

The beginning of a Big-inning!

The volunteers working for our ‘Maitra’ telephonic Helpline continue to surprise me. I was surprised when a hundred individuals enrolled themselves for the initial training in 1998. I was further surprised when almost 50 of them continued and still continue to associate with it after two years. I continue to be surprised, to find that they have an unending stream of enthusiastic ideas.

The other day, eight of our volunteers designed and presented an ‘awareness-program’, on the concept of Maitra, its working, usefulness and philosophy. It was their own work. None of us, i.e. IPH staffers had told them to do so. They presented this to a packed house of a *Mahila Mandal*. They did not forget to call some other fellow volunteers as observers and they had a long feedback session with the observers. At the end of the program, this group got two more invitations to perform. The observers called me up to share this experience. One of them summarized the experience with this comment, ‘it was all in the true IPH tradition... spontaneous, sincere and still well crafted.’

While the group is working on deficits of their last performance, I am still surprised about co-incidence. Perhaps, when this group was working out its program, we at IPH were busy planning a major initiative on similar lines. We have decided to call it Manovikas – mind development.

After our adolescent education program Jidnyasa (age 4 years, volunteers force 100, covered population eighty thousand adolescents) and Helpline Maitra (age two years, volunteer force 50, more than 2500 help calls old); we already have a list of about sixty more individuals who want to work on any interesting voluntary project. As usual, we do not have funds to implement the project. We still do not have funding for Maitra. But lack of funding has never been an issue for us, presence of sixty enthusiastic people, with at least fifty more waiting in the wings for invitation, we have decided to launch Manovikas.

The concept is this. We want to reach 1,00,000 Thaneites in three years (1 out of 10 people) with relevant information on Mental Health and Mental illness; and answer all commonly asked questions. A two-hour module will be presented by three trained communicators (called *Manovikas Prasarakas*) to different sections and groups of the society. They will receive extensive training on contents and presentation of this module. They will have written material as well as posters on the topic. Around thirty such groups will give at least one presentation per month in schools, colonies, offices, and industries. Even if each presentation reaches average 100 individuals, in a month we would have covered at least 3000 persons. Modestly, in one year one can reach at least 25,000 to 30,000 people. For some of these people two more detailed modules of four and six hours each will be introduced and finally all the modules will be published as training Manual.

The proposed reach of the program is half-exciting but the more exciting part will be that, all this will be done by the volunteer members of the society. You will surely ask, what gives me the confidence that this will work. I will point out at the Maitra presentation as one of the evidences. The healthy existence of both Maitra & Jidnyasa are actually sufficient proofs. I ask myself, what has really clicked? And, I get a word often used as a jargon in management, EMPOWERMENT. I see this word translated in action in all these community initiatives. We, as mental health professionals, have to be CATALYST in the process of health education. This may be one of the keys, for a country like ours, where the message of mental health, needs to be hammered in every possible way.

I see a revolutionary alternative in what we have been actively doing for a decade now. We are involving people from various strata and backgrounds in our ideas regarding mental health. A highly placed executive, internationally renowned artist, a fresh graduate and a busy advocate; all work in a group of 15-20 people to make our career conference VEDH successful. And mind you, they are doing this, year after year for nine years. A stage actress, an architect, a civil servant, a TV announcer work quietly back-stage to bring up our AVISHKAR – personality contest for youth.

So, if people feel that the ‘idea’ is ‘their baby’, they work. And they work creatively. This to me, is the essence of EMPOWERMENT. Manovikas had already begun before even its planning started. The seed was already sown. Such coincidences are sure to reap rich harvest... not only in terms of so called ‘success’ but also in terms of a very different gain.

I have seen umpteen number of times. In the process of working for any particular project or activity, people continue to contribute only if they continue to grow as individuals. They gain in terms of range of experiences and insights that they get through the PROCESS OF BEING IN IT. I have seen all our volunteers from close quarters and have quietly observed the emergence of a positive emotional glow. You might say, only sensitive people will have such an experience. But tell me, without 'sensitive' experiences, how will people discover their 'sensitivity'? And I can proudly say that almost two hundred volunteers working with us are so called 'common people'. Empowerment leads to self-discovery, where every beginning is bound to get converted into a big innings; both externally and more significantly, internally.