

## Book Review

***Recreating the Commons?: NGOs in Bangladesh.* By Farida Chowdhry Khan, Ahrar Ahmad, and Munir Quddus. (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2009. pp. 367. ISBN 9847022000356. Tk. 680.00.)**

*Recreating the Commons?: NGOs in Bangladesh* is an edited volume that analyzes NGOs in Bangladesh, from their history to their impact, from their conflict with religious groups to the social changes they have brought forth. The scope of this book is quite ambitious as it discards the more common descriptive approach of targeting one or a few institutions, but rather situates the whole NGO movement within the socio-cultural context and evaluates their contribution in building social capital. The different sections of the book focus on history and background; religion, gender and civil society; and contributions of NGOs towards women's empowerment, enhancing human rights, and building social capital. The question raised in the title suggests that NGOs are creating an alternate space for civil society if not creating civil society itself, and the exploration of this question from multiple perspectives is well overdue and much deserved. Although a few of the articles do draw on the political context, the rationale and processes of the absence of the state of Bangladesh (from the skirmishes between NGOs and religious powers) would have been worth examining in detail and would have added to the otherwise already informative and thought-provoking volume. Nevertheless, parsing the discussions from the various sections, we do reach the conclusion that a grassroots commons is slowly emerging in Bangladesh between the cracks of the ever-absent state and the weak civil society.

The first section of articles deals with the history and background of NGOs in Bangladesh. The global and local implications of NGOs are probed into, to provide a nice theoretical grounding to situate the Bangladeshi scenario. As NGOs have spread far and wide with very different missions, it is challenging to categorize the functions and philosophies of NGOs worldwide. While it is true that NGOs in the developing world have filled a vacuum of space in civil society, at the same time NGOs are also often criticized as agents acting on behalf of donors. On the one

hand, NGOs in Bangladesh expanded when donor countries sought a more efficient and accountable sector to siphon foreign aid to, and, in effect, bypass the Bangladesh government. On the other hand, the history of NGOs in Bangladesh includes homegrown efforts, especially in the aftermath of the liberation war in 1971. The distinction between the global and local NGOs is important as these shape the respective missions of NGOs, their relationship with their clientele, their bargaining power with the state, their power of persuasion with local elites, and the criticisms leveled against them.

Although the traditional, hierarchal, patriarchal, centralized (and often militarized) state has not typically been the breeding ground for secular and more democratic NGOs, both locally initiated and global NGOs have flourished in Bangladesh. The sphere of NGO activity ranges from traditional service delivery in health and education, to credit with emphasis on financial sustainability, and the addition of advocacy and social mobilization in recent decades. Not only is the overall NGO movement in Bangladesh perceived as a great success, but more than a handful of these locally rooted NGOs have gained worldwide recognition and their formulas are being mimicked in other developing or even developed regions of the world. These leading NGOs have become synonymous with their much-respected founders, such as Professor Muhammad Yunus and Fazle Hasan Abed. The fact that some of these are the world's largest indigenous NGOs also shields the movement from the criticism of NGOs as being only the tools of Western manipulation.

One of the more interesting articles in the collection focuses on the conflict models developed to understand the relationship between NGOs and Islam. Attempts to theorize the relationship between Islam and development abound, as do the examples of peasant revolts in Bengal's history pointing towards more complex relations between religion, tradition, and the condition of subservience. The articles in this volume credit the NGO movement for raising the political awareness of the poor, while downplaying the rich legacy of uprisings of poor throughout history. Where the NGOs have made explicit contributions in raising consciousness and opening up new economic opportunities is definitely in the realm of the womenfolk. Through various projects, especially related to credit and education, the NGO clientele—which is mostly women—becomes visible and empowered, which does not sit well with existing village power structures. The vast opportunities for

employment created for low-skilled literate or semi-literate people, especially women (who serve as field staff for NGOs), deserve to be analyzed in a separate article by itself. The article that focuses on a local grassroots NGO, *Shammo*, offers an interesting contrast to the more well-known and larger NGOs that are usually used as examples. Additionally, the process of the initiation of this lesser known NGO and its negotiations with different power brokers illuminates the stronghold of the elite and the loopholes through which this stronghold of power can be effectively challenged.

The conflicts between NGOs and religious fundamentalist groups are well-documented and analyzed with proper depth and attention. What stands out is how the state has often remained absent from the power struggle. The NGOs started out with a more apolitical stance, but by the 1990s many NGOs supported popular movements against autocratic rulers and demanded free and fair elections. As Islamic fundamentalist groups became more active in politics, clashes between NGOs and such political groups became common. In 2001, the High Court of Bangladesh ruled that *fatwas* or religious edicts by local religious figureheads were unauthorized and illegal. Since the case that led to this sentencing was initiated by an NGO, the wrath of fundamentalist power came down with full force upon NGOs. Attacks on demonstration rallies, setting fire to NGO offices, and even targeting the individual clientele, especially women, were the preferred methods of violent protest. The women's movement was historically aligned with secular nationalist struggles, and mostly embraced the modernization agenda that came with NGOs. As more and more prominent voices of women's empowerment such as Farida Akhter and Khushi Kabir became intertwined with the NGO movement, the discord between Islamists and NGOs turned more vicious.

In contrast to the lack of material on the absence of the state, the conflictual relationship between NGOs and militant Islam is well explored in the book in more than a few articles. As religious fundamentalist groups emerged in politics, they opted to convey their message through violence against women. Islam has often been analyzed from the traditional and patriarchal perspectives, but it is the political culture that made room for religious extremism in Bangladesh while both secular politics and civil society were grasping for breath during the long military dictatorship. At the same time, globalization created employment opportunities for young women in

urban areas, where they are empowered (despite exploitation in factories) and much more visible than in rural settings. The rural society is also interconnected, and reaping the benefit of the long presence of various NGO programs, especially in education. Most of the attacks of the religious right in Bangladesh are targeted against NGO schools as they have filled the vacuum left by inadequate government schools. Most importantly, the religious schools or *madrassahs* now compete with the low-cost flexible shifts of NGO schools. The focus is mostly on rural women as villages are the core areas of NGO operation, but a comparison between the rural and urban backlashes would have added an important dimension to the topic.

One of the most interesting reactions to the NGO movement by the religious right has come through the growth of religious NGOs or RNGOs. A comparison of four different faith-based (Islamic, Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu) RNGOs illuminates how different these RNGOs are from the previous generation's missionary services and their communities, as well as from other NGOs. Aside from the common problems of funding and power struggles, the RNGOs have to deal with various suspicions of wrongdoings. Christian NGOs are suspected for their evangelical role, and the Islamic ones for their alleged ties to or sympathy for terrorists. The Buddhist NGOs operate in a specific region serving the tribal population where political unrest abounds. The Hindu NGOs are targeted for their ties with India. The religious philosophies of RNGOs are inevitably reflected in their education programs, and regardless of faith all RNGOs seem to have poor gender balance on their staff. Is the emergence of RNGOs a victory for the NGO movement since religious organizations are at least trying to reach the common people and respond to their plight along with their faith-based messages, or is it a form of usurpation of the idea of reaching the people and trying to influence them through economic bribery? Maybe it is unfair to generalize and treat all RNGOs in the same light, but the fact that religious organizations are morphing into NGOs rather than the usual shapes assumed by their philanthropy, does demonstrate how intricately NGOs are woven into the socio-political fabric of Bangladesh.

If women's progress is the measure of NGO success, then we have to conclude that NGOs in Bangladesh have come a long way from where they began. Not only have NGO projects resulted in

better education, nutrition, and income generation for Bangladeshi women, but often NGOs and their clientele have been the only forces to challenge the gradual Islamization of the state. As women's economic condition improved, their status within the family and their engagement with at least the immediate neighborhood changed tremendously. The Bangladesh government and the donor community have invested billions of dollars to control the escalating birth rate, which slowed down only with new economic opportunities that the NGOs spearheaded, not so much by the relentless advertisements and free supply of family planning devices.

The backlash against the success of NGOs in raising women's awareness, status, and overall empowerment has also been quite strong. The chilling descriptions of direct physical attacks on women and the mechanisms of control through the use of *salish* (informal village dispute resolution mechanism) and *fatwas* (religious edicts) are analyzed in multiple articles. Additionally, more economic opportunities for women in the service sector have coincided with the rising unemployment and socio-economic disempowerment of men. The women's movements are more vocal about patriarchal and class-based structural inequalities, and often find the NGOs less receptive to examination of their philosophies, which are shaped by relations with government, donors, and multinationals. As more and more NGOs are getting involved beyond credit and income generation toward conscientization and empowerment, it is the women who are bridging the gap between the promises of the feminist movement and the lapses of NGO programs. Destitute women getting elected to local government bodies are perhaps the best antidotes to fundamentalist attacks.

The neo-liberal critique of NGOs as the new arm of imperialism seem to contain some truth as we read the examples of how NGOs, especially indigenous ones, are threatened when they challenge policies where the donor agency has a stake. Nasreen Huq, country director of ActionAid, a British NGO, died a mysterious death in the midst of leading protests against a controversial Asia Energy project after the UK department of International Development asked her to drop her campaign. The intricate web of dependencies between and among donor countries, multinationals, and recipient countries remains complicated, to say the least.

The shifting dynamics of the role of women, especially in rural areas, have also challenged the status quo of the rural power

structure. Increasingly, rural moneylenders are being replaced by NGOs; large landowners and religious leaders find that their stronghold on the community is being challenged. The cozy relationships between local government bodies and local elites are also becoming more complicated as NGOs play an ever-increasing role in education, employment, and political awareness. Along the path of justice for women, NGOs have stumbled on civil rights and human rights issues. Issues like the trafficking of women and children are enthusiastically taken up as causes, while the more political issues of the rights of indigenous people are carefully treaded on. Nevertheless, NGOs constitute an important voice against human rights violations, and these broader issues have provided a fertile base upon which to ground the civil society in opposition to the state. If awareness programs and microfinance have paved the way to cognitive and structural social capital, it has been the issues of justice and human rights that have made the civil society more visible and active. Civil society in Bangladesh emerged within the cracks of the long militarized rule and opposition to dictatorship and authoritarianism. It seems that civil rights and human rights issues, neglected and often opposed by the two major political parties, have been embraced by the weak but growing civil society.

The lessons from NGOs in Bangladesh are manifold and complex. The fact that a traditional, hierarchical, and patriarchal society has been so hospitable to NGOs is indeed an uplifting message in itself. Amidst the long and ugly fight with fundamentalist powers, NGOs often provided their own interpretation of Islam and generated more dialogue about Islam, thereby enabling the common folks to participate in the definition of what is Islamic rather than blindly following their leaders. New technology like cell phones reached the common people via Grameen Bank, which has had a tremendous impact on small business. NGO schools have somewhat replaced the need for *madrassahs* (though the *madrassahs* continue to exist) and compete with government schools, and actually have lesser dropout rates. In the midst of calculating the NGO contribution to GDP, what is often overlooked is the vast employment opportunity for the underclass, which would have been impossible without the NGO movement. The culture of entrepreneurship in rural Bangladesh is perhaps their most lasting contribution towards the economy, women's empowerment, and generating social capital. NGOs still leave out many among the destitute, and other criticisms

against them seem to be valid. Still, perhaps the saving grace is the large number and rich variation of NGOs, which do end up reaching most people in the educational, economic, and political realms.

This volume brings together important insights from the NGO movement in Bangladesh. The articles complement each other and provide an overall picture of the intricate complexities of the NGO sector. Instead of merely enumerating the boons and banes, we get a glimpse of the diverse NGOs and their consequences for the socio-economic arena of Bangladesh. Even if we don't credit NGOs for creating the commons, we have to acknowledge their contribution in nurturing it and playing a role along with the civil society in making it active, visible, and meaningful enough to have an impact on politics and society.

Reviewed by:

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