

‘Ego Factor’ in ‘Good Governance’ by Executive Organ of the State: A Study on Developmental Programmes in Coochbehar, West Bengal

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I. Introduction:

There is hardly any doubt that government projects are basically for the common people (specially for the poor people) who badly require a socio-economic upliftment. Since 1990s, Government of India tried to include non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the process of development (although some programmes have been started 2 or 3 decades ago). And since then number of questions arise regarding the activities of the NGOs. Now no one is in a position to disagree that the success of these programmes (where NGOs are attached) are very much dependent on the GO-NGO relationship. If the coordination is found well between these two institutions, the target people will be benefitted but lack of coordination means the waste of public money. In this article an effort was given to depict a picture on GO-NGO relationship, in particular with the ‘ego’ problem between these two. To do this we have done a survey in different parts of the Coochbehar district (survey period was between May, 2003 to December, 2008).

II. GO-NGO Problems:

The first problem between GO-NGO relationships we came to learn from the Secretary² of a Coochbehar based NGO during the time of above mentioned survey. In an interview that was conducted on October 12, 2007 he revealed one interesting point, which at the same time had made their task very much difficult. He informed us during the time of interview that, recently some gram panchayat members (particularly those members who represented the ruling party³) at the Gram Panchayat level and political leaders irrespective of which political party they belong to at the grassroots level have told them that the self-help group (SHG) members⁴ should not go to the NGO activists for any kind of consultation. They were instructed to consult the ‘Gram Panchayat Level Self-Help Group

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2 Secretary of ‘G-NESEP, Dinhata, Coochbehar.

3 In this point by saying ruling political party he actually means the party or alliance which is in power in the ‘Gram Panchayat’ level and not the party or alliance in power at the state level.

4 SHGs formed under ‘Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana’.

Monitoring Team' (GSMT) members in case of any problem. This gentleman assumed that this instruction was given by the parties considering the upcoming Panchayat elections (2008) in West Bengal. To him, no political party wants to share the credit of development work with the NGOs. Political parties are apprehensive that if any other organisation become more popular than them, this might have a negative effect on their vote banks. But surprisingly enough, nowhere the local self-government bodies issued any order that from now onwards the NGOs will not be responsible for nursing the groups. The NGO official was suspicious because he felt that if in future the GSMT or Panchayats fail to give proper nursing to the groups, the whole responsibility will pass on to the hands of the NGOs. When we discussed this matter with local political leaders, all the political leaders denied. But this was reported to be true when the staff of other NGOs and SHG members were asked about it. A large section of the NGO activists and SHG members accepted this to be true.

Relating to this when we asked the SHG members about what kind of support do they get from the GSMT (in different GPs), we found that they (the SHG members) are not satisfied with the GSMT activities and support. A staff⁵ of an NGO different from the NGO we referred to earlier also told us that although the government has given a large responsibility to the GSMT members, but in practice the performance of the GSMT is very poor. Almost all the SHG members told us that NGO activists are more helpful and much closer to them than the GSMT staff. It is not very difficult to presume that if one self-help group is formed by the NGO, it is nursed by the NGO for a long time and hence they have much more attachment than the NGO staffs. Here, in the words of an NGO staff, we can say in this way that, 'no one can know the pulse of the SHGs better than NGOs'. Moreover the GSMT comprises⁶ of 2 members from Gram Panchayat ('Pradhan' and 'Shishu Nari Sanchalika' of the respective GP), 1 member from NGO (operating in that GP), 2 members from the veterinary, agriculture or health departments, 1 member from the opposition party in the GP level. A good number of GSMT members have little idea about the SHG functionaries or members. Even in most cases the SHG members complained that the meeting of the GSMT is not held regularly. Our survey revealed that the SHG members have more feeling, more regard for the NGOs than the GSMT. So, in this point our suggestion to the government is that if they really want to make the lives of the rural poor better through the SHG movement, they should re-empower the NGOs than GSMT and restrain them from entering into any

5 An NGO activist of 'New Bharati Club', Baneshwar, Coochbehar. We meet with this activist on Oct. 13, 2007.

6 This composition can be changed looking the necessity and demands of that GP. And it was told that this committee should be met in the second saturday of every month. But, in reality we found that in nowhere (the places we surveyed) this rule is followed.

conflict with the NGOs.

We came to learn about a second problem of the NGOs that arise out of GO-NGO relationship from the Secretary⁷ of another Coochbehar based NGO. He opined that for the smooth functioning of different governmental projects, the government need to review some of their plans. Criticizing ‘Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana’ (‘SGSY’) he cited a good reason. After passing 1st and 2nd gradation, the groups under ‘SGSY’ appear for Bank Linkage, which is popularly called by the SHG members as 3rd gradation. He explained to us that Bank linkage means, it is assumed that the SHGs are now self-sufficient and they are capable of running them without taking any help from the NGOs. During this stage they can even receive up to Rs. 1.25 lakh as loan from the Banks to run different schemes like poultry farming, dairy farming, pig rearing etc. In a single line one can say that during this stage the government assumes that the SHGs had become self-sufficient to the extent that they can take important decisions of their own and need not take advice from the facilitators. But, to him, in practice SHG members do not disengage themselves from the NGOs and they come to them whenever they enter into any trouble. We also feel that if any group that has been formed and nursed by an NGO for a period of 2-3 years, it is not possible for that NGO to detach itself from that group or SHG members one fine morning. And surprisingly enough, the most unfortunate thing that takes place during or after Bank linkage is that no supportive money is sanctioned from the government side for the NGOs which is sanctioned during the time of 1st and 2nd gradation. It was learnt from the respondent code 10 that although in this period they spend time and labour for the groups, the NGO staffs are not paid. To him, this part of the ‘SGSY’ programme should be reviewed by the government and NGOs should be given proper financial assistance for this. We later talked about this to other NGO staff, DRDC official and staff. The NGO staff confirmed this problem and almost all felt that the NGOs should get proper supportive money for their labour.

The third problem of this section was also learnt from the Secretary⁸ of the same Coochbehar based NGO. This problem is related to another lacuna of the ‘Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana’ programme. In an interview with us on Oct 7, 2007 he mentioned that before taking loan for different schemes (e.g. poultry, piggery, dairy farming etc.) the SHGs have to produce their projects with their own land. Since this is the minimum necessity hence the SHGs had to part a good part of their money for purchasing land, they are facing financial problems to run the scheme. Moreover, Banks support the project for only 5

7 Secretary of ‘New Bharati Club’, Baneshwar, Coochbehar. We interviewed him on Oct. 10, 2007.

8 Secretary of ‘New Bharati Club’, Baneshwar expressed this during the time of an interview with us on Oct. 13, 2007.

years. To him, if after 5 years from the commencement of the project if it fails, what will happen to the members of those groups? Is there any guarantee that after 5 years they will be able to sell their land at a good price? So, to overcome this problem, the groups should start their schemes in leased lands rather than own land that they purchase. We also think that this is high time the government should think over this matter.

A fourth problem was also learnt from the above mentioned person (in the same day as pointed earlier), which is related to 'Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana' programme. He narrated that once a SHG was somehow able to sanction a plan to do piggery within the municipal area. But it is well known fact that nobody in the town would permit the SHG to start piggery. So, even after it was passed by the authorities, the scheme could not be implemented. So he emphasized that proper planning should be done before the implementation of the schemes.

Another major problem of the NGO sector is linked with the bank officials and staffs. The Secretary⁹ of a Coochbehar based NGO told us this problem with an example. He said that earlier their NGO and SHGs (formed and nursed by them) received a lot of help from Bank officials and staffs. But now a day, a section of the Bank officials and staff are taking the SHG related functions as a load to them. To him, this is because of shortage of staff in the Banks. Although the highest level of Bank authorities want to advance the SHG movement but in practice their dream is converted merely as a daydream because of staff shortage in rural branches. So, he demanded that the Banks where SHG related work is done should have appropriate staff. He is actually in favour of deputing separate staffs to take up the load of SHG related activities.

The Secretary of another NGO and a member of that NGO¹⁰ also felt that Bank officials in particular were not eager to support the SHG members. To him, the Bank officials and staff are still living with an old aged idea that 'Banks are exclusively for the rich people'. Although he did not forget to mention that some Bank officials and staffs are exceptionally good and always have an attitude to help the SHG members. But to him, they are only few in numbers. The large sections of the Bank staff do not entertain the poor people.

During our survey we met several Bank officials and staff and talked to them in this regard. A Branch Manager¹¹ of a Bank informed us that the performance of the SHGs is more satisfactory than individual loan receivers. In his branch the loan recovery in case of SHGs is more than 90 per cent which is

9 Secretary of 'G-NESEP, Dinahata, Coochbehar. The conversation took place on Feb. 7, 2008 at his NGO office.

10 Secretary and one member of 'Nishiganj Club'. We met both of them on Dec. 7, 2007 at their NGO premises.

11 Branch Manager of 'Uttarbanga Kshetriya Grameen Bank', Nishiganj Branch. On Jun. 25, 2008 at his Bank premises.

far better than the individual loan receiver's record. This was also said to us by one other Bank staff. These Bank staffs whom we talked to both were souls who were responsible for looking after SHG related functions in their branches. In this connection it would be proper to mention one important 'Government Order' (GO) of the 'Reserve Bank of India' (RBI). This GO was shown to us by the President¹² of an NGO. According to this GO every Bank which is attached with SHGs should spend one day in a week exclusively for the SHG members. But, he informed us that there is no Bank to his knowledge which maintains this order. Later we also tried to search out whether any Bank devotes one day in a week for the SHGs or not. But till now we have not come across any Bank. In this particular point we think that RBI should not remain silent only by issuing orders. They have to take necessary steps to implement the order also. Both the parties, i.e. the Bank officials and the SHG members will be helped by the execution of this GO. The Bank officials in that particular day will not have to entertain other customers. In this way the SHG members who are complaining against the attitude of the Bank officials and staff will be silent.

The sixth problem of this section is related with the 'involvement' of the government officials and staff towards their assigned tasks. A number of NGO activists complained that a section of the government officials and staff do not intend to coordinate with the NGOs and common people. In this connection we want to cite one good example, which was witnessed by us. On 4th April, 2008 we went to visit an NGO in Coochbehar district. A meeting had been convened at that NGO¹³ office premises with SHG members and the Block staffs and one another government official. The members of the SHGs who are engaged in likewise works (e.g. fishery, poultry) were asked to attend the meeting. The objective of that meeting was to provide some tips about their work and also offer few advices regarding the generation of their income. Consulting with the staffs of both the GOs, the NGO asked the groups to come in two different shifts one at 12 noon and another at 2 p.m. At 11.45 p.m. in the presence of us, the NGO staffs received one phone call from one of the government offices. The call was not from the block office. It was informed that due to non availability of car they were unable to come on that day. Now the problem of the NGO staff was how would they face the SHG members and what will be told to the SHG members who were to come from a long distance to attend the meeting. We think that this incident is not just one lapse. This incident shows the lack of 'mental involvement' of the GO officials in their jobs. If they have an attachment with the common people, they would have come by a substitute car or by bus. We think that proper training for the government officers and staff is needed so that they become more humanitarian.

12 President of 'Nishaganj Club', Nishiganj, Coochbehar. On Dec. 7, 2007 at his NGO office.

13 'New Bharati Club', Baneshwar, Coochbehar.

One interview with a high ranking official¹⁴ in a financial institution forced us to set the seventh problem of this section. In the last day of the month of October, 2007 he told us during a discussion that the people of this area will have to show more 'hungriness' to generate their income. He expressed that a lot of functionaries are waiting for the voluntary sector. If we quote him, this place is till now a 'virgin' place regarding the implementation of the concept that 'develop the locality with the local people'. He is quite sure that the government cannot take development solely. They do not have such a capacity of infrastructure or manpower. But unfortunately the people of Coochbehar do not take the chance to join the process of development and make it a source of income. With a deep grievance he said that although 33 NGOs enlisted their names under his financial institution but at present only 15 are functioning. This problem was admitted by the Secretary¹⁵ of a Coochbehar based NGO. He is also saying that local people should come more in number in the voluntary sector. In this particular point (that the inhabitants of this district should show more 'hungriness'), these two people agreed with each other despite their difference in their background. What is more is that the Secretary of the NGO is an inhabitant of this district, but the high ranking official come from the state hub. We believe that proper campaigning and training is needed to make people aware of the voluntary sector. It should be told to the people that one can run his family very well by joining the voluntary sector too. The government should however think about the financial security of the activists that are engaged in the voluntary sector.

The eighth problem of the NGOs in this section is related to the financial support that is given by the government. Interviews with the Secretaries of three different NGOs revealed that the financial support which the NGOs get is very meagre. They all felt that the government should support the NGOs financially more and more. Some of the NGO activists expressed that a good number of dedicated voluntary workers are leaving this field because of poor financial support. A respondent¹⁶ told us that "one cannot do social work in empty stomach". The government should give financial support to the NGO workers in such a manner so that that they can live normal lives in the society. Otherwise to them this job will be a stop gap job and they will shift to another sector in search of good salary.

During the time of surveying the socio-economic condition of the grassroots level people which we discussed in the fourth chapter, we came to one conclusion that GO-SHG relationship is an important factor which determines NGOs' relation with different GO bodies. As the SHGs are formed and nurtured by the NGOs,

14 'District Development Manager' (DDM), NABARD, Coochbehar.

15 Secretary of 'New Bharati Club', Baneshwar, Coochbehar. On Oct. 13, 2007 at his NGO office.

16 DDM of NABARD. On Feb. 16, 2008 in a Seminar organized by the 'Department of Political Science', University of North Bengal.

the problems of the SHGs also affect the NGO and its staff. A section of the SHG members revealed that sometimes they become the victim of narrow politics.

The ninth problem of the NGO is related to the above. We were told that due to their political colour some people are deprived of governmental benefits by the GP office. However when we talked to the GP members, all of them denied the charge. To avoid this, one female SHG member¹⁷ named Ms Sunity Barman told us that the government should empower SHG members more and more. To her, the 100 days job assurance programme under 'National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' ('NREGA') should be schemed and monitored by the SHG members in the villages. She told us that despite several lacunas, government's mid-day meal scheme has become successful only because of the participation of the SHG members. If the responsibility to disburse job card, preparation and monitoring of different schemes (e.g. 'NREGA', 'IAY', 'BPL Listing' etc.) is given in the hands of the SHG members perhaps nobody will complain about narrow politics affecting NGO activity.

Now let us come to the tenth problem of this section which to us is the most important problem out of all the problems that we have listed above. It is most important because, it has a direct bearing on the economic condition of the SHG members. Two Pradhans¹⁸ and two Upa (Deputy) Pradhans (one 'ex' and one running) of four different GPs, all the staffs of the surveyed NGOs and a large section of the SHG members expressed their grievances in a single voice that at present one of their main problems is that they are not getting the market to sell their products. The government and NGOs inspired them to apply for the schemes through 'SGSY' and other schemes that are in operation. But when they had started to produce various products like Dhoopsticks, Papad, Chusi (one kind of noodles eaten with milk) they failed to find out a market for those products. Some SHGs like 'Jay Baba Lokenath Swanirbhar Dal' (Nishiganj-II GP) is engaged in making Papad¹⁹. But the main problem for them is where to sell their products? If they keep it on the shelf of any grocery shop, it won't attract the eyes of the consumers because of the existence of other colour packaged Papads manufactured by the big companies. And they told us that it is not possible for them to sell their products door to door ignoring their family members and their needs. To overcome this problem SHG members and NGO

17 On May 2, 2008 at the 'G-NESEP' office. She is also the Secretary of 'Gram Unnayan Cluster Committee' at Matalhat GP (Dinhata-I Block) which is comprised of 10-15 SHGs.

18 GP 'Pradhans' of Matalhat (Apr. 19, 2008) and Baneshwar GP (Apr. 25, 2008) and 'Upa (Deputy) Pradhans' of Chilakhana-II (Apr. 18, 2008) and Matalhat GP (ex) (Apr. 19, 2008). The Baneshwar GP Pradhan was interviewed in her GP office. The other three were interviewed in their residences.

19 We bought Papad from them to check the quality of it. We found that the taste of their product is no lesser than from any other big companies.

activists suggested us that the government should take steps to package these products. For their information we wanted to mention that the government had already decided to sell the products of the SHGs (under 'SGSY' scheme) under a single brand named 'Diya'²⁰. But according to the SHG members, as the packaging of 'Diya' brand is very poor, it can't compete in the market with the big farms. Moreover if the government invests more and more in packaging the products, its cost will not compete with the big companies in the market. So what is the next best thing the government can do in this context? It should do something to market the products²¹ of the SHGs that do not find market.

Sometimes the NGO activists face difficulties in implementing government policies. This happens mainly because they are placed in between the common people and the government. And this we consider as the eleventh problem of the NGOs in this section. For instance one can take the example of 'Total Sanitation Campaign' programme. This programme is actually supported by the 'UNICEF'. The objective of this programme is to avail sanitary latrine in each house of the GP so that all the GPs turn into 'Nirmal GP' (means 'Clean GP'). When all the GPs become 'Nirmal GP', automatically all the blocks and the district will become 'Nirmal Block' and 'Nirmal District'. As per the scheme Rs. 250 is given to the interested person from the UNICEF as subsidy. There are various categories of sanitary latrines that are available under this scheme. The cost of the lowest rate of the latrine is Rs. 500 only. The rate of the other standard types of latrine is Rs 500, Rs 1030, Rs 2130, Rs 2910, Rs 4360 and Rs 5100. It means one interested individual has to pay at least Rs. 250 as subsidy to set up a sanitary latrine. But, according to the NGO activists, a large section of the rural poor still do not have the capacity to spend Rs. 250 for this purpose. So, the Secretary of a Coochbehar based NGO, field staff of a Coochbehar based NGO²² and President²³ of a Coochbehar based NGO told us that, they have to face a lot of problem to

20 The products selling under are exempted from Sales Tax.

21 We, in this particular point have a recommendation to the government to adopt the policy of the 'UNICEF' which they apply during the time of selling greeting cards. We all know that 'UNICEF' sells season greeting cards to help the poor children in the world. And people from worldwide are purchasing these cards not because of its get up or packaging, they pay for it only to become a part of one noble goal. The state or centre or both the governments should opt for the route taken by the 'UNICEF'. They should start campaigns in print and electronic media that purchasing SHG made products mean one is contributing something to the process of poverty alleviation. So, the 'mental involvement' from the part of the common people obviously will help the SHG members to sell their products.

22 An NGO activist of 'New Bharati Club', Baneshwar, Coochbehar. We meet with this activist on Jul. 6, 2008 at their NGO premises.

23 President of 'Nishiganj Club', Coochbehar. The interview was taken on Nov. 17, 2007 at their NGO office.

generate interest among the people to set up sanitary latrines.²⁴

A high ranking Bank official²⁵ also shared some experiences with us on the problems occurred during the time of GO-NGO relationship. This person tells us that sometimes NGOs are trying to force the Bank officials to pass the SHGs they formed in gradation examination (in the case of 'SGSY' scheme). The sole reason behind this is that, after passing the gradation examination, the NGOs will receive some supportive money from the government. He added that sometimes the performances of the groups are so poor that they do not want to pass the groups. But, still the NGOs create pressure on them. This person thinks, to overcome this problem the government should look into the self-sufficiency of the NGOs. If NGO activists are found well paid and the NGOs are receiving their supportive money on a regular basis, they will perhaps not turn their sight from the ideals of the SHGs movement. This person agreed to a concern raised by the NGO activists. The concern of the NGO activists is that, after making different goods, the SHGs are not provided with sound market. To the Bank official when the members of the SHGs come to them and regret about the lack of market it became an awkward moment. But they have nothing to do in this matter. What is more she adds that during the time of meeting, they share the same mat with the SHG members to prove their attachment towards them. When they (the Bank staffs) requested the SHG members to save 50 paise per day to save Rs 15 per month, the members kept their words. But in return when they asked these Bank officials and NGO activists to provide them with market, they could not do anything.

Another Bank official²⁶ told us with a grievance that even after 2nd gradation or sometimes after bank linkages which is popularly known as 3rd gradation, the SHGs do not show expected performances. To establish this viewpoint, one good example was shared by him. In his branch, a total of 60 SHGs have already opened their account. They asked some old groups to submit good schemes for big loans. But till the date of interview (i.e. Jun. 24, 2008) only 5 SHGs (out of 60 SHGs) had showed interest in this matter. And finally only 2 SHGs were able to submit schemes. What's more 1 out of 2 SHGs till now have not drawn their loans. They are now searching a good place to start dairy farming but have not found it out. So, this Bank official told us that SHG members are still happy to roll their money within the groups. And they are not interested in making more and more profit. Some other Bank officials and NGO activists also shared this point

24 Our suggestion in this point is that the UNICEF or the government should give 100 per cent subsidy in the 'Total Sanitation Campaign' (TSC) scheme. We think that by doing this the programme will become a success.

25 This lady holds an important post in the 'Uttar Banga Kshetriya Grameen Bank', Coochbehar. We interviewed her on Jun. 20, 2008.

26 An Official of 'Uttar Banga Kshetriya Grameen Bank', Baneshwar Branch. We interviewed him on Jun. 24, 2007.

with us.

III. Conclusion:

From the above discussion it is clear that in the development sector 'mentality' is an important factor. Efforts with a very good mentality (of these people) can bring the desired change in the socio-economic condition of the poor people. But at the same time lack of the good mentality may create unnecessary barriers in the developmental processes.