

CHAPTER – 7

PRI and CSOs relationship

A critical evaluation :

Khilnani and Sudipta Kabiraj commented that civil society activities are generally found strong and effective where there is strong civil society.

In India and South Asia, such a situation and culture is new and weak. According to many political sociologists, supremacy of civil society is commonly found in the countries like Canada, Britain, and United States of America, Netherlands, where people unite together and come forward to solve their civic problems. However in India, the researcher observed that day-by-day the situation is changing rapidly.

In North Bengal (i.e., in the northern part of the state of West Bengal), it is claimed, the activities of the voluntary organizations in terms of people's movement are something new. The movement led by Siliguri Welfare Organization against TISTA AGRO INDUSTRIES in 1990-1991 can be regarded as the first movement in the field of environment.

After that, in 2002, one Faribesh Banchao (Environment Protection) Committee conducted a dharna and procession in association with Medha Patekar, which protested against the vulnerable conditions of the river PADMA in the district of Malda and also the river MAHANANDA in Siliguri, which created attention towards the conscious public of the region. Later, the protest of a few organizations against urbanization in CHAND-MANI PROJECT in Siliguri Tea Estate also created the attention.

In comparison to these activities, the movement in the form of protest at larger scale is however found less at the rural level. Here the spirit of the movement is concentrated on providing service to the poor by the voluntary and non-government organizations. The formation and growth of the Self Help Groups (SHGs) at larger scale across the state having women members at the core of these activities can be considered as a positive movement for the uplift of the marginalized people at the rural level.

Today, the SHGs constitute a strong part of the civil society, even at the rural level. The number of members of these groups is rapidly increasing (now it is approx. 7 lakhs in W.B.). It is unique because about 90% participants of these SHGs are women. The credit for SHGs goes to the panchayats and the activists having inclination to build-up the SHGs.

It was found from the discussion of the previous chapters that in bringing about a good governance and development for the marginalized sections at the rural level, the responsibilities were shared by the NGOs, VOs, the government, the scientists (e.g. agricultural scientists) and social scientists, the national policy planners etc. for stimulating a real movement from the below. It was found that there had been changes in policies, legislation, pattern of resource allocation and practice of government organizations for a meaningful sharing with the community based organization (CBOs).

And as such in many spheres the government itself is playing the role of activist for enhancing such a process. At center, state or district level, the government, in a number of cases, has built up the samities or committees. These are Sarba Siksha Abhijan Committee, Health Awareness Committees, etc.

The government, especially the third tier of its federal set up (i.e. the Panchayats) sought cooperation of the CSOs for the success of their programmes. In case of mid-day meal Panchayat Samities bought utensils for cooking and handover the responsibilities to the Self Help Groups (SHGs). Women self helps groups cook and feed the children.

The government especially the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) organizes many festivals at the rural level, including at the regional level, such as Tista Ganga Utsav organized by Department of Cultural and Information, at North Bengal. In these fairs small producers find a market to sell their products. 'Zilla Parishad' organizes stalls to enhance such a rural market for the SHGs as well as for the artisans.

It is right to say, the essence of the success of the governance depends on how much and to what extent its units can extend its role in setting disputes, managing problems in a just way. In many districts, Zilla Parishad built up Mukta Manchis and helped the local artists. Their Panchayat felt nothing wrong to take the help of the CSOs.

Because of CSO activities, the people are getting the knowledge of development and better life. CSOs, to some extent, were successful to arouse the non-partisan attitude, therefore, the people are busy to built up the Panchayat not as a puppet of the party but for the whole community. Because of new outlook encouraged by the CSOs, people think only to their top priorities and not politics. People now are not satisfied with temporary relief but want a permanent settlement or solution to their problem through their Panchayats.

There is a misconception about the government-sponsored campaigns that it gets flopped. But with increasing involvement of the NGOs, VOs and other CSOs, the government programmes were able to involve the people fruitfully.

Today one understands the other better. India being a welfare country and having democracy upholds the egalitarian values in many walks of life ensuring the scope of infrastructure for good governance and development. *As Amartya Sen stated, 'it was democratic India', which has been able to pull back from the brink of famine because popular pressures through the media, an active civil society and democratic multiparty political process do not allow government to remain inactive.'*

In case of Total Literacy Campaign of the 1990s, Sarba Siksha Abhijan, Total Sanitation Campaign, Pulse Polio Immunisation Program (PPIP) of these days, the role and coordinate efforts between Panchayat and other CSOs have made these programmes near to the success.

There are difficulties with some NGOs on the reason that these are run and dependant on donations. The viabilities of these initiatives therefore, rest on the will of the others. May be, the development workers have become anti-development. Therefore, with such an observation it is wise to comment that it is not better to depend only on the NGOs for development. There is the Panchayat as the big representative unit and a sweet collaboration between CSOs including NGOs and Panchayats are to be fitted in a proper way.

Today, as it is observed from the above chapters, there are many basic issues that are not focused by the political parties but it is focused by the civil society organisations.

Again, while many panchayats are found guilty of corrupt practices by partisanship or by vested interests, the CSOs on the other hand are found active to fight for the good cause by creating pressure from the below (or, on behalf of) the masses. That is CSOs act as the medium of public action when Panchayat fails instead of being representative governance at the rural level. CSOs, if not able to bring success however, are giving local people to raise voice.

However, with this success of the CSOs, it is not wise to call the CSOs are the parallel competitors to Panchayat but it is supplementing or complementing panchayat to the role of a vibrancy or peoples action to a definite target. CSO, though not representative body, may be concerned with deciding social priorities for the better, thereby helping people to grow deciding power and speak at the right fora.

The constitution of India guarantees to citizens the right to form associations of their choice. Therefore, people get freedom to express him. In Panchayat, there are however party compulsions. Through the knowledge of many kinds of associations people understand that they should not behave in such a way that marginalize the importance of their Panchayat, the very essential one.

The introduction of Gram Sansad in the Panchayat in West Bengal has made the scope the rural people to be self-ruler, self-planner, and self-executor and self-assessor with respect to their over-all development process. But the real participation of twelve percent reveals the poor picture of participation.

In average or a little more would not suffice to a meaningful destination. It is observed from the preceding chapters that civil society organizations have successfully encouraged many people to be a good citizen, an active participant of the Gram Sansad too.

And a time is come that the civil society organizations accelerate or enhance such a process further.

There are some Panchayats which are '*jack of all trades but master of none*'. But nothing at the rural level is untouched without the intervention of good or bad Panchayats. Panchayat is a vote catching machinery too. The '*give and take*' policy of panchayat had binded all the villagers into the same knot. In such a dominating presence of the panchayat system, the role of the other organizations, e.g. non- government organizations, civil society organizations are understood as the secondary important organization to the villagers.

'As Panchayat got tremendous public support, little need was there to opt for NGOs.' *'Specially in West Bengal the NGOs could not function as well as compared to other provinces in India.'* *It was because in West Bengal 'their (NGOs) scope has been limited or restricted and their entry to rural development got obstructed mainly for the establishment of Panchayat as a strong institution through regular election during the last two decades.'* (1)

The paramount importance of Panchayat to the villagers is established fact. But in the last one and half decade, it is observed, there has been a great impact of the voluntary activities by the civil society organizations in the field of development at the rural level.

While there was no reach on the part of the right institutions at the right place, then any form of organization if it acted as the friend of the people, these were welcomed by them.

This is a reality. The unique organizations like 'Asha', a social welfare wing of the West Bengal Police including their women grievance cell, the

voluntary activities by the Border Security Force (BSF) or the Secret Service Branch (SSB) etc., other than their normal and routine activities with regard to the maintenance of law and order or protecting the Nation from external aggression provides an example of welfare at the rural level. It has made these professional organizations nearer to the people. Therefore a permanent coordination between the panchayat, the people and the security forces are being strengthened at many places in a better way.

It was also observed that there were certain areas where the civil society organizations contributed a lot of service for the community keeping close liaison with the *Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs)* in the following way as stated below:

- (a) As per the new directives under Constitutional Amendments (73rd Amendment and likewise introduced later), panchayats were found engaged with assessing the local needs. Likewise, before starting the welfare activities many CSOs were found engaged with surveying in their target areas of operation. CSOs through their well-experienced team of experts, using survey instruments and tools, investigated the area and tabulated report became the lesson of the respective panchayat institutions.
- (b) Next step of the Panchayat Raj Institutions were to formulate “*Development Plans*” on the basis of the need assessment. Before launching of any programme, it was observed that, likewise CSOs prepared “*Plan of Action*”.

Both the unit of organization was found preparing such plans keeping in view of supplementing each other.

- (c) As regards programme implementation, CSOs were found playing a facilitating role to the efforts of the Panchayat Raj Institutions.
- (d) In accordance with the new Constitutional Provisions, Panchayat Raj Institutions by their Gram Sabhas (or Gram Sansads) involved all their members (though participation of the people at these levels are still not up to the mark) in the decision-making process. Likewise, the spirit behind the CSOs resembles the feature of mass mobilization.
- (e) Apart from these, many civil society organizations were found assisting the panchayats in selecting the key issues or the problems of the localities and the right beneficiaries for different schemes etc. Civil Society Organizations, likewise, in many cases were functioning of the works done by the panchayats, found keeping perpetual vigil on the smooth functioning of the work done by the panchayats.
- (f) It was observed that several times Zilla Parishad were found helping in building rural market through organizing rural fairs and allotting space to the Self Help Groups (SHGs) free shops to sell their handicrafts and other products.
- (g) Panchayat Samities were found depending on the local NGOs and VOs with regard to preparation of sanitary products during rural sanitation programmes.
- (h) Literacy program was conducted at the panchayats under the joint supervision of the panchayats and various civil society organizations present at the localities.

(i) Under the new and changing circumstances, panchayats in many cases were found depending on the CSOs.

It was also observed, CSOs had made the panchayats pro-poor, pro-ethnic, pro-regional, or local, thereby widening the horizon of the panchayat for a transparent, friendly, and meaningful panchayat. As such, the mainstream politicians after enjoying power for a marathon period of years were not in a position to listen to their original heritage or local varieties and needs, but Civil Society Organizations had compelled them to rethink over the situation to bring the marginalized people in the limelight. Keeping in view, the above-stated importance of the CSOs, panchayats were compelled to invite them and consulted for before starting any major government campaigns or programs.

Frequently, in the changed circumstances, panchayats were found organizing a lot of seminars, worksops and training camps for the marginalized people at the remote places where CSOs were invited, not as participants but also as technical experts.

Panchayats and CSOs in these cases are both not only teach each other but also take lessons and exchange knowledgefro each other.

The relation of CSOs with the panchayats stands multidimensional because of their varied nature in terms of organizations and functions. In case of Voluntary Organizations (VOs), the natures of sacrifice to the work done by them were found almost complete. It was observed these organizations bear strong eagerness to follow Panchayat's imperatives.

However in case of the NGOs, this thing was not observed for all the time. It was because of all the NGOs did not bear the similar characteristics Some NGOs

were having both paid and unpaid workers. Some NGOs were found maintaining some reservations, independent attitude and professional outlook.

Therefore, it was observed only V.O.s and a few local NGOs played their role with regard to providing service at the rural level in the true sense of the voluntary spirit and action. These Civil Society Organizations were found acting as pressure groups, successfully drew attention of the concerned authority, the media and the people for the reallocation of the fund or reconsideration to the development activities.

However, professional NGOs were found taking innovative programmes through their own initiative. plans and proposals. Not only that, it also pinpointed the drawbacks of the development done by the concerned authority. Therefore, in the ultimate analysis, these NGOs acted their role not as the competitor but also showed their reservation to maintaining distance from the Panchayats. It was however observed that these organizations played their active and sincere role while the Panchayats sought their cooperation and help.

On the other hand, in each case, it was observed that voluntary organizations came forward spontaneously to shoulder the responsibility at the time of the government campaigns or programs or any social needs. Thus, voluntary organizations were turned as a believable partner of the panchayats as well the friend of the rural people.

The role of the other organizations specially the National Service Scheme (NSS) was completely cooperative with the panchayats or the villagers. Specific villages were adopted by the NSS and regular and special camp activities provided

by Health and other services and even building roads etc., were found as their quite common agenda.

Earlier, a number of training programs were run by the *NSS* under the *TRYSEM* scheme sponsored by the *DRDA* for a considerable period of time. Nowadays, while working and providing delivery of services in their adopted villagers, *NSS* for the degree colleges maintain a close link with the respective panchayat for the whole year.

While observing NGO activities, it was found that some NGOs acted as mother NGOs. It organized a number of *Self Help Groups (SHG)* to run under *DRDC (District Rural Development Cell)*. It was found that NGOs were engaged with specific development programs, some were provided with multi-purpose goals and activities.

Although NGOs are the integral part of the CSOs, (as it is taken in the study), strictly speaking, a little difference can be made between the professional NGOs and the other CSOs on the basis of the following observation.

Firstly, NGOs were found to be work-oriented, while CSOs were rather spirit oriented. While the former were engaged with the fulfilment of the immediate needs, the later i.e., CSOs, on the other hand, though unorganized and inefficient, always opted for better society.

Secondly, NGOs had their specific goal; the CSOs had their multipurpose goals.

Thirdly, NGOs played there complementary as well as supplementary role with the Panchayats. But, CSOs, most of the time, played the role to warn, check, press, assist, guide, influence and redirect the Panchayats to sustain the work for their favour.

Fourthly, NGOs were found to be either having with local background or from the outside, but CSOs were found to be strictly with a local, regional or ethnic background.

References

- (1) Pal, Sujit Kr., and Paul, Kakali, (2003), Role of Panchayats and N.G.O.s Towards Sustainable Rural Development, Yozna, Vol.47, June, New Delhi.