

PEOPLE'S DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SELF-HELP: THE SEVASHRAM INITIATIVE

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Development and welfare projects take a backseat in Kerala owing to a variety of reasons. Quite often, a highly politicised view mars our entrepreneurship and this acts as a deterrent for initiating new projects. Nevertheless, the generalisation does not apply to all and there are emulative models that have surpassed the hard test of adverse times. Absence of official patronage or lack of government aid is not a handicap for those who are committed to purposeful work. One such example is a group of people working under ‘Sevashram’, a modern ashram with deep traditional values” (Pillai 2001:5).

Sevashram came into existence as an indigenous initiative in people's development. Its beginning was in 1984 when a small self-help group of women was formed with the objective of enabling people of the lower income groups to improve the quality of their lives through various means. The small savings of self-help groups of motivated women gradually turned into a solid financial launch pad for a variety of programmes of the Sevashram as it is today. Statutorily Sevashram is a charitable society registered in March 1995. The objectives of the society, articulated in the Memorandum of Association, are: (1) to evolve an alternate ‘SANYASA’, rooted in Indian culture, by a group of people committed fully to the service of fellow human beings, belonging to different religions, sexes, walks of life and regions; and (2) to empower the marginalised, unorganised masses to become aware of their rights and duties as citizens and contribute their share towards the building up of a just society, drawing inspiration from the *grama*

swaraj of Gandhiji's dreams and the *kshema rashtra* envisaged in the Constitution of India, and tapping locally available resources to the maximum.

Ordinary membership of Sevashram is reserved to those who are willing to live together, accept Sevashram as their permanent residence, and observe the rules and regulations of the ashram. Sevashram has, at present, four houses in Kerala, located at (1) Angamaly in Ernakulam district, (2) Vaikom in Kottayam district, (3) *Swasrayagram*, Pullani, North Thuravoor panchayath of Aluva taluk in Ernakulam district and (4) Cheruvaloor, Kadukutty panchayath in Thrissur district.

The fact that the ashram is open to all irrespective of caste and religion shows that the organisation has responded to the context of the heterogeneity of the Indian society with a truly secular perspective. One finds the tenets of most religions of India inscribed at various locations of the ashram, and pictures of various religious leaders prominently displayed. The multi-religious prayer that is recited by the inmates of the ashram contains invocations offered by different religions. "What marks Sevashram from other similar organisations is that it has its religious and cultural moorings in a kind of eclecticism that is rooted in service to the poorest of the poor. ... The unveiling of a series of depictions in concrete marks the establishment of the Vaikom branch of Sevashram. The 32 depictions have been drawn from all the leading philosophies to drive home the message of service to humanity. ... Jesus' cleansing of the temple and as the good shepherd, Lord Krishna at the battle of Kurukshetra, Jagatguru Adi Shankara, Lord Budha, Sree Narayana Guru, Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi and his disciples like Acharya Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan are some of them..... Significantly, there is also the depiction of David who took on Goliath. These depictions are the full indication of the scope of Sevashram, which seeks to be different from other organisations providing a new thrust to the idea of service to mankind" (Martin 2003).

II. DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Sevashram's goal is to build up a community of brotherhood based on human values through the holistic development of all those whom it has pledged to serve. Helping people lead a holistic life is the mission of the ashram. It is not a merely spiritual centre; spiritualism

assumes a different form at Sevashram. The services of Sevashram are meant not only for human beings, but for the whole universe — *loka samastha sukhino bhavanthu*.

The focus of the activities of Sevashram is on human resource development as an empowerment process of the people, which is neither project-oriented nor money-oriented. Money does not ever become a bottleneck for any of Sevashram's projects. When projects and programmes are to be implemented, in response to the felt needs of the target group, funds are generated through sheer hard work and eminently ethical means. Sevashram understands development in terms of not only economic progress, but also improved quality of life, and strives to empower its beneficiaries to live fuller lives in their own life situations. Skill development and conscience formation are considered essentially important in facilitating this integrated human development.

For all who are willing to accept the challenge of holistic human development, Sevashram provides a congenial atmosphere to lead a life of genuine *karma yoga*. Anyone, regardless of age, sex, state of life, family and educational background, position in society, caste, creed or political affiliation, can aspire to be an *ashramite* by espousing the noble cause of securing "social, economic and political justice, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity, fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and integrity of the Nation", for all citizens of India, with a preferential love for the unorganised, exploited and marginalised masses, in the process, without seeking security or reward of any kind, in return. The end an *ashramite* should have in mind is the realisation of lasting peace and tranquillity, which are the fruits of pure 'BLISS' (*ananda/ moksha*).

Sevashram is special in the sense that the *ashramites* 'live a life of contemplation in the heart of the world'; they live among ordinary people, identifying themselves as much as possible with the people of their surroundings and eke out their living by implementing homestead (micro) self-employment projects and human resource development programmes.

Perception of Development

Sevashram's concept of development is based on the belief that every form of life created by God has a birthright to have a share in the

riches of the universe. This belief is the very foundation of what has, of late, come to be known as eco-spirituality. It is the expression of *dharma*. The literal meaning of *dharma* is 'to uphold' or 'held together'. All the creation in the world is to be held together as one family — *vasudaiva kudumbakam* (the whole world is a family). The universe is home to plants and trees, and birds and beasts, besides human beings. All of them are to live together in harmony, each contributing his/her/its share towards the well-being of the others.

One of the basic elements of this holistic perception of development is the notion that 'Being' is more valuable than 'Having'. While the former indicates the state of life, the latter relates to what each form of life has acquired in the process of living. Of course, 'living is more important than 'possessing'. It is not by virtue of mere 'existence' that some are able to 'acquire'; it is thanks to the grace of the Almighty and the wise and skilful use of the physical and psychic faculties, favourable circumstances and opportunities that one is able to make strides of progress towards achieving one's full potential. Hence, one has the obligation to share what one apparently has with those who are deprived of these fortunes in right measure for no fault of theirs. If this is not done, demands of *dharma* will not be met. Deprivation and exploitation will, then, be the natural fallouts. They may provoke revolt and retaliation, which can assume disastrous forms of violence sooner or later.

All creatures, not only humans, are 'share-and-stake' holders of the universe. Hence, development has to be eco-friendly and value-based. *Sarvodaya* and *sarva dharma samabhavana* are the foundations of cosmic and religious amity. The disabled, weak, marginalised and exploited sectors and sections deserve special care and protection.

The Sevashram community believes in the Upanishadic insight: "God resides in all creatures here" (*isa vasyam idem sarvam*). It prays for the well-being of all forms of life in the universe (*loka samasta sukhino bhavantu*). All its activities are considered performance of God-willed duties without expecting anything in return, aimed at the reinstatement of *dharma* (*dharma samsthapana*). This idea is conceptualised and envisaged as establishment of the kingdom of God by Christians, *rama rajya* by Hindus, classless society by Marxists, *poorna swaraj* by Gandhians and *kshema rashtra* by the founder-fathers of the Constitution of India.

In a world where people are engaged in the rat race for riches, pleasure, power and position (*boga*), Sevashram provides the possibility of leading an alternate life style for those who dare to be different. It offers them an opportunity to practise self-denial (*tyaga*) and live a truly Indian version of *sanyasa*. Detachment (*anasakti*) is a prerequisite for reaching the state of *sthitha prajna*, and it has to be the personality trait of true *sanyasins* (those who have renounced everything).

Trusting entirely in divine providence and raising funds locally through human resource development programmes and eco-friendly micro level community based projects, without accessing foreign money, the members of Sevashram dedicate themselves to the cause of building up a community of love. Development, to be integrated, has to be multi-sectoral (economic, social, cultural, political, ecological and ethical) and cross-dimensional (vertical and horizontal).

A hub-and-spokes system, carefully put in place, well coordinated and monitored, is best suited for the small neighbourhood groups/communities to make strides on the road to balanced progress. Programmes and projects of sustainable development should become not procedure-bound, but result-oriented. Product diversification and value addition are the new '*mantras*' to be accepted with diligence for coping up with the cutthroat competitions and rat race all around.

Participatory Development

Experience has taught us that the magic of participatory development works, though not all on a sudden. A lot of training and patient experimentation has to be incorporated in any genuine attempt at introducing this development strategy in places where traditional master-servant, employer-employee relations have been prevailing for a long time. Those who assume leadership positions in this process should be satisfied with playing catalytic roles. What they could aspire for is to become the facilitators, promoters or animators only. People have to develop on their steam and at their pace. True facilitators should go to the people, love them, live with them, learn from them and start with what they have.

Sevashram has been playing its role with the above guidelines of participatory development and operates as a catalyst and a collaborator in people's development. It does not act as a paternal 'provider of charity', calling to mind Julius Nyerere's words: "...human dignity

cannot be given to a man by the kindness of others. **Indeed**, it can be destroyed by kindness which emanates from an action of charity, for human dignity involves equality and freedom and relations of mutual respect”.

III. PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

In all the charitable, empowerment and developmental programmes supported by Sevashram, maximum participation of the beneficiaries is elicited. An important principle and strategy of Sevashram is to convince the people of their own potential and allow them express it fully. “It is very much in our own hands to develop ourselves, is the strong message of the self-help groups. Sevashram is supposed to have been one of the first to take up the idea of helping the rural poor to help themselves” (Rajagopal 2002:2). People are motivated and trained:

- to identify their own needs,
- prioritise them,
- plan out the programme to be launched,
- mobilise the required resources — money, materials and voluntary unskilled labour (*sramdan*),
- implement the programme fixing responsibilities in a decentralised manner,
- supervise the implementation (monitoring),
- assess the impact on completion (evaluation) and, then
- draw the maximum benefit.

1. Swadhyaya Sangams

Sevashram reaches out to the people of four revenue districts in Kerala (Ernakulam, Thrissur, Kottayam and Alappuzha). Several of its activities of people’s development are carried out through grassroots level women’s self-help groups called *swadhyaya sangams*. In fact, the role of Sevashram is to facilitate the process of people helping themselves to have a holistic life. An initial step in the intervention of Sevashram has been to set up *swadhyaya sangams*. Each *sangam* has 20 members on an average. All of them are women from families in the neighbourhood. They belong to the economically and socially backward

strata of the society. Today there are 735 *swadhyaya sangams* in the four districts of Kerala, the operational area of Sevashram.

The *swadhyaya sangams* are encouraged to promote cultural and social activities as well. The members function like a closely-knit family unit. Whenever there is a tragedy in a family such as death, they assemble to help the needy. They also make donations for weddings in the families of the members. A strong humanitarian bond is cultivated through constant interaction among the *sangam* members and facilitated by the ashram through volunteers.

2. Savings and Credit Scheme

Sevashram believes in generating funds for community development from the community itself. It is with this principle that it has initiated the self-help scheme of savings and credit. The members of the *swadhyaya sangams* get together once a week in places convenient to them and mobilise savings ranging from Rs.5 to Rs.30 from each member. The accounts of the savings are maintained carefully and in transparent manner, and are placed before the group in the weekly meeting. After a period of six months of saving, a member is eligible to get loans from the accumulated funds. This is known as internal credit. A member can get a loan of double the amount that she deposits. After a period of another six months, a *sangam* becomes eligible for accessing bank loans financed by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), wherein Sevashram stands as a guarantor to the bank. The *sangams* advance these loan amounts also to their members in accordance with the norms agreed upon for accessing internal credit.

Sevashram has youngsters who are known as *sangamitras*. They move around on two-wheelers to meet the treasurers of the *swadhyaya sangams* and collect the savings and repayment amounts in regular weekly instalments. The total amount of savings of the different *swadhyaya sangams* up to the year 2007 is Rs.58,27,386 and the amount disbursed as loans is Rs.2,96,40,000.

Besides running an alternate savings and credit system, which is both sustainable and manageable, the *sangams* encourage their members to engage themselves in self-employment activities like running micro milk collection and distribution centres, homestead production units of vermi compost, and distribution of home

appliances and consumer goods. They become both contributors to and beneficiaries of the marriage and funeral funds that are run as centrally sponsored and administered welfare. The *sangam* members also participate actively in the talent promotion competitions such as *unniyarangu*, *kumarolsavam* and *prathibha poshini* for the age groups of 3-12 years, over 12 years up to marriageable age and above marriageable age, respectively.

3. Distribution of Household Goods

One of the activities initially undertaken by the *swadhyaya sangams* has been the distribution of household articles and commodities of everyday use. Sevashram buys the required goods in bulk, which are made available to the *sangams* for distribution to the members who are given the facility of paying the price in instalments. Every effort is made to have some control on the price and quality of the commodities brought and distributed through Sevashram. Above all there is total transparency in the whole transaction. The list of commodities with their prices and handling charges are notified, and the amount of instalment to be paid is specified. Each *sangham* maintains its own accounts and presents them at the weekly meetings.

4. Kera Kendra for Farmers

Kera Kendra is a facilitation centre to help the marginalised farmers engaged in coconut cultivation. The programme is intended to help the small farmers, who have up to half an acre of land where the number of coconut-yielding trees is below 30. It has two basic objectives. (1) Assist marginalised and small farmers to draw maximum benefit from various developmental projects, launched from time to time by the Central and State Governments, Spices Board, Coconut Development Board, Coir Board, National Horticultural Board, National Medicinal Plants Board, Khadi and Village Industries Commission and Board, Small Farmers Agro Business Consortium (SFAC), Kerala Agricultural University, Vegetable and Fruits Promotion Council of Kerala (VFPC-K), NABARD, and other financial institutions. (2) Enable the farmers to adopt organic farming methods, mixed, inter- and multi-layer cropping patterns, integrated pest management systems etc.

Sevashram has been operating *kera kendras* from 1 November 2004 onwards, in the local self-government institutions of Angamaly block

panchayath, in two phases. The first phase was in the Angamaly municipality and grampanchayaths of Karukutty, North Thuravoor, Kalady and Sreemoolanagaram. In the second phase, the other five grampanchayaths — Mookkannoor, Manjapra, Ayyampuzha, Malayattoor-Neeleeswaram and Kanjoor — were covered. “While farming is generally considered an area of less returns, the Angamaly-based Sevashram, a non-governmental organisation, is on an improvisation move with a view to helping farmers. The NGO, having a tradition of building up a strong cooperative movement in villages, is venturing into a new mode of operation...Agro business centres and agro clinics are the new concepts being introduced as part of the programme. Such centres would be managed by degree-holders in Agriculture. These professionals would regularly visit the farms and advise the farmers on ways to control any disease affecting the trees and to improve the yield. High-yielding varieties would be distributed among the farmers. Organic manure would be made available under simple terms and conditions” (Pillai 2004: 2).

5. Assistance in Organic Certification

Interested small and marginal farmers, who associate themselves very closely with Sevashram, are being assisted under the Internal Control System (ICS) to obtain organic certification from INDOCERT, the internationally accredited certifying agency for the EUREPGAP standard. It offers inspections for “Naturland and BIO SUISSE” standards and it is under contract for doing inspections for bio inspects and “FLOCert” in India. The farmers are convinced that in case they seek organic certification as individual farmers, the procedures and processes they have to go through would cost them almost ten times of the costs they have to incur if they do it through Sevashram. Hence, they enthusiastically join in ICS being introduced by Sevashram.

As a first step towards building up awareness about the need and relevance of organic farming, Sevashram organised half day long input cum discussion sessions at each of the *kera kendras* with the assistance of resource persons from the certifying agency, INDOCERT in the month of June 2005. At present, groups of 300 small and marginal farmers each, on an average, who are willing to introduce organic farming practices, are being organised as clusters in five places so that, in all, 1500 such farmers could be assisted to get the certification from INDOCERT.

6. Distribution of Coconut Seedlings

Sevashram has a programme of distributing coconut seedlings in order to support and encourage small farmers in coconut cultivation. Coconut seedlings, raised from seed nuts are procured from Kuttiyadi (a popular brand), processed scientifically under the expert guidance of an agronomist, and distributed to the farmers from the houses of Sevashram at Angamaly, Pullani and Vaikom, on no-profit-no-loss basis.

7. Swasrayagram and Income Generating Activities

Sevashram is gradually developing a network of five *swasrayagrams* (self-supporting villages) with the one at North Thuravoor panchayath, designed to operate as the hub, and the ones at Vechoor in Kottayam district, Maruthorvattom in Alappuzha district, Cherai in Ernakulam district and Kadukutty in Thrissur district as the spokes. The objective is to evolve a new work culture and labour ethics by providing employment opportunities on a share-stake basis to hundreds of members of the *swadhyaya sangams*, operating under Sevashram's auspices. The project of *swasrayagram* is supported by the Coconut Development Board.

Several income generating activities, using coconut as the raw material, are introduced in order to realise the objective of the *swasrayagrams*. They include coconut husk defibring, pith processing, production of coir using motorised traditional device (*ratts*), weaving of geo-textiles, production of natural coconut oil which is 100 per cent free from carbon and sulphur, making areca *spathe* plates and containers, and paper carry bags, production of coconut shell charcoal, and preparation of ready-to-eat convenient food items from coconut, cocoa, jack fruit etc. Coconuts are collected by the members of the *swasrayagram* giving the best prices to the growers and converted into copra with coconut dryers. Drying is done by using air from a blower so that copra is free from smoke and carbon. Coconut oil is extracted using an expeller. The whole process involved in the production of coconut oil ensures that it is free from all adulterants.

8. Organic Products

Sevashram has developed over 50 organic products and is marketing them under the brand names of *Kerasyam*, *Aiswarya*, *Jaiwa Dhannya*, *Kera Vimal*, *Kera Veeryam*, *Shree Kesh* and *Kera Biofer*.

Kerasyam is coconut oil which is 100 per cent free from carbon and sulphur, extracted from dryer dried copra and certified by the Quality Testing Laboratory of the Coconut Development Board of the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, as conforming to the norms prescribed for pure coconut oil by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS). The products under the brand name of *Aiswarya* are three bath soaps — *Chandan* (sandal wood extract), *Sugandh* (lemon extract) and *Shalini* (*tulasi* extract).

Jaiwa Dhannya is the general brand under which come several items, such as a balanced diet mix, *Ojasyam* (made of germinated, dried, roasted and pulverised wheat, *ragi*, green gram and Bengal gram, and flavoured with natural vanilla essence), *Jully* (a five spice medicinal drink powder, made of roasted and powdered cumin, fenugreek, coriander, dried ginger and cardamom), *Madhu Thani* (pure bee procured and home processed honey), and several coconut, cocoa, milk and jackfruit based convenient food and confectionery items. *Santhwana* (a traditional herbal oil, ideal for cuts, bruises, aches, pains, swellings etc.) and *Ashwas* (a pack of traditional herbal tablets, meant to relieve internal aches) are the other products under *Jaiwa Dhannya*.

Other organic products of Sevashram include *Kera Vimal* (under which come washing bar soap, detergent cake and detergent powder), *Kera Veeryam* (coconut vinegar) and *Shree Kesh* (herbal hair tonic). The coir pith based bio manure, produced by Sevashram using the technology developed by the Central Coir Research Institute (CCRI), is called *Kera Biofer*.

9. Marketing of Sevashram Products

Sevashram has its outlets for marketing its organic products. It has set up its own 'Swasraya Food Park' and developed a network of shops. The *swasraya* food park of Sevashram is located at the heart of the town of Angamaly. The shop has three sections — *jaiwa* (natural food stall), *dhannya* (organic food store) and *jaiwa dhanya* (fresh food parlour). Besides the branded products of Sevashram, areca *spathe* plates and paper carry bags, made by the women members of the *swadhyaya sangams* operating under Sevashram's auspices, are also distributed from the food park.

In addition to the *swasraya* food park, Sevashram has developed a network of shops for the sale of its organic products with the direct

and active involvement of the local brand ambassadors. At present, around 200 shops are included in this marketing chain.

10. Organic Fraternity Network

Sevashram is developing a marketing network known as *jaiwa sahodaryam*. Under the scheme informal people's consumer cooperatives are formed. The objective of the scheme is to ensure availability of quality goods of everyday needs at reasonable prices. Besides fostering love and fraternity among the share-holders, the *jaiwa sahodaryams* will help control the prices of items of staple food, health-care and sanitation.

A *jaiwa sahodaryam* has a maximum of 111 members and every member has a share of Rs.100 in it. Membership is open to all without any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, sex or political affiliation. Operating on the principles of true democracy and genuine cooperation, the group of share-holders entrust the day-to-day governance of the cooperative to a team of five representatives, elected from among themselves, comprising of a treasurer (*khajanji*), secretary (*karyadarshi*), president (*sarathi*), local auditor (*parishodhaka/n*) and a substitute for all the other four (*pakarakari/pakarakaran*). At present there are 52 *jaiwa sahodaryams* in the operational area of Sevashram.

11. Household-Based Activities

An agro-based programme of the Sevashram, that is cost-effective, is that of vermi compost. This can easily be implemented by any small farmer at the household level. The basic requirement is an earthen jar costing about Rs.500. The jar can be kept on the premises of the house. Biodegradable waste materials are deposited in the jar and earthworms are allowed to grow. Sevashram supplies the worms. An individual household can produce about 1200 kg of vermi compost in a year through this process.

Another home-based activity for the benefit of the rural community is the cultivation of Azolla, a blue-green algae that has high nutritious content. It can be used for feeding cattle and poultry. The basic requirement for this activity is the concrete container for growing the plant. The seeds of Azolla and the containers are provided by Sevashram. A pair of containers and the raw materials would cost about Rs.1000.

Gruhaiswarya, another household programme of Sevashram, is that of kitchen garden for growing vegetables in one's courtyard using the waste water. Waste water from kitchen is collected in soak pits through small canals constructed by brick and cement, and is used for irrigating the garden.

12. Social Security Services

Sevashram has introduced a social security measure in collaboration with the Life Insurance Corporation of India. The organisation enrolls people in the *Janasree-Bima Sikshak Sahayog Yojana*. The scheme provides insurance cover to those who pay an annual premium of Rs.100 with an equal amount remitted by the Union Government towards the premium. In case of accidental death of the insured, the family will get Rs. 75,000. The scheme also provides for educational aid to the children of the insured.

With special focus on the service to the senior citizens, Sevashram started the *sevan kendra* in rented premises at Kalady on 1 January 2005. Its services include assistance in accessing the benefits from various pension and relief schemes, settling personal, family and property disputes, and leading a happy family life.

13. Stake-Holders Become Share-Holders

Sevashram has promoted a public limited company — *Swasraya Organic Products Limited* — incorporated under the Companies Act of 1956 and got it registered with the Corporate Identity Number of U 24119 KL 2007 PLC 20364 on 16 February 2007. The share capital of the company is 25 million rupees, consisting of 2,50,000 shares of Rs.100 each, distributed among all those who have active and direct involvement in the activities of Sevashram.

The following principles inspired Sevashram to set up the *Swasraya Organic Products Company*:

- (1) The main mandate of the company shall be promotion of the vision and mission of Sevashram, through production of quality, value added, organic goods of mass consumption at reasonable costs, and marketing the same at affordable prices, with the optimum use of locally available materials and human resources.

- (2) Management of the company should be guided by the values of love, justice, equality, liberty and fraternity, and its operational style should be participatory, decentralised and transparent.
- (3) All those engaged in any type of active and direct service at Sevashram, *swasrayagrams* or any of their affiliates, with or without remuneration, could have shares and stakes in the company, in the proportion of their involvement in it. Members of *swadhyaya sangams* are eligible for 100 shares each, while their *samrakshakas*, *prachodakas* and *sevikas* could acquire 120, 130 and 150 shares each, respectively. The office staff could have a maximum of 200 shares each, while members of *jaiwa sahodaryams* and Elders Forum are eligible for 50 and 5 shares each, respectively. Left over shares could be held by the ordinary members of Sevashram. The shares cannot be traded in, but can be returned to the company. There will be facility for taking loans up to 85 per cent of the face value of the shares.
- (4) The share-holders should become the stake-holders too. Sevashram should be willing to play a catalytic role in converting the company into a role-model for evolving an ideal work culture, labour ethics and workers' participation in management, through constant human resource development programmes and personal interactions.
- (5) There should be in-built checks and balances to ensure that welfare of all those who associate themselves with the company, regardless of the considerations of caste, creed, political inclination, social and economic status, gender etc.
- (6) Though the company could engage itself in export and import activities, and earn foreign exchange, it should not seek or accept any foreign fund as merely donation.
- (7) Provision should be made in the rules/laws to set apart a portion of the net profit for developmental and charitable activities every year.

All the assets acquired by Sevashram, over the years, through the collaborative efforts of the *sangams*, assessed at their book value, are converted as the share capital of the *Swasraya Organic Products Company*.

IV. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

General management of all the activities of Sevashram is taken care of by the Executive Committee of Sevashram. *Swadhyaya sangams*, operating under the auspices of Sevashram, are spread over the four districts of Ernakulam, Thrissur, Alappuzha and Kottayam. In order to facilitate the activities of Sevashram in a decentralised and participatory manner, the operational area of Sevashram is, for the present, divided into two provinces. Each province, in turn, is divided into four zones. Each zone is further divided into up to eight regions, and each region, up to five clusters (each comprising of five *swadhyaya sangams* on an average). In all, presently there are eight zones, 50 regions, 150 clusters and 735 *sangams*. Each cluster has a *samrakshaka* (protector) and each region has a person called *prachodaka* (facilitator) whom the members of *sangams* select from among themselves. The *prachodakas* find out a person, who is capable of giving them leadership, as *sevika* (coordinator). At present there are eight *sevikas* — one for each zone. Then, there are the *sanghadakas* (organisers) at the provincial level. *Sanghadakas* are the resident members of the Sevashram community. It is through *sanghadakas*, *sevikas* and *prachodakas* that Sevashram has access to the *sangams*. In addition, at the level of Sevashram there are *karmayogi* members, *parisheelanarthis* (aspirants), *parishilakas*, *nirvahakan*, *karthavyan* and office-assistants. The *swadhyaya* network has its *pracharakas* and *prerakas* rendering service at the grassroots.

The *prachodakas*, *sevikas*, *parisheelakas*, *sangamitras*, *karyadarsis*, *sangadakas* and *karthavyans*, together with the office staff and office bearers of Sevashram, gather together at Sevashram on the fourth Monday of every month to evaluate that month's activities and plan out those of the next month. All those related to Sevashram's entire gamut of activities participate in this meeting. Similarly, regular monthly evaluation and planning sessions are held at the regional level in the first week of every month. The chairperson (*sarathi*), secretary (*karyadarshi*) and treasurer (*khachangi*) of every *sangam*, *khachangis* and *karyadarshis* of *jaiwa sahodaryams*, and any other interested members participate in this meeting. Likewise, all the *prachodakas* and *samrakshakas* come together under the leadership of *sevikas* on a weekly basis. Thus, every effort is made to maintain the developmental process under Sevashram decentralised and participatory.

V. RECOGNITION

As the rural community in the operational area of Svashram has benefited from the developmental initiative of the organisation, there has been increasing recognition of its activities as innovative and laudable. The success stories of the programmes of Sevashram have attracted the attention of media and interested parties.

1. Media Report

“Innovative products made by the *ashramites* are in high demand.....The net effect of the activities of the ashram is of long-term impact on the social fabric. The low income groups get a better perspective of the life around them and get the confidence to deal with different situations and continue their effort to improve their lot.... The whole operation is structured in such a way that there is always a helping hand at every stage” (Pillai 2001: 5).

“Agriculture is the mainstay of the rural economy. Low prices of farm products coupled with inadequate infrastructure have left the farming sector high and dry. Time and again, agrarian reforms are announced, but there is no major change in the overall situation....Globalisation has made things worse for many farmers who have to face competitions from new quarters. Selling the farm produce at better prices is a challenge to them. The Angamaly-based Sevashram, an NGO, is trying to help such farmers through a new venture” (Pillai 2005: 2).

Sevashram finds a place in the Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Papal Seminary, Pune. Lionel Mascarenhas in his article “Golden Moments” in the souvenir says: “Fr. Kuriakose Mampilly (Ernakulam) is the founder director of a unique experiment in social work based in “Sevashram”, Ernakulam. It is a special form of personal development and community building in the social, economic and moral (spiritual) spheres. It aims not only at integral development of the person, but also at making him/her eventually a partner in this venture. Two remarkable features of this work are: that it depends for its running entirely on local resources and the initiatives of the participants, as well as its universality of outlook, viz., that it is open to everyone, irrespective of creed, caste and social position” (Mascarenhas 2006: 26).

2. Case Study and Evaluation

The report of a case study of Sevashram has aptly made the following observation. "This is a dedicated group that has a clear distinct vision on sustainable living practices. They attempt to live out their ideals of community living and sharing, supporting themselves through activities of use to the rest of the community and not in contradiction to their values....All the programmes are economically sound in that they are self-supporting within their production-consumption cycles. None depends on external support. There is total transparency regarding their vision; the values they promote and live by; and the interventions/programmes planned and executed with their support.... The service charge that they collect is fully known, and can also be calculated since it is based on percentages. There is a humbleness to do socially unacceptable work — as in collecting garbage for vermi compost. The key is quality services at competitive costs, given the lifestyle of the group. Since their consumption levels are very low, they are able to have a surplus even from this to further service for the needy" (Bhat *et al.* 1999: 161).

The NABARD undertook an evaluation of Sevashram in 1999 in order to assess its role as a self-help promotion organisation. A system of scoring was used in this evaluation. In the test results Sevashram scored 193 out of the maximum of 200 marks (NABARD 1999: 11).

3. Award for Excellence

Sevashram won the "Father Jose Alex Award for Excellence in Social Work" in 2003. The award is offered by the Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kalamassery, Kochi, Kerala. The citation presented to Sevashram along with the award reads: "Sevashram, established in 1995, within less than a decade of development work has shown that *Grama Swaraj* of Gandhiji's dream need not remain a utopia, alien to the modern era of globalisation. This, they have proven by taking recourse to the method of grassroots level organisation, especially, that of women. What distinguishes this organisation is its effort to integrate the various aspects of life in its concept of development, and to affirm a spirituality rooted in Indian tradition, the test of which is in the works for the weal of the entire universal family, *loka samasta sukhino bhavantu*. It is the pleasure of the Award Committee to commend on the pioneering effort and novel initiative that has been taken by

Sevashram under the visionary leadership of Rev. Fr. Kuriakose Mampilly. It appreciates the much needed stress given by Sevashram in harmonising the elements of development and spirituality for attaining the national ideals of *Grama Swaraj* and *Kshema Rashtra*. It has successfully demonstrated through its *Swadhyaya Sanghams* that development is possible without sacrificing fundamental human values and relying on internal resources and self-help.”

4. Certificate of Approbation

The certificate issued by Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, Major Archbishop of Ernakulam–Angamaly on 30 October 2006 has the following to say about Sevashram. “I know Fr. Kuriakose Mampilly now for over ten years. The movement ‘Sevashram’, that he has been giving leadership to, was started way back in March 1995. Fr. Mampilly has been forming communities that have people of different castes, creeds, sexes, walks of life, age-groups and regions, as members, not only in the places where the houses of Sevashram are located, but also in different parts of the districts of Ernakulam, Thrissur, Kottayam and Alappuzha through the ‘*Swadhyaya Sanghams*’ and ‘Organic Fraternity Networks’ of ordinary people. This mission, I am convinced, is basically ‘preaching of the good news’ and ‘practical charity’, which are close to the heart of the Catholic Church.”

“Sevashram does not, as a policy, accept foreign assistance. Instead, rooted in the cultural and spiritual heritage of India, it mobilises both human and material resources from within the country, through purely ethical means, and is striving to generate as many employment opportunities as possible for the marginalised, exploited and backward sections of the society, especially the women folk. The end it has in mind is the improvement in the quality of life of the least and lost, by developing their human potential to the maximum... Discerning this as a ministry inspired by the love of Jesus Christ, whose Spirit blows where it wills as the wind does, without any regard to boundaries of dioceses, religions or regions I gladly give it my approval and blessings”.

V. CONCLUSION: GOD WILL DO THE REST

Sevashram does not pretend to be capable of pulling the shutters on the floodgates of consumerism opened wide by the force of economic liberalisation. However, without trying to curse the darkness all around,

Sevashram is aspiring for lighting a lamp, knowing fully well that all it may be able to do will only be a tiny fragment of the magnificent enterprise which is God's work. It may be incomplete; but, it shall be an opening for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest!

VI. References

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