

Dangerous sedative April 2010

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The history of the non-government organisation (NGO), as a non-state institutional initiative, might logically go back to the origin of government itself. All the same, its role as a grouping complementary to the ruling structure probably does not reach earlier than the 19th century. Broadly speaking, the first NGOs were charity organisations comprised mainly of Christian institutions, and characterised the period of direct colonial rule. The second wave

of NGOs can be termed developmental organisations, and dominated during the Cold War decades. Finally, the third and current wave comprises of participatory and globalist organisations that have been active since the start of the economic liberalisation and neoliberal globalisation that began during the 1990s. In the Subcontinent, meanwhile, though there has always been an interface between NGOs and Dalits, the former's special interest in the latter has proliferated largely during the third phase of globalisation.

During each of these three periods, the functions of NGOs have been in accordance with the changing needs of their donors or funding sources. In India as elsewhere, the colonial regimes first realised the importance of NGOs as a part of civil society, and therefore as possible agents for effectively communicating with local populations on their behalf. It was exorbitant, if not impossible, to hold large, alien populations in subjugation solely through force. Indeed, it was far more economical to work among them as philanthropists, and the missionary organisations carried out these functions through their humanitarian work for the local communities. With the knowledge gathered through the NGOs, colonial regimes were able to take timely corrective actions to keep the populations' discontent in check.

The world over, it is fairly established that these missionary organisations were complementing colonial rule, as they carried out certain tasks that challenged many traditional relations. In India's caste-divided society, for instance, where the 'untouchable' Shudras and Dalits were forbidden access to education by religious statutes, the missionaries provided modern education, proving to be catalysts in galvanising the 'untouchables' to launch a liberation movement during the late 19th century. Indeed, during the early part of that century, Christian missionaries were responsible for the entire range of educated people from these caste groups. In addition, these missionaries helped to spread 'Western values' among the masses, including ideas of equality.

Those involved in the Dalit movement today acknowledge the role that Christian missionaries played at the beginning of their struggle. Indeed, while NGOs are often denigrated as appendages of a colonial or imperialist system, many Dalits are sceptical of

this point of view. As understood today, the Dalit movement itself can even be seen as the unintended by-product of British colonial rule. The institutional ethos of Western liberalism – opportunities to work in the British Army, wield weapons, get an education, migrate to urban settings and set up small-scale businesses – was at the root of Dalit mobilisation. Consider the urban background of the pioneers of the movement in the late 19th century in Maharashtra: Gopal Baba Walangkar, the military pensioner in Konkan; Kisan Fagoji Bansode, the worker in the Empress Mills in Nagpur; or Shivram Janaba Kamble, the butler in Pune’s military cantonment. Even B R Ambedkar came from a family in which the men had served in the British Army for two generations. The Maharashtrian phenomenon of Dalit leaders rising due to opportunities thrown up by the colonial regime could, in those days, be observed in the incipient Dalit movements that were taking place throughout the country.

Away from agitation

Ambedkar had been a vocal proponent of Dalit civil rights, and had achieved enviable political stature, well before Independence. Although he was part of the first all-party cabinet as well as chairman of the Drafting Committee in the Constituent Assembly post-Independence, he was soon disillusioned by the Congress leadership and left government. All the same, after the promulgation of the Constitution, he advised his followers to shun agitation in favour of the document.

As their leader’s legacy, faith in constitutionalism became of critical importance to India’s Dalits, even though Ambedkar himself later reversed his position on this. Disillusioned with post-Independence politics and in ill-health, Ambedkar increasingly turned to Buddhism, which he embraced just before his death. Although Ambedkar interpreted Buddhism rather radically, the popular perception of the belief system disoriented Dalits, leading them to turn even further away from agitation. Yet if Dalits had continued to believe in agitational politics to achieve their emancipation, it would have been far more difficult for NGOs later to enter into the Dalit movement. Constitutionalism and the popular pacific version of Buddhism impelled Dalits to seek piecemeal solutions to their existential problems, as against the radical social transformation. NGOs, being designed to deal with piecemeal solutions, found a perfect fit in this space.

The fit between NGOs and Ambedkarite Dalits was further helped by a subtle transformation that the community underwent. With the passage of time, Dalits made significant progress in education, with which they acquired government and public-sector jobs, aided by reservation. Slowly, this process resulted in creating a quasi-class layer of upwardly mobile Dalits, who, being government servants, were statutorily barred from participating in agitation. Meanwhile, many of the educated Dalits promoted voluntary associations of various kinds, such as setting up Buddha vihars, public libraries, tuition classes, microcredit schemes and cooperative banks, in addition to taking up cultural activities such as celebrations of Ambedkar and Buddha jayantis. The emergence of ‘welfare societies’ among Dalit employees and the services they provided to their brethren – congregating at places like Deeksha Bhoomi (where Ambedkar converted to

Buddhism, in Nagpur), Chaitya Bhoomi (Ambedkar's Samadhi in Bombay), both landmarks of the Dalit movement – also led to gravitation towards volunteerism. NGOs, ostensibly driven by humanitarianism and benevolence, thus remained just a short distance away.

After Ambedkar, the Dalit movement splintered into numerous factions. Today, these tend to come alive only on the eve of elections, at which point political 'rent' is collected by the various Dalit leaders from the ruling parties. For the rest, there is virtually no political activity – a vacuum that has acted as a virtual invitation to NGOs. Indeed, these two phenomena – of election-time action and movement away from agitational politics (and thus making space for NGOs) – have been mutually reinforcing. After all, the 'rent-seeking' behaviour of Dalit leaders requires that Dalit communities do not indulge in agitation over the genuine issues that impinge upon their lives; if they were to do so, these leaders could lose control over the communities at large, and thus lose their credibility with regard to the political bosses. Yet the problems that Dalits suffer are attributes inherent in the social system, and the surest solution would be radical politics. Such a consciousness can only be sustained in the mode of struggle – which, while providing for immediate needs, also pushes itself to higher stages. In the absence of this, the entire outlook degenerates to finding short-term solutions or reformism (the belief that there is nothing inherently wrong with the societal structure, or that mere tinkering is all that is required). Unfortunately, with the decimation of the idea of radical politics in the Dalit universe, such consciousness among Dalits completely vanished. While the decline of radical Dalit politics cannot be said to be the sole cause for the growth of the Dalit NGO movement, it has certainly paved the way for their influx.

Safe service

Today there are more than 1.5 million NGOs in India of various sizes, working on a wide variety of issues. Such a situation is largely a result of the post-1990 neoliberal era, which brought new structural importance to the NGOs in the country, premised on the ideology of free enterprise for private individuals and a curtailed role for the government. The state, which had long assumed a role as welfare provider, thus began to withdraw from many of its social obligations towards the vulnerable sections of the populace. In turn, some of these obligations were assigned to civil-society organisations. India formally adopted neoliberal policies in July 1991, but they had been informally initiated in the mid-1980s, when the seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-90) legitimated the special status of the volunteer sector. Although this applied to all sectors intended to be vacated by the state (health, education, etc), they were especially meant for Dalits and Adivasis, the identifiable victims of these neoliberal policies.

Many NGOs therefore rushed in to fill what could be called the demand, until they soon occupied every possible space in Dalit life. As per recent research carried out by the Charity Aid Foundation India and the Voluntary Action Network India, in 1999 there were estimated 18,000 NGOs in India registered under the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) act of 1976, to receive foreign money without prior permission. Similarly,

another 4000 were granted temporary permission between 1990 and 1998 to receive foreign money. By the end of 1997, the volume of foreign contribution to the NGO sector had reached nearly USD 568 million (INR 26 billion), a growth rate of 643 percent over the previous decade.

Unsurprisingly, most Dalits in Indian NGOs are active at the field level. Dalit boys and girls appear to be doing social services for their communities, which is what Ambedkar expected educated Dalits to do, and Dalit communities therefore perceive such workers quite favourably – more favourably, certainly, than Dalit politicians, who are often seen as engaged in mere rhetoric. The NGO sector has thus become a significant employer for many Dalits studying for their humanities degree, typically capped with a postgraduate degree in social work. Further, as the prospects of public-sector jobs have decreased since the government's neoliberal reforms of the mid-1980s and later, the promise of NGOs as employers assumed great importance.

Unlike state jobs, those offered by NGOs are typically associated with community service, without the risk of being targeted by the state. This profile fits the need for the educated Dalit youth perfectly, as he typically aspires to do community service while still preserving his distinct status as an educated person among the common masses. He wants to earn money, but without the conditionality of the government job or without the risk of incurring the wrath of the state through possible political confrontation associated with leftist activism. NGO jobs thus promise the educated Dalit youth the respectability of community leadership and even the halo of the radical left – but without the associated risks.

Outright elimination

There are several significant problems with this state of affairs. First and foremost, NGOs are neither meant to nor are they capable of filling the space vacated by the welfare state: They are mere palliatives, not the remedy. Furthermore, if one looks at the sources of funding that have been flowing to the organisations generally, they would be found to be carriers of the agenda of global capital – one that seeks to keep the masses from recognising and acting against the core exploitative processes, as far as possible. By their philanthropic activities, the controlled rhetoric of systemic change, the issue-based focus and solution-focused working style, NGOs are able to create a positive impression among the communities with which they work. Dalit communities today have begun to see NGOs as the solution, and have thus become worryingly depoliticised with regards to the larger systemic problems.

Resource-rich NGOs have thus been able to either overwhelm or co-opt much genuine activism among Dalits. During the course of this process, the upper-caste and -class domination of NGOs has, incongruously, tended to make such organisations increasingly patronising towards Dalits. Yet even without outright anti-Dalit bias, in the absence of any overt anti-caste ideological perspective in their work, the NGOs' civil-society agenda has largely perpetuated the existing hierarchical structures, as their division of society on the basis of 'identities' (gender, ethnicity, area as well as caste) has resulted in the weakening of the Dalit agenda of outright annihilation of caste. Most significant in all of

this, NGOs today continue to project the corporate model as a panacea, thus completely decimating democratic politics – which, in fact, holds the most significant hope of emancipation for Dalits and other oppressed communities. Struggles inevitably erupt when the contradictions in society are exacerbated beyond a certain threshold level. However, if these contradictions can be contained or alleviated, the possibility of the struggle – and, in turn, of the radical change – is eliminated at the root. What NGOs do is deal with the superficial aspects of these contradictions, such that people find temporary relief; in the process, they become distracted from the basic contradiction and the need to resolve it through struggle. In this, the reformist work carried out by NGOs needs to be seen as self-perpetuating: there is no reflection of any superior goal. NGOs do not and, indeed, cannot have revolutionary goals such as the annihilation of caste or the establishment of socialism – their work is purposefully fragmented, based on a single, small section of the society, and essentially self-limiting.

In the context of the Dalit movement, the central goal is clearly the end of caste. NGOs have highlighted the oppression inherent in the caste system, and to what extent untouchability and caste discrimination are still practiced – exposing the issue in multiple international fora, such as the nine World Social Forums. These exposures could indeed lead the international community to exert pressure on the Indian government to take severe measures to eliminate caste, to shame the government into tightening the implementation of its anti-caste legal structure, or even to sensitise the larger society to some extent against its practices. But what is never highlighted in such venues is that caste is structurally integrated within Indian society itself, and hence warrants a radical change in societal structure. This cannot come from the NGOs. The spread of NGOs works subtly at the level of the sub-conscious, and their patronising attitude basically inverts the anti-caste consciousness of Dalits. Dalits begin to think that some good people from the upper castes and classes can emancipate them from their misery, a dynamic that thus keeps alive the traditional caste stratification. The NGOs divide the oppressed people into sections and identities, thereby preventing the germination of class consciousness. They seek to obliterate and obfuscate the class divisions and distinctions within the social groups by advocating the unity of the oppressor and the oppressed on the basis of various identities (gender, caste, ethnic, religion, region, nationality, etc), which in turn does much to erase the zeal in them for their self-emancipation. Dalit emancipation lies in the basic transformation of society, sans caste and class. While NGOs do talk of such transformation, their work is geared towards micro-level reformist tinkering to preserve the status quo – philanthropy, empowerment, development, advocacy. Yet all of this is to be done without disturbing the social structure.

Today, NGOs the world over constitute a central structural component of the neoliberal international system. Neoliberalism pushes states to release into the market many of the sectors that they traditionally operated; for those who cannot comfortably participate in market, NGOs were conceived to provide certain palliative services, and to channel their discontent along constitutional, peaceful methods. Thus, their myriad forms notwithstanding, NGOs function in this set-up as little more than safety valves. In India, the degeneration of the Dalit movement since the 1960s created easy space for the organisations to rush in and, in the process, effectively deflect the movement from its

ostensible core goal of radical transformation of society. In order to resurrect this goal, Dalits will have to 'de-NGOise' their movement. Neoliberalism, while projecting a 'human face', is actually decimating the people of India, particularly Dalits and Adivasis. However, with the increasing heat of various crises of living, the people are slowly waking up and rising against this imperialist machination; the Dalit movement has a definite role in this uprising.

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