

EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: GO AND NGO INTERVENTIONS FOR GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Sudeshna Parija
Lecturer, Department of Sociology
SMB Government PG College,
Nathdwara (Rajasthan)

Abstract

The discussion about social equity and justice is necessitated in the context of social inequalities engrained at the structural level leading to deprivation of the masses. The prevalent inequalities in the society mandate strategic planning through the desired intervention of mediating agencies for empowering the underprivileged; thereby ensuring social justice. The appropriate mediating agencies for the cause of empowerment is best identifiable either in the state apparatus or within the civil society. The civil society can act as the negotiating agency between the state apparatus and the masses. The paper discusses the relationship between the state and the civil society and their collaborative efforts in realizing the goals of social development and empowerment of the marginalized section of the society, particularly with respect to gender inequalities. The efforts made by the intermediating agencies i.e., the government agencies and non-governmental agencies, have been discussed to analyze the efforts made by these agencies in maintaining social equity and justice. The state activities are restricted to policy formulation, legislations, strategic planning and funding of development projects. For the implementation of development projects, the reliance of the state apparatus on NGOs is noteworthy. The NGOs, guided by altruistic motives and their close proximity with the masses are found to be best suited and committed to the cause of empowerment of the marginalized. They act as facilitators in the process of empowerment.

Keywords: *gender empowerment, social equity and justice, marginalized, GOs and NGOs*

INTRODUCTION

Development planning predominantly based on the 'trickle-down' theory assumes that the benefits of development accrue to all. Women participating in national struggles across the globe experience marginalization, which provoke them to organize separately to voice their common concerns. As a response to such upheavals, a feminist interjection was made into the existing development paradigm in the late 1970's. The United Nations has played a key role in incorporating the women's agenda in various spheres in and outside the UN (Anand 1992). Notwithstanding this, after long years of development and modernization experience, gender disparities continue to exist in various forms. Women are found discriminated in all walks of life including social, economic and political. Health and education attainment levels of women in

many countries of the contemporary world is found to be much lower than their male counterparts.

It is therefore being increasingly emphasized on various forums that development effectiveness can be ensured through gender mainstreaming. Gender inequality hinders the development agenda in terms of more poverty, increased deprivation and chronic failure in satisfaction of social needs. Gender mainstreaming ensures gender equality in rights, resources and political voice along with increased productivity (Kelkar 2005). Reviewing World Bank projects, Kelkar points out that projects that take gender relations into consideration in their design and implementation achieve their objectives better. This shows that changes in gender relations are a precursor to the poverty reduction process. Through gender mainstreaming, gender equality is maintained.

Equity and Social Justice

The two concepts of equity and social justice under reference mandates discussion in the context of the prevalent inequalities at the structural level and the concomitant suffering by the underprivileged in the society. Social justice is endowed with ethical and philosophical content and therefore difficult to define. Nayar maintains that,

“Social justice postulates that society is responsible for the undeserved suffering of its members and as such society as a whole should repair the deprivation and should construct social means to ensure that such harm is avoided.” (Nayar 2008)

The contextual reference lies within the paradigm of development, which intends to ensure an equitable distributive system through mainstreaming of the marginalized. Fundamental to the notion of justice, is the Rawlsian idea of ‘fairness’. This understanding of justice should be supplemented by ‘rationality’ and ‘reasonableness’ as Sen (2010) would put it. While rationality calls for judgment and conclusions to be based on reason and deliberation, reasonableness refers to the moral powers of individuals based on their sense of justice and understanding of ‘good’. Social justice can be understood as the social condition whereby deserving get their due share. Maximizing total welfare based on fair treatment to the worse-off or marginalized sections of the society are the means to ensure equity. In other words, equity is distributive justice. For equity and social justice to materialize, the agency of social institutions like the state and the civil society is required. Thus, the rational and reasonable intervention by the state (legal manifestation) and the civil society (socio-cultural manifestation) independently or in collaboration with each other can ameliorate the deprivation faced by the underprivileged section of the society.

Gender inequality is the most prominent of all forms of inequalities prevalent in societies. Equity and social justice in the context of gender envisages the concept of empowerment. Women are

being considered as contributing to the process of development and are recipients of the fruits of development as well. Kelkar maintains that mainstreaming requires

- Incorporation of gender concerns in planning, policy and implementation to provide effective rights and dignity to the disadvantaged.
- Women inclusive social, political and economic institutions.
- Transformation of cultural structures of power within the home and outside.
- Ending domestic and public violence
- Recognition of women's work (productive and reproductive) and contribution to the economy as well as their economic agency. (Ibid: 4694)

In the discourse of development, particularly, in the context of developing countries, gender and more specifically 'gender empowerment', has been addressed within the ambit of broader socio-economic conditions. Strategic planning suggests that the goals of gender empowerment can be realized through poverty-reduction strategies. The two-pronged strategy aims to empower women economically leading to their social mobility, visibility, dignity and self-esteem. With the capability to earn, women can become agents for reducing household poverty. As such, reduction of gender disparities acts as a pre-requisite for the reduction of other forms of social inequality. Going by Kelkar's observations, structural changes in the society with respect to gender roles are necessary through strong policy interventions for development planning to become impactful.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

GO and NGOs in development:

The state apparatus through their administrative machinery have indulged in development activities through policy formulation. For the implementation of these policies, government agencies are dependent upon NOGs. In governance parlance, the state (GO in the context of the present discussion) and the civil society (NGOs in the context of the present discussion) hold the same level of importance in realizing the goals of development. In fact, the growing significance of NGOs accrues from the increasing dependence of the state machinery and international donor agencies for undertaking the task of development. NGOs are engaged in development tasks independently; they also undertake specific development tasks on behalf of the government.

Ridell and Robinson (1995) observe that, in many developing countries, the government and the state agencies are promoting 'non-governmental' organizations to carry out their agenda of development. In the industrialized countries, the governments channelize their aid funds to and through NGOs for undertaking development work. The emerging significance of NGOs is attributable to the growing need for agencies to implement development planning. Thus interpreted, NGOs have come to act as intermediaries between the initiators of development (state apparatus i.e., the government) and the recipients (the marginalized section for whom the planning is done) of development planning.

In voicing the concerns of the poor and the marginalized sections of the society, NGOs foster healthy democratic practices. Tendler (1982) observes that NGOs succeed in their development efforts as they can reach the masses, ensure public participation and their active involvement in the process of development. They also conduct training programmes for the beneficiaries so as to enable them to gain control over the conditions of their own lives. NGOs are therefore placed at an advantageous position vis-à-vis GOs on account of their close association with the masses. This apart, their intervention being operation on a smaller scale or rather localized, they are characterized by flexibility and experimentation. Couto (1998) believes that the effective functioning of the NGOs in bringing about 'empowerment' depends upon the degree of 'representativeness' of the masses. Jordan (2005) points out that since NGOs voice the concerns of the community, they represent without being part of it, their legitimacy becomes limited. Kilby (2011) observes that the approach to NGO functioning is guided by a set of values derived from the socio-cultural milieu in their area of operation, most essentially being a '*desire for a better world*'. Another theory propounded about the functioning of NGOs relates to the fact that they are under the realm of state influence and control. Theorists like Fowler (2000) and Sen (1999) argue that the state and NGOs share an informal partnership with mutual interest and that NGOs often act as mediators between the state and the communities they are working in. NGOs in India function as

"In India (development) NGOs can be defined as organizations formed by professionals or quasi-professionals from the middle or lower middle-classes, either to serve or work with the poor, or to channel financial support to community-based or grassroots organizations of the poor. The NGOs are generally non-membership organizations and have salaried employees." (Sen, S 1999:332)

NGOs may also take a stand in opposition to the government and this sharply reflects the state-civil society demarcation. Fowler (1988) brings to notice the fact that NGOs in Africa strengthen the existing social organization by bestowing a cohesive and legitimizing status to them. For smooth functioning they may adapt to their traditional procedures. In Latin America, promote and also work with grassroot organizations which ultimately lead to social movements against government legislations in the interest of the poor. This strengthens democratic participation.

International NGOs have served as major funding agencies. For the funding part, one-third of their funds accrue from official aid agencies although there are variations between countries. In some countries like Sweden, government funds constitute 80% of the total annual income of NGOs. The World Bank also has formal mechanisms to direct the flow of government funds of countries to NGOs so that the involvement of NGOs is promoted (Paul and Israel 1991:x). Special agencies are operational in Germany and Netherlands to direct government development funds to NGOs. The importance of NGOs is expected to rise as the World Bank and bilateral agencies expand their funding of NGO projects. The growing significance of NGOs in the

development process indicates the increasing dependence of government agencies to carry out their welfare activities.

GOs and Gender Empowerment

The ninth five-year plan in India stated that empowering women as agents of social change and development should be the foremost objective to reduce gender disparity and to bridge the gender gap. It stressed on the formulation of a 'National Policy for the Empowerment of Women'. The measures to be undertaken are as under

- **Resource allocation and Economic Opportunities:** This plan directed the Centre and federal states to ensure 30% flow of funds from general development sectors towards women component plan (WCP) by adopting a special strategy. The concept of 'gender budgeting' was a novel introduction during this plan for effective targeting of public expenditure for the welfare of women. For participation of women in industrial development and to promote women entrepreneurship, proposals were made to set up 'Development Bank for Women entrepreneurs' to assist them in setting up of small and tiny sector units. In agriculture sector, greater assistance was ensured through rural development and employment schemes. The National Agriculture Policy (2000) promised to initiate functional and institutional measures to empower women, build their capabilities and improve their access to inputs, technology and farming resources.

The ninth five-year plan emphasized on women empowerment issues more extensively in comparison to the plans in the previous years. The 'Swashakti' programme launched in 1998 during this plan period was a pioneering step towards making women self-reliant and thereby becoming a strategy for poverty alleviation. As a strategic measure, the formation of SHGs was emphasized to meet the twin goals of poverty alleviation and gender empowerment. 'Swayamsiddha', a recast version of the Indira Mahila Yojna was operational in the KBK districts of Odisha as an integrated programme of gender empowerment through the formation of SHGs. In the tenth plan, adequate measures were taken to provide training and support services to empower women.

- **Social Sector Services:** In the social sector, health and education issues of women were addressed. New health care measures for women with a holistic integrated life-cycle approach with added attention on reproductive health care was emphasized. The National Policy for Empowerment of women 2001 worked on solutions to problems related to women's health through a gender perspective. In promoting education of girls, the National Policy of Empowerment 2001 advocated for the implementation of programs for motivating more girls to study science and technology. It also advocated for designing and developing appropriate technologies suited too women's needs. This apart, several

support services were planned and implemented and programs like 'Swadhar' was launched to extend rehabilitation services for women in difficult situations.

- **Legal Safeguards:** The National Commission for Women set up in 1992 as an Act of Parliament as a statutory body helped to safeguard the rights and interests of women. The commission undertakes the task of investigating individual complaints of sexual harassment against women and also reviewing women-specific and women related legislations.

NGOs and Gender Empowerment

In empowering women, NGOs (broadly identified through their close association with the masses) and their target group (women) are involved in a specific relationship with each other. Panda (2000) analyzes the modus operandi of the empowerment strategy of NGOs in particular. Analyzing the role of NGOs in empowerment, she maintains that the empowerment system has four elements: the empowerment process, immediate environment for the target group, immediate environment for the external agency or the NGO and the macro environment. The target group represents the under-privileged and the dis-empowered groups. The empowerment process links the target group and external agency through a project or a programme. Inputs in the form of various resources from the target group and external agency flow to the project. The success of resource flows depends upon the communication and implementation skills of the NGOs. Outputs from the interventions in the form of tangible and intangible benefits accrue to both the target groups as well as the external agency. The immediate environment of the target group and external agency affects the process significantly. These environments include local socio-cultural, economic and political setting. The macro environment, she maintains, also affects the process of empowerment.

The above analysis brings out the fact that NGOs have acted as catalysts in the empowerment process of the poor women. The mechanism and communication strategy used by NGOs is very critical in creating a continuous link between women's organizations and the grassroots women. Panda mentions two approaches that have been used by development agencies like NGOs. These are:

- Empowerment through economic interventions to improve women's economic status through employment, income generation and access to credit.
- Empowerment through integrated rural development program in which women's economic status is just one component along with education, literacy, provision of basic needs and services and reproductive health.

A third approach can be deduced from the general understanding about NGO functioning. Most NGOs emphasize on capacity building of its members. As such, the thrust is on facilitating better performance by upgradation of skills.

Gender Empowerment: GOs and NGOs

In India, NGOs have played a crucial role in the process of development since independence, though, the relationship of the government with the NGOs has fluctuated over the years. The relationship has been marked by cooperation and hostility. With the trending growth of the Indian economy and the rapport with the NGOs, Kilby (2011) observes that the government can resource its own agenda for development using local NGOs. According to Kilby's study, government agencies in India relied heavily on NGO programs for effective implementation of development policies. The urban-based NGOs were favored by the government as they possessed the capacity as well as the experience to implement government programs. However, the local NGOs interested in taking advantage of the government programs were required to re-scale their programs. As a result, fewer NGOs could continue their empowerment work directly with the marginalized sections of the society due to lack of proper incentives. As agencies of the civil society, non-NGO either governmental or private like banks are not directly involved in development activities due to high transaction costs. Being value-based organizations with altruistic intentions, NGOs are found to be more effective in empowering the marginalized; they act as facilitators in the empowerment process.

Summary and Conclusion

The principles of social justice advocate that the society is responsible for the injustice inflicted on certain sections and should devise mechanisms to repair the deprivation. Social justice can be ensured through a collaborative and joint endeavor of the state and the civil society. For this, the two should work at tandem and maintain a harmonious relationship. Social equity is distributive justice and this too can be maintained through a harmonious state-civil society relationship. As discussed above, empowerment of the underprivileged and marginalized sections of the society holds the key equitable and just social order.

In carrying out development work and the two-pronged strategy of poverty alleviation and gender empowerment in particular, the government has relied heavily on NGOs. The NGOs are altruistic and value-based organizations with the capability to easily associate with the masses. The role of the government is instrumental in policy formulation and legislative measures to safeguard the interests of the marginalized sections of the society. And the NGOs are implementing government-funded projects at the grassroots level.

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