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**Changing Strategies of Non Government Organizations:  
Slogan Shouting or Income-Generating Program?  
-Case Studies from Gandhian NGOs of Northern India**

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# **Changing Strategies of Non Government Organizations: Slogan Shouting or Income-Generating Program? -Case Studies from Gandhian NGOs of Northern India**

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## **I. Background**

Although India has seen an unprecedented economic growth and a reduction of the poverty rate during the last decade, it still remains a country with a population of millions who are poor and deprived, especially in the rural areas<sup>i</sup>. To tackle the rural poverty, the Central Government, together with State Governments has introduced various long-term and short-term programs. However, it has been documented that these efforts have more often than not failed to reach the needy in the rural areas (Sainath, 1996). On the other hand, while there are plenty of criticisms, programs implemented by a part of civil society widely known as the Non Government Organizations (NGOs) are said to be effective for the alleviation of poverty as well as for the empowerment for the disadvantaged groups in India (Edwards, 2007).

Civil societies have a long and rich history in India; however, NGOs only truly emerged after the nation's independence<sup>ii</sup>. Furthermore, the majority of Non Government Organizations which believe in the promotion of the development of people emerged during the decades of the 1970s and the 1980s (Kaushik, 2008). The 1970s saw a radical approach to tackle poverty through the mobilization of the rural poor. These movements were inspired by radical leftist thought and the more peaceful struggle of Jaya Prakash Narayan against the totalitarian policies of the government, which was later, called the "J.P Movement". The cadres who were actively involved in the J.P movement were the pioneers in the trend towards formation of NGOs (Ohashi, 2007). The 1980s and 1990s saw a further increase in the number of NGOs in India, which stressed development through a professional approach, sound management, and accountability to stakeholders (Riddell and Robinson, 1995). While it is difficult to grasp the exact number of NGOs operating in India, an estimate shows that anywhere between 1.2 million to 1.5 million NGOs operate in India (Goel and Kumar, 2005). The classification of NGOs in India is also complicated as it

depends on their size, approach, philosophy and other characteristics. However, Raina (1997) has broadly categorized Indian NGOs into two sets: Gandhian influenced voluntary groups (Gandhian NGOs) and professional rural development agencies (Development NGOs). The present paper deals with the characteristics, challenges and structure of the Gandhian NGOs.

Gandhian influenced NGOs of India (Gandhian NGOs hereafter)<sup>iii</sup> stress on the Panchayat Raj Institution<sup>iv</sup> by promoting the village cottage industry and agriculture (Jha, 1961). Even though they are labeled as Gandhian NGOs, it is important to note the significant influence that J.P. Naryan has had on a number of NGOs, and this is especially true in the Northern regions of India (Ohashi, 2007). The main feature of these NGOs is the betterment of the downtrodden population of the society by stressing self-reliance. For this reason, many Gandhian NGOs tend to hesitate to take funding from the government and foreign agencies. However, as we have observed in the present study, the circumstances have changed as most of these NGOs do take both government and foreign funds. Traditionally, the focus of the Gandhian NGOs was on the development of the village through the cottage industry, agriculture, and advocacy. However, these NGOs have now ventured into ad hoc development projects similar to “Development NGOs”.

In order to support these new ventures, the Gandhian NGOs are now forced to be more fund-conscious like the Development NGOs. Under this constraint, Gandhian NGOs have to make crucial decisions for sustainability of their programs and organization. In order to achieve sustainability, some NGOs, which were mainly involved in the fulfillment of rights of the people through advocacy and Panchayat Raj Institution, have now begun to venture into Income Generating Programs (IGP), Self Help Groups (SHG), Micro Credit Programs, Micro Finance Programs and so forth. At the same time, there are a few organizations, which refuse to abandon their original ideology and endeavor to maintain their identity.

The present paper attempts to outline the reasons behind the major transformations within certain NGOs while also addressing why other organizations have opted to hold steadfast to their fundamental approach. We will investigate the changing strategies of the Gandhian NGOs of Northern India in a qualitative manner by observing these groups firsthand. Although there is some research, which compares Gandhian NGOs to Development NGOs, there is little or no attempt to undertake a comparative research among Gandhian NGOs.

Thus the present paper sheds light on the differences among Gandhian NGOs in India, supplementing the previous researches on Indian NGOs.

## **II. Methodology**

The present paper is based on data and information gathered through primary research undertaken during visits to 12 NGOs by the author during various visits from 2007 to January 2009. The data and information obtained included annual reports, financial records, board-meeting minutes, project proposals, etc. In addition, information was gathered from several meetings with the staff and beneficiaries, workshops, and direct observation by the author. For privacy reasons, the names of the organizations have not been mentioned. Instead, codes have been used to identify these organizations. Three case studies will be presented in this paper. These case studies will be coded as BH-1, OR-1, and CH-1, which will represent the NGOs from Bihar, Orissa, and Chattisgarh respectively.

## **III. Characteristics of NGOs Studied**

While the focus of the paper is on the Gandhian approach to rural development: stressing on the Panchayat Raj Institution and village development through cottage and agricultural development, it is interesting to note that only a few NGOs were involved in such activities. Most of the NGOs studied were much more diverse, in terms of undertaking development activities. However, one similarity that was shared across all of the NGOs studied was that all of them faced issues with organizational level sustainability. Reliance on domestic and foreign funds for short-term, project-based development activities was common across all NGOs, though the degree varied. Even though all of the organizations were labeled as “Gandhian NGOs”, three distinct types of organizations emerged. Based on our findings, it can be concluded that Gandhian NGOs can be further classified into three different categories: “Conventional”, “Fusion”, and “Transforming”.

Conventional Gandhian NGOs retain most of the core values of the Gandhian approach of development: promotion of the Panchayat Raj Institution and village development through cottage and agricultural development. Although these NGOs seek domestic and foreign funds for short-term projects, their key philosophy is the idea of self-reliance. Furthermore, these NGOs were

found to be less receptive to proactive development, inclusive management, and gender sensitivity, which ultimately affect their organizational sustainability.

Unlike their Conventional counterparts, Fusion Gandhian NGOs are operating as professional Development NGOs, while retaining some of the Gandhian philosophy of development. These organizations, as well as the Conventional Gandhian NGOs, stress the Panchayat Raj Institution and cottage industries, however; they also offer diverse income generating activities for community development. For these organizations, the approach to the rural development tends to be much more diverse as stress is placed on inclusive and proactive development, gender sensitiveness and inclusive management of the organization. Human resource development of the organization and adaptation to changing environment are also stressed.

Finally a third category, the Transforming Gandhian NGOs, are those who were, until recently, operating as Conventional Gandhian NGOs, but are rapidly trying to transform themselves as other professional Development NGOs. The reason for this transformation is the realization of the changing environment in terms of approach to rural development. These organizations feel that the Gandhian approach to development is now somewhat outdated, and for the survival of their organizations, drastic measures were necessary. This transformation usually occurs when an organization experiences change in the upper-level management, as personnel from the older generations are replaced with new personnel from the younger generations.

In the following section, a profile and a case study of the three different Gandhian NGOs are given: BH-1 as a Conventional Gandhian NGO, OR-1 as a Fusion Gandhian NGO, and CH-1 as a Transforming Gandhian NGO.

**Table 1. Selected profile of the NGOs**

	BH-1 (Conventional)	OR-1 (Fusion)	CH-1 (Transforming)
Year of	1972	1992	1983

Establishment			
Area of intervention during the inception	Mushahar Development	Tribal Development	Bonded labor issue
Current areas of Intervention	Flood relief, advocacy, and income generating activities	Integrated Tribal development	Integrated development of ST and SC
Staff	Full time: 18 Part time: 10	Full time: 30 Part time: 50	Full time: 40 Part time: 100
Majority of staff	Male, high caste	Male, tribal	Male, SC and ST
Board Members	19	8	7
Background of board members	All male, majority high caste	Four female, four tribal	Three female, all are SC, ST or OBC
Annual budget*	RS. 2,000,000	RS. 7,000,000	RS. 4,000,000
Development approach	Advocacy, relief and development	Advocacy with development	Advocacy with Development
Major Donor	Action Aid, UNICEF	Government of India, CARE, CCF	Action Aid, Global Fund for Women
As of	December 2007	January 2009	November 2007

Source: Based on the filed work carried out by the author

\* 1 Indian RS= 0.02 US Dollar

The table demonstrates that BH-1 is the oldest organization, followed by CH-1 and OR-1 respectively. These three organizations were established to tackle various issues, such as, development of the oppressed groups of the society and other social issues like bonded labor. All of these organizations have currently ventured into a project-based development much like Developmental NGOs. OR-1 and CH-1 have 30 and 40 people on staff with a high number of volunteers and part timers respectively. BH-1 has a comparatively low number of staff and volunteers. The majority of staff and board members of OR-1 and CH-1 consist of local Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC), while High Caste male is the majority group in the BH-1. In terms of staff, all of these

organizations were to be found not to be gender sensitive, however high number of female representatives can be observed in the board members for OR-1 and CH-1. Budget size varied among the organizations from RS. 200,000 to RS. 700, 000. A further detailed profile is given in the following section.

### **1) BH-1 (Bihar)**

This NGO was established in 1972 to tackle the issue of the socio-economic imbalances in the locality. The organization first introduced a comprehensive package to benefit the Dalits<sup>v</sup> in the area.

From its inception, the organization has conducted many activities to tackle the issues faced by the Dalits, by organizing Gram Sabhas<sup>vi</sup>. The organization was very active in advocating the rights of the oppressed people like Dalits by holding mass rallies and other campaigns. Since 2003, however, the organization has also ventured into emergency relief and income generating activities. For example, it has recently started work on a flood mitigation program with the support of UNICEF. It has also started a bee-keeping program to generate income in the area with the support of the Government of India. Despite BH-1 undertaking these development activities on an ad-hoc bases, the focus of the organization is on advocacy and promoting the Panchayat Raj Institution.

In order to achieve organization's mission, BH-1 is staffed with 18 full time employees and 10 volunteers. The majority of the full time staff is male and from the high caste local elite, and only a few are from the Other Backward Caste (OBC). The average age of the full time staff of BH-1 is higher compared to other organizations that were studied. . The governing body of the organization has 19 members, who are also from high castes are male. The approximate budget size of the organization is RS. 2,000,000, and the major donors are Action Aid and UNICEF. The organization also accepts donations of money and goods, especially for the emergency flood relief activities.

### **2) OR-1 (Orissa)**

The OR-1 organization was established in 1992 with a goal to empower the oppressed population of the society, mainly the tribal people of the area. The organization aims to establish and sustainable society by emphasizing active participation from poor, tribal, and Scheduled Castes (SC).

OR-1 is undertaking various project on tribal development, such as, empowerment of women, mainstreaming of the dropouts of the school children, vocational training, integrated nutrition and health program, Self Help Group (SHG) promotion and micro enterprise activity, sustainable and organic agriculture, and advocacy on tribal rights. Besides these activities, the organization also sensitizes the tribal people on various government development schemes and facilities them to access such schemes.

The organization has 30 full time staff and 60 part-time volunteer staff. The number of women on the staff is 20, and the majority of the staff is young people recruited from the local tribal groups. There are eight board members in the organization with high number of representation of female and tribal people. Unlike its other counterpart, practice of inclusive management can be seen as it has created a six member “Core Committee” consisting of upper-level staff and the board members. This mechanism also helps bridge the gap between the board members and staff.

The approximate budget size of the organization is RS. 7,000, 000 and is estimated that it will increase to RS. 10,000,000 within three years. The major donors are the Government of India, CARE, Concern World Wide and the Christian Children Fund. The organization has two buildings and both serve as an Ashram<sup>vii</sup>, where food and accommodation are provided free to the tribal people who come from distant villages to the Block Headquarters in order to access various government schemes.

### **3) CH-1 (Chhattisgarh)**

The CH-1 organization was established in 1983 to tackle the issue of bonded labor in central Chhattisgarh. Although it is still active in the issues of bonded labor, recently it has taken an integrated approach to the development of Tribe, Schedule Castes and marginalized people of the society.

The major activities of the organization include, such as, programs for income generation, education, health, women development, capacity building of Gram Sabha, bonded labor and the disabled persons. Recently, like the development NGOs, it has ventured into the Self Help Group (SHG) programs. Although it has not completely abandoned the advocacy programs on bonded labor, the tendency to favor the diverse income generating activities through the formation of Self Help Groups (SHG) and the promotion of Micro Credit (MC) is more apparent.



The organization has 40 full time staff and approximately 100 volunteers, and the majority of the staff is from the local Schedule Tribe (ST) and Schedule Caste (SC). The governing body of the organization has seven board members; four of them male and three female. These members are all from SC, ST and OBC. The annual budget of the organization is approximately RS. 4,000,000, however, the budget size is expected to shrink due to the completion of some donor-funded activities. The major donors of the organization include: Action Aid, Global Fund for Women, and CASA. It has one office building and two field offices, while an extension center in Raipur, the capital city, has also recently been established. Like, BH-1, these facilities do not function as an *Ashram*.

#### **IV. Constraints faced by the NGOs and their mitigation strategies**

Jain (2008) has observed that uncertainty of funding, both from domestic and foreign donors, lack of a devoted and qualified human resources, and unhealthy competition from other organizations are the major problems faced by Indian NGOs. In addition to these factors, political pressure and non-cooperation from governmental agencies are other obstacles for these NGOs<sup>viii</sup>.

All three of the organizations in our study cited that obtaining adequate funding was the major obstacle for their organizations. This is especially true for BH-1 and CH-1 organizations. BH-1 and CH-1 cited that they are constantly seeking grants to support their ongoing projects. For example, during the emergency flood relief project, BH-1 relied on UNICEF as its main source of support, and this reliance on an external party is contradictory to the Gandhian philosophy that they practice. In fact, BH-1 is in constant search for sources of funding to support their activities. CH-1 faces the similar concern as several of their funding sources have phased out or in the process of phasing out, thus forcing them to seek new donors to support their programs. Unlike their counterparts, OR-1 cited that they are satisfied with their current financial condition, which is mainly due to the fact that OR-1 has several donors committed to long-term projects.

As discussed in the preceding section, the most prominent constraint faced by these organizations is financial sustainability. To overcome this constraint, different organizations have adopted differing strategies. While CH-1 and OR-1 have decided to introduce vigorous income generating activities through the formation of SHG and Micro Credit programs, BH-1 is lagging far behind in such

activities. CH-1 and OR-1 stress that income generating activities, such as SHG formation are not only demanded by the beneficiaries, but also by the donors, especially external. The CH-1 secretary explains, “The donors now fund the programs which addresses the income generating activities and formation of Self Help Group. There is little or no money for advocacy these days. How long can you go on by just slogan shouting? You have to give income generating opportunities to the beneficiaries.” Although CH-1 has not abandoned their advocacy work, it is now concentrating more on the formation and strengthening of the SHG. On the other hand, OR-1, from its inception, has stressed on blending income-generating activities with advocacy because they realize that successful income generating activities and SHG will be the keys for survival in times of funding uncertainty. Unlike Ch-1 and OR-1, BH-1 does not seem to have clear-cut strategy to address their funding concerns. This lack of fund generation strategy by BH-1 will continue to put their organizational sustainability in jeopardy. Although BH-1 has also engaged in income generating activities, however they believe that their chief mission is to empower the community through advocacy, and will not undertake income generating activities and SHG formation just to attract more government and foreign funds. One of the upper level management personal of BH-1 states, “We do not beg for money from government and foreign donors for the sake of the sustainability of our organization. It is not our style because J.P taught us that way.”

Besides perusing income-generating activities, these organizations have increased cooperation with the local government as a means to overcome financial constraints. With an increase in schemes for rural development, the local NGOs are favored as the delivery mechanism by the government (Jain, 2008). This partnership results in more programs for the NGOs. However, all of these surveyed NGOs are more or less hesitant to receive such programs for fear that they will be portrayed as the agent of the government rather than an independent NGO representing locality. To overcome this problem, OR-1 has started to sensitize and link the beneficiaries to the local development schemes directly.

A lack of sufficient funding is not the only constraint faced by these organizations because there is also a lack of qualified and dedicated human resources. All three of the NGOs studied, cited that it was extremely difficult to find qualified and dedicated personnel for their organizations. The reason is actually related to funding, as these organizations cannot provide a high

enough salary to attract top talent due to funding constraints. A qualified person can demand a higher salary, or simply opt to seek work in the urban area, thus forcing these organizations to hire individuals with either limited skills or a lack of motivation. As the secretary of CH-1 puts it, “Why would the qualified want to work in the village? They will find jobs in the big cities. We have no option but to hire unemployed graduates or post-graduates who have no idea what rural development is.” It was also observed that, in some cases, the very leaders of the organizations were the main culprits in hindering the human resource development process. These leaders, who often are very charismatic in nature, run the organization as 'one man show', thus, knowingly or unknowingly, discourage young employee from getting involved. This phenomenon is observed with the BH-1 organization.

As described in the previous section, all three organizations face challenges in staffing their organization with qualified personnel. Some of the key qualifications these organizations seek are staff with good computer and proposal writing skills. To use an example to illustrate how crucial it is for these organizations to have personnel with these skills, funding from donor agencies largely depends on the quality of proposals written by the staff of the organization, thus, individuals who possess excellent proposal writing skills are in high demand because they could be a key factor in the financial sustainability of the organization. The link between a qualified staff and sufficient funds and vice-versa is very interesting to note.

As mentioned earlier in our paper, rural development professionals and individuals with post-graduate degrees in Rural Development (RD) who possess such skills were not very keen on working in the rural area. They prefer to pursue employment in the urban areas with larger NGOs or donor agencies. In some cases, RD professionals join the village level NGO in order to gain experience, and after gaining said experience, seek new opportunities outside the rural area for a higher salary. This scenario was prevalent within the OR-1 organization. The secretary of OR-1 complains, “After investing so much in these young fellows, they would simply go to another organization. It is outrageous, but we cannot pay as much, so they abandon us. I guess that is natural.” The investment that the secretary was referring to is the experience provided by the NGOs as well as training programs. For example, CH-1 and OR-1 have recently started training their staff on proposal writing and computer skills. However, the successes of these programs are offset by the fact that many of the newly skilled

staff end up leaving their current organization to pursue more profitable opportunities. CH-1, like OR-1, has had similar issues of experienced staff leaving in order to pursue other employment opportunities once they obtain a good level of experience and skills. BH-1, on the other hand, does not have a well-defined human resource development policy, and relies mainly on external consultants when producing project proposals. The BH-1 secretary admits that reliance on external consultants is a necessity, but not by choice because “the sentiment of the project differs when an outsider writes proposals for you.”

As Jain (2008) has observed, job satisfaction for the staff of rural NGOs is generally not high because of factors like: low level of remuneration, inadequate allowances for travel, and a lack of job security. In addition to these factors, not having a voice in the decision-making process of the organization is yet another reason for a low level job satisfaction. An interview with several lower level staff members of BH-1 and CH-1 confirmed Jain’s observation. Interestingly, employees of OR-1 did not share same level of dissatisfaction with their job compared to their BH-1 and CH-1 counterparts.

While not a constraint per se, yet another challenge these NGOs face, which has not received as much attention, is the changing ideology, needs, and approach of development. Organizations that fail to address changes tend to become isolated from the donor community and struggle for sustainability. The prevailing approach to development is the empowerment of vulnerable sections of the community through the promotion of income-generating activities along with a rights-based approach. (Mikelsen, 2006). Some NGOs, like BH-1, fail to accept this changing ideology of development. A majority of the BH-1 board members, who are also the founding members, are still actively managing the organization as they have always done with no attention paid to these new developments. On the other hand, secretaries of both the CH-1 and OR-1 organizations are actively addressing the changes in the approach to community development. The secretary of CH-1 stresses, “How long can one organization solely keep on slogan shouting against the government and only promote Gram Sabhas? One should also think about how to uplift the livelihood of beneficiaries.” CH-1 has started income-generating activities in the villages for the past few years in an effort to meet the needs of their beneficiaries. The secretary further adds that while advocacy work, such as pressuring the government to free bonded labor is an important issue, however, providing income to the villagers is equally, if not more, important. Being the newest of

the three organizations studied, OR-1, from its inception, has blended their advocacy and income-generating programs; and includes SHG, micro finance, and tie-ups with government schemes as the major components of its development approach.

## **V. Summary and Conclusions**

The present paper presented three different kinds of Gandhian NGOs of North India in an effort to understand their organizational characteristics, review the constraints faced by them, and present the strategies they are employing for survival. The study reveals that Gandhian NGOs can be classified into three distinct categories: “Conventional”, “Fusion”, and “Transforming”. Conventional NGOs are primarily involved in promoting the Panchayat Raj Institution and advocacy rather than income-generating activities. One of the key characteristics of these NGOs seems to be their lack of inclusive management and human resource development. Fusion NGOs are stressing more and more on income-generating activities for rural development, while also promoting the Panchayat Raj Institution and advocacy. Fusion NGOs are characterized by placing an emphasis on inclusive management and human resource development. Finally, the third classification of Gandhian NGOs, the Transforming NGOs, are those organizations which, until recently, were operating as Conventional NGOs, but are rapidly trying to establish themselves as professional Development NGOs by introducing vigorous income-generating Programs.

The case studies of the three different NGOS demonstrate that all of these organizations faced similar financial and human resource constraints but took differing approaches to mitigate those constraints. To overcome the financial constraints, Fusion and Transforming NGOs have stressed more on income-generating activities through the promotion of SHG and Micro Credit, while Conventional Gandhian NGOs do not have concrete plans to mitigate this constraints. The Fusion and Transforming Gandhian NGOs emphasize human resource development as the key to their success, and at the organizational level, these NGOs have demonstrated more success but the Conventional NGOs either rely on charismatic leaders propene them to success or rely on external sources to overcome their staff limitations. At the organizational level, Fusion and

Transforming NGOs have demonstrated more success.

While we can draw broad conclusions from this current study, Nevertheless, the findings from the present study cannot be generalized for all of the different Gandhian NGOs in India as until more additional research in different parts of the country is needed in order to come to a concrete conclusion concerning the different Gandhian NGOs in India. However, it can be conclude with some certainty that Gandhian NGOs are no all the same. They differ in approach to development, differ in their strategies to obtain financial sustainability, and they differ in their attitude towards human resource development.

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<sup>i</sup> 2008 figure shows that 22% of Indian lives below the poverty line, while the same figure is more than 40% for rural dwellers (World Bank, 2008).

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- ii In the context of India, the term NGO, Non-Government Organization is rather controversial. Many organizations identify themselves as Voluntary Organizations (VO) rather than NGO (Jain, 2008). Since NGO is a term is accepted universally, we have opted to use this term in the present paper.
- iii The term “Gandhian NGOs” is complex. In the present paper, Gandhian NGOs are those NGOs who themselves described themselves as Gandhian organization and who were members of Association of Voluntary Action for Rural Development (AVARD). AVARD is a network of voluntary organization that follows Gandhian philosophy (Singh and Stevens, 2007).
- iv Also known as *Gramin Swaraj*, Panchayat Raj is a self-reliant and almost a “republic village” envisioned by Gandhi (Jain, 1961).
- v A Hindu group outside of caste system, also known as untouchables
- vi Same as Panchayat Raj.
- vii A place for communal living, Ashram used to be the prominent feature of Gandhian organization.
- viii For the purpose of the present paper, only funding and human resource constraints are discussed.

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