

**International Consultation on Caste-Based Discrimination
29 Nov. – 1 Dec. '04
Kathmandu, Nepal**

Role of NGOs, Mainstreaming Dalit Rights

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Background and Introduction

The history of Dalit movement in Nepal is more than five decades old, however, one can say that compared to the atrocity and exploitation they have undergone the struggle and their movement has not been very strong as a result of that they have become like a beggar in front of the state. During the black era of Panchayati rule (1960-1990) there were a few organized movement but such effort proved to be ineffective as they could not carry out a strong underground movement, otherwise their struggle would have achieved a great success.

Right after the restoration of multi party democracy in 1990 lots of social movement or in other words incidents to ascertain the rights of Dalit in the public places emerged. Such movement was led by Dalit Mukti Samaj until 1996 and that movement could not gain momentum by spreading throughout the country at the later stage. However, event wise sporadic movement has taken place throughout the country.

Here I would like to mention briefly the roles of various organizations who claim to work for Dalit rights in general and NGOs in particular. Likewise, I will briefly mention what Dalit NGO Federation and its member organizations are doing to address the Dalit problems and issues.

Sister organizations of Political Parties

In Nepal the struggle carried out by political parties and their sister organization for political or social change is considered to be a movement. Most of the political parties of Nepal have their own Dalit sister organizations. Both Nepali Congress Giriya lobby and Nepali Congress Democratic have Dalit sister organizations called Nepal Dalit Sangh, UML – Mukti Samaj, NCP Masal – Jatiya Samata Samaj, RPP – Prajatantrik Janautthan Sangathan, Sadbhawana Paty – Dalit Utthan Manch and NCP Maoist – Dalit Mukti Morcha. The primary job of these sister organizations is to help their mother organization gain power through ballot or bullet. There is no wrong that they are helping their mother parties to gain power, since they are doing politics in the name of Dalit it is their duty to ensure Dalit rights, unfortunately not even the quarter of their time they are devoting for the upliftment of their fellow brothers and sisters. These sister organizations have not been able to rise above the status of a party worker. There are several incidents where atrocities and exploitation have been caused to Dalit and these sister organizations could have played a significant role to provide justice to their fellow brothers and sisters through their parties but none of them ever care about it. They even do not dare to bring out a press release against such incident. The NGOs are doing far better jobs than these sister organizations. However, Nepal Dalit Sangh the sister organization of Nepali Congress has played some significant roles to draft a bill and formulate strategies for the long term and short term upliftment of Dalit for the National Planning Commission.

Nepal Dalit Sangh did carry out a hunger strike demanding Dalit bill if Nepali forms a government in 1998.

Dalit movement is a politics and without the involvement of these sister organizations it is almost impossible to have desired change in the policies and programmes of the government therefore, a clear strategic linkage is required in between social and political movement.

Dalit Political Party

The sister organizations of the political parties have not played a significant roles to liberate Dalits but have contributed though in a small way to raise the awareness level. If they play a good role to promote Dalits politically then that can yield a good result. Other wise in a long run Dalit will have to think of forming a strong political party as a good inspiration can be taken from Bahujan Samaj Party led by Kansiram and Mayawati. In Nepal late Ruplal Vishwakarma a staunch communist leader, after his disillusion from the left political movement did open a Dalit political parity called Dalit Sramik Morcha unfortunately due to ambiguous ideology and severe economic crisis now it is difficult to find the where about of that party. However, in the initial stage that party had tried its luck in the local election and got some partial success. The larger Dalit movement of Nepal has not thought seriously about the need of a separate political party. However, they are watching carefully the performance and success of Bahujan Samaj Party, Mayawati and Kansiram.

Dalit NGOs

The biggest achievements of Nepal after the restoration of multiparty democracy is mushrooming NGOs. There are about 30 thousands NGOs registered with the government, 12 thousands are affiliated with the Social Welfare Council and is believed that only 5% of them are active that meant nearly 1500 NGOs are actively working in their respective field. The cause of these mushrooming NGOs in Nepal is globalization and privatization where government has not been able to distribute services to its people largely due to its inefficiency and as an alternate to the government the donor agencies and INGOs have found a conduit to reach the needy people through them. As a result of that the activities of NGOs have increased drastically.

In the beginning the role of NGOs was considered to run projects comprising of literacy classes, income generating activities through saving and credit, do some small construction works and so on. In the similar context Dalit NGOs also emerged. An NGO called NNDSWO was in existence for nearly three decades having largest network of branches in 68 district and this NGOs.. Other Dalit NGOs who are in existence for a decade or less are DWO, FEDO, JUP, SAFE etc. At the moment there are nearly 200 Dalit NGOs from all over the country which have taken or sought for an affiliation with DNF. Not all of these NGOs affiliated with DNF are active, however, the activities they are carrying out ranges from providing services to doing advocacy and lobbying. In the

context of what these NGOs are doing I will discuss briefly what NGOs are doing or supposed to do.

NGOs as a Contractor

Be it an issue of Dalit or other marginalized communities it can be analyzed through two perspectives, improving condition or improving status. Until the stomach of a hungry person is filled in that person can not think of his/her rights. As of now not much thinking has developed among NGOs to analyze through these two perspective of condition and status as most of the NGOs in Nepal are working as a contractor for donors and INGOs as it is relatively cost effective and faster for them to work through NGO to reach the target beneficiaries. Like wise the NGOs are less bureaucratic and flexible enough to accommodate changes as deemed necessary. Since a few educated people are getting employment in this sector they do not mind even if they have to work like a contractor and INGOs and donors are promoting this culture.

Most of the INGOs and donors are hesitant to raise the issue of fulfilling needs of the people is the duty of the state, being the NGOs a contractor they do not want to discuss about it as well and they often forget or ignore that it is state which is responsible to fulfill the basic needs of its people. Here the role of NGOs should be a watch dog to ensure rights of the people and role of donors or INGOs are to complement or supplement the efforts of the government. In Nepal NGOs have forgotten their actual roles to be played and doing the role of government. When there is an issue of women or children the state machinery points finger towards NGOs and now there is a similar trend growing for Dalit issue and problem as well. Therefore, those who are engaged for the rights of marginalized people like Dalit need to take it up seriously.

Improving Condition and Status

When we talk about improving conditions, it is providing support to have better access to food, cloth and shelter along with necessary conditions required to sustain it. For example better facilities of health care, sanitation, credit and so on. When we talk about improving status it is representation at all level where decisions are made on the policies and programmes that affect their lives. In other words it is taking part actively in the governance. Upon improving conditions the living standard of marginalized people can be improved while improving status such conditions can be sustained and further improved. Likewise their self esteem and acceptance by the larger society through the process of socialization will improve further.

Until five years ago most of the NGOs working in Nepal were concentrating their efforts only on improving conditions, however, for the last 2-3 years they have realized a need to improve status along with the conditions but the programmes or movements are not being created as per the need.

Reformative Movement

It is much easier to carry out activities to improve conditions where as it is several times difficult to improve the status. To improve the conditions it can be done being in the periphery of the communities or affected people where as to improve the status it can not be done just being with the communities. The root cause of hindering their access to control and decision making has to be found out and movements created accordingly. The movement of improving status has to be carried out from local to national level and if necessary to international level as well. The activities carried out by NGOs can not be expected to cover a larger area, however, if same activities are carried out through a movement then it can spread to other areas as well. In other words the role of NGOs should be like dropping a stone in an undisturbed pond so that its ripples can be seen at the shore.

Compared to the magnitude of the problems that Dalits of Nepal have, the efforts put forth by a few NGOs like DWO, NNDSWO, FEDO, JUP, JMC and other Dalit as well as non-Dalit NGOs are too inadequate. If whole of the state machinery is involved only then they can feel some relief. Unfortunately, as of now the efforts put forth by state to address the Dalit problem is meager and NGOs have not been able to play proper and effective roles. The NGO culture were imported from the western countries but we have not been able to copy the good and effective role played by them because most of the NGOs of the western countries do not do the work done by the state, they have established a special status in the society that is why they are called a part of the civil society. We have not been able to import such culture sufficiently and we are playing the role which needs to be played by the state. In other words we are letting state to sleep with out being responsible and accountable to its people.

In Nepal when we see the type of movement and their content it seems to be only the political parties and their student wings leading the movement. Unfortunately, the Dalit and issue of other marginalized groups has not been a serious agenda in one hand in other neither Dalit NGOs nor the independent organizations have been able to make it a larger movement. However, Dalit NGOs are moving towards that direction and compared to the Dalit sister organizations of the political parties and so called movement oriented Dalit organizations they are playing much crucial role. When there is incidents of oppression and exploitation be it economic blockade imposed by upper caste of Siraha and Saptari district to Chamar, lately they are creating movement for land rights in the same region.

When we talk about creating a movement it requires finance and there are few Dalits who are quite rich they provide thousands of rupees as donation to political parties and religious activities but not to the movement which would benefit the larger Dalit communities.

In such situation whom we can expect to create a movement in favour of Dalits. Over the last one decades we all know that activities of NGOs have grown at very fast rate. However, NGOs have been blamed for cultivating dollars, creating and promoting self

image, misguiding the movement and so on. Some of these allegations are true as well. Since no strong alternative movements are in place, rather, those who claimed to be movement oriented organizations are almost fizzling out it is therefore, only NGOs who can be expected to lead the reformative movement by using the mandates of current constitution and situation.

Movement and Donors

Now there is a very favourable situation in Nepal as most of the international communities seem to be positive towards Dalit issues and showing interest to contribute financially. Because of their involvement and contribution a very good situation has been created for the educated Dalits as they can work for their fellow communities and get an employment. This situation has also contributed to create a confusion in between professionalism and activism. It is very difficult to combine these two and use for the movement. To deal with the donors and international communities professionalism is required and for the movement activism is imperative. Likewise, mass movement can not be created by injecting resources only, a feeling is a must. When NGOs try to create a movement they are charged for cultivating dollars in the name of poor, sometimes even to participate in a mass demonstration people expect some sorts of financial incentive. Though donors provide financial resources necessary for such activities, it is not possible to provide financial incentives to thousands of participating people. The voluntarism which should be the heart of any social movement is dying out which should be the matter of concern.

NGO Model in the Dalit Movement

Those active Dalit NGOs have been able to raise awareness among Dalit people through the electronic and print media such as radio and television programmes by DWO, JUP, JMC and NNDSWO, saving and credit programmes in the selected districts. They have been able to establish international linkage and lobby at the same time as well. Likewise they are responding to the incident when it happens against Dalit but they have not been able to create a large social movement based on a particular issue.

A non Dalit NGO called Saraswati Community Development Forum (SCDF) working in Saptari district of eastern Nepal introduced REFLECT approach to adult education and was able to create a social movement against the exploitation to Terai Dalits living there for generations. The Chamar of that region first realized that throwing carcass is the root cause of their dehumanization and started to boycott it, which subsequently led to economic blockade to the whole communities in several places. Then a large movement emerged which gained partial success. The ripple effect of that movement is still continuing and that movement has added another movement for land rights as most of the Terai Dalits have been deprived off their land rights though they are cultivating it for generations.

People's organization, today's need

It is not fair to expect revolutionary change through the NGO movement because none of the liberating movement of the world has been led by NGOs. However, NGOs can create an appropriate environment for the movement. A good example is SCDF of Saptari which has been funded and supported by Action Aid Nepal which is an international NGO working in Nepal for the last 2 decades. That NGO helped form people's organization of Dalits and now they themselves are leading the movement. Here I would like to quote Dr. Ambedkar "if you make realize a slave of his slavery, he will revolt", since Dalits are living a life of slave for centuries if we help them realize through whatever means they will start raising their voices. This can be done only through creating people's organization. Mr. Baldevram has emerged as a leader of Terai Dalit leading one of the people's organization and has been working actively to restore dignity, rights of citizenship and land for his fellow Dalits of Terai. Likewise, there is a clear need for all NGOs to follow that path and create a large social movement through people's organizations.

What DNF and its member organizations Doing?

Over the last one decade DNF along with its member organizations have emerged as advocating organization for the rights of Dalit through networking and alliance building. Though it has not reached a desired level of creating a mass movement, however, now it is making itself clearer on the need day by day. At the moment DNF has three larger projects and membership of nearly 200 organizations from 50 districts of Nepal which could be a biggest strength to create a larger movement.

The projects and programmes that DNF has are:

Dalit Empowerment and Inclusion Project:

This is the largest programme ever being carried out for the Dalits of Nepal with a 1.2 million pound budget of three years. The funding comes from DFID/ESP and has become the second bilateral agency in Nepal to support Dalit cause in such a big way. It has adopted exclusion as a frame work to analyze the situations of Dalits and to address it empowerment, inclusion, policy and institutional change as philosophy, approach and strategy. The main aim of this project is to contribute to mainstream Dalits in socio-economic and political processes. To achieve this national level policy influencing activities such as working through print and electronic media, organizing face to face with policy makers and other lobbying and advocacy programmes have been designed. To create a social movement at the grass root level it will work directly with 50,000 Dalits of Nepal living in 6 districts (3 Terai and 3 Hills). As of now within Dalit movement Terai Dalits were not taken seriously and this project aims to embrace them as well. DNF being a network organization it does not implement most of its activities

directly, but, through its member organizations, so is the approach adopted by this project.

Capacity Building Support Project

Danida/Hugou is the first bilateral agency working in Nepal to start supporting Dalit cause directly and for the last 5 years this support is continuing. Three NGOs DNF, DWO and FEDO are the regular recipients where as some other Dalit NGOs working on different issues are also receiving support. Through capacity building of DNF itself and its other member organizations it aims to achieve the goal of restoring social justice to Dalits of Nepal. Nine public interest litigations have been filed at Supreme Court and out of 5 verdicts 3 are in favour of Dalits. Under this support Dalit Legal Awareness Campaign (D-LAC) is going on and DNF maintains a hotline to provide legal counseling and support to the victims of caste based discrimination through its Kathmandu based and regional based offices in the five region of the country.

Dalit Human Rights and Legal Rights Advocacy for Human Rights & Social Justice Programme

This is a two years programme supported by Ford Foundation and being implemented through 6 member organizations of DNF in 12 districts. The main component of the programmes are legal rights and awareness through paralegal training, fact finding/case study, counseling, mediation to the victims of caste discrimination. Through this programmes people living at the grass root can have access to the legal support, counseling and mediation when they are in need.

Other activities

On the need basis DNF has carried out research and publication, campaign on different issues with the support from various international organizations such as SDC, Care Nepal, ActionAid International Nepal, Plan International, MS Nepal, Lutheran World Federation, ILO. With the support from DFID/ESP it recently carried out a study on International Development Aid and Dalits, caste based discrimination in 20 districts and profiling of Dalit NGOs in 37 districts with the support of Danida and ILO respectively.

VSO (Voluntary Services Overseas) has come in a big way to provide support in the institutional development of DNF and its member organizations through its volunteers.

For this international consultation DFID UK, DFID/ESP Nepal have provided the largest support of Euro 27K out of 43K budget followed by Danida, Plan, AAN, LWF and Care Nepal.

Conclusion

The Dalit NGOs of Nepal have been playing a crucial role to sustain the reformative movement, however, they lack a clear strategic direction and unified voice to assert their rights. They are providing leadership to the movement, however, due to support from international agencies voluntarism which is the central part of the any movement is fizzling out and has become too dependant on the donor support. In other hand those movement oriented organizations have not been able to sustain their movement as they could not mobilize their supporters for their necessary financial and voluntary support. As of now we have not experienced particular interest and interference of donors in our movement, incase they have we need to have an independent movement concurrently with donor support for our cause which is lacking at the moment and should be the serious concern of all of us.

Unless major political parties of Nepal take up the Dalit issue seriously the desired change in the government policies and programme can not be achieved. The NGOs are moving fast leading the social movement as they have resources and expertise from the support of international agencies, where as these sister organizations lack strategic vision, resources and commitment without which they will not be able to influence their mother parties. There is need to strengthen their capacity and international agencies if want to mainstream Dalit rights need to divert some of their support to these sister organizations as well.