

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in education have the potential to revolutionize the realm of education services, as demonstrated in India. They not only fulfill some of the responsibilities stated in Sarva Siksha Abhiyan but also target the strata that have either not benefitted or are deprived. By inducing accessibility, inclusion, and empowerment through advocacy, infrastructure, human capital development, and primary teaching services, NGOs are making a significant difference. In a developing country like India, the contribution of the NGO sector has been monumental, particularly in terms of human capital development and primary teaching services. These organizations are also at the forefront of pushing innovative models that can be scaled with the government's help. Their significant advantages are their adaptability and models that facilitate a shift from rote learning to critical thinking. The present article aims to study and review the role of NGOs in education in India by focusing on the transformative models and programs along with their limitations.

Keywords- *Education, non-governmental organization, development, human capital, primary teaching services, India, education models, teacher training*

Introduction

India's civil society roots have long been based on the notions of *daana* (giving) and *seva* (service). Voluntary organizations have been actively promoting Indian culture, education, and health, which has multiplied during British rule. The nationalist consciousness that spread across India in the second half of the 19th century gave rise to the concept of self-help, forming various societies and organizations. The Societies Registration Act in 1860 confirmed "the legal status of the growing body of nongovernment organizations (NGOs)." Although this legislation is vital to NGOs, various states have made amendments. After independence, the Government of India soon realized the "potential for civil society to supplement and complement its efforts." The Central Social Welfare Board in 1953 supported people's participation programs through NGOs, and the additional funding led to an increase in professional NGOs. International NGOs entered India to supplement drought relief during 1965–1966 and 1966–1967 and were permitted to establish permanent local operations. Global recognition and increased foreign funding changed the atmosphere of civil society, as there was an increase in the diversification of the NGOs, which can be attributed to the political situation and the increasing fears of poverty and marginalization rampant in society. These

organizations focussed on welfare and empowerment, with community participation being a key concept in the projects. Only during the 1970s and 1980s did NGOs begin to be “formally recognized as development partners of the state” (Asian Development Bank, 2009). According to a survey by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), 26.5% of NGOs are engaged in religious activities, while 21.3% work in community and/or social services. About one in five NGOs works in education, while 17.9% are active in sports and culture. Only 6.6% work in the health sector (Asian Development Bank, 2009; PRIA, 2002). According to Central Statistics Office (CSO) data 2012, a “sizable number of NGOs is found in social services (37%), followed by education & research (24%). The comparative distributions across areas of operation from NSS 67th Round estimates are social services at 3%, education & research at 19%, and health is around 4%” (Das & Kumar, 2016).

In the education space, unlike many other countries, NGOs in India have not only focused on non-formal education within government plans but have also fostered strong partnerships with the government. The role of non-formal education, as elaborated in the Sixth Five-Year Plan and the Eighth Five-Year Plan, recognizes the role of ‘voluntary’ organizations (and NGOs) in providing non-formal education. The Ninth Five Year Plan marks a further shift as non-formal education now appears under the heading ‘alternative education. While the Government of India has supported non-formal education, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Universalisation of Elementary Education Programme) critically assesses the ‘ideological’ debate surrounding alternative education (Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development 2002). In response to this debate, the government revised the non-formal education in India’s education plan to an ‘Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) program in 2000’, which includes funding to support voluntary organizations and NGOs in providing education. This collaborative approach has been instrumental in many ways, with India leading the field in non-formal education with its policy and practice (Rose, 2009).

Role of NGOs in Education

In India, the contribution of the NGO sector, as in the case of other developing countries, has improved the quality of learning and education by pushing innovative models that can scale up with the government's help. The NGO's advantage lies in its ability to adapt and pilot innovative models relevant to the particular context, with the focus of the intervention and model being learner-centered, thus facilitating a process of critical thinking. For instance, NGOs such as Eklavya, working in Madhya Pradesh, have focused on developing relevant curricula, exciting learning materials, and an innovative methodology for teacher training. In contrast, in collaboration with the Bombay municipal corporation, Pratham provides curriculum, early childhood bridge courses, and early-child care facilities. The Rishi Valley Education Centre has developed an innovative non-formal education curriculum and program that many NGOs have used, and it has also adopted 3000 state schools in Karnataka to run the program (Rao, 2000).

The survey of six innovative NGOs highlighted the MV Foundation (MVF) in Andhra Pradesh, which has developed a model that uses education to tackle child labor by putting working children into formal, regular government schools. They have been running residential camps to help the children in the phase of withdrawing from work and preparing for school, along with Non-Formal Education (NFE) Centres for working children and over-age children.

“Social mobilization, awareness building,” and providing voluntary teachers and teacher training are also among some of the other activities carried out by the NGO (Jagannathan, 2001) (Bordoloi et al., 2017).

Similarly, Bodh Shiksha Samiti, in the slums of Jaipur, Rajasthan, focussed on education for the children of socially marginalized groups by aiming at “equitable, quality education, based on community participation and initiatives.” The interventions have reduced dropout rates from 60% to less than 20%, improving learning levels and cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. The Rishi Valley Public School started the RVREC program, setting up 16 satellite schools in Andhra Pradesh’s Chittoor district to reach students in rural, isolated areas lacking schooling facilities. They have developed an education program for teacher education and an educational kit called “School-in-a-Box,” containing 1500 laminated cards replacing traditional textbooks and TLM. These initiatives have led to a significant improvement in the academic outcomes of the students (Jagannathan, 2001).

The Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative started using early childhood education to universalize primary education. With the success of its low-cost and effective model for early childhood education that is community-based, it aims to increase the efficiency and accountability of public education with minimal financial inputs. Pratham hopes to achieve “universal preschool coverage” and, after that, hand it over to the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai while retaining management responsibility (Jagannathan, 2001) (Bordoloi et al., 2017). Pratham has also extensively worked in the area of mapping and assessing learning achievements across various states in India from 2005 to the current year of 2022. The reports brought the issue of low learning levels among school children into the public domain. Since then, government officials have quoted and used the reports when assessing and planning for educational reform and policies for the country (Kingdon, 2007). Another organization that has had a large-scale impact is the Akanksha Foundation’s School Project. It is a venture that provides high-quality schools serving children from low-income communities in Mumbai and Pune. Again, the target group is government schools struggling with high dropout rates, low teacher quality, and poor infrastructure (Bordoloi et al., 2017).

The foundation of Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh is a pioneer in innovation in education, starting with the goal of developing an “innovative curriculum, teaching methodologies, and educational materials for science teaching.” The crux of their program is “activity-based science teaching” to induce the “spirit of inquiry.” The program's success also led the organization towards a science kit appropriate for rural schools. A remarkable aspect of Eklavya’s experiment is that it was the first time an NGO entered the portals of Government schools and established an effective collaboration within the Government school system. Agastya Foundation, similar to Eklavya, focussed on shifting the educational system from “rote learning to creating joy of creativity,” specifically in government schools through state-of-the-art science labs (Prachi et al., 2020) (Ramachandran, 2005). The Centre for Education Management and Development (CEMD), on the other hand, focused on the “whole-school-management” approach. They launched their activities through the Education Management Resource Program (EMRP) in 10 socio-economically disadvantaged Muslim schools in Delhi. The model and program aim to improve “school effectiveness by increasing the capacities and skills of school management bodies” (Jagannathan, 2001). The above studies had a similarity

as all the organizations surveyed believed in the crucial importance of collaborating with the Government schooling system to have a more significant impact (Jagannathan, 2001).

Based in New Delhi, Smile Foundation started a mission education program (ME) in 2002 and is spread across 25 states. Like MVF, they focus on early, non-formal, and remedial education (Kalra, 2019). Their model follows a four-step approach: “focus on students, a focus on teachers, prioritizing an effective learning environment and community and stakeholder engagements.” Through this model, 87% of qualified students who graduated from ME centers entered traditional schools, and almost every ME teacher possessed sufficient academic training as per the reports in 2019 (Chazkel, 2021). On the other hand, the Azim Premji Foundation contributes toward equitable and quality universal education by focusing on rural areas and government-run schools (Bordoloi et al., 2017).

The six participants' study of an NGO school in Uttar Pradesh highlighted the three significant barriers impeding girls' education: poverty, accessibility, and safety. Through an in-depth principal interview, teacher questionnaire, and observation of archival data, the study concluded that the former barriers could be eliminated by increased participation of NGOs as the NGOs are helping to improve the status of girls (Roberts & Chittooran, 2016). The qualitative study of RIVER NGO in Andhra Pradesh examined the nature and potential of NGO provision of primary schooling. The developed programs for new pedagogy and teacher training improved the school learning environment, which observed rising attendance and retention rates (Blum, 2009) (Blum & Diwan, 2007).

The study conducted in Amritsar and Gurdaspur focussed on 2 NGOs and, through the tools of interviews and questionnaires, concluded that NGOs play an influential role. This conclusion is derived from the fact that NGOs, alongside education-enriched programs, had paid attention to the ratio of the number of teachers and classes along with well-maintained buildings, computer education, free textbooks, and mid-day meal programs (Kaur & Sandhu, 2014). Going from the north to northeast India, the educational activity of Markazul Ma'airf, an NGO in North East India, through its Cent Percent Literacy program (CPLP), has helped Hojai, a small town in Assam cent percent literate (Qasmi, 2006).

The Akshaya Patra Foundation is recognized as the world's largest non-profit organization in India. It holds a record for being the world's most extensive school meal program. In contrast, Nanhi Kali is an NGO that supports education for underprivileged girls in India and is working with 19 NGO implementation partners to ensure quality education for all the Nanhi Kalis (Bordoloi et al., 2017). Along the same path, CRY works on improving the conditions of underprivileged children by helping eradicate child labor and bringing back malnourished children into the healthy stage, along with a focus on adolescent children (Bordoloi et al., 2017). The crux of all the above studies points toward the significance of NGO programs in achieving universal primary education in India (Blum, 2009) (Blum & Diwan, 2007).

The 2016 study examined two replicable models that could scale up education in schools through a pedagogical approach with the help of NGOs. Through the multiple randomized evaluations of Pratham training, they studied two models, one in Haryana and the second in Uttar Pradesh. The former focused on training government officials who further trained the teachers, whereas the latter focused on setting up learning camps. The result indicated that the model of Haryana had an increase in test scores by 0.15 standard deviation. In contrast, the model in UP had a rise in test scores by 0.60 to 0.71 standard deviation. The paper highlighted

the fact that it is not only crucial to group children according to learning levels but also to provide training to teachers and not just provide the materials. The result was evident and positive, where the teachers received the training, constant monitoring, and feedback (Banerjee et al., 2016).

The NGOs have diversified in education, with some of the NGOs focussing on teacher training, pedagogical techniques, mid-day meal schemes, and community empowerment (Chandwani & Padhan, 2012) (Kaur & Sandhu, 2014). A significant body of research recorded that the teaching method commonly used in government schools in India is recitation and memorization of material, as the long-term goals are connected to passing on facts and information and, therefore, passing examinations. This method gives no scope for critical thinking or independent exploration (Blum, 2009). Meanwhile, NGOs have been addressing these issues through effective programs and orientations, where the staff or fellows are being equipped and taught new learning methodologies that promote critical and analytical skills. They are also widespread in areas of teacher training and have, from the beginning, emphasized the importance of community participation in the child's education (Blum, 2009) (Blum & Diwan, 2007) (Ramachandran et al., 2008).

The NGOs have paid close attention to the development of human resources by providing them with best practices, and this professional development is vital to future growth. In the sphere of research and advocacy, NGOs' role in the Right to Food Campaign aided the implementation of the Mid-day meal scheme in the Indian states, and the field experiments provided a ground to test the cost-effectiveness of educational interventions (Kingdon, 2007). Thus, NGO participation in large-scale public education is negligible. However, collaboration with educational institutions of the government, as well as training and improvement of academic management, could help scale up the education level in India (Jagannathan, 2001).

Limitations of NGOs

Some challenges for NGOs in the education sector due to being seen as gap-fillers are lack of funding, transparency, and the need to “recruit, train and retain quality teachers.” Lack of financial resources or funds is the major problem, along with the rigidity in the educational space, which hinders the work and model of NGOs (Kaur & Sandhu, 2014). Fundraising professionals are in short supply and usually move on to working with international aid bodies or international organizations after spending a few years in the field. Where this has happened, the NGOs have had to put considerable effort into making such linkages and emphasizing the importance of quality education in the mainstream government school system. Nevertheless, the states need more political will to establish such linkages. Worse still, changes in political regimes at the state level can threaten such partnerships. The tenuousness of these linkages and the dependence on particular individuals for quality to be mainstreamed in education systems highlights the need for more general political commitment to improve the quality of education across the board (Rao, 2000).

A specific limitation observed in the Agastya Foundations intervention was the students' capacity to comprehend the science concepts taught through lab and experiments, which the students did not understand as they had a dire lack of understanding of the concepts. Thus, the program should be “dovetailed” as one should reflect and observe the status of science being

taught in schools rather than the government just forging partnerships with organizations to energize education on paper (Ramachandran, 2005) (Ramachandran & Jandhyala, 2007).

The survey of six innovative NGOs demonstrated that they have been working to form partnerships with the government. However, the government has yet to recognize NGOs as credible and full-fledged partners who require support for scaling, mass adaptation, and replication (Jagannathan, 2001). NGOs must evolve maturely and incorporate practices that strengthen their sustainability and longevity. Also, they need to share best practices and learnings to avoid duplication of efforts and wasteful labor (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2013) (Qasmi, 2006) (Saravana et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The above studies reiterate the fact that NGOs may be small but are an essential tool in educational improvement (Jagannathan, 2001) (Ayodhya & Papa, 1993) (Vishwakarma & Sthapak, 2017). The paradox of India's development is that despite rising incomes, the quality of free elementary schooling remains poor. Against this background, it is crucial to recognize that NGOs play a significant role in the education system, specifically in the development of teaching and human capital, and a substantial role in implementing Government policies. The government should initiate a joint vision-building exercise with the NGOs as these organizations will be able to bring to the table the aspirations of the marginalized and disadvantaged groups along with innovative approaches that can be scaled across the country with the help of the government. Thus, NGOs have been prominent in formulating and implementing development policy and are critical agents in the development discourse (Desai, 2002).

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