



# NGOs and Personal Politics: The Relationship between NGOs and political leaders in West Bengal, India

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**Summary.** — Much of the literature on development NGOs has focused on their ability to offer “development alternatives” and how their distinctiveness is threatened by increased dependence on governments and donors. However, more recent literature has increasingly focused on the constructive potential of blurred boundaries between NGOs and the state, arguing that a degree of overlap provides NGOs with increased mechanisms for influence. There has been less research on the interactions between NGOs and political parties, and how political connections affect the relationship between NGOs and the state. This article contributes to addressing that gap. The article explores the relationship between NGOs and political leaders through a study of local NGOs in the Indian state of West Bengal. It uses a combination of a survey and case studies, as well as interviews with political leaders and government officials, to question some dominant assumptions about how the state uses NGOs and how government funding for NGOs impacts on the relationship between NGOs and the state. The findings call into question the assumption that dependence on government funding creates pressure for the professionalization and bureaucratization of NGOs by highlighting the importance of non-project-based funding provided by government to NGOs and by demonstrating that political connections can play a more important role than formal bureaucratic processes in the allocation and management of government funding for NGOs. The research was conducted towards the end of Left Front rule in West Bengal and has implications for our understanding of the strategies the Left Front used in seeking to cement its authority, as well as how these were contested. The article also contributes to thinking on the methodology of studying NGOs by highlighting the benefits of combining a survey and case studies in a single piece of research.  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature on development NGOs has focused on their ability to offer “development alternatives” and how their distinctiveness is threatened by increased dependence on governments and donors. However, more recent literature has increasingly focused on the constructive potential of blurred boundaries between NGOs and the state, arguing that a degree of overlap provides NGOs with increased mechanisms for influence. This point has been analyzed by several studies on Indian NGOs given the Indian NGO sector’s high level of dependence on the Indian state for its funding. However, there has been less research on the interactions between NGOs and political parties, and how these political relationships impact on the relationship between NGOs and the state.

This article explores the relationship between NGOs and political parties through a study of local district-level NGOs in two districts of the Indian state of West Bengal. It focuses on small local NGOs that can be characterized as highly personalized organizations that are heavily dependent on their individual leaders for both the resources and connections they need to operate. It uses a combination of a survey and case studies of NGOs, as well as interviews with political leaders and government officials, to look at how government funding for NGOs impacts on both NGOs and the state.

The specific relationships that I describe between NGOs, political parties, and the state are a feature of the area and timing of my research — the Indian state of West Bengal toward the end of an extended period of rule by the Left Front — but my findings have wider implications for how we think about the relationship between NGOs, political parties, and the state. I provide evidence that reliance on government funding does not necessarily create pressure for NGOs to professionalize and bureaucratize. This is both because government fund-

ing is not necessarily linked to formal projects, making it important to look at the different modalities of government funding, and because the ability to access government funding can depend on political connections more than formal bureaucratic procedures. My findings also have implications for our understanding of why the state makes use of NGOs and how outsourcing tasks to NGOs impacts on government authority. In particular, they highlight that the state’s use of NGOs may be motivated by attempts to shift authority within the state, either to strengthen political authority in relation to bureaucratic authority or to shift authority from elected to unelected political figures.

I start with a discussion of the literature on NGOs in general, in India and in West Bengal before presenting my fieldwork findings and their implications for the wider literature on NGOs.

## 2. LOOKING BEYOND “DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVES: NGOS AND THEIR CONNECTIONS

NGOs have become increasingly prominent in development discourse and practice (Brass, 2011; Fowler, 2011; Riddell,

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2007). Early analyses of NGOs focused on the idea that they were “non-governmental” and “non-profit”, and therefore offered an “alternative”. Drabek’s edited supplement on NGOs in *World Development* was published under the title “development alternatives” (Drabek, 1987), and this notion has been echoed in much subsequent work (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015; Bebbington, Hickey, & Mitlin, 2008; Edwards & Hulme, 1992). As Fowler notes, “being “alternative” has been both a creed and a point of reference for defining and assessing NGOs” (2011: 46) as scepticism of NGOs’ ability to offer “development alternatives” has been accompanied by the suggestion that recovering the ability to do so is central to their “legitimacy” (Banks *et al.*, 2015).

The increased interest in NGOs led to a large body of predominantly case-study-based research on NGOs (Bebbington, 2004) that revealed NGOs rarely lived up to the idealized claims of “development alternatives”. Repeated findings that highlighted the misfit between theory and reality led to concerns that NGOs were losing their previous closeness to the poor (Edwards & Hulme, 1997), were becoming agents of globalization (Ferguson, 2006), were no longer characterized by the personal commitment of their staff or volunteers (Bano, 2008; Feldman, 2003; Sen, 1998), were losing their independence of government or donor money (Edwards & Hulme, 1997; Wallace, 2004), removing essential services from democratic control (Chandhoke, 2005; Kamat, 2004; Wood, 1997) and so contributing to a wider process of “depoliticising development” (Harriss, 2001; Turner, Hulme, & McCourt, 2015). Running through this diverse set of critiques is a focus on the threat that NGOs interacting more closely with donors or the state presents to the development alternatives NGOs are expected to provide.

From the mid-2000s a growing number of studies have questioned the tendency to conceptualize NGOs’ strengths in terms of what distinguishes them from other sectors. This work emerged in part from a shift away from using case studies toward studies that cover a larger number of organizations (Bano, 2008; Barr, Fafchamps, & Owens, 2005; Handy, Kassam, Feeney, & Ranade, 2006; Harriss, 2005; Jakimow, 2011c; Lewis, 2008b), which prompted more serious consideration of how the identity of those involved with the NGO sector affects the way in which NGOs interact with the rest of society (Harriss, 2005; Hilhorst, 2003; Jakimow, 2011a, 2011b, Lewis, 2008b).

Hilhorst’s ethnographic study of an NGO in the Philippines highlights that involvement with an NGO is interwoven with a staff member’s personal life, as “staff members bring their social networks and concerns to their NGO work” (Hilhorst, 2003: 24). Meanwhile, David Lewis (2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2012) has drawn attention to how the career patterns of NGO staff “blur” the conceptual boundary between NGOs and the state, as “boundary-crossers” switch between the two sectors during their careers. Both Hilhorst and Lewis thus highlight the importance of “links [that] are often far from visible” (Lewis, 2008b: 126), by focusing on how the nature of the sector is shaped by the individuals within it. In the Indian context, Jakimow has explored how NGOs are shaped by, and incrementally reshape, family relations focusing on family NGOs (Jakimow, 2011a) and their impact on household gender relations (Jakimow, 2011b).

Increasingly, authors have come to see the blurring of boundaries between NGOs and other sectors as both unavoidable and potentially constructive, recognizing that “paradox and ambiguity are at the heart of NGO management” (Lewis, 2013: 907). Batley challenged the idea that working with governments undermined the autonomy of NGOs, argu-

ing that “it is precisely their engagement with government that gives local NGOs opportunities for influence” (Batley, 2011a) and that “formal agreements had evolved out of informal relationships between governments and NGOs” (Batley, 2011b: 314). In Pakistan, Bano found that constructive NGO-state relations were shaped by a combination of the NGO’s technical expertise and its personal connections (Bano, 2011: 267).

These arguments have featured prominently in the literature on Indian NGOs as studies have increasingly emphasized the constructive potential for NGOs to exploit the blurred boundaries between NGOs and the state. For example, Thomas *et al.* argue that “NGOs may exhibit “multiple identities”—selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives—in the course of their interactions with the state” (Thomas, Muradian, de Groot, & de Ruijter, 2010: 368), while Sharma highlights the phenomenon of organizations created by the state under the Societies Registration Act to administer particular programmes that then opportunistically straddle the government/non-government boundary (Sharma, 2006). Drawing on a case study of one NGO in India, Chhotray highlights that NGOs can encounter a “highly differentiated” state (Chhotray, 2007: 7) and that NGOs may thus have different relations with different elements of, and different people within, the state. Chhotray argues that “it is precisely the synergies between state and civil society, mainstream and alternative development, and dominance and resistance that matter, not their separation as is mistakenly believed” (Chhotray, 2008: 276).

The literature has paid less attention to NGOs’ relationships with political leaders. Alikhan *et al.* highlight that “most analyses of NGOs and the state have tended to concentrate on the administrative rather than elected element of the state” (Alikhan *et al.*, 2007: 72). Their study of NGO-state relations in Ghana and India found that NGOs would look to politicians and bureaucrats to help them in different ways, and that politicians “can, in some cases, act far more decisively and effectively than bureaucrats, who are usually more bound by regulations and structures” (Alikhan *et al.*, 2007: 78). My research adds to our understanding of these political relationships, which prove to be important both for understanding why the state makes use of NGOs and for questioning the assumption that government funding pushes NGOs toward professionalization and bureaucratization.

### 3. NGOS AND THE STATE IN INDIA

Debates about how the NGO sector relates to the rest of society, but especially the state, have been prominent in the literature on Indian NGOs as NGOs in India have been shaped by the history of their relationship with the state (Kilby, 2011: 11, Nair, 2011: 255–256, Sharma, 2006: 65). The period after India’s independence was marked by the growing incorporation of Gandhian organizations into government programs with the result that “most organisations became involved in implementing official programmes” (Sheth & H. Sethi, 1991: 52–53). This was followed by increased government suspicion of more activist NGOs in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s government funding for NGOs increased (Riddell, 2007: 261), but was accompanied by greater regulation of the NGO sector (Sen, 1999; Thomas *et al.*, 2010). Rajni Kothari argued in an article in 1986 that the state was seeking to coopt NGOs, rather than repress them, in “a subtle attempt to depoliticise [the NGO sector] and distance it from those engaged in movements of struggle against the government” (Kothari, 1986: 2180) and the level of dependence on state

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