



Conversation with Arbind Singh

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the work that you do?

Arbind Singh: My name is Arbind Singh. I am based out of Delhi now. Nidan works all across the country with informal workers. We organize them and give them voice and visibility. We also try to bring laws, policies, and programs for them. We were successful in getting a law for the street vendors, and that law is now being implemented across the country. We also set up cooperative, for-profit bodies for street-food vendors and waste pickers. We try to organize them into for-profit businesses so that they're able to lead a better quality of life. We try to bring changes in government attitude, policies, and programs. We ensure that these programs reach the informal workers for which they are meant.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is distinctive about the work that Nidan does in helping communities and workers?

Arbind Singh: Definitely that we are very people-oriented. The workers with whom we work feel that it is their organization. All decision-making bodies have informal workers, like a typical trade union, but we also convert the workers into leaders. Everywhere across the country, they are led not by professionals but by the leaders themselves. That's very unique.

Second is that everybody thinks in a very positive way about what we can do, what we can achieve, what we have done, what we have achieved, how far we can go, what can be a new strategy.

Thirdly, we have both women and men in our organization.

Fourth, we work at a large scale, across the country, so it is easy for us to relate with the government of India or with the federal structure of the country or with the local governments, because we have stakes all over the country.

Fifth, we try to focus a lot on their enterprises, their skills, their abilities to garner the best results in the market, their marketing abilities, their branding, and also use of new technology or social media. For example, we have just developed an app for street vendors whereby they can look out for different venues.

We don't shy away from working with the government, not only for changing programs and policies but also for doing projects together. We take money from the government in many areas, and we work with the government very closely without being part of the government.

Ashley Hopkinson: How did you get to the point where you're working all over India? What is the scope of it?

Arbind Singh: I am from a state called Bihar. It's in Eastern India. I began working in Bihar, and we set up an organization there, and gradually we spread across the country, because we wanted to take our experiments out of Bihar. Then we set up a network, and then we started influencing the government of India. We realized that if we wanted to influence the government of India, we needed to have a good presence in Northern India. This is how we spread to different states in Northern India. I personally believe that if you claim that you are pan-India, then you should actually be pan-India. My interest lies in working in the Southern states, so this is how we gradually spread all across the country.

Ashley Hopkinson: How did you begin working with the government to get broader reach?

Arbind Singh: From the very beginning, I believed that if we organize an event and there is no government participation, the time and money is wasted. Any event, small or big, should have government officials, because we are there as a bridge between government and the people.

We need to tell the government that this is their responsibility, and they must do that. We need to articulate the views of people in front of the government. We need to give people the confidence that this is how to deal with the government. [Otherwise], they become fearful.

A street vendor becomes fearful of a police constable. But in India, we have 4,400 town vending committees. Each city has a town vending committee headed by a municipal commissioner, and 40% of the members are street vendors. When the street vendors sit with the municipal commissioner or

with high police officers, it gives them the confidence in dealing with them. They are not fearful. They are able to articulate their views.

This cannot be a one-time process. It has to be a regular process. This is how I operate.

For me, the government is not the other side. Government is on our side. We don't have to treat them as something that will not listen. Why will they not listen if we talk logic? The only thing is that many times there are systems that have been created over a [long] period of time which don't let new things happen. You have to learn to break those systems, and there are government officials who are willing to help you in that.

It has to be ingrained. Everybody in our team is committed to working with the government and making people realize how governments work and how you can benefit from the government. This can't be like a boring multi-stakeholder meeting. No. It is not like that. It has to be a process, a way of life, making things work.

Ashley Hopkinson: Have collaborations and partnerships been a part of your work?

Arbind Singh: We believe in collective action, and we collaborate. We are part of some networks. We have also promoted networks. Sometimes we have written collaborations. People bring different strengths. For example, today we organized the National Street Food Festival in Delhi. There was an organization which had come for a collaboration, saying that they can bring celebrities to our event. It will give our event popularity. We have had several collaborations with non-government [organizations], with foundations, with companies.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is an insight or a lesson that you've learned from this work that other people might find valuable?

Arbind Singh: One thing is that you never feel alone in your battle. You take people together, you share things with them, you make them join your decision-making. You work as a team. That's the most valuable lesson. Sometimes we fight mafias. We have fought with vested interests. We have also fought with government officials. They try to threaten us saying they will eliminate us. But because we work for people and with people, we always have the confidence that there is big backing behind us. That is one big lesson.

Secondly, always be with people. You should not be fund-driven. You should not be resource-driven.

Even if there are low resources, find methods for working with low resources, and share things with people. People are there to help you out. Resources really don't matter if your work is good. Whatever level of work it is, you should not miss the grassroots. The grassroots gives you strength. You receive confidence. The good stories give us the strength to work more. That can only happen when we meet people, when we talk to them, when we visit them. The thrill one gets from the grassroots cannot be compared with the thrill of big awards.

Ashley Hopkinson: What have you heard from people about the impact that this work has had on them?

Arbind Singh: There have been a lot of stories of qualitative change in their lives. There was this lady who came to the office for some work with the financial cooperative. I asked her, how has it benefited you? She started telling her story. Her family had disintegrated and they didn't know where they'd go. They were on the verge of being on the roads [in the streets]. The future was totally dark for them. Then they got this credit from the cooperative and started an enterprise. The enterprise took some years to blossom, and now the whole family's on the right path, and they're enjoying life. It took four years, but in four years' time, they have transformed their lives. There are many, many cases of people changing their lives.

Also, macro-level changes have happened. Many policies and programs have impacted [people]. For example, during COVID, we got the government of India to start a credit program for the street vendors. Now 6.5 million street vendors have been linked with that credit program; 3 million street vendors got licenses under the Street Vendors Act. Ten thousand women have been organized into self-help groups. Many, many changes. It has been a very satisfying journey.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you explain how the Street Vendors Act helps workers?

Arbind Singh: In each city, there is a town vending committee, which regulates the street vendors. The municipal commissioner is the chairperson of the committee. Forty percent of the members are street vendors, and they survey the street vendors. For example, presently surveys are going on in Bengaluru. They survey the street vendors, and after the survey is approved, the vendors are given a certificate of vending, which is called a license. The police also sit on the town vending committee. The police also approve the certificate of vending.

Once a person gets a certificate of vending, the vendors have to be given a space in the vending zone. There is a slow process in identification of vending zones. Now the government of India has taken it seriously, and they have allocated a budget this year for the creation of vending zones. Once the

vendor's certificate is given, the vendor is able to do business. If there is disturbance in that person doing business, then the vendor can go to the court, and the court has the powers to reinstate the street vendors, because the law says that after the certificate of vending has been issued, even the police law is not applicable to them as far as street vending is concerned. This is how it has brought change.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the challenges that you face with the work? How have you worked to overcome the challenges?

Arbind Singh: One problem is that the more you work, the more the need is. We have been trying to develop leadership at city level. We have also helped in the creation of town vending committees in many cities. We have trained the town vending committee members. As per the law, one-third of the members have to be women. We organized a meeting of women town vending committee members. They said that they just go to the meeting and come back. The impact we had envisioned has not happened.

Many street vendors are very focused—they just want to talk about their market. They don't want to talk about the city. And the municipal governance in India is not that developed, so there are governance issues at the municipal level. India is a federal country, so the government of India's instructions and notifications have a limited impact on the state governments and the municipal bodies.

Also, we have resource constraints. And there are other categories of informal workers like waste pickers and domestic workers, where we would've loved to do as much as we have done for the street vendors. We have not been able to do that because of resources. You need people. Hiring and paying people is not an easy thing. There is a resource constraint for civil society in India. Many foreign donors have backed out. There is a problem with the ministry allowing foreign donors. But there is now corporate social responsibility that is coming forward, which is providing some help to organizers like us.

There is definitely a role for social entrepreneurs like us, but it is not easy for the government or society to understand and to create a space for our more effective functioning. We have to create our own space and find our own possibilities. That is a big challenge.

Ashley Hopkinson: If you had the right support, if the resources were there and you had the people that you needed, what would you do?

Arbind Singh: I would definitely like to do the same kind of work that we have done for street vendors for other categories of workers. Waste management companies are displacing the work of waste pickers. People are seeing wealth in the waste, but they're not seeing the livelihood of waste pickers. There are different categories where we could have done more work. We did work with the waste pickers, but limited to a few cities. We could not do it at the national level. Similarly, with domestic workers, they are in so much need. There are certain issues which they face which have not been addressed by laws, policies, or organizing. If I had more resources I would definitely [help] care economy workers. That has emerged as a major category. Social security of informal workers is one category where I would have loved to do more work—getting the government to [provide] more social security schemes. Presently there is one for health [workers], but that is not good enough.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you demonstrate to people the value of the work you do for informal workers?

Arbind Singh: It so happened that in 2002 I visited the International Labour Organization. They were discussing informal workers for the first time. I realized that the ILO structure is a very archaic, old type of structure. In the informal category of workers, a large number of them are self-employed. Many of them have different owners, like street vendors have multiple owners. Municipality bodies are also owners. Residents, whenever they are organized, they'll also behave like employers. For example, for domestic workers—wherever the residents are organized, there is the resident welfare association. The domestic workers should also be participating in the resident welfare association. You'll have to find out two things. First, what is a structure whereby they can be involved? Second, what can be the revenue stream for their support?

In India, for example, for construction workers, they have found that those who are constructing a building have to pay 1% or 2% excess for the welfare of the construction workers. Similarly, we'll have to find out other methods, or if other methods are not happening, then the state's responsibility is to fund the social security of these informal workers.

Ashley Hopkinson: For NIDAN, how do you measure progress?

Arbind Singh: I think it has to be in all directions. When we expand our geography, we think that is a good [sign]. Second, the number of workers that we are reaching out to. Third, the use of technology tools.

On 11th of November we'll be launching an app, so we'll be able to collect all the workers on that app. We don't have any systematic method of collecting impact assessment, but we are developing a tool.

At the end of the year we might have something. The number of cities that are with us, the number of organizations that we have helped develop are some of the [metrics].

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about the street vendors app that's going to be launching in November?

Arbind Singh: This is an app in which they have different types of training, and if they get enrolled, each of them will have a small amount of accident insurance. Then they will have to pay membership fees. It's like 100 rupees, so like one or two dollars, of which 20 cents will go for coverage of social security, accident health insurance. If they have an issue they can reach out to us through the app, and we will get in touch with them, and we'll support them. It is very important because many people have said that any city has two leaders, three leaders, but there are thousands of citizens who want to be associated. We don't have a mechanism for getting them associated, so this is helpful.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything that you wish people were talking more about in these conversations about informal workers and how to help people?

Arbind Singh: Yes. Our country has been a feudal country. The past has been feudal. The caste-based occupations have been there in India. Unfortunately, all these are transforming into new forms.

Generally the lower caste people are getting into menial jobs, lower jobs. So that change has not come as expected in modern society. Caste is getting transformed. I think as a country, as a society, we should be talking more openly on this issue, and seeing how these informal workers are better mainstreamed. Because they migrate to bigger cities, but bigger cities give them just enough money for survival. They just end up surviving rather than making a better quality of life, making a more secure future for their children, and making a better foundation for their families. They just end up surviving. I think we should be talking more about such issues, because they end up making our lives better. Whether the person is a driver or a cleaner or a guard, they make our lives better, so how can we make their lives better without much of a fuss? We can do that with a little support.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you. I really appreciate your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*