

Research Article

NGO and Tribal Women: A Case Study of Odisha

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ABSTRACT

Tribals are at the bottom of the social and political ladder in India. Development projects have not only bypassed them, but have often harmed them by taking away their lands and other resources on which their livelihood was based. Unless the processes which result in their proletarianization are identified and corrective action taken to prevent it, chances are that new programmes will continue to ignore their interests as in the past. Articulation of such processes will not only lead to appropriate solutions but it also helps in sensitizing field officers who in the past often held a negative stereotype about tribals. But there are NGOs and Civil Society Organizations have been working for Tribals upliftment and betterment since years. As we know the problems can not be resolved by the Govt. alone and therefore other alternatives emerged to support the process of development. The process of inclusion started from Gandhian ideology to a democratic process of development and empowerment.

Keywords: Civil society, Development, Empowerment, NGO, Tribe

INTRODUCTION

Non-government organisations have come to occupy an important place in development discourses. They have assumed a very important role in facilitating change at the grassroot level. Since the 1980s, there has been sharp increase both in number and in importance of NGOs. Both the inadequacies of the state and dominant ideologies of development led to the emergence and growth of this sector. With the criticism of top-down development efforts, widespread evidence that development strategies of past few decades have failed to adequately assist the people in rural areas and growing support for development efforts that are sustainable and which include the participation

of intended beneficiaries have stimulated existing development agencies to search for alternative means that is to laud the role of NGOs and to involve local population in development process.

NGOs have gained recognition as the third force of development. They have greater diversity, credibility, transparency and accountability. Their dynamic presence locally has been the focus of discussion in the country over last few decades. It is a social phenomenon, which has attracted the attention of many scholars and constitutes special area of inquiry in social science research. Although many NGOs are working at the grassroot level in different parts of the country, however, there is specificity to the origin, ideology, direction and growth that requires a regionally and historically specific analysis. Despite all the critics and hurdles, NGOs have become an indispensable part of our society.

EMERGENCE OF NGOs IN INDIA

India has a greater tradition in philanthropic activities, social service and voluntary work. Before independence, people volunteered their service in various fields ranging from help extended to the needy as a part or charity work (during outbreak of famines, flood, in health, in education, etc.). To self-help programs involving the needy in the process of their own development. In nineteenth century, voluntary activity took the form of social and religious reforms. Christian missionaries also played an important role in charity and voluntary work. Gandhi's belief that India lives in village and his call for rural construction inspired his followers to do work in these lines.

During the post-independence period, there was a sudden increase in both volume of activity and number of NGOs. The most significant of these trends was the growth of size and spread of VOs as an organised and systematic form of voluntary action throughout the country. This increase in number and diversity in the activities of NGOs was in response to the dominant ideologies of development and failure of government programmes to deliver benefits to the poor. Before independence, as in ancient and medieval India, voluntarism was manifest in diverse forms. In the fields of education, medical service, natural calamities, and cultural promotion and in crises like epidemics, people volunteered their service and expertise. As Gangrade and Sooryamoorthy (1995) in their paper 'NGOs: retrospect and prospect' have discussed in detail about the factors that have promoted the rise of voluntary action in India. This can be summed up as Hindu tradition, Missionaries role, Gandhi's role and perception.

Gandhiji's strong adherence to high social ideals and practical approach inspired sincere and conscientious workers to follow him with a genuine sense of dedication. His movement for national independence was rooted in the ideal of social reconstruction,

self-help and upliftment of the poorest of the poor through voluntary action. His belief in the potential of rural India, and the wisdom that India lives in her villages guided him to concentrate his effects on villages. Rural reconstruction was his mission. He initiated a large number of construction social welfare programmes designed to remove the evils that had crept into society. His constructive programme, which entailed among others Charkha, Khadi, Gramodyog, basic education, removal of untouchability and prohibition found ready acceptance among people. His followers who could not or did not wish to join the government or ruling party established number of voluntary organisation to work closely with governmental programmes meant for diverse social strata from Harijan (the untouchables) and tribals to slum dwellers. Such agencies organised handicrafts and village industries, rural development programmes, credit co-operative, educational institution and retained a degree of autonomy in their functioning.

The sudden growth of NGOs in India was witnessed soon after independence especially around 1960s. The iniquitous nature of the state and inability of government programmes to benefit the deprived sections, led to the realisation that mere implementation of govt. schemes by the govt. sponsored agencies were not enough, and could in fact be counterproductive (Jain, 1995). Both the officials planning system and the market economy had failed to make a significant dent in India's problems of poverty and inequality. This gave rise to scepticism about the ability by the institutional structures of democracy legislatures, parties, unions, and panchayats—to address problems of needs of the poor. Formulated policies were not suitable enough to reduce poverty and inequality, and when they were, they were not implemented effectively. The govt. sponsored model of development was seen as having failed to deliver benefits to the poor, and the formal political establishment had lost its legitimacy (Rohini Patel, 1991).

There was a corresponding increase in volume of activity during the post-independence period along with increase in number. However, the causes of proliferation of NGOs in different periods, beginning in the 1950s were not analogous. According to Mukherjee (cited in Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade, 2001) if national sentiments, derived from the involvement in the freedom struggle, reigned supreme in the minds of the people and motivated them to voluntary organisation in the 1950s, the reason was obviously different for the period since then. One can notice the expansion of NGOs more in developmental activities, such as income generation programmes in the 1960s, in latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s the concern of NGOs was changing. The shift turned in favour of issues associated with ecology, environment, technology and development. While matters concerning human rights dominated the 1980s, attempts to sustain the degrading environment due to ruthless exploitation or the anti-poor policies of the state gave the impetus for the formation of NGOs in the 1990s (Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade, 2001).

Odisha has the largest variety of tribal communities. These tribals are at various stages of socio-economic development. At one extreme are the groups, which lead a relatively secluded and archaic mode of life, keeping their core culture intact, while at the other extreme there are communities, which cannot be distinguished from the general agricultural communities? The tribal people differ in their social organisation, language, rituals and festivals and also in their dress, ornamentation, art and craft and this way it shows their cultural identity and distinctiveness. They manage the internal affairs of the village through the village council and the youth dormitory. The dormitory is the core of tribal culture and it reinforces the age-old traditions. Each fact of their life is deeply connected with religious belief, ritual practices, livestock sacrifices, and belief in the supernatural powers. It is these aspects of their culture that give meaning and depth to their lives and solidarity to their social structure.

The tribes of Odisha have retained the rich and varied heritage of colourful dance and music, which forms an integral part of their festivals and rituals. It is through them and their art and craft that the tribals seek to satisfy their inner urge for revealing their soul and to express the joy of free life. The artistic skill of the tribal people is also seen in their dress and ornaments, wall-paintings, handicrafts, wood carvings and decorations, etc. The wood carving of the Kondhs, metal works by lost wax process among the Bathudis, cane and bamboo basketry works among the Juangs and Bhuinyas are all symbolic of their artistic quality and aesthetic sense. Some of the tribal communities have their own looms by which they weave clothes for their own use.

This study was conducted in three major tribal areas of Odisha. As we know Rayagada, Kandhamal and Mayurbhanj are the districts, which are known for tribe not only from socio-economic point of view but also its high socio-cultural tradition. The situation of the tribal community struggling with starvation, hunger, diseases and malnutrition forced a group of young men in the year 1981 to initiate some voluntary action in Kashipur Block of the old Koraput district, which falls under the district of Rayagada at present. The problem of money lending, bondage, payment of low wages, landlessness, low literacy rate, non-functioning of primary schools over and above lack of political will and local leadership is the main factors attributed to such a socio-economic scenario of the tribal of the region. Food scarcity has been considered to be an additional factor for the underdevelopment of the tribal this area. Low land which is considered to be the prime land of this area belong to the non-tribal landlords, who have their origin mostly from coastal Odisha, settled here and took advantage of the backwardness, simplicity and the above mentioned socio-economic situation of the various communities like Soura, Kohl, Ho, Santhal, Munda, Juang and Mankadia Kandha apart from Kondhs and Parajas. The living standard of large number of scheduled caste population is also no

better than the tribes but some of them have been used by the local landlords and sahuokaras to establish their authority over the poorest section. Agragamee took its first experiment in a tribal area like Kashipur being fascinated by the overwhelming response and initiatives of the tribal to development. The team was supported by a group of tribal youths who joined them in the second year of its action. The organisation was in search of a strategy after introducing itself to the tribal community and was looking for alternatives for the awakening of the tribal to come up in order to bring about a change in their socio-economic condition. With the above-mentioned objectives in mind, Agragamee has taken an attempt to create alternative leadership being closely associated with the tribal situation and problems of the area. The efforts of Agragamee since 1981 till date has been replicated in various tribal districts of Odisha. The organisation has concentrated in three broad areas:

- Food security for the marginalise and the deprived sections
- Education/ political literacy through village-level organisations.
- Protection against over-exploitation of the natural resources.

The organisation has promoted number of youth clubs and 'Mahila Mandals' and other informal local organisations to reduce its scale of involvement in a phase manner. Decentralisation has been emphasised in every sphere of its activities creating congenial atmosphere for the growth of individuals and it has inculcated a sense of team spirit, which seems to be the basic factors in any organised development effort. The organisation is conscious of its priorities and continues its struggle with the people all through its involvement. Agragamee has been in the field for about two decades now and in spite of occasional setbacks and strains has definitely come of age. Its main task has been to prepare an appropriate base, which will make its clientele aware and empowered and equip them for further take off that await them in the process of development. It is not easy to capture the range and richness of the Agragamee's work in a short preamble nor can we hope to do justice to the nuances. Looking back over the last 15 years, it is evident that programmes and projects taken up by Agragamee has emerged as a response to specific needs of the area, assessment of the kinds of programmes that would help them reach stated objective, response to the larger development climate, availability of resources and the pressure to become a resource institution for training and development. Agragamee has functioned simultaneously in a pro-active and reactive mode. Needless to add, conscious decisions were made on style of implementation and choice of programmes in order to further the long term goal of empowerment of the people to negotiate from a position of strength. In the ultimate analysis, Agragamee has demonstrated its staying power. This has been possible by the commitment, sense of purpose and hard work of all the functionaries. Agragamee's

strengths are the culture within the organisation, clarity about the strategy and the quality of people within the organisation and partners in the community.

Aragamee's range of activities in all its projects in different districts can broadly be categorised into the following:

- Addressing structural issues in the tribal areas.
- Food securities of livelihood options.
- Watershed development and natural resource management.
- Education for children in tribal areas.
- Training and capacity building.
- Strengthening tribal women's organisations.
- Communication and publication.

All these activities are organically interlinked and never been in isolation. These are considered a modest approach to address the problems of the tribal areas in general and the problems of the Tribals in particular. The impact of the macro-processes on micro situations is growing tremendously complex in recent times demanding more attention of organisations like Agramee to set up their interventions in an integral manner. A total assault on hunger, poverty and marginalisation has been incessant challenge for Agramee.

The forces of globalisation and market have underscore food and nutritional insecurities, the loss of livelihood, the gap between rich and poor and the digital divide, the non-response of the state in providing the basic services and improving the quality of life and above all the weakening of people's voice in governance. There could be many more in the local specific context. In Agramee's areas of operation, such issues are very sharply focused. It is not Kashipur alone that has triggered off these issues in the public domain. In all tribal areas, these issues have come alive. The impact of displacement caused by upper Indravati Hydro-electric Project in Kalahandi, Koraput and Nabarangpur districts, the drought and migration in Kalahandi and Nuapada districts, the decline of delivery of basic services and the dilution in the system of governance have raised our concern and have given us impetus to search for alternatives. It can be realised that food security is not confined only to the grain banks but to look at the interrelated issues including right to food. The education in tribal areas has demanded more dimensions to be added to Agramee's ongoing innovative education experiment.

Agramee has devoted considerable energy in imparting training to the people in tribal areas with the sole objective of making them able to cope up with the changing context.

So training to participate in NRN, micro-enterprise, advocacy, organisation building and governance system has been prevalent in all dimensions of Agragamee's interventions. The efforts of training to night school teachers are of the same depth and dimensions as in the training of farmers and watershed users.

Communication, documentation and publication have been very important components of empowerment process. It also helps in the process of networking. Agragamee's publications are very thought provoking and simple, so that ordinary people can understand. The publication on Panchayat Raj system in scheduled areas has been widely appreciated. Many in Agragamee have contributed articles and write-ups in the mainstream media. Agragamee has also produced a short film on grain banks. To sum up, Agragamee has continued its efforts in support of the poor and the marginalised in terms of a range of activities and adopting right kind of strategies to achieve overall objectives of initiating and consolidating the process of sustainable development.

EDUCATION: EXPERIMENTS AND INNOVATIONS

The focus of the programs taken up by Agragamee is as under:

- Tribal children
- Dropouts
- Girls
- Inaccessible areas.

TRAINING AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

Organising communities and build up their capability and self-reliance has been the major thrust of the organisation since its inception. It has been Agragamee's conviction and now experience that the development programmes can be effectively implemented if the community is fully involved in the planning, implementation, management and follow up levels of any development work. In these years, these activities range from formation of grain banks to providing back up supports to the block level people's organisations. Agragamee helps the communities and people's organisations to build up their capacities by imparting adequate training and exposing them to other areas to improve their knowledge and skill.

TRIBAL WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Education is a term, which is concerned with learning. Learning is a process of acquiring knowledge or skills by instruction, study or-experience; in this broad sense, this is a life-long process by which activity originates but in the modern world education is not

only a process of learning and becoming wise but also a tool at one's command to survive in this age of competition. Education is a key to development. Education is an effective tool for upliftment of an individual and society in every way whether it be personality development, social and economic development and so on. This is the only way, which can bring out prosperity.

Women constitute an important segment of any community and perform multiple roles as mothers, housewives and wage earners. Education is essential for them to be able to participate and benefit from the development process. Education can help women to enhance their literacy skills, better hygiene, caring for family health, utilisation of their leisure time to develop vocational skills for their economic development, to fight against exploitation and to conquer the disadvantage and discrimination which they suffer from and that is indeed the greater and foremost empowerment, when women are educated, their dependence automatically disappears or at least decreases. Education increases women's awareness and leads to their overall development, thereby helping the nation to prosper.

It is a fact that a mother plays an important role in the life of a child. If a child is brought up in an atmosphere of security and stability through the wholesome influence of a good mother, the child develops poise and confidence that are helpful to him throughout life. It is said that if you educate a man you educate an individual and if you educate a woman, you educate a family. So education of women is necessary condition for the development. As education helps in the achievement of overall development, therefore the tribal women should be educated and to speed up the literacy rate, the education for tribal women and girls needs special attention by the government. The extent of education among tribal women remained very low. Due to efforts of the missionaries, social workers, non-government organisations, some of the progressive native rulers and with some support from the government, spread of education among tribals, and particularly among tribal women is the least among all sections of population.

CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION

Tribal women are playing a very significant role in the economic development of tribal area as they are contributing to various economic activities, which are related to different sectors, and Education is one of them. The tribal female literacy rate is very low but with the effect of modernisation and urbanisation and due to the efforts of various voluntary organisations and missionaries, social workers, education is being spread over tribal area through constant motivation. Tribal women are now obtaining education and the educated tribal women are also providing education to other students and their family members. The educated tribal women also encourage the female education among

them for the upliftment of their society. Those tribal women who are uneducated also send their children to school and even colleges for higher education. Thus, they also cooperate in the development of education among tribal society. This makes their contribution significant.

Although, literacy is very crude indicator of educational development, even after 55 years of independence, tribal women are the most disadvantaged lot. Thus, even a large percentage of tribal women are illiterate but both the literate and illiterate tribal women are contributing in the development of education by sending their children to school and college, by obtaining education of different levels and by providing education to other members of the society. So, their contribution became significant.

PROBLEMS

To impart education to the tribals and to make successful the different programmes for the development of education, which are, running out by government, there are so many impediments, which stand on the way such as:

- First and foremost, the factor of extreme poverty operates as a check on educational development in tribes. Due to this, they prefer to send their children to earn some wages rather than send them to school. Therefore, there is a positive correlation between poverty and illiteracy.
- In tribal family, girls give every kind of help to their mothers in the work at home. During the agriculture season they work in the field with their parents. Even tribal women have interest in educating their girls but other members of the family do not want to educate them because they think that if girls will be educated they will be idle and fashionable only while they have to work hard in father-in-laws house.
- The tribal students have to walk long distances without any conveyance facility and this discourages them to go to school.
- The major impediment is the language barrier. So, the communication gap between teacher and the taught alienates the tribal child from the school.
- The tribal students are not attracted to the curriculum, as it is not their life-oriented. Therefore, they have no interest in getting formal education.
- After getting education, today only a part of the educated tribes get good employment and the rest are unemployed or under-employed. Therefore, the unavailability of employment restricts other tribal persons to educate other members of their society. No guarantee of service after education generates lack of interest for education among tribal.

- Lack of awareness, skills, vocational training, motivation towards education and new techniques limits the achievements of tribal women.

Hence there is the need to change the way of thinking of tribal to motivate them towards education and it can be done by following these suggestions-

- When every educated tribal person makes their hearty efforts to motivate the people of their society towards education as it is a necessary condition for the development of their society.
- Capable persons should be recruited from both the urban as well as tribal areas, they should be posted in tribal areas and it should make compulsory for such persons to live in tribal areas for a certain long period to provide their service regularly. Priority should be given to young persons and salary of such persons should be very attractive so that they can refuse it.
- Those tribal persons who participate in the development of their area, in the economic upliftment of women of their society and in encouraging female education in them should be honoured.
- Special attention should be given and measures have to be taken to increase women literacy among tribal.

TRIBAL WOMEN'S MOBILISATION AND EMPOWERMENT

In tribal society, the women play a very key role not only by involving themselves in household activities rather they also play major roles in social, agriculture by giving equal company to the men, collection of minor forest produce and other economic activities in the family in spite of their enormous contribution for the society, they have remained as underprivileged and ever neglected in the society. The problem in tribal areas is rather more acute than it is in other areas, where women face many kinds of oppression from a whole range of denials beginning from schooling at the early stages to due payment for work done to property ownership, access to social and political for a, to violence at home and outside, to asocial psychological conditioning from childhood that they must play second fiddle.

Initially, Agramamee was taking up issues like education, plantation, environment, etc. But in course of time, it was perceived that development couldn't possible in tribal areas keeping tribal women in isolation. It needs to put extra efforts for the involvement of tribal women in various development measures of the organisation including trainings, work camps, inclusion of women members in village committees and other decision-making bodies, creation of village and regional level women's forums, etc.

The objectives behind these are:

- Increase women's access to and ability to deal with development information,
- Initiate an exposure to and face to face interaction with government officials,
- Ensure their conscious participation in social and more specifically development process and
- Build up leadership capabilities and group solidarity for collective issue-based action.

Aragamee, during its intervention in the above-said areas, has changed its plan of action and strategies as per need of the time, situation and gravity of the issue after perceiving from the field experience, discussing with the animators and villagers. The major thrust of the programme was to bring about a critical consciousness amongst the women, so that they would be encouraged to see the contradictions within their socio-economic situation and take up collective action for change. Economic programmes were kept to a minimum, as it was felt that the important thing was to enable women to assert in ongoing socio-economic and political processes for wages, appropriate implementation of development schemes, improved facilities for women in the areas of child care, health and ensure that funds are not diverted or misappropriated. Over the past decade more of Agramee's activism and involvement with people's empowerment, the strength in women's collective action has become apparent. Women have exhibited a collective determination, social accountability and moral strength that has enabled not just the women's group, but the entire tribal community confronts situations of injustice in a sustained and systematic manner. Women have provided a more consistent leadership within their community and proved their ability for sustained issue-based action.

This potential needed to be supported through training, exposure and resource back up, as also explored so that the nascent groups forming within Agramee's different fields of action could reach out to each other and grow in strength and independence. The first step in this direction was encouraging and organising a series of series of conventions at the state level tribal women. These get together had a tremendous impact not only in strengthening the groups in the different regions, but also in drawing the attention of the state government to the needs and demands of the tribal women. Agramee has also taken up pioneering work with tribal women and had much success in organising micro-enterprise collectives who have been able to enter into the market on their own terms and improve the bargaining power of tribal producers, as also ensured better returns to the tribal family. In working with tribal women, Agramee realised that the major cause of the economic underdevelopment of the tribal communities was the poor bargaining power in the market. Despite the fact that woman's collectivities were able to have substantial cash savings through the formation of thrift and credit groups and

the tribal community could have a surplus because of the community grain banks, the overall income of the tribal people was quite low because they could not command a good price in the local market for their products.

To enable communities to overcome this problem and to help women's collectives optimise their savings, Agramee encouraged micro-enterprise efforts involving purchase of produce from the tribal farmers and processing for value addition. These efforts taken up at the Panchayat and village level helped women come together, and discuss their socio-economic problems. The outcome was that women's collectives decided that they would take up thrift and credit transactions within their own group on a very cautious scale, as nobody was ready to borrow from the savings of the collective. The capital saved up would be used to buy tribal produce at a fair price, process it for value addition and marketed with the profits being recycled as per the decision of the members. The different groups in different panchayats decided to federate to form a single umbrella organisation to take up the marketing of the produce from the different Panchayats. This experiment begun first in Kashipur in Rayagada District caught the imagination of women's groups in different districts where Agramee is working.

CONCLUSION

Agramee's intervention for tribal development combines educational input along with economic development activities for holistic development of the community. Apart from this, Agramee has made systematic effort for enabling primary age group children access education in terms of literacy, numeracy and other basic skills. This has been necessitated since the majority of the tribal children cannot avail of the benefits of the existing system of education provided by the government due to a combination of reasons including poverty, non-functioning of the existing government, mechanism and the necessity to work. The education taken up attempts to overcome these reasons for inaccessibility by adjusting schedule, timings, educational content and approach to suit the needs and priorities of the tribal people with special focus on the tribal child. Further, institutional support has also been built up for this process so that teaching-learning materials of relevance can be developed. To facilitate all this, the ministry of human resource development has funded this organisation for programmes of non-formal education, as well as for a district resource unit for adult and non-formal education.

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