

# Can NGOs Make a Difference?

*The Challenge of Development Alternatives*

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**edited by Anthony J. Bebbington,  
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Political Entrepreneurs or Development Agents:  
An NGO's Tale of Resistance and Acquiescence  
in Madhya Pradesh, India

**Vasudha Chhotray**

NGOs the world over have been regarded positively for their capacities both as 'political entrepreneurs' and as 'development agents', but there is growing cynicism over their abilities to combine these two roles.<sup>1</sup> As political entrepreneurs, NGOs have been known to act as catalysts of radical and transformative social change, through their association with grassroots struggle in various forms. As development agents, NGOs have increasingly become key partners of both governments and donor agencies in implementing development programmes. The definitive mainstreaming of NGOs within international development during the last two decades has entailed growing pressures on NGOs, many of which may have started out as small and informal cadre-based organizations, to compete for development funds, formalize their organizational structures and 'scale up' their work. All this seems to have compromised the inclination and ability of NGOs devoted to development to engage in acts that are radically transformative.

Such cynicism afflicts development in general, perceived as an activity or set of relations that is divorced of 'politics'. Here, politics is understood in terms of radical and transformative change or 'the discourse and struggle over the organization of human possibilities' (Held, 1984: 1). In this chapter, I will refer to this meaning as politics with a big P to distinguish it from the entire range of politics with a small p, from arbitrary interest-seeking to organized electoral party politics, all of which regularly mediate development. While it would be hard to argue that development is devoid of 'small p' politics, it has increasingly been distanced from 'big P' politics: with the result that development has been cynically viewed as contrary to social transformation and preserving of the status quo instead. It is this cynicism that explains why NGOs are viewed as ineffective agents of alternatives

in development. This is one side of the story. The other side points to the continuous attempts made by the development machinery (including states and other institutions of international development cooperation) to present development as a technocratic process that does not involve politics, a phenomenon that has been referred to as depoliticization (Ferguson, 1990; Harriss, 2001; Kamat, 2002). And yet discussions of 'depoliticization' have systematically refrained from specifying which meaning of politics is being referred to in this ostensible depoliticization project.

I would argue that it is necessary, perhaps imperative, to do so for two reasons. First of all, the depoliticization discourse is a discourse of denial for projecting development as free of 'small p' politics even in the face of overwhelming, everyday, indeed public knowledge to the contrary. For example, which junior government official or contractor, responsible for implementing a rural development project in India, can credibly claim that locally powerful interests do not join hands with local project officials to influence project resources? Second, however, and more seriously, the depoliticization of development discourse is impoverished by its limitedness, for it shuns 'big P' politics. So when a social movement like the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) launches into a prolonged protest against the construction of a major hydroelectric dam, it is regarded (by the 'pro-development' camp) to be 'anti-development'. In the same vein, some NGOs in India that might have confronted the state on contentious issues to do with bringing about social transformation have had to face difficult consequences. In this process, what is often forgotten is that development agencies – both from the government and from NGOs – regularly encounter politics, in its 'big P' and 'small p' forms.

It is this entanglement that forms the context for my story: of an NGO working among tribals in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. But before I can proceed, some key points need to be made by way of setting out the context. All have to do with rejecting different types of binaries that have come to dominate development debates, none of which is particularly helpful in appreciating the potential of NGOs in development. The first is drawn between the state and civil society, with NGOs being regarded as shorthand for civil society. Donors are especially guilty of this because identifying NGOs as symbolic civil society actors presents manifold opportunities for them to set up development project funding in support of their objectives, say democratization or participatory development (Igoe, 2003). However, NGOs are 'neither synonymous' nor 'entirely congruent with civil society' and their place within the latter must be treated 'carefully', 'historically' and 'relationally' (Bebbington and Hickey, 2006). Moreover, a simple state–civil society dichotomy actually disregards the profound interrelationships between the two, especially

in the developing world (Kaviraj and Khilnani, 2001). Viewed from a Gramscian perspective, it becomes possible to appreciate that the state and civil society share a dialectical relationship, where the civil society can serve both to reinforce hegemony and to foster counter-hegemonic struggle (Gramsci, 1971).

The second binary that I will not use is between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' development, mainly because it is no longer clear what exactly these terms refer to (Pieterse, 1998). Besides, upon problematizing the idea of 'alternative' development, it becomes evident that NGOs are often accused of not promoting alternatives to 'big D' development or immanent and intentional development that requires clear and concrete interventions (Cowen and Shenton, 1996; Introduction, this volume). However, not enough attention is paid to the attempts by some NGOs to provide alternatives to 'little d' development or immanent development that refers to the social, economic and political processes underlying capitalist development. The third binary I will discard concerns power as a zero-sum process where the dominant act continually to oppress the subordinate and the latter are understood as victims in unidimensional terms. Anthropological research, notably by Scott (1985, 1990) and many others subsequently, has revealed the complicated interface between domination and resistance that characterizes all social interactions (see Masaki, 2004).

And through the course of this chapter, I will reject yet another binary – that drawn between the roles of NGOs as political entrepreneurs and as development agents – for it seriously limits consideration of their potential. NGOs are uniquely positioned in the interface between governments at different levels (both elected representatives and bureaucrats), local communities and foreign donors. Using case study evidence, I will argue that NGOs that seek to be effective in meeting their development objectives need not, indeed cannot, be *either* political entrepreneurs *or* development agents. I will show how, over an entire decade, one central Indian NGO has been able to combine development work regarded as legitimate by the state with practices resisting state action in development in general. In the process, I will demonstrate how and why the 'depoliticization' of development is not always a successful state project with predictable consequences. The chapter will reveal that the NGO's seemingly dual stance was itself unreal, as resistance and acquiescence were interwoven with one another in subtle ways. It will focus on key factors – of composition, location, legislation, organizational interrelationships and politics – all of which contributed to this NGO's local power and effectiveness. It will conclude with general implications concerning the nature of, and also limits to, NGO power. My evidence here derives from qualitative research undertaken during a two-month stay with the NGO in 2000, involving interviews with a broad

range of stakeholders and local documentary sources. Proxy names are used to protect anonymity.

### The Making of an NGO

The proliferation and composition of the 'NGO universe' in India has been competently described elsewhere (Sen, 1999; Kamat, 2002). By and large, NGO activity in development and relief work has been received favourably by the state, and indeed explicitly encouraged. But, simultaneously, NGOs that have adopted a politically confrontational stand against state policies, institutions or actors have typically been disassociated from the state's development agenda, and occasionally repressed. The Seventh Plan document of the Government of India even defined NGOs as 'politically neutral development organizations that would help the government in its rural development programmes' (cited in Sen, 1999: 342).

The organization that forms the subject of my study started its association with Bagli *tehsil* (block) in Dewas district in south-west Madhya Pradesh in 1992. Dewas is a dryland district and contains striking regional disparities between its plateau (*ghaat-upar*) and valley (*ghaat-neeche*) portions as divided by the Narmada river. Non-tribal upper castes in the relatively fertile and irrigated plateau portions dominate the district's politics and political economy. The valley areas, however, have been marked by decades of resource degradation and political marginalization (Shah et al., 1998). Large tribal pockets comprising the Bhil and Bhilala tribes are interspersed with an exploitative non-tribal majority. The roots of this enduring conflict lie in the post-independence settlement process, when the Forest Department took over administration of forest areas, thus dispossessing tribals of their lands. While most tribals in Bagli's 100-village belt were compensated with small plots, these lands are largely dry and of poor quality. Poor tribals practise a combination of rainfed agriculture, wage labour and an annual routine of tortuous migration to the plateau areas during the long, dry summer.

The choice of Bagli as an area of work by our NGO was a considered one. None of the organization's eight founding members had resided or worked in this *tehsil*, or anywhere in Dewas district, prior to their arrival in 1992. They were a group of friends who had met at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, known for its left-oriented political thinking. All group members are from 'high castes'; most come from middle-class families and a few from more affluent backgrounds with important political connections. They are educated and English-speaking, while conversant in Hindi, the main regional language. Nearly all had full-time academic careers before they decided to start work that allowed them to engage more directly in

pursuit of their beliefs. The social backgrounds of group members would prove to be consequential in the course of their interactions with the local people of Bagli, as with government functionaries at senior levels.

The group sought to work in Bagli because it represented long periods of political and economic marginalization, which had in turn produced official *disinterest in the region* and, simultaneously, the marked absence of popular mobilization. Group members wanted to build a 'peoples' organization' that would engage in grassroots work and advocacy. The formation, thus, of a 'critical mass within policy making, so that marginalized tribal areas would get the benefit of increased state intervention and public investment' was central to the stated discourse of the group, and of the organization it eventually formed. It specifically wanted to promote local natural resource management, which it believed would offer a lasting solution to chronic resource poverty. Its overarching aim would be to increase local awareness of the laws of the state and constitutionally prescribed rights. In terms of ideology, the group professed an explicit belief in development, and, equally importantly, in the state as the principal guarantor of rights. This belief was certainly in 'big D' development, in concrete interventions, but importantly also in 'little d' development, given its understanding and recognition of underlying or immanent processes of development (see Introduction). Theirs was an ideology of 'positive engagement', with the state, its policies, institutions and actors – one prominent member denounced anti-state activism as easier than 'serious development work'. Not entirely aware of what was to follow, the group registered itself as an NGO, and set up a makeshift office in Bagli town, using the personal savings of its members. The NGO was called *Samaj Pragati Sahyog* (in Hindi, 'Support for Social Progress'), henceforth referred to as SPS.

### **Acquaintance with Neelpura Village: Setting Up Home Base**

Local curiosity about the newly formed SPS only increased when group members attempted to acquaint themselves with Bagli and the *ghaat-neeche* (valley) villages. Group members recounted how local officials and politicians based in Bagli, a small market town, were distinctly unfriendly. According to the group, they were most perplexed because SPS, unlike other NGOs in the district, was not there to implement any particular development project. The lack of a clearly spelt-out role also aroused incomprehension on the part of villagers during SPS's initial forays, on motorcycles, into the *ghaat-neeche* village belt. Soon enough, group members decided to concentrate their attention on one small village, conveniently located close to the main

road, and comprising almost entirely the Bhilala and Korku tribes, a village called Neelpura. This decision may have been motivated by convenience at the time, but quickly became vital to the identity of SPS in the region, and, initially, to its very survival. The socio-economic characteristics of Neelpura closely matched SPS's idea of a 'base village'. It is almost uniformly poor, with most tribals owning lands between 1 and 3 acres in size and dry. A handful of farmers own more than 6 acres and only three out of the hundred-odd households in the village are presently landless. This relatively egalitarian pattern of land ownership follows from government distribution of similar land plots to the new migrants, nearly a century ago. Neelpura is also relatively homogenous socially, since caste-based social polarization is conspicuously missing in this predominantly tribal village.

SPS's quest for local contacts within Neelpura to facilitate initial dialogues soon revealed the nature of power relationships in this seemingly unstratified village. Mahbub Khan, a Muslim landowner with more than 30 acres of land, was economically dominant, his social clout evident in his near exclusive engagement of hired labour and cultivation of a second irrigated crop. Politically, however, Mahbub remained reclusive, and a Bhilala family that had long performed functions of tax collection and dispute resolution assumed the title of *Patel* or village headman. The Patels were respected within the village, and the family's patriarch traditionally acted as the sarpanch of the village panchayat, which in turn was practically defunct (panchayats are three-tier locally elected bodies at the district, block and village levels.). Shortly before the 73rd constitutional amendment (granting constitutional recognition to panchayats), Neelpura was unfortunately paired with its large non-tribal neighbour Bhimpura. Lakhon Singh, a landless though politically connected individual from Neelpura, became sarpanch. Singh was friendly with other sarpanches in *ghaat-neeche* and with politicians at the Bagli *tehsil* office.

Of all three 'power-holders' Singh was most hospitable to SPS group members, perceiving them to be potential allies in the village's development prospects. This was logical given how SPS members repeatedly asked villagers to tell them of their problems. In doing so, they created expectations of solutions, and soon enough the NGO slid into its intended role of 'developer'. It earned greater familiarity in Neelpura, whose residents began referring to it as *sanstha* (Hindi for 'organization'). As the scarcity of water was the key problem, SPS offered to dig wells on people's private lands, and build water-conservation structures like earthen bunds and field ponds. SPS soon received funds from the Government of India under different central government schemes for the purpose. Although initially sceptical of SPS's offers of 'free wells' (due to bitter memories of a loan scheme in the 1970s that had led to government 'harassment'

for repayment), most people in the village soon agreed to have their old wells deepened or new wells dug.

These development activities by SPS constituted an important moment in its relationship with the people of Neelpura. Working on the individual lands of people in this small village allowed SPS to come into close contact with their families. It was not long before group members were engaged in personal acts of help to villagers. By 1995, SPS had come a long way. It had a base village from where to begin its task of building a 'people's organization', and it was acquiring a clear role for itself in relation to development work in the area. As evident in its well-digging initiative, SPS also had no qualms about extending a highly 'individualized' approach to development through beneficiary creation. And, as the following events will illustrate, it did not view this approach as necessarily antithetical to the formation of collective solidarities, as has been suggested by some authors (Kamat, 2002).

### **A Troubled Period: Confrontation, Resistance and Development**

During its implementation of the well-digging and water-conservation projects in Neelpura, SPS stumbled upon two types of exploitative practice in the region. These revealed the nexus of domination by anti-tribal forces in the *ghaat-neeche* area. It detected that the overall wage structure, especially for public works, in this tribal belt was not in keeping with the equal minimum wage laws of the country enacted in 1948. Both large farmers and panchayat sarpanches (acting through contractors), who engaged labourers for the execution of construction works, perpetuated this injustice. SPS also discovered that land records of poor tribals throughout the *ghaat-neeche* had not been updated in accordance with the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code of 1950, and essential information, such as correct rates for land transactions, was being kept out of their hands by the local revenue bureaucracy. This included both the village *patwari* as well as the subdistrict magistrate of the revenue division, who stood to gain monetarily from such malpractices. Emboldened by the absence of challenge, these junior state officials had also acquired near autocratic status locally.

Despite its infancy in the area and the nature of the backlash any protest would invite, SPS chose to confront the perpetrators of such exploitation. First of all, it insisted on paying equal minimum wages to all labourers hired on its development projects, an unprecedented act that upset old wage relations in the area. At one stroke, SPS had made enemies of large farmers, sarpanches and contractors in *ghaat-neeche*. Although some sarpanches like

Lakhan Singh in Neelpura were tribal, this was predominantly an anti-tribal coalition. A minor though not insignificant detail is the alienation that SPS suffered in its own little base, as it had angered its principal ally, Singh, and also Khan, the richest landowner. Even as these developments brought SPS into public scrutiny beyond *ghaat-neeche*, it went further and contacted the District Collector with a proposal to organize a 'land records camp' in order to rectify the appalling records situation. The most senior official of the district lent her support to SPS, and in January 2005 such a camp was organized in Neelpura village. It was a huge success, with more than 13,000 tribals travelling far to attend, and the district collectorate backed it with two additional camps.

The turn of events described here constituted a vital moment in the evolution of this NGO. It marked the beginning of antagonistic relationships with junior officials (like the subdivisional magistrate), whose vested interests suffered following SPS's intervention, but more favourable relationships with senior district- and state-level officials, who had no such interests at stake. Moreover, SPS communicated easily with elite and influential members of the Indian Administrative Service, aided by the social mobility that an 'English' education and privileged upbringing can bring in India. While these constituted important explanations for events, the most important was SPS's successful emphasis on the idea of the state as the guarantor of rights, and therefore of the need to uphold legislation that no civil servant could possibly disregard in public.

This episode reiterated SPS's engagement with immanent development processes and its willingness to challenge the exclusionary forms of political rule that commonly characterize state functioning. But, interestingly, it had done so without deviating from the legitimate framework of state laws and exposed the intricate politics of exploitation that impeded the development of the *ghaat-neeche* region (both within the *ghaat-neeche* and the *ghaat-upar* regions through the subordination of the tribal population). This conveyed how regular development work mandated by the state rested on critical political issues like the disregard of law (that codifies important rights) and abuse of authority. And yet, following the contradictory nature of the state, there are simultaneously existing laws like the Charitable Trusts Act of 1950 which apply to voluntary organizations, and state that

The achievement of a political purpose, in the sense of arousing in the people the desire, and instilling into them an imperative need to demand changes in the structures of the administration and the mechanism by which they are governed ... is not a charitable purpose as being one 'for the advancement of any other object of general public utility within section 9(4) of the Act'. (cited in Kamat, 2002: 56)

This clearly illustrates the use of law by the state to act as an instrument of depoliticization (of 'big P' politics), and, but for the fact that SPS had discovered malpractices in relation to *existing* law, it too may have been in trouble with its funding agencies, notably CAPART (Council for Promotion of Rural Arts and Technology). Equally important was its location in *ghaat-neeche*, the site of subordinate politics within the district, as opposed to *ghaat-upar*, where SPS may have found it a lot harder to campaign for change. Greater political stakes embedded in the long history of non-tribal and upper-caste domination would have meant lesser space for tolerance of opposition, a point conceded by both SPS and district government officials whom I met.

However, even in *ghaat-neeche* SPS experienced considerable resistance. A powerful sarpanch from a village neighbouring to Neelpura took umbrage at the fact that SPS had initiated the deepening of the main tank there, on a show of written support by other members of the panchayat and ordinary residents, but without his 'permission'. He galvanized thirty other discontented sarpanches and, with the help of the local Congress MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly), took a delegation to the Chief Minister (of the ruling Congress party at the time) to complain that the NGO was 'corrupt ... bypassed panchayats and misappropriated their money' and should be 'removed'. This reaction was interesting and a testimony to pro-panchayat decentralization initiatives under way in Madhya Pradesh, which had greatly bolstered the confidence of sarpanches. These allegations lacked credibility and SPS reacted by pursuing a vigorous policy of image building as a transparent organization that worked in the popular interest. The local press further dramatized these unprecedented developments. The situation was ultimately resolved through the appointment of an 'inquiry committee' headed by the district-level panchayat (a clever ploy by the state bureaucracy to assuage angry sarpanches). The committee, however, acquitted SPS of the charges and publicly commended it for its 'good work'.

SPS gained tremendously from public approval by the highest elected authority in the district. Its local opponents realized that 'the luxury of direct confrontation' against SPS was one that they could no longer afford (Scott, 1990), although private confrontations between individual sarpanches and members of SPS ensued on a number of occasions. From being an 'outsider' to the region, SPS was clearly an ascendant power due to its successful strategy of development, legality and positive engagement with the state, particularly through dialogue with panchayat raj institutions. At a time when the ruling Congress leadership in Madhya Pradesh was emphatic on decentralization to panchayats, SPS seemed to have stumbled upon the right language for creating necessary local institutional space.

### Formal Agent of the State: Doing Development Daily

Recognition from the state government came soon, and in the summer of 1995 SPS was invited by the Dewas district administration to become a Project Implementing Agency (PIA) for watershed development projects (under the central Ministry of Rural Development's programme) in the *ghaat-neeche* villages. SPS's selection as a PIA for a state-funded and managed development programme was particularly significant for two reasons. First, it showed that the NGO's resistance to certain types of state practices did not preclude its appointment as a formal agent of a premier state development programme. It showed that there were no definite boundaries between NGOs that implement development projects using government money and those that resist state practices. Second, it brought about the extension of the state's watershed development intervention to the impoverished and politically subordinate *ghaat-neeche* area in the very first year of the programme, even as the district administration experienced pressures for allocating watershed projects to electorally important villages in the *ghaat-upar* area.

The selection of *ghaat-neeche* villages, and of SPS as PIA, highlights the presence of a distinct political process that translated popular mobilization by an NGO into greater involvement with the state's development agenda. In this respect, moreover, SPS's confrontationist trajectory exposed the limitations of the state's depoliticization discourse by revealing the intricate connections between development and politics with a small p (of vested-interest-seeking). But, more importantly, its pro-active role as an agency of politics with a capital P, whereby it overturned unfair wage relations and updated land records, actually paved the way for a more substantial role in state-led development. Depoliticization clearly was not a 'successful' state project with predictable consequences, although the lack of success proved to be in the state's own interest. The marked improvement in condition of a large number of people in the *ghaat-neeche* as a result of SPS-led initiatives could only have restored their faith in a state, otherwise known to them mainly through its horrific acts of exploitation and abuse of authority.

As the PIA of Neelpura watershed project, SPS was in a vastly different position from other PIAs, as the village and its intrapersonal dynamics were extremely familiar to it. It did not need to 'facilitate' the creation of a watershed committee through a 'consensual' process in a public gathering, as other PIAs were advised to do by the national watershed guidelines of 1994. On the other hand, it chose to have a clear say in committee formation on the grounds that it was responsible for creating an 'effective cadre of leaders' that would be able to take 'contentious decisions'. The committee was formed and two prominent members of the Patel family, by now very friendly with SPS, became its chairman and secretary. Both Lakhan Singh

and Mahbub Khan stayed away from these new developments. The style of committee formation set the tone for a flexible and non-procedural interpretation of project management, and SPS did not bother with regular committee meetings, recording minutes and so on, claiming that decision-making worked best in the 'natural' rhythm of village life. In its daily administration of the watershed project, SPS tried to create a political culture of 'genuine devolution' and 'demystification' of technical project management by training local committee members in a range of skills.

This discourse, however, had an unflattering underbelly. By the time the project was under way, there was a small constituency (predictably including Khan and Singh) within Neelpura that thought SPS had deliberately adopted a divisive policy in the village in order to build a support base for itself. The widespread perception was that SPS was there to stay. The physical embodiment of this came in 1998, when SPS received a large grant from CAPART to establish a 'field station' about 1 kilometre away from Neelpura. SPS's growing physical presence no doubt had an increasing impact on the formation of local consciousness and the mobilization of local identities. There were growing allegiances for and against the NGO: so while members of the watershed committee in Neelpura formed its core support, others outside the village resented it bitterly. A good example was the sarpanch of the Bhimpura–Neelpura panchayat, a rich non-tribal landlord from Bhimpura, who was among those accusing SPS of trying to influence the outcome of the 2000 panchayat election by propping up favoured candidates (mostly using unsubstantiated claims). SPS adopted a relatively non-confrontationist stand here, quite distinct from its reactions in the earlier phase. Its strategy gradually gave way to a more sanguine discourse of 'partnership' with the panchayats, so that individual opponents like the new Bhimpura sarpanch could appear to stand isolated in their bickering. In a manner strangely similar to the influential institutions of international development cooperation, SPS's new and positive message of partnership reeked of a rosy confidence that only secure power holders can afford.

### **Common Property Resource Agreement: Using Law to Effect Local Rights within a Project Framework**

One case of explicit intervention by SPS in its capacity as PIA of Neelpura watershed project merits special mention, for it reveals a remarkable act of political entrepreneurship to facilitate the material and symbolic overturning of local power relations within the legitimate project framework. This involved rectifying a highly inequitable arrangement of access to the only common water source in the village. SPS was well aware that the

use of this *naala* (stream) had been improperly appropriated by a small group of upstream farmers, Mahbub Khan in particular, who drew waters continuously through *naardas* (underground channels) and, daringly, even from the surface itself through the use of through electric pump sets and diesel engines. With several farmers siphoning off waters upstream, those downstream had practically no access to running water or the opportunity to recharge their wells. Village livestock were the worst affected, since the *naala* ran dry after the rainy season.

Watershed project works included treatment of the *naala's* catchment, but SPS realized that under the existing arrangement a rich upstream minority would corner the likely benefits. It resolved not to go ahead with project activities until the arrangement had been overturned. It is clear that SPS was attempting to intervene in a highly contentious area, which other project agencies may have disregarded, but one which had actually been specified within its role as a PIA. The guiding Ministry of Rural Development's policy framework emphasizes common property resources. So, interpreting the powers accorded to it within this policy to the fullest, SPS went ahead and mobilized popular opinion in the village to formulate a collective agreement to regulate the use of *naala* waters. In consequence, 139 farmers from Neelpura and adjacent villages signed a written resolution, which in translation from Hindi reads as follows:

It is decided by consent [*sarvasammati*] that nobody will ever draw water from the *naala* using a *naarda*. Those farmers who have wells will also not draw water from the *naala* using pumps. Those farmers who do not have wells have agreed to draw water from the *naala* on a limited basis according to rules. After the water in the *naala* stops flowing, nobody will draw water from it, irrespective of whether they have wells or not. This water will be kept for cattle only. *All villagers* agree to this resolution [*stress added*].

Mahbub Khan protested vehemently, but under the weight of collective opinion and the NGO's vigilant stand had to block the underground channels with cement, along with the other farmers. Those who had water in their wells or lands on which wells could be dug had to remove pumps from the *naala*. SPS even constructed additional wells wherever necessary, free of any contributions from the farmers. The *naala* agreement was a matter of tremendous pride for SPS, and it mediated every detail of it. In the initial days after the agreement, enthused villagers set up a system of rotation to monitor the *naala* against possible violators at night. SPS claims that the agreement benefited everyone, although those with lands upstream were at a greater advantage than the rest.

Mahbub Khan went to court over the agreement, claiming 'easementary rights' over the *naala*, under the Indian Easementary Act of 1882. The Act's principal clause allows a single user or group of users exclusive or predominant

use over a village resource, on the basis of 'long use or prescription', on the grounds that this use has been peaceable, open and uninterrupted for at least thirty years, as an easement and over a resource that is not owned by anyone in particular. SPS fought back, claiming that none of these grounds was valid. It offered convincing reasons – the *naala* was actually owned by the government, which in 1993 had issued an order prohibiting villagers to refrain from its use, and Mahbub himself had claimed right of use for the last seventeen years only. Mahbub was reprimanded for going to court with 'unclean hands' and his appeal for 'easementary right' was struck down. This had the effect of upholding the *naala* agreement and effectively altered the local field of power. Mahbub Khan was dealt a clear blow, symbolic and material, and SPS once again established itself as a proactive agency of change.

### Scaling Up Development and Scaling Up Politics

SPS has energetically scaled up its development work, and, from a couple of villages in Bagli *tehsil* in the mid-1990s, it now implements a range of development projects in forty villages spread over three *tehsils* in Dewas and adjoining Khargone district, with further plans for expansion. Its staff strength exceeds one hundred and it has constructed new and impressive offices in Bagli. The main focus of its projects continues to be related to watershed development and drought-proofing, and the funding agencies include the state government, CAPART (an old supporter of SPS) and, more recently, the American India Foundation. It has also developed an 'Agricultural Programme' spread over forty-five villages, and an initiative for micro-finance through women's self-help groups is rapidly growing.

In all these projects, SPS is emphatic on transparency and has initiated regular public meetings or *jan-sunvaayis* (literally translated from Hindi as 'hearing of the people'). A typical or *jan-sunvaayi* involves a large public gathering in the village, attended by grassroots workers of SPS and frequently its founding members. They apprise the public of the project's progress and financial status and answer questions from the audience. SPS hopes that this exercise will promote a culture of accountability among local bodies in the region. This method of accountability is in tune with the idea of 'social audit' in the panchayat *gram sabha* promoted by the state.

In addition, SPS has adopted a much more proactive strategy to contribute to the 'real' empowerment of panchayat institutions. It seeks to create a 'cadre of local leaders from amongst those who are committed to village development, but who are also from the poorer sections (tribals and women), to carry forward the panchayat process with systematic training'. These activities go beyond the scope of 'regular' development project

work and are visionary in a political sense. SPS views itself as an agent of decentralized development and intends to network with other grassroots organizations and orient them to conduct training exercises for panchayats in their regions. Its work in this area has found abundant favour with the state government.

And yet SPS has not (so far) shied away from issues that are politically contentious. It has continued to oppose the politics of state oppression of tribals, by allying itself with forces that have arisen to resist it. Bagli *tehsil*, with its forested areas, has been the site of exploitation of the tribal population by the Forest Department and, more recently, their collective mobilization against it through organizations called the Adivasi Morcha Sangathan and Adivasi Shakti Sangathan. The nadir of such exploitation came in March 2001, when the district administration authorized police firings upon tribals in a number of villages in Bagli, ostensibly to evict them from forest land which they had illegally occupied. The act was condemned widely in the popular press. According to the 'Friends of the River Narmada', a volunteer-based solidarity network, this attack was unjustified and fuelled by state animosity against the growing strength and local political influence of the tribal *sangathans*. SPS played an active part in investigating the firings, compiling a detailed report of the atrocities and supporting many tribal families that had been affected.

Unlike the earlier period in its history, when confrontation with established stakeholders was risky and support from certain quarters of the state administration untested, SPS was able to take a firm stand on critical issues without worrying about its own position. Over the decade, it had built up a popular following in the *ghaat-neeche* villages, exposed the vested interests of local opponents and marginalized them, built firm connections with the district- and state-level administrations, and embedded itself firmly in state-funded development activity. Thus, even as it championed politically thorny issues like tribal exploitation, it denounced radical politics that were delinked from positive engagement with the state and its development agenda. Its view of 'big P' politics was at no time detached from the state. Given that a large number of panchayats in the *ghaat-neeche* area are vying to collaborate with SPS for development work, it would appear that the NGO has successfully created a discourse that 'good economics can make excellent politics'.

### **Hegemony or Counter-hegemony**

The narrative so far has described how counter-hegemonic initiatives against various forms of domination – which reflect the existing underlying characteristics of development – have underlined SPS's strategy time and again

since its arrival in the *ghaat-neeche* part of Bagli *tehsil* more than a decade ago. Through its struggle against exploitative wage practices, outdated land registrations and unfair appropriation of essential common property, SPS concretely overturned the fortunes of a dominant minority, and shattered even the 'public transcript' of their hegemony (Scott, 1990). In each case, the concerned actors suffered not just material loss but also public shaming and a sharp curtailment in their previous authority.

Simultaneously, however, SPS has rapidly gained in terms of local standing and prestige, with a visible rise in material capacity. It is acutely aware of its new position and projects itself as the 'only agency, either governmental or non-governmental, that is talking about development'. This seeming appropriation of a legitimate mandate is not surprising; it closely follows from the NGO's iteration of positive ideas of the state, as a guarantor of rights (during its early confrontations) and, subsequently, as a doer of development. While SPS may have resisted state structures or actors or processes, it never discredited the idea of the state as such, and has painstakingly moulded both its organizational practice and its discourse to complement this state idea. This has made it all the more difficult for local stakeholders to oppose SPS, which stands tall in its demonstrated conviction in all the 'good things' that the state might embody, and drastically changed the politics of the 1990s. Even the Congress MLA, which once facilitated a sarpanch-led petition to the Chief Minister for the ousting of the NGO, is seeking its support to bolster its constituency.

But what are the implications of the sort of power that this NGO is beginning to wield? I would argue that the latest phase in SPS's life history has witnessed the emergence of a new hegemonic position in *ghaat-neeche*, backed by a winning discourse, a popular base, connections with influential *state officials*, and a *clearly charted yet expanding agenda with active fund flows*. While SPS has up to now used its position to speak out in favour of subordinate interests, it will be interesting to observe the kinds of issues it takes up in the future without compromising its own critical leverage. It would be equally important to understand the kinds of subject positions that SPS is fostering as a hegemonic power in the area, among its supporters, employees as well as patrons.

### **Conclusion: The Nature and Limits of NGO Power**

In my attempt to understand SPS's trajectory in the Narmada Valley, the profound links it has carved and sustained between political entrepreneurship and development agency have been made clear throughout. It was aware of these links to begin with, as evident in its guiding objective to

direct the state's development resources to marginalized areas, and it has persevered so as not to separate them in its continuing practice, striving to create a new type of politics in its development work with the state. Its own transformation from new, even subordinate, actor to dominant player in *ghaat-neeche* development and politics is an inescapable part of the story. So how are we to understand and appraise this NGO's praxis?

Recent discussions of grassroots activity are increasingly recognizing the blurred boundaries between resistance and acquiescence, struggle and compromise, activism and development, all binaries that have typically distinguished radical social movements from NGOs. In her discussion of examples of 'powerful' NGOs in the developing world, Michael (2004) identifies two key commonalities: their interest in linking activities with 'mainstream' economic systems and their engagement with political activity. The founder of one Indian NGO, SEWA, sums up the story I have narrated in this chapter in her succinct remark that NGOs ought to pursue 'the twin strategies of struggle and development' (Michael, 2004: 40). Yet it is admittedly not easy for NGOs to do this. Kamat remarks on the difficulty of maintaining a balance between 'a struggle based organization supported largely through popular participation and nominally paid tribal cadre on the one hand, and a development organization flush with funds managed by a professional paid staff on the other' (2002: 77). In SPS's case, much of this transformation has been remarkably nuanced, mostly because it started out as an organization with a philosophy of positive engagement with the state, invoking confrontation and cooperation in alternate measure. At the same time, one wonders if the more radical elements of its strategy would not be blotted out by the constraints of a new-found hegemony with its own dynamics of subordination. My account offers some insight into perceptions of this NGO's strategies to wield local power and popularity, especially among those piqued by it.

And yet the nature of SPS's praxis perhaps offers a way forward to numerous NGOs seeking to forge transformative change without rendering themselves unsustainable. Indeed, SPS's experience reveals how engaging with both 'small d' and 'big D' development is integral to the articulation of transformative or 'big P' politics. Here, it is precisely the synergies between state and civil society, mainstream and alternative development, and dominance and resistance that matter, not their separation as is mistakenly believed. The chapter also reiterates the fallacy of depoliticization – and affirms the fundamentally political nature of development – since it is quite clear how 'small p' politics pervades development (evident through the actions of appropriation by local officials in Bagli), but also that 'big P' politics can accompany development. While senior officials were more likely to preserve a technocratic façade to development, they were also formally

bound to the idea of the state as a guarantor of rights. It was precisely this disjuncture that allowed SPS to obtain its support to orchestrate transformative development politics.

While SPS's experience cannot possibly be a blueprint for non-governmental action, it offers some general lessons about the power of NGOs. Many of these reiterate key points made by Michael (2004) in her theorization of NGO power: the need for NGOs to 'capture' or 'protect' space, be based within 'communities', set their own 'agendas', prevent conflict, and acquire synergetic relationships with the state. Here, I present four aspects to delineate the power available to NGOs as observed in this case study.

First, NGOs have the power to effect concrete changes in local power relations, as SPS did by overturning wage relations, transforming common property access and challenging an exploitative anti-tribal coalition. This may also mean that their power can sometimes be exclusionary. Second, their power is often text-oriented. SPS relied on a correct reading of the laws and official guidelines of the Indian state to fuel its radical initiatives. NGOs do not have constitutional power and face a greater need to justify their actions within existing notions of legality. Undoubtedly, many NGOs campaign to go beyond this, for a drastic change in state laws and policies. Third, the power is performance-oriented and increasingly enacted in settings like the *jan-sunvaayi*. SPS, especially in its early days, repeatedly chose to create public events out of confrontations and chased a 'good reputation' in the local press. Quite in contrast, a district collector can simply order the closure of a road; she need not resort to a public debate on the matter. There is little consensus or legal validation of what power NGOs should have. Finally, as key episodes in this chapter – for example, the land records camp, the opportunity to work on the watershed project, and panchayat-related activities – illustrate, NGO power greatly depends on its ability to elicit government support. It is necessary to take this argument one step further. SPS's actions reveal a continuous interface not only with government officials but with key actors within 'political society', including political representatives, activists and local courts. NGOs cannot afford to limit their interactions to government officials alone; the impetus for transformation comes from their messy entanglements and struggles with political actors that impact upon the very fabric of development and society. Indeed, it is the synthesis of their roles as political entrepreneurs and development agents that holds the key to their power.

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