



Role of Voluntary Agencies in Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders

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ABSTRACT

The Problem of crime is as old as man himself. It is so eternal and universal that no society has yet been able to provide a complete answer to it. A crime-free society is still no more than a myth or an utopian end. Even affluent, developed societies are not free from the menace of crime. On the contrary, they have to combat with increasingly sophisticated and complicated forms and techniques of criminal activities. As a matter of fact, economic growth alone scarcely seems to be able to check the rising trends in crime. The Sixth United Nations Congress on prevention of crime and treatment of offenders, held at Caracas, Venezuela in 1980 declared, "the success of criminal justice systems and strategies for crime prevention, especially in the light of the growth of new and sophisticated forms of crime and the difficulties encountered in the administration of criminal justice, depends above all on the progress achieved through- out the world in improving social conditions and enhancing the quality of life." The Congress, therefore, called upon all Member-States of the United Nations to "take every measure in their power to eliminate the conditions of life which detract from human dignity and lead to crime, including unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, racial and national discrimination and various forms of social inequality. Thus, in any country, whether developed or underdeveloped, crime prevention has to be planned and programmed on a long-term basis as an integral part of national planning and development strategy.

KEY WORDS

Crime, Juvenile Delinquency, Offenders Voluntary Agencies and Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Growing problems of crime control in contemporary world, continuing failure of existing criminal justice systems in prevention of crime, alienation of criminal justice from the machinery of social control as well as the people and a quantitative increase and a qualitative worsening of crime in a large number of countries have convincingly proved that no country can deal with its crime problem effectively without broader public participation in programmes and activities of social defence aiming at prevention of crime and treatment, reclamation and rehabilitation of criminals. The oft-quoted proverb— prevention is better than cure appears to have intimate bearing on crime control. As Bentham observed long ago, before an offence is committed, it may give warning of its approach in many ways; it passes through a train of preparations which often allow it to be arrested before it reaches its catastrophe. Inadequacy or limitation of existing criminal justice system is that it usually takes cognizance of an offence only after its occurrence and this is why public participation is considered to be the hall-mark of any successful plan for crime control. Members of public as representatives of a community can take part in different ways in programmes and activities of crime prevention and control both under govern- mental and voluntary sectors. However, in pluralistic societies and political democracies as ours, “voluntary agencies have an infiltrating and catalysing capacity which official departments do not possess. To Governmentalize social work may, sometimes, knock the people’s soul out of it.

Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency

Prevention of juvenile delinquency must be the starting point of any crime control programme. The United Nations Caracas Declaration recognised that a “high degree of social attention should be paid to the ways in which juveniles are handled, because of their early stage of development.”

Although juvenile delinquency is a world-wide problem, there are divergencies in magnitude of the problem consistent with sociocultural and socio-political differences within and between countries. According to the latest edition of an official report entitled Crime in India-1982, there has been “continuous increase” in the number of juvenile crimes during the decade 1972-82. From 5.6 per cent in 1972, the volume of juvenile crime per lakh of population has increased to 8.4 per cent in 1982. Poverty, illiteracy, broken homes or weakening of family ties resulting from increased urbanisation, migration and industrialisation contribute to the growing criminal tendencies among the youth. Official statistics reveal that economic factors are largely responsible. According to the report, in all our states and Union Territories, the majority of the juveniles apprehended during 1982 belonged to the lower income groups

One of the most effective ways to curb criminal propensities among the juveniles is to provide homes for homeless and hapless children. Voluntary agencies can do a great deal of useful work to this end. The All-Bengal Women’s Union, for example, has been running its Children’s Welfare Home for girls in Calcutta since 1950. This Home is now taking care of about 250 orphan and destitute girls—which include lost, stray and abandoned children, cases received from prisons, and those rescued by the police facing moral danger. Its Welfare programme is a total one which begins from the time of admission and ends with her settlement. Since rehabilitation comes best from employment, the inmates are given primary and high school education plus vocational training. Those who show an aptitude are also given the chance for training in nursing and teaching outside the Home. Over the years, hundreds of the Home’s girls have found employment as craft and school teachers, village welfare workers, nurses, typists, and domestic helpers. For those skilled women, who are unable to find any employment outside, work centres have been opened in the Home’s own premises. Wages are paid to these women and their work has a good market. Had the Home not given them help in their childhood, these useful citizens would have most likely been trapped for ever in a web of crime.⁷

The Ramakrishna Mission Boy's Home at Rahara in the vicinity of Calcutta is another institution doing commendable philanthropic work for orphan and destitute boys. Started in 1944, with only 37 orphan boys, the Home now provides shelter for some 700 boys—all orphans and destitutes or sons of poor tribals. It has devoted itself not only to rearing 'these boys into manhood but also bringing about their social rehabilitation.

While more such homes are necessary, in view of limited resources, other less costly preventive programmes also need to be devised, such as imparting free primary and vocational education to poor children especially those living in slums and in areas with high crime rates, providing counsel to parents and rendering after-care services to released juvenile offenders. Voluntary organisations, whether secular or run by religious groups, are well-suited to take up these programmes.

The Central Children Act of 1960 as well as the State Children Acts provide for custody, protection, care, education, training and rehabilitation of destitute, deprived, dependent, deviant and other socially handicapped children. In some states, viz., Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, short-term institutions such as Remand/Observation/Auxiliary Homes, Reception Centres, Probation and Aftercare Hostels and long-term institutions such as Certified/ Approved/Special/Reformatory Schools have been established by the Children Aid Societies and other voluntary agencies for implementation of the Children Acts.

The problems of juvenile delinquency is stupendous and growing and deserves urgent attention. Juveniles are in need of community care and assistance both before and after the onset of delinquency. Since the children of today are citizens of tomorrow, efforts put in to save them from going astray are our investment for the country's future. Justice Mulla Committee on Jail Reforms, therefore, suggested that special voluntary social service institutions should be helped to come up for protection and welfare of children and youth facing moral danger.

Institutional and Non-institutional Treatment of Women and Other Adult Offenders

Next to juvenile delinquency, the problem of female criminality should receive special attention in crime control programmes in view of the vital role of women in their capacity as mothers in the family. Unfortunately, because of the small number of women offenders throughout the world, they often do not receive adequate attention and consideration and this often results in limited access for women to the necessary programmes and services, including placement in detention facilities, far from their families and home communities. The Caracas Declaration', therefore, emphasised the need for deinstitutionalisation as an appropriate disposition for most women offenders to enable them to discharge their family responsibilities. Deinstitutionalisation requires that programmes and services used as alternatives to imprisonment are made available to women. Probation, for instance, is a non-punitive method of dealing with offenders as well as an acceptable substitute for imprisonment. The chief aims of probation are: (i) to prevent further development of the criminal intentions in the offenders, and (ii) to accomplish their rehabilitation by returning them to their natural setting in the free community with a chance to rectify themselves during a period of supervision instead of sending them to the unnatural and too often socially harmful atmosphere of prisons. It is, however, the rehabilitation element that actually gives meaning to the preventive aspect of probation.

It is generally believed that the probation system is effective, particularly in cases of juvenile and first offenders. But as a matter of fact, even carefully selected recidivists can effectively be brought under this system. As M.A. Subramaniam has aptly pointed out, "Rehabilitation is the true antidote for recidivism generally and most of the recidivists are anxious to come back to normal life at some stage or other because their very nature and conscience yearns for freedom and recognition. Unless compelled by adverse conditions, the majority may not want to revert to crime. Probation takes note for this fundamental trait in human nature and works upon it.

Voluntary organisations can help in application of probation by setting up Societies and Homes for the rehabilitation of probation cases. The members of these organisations may also function as Voluntary Probation Officers. Under Section 13(1)(b) of the Probation of Offenders Act 1958, a person provided for the purpose by a 'Society recognised in this behalf by the State Government can be appointed as Probation Officer. Unfortunately, most of the state Governments have not so far evinced much interest to utilise the services of voluntary probation officers. As the Mulla Committee have very poignantly observed: "The Indian probation system is seriously handicapped for want of adequate number of departmentally paid probation officers and this deficiency can be effectively remedied by utilising the services of voluntary workers". Voluntary women organisation will be particularly helpful and effective in dealing with female probation cases.

The services of voluntary women organisations may also be utilised for institutional treatment of female offenders. In the women's section of Calcutta's Presidency Jail, for instance, some voluntary agencies have been rendering invaluable service in imparting, both general and vocational, education to prisoners. The pioneer organisation in this field is the Prison Reform Committee of the National Council of Women in India which, in addition to other programmes, have organised since 1955 Ramnam Kirtan, Bhajans and reading from the Ramayana twice a month on Sundays. This has proved very popular and now continues with a Government grant. They have also started a nursery class for lost and stray children and those accompanying their mothers to jail. Other voluntary organisations functioning here are the Soroptimist International of Calcutta and the All-Bengal Women's Union. With cooperation from jail authorities, they have successfully taken up programmes, such as training in art and crafts, manufacture and sale of greeting cards, table-mats, etc. The latest addition to these programmes is manufacturing of cigarette packets by hand-operated machines through the collaboration of a leading tobacco company. Prisoners are paid for their work too. The success of these programmes calls for an extension of voluntary services to other prisons in the country, covering both male and female offenders. The Mulla Committee have also suggested inter alia that community groups can be organised as Friends of Prisoners: (i) to organise functions on national days and other festivals in prisons and allied institutions; (ii) to work for reconciliation between prisoners and their victims or between prisoners and their own families so as to facilitate their smooth return to homes after release; (iii) to provide foster homes for the dependent children of prison inmates; (iv) to collect books, magazines and journals and distribute them to prison inmates for their leisure-time reading; (v), to come to prison to spend some time with small groups of prisoners to help them in easing their tension and to afford them an opportunity to open up and express their feelings; (vi) to extend counselling and guidance to inmates for their current problems and future rehabilitation; (vii) to organise lectures and audio-visual demonstrations in prisons on secular moral topics and on social education for the benefit of inmates.

After-care of Released Prisoners

After-care of released prisoners as one of the most effective means to curb recidivism constitutes an integral part of crime control programmes and activities. An offender, immediately after release from prison, has to face a lot of social and personal problems, such as loss of family contacts, lack of suitable employment opportunities, social stigma of prison sentence and so on. It is for a solution of these serious problems that a discharged offender needs community's solace, sympathy, help and care without which he will, in all probability, find no other alternative but to revert to crime.

Absence of after-care, therefore, gives rise to recidivism, "After-care", to quote the Model Prison Manual, "is the released person's convalescence. It is the bridge which can carry him from the artificial and restricted environment of institutional custody, from doubts and difficulties, hesitations and handicaps to satisfactory citizenship, resettlement and to ultimate rehabilitation in the free community."

The Western experience of correctional work reveals that there is ample scope for work by voluntary agencies in the after-care of released prisoners. An ideal after-care scheme should begin at the commencement of the sentence. Starting from interviews with offenders at the court immediately after sentence, the functions

of voluntary agencies can be extended to a wide variety of programmes, such as group work with prisoners and their wives and families during sentence, looking after children during mothers' visits to prison, providing transport to prisons, support and advice to offenders and their families in their own homes after discharge, setting up of after-care hostels for accommodating homeless ex-prisoners, supportive work with homeless ex-prisoners living in lodgings or hostels, helping offenders to find employment and to take part in community life, etc.

In the developed countries of the West, voluntary social and religious organisations have been doing a lot of extremely useful and humanitarian work in connection with after-care of released prisoners. In India, the Discharged Prisoners Aid Society was established for the first time in Uttar Pradesh as far back as 1894. Thereafter, such societies were set up in the then provinces of Madras, Central Province, Punjab, Bengal and Bombay between 1921 and 1933. Apart from helping the released prisoners in their social and economic rehabilitation, these societies also rendered invaluable service for reclamation of habitual offenders, prevention of casual and juvenile offenders from becoming habitual. But unfortunately, some of these societies have already been closed down for want of funds, adequate Governmental support and recognition. Those which still exist are the UP-Crime Prevention Society, All India Crime Prevention Society, Madras Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society and Maharashtra State Probation and After-care Association. Emphasising the need for revival of after-care programmes, the Mulla Committee suggested that efforts should be made to set up at least one voluntary organisation in each district to which the work of extending help to released prisoners could be entrusted. "It should be the policy of the Government", says the Committee, "to encourage formation of voluntary organisations for taking up programmes for the help of released prisoners. Such voluntary organisations should be given financial and other help to make it easier for them to carry on this work. Voluntary workers devoting considerable part of their leisure time to such work should be socially recognised."

Problems and Weaknesses of Voluntary Agencies in India

Paucity of funds and lack of adequate Governmental support and cooperation are largely responsible for the fast decline of voluntarism in the social welfare sector in general. Unfortunately, more than the problem of funding or official assistance, almost every voluntary organisation in India now suffers from an acute shortage of devoted volunteers. An empirical study of public participation in social defence in the cities of Lucknow and Kanpur of Uttar Pradesh by S.P. Srivastava also confirmed this sorry state of affairs. A larger number of elderly respondents in this study nostalgically recalled the glorious tradition of voluntarism in India during the pre-independence days. The spirit of Samaritanism, according to them, has witnessed an almost total eclipse in recent times when the people have become totally self-centred. In their opinion, the chief reasons for the decline in the number of voluntary social workers today were: (1) the change in the traditional pattern of living, (ii) progressive decline of moral standards with modernisation and city living, (iii) eclipse of older traditions and informal social control, (iv) diminishing sense of civic responsibilities, and (v) emergence of a loveless, conscienceless and emotionally cold individual. The study has also identified internal groupism, bureaucratic attitude of senior members of the agency staff, lack of trained and skilled volunteers, lack of adequate support and cooperation from the parents/guardians/relatives of the inmates of social defence institutions, and corruption and abuse of authority by the agency staff as some of the major problems of voluntary social defence organisations.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion leads us to an inescapable conclusion that voluntary agencies have a great role to play in prevention and control of crime as well as in institutional and community-based treatment programmes for the juvenile, youth, female and all other deviants. There is indeed immense scope for work by voluntary agencies in these fields. The ranges of tasks available to them would, however, vary in accordance with the contribution that they would be able to make, and the items of work mentioned in this article are only illustrative but in no way comprehensive. Apart from socio-cultural environment becoming conducive to voluntary service,

the success of voluntary agencies is largely conditioned by Governmental support and cooperation. While Governmental interference in the autonomy of voluntary agencies in lieu of patronage is detrimental to their success, periodical evaluations of their performance by non-official experts appointed by the Governments are necessary. In the ultimate analysis, however, the enduring solution to the growing problems of crime control would hinge on the political will to bring about rapid socio-economic development for the welfare of deprived, depressed and downtrodden people of the country.

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