
Women on the margins and the role of NGOs in India

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Abstract: This article examines the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in India in the context of women on the margins by responding to questions such as what NGOs can/cannot do, what they should/should not do and what they will not do. Women are not a homogeneous group and, therefore, not all suffer the same degree of marginalisation. The actors and factors responsible for marginalisation of women are multiple including the caste system, patriarchy and varna ideology. The state and market have roles to play in discrimination of women but men with greed for power and wealth play a lead role in the marginalisation of women. The civil society and NGOs in particular are proactive in assisting the women but at times, they are guilty of pushing the women to the margins. The article concludes with some possible actions to facilitate the movement of women in their struggle for freedom.

Keywords: caste; discrimination; ideology; margin; NGOs; Organisations; patriarchy; power; social exclusion.

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1 Introduction

This article examines the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in India in the context and reality of women on the margins. The article draws much from years of experience of the author with the NGO sector that includes interactions with NGOs, seminars and research (see Dabhi, 1999, 2003, 2008).

Social exclusion and marginalisation of people and role of non-state actors in development of people are areas of concern and debate in current discourses on development. Studies and experience suggest that women are a marginalised group

“The fact that women and their children make up 80 percent of the forcibly displaced makes their abject rightlessness more easily naturalised, because in our patriarchal acculturated state system, women are largely seen as non-subjects, enjoying at best secondary citizenship.” (Manchanda, 2004, p.4179)

In this context, the role of NGOs in the lives of women living in and on the margin must be examined in a larger perspective. The reality and myth about NGOs, who are there with noble and philanthropic motives and values need to be distinguished and verified between what is given in their glossy brochures and annual reports and the ground reality.

The role of NGOs in society is more complex than it is made out to be. A set of questions we need to ask ourselves: what NGOs can do and what they cannot do; what they should do and what they should not do and what they will and will not do. Yet another set of query in our effort to understand the role of NGOs is regarding the concept of margin, namely, what is it to be in/on the margin and who are the women in the margin?

Having explored this issue, I would like to reflect on the actors and factors which keep these women in the margin. The factors responsible for these margins are multiple; they are socio-cultural, economical and political. The caste system, patriarchy, Varna and gender ideology (see Franco and Sarvar, 1989; Dabhi, 2005) not only add to the suffering of women in particular, but also make their struggle for liberation difficult. The actors responsible are many, but by and large they are those with authority and are greedy for power and wealth. They happen to be human beings and among these, there are more men than women.

Furthermore, I would like to highlight the role of the state and market in responding to the women in/on the margin. Finally, I would like to spend some time on the civil society and NGOs *per se* and their role in pushing women in to the margin and/or helping them to be out of the margin. I would like to conclude with some possible actions to facilitate the movement of women in their struggle for freedom. I wish that at the end of the article, the reader is able to have a fairly good idea about what to expect from NGOs; however, good the cause may be.

2 Non-governmental organisations – who and why they are

Definition of NGO is complex and to some extent overlapping and ambiguous. Briefly, NGOs are organisations which are not governmental as such. The term non-governmental may include profit-making organisations, foundations, educational institutions, churches and other religious groups and missions, medical organisations and hospitals, unions and professional organisations, business and commercial associations, cooperatives and cultural groups as well as voluntary agencies (OCED, 1988). NGOs are different in more ways than one. I have discussed NGOs in some detail elsewhere (see Dabhi, 2003, 2008).

2.1 Definition of non-governmental organisations

There is a large spectrum of NGOs, different in nature, size and legal forms. The grassroots support organisations (GRSOs) are nationally or regionally based development

assistance organisations, usually staffed by professionals, that channel international funds to grassroots organisations (GROs) and help communities other than their own develop' (Fisher, 1993, p.5). Korten (1991) has argued that the term NGO encompasses a variety of organisations – 'voluntary organisations', those having a social mission and committed to shared values. There are also NGOs which are promoted by the government and act as its extended arm (for example, Council for Advancement of People's Organisational and Rural Technology (CAPART) in India). Clark (1991, p.53) argues,

"There is at present a dramatic mushrooming of NGOs, particularly in the South, and their credentials deserve to be questioned. Those set up by Third World government ministers, which work essentially with government departments and which receive their funding from official aid agencies are hardly non-governmental, this is not to say that all the above are necessarily bad agencies."

The definition of NGOs further depends upon the particular situation within a given country. For our purpose, we would adhere to the term NGO as – 'all non-statutory, non-profit-making organisations that are concerned in some way with relief and development in the Third World' (Billis and MacKeith, 1993). Therefore, we perceive NGOs as not-for-profit agencies; not affiliated to any government or private sector entity; devoted to managing resources and implementing projects with the goal of addressing social problems, development, empowerment and human rights issues. They may or may not receive some public funding (see <http://www.ecodirectory.org/categories.php>).

2.2 Non-governmental organisations – purpose of being

Organisations may not be a topic of study for a large section of people, but they are definitely vital arena for interactions – personal, social, professional and political. They influence a gamut of human activity and productivity including birth, growth, learning, education, socialisation and even the final journey to death.

Literature suggests that the function of non-profit organisations or NGOs is to produce public or collective good for society (Morris, 2000). A large number of human needs are met by organisations of various types. American sociologist Amitai Etzioni had said, 'Our society is an organisational society' (Haralmbos and Heald, 1981, p.278), so much so that the formal structures of organisations dominate human lives from the cradle to the grave (De, 1984). No wonder, it is said that 'what happens in our society happens in the context of organisations' (Mintzberg, 2000, p.338).

Organisations, international or local have played an important role in meeting people's needs. They not only fulfil individual and collective needs, but also function as agents through which nation-states and societies translate their aspirations (Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi, 1995; Dabhi, 2003).

3 Non-governmental organisations in India

NGOs are part of civil society and referred sometimes as civil society organisations in India. Comparatively, civil society in India is strong and very active compared with other South Asian countries. NGOs are important units of civil society, closely associated with development. In India, some of them are even called development NGOs. Foreign contributions and donations to scores of Indian voluntary organisations, religious groups

and charitable institutions every year touch nearly Rs.5,000 crores (Rs. 50 billion). As per the latest available data with the Union Home Ministry, the US heads the list of donor countries to India with Rs.1,492.62 crores (Rs.14.926 billion), followed by the UK (Rs.677.59 crores), and Germany (Rs.664.51 crores)¹. In India, 90% of NGO funding comes from foreign donations and grants. Bunker Ray points out that Indian NGOs receive about Rs.20,000 million every year from foreign sources (Sarkar and Mukherjee, 2000).

3.1 Rise of non-governmental organisations in India and what explains it

Like in other South Asian countries, the growth of NGOs has occurred partly as a result of the failure of official aid and welfare programmes to reach down to the poor (Chandra 2001; Zaidi, 2007). The failure of state can be seen in many instances – the constitution of India has abolished untouchability, but in practice, it exists all over the country, and land reforms have hardly been implemented (Thimmaiah and Aziz, 2004) in absence of ‘political will’. Failure of market especially in terms of people having no buying capacity for their basic needs and government failure in terms of ensuring basic human needs (stipulated by the country). Welfare services may be considered yet another factor in the creation of voluntary agencies (Bhatt, 1987; Sheth and Shethi, 1991; Sen, 1992) The ‘market-government theory, therefore, suggests that when both market and government fail to provide needed services, the non-profit sector develops’ (Winkle, 1990).

A free and open market was expected to provide ways and means to satisfy people’s essential needs, but experience suggests that this does not happen if people do not have purchasing power. Monopolies as well as unhealthy competition in market, lack of encouragement of indigenous technologies and knowledge, lack of purchasing power, etc., have led to failure of markets in meeting the needs of people, especially the marginalised, the poor and unorganised labourers. The market, left to itself has failed to ensure the basic needs of individuals. In the case of market failure, the HDR (1997, p.10) has recommended: ‘The State must advance the interests of the poor people and promote pro-poor markets’. Therefore, ‘the NGO sector in different countries has developed widely differing characteristics according to the history of the state, the amount of development assistance received and the gap perceived in public service provision’ (Farrington and Lewis, 1993, p.30). With the rise of free market economy, shrinking role of the State in development and the contracting and sub-contracting culture, there has been a huge increase in the actors assisting and facilitating development in India (Dabhi, 2003). HDR reports

“In 1914 there were 1,083 international NGOs. By 2000 there were more than 37,000—nearly one fifth of them formed in the 1990s. Most developing countries have seen an even sharper increase in the number of domestic NGOs and non-profits: in 1996 India had more than 1 million non-profits, and Brazil had 210,000.” (HDR, 2002, p.5)

The trend of career seeking professionals aspiring to come into the NGO sector is uncommon in India and it does not always help the NGOs to take hard and challenging options. They prefer softer, non-confronted options, projects and programme, often sponsored/supported by World Bank or related foundations, or some government agencies. The Indian NGOs follow family-based style of organisation, with unchanging or rotating leadership in the form of directors, managing trustees, secretaries and

presidents who often hinder young women and men to take the lead and provide new energy and dynamics.

3.2 Indian non-governmental organisations and difference

Indian NGOs are internally different in more than one way. They address different issues – social, economic and political. Singh (2005, p.229) argues in the Indian context, “Strictly speaking, the NGOs are more involved in the welfare and development work, but the social action groups are more interested in social action”. He further argues that the NGO leadership, its staff and volunteers look at and interpret reality and social problems differently. Therefore, Singh attributes a different cause-effect analysis to the Indian situation. The development discourse of NGOs is not the same even if they are called development and empowerment NGOs. Thus, it is suggested not to overlook that the NGOs and action groups do not have the same or similar kind of ideology and work ethics.

NGOs in India are extensively involved in development activities such as elimination of poverty, social and economic injustice, caste, gender and religious discriminations, and protection of the environment (Dabhi, 1999, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Chambers, 2006; Suar, Hota and Sinha, 2006; Chandhoke, 2007; Ravichandran, 2007). There are also NGOs, which do take hard options and are willing to forgo publicity, limelight, awards and rewards the so-called elite, middle- class, government and civil society bestow upon the NGO leaders. For example, remarkable work is being done in favour of people in Jharkhand, Gujarat, Chattisgarh and Orissa by some of the community-based organisations of the Dalits, Adivasis, minorities and women.

However, NGOs are governed and managed by different kinds of people varying in caste, class, gender and religio-cultural ideologies. The name, the objectives, governing body members, staff and volunteers and the geographical and human communities they work with are an indication of some of the differences. They may have different strategies to mobilise resources and may have different sources of funding. Some NGOs in India are highly critical of IMF and World Bank discourses of development but have no scruples in taking up consultancy and receiving funds from these agencies directly or indirectly. Some others resemble corporate houses and family business ventures in terms of their ambiance, infrastructure, salary structure and cut-throat competition and in projecting their performance or bidding for funds. They also undermine the contribution of others by hogging credit for themselves. The ideologies of their leaders, their governance and staff selection may be strongly influenced by caste, gender, race and religious biases besides political ideological leanings.

The NGOs in India are hence not a coherent category. They have another peculiarity – some of them are secular in nature and approach while others are not. A few of them are even fundamentalist and communal (with strong religious leaning to the extent of being exclusive) in nature. Some others starkly adhere to right, centre and left ideologies. In addition, not all of them are capable of or/and are interested in empowering the marginalised and women in particular.

Having said that let me also suggest that in India the commitment, approach and engagement of NGOs’ are determined by the reasons of their existence, the mindset of people within the organisation, the development discourse that exists therein and that of the resource support agencies (also see Dabhi, 2003; Ganguly, Jowher and Dabhi, 2006).

4 Women on the margins

Let us briefly look at the people and women in particular who are at the margin and whom we expect the NGOs to work for, but more so work with. The conceptual understanding of being in the margins is much easier than experience or experiential learning of it. Quite often, among us those who write and talk about people being in the margins do not have the slightest experience of the situation. On the other hand, those who are constantly with/in the struggle of the marginalised often do not have a clear understanding of being in the margins and its implications. Struggling with the people in the margins is not an easy task, and many of us would find it difficult to leave the cosy comfort of our homes, well-equipped and furnished offices and social circles to do so. The least we can do is to understand conceptually what it means to be there and at the very least verbally support their cause.

4.1 Who are these women?

Those who are in the margins are the ones who are sidelined in society – ignored, looked down upon, not counted, excluded and deprived. For practical purposes, all those who are below and around poverty line are in the margins and most of them are women (see Bradley, 1996; Anker, 1998; Sachar, 2006; Alexander, 2007; Thorat and Newman, 2007; Banerjee, 2005; Bhaumik, 2007; Zaidi, 2007; Dabhi, 2007b; PWESCR, 2008).

The majority of the 1.5 billion people living on one dollar a day or less are women in margins. India accounts for more than 40% of the world's poor, with a significant majority being women (UNIFEM, 2005). In addition, the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in the past decade, a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'the feminisation of poverty'. Women worldwide, earn on an average slightly more than 50% of what men earn¹.

"Poverty is not only about shortage of money. It is about rights and relationships; about how people are treated and how they regard themselves; about powerlessness, exclusion and loss of dignity. Yet the lack of an adequate income is at its heart." (ILO, 2003)

Individuals and communities are pushed to the margins in more than one way. They are socially, economically, politically and culturally sidelined or excluded and include the indigenous people (Adivasis), Dalits, and religious minorities, especially the Muslims (see Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Nayak and Dabhi, 2006; Sachar Report 2006; Thorat, 2006; Thorat and Newman, 2007; Dabhi, 2006, 2007a; PWESCR, 2008).

The marginalised are found in rural and urban areas and they live below and around the poverty line. They are found in agriculture and unorganised sectors; they are domestic workers, sex workers, trafficked, displaced, refugees and road side self-employed persons. Often they are the old, sick, destitute, single parent and wage earners. Most of them have no assets, income or gainful livelihood; they are unemployed or under-employed, under-paid, dependent, without shelter and sometimes under-trials. These are the people, women in particular, who are in grips of poverty. Poverty, with its multifaceted nature, dynamics and intensity, changes from place to place and over time – "the special map and social base of poverty have significantly changed over time and poverty is increasingly concentrated in a few geographical locations and among specific

social groups” (Radhakrishna and Rao, 2006, p.15). Poverty is not something people enjoy and therefore, want to get out of it.

Mehta (2008) argues that in spite of substantial economic and political changes in India, women remain controlled by families, communities, the state and increasing corporate power. She further argues that more disturbing is the centrality of sexual violence against women during times of conflict. More than a decade of economic ‘liberalisation’ has resulted in the withdrawal of the state from many essential sectors like health care, power and water. As they get privatised, the inequalities between the rich and poor are getting starker, large sections of the people, especially women and girls are deprived of access to them. Girls are denied of education and women are becoming homeless and migrant than ever before.

On any count, women are the one who most marginalised and more, so women from communities which are vulnerable, socio-religiously and culturally excluded and economically deprived.

5 The actors and factors that push people into margins

People do not go to the margins voluntarily; they are pushed into margins more by design than default. The commissions and omissions in political, economic, socio-cultural and judicial decisions determine who will be further pushed into/freed from margins. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Power is vested in persons and they are the actors in the process of marginalisation. Power and wealth are assets and instruments for empowering as well as marginalisation. They often go together and are manipulated by a few to disempower and enslave others.

5.1 Greed for power and wealth

The source of power is wealth and assets amassed, political positions held and social status defined and acquired (see Dabhi, 1999). Very few who are in position of power would like to share it, let alone give up the power. It is not a crime to have wealth and assets, but it is violation of human rights when it is amassed at the cost of the lives, livelihoods and the well-being of others, thus pushing them into the margins and becoming oblivious to reality.

The development paradigm (that includes dams, huge infrastructures, mining, parks and tourism, sanctuaries, industries and firing ranges) in India has become more of economic growth at the cost of generating employment, creative production and well-being of all. Development projects like special economic zones are either forcing or luring people to sell off their land and these have become more of special exploitative zones or in the words of Bhaduri (2007) ‘development terrorism’. Helpman (2005, p.105) argues, “The effects of growth on the poorest members of society are controversial. Has growth been harmful to the poor, as some have argued? Or has growth tide raised all boats, as others have argued?” The growth tide talked about has raised many boats, but not equitably and in the process, some boats have been badly damaged and even sunk.

5.2 Ideologies and culture of oppression

The factors responsible for marginalisation, as suggested, are multiple; they are socio-cultural, economic and political. Poverty and social discrimination are effect as well as cause that push women to margins. The actors are more so from the so called upper castes, those wedded to the patriarchal system, members to certain high status families and clans, and from upper middle and elite class. They also happen to be bureaucrats, politicians and business people who are hardcore profiteers, people from the armed forces, high salaried and influential people. Although they are all human beings, there are more men than women.

Patriarchy, gender, caste, class and religious ideologies and practices are deeply engrained in socialisation of Indian society and women are no exception. It is argued that these ideologies place people and communities in hierarchical order and maintain the hard and oppressive status quo by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief (Chitnis, 2004).

6 Role of the state, the market and civil society

Human, community and national development are more planned than mere historical evolutionary processes. In democratic nation-states, agencies and actors are more than one though the state is the primary actor. The market and civil society organisations therein are responsible and accountable for development or failure of it.

6.1 Role of the state

In a democratic welfare state like India, the responsibility of development and ensuring people's constitutional rights and human rights are primary duty of the state. The state cannot shirk its responsibility of taking care of the welfare of all. Having said this let me also add that the government does not always work in the best interest of the people. The interests of the ruling party or the coalition often take priority over freeing people from the margin. They will also push people into the margin if that helps them in consolidating power. The state can become repressive instead of empowering – West Bengal, Gujarat and Chattisgarh are cases worth mention. The stance of the state against some of the NGO activists reflects both the extreme paranoia that has overtaken the government and its exclusive reliance on a narrow law-and-order approach (Ghate, 2007).

Health and education are described as two important pillars of human development by economists such as Mahbub ul Haq of Pakistan (founder of Human Development Report) and Amartya Sen of India. In spite of governmental emphasis on access to health services by all in the last decades and India being a signatory to the Alma Ata declaration of 1978, we are nowhere near the goal (Joshi, 2006). As far as women are concerned, lack of and low education, poor health, lack of exposure and freedom of movement and responsibilities of household work prevent women from doing productive employment (see Nambissan and Sewal, 2002; HDR, 2003).

Poverty, marginalisation and discrimination are hence not only gendered, but also 'casteist' and religiously biased (a large population of Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims are poor, marginalised from mainstream and discriminated in/excluded from positions of power in governance, management, judiciary and other state institutions). The state has played lip service to eliminate marginalisation by announcing some programmes and

schemes without much political will and lacklustre implementation of recommendations of many of the commissions set up to work towards reducing discrimination and exploitation.

6.2 *Globalised market economy*

At the onset of globalisation and free market economy in the early 1990s in India, we were told that this was supposed to remove the monopoly of any one player. But, experience suggests that globalisation has brought in the monopoly of multinational corporations (MNCs) and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which control the domestic, national and global economies, reducing the state as a ploy in their hands, even endangering its sovereignty. In other words, international economy today controls the politics of the world and the nation state. Monopoly and democracy are contradictory in terms and the present profit-oriented globalisation encourages monopoly and undermines democracy, people centric economic growth and development (see Kumar, 2004). Stiglitz (2002, p.248), the Nobel Prize winner argues,

“But for millions of people globalisation has not worked. Many have actually been made worse off, as they have seen their jobs destroyed and their lives become more insecure. They felt increasingly powerless against forces beyond their control. They have seen their democracies undermined, their culture eroded.”

The women and children are the worst affected victims of conflict induced displacement of Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims in various parts of India including in the so-called prosperous states like Gujarat. Violent conflict seriously affects development and further pushes the people into margins. According to a new report by Amnesty International, ‘Women’s bodies have become part of the terrain of conflict’. Rape of women either during war or caste violence is in some way articulation of these ideologies, affirming the domination of men of victorious armies, upper castes and elite over the weaker communities. Gita Sahgal of Amnesty International says, “Rape is often used in ethnic conflicts as a way for attackers to perpetuate their social control and redraw ethnic boundaries” (BBC News World Edition, December 8th, 2004). Governments at both the centre and the states have been mute spectators of such conflicts and in some cases party to it.

6.3 *Civil society*

Chandhoke (2007) has suggested that civil society consists of various communities, groups, organisations, interests, ideologies and power alliances and argued that the civil society possesses no one attribute, no one core and no one moral disposition. In her earlier writing, Chandhoke (1999) observed that despite all the precautions built into the Constitutions, and despite the original spirit of the polity, ‘majoritarianism’ promoted by the Sangh Parivar still exists in the state of Gujarat. This observation is valid for many other states such as Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc. Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically democratic about civil society. Besides other reasons for the flourishing of the NGO sector, the failure of the state and the market are responsible for civil society organisations to come up and get engaged in philanthropy, development, human rights

and advocacy. Besides individuals and groups, organisations claim spaces in civil society democratically and otherwise with different motives, purposes and projects including that of marginalisation of some groups by acts of commission or omission. For example, a number of NGOs working with self help groups (SHGs) have done some good work but at the same time they have reinforced caste and religious segregation by the kind of SHG formation, adhering to patriarchal system and varna values therein (Dabhi, 2005). It may be appropriate to cite Bourdieu, the French sociologist who said, "Individuals and groups draw upon a variety of cultural, social, and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order" (quoted in Swartz, 1997, p.73).

7 Labouring women and role of non-governmental organisations

Empowerment is defined by Dias Alberteni as a process enabling the poor "who have been traditionally powerless, to become protagonists or subjects of their own and society's development" (as quoted in Fisher, 1993, p.196). Development which is empowering would imply that women at the grassroots level are not only capable of defining their needs, but also they can and should plan, implement and evaluate their own development process. Referring to Fals Borda, Fisher (1993, p.172) argues, "Outsiders can serve as development catalysts, but if training is successful the people themselves become further empowered, take over the development process and begin to determine how and when they will make use of the outsider".

Though it is argued (Fisher, 1993, p.4) "The nongovernmental organisations founded in the Third World in recent years are already implementing sustainable development and are increasingly challenging and sometimes changing governmental policy," I would like to suggest that there is the other side of the coin as well.

It is well-acknowledged that

"Serving the poor even for NGOs it is not easy to reach the very poorest and some unfortunately make little effort. It is easier to work with people who start with some assets, some confidence and some skills of farming, crafts, numeracy and literacy. It is easier to help increase productivity of those assets and the application of those skills for example the provision of credit, irrigation or market outlets to small farmers is easier than the provision of land, farming skills and confidence to the landless. Meaningful development (as opposed to welfare) with the disabled and destitute is even more taxing." (Clark, 1991, p.54)

With due respect and recognition to sizable NGOs who are competent and committed to marginalised communities and women in particular in their struggle for emancipation, freedom, development with dignity, we must examine their flipside as well. The foregoing discussion makes it clear that not all NGOs wish to struggle with the marginalised women because their reasons for existence (besides the stated vision and mission) are different and their strategies to sustain themselves are multiple. Fisher (1993) argues that the NGO diversity exists not only in function and typology, but also in its historical roots, culture and the nature of relationships between NGOs and their different political, social and economic contexts.

In the complex civil society and developing NGO scenario, it is not easy to understand the role of NGOs in the process of women's empowerment. There are many NGOs including those headed by women, which are engaged in the process of women's

empowerment. The reasons could be many and often mixed. After the Sixth Five Year Plan the, Indian state has provided greater scope for NGOs to implement various social development plans including 'National Policy of Women 2001'. Another reason cited can be what is called 'NGOisation of feminism' (see Chaudhuri, 2004, p.38), where gender studies and work related to gender justice are often projected as a viable professional and well paying option, especially in some big implementing NGOs or funding NGOs (national and international). Akin to the case of the large number of development NGOs headed by men in India the women NGO heads are also from the so called upper caste and class and from the so called 'majority religion' community (also see BSC, 1998).

We have seen that some NGOs raise a lot of hue and cry in the wake of violence and atrocities against the marginalised communities, in preparation and during various events (e.g. International Women's Day, Labour Day, Human Rights Day parliament sessions, etc.). During the 'morchas' (protest marches), their leaders make emotional speeches, which may serve the purpose temporarily, but unless the voices (sometimes mere rhetoric) are translated into concrete actions round the year things do not change.

The groups and NGOs that are engaged in welfare or/and mere development activities with no intention of changing the power structure and social order in favour of the marginalised will not easily respond to crime and atrocities and related issues. Based on my experience in the state of Gujarat in India, I have argued else where that some of the voluntary organisations sit on the fence when it comes to combating communalism because many of the trustees and managerial staff of these NGOs come from upper castes and have strong prejudices against Muslims and other minorities. The notions of 'us' and 'them' (the Muslims) exist strongly. Often NGOs working with and for the Muslim communities shy away from including Muslims in their governance and management. Their respect for diversity and exclusion stretches only to gender diversity – that too, recruiting women largely from upper castes/class backgrounds (Dabhi, 2007a).

A word of caution – no one empowers anyone, we empower ourselves. Many years ago, Julius Nyerere said, 'People are not developed, they develop themselves' (The Hindu, 27th April, 2003). Unfortunately, this wisdom bypasses many of us and we become saviour and messiah of people. Therefore, empowerment is closely associated with humanisation, values and attitudes, which enhance human life within and around. If NGOs are not equipped themselves with these, it is difficult for them to accompany others in their endeavour for empowerment.

However, the NGOs can take some credit and some blame for the empowerment of women. It must be noted that 'empowerment' as a mere jargon has diluted the meaning of the term and has discredited those Voluntary organisations/NGOs that are genuinely committed to the process of empowering the powerless, the marginalised, tribals, Dalits and women. It is contradictory to expect some of these NGOs to take options in favour of women's empowerment. It is like expecting people grounded in Hindutva and Taliban kind of fascist ideologies to work for secular, secure, non-violent and egalitarian society.

NGOs also depend on external organisations for resources. Therefore, it is argued that a potential side effect of goal displacement occurs when goals and activities are modified to satisfy the wishes of contributors, individuals and organisations. Goal displacement is an obvious danger that NGOs face. Those NGOs which enjoy government, caste, religious and/or political patronage would hardly get involved in issues that would jeopardise or threaten their relationship to their patron/sponsor, and hence their survival (Dabhi, 2006).

It is also argued that the International NGOs which work in India through partners and associates more often than not have their own ideas of what should be done and how it should be done, what constitutes a human rights violation and what does not, how environmental issues need to be tackled, and how women and other vulnerable sections should be empowered. These NGOs more often than not have their own pre-programmed agendas, they more often than not speak a highly specialised language that may well be incomprehensible for the inhabitants of the very worlds which they 'speak for', and they definitely have their own ideas of what is politically permissible and what is not. Chandhoke (2007) rightly asks if persons whose needs are being 'represented' have any voice in the forging of these agendas.

We are familiar with resource dependence theory argued by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, p.2) which says, 'The key to organisational survival is the ability to acquire and maintain resources'. Further research findings suggest that organisations, then, are not totally autonomous entities pursuing desired ends at their own discretion. Rather, they are constrained by the environment as a consequence of their resource needs. The degree of dependence experienced by an organisation is determined by the importance and concentration of resources provided. Organisations that rely on few sources for vital inputs become highly dependent on and beholden to those providers for survival (Froelich, 1999).

The above discussion makes it amply clear that NGOs have their own inspirational and existential roots and reasons. and these roots and reasons are often personalised as their leaders influence their approach and orientation. Therefore, gender justice, equality and empowerment need not be the direct or indirect focus of many NGOs.

8 Conclusions

We have discussed the definition and reasons for NGOs to be around. We have also examined the state of being in the margins and have identified those communities and women who are pushed to these margins. The role of civil society, state and market in responding to the issues of marginalisation of people has also been analysed. Last, but not the least, we have touched upon the options NGOs take in response to the situation of women.

As we conclude, we need to highlight that equity (distribution of wealth and assets) and social justice are at the centre of empowerment of women. Women's freedom from margins and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace (Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing Declaration, 1995). Moreover, for this the governments of the world, the global market, civil society and NGOs within them need to be committed. As endorsed in the Beijing Conference, women's empowerment is associated with the eradication of poverty and doing away with social discriminations. This cannot be accomplished through anti-poverty programmes alone, but will require democratic participation and changes in the economic structure in order to ensure equal access for all women to resources, opportunities and public services.

Organised and organisation-supported collective public action is necessary for social transformation, but not without the right kind of people in these organisations, clear understanding of the issue/s, commitment, motivation, development and empowerment

approaches. Not all, but some genuine NGOs do work and support this mandate for empowerment of women. These NGOs will be ready to choose the harder option of finding out the actors and factors that perpetuate the enslavement of women and will be willing to confront the agents and structures that perpetuate exploitation and marginalisation of women.

NGOs interested in working with and for women in margins and their empowerment will have to ensure that the organisational structure, work environment and leadership are gender sensitive and gender just (Dabhi, 2005). People's organisations and especially the leaders within such organisations, if not sensitive to people's long-term felt needs, can scuttle the process of empowerment. It is argued that development organisations can become self-centred (may just fulfil organisational goals and lose sight of the larger social goals for which the organisation was created) and may lose touch with people and their aspirations (Dabhi, 1999). People's organisations are true to their objective when they foster peoples' movements.

It is crucial that the NGOs revisit and critique their roots, foundational inspiration, development, empowerment assumptions and promote more critical understanding and analysis to face the human development challenges in India and respond to them effectively. For this, however, "an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation" is essential (Bhasin and Khan, 2004, p.4).

Therefore, the NGOs and their leadership will have to seriously look into their collective and individual religio-cultural baggage and development discourse and align them with the work of gender justice and women's empowerment. No NGO can boast of working for women's empowerment and ignore caste, class and religio-cultural discrimination that exist in our organisations, institutions and society. Working for women's empowerment then would mean working for it within the organisation and society at large, and the willingness to change and be changed.

NGOs thus will have to work more collaboratively to create opportunities and environment for women's empowerment. Experience suggests that networks, seminars and workshops by themselves do not ensure collaboration, cooperation or committed action. Ego, personality clashes, competitiveness for publicity, funding and political patronage are some of the dangers NGO networks will have to reckon with. Many NGOs will have to clean their house first to bring in fresh air of women's empowerment before they address the same elsewhere. The story of a Buddhist monk is an apt example: giving up eating sugar himself before advising the mother of the lad who wanted her son to give up eating sugar.

Let me end with the words of Mahbub ul Haq, the architect of the Human Development Reports:

"The basic purpose of development is to enlarge people's choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and can change over time. People often value achievements that do not show up at all, or not immediately, in income or growth figures: greater access to knowledge, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, political and cultural freedoms and sense of participation in community activities. The objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives.²"

Can and will the NGOs contribute to this human development especially for the women in margins?

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Notes

¹ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs1.htm>

² What is Human Development', Source: <http://hdr.undp.org/hd/default.cfm>.