The Role of Voluntary Organizations in Rural Development: 
A Study in Selected Sectors in West Bengal

ABSTRACT

Introduction

Development is a subject of intense interest for social scientists in all the countries, developed or developing. Development has been one of the most important concepts of our time, raising various questions about values, techniques and choices. The formation and implementation of national policies revolves round this central aspect of development of any country.

In spite of the fact that the state is the prime mover of development in the developing countries and the development efforts are mostly state initiated, the administration in these countries are suffering from their own contradictions and the development process is largely thwarted. In a self-development participatory process of development the role of non-bureaucratic organization has consequently assume rising importance especially in creating awareness and developing real participation among the deprived sections of the rural population. In a changed (market economy) economic environment the state has also come forward to encourage voluntarism that makes development endogenous and springs from the heart of the people. Struggles for organizing the poor, conscientization and people’s empowerment have become the key words for voluntary actions.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of development is perceived not only as a condition of life but also as a goal to be attained, as the capacity to grow and change and develop.
These three ideas of development are bound together in efforts to understand and deal with the phenomenon of development. With the process of decolonization, development became the most dominant issue in newly emerging societies. During 1950s–1990s the conceptual meaning of development has been changed drastically and new meaning and strategies of development have developed. The major strategies of development like the modernization paradigm, developmentalism, dependency theory, articulation of modes of production, new political economy approach or political autonomy approach, another development, basic needs, sustainable development are the product of this period. (decolonization period).

In countries which have development as a major national goal, bureaucracy is supposed to function as an agent of change then as an instrument of stability and continuity. In the context of development administration the Weberian model of bureaucracy may not be conductive to the fulfillment of development objectives. A development bureaucracy must be more functionally oriented, achievement centered, action-oriented, streamlined and result oriented.

The problem of bureaucracy is somewhat complex in developing countries where social and political institutions are relatively less developed and the state has mainly to depend upon the administrative structure for the accomplishment of its goal. So, all development programmes require considerable direct involvement and participation by the bureaucracy at all stages of their formulation and implementation. Indian bureaucracy was considered as capable of bringing about speedy socio-economic development in the country. But the characteristics of development bureaucracy are lacking in the Indian bureaucracy. It is centralized, rule-bound, authoritarian, lack initiative, change resistant.
The process of economic liberalization in its basic conceptual framework seeks a reduced governmental intervention in the economic sector. The newer approach is to cut back the scope of government activities through privatization, deregulation, decentralization and similar efforts which may be subsumed as debureaucratization. In debureaucratization downsizing of bureaucracy and the reduction of its scope have resulted in taking over its functions and activities by other groups or organizations.

A society’s progress is determined by its social development which is both the cause and effect of economic growth. In a developing country social development depends on the proper and adequate human development particularly in rural sector where majority of the people are very poor, illiterate and lack the necessary knowledge, skills, initiative. India’s track record in human development is dismal. In the 1990s reform process the new thinking regarding state’s role is that state should retreat in the economic sector but concentrate on social sector. The new thinking regarding the rate of the state raises some fundamental questions. Administrative culture and morality remain problematic and improvement within the administrative infrastructure in programmes, project management is very much dissatisfactory. The Eighth Five Year Plan had identified human development as the main focus of development in social sector. After the introduction of New Economic Policy and despite fiscal austerity, the government committed itself to increase outlay for clearly targeted social sector expenditures and for rural development during the plan period. But constraints on budgetary resources forced the government to postpone the provision for extra funds and on the contrary, to curtail them along with all other public expenditure. This expenditure cuts in social sector affect the development of social sector. With all these problems it is doubtful whether the state will be able to render service effectively to the social sector. In this
context, the voluntary organizations or non-governmental organizations may play a crucial role in developing the rural area and rural man power.

In India, in the past, various activities and functions were performed by a variety of local organizations which were essentially philanthropic and societal in nature. With the passage of time, because of their proximity to grassroots, flexibility of approach, ability for experimentation and people-centred, people-oriented model of development, the NGOs have emerged as one of the most viable alternatives in the search of development planners to bring about sustainable development and effective structural change from centralized to decentralized delivery system. The NGOs have a crucial role to play in development particularly in developing nations like India. Participation is the most key component of development process. Participation in the process of development requires conscientizations, education and training of the rural people. NGOs can play a very active role in mobilizing the rural people through proper motivation, education and training in participatory decision making process. They have challenging role to play as catalysts of social change, as educators as conscientizers as innovators and as awareness builders. In the context of market economy NGOs may perform their specific functions ensuring distributive justice, abolishing inequalities and judging every issue in terms of human rights.

In the context of the possibility of dynamic role that NGOs can play in the development process (particularly in rural development) the present study is a modest attempt to explore the ground realities of the role played by NGOs in rural development in West Bengal in some selected sectors – health, women welfare and women empowerment.
Methodology

Method of Data Collection

The study was done in two parts. For the first part of the study, which was mainly exploratory in nature, reliance was made primarily on books, journals, government reports, and annual reports, other published and unpublished source-materials. The data collected from these sources are supplemented by way of adopting the empirical survey method of personal interview based on structured as well as unstructured questionnaires.

For the second part of the study, the data were collected solely and completely by using the personal interview method of survey research. A structured questionnaire was administered among the sampled respondents for information relevant for the present study.

In the second part of the study interview method was adopted at two stages one at the organizational level and the other at the beneficiary level. As the organizations are working at the community level to empower the rural people socially and economically the study was shifted from the organizational level to beneficiary level of inquiry to see how far rural people are getting empowered and developed assessing the changes in their perceptions and attitudes. Consequently a survey research method of personal interview with a structured and unstructured questionnaire was chosen as the principal source of data collection for this part of the study.

Data Processing and Analysis

The two sets of questionnaire prepared for interviewing the two groups of respondents included both open-ended and close-ended questions. The data gathered from the close-ended questions were readily amenable to statistical analysis. Hence, the data that were obtained from the structured questions were first classified into categories and arranged in the form of
tables. Finally the data were analysed and measured in percentage to find out the relationship between the dependent variables and a set of independent variables.

Locale of the Proposed Study

The field work of the proposed study was conducted in two districts of West Bengal – one in Darjeeling and the other in Birbhum. The districts were selected from the 18 districts of West Bengal ranked on the basis of human development index.

The motto of the study was to choose one district from upper rank and one from the lower rank. The nine districts from the upper rank and the rest nine from the lower rank formed two parts. By random sampling Darjeeling district from the first part and Birbhum district from the second part were selected for the field study.

Findings

The study finds that barring a few organizations, majority of the NGOs concentrate on dissemination of health information, awareness creation, providing health services and related advices which are all communication based, while delivery of medicinal materials was done by two third of the organizations.

The techniques used by the NGOs like group meeting, health camps, cultural shows, practical training for awareness creation on health matters are very effective. The relation between the organizations and the community is positive. The relation between the NGOs and the Government agencies is a sort of cooperative relation.
The study finds that in delivering rural development efforts the role of the NGOs may be mediators between government agencies and rural people; co-partners of government and supplementary to government agencies but never alternative or substitute to government. Non-governmental organizations can speed up the vast activities of the state. They can only meet the challenge of making the beneficiaries get all the health inputs in selected pockets of rural, tribal and urban fringes but can raise resources – human material and monetary sparsely. Non-governmental organizations through their limited dedicated workers can motivate, create field for self-sustaining activity, where their voice can be receptive.

The role played by the NGO in its effort towards economic empowerment of women through microfinance is impressive. The formation of self help groups as a basis for the social and economic empowerment of the rural deprived and disadvantaged women has yielded positive contribution in the mobilization and self development of women. Women who have participated in self-help groups have developed strong sense of self confidence and faith in their ability to interact with power structures and increase their contribution to the household. The disadvantaged women are capable of bringing about their economic upliftment given sufficient and necessary support. Women being the members of the SHGs enjoy better standard of living, awareness to children concerned and above all a sense of belongingness to the witness of social development.

Social Mobilization has increased considerable control over physical mobility of women. Mobility within and outside village, reduced men’s resistance, the acceptance of this mobility in family and community at large has resulted in breaking up geographical isolation and creating social network. Group activity has led to a greater cohesion, serving as a social safety net and reduced the feeling of vulnerability. Greater decision making
power of women within the household does not only improve gender justice but create a more equal dispersion of power in a household.

The savings by the poor women facilitated greater control over financial resources and access to cash in need and the women feel secured during emergencies. The savings facilities in the SHG programmes have created an opportunity for women to have savings in their names. But there is no information about how these savings are used and whether women really can decide as to how they want to spend the savings. Because women continue to depend on men for support from loan repayment to spending their savings.

Empowerment has taken place but primarily in case of group leader and office bearers whose mobility and skills are enhanced due to their leading roles in the groups and capacity building training programmes of group given to them rather each member of the groups.

Local banks are reluctant to give enough time to this bank linkage programme which creates an obstacle to the quick bank linkage of the SHGs. It is a harassment to the SHG members and at the same time the denial of Govt. policy of inclusive growth. However the free and flexible characteristics of the NGO in the execution of their programmes make it more dynamic to reach to the population irrespective of age, education, income, caste, class etc.

Therefore the NGOs concerned have done some justice albeit to a limited extend to the rural poor in general and rural women in particular with their limited resources where the state fails to do with huge resources at its disposal, both administrative and functional. The state has now recognized the role of the NGOs as supplementary agencies to assist the state in its development efforts.