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Role of NGOs in Good Governance

Vivek Kumar Gupta

Faculty of Law Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, INDIA.

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ABSTRACT

Voluntary organisations play a vital role in shaping and implementation of participatory democracy. The main role of NGOs has been in enforcement provision. Their 'gap-filling' role and independence from government has allowed them to implement innovative approaches that can serve as models for government and the public enforcement system. In this sense, NGOs should continue doing what they already do best in order to become a useful laboratory for government. Mainstreaming such successful innovations in cooperation with government thus becomes an enforcement of human rights process par excellence; going beyond the individual and community level, this type of scaling up can become part of enforcement of human rights sector reform, involving all levels and actors, and incorporating NGOs as policy-partners and advisors. NGOs can become acknowledged innovators in the public interest, with a constant eye on adoption by bigger and more powerful actors and on enhancing the capacity of claimants.

1) INTRODUCTION

Voluntary organisations play a vital role in shaping and implementation of participatory democracy. They have been contributing immensely towards various development programs. They work at grassroots level even in remote areas and ... their reach is much wider. They are closer to ground realities and know the needs of the communities. Their approach with target groups is direct, emphatic and ... they are able to draw more contextualised plans of action. They also manage to develop intimate contacts with people and develop confidence among them.

The above lines, though appear like comments from NGO quarters or their sympathisers, do in reality constitute the opening remarks of the *Report of the Steering Committee on Voluntary Sector for the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-07)* of the Planning Commission, Government of India [1].

Five decades after government's planned effort in enforcement of human rights and poverty eradication, there are still a whopping 25 per cent of the total population below the official poverty line. Out of 192 (138) million households in India, 32 (27) million have no drinking water facility in their premises, 83 (77) million have no electricity or use kerosene for lighting purpose, 122 (108) million have no toilets even of rudimentary type, 103 (91) million have no drainage (even open drainage) for waste water disposal, 68 (55) million have no kitchens in their houses or cook in the open, 124 (97) million are unable to access banking facilities in view of utter poverty, 132 (112) million have no TVs at home, 175 (133) million have no telephones, and 109 (79) million do not even have bicycles for

communication." The failures of the government are too obvious. This has indeed prompted it to look for modifications in the existing approaches to enforcement of human rights or explore alternative approaches. The realisation of the government came sometime around the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-90), and, accordingly, emphasis was given to partnership with NGOs in consideration of their foregoing virtues [2].

It goes to the credit of the voluntary sector that the government today recognises the good work done by the NGOs and has come to a stage seeking cooperation with NGOs. This has come through a historical process which can be traced to 1970s when hundreds of restless citizens in India came out of their confinement to offer voluntary work with a view to resolving the problems of enforcement of human rights. In the mid-1980s many professionals joined voluntary service with the same elective. With the increase in international aid for NGO activities, the country went through NGO booms in 1980s and 1990s. The government slowly but more and more realised the potentials of the voluntary sector, and consequently, moved in the direction of partnership with NGOs of proven track record. To ensure that the full potential contribution of voluntary organisations is realised, the Planning Commission advised that "the fullest possible communication and cooperation between national, state and local governments and NGOs should be promoted in

* Corresponding Author: Mr. Vivek Kumar Gupta

Email address: advivekgupta@gmail.com

institutions mandated and programmes designed to carry out various schemes.”

The trend around the world is no different. All over the world, the fastest-growing segment of the society is the nonprofit sector, as millions of ordinary people social entrepreneurs are increasingly stepping in to solve problems where governments and bureaucracies have failed [3]. Without a doubt, the past twenty years has produced more social entrepreneurs than terrorists. The observation speaks of the shape that the voluntary movement has taken, most of which have gone unreported in the world media. In recognition of the role of voluntarism, the UN General Assembly in its 52nd session declared the year 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers. The role of NGOs was particularly recognised at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Thereafter, active presence of NGOs continued at all important global international forums, such as the Cairo Population Conference 1994, the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development 1995 and the Beijing Conference on Women 1995 [4].

Today, NGOs are serving millions of citizens in scores of countries. Their reach and scope often eclipse both the private and public sector, touching and affecting the lives of every citizen, often more profoundly than the forces of the market place or the agencies and bureaucracies of government.

In India today, there are more than 50,000 active development oriented NGOs, of which not less than 13,000 NGOs have availed assistance from the Government of India alone on different projects and programs. With the call of the government to deepen further the government NGO cooperation, the role of NGOs is bound to increase manifolds. In the context of increasing responsibility for NGOs and trust reposed in them by funders, it has become all the more necessary now to understand the nature and role these new institutions are playing and are capable of, especially, in an area such as enforcement of human rights which is full of pitfalls.

In this background, an effort has been made to deal with NGO conceptually and analyse its growth, structure, function and relationship in all its manifestations. The theoretical handling of the topic is bound to help us understand the innermost aspects of NGO that lead to better transactions with and within the institution in question in field conditions. Further, in keeping with the theme of my study, a conceptual treatment of terms such as *enforcement of human rights by NGOs* has been undertaken and the history of NGOs in India, from the ancient age to the modern times, has been traced to enable the reader to better appreciate the subject in the present context. A space has also been devoted to a brief description of the objectives behind each of the important initiatives and programs of NGOs in enforcement of human rights implemented during 1945-2010.

After dealing with the theory of NGO and enforcement of human rights, there follows a picture of the real world of Indian NGOs through a micro study conducted in State of Uttar Pradesh. The findings are neither in all praise of NGOs nor do they take away fully the credit of NGOs that this sector has so far acquired for itself. They are important from the point of view that there are elements in the study which can help the voluntary sector in taking stock of its strong as well

as weak points and thereupon working to refashion NGOs in service for the better. Nevertheless, the voluntary sector being largely without checks and control until now, the ultimate balance sheet of its success and failure *vis-a-vis* its constituents' vision and mission would lie in the age-old Indian saying as contained in the Mundaka Upanishad - *Satymeva jayate (truth alone triumphs)*.

2) NGOs IN INDIA ACROSS SECTIONAL

Nongovernmental organizations have come to occupy an important place in India. The spread of NGO activities in the country, as in many other parts of the world, are manifest in a number of spheres and in a wide spectrum of programs [5]. In welfare programs, development-oriented initiatives, empowering women and weaker sections, protecting the rights of marginalized segments, protecting the environment, spreading literacy and education, to name a few, the participation of the NGO sector has been impressive, particularly since independence. There is a high degree of diversity and heterogeneity in the activities as well.

India witnessed an increase in the number of NGOs since independence. A corresponding increase in the volume of activity was also evident during the post-independence period. According to one estimate, there are 1 million NGOs in the country. However, the causes of proliferation of NGOs in different periods, beginning in the 1950s, were not analogous. If national sentiments, derived from the involvement in the freedom struggle, reigned supreme in the minds of the people and motivated them to form voluntary organizations in the 1950s, the reasons were obviously different for the period since then. One then notices the expansion of NGOs more in developmental activities, such as income generating programs in the 1960s. In the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s the concern of NGOs was changing. The shift turned in favor of issues associated with legal rights, the environment, technology and development. While matters concerning human rights dominated the 1980s, attempts to sustain the degrading environment due to ruthless exploitation or the anti poor policies of the state gave the impetus for the formation of NGOs in the 1990s [6].

Today NGOs are found all over the country. The socioeconomic backdrop of the country served as a fertile ground for the genesis and growth of the NGO sector, further facilitated by the democratic system prevailing in the country, which granted ample space for its existence. The remarkable growth in the number of organization registered in the country since independence testifies to this fact. This is evident not only from the size of the sector, but also from the enlarging area of activities it has been engaged in over the years.

However, the growth has not been geographically uniform in different parts of the country. More often than not, the number of voluntary organizations does not correspond to the size of the population in the states. In other words, it is hard to find any association between the number of voluntary organizations and the size of the population. Highly populated states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, for instance, have a very weak presence of voluntary organizations. Even after independence the trend continued unabated, with the convergence of voluntary activity in the developed parts of the country and in urban areas. The preference of voluntary

workers for regions where the availability of infrastructure and resources is better perhaps explains the skewed distribution of voluntary work in the country. Some States, like Maharashtra, West Bengal, Gujarat, and Kerala, are ahead of others in the number of organizations.

The contribution of the sector to the domains of social welfare, development, income-generating enterprises, empowerment, and conscientization (the process whereby people are made aware of their conditions, rights, and expectations) was notable. NGOs have ventured into territories (not only in a geographical sense) that were left out or sidelined in the various programs of the State. The presence of NGOs is felt among the tribals, women in the unorganized sector, destitute, children, the aged, sex workers, the blind, and other similar neglected and marginalized sections of society [7]. NGOs could penetrate into these segments of the populace, where assistance was required but hard to come by. Even though the work of NGOs in these fields was carried out at the micro level, in the end it has borne fruits and made a significant impact. It is widely recognized that they have been quite effective in their limited areas of operation.

The roles NGOs perform today are numerous: They are advocates, educators, catalysts, monitors, whistle blowers, mediators lobbyists, activists, mobilizers (of both men and resources), protectors of human rights, conscientizers, animators, and conciliators [8]. Notable is the fact that these roles are never played in an affable 'climate in India. NGOs, mainly those that perform advocacy roles and critique government policies, have constraints in their working environments. Sometimes there are occasions in which the organizations are silenced by the mechanism of cooption. Allocation of grants in aid and respectable positions in government bodies with perks and privileges are being used to woo voluntary workers. Cooption can come not only from those in powers but from other political actors as well, including the opposition, as happened in some Arab countries. For them, NGOs are instruments that can be used for political support and influence.

The advantages of voluntary organizations are many. In comparison to government, NGOs are in a relatively better position to personalize the provision of services they offer to the people. The principal advantage of NGOs lies in their proximity to people and their sensitivity to the needs of the community. A prominent feature of the nongovernmental sector is its capability of bringing people together and motivating them to participate in the developmental process. Whether it is in pani panchayat for water conservation and distribution or in Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad for popularizing science among the masses, the element of participation and involvement remains the strength of NGOs. Due to this strength, the work of the organizations in the arena of development in general has been quite remarkable. This is clear from the sector's effective programs using indigenous resources, mobilizing the masses, and reaching the poor [9].

Flexibility in approach helps NGOs invent appropriate solutions to the issues they handle. They can adjust to the needs of the clients. Micro-level operations provide greater opportunities for tailoring the services to the requirements of the beneficiaries. The small size is advantageous, for it gives the NGOs the capacity for innovations rarely seen in

government and business. Since the constituencies of NGOs are smaller, they can define their positions clearly, press for innovative solutions, and experiment in ways governments may not find it easy to do. The potential of creative talent in them facilitates a necessary opportunity to design, experiment with, and amend their strategies to suit the needs of the people for whom the programs are intended [10].

An approach characterized by informal, personal, and humane elements enhances the quality of service they render. This has been a universal feature of NGOs all over the world. They have been perceived as flexible, participatory, inexpensive, and able to reach the poor better, in contrast to government, which is typified as inefficient, hampered by bureaucracy, and in the thrall of self-interested politicians. More important, NGOs vis-a-vis the government have the ability to help ensure that the people, vulnerable groups in particular, are involved in decisions that affect them. Partly, these specialties have helped the sector to create a dent for itself in the development of the country. NGOs begin to work in areas even before the development of government programs in those areas.

One of the major advantages of the NGO sector is that it uses resources economically and appropriately vis-a-vis the state. This is evident even in the routine affairs of NGOs [11]. It is a common practice in government offices and organizations to utilize resources without any concern, which lead to waste. There is misuse of money, services, and facilities in government organizations. The social concern of NGOs is their hallmark.

NGOs receive accolades for their innovative and enterprising spirit in finding solutions to the issues confronted by society. It has been widely acknowledged that the strongest functional aspect of NGOs is their potential role as trailblazers and pioneers of new untried development approaches. Innovations in community health, indigenous medicine, techniques of delivery of services to the poor in remote destinations, microfinance and banking systems, organizing workers in the informal sector, and evolving appropriate credit systems that benefit the poor all had wider repercussions in the society at large. In reality, NGOs serve as a test bed for new ideas and methodologies that are difficult for the government and business sectors to develop, and NGOs act as a sounding board for government policies 'and programs. Such attempts secure recognition and often governmental agencies try to emulate them. A role at the Comprehensive Rural Health Project in Jharkhand offered a low-cost and appropriate model for the delivery of health services that the government tried out in the form of village health workers in the area of public health. The NGO sector has, on the other hand, definite policy implications too. The work of the NGO sector has proved to be instrumental in influencing the state to formulate policies for the benefit of the neglected and marginalized.

Smallness is both the strength and the weakness of NGOs. The success of NGOs in their chosen field of activity is often attributed to the smaller size of the organization, which has many advantages on the management front in devising appropriate strategies to achieve the goals of the organization and in experimenting with innovative ideas. While having advantages, smallness has limitations too. NGO's attempts, because of this, are confined to the micro level and therefore unable to extend beyond a certain limit. This prevents them

from bringing about substantial socioeconomic and political changes in society. Despite this, there is consensus about the crucial part played by NGOs in the country and the recognition they have gained as a third force of development, strengthening the work of the public and private sectors.

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