Gandhian Thought in Seva Mandir

Ajay Mehta and Suraj Jacob

1 Introduction

Seva Mandir is an organization that works with disadvantaged sections of society, especially small peasant communities living in the undulating tracts of the Aravalli hills in the districts of Udaipur and Rajsamand in India's Rajasthan state. Continuous engagement in one area has shaped Seva Mandir's thinking about how we may enable people to lead dignified lives, get organized to make democracy work, and, most importantly, become trustees of just and sustainable development.[1] At every stage in Seva Mandir's life history, there have been multiple views, if not conflicting ones, about how best to achieve these goals. The choices made may well have been suboptimal, but the future remains open to fresh ways to bring about more egalitarian and democratic arrangements for those who lead precarious lives. This chapter identify some themes that might offer insights about overcoming poverty, polarization, and disempowerment in our society (Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Maurer &

[1] For a recent narrative of Seva Mandir's journey, see Khetan (2022).

A. Mehta
Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur, India
e-mail: ajaysinghmehta1954@gmail.com

S. Jacob (✉)
Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, India
e-mail: Suraj.jacob@gmail.com

Qureshi, 2021; Qureshi et al., 2018b, 2020, 2022a; Sutter et al., 2023; Zainuddin et al., 2022), and lessons for emerging models, such as social infomediaries (Parth et al., 2021; Parthiban et al., 2020a, b, 2021; Qureshi et al., 2017, 2018a; Riaz & Qureshi, 2017), environmentally responsible businesses (Bansal et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2022), social entrepreneurship (Bhatt 2017, 2022; Bhatt et al., 2013, 2019, 2022, 2023; Hota et al., 2019, 2023; Kistruck et al., 2008, 2013a, b; Qureshi et al., 2016, 2023), sharing economy for the marginalized (Bhatt et al., 2021; Escobedo et al., 2021; Hota et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2021; Pillai et al., 2021a, b; Qiu et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2021a, b, c), and technoficing (Qureshi et al., 2021d, 2022b, this volume) to nurture the resilient communities (Bhatt et al., this volume-a) and find a way forward to cultivate self-reliant communities (Bhatt et al., this volume-b).

2 Background and Discourse

Gandhian ideas and practices have had a profound impact on Seva Mandir as an institution. As a young man in Allahabad, the founder of Seva Mandir, Dr. Mohan Sinha Mehta (Bhai Sb. as he was popularly known) wanted to join the national movement. Although circumstances forced him to return to his hometown of Udaipur in 1922 to join the administration of the princely state of Mewar, he did not give up his aspiration to contribute to the national movement. Sometime in the late 1920s, it began to crystalize in his mind that he locates himself in the Gandhian tradition of constructive programs. His pre-disposition to this tradition can be gleaned from an essay he wrote in 1956. He had this to say about persuading Shri Kalu Lal Shrimali[2] to join Vidya Bhawan School as its first Headmaster. Bhai Sb started Vidya Bhawan in Udaipur in 1931.

> In the beginning of that year, the Civil Disobedience Movement under Gandhiji's leadership had submerged the entire country. One morning came a long letter in which Shrimali asked for permission to join the Non-Cooperation Movement. He said it was impossible for him to apply his mind and energies coldly to studies when all round the fervour for the freedom movement swayed the minds of youth. He could not work with any peace of mind. I sent a telegram asking him to come to Udaipur for personal discussion. Two or three days later he arrived. We were joined by a third friend, K.L. Bordia, who was associated all along with us in our aspirations for social work. I put it to Shrimali whether it would satisfy him to devote his life to work of social reconstruction, something of as great value and importance for national freedom and regeneration as (though perhaps less spectacular than) the political struggle for self-governance. (Vidya Bhawan Society, 1960)

Vidya Bhawan School was designed to impart an education that would encourage critical thinking, alongside democratic, egalitarian, and pluralist values. The central concern was to build the character of students so that they become responsible citizens. Seva Mandir, though conceived at the same time as Vidya Bhawan, saw its practical realization after independence. Bhai Sb. continued to see constructive programs as relevant to the quest for "Swaraj" or freedom beyond political independence from colonial rule (Koulagi, 2022). He could see that the poor in society

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[2] Dr. K.L. Shrimali was to become India's Education Minister in 1954.

needed more than a paternalistic welfare state to empower and serve their needs of dignity (Mehta, 1983; Ramaswami, 2002; Rodrigues, 2018).

The early years of Seva Mandir were devoted to promoting adult literacy among villagers in the hinterland of Udaipur City. Many of them were *adivasis* (indigenous communities) and lived in remote villages unconnected by metalled roads. The idea behind promoting adult literacy and awareness was that villagers should be able to participate in mainstream processes of development and democracy. Perhaps at the back of Bhai Sb's mind was Gandhiji's quest of making ordinary people moral agents for their own well-being and that of the common good (Erikson, 1993; also see Bhatt et al., this volume-a, b). Within a short period of time, through the decade of the 1970s Seva Mandir's adult literacy work expanded to agricultural extension programs, relief activities in times of drought, and building small village associations (*samuh*s). Seva Mandir also encouraged villagers to participate in the 1978 elections to the village councils (*Panchayat*). In these elections, many villagers associated with Seva Mandir programs were elected to the Panchayats. The expectation that their presence in Panchayats would make these institutions responsive to the needs of the most disadvantaged was, however, belied. Panchayats were embedded in the hierarchical structures of the State. They lacked the resources and cultural capital to respond to the needs of the most oppressed in society.[3]

Seva Mandir's response to the limitation of statutory bodies in the mid-1980s was to intensify its constructive programs (Khetan & Mehta, 2009; Mehta, 2000). There were two related ideological justifications for Seva Mandir's strategy of deepening and expanding the scope of its constructive programs. The first was the idea of "Gram Swaraj," a multivalent concept about agency and responsibility being located in individuals and local communities where relationships of trust lead to justice and well-being (Govindu & Malghan, 2016). The second was the image of the State as a "soulless machine." Gandhi (1948, 2) observes about the State: "… although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress. … The individual has a soul, but as the State is a soulless machine…."

In the mid-1980s, both the national and international contexts were conducive for nongovernment institutions to contribute to development work. After the Emergency[4] was lifted in 1977, there was an ideological shift from State authoritarianism to the State acknowledging the value of people's participation in promoting voluntary organizations and democratic decentralization in governance. Internationally also, more aid was available to the nongovernment sector. In this positive environment, Seva Mandir was able to create significant capacity to execute programs of development independent of the State and operationalize its strategy of people-centric development and governance.

However, by the mid-1990s, Seva Mandir realized that its strategy was not making headway. The challenge was that indigenous communities were fragmented and

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[3] For a discussion of the "statification" of local governments and low capacity and autonomy compromising the potential for emancipatory justice, see B. Jacob and Jacob (2021); S. Jacob and Jacob (2022).

[4] In 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had declared a state emergency and suspended the Constitution.

not able to put their common interests above individual needs. They sought benefits from power brokers and State functionaries on terms that were disempowering and that increased dependence. One pernicious mechanism for the fragmentation of village solidarity and self-governance was the privatization of the commons—pastures, water bodies, and forests—as a quid-pro-quo for votes at the time of elections. To overcome the development impasse in which Seva Mandir found itself, it turned reflexively to the Gandhian insight that overcoming one's internal contradictions was the way to gain ethico-politico agency to counter political emasculation and social fragmentation (Bilgrami, 2021; Mehta, 2000).

From the mid-1990s onward, Seva Mandir focused on facilitating dialogues among villagers to free themselves of relationships of dependence. Over time Seva Mandir's frontline workers along with enlightened village counterparts were able to persuade villagers to give up individual encroachments on the commons and come together to rebuild their capacity for cooperating with each other across social distinctions of caste, gender, class, and religion(see Ghatak et al., this volume; Iyengar & Bhatt, this volume; Javeri et al., this volume). Now, after more than 25 years of this approach, there is no gainsaying the fact that people at the grassroots are capable of "*Satyagraha*" to achieve their aspirations to create just social arrangements and seek dignity and well-being in their lives. Some of these village cases have been documented in the volumes *Decolonising the Commons* (Bhise, 2004) and *Land, Community, and Governance* (Ballabh, 2004).

Another feature of Gandhian thought that has informed Seva Mandir is that its constructive work programs are not elite-driven. Since the mid-1980s, the policy of Seva Mandir has been to design its programs around the skills, knowledge, and dignity needs of all sections of society—be they villagers, the lower middle classes, or western-educated professionals. This strategy has not only given Seva Mandir deep roots in the communities where it works, but it has also made the staff members and village people feel "trusteeship" over the idea of social transformation.[5]

What follows is an account of Seva Mandir's praxis over the last 55 years. It describes the challenges and many collaborations—including with international donors, idealistic volunteers, and academics—that have kept Seva Mandir reflexive and given it vitality.

3 Seva Mandir's Praxis

3.1 Early History of Seva Mandir

Seva Mandir has been working in the field of rural development in Udaipur among rural communities and disadvantaged sections of society for over five decades. It was conceived at a time when the national movement for independence had taken

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[5] For Gandhi's idea of "trusteeship," see Iyer (1986). This is one of several Gandhian ideas that have been critiqued from modernist perspectives; for a nuanced understanding of how these are somewhat misplaced, see Lal (2008b).

on distinct Gandhian hues, involving the peasantry and working class. As a revenue officer in princely Mewar, Bhai Sb. was aware of the plight of peasants suffering from oppression and poverty. His thinking on democracy and development was influenced by many sources over the decades: studies in Agra and London, participation in the Seva Samiti Movement (Allahabad) and the Scout Movement, exposure to the functioning of princely states of Rajasthan, engagement in the work of Vidya Bhawan with a belief in organic education and preparation for enlightened citizenship, ambassadorships and international diplomacy, and involvement in higher education leadership. The foundation stone of Seva Mandir was laid in 1931, but it became operational only in 1968 after Bhai Sb. retired as the Vice Chancellor of Rajasthan University in 1966 and returned to Udaipur. He was imbued with the spirit of tending to the local and facilitating local responses to local challenges—forging relationships of democracy and responsibility through the tradition of constructive work (Gandhi, 1968; see also Bhatt et al., 2022; Bhatt & Qureshi, this volume).

Seva Mandir's motto—*seva, sadhana, kranti*—indicates its founding values (Khetan, 2022). *Seva* stands for selfless service, drawing on many Indian traditions including Gandhi's path of *karma yoga*. *Sadhana* stands for dedication and devotion on the organizational path, in this case, the path of participatory and just development practice. *Kranti* stands for revolution in social relations and relations with the natural environment. The conjoining of *seva* and *kranti* suggests a creative approach to social action through the spirit of *sadhana*.

One major part of Bhai Sb's vision for the work of Seva Mandir was to create "Gram Swaraj" in the region: "I would work and try to convert Udaipur district into small but self-sufficient and autonomous republics and then get it recognized in the Constitution."[6] This was the dream he put to his colleagues in Seva Mandir two months before he passed away on June 25, 1985 at the age of 90.

The early years of Seva Mandir were devoted to creating adult education centers in villages in the vicinity of Udaipur. Slowly, this work expanded into the very remote parts of Udaipur district constituted by small *adivasi* (indigenous community) villages. These villages had no proper roads and few facilities such as schools, health clinics, and development infrastructure. The Seva Mandir team was constituted of idealistic people from different parts of the world. It was also a hub for local young men and women in need of meaningful work. They became the vanguard of Seva Mandir programs centered around adult education, agricultural extension, forestry, water conservation, and mobilizing village folk to practice self-help.

Bhai Sb. was comfortable with divergent ideological views among his colleagues, but he was clear that Seva Mandir should steer clear of partisan politics and violence. At the organizational level, there were forums where staff, at all levels, met to deliberate and review work. This was a mirror image of the structures created at the village level for villagers to deliberate on and promote the local common good. There was also a tradition for all the staff to gather annually in retreats to reflect on the purpose and strategies of Seva Mandir.

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[6] Speech at Seva Mandir, 1985.

The decade of the 1970s was a pioneering period in the history of Seva Mandir. It was during this period that Seva Mandir put down roots in the interior parts of Udaipur district and evolved its core organizational culture and structure. The next phase of Seva Mandir was marked by the intensification of its development programs.[7] The decade of the 1980s was a period when national and international attitudes toward the voluntary sector changed for the better. International aid agencies and foundations diversified their aid programs to support the voluntary sector. At the national level, after the Emergency, there was a greater appreciation of democracy, Gandhian ideas, and the value of promoting voluntary organizations. Over time, a trend was set where irrespective of the government in power, there was policy support for promoting people's participation and the voluntary sector.

All these changes together made it possible for Seva Mandir to undertake development programs that enabled villagers to become the pivot of development in their local contexts. It allowed Seva Mandir to create community institutions and enable and train village-level workers to deliver services to their own people. A central aspect of this approach was also to seek the help of professionals especially where technical skills were concerned.

The idea of professionalizing rural development found resonance with philanthropic institutions like the Tata Trusts and the Ford Foundation. Ford gave Seva Mandir a grant to recruit professionals to improve its effectiveness and scale up operations. This enabled Seva Mandir to hire young professionals from institutions such as Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN) (see Ghosh, this volume), Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA), Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), and the Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM). Seva Mandir also hired retired people from both the private and government sectors. The combination of professionals and a well-motivated cadre of grassroot workers gave Seva Mandir the organizational wherewithal to conduct effective programs of development.

3.2   Doing Constructive Work and Developing Ethical Communities

The presence of professionals and adequate funding led to the expansion of the constructive work programs of Seva Mandir. This shift was perceived by some in the organization as diluting Seva Mandir's commitment to holding the State accountable to its obligations to serve the people. They were disappointed that Seva Mandir was becoming more inward-looking and less invested in demanding accountability from the State.[8] For better or worse, Seva Mandir chose the path of developing its

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[7] In the first part of the 1980s, prior to the intensification of constructive programs, Seva Mandir went through a period of personal and ideological differences among the top management. It survived this crisis partly due to the democratic sensibilities that were tended to at all levels in the organization and decisions made by the trustees on the question of leadership.

[8] For a discussion of the "rights turn" in India, see Ruparelia (2013) and Aiyar and Walton (2015). For empirical explorations of the slippages and realities in practice, see Gaitonde et al. (2020) and Dyer et al. (2022).

own constructive programs on the ground. These included primary school education, training of traditional birth attendants, public health, early childhood care, forestry, watershed and water conservation, and supporting self-help groups. It also had a strong women's program, including a women's artisan cooperative called Sadhna (Cummings & Ryan, 2014). In all these areas, elaborate structures were created to deliver services in villages.

One distinctive feature of the organizational arrangement toward development was to appoint grassroot workers from among the village people themselves. They were given modest stipends and were expected to participate in a variety of programs with support from Seva Mandir. In time to come, these workers provided leadership to their community organizations (Ballabh, 2004). Community institutions called Gram Vikas Samitis (Village Development Committees) were built around a village fund called the Gram Vikas Kosh (Village Development Fund). Funds for the Kosh were contributed by the villagers from their savings while undertaking constructive work programs with the help of Seva Mandir.

On the funding front, a dramatic shift occurred in 1989. The Interchurch Organization for Development Corporation (ICCO), a Dutch funding organization that was supporting Seva Mandir, went from supporting projects and programs to providing long-term institutional funding. This unusual funding perspective came out of a discourse in the Netherlands that argued that the devastation caused by colonization could only be reversed if there was a long-term commitment to building institutions dedicated to the service of the poor and their empowerment. It needs to be emphasized that this perspective is relevant even today as the post-independence development paradigm has displaced millions of forest dwellers and peasants from their traditional homelands—and even when it has not displaced people, market forces and State-led development have not strengthened disadvantaged communities to act in concert to promote their interests.[9]

The presence of stable funding irrespective of any project or program targets allowed Seva Mandir to deepen its commitment to participatory development and build community institutions. Seva Mandir was able to recognize contradictions internal to local communities that came in the way of their being able to cooperate with each other and pursue their aspirations for just social arrangements and dignified livelihoods. It became apparent to Seva Mandir that village folk is embedded in relationships of dependency and is fragmented along contemporary cleavages of power and patronage, not just around caste, class, and gender differences (Mehta, 2000). Seva Mandir felt that overcoming contradictions internal to disadvantaged communities was key to their empowerment and democratization (see also Kumar et al., this volume; Mahajan & Qureshi, this volume).

One area where these contradictions are manifest is the management of the commons: forests, pastures, watersheds, and farming systems. It is standard practice for State functionaries and elected representatives to let villagers—both those who are

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[9] Another reason for the ICCO's institutional funding approach was its protestant Christian culture that emphasized the prominence of the local community efforts and voices over those in positions of high authority and far away from the ground realities of the oppressed (Personal Communication with Abraham Van Leeuwen, Program Office for ICCO dealing with Seva Mandir in the 1980s).

better off and those who have modest means—occupy and informally privatize parts of the commons. This tendency has the effect of undermining a shared stake of local people in the management of the commons. Seva Mandir decided to counter this tendency and started a dialogue among peasants for them to reconsider this form of land management based on unstable and nontransparent property rights. To give impetus to this effort, Seva Mandir created the *Van Utthan Sangh*, a federation of village forest committees, to spearhead such dialogue. These efforts spread over decades of work have met with considerable success. The outcomes at their best are individuals and community institutions that act as trustees for just, democratic, and sustainable development. There is no gainsaying the fact that many such institutions turn derelict under pressure from vested interests and see their own leadership getting coopted by those who can offer them more power without accountability.

The response of the State to help villagers to decolonize the commons—that is, give up their individual encroachments and manage these lands as true commons—has been mute. Government-initiated programs such as Joint Forest Management were abandoned by the State Forest Department. Processing applications for getting community forest resource rights as per the 2006 Forest Rights Act are marked by delays that extend over years. Despite this, thousands of farmers have found it worthwhile to cooperate with each other and resist the lure of patronage. The significance of this is not just in terms of the better governance of these resources but also in strengthening grassroots democracy. The experience of working together to manage resources has prepared village communities to practice democracy on an everyday basis. It has also given them the experience of demanding accountability from themselves apart from the panchayat bodies and State agencies. In 2018, the Forest and Revenue Departments denied permission to the village panchayat of Amiwada to harvest a bamboo grove tended by Amiwada villagers and to transport the harvest for auction. The panchayat of Amiwada with the help of Seva Mandir had developed a forest in their pastureland. The bamboo plants, of which there were many, had reached the age for harvest, but no government agency was willing to give permission. No State body actually felt it was empowered to do so. Fed up and frustrated, the village people of Amiwada gave an ultimatum to the authorities that they would defy the law in case they did not get permission. In solidarity, 15 other villages also decided to join the satyagraha of Amiwada and cut bamboo "illegally." Two days before the cutting was to happen, the government granted permission.[10] The Amiwada satyagraha reflects Gandhi's idea of "Truth force," the idea that it is possible to create ethical communities who are willing to struggle for something larger than individual self-interest (Erikson, 1993; Lal, 2008a).[11]

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[10] Seva Mandir had called a press conference a few days earlier to explain that even after 2 years no one in the government was willing to sign off on granting permission to cut and transport bamboos that had significant commercial value.

[11] Every year since 2000, Seva Mandir, in collaboration with the Umed Mal Lodha Memorial Trust, gives awards to villagers and village groups for their leadership roles in ensuring that forests are protected, livelihoods improved and people's wellbeing advanced. These awards are given in three categories: to individuals, to village groups, and to government forest protection committees. The

3.3   Measuring Impacts on Individuals and Communities

Another area in which Seva Mandir has excelled is in the quality of service delivery by way of programs in women's development, health care, early child care education, sanitation, and waste disposal—besides livelihood, water conservation, and forestry. In 1996, Seva Mandir was fortunate to meet Abhijit Banerjee,[12] a Professor of Economics at M.I.T., and invite him to Seva Mandir to do research. Along with Professor Michael Kremer, he visited Seva Mandir in December 1996 to design randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to identify interventions that have a high impact and are cost-effective. In 1997, Esther Duflo joined the research effort. The collaboration with Seva Mandir lasted 12 years and included multiple research studies in the Udaipur region (for instance, Banerjee et al. (2004). Their research pointed to large gaps in the impact of government programs and smaller gaps in the impact of Seva Mandir programs. But more importantly, their experiments showed how outcomes can be improved by designing interventions carefully after piloting them for their efficacy. The collaboration not only helped Seva Mandir to improve the specific designs of its ongoing programs but also helped create a culture in Seva Mandir of piloting projects before rolling them out at scale. Seva Mandir incorporated the idea of evidence-based impact studies of its programs. At the same time, it was mindful that technocratic changes cannot substitute for the role of individuals and the community to perform their duties and be accountable.

Seva Mandir's openness to research and to being studied led to several insights. A study from Canada's McGill University found that Seva Mandir's daycare centers had resulted in 43% of households utilizing this service. This led to mothers having an opportunity to work to supplement their income and also enjoy some free time. Another and more ambitious study conducted by Professor Raj Desai of Georgetown University and Dr. Anders Olofsgård of the Stockholm School of Economics tested the impact of cooperation on a range of development outcomes (Desai & Olofsgård, 2018). The study found a positive impact on natural resource management, conflict resolution and violence reduction (especially caste-based violence), satisfaction with public goods, democratic participation, and female empowerment. The evaluation was planned, designed, and conducted in collaboration with, but independently of Seva Mandir over several years starting in 2014.

4   Culture of the Organization

Perhaps, the most significant achievement of Seva Mandir lies in the nature of its gender and staff relations. Seva Mandir's staff body is diverse in terms of gender, education, social background, and geography. At any given time, it also has a pool of volunteers from India and across the globe.

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citations for each award read as profiles in courage of individuals and groups. The most remarkable stories of courage belong to women.

[12] Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2019.

It was in the mid-1980s, after constructive programs expanded, that Seva Mandir recognized that while having a diversity of talent was desirable, getting local staff to work with professionals as equals was not so easy. Local staff feared that they would be marginalized by the presence of professionals who could draw on higher levels of formal education and proficiency in English. They were unhappy at the induction of so many professionals all at once and expressed their disquiet in subtle ways of non-cooperation. On the side of the professionals, the lack of welcome and fraternity held the potential to erode their idealism. Fortunately, Seva Mandir sensed that it was a fraught relationship. It made efforts to explain to both groups that each was critical to the personal and professional growth of the other, and certainly to the betterment of Seva Mandir's work, and that neither group was more or less important than the other. Over time, as they worked together on multiple projects, their fears and anxieties dissipated. People across social differences get to know each other as individuals and not just in terms of their social identities.

What helped Seva Mandir greatly in finding the right balance of mutual regard is that some professionals who joined initially were role models in humility. They did not see their superior education or erstwhile seniority as retired public servants as an entitlement to special consideration. They reveled in work and not in the positions they held. On the side of the local staff, there were those who have the courage and foresight to recognize that the inclusion of professionals is good for the organization and its work and that it helps their career prospects. They dissuaded their colleagues from coming together to resist the inclusion of professionals.

One indication of this emerging culture was the appointment of a female Chief Executive in 1999. Although she was only 37 at the time, there was a broad-based acceptance among the staff about the appropriateness of the appointment despite the fact that she superseded many men who were older and more senior to her in the organization. The smooth transition in leadership was a measure of the fact that Seva Mandir had established a culture where leadership was not identified with authority. Field staff gave autonomy to village workers—and within the organization, those in senior positions gave space to those below them in the hierarchy.

On the side of gender and social relations, Seva Mandir has been fortunate. It has had women in leadership positions for a long time, almost since its inception. In the last three decades, for close to 20 years the Chief Executives have been women. Not only that, the majority of leadership positions have been held by women. There is no gainsaying the fact that having women in leadership positions has had a positive impact on gender relations. At another level, because many staff members—both men and women—have roots in traditional structures such as joint families, caste groups, and local communities, they have responded creatively to the challenges of modern development (meeting targets and exercising good management) while also respecting the rhythms of change that are characteristic of rural settings and small towns. They have been able to bring about more equal social relationships across caste, gender, and class hierarchies without creating disputes. Their intuitive attitude resonates with Gandhi's belief that justice is that which does not harm either party in a dispute. Seva Mandir staff know that in order to be effective, they need to be patient, willing to build consensus, and acknowledge traditional norms even

while trying to change them. As one of the review reports observed, Seva Mandir has balanced "feminine" and "masculine" attributes and has been able to get things done while at the same time carrying people along in the process (Aiyar et al., 2016):

> Feminine and masculine practices in tone are in an unusually good balance at Seva Mandir. By this we are referring not to the ways in which organizations work—nor to the gender balance in employment. Organizations that have a feminine way of working are usually those that work in a collective way, take time for consensus-building, are nurturing of their staff and make sure nobody is left behind. Organizations that have a masculine way of working are very good at meeting goals and targets, doing it on time and having data at the centre of decision-making. Ideally an organization should balance and integrate both ways of working. Too much feminine could lead to endless discussion and endless time required for decision-making. Too much masculine makes people feel they are not valued and that all that matters is to deliver on specific targets. Seva Mandir has both: a consensus-building culture (which was impressively quick in problem-solving together in the participatory sessions that we ran during the visit) combined with a focus on numbers and data which is commendable, and better than many of the large NGOs in India.

The bulk of Seva Mandir's staff is from the lower middle class. Very few of them have professional degrees, unlike their Western-educated counterparts from middle-class backgrounds. Often, initially, their motivation to join Seva Mandir is simply to get a job. Even though Seva Mandir is not able to compete with State institutions in terms of remuneration and status, over time people working for Seva Mandir develop a positive identity about themselves as NGO workers. Their jobs and careers in Seva Mandir have provided self-affirmation and pride. From the most junior to the most senior in the hierarchy of Seva Mandir, there is always the opportunity for creativity. They grow to respect Seva Mandir for being sincere in its efforts. They identify with its purpose, even as they may have their own complaints about low salaries and slow career prospects. Providing members of the lower middle class a sense of professional pride is one of Seva Mandir's greatest achievements. This contrasts with the frustration that many from their backgrounds feel when in their jobs they are neither respected nor can they respect their organizations and those who lead them. Those from middle-class backgrounds, as with those from lower-middle backgrounds, feel reaffirmed in Seva Mandir. It has given them a chance to express their talents and leadership qualities but also their idealism to be part of the project to fulfill the country's "tryst with destiny," in the famous speech by Jawaharlal Nehru at India's independence.[13]

5 Concluding Thoughts

Seva Mandir's experience in development suggests that there is a need for a paradigm shift in the way we think about development. It is not enough for the government to make large allocations of funds for poverty alleviation and rural development. What is

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[13] The "Tryst with Destiny" speech was delivered by Nehru, the first Prime Minister, to the Indian Constituent Assembly in the hours leading up to August 15, 1947.

needed is that villagers themselves and civil society be empowered to play a significant role in the conceptualization, execution, and governance of development. In this approach of autonomous development, the differences in education and class backgrounds can give way to more wholesome identities of shared purpose.

At another level, Seva Mandir has also discovered that those who are oppressed are often complicit in their exploitation and disrespect.[14] They tolerate the poor quality of public goods such as health provision, education, and property rights, and the arbitrary behavior of authorities. They often seek benefits to which they are not entitled and thereby bend to those in power rather than seeking to transform their relationships. The challenge for development is to realign self-interest so that it supports rather than undercuts the common good—and is not about only improving individual well-being in terms of health, education, income, and so on. Seva Mandir has found that constructive work programs can bring this change. However, it needs time and patience and a vision for development that acknowledges the damage being done by "development" sans democracy as Gandhi understood it (*Swaraj*).

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[14] Among those who have written about this in the Indian context is Nandy (1989).

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Ajay Mehta is the president of Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur. He has a long association with Seva Mandir, having joined it in 1985 and later serving as its chief executive for nine years. He was later the executive director of the National Foundation for India, a philanthropic trust that supports civic action for promoting democracy and social justice. Ajay serves on the board of several development organizations and has been active in several government committees pertaining to development and the voluntary sector.

Suraj Jacob presently teaches development and policy at the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. He was trained as a political economist in Delhi, Cambridge, and Stanford. His interests concern democracy, governance, and social practices as well as the cultures and institutions that sustain them. Suraj is the co-author of the book Governing Locally (CUP, 2021). He is a trustee of Seva Mandir and was previously chief executive of Vidya Bhawan (both NGOs based in Udaipur, India).