

# WHY BECOME AN ACTIVIST?

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To be sensitive in these trouble-torn times is to be a worried person. It is not easy; one is always acutely aware of the injustices, the atrocities being committed, the cruelty of human nature. And what choice does one have then, but to be an activist?

I have been what one might call a *voluntary activist* for over a dozen years now. I have concentrated on environmental issues trying to do my very minute bit in bringing this insanely destructive world back into some semblance of sanity. In these twelve years I have seen things go from bad to worse; the loss of our heritage, forests razed to the ground, wildlife decimated, rivers turned into sewers, tribals dispossessed of their land and rights, people murdered and maimed by killer gases, and my own city, Delhi, become more of a hell-hole. But I have also seen sparks of hope turn into rays of light. Ordinary people promoting our heritage and the arts, saving forests, governments responding with appropriate policies, laws and programmes, and a whole range of alternative development paths emerging. Has life as an activist been worth it?

Sometimes, when it all gets too much, when news comes in of yet another forest sold off to a contractor, when the police shows its frequently repressive might against peaceful protesters, when another careless motorist drives over a puppy trying

*"The voluntary sector" as we know it today came into existence to fill the gaps of State failure. The very fact that the people who compromise this sector are "voluntary" gives a new dimension to their cause, namely, that of selflessness. The strength and conviction behind this process have shown up rare individuals of character and refinement. THE EYE gratefully acknowledges voluntary movements all over the world and wishes to feature them and learn from them in the following issues.*



to cross the road, I almost wish I had never been sensitive to such things, never become an activist, but rather gone into diamonds or some such thing. Then all I would have had to worry

about is the latest market prices... and perhaps about being kidnapped! How can people be so oblivious to anything other than themselves?

But they are, and so are. I am sorry to say, many of those who are reading this magazine. They are, quite frankly, not concerned about petty things like social exploitation and ecological destruction, they would much rather worry about momentous problems like how to land a job with a cushy five-figure salary, or if they already have one, how to get a promotion. They would rather spend a few hundred rupees buying a new dress (so necessary for the Wednesday night party), rather than donate even a fraction of that on such trivial matters as earthquake relief. It is not necessarily anyone's fault; our bitterly competitive educational system moulds them into thinking how to be one up

on the other, not how to help the other; and our "21st-century" consumerist society entices them into always wanting more than they have. Result: an uncaring, selfish, over-consuming, passive human being.

But then, what is wrong with that?

Plenty. Especially if the person in question belongs to the privileged section of Indian society (like myself) having had the opportunity of a comfortable life; adequate *roti, kapda aur makaan*

(food, clothing and shelter), higher education, and urban amenities. Because then, he or she has been subsidised by the state and in all likelihood, has enjoyed such a lifestyle at the expense of

some less fortunate citizens of India. Let me explain that last part of the sentence a bit. In the past few years, it has become increasingly clear to

me that our resource consumption in the city has a drastic impact on villagers, often hundreds of kilometres away. Our electricity probably comes from a dam which has displaced people and submerged forests or, from a thermal power station which pollutes the air and fields and waterways of villages downwind/downstream. The paper used in our daily newspapers and in the magazines we are so fond of, including this one, comes from bamboo forests which once supported entire tribal communities. The colleges we study in and the houses we live in are built with bricks made from the topsoil of some farmers' fields, farmers who have probably been paid peanuts for it. And all this has been made possible by government policies which allow, indeed encourage, such transfer of resources from the villages to the cities, from the poor to the rich.

Does that make you feel guilty? I am sorry, that was not my intention. Guilt cannot be an adequate basis for taking to activism. For that, a simple lifestyle would be an adequate response. But an ascetic who seals himself/herself hermetically from society is not much more of a socially useful character than an elite person with a lavish lifestyle, only a little less destructive. Both are socially passive, and unable, or unwilling, to do anything about the crises around them.

But if not guilt, then what could be a basis for activism? Concern. Concern for the consequences of one's actions, concern for the humans (and other creatures) who suffer things we would ourselves hate to suffer, empathy, respect for others' lives, a feel for others. These are the cornerstones of activism. And those of us who are lucky enough not to have to worry about where our next meal is to come from, have a responsibility as human beings, to do something about those who do have such a worry.

What comprises activism? That's a difficult question to answer. These days, everything ranging from terrorism to

lecturing at seminars, is termed activism! I would rather restrict my definition to a smaller range, basically to activities which are socially responsible. Terrorism is not socially responsible...nor, often, is seminarizing.



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But action research could be; that is, research which is oriented towards some social action, even if the researcher himself/herself does not take this action. Then there is, of course, a greatly diverse range of activities which could constitute activism: social work, organising the disprivileged or helping them organise themselves, socially relevant media work, lobbying with the state, participating in protest demonstrations, taking legal redress, promoting the arts and preserving our heritage.

Activism is not, should never be treated as fashion. It is today, indeed, fashionable to claim to be an environmentalist, or a social worker or

a promoter of culture. Poor villagers who are protesting about the destruction of their life-support systems (forests, rivers, land) are true environmentalists, but do not claim to be so. But there is also a whole bunch of ivory tower pseudo-activists, who treat the whole thing as a means of making a name for themselves, who are basically jumping onto the bandwagon, and who, in the process give all environmentalists a bad name. Activism as a fad means you do not actually want to get your hands dirty, you would rather avoid controversial issues, and you treat as mere objects the people you claim to represent. True activism means the opposite of these.

While I think it is wrong to look at activism as a 'career' which can get you places in society, there is nothing wrong with earning a livelihood from it. Being able to feed and clothe yourself, even give yourself some basic comforts, is not evil. Indeed, I think that self-deprivation is as bad as over-indulgence for, it is a form of violence towards oneself which is as unacceptable as violence towards others. I know many activists who are not careful about their personal well-being, and end up sick and diseased, with only their sheer will-power carrying them on. Not only is their own productivity reduced, but they become a constant source of worry to their dear ones.

Does all this sound a bit patronising, or maybe slightly arrogant? I hope not, for it is not intended to. I do not claim to have found all the answers to my own personal and professional quandaries, I am groping as much as anyone else. But perhaps my dozen or so years of activism have taught me something, and it's nice to share it with others. After all, that is also a must for an activist; to reach out, to share information and experience, and to be frank, honest, forthright. I'm trying. ●

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