

THE HISTORY OF NGO'S IN INDIA

The changing face of volunteering in India

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by Patralekha Chatterjee

It was dark, around midnight. The place - on the outskirts of the Indian capital, New Delhi. There was no house or car or road to be seen - only dark mounds that turned out to be excavated rock when one went near. Next to each mound was a near vertical pit - about 20 meters deep on the average. That was where the rock had been dug out from - the rock that went into making the big houses of the political leaders and bureaucrats and rich citizens of New Delhi.

Stepping carefully around the pits and mounds, four men approached the only source of light to be seen - a small kerosene lantern burning inside a mud and grass hut. There were four residents inside - a couple and their two children, 10 and eight. They dug the pits, cut the rock and hauled it to the trucks, all without salary. They were bonded labourers, bonded for life and for generations to the owner of the pit because some ancestor sometime had borrowed money and had been unable to pay it back.

Two of the four men who visited the hut that night in 1985 were from a non-governmental organization called Bandhua Mukti Morcha (Bonded Labour Liberation Front). The other two were journalists brought by the NGO to prove that bonded labour - a form of slavery - did exist right in the nation's capital. After the visit, the men from the NGO went to the police station to lodge a complaint, because bonded labour is illegal in India, and so is child labour in a profession as hazardous as this. The complaints, and the articles written by the journalists after the visit, were part of the NGO campaign to make the government implement the law.

Every day, different NGOs all over India are doing things like this. Sometime it may be taking a sample of water from a well that has been polluted by a nearby factory, getting the water analysed and then filing a "public interest petition" in a court to force the factory to follow anti-pollution laws. Another time, it may be a heated debate with a bureaucrat on why all citizens should have the right to be informed about all government decisions that affect their lives.

Though the term NGO became popular in India only in the 1980s, the voluntary sector has an older tradition. Since independence from the British in 1947, the voluntary sector had a lot of respect in the minds of people - first, because the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi was an active participant; and second because India has always had the tradition of honouring those who have made some sacrifice to help others.

In independent India, the initial role played by the voluntary organizations started by Gandhi and his disciples was to fill in the gaps left by the government in the development process. The volunteers organized handloom weavers in villages to form cooperatives through which

they could market their products directly in the cities, and thus get a better price. Similar cooperatives were later set up in areas like marketing of dairy products and fish. In almost all these cases, the volunteers helped in other areas of development - running literacy classes for adults at night, for example.

In the 1980s, however, the groups who were now known as NGOs became more specialized, and the voluntary movement was, in a way, fragmented into three major groups. There were those considered the traditional development NGOs, who went into a village or a group of villages and ran literacy programmes, crèches for children and clinics, encouraged farmers to experiment with new crops and livestock breeds that would bring more money, helped the weavers and other village artisans market their products and so on - in short became almost a part of the community in their chosen area (usually in rural India) and tried to fill all the gaps left in the development process by the government. There are many examples of voluntary organizations of this kind running very successfully in India for the last five decades. Perhaps the most celebrated example would be the treatment centre for leprosy patients run by Baba Amte in central India.

The second group of NGOs were those who researched a particular subject in depth, and then lobbied with the government or with industry or petitioned the courts for improvements in the lives of the citizens, as far as that particular subject was concerned. A well-known example of an NGO of this type is the Centre for Science and Environment. It was a CSE who picked up that sample of well water and then submitted the results of the chemical analysis to a court because the organization had not been able to get the factory to change its polluting practices in any other way.

In the third group were those volunteers who saw themselves more as activists than other NGOs did. Of course, all NGOs undertook a certain amount of activism to get their points across - they petitioned the bureaucrats, they alerted the media whenever they found something wrong and so on. But this third group of NGOs saw activism as their primary means of reaching their goals, because they did not believe they could get the authorities to move in any other way. Perhaps the best-known example of an NGO in this category is the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Campaign), an organisation that opposed the construction of a series of large dams in a large river valley of central India. The members of this NGO believe that large dams worsen water scarcity for the majority of the people in the long run rather than solve the problem, and they oppose the displacement it entails upstream of the dam. When the NBA found that it could not persuade the planners in India to agree to its point of view, the NBA members put up pickets, held demonstrations and tried every other way they could think of to oppose the construction of the first of the big dams. Most of the NBA member went to jail a number of times as a result. Right now, some of them - including celebrated novelist Arundhati Roy - face the prospect of being jailed again, because they criticized the Supreme Court of India when the court's decision on dam construction did

not go in their favour.

There is no strict boundary between these three groups of NGOs - in fact, Baba Amte is now an important member of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. And whatever be the category a particular NGO falls into, all of them play an important role in modern India - they hold the politicians accountable to the people.

India is a representative rather than a participatory democracy. Once the elections are over, the politicians who run the federal and state governments do not really need to go back to the electorate for every major decision - there is no tradition of referendums in India, as there is in Switzerland or Denmark. So, in the five years between one election and another, the NGOs - and parts of the media, to some extent - are often the only means available to the citizens to voice their opinions on any decision taken by a government.

In a large developing country like India, there are numerous gaps left by the government in the development process - sometimes by intention, sometimes due to lack of funds, sometimes due to lack of awareness. These are the gaps that many NGOs try to fill in modern India. Some of them may work in areas that the government does not want to get into - like fighting discrimination on the basis of caste. Most Indian politicians do not really want to upset the existing caste hierarchy in his or her constituency, because the politician is dependent for votes on the dominant castes of that particular constituency. In the process, laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of caste are often ignored unless there is an NGO working in the area that is willing to take up the cause of those being discriminated against.

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<http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/news-views/viewpoints/doc/the-changing-face-of.html>
