

Confronting or Complementing? A Case Study on NGO–State Relations from Kerala, India

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Abstract NGOs have, of late, found some of their traditional domains, such as provision of micro-credit and participatory development, coinciding with or being taken away by the state. How do they position themselves and retain relevance vis-a-vis the state in the changed scenario? Tracing the trajectory of interventions of a local NGO in Kerala, India, this article shows that NGOs exhibit ‘multiple identities’—selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives—in the process of engagement with the state. The ‘strategizing’ of such identities may hold the key to their relevance vis-a-vis the state.

Résumé Depuis un certain temps, les ONG constatent que certains de leurs domaines d’activité traditionnels, tels que la fourniture de microcrédit et le développement participatif, se recoupent avec les actions des États ou sont remplacés par ces dernières. Dans ce contexte modifié, comment manœuvrent-elles pour conserver leur utilité face aux États? Cette étude, en retraçant la trajectoire des interventions d’une ONG locale au Kerala (Inde), montre que les ONG affichent «plusieurs identités» – collaboration sélective, comblement des lacunes, création d’alternatives

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– en même temps que le dialogue entretenu avec les États. La «fabrique de la stratégie» de ces identités peut détenir la clé pour que les ONG gardent la pertinence face aux États.

Zusammenfassung Nicht-staatliche Organisationen haben in letzter Zeit einige ihrer traditionellen Bereiche entdeckt, wie beispielsweise die Bereitstellung von Mikrokrediten und die partizipatorische Entwicklung, welche entweder im Einklang mit dem Staat stehen oder von diesem übernommen werden. Wie finden die Organisationen in dem neuen Szenario ihren Platz, und wie können sie ihre Bedeutung gegenüber dem Staat wahren? Es werden die diversen Eingriffe einer lokalen nicht-staatlichen Organisation in Kerala, Indien verfolgt, und die Abhandlung zeigt, dass nicht-staatliche Organisationen im Dialogprozess mit dem Staat „multiple Identitäten“ annehmen – z. B. die gezielte Zusammenarbeit, das Lückenfüllen und das Angebot von Alternativen. Der „strategische“ Einsatz dieser Identitäten kann der Schlüssel zur Bedeutung der nicht-staatlichen Organisationen gegenüber dem Staat sein.

Resumen Últimamente, las ONG han visto cómo algunos de sus dominios tradicionales, como la provisión de micro-crédito y el desarrollo participativo, se han solapado con los del estado o han sido absorbidos por éste. ¿Cómo se han posicionado estas ONG y qué han hecho para conservar relevancia frente al estado en este nuevo panorama? Este artículo, que hace un seguimiento de la trayectoria de las intervenciones de una ONG local en Kerala (India), demuestra que las ONG muestran «varias identidades» (colaboración selectiva, relleno de huecos y planteamiento de alternativas) en el proceso de compromiso con el estado. La posición estratégica de estas identidades puede ser la clave de la relevancia frente al estado.

Keywords Self-help groups · Multiple identities · Strategizing · Development

Introduction

Though non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in various forms have been in existence since the 1950s (Lewis 2001, pp. 29–61), it was the impasse in development during the 1980s (Schuurman 1993) that made them proliferate as development actors. Disenchanted with both the state and the market, the early literature on NGOs envisages them as a third way in development. The conceptualization was characterized by what we could call a ‘binary model’, positing NGOs or grassroots organizations as opposites or ‘alternatives’ to the state as well as market. This was true of both the mainstream development literature (Drabek 1987) as well as the writings in critical development studies (Escobar 1992).

Although the ‘either-or’ binary model still held ground during the late 1990s (Zaidi 1999), the later studies portrayed a more balanced picture, surveying the strengths as well as weaknesses of NGOs as also areas of their conflict as well as co-operation with the state (Bebbington and Farrington 1993). This was reflective of

the realization, at least amongst a number of commentators, that NGOs can be more effective when they are able to build strategic partnerships with the state and also intervene in the market. Sanyal (1997, p. 31) argued that the ‘autonomy fetish’ worked to the disadvantage of NGOs and pointed out that several successful NGO experiences such as the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India had emerged out of forging synergistic relationships with state and market institutions. NGO certifying and labelling of coffee in the wake of the coffee crisis of the 1990s is an illustration of partnerships with businesses to ensure environmental and livelihood sustainability (Linton 2005). The fears that closer relations with the state can bring identity problems to NGOs are rather misplaced as studies show (Ramanath 2009). It has been argued that even in instances where ‘institutional pluralism’ has created prolonged conflicts, these have ultimately resulted in innovative institutional transformations and increased access of the poor to social resources (Sanyal and Mukhija 2001, p. 2045).

The boundaries between NGOs and other development actors have become increasingly blurred in recent times. The originators of participatory development (Chambers 1994, p. 958), NGOs encountered the reality where the state began to take over this role in the wake of decentralization (Véron 2001). Local governments are getting involved in activities such as micro-credit, a traditional domain of NGOs, as well as in devising better strategies for inclusive development at the grassroots (Bebbington and Bebbington 2001, p. 15). Even as such changes have been taking place externally in relation to the state, NGOs and grassroots organizations themselves have been changing internally, leading some critics to argue that globalization has lend these organizations vulnerable to corporatization and ‘reproducing the state’ (Kamat 2002, pp. 166–167).

In the changed scenario, how do NGOs position themselves and retain relevance vis-a-vis the state? Tracing the trajectory of interventions of a local NGO in Kuttanad region in the South-western province of Kerala in India, henceforth denoted by the pseudonym KNGO, this article shows that NGOs exhibit ‘multiple identities’—selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives—in the process of engagement with the state. We posit that the ‘strategizing’ of such identities may hold the key to the relevance of NGOs. The rest of the article is structured as follows. A brief overview of NGO–state relations in Kerala is provided next. The ensuing sections introduce the location, outline the research methods and present the case study. We conclude with a discussion on the key insights from the study.

NGO–State Relations in Kerala, India

Surveying NGO–state relations in India over a period of 50 years Sen (1999) notes three distinct phases. The first was an ‘era of co-operation’ (1947 to late 1950s) characterized by a strong state, that had the task of nation-building in the post-colonial decades, supported by NGOs which were largely welfare and modernization oriented. This period was followed by the ‘emergence of antagonism’ (1960s and 1970s) where the state challenged the more action oriented NGOs, but was still favourable to the welfare oriented organizations, whose activities by and large

supplemented its development efforts. The third phase was marked by ‘increased state control’ (1980s and 1990s) of NGOs which led many in the sector to argue that their political space has been constrained and that the state was either unwilling to accept or feel threatened by the ‘alternative development models’ promoted by the NGOs (Sen 1999, p. 341). Even as this was the case, the period from the late 1980s to the present has witnessed ‘uneasy partnerships’ (Kudva 2005, p. 245) between the state and the NGOs. A reason for such partnerships could be that the state wanted NGOs to take over delivery of social services, an activity from which it had been withdrawing in the wake of neo-liberal policies (Sen 1999, p. 346).

Kerala is considered a ‘model’ in development policy circles owing to its high levels of human development and female empowerment (Parayil 2000; Drèze and Sen 2002).¹ Much of this has been attributed to the presence, historically, of several social movements and an active welfare state in the region (Drèze and Sen 2002, pp. 16, 97–101). Reviewing instances of NGO–State relations in Kerala, Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade (2001, p. 67) note that the state’s engagement with NGOs has been infrequent. There have been successful NGO–state partnerships, such as the Total Literacy Campaign or the People’s Resource Mapping Programme of the late 1980s (Isaac and Franke 2002, pp. 21–41). Although it was mostly under the Left wing governments that such partnerships were fostered, for specific massive social development projects, we could say that it was largely limited to Left oriented NGOs such as the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP).

Also noticeable is that Church-based NGOs, a major force in Kerala (Sooryamoorthy 2002, p. 168), are largely independent of the state for financial support and take an ideologically opposite stance to the Left. Apart from their basic differences in worldviews (faith versus atheism), the Church and the Left in Kerala have been historically at opposites, ever since the ouster of the Communist Party led government of 1957, in which the Church played a major role. The Left has been antagonistic to caste and religion based NGOs as well as their trans-national networks, and consider these as ‘imperialistic’ (Karat 1984). This comes even as the contributions of religious NGOs to Kerala’s remarkable social achievements are substantial and widely acknowledged (Parayil 2000). Though the sharp divide between the Church and the Left has narrowed down over time, differences still persist on approach and policies.

The decentralization programme initiated by the Left government in the late 1990s was a watershed in NGO–state relations in Kerala (Isaac and Franke 2002, pp. 21–41). Decentralization resulted in the devolution of administrative and fiscal power to the local governments, enabling them to implement development plans prepared in consultation with local people, based on their needs and priorities, through participatory processes. Networks of households called Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), formed at the local level, all over Kerala, under the *Kudumbashree* programme of the government, played a vital role in this. Although some commentators have argued that decentralization has led to the creation of synergies between NGOs and state at the local level paving the way for a ‘New’ Kerala Model

¹ This is reflected in the Human Development Index and the Gender-related Development Index of Kerala, which were .773 and .746 respectively in 2005 (Government of Kerala, 2006).

(Véron 2001), there were concerns from the NGOs that ‘their space was being encroached upon’ and that the state was trying to create ‘government run NGOs’ through the NHG-based structure.² Ramakumar and Nair (2009) dispel such concerns by making a rather provocative argument that it is the ‘undemocratic’ associational networks promoted by caste and religious organizations that were weakened by decentralization and not that represented the poor.

It is in the backdrop of this history of strong social movements, a relatively successful welfare state and the post-decentralization flux in NGO–state relations that we have framed this article. We argue and illustrate that KNGO has been ‘strategizing’ its identities in the effort to retain relevance as a development actor vis-a-vis an ‘active’ state.

Location and Research Methods

Kuttanad is one of the agro-ecological zones of Kerala. The region is characterized by contiguous blocks of vast paddy fields (*paadasekharams* or polders) surrounded by protective man-made dykes outside which lie natural canals and rivers. Houses are situated on the dykes as well as on elevated pieces of land inside the polders. Population density is high with numerous small houses lying side by side on the dykes. Much of the polders of Kuttanad are land reclaimed from backwaters of the Vembanad Lake. Since they lie below mean sea level, during off-season the polders are immersed in water. Water is pumped out before the onset of cultivation and let in during irrigation. Paddy (rice) cultivation is central to the livelihood of Kuttanad with several farmers and a large number of agricultural labourers dependent on it. Other popular livelihood categories in the region include inland fish workers, lime shell miners, toddy (traditional beer) tappers and coir labourers (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) 1992, pp. 19–24; Thampuran 2004, pp. 65–75).

The empirical material used in this article draws from a variety of sources. We undertook fieldwork in Kuttanad in two phases during 2002–2003 and 2004–2005. The first phase of fieldwork formed part of a project in which the researcher’s organization and KNGO acted as partners. KNGO was the natural choice for the study since it was the one major NGO in the region at that time with its reach spread across a number of villages. The second phase of fieldwork, on which this article mainly relies on, was conducted independently during 8 months in 2004–2005. The methodology was largely ethnographic, comprising of community level field research followed by a household survey. The objective of the community level study was to understand the local context of development issues, particularly poverty, and to examine the organization and conduct of self-help and neighbourhood groups. Self-help groups in the region were organized mainly by KNGO whereas the neighbourhood groups were formed by village bodies (*panchayat*) under the decentralized system. Focus group discussions, informal interviews, observation and triangulation constituted the community level study. For the survey,

² Thomas Isaac, one of the architects of the Kerala decentralization programme, in an interview to *Frontline* (Krishnakumar 2003).

we selected 100 households in the village. A purposive sample was chosen ensuring that it contained households exhibiting diverse characteristics; poor as well as non-poor and KNGO members as well as non-members. Household interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. We also held discussions with KNGO leader and personnel during the two phases of fieldwork. Field data was supplemented with information from secondary sources such as scientific and popular literature on Kuttanad, organizational documents of KNGO and media reports.

The Case Study

The origin and growth of most NGOs, as Korten (1987, p. 155) notes, could be related to ‘... the high moral purpose, good will, hard work, and common sense...’ of one or more individuals. KNGO’s case was no different. The organization, which was formed under the leadership of the regional Catholic archdiocese in 1979, remained dormant until 1993, when a highly motivated Catholic priest was appointed as the chief of operations. Over the next decade, it progressed from a community based organization engaged in self-help based activities to an activist NGO taking up the wider socio-economic and environmental issues confronting Kuttanad.

KNGO’s development vision of Kuttanad centres on the notion of Swashraya or self-reliance. The organization envisages the creation of ‘... Swashraya Kuttanad adhering to the principles of self-reliance and keeping the spirit of (Gandhian) Grama Swaraj...’³ Kuttanad being a collection of numerous villages, the analogy of village self-rule/self-reliance (Grama Swaraj) is appropriate. At a more operational level, KNGO recognizes that human deprivation/poverty has many faces such as ‘... hunger, lack of shelter and access to drinking water, illiteracy (and) ill-health...’. Drawing from the ‘human development’ (Sen 2000; Alkire 2002) and ‘sustainable development’ (Lélé 1991) paradigms, the organization want anti-poverty programmes to culminate into ‘... self-propelled community processes with justice to man (livelihood) and natural resources (the environment)’. Furthermore, adding a gender dimension, KNGO views women as the ‘primary agents’ of human development.

The Early Phase: The SHG Movement

The main operating strategy of KNGO during the first phase was to mobilize the local community to organize themselves into self-help groups (SHGs) of 10–20 households, a practice that is common among Southern development NGOs. Replicating models elsewhere, such as Grameen in Bangladesh, the SHGs then were comprised only of women, one from each household in a particular neighbourhood. The charisma of the new leader as well as his persistent methods were key factors

³ The quotations are from the decennial report of KNGO published in 2004, which surveys the activities over a decade since its inception.

behind KNGO's entry into the local community and consolidation of its activities. The SHG centred strategy followed directly from the Swashraya vision of KNGO—'from Swashraya households to Swashraya villages' and 'from Swashraya villages to Swashraya Kuttanad'. KNGO being a Catholic organization and its leader the parish vicar, it was basically the women from the parish households that formed the first SHGs. Nevertheless, the SHGs soon took an inclusive character, with women from other communities also joining, and evolved into a local movement.

The primary activity of the first SHGs was micro-credit (savings model). The objective was to eliminate money lenders, encourage small savings and provide economic independence and security for poor households. In an effort to formalize the movement, the SHGs were linked to mainstream banks by KNGO under the Linkage Programme of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). Later on, with the objective of promoting sustainable livelihoods to the households, the SHGs were given training in occupational skills such as manufacturing and/or assembling of consumer items such as notebooks, umbrellas and soap (business model). Income generating activities such as horticulture, coir yarn making, rabbit, poultry and duck rearing were promoted with the objective of supporting or reviving locally relevant livelihood activities. Efforts were also made to put the previously wasted local materials like water hyacinth into productive use such as making of artistic and utility items that could be marketed. The fundamental objective was to form groups, find out and nurture the creative energies in them and eventually leave them to manage by themselves in the spirit of Swashraya.

Enter the State: Crowding Out of SHGs

As we saw in the beginning, the Left government in Kerala embarked on an ambitious programme of decentralization in 1996 (Isaac 2000). Networks of households known as Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) were formed all over Kerala under the *Kudumbashree* programme as part of decentralization. In structure as well as functioning, the government NHGs replicated the conventional SHGs of the NGOs. It was envisaged under the decentralization programme that 35–40% of the plan funds would be earmarked for local self-governments (*panchayats*) (Heller 2001, p. 141). With such massive inflow of resources at the local level and active promotion by the local self-government bodies, several NHGs ventured into micro-enterprises (business model), in addition to basic micro-credit activities (savings model).

Proliferation of *Kudumbashree* NHGs posed serious challenge to the existence of KNGO SHGs. NHGs began crowding out SHGs with many SHG members leaving the groups for NHGs. Crowding out of SHGs was evident during our 2004–2005 field visits. We noted that several SHG households that we had interviewed during 2002–2003, had left to join NHGs. There were two major reasons behind this. First, as we found out, the *panchayat* NHGs could provide easy access to loans and borrowings. KNGO, on the other hand, faced constraints in extending liberal loans and had stringent conditions on eligibility and repayment. Second, the NHGs catered to the requirements of the poorest, with membership largely limited to households in the official below poverty line (BPL) category. In contrast, KNGO

often mixed poor and non-poor households in the SHGs to ensure adequate liquidity and financial sustainability. At times, this created intra-group rifts between the poor and the better-off members, resulting from the gap in their expectations from the group.

Responses of KNGO: Confronting or Complementing?

In the beginning, KNGO resented the state's intrusion on its terrain. It directed the group members that they cannot hold membership in the SHGs and the NHGs at the same time. Later on, this tough stance was relaxed. More importantly, KNGO began developing innovative SHG models. Even while trying to keep the old savings and business models intact, a new issues-based model was experimented. A distinguishing feature of the new SHG model was that a common 'issue' was what held the group together and not proximity of stay as in NHGs or the old SHGs. Furthermore, there were both men's as well as women's groups in the new system, marking a departure from the conventional women-centred approach.

Different types of issues-based SHGs were formed. Housing SHGs comprised of members from households that were in need of a new house or toilet, engaging in savings, on the basis of which KNGO facilitated affordable loans from banks. Education was the focus of another issues-based SHG. In this case, acting as liaison between the banks and the SHG households, KNGO facilitated the provision of loans for higher education, previously unavailable for poor households. In the list of priorities of the local people, which we had elicited during both community level research as well as household survey, housing and education had figured prominently, along with drinking water. KNGO had already been involved in the provision of drinking water, using Ferro-cement rainwater harvesting tanks, constructed through its SHG network, which has been one of its high impact grassroots interventions.

There was enthusiastic response to the education loan scheme. Many households in our study area wanted bank loans for professional education, especially in nursing, in private colleges outside Kerala, which were very expensive. The burgeoning demand for nurses in the West, articulated by popular media, as well as the visible economic success of migrant nurses contributed to the perception of this investment being worthwhile. Although poor households individually could not fulfil the collateral requirements of the banks, loans could be granted on the basis of the financial discipline of the SHGs as well as the good-will of KNGO, the liaison agency.

New SHGs of farmers were also formed, linking them with banks through which group loans were provided to undertake agriculture. Farmers' SHGs were of strategic significance, politically, socio-economically and ecologically. As we noted in the beginning, the Church in Kerala, and consequently Church-based NGOs, has been taking an ideologically opposite stance to the Left. Farmers in Kuttanad are largely Syrian Christians, the community that has promoted KNGO. Their interests, being erstwhile landowners, are usually characterized as antagonistic to the interests of labour, the constituency that the political Left in Kerala stands for. The fragmentation of land, an offshoot of land reforms, had culminated in two

competing perspectives, one attributed to farmers and the other to labourers, on the rice-centric development model of Kuttanad (Narayanan 2006). The ‘farmer perspective’ argued that paddy cultivation has become unviable or uneconomical and the farmers be allowed freedom in choosing the crop that they cultivate. The state policy, as outlined in the Kerala Land Utilization Order, prohibited conversion of paddy land, being a source of food, to other (cash) crops or constructions (except housing). The ‘labour perspective’ argued that rice cultivation should continue, pointing out the threat to food security, environmental damage and the loss of employment, especially for women. Though this has generally been the case, as a result of the socio-economic transformation that the region underwent, farmer–labourer distinction in Kuttanad has over time become blurred. On the one hand, the erstwhile landowning farmers have become worse-off and on the other, several agricultural labourers have become landowners or lease-farmers. The farmers’ SHGs were strategic avenues to bring these contesting political constituencies onto a single platform.

In addition, these groups were encouraged to undertake organic farming (of rice and other crops) and ‘one paddy, one fish’ (crop rotation between paddy and fish), adding ecological and economic significance. Just as the farmer versus labour perspectives on paddy cultivation, the divergence of views is sharp as regards crop rotation. The ‘expert view’ supports crop rotation on the grounds of increase in fertility as well as productivity (Thomas 2002). However, the ‘labour perspective’/ political Left argues that this will result in loss of labour days in the short-run and divert the farmers from food-crop (paddy) to more lucrative crops in the long-run, thereby endangering food security. Against this backdrop, KNGOs efforts in promoting farming of other crops and crop rotation remain politically contentious.

Even as it has been devising such innovations at the community level, holding its ground firm, KNGO began to scale-up its presence to the regional level. A paddy crisis gripped Kuttanad during 2003–2004, putting several farm households in crisis. The administrative lax in repairing and operating the damaged salt water regulator, which should have prevented salinity intrusion from the sea into the Vembanad Lake and thereby to the paddy fields, was one of the major reasons for crop destruction. In addition, the delay in paddy off-take by the administration and lack of provision for storage of harvested crop to protect it from rain had forced the farmers to sell their harvest at very low prices to private rice mills. In the wake of these developments, KNGO mobilized farmers and organized public protests, calling for state intervention to resolve the situation. It organized public consultations to create awareness on the complex inter-linkages between geography and livelihoods in Kuttanad and to take these into account while devising development plans for the region. Going further, KNGO mobilized farmers, collected paddy and processed it using the traditional method, branded and marketed it directly, thereby bypassing the middlemen and private rice mills. Traditional paddy processing in Kuttanad involves boiling of paddy, drying in the sun and making of rice through indigenous techniques. Being labour-intensive, this generates local employment, compared to mechanized processing. Furthermore, the profit accrues to local farmers and not modern rice mills, most of which are

privately owned and located outside Kuttanad. KNGO's effort at reviving traditional paddy processing was thus a significant move.

The organization and the leader had begun to figure prominently in the popular media by 2005 for its activism and development interventions compared to 3 years back when we made our first field visits. From a purely organizational development perspective, we could say that KNGO has started exhibiting the characteristics of 'third generation NGOs', that are characterized by '... effective strategies involving longer time perspectives, broadened definitions of the development problem, increased attention to issues of public policy, and a shift from exclusively operational to more catalytic roles' (Korten 1987, p. 147). However, as we argue below, this transition of KNGO should as well be viewed in the context of its changing relations with the state.

Discussion and Conclusion

The limitations in making generalizations from a single case study notwithstanding, certain inferences could be drawn from KNGO's trajectory. KNGO collaborates with or complements the state at some points and, at times, takes a confrontationist stance. Such a finding is not uncommon in the empirical literature on NGO–state relations. The pertinent question, however, is—what might explain such dynamism in NGO–state relations?

A straightforward explanation would be to reject the binary characterization (NGO versus state) suggesting that NGO–state relations are complex as any facet of real world. Chhotray (2005), for instance, narrates the story of an Indian NGO to argue that NGOs can be both 'development agents' and 'political entrepreneurs' at the same time—doing development work along with the state on the one hand, and on the other, resisting it by taking an activist mode. A more critical explanation might still characterize the state and NGO domains as overlapping, but with NGOs succumbing to the hegemony of the state. Using the Gramscian framework Kamat (2002) portrays such a situation to explain the dynamics between an Indian grassroots organization and the state.

In comparison, Mitlin et al. (2007), relying nonetheless on Gramscian reading of the extant literature on NGOs, takes a balanced position arguing that NGOs may be involved in forging hegemony as also counter-hegemony and that their role in realizing 'alternatives' has often been in conjunction with the developmental programmes of the state. This is a useful stance. First, it moves beyond the 'binary model', emphasizing overlaps between the functions and actions of NGOs and the state. Second, and more importantly, it shows the limits (and dangers) of equating NGOs with civil society.

Despite the enormous confusion as to what constitutes NGOs (Vakil 1997), there is a tendency to view them as representing civil society (Whaites 2000). Moreover, the theoretical discussions on the relations between NGOs, civil society and the state are often presented in a normative manner, as Mercer (2002) notes, ignoring the politics of development as well as the nuances of day-to-day operations of NGOs. This is problematic since, as a recent organizational form, the emergence of NGOs

can only be understood in terms of their links with the more deeply seated actors in society such as religious institutions, political movements or governments. Although NGOs need not merely be the instruments of these actors, they are neither constitutive nor the most important actor in civil society (Mitlin et al. 2007, p. 1702).

At an operational level, such a position demythologizes NGOs as what we could call ‘strategizing actors’ than as actors ‘doing good’ (Fisher 1997). KNGO’s case is illustrative of such ‘strategizing’ vis-a-vis a strong and active state. As we saw, in the process of formalizing the SHG movement as well as in its several community level programmes, KNGO engages and manages a working relationship with government agencies and institutions such as NABARD. Though from an ‘alternatives’ perspective, such collaboration might lend it vulnerable to criticisms about its ideology (Pieterse 1998, p. 346) and independence, to remain effective, KNGO needs to ‘strategize’ its actions based on the opportunities and constraints. Compared to such ‘selective collaboration’, the case of issues-based SHGs may be viewed as ‘gap-filling’ (Lewis 2001, p. 150). In this case, though KNGO initially resisted the state taking over its functions, it identified certain ‘gaps’ between the priorities of the local people (education, housing, water) and what the state offered and stepped into fill this. On the one hand, this repositioning avoided conflict of interest between (a weaker) KNGO and the (stronger) State. On the other, this ‘product differentiation’ (credit plus other services) made good sense for strategic management of service delivery by KNGO.

In contrast, KNGO’s response in the wake of the paddy crisis takes an ‘open confrontation’ mode, mobilizing farmers and resorting to street protests, against the ineffectiveness of the government. Such a ‘political’ stance is closer to the ‘alternatives’ based view on NGO–state relations. Even as it engages in activism, it promotes sustainable (organic farming) and locally relevant (traditional paddy processing) ‘alternatives’. Though symbolic, this nevertheless brings politics and ideology back into the frame, positing local and indigenous systems against the predominantly urban orientation in development (Escobar 1992). For most mainstream development organizations such as KNGO, however, ‘alternatives’ remain an ideal that is strategized, and perhaps redefined, in the day-to-day practice of ‘doing development’. To summarize, NGOs may exhibit ‘multiple identities’—selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives—in the course of their interactions with the state. Amidst the state taking over some of its traditional roles, NGOs remain relevant by ‘strategizing’ these identities as well as their interventions.

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