Introduction
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Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are fast becoming the ‘engines’ of social development. Far from being small and ephemeral, these organizations have come of age to attain a stature of their own and become a compelling feature of the organizational universe. Their increasing magnitude and spread across regions and the various facets of human life, the ability to handle mammoth programmes, and agonistic engagement with the states on issues of public concern, have equally stunned learned commentators and the laity. Similarly, the idea of empowerment has received widespread support and has been accorded a pride of place in the current normative discourse on development. Of curious importance are the varying claims for empowerment made within the mainstream and alternative formulations for social transformation. Another conspicuous trend is the forceful discourse of the feminists and the foregrounding of gender concerns, which received fresh impetus after the Beijing conference on women in 1995. The conference witnessed active participation by NGOs and articulated a widespread sentiment in favour of greater power for women within and without their households. Accordingly, the three elements – the NGOs as institutions, empowerment as a strategy, and women as a marginalized section – have coalesced to form a development triad addressing issues of substantial human concern. This study purports to explore this development phenomenon. The aim of this research is to understand the role NGOs play in the empowerment of the poor women in rural India through a contextual study of the developmental praxis. The study engages itself with identifying the forms and possibilities of empowerment of poor women and the range of strategies available and adopted by the NGOs, both in their capacity as individual social agents and also the prospects for increased partnership for empowerment between them.

The study derives its motivation from the diverse circumstances that have culminated in the current importance attached to the development efforts of the NGOs to empower the marginalized – the immanence of power relations in human existence and the failure of the expectations of a revolution to transform power distribution; the ideological coherence of neo-liberalism and post-Marxism in their support to NGOs and efforts at empowerment; the opposition to the active involvement of the state in development efforts; advancements in the field of development theory; the centering of women’s issues in the development agenda; and the exponential growth of NGOs and the support they receive.
Context of the Study

Experiences of power and the lack of it have been an intrinsic part of human history. The powerful and the powerless have been a constant social feature except for the regular changes in particular actors. Human experiences of power essentially derive from two intermeshed relations they are implicated in, one, with the surrounding and at times unfathomable nature, and two, amongst themselves. Consequently, human evolution is a story of ceaseless endeavour to grapple with the living and social environments, one a 'given' for the primeval and the other a 'creation' of subsequent generations.

As varied as humans and their surroundings are, their response too has been multifaceted to include reflections on reality, diverse conceptions of the same, and actions or inactions based on these. Nonetheless, human interactions amongst themselves and with nature have been characterized by a basic predicament – to make (efficient) use of the available resources, and to challenge and overcome the concomitant limitations, including scarcity of resources. Accordingly, nature has been negotiated, tamed and exploited, and the barriers in place have been gradually surmounted.

At the same time, a variety of institutions – family, kinship, tribe, caste, religion, patriarchy, monarchy, feudalism, market, state and the like – have been created to aid the human interaction with nature and to satisfy their civilizational urge. These institutions not only enabled people to achieve desired objectives, they also chose the achievers by privileging some against others. These institutions per se also contained sets of resources and constraints that were differentially distributed. A few have always controlled resources within institutions and thereby exercised power over others. Accordingly, though none of these institutions remained static, with some losing their original vigour and others totally overwhelmed by new ones, they have nonetheless been characterized by a clear differentiation between those who wielded power and those upon whom this power was exercised. In general, two conspicuous features of power relations emerge vis-à-vis institutions – the powerful have invariably been fewer in numbers and women have been largely powerless compared to men.

Each historical epoch has been witness to specific sets of ideas and institutions that defined the powerful and the powerless and the nature of interaction between them. The powerful have always sought to frame and reframe these institutions in order to sustain their control over resources and to impose restrictions on the powerless. From time to time, the powerless have also reacted against the
powerful. This led Marx to famously configure history in terms of a struggle between the powerful and the powerless of different epochs, and propose the need for a revolution, which alone could provide power to the powerless.¹

Indeed, the yoke of the powerful has been challenged and overthrown by the powerless at different junctures in history. From the days when the Thracian slave Spartacus rebelled against the mighty Romans to the modern day revolutions and struggles against colonial rule, and the even more contemporaneous rebellion of the Zapatistas, the powerless have sought to gain power through overt actions challenging the powerful. Recent scholarship has shown that absence of such eventful acts does not necessarily mean acquiescence of the powerless to the diktats of the powerful, and on the contrary, there are everyday acts of defiance and assertion by the powerless in their interaction with the powerful.² These two responses of the powerless stand in stark contrast to each other. The first genre comprised of eventful acts that were collective in nature and distinctly oriented towards the overthrow of regimes and the ushering in of structural changes. In most cases, such actions resulted in definite changes in the composition of the powerful. The second type – everyday acts of covert defiance – were characteristically unconnected actions by individuals or informal groups and were largely limited to the personal level of interaction, and never aimed at structural transformation. Here the only possibility for a large-scale outcome was through a distant cumulative effect of the multitudes of people acting in their everyday lives.

As distinct from these two polar response types, is the currently popular proposition to empower the powerless through institutional means. This occupies a middle ground in relation to the other two responses mentioned above. It neither expects revolutionary upheavals to occur, nor is confined to secluded acts of mere everyday importance. On the contrary, empowerment purports to usher in changes at both the individual-and-collective levels, and to ease the gap between these by organizing the masses. The individual capabilities of the powerless are to be augmented and the people organized so as to increase their influence, and subsequently transform the power relations and structural conditions weighed

against them. The present enthusiasm for the idea of empowerment also derives from the falling expectations of "participation" as a development strategy to ensure adequate representation of people's interests in policies and programmes. Critical perspectives argue for the necessity to look beyond participation, which in many instances reaffirm the existing power relations disadvantageous to the marginalized.\(^3\) The idea of empowerment, which purports to transform power relations in favour of the powerless, thus poses as a definite alternative. Consequently, empowerment has effectively dislodged several of its predecessors – modernization, revolution, participation, etc. – to become the transformatory idea *par excellence*.

A significant aspect of empowerment is the role played by external agents. The powerless have time and again received support from external agents, but the intent and form of this support have varied considerably. Most religions have implored the rich and powerful to offer charity to the poor and powerless, and in particular the missionaries have been in the forefront propagating acts of charity. The mid-twentieth century saw the active intervention of the state on behalf of the powerless to protect them by providing welfare measures. Political parties and social movements of a radical hue have resorted to mass mobilization and politicization as the means of empowerment. And among NGOs, some have reposed faith in charity and welfare relief as social responses, while others opt for the empowerment of the marginalized.

The modern state has often been looked to for solutions to various social problems. The state, with its command over national resources and in charge of national policy-making, was naturally seen as the agency that could effectively address important social issues. The communist regimes and the welfare states of Western Europe were good examples of this thinking. But the 1990s witnessed serious debate about the role of the state in national development. This perception is traceable to two influential bodies of ideas.\(^4\)

The first of these is the neo-liberal thinking, which was directed against western social democracy and liberal collectivism. It was argued that national economic management and comprehensive social welfare had produced a crisis in the national economies. Advocates of this idea contended that accelerating inflation, excessive public borrowing and spending, the crowding-out of private capital, and the growth of inefficient big government were primarily due to the state-led development


model. For them the solution lay in rolling back the state, increasing the scope of market forces, and opening nationally regulated economies to international competitive pressures. Though there was some subsequent blunting of this enthusiasm due to widespread failure of the neo-liberal policies, nonetheless the role of the state was considerably diminished across nations. Secondly, the postmodernist social scientists also critiqued the modern state and questioned its intellectual foundations. Their opposition derived from their critique of enlightenment thought, upon which the modern state was premised. They dismissed the ‘project’ of the modern state as a “grand-narrative” that trammelled over the imaginations of its own citizens. In terms of policy, the structural adjustment programmes advocated by the international financial institutions, ensured that the state absolves itself of its pivotal role in development and welfare. The states were expected to play a regulatory role, with their economic and social functions taken over by business and NGOs.

From a leftist perspective, proponents of popular participation see NGOs as an instrument of empowerment that will enable ordinary folk to take control of development decisions. These writers are predominantly disillusioned not only with state sponsorship, but with “developmentalism” itself. They argue that industrialization and economic growth are usually accompanied by dependence, marginalization, and impoverishment. According to this perspective, the poor can achieve sustainable and equitable development only on the basis of full political and economic participation. This change in the debate about international development policy has aided the thrust NGOs have received in the recent times.

The churning within the field of development theory is significant for the manner in which the direction and content of development policies and the character of agents involved therein are delineated. Various theories have been advanced as to what constitutes development and how it is to be achieved. The intellectual foundations of and a conducive policy environment for, the recent spurt of NGOs derive from advancements in the field of development theory. Growth theory was the first to be preoccupied with the question of development. It saw development as more growth and assumed a direct relationship between growth and development, which it was presumed, would automatically solve the problems of inequality and poverty by enlarging the available resources. It was succeeded by Modernization theories. At the heart of these theories was the essential claim that the structures and processes of

human societies develop from simple forms of traditionalization to complex experiences of modernity. The theory argued that most third world countries could and should follow the path of economic and political modernization, parallel to the one the first world had travelled. To accomplish this, developing nations had to acquire modern cultural values and create modern economic and political institutions. Modernization theory was flawed in its understanding that development was to be based on the technological potential of an industrial or post-industrial economy and therefore would broadly follow the pattern of the west. The rural poor were seen as ignorant, backward and as receivers of benefits. Development was wrongly perceived as the process by which people move from underdevelopment towards the universal destiny of economic well-being. Few searching questions were asked about its ecological, cultural, social and ethical implications.

The alternative development theories – the structural dependency theory and the normative alternative development theory – questioned the logic of the prevailing mainstream theories. Dependency theorists argued that developed countries continued to use their economic power to create an international division of labour between nations. They redefined the concept of economic development by emphasizing the importance of economic distribution. Nevertheless, dependency theory failed to address important questions like human agency, environmental degradation and empowerment of the poor.

The normative alternative development theory originated as a loosely interconnected series of alternative proposals and methodologies which criticized mainstream development. In the 1970s, dissatisfaction with mainstream development crystallized into an alternative, people-centred approach. According to the 1975 report of the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, “What Now? Another Development”, development should be “geared to the satisfaction of needs”, “endogenous and self-reliant” and “in harmony with the environment”.

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"Alternative" generally refers to three spheres—agents, methods, and objectives or values of development. According to Nerfin, alternative development is the terrain of citizen, or 'Third System' politics, the importance of which is apparent in view of the failed development efforts of government (the prince or First System) and economic power (the merchant or Second System). Hettne presents "Another Development" as a combination of basic needs, self-reliance, sustainable and endogenous development. He identifies three principles: The principle of territorialism as a counterpoint to functionalism; that of cultural pluralism as a counterpoint to standardized modernization; and that of ecological sustainability as a counterpoint to "growth" and "consumerism". For Carmen development "is not and never can be neutral" and is couched in human values. Development is perceived not just in terms of the necessities of life, or diversity of choice in information and goods, but as concerning wisdom and the good life.12

Korten defines development as transformation towards justice, inclusiveness and sustainability.13 For him development is a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations. Max-Neef talks of "Human Scale Development" which is focussed and based on the satisfaction of fundamental human needs, on the narration of growing levels of self-reliance, and on the construction of organic articulations of people with nature and technology of global processes with local activity, of the personal with the social, of planning with autonomy, and of civil society with the state. Alternative development is satisfaction of fundamental human needs, which include material needs but are not confined to them.15

Alternative development differs from mainstream development in significant aspects. The objective of the latter is accumulation, while for the former it is capacitation and human development. Capital, technology, trade, foreign investment and external expertise are the resources for the latter, whereas the former give importance to human skills, local resources, social capital and local knowledge.

12 Carmen, Autonomous Development.
15 Carmen, Autonomous Development.
Mainstream development is growth-led, while the alternative perspective is equity-led. State and market were the agencies of development for the former whereas people and community occupied that role in the latter. "Another Development means people organizing themselves so as to develop who they are and what they have, by themselves and for themselves".\textsuperscript{16} While the former relied on science for development, the latter developed a critique of science and gave prominence to indigenous knowledge. The modalities adopted by mainstream development were exogenous examples, demonstration effect, and technology transfer based on the modernization perspective. The alternative view emphasized on endogenous development, modernization from within and the modernization of tradition.\textsuperscript{17} Autonomy is defined as the right to invent one’s own future. The basic methods advocated by mainstream development were import substitution, industrialization, export-led growth, innovation and structural adjustment programmes, the alternative stressed on participation, micro-credit, sustainability, and democratization. Development is indeed viewed as an “eminently educational process” where people, individually and collectively, should be actively involved in the process of defining their needs.\textsuperscript{18} The social policy of mainstream development relied on the trickle-down process and social capacitation through redistribution. Aid and assistance meant development co-operation to the former, while partnership and mutual obligation found prominence in the latter. Mainstream development takes GDP as the indicator of development, while the alternative theory adopts Green GDP, HDI and institutional densities. Alternative development theory gives a significantly different perspective on development, the key point of which is development from below. It is primarily concerned with alternative practices of development, that are participatory and people-centred, and with redefining the goals of development.\textsuperscript{19} This emphasis on alternatives and people-centred development, in contradistinction to the 'grand' plans of the state, foregrounded NGOs as institutions of alternative development.

\textsuperscript{16} Nerfin, \textit{Another Development}.
\textsuperscript{18} Carmen, \textit{Autonomous Development}.
\textsuperscript{19} The post-development theory which has developed as a critique on mainstream and alternative development theories is not dealt with here, because it is more oriented towards and advocates social movements rather than institutional interventions like that of the NGOs. Moreover, its emphasis is on “people’s culture”, indigenous culture, and local knowledge.
Women as a section of the population were characteristically absent in much of the writings on development till 1970s. It was assumed that all the development policies were also benefiting women. Ester Boserup's study proved that development schemes, rather than improving the lives of third world women, had often deprived them of economic opportunities and status.\(^{20}\) She argued for a greater recognition of women's role in economic development. The "Women in Development" (WID) approach that followed sought women's equality through improved access to education, employment, and material benefits such as land and credit. It called for integration of women into development. This approach never questioned gender hierarchies. It also ignored the possibility that women's development might require fundamental social change. Furthermore, WID-inspired projects were discredited for marginalizing women, as projects specifically meant for women sought to remove their concerns from the mainstream with women-specific policies. This meant that women were treated as a separate category and the necessity for their access to mainstream resources was not realized.

WID has been replaced as the predominant approach by Gender and Development (GAD). This perspective focuses on gender rather than women, particularly the social construction of gender roles and gender relations. "Gender is seen as the process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male or female become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally-defined attributes of masculinity and femininity".\(^{21}\) Gender mainstreaming has become the focus of much GAD efforts, since it was expected that mainstreaming would avoid isolating gender discourses as bounded and separate, and bring about broader institutional transformations and allow access to resources on a gender scale that were denied in women-exclusive projects. GAD also emphasizes the poverty of women as a primary justification for development interventions designed to improve the position of women. It provides for a gender analysis and thereby the possibility of transforming gender roles. This approach also emphasizes the importance of examining the gender division of labour in specific societies, particularly the more invisible aspects of women's productive and reproductive work, and the relation between these patterns and other aspects of


gender inequality. It also looks at the issue of power as it relates to gender and at strategies for empowering women and challenging the structures and ideas maintaining gender hierarchies. These changes are important. In principle the enthusiasm for gender rather than women in development approaches signals not just a change in language, but reflects the fact that there is an acceptance that it is not women per se who are to be problematized, but gender relations in which women are subordinated which must be interrogated, and that this analysis not only justifies the concentration of resources on women's development activities and access to resources, but also points to the centrality of gender analysis in the development of effective policies at all levels. This implies the extension of analysis from issues which were clearly concerned with sectoral aspects of women's development to generic issues of macro-economic planning, structural adjustment and debt, environmental degradation and conservation and civil and political organization, which are clearly of general rather than sectoral relevance. The important place gender as a category defining development initiatives has is reflected in the enthusiasm for gender issues and policies both in international development agencies and states. Gender has become not only a desirable attribute, but also a development goal of agencies and policy-makers. In short, Gender has been assimilated into development thinking. But WID-orientation is still strong and this gets reflected in several ways, and for instance, in the current support for micro-credit programmes that focus on women and adopted by several NGOs.

Though NGOs are a relatively new phenomenon, there have been several similar organizations like civic organizations, charities and foundations existing in different countries. The intent, character and functions of these organizations varied substantially and they were at best a motley of organized entities that existed outside the direct control of the state. The term 'NGO' first appeared in the United Nations Charter of 1945. Some of the country delegations at the San Francisco drafting


23 The manner in which gender issues are approached and assimilated into their policies by various agencies, state and non-state has been an important subject of analysis. For example see, J. Jacquette, "Gender and Justice in Economic Development", in I. Tinker, ed., Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp.54-69.
convention had organizations established independently of government as unofficial consultants. The role of NGOs in the emerging United Nations system was explicitly recognized in Article 71 of the Charter. The 1980s were witness to two distinct trends in relation to NGOs. First, the development assistance flows to NGOs in the developing world began to expand exponentially. Second, the number and functional areas of NGOs grew rapidly and revolved around development. As a result, the term 'NGO' acquired a new meaning, which made an explicit connection between NGOs and development focusing on their efforts to address the structural causes of poverty.

The explosive growth of NGOs in many countries can be gleaned from various sources. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has estimated that there are more than 3000 Northern NGOs (NNGOs) that are developmentally active in the south along with roughly between 30000 and 50000 Southern NGOs (SNGOs). The number of development NGOs registered in the OECD countries of the industrialized 'North' has grown from 1600 in 1980 to 2970 in 1993. According to the Union of International Associations, the NGO universe includes well over 15000 recognizable NGOs that operate in three or more countries and draw their finances from sources in more than one country. According to another estimate, the 176 "international NGOs" of 1909 have multiplied into 28900 by 1993.

This broader picture is corroborated by the figures for individual countries. In Bangladesh, the foreign-funded NGOs rose from 494 in 1990-91 to 986 in 1994-95. In the same period the native NGOs rose from 395 to 848 and Official Aid to NGOs as a percentage of total Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) had risen from 8

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24 L. M. Goodrich and E. Hambro, *Charter of the United Nations: Commentary and Documents*, Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1946, p.224. Article 71 reads "The Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-government organisations which are concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultations with the Member of the United Nations concerned".


27 *Yearbook of International Associations*, Brussels: Union of International Associations, 1993/94.

per cent in 1991-92 to 14 per cent in 1994-95. By 2000, there were an estimated 12000 NGOs and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in Bangladesh.\(^{29}\) India had more than 100,000 NGOs. In India, 10963 NGOs received contributions from abroad in 1994 and NGOs in India alone are reported to handle $520 million annually or 25 percent of all external aid.\(^{30}\) The number of NGOs registered with the government in Nepal increased from 220 in 1990 to 1210 in 1993.\(^{31}\) In the Philippines, the number of registered NGOs grew by 148% to 58,000 between 1984 and 1993, more than twice the rate (65%) at which private sector organizations proliferated.\(^{32}\) In Tunisia, there were 5186 registered NGOs in 1991 as opposed to 1886 only three years earlier, in Egypt it was 11471 in 1985 and 13239 in 1999, and in Jordan 221 in 1980 and 587 in 1992.\(^{33}\) In Kenya, the number of non-church NGOs grew from 37 to 134, by 260 per cent during 1978-87, and local NGOs by 115 per cent from 57 to 133. Between 1985 and 1989, indigenous NGOs in Botswana increased by some 60 per cent. In Ethiopia, the number of registered NGOs increased by 12.5 per cent in one year alone, from 240 in late 1994 to 270 in late 1995.\(^{34}\) In Brazil, the number of registered non-profit entities rose by 150 per cent between 1978 and 1991, from


\(^{31}\) A. Rademacher and D. Tamang, *Democracy, Development and NGOs*, Kathmandu; SEARCH, 1993, p.34.


76,000 to 190,000. By 1993, Brazil had an estimated 110,000 NGOs, with the largest number of NGOs in the developing world.\(^{35}\)

There has also been a rapid growth of several of the NGOs as individual organizations. NGOs such as BRAC and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh, Sarvodaya and SANASA in Sri Lanka, and SEWA and the Working Womens’ Forum in India, each work with millions of people in thousands of villages. BRAC, for example, has more than 10,000 staff, covers 15,000 villages and has more than 400000 borrowers.\(^{36}\) The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has over 160000 borrowers.\(^{37}\) The Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi has assisted over 72,000 families to improve their sanitation and sewerage systems.\(^{38}\) SEWA already has over one million clients in its low-cost credit programme. Sarvodaya works in over 8,000 villages with more than half a million people.\(^{39}\) The number of primary societies that were part of SANASA grew from 1448 in 1981 to 7245 in 1991, and during the same period the membership grew from 207856 to 702238.\(^{40}\)

In general terms, six key factors can be identified as having fuelled this proliferation of NGOs throughout the developing world. First, there is substantial financial flow from the non-governmental development agencies in the industrialized to their non-governmental partners in the developing world. This provides a reason for the spurt both in the number and activities of NGOs in the latter countries. Between 1980 and 1990, the total flow of private funds sent by northern NGOs to developing countries rose from US$2.4 billion to US$ 5.1 billion, rising eventually to US$6.3 billion.\(^{41}\) On a global scale, international funds channelled through NGOs reached approximately US$7 billion in 1990 – the equivalent of 16% of total bilateral

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aid flows; as against only US$3.6 billion in 1983.\textsuperscript{42} NGOs acquired this financial role in a relatively short period of time.

The second reason is that, this support for NGOs has been further augmented by multilateral and bilateral development agencies. In a neo-liberal climate of disenchantment with the state, and under pressure from member states, multilateral donors and their bilateral partners channelled increasing amounts of funding from the early 1980s through Southern NGOs. Official Development Assistance disbursed through NGOs grew by 1400 per cent in the ten years to 1985.\textsuperscript{43} The proportion of total aid from member countries of the OECD channelled through NGOs rose from 0.7 per cent in 1975 to 3.6% in 1985, and at least 5 per cent in 1993-94; US$ 2.3 billion in absolute terms.\textsuperscript{44} In India, NGO revenue from abroad at Rs.9 billion (US$ 520 million), was equivalent to approximately 25 per cent of official development assistance flows in the early 1990s. When contributions from government to NGOs were taken into account, the annual income of Indian NGOs, Rs. 10 billion, was equivalent to 10 per cent of the government’s anti-poverty expenditure.\textsuperscript{45}

At the third level, as a response to the economic crisis in the 1980s, governments in many developing countries changed their approach towards the NGOs. The earlier attitude of caution and cynicism gave way to recognition and greater involvement for NGOs in socio-economic programmes. In Chile, for instance, the growth in poverty, from 15 per cent of families in 1970 to 30 per cent in 1982, promoted the proliferation of NGOs concerned with health and social welfare.\textsuperscript{46} In Kenya, up to 35 per cent of health services were provided by NGOs in the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{47} Multilateral agencies like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank now seek NGO partners for the implementation of development projects and highly favour government-NGO joint ventures.

\textsuperscript{42} J. Farrington, and D. Lewis, "Introduction", in Farrington and Lewis, eds., \textit{Non-Government Organisations and the State in Asia}, p.3.
\textsuperscript{43} H. Van Der Heidjen, "The Reconciliation of NGO Autonomy, Program Integrity and Operational Effectiveness with Accountability to Donors", \textit{World Development}, Special Supplement 1987, p.104.
\textsuperscript{45} M. Robinson, J. Farrington and S. Satish, "Overview", in Farrington and Lewis, eds., \textit{Non-Government Organisations and the State in Asia}, p.93.
The fourth factor is the fragmentation in many developing countries of large-scale social movements that were once ideologically and organisationally cohesive and the ensuing shifts in the 'themes' of social mobilization. The systematic repression of class-based, left-wing social movements in Asia, Latin America and parts of Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, and the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, compounded by the social differentiation triggered by economic growth, restructured the basis of the organization and mobilization of disenfranchised sections of the population. Since the late 1980s, Lehmann argues, "in the place of large formal organisations, we find a myriad of small-scale dispersed movements engaged in an enormous variety of conflicts". In turn, NGOs acquired important roles in initiating and sustaining these myriad protest movements.

The fifth reason is the complex process of social differentiation, economic growth throughout the developing world has promoted. Institutions that traditionally facilitated participation, such as political parties and trade unions, have failed to respond by effectively articulating the new concerns of disparate constituencies. As a result, a variety of social forces have contributed to the establishment or expansion of NGOs. For example, Indian NGOs emerged from a long tradition of charitable and Gandhian traditions of voluntary action, nevertheless challenging its welfare delivery approach. Indonesian NGOs were formed by ex-student activists as an alternative to Marxism. Brazilian NGOs were founded by secular and catholic leftists, who challenged the traditional authoritarian relations of the dominant social sectors and the traditional left with "popular sectors".

Sixth, international organizations, especially the specialized agencies of the UN system, actively involved NGOs in their efforts. More importantly, these agencies gave 'space' to the NGOs in conference rooms, which the NGOs used effectively to raise issues ignored by governmental agencies that were of substantial public concern. For instance, 1200 environmental organizations were accredited observers to the final meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) of 1992 in contrast to the 250 groups at

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49 Ibid., p.157.
United Nations Conference on Human Environment of 1972.\textsuperscript{51} From June 14 to 25, 1993 the Second World Conference on Human Rights took place in Vienna, and non-governmental organizations were involved in this largest gathering on the issue of human rights. Around 2100 official representatives from 171 countries participated at this international meeting gathered by the United Nations and another 3600 NGO representatives of 840 organizations were present at Vienna.\textsuperscript{52}

The cumulative result of these factors has been a dramatic increase in the number of NGOs throughout the developing world, in many cases exceeding rates of economic growth and a concomitant increase in their prominence in national politics. The implications of this growth and expansion are profound. According to Salamon, "we are in the midst of a global ‘associational revolution’ that may prove to be as significant to the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation-state was to the latter nineteenth".\textsuperscript{53} As a result of this "associational revolution", NGOs have become significant economic and political actors. This relatively new expansion provided NGOs with significant organisational reach: Estimates for the mid-1980s suggested the existence at that time of 12000 separate NGO projects in Africa and 30000 in Asia, with beneficiary estimates for roughly this period involving 25 million in Latin America, 12 million in Africa and 60 million in Asia.\textsuperscript{54} According to one official estimate, the programmes of NGOs benefited 250 million people in the third world in 1992, compared to the 100 million their activities "touched" in the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{55} These numbers denote the increasing legitimacy the NGOs have managed to gain in the eyes of donors, official or non-official. In Bangladesh, NGOs constitute a virtual parallel state, their programmes reaching 10 per cent to 20 per cent of the population (roughly 13 million to 26 million people) in the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{56}


\textsuperscript{54} Charlton and May, "NGOs, Politics, Projects and Probity", pp.239-240.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
Situating the Problem

Underlying this proliferation and increasing legitimacy of the NGOs are certain wider perceptions of the NGO character. Four broad perceptions frequently encountered are the notions that NGOs represent a force enabling a democratic and pluralist civil society; that they have particular strengths in poverty alleviation and sustainable development; and that they offer the prospect of enhancing the efficiency of the state; and finally, they have the proclivity and potential to empower the marginalized, thereby enabling them to take control of their lives. This NGO growth raises important questions about the nature of NGO action and its impact on politics, the state, civil society, and for the poor and powerless. Does the NGO community strengthen civil society? Can it transform relations between the state and civil society? Can it empower the multitudes traditionally marginalized experiencing several forms of powerlessness?

As a force of democracy, NGOs have increasingly become associated with the grassroots,\(^57\) with development and democracy\(^58\) and with alternative development and empowerment.\(^59\) A case in point is the Philippines, where NGO representatives helped to draft the 1987 constitution, and since then have participated in election campaigns, in local government structures and in contemporary issue-based social movements. Since 1986, however, NGOs have worked closely with the government in the implementation of development projects and in policy-making concerned with issues such as human rights, the environment and macro-economic policy. At the same time, they have advocated further change and reform and protested against measures, which undermine the interests of constituencies they seek to represent. Fox comments that rural democratization involves the emergence and consolidation of social and political institutions capable of representing rural interests vis-à-vis the state.\(^60\) For him non-membership NGOs are one such institution with the potential to represent and defend rural interests. Friedmann draws attention to the ability of NGOs to pressurize the state to be more responsive to the claims of the NGOs.

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disempowered. The concern in these writings has been less with the establishment of multi-party democracy in the western liberal sense. For them the work of NGOs constitutes part of the process of building a more inclusive and equitable rural development. They are more concerned with the establishment of checks and balances on the use and abuse of power, with the struggle for liberty to express views at odds with those of established interests and with increasing representation of the views of the poor.

Another perspective is that NGOs' commitment to poverty alleviation underpins a strong presence in rural areas. It is seen that their respect for self-determination encourages them to support the establishment of mechanisms and grassroots organizations through which the rural poor can express views about their needs. Their small scale and flexibility allow rapid response to these needs.

Those who view NGOs as efficiency-enhancers are primarily concerned with the potential that NGOs offer for enhancing the efficiency of service delivery in general, and of governmental services in particular. The arguments advanced by them are broadly threefold: first, that a strong presence in rural areas and detailed knowledge of the needs of the poor allows NGOs to deliver more appropriate services to the poor more cost-effectively than the public sector could. The perception of NGOs as service providers is also common among governments in the developing world as documented by Brown and Tandon (India), Sanyal (Bangladesh), Farrington and Lewis (Nepal and Philippines), Wellard and Copestake (Ghana and Zimbabwe), and Davis, Hulme and Woodhorse (Gambia).

This orientation towards the NGOs as "service providers" is global in scope and the Northern states' support to NGO service provision is also on the increase. Smith and

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61 Friedmann, *Empowerment.*
63 Clark, *Democratizing Development,* pp.78-81.
67 Farrington and Lewis, eds., *Non-Government Organisations and the State in Asia.*
Lipsky note that this likeness for NGOs by the states has other reasons: the NGOs can be discarded whenever necessary.\textsuperscript{70} The second argument is that the innovations (technological, methodological or institutional) developed by NGOs would enhance the efficiency of the state if it were to adopt them and apply them on a wider scale.\textsuperscript{71} It is argued that many NGOs are concerned with technologies that are more environmentally sustainable than those relying on high inputs of agro-chemicals and mechanical power, and so offer prospects of efficiency enhancement in the long run. In terms of their capacity to innovate, there is evidence that individual NGOs have been effective in some fields of service-delivery\textsuperscript{72} and in pioneering new planning methodologies, particularly participatory rural appraisal.\textsuperscript{73} The third perspective is that NGOs can influence the agenda of the state informally through personal contacts and more formally through representation on advisory bodies. This ‘demand-pull’ can be sustained in the long run by a gradual take-over of NGOs’ responsibilities by the GRO that they seek to support.\textsuperscript{74}

Some recent works have taken a critical view of the NGOs. Tendler has assembled evidence from Latin America that NGOs do not always deliver sustainable benefits or reach the very poorest.\textsuperscript{75} Following on Tendler’s work recent studies of GRO and NGO performance in Africa,\textsuperscript{76} Asia\textsuperscript{77} and Latin America\textsuperscript{78} have questioned the accepted wisdom about the levels of poverty-reach, cost-effectiveness, popular

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} Hulme and Edwards, eds., \textit{Making a Difference}, 1992.
\item \textsuperscript{73} R. Chambers, \textit{Challenging the Professionals}; London: Longman, 1993.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Carroll, \textit{Intermediary NGOs}, pp.126-30.
\end{itemize}
participation, flexibility and innovation among the NGOs and the GROs. Fowler for instance argues that for Africa the democratizing potential of NGOs is likely to be more limited than is widely believed.\(^79\) Dicklitch has also questioned the democratizing role played by NGOs in Uganda.\(^80\) Riddell and Robinson, reporting on a study of the impact of NGOs’ rural income-generating activities in Africa and Asia, doubt whether they have been able to reach the lowest 10-20% of the rural poor,\(^81\) and Carroll’s impact-assessment study in Latin America suggests that NGOs have been unable to reach the poorest 20-30 per cent.\(^82\) Claims that the NGOs reach “the poorest of the poor” are often inaccurate as demonstrated in NGO credit schemes\(^83\) and other economic interventions.\(^84\) Hashemi finds that large Bangladeshi NGOs fail to reach the poorest in their efforts to achieve rapid expansion in geographical coverage, the drive for “breadth” instead of “depth”.\(^85\) Hulme and Edwards tell us that NGOs are responding more to donors on the supply-side than the poor on the demand-side.\(^86\) There is no empirical study that demonstrates that NGO provision is cheaper than public provision. With the increased flow of aid to the NGOs, Farrington and Lewis argue that the widening gap between the government and the NGO resources make state inefficiency a “self-perpetuating reality.”\(^87\)

There are also fears expressed about the possible “rewriting of the social contract”\(^88\) between the government and its citizens as a result of NGO substitution of the state in key aspects of the development process, particularly the provision of services. At a deeper level there are worries about the long term impact of the NGO service provision on access to quality services for all.\(^89\) Robinson points out that large, influential and well-funded NGOs may be able to “concentrate resources in regions and sectors that might not be most important for national development”.\(^90\) Edwards talks about the possibility of the emergence of a “patchwork quilt” of

\(^79\) Fowler, The Role of NGOs in Changing State-Society Relations.
\(^81\) Riddell and Robinson, The Impact of NGO Poverty Alleviation Projects.
\(^82\) Carroll, Intermediary NGOs.
\(^83\) Hulme and Mosley, Finance Against Poverty.
\(^84\) Riddell and Robinson, The Impact of NGO Poverty Alleviation Projects.
\(^85\) Hashemi and Schuler, State and NGO Support Networks in Rural Bangladesh.
\(^86\) Hulme and Edwards, NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?
\(^87\) Farrington and Lewis, Non-Government Organizations and the State in Asia, p.333.
\(^88\) Farrington and Bebbington, Reluctant Partners?, p.188.
services of varying quality against the background of weak central oversight. There is evidence for Asia and Latin America that time and space for reflection and innovation are increasingly getting reduced, as NGOs are becoming contractors to donors and governments. There are arguments that NGO service provision acts as a palliative, a barrier to the more fundamental structural changes in the ownership of land and capital assets which are essential if significant economic and political changes are to occur. The accountability of a non-elected actor when providing services to "clients" is very different to the formal relationships established between governments and citizens, giving rise to what Wood calls "a franchise state". For these reasons, some argue that it should be the membership organizations (GROs) who should lead local development and not other types of NGOs. Despite these critical views on NGOs, these organisations cannot be discarded altogether as agencies for the upliftment of the poor, given their capacity to target poor people better than government and commercial institutions.

Grassroots Organizations (GROs) have been proposed by many practitioners and scholars to be the most suitable agencies for poverty-alleviation. The argument advanced is that the rural poor are extremely knowledgeable and skilful managers of their immediate resources. Consequently, their ideas ought to be taken very seriously especially because they are part of the practices oriented towards the goals of these agents. Chambers has argued forcefully for understanding and then using as building blocks the ideas and responses of the same rural poor who are coping with a difficult environment. The knowledge and practices of the rural poor are believed to be successful survival/ livelihood strategies and extremely sustainable.

92 Farrington and Lewis, Non-Government Organisations and the State in Asia, p.331.
93 Riddell and Robinson, The Impact of NGO Poverty Alleviation Projects.
96 Smillie and Helmich, NGOs and Governments; Farrington and Bebbington, Reluctant Partners?.
99 Chambers, Rural Development.
This gives rise to propositions like “autonomous development”,100 “people’s self-development” and a severe criticism of the role of outsiders.101

These positive features notwithstanding, overlooking the problems in GROs will only perpetuate a romantic populism, which has proclaimed the virtues of rural peoples’ knowledge, life and capacity to organize. GROs are found to be as accountable or unaccountable to the people as the NGOs are to the grassroots. Watts reminds us that there are structural reasons for the failure of peasant initiatives to solve their problems.102 Corbridge stresses the need for co-ordinated initiatives both inside and outside the peasants’ local sphere of action.103 More recently, Carroll has concluded that non-membership NGOs were more responsive and accountable to their beneficiaries than were the membership organizations.104 Often, the GROs are also controlled by unaccountable leaders. We cannot a priori conclude that GROs are more responsive or representative of the rural poor.

Aside from concerns about the limits on accountability in GROs, they are also found to be administratively and professionally weaker than NGOs. In an evaluation of thirty different projects in Latin America, Carroll found NGOs more effective with wider impact, innovativeness and poverty reach.105 Bebbington finds the local institutions in Ecuador suffering from administrative weakness and lack of innovation in their development proposals.106 This compels us to look at the issue of appropriate agency for empowerment of poor women in a more complex manner, taking into account the prospects and problems in relying on either NGOs or GROs to the exclusion of the other. The study would argue that an increased interaction and cooperation between these two sets of organizations is important for empowerment. This necessitates reorienting the perspective of viewing these institutions as counter-forces to one of regarding them as counterparts in development. Nonetheless, there are several issues at hand that need to be addressed by all social agents involved in the process of empowerment.

100 Carmen, Autonomous Development.
101 Rahman, People’s Self-development.
104 Carroll, Intermediary NGOs.
105 Ibid.
Among the various functions ascribed to the NGOs, empowerment occupies a unique position, as in a way it includes and has considerable implications for other functional aspects of NGOs like democratization, efficient service provision and relationship with the states. Furthermore, the very fluidity intrinsic to and allowed for by empowerment, both as an idea and in practice, means that there are/can be several paths for empowerment of the marginalized. The diversity and multiplicity of empowerment has meant that NGOs can adopt different strategies to achieve the purpose, and thereby innovate continuously to cater to the varying dynamics of power relations. This notwithstanding, the substantive query about the empowering potential of the NGOs as specific organizational types, and in comparison to the states and grassroots organizations (GROs), has been repeatedly put forward and still needs to be addressed convincingly.

The foremost challenge posed to NGOs by the dynamic nature of empowerment process is: how to approach the marginalized and gain their confidence to build a partnership that will challenge and transform the power relations in favour of the powerless. Empowerment is essentially a political process, and this requires the powerless to be mobilized in strength to articulate and assert their interests. But as social agents seeking to empower others, and in our case poor women, the NGOs are faced with a fair amount of issues to grapple with. An issue of fundamental importance is the diversity of people the NGOs purport to work with. Poor women are not a homogenous category. They are embedded in layers of cross-cutting relationships, in terms of household contexts, kin group and other social networks, caste, religion etc. They also inhabit different economic conditions, which includes diversity in natural resources, infrastructure, regional work and wage patterns, their relationship with landlords, etc. Furthermore, though poor women are invariably in a disadvantageous position in relation to them, the institutional set up which already exists – traditional village institutions like panchayats, rural institutions like cooperatives, various state institutions at the district and sub-district levels, etc. – also vary substantially in their nature, as reflected in the norms and values they prescribe. This variation is further accentuated, by the actors positioned in various levels of these institutions, and the individual capabilities and idiosyncrasies of the poor women themselves. The latter factor is implicated in the differences in literacy level, awareness, attitudes, and perceptions, as well as in variations in possession of productive assets, income, wage-earning capacity, etc. Given these issues, which are necessarily basic and require satisfactory handling, how do the NGOs respond?
The very manner in which these issues cross-cut, question and defy the efficacy of any standardized solutions and strategies. But as organizations, NGOs have to create certain norms and procedures that would aid their operations and mode of interaction with the people. The necessity for such rules pose another set of questions, essentially normative in content and different from the questionable ability to address the variations in the everyday lives of poor women we have pointed to above. Who should frame the rules and procedures for the interaction between NGOs and poor women? And, in other words, who should decide about the nature of the empowerment initiative – NGOs or poor women? Several issues rise from this question. Firstly, we have the issue of the role of “outsider” and “insider” in the process of empowerment. NGOs, as the “outsider”, invariably have a set of universal values that are transformatory in character. These values are widely cherished and are crucial for the NGOs not only to realize their mission commitments, but also are important to gain legitimacy and appreciation from donors. The latter aspect cannot be wished away as of lesser relevance to the process of empowerment, as it involves the issues of the sustainability of NGO programmes which rely heavily on donor funds, and address their survival anxieties. In contrast to this, the poor women as “insiders” inhabit an experiential reality that has its own sets of norms and varying costs attached to violation of these. Moreover, these social norms are ingrained in institutions like patriarchy, marriage, etc. that delineate the life patterns of poor women. However adverse they might be to their individual well-being, women internalize these norms and follow them in their everyday practice leading to further strengthening of the hold of these norms on their lives. These norms thus get reified and women hardly imagine the possibilities of defying them. Hence, we find practices like female infanticide, privileging of boys over girls in education, dowry, etc., with ‘compliance’ and at times ‘active participation’ of women. Given this situation the NGOs with their universal set of values and poor women with norms deriving from their experiential ‘lived’ reality find divergences in their respective interests and positions in the empowerment process. In sum, the values poor women cherish might not be transformatory from the perspective of the NGOs. How can the NGOs resolve this contradiction? What strategies are available to them? Should they affirm and impose the universal values of transformatory significance, or should they seek to educate and conscientize poor women about the alternatives? Having assumed the role of external social agents who seek to empower poor women, the NGOs have
to necessarily negotiate with the latter and resolve this and other contradictions in order to empower them.

A related issue is the arguments advanced from a Foucauldian framework about the "disciplinary" role played by the NGOs to strengthen the hold of neoliberalism and to 'bring in' the masses into the mainstream development system, thereby eroding their intrinsic values and capacity to resist outside intervention in their lives. Here NGOs are seen as a means for backdoor entry of 'outside' forces into the lives of people who have been at the margins of developmental discourse and practice till now. Especially, the current enthusiasm in the policies of states and developmental agencies for micro-credit has been criticized as a "disciplinary tool" that conditions the lives of poor women and integrates them into the mainstream.¹⁰⁷ In this context, the structures created by NGOs to empower the poor women assume importance. These structures offer resources for the poor women that variously enable them to negotiate the existing forms of powerlessness. But, any structure contains rules and resources that are differentially distributed either according to the hierarchy or the individual capabilities of the agents involved. The higher levels of literacy, awareness, and capability sets that NGO staff possess in comparison with women and their control over the resources of the organization, mostly in the form of loan allocations, naturally place them at a position of advantage over the poor women. Does this translate into a relationship of dominance of the NGO “outsider” over the poor women, or do NGOs consciously create mechanisms within the broader structures they create to offer space and positions of leadership to women? The issues get further complicated when the capability sets possessed by the poor women and the fact that the demands placed by NGOs on their time and resources are taken into account. The point to be noted here is that, women have pre-existing commitments to work and household, and they will negotiate any demands placed by NGOs from that standpoint. This necessitates increased negotiation between NGOs and poor women to ensure that the latter faced lesser constraints in their participation in NGO initiated activities. This means that the procedures adopted by

NGOs do not deter and eliminate illiterate women from active participation. Moreover, poor women have always been marginalized from the traditional forms of leadership, and naturally they would need time and support to assume leadership positions even within NGO-created structures. How do the NGOs perceive the issue of training women for positions of leadership? And, how do poor women themselves perceive it? The manner in which women perceive the resources and incentives offered by the NGOs and the constraints this relationship impose are of substantive importance for the process of empowerment, as it influences the nature of participation and thereby the direction and content of the NGO initiatives.

Another set of issues focus on the strategies to be adopted by the NGOs in their efforts at empowerment. In the context of empowering poor women, two issues are especially central. Firstly, what is the relative importance of credit and conscientization for empowerment? Is it possible for NGOs to integrate both these strategies? How do poor women relate to these? Secondly, what is the relative importance of the practical and strategic interests of poor women? Do practical interests have transformatory value? Is there any positive relationship between the two sets of interests? A related concern is about the representative role of the NGOs. Commentators have expressed doubts about the ability and appropriateness of NGOs to fulfil representative and lobbying roles. The self-proclaimed role of many NGOs is to strengthen the rural poor’s capacity to make political demands for themselves and to assume representative and administrative functions that the NGO may have performed at an earlier stage. Their stated aim is to promote a process in which power is steadily transferred to the rural poor, with the NGO passing all decision-making and resources over to a GRO. Then the question arises, what will become of the NGOs if the rural people themselves are capable of representing their interests? Further, some commentators even argue that NGOs do not generally share the social and cultural origins of the rural poor. They argue that NGOs should not be allowed the role of representing rural interests. According to Rivera-Cusicanqui, they may often misinterpret and misrepresent such interests.\(^{108}\)

Also important is the readiness of NGOs and poor women to take risks in the process of empowerment. There are several other agents who are also involved and are capable of affecting the nature and outcomes of the process. Notable in this respect are the household members of poor women (especially their husbands),

\(^{108}\) Rivera-Cusicanqui, cited in A. Bebbington and G. Thiele, *Non-Government Organisations and the State in Latin America*. 26
states and donors. In countries like India, where there is widespread regional disparity in economic development and distribution of wealth resulting in situations of poverty and denial of basic needs for a large section of the population, the state continues to play a significant role by creating positive policy environments and through effective programme implementation. In this context, what is the role of the NGOs? Should they implore poor women to adopt a confrontationist attitude and adopt methods of protests to demand basic needs and assert their claims on public institutions, or should they adopt a cooperative stance and become effective service deliverers. The issue is again further complicated by the sustainability imperatives of the NGOs, whereby they undertake state programmes to get the much needed funds. The latter option entails trade-offs that might affect the NGOs. What might they lose in such relationships? What might collaboration imply for the institutional identity and autonomy of NGOs?

Finally, the agential role of poor women needs to be recognized. It is quite naïve to suppose that the poor will follow the prescriptions of the NGOs and to explain their relationship functionally as one between a ‘beneficiary’ and ‘the benefactor’. It has been recognized by some that NGOs are shaped more by the aspirations and expectations of people and what they can accept from them rather than by “material investments and constraints.” Given the wide variety of contexts that underlie the grassroots organizations it would only be plausible to expect a highly complex relationship between the poor and the NGOs, further mediated by the innovativeness and local knowledge of the poor which cannot be ignored.

The study adopts the position that theory cannot be divorced from praxis, as both necessarily inform each other. This is more than evident in the common usage of concepts like micro-credit, self-help, social capital, participation, institution-building, and empowerment. These concepts have underlying theoretical assumptions and employing them essentially implies affirming our faith in certain propositions against others. We contend that unrestrained use of concepts and empirical analysis uninformed by theoretical content lack purpose and substance, and severely impedes a proper understanding of the social phenomena at work. Moreover, all attempts at empirical analysis and grassroots practice bear in them an implicit allusion to theories, which prescribes the understanding of social life and its

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varied aspects including the possibility of transforming it. The well-meaning criticism
that the available theoretical propositions are not complex enough, should propel us
to look for more sophisticated theories reflecting the reality, rather than dismissing
theories altogether. More importantly, any effort at the praxis essentially entails
some knowledge of the social reality we inhabit. The manner in which we are going
to conceive the social reality necessarily informs, aids and limits any efforts at
transforming it. Hence, any successful effort at the grassroots necessitates a clear
perception of the social reality and adoption of suitable strategies, be it micro-credit,
participation or empowerment. It becomes the onerous task of social sciences to
suggest the possibilities a practitioner can successfully adopt and employ. The
argument here is that both theory and praxis should necessarily inform the other and
accordingly the study is premised on the understanding that philosophical and
theoretical debates within social sciences have a lot to offer such empirical
engagements. Following this the study argues that the complex relationship between
NGOs and poor women as social agents in relation to their efforts at empowerment
needs to be understood through the structure-agency framework. The study
suggests that the structure-agency framework is made relevant for this enquiry by,
the basic nature of social reality; its immanence in everyday human existence; its
centrality to all enquiries on society; essential manifestation as a problem of power;
subordination and powerlessness of the poor; and the social embeddedness of
NGOs. Such a theoretical framework conceives empowerment as an interaction
between various social agents and their structural conditions. The study further
proposes a framework derived from the morphogenetic approach of Archer to the
‘problem of structure and agency’ which treats reality and agents involved as
stratified and understands their interaction from a temporal allowance for the
conditioning influence of the pre-existing structures.

Scope and Objectives of the Study
Empowerment of the poor has become an imperative for achieving sustainable
development. More often than not in state policies, empowerment has been
discussed with prefixes such as political, social and economic, as though they are
different closed sectors, without serious implications for each other. There seems to
be little realization about the complex nature of the empowerment process. In social
science literature, studies have predominantly highlighted the role of either NGOs or
GROs in empowering the poor, and sectorally on specific strategies like capacity-building or resources (micro-credit). This study would deviate from this tendency by treating empowerment as a process, which needs to be addressed on many fronts. The study would focus on two specific areas. Thematically, the focus would be on the empowerment of poor women in rural south India. Institutionally, the focus will primarily rest on NGO and their interaction with GROs and the state in empowerment of rural poor. The study will also take into cognizance the broad context within which the whole process takes place.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To develop a framework that would enable a better understanding of the empowerment initiatives of NGOs.
- To develop an understanding of the process of empowerment as an interaction between the NGOs and poor women and unravel its dynamics.
- To explore the empowering potential of the structures created by the NGOs.
- To critique and offer an alternative to the dichotomic understanding that dominates the current perspectives and approaches on empowerment.
- To understand the relative significance of credit and conscientization for the empowerment of poor women.
- To understand the relative importance of practical and strategic interests of poor women and the relation between them.
- To investigate the impact of credit on intra-household gender relations, especially decision-making.
- To explore the transformatory significance of various strategies adopted by the NGOs.

The study proceeds with two working hypotheses:

- Empowerment is essentially a contextual, contingent and negotiated process. Hence, NGO efforts at empowerment are conditioned by the 'lived reality' of the poor women and their agential action.
- The structures that NGOs create to empower poor women act both as resources and constraints for the social agents involved in the process.

**Methodology**

The study relied on semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection, but did not limit itself to these. In addition to the semi-structured
interview technique, the study also relied on non-participant observation of the meetings of GROs and NGOs, wherever it was possible to gain access to these. There were also occasions when the researcher had to rely on unstructured discussions. The qualitative research methods adopted necessitated in-depth face-to-face fieldwork. The investigation required specific skills to relate the various dimensions of the empowerment process, as the semi-structured interview method not only allowed the respondents the freedom to recount their life histories and individual perceptions; there was also ample scope in this technique for the emergence of significantly new insights and variations, the import of which for the understanding of the empowerment process can hardly be overemphasized. Language skills were critical to understand the perceptions of the respondents and the interaction of the various agents vital for the success or failure of the NGO efforts. The specific words women use to describe particular situations and their responses to them are significant to understand the empowerment process and their perceptions of it.

Three NGOs were selected for this study on the basis of purposive sampling. This technique was adopted essentially for two reasons. Since the study is about the process of empowerment engineered by NGOs as particular types of organizations in the social realm, it was essential to exclude those NGOs that were not committed to empowering poor women in rural areas. Both programmatic commitment and the clientele to which the same was oriented were important considerations here. Those NGOs that were predominantly working in the urban areas too had to be excluded from the purview of the study. Another concern was to identify those organizations that would offer a wider range of experiences making it possible for us to understand the intricacies of the process of empowerment. The adoption of a qualitative methodology based on intensive fieldwork, where knowledge of the local language was a vital ingredient, meant that the selection was further confined to Tamil Nadu. The study worked downwards from the NGO, also focusing on the GROs promoted by them and the beneficiaries involved. The NGOs were asked to identify two of their successful GROs that best exemplified their approach to the empowerment of poor women in the rural areas. The definition of ‘success’ and ‘empowerment’ was left to the NGOs themselves. The idea here was to understand the process as engineered by the NGOs and the outcomes. Based on this methodology the study attempts to understand the empowerment process and its various nuances.