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NGO and women empowerment in India

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Abstract

NGOs have been regarded as pillar of development in India along public and private sector. The vitality of NGOs can be found from fact they take positions on the board of corporates to high tables of diplomacy. NGOs have been serving in India for more than 100 years. They work primarily with marginalized communities that cuts across gender, caste and religion. They have made their mark in ameliorating women's condition by shaping policies that make societies and communities gender equal. For very society to prosper women empowerment is must not only in terms of numbers that feed into GDP growth but for it to become self-reliant. NGOs have helped women financially to get involved in entrepreneurship, raise their political awareness, educate women on health and provide information on crime against women and adequate legal and emotional support to fight malpractices.

Keywords: NGO, women, empowerment, equal, society

Introduction

There is no single line definition of NGO. They have risen in the background of vacuum created by state and to reach society. World Bank document – *Working with NGOs* defined them as private organization that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services or undertake community development (World Bank, 1995: 7) ^[21].

Most definitions for NGOs include list of the organizational forms they can take, based on the terms used by associations to describe themselves. These include 'grassroot organization', 'self-help group', 'credit societies' and so forth. There is much disagreement whether each subcategory qualifies as an NGO (Jenkins 2011) ^[8].

NGOs are at fore front in democratizing development. They play different actors at different stages be it environment movements, farmer organization, women groups, student protests, trade unions or religious units.

Ngo channels and process the demands and concerns of disparate groups to the state. Thus, they underpin an effective and streamline state, ensuring legitimacy, accountability and transparency thereby strengthening the state's capacity for good governance. A strong state and strong NGO networking are essential complements (Baker, 1997) ^[2].

With the onset of neoliberalism in 1970-80s, New NGOs role in social sector have expanded. As the state withdrew, they took over the space meant for welfarism. The social pressure generated also resulted in rolling out of what we know as 'corporate social responsibility'. These then became cushion to absorb the impact of structural adjustment policies. This points out NGO are merely not be seen as democratic but also peddling vested interests of lobby groups.

In India's developmental realm Indian NGOs have a deep-seated ethical basis for altruism (Baxi 1997; Viswanath 1993) ^[4, 20]. Because of the altruistic motivation, Indian NGOs:

- tend to be relatively conservative and service-oriented
- are incrementalistic (that is, they seek small improvements in people's lives) and
- promote non-violence

NGOs in India have seen 'moment of conflict' with socio-political movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan against Sardar Sarovar Project, NGOs close to Gujarat government and 'moment of solidarity' expressed in convergence of social movements and NGO working to address causes of women's financial independence by formation micro-credit societies and self-help groups that augmented socialization of women and reclamation of public space by women for first time.

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Amount of work NGOs have done for betterment of women's lives is remarkable. Encouraged women to participate in SHGs attain financial well-being, educate dropout college girls, trained them in vocational skills, made them aware about constitutionally guaranteed legal rights, helped women access health services like contraceptives, family planning, HIV awareness programmes. NGOs have been at front of environment protection. Environment exploitation affects women negatively as they distanced from resources like water, forest produce etc.

This research paper delves into contribution made by Ngo for multi-dimensional women empowerment.

Women Empowerment and NGO

Women's empowerment is a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources – material, human and intellectual such as knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources like money as well as control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation so as to gain "power" [1].

Amartya Sen in 1999 came up with Capability thesis. That certain factors impede women progress like deep rooted patriarchy that disempowers women socially and economically. Ngo provide women these myriad capabilities. For women is the nucleus of the family, investing in her to reduce poverty, make development inclusive and egalitarian.

SHG and Financial Empowerment

The poverty levels for female-headed households in India are a full 20 per cent higher than the national average, and the story is similar for inequality levels (Meenakshi and Ray 2003; Sen and Mukherjee 2006) [11, 16]. Statistics point to the extent of disadvantages like: the earned income for women is 34 per cent of that for men; the adult literacy ratio for women is 70 per cent of that for men; primary school enrolment for girls is 85 per cent of that for boys; high school enrolment ratio is 80 per cent; tertiary enrolment ratio is 70 per cent, and so on (UNDP 2008) [19]. These statistics point to an 'unequal allocation of food, lower wage rates and a lack of inheritance rights' (Mehta and Shah 2003: 503) [12]. In short, the vicious cycle women are subjected gets translated into low economic freedom.

In 1972 Ela Bhat, a staunch Gandhian started SEWA in Ahmedabad. Because larger Indian banks refused to service poor women with their minimal incomes, SEWA Bank was formed in response to poor women's demands (Rose, 1992) [14]. According to SEWA's founder Ela Bhatt, "poverty is a form of violence with the consent of the society. We have agreed to keep poor people poor. We make the poor vulnerable. Therefore, at SEWA we believe that organizing to seek freedom from poverty, hunger and starvation is a human right." At SEWA women strive for right to work at dignified terms.

Naandi Foundation works with tribal women farmers to get best price for their coffee produce. Arakunomics empowers them financially. These women then educate their daughter and this creates a virtuous cycle of emancipation.

The main model of intervention for the majority of Indian NGOs working in rural areas on issues of gender and poverty is the self-help group. In 2006 there were over two million SHGs across India, with 33 million members and delivering services to well over 100 million people (Isern *et al.* 2007) [6]. The model meets the demand of poor women for access to affordable credit, and it enables a broader

social intermediation function by the NGO, fostering the notions of self-help and self-reliance that should lead to sustainability (Banerjee 2004) [3].

Research by Patrick Kilby who surveyed 77 NGOs in southern India concludes that, "increased mobility gave women and their SHGs legitimacy in the eyes of other family members, particularly, the husbands who 'allowed' the women to attend the meetings and the groups were seen by the family primarily as savings and credit groups, so were a means to increase the financial resources available to the household." (Kilby, 2011) [9].

Political Empowerment

Given a pervasive role in promoting shg - these NGOs are not only service providers, but have become facilitators of local level activism and local-level power politics, and have a role as empowerment agents (Sen, S. 1999; Anand 2002) [15, 1].

Ngo like Lok Shikshan Sansthan that promotes Adivasi rights in Chhattisgarh explicitly build in their organization charter that contesting in elections is prohibited in their organization. However, many NGOs such as Karnataka based SEARCH train people elected in panchayats on regulations, providing information on vigilance committee etc. (Jenkins, 2011) [8].

YIP, an NGO has unionized agricultural laborer in rural Andhra Pradesh, that in turn have supported their own candidates in panchayats. In 1995 out of 7000 village panchayat seats, 6100 were members of these unions. (Mediratta and Smith 2001; Suvarchala 1999; Bedi 1999) [10, 18, 5].

Trend of NGO-ization of women's movement (Menon 2000: 3839). They have facilitated activism that has captured political space like Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan.

Social Empowerment

In large areas of India women live with many burdens and fears. They carry the burden of neglect and discrimination, household work, looking after siblings and of work outside the home. After marriage a girl's status descends to an even lower level and her subservience becomes institutionalized. (Janardhan 1995: 39) [7].

Newer process post 1990s like Hindutva that unfolded on political scene had spillovers on social scene. Right-wing NGOs in India afforded new 'safer' roles and status for women, such as performing Hindu rituals and meeting with other women on religious issues. This had the effect of elevating their self-worth at an individual level (Parker 2003) [13].

Ngo like MAVA (Men against violence and abuse) approaches violence against women by engaging boys and men to address abusive issues like dowry deaths, marital rape, domestic violence, child marriage etc.,

NGO like Rajasthan Samgrah Kalyan Sansthan established in 1992 help women in upgrading skills, create awareness to stop domestic violence, safe motherhood. For its contribution it has been granted consultative status in 2015 by UN-ECOSOC. NGOs have been at front to fight crime against women. Ngo like Kshmata rehabilitates survivors of human trafficking. Barefoot Ngo in Tilonia provides women like skills – like Afghan women were taught to make solar lamps. Meer Foundation helps women who are victims of acid attack to move further in life. It also funds surgeries of victims.

The Live Love Laugh Foundation promotes discussion on mental health, strives to eradicate stigma around mental

¹ Chapter-3, Conceptual framework of women empowerment and entrepreneurship, Shodhganga, 2015

illness. HelpAge foundation creates awareness about issues elderly face and funds cataract surgeries. CRY foundation promotes consciousness around child rights and healthy childhood. Smile foundation works with underprivileged kids in slum areas who are affected by rare diseases.

Climate Justice and Women Empowerment

Women and climate are intertwined. Women have questioned the hierarchical status in reaping dividend of produce from nature. Men have taken control of production process despite a known fact that climate adversity impacts women most. From water scarcity and school dropouts to desertification and child marriage, women bear maximum brunt of environmental degradation. Women closeness to trees is recorded in folk songs and that is also referred to 'maika' by activist to spearheaded Chipko movement.

Today, various NGOs are working to protect environment. Ngo like Janmitram believes in social entrepreneurship to secure livelihood of women bringing land under cultivation sustainably. Marathwada Gram Vikas Sanghatan works in drought prone region, its main work is to generate employment by taking up community works and working for providing safe sanitation service to women and children. Women and Gender Constituency, established in 2009 works to ensure women concern about environment finds place in UNFCCC network. WGC also brings out annual manual that provides a framework for gender just climate solutions like constructing bio-loos, use of solar cooker, solar home lightening systems promoted by tribal girls to access education, constituting agro-ecological women cooperatives to ensure food security in drought and desertification prone areas.

Grey Areas

Despite their work and impact certain factors impede NGOs effectiveness. Such as NGOs personnel in rural areas are equally ill-equipped as their client to bring out local solutions. In urban areas NGOs show 'oligarchic tendencies' (Sheth 1996) ^[17] there is no accountability in terms of expenditure and ignoring advise of grassroots professionals. Opaque funding is another issue. Many NGOs working in Tribal India espouse lofty ideals of gender equality but in turn radicalize women to join extremist left wing movements. On the other hand, there are ultra-right-wing organizations that concentrate solidarity by communalizing people. Such organizations prevailing at both ends of political spectrum destroy harmonious social fabric and should be banned.

Conclusion

Women who have been exposed to any type of Ngo intervention financially or politically or socially is positive about its impact. Earlier, they were restricted to 'four walls.' Now, they can act independently, their self-esteem is enhanced and choices are expanded. Thus, for developing country like ours NGOs are part of and "empowering process".

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