

Role of NGOs in Environmental Protection: A Case Study of Ludhiana City in Punjab

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Abstract

Internationally there is a growing environmental awareness amongst stakeholders, individuals and communities. This increase in knowledge and awareness has been the result of campaigns and education programmes run by major public interest groups. These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the international, national and regional levels. These organizations extend beyond their own community and can reach places where governmental agencies cannot sometimes reach. They are generally characterized by creativity in approach, flexibility in functioning and innovativeness in methods and technologies. Though, recent years have seen a proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with a mission to help in redressing various social and environmental problems, the effectiveness of these organizations in carrying out their stated goals is rarely assessed or critically examined. This paper reemphasizes the significance of NGOs in environmental protection and seeks to analyze their contributions in the promotion of environmental knowledge, awareness and action in the city of Ludhiana.

Keywords: Environment, Civil Society, Non-Governmental Organizations

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Introduction

Man's concern for natural environment has always been a point of consideration but the serious concern about the issue of resource depletion and degrading environmental ecosystems began after the Second World War, when industrialization started vigorously. Population explosion, ever increasing thirst of consumerism and advancement in human life and life style posed a serious challenge to the very survival of the human specie. Environmental problems thus, have become critical. The protection of environment and conservation of resources has emerged as the focal point of nations. The international debate and concern for ecology has now become the watchword. As the concern for environmental problems increased, government institutionalized the environmental issues through new legislations and regulations. International agencies especially the United Nations swung into action. Civil society organizations started playing a proactive role in global environmental governance.

Civil Society is not a new concept as it is an English word equivalent to a Latin term '*societas civilis*' of the time of Cicero and of Aristotle's '*Koinonia politike*', when there was no distinction between 'state' and 'society' or between 'civil' and 'political'. It referred to a collection of people within a legitimate political set-up (Gill et al., 1997). The concept of civil society in its pre-modern classical republican understanding was usually connected to the period of enlightenment in the eighteenth century. In the classical period, civil society was regarded as a political association governing social conflict through the imposition of rules that restrained citizens from harming one another. G.W.F. Hegel completely changed the meaning of the idea. Consequently, the modern liberal understanding of civil society as a form of market society appeared (Roy, 1995).

The post-modern understanding of civil society was first developed as political opposition in former Soviet Block East European countries in 1980s. From that time onwards the practice of using the idea of civil society instead of political society was initiated in the political field. However, in the 1990s with the emergence of nongovernmental organizations and New Social Movements (NSMs) on a global scale, civil society as a third sector became a key terrain of strategic action to construct 'an alternative social and world order' (Roy, 1995).

The 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment that led to the founding of United Nations Environment Programme saw an unprecedented role being played by NGOs in shaping the international environmental agenda. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1992 was of particular significance to NGOs. The diversity of civil society and its value to official intergovernmental processes on the environment was acknowledged in Agenda 21 at the Rio Earth Summit. The successive UN resolutions have re-emphasized the need for working with the widest possible range of public organizations. A number of government delegations to international conferences are now formally including NGO representatives.

The encouragement to public participation in environmental management through legislations in recent years has also enhanced the role of NGOs and other civil society organizations (Sawhney, 2004). Broadly, four kinds of participation by NGOs had been recognized: participation in decision making, in implementation, in benefits and in evaluation. Among all these functions, the facilitation of dissemination of environmental information had been a crucial aspect of each - whether as the watchdogs of government policy and industrial activity, or indirectly educating entrepreneurs and consumers (Kumar, 1999).

The conviction that NGOs and government agencies can and should work together in a complementary relationship has become stronger and the credibility that NGOs have acquired from successful campaigns has created a firm and growing public support for their new policies. The new electronic forms of communication principally e-mail and websites have greatly assisted in these endeavors.

As the issue of environment pollution in India is large and diverse with wide ranging socio-economic dimensions, the Government of India has envisaged an important role for NGOs in environmental protection. The 'Policy Statement for Abatement of Pollution' (1992) included various activities of NGOs and the general public. It specifically stressed upon partnership with the public in implementing environmental laws (Government of India, 1992).

To encourage the role of NGOs in environmental protection, the Pollution Control Boards gave official recognition to NGOs. The Central Pollution Control Board established an 'NGO Cell' to coordinate pollution control activities across the country (CPCB, 2000-01). Besides establishing a network with the State Pollution Control Boards, NGOs were provided with pollution testing kits. They were also offered financial assistance to organize mass awareness programs on environmental issues. The NGOs' activities were placed in three different categories – (a) supplementing the pollution control authorities through monitoring and vigilance; (b) preparation of literature, audio and video programmes for educating the general public; and (c) organizing and conducting programmes/camps for creating mass awareness. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) also supported NGOs engaged in promoting environmental education in the country. The National Environmental Awareness Campaigns, promoted by the MoEF successfully encouraged many NGOs to work for environment protection and sustainable development. About 4000 NGOs were given financial assistance for creating environmental awareness. An Environmental Information System (ENVIS) network was setup to disseminate information on environmental issues.

The Draft 12th Five-Year Plan (2012-2017) also prescribed partnerships with the civil society organizations. The plan stated that:

"Civil Society has a crucial role to play in strengthening of local institutions and in bringing innovation into government programmes. Government must strongly encourage partnerships with civil society including not only NGOs, but also academic institutions, professional associations and universities" (Planning Commission, 2012).

Thus, the need to involve NGOs in terms of the grass root monitoring of environmental quality was well recognized. In developing countries like India, where NGOs worked with a number of constraints, practical and people-oriented views on environmental issues might not exist universally or to a desirable extent. It has become increasingly clear that these organizations vary greatly in their level of competence and professionalism. Many of them are ineffective, and in some cases they may even exacerbate the problems they set out to solve.

This paper is focused on the role of the NGOs in environmental awareness and protection in Ludhiana city (Punjab). For the study, the NGOs dealing with environmental issues were identified in Ludhiana City. An official from each of these NGOs was interviewed. The effectiveness of these NGOs at grassroots was further tested by an informal interview with general public. A stratified sample of 100 people was taken on the basis of their education level. 20 persons each were selected from different categories: primary, secondary, graduates, post graduates and uneducated. These 100 respondents were asked whether they were aware of the functioning of the NGOs in their city and also if they participated in the activities and programmes of the NGOs. The following sections deal with the description of these NGOs, followed by analysis of their work.

Role and Significance of NGOs in Ludhiana City

The city of Ludhiana with the population of more than 3.5 million is Punjab's most populated and rapidly growing metropolitan city. An important industrial town, Ludhiana is the textile, light engineering goods and services centre of India. Woolen garments, machine tools, dyes, cycle parts, mopeds, sewing machines and motor parts produced here are exported all over the world.

Ludhiana accounts for 90% of the country's woolen hosiery industry and thus is also known as the Manchester of India. Ludhiana has a strong economic base due to high industrialization. This resulted in a rapid and sizable expansion of the city both physically and demographically. Ludhiana covers 7% of the total area in Punjab and contains 12% of the total population of Punjab. Obviously, the wheel of progress cannot run in isolation and therefore, requires simultaneous improvement in its mobility.

Being one of the fastest growing cities of the state, the severity of the problem of environment degradation in Ludhiana has become a challenge for the state government. The situation is getting worse day by day due to heavy industrial and vehicular pollution, despite various policies of the state government to protect and conserve environment. One of the prime causes for increasing pollution level can be attributed to lack of people awareness and participation at grassroots level. Hence, the role of NGOs in protection and control of environmental pollution has been widely recognized. There were a number of NGOs in Punjab that participated in several awareness campaigns throughout the state. In Ludhiana, three NGOs working in the field of environment protection and awareness were identified. These were:

1. Bharat Jan Gyan Vigyan Jatha
2. Educational Welfare Society
3. Watawaran Sambhal Society

Out of these three NGOs, first two were established in early 1990s (1992 and 1993 respectively) and the third was established in 2004. The primary environment related activities of these NGOs were conducting awareness campaigns. These were being run at educational institutions and public fora. At educational institutions, it was done through facilitating the formation of eco-clubs in schools. Students were involved through conducting painting competitions, declamations and debates on environment-related issues. Besides this, special lectures were arranged in schools on environmental issues such as- the need and significance of proper management of solid waste at home, save water and save electricity. Public interaction was done through seminars/symposium, *mohalla*/community meetings and street plays. The general public was sensitized about environment and health related issues such as - significance of rainwater harvesting and harmful effects of paddy straw burning. NGOs published and distributed hand bills, posters and booklets for the same. Apart from these activities, these NGOs conducted plantation drives in various educational institutions, residential areas and industrial areas in and around the Ludhiana city at regular intervals. Vermi-composting units were installed at various places. They further introduced crop diversification, solid waste management, water management techniques to the masses. Farmers were motivated to grow medicinal and herbal plants which were environment friendly.

The above stated activities clearly indicate that NGOs in Ludhiana were playing an active role in creating environmental awareness and promoting environment protection. However, certain gaps were identified in the functioning of the above stated three NGOs. Some of these have been discussed below.

Lack of Participation in Policy Formulation

The NGOs, being close to ground realities, can play a very effective role in decision making at government level. This is the reason why most of the environment related legislations in India provide for an adequate representation to the civil society organizations at the policy making level. For example, the Section-5 of the Air Act (1981) provides that:

"Pollution Control Board shall consist of such number of persons, not exceeding three, to represent the interest of agriculture, fishery or industry or trade or any other interest which, in opinion of the State Government ought to be represented" (Government of India, 1981).

Hence, the law has provided enough scope to nominate members from amongst the NGOs in the pollution control boards. However, not a single NGO was ever represented in the Board in Punjab till 2010. In 2010, Baba Seechewal, a renowned environmentalist from Punjab was for the first time nominated to the Board. Despite Ludhiana being one of the most polluted cities of the state, no representative of any NGO from Ludhiana was ever nominated in the Punjab Pollution Control Board. The head of one of these three NGOs when asked about this, stated that the local NGOs could be more effective if they participated in the decision making process at the district level. He further related that one such effort was made in 1992, when the government started 'Paryavaran Vahini', a scheme for encouraging people's participation in environment protection at the district level. The scheme provided for a joint meeting of the representatives from district administration, Punjab Pollution Control Board, industries and local NGOs. Though started with a great enthusiasm, this scheme gradually became dysfunctional due to the lack of interest of the administration. The meetings were not held regularly. Most of the times lower rank officials, with little information about the issues were sent to the meetings. In the absence of senior official, most of the decisions were not taken timely, which defeated the very purpose of conducting such meetings. The NGOs also gradually lost interest in such meetings. Similarly, a Noise Monitoring Committee was set up as per the guidelines of the Supreme Court in 2011. No meeting of the same was conducted. Hence, it could be surmised that though various initiatives were taken by the government to ensure NGOs participation at policy formulation level, none of these efforts proved to be effective. This was in keeping with the findings of other studies:

"Domestic non-state sectors such as NGOs generally had very little influence over policy formation. To begin with, very few NGOs were there which possessed at least some of the resources and the interest to try and influence environmental policy" (Rajan, 1997).

One of the reasons identified in this study was that these NGOs lacked financial resources and infrastructure and were therefore, ignored at the policy making level.

Inadequate Manpower

The environmental issues have an important technical dimension. The effective implementation of the environmental laws needs regular monitoring. Monitoring mechanisms help in comparing the current status of pollution against the standards prescribed. In fact, they portray the *de jure* and *de facto* aspects of environmental pollution. It is with this purpose that the Central Pollution Control Board in 2001 provided pollution testing kits to NGOs so that they could monitor pollution levels at various sites and check the genuineness of the data collected by the Board. The NGOs were found to be neither aware about such facility, nor were they technically competent to carry out monitoring of the pollution level at various sites in the city. The testing being a technical job required specific skill for the same. All the three NGOs had a good number of volunteers from different fields such as doctors, lawyers and teachers with adequate environmental knowledge and awareness. However, none of these NGOs had an environmental expert to test the pollution level at various sites in Ludhiana. Thus, they were solely relying on the Pollution Control Board's reports for the status of the pollution level in Ludhiana. As also noted by other studies:

"The major constraint of effective functioning of NGOs apart from shortage of funds is lack of trained personnel to carry out in-depth analysis of environmental issues. This limits the role of a vast majority of otherwise enthusiastic Indian environmental NGOs and results in the organization of repetitive and poorly planned seminars, competitions and functions" (Kumar, 1999).

Inadequate Financial Capacity

All the three NGOs were primarily dependent upon the government for funding. The heads of these NGOs maintained that there was a huge shortage of funds and believed this to be the major constraint to their functioning. The Punjab State Council for Science and Technology gave financial aid to the tune of Rs. 8000-10,000 annually to these NGOs. However, most of these grants were conditional and for specific purposes. This left them with limited discretion while spending these grants. Besides this, there was a lot of paper work involved, which lead to unnecessary delay in getting these grants. Sometimes the grant reached them too late, which adversely affected the implementation of their programmes. The heads of all the three NGOs stated that this amount was so minimal that many times they collected money from volunteers to fulfill their infrastructural needs such as rent of the building, purchase of computers, payment of telephone bills and conveyance charges. Two of the NGOs claimed that, once in a while they managed to get private sponsors to fund certain programmes. However, the third NGO (Education Welfare Society), as a matter of policy did not accept donations from any private person as it believed that it would lead to unnecessary interference in its functioning. Hence, the shortage of funds was identified to be one of the prime causes for dismal performance of these NGOs.

Lack of Accountability

Accountability and professionalism of NGOs and civil society groups is crucial if they are to become appropriate representatives of the needs and concerns of those members of society who are disadvantaged, disenfranchised and poorly informed. It was revealed that the actual work of these NGOs was largely unnoticed. All the three NGOs maintained newspaper clippings as a proof of media coverage of their activities. These served to provide legitimacy and visibility of these NGOs in the eyes of the general public. However, some of the individuals interviewed, expressed doubts regarding the working of these NGOs. They feared the misuse of money by these NGOs; one of the fears expressed was lack of accountability. Hence, the actual performance of these NGOs remained a grey area in popular perception.

Lack of Inter-Organizational Linkages

The classical implementation theory states that successful implementation depends upon linkages between different organizations and departments at the local level. "*Links have to be very close to the hundred percent if a situation is not to occur in which a number of small deficits cumulatively create a large shortfall*" (Hill et al, 2002). The lack of proper linkages among various institutions is an important loophole in an institutional set up. Though all the three NGOs studied were found to have organizational linkages with various governmental agencies, it was noted that there was no uniformity in such linkages across the NGOs. As there was no regular mechanism in practice for periodic meetings between administration and NGOs, most of the interaction with the administration was irregular and ineffective. The head of one of the above stated NGOs revealed that they have linkages with other voluntary organizations in Ludhiana such as Medical Association, Working Women Forum, Youth Organization and trade unions; however, there was no inter-relationships found among the NGOs working on environmental issues. The heads of all the three NGOs said that they did not maintain any communication with the other NGOs working in the same region and on the same issues. It was also believed that the identity and relevance of an NGO would be threatened if it integrated its functioning with other bodies. One way or the other, there was lack of interest in establishing horizontal inter-organizational linkages. Here it is important to point out that the links with government agencies were out of the necessity and not by choice or design.

Unimpressive Public Interaction

All the three NGOs declared creating general awareness on environmental protection as their prime objective. However, the NGO-public interaction in Ludhiana city was not impressive. One of

the members of these NGOs, on the condition of anonymity, revealed that most of the time getting a reasonable audience for any activity organized was difficult. Many of the times, all the saplings to be handed out for plantation during plantation drives remained undistributed and were wasted. When the general public was asked about their knowledge of any NGO working for environment in Ludhiana city, 41 out of the 100 respondents replied in the affirmative. On further inquiry about having attended any environment awareness programme, only 15 (out of 41) of them replied in the affirmative. The data reflected that while people had a vague idea about environmental efforts, there was lack of any deeper involvement and commitment.

Discussion

Hence, it could be said that while some NGOs were working in the field of environment in Ludhiana city, there were many loopholes in the functioning of the three NGOs identified. Most of their activities were at the superficial level, with little effective contribution towards generating environmental awareness. An environmental expert, when asked about the contribution of these NGOs to environment protection, believed that the focus should not be on the number of NGOs working in this area but on the quality of work done by them to improve the environmental conditions in Ludhiana. The present study found that both the number and the quality left much to be desired.

"...NGOs are also prone to weaknesses that can limit their contribution to society, such as - Insufficient Resources, Personality Culture, Invisibility, Competitiveness and Fragmentation, Perceived Ineffectiveness and Lack of Political Sophistication" (Ovasdi, 2006).

The commercialization of NGOs has no doubt led to their rapid growth but it does not mean that all join this field for financial gains. A high official with CAPART (Council for Advancement of Peoples Action and Rural Technology) stated that there are more number of good NGO's than the bad NGOs but "...unfortunately it is only the bad ones who get projected". Despite these limitations, it is acknowledged that the NGOs have the potential to counter the detrimental effects of the state and market forces, and strengthen democratic systems. This significantly requires the enhancement of their internal abilities to effectively bring about the desired social change (Mahtani, 1998).

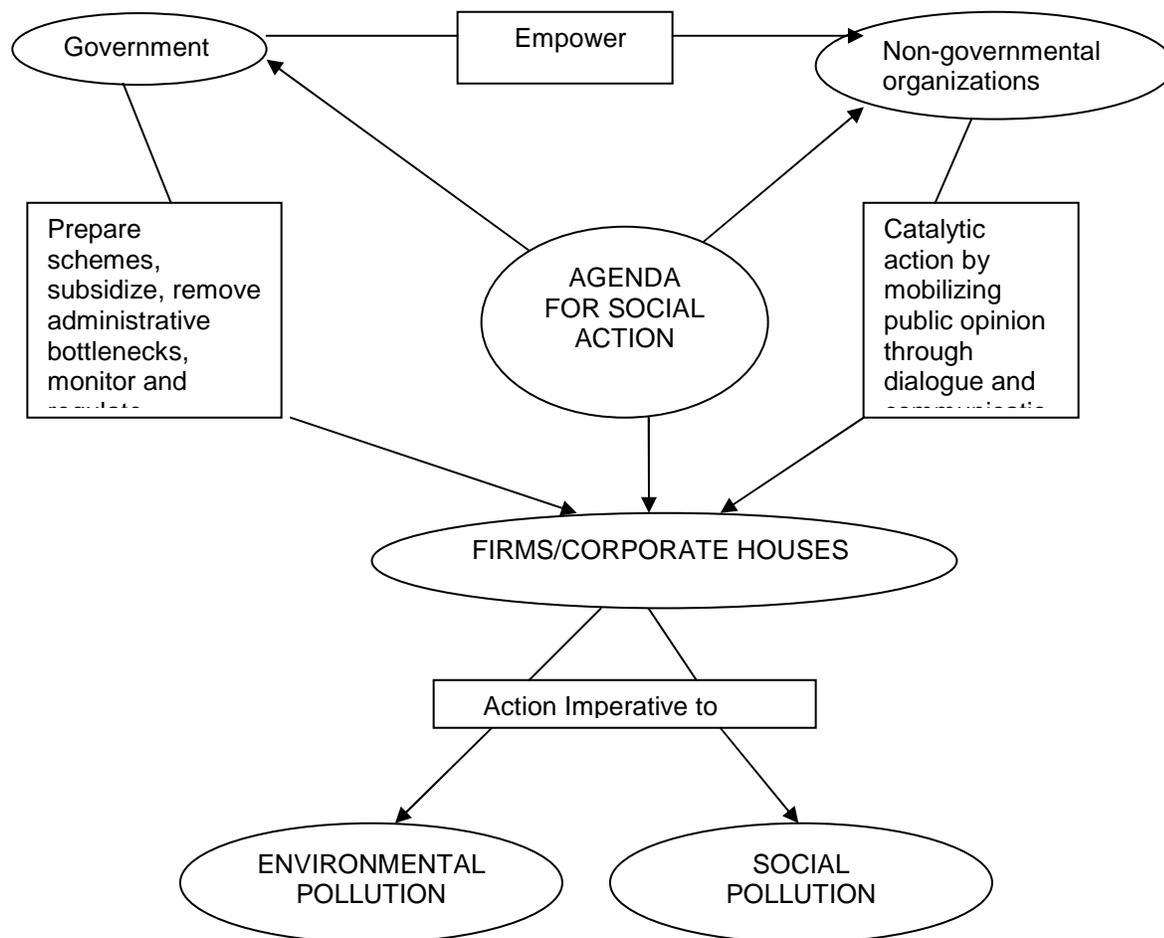
NGOs should be subject to the same scrutiny and assessment as any private sector organization contracted to the government and/or donor agencies, and those who fail to perform should be barred from further receipt of public funds. An improved governance structure would acknowledge the role of NGOs and other members of the civil society and devise formal channels for participation. The mechanisms that can best be utilized to ensure balanced and equitable networking among the NGOs need to be identified. A code of conduct should be evolved to evaluate and rate the NGOs and initiative should come from within the NGO sector.

"The involvement of NGOs as the 'eyes and ears' of the government in terms of the grass root monitoring of environmental quality needs to be properly recognized. In turn, steps should be taken to strengthen the NGOs" (Jain et al., 1989).

NGOs also have to review their own culture and tradition. The clientele and beneficiaries are vital players and working with them for ushering attitudinal change, while remaining compassionate and understanding is the great imperative. Apart from basic attitudinal changes of individuals and organizations, i.e. adopting a positive attitude and a holistic and universal value pattern, social action is also required. A plan for this integrated approach has been drawn from Habermas's theory of 'communicative action' (Rath, 2002) in Figure-1.

In the Habermas theory of communicative action, actors in society seek to reach common understanding and coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation rather than strategic action strictly in pursuit of their own goals (Habermas, 1984). Habermas provides a

Figure: 1. J. Habermas's Theory of 'Communicative Action'



Source: Habermas, 1984

theoretical basis for a view of planning that emphasizes widespread public participation, sharing of information with the public, reaching consensus through public dialogue rather than exercise of power, avoiding privileging of experts and bureaucrats, and replacing the model of the technical expert with one of the reflective planner. Hence, the agenda for social actions must capitalize on the communicative reason of the corporate houses to resolve controversial validity claims on the issue of environmental pollution. While subsidy on import and transfer of green technology would ease the financial burden on industries, government agencies for environmental control have to play a ruthless yet responsible role to ensure that the agenda is implemented in letter and spirit. Further NGOs through continuous dialogue and communication can raise the level of societal concerns for environment and help build an equal amount of social pressure so that the capitalist class reads the writing on the wall and become more environment friendly (Rath, 2002).

The NGOs in contemporary times are playing an increasingly vital role in democratic and democratizing societies and the challenges they address are growing, and will continue to do so. The governments and business may resist their advocacy, but there is now a real interest in the potential roles NGOs can play in developing and deploying solutions. As a result of this, a new market-focused opportunity space is opening up. However, this often requires solutions that are not based on single-issue responses.

In the context of the growing institutionalization of NGOs, it is important to remember that NGOs are not ends by themselves, but means to addressing wider environmental goals. The ultimate objective of capacity building of NGOs should be that they in turn are able to capacitate general public to foster their own environmental issues.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be stated that designing governance structures that draw NGOs into environmental problem solving, policymaking, and implementation remains an important challenge. The solution lies in a revitalized global environmental governance system that would facilitate both an expansion of these roles for NGOs and the development of better-defined processes of participation. NGOs cannot replace the state, but may perform complementary as well as supplementary role. Nonetheless, a successful Government-Corporate-NGO partnership based upon a commitment, mutual trust and respect, as well as the willingness to understand the values, objectives and concerns of all partners is a step in the right direction that would lead to a significant improvement in the environment.

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