

How *Samaj Pragati Sahyog* works the state and why it succeeds

Vasudha Chhotray

School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich

The central proposition that I will put forward in this chapter is as follows. Although non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are regarded as the most visible spokespersons for ‘civil society’ in recent development discourse, in fact they are fundamentally constitutive of the state. The term civil society has gained prominence within development discourse for it has come to signify domestic public space where powers ‘illegitimately’ usurped by states can be reclaimed (Khilnani, 2001: 12; Jenkins, 2001). These ideas have been as influential in India as elsewhere, where since the 1980s, the proliferation of an ‘NGO universe’ comprising very diverse and indeed dissimilar organisations has been euphorically noted and lauded (Sen 1999). Ample recognition has followed even within the official apparatus of the Indian state, which has duly initiated various programmes of state-led reform aiming to introduce decentralised and participatory forms of governing to ward off criticisms against centralised and top-down government. Eager to share in the salutary effects of ‘civil society’, the key component of such initiatives is often the involvement of NGOs of various hues in different capacities. The point simply is the use of the NGO as a metaphor for civil society by officials as much as non-officials.

My purpose in this chapter is neither to present a tirade against the equation of NGOs with civil society nor to quarrel with the projection of civil society as a homogenous terrain without any internal hierarchies of power amongst its various constituents. A number of scholars have done this most satisfactorily (see Igoe 2003, Bebbington and Hickey 2006 and Hadiz 2004 for example). Moreover, the point has also been made that identifying NGOs as symbolic civil society actors that can achieve objectives like democratisation and greater state accountability follows a rather simplistic dichotomy between the state and civil society, one that is essentially unsuitable for understanding the profound interrelationships between the two in the postcolonial developing world (see Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001). So for instance, Bayart (1986) and Kaviraj (2001) have described how following peculiar historical conditions, civil societies in sub-Saharan Africa and India are neither substantive entities, nor armed with limited powers against their respective states. Chatterjee (2004) further rejects the wider applicability of the idea of civil society in India, on the ground that it is inhabited solely by a small section of elites. A broader notion of ‘political society’, Chatterjee suggests, is suitable for understanding how the vast majority of people interact with state agencies to negotiate their claims.

In this chapter therefore, I will not restrict my analysis to the prospects of NGOs in furthering or deepening civil society involvement in traditionally state-led activities. Instead, I will pose a somewhat different set of questions: how do NGOs see the state, their own position within it and most importantly, what do they make of the idea of the state in negotiating a space for themselves to undertake socially transformative development. I think these questions are necessary if we are to understand the character of Indian civil society and the opportunities and constraints available to NGOs, given their often unique position in the interface between governments at different levels (both elected representatives and bureaucrats), local communities and foreign donors. My inspiration for these questions comes from the experiences of an organisation in the tribal lowlands of Bagli in Madhya Pradesh that I observed during a period of doctoral fieldwork in 2000 (and have remained in touch with since). I hope to justify in the end my choice of questions, and to conclude that the key to the power that NGOs can wield depends greatly, even largely, on the manner and extent to which they are able to work the state.

The context for state-NGO relationships in India

NGOs have frequently been depicted in a unified manner in development literature. The point that this causes ‘ambiguity and conflict’ about the role of the grassroots sector, has been made forcefully (Kamat 2002a, Bebbington and Farrington 1993). A brief history of NGOs in India reveals that a wide range of voluntary initiatives have existed since independence. It shows that NGO is a catch-all term that does not capture differences among these initiatives adequately.

The late colonial period witnessed the emergence of several indigenous voluntary organisations for socio-religious reform (Sen 1999). Voluntary organisations espousing Gandhian ideals of local and voluntary action for development were involved in a variety of works. In fact, voluntary organisations found explicit mention in the first five-year plan. Moreover, the Community Development Programme (CDP) in 1952 was the first instance of an official proposal to involve local people in development. However, these initiatives could not predominate following the formulation of centralised development strategies after independence.

The problems of centralised development planning were evident in the following decades. The highly iniquitous consequences of the development revolutions (post the 1965 agricultural Green Revolution, and the 1970 White Revolution for increasing milk production and marketing) engendered radical outbursts against state action. Naxalites and other Maoist groups struggled to highlight the issues of poor and landless peasants. The *Sarvodaya*

movement, a form of Gandhian socialism, led by Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), reached its peak between the early and mid-1970s. The principal focus of this movement was *Bhoodan* or voluntary redistribution of land. Narayan also organised radicalised students into the *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini* or 'Student and Youth Struggle Army', and called upon them to organise the rural and low caste poor against the tyranny of the landed, upper and bureaucratic classes.

The state came down with a heavy hand on all these radical initiatives. Mrs Gandhi's government declared a national emergency in 1975 and jailed naxalites, maoists, students and any other agitators against the state. By the 1970s, many NGOs in India had started receiving foreign funding from international donors. International NGOs like CARE and OXFAM had also started working in India. In 1976, the state passed the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which required that all foreign money to voluntary organisations be routed through and cleared by the Home Ministry¹. This Act was perceived as a sign of state control over NGOs receiving foreign funds (Fernandes 1986, Kamat 2002).

Yet, the state did not indiscriminately suppress all NGOs during this period. It continued to support welfare oriented NGOs and NGOs that did not challenge its development strategies (Franda 1983, Kothari 1986). In fact, the third plan (1961-1965) reiterated the importance of NGOs in the successful implementation of development plans. The coming to power of the Janata Party in 1977 was clearly the turning point in the history of state-NGO relationships in India. The party comprised thousands of *Sarvodaya* workers who had rallied around JP against the Congress government, as well as older generation Gandhians, who advocated a greater role for NGOs in development. Some factions of this party may have also promoted NGOs for partisan gains, like the Jana Sangh Party (Sen 1999: 339). The Janata government undertook greater initiatives than its predecessor to encourage voluntary work in the 'countryside' as part of its rural improvement programme. It was at this time that GoI instituted CAPART (Council for Promotion of Participatory Action and Rural Technology) to provide technical and financial assistance to voluntary organisations and workers. As a result, a large number of NGOs mushroomed to avail of new opportunities for development. At this time, several voluntary activists, especially Left supporters of the Naxalite movement, the CPI-ML and Maoist groups, were released from imprisonment. While they did not wish to return either to their fragmented movements or to radical party politics, they were motivated to resuming political work in some form (Kamat 2002: 16-17). This led to a steady burgeoning of independent groups, committed to work among the rural and urban poor, and

¹ This followed a public disclosure by the Asia Foundation, a US based agency, that it was funded by the US Central Intelligence Agency. This caused public outrage (Sen 1999, p 338).

mostly not linked with any formal, political party. Many scholars have called such groups social action groups or non-party political formations (Kamat 2002, Kothari 1986, Lewis 1991 and Sen 1999).

By the 1980s, the NGO universe in India had grown substantially. These ranged from welfare oriented NGOs to those formed by international NGOs, social action groups, NGOs formed with government support for development work, development research organisations or think tanks and smaller Community Based Organisations or CBOs². There are other voluntary initiatives as well that are typically not described as NGOs. These include issue based lobby groups such as large farmers' organisations, and mass movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). The NBA in particular is a striking example of a new social movement that comprises development NGOs, GROs, activists and intellectuals, all of whom have come together to oppose the Narmada Valley Project.

This brief discussion indicates that a large variety of voluntary initiatives have existed in India since independence and even earlier. Many of these are clubbed under the term NGO. Attempts have been made to classify NGOs in India using characteristics such as size, composition, origin, source of funding or ideological orientation³. Despite these taxonomies, terms like NGO, CBO, GSO (Grassroots Support Organisation), MSO (Membership Support Organisations) and also CSO (Civil Society Organisation) are used without further qualification by donor agencies, government officials and scholars in India⁴.

The discussion also shows that NGOs continue to share a range of relationships with state institutions and actors at different levels. NGO activity in development, mostly as implementers of development programmes, whether state or foreign funded, has generally been received favourably. State willingness to involve NGOs in development and relief work has grown since independence. Simultaneously, NGOs that have adopted a politically sensitive or confrontationist stand against state policies, institutions or actors have typically been disassociated with the state's development programmes, and occasionally been repressed. The 7th plan document of the Government of India (GOI) even defined NGOs as 'politically neutral development organisations that would help the government in its rural development programmes' (GOI 1985 as cited in Sen 1999: 342). This cynical view of

² The records of the Home Ministry showed nearly 12,000 NGOs receiving foreign funding in 1988 (Kamat 2002: 19). There are thousands others that do not depend on foreign money. CAPART itself funds more than 17,000 NGOs for development work (capart.nic.in)

³ Robinson et al (1993), Garain (1994)

⁴ An MSO is staffed by members who belong to the locality. A GSO may perform functions similar to an MSO, but typically does not comprise of the beneficiaries it intends to serve (Carroll 1992). CSO is used to denote a whole range of voluntary organisations.

politics is pervasive in heavily bureaucratised development endeavours, and was immortalised as the ‘depoliticisation’ of development by James Ferguson in his classic 1990 study. It is this stance that can create tensions for NGOs increasingly being brought within the fold of state-led initiatives for decentralised and participatory governance. So for example, NGOs that work intimately on resource issues to do with water or land are more than likely to be presented with inequitable and conflict ridden situations, and they may be required to adopt positions that are less than welcome within regular government funded development initiatives. Does this mean that those NGOs which are inclined to adopt confrontationist positions, or be more explicitly ‘political’ in the sense of challenging established status quo, cannot or do not work constructively with the Indian state? Are we then faced with the over-characterised antipathy between an ever-democratic civil society and an ever-repressive state, one that is massively popular with foreign funders who seek to fund NGOs in support of participatory development or democratisation objectives (see Igoe 2003 and Jenkins 2001 for excellent critiques)? Are we also left with the execution of governance without politics, where the broadening of hierarchically organised government into more complex and lateral relationships between government officials and a range of non-governmental actors is taking place without any change at all in the space for politics, as traditionally afforded within government? If evidence from the following case study is to be considered, then the answers to each of these questions would be no.

Viewing the state

This story is set in the picturesque but poor valley of the Narmada in the district of Dewas in Madhya Pradesh. The Narmada transects Dewas into the plateau (*ghaat-upar*) and the valley (*ghaat-neeche*). The two portions could not have been more distinct, in political, social as well as economic terms. The plateau is fertile, irrigated, industrialised and economically prosperous. It is dominated moreover by non-tribal upper castes that are influential in the district’s politics as well as political economy. In the valley by contrast, large tribal pockets comprising the *Bhil* and *Bhilala* tribes are interspersed with an exploitative non-tribal majority. The area is marked by decades of resource degradation as well as political marginalisation. The tribals of *ghaat-neeche* have been locked into an enduring conflict with their non-tribal oppressors, the roots of which can be traced back to 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 NGO whose story I am about to tell arrived in Bagli, a tehsil in Dewas's *ghaat-neeche* area, in 1992. It was not the 100-strong organisation it is today, with established links with the state and central governments and various assorted donors. In fact, it was not even a formally registered NGO. It was a small group of eight friends who had met at the Jawaharlal Nehru University at 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 fulltime academic careers before they decided to start work that allowed them to engage more directly in pursuit of their beliefs. Especially as most of them had never lived in Bagli before, their social backgrounds proved to be immensely significant in course of their interactions with government functionaries at different levels and the local people of Bagli.

Although the group had no clear strategy or design, its intent was absolutely clear from the start. Group members wanted to build a 'peoples' organization' that would engage in grassroots work and advocacy⁵. The formation thus, of a 'critical mass within policy making, so that marginalised 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 organisation it eventually formed. From this point of view, the choice of Bagli was a deliberate one given its history of political and economic marginalisation, acute resource degradation and chronic poverty. The group was therefore keen to engage with the contested and intertwined land, forest and water issues of this tribal area. The group soon registered itself as an NGO and with the personal savings of its members set up a temporary office in Bagli town. The NGO was called *Samaj Pragati Sahyog* (in Hindi, meaning 'Support for Social Progress'), henceforth referred to as SPS.

From the outset then, SPS espoused a philosophy of 'positive engagement' with the state, its policies, institutions and actors. Given that it was seeking to work amongst exploited tribals, it was eager to distance itself from the pro-tribal, radical and violent naxalite and maoist modes of activism that are widespread in parts of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa among others. A prominent member of the group said, 'We do not regard naxalism to be a way forward...it is easier than serious development work'⁶. The group did not therefore position itself *against* the state. It did not perceive the state to be a homogenous entity that could be denounced and defeated. On the other hand, it was clear that if there was to be any lasting redress to the exploitation endured by tribals in Bagli, it could only follow from sustained engagement with

⁵ Interview with a group member, Bagli, 2000

⁶ Interview, Bagli, 2000

the state. But as it discovered soon enough, not only was the state highly differentiated, even the idea of the state was far from cogent, for different actors (both official and non-official) internalised and used what they perceived as the state's authority in different ways.

Onset of contradictory relationships

The state in small-town India, as Bagli *tehsil*, is typically symbolised by the *tehsildar*'s office, the police *chowki* and a few other government buildings. Bagli is a small market town and the arrival and announcement of SPS aroused noticeable curiosity, even concern. If SPS was not part of the *sarkar* (government) and it was also not there to implement any health or education project, then what exactly was it and why was it there? The local MLA was particularly perturbed. The initial forays made by group members on motorcycles to the tribal villages did not help assuage these doubts. The group was looking for a beginning, somewhere to start their involvement, and Neelpura seemed to be an ideal choice.

Neelpura is a small village that lies near to the main road and is relatively accessible. It comprises mainly *bhilala* tribals and is uniformly poor. Most persons here own between 1 and 3 acres of poor quality and dry land. A handful of farmers own more than 6 acres and only 3 out of the 100 odd households in the village are presently landless. It is a relatively homogenous socially. However, it is a hamlet of the large Bhimpura village panchayat, a prosperous village that is dominated by non-tribals. When SPS first tried to make acquaintance with persons in Neelpura, it received a lukewarm response. The respectable *Patel* family were reclusive and so was Mahbub Khan, a Muslim, and the largest farmer in the village. It received its first anchor in Lakhani Singh, a landless though politically connected tribal man, who was then also the sarpanch of the Bhimpura-Neelpura panchayat.

Early hesitation on part of the residents of Neelpura towards SPS soon gave way to eager interactions, especially when the latter offered to dig wells on the private lands of people. SPS had received funds from various central government schemes. By 1995, SPS had established itself more firmly in Neelpura and became known in the Bagli region for its development activities. But few had expected that SPS would raise questions that had been unasked for long, questions that would destabilise the established relationships of power in *ghaat-neeche*, especially since it seemed to be a 'regular' NGO implementing central government schemes.

During its implementation of the well digging and water conservation projects in Neelpura, SPS stumbled upon two types of exploitative practices 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 bounds by the local revenue bureaucracy. This included both the village *patwari* as well as the sub-district magistrate of the revenue division, who stood to gain monetarily from such malpractices⁷. Emboldened by the absence of challenge, these junior state officials had also acquired near autocratic status locally.

In an unprecedented move, SPS insisted on paying equal minimum wages to all its hired labourers, making enemies of large farmers, sarpanches and contractors in the *ghaat-neeche* all of whom of course had benefited from existing local wage relations. Mahbub Khan and Lakhan Singh distanced themselves from the NGO immediately. This was the time for dramatic developments, and SPS only intensified the confrontation by contacting the District Collector with a proposal to organize a ‘land records camp’ in order to rectify the appalling records situation. The senior most 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. And so unfolded two entirely contradictory relationships between SPS and state actors: on the one hand, junior officials like the sub-divisional magistrate who suffered humiliation and material loss by the organisation of the land records camp were drawn into an intensely antagonistic relationship, but on the other, SPS seemed to embark on a very cordial and friendly equation with top district and state-level officials, together strategising various redemptive steps in favour of tribals.

So how did SPS manage to evoke this reaction from the state in Dewas to rectify old and contentious practices that seemed to be deeply embedded within the prevailing status quo? I will venture two explanations for this, all of which played a part in the turn of events. The first is a relatively minor albeit an important one. The educational and social backgrounds of SPS members meant that they were able to communicate easily with the District Collector and other senior bureaucrats, many of whom belonged to the elite Indian Administrative Service. Fluency in English certainly contributed to the making of very conducive social intercourse between SPS and key government officials. The second, in my opinion, was the principal explanation for the leverage that SPS was able to exercise on the actions of key

⁷ They sold land revenue books worth five rupees at five thousand rupees per copy!

government officials. And this was SPS's successful emphasis on the idea of the Indian state as a guarantor of rights. Presented in this way, these civil servants would have found it extremely difficult to remain inactive in the face of blatant aberrations of existing legislation (in this case the Minimum Wages Act of 1948 and the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code of 1950). It ought to be emphasised that the location of the struggle in *ghaat-neeche* and not *ghaat-upar* made some difference to the ability of the district administration to respond favourably to the demands made by SPS. 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 admitted to both by SPS and district government officials whom I met.

It is true nevertheless that even in *ghaat-neeche* SPS faced tremendous opposition. A group of sarpanches, mobilised by the local MLA, petitioned the then Chief Minister Digvijay Singh to have the NGO 'removed' from the area. Their grounds for this were that the NGO 'was corrupt, it bypassed panchayats and misappropriated their money'. The local press greatly dramatised these developments through sensational articles, but SPS also used the media to build a favourable image of itself as a transparent organisation that worked in popular interest. The situation was resolved when an enquiry committee appointed by the Chief Minister and headed by the district level panchayat cleared SPS of all charges and publicly commended it for its 'good work'. This was tremendously helpful. Public ratification by the highest elected body in the district at a time when the state government was vigorously pursuing decentralisation to panchayats in effect placed SPS on the 'side' of the state and not against it. With a firm base in Neelpura, whose people rallied behind SPS, and an ascending hold on key officials both elected and non-elected, the NGO was stronger than ever before.

Working for the state

Success breeds itself, and this could scarcely have been truer than it was for SPS in the summer of 1995. Not long after the organisation had been publicly vindicated despite taking a politically contentious stand against the non-tribal exploitative coalition, it received a formal invitation from the Dewas district administration to become a Project Implementing Agency for watershed development projects (under the central Ministry for Rural Development funded programme) in the *ghaat-neeche* villages. Watershed projects under the Ministry's 'Common Guidelines' (1994, later revised in 2001 and 2003) are implemented on a micro-watershed basis and aim to treat land, water and forest area included in the watershed on a holistic basis. SPS's selection as a PIA for a state funded and managed development programme was particularly significant. 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. It also established that the district administration was quite willing to further its alliance with an organisation that had taken on some of the most powerful political forces in the *ghaat-neeche* region, at a time when the interest of politicians and political representatives in newly launched watershed projects was strong. The district administration was under considerable pressure from politicians to 'award' watershed projects to electorally significant villages especially in the *ghaat-upar* region. And yet, Neelpura was among the first batch of villages selected for watershed development in Dewas and SPS was its PIA.

SPS welcomed the opportunity. It was not entirely a novel matter for the NGO to work on government sponsored schemes and projects but the involvement with a prestigious, well-financed and well-publicised programme was certainly special. The central government's scheme was being implemented under the auspices of a specially created technical mission in Madhya Pradesh. The Rajiv Gandhi Mission had been created on the Chief Minister's directions to allow specially handpicked 'reform-minded' bureaucrats special access without being encumbered by regular bureaucratic hierarchies. As PIA, SPS became associated with the mission. But here too, unlike many other PIAs that tend to be bogged down by the literal requirements of the centrally imposed policy guidelines, SPS adopted a bold interpretation of the latter. It went about implementing the watershed project in Neelpura paying little heed, for instance, to detailed instructions prescribed for the constitution of a local watershed committee (i.e., through 'consensual' methods in the presence of a public village gathering). As it had already established itself in the village and was acquainted with people here, many of whom were already engaged on a number of its other projects, it decided to facilitate the formation of a committee under the leadership of individuals who it perceived would be 'effective and able to take contentious decisions'. Both these persons belonged to the Patel family, and SPS justified their selection on the grounds that they were widely respected. It also trained committee members to conduct works, pay wages and keep accounts and did away with the (tiresome) requirements of keeping minutes for committee meetings. It believed that 'demystification' of the project's objectives would be the best way of ensuring 'genuine devolution'.

An episode that occurred at the very beginning of its involvement as PIA of the Neelpura watershed project further established SPS's emerging strategy of using state laws and policies to rectify existing malpractices that worked against the interests of poor tribals. This is extremely important for so much attention is placed on advocating change in state laws and policies that it is often forgotten that existing legal and regulatory frameworks may themselves have radical consequences if only implemented properly. While conducting watershed works in Neelpura, SPS discovered that the use of the village *naala*- its only

common water body- 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, through electric pump sets and diesel engines from the surface itself. With a few 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. SPS concluded that if works were carried out under this inequitable arrangement, then a rich and powerful minority would undoubtedly corner all the 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, that other project agencies may have disregarded, but one that had actually been specified within its role as a PIA. The guiding Ministry of Rural Development's policy framework emphasise common property resources. So, interpreting the powers accorded to it within this policy to the fullest, SPS went ahead and mobilised popular opinion in the village to formulate a collective agreement to regulate the use of *naala* waters. 139 farmers from Neelpura and some adjacent villages signed a written resolution, which in translation from Hindi reads as follows:

It is decided by consent (*sarvasammatti*) that nobody would ever draw water from the *naala* using a *naarda*. Those farmers who have wells will also not draw water from the *naala* using motors. 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 would draw water from it, irrespective of whether they have wells or not. This water would be kept for cattle only. *All villagers agree to this resolution (italics 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 motors from the *naala*. SPS even constructed additional wells wherever necessary, free of any contributions from the farmer. The *naala* agreement was a matter of tremendous pride for SPS, and it mediated this to the last detail. In the initial days after the agreement, enthused villagers set up a system of rotation to watch 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. Khan protested violently, even taking SPS to court claiming that he had 'easementary right' to the village *naala* under the Indian Easements Act of 1882. SPS was well-placed to undertake research into the legal history of the *naala*, and was soon able to trounce Mahbub's claims. While the Act 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 30 years, as an easement and over a resource that is not owned by anyone in particular, SPS demonstrated that 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 17 years only. Mahbub was reprimanded for coming 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.

The agreement, along with the verdict of the court was a huge blow to Mahbub Khan, both symbolically and materially. Lakhan Singh and other sarpanches in the area, seething from their own separate issues of discontent with SPS, supported Mahbub and sporadic outbursts of anger against SPS continued. After a few such incidents, SPS was enraged and organised a non-violent *dharna* or ‘sit-in’ at the entrance to Neelpura, protesting against the hostility shown by sarpanches towards its members. This *nijbal satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) lasted four days. Sufficiently stirred after the dynamic events of the last month, villagers from Neelpura expressed their solidarity with SPS. The incident received much attention locally, and ended on the pleas of several Zilla and Janpad Panchayat members, who came to appease senior members of the SPS. A month later, in November 1995, the *gram sabha* of Bhimpura-Neelpura passed this resolution in a meeting.

With this Act, major local opposition by Mahbub Khan and the sarpanches against the NGO had been crushed. This resolution was important in at least two ways. First, it showed a significant change in SPS’s attitude (from the times when it had raised the minimum wages and land records issue). Eager to avoid allegations that it was by passing panchayat institutions by assuming a pro-active role in the *naala* episode, it was very keen to seek an endorsement of its actions in the panchayat gram sabha. Second, the resolution created a precedent in the region as never before had such a written agreement been attempted in public nor had the institution of the gram sabha been taken seriously enough for a resolution of this nature to be passed at its venue. It was also a remarkable synthesis of efforts by local institutions. A constitutionally mandated village panchayat had approved a popular collective initiative to govern the use of a village resource that had been facilitated by an NGO working at the grassroots.

The *naala* episode reiterated SPS’s willingness to take on contentious issues and within the framework of a state-sponsored development project. It had in fact acted as a political agency for transforming the local field of power as a *prerequisite* to continuing the project. This has had several significant consequences. The process of formulating this agreement and abiding

by it introduced new political and economic behaviour by farmers from this village that, as a result of better availability of water, were able to grow and sell many new varieties of crops. Never before had an agreement such as this been so effectively executed, in public, to result in the material transformation of existing arrangements of resource use. The entire experience also had an extremely positive impact on the working culture of inert and defunct panchayat institutions in the area, even beyond the project. In 2000, I was witness to a brewing movement amongst a few tribal *panches* (panchayat members) of Neelpura to challenge the corrupt practices of the non-tribal sarpanch from Bhimpura in a gram sabha, precisely mimicking the bold resolution of the *naala* agreement in a gram sabha five years ago. Just as SPS had done several times in course of its involvement in Neelpura, they went about collecting signatures in support of their campaign to recall the sarpanch in the middle of his term (radical new legislation in the state had recently sanctioned this). Eventually the expected confrontation in the gram sabha whittled down to a heated argument with the sarpanch who abandoned the sabha and left, and nothing more came of it. Nevertheless, SPS takes tremendous pride in these developments, attributing it to its insistence on transparent functioning, and the debates on accountability that these had generated.

Consolidating state support (but not fearfully)

When SPS arrived in Bagli in 1992, it was keen to mobilise popular action at the grassroots to campaign for better resources from the state. Although it was never interested in distancing its efforts from state institutions, its experiences in Bagli demonstrated that doing so would be fundamentally counterproductive. So while it gradually built a popular base for itself, first in Neelpura and then slowly in other neighbouring villages that too benefited from their initiatives, it knew that it could not afford to disregard panchayats in the region precisely because of their vehement hostility. The attempt by nearly a 100 sarpanches to have them 'removed' from the valley drove home the fact that it would have to ally itself with panchayats in the area. It soon brought this objective into the centre of its activities. Encouraged by developments as the one described above, it now conducts a range of activities to strengthen panchayats in the region. In 1998, SPS received a large grant from CAPART which it used to establish a 'field station' about a kilometre away from Neelpura. The Baba Amte Centre has been named after a respected social worker who works amongst tribal peoples in Madhya Pradesh, and is now a beehive of training activities for panchayats in the region.

SPS intends to use the Baba Amte Centre as a base to network with grassroots resources on a national scale. Its practical operations would primarily involve training large numbers of

development workers in the watershed sector⁸. The agenda for networking grassroots resources includes training elected representatives to panchayat bodies. SPS sees itself as an agent for decentralised development in the region. It regards that such agents are necessary if the state government's decentralisation legislation in favour of local elected bodies is to be effective at all. 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'⁹. These initiatives have been received very positively by the district administration, which has agreed to extend its support and cooperation. All this has meant an outpouring of support for SPS by local panchayats, and those who wished to oppose it stand rather alone in their opposition. Indeed SPS is too secure in its own position to espouse a confrontationist stance in relation to isolated individuals.

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 40 villages spread over 3 tehsils in Dewas and adjoining Khargone district with further plans for expansion. Its staff strength exceeds 100 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 and other foreign donors. It has also developed an 'Agricultural Programme' spread over 45 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 *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 would 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.

⁸ 'There are 6 lakh villages in the country, of which 4 lakh need urgent water retention. These are situated in 1,00,000 watersheds. If you have 200 NGOs covering 50 watersheds each, you can cover this scale; for that you would need 10 Voluntary Support Organisations, who will train 20 NGOs each. In this way, we can actually make the effort to upscale this to the entire country in the next 20 years', Interview with Secretary, SPS, Bagli, 2000.

⁹ Interview, Secretary, SPS, Bagli 2000

For an organisation that is so comfortable in speaking a language that is welcome to state authorities, i.e. a positive language of decentralisation and the promotion of local institutional capabilities, SPS has not (as yet anyway) shied away from using its voice for issues that are less complementary. The forests of *ghaat-neeche* have long been the site of exploitation of tribals by the Forest Department and at least two tribal organisations have emerged to promote collective mobilisations to resist such oppression: the *Adivasi Morcha Sangathan* and *Adivasi Shakti Sangathan*. In March 2001, the district administration authorised police firings upon tribals in a number of villages in Bagli, with the purpose of evicting them from land which they had ‘illegally’ occupied. This act was widely denounced in the local and regional media. Accompanying a sense of general outrage was the view (expressed by the ‘Friends of the River Narmada’, a volunteer based solidarity network) that the ‘attack’ by the state had been prompted to counter the growing political influence of the tribal *sangathas*. 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.

By lending its stated support during this very unpleasant, even dangerous confrontation, SPS remained true to its abiding philosophy of working in the interests of the tribals of Bagli. It is important to note however that this was necessary from a pragmatic point of view as well. SPS enjoys widespread support amongst the tribal peoples of *ghaat-neeche* and it was crucial to publicly express solidarity, or risk damaging (even if not losing) the key source of its current strength and legitimacy in the region. In its philosophy of working with the official state apparatus, it positions itself critically as a popular organisation, one with mass support, and it follows that its interactions with the former depend greatly on the viability of its stated discourse. Its firm stand sent a strong message to the district administration at this time, reiterating clearly that SPS would be unafraid to take sides if the need arose. Even though the key officials in the district administration had changed hands several times since the heady days of 1995, SPS is well known, its history well established, and its key members well respected within the administration. It is difficult to say how things might have fared had the district administration taken a stern view of SPS’s stance given its involvement with so many different state funded projects, but it is precisely this intensity of collaboration that SPS shares with the state at different levels that accord to it a very unusual bargaining power.

I have mentioned how over the years, as SPS evolved in its role as an active agency of change within the tribal drylands of the *ghaat-neeche*, it simultaneously involved itself with the creation of lateral networks with other grassroots organisations in the region and in other states as well. But equally, it cultivated important relationships with policy communities around watershed development at the state and national levels, offering technical expertise

rooted in its field experiences and experiments in the range of projects that it continues to implement. Watershed development in India has been the subject of fairly intense reform since the early 1990s, reflecting a wider transition from a soil and water conservation programme to a comprehensive programme for rural development. The ‘common guidelines’ of 1994 implemented by the central Ministry of Rural Development were significant in that they introduced for the first time a decentralised programme structure and participatory modes of local decision-making. The guidelines were subsequently revised in 2001 and 2003 reflecting a range of debates around various aspects of the programme, from the nature of decentralisation (panchayats or watershed committees) to the role of NGOs and the prioritisation of programme objectives¹⁰. In 2005, the Ministry of Rural Development constituted a Technical Committee to comprehensively review the various programmes being implemented for watershed development in the country and make recommendations that would enable a fuller understanding of the complexities of implementation in light of emerging experiences. SPS has assumed a pioneering role in this process and its entire ‘research team’ has offered substantial inputs into the Technical Committee’s report, which was finally submitted and approved in January 2006. Its secretary was designated an ‘Honorary Advisor’ to the committee and his efforts have been acknowledged enthusiastically by the committee’s Chairperson. The recommendations of the technical committee closely mirror various integral aspects of SPS’s philosophy of decentralised watershed development including its emphasis on ‘informed participation’, ‘the demystification of expertise’ and the careful integration of responsibilities between village watershed committees and gram panchayats (as opposed to totally doing one or the other away from the fold of the programme, as previous guidelines have sought to do) (Ministry of Rural Development, 2006). A fuller examination of the extent of influence would be interesting, and ought to be carried out separately.

Conclusion

It would seem that SPS has gone from one strength to another, and is in a formidable position to undertake important local initiatives as well as negotiate policy change at the national level. It is always tempting, while reviewing the evidence from a case like this, to draw lessons for other organisations to follow. Indeed, this is what I had promised at the beginning of this chapter. I should emphasise however that the lessons I draw are not intended to serve as a blueprint for non-governmental action in India. Several aspects of its experience were deeply particular to the nature of its core organisation and its operation in a site of subordinate politics where it was able to create spaces for resistance (albeit not without struggle) that will

¹⁰ See Chhotray (2007) for a consideration of the debate on the appropriateness of panchayats or watershed committees in watershed development.

not be easy to replicate. Even so, it is possible to take away the essence of its broader approach especially if it allows us to rethink the terms in which we urge NGOs to assume leadership of 'civil society' to influence and reform the state.

From the very beginning, SPS positioned itself as an integral part of the Indian state. It recognised that although the state was overarching, access to it was anything but uniform and in fact different groups of people enjoyed very differential kinds of access to the state's power and resources. The tribals of *ghat neeche* had historically been in a subordinate and disadvantaged position in this regard and therefore it saw itself as an agency that would work to alter their situation in material terms. It did not see any virtue in adopting a violently confrontationalist stand against the state per se, not only because it acknowledged that the state was an entire set of entities, actors and institutions with which it would necessarily have to be involved, but also because it was not trying to substitute the state with something else. This is an important point, because in fact the idea of the Indian state as a guarantor of rights was absolutely central to its own strategy. In taking up contentious issues against local power holders, some of whom were officials of the state at local levels, it was this idea that SPS wielded, compelling more senior officials to lend their support to its demands. Time and again, it was this idea of the Indian state that SPS put to work, in different ways as necessitated by particular circumstances. In its early days, with the minimum wages and land records' incident, it was the *violation* of this idea that SPS complained about, whereas later on, with its initiatives regarding the strengthening of panchayats, it was the *upholding* of this idea that it emphasised. It was this idea of the state that it used to create synergies between a 'popular agency' like itself and official state institutions like panchayats, arguing that without these synergies formal institutional changes like decentralisation would not translate into their desired objectives.

Did this mean that SPS saw no difference in the way it operated and staked power from other state officials, whether elected or non-elected? Indeed, SPS harboured no illusions about the basis of its power and sought consciously to embed itself amongst the tribals whom it sought to empower. While it went about obtaining funds from various state and central government schemes for development projects and interacting with important policy makers, it was its large and growing popular base that acted as its principal claim to fame. The dramatic events of 1995 that I have tried to describe in this chapter have gone a long way in the making of this NGO, and it is this identity that it cherishes and perseveres to sustain. Therefore, even with the physical transformation and escalation of its scale of activities, SPS projects itself as a people's organisation and does not want to be seen as a replica of the district administration. And indeed, it is well aware that NGOs cannot claim power in quite the same way as official

state actors can. Its own experiences of working and surviving in the *ghaat-neeche* have shown it that NGOs need to create a space for themselves amidst the prevailing balance of power and often this process can be exclusionary. It also knows that it has needed to rely on the public enactment of outrage or persuasion- as the case may be- to convince the wider public of its stance. Official state actors like the district collector for instance have clearly prescribed powers and they do not need to justify their actions to the public, sometimes even getting away with the flagrant misuse of authority. It is aware that NGO power is as difficult to sustain as it is describe, and therefore SPS is cautious about the way it is perceived, taking as much care to forge partnerships at different levels of the state as it does to build on its popular local standing.

In observing the rise and rise of SPS in Bagli's *ghaat-neeche*, I was deeply influenced by the energy it put into its engagement with the state. This engagement was as much with the state's resources (and most cynical views of NGOs would rest here!), as with its laws, its institutions and most crucially, with its core idea, or ideas. Its remarkable fortunes reveal to me the inextricability of what NGOs can and cannot do, from the constraints and opportunities presented by these very state laws, institutions and actors. Although there may be vast differences in the permutations of circumstances that particular NGOs find themselves in, it may still be possible for NGOs to work the idea of the state to their advantage. Indeed, if I were to be ironical, the best bet for civil society in India would still have to be the state!

References

Bayart, J.F. (1986), 'Civil Society in Africa', in P. Chabal (ed.), *Political Domination in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Bebbington, A. and Farrington, J. with Wellard, K. and Lewis, D.J. (1993), *Reluctant Partners?: Non-Governmental Organisations, the State and Sustainable Agricultural Development*, Routledge, London

Bebbington, A. and S. Hickey (2006), 'NGOs and Civil Society', in D.A. Clark (ed.), *Elgar Companion to Development Studies*, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham, pp 420-422

Chatterjee, P. (2004), *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York

- Ferguson, J. (1990), *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Fernandes, W. (1986), 'The National NGO Convention: Voluntarism, the State and Struggle for Change', *Social Action*, Volume 36, no. 4, pp 431-441
- Franda, M. (1983), *Voluntary Associations and Local Development: The Janata Phase*, Young Asia Publishers, New Delhi
- Garain, S. (1994), 'Government-NGO Interface in India: An Overview', *Indian Journal of Social Work*, Volume 55, no. 3, pp 337-346
- Hadiz, V.R. (2004), 'Decentralisation and Democracy in Indonesia: A Critique of Neo-Institutionalist Perspectives', *Development and Change*, Vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 697-718
- Igoe, J. (2003) 'Scaling up Civil Society: Donor Money, NGOs and Pastoralist Land Rights Movement in Tanzania', *Development and Change*, Volume 34, No. 5., 863-885
- Jenkins, R. (2001), 'Masking "Governance" for "Politics": Foreign aid, Democracy and the Construction of Civil Society', in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Kamat, S. (2002), *Development Hegemony: NGOs and the State in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi
- Kaviraj, S. (2001), 'In Search for Civil Society', in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Kaviraj, S. and Khilnani, S. (2001) (eds), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Khilnani, S. (2001), 'The Development of Civil Society', in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Kothari, R. (1986), 'NGOs, the State and World Capitalism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 21, no. 50, pp 2177-82

Lewis, P. (1991), *Social Action and the Labouring Poor: An Experience*, Vistaar, New Delhi

Robinson, M. et al (1993), 'Overview: NGO-Government Interaction in Asia', in J. Farrington, D.J. Lewis, S.Satish, A. Miclat-Teves (eds.), *Non-Governmental Organisations and the State in Asia*, Routledge, London

Sen, S. (1999), 'Some Aspects of State-NGO Relationships in India in the Post-Independence Era', *Development and Change*, Volume 30, pp 327-355