NGOs, Civil Society and Social Reconstruction in Contemporary India[1]

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ABSTRACT

The decline or retreat of the state as well as the triumph of the market today is accompanied by increasing attention to Civil Society Organizations. There is a newfound expectation that NGOs or the 'third' sector is better placed as compared to the other stakeholders to provide leadership for social reconstruction in the developing world in particular. This article seeks to critically review the role of the NGO sector in India using empirical evidences collected from secondary sources. It argues that NGOs are not an alternative to the state and the public sector. NGO-ization is also neither a means to correct market failures. In spite of the relevance of this sector, we need to look for other viable alternatives.

Keywords: civil society, state, NGO-ization, development, participation

Introduction

Increasing concerns for social justice, inclusive growth and empowerment of the poor and marginalized, particularly in the wake of 'market globalism' in contemporary world, have paved the way for the rise and growth of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Civil society is considered to be a space for the enforcement and enhancement of social, economic and political justice. It is a healthy and necessary compliment to democracy. Interpretations of civil society, however, differ and contemporary social scientists seem to draw heavily on the liberal intellectual tradition to stress on 'civility' as the core of civil society. The notion of civility considers 'others as fellow citizens of equal dignity in their rights and obligations as members of civil society' (Shils, 1991: 12). According to Hall (1998: 33), the concept of civil society in more positive terms upholds voluntarism and freedom and offers individuals, irrespective of their creed, colour or culture an equal chance to create their own selves. According to Beteille (2001: 287),

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the core of civil society consists of the open and secular institutions that mediate between the citizens and the state in modern democratic societies. Kothari (1988) has equated civil society with non-state, non-government organizations even though the non-statist conception of civil society is argued to be weak in the Indian context. Notwithstanding differences of opinion about the nature and goal of civil society in the contemporary context, it may fairly be argued that autonomy of individuals, protection of individual rights, equal citizenship and access to decision-making apparatus and participatory framework are necessary conditions of civil society. State failure to guarantee these, argues Dhanagare (2001: 188), necessarily makes way for the entry of non-state associations and voluntary mobilizations. The salience of the NGO sector within civil society is understood from the fact that civil society needs a great variety of associations whose members have to relate to each other open-endedly, without exclusion on grounds of religion, gender and so forth (Saberwal, 2001: 193–4). If strong, vibrant and lively civil society is the foundation of modern open democratic polity, NGOs are the very live-force for the civil society. Civil society and NGOs seem to go together and one cannot exist without the other (Baviskar, 2001: 7). NGOs are considered to be a means of strengthening civil society and fostering good governance (Beddinton and Riddell, 1995). They are essential for the dissemination of new ideas and concepts with regards to social and economic development and fostering participation and democracy in order to improve civil society.

The concept of civil society as a space between the family, the market and the state, however, comprises of a plethora of groups of all sorts ranging from charities to advocacy groups. CSOs vary widely in membership and geographical coverage. They espouse all shades of causes and concerns (Nayar, 2008: 19). NGOs constitute an important component of civil society as they work in the space of civil society even though all CSOs are not NGOs (Ibid.: 28). NGOs have become a part of a new development paradigm or New World Order in today's world. NGOs and particularly International NGOs (INGOs) are a part of globalization, as enormous amount of development funds are being channelled or rechannelled through them during the past three decades. The new 'policy agenda' of civil society building and 'NGO-ization' also matches the neoliberal agenda of government roll back and decentralization. The rise of market, media and the middle class, particularly after economic liberalization in India, for instance, has provided stimulus to the growth of CSOs. Simultaneously, the emergence of a new paradigm of 'society-led development'

(Pieterse, 2001: 17) so as to compensate for the failures of the state as well as market-led growth has contributed to the great wave of 'NGO-ization' since 1980. NGOs are seen as vehicles of democratization as well as for providing goods and services in the Third World countries where governments lack capacity or resources to reach the poor or where markets are inaccessible to them. As the post-Cold War considerations led to the diminishing importance of development aid for strategic and military importance for the Western industrialized countries including the United States, the donor community found it better to channel development aid through NGOs under the New Policy Agenda (Wagona, 2002). Thus, in between 1970 and 1985, the total development aid distributed by international NGOs has increased ten fold and in 1992, international NGOs channelled over US$ 7.6 billion of aid to developing countries. It is worth mentioning here that since 1990s, the World Bank has not only encouraged member governments to work with NGOs on development projects, but has also increased its direct funding of such projects. As a result, approved World Bank projects in Third World countries involving NGOs in 1997 were found to be 84 per cent in South Asia, 61 per cent in Africa and 60 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean (World Bank, 1997: 49). Several other international agencies including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have increased their flow of fund through NGOs during the period (Wagona, 2002).

Simultaneously, with the onset of alternative development thinking, the focus of development has shifted to alternative agenda like human development, community development, sustainable development, capacity building et cetera. As NGOs plead for all these, it is quite commonplace to argue for the entry of this 'third sector'[2] for the 'enlargement of people's choices' as well as 'people-friendly' grassroots movement. The new development strategies perceive poor people including women as active agents of their own development and instead of a top-down, hegemonic character of development under both the capitalist and state socialist models, it calls for a bottom-up participatory approach like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) – one where development 'experts' become 'facilitators' working with poor rather than directing them (Chambers, 1997; Munck, 1999). This is because development cannot be 'given' to the poor. It requires attention to local knowledge and accumulated wisdom, respectful partnership and participatory practice that will empower the poor so that they can define their own developmental problems, goals

and solutions (Freedman, 2000). NGOs are frequently identified with alternative and participatory development; but given the wide variety of NGOs and NGO practices, such claims need to be critically evaluated today. It would be interesting to review whether NGOs in India today really qualify for the distinctions, methods and goals they are supposed to perform or cherish. This article seeks to critically review the role of NGOs as CSOs in social reconstruction of our life today on the basis of certain real life experiences from India.

Concept and Nature of NGOs

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is normally defined as a non-profit, voluntary citizens' group that is organized on a local, national or international level. The World Bank has defined NGOs as 'private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development'. A World Bank Key Document, Working With NGOs goes on to say that:

> In wider usage, the term NGO can be applied to any non-profit organisation, which is independent from government. NGOs are typically value-based organisations that depend, in whole or in part, on charitable donations and voluntary service. Although the NGO sector has become increasingly professionalized over the last two decades, principles of altruism and voluntarism remain key defining characteristics. (World Bank: 1995: 29)

World bank has classified NGOs into two major types: Operational and Advocacy. Operational NGOs are concerned with design and implementation of development-related projects while Advocacy NGOs defend or promote a specific cause.

The distinguishing features of an NGO lie in its being autonomous, non-profit, relatively independent and self-propelled organization. These characteristics differentiate NGOs from both the state and the market and establish its claim of being the 'third sector'. Even though governments fund NGOs partially or completely, they maintain their non-government status by excluding government representatives from its membership. NGOs, however, differ from each other in terms of size, membership, funding, approaches, strategies and outcomes (Patel, 1998: 41). There are three axial institutional forms available in contemporary society. One is what Weber called the prebendal form,

based on personal 'feudal' relations, the other is the bureaucratic of government and the third is the corporatized form of the private corporations. NGOs come in all the three forms in India, although the recent trends are towards adopting corporate practices for non-profit objectives. A fourth type may be added to this list, which is a charismatic type, but I see it as a variant of the prebendal form. Hence, a generalized statement about NGOs is difficult and consequently scholars have attempted to classify NGOs differently (Baviskar, 2001: 5).

It is argued that NGOs are task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest. They perform a variety of service and humanitarian functions, conveying citizen's concerns to governments, advocate and monitor policies and encourage political participation through provision of information. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, environment or health. *The World Social Forum*, for instance, is an international NGO that seeks to counter the ill effects of economic globalization while arguing for sustainable and equitable development. The vital role of NGOs (and other major groups) in sustainable development was recognized in Chapter 27 of Agenda 21, leading to intense relationship between the United Nations and the NGOs. While all voluntary actions are not political, some are in fact non-political in nature focusing on ethical norms or the defence of civil rights. At the other end of the spectrum are groups that take a more radical and often revolutionary stance. In spite of such wide differences, however, it is argued that they collectively present a challenge to the political and economic model that continues to inform the Indian State and its institutions (Kothari, 1998: 185). It would be interesting to see the extent to which NGOs in India qualify for such a distinction. This is more so in view of Beteille's (2000: 194–95) argument that NGOs are either conspicuous by their absence or overshadowed by the personalities of their creators in India.

One may, however, argue that the ethos of voluntarism is not new in the Indian context. It is rather woven into the very fabric of Indian social structure. According to Kothari (1998: 183), 'it is closely tied to the fundamental plural nature of our society'. We may trace them back to the efforts and ideologies of Buddha, Vivekananda, Gandhi, Tagore, Phule and Ambedkar. Organizations like Ramakrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Jesuit Mission, Harijan Sevak Sangh, etc., have carried out relief and welfare activities relentlessly as first generation NGOs.[3] Later, a renewed interest in decentralized, participatory and local model of development has led to the growth of a sizeable number of NGOs in

India like many other parts of the world (See, NGOs India, 2008, for a list of state-wise registered NGOs in the country). Along with international efforts to provide fund for voluntary action,[4] the Government of India has equally begun welcoming NGO participation first in the Seventh Five Year Plan and later more openly in the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992–1997) and the fund allocated to such development with NGO participation increased incessantly after that.[5] The Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART), the government body to fund grassroots NGOs, has sanctioned about Rs 330 crore to about 7,500 NGOs in the last nine years in addition to grants from other ministries.[6] As a result the number of NGOs, both registered and unregistered, in the country has increased to 1.5 million in 2008 (VANI, 2008).

Arguments for NGOs

It is not just coincidental that the decline or retreat of the state as well as the triumph of the market is accompanied by increasing attention to CSOs. This is rather based on a new found expectation that NGOs are better placed as compared to the state bureaucracy or private capitalists to provide leadership for social reconstruction of societies of the developing world particularly. As Baviskar (2001: 7) argues, 'the growing prominence of NGO in the field of development is strongly related to the declining legitimacy of the state. Increasingly, the state is looked upon with suspicion if not contempt. It is considered to be corrupt, oppressive and anti-poor. Least governance is seen as the sign of good governance'. Flaws in the functioning of government machinery (red-tapism, apathy, collusion with vested interest, deliberate delay in decision making or its implementation et cetera) have led many to see certain inherent value in voluntary movements. NGOs are favoured because they are supposed to facilitate 'participatory management', encourage local initiative, maintain link with grassroots, reach the poor effectively, promote popular participation, react to any calamity immediately, remain accountable and cost effective, emphasize sustainability, remain responsive and committed to the cause of people, perform with greater efficiency and dedication and the like. Apart from such advantages, voluntary actions also help to increase diversity of opportunity in society. By providing variety and autonomy in associational choice, they promote the formation of interest groups that can challenge monopolistic tendencies and the poor performances of state enterprises (Bebbington and Riddell, 1995: 56). From such a point of view, NGOs

do not just attempt to replace the state; they rather try to democratise and politicize the civil society more than any other institutions. Hence, the key justification for the expansion, growth and importance of NGOs seems to be 'their ability to be what the state is not and cannot be' (Zaidi, 2004: 191).

The upswing of a 'new form of voluntarism' as a catalyst of human liberation and genuine freedom has led to a redefinition of the concept of politics as 'multidimensional'. It now seeks to go beyond narrow political or economic demands and cover ecological, feminist and cultural aspects, including a sustained attack on any decay or degeneration (Kothari, 1998: 188). NGOs have engaged themselves in activities related to poverty eradication, removal of illiteracy, preventing human trafficking, domestic violence or child marriage, income and employment generation, tribal development, rural development and many other issues of social reconstruction in contemporary India. It can fairly be argued that there are some brilliant examples of NGOs playing the model role in social reconstruction in contemporary India. Let me now discuss, in brief, the success stories of some of the 'harbingers of silent revolution' (Sharma, 1992).

Some Success Stories

Let me begin by discussing the case of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad (Bhatt, 1998: 146–61). SEWA had begun its journey as a trade union in 1972; but gradually it has been able to expand its activities and serve as a true representative of self-employed women in the unorganized sector. Today its membership has crossed 2.2 lakh and it has been able to come close to achieve two of its basic goals of full employment and self-reliance. SEWA now provides diverse opportunities to the families of its members including food security, income security and social security. In the initial years, SEWA attempted to collect loans for its members from nationalized banks; but faced with several difficulties to do so the organization under the leadership of Ila Bhatt formed SEWA Bank in 1973. Each of 4000 Seva members then paid Rs 10 as capital share. Initially, it acted as an intermediary to enable its depositors to secure loan from nationalized banks. But later on, SEWA Bank has begun advancing loan from its own fund. It has encouraged women to form groups in different localities and work as a team to cultivate the culture of continuous savings for withdrawal of loans for

domestic and productive needs. The Bank has charged interests between 12 per cent and 17.5 per cent per annum for loans taken for a maximum period of 36 months. It has simultaneously provided technical assistance to its members for the use of loan money and closely monitored progress. As a result, the Bank has achieved 96 per cent repayment rate leading to improved income, employment and access to social security for its members. In the 2002–2003 fiscal year, SEWA had a working capital of nearly 85 crores and its audit classification has been consistently 'A' grade. SEWA has successfully linked micro-finance movement with much needed support services like insurance, health care, child care, legal aid, and training to reduce women's vulnerability. This micro-finance movement has now become a model for others to follow and one can refer to some other successful experiences[7] of empowerment of poor and the needy through micro-finance.

The experience of Swadhyaya, an NGO started by Pandurang Shastri in 1958, depicts yet another success story of a socio-spiritual movement in organizing two million poor people and mainly *dalit*s and fisherman in Gujarat and Maharashtra (Shah et al., 1998: 57–73). It has propagated the concept of 'impersonal wealth' generated through collective efforts. It has organized collective projects such as fishing cooperatives, deepening of wells, collective farms and orchards on which members of neighbouring villages work with a spirit of harmony and brotherhood. Thus, the members of Swadhyaya Parivar could achieve the twin goals of social transformation and community development with one stroke. A notable feature of this movement was to uplift the 'transformers', the elites, as well as the 'transformed', the poor and the deprived. The elites as motivators and catalysts had to maintain discipline and spend a part of their wealth, talent and time for rural development. Many Swadhyayis have given up smoking, drinking and other harmful habits. Apart from spiritual activities, the organization also utilized science and technology for economic and social development of rural people. As a result of improved farming practices, better environment and sustainable resources, the Swadhyaya movement has gained popularity and crossed its geographical limitations by inspiring even people of other countries to initiate similar movements.

The case of Ralegan Siddhi, a drought-prone and liquor affected village of Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra is another interesting instance of social development through voluntary efforts (Awasthi, 1998; Baviskar, 2001). Anne Hazare, a retired army personnel, was

the leader of the movement. His selfless leadership and moral appeal mobilized the 2000 odd villagers. He formed a *Tarun Mondal Volunteers* to impress upon the villagers to utilise the government grants for rural development with free labour. The important point to be noted here is that people of Ralegan did not receive any external help except the usual government grants to develop them. Hazare used Gandhian tactics to impress upon those who opposed the move. He attempted to unite the villagers morally before undertaking any development effort. Villagers dig wells, construct check dams, plant trees and build hostels for students through voluntary contribution of physical labour. Apart from *shramdaan*, the village contributed Rs 30 for every 100 Rupees of government grants. One fourth of the surplus generated went to a village fund, from which other community schemes were implemented. As the guiding principal of economic development in Ralegan was 'growth with equity', special attention was paid to eradicate social discrimination. Thus, new houses were built for *dalits* in the centre of the village and they were also given loans and subsidies for swing machines, irrigation pumps, biogas plant, common toilet and children were provided with free textbooks, notebooks and uniform. Due to such collective efforts, people of Ralegan gradually experienced increased crop and milk production, poultry farming, development of watershed, availability of safe drinking water, opposition to alcoholism, abolition of dowry, increased status of women, removal of caste divisions and superstitions as well as a sustainable ecology. It was, therefore, declared as a 'model village' by the government of Maharashtra. Inspired by such outstanding performances, the government also persuaded Hazare to create 300 more 'Ralegan Siddhis' across the state. But, political competition and bureaucratic corruption belied the expectation of Hazare and his experience could not be replicated.

There are plenty of other successful NGOs in the country who have made their presence felt in the society through constructive social work (see, Awasthi et al., 1998, for some of such cases). Thus, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programmes (AKRSP) has achieved notable success in implementing a participatory watershed development project funded by the Government of India in 35 village of Bhavnagar district, Gujarat (Shah and Iyengar, 1998: 92–112). The organization has been able to complete a lift irrigation project and built a percolation tank very quickly in 1985 with a cost that was less than that of government's estimate. The success of AKRSP has put pressure on the government agencies to improve work standard when people started comparing the quality

of similar works. Again, the National Institute for Rural Integrated Development (NIRID) has persistently worked in the Sahyadri hills of Maharashtra to prevent deforestation and consequent soil erosion and slitting of riverbeds for twenty years (Patel, 1998: 113–29). By this, it has not only arrested environmental degradation in the affected area, the tribals could also be motivated to become self-reliant farmers, develop community assets, conserve water, generate income, regenerate natural resources, preserve forests and wild life and above all become active participants in the process of development. NIRID has even gone beyond its objectives to improve provisions of social services like education, health and family planning. It is unusual for NGOs to adapt to such challenging goals. Similarly, the Sumangali Seva Ashram (SSA) of Bangalore was set up in 1975 to provide shelter to women and children in need (Pulavarti, 1998: 130–45). From a modest beginning as a home for destitute, the SSA has today grown into a district-wide organization with extended facilities and wider scope of activities for the upliftment and empowerment of urban women and children. Again the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) of Tilonia at Ajmer District of Rajasthan has achieved the rare distinction of going for general scrutiny of its activities and fund through public meetings. Banker Roy of this organization has also initiated a move to formulate a code of conduct for voluntary organizations (Sethi, 1998a: 174–75). The experience of Women's Thrift Cooperatives (WTC) of Hyderabad in raising small and regular contribution from their members with one per cent interest per month and distribute loan with two per cent interest per month is equally interesting. Like SEWA, it has achieved excellent loan recovery rates due to group discipline since 1990. Nearly 33,000 members of 101 WTCs could collectively generate savings up to Rs 26 million by the end of 1998 (Baviskar, 2001: 6–7).

The contributions of many other small and big NGOs in India are conspicuous by their salience. Thus, to name only a few, organizations like Narmada Bachao Andolan, Centre for Science and Environment, Working Women's Forum, Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres, Lawyer's Collective, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, Bandhua Mukti Morcha, Shakti Vahini, Child In Need Institute, Sanlaap, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Bhartiya Patita Udhar Samiti, Prerana, Bhoruka Public Welfare Trust, Tagore Society for Rural Development, Sachetna, Paschim Bangla Kheria-Sabar Kalyan Samiti, People's Union for Civil Liberties, Voluntary Action Network India, Society for Participatory Research in Asia etc., have quite successfully intervened in protecting

and preserving our environment, enlarging the rights of women and children, preventing the onus of illiteracy, trafficking and dowry and the like. It is worth mentioning here that Mazdoor Kishan Shakti Sanghthan, an NGO in a Rajasthan village, had started a campaign for right to information in 1990 and it is one of the pioneers of RTI movement in the country. The success of the Association of Voluntary Agencies For Rural Development – North East in organizing the people of Majuli island in Assam to fight corruption by contractors in anti-erosion work had ironically led to the kidnapping and killing of its secretary Sanjoy Ghosh. Ajailiu Niumai's (2006) illuminating field research on the role and functioning of five NGOs in Tamei sub-division of Tamenglong district, Manipur also proves that local community sees NGOs as an important agent of social change. These NGOs have been working among the marginalized rural people for more than two decades on issues related to rural socio-economic life and culture.

These examples should not, however, lead one to conclude that the NGO sector, as a whole, has no problem. Irrespective of the achievements of a number of NGOs in India, there are vast areas of darkness, shortcomings and failures. Niumai (Ibid.: 235) herself has recognized that two of the five NGOs she studied were found to be 'more accountable to the government and foreign funding agencies than to the local community and beneficiaries'. It is important to evaluate the nature of NGO sector as a whole, rather than look at certain successful or failed NGO projects. Because of heterogeneity and complexity of this sector, we should be careful in making generalization by looking into some individual cases (Kaimowitz, 1993: 1139). But ironically the dominant thrust of the literature on NGO is either to praise or to malign them. Let me now discuss the failures of NGOs in brief to arrive at a balanced conclusion.

Arguments Against NGOs

The fact that NGO movement has not been able to become a true alternative to the state or private sector is increasingly being recognized in different quarters. While it is logical to argue that in a democratic society the state should not be asked to do everything, it is equally true that NGOs should have their own limitations. NGO advocacy often fails to grasp the fact that 'if every soil is not equally conducive to the growth of open and secular institutions, it is not equally conducive to the growth of civil associations' (Beteille, 2001: 299–300). In spite of very high credible

achievements of many NGOs in India in the fields of health, education, childcare and so on, 'the question of what they contribute to the creation of civil society, and in what way, still remains open' (Ibid.: 303–04).

Like the state, NGOs, barring a few exceptions, 'have failed at making a substantial impact upon the perceived beneficiaries they were expected to benefit' (Zaidi, 2004: 191). The reasons for the failure of a large number of NGOs to come up to the desired level of expectation are numerous. The major argument against many NGOs is: they are the creation of funding agencies and hence 'their entire existence, not merely dependency, is on donor money, almost always from above' (Ibid.: 192). Being a 'favoured child' (Edwards and Hulme, 1996: 961) of western donors, they are capable of exerting pressure on national governments with enormous power in terms of money, technology, cyber strength and knowledge. Hence, they are argued to be the 'handmaidens of global imperialism' (Karat, 1984). A UN sponsored publication has warned about the 'potential (of INGOs) to undermine the sovereignty of constitutional democracies' (Bendell, 2006: x). The publication has also documented that 'in countries newly independent of the Soviet Union, and in Russia, the NGOs are often perceived as covers for organized crimes, in Bangladesh and Pakistan, NGOs are sometimes seen as fronts for fundamentalist causes and in Central Asia they can serve as platform for failed politicians' (Ibid.: xii). Ghosh (2003: 237) has noted that tribal insurgents in the Northeastern Indian state of Tripura have utilized foreign donations send to Baptist church for ethnic mobilization and insurgent activities. There are nearly 40,000 INGOs in the world today and some of them have annual budgets worth billions of dollars. The estimated total receipts of NGOs in India during 1999–2000 were Rs 17,922 crore and it has increased several times since then (PRIA, 2002). It should, however, be recognized that donor dependency varies from country to country. According to a survey conducted by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in 2002, grants and donations (from domestic and foreign sources) constitute two-fifth (41.9 per cent) of total receipts of NGOs in the country. Interestingly, the survey has revealed that only 7.4 per cent of total receipts of NGOs are foreign funds.

Yet, the philanthropic funding of NGOs in India from the rich countries of Europe and North America appear to be devoid of the civic virtues of mutuality, rationality and collective interests as 'support flows more easily into temples than into universities, libraries or laboratories'[8] (Beteille, 2001: 306). It appears from Table 1 that due to the 'spending spree'

Table 1.
Trends of Foreign Funding to Indian Voluntary Associations, 1996–2006

Year	No. of registered associations as on 31st March of financial year	No. of reporting associations	Amount of foreign contribution (Rs/Crores)
1996–1997	17,723	12,136	2571.69
1997–1998	18,489	12,198	2864.51
1998–1999	19,834	13,775	3402.90
1999–2000	21,244	13,986	3924.63
2000–2001	22,924	14,598	4535.23
2001–2002	24,563	15,598	4870.52
2002–2003	26,404	16,590	5046.51
2003–2004	28,351	17,145	5105.46
2004–2005	30,321	18,540	6256.68
2005–2006	32,144	18,570	7877.57

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2006.

initiated mostly by foreign donor agencies in liberalized India, thousands of NGOs are just formed within the last one-decade or so and the amount of contributions received by them has propelled equally. Several retired government official, politicians and people with vested interests have formed NGOs or GONGOs (Government-Operated NGOs). This extraordinary mushrooming hardly enhances the ideology of civil society activism as NGOs now are formed 'to compromise with donor's likes and dislikes and even to fudge data to suit the clients needs' (Zaidi, 2004: 193). It is unfortunate to learn that many of the new generation of Project NGOs create hypothetical beneficiaries say, AIDS patient, for meeting targets within a stipulated period. A World Bank study has acknowledged that in 57 per cent cases, NGOs have worked like 'technical transfer agents' (Bebbington and Farrington, 1993). Valid questions are necessarily raised about the capacity of such NGOs to spread either civic virtues of mutuality and self-reliance (Beteille, 2001: 303), or to represent the views of vulnerable social groups (Baviskar, 2001: 12).

The patron-client relationship emerging out of such a model of development raises numerous questions about the accountability and legitimacy of NGO activity. A 'puppet' NGO, in spite of its best records, is bound to betray the very spirit of civil society activism and replace accountability by accountancy (Edwards and Hulme, 1996: 968). This also reduces NGOs to the position of mere 'sub-contractors' who have to rely to external agencies including the government for launching and managing a project and shift from one problem to the next depending on fund

availability and donors choice. It has also been argued that donors choose to spend their money in different areas from those in which most NGOs function (Farouk, 2002). Table 2 provides a glimpse of the purposes for which foreign fund was made available to Indian NGOs, mainly religious organizations, during 2003–2006. The table also makes it clear that there is lack of consistency in foreign contributions to different schemes. The issue of external funding also gives the state a convenient leverage over NGOs and there are instances of government threatening NGOs for supporting anti-communal campaign during elections (Baviskar, 2001: 12). This implies that donors including government policies dictate NGO agenda or even their existence. To what extent then NGOs are autonomous institutions? In other words, the much acclaimed autonomy of NGOs is relative and not absolute. When NGO activism is reduced to only time-bound or project-specific 'development', it only results in mechanistic implementation of any top-down decisions on temporary basis. NGOs are expected to fulfil physical and financial targets within stipulated period.

Table 2.
Receipt of Foreign Contribution by NGOs towards Top Fifteen Purposes, 2003–2006

Sl. no	Purpose	2005–2006	2004–2005	2003–2004
1	Relief/rehabilitation of victims of natural Calamities	875.67	655.65	162.66
2	Establishment expenses	679.46	948.20	639.31
3	Rural development	475.18	582.49	494.64
4	Welfare of children	323.62	303.20	221.38
5	Construction/running of hospital/dispensary/ clinic	215.47	182.69	173.58
6	Welfare of the orphans	187.19	189.37	164.56
7	Construction and maintenance of school/college	183.51	295.94	221.63
8	Grant of stipend/scholarship/assistance in cash and kind to poor/deserving children	59.62	210.13	161.40
9	Holding of free medical/health/family welfare/ immunization camps	105.16	126.53	123.85
10	Awareness about AIDS/treatment and rehabilitation of person affected by AIDS	101.26	88.42	181.58
11	Research	93.13	116.71	117.17
12	Non-formal education projects/coaching classes	85.21	92.84	71.22
13	Construction and running of hostel for poor students	85.07	113.36	130.24
14	Welfare/empowerment of women	82.58	100.38	97.51
15	Maintenance of priests/preachers/other religious functionaries	81.18	100.90	80.76

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2006.

The pressure to reach the magic figures quickly often leads to sacrificing quality of the output. If an NGO or a group of NGOs seek to continue spreading awareness among say, prostitutes, even after ten years of continuous campaign, doubts about earlier credentials are validly raised. Contrarily, the success stories that I have cited earlier typically remind us about the need of people centric and community based approach to lay the foundation of any long term and holistic development. But the new generation NGOs relying solely on external funding for their existence and expansion are far short of this goal.[9]

It appears that reliability and sustainability of NGO activities, the two distinguishing criteria for their success, are hardly fulfilled in many instances. This may also be due to the fact that a NGO totally relies on the quality of leadership provided by its founder member. As a result, NGOs often fail to maintain the zeal after the demise of its charismatic leader. Again, the very specific and local factors that led to the success of NGO activity in any region may not be replicable in a different region due to changes in socio-cultural and political aspects of life. Anne Hazare could not create another Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra in spite government support. Similarly, the Amul experience at Anand in Gujarat could not be replicated in any other part of the country even with the help of foreign funding (Baviskar, 2001: 9–10).

It has been argued that new generation of NGOs are more concerned with programme implementation than policy and political critique. This may be due to the fact that they now seek 'safe' and non-controversial issues including the delivery of government programmes for their existence. Becoming an extension of the government or donor agencies may lead to dependencies of various types including any forced compromise with ideology. If NGOs merely become an agency for 'non-party political work' for some, it may lead to growth of opportunism and corrupt practices. Even the political party sponsored NGOs today seek to play the 'safe game'. Unlike the NGOs of 1960s and 1970s in many parts of Latin America and Third World, who vigorously fought for curtailment of civic and political rights, the new *Project NGOs* hardly work to enhance the space for civil society.

Moreover, not all people working for NGOs are volunteers. Today the NGO sector provides enormous employment opportunities to young social scientists and to those who merely work as paid employee of an NGO, the 'service' is nothing more than an 'occupation' for a living. The PRIA survey (2002) had revealed that as many as 20 million people are

associated with the NGO sector in India and 15 per cent of them are paid staff. One should not expect these paid employees to be either committed to the goal of social reconstruction or even to the particular task on which a project is launched. In other words, the vocation of social welfare has now got transformed into an occupation of social work to suit individual interest. As Niumai argues (2006), whenever an NGO tries to expand and focus on the rights of its employees, it faces routinization and consequent decline of voluntarism. This also contributes to increasing doubts and disillusionment about the way NGOs utilize their fund. Hence, NGOs should not be romanticized as one of the most effective organizations in alleviating poverty and bringing social transformation in society. One should, therefore, not compare the policies and perspectives of Project NGOs with the idealistic notion of altruistic, value based, people centric or non-profit voluntarism. Since NGOs are being formed with the singular objective to trap and manage money that is flowing in the names of corporate responsibility, sustainable development, equitable growth or grassroots development. As a corollary, non-remunerative societal tasks do not attract their attention.[10]

Corruption in fund management is another major argument against NGOs.[11] They very often become defaulters for not submitting grants utilization certificates. It is only expected that in the contemporary world, market-driven NGOs would prefer to sacrifice their ideology for prudence. While commenting on the functioning of human rights NGOs, Baxi (2002: 12) has alleged that they cannot always be trusted in promoting human rights, as they have become market oriented. According to Giri (2006), NGOs are one-man show where the leaders behave like a tyrant. On the whole, many NGOs lack transparency, as they are not open to scrutiny by others. The leaders never disclose their balance sheet to the public or even to its employees[12] though they talk about the current and future programmes of the organization. The need for transparency in dealings, democratic accountability in transactions, and sensitivity to the concerns and aspirations of the people they serve has forced some to argue for a code of conduct for NGOs (Baviskar, 2001: 11).

It seems that NGOs often indulge in a double standard. Thus, on the one hand, they argue for transparency and democratic participation while criticizing the state/bureaucracy for their failure to do so. But, while discharging their duties, they themselves fail to observe such norms. It is worth mentioning here that authority structure of NGOs is highly idiosyncratic, paternalistic and authoritarian in nature and it is

almost difficult, if not impossible, to penetrate into that structure.[13] This is because, as Beteille (2001: 314) argues, NGOs in India are not able to escape the institution of kinship even though they are able to escape the influence of caste. The more cosy environment of the NGOs, particularly the smaller ones, makes them more indulgent towards the claims of family and kinship and they find it easy to accommodate the wife, the nephew and the daughter-in-law than the civil society. As a result of such 'nativization' of their staff (Sethi, 1998b: 413), the dictatorial patriarch of the organization often reduces research on NGOs to only routine exercise. I may add a point here in addition to Beteille's correct assertion. Thus, in case of West Bengal, a new found desire of Left political parties to form NGOs has added a new dimension to voluntary movement though the state is otherwise known for the rise of Left party hegemony in controlling public space since 1977. The Left is probably compelled to develop this desire (as against Karat's accusation of NGOs as agents of imperialism) due to the growing concern for civil society activism in Bengal to prevent human rights abuse and atrocities on people at large by the state forces. As a corollary, these NGOs are reduced to merely extension of political affiliation and support without any concern for 'voluntarism' or civil society issues. If NGO activities are influenced by family, kinship, religion or narrow party politicking, it would be doubtful to what extent they may fit into our imagined paradigm of alternative development!

The middle class background as well as life style of many of the NGO personalities has also come under serious attack. It is argued that these professionals have by now transformed CSOs into media focused protests or well published marches. In other words, even the 'politics of symbolism' of the NGO sector is now being surpassed by the 'politics of rituals' (Sethi, 1998 b: 411). The 'easy money' syndrome is also argued to have led to the growth of a new category of 'airport NGOs' – those who travel from one part of the world to the other to attend conferences, meetings – in the name of poor and grassroots activism (Chatterjee, 2001). In the context of serious questions regarding NGO credibility and accountability, it is more pertinent today to revise our understanding about 'what an NGO stands for', rather than 'what it is not' (non-governmental).

Conclusion

It appears that the NGO sector has the potential to stretch out to the needy, vulnerable and the poor with a kind of approach that is unique

and deserving. But many NGOs just do not qualify for such a distinction. As a corollary, the presence of millions of NGOs in the sphere of civil society has failed to meet our expectations. One also hardly expects the 'project culture' of innumerable NGOs to be rectified or controlled by any real sense of 'voluntarism'. Probably, the hype about NGOs is exaggerated and they are certainly not the panacea for all ills. One may, however, argue that there are serious inherent flaws in this model of development as NGOs are neither completely endogenous nor participatory. They also do not represent any real alternative to the state and the public sector. In recent times, the state is rather co-opting NGOs to regain supremacy. Today even the strong protagonists of market liberalism seek state protection, as global recession is more fatal than state control. NGOs are also not seen as a means to correct market failures. On the contrary, the more an NGO becomes successful in expanding its activities, the more it gets alienated from the people and becomes hierarchical. The 'iron law of oligarchy' therefore applies to big and 'successful' NGOs as well. This means that the success of any NGO should not be measured by looking into its size and scale. Similarly, the effectiveness of an NGO should not be judged on the basis of its 'accomplishment' in fetching foreign fund alone. NGO's capacity to contribute to the growth of civil society would rather get squeezed by such 'achievements'. It should be remembered here that the scope of NGO activism to provide support and relief to the millions of poor, subaltern and weaker sections of people in the world is limited. NGO-ization could hardly prevent growing disparities in income and opportunities of a vast section of masses in post-globalized India. In spite of the relevance of this sector, therefore, we need to look for other viable alternatives. Although, there are many pitfalls of state action or inaction, the alternative is certainly neither just privatization, nor NGO-ization. This realization has become truer in the context of market recession at the global scale and state's initiative to repair the loss in recent times. Hence, a strong, activist and welfare state (not a dominant/authoritarian state) that would serve as a facilitator of people's self-development in association with CSOs and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) offer a better alternative to the existing impasse on holistic and sustainable development. SHGs have greater potential to actualize the goals of alternative development and we need to link them up with CSOs, cooperatives and other market forces for wider networks and better competence. It should be kept in mind that there is neither any short cut nor any singular model of any real development, and any one claiming to do this either fools us or makes

a mockery of the whole process of development. It is high time that we become serious about agenda of alternative development and assign due responsibilities to genuine agencies.

NOTES

1. A draft of this article was presented in the proceedings of a UGC Sponsored National Seminar on 'Civil Society and Social Change' held at Arambag Girls College in between 25–26 September 2008. I am grateful to Prof. Aswani Ray and Prof. A.K. Mukhopadhyay for their comments and suggestions on the article. I am also indebted to Prof. M.N. Panini and Prof. P.N. Mukherji for their help in writing this article.
2. Several other terms like Independent Sector, Non-Profit Organizations, Voluntary Citizen's Group, Voluntary Development Organizations (VDOs), Community Based Organizations, Grassroots Organizations etc., are suggested to refer to NGOs.
3. Korten (1990: 115–27) has distinguished NGOs into three generations. Apart from the relief and welfare-based first generation NGOs, the second generation attended to small-scale, local development projects, and the third generation consisted of community organizations interested in building coalitions.
4. The inflow of foreign fund to NGOs has gone up from Rs 1,584 crores in 1992–1993 to Rs 4871.9 crores in 2001–2002. Notwithstanding the role of factors like depletion of Indian Rupee as against dollar and inflation during the period, the escalating volume of foreign funding is also a testimony to increased activities of nearly 23,000 registered societies in the country.
5. The Government of India has sanctioned Rs 200 crores in the Seventh Plan and 750 crores in the Eighth Plan for NGO funding. See, Patel (1998: 47).
6. For the 2008–2009 fiscal year, the CAPART's budget strength is Rs 74 crores for different developmental works.
7. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has achieved international recognition for its splendid performance.
8. It is interesting to note that majority of the recipients of foreign donations in India are religious organizations, both Christian and Hindu. According to Union Home Ministry, Rs 7,877.57 crore was received by way of foreign donations to various voluntary associations during 2005–2006, up from Rs 5,105.50 crore in 2003–2004. Tamil Nadu (Rs 1,610 crore), Delhi (1556 crore) and Andhra Pradesh (Rs 1,011 crore) were among the highest recipients. One would wonder why such donations are little for NGOs operating in poor states like Bihar or Orissa. The highest foreign donors were

Gospel Fellowship Trust USA (Rs 229 crore), Gospel for Asia (Rs 137 crore), Foundation Vincent E Ferrer, Spain (Rs 104.23 crore) and Christian Aid, UK (Rs 80.16 crore). The largest recipients were World Vision, Tamilnadu (Rs 256 crore), Caritas India, Delhi (Rs 193 crore), Rural Development Trust, Andhra Pradesh (Rs 127 crore), Churches Auxiliary for Social Action, Delhi (Rs 95.88 crore), Plan International Inc., Delhi (92.09 crore), Mata Amritanandmayi Math, Kerala (85.33 crore), Believers Church India, Kerala (78.62 crore), Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust, Andhra Pradesh (72.12 crore), Oxfam India Trust, Delhi (Rs 71.90 crore), Women Development Trust, Andhra Pradesh (Rs 68.53 crore), Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushotam Sanstha (Rs 62.31 crore) and Gospel For Asia, Kerala (Rs 58.29 crore). The amount of donations, however, varies from year to year depending on donor's choices (See, Govt. of India 2006).

9. The case of high profile Bangladeshi NGOs failing to stand by the sufferings of flood-affected people may be referred her. More than 2000 NGOs in Bangladesh received fund worth 211 crore US Dollars during the 2000–2001 fiscal year. But they were hardly seen in proving relief during the two successive floods that inundated 40 per cent of the country in 2007. See, for details, Rahman 2007.
10. The non-remunerative task of 'Service Providers' for the victims of domestic violence did not attract the attention of NGOs in West Bengal.
11. It was revealed through Public Interest Litigation before the Delhi High Court in 2000 that over 30,000 NGOs did not account for Rs 7,535 crore given to them by the government during the past several years (Baviskar, 2001: 13). Also, as per government record, 36,561 associations did not submit their statutory annual returns relating to receipt & utilization of foreign contributions in between 2003–2006 (http://mha.nic.in/fore.htm). Again, five NGOs from West Bengal were accused of misappropriating Rs 1.5 crore in central funds meant for the welfare of SCs and STs in 2001 (The Statesman, 2002: 5). The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh has blacklisted 220 NGOs since 31.3.2004 on corruption charges (see, rmk.nic.in/rmkngo.htm). Anil Singh of Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) has claimed that most of NGO funds do not reach the poor. He even argued that CAPART is corrupt and charges commission in return for sanctioning projects. See for details, Prasannan (1996: 31).
12. The employees often complain that the management cuts a portion of their salary shown in the budget as 'development fund'.
13. One of my ex-students working as the coordinator of an AIDS project had complained to me that she is merely reduced to a puppet by those who appointed her to look into the work.

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