

MAY KNOWLEDGE GROW IN OUR HEARTS:

Applying Spiritual Principles
to Development Practice

The Case of Seva Mandir



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... We need a new language that opens the door of understanding; not a language of power and domination, but a language that emerges from the depth of our self-discovery, of discovering ourselves as an inseparable part of a whole that is the cradle of the miracle of life. If we manage to provoke such a shift, we may still experience the satisfaction of having brought about a new century worth living in.

—Manfred Max-Neef



Introduction

Through the following study, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity hopes to contribute to the worldwide discourse on social and economic development some of the insights it has gained into the nature of development work that is cognizant of both the spiritual and material dimensions of reality.

The case described here, though of one organization, Seva Mandir* (Temple of Service), an organization working primarily with the rural and tribal communities in Rajasthan, India, is representative of the thousands of efforts that draw on spiritual principles and scientific methods to bring about social transformation.

In its attempts to describe, from the perspective of Seva Mandir staff, the nature of the work that they undertake and the challenges they face, this document discusses the meaning and implications of working for the “common good”, a goal that is present in Seva Mandir programs in areas such as forestry, health, and education. Particularly, it tries to capture the way those who

* For more information about Seva Mandir, see Appendix III.

work for the organization apply the concept of interconnectedness to all of their activities. The interconnectedness of all things, a principle that transcends the physical and visible relationships that exist among phenomena and includes a spiritual connection, can be considered the organizing principle around which all Seva Mandir activities revolve.

The Institute's ultimate aspiration in preparing this document is to contribute to the efforts made by individuals, groups and organizations around the world to engender a new consciousness of how science and religion can work together to create a more humane and just world.

A Discourse on Science, Religion and Development

This study was carried out in the context of a growing body of knowledge related to development that emphasizes the positive effects that spiritual values, derived from religion, have on efforts dedicated to the empowerment of a population to act as the main protagonist of its own progress. Despite the skepticism of those researchers and planners who may oppose the incorporation of religious values in the development paradigm, there is consensus among many theoreticians and practitioners that if the field of development continues to ignore the spiritual dimension of the human being and the cultural, transcendental and religious aspects of peoples and societies, it will fail to bring prosperity to humankind. Efforts made during the past years by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity to introduce to the broad discourse on development a stream of thought and practice that promotes a spiritual perspective on the advancement of civilization have been inspired by the work of like-minded institutions, for example, The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada. One particular study published by this organization, *The*

Lab, the Temple, and the Market: Reflections at the Intersection of Science, Religion and Development, that brings together the views of scientists from four different systems of religious belief (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith) on issues related to development, has provided a major part of the theoretical background for the Institute's efforts in the promotion of a discourse on science, religion and development.

Introduction

The present publication expands on ideas presented in *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market* and two additional documents prepared by the Institute. The first is a concept paper titled *Science, Religion and Development: Some Initial Considerations* and the second *Science, Religion and Development: Some Aims and Challenges* (hereafter referred to as the Aims and Challenges document). In the first document the Institute brings together the results of a year-long conversation with development thinkers and practitioners in India on the state of development thought and practice. The ideas and principles expressed in this document have animated the discourse on science, religion and development that the Institute has promoted in several countries during the past few years. The second document was prepared in response to the expressed wish of a number of the organizations involved in the discourse in India to better articulate their own experiences in applying spiritual principles to their daily work. It consists of five statements, which assisted the participating organizations to describe how they draw upon spiritual principles and employ scientific methods in their work and to reflect on a few of their common aims as well as some of the challenges that they regularly face in putting their ideals into action.

This paper is an account of the reflections of Seva Mandir staff in response to the questions posed in the Aims and Challenges

document*. The study was carried out over a period of five weeks during November and December 2009 and involved a series of reflection meetings conducted by two facilitators from the Institute with staff and collaborators of Seva Mandir from various levels of the organization. In these meetings the Aims and Challenges document was studied and the questions posed in it were used to stimulate discussion and reflection. Below is a summary of the five statements:

Science, Religion and Development: Some Aims and Challenges

The first statement in the Aims and Challenges document refers to the oneness of mankind both as a spiritual principle and as one of the major aims of social and economic development. It mentions some of the challenges that organizations face as they design and implement programs that, though inspired by this principle, also strive to strengthen the will of the people to struggle to transform their own environment. Participants reflecting on this statement are thus encouraged to explore the apparent contradictions between creating unity and struggling for bringing about change. They are then asked to examine the way they incorporate in their own programs principles such as reciprocity, cooperation and interconnectedness, and to reflect on the direction they give to the struggles in which they accompany the people with whom they work.

The second statement addresses the question of individual transformation and structural change. It questions two prevalent ideologies of social change—that social transformation is a mere outcome of the upgrading of the individual and that no change is possible unless social structures, mainly those related to matters of political power, are first changed. The statement proposes

* For a full version of this document, see Appendix II.

that lasting change can only result from simultaneous efforts to transform both the individual and society. To gain insights into how Seva Mandir addresses this question, staff and collaborators were asked to examine their activities and programs in terms of the changes they promote at the level of the individual and the way they affect structural change in their areas of influence.

Introduction

Knowledge is the main theme of the third statement of the document. Many development organizations recognize that the generation and application of knowledge, rather than economic activity, is the central process of social existence. Development is not viewed as the mere delivery of goods and services to the disadvantaged, but as the process that enables the people of the world, the major protagonists of change, to acquire knowledge and to apply it to the shaping of their own affairs. After reading this statement, participants are asked to discuss how their organization strives to bring knowledge to bear on the problems of the populations it serves.

The fourth statement focuses on a conception of the human being which reflects both a material nature, inherited from millions of years of physical evolution, and a spiritual one that has gradually made it possible for human beings to rise above the exigencies of animal existence and mere physical survival. The assertion that development theory and practice must give urgent attention to the spiritual dimension of human existence arises from such an understanding of human nature, and this statement invites participants to reflect on how this conception informs their work.

As an enterprise that is envisioned to bring prosperity to the entire human race, development is often concerned with processes that lead to the generation and distribution of wealth. This concept, however, has been treated contradictorily in every period of social

evolution. Some ideologies have conceived of wealth as the corrupter of the human soul while others have venerated it as the ultimate dispenser of happiness. The fifth and final statement in the Aims and Challenges document suggests that the concept of wealth needs to be re-examined in the context of a development process that contributes to the spiritual and material advancement of the human race. In this regard, participants are invited to discuss how their organization's programs strive to meet the following conditions, which, based on spiritual principles, make the acquisition of personal wealth acceptable: "Wealth must be earned through honest work, physical or intellectual, and its acquisition by the individual must not be the cause, no matter how indirectly, of the impoverishment of others. Moreover, the legitimacy of material possessions depends equally on how they are earned and how they are used. One should enjoy the fruits of one's labors and expend one's wealth not only for the good of one's family but also for the welfare of society."

The nature of the responses

Before presenting the results of the discussions with Seva Mandir staff, a few words have to be said about the nature of the language being used here to analyze these responses. Clearly, the language used by the staff to describe their work did not correspond directly with the language used in the documents presented by the Institute. Different people used different words to describe the very deep and complex issues that were being discussed in the meetings. Moreover, no attempt was made in such conversations to define precisely the terms that were being used. Some felt more comfortable with words that have less religious connotations and preferred to refer to terms such as ethical, human, and social to describe the concepts that were being discussed. Others were more at ease with religious terminology. Those in the Institute

who analyzed the responses had to try to penetrate the meaning that each participant was trying to convey and understand it in the context of the kind of activity they were describing. What follows, then, is the Institute's understanding of these conversations in a language that it feels conveys in a consistent way the ideas that were discussed.

Introduction



Spiritual principles for a better society

Where there is the darkness of ignorance, it is there that Seva Mandir should reach out. This phrase uttered by Mr. Mohan S. Mehta, founder of Seva Mandir, echoes loudly in the minds of many of his organization's staff. One member of a Seva Mandir village development committee explained that this phrase paired with Seva Mandir's slogan—"Service, devotion, revolution"—captures the organization's philosophy well. "We want our children to receive education, to have a green forest, to live with truthfulness, love and unity. We want to advance. This is our purpose," he explained.

Love, unity and truthfulness featured prominently among the spiritual values to which Seva Mandir staff and collaborators frequently referred throughout the conversations that were held at different moments and at different levels of the institution. Educating the younger generations was referred to as one of its goals; preserving the environment as another. For many of those who work at Seva Mandir, all of these aims are grouped together under one overarching purpose: learning to work for the common

good—an aspiration that reflects the organization's perception of spiritual and material progress.

To work for the common good, many emphasized, requires an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, a principle that is present throughout all of creation. Seva Mandir staff and collaborators believe that their programs have gained their vision, direction, and impetus from the recognition of this spiritual principle. According to Mr. Mohan Singh Kothari, a long-standing collaborator and a member of its board of trustees, such consciousness reinforces and is in turn deepened by the actions people take for the common good: “An awareness of interconnectedness generates motivation to work with others for the well-being of all, and every action taken in concert with others in turn expands and deepens this sense of interconnectedness.” Spirituality, thus, is not conceived of merely in terms of the personal, but as an aspect of the human being that expresses itself in the love and concern people feel for one another. “Spirituality has to do with collective well-being, not just individual well-being—we try to bring this into society,” said Mr. Hemraj Bhati, Seva Mandir's general secretary. Spiritual and material progress, then, are achieved when members of a community, convinced of the interconnectedness of creation, engage in action that transcends individual interest and benefits the whole.

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In working with communities to define, protect, and preserve collective assets such as pasturelands and forests, Seva Mandir puts this vision of spirituality into action. Efforts in this area draw to the fore another dimension of interconnectedness—the understanding that nature and human beings are part of a single, interconnected creation. Resources of nature are the property of all, a trust, according to Mr. Kothari, that the present generation holds for future generations:

...Spirituality says that all assets belong, depending on what language you are speaking, to God, or to the earth, Mother Earth, and they are not for exploitation or personal gain at the cost of the deterioration of those assets. There is a theme song of Seva Mandir: '*Sampurn srishti mandir manav.*' It means that we regard the whole creation as a temple. Now, in a temple, you don't desecrate it—you don't misuse it or steal from it.

Staff who participated in the meetings frequently made mention of love and empathy as two pivotal values in Seva Mandir's work. Ms. Neelima Khetan, the chief executive officer of the organization, referred to love as a fundamental element of Seva Mandir's approach to education. She used the example of *balwadis*—pre-school level educational centers promoted by the organization—to illustrate this idea:

If you boil it down, it's a relationship between a woman and small children. If you have love there, you can do anything, but if there is no love, little children will not come. You can give them toys, you can give them food, but if there is no love they will not come. Love is present in everything, but in the *balwadi* it is so apparent. It will not work and somehow in whatever we do, we have been able to invoke the love in the *sanchalika* (*balwadi in-charge*).

Another staff member from Badgaon block provided a concrete example of how members of this committee try to show love and empathy even towards those who may at a given moment be harming the common good. If a person takes fodder from the common land before it is distributed, he mentioned, the village committee will meet with him and try to elevate his understand-

ing*. He emphasized that the committee will try to resolve the matter without using violence or force. He added that by showing love and by preserving unity in its problem-solving approaches, the committee sets an example of how frank and loving consultation can serve as a tool for solving problems.

Some members of Seva Mandir staff referred to the connection that exists between Seva Mandir's understanding of love, empathy and interconnectedness and Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and worldview. Ms. Khetan spoke of this connection in the following manner:

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In terms of theory, one question is 'Where is the problem?' If you theorize development in terms of 'the state has not done this', then it is the 'otherizing' of the problem. That will lead to solutions of a different kind. But suppose your analysis is saying that maybe 'we are all part of the problem', then it is not that there is someone who is the exploiter and another person who is exploited...There are no black or white categories. Maybe there was a time when you could lay blame—maybe in the freedom struggle—but even then, Gandhi resisted calling the British the enemy. So how do we today go and do it when there isn't even some [group like the] British to go and point fingers at?

As illustrated by the above comments, Seva Mandir staff does not conceive of interconnectedness, love, and empathy as abstract ideas, but as aspects of human existence that are manifest in every-day human behavior. The application of spiritual principles

* The fodder needs to grow for a certain amount of time before it is considered by the community to be ready for distribution. If people ignore the rules and the fodder is cut prematurely, it will not grow properly and the community will not be able to benefit as much as if the fodder had been allowed to grow to maturity.

to the practical aspects of life, however, requires the adoption of methods that are consistent with such principles.

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Building consensus through open and frank dialogue

In their comments, Seva Mandir staff and collaborators expressed the view that the means of social change need to be consistent with the ends. To express the spiritual reality of oneness in our social lives we need to adopt approaches that are unifying rather than divisive. According to Mr. Kothari, enduring social change can only be achieved through processes of consensus building. Consensus building requires people to feel empathy, he emphasized, drawing attention to the way that confrontation can obstruct efforts to bring about deeper changes in the hearts and minds of people: “Throughout the history of all these spiritual people that we have heard about, or know about,” he said, “you will find cases—from Christ to Ramakrishna Paramahansa—that when you see someone who is a wrongdoer, you don’t hate him, you don’t confront him; you change his heart, because these things require a change of heart and a change of heart cannot be brought about by these sudden revolutions.”

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frank dialogue*

In order for these ideas to become a reality rather than a mere enunciation of hope, certain methods are required. Pivotal among these is the employment of frank and open dialogue. This is no small feat in a social context in which one's age, gender, class, or caste usually determine whose opinion matters and whose voice is heard. The groups and committees that Seva Mandir creates at the level of the grassroots provide spaces in which many of these principles are enacted. It is in such spaces that consensus is built among those who participate in the organization's different programs. According to Mr. Kothari the sense of togetherness is intensified in people when they come together to discuss common issues, express their points of view openly, and advance in their collective understanding of these issues. As people express their opinions freely and listen to one another, they realize that the collective good does not contradict the interests of the individual. For people to talk to one another openly, they need to respect each other. The preservation of the dignity of the individual is thus one of the aims of the groups that are being formed by Seva Mandir. Empathy and respect must be expressed in people's speech and in the way they interact with one another.

Regarding this matter, a member of the village development committee of Malaria said:

When there is conflict among the committee members, even if it is with one person, then it will affect everyone else. So to prevent this, we are very careful about the way we speak to the villagers and to one another. We make sure to be considerate of each other's feelings.

Ms. Khetan explained how Seva Mandir staff strive to maintain the dignity of people under all circumstances. "Even if an individual or a department is behaving poorly in some way," she said,

“rather than labeling the respective party as ‘bad’, the behavior itself is addressed.” The following example given by her illustrates this point:

Even when there were corruption cases in Seva Mandir, the way we have dealt with those involved has not been to demean them and show that they are thieves. I think that there has been a lot of effort put into trying to understand why this person deviated from the path. Why did they cheat or become corrupt? If we had to part ways, it has not been done in a vindictive way. We have not tried to get their money; it has been very civilized. Even after they’ve gone, we’ve sometimes taken them back when we felt that there was true remorse on that side.

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Seva Mandir has played a key role in creating the conditions for free and frank dialogue and an environment where everyone’s opinions are heard. The organization has set guidelines regarding the way the committees and the self-help groups it creates operate, and it trains the members of these groups and committees and follows their progress. The following example provided by a staff member from Badgaon illustrates the role that Seva Mandir workers play in facilitating these group discussions:

...It happened that half of the people in one of the village development committees wanted to allocate money to build a community hall, and the other half didn’t. But [the former] half didn’t want to speak because they were afraid of breaking the unity of the committee. However, they discussed it and Seva Mandir played a facilitating role to enable frank discussion and to make sure that people’s opinions were heard and consensus was reached. Finally they all decided to allocate

money from the village development fund to build the community hall.

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Creating structures that reflect noble values

To bring about change, Seva Mandir has chosen constructive work*. This includes developing the capacities of the people,” said a staff member from the Natural Resource Development unit. “Such constructive work,” he further explained, “involves encouraging people to come together, consult, and work in cooperation with one another. The progress of both the individual and society has always been the main objective of Seva Mandir. We do noble work, and noble work should be done in a noble manner.”

But to carry out noble work, structures that reflect noble values are needed. Good individuals will not accomplish much in society if they are obliged to work in institutions that do not reflect the values that they cherish. How can people work for justice through structures based on injustice? How can equality between men and women be established when the institutions of society are governed by norms that discriminate against women? To make sure that those who participate in its programs can pursue their

* The concept of constructive work was developed by Mahatma Gandhi. It was based on the idea that the people themselves had to work for their own social, economic and moral development.

noble goals, Seva Mandir creates spaces at the level of the grassroots that are governed by norms such as justice, collaboration and cooperation:

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...These kinds of platforms are created for people to come together. Nothing can be done in a vacuum. You can't just talk about this. You have to create a place where people can practice these qualities. (A staff member of the Women and Child Development unit)

The constructive work aspect has helped people—social transformation through constructive work. Doing something, seeing the benefit of that change, adding to your confidence, through that process also cleaning up whatever internal contradictions are there, and then demanding changes in the structure.... (Neelima Khetan)

In Seva Mandir, working together...brings about a lot of conquering of the ego without any bombshells coming from anywhere. The same applies to groups—the ego will be questioned and gets rectified automatically. (Mohan Singh Kothari)

Spaces of this nature also provide all community members with the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the activities that are being organized. Seva Mandir's efforts to ensure inclusivity through universal participation are derived from the recognition of the principle of interconnectedness. Acting according to this principle implies ensuring that programs reach everyone, particularly the poorest members of the community. "We try to reach where the government does not," said a staff member from Badgaon block. "...In cases where a family or an individual is extremely poor, the first opportunities are given to them," a member of a village development committee of Dulavaton ka Guda ex-

plained. “Everyone sits together and prioritizes. We see who needs what, which household really needs more, who is younger, who is older. We make a plan to give benefits to the weaker ones first,” offered another member of a committee from Malaria village.

Ms. Swati Patel, in charge of the Women and Child Development unit at Seva Mandir, expanded more on the role that the village development committee plays in ensuring that all action is directed towards collective well-being. According to her, Seva Mandir has faced situations in which people have wanted to work only for their own self-interest or that of a small group of people. For instance, on one occasion a few prominent individuals working at the grassroots were asked to make bathrooms, wells, hand pumps, or cattle sheds which were expected to benefit everyone. Yet they made only a few of these items for their own benefits. “We saw,” she commented, “...that oftentimes people weren’t able to see beyond their own self-interest or beyond that of a certain group of people. Most people could not tap into these benefits so we decided to form these village committees, most of which have about 12 members.”

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According to its staff, the committees and groups fulfill several objectives for Seva Mandir. First, their existence at the level of the villages implies more opportunities for the participation of larger numbers of people. This means that new people in the villages have access to knowledge and resources that have traditionally been in the hands of a few. In addition to this, through their participation in these groups, people learn to work together in an environment of mutuality. Capacity is built at the level of the villages to assume greater responsibility for their own progress and to learn from experience.

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Seva Mandir staff and collaborators described how these groups and committees serve as spaces where social issues are discussed, community needs are addressed, and plans for action are designed. Through their participation in these spaces more and more people come to take responsibility for the development of their villages. Village committees are responsible for providing leadership and managing a variety of local development activities including convening village meetings, monitoring and evaluating ongoing development work, paying village-level workers associated with Seva Mandir, and facilitating interaction with formal government bodies.

Mr. Kamal Lal Ahari, a member of the village development committee of Madla, offered the following on this subject:

Earlier the proposals for development would come from the government, but now with the help and training received from Seva Mandir, we are able to design our own development programs based on our needs and the requirements of the village and then we are able to propose these to the government, through the *panchayat* (village council, a government body) and *gram sabha* (village assembly). The village people themselves have made the village development committee; the entire community looks at the problems, consults on them, reflects on them and then takes the proposal to the government.

A member of the village development committee of Dulavaton ka Guda village commented:

Before we had a village development committee we used to only meet to discuss funerals and weddings. But now we

have a platform that enables us to meet every month and discuss a range of issues.

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Adopting new attitudes

Those who participated in the reflection meetings for this study reiterated many times that the best and most appropriate social structures will not fulfill their purpose unless people are empowered, their vision and consciousness is raised, and they are enabled to possess the qualities, skills and intellectual capabilities that allow them to work for the common good. But what qualities and attitudes should people who wish to work for the betterment of society acquire? How are these qualities developed? “There is a term—*manviya mulya*—for spiritual qualities or human values: truthfulness, dedication, sacrifice, responsibility, collective benefit,” said Mr. Abhishek Jain, a staff member from Jhadol block. Ms. Lakshmi Thakur of the Women and Child Development unit, referred to another important aspect of the work. “...Training, and more training,” she said. “If you want to change the mindset of the people and bring about change without violence and conflict, you have to...change their way of thinking. That can only be done through training.” It is through these trainings, according to one of the members of a village development committee in

Dulavaton ka Guda, that people “develop within themselves the desire to stand up and become champions of justice.”

Over time there has been a great improvement in the understanding of the villagers. Through meetings people are made aware of their rights and responsibilities, and this also helps. People are aware of the development and changes taking place; they are made aware of these through meetings and trainings.

Adopting new attitudes

Working for gender equality is an important area of work for Seva Mandir. “When we form committees we say we need fifty percent women. In the beginning we couldn’t reach that, but now it’s happening,” Mr. Jain explained. “In Seva Mandir’s work we believe that without the participation of women, no work can be accomplished. When women have a role in decision making, then change can come. But to achieve equality, attitudes towards women and commonly held ideas about their status in society have to change.” Educating both men and women about gender equality is an important aspect of Seva Mandir’s work. As Ms. Patel explained, “We talk to the men-folk and find out why this is a problem? What can we do about it? Why do we behave this way? Why is it mainly against women that there is this savage, violent behavior?”

“We pose the same questions to women,” she said and further explained:

We try to raise awareness by showing them that they need to stand up against violence. Just because there is this belief that *pati* is *parameshwar* (husband is lord), that doesn’t mean that the wife should accept everything. We had a workshop with 30 women, and asked them about violence; they said it

is accepted that the men hit them. If you don't put enough salt in the food, then your husband is going to beat you. The attitude was, 'What can we do? If we did something wrong then the husband will hit us. We deserved it because we did the wrong thing, and what can I do about it?' So when we saw the situation, we decided to ask some other older women who had experienced similar violence to speak to them about why it is wrong. After this, there was a change. This was a way in which we raised among these women the awareness of what they can do about violence and that they should also not perpetuate it, because in the way that they educate their children or daughters-in-law they teach them to expect it.

According to Ms. Patel, although the establishment of equality between men and women requires changes in the attitudes of every member of society, special attention has to be paid to the future generations: "A few years ago, a 15-year-old boy told me that 'If my wife makes a mistake I will hit her.' When I heard this, I realized that if this is his thought process now, then later on when we work with these men, of what use will it be?"

But equality between men and women cannot be established in a society that is permeated by other kinds of prejudices. "There are two levels of unity—unity between women and men, and unity between women of different backgrounds," added Ms. Patel. "There are a lot of prejudices between women—you are Johar, she is Adivasi, you are Meghwal (different castes). But if the women aren't first unified, then how can we ever struggle for equality with men? ..." Seva Mandir tries to eliminate these prejudices by creating bonds of friendship among people: "The Kaya Training Centre helped a lot because the rule was that all have to eat together, and all the women have to sleep in the same room...it was not that the Brahmins (considered the highest caste) would eat separately—

otherwise they wouldn't sit with the others. Sometimes things are addressed openly, sometimes indirectly," Ms. Patel explained.

She later shared an example of how the organization discovered an indirect way to encourage younger women who were intimidated by the attitudes of older women to participate in Seva Mandir's programs:

Adopting new attitudes

The older women would always come to the Seva Mandir programs, but we also wanted to encourage the younger women to attend. So what we did was encourage them more by having more programs catering to their needs, such as discussing adolescent problems or younger women's issues, which really didn't concern the older women...If the older women would shout at the daughters-in-law, they wouldn't do anything or stand up for themselves. So these programs encouraged the daughters-in-law to know their rights and stand up for themselves. Also, only the younger daughters-in-law would have their young children come for the *balwadis*, so it opened a space for Seva Mandir to work with the younger women, otherwise they couldn't even leave the house. They made separate groups for married and unmarried, and adolescents, to tackle these problems also. In issues for married women, like reproduction, pregnancy—these are younger people's problems, so it became very easy to encourage the younger women to come for these programs.

The different values and expectations that people hold are influenced by many factors and will not change overnight. Ms. Vidhya Bhati of the Women and Child Development unit explained, for example, that even though Seva Mandir trainings emphasize that people should share their ideas, ask questions, and speak, it is

challenging to overcome the many other cultural factors that keep women silent:

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People's socialization is based on all of their interactions in society, not just with Seva Mandir, so changing behavior is difficult. People sometimes go and talk to them and the women just sit quietly. One of the rural ladies went with me to talk to a balwadi *sanchalika*. And while the *sanchalika* was talking, the lady was just looking on and staring at her face, but she wasn't talking or contributing anything. And after a while the *sanchalika* asked me, 'Does this lady have some mental problem?' Because she was just sitting there and staring blankly. Then, of course, I said, 'No, she doesn't.' Once the *sanchalika* had left, I told the lady, 'Why weren't you sharing your thoughts and opinions? You have so much knowledge and practical experience; why didn't you share it?' The *sanchalika* was telling her exactly what she had been told in another training session, but she was just sitting there, listening. She never explained that she already knew that information.

To deal with these challenges, then, Seva Mandir also has to direct its attention to the family and the community. It has to address the culture in which men and women are immersed. According to Mr. Devlal Katara of Jhadol block, the first step to change culture is to involve all members in the decisions the family has to make, and to begin "to educate the children and treat the girl and boy child the same way."

But to change those cultural elements that are impediments to the full participation of women in society is not a simple task. Various staff members gave examples of some of the elements of the local culture that have to change and of ways in which Seva Mandir

addresses them:

During women's monthly menstrual cycles, they are told that they are dirty and must stay separate from everyone until their cycle ends. Therefore, we make an effort to educate these women about the scientific causes of these monthly cycles and help them to understand that it is not their fault in any way and that they should not feel dirty or unwanted. (A member of the Women and Child Development unit)

Adopting new attitudes

The entire community sits together and they evaluate what are the correct and incorrect norms and practices being followed and try to bring about change. For example, child marriage was a practice that was morally and socially incorrect so the entire community sat together to discuss this. We now ensure that all marriages are registered and the committee also ensures that child marriages do not take place. (Mr. Kamal Lal Ahari)

With regard to aspects of the culture that are resilient to change, Seva Mandir has sought to distinguish between those issues that are to be addressed directly and those aspects of the culture that need to be dealt with gently and worked around. A staff member of the Women and Child Development unit remarked:

According to Rajasthani culture, women are not encouraged to attend any event alone or unaccompanied, hence we kept this aspect of culture in mind and when Seva Mandir organized programs for women; if men-folk wanted to accompany them, then this was allowed. Similarly, there is also a *ghunghat* (veil) culture among women, so we do not insist that they should remove their *ghunghat* when they come for activities and workshops. We also do not criticize them or say that *ghunghat* wearing is wrong, but slowly and with encourage-

ment we tell them that they can share their thoughts even if they do not want to remove their *ghunghat*. We use a similar approach in the case of women who want to bring their children along with them.

Adopting new attitudes

In addition to seeking to change those aspects of the culture which have been sources of oppression and injustice, Seva Mandir's work also involves efforts to draw from some of the positive attitudes and values that are embedded in a region's culture. "Any part of the culture that is for the common good, the larger good, we have adopted," explained Mr. Kothari, "but we have not adopted any part which does not fit into that definition, because society has its own superstitions, so we have to use discrimination."

An existing cultural value is the recognition of human solidarity. Seva Mandir builds on this sense of collective identity that exists among the people of the region; this sense lends impetus to a desire to work for the common good. According to Mr. Kothari there is a general feeling among the people that what is in the interest of the collective ultimately proves to be in the interest of the individual as well. "If you have a proper dialogue with people," he said, "this idea is inherent somewhere in their hearts—although it may not be clear in today's thinking or vocabulary—that whatever is for the larger good may also be good for me in the longer run."

The following are Mr. Ahari's words in relation to the concept of solidarity:

Some families, if they don't have many people to work on their land and are poor, they perform *handa** during the har-

* Handa is the local term for a practice whereby the villagers of a certain area come together as a group and they go to each others' homes to help one another with their harvesting as needed.

vest time. They put out the word in the village that they need help and everyone comes to help with the harvest. This is part of the culture. With weddings and funerals, too, everyone contributes.

To preserve and to promote these values further, Seva Mandir uses the effective means of social communication provided by the local culture. A few staff members referred to Gavri, a tribal festival which involves dance-drama performances, as a medium for raising awareness about government campaigns, and educating people about immunization, the environment, and afforestation. Others spoke of how in its forestry work Seva Mandir has adopted a cultural practice called *kesar chadkao* (saffron sprinkling), which involves throwing saffron on trees to discourage deforestation. The saffron, considered to lend the area an aura of sanctity, is sprinkled by a recognized religious figure. They also referred to the usefulness of sacred groves—areas of the forest in which a temple is built—in encouraging the preservation of the forest around the temple. Mr. Madhav Tailor of the Natural Resource Development unit observed: “In the last 50 years, most of the forest has been cut, but only the sacred groves remained. They even had to divert roads around them.”

*Adopting new
attitudes*



Working for the common good in the midst of contrary forces

Applying spiritual principles to social processes that become more materialistic with every passing day is not an easy task. Endeavoring to work towards the common good in a world in which individuals are urged to pursue their narrow self-interest is challenging. Given the great influence that individualism and materialism have on the lives of people, it is not surprising for Seva Mandir staff to encounter people in their work who are more interested in their own short-term gain than in a vision of collective betterment. A few Seva Mandir collaborators feel that during the past years the people from the villages have begun to lose their sense of connectedness. As one collaborator explained, those who participated in the projects in earlier stages had a long-term vision of their purpose and work with Seva Mandir. According to him, the number of people who see the payment that they receive for their labor as an end in itself has increased significantly.

Aware of the difficulty of controlling most outside influences, Seva Mandir staff try to ensure that at least the trainings they provide

for raising up village leaders do not increase in the participants the desire and the capacity to pursue their own self-interest. Ms. Thakur explained this challenge in the following way:

Usually when we're promoting leadership programs in villages, there are certain people whose understanding is better than others...So, unconsciously, one of these people gets promoted by Seva Mandir. But then the same person goes and does just the opposite of what he is taught. He starts working with others, but for his own self-interest...They don't work honestly, they favor their own people. It's not possible to work with everyone at the same time. You have to work with a few people at a time. But how do you go beyond the few you begin working with and reach everyone? How do you prevent individuals from working for their own self-interest?

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In addition to raising participants' awareness of the importance of behaving in ways that will benefit everyone, staff at Seva Mandir have to address the question of nepotism at the level of the village committees. "People, especially the committee members, do take advantage of their position and take extra benefits," a Badgaon staff member observed. "The village development committee sometimes wants to give the position of *balwadi sanchalika* (in-charge) to their own daughters-in-law or family members," another member commented. "So we had to develop a system to make the process transparent...We sit with the committee, share the *sanchalika's* paper with the committee and discuss why they have chosen her."

Other members explained that, by incorporating more and more people into its programs and raising their capacity to be able to serve in these committees, Seva Mandir tries to avoid the creation of a group of elite who are in charge of the affairs of each

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community. They explained that through discussions held with both committee members and the entire village Seva Mandir staff remind villagers of the responsibility they have for the development of their communities. To fulfill this responsibility, they are to avoid following anyone blindly. The committees are there to serve them. They, too, as community members should assist the committees in their task by reminding them that the choices they make have to be based on their moral judgment rather than on their own interests. Putting spirituality into action, said one Seva Mandir staff member, means acting as a responsible member of the community.

Another challenge that Seva Mandir collaborators are aware of is the challenge of ensuring that the promotion of qualities such as empathy and love, and the use of methods based on building consensus do not inadvertently lead to passivity in those who participate in its programs. “To say that one should neither express anger towards others nor use violence is not tantamount to telling people that they should be passive, merely accept what comes to them, and not strive for change. One can struggle for justice and yet still show empathy towards others,” said Ms. Khetan. “For example, we all agree that a man has done something wrong when he’s beaten his wife, but you can conduct a conversation with him either with empathy or with rage.” For Ms. Khetan, the path to societal improvement is long and involves many gradual and incremental changes. In response to critics who may question an approach of building on consensus rather than on conflict, she said:

...You should look at it and tell us...of the women’s groups you’ve seen, the changes you’ve seen, are they fundamental changes or not?...You look at the Van Utthan Sangh [a federation of forest protection committees in the region created

by Seva Mandir]—it is not a small achievement that they have altered the nature of the discourse. From a private approach to land, they have shifted it to a more common kind of ownership and approach. So are these shifts fundamental, deep, or not?...If they are deep shifts, then maybe our method may not be that weak...It can't be just a conversation on 'I think this is the theory, you think this is the theory'—it has to be on social change in practice.

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Achieving consistency between the personal conduct of Seva Mandir staff and the aims and practices they are trying to promote in the communities the organization serves was another challenge Seva Mandir staff and collaborators identified. In this connection, Ms. Patel commented:

Whether you look at Seva Mandir's aims or the Women and Child Development unit's aims, the first struggle is with yourself. Because until we make and feel these changes within ourselves, it is hard to talk to anyone else about it. It will be very superficial. For example, if I say that people should treat children—boys and girls—equally, and that is what we want to bring about, a change in attitudes towards gender relations, then if I don't believe in this or I'm not practicing these at home, it may become difficult to tell others to do it. It is very empty. It is like this with any area of Seva Mandir's work. Until we practice it ourselves, it is difficult to tell anyone else to do it. Sometimes it does happen that we say one thing and practice another. We may yell at the servant at home, but at Seva Mandir we say we are equal and should treat others equally. Sometimes we do it consciously, sometimes unconsciously. It is a big struggle, because sometimes you do one thing inside and another thing outside. Sometimes I feel like I have different identities. In Seva Mandir I have a different identity.

When I'm at home it is different. And at my home in Pune, my identity there is also different. There are lots of different struggles.

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In relation to this theme, a staff member of the Natural Resource Development unit said the following:

Sometimes we do something ourselves then go to the village and tell them not to do it. Development isn't just for tribals; it's for us all. We have different masks, but we should analyze this. Morality is not just a subject in our textbooks; what is it in practice?

Although the challenge of achieving higher levels of consistency between one's own behavior and the aims one espouses in one's work with communities is inevitably great, Seva Mandir does offer spaces for reflection for its staff to meet and discuss such challenges. This assists individuals to become more aware of any contradictions that may exist and strive towards greater consistency. "If the self-help group is not united, then how can they share benefits with others? If we have a contradiction, how can we help others?" asked Mr. Taylor.



May knowledge grow in my heart

*M*ara ghat mein upje gyan (may knowledge grow in my heart) were the words Mr. Kothari uttered, referring to a line from the theme song of Seva Mandir. He further explained the meaning of *gyan*, the Hindi word for both scientific knowledge and higher understanding:

The line that comes out of it is ‘*gyan*’. This is a complex word. It means knowledge, understanding, and also a sense of the larger good, enlightenment. This is all encompassed by the word. This song has been sung by thousands in the Seva Mandir programs over the years and it appeals to the higher sense that is inherent in people. The second line that comes is, ‘Human life/is an important jewel/without striving/it is worthless.’ This means striving to have a higher understanding. This makes sense to the people we work with even today.

Knowledge, then, in Seva Mandir’s perspective, is the impulse that drives and gives direction to change, it is the inner yearning of the soul that drives the individual to seek understanding.

*May knowledge
grow in my heart*

Mr. Shailendra Tiwari, head of the Natural Resource Development unit, referred to a prayer that expresses this meaning of knowledge:

'De gyan, Saraswati Ma ...' (give us knowledge, Mother Saraswati) the prayer says. It is a soul-cry. It is not simply literacy, it is *gyan*. We need both Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) and Saraswati (goddess of learning and knowledge). The soul is crying for knowledge—about education, life, the environment, everything. *Gyan* means exposure, which can generate demand for development.

Where is one to find this kind of knowledge? According to Mr. Niranjan Ameta, a member of the Natural Resource Development unit, the source of this knowledge is not only the major urban centers like New Delhi, as is often assumed. Rather, knowledge can also be passed from one village to another. Other members of the staff elaborated on this idea. While local knowledge is important, they said, development efforts can benefit from combining it with modern science, technology and other sources of knowledge from outside the community in an appropriate manner. "Local knowledge and outside knowledge are both used; we combine both. We don't say only local knowledge or outside knowledge is always good," Mr. Bhati commented. "Both have a place," Ms. Khetan added. "Both bottom-up and top-down happen because the issue of women's empowerment, not beating children, doesn't come from the bottom. Our society has always believed that if you hit the children, they will study, that there is nothing wrong with that. [The idea that it should not be like this] was not in the discourse. The way the caste *panchayats* exclude women is not good, nor are all local things good."

Staff members from Badgaon block shared examples of how local and scientific knowledge combine in a few areas in which Seva Mandir works with the community. With respect to agriculture, one of them explained:

Old seeds offer less yield, so we teach community members how to use the new seeds using modern scientific techniques. We are not bringing in hybrids, but are improving the ones that exist in the local area. In the training for the traditional birth attendants, we use scientific methods, teach them what medical practices they should use while helping mothers give birth, the schemes available for pregnant women, and immunization.

*May knowledge
grow in my heart*

Indigenous technologies are also preserved and used in Seva Mandir's work. Mr. Tulsi Ram, a staff member from Jhadol block, noted the following with respect to some of the local technologies used and developed by the people of the region:

They have so many different technologies—they do a kind of engineering to connect two streams and make a wooden bridge between them. When the water is channeled from different streams, they make a barrier and a third channel at a cross point and use that to bring water to the lower fields. They measure it and build a bridge across.

Mr. Katara added:

They have lots of different types of water engineering that even engineers don't know. We combine the different types of knowledge—local and modern—to give them the maximum benefit. We see how they can benefit from modern agricultural technologies.

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grow in my heart*

“And what is the source of spiritual knowledge?” Seva Mandir staff were asked. The source, many answered, is the common spiritual knowledge that has been accumulated by populations throughout the centuries. There is a conviction among the staff and collaborators that certain principles that form part of this knowledge are still relevant, but at the same time, the organization is not inflexible. There is a constant dialogue with these ideas with the intention of first finding those principles or beliefs, especially those from the local culture, which have proven efficacy. Ms. Khetan remarked, “These are maybe principles espoused by Christ to Ramakrishnaji, but Seva Mandir came to it not through any religion; the villagers taught us this. It has arisen out of our experience.”

Spiritual knowledge comes from the conviction that qualities such as love and truthfulness and principles such as the oneness of mankind are real and that they can contribute to the construction of a better world. People in the villages possess this knowledge because they have lived it all their lives. “When the farms of some families in the village were burned and the family had nothing to eat, the whole village got together and arranged to provide food grains for that family. We think that way,” a committee member from Bada Bhilwara explained.

A committee member in Dulavaton ka Guda stated: “Humanity is one and God created us all. We’re all God’s children, so why these differences?” Another member from that village commented: “Every person together makes up the society and each person has to answer at the end of his life for what he has done. If you have followed the path of truth, you will find truth.”

Naturally, making sure that a holistic conception of knowledge permeates all of its activities has certainly not been without challenge for Seva Mandir. For one, the agency has had to strive to think critically about its own approach in order to avoid being unduly swayed by the dominant discourse in the field, and increasingly by the modern educational system, which has encouraged more professionalization and specialization and a narrower focus on science. In this context, it is easy to lose sight of an integrated understanding of knowledge or *gyan*. Referring to an approach increasingly taken by actors in the development field, a staff member of the Natural Resource Development unit commented:

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Most focus on only one particular sector of development, the area in which they are specialized, and tend to ignore the other areas. We often lack a holistic approach in development...we are focusing too much on science.

Another member of that unit said:

We come from an era of scientific imperialism and when we started to implement policies, we were taught that we had to teach the tribals, that knowledge has to be brought from outside. In other words, the knowledge from the West and centers of learning have to be brought and provided to the villagers...instead of making efforts and encouraging people at the grassroots to generate local knowledge. Our current education system teaches people to work and aspire for jobs in the cities rather than devoting one's time to agriculture in the villages. To bring about a change in this kind of mindset is extremely challenging, as we have from the beginning been brought up in this kind of culture.

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The staff of the organization have themselves been brought up in an educational system that largely values modern science above local knowledge and values urban employment and lifestyles above agriculture and rural life. Thus, encouraging people at the grassroots to generate and apply local knowledge and to value their agricultural lifestyle required staff to reorient their own thinking.

Another challenge for the agency in seeking to encourage people to generate and apply knowledge is for the staff members to really believe that the local people have the capacity to do so. The organization's staff had to change patterns of behavior inherited from the culture they grew up in, which hindered their ability to build the capacity of others. In addition, though it was not initially easy, they had to learn to convince community members—particularly segments of the population which have historically been oppressed—that they possess knowledge and that their views matter.

Ms. Patel explained the process she went through in order to overcome cultural assumptions that someone with more formal education has all of the answers:

The culture of asking questions did not exist in India. What your parents or school teachers say is correct and you are not to question it. So when I studied at a very famous university and came here, I thought I knew all the answers. But afterwards I also realized the significance of giving other people's views importance. They have more practical knowledge. We have come from far away, but [they] are here, so [they] have more practical knowledge. It's very important that people should confidently share their opinions, especially women.

Ms. Bhati described the approach the organization takes to helping community members, especially women, realize that they possess knowledge and their views are important to the consultative process:

Oftentimes we assure the people of their value—whether you are from the village or from the city, your viewpoint and opinions are also important. We encourage them to share. For a change to be brought about in these women you have to encourage them to know that their opinions are important. This helps bring about a change, because they will share more, express more. Because from the beginning they are taught that they don't know anything; but when we tell them that their opinions are important, this gives them confidence and helps to bring about change. They realize that they also have understanding and they can use this. This [encouragement] we do through the medium of trainings. So then they also feel that women also have a standing in society and our thoughts also have some importance.

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grow in my heart*

Another challenge Seva Mandir has faced pertains to the role of knowledge drawn from religion. While religion holds much value as a source of spiritual principles, insights and motivation for the development process, many people hold beliefs that are part of their religious traditions but that prove to be a great hindrance to the development process. Much gender inequality, hatred, conflict and prejudice has been upheld and promoted in the name of religion. Due to this, Seva Mandir has had to sort through the various beliefs held by the members of the communities in which it works. It has endeavored to distinguish between those beliefs and traditions that are found to be valuable from others that cause harm. A staff member of the Women and Child Development

unit commented:

*May knowledge
grow in my heart*

When there is violence against women, we try and address all these misconceptions about women that we claim come from religion...how much actually comes from religion is yet to be known. Scientific methods are used to explain various concepts...When we talk about development of children, we explain to them about the entire process in a scientific manner. Whatever programs we carry out, we try to use both religious and scientific knowledge. If religion is saying something about a particular issue then what does science say about the same issue.



Rising above the exigencies of material existence

What is it that makes human beings human, motivates them to love, to sacrifice and to give of themselves? What impels people to sustain their work for the common good? Answers to these questions are, for many, grounded in the spiritual nature of the human being. To say that human reality is spiritual is an affirmation of human potentialities and not a denial of the material dimension of existence. It suggests that we as human beings can rise above the natural and material exigencies of our existence, and implies the need to raise our consciousness, to realize that we are bound to others in spirit, that we share the same reality, and that we are united and connected both to each other and to nature. Maybe it is such faith in the capacity of human beings to develop their spiritual qualities, to grow, and to transform themselves that motivates many development organizations to work for a better society.

To work for the common good requires sacrifice. But what makes people give up their own comfort for others? What makes them

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love and trust people they barely know? What motivates them to see beyond their own interests? Seva Mandir's answers to these questions are derived from its belief in the goodness of the human being. It is on that dimension of human nature, which inclines the individual toward qualities such as honesty, selflessness, and trustworthiness, that it focuses its attention. "The human being... is not only a selfish being. There is a higher plane to that," Ms. Khetan observed. She believes that the intrinsic nobility that people have within them enables them to respond to appeals to strive for the common good. It is to this nobility that Seva Mandir appeals when it calls people to transcend the promptings of the ego and of narrow self-interest, which also form part of human reality.

"The movement of the individual towards higher ideals is a process that takes time," said Mr. Bhati. "The ego doesn't get conquered all at once. It is a process from stage to stage." Mr. Jain explained, "If a glass is half filled some people think it is half-empty. We look more towards the positive side and hope the negative side will be drowned in it."

Many at the organization believe that people should be treated in such a way that their lower nature is not unnecessarily provoked. Mr. Ameta said:

In a person, there is the lower nature and the higher nature; they can go in both directions and the capacity has to be used in the right direction. Everyone has the same reality, no one is just an animal. You have to use the person well, treat them with dignity and understanding and their reaction will be different...At whatever level the person is, we have to see the positive in them and take the positive forward. If a person has enthusiasm and capacity, we need to take it in the right direc-

tion, otherwise they can become unmotivated...In our work with the commons, Seva Mandir tried to give everyone work on common lands. If we had not involved everyone, some people might have opposed it. When you let the animal nature start to develop from a small level, then it just grows....

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Mr. Arun Maheshwari, a member of the Natural Resource Development unit, concurred:

...Sometimes development...will stimulate the animal nature. There is always the animal nature, but certain things in the environment influence it and can bring man's animal or positive nature out. If you offer benefits to one family and not to another, then you can bring out the bad sides. People's animal nature doesn't come out because people are poor and uneducated, it often actually becomes worse when people are more rich and educated.

The way the organization is managed is also a reflection of its belief in people's capacity to rise beyond the limitations of the self. The atmosphere, according to Ms. Khetan, is not one of supervision. "We give people space and trust that they want to do work." According to her, this trust has been paid back to Seva Mandir in full measure. "It's not that we've trusted in people and have then been taken advantage of."

She then referred to the following example to demonstrate the commitment that Seva Mandir staff have towards the organization:

Sometimes in the board meetings we engage in such hard discussions—should we take a salary raise or not at this time? We are one of the few organizations who have increased the work hours; we used to work from 10:00am to 5:00pm and

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we made it 9:30 to 5:30, and everyone discussed and people agreed to it, and no union came up to protest. In this day and age where can you find people on such low salaries saying ‘we’ll increase our work hours,’ even though we brought down the number of holidays?

Regarding the atmosphere of trust and mutual support that exists in the organization, a staff member in Badgaon recounted, “I had an accident and needed money for treatment, then I received a transfer of funds to my account from Seva Mandir. We really take care of each other and treat each other like family members. There is a lot of trust.”

If avoiding approaches to development that try to satiate people’s limitless material desires is difficult, building an organization based on trust and mutual respect is even more demanding. Seva Mandir staff commented on some of these challenges:

If we give people the capability to decide, they can also oppress others. (Mr. Nitin Verma from Jhadol block)

In our work with the commons, Seva Mandir is always trying to give everyone work on the pasture lands, but sometimes if a person does not get work then he goes and opposes all the other programs of Seva Mandir. (A staff member of the Natural Resource Development unit)

Consumerism tries to create needs and people try to fulfill those needs. Then it creates even more needs and forces people to do wrong to fulfill these unjustified needs created by the market and consumerist society. (A staff member of the Natural Resource Development unit)

The influence of a culture that continually creates new needs and wants in people makes the task of encouraging individuals to live up to higher ideals—to share, to be generous, and to sacrifice for the well-being of the community—even more challenging. According to its staff, the organization has sought to forge ahead patiently in its efforts to promote sustainable development by bringing out the good in people, even when the behavior of certain individuals has been less than cooperative. An individual from the Natural Resource Development unit said:

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During Seva Mandir's work and programs, if we feel that an individual is not cooperating or is incorrect in their approach, then we try and maintain tolerance. We are constantly striving to be more tolerant and to accept others' views and opinions no matter how difficult it is. The aim is to pursue a common goal but not compromise individual benefit while we accompany people. We motivate people by...appreciating their viewpoints and recognizing their efforts...we encourage more people to work together and in cooperation with one another. This approach takes longer but it is more sustainable.

While seeking to give people freedom to decide, Seva Mandir avoids creating structures that place power completely in the hands of individuals. As Mr. Nitin Verma explained:

In order to avoid the freedom of the individual becoming the cause of the oppression of others, we join people together into collectives. People are free to express their opinions, but we ask all to share their opinions and make a collective decision. People can express it if they don't like a decision, so no one can force others.

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In the context of Seva Mandir's view of human nature, the organization's view on freedom reflected, not so much a desire to promote unbridled liberty, as much as a commitment to create space for individuals to frankly and openly exchange views, take responsibility and make decisions for their own development. Mr. Bhati remarked:

Everyone has freedom to express ideas; it's not just that Nee-limaji (the CEO) said it and so that's it. There can be debate. There is a space created. If a professional comes, he can speak, and if a villager comes, so can he. At all levels, people can speak and have equality. Whatever seems best after discussion is carried forward.

Ms. Sunita Kumari, in-charge of the People's Management School, commented that this freedom comes with responsibility. She described the organization's work as "building people's capacity to make decisions, fostering their ability to work together in groups, and to uphold the rules of those groups. They are taught that they have not only rights, but also responsibilities."



Material means and the common good

In their reflections on material possessions, Seva Mandir's staff and collaborators spoke of wealth as a means to further the progress of the community rather than as an end in itself. Based on such understanding, then, the purpose of work is to contribute to the common good. It is through their work that individuals can generate material means that can benefit themselves and their families as well as their neighbors and other members of the community.

An emphasis on collective good implies that individuals cannot amass wealth at the expense of the well-being of others. Mr. Kothari shared his insights on the purpose of wealth:

Adoration of wealth as the ultimate dispenser of happiness can become a problem, and this sense of collective good and larger interest helps to counter this. When you are seeking the whole wealth of the world for yourself, then you are impoverishing the community, depriving it of something else. So I think this sense of the larger good—of what is proper and how much to

strive for money and by what means to strive for money—that sense comes, and I think Seva Mandir’s work entails that.

He later spoke of the idea of balanced and appropriate development in the following manner:

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Even when we discussed the process of development in one of these Seva Mandir functions, I made a statement that was a difficult statement to make. I said that we must aim for balanced development, and people must accept development based on balance and wisdom. We cannot expect to all become millionaires, because if every villager started expecting that, it will either be an impossible task or it will set into motion greed to such an extent that it will pervert society. That was a dangerous statement to make. But the sense that we convey to the people we work for and work with is that by joining our movement you aren’t going to become millionaires, but the aim is development in which your needs, not your greed, will be met. That understanding exists in Seva Mandir. The challenge remains in the present scenario because of this attraction of endless acquisition of goods and gadgets and luxuries.

A number of activities undertaken in the communities in which Seva Mandir works demonstrate this understanding of work and wealth. The organization has helped many communities establish village development funds, in which community members contribute a certain percentage of their earnings to be used for the development of the village. Village development committees that provide a space in which people can develop and practice qualities such as selflessness and sacrifice have also galvanized community efforts to contribute voluntary labor in order to construct community centers and roads. Regarding the village development fund, Mr. Jain said:

The village development fund is for all—all people contribute. If they are using it, it should be invested in something that can result in earnings, so it is revolving.

The fund not only provides material means; it also contributes to unifying the members of a community and creating a sense of shared responsibility. Mr. Ameta remarked:

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Many times in the traditional forums for decision-making, people decide to use money they would use for alcohol to put in the village development fund instead—they make sacrifices.

The village development fund reflects an understanding of wealth as being a shared resource for the development of the community. The fund is used for a variety of development efforts. For example, in Madla, the funds were used to hire extra teachers in order to provide education to the children of the village. The local government school had only 2 teachers for 230 students, so the village development committee met and decided to hire 2 more teachers from among the educated but unemployed youth of the village. The committee pays the salaries of these 2 teachers out of the interest received from the village fund. They hold classes in the village library established by Seva Mandir.

The sense of balance and moderation in regards to material wealth is not imposed by Seva Mandir on the communities with which it works. In general, from the perspective of the communities, true wealth is social wealth. It is recognized that while individual wealth yields temporary benefit, collective funds have more lasting value. There is a consciousness of the need to use wealth to contribute to collective well-being. For example, Mr. Ahari remarked:

In the village the prevalent mentality towards wealth is that if a person does not have wealth or money then everyone helps him, individually we help him and as a community we help him, too. In the entire village people who earn a lot of wealth are few, but whatever wealth is received is shared with families who are needy. We also try to prevent corruption from entering the village. The attitude in the village towards work is a positive one. Work is something that should be done for the benefit of all. There is a feeling of sacrifice and ownership.

The understanding that has traditionally existed in the village is that good character is more important than the possession of great wealth. A staff member in Badgaon commented:

If you have a good child, but little wealth, that child can eventually earn through an honest livelihood and help the household. But no matter how much money you have or how much he earns, if your child is not good, he will spend it away recklessly.

If the accumulation of wealth is not to be the purpose of one's efforts, what is it, then, that motivates people to work? A more spiritual approach to development might propose that service to others should be what motivates people's work. According to some staff, only when people work with the spirit of service does a sense of concern for the well-being of future generations arise. When work is done for profit alone, only immediate benefits are kept in mind.

A Badgaon staff member commented:

People should work out of the spirit of service, not just for money, otherwise the activities don't go well. If someone works

out of the spirit of service, then they will sacrifice for the sake of the well-being of future generations.

To foment a spirit of service among community members, Seva Mandir has encouraged the participants in its programs to do voluntary labor in their communities. In one village, for example, with the encouragement of the village development committee, community members contributed a total of 1250 days of voluntary labor to construct a community center while Seva Mandir contributed the construction materials. A committee member described the experience from Dulavaton ka Guda village:

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...The community decided to construct a proper road to the village school. Now the school offers up to class 8 and the children can study in it very comfortably and also go to it because of the road. Similar efforts were made for the construction of the health centers in the village. Otherwise, things like this cannot be accessed by the poor, who are not able to travel to the city.

According to Ms. Khetan, it is the quality of the work that is undertaken by the people who participate in Seva Mandir programs that distinguishes them from others. In response to people who ask Seva Mandir to upscale its *balwadis*, she said:

How do you upscale love? Upscaling love is also not rocket science. If Seva Mandir can bring love into its work with much less qualified people working at a much lower salary, why can't the government, with all the brains in the country, bring love into its functioning? So it's not that esoteric either. But institutions aren't structured around it, empathy and love. They have become dry and hard.

Mr. Kothari observed:

Many institutions—government institutions or others—there the whole approach is not love-based or empathy-based, but the whole approach there actually arises from the prehistoric times of someone driving slaves to do some work. They will do the minimum they can get by with and carry on, and try to extract as much work out of a person as possible. So there, love is sidetracked.

Love creates an encouraging, nurturing and creative environment which changes the character of institutions and the work carried out under their aegis. While Seva Mandir recognizes how vital qualities such as love, service and empathy are to the building of strong institutions, it is at the same time not blind to the crucial role that hard work and consistent effort play in the raising of such institutions and in their perpetuation. Mr. Vivek Vyas of the National Resource Development unit said, “Development will never take place—Einstein will never be born—if people don’t work hard. It will not happen just by working a few hours a day.”

Seva Mandir has been presented with a number of challenges related to promoting and upholding the above attitudes toward wealth and work in the context of the growing influence of consumerism and individualism in society. Preventing corruption in the village with regard to the use of money and the provision of work was another one of the challenges mentioned by Seva Mandir staff. In Madla, a member of the committee explained:

We don’t allow injustice to happen; if we do the entire job for someone, we also accept the full amount of money for it. In the village there is an individual who is a contractor. This person is in charge of assigning jobs to the people in the vil-

lage. Sometimes what he does is to appoint only two people to the job and the remaining two names he puts down himself without informing the concerned people. Then he takes the money meant for these people for himself. When the committee was informed of this, it spoke with the person and tried to put an end to the problem. The committee prevents this kind of injustice and dishonesty from happening.

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Similarly, the village committee helps the whole community decide where a new scheme such as the installation of a hand pump should be implemented so that it addresses a real need and does not just end up in the area where the more powerful community members live.

Sometimes, corruption occurs during the implementation of government schemes. For example, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA*) has provided labor to many villagers, but some community members and local leaders have misused the Act. The dishonest contractor referred to above by the member of the village development committee of Madla is a case in point. In such instances, Seva Mandir seeks ways in which it can help ensure that the work and money expended under the Act benefit the generality of community members. Effort is also made to ensure that other forms of corruption such as neglect for the quality of the work done does not set in and that through implementing the Act, dependence is not created. Mr. Ameta explained:

Seva Mandir thought maybe we shouldn't work on NREGA because the government is doing it, but the quality is poor.

* The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, a scheme of the Government of India, aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas of India by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

There is planning done for the whole village, but it is not good. People use money in the wrong way. The government will leave in a few years; then there will be no one at all to help. People don't care because they're getting money at the moment. But later when these things fall apart, what will be left? People become dependent. So we're looking for ways Seva Mandir can help ensure quality work.

Otherwise, as Mr. Vyas commented, "corruption becomes a habit." Seva Mandir's sustained effort over the years and its attention to raising the capabilities of communities to take responsibility for their own advancement has led it to develop a keen perception of the challenges facing communities regarding the role of work and wealth in community life, and to continually evolve new ways to address these challenges.

Even as Seva Mandir carries forward its work to build capacity among communities to take responsibility for their own development, it cannot, of course, like any development agency that relies on the support of funding agencies, remain immune to challenges related to gaining the means to pursue its aims. Mr. Vyas remarked:

Most funding agencies look for immediate results—for example, the villages should become self-sufficient in 3 years—then withdraw. They overlook the institution-building part. Our work by contrast was to build institutions. But they want immediate results. Having an in-depth understanding of the culture seems irrelevant to people, but it is very important in the long-run.

Although it may at times be challenging, the organization manages, with wisdom and discernment, to locate funds for its ac-

tivities without compromising the basic principles on which its approach is founded. It is evident, however, that the challenge of the legitimate pursuit and use of wealth can exist at all levels of a development agency.

A challenge Seva Mandir encountered in striving to encourage an ethic of service among its staff had to do with the setting of their remuneration. Ms. Khetan commented:

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Seva Mandir as an institution has tried to take a balanced view. Even in development organizations there was a time when we said we'll only pay Rs 2000 per month and that became a sacred kind of thing—it's not for money, it's service. But then we realized that if you pitch it like that, then most people in society will not join the effort, because they don't have money, they have family liabilities, and they have to be responsive to those also. On the other hand Seva Mandir has not gone the way of paying salaries which are so market-driven that you can't justify them even—why do you need so much money? In that sense we've had a pragmatic approach. We have looked at the market but we have also told people that if in Seva Mandir you are looking at the job, don't assess it only in terms of the salary. The work environment you will have here, the respect you will get, the space you will get, you will not receive elsewhere. So you have to look at that, at the totality of your job, not just say that I'm getting Rs 20,000 elsewhere, why don't you give me more.

She went on to cite an example that illustrated her point:

There was a [Seva Mandir] non-formal educational center instructor who worked in the city and now works for less [remuneration] in the village. She said that, for her, respect

was important—‘Because here I get respect, I can live in my own village, and I get happiness because of teaching the village children.’ In the city you are a faceless entity. Maybe you are getting more money, but there is no respect in that job. So I think in those cases, people have made those choices. If you create spaces and opportunities where a more fulfilling life can be created, then people will not look only at money.

There is a growing trend of migration to the cities that is fuelled by the breakdown of social and economic structures in rural areas as well as the increasing influence of a culture that encourages people to pursue avenues leading to ever-greater material wealth. That this instructor decided to return to her village and work in the local non-formal educational center demonstrates the existence of non-material motivation. Seva Mandir has thus sought to address challenges related to the levels of remuneration it offers by raising people’s consciousness of the value of work beyond the money one earns. The joy that comes from serving one’s community, the respect and love one earns from those for whom and with whom one serves, and the extent to which one’s capacities develop in the process motivate people to choose to work with Seva Mandir.



Reflections on the results of the study

The study presented here has provided the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity with an opportunity to reflect on certain concepts that seem to be highly relevant to development efforts that try to draw on spiritual principles in carrying out their programs. This section provides a brief discussion of some of these concepts.

Words such as “spiritual” and “spirituality” convey many meanings. A person who does no harm to others may be called spiritual, as may another who meditates, prays, or is connected to nature. For some, a spiritual person reads sacred scriptures, defines the correct path, answers mysterious questions, and has followers. For others, spirituality implies being detached from all that is in this world, living a relatively solitary life, or joining a closed community.

But spirituality cannot be defined as something that belongs to a few. In this context, it has to be concerned with the concrete and the tangible; yet it should also bring to every social and economic activity that which is pleasing to the soul, that which motivates

and attracts the spirit of the human being. It implies the application of spiritual laws and principles to real-life situations, imbuing ordinary activities with the spirit of love, unity, and justice. It has to be concerned with the purpose and meaning of human activity. Drawing upon spiritual principles to create a better world cannot be limited to noble thoughts, attitudes and beliefs. It entails profound transformations both at the level of the individual and in the structure of society. This simultaneous focus on individual and collective existence demands the participation of all people.

The claim that an essential interaction between the spiritual and the material should occur at the level of principle may be accepted by many. The translation of this thought into action, however, is far from simple. It requires from those who design, promote, and implement development projects both the firm conviction that action is to be guided by spiritual principles and the commitment to turn this conviction into reality. The challenges faced by development organizations that try to act in this way are many. They include the widespread influence of the materialistic theories that underlie global development policies and strategies, and the paucity of the vocabulary that can adequately describe the form and shape that spiritual principles take when applied to social reality.

To create an appropriate environment in which the people of the world can strive to achieve spiritual and material prosperity, the field of development will have to free itself from many of the contradictions that afflict it. How can development efforts apply such spiritual principles as the oneness of mankind, justice, and stewardship of nature to the social reality with which they interact when the policies that drive them are based on ideologies that consider whatever gives results to be the final arbiter of truth and that justify the use of any means to reach the ends that are presumably for the common good? How can the principle of equality of

men and women operate in a program that is structured around the conception of power as that which allows people to dominate and manipulate others? If justice is indeed a principle that is to govern relationships, how can development plans and policies justify creating injustice as a temporary measure to achieve prosperity at a future date? If the oneness of humankind is an accepted reality, then why would individuals be continuously encouraged to struggle for that which only benefits themselves, to merely take care of their own affairs?

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The oneness of humankind

Oneness is both an expression of the reality of creation and a goal towards which humanity strives. That human beings are one in essence, regardless of their apparent differences, is a spiritual truth expressed in all religions. “Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other,” writes Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í Faith. “He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye”, are the words of Buddha. “He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature...seeing the same Lord everywhere, he does not harm himself or others,” says lord Krishna.

That human beings are one despite the differences in their physiological and cultural characteristics is a notion that has also received sufficient support from modern biological and social sciences. Scientific research aimed at mapping the human genome has provided incontrovertible evidence of the fact that what makes us different from each other is superficial in comparison to, and is vastly outweighed by, what we have in common with one another. Negating this reality will have devastating effects on

the future of humanity. The acceptance of the principle of the oneness of humankind and its translation into social reality is the only means to save human society from the afflictions of the present social order, an order that is built on the assumption that each individual is separate from others, that strife and competition lead to excellence, and that civilization is advanced through conflict. “The call has come,” wrote the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore more than a hundred years ago, “to every individual in the present age to prepare himself and his surroundings for this dawn of a new era when man shall discover his soul in the spiritual unity of all human beings.”¹ The choice before humanity, then, is to “deal with this great fact with all seriousness or perish.”²

Clearly, development efforts can play a major role in laying the foundations of a civilization that is characterized by peace and unity rather than division, contention and bloodshed. For these efforts to bring both spiritual and material prosperity to humankind, however, the principle of oneness is to be incorporated in development discourse at three levels. The first would be at the level of policy and direction. To consider all people one and to create equal conditions for exchange and collaboration among populations should be the purpose of these policies. Policies that promote separateness, or that consolidate the isolation of groups, or that enable the ascendancy and domination of one group over others, should be abandoned. The second level in which the principle of oneness should enter development discourse is that of methodology and approach. “Development understood as extending prosperity to all cannot be advanced through the glorification of conflict, whether of class or of ideology. Nor can the pursuit of selfish aims and competition be considered the organizing principle of society and the only path to excellence... Excellence will be achieved if the noble qualities of the human

soul are allowed to flourish in the environment of freedom created by cooperation.”³

The principle of oneness would also enter development discourse at a third level—that of program activity. At this level oneness would be incorporated both in the goals and the methods of projects. Here measures are to be taken that help join together the hearts of people to collectively attain ever-higher degrees of unity of thought, of purpose, and of action.

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Clearly, it is at this third level that Seva Mandir has incorporated the idea of oneness in both its goals and its methods. Far from having adopted a romantic view of oneness and interconnectedness, its staff realizes that creating in individuals a consciousness that provides them both with the vision and the motivating force to apply this principle to the transformation of social reality requires hard work. The identification and preservation of pasturelands as resources that are owned and shared by all members of society, the promotion of collective decision-making through free and frank dialogue, the endorsement of qualities and attitudes such as empathy and love and the desire to serve others and to witness their advancement are examples of ways in which Seva Mandir translates this principle into action.

Also, convinced that means and ends have to be consistent with one another, that unity cannot be achieved through divisive methods, that peace is not established through conflict, Seva Mandir tries to avoid in all its programs methods that promote individualism, that employ conflict as a means for social advancement, or that seek to bring about change through manipulation, force or enticement. It reinforces this sense of oneness by creating spaces where people can work together and by forming self-help groups and village development committees in which the sense of con-

nectedness is emphasized. It is in these spaces that people find an opportunity to learn to create unity in action.

It is evident, however, from the comments made by those who participated in this study that all of these activities take place in a challenging environment. While seeking to make progress through consensus building, Seva Mandir increasingly finds itself at odds with the policies of the state and with larger forces that seem to be moving society as a whole towards separateness and alienation. As mentioned by a few members of the staff, as time goes on the organization's struggle against forces that promote urban migration and acquisitiveness becomes more intense. Hard work is required to keep those who participate in its programs focused on the goal of serving the common good.

Justice

“Where there is sorrow, where there is poverty and oppression, where man is inhuman to man, where there is the darkness of ignorance, it is there that Seva Mandir should reach out.” These words alluded to in the beginning of this document, we believe, reflect the aspirations of many organizations that are motivated by the desire to overcome oppression and to diminish suffering. They are an expression of the recognition that human beings are one, that the pain suffered by one should be felt by others. They reflect the ardent desire to live in a society that is illuminated by the light of justice.

Justice is both a principle and a spiritual quality that should adorn all human beings. It is the power that moves people at the depths of their consciousness and motivates them to take action to transform society. It empowers individuals, communities, and institu-

tions to build a world in which everyone, regardless of sex, class, caste, culture, religion, or nationality, is treated equally.

The spiritual roots of justice can be found in the capacity that is latent within each person to see with his or her own eyes. Freed from the crippling influence of blind imitation, those who develop this capacity are enabled to search for the truth independently. The acceptance that justice is not a condition to be imposed on people nor is it limited to a set of legal codes or a series of institutional procedures has many implications for the field of development. The belief that individuals are fundamentally good and that this goodness drives them towards a more just state of affairs is an assumption that underlies the efforts undertaken by Seva Mandir. That the inclination towards justice, inherent in the hearts of people, is to be awakened, nurtured, and developed was an idea expressed by many of those who participated in this study.

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But is it sufficient to appeal to the individual's moral sensitivity, or to develop in people the capacity to act in a just manner? Seva Mandir's response to this question is clearly negative. A society that truly reflects justice requires both individuals who apply this principle to every aspect of their lives, and social, political and economic structures in which these individuals can pursue their noble ideals. As it works to raise people's consciousness with regard to justice, Seva Mandir also creates structures through which justice can be channeled. The village development committee and the village development fund are concrete examples of institutions created by Seva Mandir to facilitate the promotion of that which leads to the common good.

Equality of men and women

The principles that are being discussed here cannot be addressed in isolation from one another. Justice is, clearly, a prerequisite for unity and the consciousness of the oneness of humankind is the driving force for the establishment of justice. The equality between men and women is another principle that speaks of the spiritual reality of oneness. Its establishment is clearly one of the signs of a just society. That we are all part of one creation and connected to one another also reveals a truth about the relationship between men and women. The equality of men and women is a fundamental truth about human nature. It derives from the fact that the reality of the human being is his or her soul and that this soul has no gender. Neither man nor woman can claim superiority over the other. “Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God,” say the Bahá’í scriptures. The equality that already exists at the spiritual realm has to be also expressed in practice. Translating such a fundamental principle into reality demands great changes in the individual and in the structure of society. It implies the creation of conditions that will allow men and women who are free from prejudice to work shoulder to shoulder for the construction of an ever-advancing civilization.

To change the existing notions of male superiority, not only visible at the level of thought and behavior but also in the structure of society, Seva Mandir has to work through layers and layers of social norms and customs that reflect pervasive attitudes against women. From among the efforts it makes in this direction, two stand out: raising the consciousness of different groups about the principle of equality, and creating spaces where this principle can be practiced. Positive gender-related attitudes are instilled in children and youth. Women learn not to see abuse as a natural aspect of their lives, as something that every woman has to accept and endure with resignation. They are made aware of their rights and

taught to stand up to injustice. Efforts are made to build in them the confidence that they too possess valuable knowledge. Women are encouraged to participate in decision-making processes set in motion by the organization. To ensure their participation, fifty percent of the membership on the village development committee is reserved for women.

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Clearly, the establishment of equality between men and women also requires the participation of men. In this regard, Seva Mandir staff tries to modify negative attitudes in the male population with which they work. Much effort is made in these interactions to maintain the dignity of men. While they can go to lengths to ensure that women are not deprived of their rights, these staff take particular care in order not to demean men, to seek to understand and help them correct their behavior, to have faith in their capacity to change and not to treat them as the “other.” With such a perspective, the division of people into the oppressors and the oppressed is no longer helpful.

True equality between men and women, however, will not be established unless prevailing conceptions of power that dominate contemporary thought are seriously questioned and fundamentally changed. Though the exercise of power is fundamental for social existence and essential for transforming reality and advancing civilization, current conceptions of power that tend to focus on the capacity to pursue one’s self-interest, to compete effectively, to get others to act according to one’s will, to dominate, to manipulate and to prevail over or against others, are defective. Advancing the equality of men and women, therefore, can only be conceived in terms of a different social order with a different conception of power, a social order where neither men nor women seek to dominate others.

Stewardship of Nature

With the growth of materialism, reverence towards nature steadily diminishes in human society. The earth has become a vast reservoir of material resources to be exploited. The principle of oneness, however, also includes our relationship with nature. Taking care of the planet is a spiritual duty of humankind.

The principle of the stewardship of nature does not imply the worship of nature. The purpose of human life, after all, cannot be merely to spend a few decades on the planet living in harmony with nature as does the fish and the bird. Human beings should clearly aspire to transcend the limitations of the material world, to use the natural resources that are available to them for the construction of spiritual and material civilization. Yet, this is to be done in a responsible manner and with an attitude of respect towards nature. Humanity has to become aware of the role it must play, among the countless species in the biosphere, as a conscious, compassionate and creative participant in the evolution of the life of the planet.

Undoubtedly, the convictions that human beings and nature are part of an interconnected whole and that human progress cannot be achieved by externalizing nature and seeking to exploit it guide the activities of Seva Mandir. The analogy of creation as a temple in its theme song powerfully conveys the idea that the relationship between human beings and nature is not a utilitarian one. The contemplation of the universe, like prayer in a temple, fills the heart with worshipful reverence for the intelligence and power that lay behind the majesty and awesomeness of creation. This idea of sacredness implies that in using the resources of nature, one does not adopt the arrogant posture of an 'owner'. When the interconnectedness of creation is appreciated, one's interaction with nature is governed by the same understanding that eventu-

ally one's own well-being is served in having regard for the other. In using a resource one is conscious of being part of the chain of life to which are connected, and on which are dependent, countless other individuals and life forms. As Seva Mandir staff mentioned, an individual or a group cannot, for their own personal gain, exploit a resource that belongs to all humanity.

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Through its efforts to preserve the environment Seva Mandir has created institutional structures that develop a sense of stewardship towards the natural environment in individuals and communities. Examples of these efforts include the Joint Forest Management program, a mechanism through which communities can share control over local forest resources with the government; the Van Utthan Sangh, a federation of 101 forest protection committees which deal with issues such as the protection and preservation of forests; and efforts to help villagers establish nurseries, undertake plantations on wastelands and adopt measures to conserve water and prevent soil degradation.

Freedom and empowerment

It seems appropriate to bring this document to a close with an invitation to reflect on the issues of freedom and empowerment. The following quotation on these two concepts that are at the centre of development, taken from the book *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market*, may be useful for these reflections:

At the heart of spirituality is the yearning of the human soul for freedom from the chains and struggles of material existence. Paradoxically, the impulse is opposed by another: license to follow the dictate of one's desires. Throughout history, these two urges have coexisted and have become intertwined, spinning dozens of ideologies, each appealing to noble aspirations

and each carrying within it the seeds of its own destruction. Revolution has followed revolution—driven initially by legitimate longing to be free, only to be co-opted later by the cruelest manifestations of a lower nature. The despair that characterizes today's society owes much of its force to the confusion of those who cannot distinguish between true freedom and surrender to animal desire.

Science provides tools and methods that can be used to achieve freedom. But it is the light of religion that separates nobility from baseness. From a religious point of view, true liberty is compliance with divine teachings. For only to the extent that human beings are awakened to the capacity for love, generosity, justice, compassion, trustworthiness, and humility can they manifest the extraordinary powers with which they have been endowed.

Certainly, freedom from oppression is a cause to be upheld throughout the age of transition from childhood to maturity. Those working toward this goal will have little trouble detecting the oppressive behavior of tyrannical regimes and the political and economic measures instituted by one group to suppress another. What is somewhat more difficult to appreciate is that the reigning version of democracy, so closely tied to the operations of the market, breeds other forms of oppression, subtle but equally damaging, for the greatest crime of oppression is that it robs people of their true identity. Its weapon is the prolongation of ignorance through the manipulation of information and the denial of access to knowledge. Ironically, the perpetrator and the victim both find themselves deprived of opportunities to develop the potentialities on which fulfillment ultimately depends. A central task of development,

then, is the systematic propagation of spiritual and material knowledge for the clear purpose of empowering people.⁴

The title of this publication, *May Knowledge Grow in our Hearts*, is an expression of the hope that development strategy can draw knowledge from religion and science to drive spiritual and material progress. It springs from the conviction that if understanding is nurtured in the hearts and the minds of the protagonists of development, their paths will be illuminated as they endeavor to construct a civilization that is both spiritually and materially prosperous.

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Appendix I

A Discourse on Science, Religion, and Development: Some Aims and Challenges

In recent years, a number of organizations in India have engaged in the promotion of a discourse on science, religion, and development in order to fulfill two interrelated purposes. The first is to increase their own effectiveness by expanding their vision and improving their methodologies according to the insights they gain from their participation in the discourse. The second is to generate knowledge on the nature of development programs that would take into account the spiritual dimension of human existence, knowledge that can gradually influence policy. In pursuit of the first purpose the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, in consultation with a few organizations, has designed a small action research project to be carried out over a period of one year beginning February 2007.

The project calls for reflection and analysis of a set of statements that express some of the broadest aims pursued by the participating organizations. These affirmations have emerged from the discussions of the past few years and bring together some of the

fundamental tasks and challenges that development organizations face as they strive to apply spiritual principles and scientific methods to their plans and programs. Organizations are asked to reflect on these statements in the light of their own experience and to describe the way they meet the challenges these entail in their day to day work.

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It is envisioned that the project will take the following form: An initial meeting in which participating organizations analyze the statements prepared by the institute is followed by a period of consultation internal to each organization. Each institution records the results of its reflections that are then shared with partner organizations in a series of meetings, coordinated by the Secretariat for the Promotion of the Discourse in India. At the end of the year the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity will compile the lessons learned by each institution and the results of the collective deliberations in a final document to be disseminated among the increasing number of individuals and institutions that are becoming engaged in the discourse on science, religion, and development.

1. Change requires determination and the will to struggle. Contributing to the empowerment of a people and developing in it the will to transform their social environment is one of the major aims of most of the development organizations that wish to go beyond the present materialistic conceptions of development. Yet, struggle is not to become an end in itself. In fact, most of us wish to work towards a society which embodies the principle of oneness of humanity free from the prejudices of race, nationality, ethnicity, class, and gender that have afflicted the world throughout history. The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity has introduced into the discourse the analogy of the human body to shed light on the nature

of society. Within this system, millions of cells, with an extraordinary diversity of forms and functions, collaborate to make the existence of the human being possible. They give and receive whatever is needed for their individual function as well as for the growth and welfare of the whole. No one would try to explain the life of a healthy body in terms of principles used so freely nowadays, for example, competition among the parts for scarce resources. Nor would one argue that in order for the body to function better, all of its cells should become identical—uniformity would make the body incapable of carrying out any of the complex tasks necessary to its healthy functioning. The principle that governs the functioning of the body is unity in diversity. It is possible to conceive of human society in a similar way—myriads of diverse individuals and communities with distinct talents each have the potential to contribute to the health and advancement of human civilization. Moreover, just as in the body, the suffering of any one member of human society results in diminished well-being for the whole.

What are, then, the parameters of the kind of struggle that leads to a society which embodies the principle of oneness and not to violence and perpetual conflict? How do we make sure that raising consciousness does not lead to narrow struggle for one's own interests rather than the benefit of the whole, thus avoiding the replication of today's structures of oppression? How do we assure that emphasizing unity and oneness does not reinforce passive habits of acceptance and resignation but rather strengthens the will to champion justice?

In order to answer these questions, the participating institutions may wish to examine their own programs to see how they incorporate in them principles of reciprocity, coopera-

tion, and interconnectedness both at the level of theory and practice. What direction do they try to give to the struggle in which they accompany the people? How do they motivate people to arise and dedicate themselves to the improvement of their social environment?

Appendix I

2. Most ideologies of social change during the twentieth century tended to fall into one of two extremes. On the one hand, many organizations saw social change as a mere outcome of the upgrading of the individual, be it through secular education and training, or through religious conversion. It was implicitly assumed by these groups that change in social structures will somehow be an automatic consequence of the salvation or improved capacity of a sufficient number of individuals. In practice, of course, it is not difficult to find those individuals who have benefited from such interventions participating in oppressive social structures without even noticing the slightest contradiction, and therefore without the motivation to strive for change.

On the other extreme, views opposing this individualistic approach to social change argued that the human being is entirely a product of society and that no change is possible unless social structures, mainly those related to matters of political power, are changed first. The greater social consciousness of adherents to such views, however, does not guarantee freedom from oppression either. It has not been difficult for many to argue that ends justify means, often resulting in acceptance and even glorification of any act of violence and oppression that is seen to be effective for producing revolutionary change.

The Institute has introduced into the discourse the idea that the human heart cannot be separated from its environment,

for the inner life of every human being both molds the environment and is deeply affected by it. Enduring change then depends upon simultaneous efforts to transform both the individual and society. How to reflect such conviction in action is a question that most organizations ask themselves. How can the efforts in the field of social and economic development move past the false existing dichotomy between the individual and society?

In order to gain some insights into these questions, participating institutions may wish to examine the changes their programs promote at the level of the individual and look for signs of structural change in their areas of influence. Which aspects of their programs help individuals to develop both their spiritual qualities and their faculties to investigate and understand nature? What meaning do they give to social transformation? How do they bring the question of culture, both in its material and spiritual dimensions, into their programs?

3. Recognizing the spiritual dimension of human existence in development implies to transcend the struggle for material existence and to make serious attempts to attain higher levels of collective consciousness. This requires access to knowledge by the great masses of humanity. How can the dwellers of villages and the urban poor claim to be in charge of their own development if they have no access to knowledge so easily available to other sectors, if they do not learn systematically from their own experiences, and if they do not participate in the generation, as well as the application, of knowledge? As organizations strive to bring knowledge to bear on the problems of the populations they serve, they are faced with a series of questions related to its nature, its sources and the mecha-

nisms and conditions that are to be used for its validation and accumulation.

In relation to the generation and application of knowledge, the organizations that participate in the discourse on science, religion, and development may wish to ask themselves the following questions: For which aspects of their programs, is science the source of knowledge? Where in their work is religious knowledge reflected? To take the case of technological knowledge, where much of the flow today is from centers in the North to the people in the south, how do they take into account the technological logic and the knowledge base of the people with whom they work? What kinds of structures do they create that can serve for the recuperation, systematization, and the subsequent progress of the entire knowledge base and culture of the inhabitants of a region? How do they design and carry out research that is beneficial to the advancement of populations?

Appendix I

4. Development must aim at satisfying human needs and aspirations and yet the satisfaction of needs does not lead to freedom from want, which requires freedom from lower desires. To seek freedom through the development process calls for an accurate conception of human nature. The Institute proposes for the discussions of its participating institutions, the notion of a human being with a dual nature, an animal nature inherited from millions of years of physical evolution and a higher nature, a spiritual one that has gradually made it possible to rise above the exigencies of animal existence. A conception that reflects both the material and the spiritual allows insights into the history of the human race with all its accomplishments and follies in which expressions of love, of the will to conquer the ego, of transcendence, and of beauty have mani-

fested themselves alongside with cruelty, egotism, and the will to oppress and dominate others.

Appendix I

But how can we liberate ourselves from a paralyzing contradiction that affects us all? On the one hand, we dream of, and labor for a world of peace and prosperity; on the other, what passes for scientific theory depicts us as slaves to self-interest, incapable of rising to the heights of nobility. How can we distinguish between true freedom and giving free reign to our animal desires and at the same time avoid fatalistic views of material existence?

To gain insights into these questions and to see how they treat the concept of freedom both in theory and practice, participating organizations may want to reflect on the conception of human nature that informs their work.

5. Wealth has received contradictory treatment in every period of social evolution. Repeatedly, the pendulum has swung from one extreme to another, from contempt for wealth as the corrupter of the human soul to its adoration as the ultimate dispenser of happiness. The concept, clearly, needs to be reexamined in the context of a development process that can contribute to the spiritual and material advancement of the human race. The spiritual principle that can help define a proper attitude toward wealth is one that is consistent with the real nature and purpose of work. Work is both an exigency of life on this planet and an urge inherent to human character. Through it, essential requirements of the human soul find fulfillment, and many of its potentials are realized. To accomplish its purpose, however, work cannot be reduced to a mere struggle for survival. Nor can its aim be solely the satisfaction of the demands of the self. Work's highest station is service

to humanity, and when performed in that spirit, it becomes an act of worship. Seen in such a light, personal wealth is acceptable so long as it fulfills certain conditions. It must be earned through honest work, physical or intellectual, and its acquisition by the individual must not be the cause, no matter how indirectly, of the impoverishment of others. Moreover, the legitimacy of material possessions depends equally on how they are earned and how they are used. One should enjoy the fruits of one's labors and expend one's wealth not only for the good of one's family but also for the welfare of society.

Appendix I

Participating organizations may wish to discuss how they strive in their programs to meet the above conditions. What are the obstacles and challenges that they face as they pursue some of the values that are mentioned here?



Appendix II

Methodology

The content recorded in this study was generated through a series of meetings in which two facilitators from the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity collaborated closely with members of Seva Mandir staff to study and discuss the content of the Aims and Challenges document.

The facilitators strove at every moment to demonstrate an attitude of modesty and cultivate a harmonious atmosphere conducive to consultation and learning. Their role in these meetings was primarily to observe, listen, ask questions, and guide discussion, clarifying concepts where necessary. They worked closely with the staff members from Seva Mandir who were identified to assist them.

Efforts were made to ensure that the process of inquiry was participatory and inclusive. The Institute hoped to garner the wisdom which existed at all levels of the organization and to help Seva Mandir staff articulate their understanding. It, therefore, sought to involve individuals ranging from the management and staff of

the organization's head office to the members of the village development committees at the grassroots*. In total, 95 people were involved in the meetings (see Figure 1 for details).

Group	Participants
Management	3
Women and Child Development Unit	3
Natural Resource Development Unit	9
Collaborators (Ms. Kumari and Mr. Khan)	2
<hr/>	
Subtotal: participants at the head office	17
Badgaon block (including zonal staff)	17
Jhadol block (including zonal staff)	20
<hr/>	
Subtotal: block and zonal-level participants	37
Bada Bhilwara village	14
Madla village	8
Dulavatn ka Guda village	13
Malaria village	6
<hr/>	
Subtotal: village-level participants	41
Total	95

Appendix II

Figure 1: Seva Mandir staff involvement in meetings.

* At the village level, the village development committees oversee most of the activities undertaken in the field. The villages in which Seva Mandir works are grouped in clusters of 10-15 villages to comprise a zone, and in each zone Seva Mandir has offices and staff. Some 5-7 zones are integrated at the block level. Each block has a team that includes members in charge of Natural Resource Development, Women and Child Development, Education, and Health, and a team leader who coordinates these efforts. The organization currently works in 7 blocks: Badgaon, Girwa, Jhadol, Kerwara, Kotra, Kumbalgarh, and the urban block. At the head office in Udaipur City, there are staff members in charge of the sectors of Natural Resource Development, Education, Women and Child Development, Health, the Village Institution Program, and the People's Management School. An organizational chart depicting the structure of the agency is included in Appendix III.

Initial presentation

The process of reflection began with the presentation of some of the basic concepts of the discourse on science, religion and development to all Seva Mandir staff. These presentations were held four times—twice at the organization’s head office and once each at two of the block offices.

Reflection meetings

In preparation for the reflection meetings, the facilitators met with Ms. Sunita Kumari, who is in charge of the organization’s People’s Management School, and Mr. Yakub Khan, who is involved with the Village Institutions Program, to study and discuss the Aims and Challenges document. Ms. Kumari and Mr. Khan were able to provide valuable feedback about how the concepts in the statements could be clarified and contextualized for the staff of the organization in the reflection meetings. These discussions provided an initial source of examples, stories and anecdotes.

The reflection meetings were then facilitated by the two representatives of the Institute, often in collaboration with Ms. Kumari, and attended by groups of three to twenty individuals who studied and discussed the statements in the Aims and Challenges document in the context of the work they were already carrying out. They also reflected on how certain spiritual principles were applied in the organization’s programs and activities. The facilitators used the series of questions after each statement to assist participants in exploring key concepts.

Given the multifarious programmatic areas in which the organization is involved and the limited scope of this study, two areas of Seva Mandir’s work were identified to be given special focus: Natural Resource Development and Women and Child Development.

These represent two areas in which Seva Mandir and its staff have accumulated significant experience over the years. Meetings took place at the head office with the staff of both units responsible for these areas. A separate meeting was also held with the Chief Executive Officer and General Secretary of Seva Mandir, along with a member of the Board of Trustees. Additionally, all of the block and zonal staff of Badgaon and Jhadol blocks were invited to participate in reflection meetings together in each of their respective blocks and most attended. Jhadol block was chosen because of the longstanding and widespread presence of Seva Mandir activities in the region, including notable work in the area of forestry. Badgaon block was selected because it comprises many villages that are fairly representative of the typical communities Seva Mandir works with and is more easily accessible from Udaipur city. At the village level, reflection gatherings were held once each in Madla and Bada Bhilwara in Jhadol block and Dulavaton ka Guda and Malaria in Badgaon block. These villages were chosen because of the relative maturity of their village development committees and the wide range of activities they support, including those in the area of Natural Resource Development and Women and Child Development.

The format which proved effective in discussing the Aims and Challenges document was to read an entire statement first, clarify the concepts, and finally review each of the questions. The concepts were clarified in a number of ways, depending on the needs of the group. In many instances, certain participants who grasped the concepts well naturally assisted others by providing examples and sharing their own understanding. Facilitators also found that sharing practical examples demonstrating how certain principles were applied in different areas of Seva Mandir's work helped to enhance understanding, stimulate thought on how various principles mentioned in the statements worked together, and

clarify what was being asked. At the same time participants were encouraged to move beyond these initial examples in their own examination of the questions. Another approach which proved helpful was the occasional use of anecdotes to help elucidate and clarify key concepts.

Appendix II

A final meeting was attended by members of the Natural Resource Development unit and representatives of Jhadol block*. Participants reviewed concepts and discussed some preliminary findings which helped generate new insights.

Reflections from the facilitators

The approach towards facilitating reflection meetings evolved throughout the study. The insights the facilitators gained in this process can be organized in three general categories. The first had to do with the content of the document—helping the participants to understand the meaning of words and concepts and to bring these from the realm of the abstract to the realm of reality. A key challenge in this regard was learning how to clarify a concept without distorting, misrepresenting or unduly simplifying it. The second area of learning had to do with the dynamics involved in reflecting and consulting in a group. How does one manage a process of reflection involving a group of people in such a way that the process becomes a collective exploration of reality rather than a discussion dominated by the contributions of a few? For example, at the village level participants who were more fluent in Hindi tended to speak more frequently. Further, it was observed that a different dynamic is created when individuals from various levels of an organization are brought together and asked to share their views candidly in one another's presence; facilitators found

* Although representatives of each of the groups who had participated in the reflection meetings were invited, many could not participate due to the challenges of scheduling meetings between different units.

that many participants felt somewhat obliged to allow a more senior member of the staff to guide the discussion. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the facilitators realized that they needed to identify what constituted reflection on the general meaning and implications of the statements under discussion and what it meant to reflect on the spiritual principles that the statements refer to in the context of one's everyday work.

A crucial part of this study was the constant consultation taking place between the facilitators amid reflection meetings. The regular analysis and articulation of strengths and challenges allowed them to continually refine their approach. They learned, for instance, that while it was important to allow for flexibility in the discussion and in the way people related ideas, they also needed to help participants stay focused on the questions. They also realized the important role that language and a shared understanding of the meaning of words played in the discussions. Certain terms have several shades of meaning in the Hindi language and it was very important that it be made clear which connotation was implied in a specific context*.

Similarly, at times the facilitators found it challenging to help participants make connections between their own experiences and the principles addressed in the Aims and Challenges document. Participants often described an experience in terms of what they did, but facilitators encouraged them to explore how these experiences related to the spiritual principles highlighted in the statements. To assist them move from one level of reflection to a much deeper one, facilitators had to ask probing and clarifying questions.

* For example, the word *sangharsh*—a word that means struggle but that can also be associated with conflict—often evoked a negative connotation for the participants. It needed to be clarified, then, that while dedicated effort towards change could potentially be taken in different directions, *sangharsh* in this case did not only imply conflict.

A deep interest in this study was evident at different levels of Seva Mandir. The generosity of the organization and its members in sharing their insights, time and resources was greatly appreciated by the facilitators.

Appendix II



Appendix III

About Seva Mandir

Seva Mandir is a non-governmental organization working for the development of the rural and tribal populations in the Udaipur and Rajsamand districts of southern Rajasthan in India. The organization's work area encompasses 626 villages and 56 urban settlements. In total the organization reaches out to around 70,000 households, influencing the lives of approximately 360,000 people.

The organization's mission is to make real the idea of a society consisting of free and equal citizens who are able to come together and solve the problems that affect them in their own particular contexts. It is committed to work for a paradigm of development and governance that is democratic and polyarchic.

Seva Mandir seeks to institutionalize the idea that development and governance are not only to be left to the state and its formal bodies, such as the legislature and the bureaucracy, but that the citizens and their associations should also engage in them separately and jointly with the state. Its mission, briefly, is to construct

the conditions in which citizens of many backgrounds and perspectives can come together and work to benefit and empower the least advantaged in society.

Appendix III

In an effort to achieve its purpose, Seva Mandir works through a three-pronged focus on the following distinct yet interlinked areas: creating platforms for people to come together and participate in development processes; equipping village groups and leaders with skills and resources to respond to their own needs; and ensuring that members of village communities are able to interact with, and access benefits from *panchayati raj** institutions and other government and non-government agencies.

Seva Mandir seeks to enhance the capabilities of people to develop themselves by working for improved literacy levels, better health status and sensitization against oppressive gender relations. It strives to create sustainable improvements in the livelihoods base by revitalizing the natural resource base of communities and it works to strengthen village institutions by creating an alternative paradigm of power structures and community interactions that reinforce the positive forces of cooperation, transparency, equity, justice and responsible citizenship.

Programmatically, Seva Mandir's work is divided into six sectors: Natural Resource Development, Education, Women and Child Development, Health, the Village Institution Program, and the People's Management School. At the organization's head office in Udaipur city, there are staff members in charge of each of these sectors. They supervise the work that happens at the block level. The organization currently works in 7 blocks: Badgaon, Girwa, Jhadol, Kerwara, Kotra, Kumbalgarh, and the urban block. Each block comprising 5-7 zones has a team that includes members

* Village council composed of five wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community.

in charge of Natural Resource Development, Women and Child Development, Education, and Health, and a team leader who coordinates these efforts. A zone is a cluster of 10-15 villages and Seva Mandir has offices and staff at the zonal level. At the village level, the village development committees oversee most of the activities undertaken in the field. A chart depicting the organization's structure can be found in Figure 2.

Appendix III

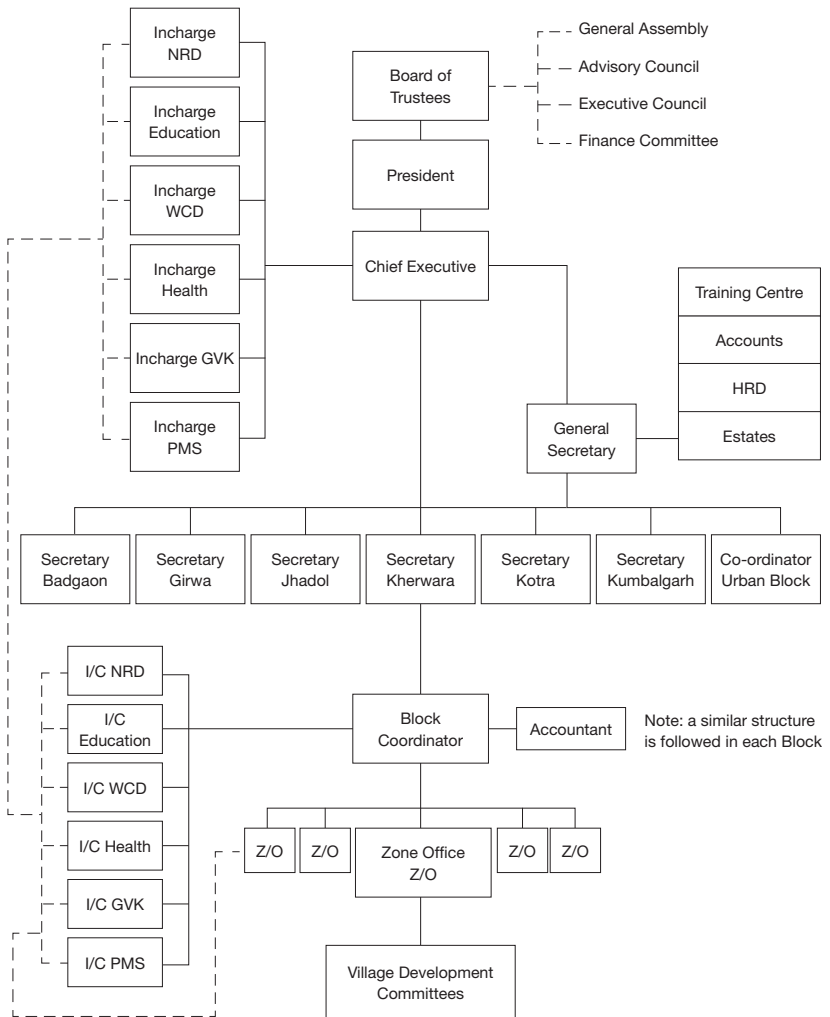


Figure 2: Organizational Chart



Endnotes

1. Rabindranath Tagore. Nationalism. London: Macmillan: 1950. p.102
2. ibid
3. Farzam Arbab, "Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion and Development." The Lab, the Temple and the Market: Reflections at the Intersections of Science, Religion and Development. Ed. Sharon Harper. Ottawa: Kumarian Press, 2000. p.200.
4. ibid, p. 204.

About the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity

The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) is a non-profit organization, dedicated to building capacity in individuals, groups and institutions to contribute to prevalent discourses concerned with the betterment of society.

Drawing on both science and religion as two complementary systems of knowledge and practice, learning environments are created where knowledge and experience can be shared and systematized. Principles, concepts and approaches that are relevant to the advancement of civilization are explored through a process of study, reflection and consultation.

Founded in 1999 - and working in collaboration with the Bahá'í International Community - the Institute also engages in learning about the methods, approaches and instruments which can best be employed to contribute to the discourses of society.





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