

Book Review

Trojan Horses?

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Recolonisation: Foreign Funded NGOs in Sri Lanka

Susantha Goonatilake;

Sage, New Delhi 2006;

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One of the most striking features of the current phase of globalisation is the policy impetus provided to the growth of the NGO sector. The UNDP, for instance, notes approvingly:

NGOs have emerged as major actors, both in size and impact. In the United States employment in the NGO sector is nearly 9 million...in the European Union nearly 6 million and in Japan more than 2 million.... The share of resources accruing to NGOs has steadily increased, even though official aid transfers have been steadily declining. NGO revenues in the U.S. total U.S. dollars 566 billion, in Japan U.S.dollars 264 billion and in the U.K. U.S dollars 78 billion. In the developing world NGO budgets are nearly U.S. dollars (UNDP 1999:95).¹

In India, for example, the Tenth Plan document states:

It is expected that the state yields to the market and civil society in many areas where it, so far, had a direct but distortionary and inefficient presence...At the same time, with the growth of markets and the presence of an aware and sensitive civil society, many development functions as well as functions that *provide stability to the social order* have to be performed by the market and the civil society organizations [GOI 2002: 181, emphasis added].²

Resources for population programmes channelled through NGOs increased over the last decade from 41 per cent in 1992 to 57 per cent in 2002 [UNFPA 2004].³ It is thus not at all surprising that there has been, as it were, a metastasis of NGOs. At the same time, as the author of the book under review points out, the funding from governments to Western NGOs has increased substantially: in the early 1970s, only 1.5 per cent of the total income of Northern NGOs came from governments, by the mid-nineties it had risen to 30 per cent. In the U.S. 66 per cent is derived from the state, in Canada 70 per cent and in

Sweden, 85 per cent. As Goonatilake puts it, NGOs are not only big business, but big government business.

Neera Chandhoke raises extremely pertinent and troubling issues regarding the on-going process of NGO-isation of the social sector: what on earth happened to the autonomy of civil society? [Chandoke 2006].⁴ Are NGOs then efficient, 'non-political' actors? Is this what John Harris meant when he spoke of the anti-politics machine? [Harris 2001].⁵ We know of course that the discourse of 'social capital' is the discourse of attempting to explain away the terrible and apparently inexplicably inequalities that have surfaced in the wave of globalisation; it is also a form of victim-blaming.⁶ The concept of social capital, as the missing link in development, of course has the imprimatur of influential international organisations like the World Bank. A portmanteau concept, it is sometimes cause, sometimes consequence, at all times bereft of explanatory value. Does the emphasis on civil society, on social capital, then, Chandhoke asks, belong to a post-statist world of politics? Has the devolution of functions to NGOs meant that the state has emptied itself of its responsibilities for welfare, a deeply political issue?

NGOs comprise a broad and heterogeneous category in terms of ideology, activities, funding, outreach and effectiveness. Generalisations, then, about their effectiveness and efficiency are made out of ideological concerns. Further, there is little empirical data to substantiate claims to justify greater public support to NGOs on various grounds. They are not necessarily demonstrably either more effective or efficient than any public funded institution and cannot be used as a substitute for a variety of reasons. First, NGOs, by definition, are discretionary and not mandatory. Thus they can be socially exclusive, and indeed the fear that NGO-isation may be against the interests of dalits has been frequently voiced by dalit activists and scholars [Thorat: 2001].^{7, 8} Second, they are not necessarily accountable, certainly not to the people they work with. It has been the assumption that governments are responsible to their citizens, but who are NGOs accountable to: Their clients? Or, to multi-lateral funding agencies? Or, to Northern INGOs who fund them? Third, the issue of monitoring and regulation of the private and NGO sectors is an urgent and vexed question, but we have only to remember that the scandal of quinacrine

sterilizations in the country that was largely carried out by NGOs [Rao 2001].⁹ Fourth, it is a well-worked out myth that NGOs are somehow more ‘representative’ than other political organisations. Thus the whole ‘space’ for ‘Civil Society Organizations’ in policy-making bodies that rigorously include NGOs but exclude other civil society organizations like trade unions is problematic. Finally, it is also not true that NGOs are internally more democratic: we have only to remember that the RSS and the VHP, the largest network of foreign funded CSOs in the country are deeply hierarchical, non-representative, anti-democratic and indeed fascistic. It is to be borne in mind that typically NGOs are small and often scattered; they are neither universally available nor accessible. Baru has shown on the basis of available data that NGOs providing health services are typically located in the better-off states and in better-off areas among them; indeed that the availability of NGO services is even more inequitably distributed than public ones [Baru 1999].¹⁰

The book therefore, is extremely timely given the huge amount of myth-making that surrounds NGOs, even in policy making circles. It takes up the case studies of some leading development and human rights NGOs in Sri Lanka, arguing that NGOs are neither more efficient than the government agencies they replace nor more transparent; indeed that fraudulence is more than likely in the NGO sector given the lack of checks and balances. An extremely interesting chapter also looks at the politics of think tanks, and how they are, in a sense, *dwarapalikas* to academic knowledge being manufactured in the West. Are NGOs then Trojan horses to imperialism? The author seems to think so, although he does not use the word imperialism. But the book is deeply disturbing for other reasons as well. Not that it is passionate, which it admirably is, but that the tone of the book is nasty and personalised and reeks at times of nativism, indeed of Sinhala chauvinism. Mr. Ashok Singhal, had he been literate, would also have written this way. This is a huge pity, because the issues raised by Goonatilake are pertinent, urgent and need to be extensively debated. Sage must be congratulated for publishing the book, for, as the postscript to the Preface tells us, there were attempts by some of the leading actors mentioned in the book to stop its publication.

¹ UNDP (1999): *Human Development Report 1999*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

² Government of India, Planning Commission (2002): *Tenth Five Year Plan*, New Delhi.

³ UNFPA 2004 (2004): *Financial Resource Flows for Population Activities in 2002*, New York

⁴ Chandoke, Neera (2005): 'Seeing' the State in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XL, No.11. 12th March.

⁵ Harris, John (2001): *Depoliticising Development*, Leftward, Delhi.

⁶ On this, there is a huge amount of literature, but on the concept of social capital and health. See Indranil Mukhopadhyay, 'Social Capital and Health Inequality: A Preliminary Enquiry', unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, CSMCH, JNU.

⁷ Thorat, Sukhdeo (2001), 'Strategy of Disincentives and Targeting for Population Control: Implications for Dalits and Tribals', Paper presented at the National Colloquium on Population Policies, Center of Social Medicine and Community Health and the Singamma Sreenivasan Foundation, New Delhi.

⁸ Alarmingly, as if in response to this criticism, I heard a presentation by the DFID at the representations made to the Sachar Committee set up by the Government to study the situation of minorities, that there were few NGOs among Muslims and that the DFID sought to address this issue by funding NGOs for dalits and Muslims. The perils of the kind of multi-culturalism practised in the UK visiting India! Similarly donor agencies have had national events with the most regressive of religious leaders on the issue of sex-selective abortion: clearly they believe that you can sup with the devil and quote scriptures. This of course comes out of policy changes in the USA initiated during the Bush *filis* regime of supporting what they call Faith Based Organizations or FBOs. This gets translated in India to supporting events inviting people who exhorted the annihilation of Muslims, as Sadhvi Rithambara, a "Hindu religious leader" or others such as a Shankaracharya who described women as "stepneys". All of us working on issues of women's health and rights boycotted this meeting called by UNICEF and UNFPA.

⁹ Rao, Mohan (2001): 'The Rhetoric of Reproductive Rights: Quinacrine Sterilisation in India' in Qadeer *et al* (ed), *Public Health and the Poverty of Reforms*, Sage, New Delhi. NGOs, with utterly no accountability, and little knowledge of either health or research, are involved in research from areas like reproductive health, to clinical research for a range of organizations from the World Bank to INGOs and pharmaceutical companies. These research findings are only subjected to in-house reviews, but enter into policy making, or influencing documents. Thus also the spate of "action research", "qualitative research" etc., all of which neatly fit into pre-ordained policies.

¹⁰ Baru, Rama (1999): 'The Structure and Utilisation of Health Services: An Inter-State Analysis' in Rao, Mohan (ed), *Disinvesting in Health: The World Bank's Prescriptions for Health*, Sage, New Delhi.