

Role of NGOs in Tribal welfare and Rural development

At the outset let me clarify that in today's context it is not correct to generalise NGOs, since there are NGOs and NGOs. It is not correct to assume that all NGOs are do-gooders, who have a magic wand to remove all ills of society. At the same time it is also not correct to generalise that all NGOs are corrupt or mis-managed. In the state I come there are a number of NGOs floating around in the name of people's development; even the most corrupt politicians have registered NGOs. We have to realise that like there are good and bad government officials, and not all bureaucrats are corrupt, so also there are good and bad NGOs.

While making the distinction about the role of NGOs, I will confine myself to non-government organisations and people who have come through the test of fire; organisations which have grown with a genuine commitment and appreciation of social welfare and justice. I speak about those who are aligned to the interests of the marginalised and strive to demonstrate professional and ethical values in their work; those who are driven by a vision and mission and not by funds alone.

Understanding deprivation and poverty

To begin with we must understand the context in which NGOs work - a context of deprivation and poverty of the poor in rural areas. In Orissa, the state I come from, the tribal people form the largest percentage (22%) of the poor and marginalised. Tribal people are also referred to as 'adivasis' meaning 'indigenous' - a term which acknowledges the fact that the tribals were the original inhabitants of the lands. For centuries they lived in harmony with the forests, relying on them for food, shelter, fuel and the practise of their religion. But beginning with the Aryan invasion and continuing through the time of Indian kings and the British Raj, to the present, these people have been systematically marginalised from, and robbed of their own land. Their peaceful way of life and belief in community ownership of land has made them especially vulnerable to acts of aggression. During the British Raj certain prime forests were demarcated as property of the crown. Even so the tribal people enjoyed unrestricted use of most of the forest lands. It is only since independence that they have been threatened with complete loss of land rights and along with that, everything they have ever known.

Today there are no forest lands and by extension there is no aspect of tribal life which does not come under the asphyxiating jurisdiction of the government. It is a bitter irony that the tribals living in forests maintained by their ancestors do not have even the right to collect the smallest forest product without permission of the government, or collect stones to build their house. Tribals cannot lay claim to even the trees that grow in their backyard. Tribals are considered 'encroachers' and treated as labourers and not as shareholders of the land. It would infact be in the best interests of the government, the tribal people and the environmental health of forests, to work out a profit sharing and land maintenance agreement for all timber and other forest products. Tribal people who have lived on the land for centuries have a higher stake in protecting and maintaining forests than business and administrative interest groups who currently control it.

State and the deprived

The situation of these communities is made more difficult by the prevailing political situation. The State, which is bound by the Constitution to provide these communities with better

alternatives, social, educational and economic, has not been able to do so. This is not surprising, as in the first fifty years of independence, these communities have had hardly any meaningful representation in the policy-making processes. There have been a number of laws, statutes, committees and corporations created for the sole purpose of helping these communities access better alternatives. Sadly, few of them have been effective and any positive impact has been confined to small pockets.

In the context of the deprived communities, the State and its manifestations are the most important agency. The Indian constitution provides for reservation for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in almost all arenas. Thus they have Parliament and State Assembly seats reserved for them; they enjoy special status in getting higher education; in accessing state and quasi-state employment; and these laws of reservation have been followed true to the word to some extent.

However, on the whole, the role played by governments at various levels - national, state, district and local - have in some or many ways failed at addressing the key issues. These issues have been and remain in the nature of underlying social relations, and the impact of these social factors in determining the kind of political and economic processes. Education and awareness generation, which could have helped in addressing these issues in a more effective manner have not been accorded any importance in the governments' agenda. Though reservations in higher education is a reality, there are not many professionals from tribal communities. It has remained a dream due to absence of any concerted effort in ensuring elementary education.

Governments at the local level, in principle are the best medium for these communities to assert and gain their rights. In spite of legislative efforts in making local self-governments a medium of social change, the micro level social reality has not allowed the *dalits* or the *adivasis* to play any significant role in local self-governance. With the legislature, executive and judiciary at all levels remaining in the control of the dominant sections, there is very little the marginalised communities could or can do in asserting their rights.

This is not to say that there has been an absolute absence of these communities from the policy making process. What is real is the lack of quality of leadership that has come up from among them. There have been a few leaders of national standing, who were/are *adivasis* or *dalits*. However, they were too much a part of the corrupted political process, to be of any positive impact to the communities.

Market forces

The role of market forces and private enterprise in this context is also worth a discussion. Given the rigid structures that govern entry and exit into the commercial economic processes, neither of the resource poor communities could ever be a part of the large profits created. At best they have been suppliers of very cheap labour to the market. Thus for the market, these communities exist at the periphery or even beyond.

On the other hand, the expansion of commercial interests in search of cheaper and abundant raw materials have impinged upon the *adivasi* communities in more than one negative manner. The large tracts of forests have been an attractive source of raw materials for many industrial units. In collusion with the State, these units have been able to access these resources without any control. With the State assuming legal and de-facto ownership over all forest resources, the forest dwellers had little choice, but to succumb and move out. Neither the State, nor the

commercial forces were interested in rehabilitating or providing better alternatives to the displaced.

For example, in Orissa, the state government so far had monopoly over the trade in forest produce - both timber and non-timber. The most significant outcome of this monopoly was that, industries dependent on these products have been able to access these produce for a song. Thus, bamboo is sold by the government to paper factories at Re. 1 a ton. The same government sells bamboo to traditional bamboo workers (mostly *adivasis*, sometimes *dalits*) at Rs.20 or Rs.25 per bamboo pole. While a resolution de-licensing over 57 minor forest products was passed last year, clear process for its implementation are not yet in place. The extent of the State-Market collusion can be understood from the fact that the government clears large tracts of thick and rich forests to raise ecologically suicidal eucalyptus plantations - eucalyptus wood is an important raw material for the paper industry.

One also needs to understand the micro level commercial interests who play an important role in the lives of these communities. The moneylender/trader is the most significant local level commercial factor. They have, over a few generations, built large fortunes by exploiting the poor - by usurping their land and other assets, by bonding their labour over a few rupees or food grain lent in times of distress, by making the poor men more dependent on borrowings by selling them alcohol and through a number of such devious methods. The relationship between the poor communities and the influential moneylender is an extremely exploitative manifestation of the patron-client relationship that existed in medieval feudal societies.

Non-government organisations

Traditionally, the non-government sector has played a subdued role in the context of deprivation and poverty of *adivasis* and *dalits*. NGOs have kept away from addressing larger social and political factors that underscore the forces of deprivation. They have been active in areas where the market would not and the state failed to reach - especially in relief and welfare functions.

This does not mean that their role has remained static over years. However, NGOs' greatest limitation has been in confining their vision to gap-filling roles - complementing, even substituting roles which ideally should have been the state's. Thus, in a way, the locus standi of NGOs in this context arises out of the state's failure to fulfil its responsibilities.

Over years, NGOs have moved away from being mere delivery agents of various services to undertaking training, capacity building and facilitating roles. Empowering communities became the key issue in their work during the last decade or so. This empowerment is being manifested in processes that involve target communities in more roles than that of a beneficiary; in institutional mechanisms at the lowest level to consolidate and expand on the results of combined action. Tracking the trajectory of the growth of NGOs, it is only over the past two decades that they have been gaining visibility and recognition in development processes. Over this period they have been playing various roles, a few of which I will dwell upon.

The role in improving the quality of life rural communities

NGOs play a vital role in demonstrating interventions towards improving the quality of life of rural communities. Through conscientisation, awareness generation and capacity development processes, they attempt to break the cycle of deprivation and poverty to enable rural poor to assert their rights and lead a dignified quality of life. While quality of life is an esoteric

concept, certain elements of it can be captured by indicators of qualitative and quantitative improvement in employment opportunities and income levels; access to schooling and higher education; access to health services and hygienic living conditions - good housing, piped water supply; electricity and better communication facilities, etc.

With the deteriorating quality of life in villages, out migration is a stark reality. People migrate in hordes, drawn by the bright lights of the cities to live an inhuman existence in slums. Cities are choking and there are frequent breakdowns of essential services. It is evident that if cities are to survive today there have to be concerted efforts at improving the quality of life in villages.

Today the poor in rural areas have to make a quantum leap to be considered at par with citizens of urban areas. An area where there is a crying need to improve living conditions in villages is disaster proof housing. Gram Vikas' experience in housing for the rural poor over the past decade is that even the poor will pay to build good houses. We facilitate poor people to access loans from banks and technical support to build their houses. A 45 sq.m house costing Rs.45,000 using cost effective technologies. We have covered over 3000 families under housing of which over 60% are adivasis. For them this is a more cost effective than waiting for government to sanction a housing subsidy of which there are percentages deducted at all levels; the contractor cheats them with poor quality construction; and above all till they get the government sanction they continue to incur regular costs of repair and maintenance of their traditional houses, which are vulnerable to fires, storms and other disasters.

Simultaneously with the housing we help each family to identify a viable livelihood option, which is based on their skills and local resources. The enhanced pride and dignity that comes as a direct fallout propels them out of the orbit of poverty, taking them to face greater challenges. This overarching view, with sustained handholding is the greatest strength of NGOs.

The role in development of replicable and sustainable models

There are many different ways to address issues of deprivation and poverty. At one extreme, and what is seen more often through both government and many NGO interventions, is the grant based approach, which exemplifies the "*mai-baap*" approach (sic. paternalistic), in which the entire onus is on giving, often only to a select few, since funds are limited. Dependence is a core value instilled here and which ensures that the entire effort collapses once the intervention stops. The challenge for NGOs, and an area where there are many examples to be emulated, is to innovate and develop models, which are replicable and sustainable. The interventions must be time bound with clear phases for transfer of responsibilities to the communities and withdrawal of the NGOs.

Gram Vikas has had encouraging experiences in the Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP) which begins as an intervention in water and sanitation but brings into its ambit other aspects of village development as well. A key aspect has been demystification of the associated technologies, whether it be in establishment of water supply systems, construction of toilets, etc, through continuous training of educated youth (matriculates) as "barefoot engineers". RHEP is a community-centered initiative in which all adult men and women take part. Each family in a village, without exception, makes a contribution of Rs.1,000 on an average to raise a corpus fund. With this as the expression of interest, Gram Vikas provides technical and financial support to each family to build toilet-bathing room units and a water supply system which takes

water to each house, toilet and bathroom and supplies water for 24 hours - a luxury which even many towns in India still do not have.

Each unit costs around Rs.7,000 of which Gram Vikas subsidises Rs.3,000, the rest is borne by the people through contributions of labour and local raw materials. For the water supply system including identification of protected water source, construction of water tank, laying of pipelines people contribute over 30% of the costs. The corpus collected at the start of the programme is kept in a term deposit. The interest from this goes towards supporting new families build their toilets and bathing rooms - they in turn must add to the corpus as well. The village pond freed of household use is now used for pisciculture and pond embankment cultivation. Also the village wasteland is covered under plantations. The pisciculture and forestry generates adequate funds for maintaining the infrastructure established. Often there are surpluses which go into the village development fund. For regular maintenance, a few village youth are trained in operation of the pump, minor repairs. The village pays for their services and the fuel or electricity bills. All activities are supervised by village committees elected by the people. The programme has been implemented in 67 villages covering 5,000 families. And we see that even without constant supervision by us the systems work, people use and maintain them.

The direct fallout of the programme has been reduction in incidence of water-borne ailments which are the greatest factor for ill-health in rural areas. Change in women's status as their productive energies are diverted from the chores of fetching water, etc; their confidence grows as they are encouraged to participate in village level decision making. The spin off also has been in using community cohesion to access development funds from the government, revitalising education and health systems in the village, strengthening livelihood options, and in many more areas.

Contrast this with the fully subsidised government sponsored programme in water and sanitation. A few houses are selected, given a toilet pan, three concrete rings, and expected to build their own toilets. One can well imagine what the fate will be. There is no hand-holding for assessing the technical feasibility, or to support construction or ways to ensure that the water reaches the toilet and that it is used. The very fact that the programme covers only a few houses does not address the root of the sanitation issue, for unless there is participation of all families in a habitation, the intervention will fail. In the case of numerous tubewells installed by the government for protected water supply, the greatest drawback is the transfer of capacities as the villager have to wait for the PWD technician each time there is a breakdown.

The role in promotion of appropriate technologies

I believe that science and technology for the poor in no way means poor technology or even poor science - it has to be the best and the most apt technology. The liberal use of appropriate technology in development parlance has reduced it in many cases to outdated and outmoded technology, which is often not useful. What is needed is apt and appropriate technology, truly being, that, which is most suited for the situation that the poor are in, and not that which costs less. If it is low cost, that is an additional advantage, but that should not be the precondition.

In mainstream understanding, advancements in science and technology directly correlate to wealth creation for the rich. This has been particularly exemplified with the growth in the field of Information technology. But even small innovations in this can result in good for all. In my remembrance if a single technology has benefited the public, it has been the increased

accessibility of telephones through the PCO/STD booths, which today dot both rural and urban landscapes. With no extra investment by the government in setting up huge exchanges, by generating large-scale employment for the booth operators, additional revenues for the government and greater flexibility and reach for the common man, especially the poor who do not have the luxury of getting their own telephone connection.

In the world of the people I work with, the rural poor in Orissa, Science and Technology directly relates to the question of survival on a human plane, a dignified quality of life. A few simple interventions go a long way in lifting these people from the morass of subhuman existence to a life of dignity and quality.

On the other hand the overpowering mainstream has systematically subdued through a process of denial, traditional knowledge systems, skills and enterprises. The current system of awarding contracts on the basis of estimates and quotations does not recognize traditional skills and knowledge. The PWD will not allow them to construct a diversion weir, even with proof that they have the knowledge. Recently during our work in severely drought prone areas of Gajapati, we thought of bringing water from across the hill to irrigate atleast 500 acres of land. While engineers of the land and water department said it was not possible, a group of Saura adivasis came forward and said that they could do it. They asked us for Rs.4 lakhs and a time period of four months. The local villagers vouched that they were traditional engineers and could the job. We took the risk and today the area has water. They need an additional Rs.20 lakhs now for developing the structures further, but no government will give it to them. For their survival these Saura engineers said that they are forced to work as unskilled labourers on jobs undertaken by contractors. These people need greater encouragement, patronage and capacity building to compete in today's world of contracts.

I have also found among adivasis some of the best construction technicians - they have an innate sense of aesthetics and symmetry and a grasp of building technology. In such a context equipping them with skills such as masonry, carpentry and the like can provide them viable alternatives that fit into the existing job context. There also have to be systematic interventions to develop the enterprise approach in the value that people attach to land, water, animal and other natural resources. These efforts are often curtailed by lopsided policies, which infringe on people's traditional rights to the resources.

The role in actualising local self governance

The 73rd constitutional amendment speaks of giving real powers to the people to enable them to determine development processes. I believe that without significant improvements in the lives of the poor and marginalised people, all talk of self-governance is mere wishful thinking. The people must have dignity and pride in themselves, before they begin to assert their rights, and start believing that they can take control of their destinies. Through motivation and hand-holding NGOs enable poor people to mount enough pressure on the government to get what is rightfully theirs. One major weakness of government interventions is their selective approach, which splinters villages, which is essentially an integrated construct. In spite of the caste, political and other divisions, the greatest strength of our villages is in being a community and not just a mass of individuals.

In the early 80's we had great success in freeing the lands of tribal people from non-tribal land sharks, who came in the garb of traders, money lenders, and liquor merchants. The entire

process took the form of a movement with *adivasis* in over 60 villages where we worked conducted people's courts and put into place social boycotts to oust the 'encroachers'.

However after this initial success they have really not been able to go beyond. Lack of education and skills to compete in the mainstream, have kept them at the level of physical labourers. The schools exist but the teachers do not attend - the people have no control over the functioning of the schools. If we look at the investment in education in these areas, the per capita investment per year per matriculate child is perhaps higher than what a Swiss finishing school costs. A similar economics is there in the health services. The pitfalls of a centrally controlled system are clear, but yet the government and bureaucracy have not got the courage to give the real powers to the people. Whatever the fears, the poor people cannot do worse than what the present system does.

The role of NGOs as conscience keepers through advocacy

The plight of poor communities, especially *adivasis*, is accentuated because they are voiceless. They do not have representation either in political processes or in administration for their concerns to be either heard or addressed. Human rights and environmental violations in the development of mines, harnessing of water bodies, setting up of industries, etc are commonplace not just in India, but all over the world. People are displaced without a care and in the name of compensation and rehabilitation uprooted from places they have inhabited for centuries. By mobilising people and building pressure groups, the government is forced to acknowledge the rights of the people and ensure social justice, a role which is in fact central to its being.

I am convinced that the poor can and will pay for products and services that they believe will improve their quality of life. At the same time we cannot be blind to the double standards being applied by the government and multilateral agencies, when it comes to treating needs of urban and rural areas. A salary earning city dweller can earn a tax rebate if he/she borrows to construct a house. The expenditure per capita in municipal Delhi is much higher than the income per capita. In any town people only have to build their own toilets. Pipelines for water delivery, waste disposal mechanisms are all created and maintained by the government. Do city dwellers pay for the construction of roads and bridges, building schools, laying of telephone lines and setting up exchanges, power generation systems? Governments subsidise, directly or indirectly, all these services and facilities in urban areas, while in the rural poor must invest/participate in developing their own infrastructure. Subsidies is a bad word when it comes to the poor. We are certain that communities need to pay for and participate in such initiatives, so that necessary ownership and stakes are created within the communities. The question is whether or not there is a social cost in ensuring that the rural poor have access to these. We believe that the governments need to pay for its social obligations, in ensuring adequate efforts in making science technology and initiatives in rural enterprise available to the poor in rural areas. And if the government does not have the resources to pay, bilateral donors and financial institutions can contribute towards these.

The root of the problem is not so much in the concept but in the delivery mechanism. Take the instance of watersheds, the in-thing in development work with the government these days. While in principle the approach is ideal to harness the natural and physical capital of the rural areas, the gaps are in the design and implementation processes. By developing land it is the

landed who will benefit more. Most watershed programmes today have people's contribution as a pre-requisite. In actual terms, the danger is that the big landlords will be back in business, forcing the landless, marginal and small farmers to do free labour on their behalf in return of small favours. The land will belong to the big farmers, their incomes will increase but what is the poor, what of equitable land distribution. In the net analysis we have to ensure that the poor don't become more marginalised and poorer than they already are. Is the government conscious of the factors of social equity in implementation of such programmes?

You as administrators will one day be presiding over the destinies in some very backward areas. We believe that the government needs to be conscious of their social obligations, in ensuring adequate efforts in making essential products and services available to the poor in rural areas, and that development does not happen at the cost of social equity. We need a government that does not consider NGOs to be hand maidens, nor as adversaries. Where the interests of the poor is in question, the government and NGOs can certainly come together and dialogue to ensure that social justice and equity are upheld. We need an administration that is vigilant and conscientious, and that which works with a bias for the poor.