

NGOs AND TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

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From time immemorial, India has a natural propensity towards voluntary works. In epics and Hindu mythology, the kings and the individuals practised *dana* for the sake of attaining *moksha*. Such charities in the social and public domain were highly revered as they opened the door to heaven. Thereafter in ancient and medieval India, the form of voluntarism changed. Voluntarism thereafter was conceived as the delivery of service to the people for meeting their immediate needs, e.g. serving the people who were in distress and got affected by natural calamity like earthquake, flood, famine, disaster of any kind, shortage of food and other basic necessities. This continued till the nineteenth century when the conventional mode and attire of voluntarism changed again. In the past the voluntary activity was an informal affair which stressed more and more on charity, relief and social reforms. But in recent times, the voluntary activities have become much more professional and a rights-based approach is adopted where the betterment of the beneficiary and more importantly, the empowerment of the target groups has become the main focus of their activities.

At the other end of the spectrum, is the issue of tribal development. The development of the tribal population in India has been one of the major concerns of the government of our country since the attainment of independence. The tribes constitute the weakest section of the Indian population from all angles. Although the tribes are the 'sons of the same soil', they have been denied all civic facilities and amenities for centuries. The Government of India has conceived and implemented various plans as well as programmes but in most cases they have failed to yield the expected results. Consequently the tribal life has worsened. The

question that can be asked at this point of time is: What went wrong? Where did it go wrong?

Against this backdrop, this article aims to establish a linkage between these two diverse areas which are apparently isolated from each other but are in fact closely related. For the sake of convenience of study the article will be broadly classified under two major heads, viz. Issues and Concerns. Firstly, the two issues of NGO and Tribal development would be discussed in the Indian context and secondly, the area of concern regarding the role of NGOs for the development of the tribals would follow suit.

Non Governmental Organization (NGO)

Before initiating the study, we need to have a clear conceptual understanding about the NGO sector. The term "Voluntary" finds its origin in the Latin word "voluntas" which denotes will or freedom. The term "voluntary" means performing or a specified function of one's own accord and without compulsion or promise of remuneration, arising out of natural impulse, or done without any legal compulsion. (Thirunavukkarasu 2009:1) However, the word 'NGO', has passed into popular usage, particularly from the early 1970s onwards and is often referred to as Civil Society (CSO), Private Voluntary Organizations (PVs), Third Sector Organization, Non State Actors, Volags (Voluntary Agencies) and Action Groups (AG). The name "nongovernmental organization" is perhaps unfortunate. It conveys a negative meaning. We do not call governments "non-private organizations" or "nongovernmental organizations" We refer to voluntary, private organizations that mobilize the commitment and enthusiasm of volunteers to the objectives of relieving suffering and of development. (Streeten 1997:194)

However, in the present day, we see a mushrooming of Non Governmental Organizations not only at the global level but also at the national level. Certain reasons can be attributed for the sudden upsurge. With the end of cold war and the slackening of state sovereignty, the NGOs have come out of all shackles of restrictions and imposition and can operate more spontaneously. During the fiscal crisis when there was an abrupt budget cut and the economy became victimized with slow growth and recession, the voluntary organizations stood beside the poor and the down-

trodden firmly who were suffering from the anti-poor postures of the state. The dedicated activities of the NGO workers championed the cause of the common people with whose support organizations of such kind germinated throughout the country. It is important to add that the triumph of Information Technology have accelerated this process as well. The communication advances, especially the internet has created new global communities which results in cross ventilation of intellect and ideas. The NGOs thus have become successful in coaxing the government by the global citizens from taking or retreating from any step which is antithetical to the interest of the common people. The NGOs can now concentrate on diverse issues of contemporary importance like ecology, human rights, women empowerment, tribal development and so on. They mobilize the people and encourage them to raise their voice against arbitrary government policies. The increased visibility of the NGOs is synchronized with the growing role of the civil society as well. The duo has generated a new equation in the development perspective. Some NGOs implement concrete development activities while others play the role of conscientization, sensitization, promoting awareness of the people's rights and justice. Some try to replicate one programme which has been successful in one area to another while some NGOs prefer to experiment and come up with new programmes. It is seen that the NGOs are renowned for their flexibility, enterprise, spirit of public action, expertise and capable of bringing about development in a decentralized manner. In comparison to government, NGOs are in a relatively better position to personalize the provision of services they offer to the people. Flexibility in approach helps NGOs invent appropriate solutions to the issues they handle. They can adjust to the need of the clients. (Salamon 1987:31) Moreover, the small size is advantageous, for it gives the NGOs the capacity for innovations rarely seen in government and business. Since the constituencies of NGOs are smaller, they can define their positions clearly, press for innovative solutions, and experiment in ways governments may not find it easy to do. (Korten 1992: 99)

The NGO is the bed hub of new ideas and techniques and play an important agent in the process of nation building. They serve as an institutional mechanism for channeling the initiatives, enthusiasm and resources of the grassroots people in the development

process. The NGOs play a significant role of catalysts of social change, educators, informers, enablers, project planners, administrators, experimenters, innovators, awareness builders, motivators, impact evaluators, harbingers of silent revolution, national constructors, conscientizers, and a friend, philosopher and guide of the weak, poor and downtrodden. They are excellent, inexpensive trouble-shooters who are armed with robust information. Moreover, the micro-level operations help the NGO to tailor services to the needs of the beneficiaries. NGOs at grassroot level employ different strategies for creating awareness among the target population and earn their support. The support of the concerned local people helps to implement their policies in an effective way and make them aware of several bottlenecks which they might face in the course of implementation. In order to create a rapport with the target group and a conducive environment of working, the NGOs often organize street plays, cultural shows, puppet shows, use folk and popular songs, audio-visual shows, debates on relevant themes in schools, panchayat bodies and local institutions, arrange workshops and earn support from the media. All these awareness and confidence building mechanisms brings the local people and the NGOs in a face to face interaction and generates a good deal of enthusiasm among the people as they too can come up with their suggestions and solutions for any given problem. Their traditional knowledge, wisdom and expertise are harnessed by the NGOs to a significant extent. The potential of creative talent in them facilitates a necessary opportunity to design, experiment with, and amend their strategies to suit the needs of the people for whom the programs are intended. An approach characterized by informal, personal and human elements enhances the quality of service they render. This has been a universal feature of NGO all over the world. (Clark 1997: 57)

In India, the voluntary organization got a fillip when its importance was acknowledged by the Government of India in the Sixth Five Year Plan. The government identified certain areas where the voluntary organizations might work. The areas were forestry and formation of renewable energy association at the block level, family welfare, health and nutrition, education, organizing community programmes, implementing social welfare programmes for weaker sections, minimum needs programme, disaster management, promotion of ecology, tribal development, environmen-

tal protection etc. Likewise, the voluntary sector was accorded high priority in the Seventh and Eighth Five Year Plans as well. But despite all its virtues, it is undeniable that the NGOs cannot throw any challenge to the welfare state. The NGOs are only public contractors who can carry on their welfare programmes but have to work within the framework of constitution and the law. However, on the other hand, as the government too has to admit the indispensable role played by the NGOs, so it should also not coerce NGOs with stringent rules and regulations and let loose a reign of terror. In a globalized world, the interests of the First, Second and the Third Sectors are locked up together. In the existing pattern of interaction the governments, businesses, and civil society actors can appreciate of each other's concerns and aspirations, recognize each other's resources, and negotiate an agreement which all the parties would accept as fair and justified for good. Public-private partnership doesn't necessarily mean a decline in the power and spending of the government in social and physical infrastructure. But it does mean leveraging available government resources with private resources where possible and also partnering with NGOs to achieve better mobilisation of the community. NGO efforts of this type will always be small compared to the efforts of the government can mount, but NGOs often achieve better results and their involvement often improves the quality of governance and the degree of community participation. (Ahluwalia 2008:27)

Tribal Development

The word 'tribe' is derived from the Latin root, the Middle English Term "Tribuz" meaning the three divisions into which the early Romans were grouped, which ultimately evolved into the modern English term which stood for a political division. (Ray 1972:22) The Government of India Act 1935 used the term "Backward Tribe" and later the Indian Constitution introduced the term "Scheduled" instead of the term "Backward". But the Constitution of India has nowhere given a precise definition of the tribe. The Gandhians popularized other polite equivalents such as "ranipaja", "vanyajati" and "girijan". The tribal people are differently known as Vanyajati (forest caste), Vanvasi (forest-inhabitants), Pahariya (hill men), Adimjati (primitive castes), Adivasi (origin settlers), Janajati (folk communities)

and Anusuchit Janajati (scheduled tribes). With the passage of time, in various international forums including those sponsored by UN, the word "tribe" is being replaced by the word "indigenous". However, no matter whatever name we use for addressing these communities, it can be said that diverse approaches have been adopted by the government of our country like the policy of segregation, assimilation and integration for accommodating the tribals in the country's federal framework. After the attainment of independence certain positive and concrete steps like devotion of almost twenty articles and two Special Schedules in the Constitution of India were taken which elaborately explains the protective privileges meant for the tribal people. Apart from these safeguards, the Constitution also calls for the establishment of the Tribal Advisory Council and the Right of Self Governance of the Traditional Council under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Coupled with these, different commissions and committees like Dhebar Commission or Renuka Ray Committee were appointed from time to time for investigating the position of tribals and the problems that they encounter in today's world. The Five Year Plans of the Government too proposed many constructive plans for the tribals. *The First Five Year Plan* (1951-1956) aimed at bringing development in the rural and tribal areas by making an expenditure of Rs1.03 crores. The *Second Five Year Plan* (1956-61) set up the Special Multipurpose Tribal Development Blocks (SMPT) in selected tribal areas on an experimental basis. During this plan priorities were given to development of education, communication, agriculture, animal husbandry and medical care in the tribal areas. The *Fourth Five Year Plan* (1969-74) initiated a series of development programmes for a specific target group. The Tribal Development Agencies were established on the pattern of the SFDA (Small Farmers Dev Agency) which catered to the need of the individual tribals. During the *Fifth Five Year Plan* (1974-1979) a comprehensive view of the tribal problem was taken and a new strategy called the Tribal Sub-Plan approach was evolved. The Tribal Sub-Plan Strategy envisages a provision of a minimum amount of 20% of the total plan size of the state to be spent for the development of the tribal areas. The plan also heralded the idea of an integrated Tribal development Plan (ITDP) in which a number of specific projects for the tribals would be given high priority. During the *Seventh Five Year Plan*

(1985-1989), several innovative steps were followed. Efforts were made to alleviate the poverty of the tribals by promoting agriculture, horticulture, forestry, cottage industries, small industry etc. The tribals were given special training of using technology, marketing and advancing monetary assistance. The *Ninth Five Year Plan* (1997-2002) vowed to empower the tribal communities who are striving for survival for centuries. Hence, the Plan took a holistic vision of the empowerment process and approached both the Government and Non Governmental agencies to contribute in the development of the tribals. The Plan adopted a three point strategy for tribal development, viz. social empowerment, economic empowerment and social justice. By the three forms of empowerment, the fruits of development would "reach the unreached." During *Tenth Five Year Plan* (2002-2007), development of the Primitive Tribal Groups was given high on agenda. The Government of India allocated as much as Rs. 105.03 crores for various activities viz. housing, land distribution, land development, education, agriculture, horticulture development, health, etc. were taken up through State Governments and NGOs. In the *Eleventh Five Year Plan* (2007-2012) proposed different strategy for two distinct primitive Tribal Groups. The approach of heritage group will emphasise on preservation of eco-system and traditional skills along with an economic component. However, in the case of peripheral community, one approach will be conservation of eco system with stress on economic programme. For the purpose, unique attribute of each group will determine specific treatment in planning and implementation.

Thus, all these initiatives, plans and programmes of the government of our country have definitely earned some success but in spite of keeping the issue of tribal development high on agenda and spending such huge amounts for the development of the tribals, it has been seen that even though six decades after the attainment of India's independence had passed by, the impact of all these ambitious plans and programmes are not uniform and could not be successfully implemented throughout the length and breadth of our country. The government had spent crores to alleviate the sufferings of the indigenous people but still it had failed to ensure a smile in the face of the adivasis who for all practical purpose had been pushed to the wall. In independent India, all social groups that have suffered from centuries of

discrimination and neglect are assured of protections but these promises largely remained as an unattained dream. Advantages have been reaped by the non-tribals who lived in the tribal areas but were more in contact with the politico-administrative machinery. Thus the vulnerability of the tribals becomes apparent as their notion of development does not match with that of the framers of the constitution as well as policy makers. Although the latter is trying to take effective steps for the promotion of tribal development but with the passage of time it was well understood that the intervention packages of the government are much more target oriented rather than people oriented. But, by and large the emphasis of such intervention packages has been towards assimilation in the so called mainstream without much regard and understanding of the needs of all the tribal communities, their culture, social structure and rich heritage. Development intervention approach in India over the past sixty years has been very much a "supply oriented one-way traffic". This approach has been restricted due to the top-down strategy, poor percolation due to bureaucratic practices at all the stages of development, the non-involvement of people in selecting the right development strategy and their ever-growing recipient attitude. Moreover, adhocism, piecemeal efforts, lack of coordination and of new insights and ideas have hindered the process of development. Most of the programme planning and implementation has been stereotyped and there are many a slip between the rules formulated and their actual implementation. Such defected planning and their implementation, however, results in an undulating situation where some tribals have advanced in terms of the socio-economic indicators while the other tribals have remained static. Moreover, the special programmes framed for the development of the tribals have a limited coverage and are rigid and uniform in nature although the demand of the tribes of different topography are different. Further, the areas which were delineated for the sake of the development of the tribals are without any rational and scientific basis. In addition to these, the persons who were concerned with the implementation of the programmes were found unsympathetic to the unfortunate tribals. Bureaucrats at the secretariat level seem to be involved in a constant battle for fine tuning them, not always successfully. Rules for the day-to-day functioning of the government, in themselves are lifeless. At

best they can specify who has to do what, how, when and where. But the desire to make that happen has society has to come from public life. Like much else in society, the act of bringing rules to life gets refracted through a variety of factors: power, culture, local traditions etc. (Rajivlochan 1997: 2095) Hence, the strategy for tribal development has lost its vigour, and got bogged down in the quagmire of formalism and routinization. After Africa, India is the second country to host a large number of diverse tribal communities. After so many decades of independence, the tribals are still languishing in the periphery and paying a heavy price with the hope of getting integrated in the mainstream. Such pathetic situation has bewildered the tribals and it is seen that the tribal community is also being subjected to certain catastrophic changes as they are undergoing a radical transition. In a pluralist country like ours, each of the different strata of society has its own perception of development. It is possible that while viewing the things from national vantage, the planners might not be able to appreciate or absorb the varying perceptions of the different sections. There has to be a deliberate, conscious effort of promoting distributive equity. The constituents should feel satisfied that they have been partners both in generation of wealth as well as recipients of the benefits. (Goswami 1994:54)

The makers of the Indian Constitution were, however, conscious of the fact that due to historical reasons, some kind of mental barrier prevailed between the tribal and nontribal population. What is necessary in the present Indian situation is the conscientization of the tribals regarding their latent capacities and stimulating their will to acquire and live a better life. Dawn of awareness is the solution to their psychological gap and rigidity of attitude. The tribals have not been allowed to take the initiative for their own development. Hence they have to depend on the government for their welfare. Though these plans may appear attractive recurrent assistance in the form of spoon-feeding would not help the tribals in the long run. The tribals should not be a mere beneficiary but a contributor in the process of development and decision-making. Michael Todaro considers that 'development is both a physical reality and a state of mind in which society has, through some combination of social, economic and institutional processes, secured the means for obtaining a better life'. (Todaro 1985:87) It is to be kept in mind that a tribal problem requires

a tribal solution and this requires a paradigm shift in the very perception of their development. Attempts should be made to make people stand on their own feet and this is where the Non Governmental Organizations step in.

NGO and Tribal Development

The inability as well as the failure of the government provides the NGO a fertile ground to work upon. The role of the Voluntary or Non-Governmental Organization, with their local roots and sense of service has become increasingly important in the arena of the development of the tribals in our country. The NGOs can contribute to the tribals on a positive note in the field of education, health, employment generation, livelihood security, relief and rehabilitation, activism, protecting their tradition, art, culture, environment etc. They try to protect the indigenous knowledge base of the tribals which are either ignored or exploited. We all know that the tribals have keys to the biologically diverse areas. The tribal homeland is the hub of natural resources like oil, minerals, silvicultural and other biotic objects, which are the important factors of production. These hubs make the tribal and indigenous territories targets of the greed of the global hegemons and their compradors that are extending their tentacles to squeeze the resources as much as possible. The globalized economy has depleted the resources beyond repair. The tribal territories have become arenas of the global 'free' market economy and there is a gradual process of monopolization of resources by the dominant economic forces. (Bhaskar 2006:79) This exploitation has alarmed the tribal and indigenous elites, tribal leaders and a large number of tribal commoners who are conscious of this emerging global scenario and getting agitated by the same. The rise of such political consciousness among the marginalised socio-political category that constitutes four percent of the global population has a considerable implication for the geo-politics of the 21st century. Moreover, the invasion of tribal areas by Multi National Corporations were accompanied by migrant populations, big townships, tertiary sectors like trade and related activities, new forms of economic activity, large scale destruction which displaced and pushed the tribals into fringes. The tribals have thus become unskilled labour like construction work, domestic service, vending, petty trade, etc. Dispossession of age

old right to access, control, manage resources, marginalization in the decision-making process creates enormous problems for the tribals which can be taken care by these Non Governmental Organizations to a considerable extent. *Secondly*, by collaborating with the Government, Donor agencies and local beneficiaries, the NGOs can play a very important role in making an impact on policy making and change at the micro, meso and macro level. The public policy is a combination of goals, laws, rules which are formulated by the key decision makers. If the NGOs press for any cause to a tantalizing effect and gather a support from the public and the key stakeholders then the policy makers are bound to react and keep the specific issue to the fore. *Thirdly*, the NGOs in India can struggle and launch a crusade for upholding of human rights and the establishment of a society based on justice and social equity. *Fourthly*, the NGOs can play a crucial role in documenting tribal knowledge, language and culture. The tribals have profound knowledge of the flora and fauna, the appropriate plant species with medical purpose, their location, parts to be used, or time of collection, preparation and administration of the same. The knowledge of ethno-medicine is very important for their existence. Moreover, there is a growing inclination all over the world for herbal drugs, nature based products instead of synthetic ones. But there are certain threats to this indigenous asset of the tribals. Deforestation, environmental degradation, lack of initiative of the younger generation to learn and adopt the medical practices of the tribal medicine men known as 'Dishari', lack of proper dissemination and transmission of knowledge, piracy of knowledge are some of them. The healing traditions and techniques are transmitted orally from generation to generation which means that slowly but steadily some part of it may be forgotten for good. Here the NGOs can play a very important role in documenting such important knowledge base for protecting the knowledge of the tribals in the form of community knowledge register. This is the most difficult and intellectually challenging task as it involves garnering the support of the knowledgeable people, village elders, tribal chiefs, traditional health practitioners and seeking their cooperation. The participation and support of local communities are considered essential in these programmes. The data should be catalogued and analyzed in such a way that the communities that provide information should re-

ceive benefits from any commercial use of the community. Good planning depends on good data. The most important of all is that the communities should have complete control over the process and they should have the right to access the register. *Fifthly*, the NGOs invest time to build awareness within the local community regarding their rights and entitlements provided by the government, facilitate people's access to those rights and also put forward grievances when their entitlements are not met with. The NGOs strengthen village committees by providing them with trainings, workshops, capacity building, leadership skill development and many other practical supports. Hence, all these are the most significant roles that the NGOs can perform for the development of the tribals. Therefore increasing participation of the voluntary organizations in nation and society building is not only desirable but also crucial. (<http://socialjustice.nic.in/index.php>)

However, although the government acknowledges the contribution of the NGO to the cause of development and admits its own limitation in terms of man power and other resources, it looks at the activities of the NGO sector with suspicion and mistrust. The government accepts that the presence and activities of the Voluntary organizations are not uniform throughout the country. In addition to that there are certain spheres of activities and areas of action that attract greater participation by voluntary organizations. The disparity in presence and action results in a lop-sided development of the region and the community. Hence the government encourages the voluntary sector to work in those areas which are neglected and have comparatively drawn little attention in the panorama of development. The Ministry of Tribal Welfare alleges that some Voluntary Organizations have mastered the art of securing handsome amounts from the government as well as the donor agencies. There are a large section of NGOs who are working on different sectoral issues but are not getting any fund from the government for their development agenda. Seeking a solution, it can be said that the voluntary sector should reduce its dependence on the government and try to build up a pool of fund on their own. The government too encourages Voluntary Organizations to build its own credibility and earn support from the community, business houses, national and international sources. In a way, the government allows the

Voluntary Organization to search and acquire its own resources in a responsible manner. The government however is vigilant as to the activities of the NGO and subjects it to strict supervision and periodic invigilation. But inspite of such periodic monitoring and supervision, it has been witnessed that the Voluntary Organizations are accused of misutilization of funds provided by the government. In such cases, the Ministry takes stern steps and goes to the extent of blacklisting the NGO. In addition to that all the assets created out of the funds from the government would be confiscated and penalty would be imposed on the NGO for misappropriation and forgery. It is an undeniable fact that both the government and the NGO sector are striving relentlessly for the goal of tribal empowerment and their consequent development. But the results vary from time to time, place to place and case to case as well due to multiplicity of reasons. To keep in line with the process of privatization, the state has been gradually following the principle of social contracting with NGOs in implementing its programmes, providing ample space for them to collaborate with the government in power. At the same time, NGOs, together with the marginalized sections, are actively involved in opposing state and government policies which are detrimental to the livelihood options of the poor.

Against this juxtaposed situation, the new tribal generations believe that they have been betrayed as they have been pushed to the wall and suffer from the hydra-headed problems like poverty, indebtedness, illiteracy, morbidity, mortality, malnutrition, underemployment, cultural erosion, displacement trauma, identity crisis and dispossession. For the state's neglect of the adivasis is in many respects a product of the terrains in which they live. In these remote upland areas, public officials are unwilling to work at all. Doctors do not attend the clinics assigned to them; the schoolteachers stay away from schools; magistrates spend their time in lobbying for a transfer back to the plains. (Mukherji 2005:7) All these problems collectively result in a crisis which has engulfed the tribals with the passage of time. The resentment of the tribals bursts out here and there like a sore in the body of our country in the name of identity politics. The recent formation of the new states of Chattisgarh and Jharkhand in the Indian union poses as a challenge, both theoretical and practical. A state, as everyone knows, has to have 'elected' representatives

who need a modern air-conditioned assembly hall to deliberate on the welfare of those who have elected them, need reasonably comfortable houses to live in and transport facilities to go to the assembly building and to visit and look after their constituencies. They also need a governor from the centre to 'oversee' the working of the state from his central palatial building and a whole set of ministers with their diverse departments and offices to 'develop' the economy of the state and plan its social and 'human' development conceived of in terms set by experts trained in the west. (Krishna 2000: 3997) For the post-colonial government is still much more in continuity than discontinuity with the earlier colonial state. Tribal resistance is all too often treated as a law and order problem and suppressed as ruthlessly as before. (Heredia 2000:1524)

In this situation, the benefit of the complexity of situation is reaped by the Naxalites who are bringing the adivasis within their fold. They are committing crimes and taking refuge in the hills and forest of the tribal homeland. They are consoling the tribals and giving them false promises of statehood and self-determination. This sorry state of affair is experienced in many states of our country. The tribals are stuck in a severe crisis. So in order to protect them, serious steps should be taken not only from the government but from the Non Governmental Organizations as well. They have to plunge with whatever resource and strength they into the task of the tribal development. The recurrent convulsions caused by communalism, regionalism, tribalism, linguism, and casteism differed in their intensity and duration, but their consequences were sufficiently unsettling to raise doubts in many minds- both at home and abroad- about India's visibility and durability as a nation. Tribal sub-nationalism -dormant in some parts and explosive in others - contributes to the uneasy mosaic so characteristic of contemporary India. Evidence of simmering discontent is all-too-clear. Dark and ominous clouds are gathering on the tribal horizon: a cloudburst, followed by a tornado, might come anyday. (Dube 1972:27)

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