

**DEVELOPMENT POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHARACTER OF NGOS:
A STUDY OF BUNDELKHAND REGION OF NORTHERN INDIA**

PAPER PRESENTED IN THE DEVELOPMENT STUDIES ASSOCIATION ANNUAL CONFERENCE, OXFORD 2016

Rough Draft, not for citation

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to understand how development politics of NGOs in an undeveloped region can be a function of their place in the social power hierarchy. For this purpose, the northern Indian region of Bundelkhand is being analyzed. Bundelkhand is an economically underdeveloped and draught-prone region located in the north of the India. The region also suffers from deep-rooted social hierarchies of caste. Unlike the other underdeveloped areas of India where questions of economic development, political representation, and concerns of social equality have been the primary agenda of NGOs development politics, in Bundelkhand, the NGOs have confined their development politics largely to the questions of economic distribution of state resources while restraining from the concerns of the social inequalities. The study attempts to argue that a major reason of this is the social character of the leadership of various NGOs. People belonging to the social and economically dominant castes like Brahmins and Other Backward Castes have been 'running' most of the NGOs of the region. Therefore, the development agenda of these NGOs is also oriented towards raising issues which are largely the concerns of the dominant and powerful sections than of the poor and backward groups. Consequently, despite having a large number of NGOs and increasing state expenditure on welfare, the region continues to suffer from chronic poverty, migration, poor human development and increasing farmers' suicides.

Introduction

A major development in Indian politics in the last two decades has been a 'sudden' growth of voluntary sector or non-governmental organizations.¹ These organizations have played a vital role in bringing major policy changes in India's development politics. With the gradual expansion of the idea of democratic governance and increasing emphasis of various international agencies like the United Nations Human Development Program, the World Bank, etc., these organizations have acquired more space in the policy-making process and implementation. Despite these participatory efforts, India's development trajectory continues to be contradictions and ironies. Quite like its electoral process which has provided a free and fair platform for the emergence of the representative democracy but at the same time also promoted role of money and muscle power in the political process, India's civil society is also a realm of inherent contradictions. The emergence of an active voluntary sector started taking place immediately after independence but mushrooming of the voluntary sector was witnessed in the aftermath of the implementation of economic reforms in 1991 (Sheth and Sethi 1991, Sen 1999). This was the time when not only India's political economy was undergoing significant change, but it was also accompanied by a different kind of global developmental discourse. With the implementation of new economic policies and opening up Indian economy also facilitated a smooth passage for developmental aid through various global agencies like United National Developmental Programme, World Bank, Action Aid, Oxfam India, IDRC, SIDA and so on. With the changing character of India's welfare state, the focus shifted from an ideology oriented state support system to a market-friendly welfare policy paradigm. The Indian state also adopted the World Bank promoted and globally accepted the model of voluntary sector partnership in the service delivery. However, in this new paradigm the voluntary sector took over as the representative of the public. Though it did play a very crucial role in the new development discourse it has failed to mark any significant departure from the social power hierarchies of India as it continues to be dominated by the traditionally dominant social sections.

¹ This has also been described as the the emergence of a very strong 'civil society' as well as a vibrant political society (Chhatterjee 2011). However, civil society indicates a very vast category of actors. To be more specific, this paper focuses only on the Non- governmental organizations (NGO) and not other players.

Research questions

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Are NGOs a reflection of an emergence of a new, vibrant and democratic polity in the Indian countryside or are they representative of the traditional form of politics which can be characterized by feudal practices, caste related social hierarchies, and existing rural rigid practices?
2. How the character of an NGO has an impact upon the kind of development agenda it pursues?
3. What are the larger features of civil society in India can be inferred from the character of NGOs?

Methodology

This paper is based upon extensive field work of the author in the Bundelkhand region of the Central India. Bundelkhand is a socially and economically backward region. There are a large number of NGOs operating in the region for the welfare of the weaker sections of the society. During author's work on agrarian question and the problems of underdevelopment, the author got an opportunity to work with the civil society in Bundelkhand in general and NGOs in particular. Findings of this study are based upon the field based work from 2010-15. To verify the findings of this study a random click of the existing website of the government of India which displays details of the NGOs was checked.

Hypothesis or argument

NGOs in Bundelkhand are largely dominated by the historically dominating social, and economic sections. A large number of the NGOs continue to suffer from these historical linkages. Consequently, their agenda or activism is also primarily guided by such linkages.

Structure

This paper has three sections. The first section looks at the changing nature of India's development politics and increasing the role of the voluntary sector in this process in the past few decades. The second section tries to identify some key features of NGOs system in India. It mostly focuses on UP as a case. For this purpose, field-based analysis from the Bundelkhand region of UP is cited. From the field work the paper attempts to explain various features of NGOs in detail. The third section attempts to explain the nature of development agenda which most of these NGOs try to follow. This section also tries to show a linkage between NGOs development agenda and their socio-economic character.

I

Role of NGOs in India's development politics

NGOs as civil society representatives in backward regions of India especially in the rural areas or the semi-urban areas. In the past two and half decades, NGOs have played a crucial role in the making, and implementation of various schemes and policies meant for the rural areas or the backward social sections. There were larger structural, procedural and institutional changes which fostered role of this sector in the development policy.

There has been increasing emphasis on rural development in the aftermath of economic reforms. In this process two noteworthy changes took place. Firstly, the state on its own couldn't achieve any substantial progress in this direction almost for four decades. Secondly, bureaucratic apathy, insensitivity and corruption were major hindrances towards achieving faster rural modernization in few states like UP, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Bihar. As a result, voluntary sector organizations or NGOs were given more space in the implementation of various policies at the grassroots.

With the 74th constitutional amendment in 1993, the institutions of Panchayati Raj were given a constitutional status with clear cut guidelines for their structure, functions and financial situation. However, despite this political change another social reality of India was that a significant section of its population was still illiterate. In such case, how the panchayats will handle various developmental works or formulate different demands of the rural areas was a big challenge.

Hence, a parallel support structure was needed which can facilitate policy making and implementation in the countryside. Besides, it was also expected that they would also generate awareness amongst the social and economically sections.

This changing political set up resulted in a greater role of NGOs in India's developmental politics. This is not to say that before this they didn't have any part in the development process. What changed after 1991 was the institutionalization of their role in such processes. In addition to this, with the opening up of Indian economy India, also witnessed a gradual growth in the foreign aid for various developmental activities along with other funds coming from the global financial institutions like the World Bank or Asian Development Bank.

The Planning Commission, a body responsible for drafting and monitoring of five-year plans also started accommodating representatives of these organizations in its activities. For the first time, the Prime Minister's Office came up with the idea of National Developmental Council. The primary objective of this council was to involve representatives of the civil society organizations in the development policy formulation and implementation.

In other words, NGOs emerged as a parallel pillar of development paradigm in India along with other institutions of policy formulation, monitoring, and implementation (Sheth and Sethi 1991). Many civil society organizations did play a significant role in analyzing causes of policy failures in various fields like education, public health, employment generation, etc. NGOs also took up independent tasks of making people aware of such policies and forcing the local bureaucracy to implement such policies properly. By doing so, they also provided an institutionalized and organized form of leadership to socially and economically backward sections of rural India.

This also helped the local bureaucracy in smooth implementation of various policies without having any additional burden of everyday challenges of implementation ranging from identification of the targeted group to distributing multiple benefits and monitoring how far it has reached to the needy families. In this entire process, NGOs became very efficient partners for the bureaucracy. Another significant development was the increasing demand for the role of

community development. In the name of community development various socially backward sections were identified and particular attention was given to their requirements.

In this entire process, NGOs were being governed by the process which was laid out in the early phase of independence. This process was more legal and less oriented towards the internal matters of these organizations. Consequently, issues of transparency, accountability or their participatory nature were not given any attention except some legal paper based provisions. Secondly, there were not effective measures to monitor the activities of such organizations. For instance, what if some organizations are involved in disturbing the communal harmony of a particular region or if they are spreading hatred for few groups. The caste system is another deeply entrenched social practice which has a profound impact on the functioning of the NGOs.

II

Features of NGOs in Bundelkhand

About Bundelkhand

Bundelkhand is a region located in the Central India. As the states of Central India are considered backward as compared to the states in Southern part or the western or northern part, Bundelkhand being a part of two central Indian states: Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh is also not an exception. Apart from the policy as well as institutional challenges of underdevelopment, the region also suffers from many natural adversities like drought, floods, hilly terrain, ravines, etc. These physical difficulties make agriculture a tough economic activity. It also leads to problems of livelihood in the region. Consequently, Bundelkhand continues to suffer from varieties of development challenges including poverty, malnutrition, rural inequalities, crime and so on. Though the government reports show a significant decline in the poverty rates in the region, our field analysis shows a contrary situation.

Quite like other backward regions of India where there has been a significant expansion of the civil society Bundelkhand has also witnessed this phenomenon. The civil society in such areas loosely consists of the local media and non-governmental organizations. These two actors of the civil society play a very crucial role in defining the development agenda including challenges of development, the affected sections, public policy implementation, etc. In addition to this,

these two sectors are also a medium of communication between the other sections like academia, national and international media, bureaucracy, political leadership, etc. In other words, these two actors mostly dominate the development process in the backward regions in general and Bundelkhand region in particular.

Table 1

Scheduled Castes and Tribes in Bundelkhand Source: Census of India 2011					
	Total Population	SC	Percent	ST	Percent
Banda	1799410	387855	21.55	163	0.01
Chhatarpur	1762375	405313	23.00	73597	4.18
Datia	786754	200270	25.46	15061	1.91
Damoh	1264219	246337	19.49	166295	13.15
Tikamgarh	1445166	361604	25.02	67857	4.70
Jalaun	1689974	468178	27.70	832	0.05
Jhansi	1998603	562505	28.14	3873	0.19
Sagar	2378458	501630	21.09	221936	9.33
Panna	1016520	207990	20.46	170879	16.81
Lalitpur	1221592	240519	19.69	71610	5.86
Mahoba	875958	220898	25.22	647	0.07
Hamirpur	1104285	241198	21.84	474	0.04
Chitrakoot	991730	266655	26.89	366	0.04
Total	18335044	4310952	23.51	793590	4.33

Social-economic character of Bundelkhand

The social character of Bundelkhand region is quite complex. The region has a significant population of the Scheduled Castes (around 25 %, table 1). Similarly, in few districts, the Scheduled Tribes groups are in large numbers (e.g. Panna, Damoh, Lalitpur). Largely Bundelkhand has a majority of Hindu population, but there are other minority groups as well. However, they are based in different districts of the region. Muslims are in very few numbers in the region.

Due to lack of education facilities the region has a very high percentage of the illiterate population. The region also suffers from the lack of drinking water, sanitation and health facilities (table 2). Though the government of Uttar Pradesh data shows significant development in the region in terms of reduction in poverty, and increase in food grains production, education and health facilities and irrigation facilities. However, ground reality provides a contrary picture. Many other reports also highlight the same.

Traditionally resources like land are mainly controlled by the Brahmins and Bundella Rajputs.² Since traditionally Brahmins are also the educated sections they also control most of the government jobs. Consequently, Brahmins are dominant sections in economic respects in the Bundelkhand region. This also provides them a natural advantage over the other social sections concerning access to various government welfare programs. Besides, their control over the land makes them an active actor in the agrarian politics in the region. Bundela Rajputs and few backward castes like Kushwahas and Patels. Largely the Scheduled Castes are landless sections, yet they are involved in cultivating the land as the agricultural laborers and also as household workers.

Amidst this caste hierarchy ridden social setup, the region of Bundelkhand is also a highly patriarchal society making women as a highly vulnerable social group. Women also do not own land since the traditional Hindu family system declares men as the owners of the property including land. The literacy rate is further low level amongst the women of the region. Hence they are dependent upon the household works for their livelihood. The Scheduled castes and tribal women suffer from double marginalization: one as scheduled castes and tribes and other as women.

² Brahmins are the intellectual class in the four-tier social hierarchy system called caste in the Indian society. Rajputs are the warrior class. One section of this hierarchy belongs to the business class. Remaining social groups are categorized as Shudra or also known as untouchables.

Table 2: Human Development in Bundelkhand
(Source: UP and MP Human Development Reports)

District	Literacy rate 2001	Household with safe drinking water 2001	Household with electricity 2001
Chhatarpur	53.3	38.1	46.6
Datia	71.8	68.1	67.4
Panna	61.4	49.2	34.6
Sagar	67.7	57.6	69.2
Tikamgarh	55.7	35.1	49.3
Chitrakoot	65.04	96.15	49.54
Banda	54.38	98.97	64.22
Jalaun	64.52	97.75	65.95
Hamirpur	57.38	98.27	66.21
Lalitpur	49.46	95.98	50.5
Jhansi	65.47	98.95	67.8
Mahoba	53.28	95.72	40.85

Other dominant castes are Kushwaha, Patel and few other backward

castes which also control land resources. But their nature of the socio-political intervention is restricted to accumulating economic wealth and political power through aligning with various leaders of political parties or contesting elections. Rajputs and Brahmins, on the other hand, have been quite active a social group through running various civil society organizations including NGOs.

NGOs In Bundelkhand

A large number of NGOs are present in the two states. At the all India level, there were 71908 registered NGOs out of which 11518 NGOs are registered in UP and 3366 NGOs are registered in MP. A significant number of such NGOs are based in the Bundelkhand region and have been working on various issues of underdevelopment and policy related issues. The majority of NGOs work in the field of poverty eradication, the right to food campaign and issues of poverty

and livelihood. In the past few years, these groups have also started working on the issues of farmers suicides and agrarian crisis in the region.³

An analysis of development agenda of various NGOs show that a significant number of issues are being taken up by them ranging from agriculture, minority affairs, right to food, right to education, women empowerment etc. however, there are only few NGOs which focus on any particular agenda. Rather most of the groups deal with multiple ranges of issues to get funding smoothly. With changing nature of development politics and the character of state or national electoral agenda, the development strategy of such groups also witnesses a change.

NGOs do play a crucial role in the policy implementation at the grassroots. NGOs have been involved in spreading awareness about various development schemes which are implemented by the central as well as the state government. For this purpose, these groups play the role of an intermediary between the local administration and the rural population. They help the local administration in identifying the target groups, individuals or the families. Though this may not always result into distributing the benefit to the right person since patronage politics is a strong phenomenon in these states, especially in UP, but still it helps in wider dissemination of information and developmental benefits.

Which are the groups receive assistance from the NGOs and what kind of agenda is mostly being highlighted by these groups, is also related to the internal social character of an NGO. Social feature of an NGO can largely be measured by the person who is the main administrator of the organization. Usually, an NGO is established and run by an individual or sometimes by a family. NGOs in India are mostly individual initiatives and not collective efforts. Therefore the character of leadership can also be understood by identifying the social background of the primary administrator.

³ The information related to NGOs numbers, agenda and leadership, are taken from the government of India website http://ngo.india.gov.in/ngo_stateschemes_ngo.php. The number may not be correct exactly as there are voluntary organization which doesn't register themselves but such instances are not much.

Most of the NGOs are being run or registered in the name of an upper caste male. A random check of the first 50 entries of the NGOs lists most of the names were either upper castes or intermediary castes. Besides, most of the NGOs are registered at the level of district headquarter and very few groups are working in the villages. We found that almost all the NGOs were being run by the people from Hindu religion and within this the upper castes. Bundelkhand is a Hindu dominated region where Brahmins, and Rajputs are dominating castes. Quite like other parts of northern India largely these two caste groups control the land resources and also traditionally wealthy classes. These sections are also more educated than the other caste groups, and therefore they have a large number of people in the organized sector.

There are very few NGOs which are bring run by the females. Besides, most of the NGOs are also led by the Hindus and that too by the upper castes. There are very few which are being led by a Dalit.⁴ The same was found during author's field work on agrarian question in Bundelkhand.

III

Nature of NGOs development agenda in Bundelkhand

Since Brahmins are largely the affluent social section in the Bundelkhand region with a strong political network, most of the NGOs are also being run by them. Their educational background, as well as political and academic networks, facilitate their presence in this field starting from the registration of the organization to fund collection and interaction with the local bureaucracy and media. Other castes which are involved in the NGO sectors, are Yadavs, Rajputs, and Patels. During my field work, the researcher didn't find even a single NGO which was being run by a person from the Scheduled Caste or Tribe. There may be some groups present but their number is quite negligible. In the case of poverty eradication and education related development programs, these sections have not stake in this process since they are already better off in the field of education. However, the only developmental area where these sections have a stake and there exists a clash of interests between them and of the landless laborers, or the

⁴ In the Indian caste system, the Sir or family name is an indicator of caste belonging. Hence looking at the full names of the person in whose name a group is registered one can easily identify the caste of the NGO leader.

scheduled castes and tribes are the question of agrarian reforms and control over natural resources.

Though theoretically most of the NGOs declare empowerment of marginalized sections as their priority but in practice they try to strike a balance between the interests of the dominant community and the weaker sections. In most of the cases, this goes in favor of the former due to their control over land and local bureaucracy and their capacity to mount community pressure on the person who runs an NGO with such an agenda.

This process of agenda setting is full of complexities. Most of the NGOs have two sets of agenda items: first which is used for the fund generation from the government of India and the local administration and second are those which are meant for fund generation from the international donor agencies. In the case of the former, usually, those issues which can provide political mobilization to the NGOs are selected. In the case of agrarian question, this is mainly visible from the working of most of the NGOs. Largely NGOs have rural development, poverty eradication, education, migration and right to work programs on their list of agenda items. Within the category of rural development concerns of agrarian groups and agriculture-related plans are given priority over other issues.

In the past few years, an attempt is being made by the NGOs to support the demands of more and more agricultural supports for the farmers. The increasing subsidy, regular supply of water, higher Minimum Support Price are few such demands. In addition to this, a major demand is of better credit facilities on lower interest rates and waiving off the existing loans. The state governments are usually not very sensitive to such needs of farmers. The NGOs try to help such farmers by drawing media's attention to various problems which are being faced by farmers in the region. While doing so, they mostly focus on the question of medium farmers. The quite of landless laborers or marginal farmers don't get much attention in this discourse. Even amongst the marginal farmer's concern of upper castes are raised. NGO also make attempts to ensure maximum benefit of the government plans for agricultural modernization to these already established farmers.

Hence, most of the NGOs don't focus on the question of land reforms, industrialization, irrigation facilities or any structural changes in the economy of the region. In addition to this, the NGOs don't have any agenda of social reforms related to the weaker community including SC, ST, and women. This has resulted in increasing exclusion of these groups from the welfare schemes and policies. Bundelkhand's marginalized communities continue to have a serious problem of livelihood and survival.

Sometimes the NGO leader is also involved in harassment of the socially weaker sections. In such a case a very popular NGO's manager in the Banda district was accused by her assistant for sexual harassment. This person was not arrested for very long due to his strong political connections. However, due to increasing pressure from other organizations, the police filed an FIR but didn't arrest him. He is still absconding.⁵

Similarly, many other such NGOs have been alleged for their support to the dominant social sections and their involvement in misappropriation of money given by the international funding agencies. One major reason behind Bundelkhand's continues underdevelopment is this character of the civil society especially of the NGOs in the region.

There are a variety of reasons behind the success of such NGOs despite these problems. One major reason behind this is their access to the financial support systems based in the capital cities of Lucknow and Bhopal where a similar kind of power structure operates. Since the politics of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh is largely governed by the caste and religious identities, being a part of such community network works for the NGOs. The strong caste and community networks also work for these groups. Another reason is their nexus with the local politician as well as bureaucracy.

Conclusions

In this paper, an attempt was made to show that the development politics of NGOs in India also suffers from the lineages of caste, class, and religion. This can also be seen within the larger context of the character of civil society in India. Since most of the NGOs are largely run by the socially, economically and politically affluent sections, their development agenda tend to ignore

⁵<http://www.bhaskar.com/news/UP-JHA-banda-gang-rape-case-mla-demands-cbi-investigation-to-chief-minister-5283101-PHO.html>

the questions which are crucial for the extremely vulnerable and weaker sections of the society. Their development program works for the marginalized so long as it doesn't clash with their community interests. In the case of such a conflict, the NGOs prefers to take up the development agenda of the wealthy and powerful in the name of development and empowerment of the weak.

Policy recommendation

In their internal functioning, the structure and leadership of the NGOs need to be more inclusive and participatory.

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