

# ‘We need a dialogue between communities and the State’

## Dr R. Balasubramaniam on why schemes and policies don't always deliver at the grassroots

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DEVELOPMENT is about demand and delivery. If people know what to ask for, governments will learn to respond. In the face of stark inequalities, however, a balance is difficult to achieve. In the asymmetry that prevails, people lack awareness and access while governments exercise excessive authority and lose touch with reality.

Voluntary organisations can play an important role in making things work. But what strategies should they employ? How should they pace themselves? What are the realistic expectations they can have?

Dr R. Balasubramaniam, founder and chairperson of GRAAM (Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement), has valuable experience in making interventions and building dialogue.

A physician, he has spent more than 30 years in the service of marginalised people especially among tribal communities in the H.D. Kote district of Karnataka. At the age of 19 he founded the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement which carries out several charitable and development initiatives.

GRAAM's canvas is immense and includes projects in health, education and livelihoods. More recently, the NGO was involved in framing Karnataka's skill development policy.

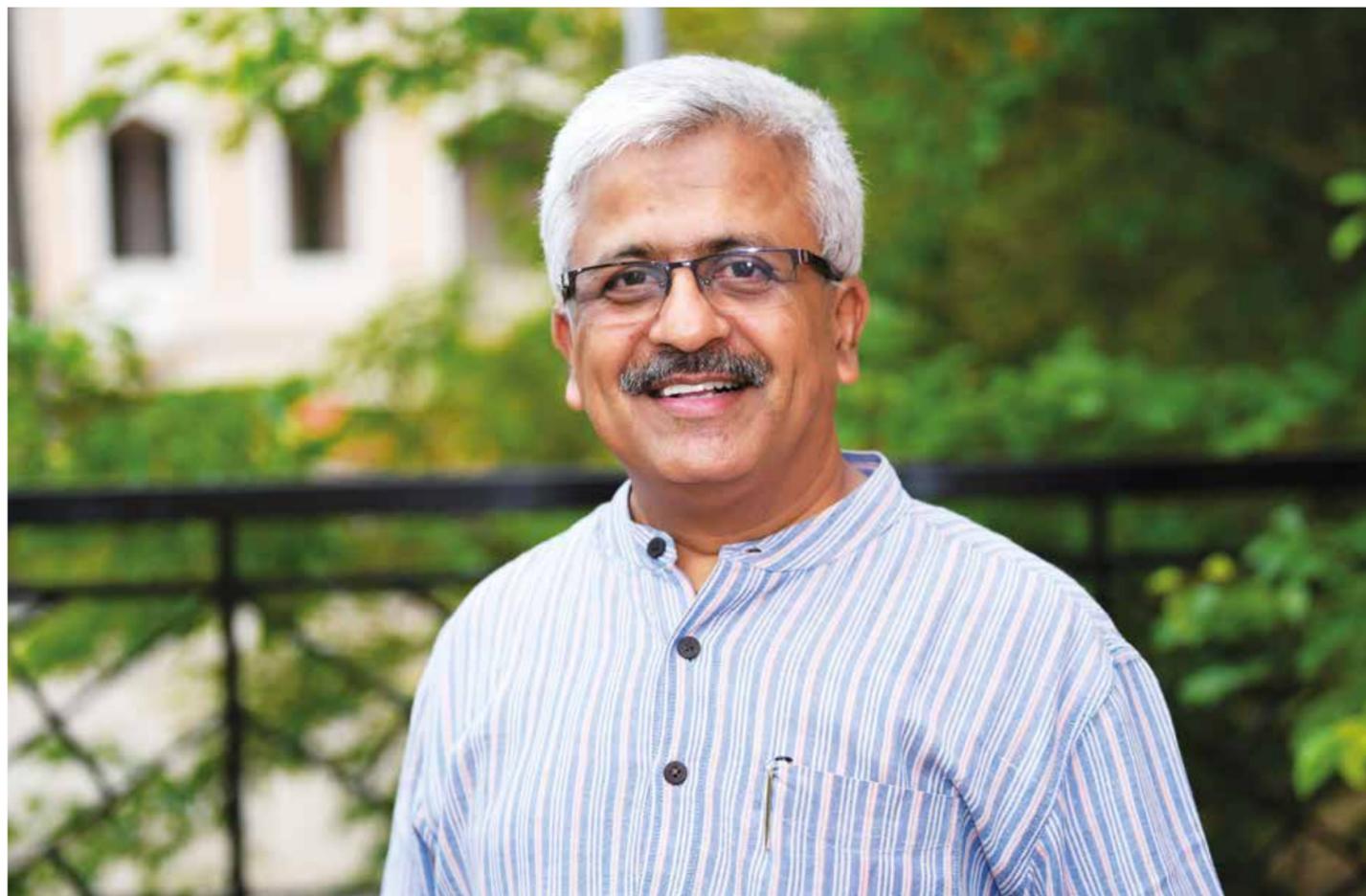
GRAAM facilitates dialogue with communities before designing projects. It works with government and companies.

Dr Balasubramaniam has outlined his views in two recent books. *Voices from the Grassroots* is about the aspirations of villagers regarding development. An earlier volume, *i, the Citizen*, urges people to become active citizens and work with the system so that our noisy democracy can evolve.

**You have strived to bring communities and government together. Your Arogyashreni project to improve primary health centres (PHCs) in Mysore district built bridges between people and government. What was the learning from that experience?**

Arogyashreni was about rural communities using technology to assess and rank the performance of PHCs in Mysore district. My greatest learning was that our rural communities are willing to participate in monitoring the government's service delivery institutions. Surprisingly, the government too, especially at higher levels, was keen to listen to citizens' voices and see the people as customers.

What I also painfully understood is that our



Dr R. Balasubramaniam: 'We need to give the State a different perspective on people, poverty and entitlements'

government still has the mindset of being a provider, a patronising institution which expects citizens to be benign 'subjects' and be thankful that they are getting services. We are still a long way from getting citizens engaged as empowered participants in such programmes. The State, too, needs to evolve and start seeing people as active citizens.

We, in the civil society space, need to give the State a different perspective on people, poverty and entitlements. As NGOs we also need to understand that social accountability will remain a myth if we are unwilling to facilitate the participation of citizens and empower them with information which will reduce the power asymmetry between them and the government. What is required is a dialogue between communities and the State.

I have evolved into being an honest broker facilitating this delicate partnership without being a threat to either. I have also understood that this journey is going to be long and sometimes frustrating.

**You have tried to get marginalised communities basic amenities like water, health facilities and education. How did doing this change your perceptions of development from the community's perspective? How receptive have you found local government agencies and village level functionaries?**

Getting the government to deliver services was what I did, successfully, in the initial days of my life in the development sector. I quickly realised that mere delivery of these 'missing' services is important

but not truly sustainable or good enough in addressing the root cause of the problem. Delivering services is the easy part. Being a provider does not need much sensitivity. All it needs is intent, expertise and the resources.

It is only when you become a facilitator and start empowering communities to explore solutions from within that you realise how difficult it is. Initially, I found communities equally resistant. They have got so used to receiving services, especially in today's world of doles and charity, that they resist doing the hard work of thinking through their problems and building their own capacities to find solutions. At village level, development is now

need to start by giving people complete information on why they exist, what is their role and how they operate.

Once you provide information, you also give communities leverage. This builds the 'power within' them. When you collectivise them, you give them 'power with' and the agency to handle the externalities. Gradually, with increasing success, people learn that they can build 'power over' the people in the system — whether it is the bank manager, the local politician or the bureaucrat. And then the 'power to' bring about social change will emerge.

I see this playing out in real life too. But then we need to understand that all this is hard work. It takes a generation and needs a good facilitating civil society partner who neither manipulates the community nor exploits it for personal gain.

**Corruption, whether it is in the public distribution system (PDS) or healthcare in government hospitals, prevents people from gaining access to basic services. From your experience, how can involving citizens prevent this kind of corruption?**

Building social accountability frameworks into existing government programmes and schemes is a realistic approach. Whether it is the Vigilance Committees at the ration shop level or the social audits in the MGNREGS, we need to keep going at it.

Simple interventions like training communities to understand what goes into building a village road

**‘Development in villages is now so beneficiary driven and politicised that building human capital is going to be that much harder. But I have also found some bureaucrats and panchayat members keen to change this.’**

helped us build strong teams of young people who became real-time monitors when roads were being built in their villages. Using IVRS (Interactive Voice Response) technology to oversee and monitor PHC services in the Arogyashreni project ensured better health outcomes for local communities.

Having served as a Special Investigator in the Karnataka Lokayukta during the tenure of Justice Santosh Hegde, I am inclined to believe that it is more rewarding to educate and impress on people to stay honest rather than spend energies in fighting corruption.

We can only make a difference if we are able to build a critical mass of people who refuse to participate in collusive corruption. Strong laws can serve as deterrence only when they are effective and when the complainant is protected and reassured that action will happen.

When you see high-profile corrupt politicians and businessmen getting away scot-free and many RTI activists and whistleblowers getting killed, you tend to become sceptical. And this is when you realise that societal stigmatisation of the corrupt is a good first step. How many of us will refuse to invite the local MLA to our functions if we know that he is corrupt? How many of us are ready to boycott meetings called by corrupt bureaucrats and publicly name and shame them? If we can develop this

strength by being scrupulously honest, then the fight against corruption will show results.

**There is often a dearth of information at village level — of government schemes and policies and how to access these. What do you think the government should do to improve its social marketing?**

I think using technology is a good first step. We need to build on the cell phone movement and use smartphones to become 'governance smart'. We need to build portals in local languages that put up all information of government schemes, rules, barriers, citizens availing of benefits, and enabling laws like RTI and Karnataka's Sakala which guarantees services to citizens. We need to use block chain technology to provide as much information as possible in a usable format. We need to begin having 'open budgets' that citizens can understand. When governments provide all this information as an obligation and not as a right, things will change enormously.

**There is no platform for grievance redressal. Take Aadhaar, for instance, which is leaving vulnerable people out of the system. Or the LPG scheme, which is a success, but now people find refills too expensive. Or badly built toilets. What are the ways in which government-citizen interaction can be built so that schemes are better implemented and local development takes place?**

Engaging people when you plan these schemes is so critical. It is experts in Delhi or other capital cities

in the states who provide the analysis for schemes. Most of them have little understanding of ground realities. We need to get the voices of citizens into the conversation. Not a monologue but genuine dialogues. Politicians and experts need to be willing to engage in town hall meetings and debates and invest stakeholders with the responsibility of implementing and monitoring government initiatives.

We also need a system that responds to the demands made by such engagements otherwise people will feel used and slowly disengage. There has to be genuine respect and concern for native intelligence and community wisdom. Only when we democratise development and remove it from the monopoly of the government and NGOs will sustainable, people-centric human development happen.

**Elections, as you point out, are a major source of corruption. Voters are bribed by candidates, a malaise that has been spreading to other states. You ran a campaign, 'no note for vote'. What was its outcome?**

It was a mixed bag. We had people who refused to accept such bribes (a small percentage). Several people told me that they would accept such gifts

Continued on page 8

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*Continued from page 7*

from all the politicians but still vote for whoever they considered good. One former chief minister told me in confidence that ‘paying voters was no longer a definitive assurance of winning, but not paying was surely a recipe for losing’.

I learnt this too in the campaign. Corrupting voters in several places was no longer seen as a criminal activity. Many considered it an essential ingredient to fight elections. Voters too have started seeing such bribes as their entitlement. But we cannot stop fighting this cancer.

**You say citizen-government interaction is critical for our democracy. Why? We have elections. We have political representatives. There is the sarpanch in villages, towns and cities have councillors, there are MLAs, MPs. Does consistent interaction lead to better outcomes?**

What we have today is a democracy that is loud, unhealthy and limited to the ‘representative form’. While this is a good beginning, it is not enough. We need to move towards a functional, participatory form of democracy — where citizens go beyond voting to engaging with elected representatives, post-elections.

We have tried several experiments with mixed results. One mechanism was to use our community radio to get citizens to engage anonymously with elected representatives and government officials to demand services, address civic grievances and complain about inaction or inefficiency. We saw results. Radio provided exposure to the politicians but subtly ensured accountability too. It also gave citizens a sense of empowerment as they voiced their frustrations and demands. When they saw action — whether it was their local ration shop or metalling of a road or action against an errant teacher — they felt a sense of accomplishment.

And let us not lose faith in the goodness of people, whether it is politicians, the bureaucracy or citizens. It is by appealing to their innate goodness that we can bring about change.

**Having worked extensively in rural areas, how do you see the current farmers’ agitation? What are the messages that you get from it?**

I see it as a wake-up call. Our planners and political leaders have been offering only lip sympathy and band-aid solutions to the agrarian crisis for far too long. We talk about the Swaminathan Commission report only when our farmers agitate.

But the agrarian crisis has several layers of complexity. Our rural economies are seen merely as markets at the bottom of the pyramid and farmers as consumers of goods and services. Successive governments perceive villagers as mere recipients of dole and not as empowered participants in creating wealth.

The current agitation is an expression of anguish by farmers. The unrest is an opportunity to think about how we can build sustainable and consistent incomes for our farming communities. We need to create a model of rural transformation. ■