

NGOs in Bihar: Voluntary Sector and its Credibility

Dr. Anant Kumar*

This commentary is based on my field visits, and interaction with over four hundred NGO's representatives, staff and functionaries in Bihar. I also got an opportunity to see some of their work in the field and interact with their staff and communities. There is lot to share and I know many of NGOs and readers of this article may not agree with my views and the way I see NGOs and its emergence in Bihar and their work. The observations, comments and examples mentioned in the paper are my own views and perception, and not against any particular organisation or individual.



There are several issues and concerns which questions the credibility of NGOs in Bihar. In last ten years and particularly after nineties, the number of NGOs registered in Bihar has outnumbered the other states. Although we do not have exact numbers, according to estimates, presently there are more than thirty thousands NGOs in Bihar. According to official sources nearly 10,000 NGOs exist only on paper .



There are several reasons for the increase in this number. Registration of trusts and societies have become hotbeds of corruption. It is interesting to note that many people are registering or have registered NGOs as property value which gives good return after three years or even before that. One can buy an NGO in Bihar in ten to fifteen thousand and if the NGO is more than three years old with FCRA one has to pay even more (Fifteen to thirteen thousand). NGOs complain that officials in Bihar charge up to Rs 10,000 for registering a society or trust; clearance under section 80G of the Income Tax Act can cost Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000; acceptance of audited accounts can cost even more .

There are families, who have more than five NGOs within the family and all the family members are part of it. So with time, these NGOs have also emerged as family business. In fact, some of the families with their sister organisations have emerged as very influential in lobbying with donors and bilateral agencies. However, in most of the NGOs in Bihar, it is difficult to find second line of leadership and even if it exists, it is confined within the close family members.

Besides the family, caste has also played a very important role in the emergence of NGOs in Bihar. Although there is no data available, it is believed that before nineties most of these NGOs were headed by upper caste and especially the Bhumihars, Rajputs and Brahmins or caste elites. After the nineties, there was change and it also spread to other caste groups. Primarily there are two reasons for this spread. First, by that time lot of funding agencies were approaching the state and secondly because of change in government which was pro-poor in principle. The other caste groups also became aware of the NGOs (easy money making business with no accountability towards people) with political, bureaucratic connections and patronage.



In the beginning, many NGOs were established in Bihar in late seventies and early eighties by sarvodayis or socialists or youth who had been a part of the J. P. movement. It may be noted that it is not uncommon for activists from emergency days (part of J P movement) to be part of NGOs in Bihar. A large section of youth was mobilized during this movement, lot of them had left their studies and jobs, later, a number of these activists, became part of NGOs . Most of these people were political activists and believed in socialist ideology guided by Jay Prakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia. They believed in social change and some of them really did good work and were able to mobilise people for volunteerism and community development. Initially there were no outside funding support and resources were mobilised locally from the community and there was full community support and participation. It was during this period that many of Ashrams were established for social development.

At the same time, many of caste elites also opened voluntary organisations and NGOs in their villages but they were not able to succeed because of the ownership and hierarchy. Later they moved to cities like Patna, Ranchi and other urban centres because it was easy to lobby with government departments and donors. In fact many bureaucrats and politicians also associated themselves with these NGOs. This nexus has in fact further facilitated the spread of corruption. The functioning of a large number of fake non-government organisations (NGOs) in different parts of the state has proved beyond doubt that it has a well-knit group of highly-placed officials for running it smoothly. Investigations have revealed that close relatives of a large number of politicians, bureaucrats and academics are engaged in running such NGOs, each one of them claiming to change the face of the society . In many of these NGOs, most of the chief functionaries are family members, no matter whether they have an understanding of NGO or development or not. There are couples, who have separate NGOs, where husband has a mother NGO for RCH programme and field activities are run by the wife's organisation. In principle there is nothing wrong in it but the dynamics and inter-relationship is important because the work done by both the organisations is in question and they are ultimately accountable to the people for whom they are working.

During the last fifteen years, NGOs in Bihar have increased in number, size, and scope and have established themselves to be perceived in pivotal positions capable of bringing about social, economic, and political change. In this context, it is imperative to understand the dynamics, work and political economy of NGOs and to evaluate their social roles. A study led by Elmer H Lighid, of the International Council on Management of Population Programmes (ICOMP), Malaysia reports that though the number of voluntary organisations working in a district varies, out of every 1,000 such organisations, there are only 20 "real" ones. It stresses that the voluntary organisations in Bihar are fragmented and work in isolation due to caste, religious and ideological factors. It maintains that the voluntary organisations lack the requisite technical skills, qualified staff and exposure .

Credibility Question:

The question is "what is credibility" and what constitutes credibility for an NGO. One can define credibility as quality of being trustworthy which means, whether or not the NGO (the aims and vision with which it is established) is to be believed or trusted. We know that many a times, NGOs are not considered credible because they have a personal, monetary, political or other interest which is often in contradiction with the interest of the community or people whom they claim to serve..

Credibility is one of the most critical factors, which has affected the peoples perception of NGOs in

Bihar. Now people and communities have started demanding money for participation in NGOs programme as they believe that NGOs are getting money in their name. The question here is, 'how can an NGO build its credibility?' Before answering this question, however it is important to focus on why NGOs have lost their credibility. NGOs have lost their credibility in people because they are not consistent, transparent, honest and accountable to their work being done. Despite the recent cancellation of the registration of hundreds of "fake" non-government organisations (NGOs) in Bihar, a large number of people, including those belonging to Naxalite outfits, have made a beeline for getting their new organisations registered. Interestingly, people belonging to various Naxalite outfits and women activists top the list of those who have set up their NGOs in different parts of the state . Transparency and sharing information and knowledge is a best way to build credibility which helps in building the intellectual base of the NGO, and its ability to articulate the views of the people it is speaking for. There is no fix set of guidelines for NGOs, which we have for other sectors like government, corporate and other institutions. Although several activists, networks and Alliances (Like credibility alliance) are raising these issues and have developed norms and good practices for governance and public disclosure, we have not achieved and provided rights to people working in development sectors (Its not true for all organizations but applies to many voluntary organizations and NGOs).

There is need to debate, raise and discuss the issues which hampers NGOs credibility directly besides other factors.

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Comment

Dear Mr. Ananat Kumar,

Too negative article based on the limited exposure to NGO sector. Why don't you send some one in South India and find out that Bihar NGO's are working much better than elsewhere despite the odds. The biggest enemy of Bihar, the people of Bihar origin settled out side largely belong to middle and upper middle class. Why don't you send some researcher to DELHI and PUNE and find out that are studying here from Bihar, From where this lakhs of Rs. coming to give donation and a filthy rich life style.

Kindly be reasonable to Bihar NGO all of them are not bad. as you portrayed.

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Lets us initiate a step for Bihar NGOs. Lets appeal to the PM OFFICE RTI CELL. ALL TRUSTS, SOCIETIES AND COOPERATIVES BE MANDATORYLY COVERED UNDER RTI ACT IMMEDIATELY IN BIHAR

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banerjee

Dear Anantji

namaskar. This is very good article and reality of ngo world.

RTI must be mandatory for ngo also. you can see our 2004 bihar flood appeal as below:

Year 2004

We from Bihar Jan Pahal and Lok Shakti Sangathan (A mass movement organization) appeal to all International Donor agencies/ Ngos who is working in Bihar for flood relief and Rehabilitation to be more transparent. Transparency is not to say only but it must be appear on working place. For transparency and to avoid duplicacy, Donor Agencies or Ngo should fix a sine board on relief and rehabilitation working place in Hindi or Regional language. This is first step of Right to Information and transparency. As for our information near about 20 International Doner Agencies working in Bihar Flood Relief and Rehabilitation.

TDH raised 76 lakhs to work through six ngo partner but only one ngo partner Kisan Vikas Trust displayed the board on working place in Khagaria district. Similarly Swiss Red Cross raised one crore and thirty lakhs to work through three partner, but only one partner Samajik Shaikshanic Vikas Kendre (ssvk) in Jhanjharpur sub division (Madhubani District) with full detailed displayed a board of 8/4 Feet on the road side of working place and organization,s campus also.ssvk printed materials name and quantity on beneficiary coupons. Ssvk received a tune of Rupees 51,19,225.00. from swiss red cross. Ssvk constituted a 65 members monitoring committee from its target groups. Relief has been operated through its target community members and local workers. ssvk sent the copy of approved budget for flood relief to all concern govt. officials. On the occasion of relief distribution 21st of September 2004 in ssvk Jhanjharpur campus, Darbhanga commissioner Mr. K.P.Ramayya instructed his govt. official as well as panchayats to fix the board on working place like SSVK. Actionaid raised one crore rupees and working through one partner in champaran and in Darbhanga Actionaid is working Directly through NAPM Convenor and its staff. But there is not any fix board or any sign of transparency on working place. Oxfam GB also could not fix the board in madhubani district. Flood effected people do not know how much resources coming for him. For example one ngo of Bhusara (Gaighat) Muzaffarpur is claiming flood relief with four donor agencies like swiss red cross 38 Lakhs, care, plan international and the hunger project in Gaighat block and another ngo is also claiming of flood relief in Gaighat block with the help of Oxfam Hongkong. Peoples of Gaighat do not know how much resources coming for him .Without putting village list, material list and Donors name in the Fix Board, how can any ngo claim that there is no duplicacy there and they are transparent. How they can question to the representative of panchayats and the government officials morally. We expect to positive step as early as possible that Doner Agencis and its partners ngo will come forward in the larger interest of flood effected people,s of north bihar. Lok Shakti Sangathan Bihar has written a letter to the chief secretary of bihar (Chief Secretary is coordinating relief operation in bihar) and requested him to instruct the govt. officials, Ngos/ Donor agencies as well as panchayats representative to fix the board with full detail in working place to maintain transparency and right to information in the larger interest of people.

Lok Shakti Sangathan Bihar is planning to launch the right to information campaign in the state regarding relief and other developmental programme.

List of International Donor Agencies working in North Bihar Flood Relief and Rehabilitation:

1. Unicef

2. Oxfam G B
3. Indian Red Cross Society
4. Care India
5. Efficor
6. Caritas-India
7. Christian Aid
8. World Vision India
9. CASA
10. Swiss Red Cross
- 11.ECHO
12. IFRC
13. The Discipleship Centre
14. tere desh homes (TDH)
- 15.UNDP
- 16.The Hunger Project
17. ActionAid
18. Medicines Senf (MSS)
19. Oxfam Hongkong
20. Plan International

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