

# THE OXFORD COMPANION TO POLITICS IN INDIA

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# NGOs and Indian Politics

Rob Jenkins

**A**nalysing the relationship between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Indian politics is a fraught task. Considerable terminological confusion afflicts the sizable literature on India's NGOs. There is also a long history to be considered: India's 'modern' voluntary sector, broadly conceived, goes back to at least the late nineteenth century. Disagreements over its relationship to political activity were present from the start. Just to complicate matters, discussions of NGOs are often subsumed within the larger discourse of 'civil society'.

Since the idea of civil society is so ubiquitous, it is as good a place as any to begin the discussion of the role of NGOs in Indian politics. What civil society is and is not, whether it is culture-bound, how it arises, whether it can be promoted, what purposes it serves, whether a transnational variety is emerging—none of these questions have generated anything remotely resembling consensus. The conceptions of Locke, Marx, Gramsci, and others jostle for pre-eminence. Political theorists question the liberal assumptions often smuggled into contemporary definitions of civil society.

Development agencies debate the practical utility of the idea of civil society. Members of civil society themselves cannot agree on where its boundaries lie, and therefore, who is included within its ranks.

Amidst the conceptual ambiguity, Kaviraj has traced a common thread running through almost all the accounts of civil society: their definitions are 'based on dichotomies or contrasts'. Civil society is variously 'defined through its opposition to "natural society" or "state of nature" in early modern contract theory ...; against the state in the entire liberal tradition, and contrasted to community (*Gemeinschaft*) in a theoretical tradition of modern sociology'. Civil society thus 'appears to be an idea strangely incapable of standing freely on its own' (Kaviraj 2001: 288).

NGOs—like civil society generally—are frequently located conceptually within more than just one dichotomy. In the usage that predominates in India's contemporary political discourse, an NGO is not just a non-state actor; depending on who is doing the defining, there are any number of things that NGOs are not. They are not political parties; they are not social movements; they are not labour unions;

they are not even, according to some critics, agents of popular struggle at all. Indeed, apart from its status as an entity distinct from the government, existing within a realm of associational freedom, the Indian NGO's defining characteristic is its *constitutional inability to engage in politics*—except, it would seem, as an unwitting tool of larger forces (Ndegwa 1996). Or so the NGOs' myriad detractors would have us believe.

This essay explores two paradoxical implications of this widespread, though of course not universal, characterization. The first is that despite their ostensible location in the non-political domain of civil society, NGOs have over the past forty years ended up playing a central, if indirect, role in India's politics. They have increasingly served as a crucial reference point, a kind of photographic negative against which other actors—party leaders, movement figures, union representatives—have sought, by contrast, to define themselves and imagine their own distinctiveness. This has invested NGOs and their actions with far more political significance than might otherwise have been the case.

The second paradox is that the more vigorously these other political actors have sought to differentiate themselves from the NGO sector, the less tangible have become the boundaries separating them from their NGO colleagues. By articulating their critique of India's NGOs through a series of stark, value-laden dichotomies, their detractors have provided a powerful incentive for NGOs to reinvent themselves. The result has been experimental cross-breeds with other species of civic association, creating new organizational hybrids. This, combined with profound institutional change in the structure of the Indian political system, has over the past two decades led to a more direct role for NGOs in India's politics.

### TERMINOLOGICAL CONFUSION

What is an NGO? This question has been answered in a variety of ways in India. Internationally recognized definitions are often a starting point, but rarely a final destination. Most international institutions recognize that the term NGO encompasses a wide variety of organizational forms. A key World Bank operational document—1995's *Working with NGOs*—defined

NGOs as 'private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services or undertake community development' (World Bank 1995: 7). This is broadly consistent with popular usage. NGOs are generally associated with charitable activities that promote the public good rather than, as with business associations or labour unions, advancing private interests.

Most definitions for NGOs include a list of the organizational forms they can take, based on the terms used by associations to describe themselves. These include 'community-based organizations', 'grassroots organizations', 'self-help groups', 'credit societies', and so forth. There is much disagreement as to whether each subcategory qualifies as an NGO—are credit societies about the public interest?—or whether a group's self-description is sufficient to determine its classification. Some groups that call themselves grassroots organizations may in fact have very little demonstrable following among ordinary people, raising the question of whether it is feasible to set objective criteria for defining any organization that describes itself with as vague a prefix as 'mass-based', 'grassroots', or 'people's'.

Efforts to stipulate meaningful criteria to distinguish NGOs from other forms of civil society, or to distinguish one type of NGO from another, quickly run into trouble. In one of the most systematic (and in many ways admirable) accounts of India's NGO sector, Sen distinguishes NGOs from Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and what he calls Grassroots Organizations (GROs), stating that CBOs and GROs are membership-based, whereas NGOs are not (Sen 1999). He then qualifies this statement in recognition of the fact that regulations governing various NGOs as legal entities (societies, charitable trusts, non-profit corporations) often require officials of such organizations to be members.

Sen draws on the international literature (Farrington *et al.*, 1993; Kortzen 1990) to arrive at a definition flexible enough to accommodate the Indian context:

In India, NGOs can be defined as organizations that are generally formed by professionals or quasi-professionals from the middle or lower middle class,

either to serve or work with the poor, or to channel financial support to community-based or grassroots organizations. (Sen 1999: 332)

Community Based Organizations, on the other hand, are composed of ‘the poor’ or ‘the low-income community’—a valiant attempt at conveying the general usage in the development field, but one that inevitably sidesteps uncomfortable questions, such as what middle-class neighbourhood associations should be called. Moreover, many NGOs contest the idea that they were ‘formed by’ middle-class people. In the end, despite differentiating NGOs from CBOs and GROs, Sen cannot avoid, for practical reasons, including the latter two within ‘the universe’ of NGOs either.

Partly because defining an NGO is so tricky, data on the size of the NGO sector is similarly variable. One longstanding NGO network, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), estimated the number of NGOs in India in 2001 at 1.5 million. One PRIA survey found that almost three-quarters of NGOs have one or fewer paid staff, and that nearly 90 per cent of NGOs have fewer than five members of staff.<sup>1</sup> Raina, however, cites a figure of 200,000 Indian NGOs (Raina 2004). Statistics compiled by the Home Ministry indicate that in 2000–1 nearly 20,000 organizations were registered under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act 1976, though only 13,800 submitted their accounts to the government as required. The total foreign funds received by these groups increased by more than 25 per cent between 1998–9 and 2000–1, from Rs 34 billion to Rs 45 billion.<sup>2</sup>

While it is difficult to arrive at a consistent and theoretically satisfying set of criteria that would allow us to impose precise boundaries around the NGO sector of civil society, a rough-and-ready practical definition exists, and is in widespread use. In common parlance throughout India’s ‘activist’ community (which I take to include all people working for social change, regardless of the types of organizations with which they are affiliated, so long as they are not state employees), *public-interest groups that are not ‘people’s movements’ are regarded as NGOs.*

The distinction is often contested, not least by avowedly ‘movement’ groups eager to avoid the ‘NGO’ label, which confers an establishment

status with which many activists do not wish to be associated. Using the term NGO to refer to a group that describes itself as a people’s organization is usually a not-so-subtle form of denigration. The ‘movement’ descriptor is prized as a symbol of political legitimacy, not in the sense of representing widespread mainstream acceptance, but in terms of a group’s commitment to a radical form of political engagement, the precise content of which inevitably varies from one context to the next. The NGO label connotes an *apolitical* (or worse, *non-political*, or even *depoliticizing*) form of social action.

The origins of what might thus be called ‘movement populism’—the idea that more formal organizational forms are alienated from ordinary people’s concerns and perpetuate elite biases—lay in the widespread discrediting of NGOs that has taken place in India since the early 1980s. However, before outlining the basis for these critiques of India’s NGOs, we must return to the age of NGO innocence. Given the extent of their recent demonization, it is not surprising that NGOs once enjoyed a golden era, before their fall from grace.

## NGOS AND NARRATIVES OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

NGOs have figured prominently in many well-rehearsed narratives about the trajectory of India’s democracy. These frequently involve a fall-from-grace element. Sheth and Sethi’s account of the ‘historical context’ of the ‘NGO sector’ nicely encapsulates the dominant themes:

the conversion of voluntarism into primarily a favoured instrumentality for developmental intervention has changed what was once an organic part of civil society into merely a sector—an appendage of the developmental apparatus of the state. Further, this process of instrumental appropriation has resulted in these agencies of self-activity losing both their autonomy and political-transformative edge. (Sheth and Sethi 1991)

How India’s progressive intelligentsia has viewed the country’s NGOs—particularly their potential contribution to an alternative form of politics—has varied considerably over the past forty years. It is

because there is such variety among NGOs, and considerable diversity even among the broadly Left-leaning intelligentsia, that there are no unambiguous patterns. But broadly speaking, during much of the 1970s, intellectuals invested great hope in the country's NGOs as a force for the reinvigoration of democracy. The prevailing tendency at the time was not to distinguish too minutely between organizational forms or to split hairs over the descriptive terms applied to individual groups, both of which were later to become standard practice. Analysts seeking to understand the significance of these new 'social action groups' for Indian democracy quickly embraced the term devised to encompass such diversity: 'non-party political formations' (Kothari 1984).

The emergence in the early 1970s of a tangible sense of optimism about the NGOs' potential to play a major role in democracy's reinvigoration coincided with other important political trends. The most notable was the creeping authoritarianism of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. She had abolished Congress's intra-party elections, following her triumphs against, first, the Congress old guard that had sought to tame her, and second, the Pakistani army during the 1971 war that created an independent Bangladesh. The movement that opposed Mrs Gandhi's increasingly personalized form of rule, her anti-union policies, and her attacks on judicial independence—among other things—included within its ranks a large number of NGOs. Several of these traced their lineages back to Mahatma Gandhi, and adopted a Gandhian vocabulary and repertoire of tactics. Many people who would later form the mainstay of India's social activist community entered this porous field in response to a major drought in eastern India in the mid-1960s, at which time they emerged as articulate spokespersons for an alternative form of political engagement, even as they organized and delivered vital relief services.

The civic flowering that ensued was celebrated as a democratic rebirth. It was also widely explained as a response to the failure of India's formal political process, still dominated by elite groups, to address the pressing concerns of poor and marginalized people. The mushrooming of India's NGOs was seen as substituting for the failure of India's other democratic institutions—particularly its parties—to provide

avenues of political engagement. 'Environmental action groups' such as the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Sangh, which kick-started the Chipko Andolan in the early 1970s, were supposed to help pick up some of the institutional slack. Rajni Kothari was among the earliest and most eloquent spokespersons for this view, but an entire generation of intellectuals and activists invested enormous hope in the capacity of non-party political formations to transform the nature of politics, and to extend democracy to constituencies that had not been active participants (Sethi 1984; Sheth 1984). This was a theme that continued long after the love affair with the voluntary sector fizzled.

However, it was not just the 'weakness' of party organizations against which Sethi (1993) and other writers were reacting, but their 'strength' as well. For much of the post-Independence period, party-affiliated civic groups have dominated the political space that should have served as the natural home for alternative politics. The front organizations connected to every political party—women's wings, student federations, trade unions, farmers' associations—usually lacked autonomy (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). As India's voluntary sector came of age in the early 1970s, it faced the task of transcending the partisan divisions that ran throughout civil society.

The high point of the NGOs' political role, the moment that appeared most strongly to redeem their promise, was the internal Emergency imposed by Mrs Gandhi from 1975–7. NGOs were a crucial part of the nationwide protest agitations that led her to declare the Emergency (Brass 1990). During the Emergency itself, NGO leaders were imprisoned, along with more traditional (that is, partisan) political figures. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) 1976, enacted at the height of Mrs Gandhi's paranoia about external subversion—the 'foreign hand'—allowed her government to deny access to foreign funding to NGOs considered likely to threaten 'the sovereignty and integrity of India, the public interest, freedom or fairness of election to any legislature, friendly relations with any foreign state, harmony between religious, racial, linguistic or regional groups, castes or communities'. This wide, though by now restated, remit continues to provide ample opportunity for government intimidation of NGOs, and of course

scope for considerable rent-seeking. NGOs also contributed to the political mobilization that helped to bring the Emergency to an end, and many were outright supporters of, or even incorporated within, opposition parties that brought about Mrs Gandhi's defeat in the 1977 general election that followed.

As the rickety Janata coalition government assumed power in 1977, there was more than a hint of Gandhian *schadenfreude* in the air: dispersed voluntary groups were cast as having rescued democracy from the havoc wrought by Nehru's legacy—not just his daughter's personalistic rule, but the entire top-down, state-centric approach to social and economic change. It was during the Janata government that a range of rural development programmes and participatory techniques pioneered by NGOs were incorporated within state policy (Franda 1983). Revisionists seek to discount the importance of NGOs in the events surrounding the Emergency, preferring to attribute the key role to movements rather than to NGOs. This, however, is to impose an anachronistic distinction that possessed none of the connotations that arose subsequently.

By the time Indira Gandhi began her second stint in office in 1980, her approach to the voluntary sector had become considerably more complex. On the one hand, she associated this constituency with those who had brought about her political downfall. Her government appointed the infamous Kudal Commission, which investigated a large number of NGOs—particularly Gandhian organizations—and exerted a chilling effect on many others. On the other hand, Mrs Gandhi had become severely disillusioned by the state's potential for effecting social change (Kohli 1990). It was under Indira Gandhi that India's movement towards a liberalized economy began, though this trend would assume more concrete form under her son Rajiv, and especially under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao from 1991.<sup>3</sup> Mrs Gandhi, and Rajiv even more so, embraced the idea of an NGO-led 'third sector' as a complement to government agencies and private business.

Once NGOs had received even lukewarm endorsement by the Congress establishment, it was perhaps inevitable that a major split within the larger voluntary sector should occur. This is not to imply that

conflicts were not already rife. But whereas previously the divisions were between various Gandhian sects, particularly between those that had grown close to the state and those that had remained relatively aloof, and between Gandhian and non-Gandhian organizations, the kind of overarching master cleavage alluded to earlier, between the political and non-political, had yet to assume its later, epic proportions. Ironically, it was not just from the right—for this is what Mrs Gandhi had come to represent—but from the left as well that the NGOs would be hit.

### THE BACKLASH AGAINST NGOS

As the 1980s progressed, complaints about the NGO sector began to accumulate, the voices of dissent coming increasingly from within the broadly defined field of civic activism. NGOs were seen to have lost their radical edge. When exactly the rot set in, what the nature of the ills were, and why it all went wrong varies according to which critics one reads.<sup>4</sup> But a common theme is that the NGO field ossified. Existing organizations became bureaucratized, either directly subverted by establishment interests or undermined by the loss of vigour among activists grown older and more risk-averse. In addition, both new and existing organizations became magnets for youthful new arrivals, for whom activism was, in the words of their critics, just a career path. Slowly but surely, according to this widely repeated view, NGOs were stripped of their ability to mobilize people to take political stands on controversial issues.

There is undoubted truth in this general plot line, and its basic ingredients do not vary hugely from the narratives of organizational decline recounted by 1960s radicals in Europe or North America. Organizations such as the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD), and the myriad groups of which it is composed, are sometimes cited in this connection. In later versions of this story, so too are organizations such as the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) in Tilonia, Rajasthan. Ironically, it was the SWRC's Bunker Roy who was among those who had sought in the mid-1980s to do something about the declining reputation of the NGO field, which had suffered from the entry of

less altruistic operators (Roy 1988). For his pains, Roy was rewarded with the charge of cosying up to powerful political patrons and seeking to control the NGO sector (Tandon 1986).

Arguably, what caused the dispersed grumbling about the role of NGOs to solidify into a lasting critique, which continues to resonate with many people a quarter century later, was a 1984 broadside issued by Prakash Karat of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). Karat's article, 'Action Groups/Voluntary Organizations: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy', was published in the CPI-M journal *The Marxist*, and subsequently appeared in book form (Karat 1988). Karat claimed the existence of 'a sophisticated and comprehensive strategy worked out in imperialist quarters to harness the forces of voluntary agencies/action groups to their strategic design to penetrate Indian society and influence its course of development'. The 'left forces' were advised 'to take serious note of this arm of imperialist penetration'. This would require, among other things, 'an ideological offensive to rebut the philosophy propagated by these groups', not least because 'it tends to attract petty bourgeois youth imbued with idealism' (Karat 1988: 2–3).

Since Karat's seminal contribution is often cited, although without much attention to its detailed content, it is worth noting a few salient features of his analysis. First, while Karat's focus was on the foreign funding of NGOs, his sights were just as firmly trained on those whose ideological support for the voluntary sector lent it what he considered spurious legitimacy. Second, because he stressed this ideological dimension, Karat's targets were not just development agencies, but academics as well, and because academics were represented as an intrinsic component of 'imperialism', a notion he invested with a definite agency of its own, Karat condemned not just foreign scholars, but by extension certain Indian academics too. Third, unlike subsequent critics of the NGO phenomenon, Karat did not distinguish much between different types of NGOs, except insofar as their sources of funding were concerned. In fact, his distaste for the entire 'social action' phenomenon, which he blamed for what he saw as widespread political *inaction*, was never far from the surface. In Karat's black-and-white world, 'the whole voluntary

agencies/action groups network is maintained and nurtured' by external funds (ibid.: 34).

Upon closer examination, it is clear that Karat's eagerness to attribute the rise of the NGO sector to imperialist forces stems mainly from political self-interest: Karat's narrative of foreign subversion (the mirror image of Mrs Gandhi's 'foreign hand') casts both Karat himself and the Left in general as victims. International funding agencies were using NGOs 'as a vehicle to counter and disrupt the potential of the Left movement' (ibid.: 2), which apparently the imperialists recognized as the staunchest protectors of India's sovereignty. In other words, the main target of this ideological manifestation of imperialist aggression was none other than Karat's own CPI-M.

The excesses of Karat's theory—not the legitimate concern that foreign funding may undermine the responsiveness of grassroots organizations to local articulations of need—served to absolve the Left parties of their manifest failure to mobilize the great mass of marginalized Indians into a sustained political force in most parts of the country. Karat was arguing, in effect, that Kothari and others had it wrong: people were not turning to non-party formations because India's party system offered them no meaningful choice. The problem, as India's industrialists would claim a decade later when faced with foreign competition, was the lack of a level playing field. The NGO sector, which was poaching on the Communists' political turf, had access to cheap sources of finance whereas Left parties did not. Karat's proposal was to strengthen the FCRA such that '[a]ll voluntary organizations which claim to organise people for whatever form of political activity should be included in the list of organisations (just as political parties) which are prohibited from receiving foreign funds' (ibid.: 64).

The self-serving nature of Karat's plea has not prevented it from becoming the prevailing discourse among social activists since the late 1980s. Karat's dictum—that 'those organisations receiving foreign funds are automatically suspect' and 'must be screened to clear their bonafides' (ibid.)—was incorporated not only into the official state oversight process (the Home Ministry's implementation of the amended FCRA), it also increasingly manifested itself in the

informal ideological litmus-test applied by social activists themselves. In such a context, it is not surprising that civic groups would take elaborate measures to avoid *direct* contact with foreign funders, giving rise to an intermediary resource-channelling sub-sector, which—in a self-fulfilling prophecy—would come to be widely seen as synonymous with the entire NGO sector. This marks the origin of the contemporary meaning of NGO, both in Sen's value-neutral definition, which stresses the 'channeling of funding' to grassroots and community groups, and in its pejorative sense—the NGO label deployed as a term of abuse by one civic group against another.

Karat's call to mount 'a sustained ideological campaign against the eclectic and pseudo-radical postures of action groups' (ibid.: 65) was taken up with gusto, resolving itself along the now-familiar movement-NGO dichotomy. Thus, movements worked at the grassroots, while NGOs were office-based. Movements were radical, NGOs reformist. Movements sought people's empowerment; NGOs made the poor dependent on charity.<sup>5</sup> Movements were political, NGOs depoliticizing.

In an article published in 2002, environmental activist Dunu Roy, too, cites 1984 as a watershed in the evolution of India's environmental movement, reminding his readers that it was in that year that Karat published his influential tract. Roy recalls that environmental NGOs were among those criticized by Karat and other Left-party-affiliated intellectuals. Their crime, as Roy summarized the charges levelled against him and his colleagues, was 'being part of an imperialist design of pitting environmental concerns against working class interests' (Roy 2002). Roy argues that this provoked 'a schism between political and apolitical environmentalists'. Here, the divide was not between those affiliated with parties and those in the 'non-party' arena, but between 'action groups' that challenged the state's orthodoxy and 'NGOs' incapable of transcending the conceptual boundaries of the existing paradigm. This pattern of activist one-upmanship has persisted, the use of the NGO sobriquet serving as a marker of the critic's distinctive political position.

The NGOs' critics often plead that they are voices in the wilderness, waging a lonely struggle against an

orthodoxy that lauds the beneficial effects of NGOs. As Sangeeta Kamat puts it in her book, *Development Hegemony: NGOs and the State in India*, 'what is clear is that the supporters of voluntary organizations far outstrip their detractors and critics' (Kamat 2002: 21). Convinced that NGOs remain an object of popular and official veneration, *despite more than twenty years of constant vilification at the hands of the state and of other non-party groups*, a wide range of observers continue to fulminate against a position that no one—or at least no one worth arguing with—really propounds. Even Chandhoke, one of the most level-headed analysts in this crowded field, whose book on civil society is filled with lucid observations, warns of trouble ahead 'if we begin to think that civil society is mainly inhabited and represented by non-governmental organizations [NGOs], or indeed that NGOs are synonymous with civil society' (2003: 70–1). It is not clear who *does* think in these terms, but we are assured that 'it is this very notion that forms the stuff of current orthodoxy' (ibid.: 71). Perhaps in the 1970s or early 1980s such warnings offered a useful corrective to lazy civic utopianism. But by the early 1990s, and certainly by the twenty-first century, when Kamat's and Chandhoke's books were published, the orthodoxy had moved very much in the opposite direction.

Kamat's catch phrase, 'the NGO-ization of politics', which casts NGOs as agents of depoliticization, captures the current conventional wisdom—that NGOs are the non-political face of civil society, and that their expansion threatens to depoliticize the movement sector. The movement-versus-NGO duality, cast in explicitly zero-sum terms, is now a mainstay of the international development discourse (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001). One of the objectives of the World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework of the late 1990s—a key element in what has become the Aid Effectiveness Agenda<sup>6</sup>—was to funnel less aid through NGOs, and to focus on building viable state institutions rather than bypassing those that do not work. Misgivings about the NGO sector in the international development community were a major feature of the literature even in the early 1990s (Hulme and Edwards 1995; Smillie 1995).

By 2000, what one British magazine called the 'Backlash Against NGOs' (Bond 2000) was already an established talking point among Western publics. NGOs operating transnationally had become a particular target of criticism.<sup>7</sup> Described as 'interest groups accountable only to themselves', NGOs have been confronted with the question: are 'the champions of the oppressed ... in danger of mirroring the sins of the oppressor?' (Bond 2000)

### STRUGGLE POLITICS, CONSTRUCTIVE WORK, AND THE WRONG KIND OF RIGHTS

Kamat has, however, articulated the NGO-movement dichotomy slightly differently—as a contrast between groups pursuing 'struggle-based politics' and those engaged in 'constructive development'. Influenced by post-modernism, Kamat portrayed the latter group as having bought into the modernist myth of progress, while stumbling headlong into liberalism's political trap of expecting constructive work amidst the poor to give way over time to more radicalized forms of mobilization. This critique is consistent with a long radical tradition which sees running health clinics, schools, livelihood programmes, and so forth as politically disempowering. Mumbai Resistance, a group formed to protest the hijacking by 'NGO celebrities' of the 2004 World Social Forum held in Mumbai, argued that by working to ameliorate suffering, 'NGOs come to the rescue' of the state—declaring it, in effect, 'absolved of all responsibilities'.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, 'the NGOs give employment ... to certain local persons' who 'might be vocal and restive persons, potential opponents of the authorities'.<sup>9</sup> Chandhoke agrees that NGOs undermine radical movements by drawing away from the path of militant resistance that segment of the non-conformist youth that might have been expected to embrace it. And by 'bailing out' government agencies through service-delivery work, NGOs have 'rescued and perhaps legitimized the non-performing state ... [and] neutralized political dissent ...' (Chandhoke 2003: 76).

Kamat's stark struggle-politics-versus-constructive-development dichotomy has two shortcomings. First, it violates one of the key

methodological tenets of the post-structuralist school in which she roots her analysis: she frames her analysis in terms of a strict binary opposition, thus committing the mortal sins of 'reifying' social relations and 'essentializing' political identities. Second, Kamat gives short shrift to the tradition in India of combining radical social action with hands-on development. As Mahajan reminds us:

Gandhiji's first 'satyagraha' in support of the indigo labourers in Chamaparan, while primarily a political struggle, also had elements of voluntary action or 'constructive work' (as Gandhiji called voluntary action), such as training villagers in hygiene, educating children, building roads and digging wells. After this, Gandhiji made constructive work an integral part of his political strategy, where periods of intense struggle for Independence were interspersed with long periods of voluntary action for the alleviation of suffering and social and economic upliftment of the poor. (Mahajan 1997)

Not only do many organizations engage in both struggle-oriented and constructive work, the tendency to see development activities as inherently status-quoist ignores the fact that groups often engage in constructive work precisely in order to challenge the hegemonic 'truths' propagated by official state ideologies. For instance, for some years beginning in the 1990s, the Rajasthan-based Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) operated a small number of 'fair price' (or 'ration') shops, which sell subsidized commodities such as food grains and kerosene. Launching any kind of business initiative was a source of much debate within the MKSS. Some saw it as a costly diversion of scarce energies; others perceived a risk that the group's opponents would portray the MKSS as committed to profiting from, rather than fighting for, the rural poor. The main motivation for running the ration shops was to counter the neoliberal orthodoxy that food subsidy bureaucracies—in India's case the Public Distribution System (PDS)—inevitably produce unacceptable levels of corruption, including diversion of food grains to the non-needy. The idea that the PDS was inherently pernicious, that no amount of reform could improve poor people's access to food, was considered a dangerous myth, propagated chiefly by the World Bank. By operating shops in a transparent fashion, the MKSS

hoped to demonstrate that it was possible to treat customers fairly and provide a livelihood for the shop's proprietors without resorting to corruption (Jenkins and Goetz 2004).

Clearly, NGOs are in a no-win position when it comes to carving out a more political role. As we have seen, for Mrs Gandhi and the Left parties, NGOs were destabilizing the state; whereas for non-partisan intellectuals—whether liberal or post-modern—they were propping it up. While NGOs have long been branded apolitical, adopting a more confrontational posture has done little to enhance their status among movement populists. One critic complained that whereas 'NGOs earlier restricted themselves to "developmental" activities, they have expanded since the 1980s to "activism" or "advocacy"—funded *political* activity'.<sup>10</sup> The fear is that through 'platforms such as the World Social Forum ... NGOs are being provided an opportunity to legitimise themselves as a political force and expand their influence among sections to which they earlier had little access'.<sup>11</sup>

Where politics is concerned, NGOs are damned if they do and damned if they don't. NGOs that attempt to graduate from a 'welfarist' approach to one based on 'empowerment' are dismissed as dabbling in matters for which they are not qualified (Sen 1999: 333). Human rights NGOs are a particular sore spot. NGOs 'may even have performed a disservice to the idea of human rights', argues Chandhoke, 'because rights have not emerged through the struggles of people, but from the baskets of funding agencies' (2003: 87). The rights discourse has been articulated by elites through 'layers of mediation ... provided by NGOs who are conversant with modes of information gathering' that NGO workers, in other words, have been, moulded into glorified bureaucrats rather than fighters for the poor (ibid.: 88).

Even when seeking to organize people to demand rights, as opposed to sounding off about rights in international meetings, NGOs are frequently dismissed as driven by a neoliberal project to create individual economic actors rather than politically mobilized collectivities. Kamat claims that when NGOs pursue a rights agenda, 'their concern is often limited to oppression caused by feudal social relations, and does not refer to capitalist social relations' (ibid.:

22). However, almost no evidence is provided to support this claim. Indeed, even foreign-funded NGOs have lent their support to campaigns to curb abuses perpetrated by Western multinationals operating in India and other developing countries.<sup>12</sup>

The no-win situation faced by NGOs is also apparent when they seek to link rights claims to issues of identity. One line of attack claims that '[t]he foreign-funded NGO sector has, with remarkable uniformity, propagated certain political concepts', most notably 'the primacy of "identity" — gender, ethnicity, caste, nationality — over class'.<sup>13</sup> Another, however, argues the opposite—that their disembodied approaches to rights 'ensure that NGOs will ignore issues of ... caste, gender, and environmental justice in their own work' (Kamat 1996). Worst of all, the rights-based work of 'movements' is undermined by "'advocacy NGOs", which ... redirect struggles of the people for basic change from the path of confrontation to that of negotiation, preserving the existing political frame'. The problem, put baldly, is that 'NGOs bureaucratise people's movements'.<sup>14</sup> Though desperately seeking to shed their mainstream essence, NGOs appear doomed to remain intellectually and politically out of their depth.

## BLURRING BOUNDARIES AND BRIDGING DIFFERENCES

Despite the persistence of conflicts (and the habit of binary thinking) among activists, some of the old barriers are eroding. Chandhoke argues that 'when they have tied up with oppositional social movements', occasionally 'NGOs have been able to transform political agendas' (2003: 71). The struggle against the Narmada Dam was, for a time, an example of this kind of coming together. Wagle notes that ARCH-Vahini, a Gujarat-based 'voluntary agency ... active in the areas of rural health and development', was said to have 'played an important part in the initial period of the struggle' (Wagle 1997: 437, and 457). When ARCH-Vahini and other groups began to question the strategy of the leadership of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) however, they were dismissed as insufficiently aware of popular feeling in the area, embodying an 'NGO mindset' (ibid.: 438).

India's hosting of the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai, for example, revealed a more constructive relationship among different sectors of civil society. Much of the early planning phases suggested that WSF 2004 would provide an occasion for another round of internecine warfare among the various NGO factions, between NGOs and movement groups, among party-affiliated groups, and between party and non-party organizations.<sup>15</sup> There were also groups that chose not to participate, organizing an alternative event under the banner of 'Mumbai Resistance'. Still, WSF 2004 generated considerable common ground, according to Raina, even amidst 'the divisive world of Indian social movements and NGOs' (Raina 2004: 12).<sup>16</sup> Raina noted that approximately 200 organizations (NGOs, movement groups, and others) formed a WSF 2004 steering committee that accommodated a wide variety of organizations and embraced the full spectrum of ideological tendencies.

That even the previously highly doctrinaire CPI-M has been increasingly willing to join hands with NGOs is one indication of a new spirit of coalition-building. Critics charge the CPI-M with compromising its earlier principled stand. One report complained that '[i]n a number of forums, CPI-M members and NGOs now cooperate and share costs—for example, at the People's Health Conference held in Kolkata in 2002, the Asian Social Forum held in Hyderabad in January 2003, or the World Social Forum ... in Mumbai in January 2004'.<sup>17</sup> Another group, the aforementioned Mumbai Resistance collective, was incensed by the 'revisionist' position adopted by Thomas Isaac, then a member of Kerala's Planning Board, during a previous CPI-M-led government. Isaac's ideological transgression had been to distinguish between *types* of NGOs. Granting the central tenet of Karat's critique—that 'there is a larger imperialist strategy to utilize the so-called voluntary sector to influence civil society in Third World countries'—Isaac argued that

there are also NGOs and a large number of similar civil society organisations and formations that are essential ingredients of any social structure. Therefore, while being vigilant about the imperialist designs, we have to distinguish between civil society organisations that are pro-imperialist and pro-globalisation and those that are not....<sup>18</sup>

This was outright heresy for many movement leaders weaned on anti-NGO rhetoric. Critics saw the CPI-M compromise on NGOs as consistent with the party's compromises on privatization, foreign investment, and other issues, demonstrated by the actions of economically liberalizing CPI-M state governments in West Bengal and Kerala.

NGOs are, in fact, often eager to support movements. This occurs informally—the provision of meeting space, office help, vehicles—and sometimes in more systematic ways. Local people often fail to distinguish in practice between certain NGOs and their associated movement groups. These can be seen as dual-purpose associations. In Rajasthan, the movement-oriented MKSS is closely linked to the Social Work and Research Centre, clearly an NGO. The movement-like activities of social activist Anna Hazare in Maharashtra are difficult to disentangle from the Hind Swaraj Trust, an NGO that he also helps to run (Jenkins 2004). In Mumbai, the Rationing Kruti Samiti, a formidable movement for accountability in the PDS during the 1990s, was closely interwoven with the activities of an NGO called Apnalaya, but remained organizationally separate. In the northern districts of Karnataka, a similar division of labour characterized the relationship between the India Development Service, which pursues fairly conventional NGO activities, and the Samaj Parivarthan Samudhay, which assumed a militant campaigning role against government and corporate abuses.

Another well-known example is the Shramajeevi Sanghatana, an activist group that spawned an NGO-front organization, the Vidhayak Sansad. These two groups provided the empirical material for Kamat's analysis of 'NGO-ization'. Though she anonymizes the organizations in her text, it is evident that these are the groups discussed.<sup>19</sup> In Kamat's account, it was the establishment of the Vidhayak Sansad that de-radicalized the Shramajeevi Sanghatana. She frames her story as a cautionary tale of inadvertent NGO contagion. It was the Sanghatana's engagement with the central government agency created to assist and regulate NGOs, Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) that brought about the movement's tragic demise. To continue working with CAPART, the Sanghatana had to float a

conventional NGO—Vidhayak Sansad—to oversee the health, education, and livelihood programmes essential for rehabilitating people freed from bonded labour, the Sanghatana's main field of work. Ultimately, the Sanghatana allegedly began to internalize the norms associated with the NGO's mainstream conception of progress. This manifested itself as what Kamat considered shockingly liberal notions, such as the rule of law and the promotion of science and technology as means of improving people's living conditions.

Kamat cites the case of the Bhoomi Sena (Land Army), 'one of the earliest militant tribal organizations in Maharashtra', as another example of the negative effects wrought by the dual-purpose organizing strategy. A Bhoomi Sena stalwart recounted to Kamat the story of one Sena organizer who

thought he could take the [foreign donor] money for the activists, and he floated a rural development agency, and told activists you can work for Bhoomi Sena but you can be part of this agency and it will help you take care of your family, so you can dedicate yourself to Bhoomi Sena. Many of our activists became more involved with that work, and this broke the Bhoomi Sena ... (Kamat 2002: 24)

Kamat portrays this case as paradigmatic of how movements get 'hijacked', a term drawn from Rajni Kothari, one of India's most well-known political scientists, whose disillusionment with 'non-party political formations' could be seen in his writings of the late 1980s and early 1990s (1989: 235–50; 1993: 119–39). Chandhoke also uses the term 'hijacked' on a number of occasions (2003: 24, 82). And yet, it is worth asking whether the Bhoomi Sena leader's account of that organization's decline might not be self-serving. The narrative bears a striking resemblance to Prakash Karat's analysis of the forces arrayed against the Left parties. In both cases, NGOs were seized upon as useful scapegoats. The Bhoomi Sena's failure to sustain itself as an effective movement, to build a more durable cadre in support of the cause, can be blamed on well-meaning but misguided activists who failed to recognize the danger of NGO contagion. The movement's leadership itself can be left blameless.

The existence of dual-purpose vehicles is just one manifestation of a gradual blurring of the lines

between the movement and NGO categories, which have long stood in mute opposition to one another at the conceptual level, while carrying on a voluble conversation in practice. In any case, the NGO-movement divide always reflected rhetorical positioning more than substantive differences. The trend since the mid-1990s has been towards the creation of hybrid organizational forms, in which the tactics and structural features of both movement-style groups and NGOs have been incorporated pragmatically.

The Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi (BGVS), founded in late 1989 to promote literacy, is a good example of organizational cross-breeding.<sup>20</sup> It is a classic NGO in many respects, undertaking programmes, channelling funds to CBOs, and focusing on conventional good works. That, however, is just part of the organization's identity. Formed in association with a government initiative—the Total Literacy Mission—the BGVS nevertheless sees itself, with some justification, as a 'broad democratic movement'—one 'in which even the state participates'. The BGVS particularly aims to encourage women's 'participation in a process of social mobilization.'<sup>21</sup>

Although engaged in constructive development work, the BGVS clearly sees itself as part of struggle-oriented politics. Its approach has stressed the need to 'link literacy with many basic livelihood problems and even with questions of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination against women'. The organization describes itself as a 'movement', and its activities as 'campaigns'—for instance, the Total Literacy Campaign.

In a reversal of the logic underlying the Shramajeevi Sanghatana and Bhoomi Sena examples, where movements gave birth to NGOs—allegedly with disastrous results—the BGVS has worked in the opposite direction. It is an NGO that sees itself as capable of spawning movements. Movements thus created can, in turn, catalyse the formation of additional NGOs. By tapping into local women's movements of various kinds—such as the anti-liquor campaigns in Andhra Pradesh in the 1990s—BGVS programmes have, in the words of the BGVS's own documentation, assisted 'the conversion of the literacy movement into a women's employment generation programme'. Nor does the BGVS appear to recognize boundaries between mobilizational and electoral

politics, with some local groups working ‘to enhance women’s participation in panchayats and the use of the panchayati raj structures to effect changes to further benefit women.’

The BGVS is perhaps best viewed as a civic group attempting to harness the comparative advantage of different organizational forms and mobilizational tactics. Indeed, the group’s use of the term ‘movement’ is better understood if we see it as ‘mobilizing people in large numbers and building up a momentum for change.’ In its ‘Samata campaign’, the BGVS’s ‘aim was to consciously develop and transform the literacy campaign into a cultural and economic movement for women.’ The guiding principle behind new initiatives was retaining the ‘basic people’s movement character of the campaigns.’

### ENGAGING WITH PARTIES AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

The blurring of the boundaries between NGOs and movement groups, and, as we have seen, between NGOs and the state, is just one of many factors that have allowed NGOs to enter, gradually and often indirectly, into the domain of electoral politics. Thanks to India’s constitutionally mandated system of democratic decentralization—which created new tiers of elected local government, including one for every village—there is now an almost ‘natural’ point of entry for NGOs into a sphere once reserved for political parties. And because electoral contestation now takes place regularly—unlike in the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, when elections were sometimes held at the whim of ruling parties at the state and local levels—parties themselves have a much greater incentive to court NGOs, particularly those with strong grassroots networks.

A good example of an *indirect* means through which NGOs impinge upon electoral politics is to be found in Krishna’s study of what he calls ‘*naya netas*’ (new politicians) (Krishna 2002)—members of non-elite castes who have emerged as important ‘political fixers.’<sup>22</sup> Krishna found that people increasingly turn to *naya netas*, rather than established figures from dominant landowning castes, to assist in brokering transactions with officials at the block or district

headquarters. However, *naya netas* have also been instrumental as ‘political entrepreneurs’ who, on behalf of a village or hamlet, negotiate with party leaders at election time for the price to be paid for the locality’s votes. This works best in places that have high stocks of social capital for *naya netas* to ‘activate’, in the form of en bloc voting.

Interestingly, in some cases it is through NGO-led projects that *naya netas* obtain the skills and contacts necessary to ply both their retail trade (assisting people with their work at government offices) and their wholesale trade (bargaining with parties in exchange for local support). NGOs draw on many more local people for their operations than is reflected in the data on the number they formally employ. For many rural development NGOs, just to take one category, outreach to remote locations (where dialects may be spoken) requires a large number of field operatives who are not employees, but are paid on a casual basis as and when projects arise. The biggest NGOs involve thousands of young people as outreach workers, survey enumerators, health education assistants, and so forth. This exposes them to the world of officialdom and often involves training in technical skills, such as the management of minor irrigation works. The NGO-implemented government programmes are a training ground for *naya netas*, often bringing them into contact with party leaders.

It is not surprising to find that among the NGOs that have become increasingly close to political parties as a result of the new incentives thrown up by democratic decentralization are those that have effectively straddled the NGO-movement divide. One example is the Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP). While many of its leading lights have enjoyed a long association with the CPI-M, the KSSP has also managed to maintain a reputation for defending its organizational autonomy. This independent streak was demonstrated most visibly in the late 1970s during the campaign spearheaded by the KSSP against the planned Silent Valley power plant, a project backed by the state’s CPI-M-led coalition government.

When, in the 1990s, another CPI-M-led government in Kerala initiated India’s most far-reaching democratic decentralization programme,

the KSSP was closely involved in designing the mechanisms through which popular participation could be engendered, all the way down to the neighbourhood level. It also played a major role in the massive training programmes aimed at assisting local communities in formulating comprehensive development plans.<sup>23</sup> In the decade prior to the launching of the new decentralization initiative in 1996, much discussion within the CPI-M had centred on the loss of enthusiasm among local cadres. By using decentralization as a means to re-establish links with the KSSP, the CPI-M hoped not only to benefit from the expertise of the KSSP, but also to rekindle interest among people disillusioned by the ceaseless factionalization of the state CPI-M, which seemed to some like a carbon copy of the Congress.<sup>24</sup> Kerala's CPI-M embraced the movement mode of political organizing, naming its radical decentralization initiative 'The People's Plan Campaign.'

Another organization that at one time edged close to party politics was Ekta Parishad (EP), or 'United Forum'—a group based mainly in Madhya Pradesh. The EP, like the BGVS, defies classification. It calls itself 'a mass movement based on Gandhian principles', but is in essence a coalition of NGOs whose common agenda is to place livelihood resources in the hands of ordinary people. It 'patterns itself after a trade union'—though the workers involved are in the informal sector: agricultural labourers, small-scale peasant proprietors, forest dwellers, and so forth. It calls itself a 'non-party political entity', specifically citing Rajni Kothari, though it distances itself less from party activity than other such organizations, stating openly that it 'has at different times provided backing to candidates who support the land issue and pro-poor policies'. The EP's literature even recounts the familiar explanation for its existence: 'there is a vacuum left by political parties and people are looking for other channels for representation.'<sup>25</sup> Its leader wants to broaden the 'public space' within which people can demand rights. Party competition is seen as constraining that space, because party discipline requires adherence to a full party programme, limiting the range of independent positions that party members may take.

The EP 'mobilizes people ... on the issue of proper and just utilization of livelihood resources'. It pursues

*morchas* (which it translates as 'campaigns') and more sporadic activities, such as *padyatras* (long-distance protest marches) and rallies. Its focus has been on pressuring the state government to implement laws that prevent the alienation of tribal land. The EP counts among its successes the creation of a state-wide task force on land alienation and restitution, the distribution of over 150,000 plots of land, and having pressured the state to withdraw spurious criminal cases against tribal people. It claims a membership of 150,000 dues-paying members, but says its wider following constitutes a 'formation' of more than 500,000.

The EP sees struggle (*sangharsh*) as peacefully coexisting alongside 'the promotion of constructive work'. It has assisted organizations to establish 'grain banks' designed to help *adivasis* (tribals) to evade the grasp of moneylenders. This kind of constructive work, because it attacks feudal relations rather than capitalist modes of production, would likely not qualify under Kamat's demanding definition of what constitutes radical political engagement.

The EP has nevertheless found itself further enmeshed within the electoral sphere. During the decade (1993–2003) in which Congress Chief Minister Digvijay Singh was in power in Madhya Pradesh, EP became associated with the Congress, and with Singh in particular. Singh was also said to have drawn on the local popularity of NGO workers affiliated with the EP, assisting them to win seats on village councils in exchange for their support for Congress candidates.

Like many other movement groups and NGOs, EP activists were not above bolstering their claims of influence by recounting the interest taken in their work by some political figure or other, or inflating their claims to legitimacy by referring to the group's strength in a given locality or among a particular constituency. 'Ekta Parishad is a force to be reckoned with' in the Chambal region—according to Ekta Parishad anyway—'so much so that during the general elections ... Chief Minister himself comes down to Mahatma Gandhi Sewa Ashram at Jaura to negotiate and canvas support with Ekta Parishad members' (Ramagundam 2001: 29).

The EP's strategy of hitching its fortunes to Digvijay Singh's Congress Party was considered a

mistake by many of MP's activists. By siding openly with Congress during the 2003 assembly elections and appearing on public platforms with the Chief Minister, the EP sacrificed much of its credibility among activists, and earned the hostility of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which ousted Singh from power.<sup>26</sup>

Movements have wrestled, individually and in federations such as the National Alliance of People's Movements, with the question of how best to approach the electoral sphere. Should they endorse individual candidates? Or should leading members of the organizations concerned extend support to specific candidates, without invoking the movement's name or membership? The NBA's Medha Patkar has at times taken the latter option. But when Patkar voiced her individual support for a Congress candidate (former state Home Minister R.R. Patil) in the Maharashtra state assembly elections in 2004, it was inevitable that this would be portrayed as NBA backing for the Congress Party as a whole.<sup>27</sup> Whether such support is in exchange for promises of action on the movement's demands is impossible to say, but as Raina has argued, 'the degree of mobilisation under the NBA banner has been difficult to ignore for most of the mainstream parties, and individuals from these parties have covertly and overtly supported the movement from time to time ...' (Raina 2004:15–16).

The MKSS, which as we have seen is part of a movement-NGO duo, has increasingly entered the electoral arena. A few MKSS workers contested the inaugural panchayat elections in 1995, but with only the half-hearted blessing of the organization. One who was elected was subsequently found to have engaged in corruption, a major embarrassment for an organization dedicated to rooting out fraud. The group's response in the next round of panchayat elections in 2000 was not to back away from electoral politics, but to insist that anyone associated with the MKSS wanting to contest panchayat elections subscribe to a list of principles, including, most notably, a commitment to thoroughly implement the social audit provisions contained within Rajasthan's newly amended local government legislation—provisions which the MKSS had been instrumental in having passed. Among the MKSS's winning candidates was a sarpanch who proceeded to both strengthen the MKSS in the area and demonstrate

the possibility of implementing development programmes without rampant corruption. In the 2005 panchayat polls, MKSS supported twelve candidates contesting for the post of sarpanch. Only two were elected, but the MKSS had not selected candidates on the basis of their 'capacity to win'. Rather, the overriding criterion was their 'commitment to follow the norms evolved collectively by the MKSS in discussions held over the last year'. The objective was 'to influence the mainstream political process in the area so that issues of importance to the MKSS became part of the debate'.<sup>28</sup>

The ability of NGOs to engage in electoral politics is limited by their legal status as charitable entities. Some NGOs, such as the Lok Shikshan Sansthan, a Chittorgarh-based 'autonomous organization' that promotes *adivasi* rights, explicitly build into their founding documents' provisions that *prohibit* members from contesting elections.<sup>29</sup> Whether this is driven by legal requirements or strategic calculations is difficult to know. Other cases are less clear-cut. At least one women's Self Help Group (SHG), established through a rural credit programme in Maharashtra, voiced an intention to use the SHG as a platform for contesting the next panchayat elections. This was despite a resolution taken by the coordinating body for the SHGs that forbade their use for political purposes. How precisely it could prevent leading SHG members from exploiting their prestige to further their political careers remained unclear.<sup>30</sup>

Many NGOs, such as the Karnataka-based SEARCH, train some of the hundreds of thousands of people elected to panchayati raj institutions. Because one-third of panchayat seats are reserved for women, some NGOs specialize in training women representatives or women's groups seeking to engage with the participatory structures—beneficiary groups, vigilance committees—established under local government regulations. Not surprisingly, NGOs engaged in providing information, guidance, and support to elected representatives or aspirants for local-government office can begin to resemble political parties in certain respects. NGOs that implement watershed development and other such grassroots projects become intimately involved in the workings of village panchayats.

One NGO that has openly declared its ambition to facilitate the entry of its members into elected office is the Young India Project (YIP). The YIP has helped organize many unions of agricultural labourers and other marginalized groups in rural Andhra Pradesh. The membership of these unions, which coordinate their activities with the YIP, was reported in 2000 as 173,000. The unions work to obtain benefits from anti-poverty schemes, and to insist on the distribution of surplus lands. The unions also support the election of their own members to panchayati raj institutions, with the support of YIP. In the 1995 panchayati raj elections in the state, members of these unions were said to have contested approximately 7000 village panchayat seats, allegedly winning 6100 (Mediratta and Smith 2001; Suvarchala 1999; Bedi 1999).

India is not the only country where democratic decentralization has provided an opportunity for NGOs and movement groups to enter into the electoral domain. As in India, this has been especially evident among groups that straddle the NGO-movement divide. Clarke tells us that Chilean NGOs 'played an important role in helping Popular Economic Organisations (*Organizaciones Economicas Populares*) and Self-Help Organisations (*Organizaciones de Auto-Ayuda*) to contest the 1992 local elections and to subsequently participate in local government structures.' NGOs in the Philippines 'sit alongside political parties in local government structures created under the 1991 Local Government Code and have actively participated in election campaigns, including the 1992 Presidential and the 1995 local and Congressional elections' (Clarke 1996).

## CONCLUSION

Clarke's review of the relationship between NGOs and politics in the developing world observes that the NGO sector is often a political microcosm, reflecting larger ideological struggles. The field of 'NGO action ... in parts of Asia and Latin America, and to a lesser extent in Africa,' he argues, is 'an arena within which battles from society at large are internalised' (ibid.). India's experience exemplifies this trend.

The organizational forms assumed by India's civic groups are far too varied and complex to be reduced

to simple dichotomies, and yet the competition for legitimacy, and the profound desire of activists to demonstrate their closeness to ordinary people, their autonomy from the state, their financial independence, their ideological purity—in short, their distinctiveness—has reinforced a fundamental divide between 'political movements' and 'apolitical' (or depoliticizing) NGOs.

This is in one sense a reflection of how crowded the market for social and political entrepreneurs is in India. But it is also a hangover from the myth (as opposed to the more complex reality) of Gandhi's mode of political action—an unattainable ideal in which personal sacrifice gives rise to an organic flowering of mass collective action. This is what Morris-Jones called the 'saintly idiom' in Indian politics. It provides a constant 'reference point', 'an ideal of disinterested selflessness by contrast with which almost all normal conduct can seem very shabby' (Morris-Jones 1963: 133–54).

However, could it not be the case that groups which zealously defend their 'movement' credentials—their non-NGO status—doth protest too much? Could it be that their critical stance towards NGOs reveals their own political insecurities? It is reasonable enough to interrogate NGOs about the nature of their accountability, the biases smuggled into their programmes, the distortionary impact of their role on the larger civil society. All too often, however, these searching questions are absent when critics turn their attention to the other half of this alleged dichotomy—people's movements, which are regarded as somehow organically accountable. But how true is this in practice? What exactly are the mechanisms of accountability through which social movements are answerable and sanctionable by larger publics? How democratic are people's movements? Movement leaders often possess social and political clout, which either preceded their participation in the movement, or else resulted from it. Their political contacts, media profile, or specialist knowledge of law or administration makes them difficult to overrule. Dissidents from within movement groups are in some cases branded as lackeys of NGOs.<sup>31</sup>

One hypothesis at least worth considering is that the persistence of the movement-NGO dichotomy

as a point of social and organizational differentiation reflects the desperation of social activists to shore up their legitimacy in the face of profound new challenges. Many activists are acutely aware that not only has the initial wave of 'social action group' dynamism ebbed, but, indeed, that one of the main justifications for the existence of such a diversified social-movement landscape—that parties were no longer capable of inducting new social groups into the formal political process—was seriously undercut by the electoral successes since the early 1990s of parties based on lower-caste identity.

Other shifts in the political terrain have disrupted established fault-lines as well. In the development discourse, the *post*-Washington Consensus on economic policy has supplanted the earlier certainties of neoliberal prescription. Once easily adopted positions against neoliberalism must now yield to more difficult judgements on the role of the state. Whether to engage with, or remain aloof from, the domain of parties and electoral politics is among these hard choices. Arguably, activists in India are increasingly in tune with the sentiments expressed by one observer of the Philippines case: 'NGOs cannot simply avoid politics or leave it in the hands of traditional politicians' (Abad 1993). The stakes are too high. The idea of civic groups transforming themselves into party-like organizations is not without precedent in India. After all, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the most successful of India's dalit-assertion parties, originated as a civil society formation—a trade union once dismissed by its critics as an NGO.

## NOTES

1. <http://www.indianngos.com/ngosection/overview.htm>.
2. *The Economic Times*, 4 September 2003.
3. For a contrary view on reform's trajectory, see Dani Rodrik and Subramanian (2004).
4. Different emphases can be found in, for example, Jain (1986); Sethi (1987); and Tandon (1987).
5. Foreigners often agree. One French academic who founded an NGO in India observed: 'Very often, NGOs think that they are doing good work but they actually are creating new forms of dependence. I have seen some poor

people totally dependent on NGOs'. See 'Interview with Dr Guy Sorman', TERI Silver Jubilee Interview Series, <http://www.teriin.org/25years/intervw/sorman.htm>.

6. For a description of the new aid agenda, see Booth (ed.) (2003).

7. The conservative Washington-based American Enterprise Institute has established NGO watch, which focuses on groups that 'have strayed beyond their original mandates and have assumed quasi-governmental roles'. See <http://www.ngowatch.org/info.htm>.

8. 'Economics and Politics of the World Social Forum', *Aspects of Indian Economy*, 35 (September), 2003, <http://www.rupe-india.org/35/wsfmumbai.html>.

9. *Ibid.*

10. 'Economics and Politics of the World Social Forum', *infra* (emphasis in original).

11. *Ibid.*

12. The campaign against a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Kerala was taken up by the UK-based development NGO Christian Aid, among other organizations. See [http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/campaign/letters/0401\\_mylama.htm](http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/campaign/letters/0401_mylama.htm).

13. 'Economics and Politics of the World Social Forum', *infra*.

14. *Ibid.*

15. In March 2002 and February 2003, the author discussed with members of the coordination committee, the Byzantine arrangements for ensuring that all major groups would be accommodated.

16. Raina (2004) notes particularly the 'divisions even among the movements sharing the same ideology', not to mention 'the historical differences between the left, the Gandhians, the dalits, the Socialists, the environmentalists, as well as the new and the traditional among the women, worker and peasant movements' (p. 13).

17. 'World Social Forum Controlled by Euro-American Bourgeoisie', Report of the Independent Media Centre (USA), January 2004.

18. 'People's Plan is Different from World Bank Programme', *Frontline*, 2–15 August 2003.

19. Confusingly, Kamat gives Shramajeevi Sanghatana the fictitious name of a real organization—the Shramik Sanghatana, another Maharashtra-based activist group.

20. Much of the following is drawn from the organization's website ([http://www.bgvs.org/html/literacy\\_campaign.htm](http://www.bgvs.org/html/literacy_campaign.htm)), as well as from discussions with activists associated with the BGVS.

21. Report of the Committee of the National Literacy Mission, 14 December 1990.

22. This is the term used in Manor (2003: 816–35).

23. At least one KSSP critique from within the CPI-M echoed the fall-from-grace narrative outlined earlier. A

party vice-president claimed in 2003 that though the KSSP had been born as a popular democratic organisation in the Sixties, it had lost its democratic character in the Seventies and had [by the end of the century] degenerated to the level of being yet another of the 70,000-odd non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) ... whose main job is to campaign for the development strategy of the G-8 nations (see 'KSSP Draws Flak in DYFI Organ', *The Hindu*, 25 November 2003).

24. Author's interview with a member of the KSSP's executive committee, Trichur, 11 January 1999.

25. All quotes come from [www.ektaparishad.org](http://www.ektaparishad.org), but further background material is drawn from Ramagundam (2001).

26. Personal communications from two Bhopal-based activists, 3 and 26 February 2005.

27. See 'Quietly Efficient', *Frontline*, 6-19 November 2004.

28. MKSS email circular, 14 February 2005. For further details, see Kerbart and Sivakumar (2005).

29. [http://studentorgs.utexas.edu/aidaustin/OFI2004/ofl\\_iss/presentations/LSS\\_answers.pdf](http://studentorgs.utexas.edu/aidaustin/OFI2004/ofl_iss/presentations/LSS_answers.pdf)

30. International Fund for Agricultural Development, (2000: 35).

31. Challenges to NGOs as agents of accountability-seeking are treated in greater detail in Goetz and Jenkins (2005).

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