Public Advocacy in the Indian Context

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Public Advocacy is a mode of social action. The nature and character of Public Advocacy, to a large extent is shaped up by the political culture, social systems and the constitutional framework of the country in which it is being practised. The definition and a theoretical understanding of Public Advocacy can only be derived from the varied practices of influencing decision making and public policies by public interest or social action groups in different socio-cultural and political contexts. It is the practice which makes the theory of advocacy and not vice versa. But the way we perceive and practise Public Advocacy is determined by the ideological inclinations, historical settings and the value system of the proponents. One of the difficulties in getting clarity about the term advocacy is the fact that it is being widely and broadly used to signify a sweep of practices ranging from public relations, market research and report writing to lobbying, public interest litigations and civil disobedience. Though the process of advocacy encompasses one or more of such components, mistaking the use of one component to public advocacy is to miss the woods for the trees.

It is those ones who practise public advocacy, decide whether it is a permutation and combination of skills and strategies or it is a value driven political process that will make policy influencing more effective and efficient. The practice of Public Advocacy can be seen from three perspectives viz. political, managerial or technical. While effective efforts of public advocacy integrate all these aspects, the emphasis of different aspects will depend on the beliefs and background of the proponent. For instance, a social or political activist would perceive public advocacy basically as a political process, that may involve some professional approach or technical understanding of the appropriate devices and skills. But, some one with a managerial perspective may see it as the effective use of technical devices and skills and professional practices, with or without some political component. Since the term is in current circulation in the social change and development discourse, most of the international development agencies either try to use the term with a broad coverage to project their research and publication agenda as a part of Public Advocacy or straitjacket the very definition of advocacy to suit their immediate institutional needs and strategic roles.

Hence there is a need to develop a long term political and historical perspective about the concept and practice of Public Advocacy; its relevance for advancing a more humane, just and equal world. This paper attempts to locate and understand the concept and practice of Public Advocacy in the Indian context.

The concept and practice of Public Advocacy in India can be located from three different streams; firstly, from the history of socio-religious reforms movement and nationalist struggle for the Indian independence; secondly, from the dynamics of political culture and social systems prevailing in the country for the last fifty years. And finally, the prevailing practices of Public Advocacy by non-party political formations, social action and public interest groups. The entire
arena of Public Advocacy becomes functional and meaningful in relation to the constitutional framework, character of the State and the operating political culture. In the Indian context, the process of public advocacy can be better understood by locating it in the historical, political and social practices and analysing it in relation to a representative parliamentary democratic constitutional framework.

**Understanding Public Advocacy : A political perspective**

It is essential to spell out what do we mean by Public Advocacy before attempting to locate it in the Indian context. As it has been pointed out earlier, the definition of the term can not be a universal one, as it is being perceived and practised differently by different set of actors or proponents. Here, the attempt to define advocacy is primarily based on the perspective of many of the politically oriented social action groups and social change agents in India.

Public Advocacy is a planned and organised set of actions to effectively influence public policies and to get them implemented in a way that would empower the marginalised. In a liberal democratic culture, it uses the instruments of democracy and adopts non-violent and constitutional means. The purpose of public advocacy is to advance social and economic justice, human rights, public interest and to make the governance accountable and transparent. It is being perceived as a value driven political process. Public Advocacy is considered as a political process because it seeks to question and change existing unequal power relations in favour of the socially, politically and economically marginalised sections. In the Indian context, grassroot organising and mobilisation become means for rights awareness and assertion, and lend credibility, legitimacy and crucial bargaining power to Public Advocacy.

**Advocacy involves :**

- **Resisting** unequal power relations (like patriarchy) at every level
  - from personal to public
  - from family to governance
- **Engaging** institutions of governance
  - to empower the marginalised
- **Creating** and using ‘spaces’ within the system
  - to change it
- **Strategising** the use of knowledge, skills and opportunities
  - to influence public policies
- **Bridging** the micro-level activism and macro level policy initiatives

From a people centred political perspective, advocacy is not merely a permutation and combination of skills and strategies or a substitute for grassroots mobilisation or organising.

In India, one of the major thrust of Public Advocacy is the implementation of existing social justice legislations and social security programmes. Though there are number of progressive legislations such as Equal Remuneration Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, Bonded Labour
Prohibition Act or Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Act, there is a large lacuna in the implementation of such Acts. This is primarily because of two reasons. Firstly, the lack of political will and administrative efficiency to implement such legislations. And secondly, the incompatibility between the libertarian or liberal constitutional values and the traditional socio-cultural practices (like caste) and religious values (like fatalism). For instance, deep-rooted caste and class prejudices or patriarchal practices get into the way of implementing any progressive social justice legislation. Hence, from a holistic social change perspective, Public Advocacy should ideally go beyond mere public policy influence to the larger arena of influencing societal attitudes and practices so as to transform oppressive value system to a more just and humane worldview. Thus, the awareness and assertion of the rights and social responsibilities of citizens become almost a pre-requisite for a people-centred public advocacy. From such a perspective, Public Advocacy is a mode of social action that leads to the empowerment of the people with less conventional economic, social or political power.

There cannot be any public advocacy in vacuum. Issues of deprivation, injustice and rights violation precede the process of advocacy. Without an issue, what will one advocate for. In other words, there is nothing like advocacy as such in isolation. There has to be an issue or a cause to advocate for. We use the term Public Advocacy to signify a set of planned, proactive and organised actions to address issues of injustice, marginalisation and rights abuse in a more effective and efficient manner. Since in a liberal democratic framework, public policies play a very important role in determining the directions of social justice, political and civil liberties and the long term interest of the environment and people at large, the primary focus of advocacy is the arena of influencing policy formulation, change and implementation. But public policies are a function of the dominant political equation at a given space and time. Hence to effectively influence public policies, one has to influence the existing power relations in a way that would shift the power relations in favour of the marginalised. Influencing power relations is not a one-way traffic or a linear process. It is a complex process, wherein various interest groups confront and negotiate to advance their particular interest. The challenge for Public Advocacy or social action groups is to advance the rights of the marginalised and voiceless, with the minimum financial, institutional and human resources available with them. To effectively influence power structures of government or corporate interest, one needs other sources of power. In the context of Public Advocacy, five major sources are: the power of people or citizens, the power of information and knowledge, the power of constitutional guarantees, the power of direct grassroots experience or linkages and the power of moral convictions. In an effective advocacy, it is not only important to have information. It is more important to transform such information into knowledge by interpreting the former with a set of values.

**Advocacy in India : A historical understanding**

The history of public advocacy can be reconstructed from the social and political practices of public policy influencing for the last two hundred years. The history of conscious and organised socio-political actions for public policy change can be divided into four phases. The first phase is that of socio-religious reform movement from 1800 to 1857, the second phase from 1857 to 1920s is that of the emergence of a nationalist movement for the Indian independence, the third
phase from 1920 to 1950 is that of a mass based political movement for freedom struggle; and the fourth phase is from 1950s to the emergency period of 1977. All these phases constitute the process of the establishment of a liberal democratic order based on a representative parliamentary constitutional framework. The ongoing phase of Public Advocacy in its present form emerged as a post-emergency political process from 1977 onwards. The different phases of history of Public Advocacy is marked by a substantial change in the nature and character of the polity and concurrent changes in the political system and institutional framework. The character of Public Advocacy and the use of various methods changed from time to time, depending on the changing institutional structures.

Advocacy as a practice is not nascent in India. The tradition of influencing public policy, for eradicating social evils, goes back to the nineteenth century social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The legacy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar gives significant insight into the indigenous and effective advocacy methods practised during the pre-independence period. Here it would be interesting to note the influence of Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent methods on Martin Luther King, whose legacy still prevails in various social justice movements in the USA. As David Cohen (1994) pointed out, “the legacy of Gandhiji and Luther King is not just non-violence but non-violence to achieve social justice and with that a fundamental re-ordering of power relationships within the society.”

In India, there have been advocacy efforts on issues related to environmental degradation, rights of the dalits and tribals, women’s rights and civil rights, nuclear installations, land alienation of tribals, child labour, unorganised working sector, drug and forest policies and many other issues. While voluntary organisations and activist-groups have been active in social, developmental and political interventions at micro level, occasional efforts by such organisations or groups to influence the formulation or implementation of public policies remained by and large fragmented or isolated in the larger context of the country. Even within such a context, some of the successful advocacy campaigns like the Silent Valley Movement in Kerala and Amniocentesis Campaign in Maharashtra point to greater possibilities of organised advocacy efforts. Advocacy efforts by the social action groups played a crucial role in the making of government policies such as the Abolition of Bonded Labour Act (1976) and the Primary Health Care Policy (1977). It is true that many a time initiatives of grass-roots organisations to intervene at a macro level for influencing the public policies were not sustained and systematic enough to bring out the desired results. This was also due to lack of adequate knowledge and skills to deal with various systems that determind the making and unmaking of public policies. At a time when grassroots reality of the country is increasingly being affected by economic liberalisation and structural adjustment policies, there is a growing realisation among the social action groups about the necessity of empowering the people to influence the public policies for ensuring socio-economic, environmental and distributive justice to all.

**Advocacy Methods in the Indian Context**

The isolated ‘murmurs of dissent’ can be amplified and channelised by using appropriate advocacy methods. This would enable the organisations and activist-groups to influence the
policy makers more effectively. For this, it is imperative to develop advocacy methods and models within the context of an Indian situation. It is also necessary to understand the possibilities as well as limitations of using advocacy as a tool for social change in India. There is much to learn from the experience of the activist-groups that made use of organised advocacy methods. Some of the successful social advocates (Vivek Pandit - Advocacy workshop, Nirmal, October 6th and 7th, 1993) rightly pointed out the need to evolve an integrative approach that would make use of various advocacy components (like legislative advocacy, media advocacy, judicial devices, dealing with the bureaucracy, framing the issue, coalitions and grassroots mobilisation) simultaneously and optimally according to the context and nature of the issue. In many of the relatively effective advocacy efforts, mass mobilisation, improvised methods of non-violent protest and persuasion, public interest litigation, legislative advocacy, lobbying the bureaucrats and media advocacy were strategically and simultaneously used to build up an effective public argument. In some of the ongoing campaigns like Save Narmada Movement, grassroots mobilisation was combined with other advocacy strategies such as activating global pressure through international advocacy groups and development lobbies (Srinivasan 1992).

Advocacy is a means and not an end in itself. In India, advocacy without mobilisation may prove to be more of a vanity. Grassroots mobilisation and advocacy efforts should be complementary. While there are various elements or components of influencing public policies or public opinions, it is important to advance advocacy initiatives with holistic perspective about the social change process. The use of any one component, such as mobilisation or media relation in isolation may not lead to effective public advocacy. In the Indian context one should also think of an advocacy model that would enable us to deal with the system at different levels such as Central, State, District and Taluk. Since the political culture prevailing in different states of India varies considerably, the strategies of advocacy also may change accordingly from one state to another. A proper advocacy model should be able to address long-term goals in the larger context of the country and short-term goals with in a given space and time. The credibility and the socio-political legitimacy of advocacy efforts in the Indian context would largely depend on the consistency and compatibility of means and ends.

As it has been pointed in one of the earlier studies (Srinivasan, 1992), the public advocacy movement in India seems to be more concerned about the fundamental power relations and processes in the society than its American Counterparts (especially anti-smoking campaign, pro-choice campaigns and the likes). Whether this difference in advocacy priorities is “a function of economic well-being of a society or the degree of anarchy in civil society is worth considering”. In parliamentary democracy like India, the avenues for lobbying through the legislative committees is rather limited as most of the legislations are initiated by the cabinet (executive) itself, which usually commands the support of the majority party in the parliament. In the absence of strong party whips, it is relatively less difficult to persuade the senators or the congress men in the USA. There is a wide spectrum of ideological shades that is associated with the party politics in India and lobbying the parliamentarians, who are generally bound to follow party whips, may not be as effective as in the USA. But the proper use of ‘Question Hour’ in the parliament and legislative assemblies through legislative lobbying is one of the effective advocacy strategies. In the Indian context, grassroots support and constituency is the most
important factor that determines the credibility of the lobbyist rather than his/her professional background or expertise. It seems that activists with adequate level of expertise and mass support were proven better lobbyists in India than any professional expert.

**Major challenges**

The major challenge for the Public Advocacy in India would be that of safe-guarding and extending the political space for effectively advocating the cause of the marginalised sections. It is equally important to resist the agenda setting mechanisms of the multinational corporations and the vested interests operating through various kinds of fundamentalism.

Access to information is a pre-requisite for any advocacy initiative and a sustained campaign for repealing the Official Secrets Act is an indispensable step towards a more effective Indian Advocacy. Another danger of an increasingly ‘professionalised advocacy’ is the dilution or marginalisation of real issues in the ‘labyrinth’ of strategies, tactics and skills.

If the Public Advocacy initiatives are not rooted in the grassroots reality and is practised only at macro level, there is a danger of appropriating the voice of the marginalised by a set of urban elites, equipped with information and skills. **The challenge is to constantly be sensitive to the grassroots situation and organically bridge the gap between citizens and the policy change, without appropriating the voice of the marginalised and without being co-opted by the dominant system.** A potential threat to the credibility of the advocacy practitioner is the alienation from mass-based movements that could happen when activists get more interested in lobbying and the powers related with it and or in the process? themselves co-opted by the power structure or get lost in the maze of vested interest politics.

**Reference**

- David Cohen (1994) : Key-note Address at the National Workshop on Indian Advocacy, NCAS, Pune