Uncertain Networks:
NGOs, Dalit rights and the development agenda
in South India

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s, a rights-based approach to development and the revival of Dalit movements and politics converged to produce a ‘dalitization’ of the field of NGOs. This paper examines how NGOs in south India came to adopt a Dalit rights approach and the significance of the NGO form itself as a vehicle for Dalit social goals. It describes the emergence of a Dalit rights discourse in the context of the relationship between NGOs and their international donors to show how regional caste politics intersect with NGO institutional processes. The paper explores some of the issues and debates around a Dalit rights approach. It explains the uncertainties that this involved – social retaliation, political risk and financial insecurity – and specific organisational responses, in particular the emergence of ‘network’ forms. To make sense of the expansion and later fragmentation of certain Dalit NGO networks, two approaches are needed. The first draws on anthropological approaches to ‘the network’ as a discursive effect, a cultural construct or mobilising metaphor. The second adopts an organisational view of the inter-agency relationships that determine the actual practices of Dalit NGOs. Seeing Dalit NGO networking as a two-level process helps focus on the disjuncture between the ‘narrativised network’ and organisational relations. This not only explains the success and vulnerabilities of NGO Dalit rights work, but also how NGO donors – supporting network narratives through fund flows into agencies – amplify the tension between ‘network idea’ and organisational processes to a point of crisis which brings about policy and institutional change.

Warning

In my experience ethnographic analysis involves three stages: first there is immersion in the data (fieldnotes, interviews, documentation) in its detail and the many different events, interpretations and voices which overflow and exceed any framework; second, there is a process of abstraction and simplification, the development of a provisional framework of interpretation that organises this profusion; third there is a testing, refining, challenging and correction or this framework/interpretation against the data. This is an output of stage-two.

INTRODUCTION

This paper begins by asking how development NGOs in south India and their INGO donors came to adopt a ‘Dalit rights’ approach and with what consequences. Addressing this question presupposes some understanding of the wider political context and the question of how Dalit activists adopted the NGO form as a vehicle for their social and political mobilisation in Tamil Nadu. Dalit-led NGOs came into being in large number in the 1980s in a field of activism already dichotomised into movements vs NGOs and amidst intense competition within India’s ‘crowded market for social and political entrepreneurs’ (Jenkins 2009: 493). Marxist-inspired critics discredited foreign-funded NGOs which, even if not part of an imperialist conspiracy (Karat 1988), were considered excessively instrumental, state-co-opted or de-politicising, and undermining of genuine people’s struggle (Kamat 2002).

The sections of Indian society which railed against foreign-funded NGOs as a threat—whether Indira Gandhi’s Congress, the CPI-M, or more recently Hindutva organisations—were not, however, natural allies of the Dalits. The Left-wing (or Hindutva) vilification of NGOs had no more relevance to Dalits than the nationalist vilification of missionaries decades earlier. Both sought to undercut self-evidently valuable, locally important and externally-connecting sources of support for Dalit communities and activists. Typically poorly served by the communist parties, Dalit leaders were thus not overly influenced by the anti-NGO backlash. Indeed some of the reasons given for discrediting NGOs and foreign donors (Jenkins 2009) were the very ones that made them important to Dalits. NGOs were a means to access resources without which Dalit movements and their leaders had little possibility of becoming established. The fact that this finance was foreign and linked to supra-local, even international, constituencies of support — Church-based or secular — made it more not less valuable to Dalits. Even if it is not politically helpful to acknowledge the fact, in Tamil Nadu Dalit social movements, Dalit political parties and their leaders have been supported and influenced in profound ways by Indian and international NGOs, church-affiliated and secular. NGOs not only raised finance, but also helped to link local Dalit struggles to an external language of human rights. They were also willing ‘to link rights claims to issues of identity’ (Jenkins 2009: 417) rather than reducing struggles to matters of class.

The conceptual dichotomy between movements and NGOs, between ‘struggle-based politics’ and development programmes, has had little prima facie relevance Dalit NGOs. Tamil Nadu presents a fast changing field of Dalit NGO-movement-party hybrids and the flow of individual activists through these diverse forms. NGOs promote movements; movements access NGO resources; political leaders are trained by NGOs and those who developed skills as NGO leaders move to the party. Rather than de-radicalising Dalit youth, NGOs have been a means for the formation of cadres whose struggle was, in the first instance, not against the state but against locally dominant castes. As elsewhere in India, “it is through NGO-led projects that naya netas (new politicians) obtain the skills and contacts necessary to ply their retail trade (assisting people with their work at government offices) and their wholesale trade (bargaining with parties in exchange for local support)” (Jenkins 2009:490). For those threatened with violence or socio-economic boycotts, the backing of an externally-connected NGO opened rather than closed activist possibilities. Even the Left’s critique of the neoliberal project, and the emergence of market relations and the individual freedoms offered, did not have the same purchase among those with the historical experience of collective subordination and punishment. For some Dalits at least, capitalist social relations had

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2 The Hindutva sympathies of unbalanced, polemical, poorly researched and analytically spurious Breaking India (Malhotra & Neelakandan 2011) is a case in point.
liberating potential, even though it has now become clear to many that capitalism reproduced categorical exclusions and exploitation and that caste struggles would need to be trained on a capitalist economy of caste, and the particular vulnerabilities of Dalit communities to dispossession through contemporary capitalism’s ‘primitive accumulation.’

The historical place of NGOs (and churches) in the 20th century rise of Dalit politics is a subject deserving of its own separate discussion. But this paper sets itself a more limited task, namely to trace the gradual opening of space among south Indian NGOs and their international donors for a Dalit-focused approach to development. I want to use some specific cases to try to explain the reasons for a ‘dalitization’ of development thinking. I will suggest that this policy agenda also encouraged particular institutional approaches. Especially important here is the idea of the ‘network’. It will become clear that when analysed as a cultural construct or metaphor (as significant and powerful as earlier development metaphors such as ‘community’) the ‘network idea’ has important effects; but also that it has to be distinguished from the organisational relationships that determine the actual structures and practices of Dalit NGOs. Adopting an organisational approach it becomes evident that uncertainty in the field of Dalit NGOs is a major determinant these practices (Watkins et al. 2011). There is a paradox here: a Dalit focus among NGOs introduced uncertainties that encouraged new network forms, supported by donors as a way of securing programme coherence, and yet these network forms (rapidly expanding affiliations and large scale events) were also a source of increased instability in organisational terms. In short, what this paper examines is the discrepancy between, on the one hand, a productive centring of Dalit rights among NGOs through the high visibility ‘narrativised networks’ (Knox et al. 2006), and on the other the persisting organisational uncertainties of Dalit NGOs which destabilise, undermine and bring about moments of crisis in the discourses (of Dalit development) around which the networks cohere (ibid: 130).

I will develop this argument in relation to a particular case, but it is also underpinned by a particular theory of networks which needs to be set out. In the field of Dalit NGOs as elsewhere it is necessary to distinguish network ideas or network thinking from networks as a description of a set of individual or organisational relations, as a form of relatedness, or ‘network sociality’. It is fairly clear that Dalit NGOs brought together around the concept of the network do not necessarily (in fact, rarely) display network relations – that is flat, mutually exchanging, fluid, self-organising. The organisational realities of inter-NGO relations are rather shaped by the need to ensure survival in the context of various uncertainties (especially input uncertainties of resources; and output uncertainties – the demonstration of impacts, cf Watkins et al. 2011). But this does not make the network irrelevant. On the contrary, the ‘network’ is a central cultural construct that emerged (especially, but not exclusively) alongside Dalit rights discourse among Tamil NGOs. This history of particular Dalit NGO networks, their rapid rise to prominence and their catastrophic collapse can be made sense of precisely in terms of the tension between the network concept that attracted international funding, and the complex organisational relations that were not in fact organised by this concept, but by prevailing uncertainties. In short, Dalits have found powerful support and carved political and policy space through internationally-funded NGOs and ‘the network,’ but this has been bought at the cost of persisting organisational uncertainty of donor-NGO forms which threaten to undermine or terminate some of these achievements.

In developing these arguments about the complex inter-relationship of Dalits and NGOs in Tamil Nadu, the paper will draw on particular examples of NGO dalit-ization, and of Dalit NGO-ization. The story begins with the co-emergence of Dalit-led NGOs and donor strategies in the 1980s and 1990s, before tracing the history of one particular Dalit NGO network formation — the Human Rights Forum for Dalit Human rights (HRFDL) Tamil Nadu.
NGOS AND DALIT DEVELOPMENT / ANTI-DEVELOPMENT IN THE 1980S

Shortly after I moved to Bangalore in 1987 to take up the post of Regional Representative managing the south India programme of the INGO Oxfam, our office was called upon by the state government's senior-most civil servant, the Chief Secretary to support relief efforts among the Dalit victims of the latest in a series of atrocities by ‘upper’-caste Vanniyars, whose road-block agitations and arson attacks had left several Dalit hamlets decimated. Dalits and Vanniyars did not fall either side of a class divide; these communities were similarly economically disadvantaged, although typically the educational achievement and occupational mobility of the Dalit minority provoked outrage from non-Dalit status rivals. Dalit acquisition of simple rights such as temple or teashop entry through collective action backed by NGOs who temporarily shifted the balance of power, led to economic boycotts, the cancelling of tenancy agreements, refusal of village services or shops and unemployment. In this particular case, the Dalit victims of caste conflict were mostly landless labourers unable any more to secure work even in distant villages because fire and theft had taken away their implements. One of the first items of relief was therefore the supply of axes and mattocks with which labourers seeking employment had to present themselves. But perhaps even more telling was the fact that the Tamil Nadu Government Chief Secretary, himself a Dalit, had contacted an international NGO to support this relief work, knowing that that the governmental system which he oversaw would be slow, apathetic and locally reluctant to intervene on behalf of Dalit victims.

Such violence against Dalits reminds us that although it was only in the late-1990s that development NGOs widely identified Dalits as their principal focus, long before this, anti-Dalit ‘upper’ caste opponents recognised ‘Dalit development’ and made it a target for attack. Not only were Dalit claims to resources -- whether land, water or conveniently located services (roads, street lights etc.) — blocked, but also those assets which symbolised Dalit advancement – radios, bicycles, tiled houses – were marked for destruction in what amounted to an anti-development reversal. But these ‘field realities’ did not register in the explicit NGO development discourse of the time (in the 1980s), nor in proposals to donors, nor in impact evaluation studies undertaken. The discriminations of caste were instead folded into a broader Marxian or class analysis of poverty and disadvantage manifest most commonly in the local promotion of non-formal education among landless labourers or ‘marginal’ farmers adopting some method of ‘awareness raising’ or ‘conscientization’ with a nod in the direction of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), and focused on ‘groups’ (sangams) of young men and (separately) women gathering at night in the segregated unelectrified Dalit ‘colonies’. These youth, perhaps linked to other such groups and backed by NGO workers and strategic contacts in the local bureaucracy, would stage public protests to secure the key resources to which they were entitled: house sites titles, approach roads to the settlement or its burial grounds, street lighting, drinking water and the like. These pragmatic actions focused on Dalit caste interests and the experience of discrimination began themselves to shape a broader organisng discourse of NGO action, eventually in the 1990s framing ‘development’ as a matter of Dalit rights and the struggle against untouchability which became influential in a large section of the Tamil NGO sector. How did this policy reorientation come about, and what were its consequences? What are the implications of the politics of poverty merging with a politics of caste identity?

Friere visited Bangalore in the mid-1970s, helping the shift from hitherto predominant Gandhian Sarvodaya approaches to rural development to the promotion of Social Action Groups across the state, interview Vincent Manoharan, London, July 2011.
THE DALITISATION OF NGOS IN TAMILNADU

The turn to Dalit rights perspectives within NGOs has been driven by Dalits themselves. Today there are hundreds of Dalit-led NGOs in the state, many affiliated with district or state-level ‘networks’ (see below). Many of the senior figures in this field are educated Christian Dalits who in the 1970s and 80s were influenced by Liberation Theology perspectives brought to them through groups such as AICUF (the All India Catholic University Federation) and the Student Christian Movement (SCM), or training centres such as the Indian Social Institute (ISI). When interviewed, such NGO leaders insisted on the special importance of mentor figures—some of whom were priests or Jesuits or those who introduced Marxian ideas and inspired social action; a few had links to left movements and the Communist party.

The educational opportunities available to these Dalit NGO leaders were possible— they commonly maintained (in interviews)— because of a break from caste and agrarian dependence that had been achieved by a previous generation, through church education, employment as teachers or in national institutions such as the army or the post office. Some senior NGO leaders narrated their own village childhood experiences of caste abuse, but more often they described the discrimination against which their fathers or grandfathers had struggled. One for instance related how at the ‘upper’ caste-owned village shop, his father was passed items on a wooden plate to avoid his touch. Many said that they first personally experienced caste discrimination in the associations and avoidances of college life itself, or when youthful voluntary work took them to rural areas for the first time. A handful of Dalit NGO founders supported by AICUF, ISI or the CISRS (the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore) became plants from which other Dalit NGOs were propagated and to which these now trace connections in the ‘genealogical’ reckoning of NGO relatedness. The founding leaders of Dalit NGOs became key mediators in the networks that later developed.

A different route to Dalit NGO leadership begins with less educated, poorer and un/underemployed Dalits who found jobs in non-Dalit NGOs and worked in their own and neighbouring villages as animators, night-school teachers or inter-village coordinators. For these NGO workers, childhoods of poverty and everyday untouchability were common. Today their accounts of being ‘burned by the fire of discrimination’ often focus on the experience of school, the shock, tears and confusion of biased treatment by teachers. They describe growing into an awareness of caste through village youth groups in the isolation of the Dalit ‘colony.’ Sometimes there was inspiration from caste-blind social workers or foreigners, such as the Belgium ‘Little Brothers of Jesus’ who young [X…] witnessed labouring in the rice fields alongside Dalit workers at a time when he served in the presbytery of the caste-minded Tamil Catholic priest. Becoming an NGO animator was a way out of unemployment or wage labour servitude; but this world of NGOs with its class-shaped agenda (and the avoidance of the ‘sensitive’ issue of caste discrimination) squared poorly with the Dalit experience of caste as an organising factor of village life. The same caste prejudice was described as occurring within the NGOs themselves in ways that restricted Dalit promotions or relegated to them to despised work, one example given being the demonstration of condom use in HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programmes.

Dalit activists who came out of left parties (CPM) faced similar frustrations. Like Dalit NGO animators, some such activists resigned (some felt they were pushed) in order to form their own organisations, specifically working for Dalits and against untouchability in its various forms, whether the humiliating caste-linked funeral work, drumming or cattle scavenging, the denial of rights in temples or festivals, the exclusion from public spaces, denial of house-site
titles, Public Distribution System ration cards or services such as ‘colony’ approach roads, water or street lights. These new NGOs retained their links to ‘parent’ NGOs as the means to obtain access to European donors (many did not have foreign contributions act – FCRA – registration or well-honed proposal writing skills). But continuing Dalit to non-Dalit relationships of patronage, mediation and power-brokering also generated a resentment which played its part in defining the space of Dalit NGO activism. Dalit NGO leaders interviewed in 2009-10 often complained of the non-Dalit’s privileged English-language mediated links to donors, and a reported capacity to manipulate representations of social activism by claiming Dalit street protests as their own. ‘Collecting news cuttings of non-Dalit NGOs’, says one Dalit human rights activist who claims that his fund application was questioned by a Dutch donor on the basis that it described events already reported as part of another funded NGO. His wider point was that among NGOs, non-Dalits deny power to Dalits and that through the media, public hearings, or documents highlighting human rights violations, non-Dalits project themselves as guardians and protectors of Dalits who are only victims. The way in which the NGO field is tilted against Dalits was indeed a common interview theme.

Whether because of the new awareness of caste discrimination among an upwardly mobile Church or Left-influenced Dalit elite, or the Dalit animators’ experience of village-level discrimination persisting into NGO structures, the growing number of Dalit NGOs in the late-1980s was accompanied by the view that ‘unless caste oppression is addressed there can be no development’ [X…]. This NGO perspective was not of course brought about in isolation. It arose from the influence of wider changes in Dalit politics of the region. Among these influences, six can perhaps be highlighted as especially relevant to the 1990s ‘dalitization’ of NGOs.

First, as mentioned, NGO leadership was drawn from a section of Dalits whose economic and professional mobility had made them acutely conscious of the persistence of caste discrimination as a distinctive force, apart from and contributing to class oppression. Second, NGO work was influenced by the anti-Dalit violence that spread in the Tamil countryside in the late-1980s and early-1990s, often (as in the case noted above) perpetrated by Backward Castes in response to Dalit assertions of self-respect, insubordination, and claims over resources such as land or common property. Anti-Dalit violence in its aftermath brought about coalitions of NGOs, Christian priests, Dalit movements and associations in large-scale public protests. The passing of the 1989 ST/SC (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, which made any practice of untouchability a criminal offense, gradually opened up an important new avenue of action by Dalit NGOs and human rights groups (although the rules that made this Act operable were only passed in Tamil Nadu in 1995). Anti-Dalit atrocities also provided the ground for more militant articulations of Dalit interests and the rhetoric of retaliation (for example, from Dalit Panther leader Thol Tirumavalavan) and was the stimulus for the formation of the first Dalit political party, the Pallar-led Puthiya Tamilagam.

A third factor influencing the NGO sector was therefore the rise of specific Dalit movements and political parties which carved out a distinctive Dalit political space, with accompanying militant rhetoric and assertiveness, especially among the youth. This re-invoked the legacy of social radicalism of Periyar’s Self-Respect movement as well as its antecedent Dalit thinkers such as Iyothi Das. More immediately, fourthly, many activists traced their awakening to Dalit rights perspectives to the high profile state-supported national celebration of Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s birth centenary (in 1991) which made his writing available in regional languages.

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4 See, other Caste Out of Development research papers.
such as Tamil for the first time. Not only the inspiration of new knowledge of Ambedkarite ideas, but the more general Dalit aspiration and political awakening was often symbolised by Ambedkar whose statue (in modern suited pose holding a copy of the constitution from which Dalits could claim rights) began to appear in the crowded urban dalit streets and rural ceris (Dalit settlements).

A fifth critical factor giving a Dalit-focus to NGO discourse and action was the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (Panchayats) which in 1992 mandated a uniform three-tier (District, Block, village) structure and made holding local council (Panchayat) elections compulsory, while also establishing reserved constituencies for Scheduled Castes in proportion to their population. A third of such seats were also reserved for women. The first such elections, which in Tamil Nadu took place in 1996, opened new possibilities for forging a Dalit constituency and asserting constitutionally guaranteed political rights. But the denial of these rights in practice brought spectacular violent and mortal attacks against Dalits who filed nomination papers or stood for election – including the notorious Melavalavu Panchayat near Madurai where the winning Dalit candidate was beheaded and five others murdered by ‘upper’ caste opponents. NGO attention was turned to the Panchayats as key sites of action for human rights and developmental justice, as well as the protection of the newly established political rights. Even though NGO leaders today recall optimism that the growing number of Dalit Panchayat Presidents would be a focus for change, initially (as interviewees explained from experience) many Dalit Presidents were ‘upper’ caste puppets, ‘a dim and deaf benami person on whom to put a garland,’ either forced to resign immediately in a deliberate stalling of the democratic process, or strictly controlled while in post. It was known that even if they passed resolutions in favour of Dalit development, such Dalit leaders would be unable to execute them.

Sixth, conditions for a ‘Dalit turn’ in development also came from changes in the Churches. Both Catholic and Protestant churches were influenced by events taking place in the region, but also themselves made distinctive and significant contributions to Dalit politics. In the 1990s, the Catholic hierarchy was shaken by a popular rebellion led by Dalit Jesuit priests against the predominantly ‘upper’-caste leadership and continuing exclusion and discrimination, in worship and in the practices of the Church’s educational and development institutions. As a result of the public action of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM), the Catholic Church was forced to adopt a ‘Dalit option’ and to re-orientate the priorities of the institutions and programming to Dalits. If the Catholic Church was led by popular protest, innovations from the Protestant churches (in which the Dalit majority had entered the leadership with charismatic figures such as Bishops M. Azariah and V. Devasahayam) came from centres of outreach, research and theological innovation. These included the action-research of the Christian Institute of Religion and Society (CISRS) in Bangalore, and the Madurai Tamilnadu Theological Seminary and its Rural Theological Institute (RTI) under the leadership of Rev. Dayananda Carr (involved in struggles for land, for the rights of the urban dalits and sanitary works), and the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement (CDLM) led by Rev Jayakaran Joseph. The Protestant centres especially supported Dalit cultural production, inspired by the idea of an authentic, Dalit counterculture coming out of the new Dalit theology, which was as influential on the thinking of some Christian-led NGOs as had been the liberation theology of the 1970s and 1980s. The Dalit cultural politics that was brought to the fore here involved socially disembedding, reversing and re-signifying signs of Dalit subordination or ‘pollution,’ honouring the stigma, and transforming servile performance of village (festival or funeral) drumming and dance forms into honourable art (kalai) celebrated in fairs, public displays and the high stage. Dalit arts were now claimed as ‘weapons for liberation’ (viṭutalaiyin karwikal). These centres were
sources for an expanding Dalit women’s activism including Ruth Manoram's National Dalit Women Organisation (see papers by Anandhi et al.).

These various factors generated a Dalit discourse which, when transmitted, provided meaning and motivation for the kinds of micro-level interventions in relation to Dalit livelihoods and access to resources and services which NGOs had for long been engaged in. This work was significantly funded by overseas donors, and the shift in donor policy was an important additional factor in consolidating a Dalit rights approach within the NGO sector.

4 DONORS, DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE AND DALIT RIGHTS

There was a mutuality between contextually-driven revisions of NGO practice in south India and the policies of European donors that turned local practice into NGO programming. The Dalit turn among different NGO donors has its own distinctive history. In some cases, the position taken by key donor representatives and their Dalit ‘consultants’ or advisers was crucial. For example, the India Coordinator for ‘Bread for the World’ (BFW) — an aid arm of the Protestant Churches of Germany — who in the 1970s came to regard caste as a structural factor behind poverty, encouraged partnership with major long-established Dalit-led NGOs in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, as well as recruiting Dalit consultants well-connected to Dalit movements. The shift towards an explicit Dalit focus in place of conventional support to Church-based welfare institutions had, however, to be negotiated internally. Representatives of the Indian Church articulating a Dalit perspective (notably Rev. M.M. Thomas [CISRS] and especially Bishop M. Azariah) were needed to make the case to the BFW Board to justify the move away from existing patterns of funding (interview, Walter Hahn, 23 June 2011). But in this case as in others, the turn to a Dalit-focus involved the enrolment of other constituencies than the churches. In the early 1980s, BFW mediated links with a German young farmers’ movement (Bauernschule Nordbaden) and exchange visits between Guntur Dalits and German sugarbeet farmers (2003). These (unusually) began with Dalit farmers staying with German farming families, followed by a return visit. These exchanges — fraught with cross-cultural misunderstandings about gift and hospitality — seeded one of the earliest European Dalit solidarity forums (Weber 2003, interview, Walter Hahn, 23 June 2011). It was the nature of their home and Indian constituencies, and the mediated links between them, that made Church-based NGO donors in south India, both Protestant and Catholic (HEKS, BFW, EZE, Christian Aid, Miserior, CordAid), especially willing to rearticulate their development objectives in Dalit terms, as well as to direct their resources to Dalit research and cultural production at seminaries and other centres.

By the late-1990s, a Dalit rights approach to development centralising the issue of caste had become widespread among secular NGOs too, including Oxfam who had been accused of reluctance to adopt a Dalit-first approach stemming from an overly upper-caste or Brahman dominated staff. The spreading policy shift does, however, require some further explanation in terms of some internal institutional processes as well as the external influences so far identified. To illustrate these I will turn to the case of Oxfam with which I was associated as Regional Representative in Bangalore at the time (1987-1991).

From the late-1980s, NGO donors with programmes in India were facing a new demand for policy coherence and professionalization. As Oxfam’s Representative for South India I was required to oversee the shift from a largely contingent, responsive ‘project-based’ approach to

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5 With Quaker roots, Oxfam nonetheless remained independent of the Christian Churches.
grant making to an ‘issue-based’ one; from personalised contacts to thematic networks. Regional office-based ‘strategic planning’ would eventually lead to Oxfam India’s rationalisation into a ‘One Programme’ approach. In Bangalore, we began with (annual) programme reviews to establish priority areas. In the early-1990s, caste oppression or untouchability had yet to become a focus even though those falling under prioritised themes such as ‘drought vulnerability and its effects on landless labourers and marginal farmers,’ were largely Dalit. Other thematic foci were ‘adivasi and forest issues,’ ‘the social and environmental problems of the coastal areas’, and the cross-cutting one of gender inequality.

It is fair to say that during my tenure as Oxfam Representative in Bangalore (1987-1991), caste was identified as part of the context of Oxfam’s programme understood in terms of, for example, deepening agrarian inequality and economic and ecological vulnerability associated with capitalist transformation (e.g., casualised labour, landlessness and drought), but not the organising principle of it. Dalits were the focus of educational and ‘organisational’ projects; they were prominent among those mobilised as claimants on the state for various entitlements, against injustice as well as for various individual and collective income-generating activities, whether goat-rearing, gem polishing or beedi-rolling, and, as noted, Oxfam-funding went to provide relief to Dalit victims of upper caste attacks. It was also recognised that caste has a ‘socio-cultural aspect’, but policy at the time was that this was ‘best dealt with indirectly in ways which diffuse rather than amplify conflict’ (Oxfam Bangalore, Bi-Annual Report 1980-91). Even though project practice throughout the 1980s was increasingly oriented to the struggles of Dalits, and more and more NGOs emerged with Dalit leadership, Oxfam’s policy discourse was framed in other terms; and caste discrimination and Dalit rights were not central.

Policy is rarely a good guide to action. More often its formulation involves the reinterpretation of practice in terms of currently favoured ideas and categories (Mosse 2005). The Oxfam strategic planning in which I was involved was, to a large extent, an ex-post rationalisation for existing funding practices that were in fact the outcome of out-of-sight negotiations and relationships between Oxfam staff (Project Officers) and NGO leaders, to be communicated upwards to managers and committee members. Nevertheless, such representational practices did have effects. A thematic approach framed budget allocations so as to stabilise (or discipline) field office relationships, and brought new NGO networks into existence for research, training and advocacy on key issues (e.g., the Drought Action Network). Even through so-called ‘non-funding support’ donor policy exercised influence over NGO interactions.

While in practice NGOs were significantly working with Dalits and Dalit NGOs, Oxfam policy in the early 1990s did not legitimise or arrange work around a caste and Dalit-rights approach. Furthermore, certain NGO policy trends specifically blocked such an approach. Under my own management of the Oxfam south India programme, a focus on caste, Dalit identity and rights assertions was pushed aside by a new wave of neoliberal institutionalism that began to pervade international development discourse under the rubrics of participation, self-reliance, sustainability and local institution building. These were also the terms in which the Indian state sought contributions from NGOs in the run up to the 8th Five Year Plan (1992-1997). This itself marked a shift in relations between the state and NGOs, who for much of the 1980s had been regarded as a suspect anti-government influence that ought to be subject to state control (via strict foreign contributions regulation), surveillance and direct intimidation – especially if thought in any way connected to violent extremists (Marxist-Leninist, Tamil or Sri Lankan). In these circumstances, rural NGOs sought the prophylactic of alignment with government schemes or disbanding their solidarity networks. Then with the 8th plan, NGOs were actively sought as partners ‘in restructuring rural development
programmes,’ as implementation agents and especially as specialists in participation and community mobilisation.

The broader neoliberal ‘rolling back of the state’ involved a move in some sectors from centralised bureaucratic control to community management, marked for example by the June 1990 government order that opened the way to ‘joint forest management,’ and the parallel process of ‘irrigation management transfer’ (from state bureaucracy to farmer groups), as well as participatory watershed development initiatives, all of which opened spaces into which some of the region’s most prominent NGOs (such as Myrada in Karnataka) moved and were enrolled onto state programmes as model builders and mobilisers of self-reliant, self-managing communities. It was into this stream that Robert Chambers introduced his Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approaches partnering with south Indian NGOs such as Myrada and Gram Vikas (in Karnataka) and SPEECH (in Tamil Nadu), while micro-finance and the promotion of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) became introduced as substitute ‘technology’ of people’s mobilisation (Elyachar 2005). These approaches, practices and technologies allowed the mobilisation of considerable resources through links into state and official aid (bi-lateral or World Bank) programmes.

These policy processes in the early 1990s drove an invisible wedge between NGOs (largely non-Dalit led) aligned to the new rural development agenda and drawn towards institutionalist approaches or PRA practices or SHGs that registered in the policy frameworks of donors such as Oxfam or Action Aid and connected to aid resources, and those influenced by rising Dalit movements and operating within a framework of local caste struggles, which were then still peripheral to these fund-mobilising policy visions. But circumstances at the time were already the mainstream of Oxfam south India policy towards Dalit perspectives. For one thing, national politics had raised the profile of caste and communalism in the country as a whole. In 1990, the V.P Singh government decided to implement the recommendations of the ten-year old Mandal Commission extending reservations to a category of Other Backward Castes. The impact in Tamil Nadu was muted because such reservations already existed, but the violent clashes that the issue triggered, extended and amplified by nationwide Muslim and Hindu conflicts provoked by the Hindu Nationalist BJP’s retaliatory manipulation of religious identity, unavoidably altered the discourse of NGO action. Even if there were no immediate programme implications, Oxfam and other donor NGOs could not avoid engaging with a wider politics of caste and communalism (regional and national) which was already a reality in local caste conflicts and anti-Dalit attacks. But there were also dilemmas internal the world of NGO programming that encouraged a policy shift towards Dalits.

5 DONOR POLICY DILEMMAS AND THE DALIT FOCUS

In their own evolutionary models, many donor NGOs imagined a progressive policy movement from missionary-welfare via integrated development to ‘empowerment’ approaches; yet the goal of ‘empowering the poor’ proved elusive. The largest part of Oxfam Bangalore’s funding (around 60 per cent between 1987 and 1991) was for what was labelled ‘social organisation’; that is support for small NGOs – the so-called Social Action Groups – dedicated to enhancing the collective strength of the poor through non-formal education (loosely Freireian) and the formation of associations (sangams) of the village poor leading to ‘awareness raising’ and public action to claim entitlements to state programmes and services, or access to land or other resources. But in the late-1980s there was growing disenchantment with the results of this ‘sangam model.’ NGOs had been funded to increase the number of
such groups with little regard to their quality in terms of leadership, perspective or capacity to organise common action. The field reports arriving at Oxfam and other donor offices were reaching similar conclusions: a now standardised approach multiplied sangams which, rather than fostering independent initiative and collective action (of various kinds) against oppression, had too often become beneficiary clients of external NGO patrons awaiting delivery of the next funded scheme. Some reports even described membership falling or sangams splitting if the expected benefits did not materialise; or people transferring allegiance to sangams organised by a rival NGO (Good 1989). Judged by the standards the new institutionalism, this NGO work was ineffective at fostering local institutions with resource management skills, and several NGOs began to replace non-formal education with microfinance as the core group-forming activity, self-help groups (SHGs) replaced sangams; judged by the leftist goal of mass mobilisation for societal change it was a dismal disappointment.

Oxfam (and other donors) could also see themselves as part of the problem. On the one hand, a multiplicity of funding sources and inter-donor competition had encouraged rapid expansion of sangam-focused work, while donor PR departments picked up sound-bite success stories of ‘empowerment’ underlining an illusion about what was actually achievable. On the other hand, small NGOs were themselves encouraged to launch a range of programmes tailored to the specific demands of different donors so as to ensure their own organisational continuity and stability. But despite these concerns, donor managers such as myself concluded that:

‘SAGs [Social Action Groups] still provide the best alternative for funding support [and] have proved to have an important role in mobilising resources for the poor from government welfare schemes, in helping the poor to better represent themselves and their grievance and in providing limited resources for economic change. In short, SAGs with their wider contacts and resources bring about a localized change in the balance of power in favour of the poor’ (Oxfam Bangalore Annual Report 1988-9, p8)6

Oxfam and other donors sought remedial measures – continued monitoring and research on SAG work, strengthening local leadership and developing the sangam approach through encouraging apex structures or inter-village federations. Clientalist relationships between NGOs and ‘their’ sangams had to be overcome. Most significantly, donor (INGO) discourse began to sharply distinguished between People’s Organisations (sangams) and the development NGOs which had promoted them. NGOs were to be regarded as a temporary presence in any given area, fostering capabilities and transferring skills before withdrawing. That NGOs might ‘overstep’ an educational-facilitation role and themselves develop as institutions and actors within the local power structure was antithetical (Oxfam Bangalore Bi-Annual Report 1980-91). ‘We have to move towards supporting individuals to work towards developing CBOs [Community-Based Organisations], rather than investing in organisational structures,’ was the conclusion of the Oxfam India review later in 1996. The obvious tension of this position with NGO ambitions for institutional security and growth was acted out in the negotiation of every grant budget, especially around capital items such as training centres or vehicles. Of course, the idea that INGO donors could support People’s Organisations without investing in NGO institutions was a persisting illusion founded on the unlikely notion that

6 By 1989-91 the language was more neoliberal, institutionalist and instrumental: rather than the goal of ‘people’s mobilisation’ “…organisation (forming and supporting sangams) at the community level is essential as a basis for people’s participation in specific development programmes – governmental and NGO – crucial to sustainability or any external interventions, and to equitable access to inputs and benefits. Institutions of the poor increase access to productive resources (via land titles, loans etc.), to government officials, and improve poor people’s ability to respond to injustice and open opportunities of access to political power” (Oxfam Bangalore Annual Report, 1991).
NGOs would put up proposals for their own disappearance. NGO work in south India was fraught with contradiction.

Then, the emergent Dalit politics of the 1990s opened for donors the possibility of viewing NGO action and the sangam process rather differently. By this time, a larger number of NGOs were in fact Dalit-led, and their caste-based activism, conflict and struggle over resources and against untouchability — focusing on temple entry, exclusion from public spaces, economic boycotts and direct violence — could be seen a kind of social action that actually demonstrated the elusive notion of ‘people’s empowerment’. Moreover, a Dalit approach allowed the reorganisation of categories. Dalit NGOs whose staff worked in their own localities blurred the critical distinctions between NGOs and ‘people’s organisations.’ Dalit NGOs could be construed as people’s organisations. Their social action was locally initiated but regionally interconnected into a kind of self-organising movement for ‘structural’ change. It was not narrowly ‘activity-focussed’ (on schemes), but pointed to a holistic (material, cultural, spiritual) perspective on human dignity and development. Here was a form of dynamic social action with which jaded European funding agencies in the 1990s could reconnect, offering a way out of the frustrations of the ‘sangam model’, and which clearly signalled the progressive policy shift from welfare or economic development to the hitherto hard to operationalize ‘empowerment.’ Even though field-level practice — budgeting, funding, programmes — might remain relatively unchanged, a Dalit focus allowed new interpretations, and recognition of the fact that the work already funded involved sangams for landless labourers or marginal farmers who were from segregated Dalit communities. Indeed a conceptual reorientation meant that existing Dalit groups could meet the goal of self-perpetuating community empowerment and popular claims to state resources and justice. Self-generating Dalit groups seemed somehow better at mobilising resources, and had inbuilt sustainability.

A growing focus of the identity of the vulnerable — Dalits, Adivasis, women, children, HIV/AIDS-affected people — was reflected in Oxfam’s Strategic Planning of the mid-1990s (1996-2000). The context of Oxfam’s work came more clearly to be defined in terms of Dalit disadvantage (Parasuraman et al 1997: 103). Poverty, landlessness, dependence, unemployment, migrant exploitation were issues of Dalit powerlessness, while the violence and economic boycotts that arose from Dalit assertions over resources or for justice were a measure of vulnerability. Dalits were unprotected by a state machinery willing to disregard the law, and a political system that had spread preferential developmental provisions too widely and concentrated political power among economically powerful ‘Backward Castes’ (ibid). What was surprising, however, was that Oxfam’s decisive shift to Dalit development actually occurred amidst a radical rupture: the closure of the Oxfam south India programme. And what this suggests is that the shift to a Dalit focus was not simply ideological; complex institutional logics were also at work.

6 DONOR EXIT AND DALIT DEVELOPMENT -
THE NEW ENTITY FOR SOCIAL ACTION (NESA)

The regional office in Bangalore was Oxfam’s first overseas office, opened in 1965. In 1998 it was the first to close as a result of programme rationalisation. Oxfam India’s National Strategic Plan in 1992-5 underlined the above-mentioned shift from a contingent, responsive, project-based funding mode to a coherent issue-based approach, while the equivalent Plan for 1996-2000 marked integration nationally into a ‘One-Programme’ approach. The move against autonomous regional programming, the demand for a strategic focus (on the poorest
states) in the rubric of ‘impact maximizing’ and, especially, pressure in 1996 to cut management expenses (i.e., staff and office costs) led to a reduction in Oxfam’s geographical spread and the decision to close the Bangalore office covering the southern region (Tamil Nadu, S. Karnataka and Kerala) which was judged to be better off. ‘Phase Out’ was the term for the two-year (1996-8) process of terminating Oxfam funding for its 48 NGO ‘partners’ by April 1998. The process was difficult and emotion-laden. After all, what interpretation could be placed on ‘partnership’ in face of unilateral Oxfam withdrawal?

The point that I want emphasise is that framing a Dalit-focussed approach to development helped in the negotiation of this major donor withdrawal and shaped its outcome in two significant ways. First, conceiving development as a self-sustaining caste struggle offered a vision of programme continuity post-Oxfam, thus moderating an unpopular withdrawal of development support and salving institutional guilt. Second, the needs and opportunities presented by the Dalit struggles demanded programme continuity in some form. Let me consider these in turn, beginning with the idea of self-sustaining Dalit development.

When Oxfam staff carried out a ‘pre-phase out’ review of the south India programme, they concluded that “the programme structure in Tamil Nadu is very interesting. The central objective of almost all projects was development of Dalits and most backward caste groups…with the Dalits trying to assert their social and political rights …[and] gain freedom from social and economic oppression” (Parasuraman, S. & J.Vimalanathan 1997: 105-6). Furthermore, when Oxfam assessed ‘the stage reached in [the] empowering process’(ibid: 6) according to indicators of group or institutional strength and ‘sustainability,’ Dalit-led NGOs were consistently classified in the most advanced category, as groups ‘concentrating on social mobilisation for fundamental change’ (in contrast with developmentalist or welfare agencies) (ibid: 104).7 The new organisational networks of mutual support formed by Dalit NGOs – one in the north and one in the south of the state – further demonstrated the self-organising capacity of Dalit NGOs. Conceived as the Dalit struggle for justice and rights, development would continue without Oxfam. The optimism surrounding Dalit NGOs and their local networks was, however, also reason to ensure (and for Oxfam partners to demand) further inputs such as the provision of necessary training or legal aid, especially in the face of threats from locally dominant castes, and given that Dalit NGOs were themselves at risk since Oxfam’s exit was part of a more widespread donor migration away from the southern region leaving programmes and the jobs of hundreds of grassroots workers vulnerable.

Dealing with risk was one argument for continued donor support; opportunity was another. In particular, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment on local government had, in the view of many, changed the field of development entirely. It potentially put power and resources for local development in the hands of Dalits (through reserved constituencies). An Oxfam Project Officer recalls the enthusiasm stirred by Panchayat elections in 1996, held for the first time in decades. NGOs were able to engage with this political process through involvement in the preparation and training in democratic rights for the elections, and supported many Dalit and women sangam leaders who were successfully elected as Panchayat Presidents. The elections also opened a new space in which ‘bureaucrats came out openly in support of Dalits for the first time’ (interview, 2 Feb 2009). Asserting political rights and gaining resources through Panchayat elections was the new hope for grassroots development, especially for Dalits and women.8 This was no time to be closing down NGO programmes. Indeed, some NGOs were

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7 There was an explicit assumption that ‘the programme approach of an organisation depends upon the caste background of it leader’ (Parasuraman, S. & J.Vimalanathan. 1997: 104)
8 As Panchayat President, Ms Shami Jagan, for example took over the auctioning of common lands previously run by upper castes (Vanniyars).
returning to locations from which they had earlier moved in order to reappraise and use these possibilities. During Oxfam’s ‘Phase-Out,’ Dalit development initiatives and the supporting legal work, together with training for an emerging group of Dalit Panchayat Presidents, were marked out for continued support by some post-Oxfam mechanism.

What was the nature of this mechanism and how did it advance the Dalit rights agenda? Consultations between Oxfam and its NGO partners during the two-year ‘phase-out’ resulted in the transfer of the donor’s south India programme to a new institution governed by former ‘partners’ registered as ‘NESA’, whose indeterminate nature was captured in the expansion ‘New Entity for Social Action.’ From the start, this was a Dalit-focused entity. Of the twelve Oxfam NGOs who did not join this ‘federation’ (29 did), many were non-Dalit. At the same time, eleven new Dalit NGOs and networks joined, meaning that the new entity’s general body (of 40) was overwhelmingly Dalit. The first Chair was a Dalit-NGO head and the former Oxfam Project Officer was appointed as Chief Executive of a secretariat to which Oxfam transferred its assets. NESA’s goal was defined as ‘to facilitate and support NGOs and CBOs to enable Dalits, tribals, women and other vulnerable groups to intensify and sustain efforts in securing and enhancing basic rights and sustainable livelihoods.’ As an evaluation study—for NOVIB the main funder—in the year 2000 put it, ‘one of the reasons for the founding of NESA was the need to consolidate the gains for Dalits, especially Dalit women [particularly] in local (Panchayat Raj) elections’ (Barton et al. 2000:5). Moreover, while the NESA focus on Dalit rights was clear, those Dalits involved in early policy negotiations emphasised the effort required to move from the idea of (non-Dalits) working for Dalits towards Dalits controlling institutions; which is precisely why so much effort went into establishing the representation of Dalits (and women) on decision-making bodies and making rules on this ‘non-amendable.’ NESA might embody the late-Oxfam vision of Dalit NGOs as independent, sustainable, and their networks as a kind of self-organising people’s movement. At the level of discourse a ‘rights’ approach that implied individual claims as citizens was blurred with a ‘cultural-political emancipatory’ approach; as NGOs appeared to take on a burden of grassroots mobilisation around Dalit identity shared with social movements or political parties (Krishnan 2011). However, it will become clear how at an organisational level, the logic of NGO relations involved a differed reality.

With closure of the Oxfam office and the transition to NESA, hybrid ambitions and structures (donor-NGO-movement) were taken on. NESA’s so-called focus ‘sectors’ — children, HIV/AIDS, micro-credit and natural resources management — each defined a largely Dalit constituency of need. ‘Dalit empowerment’ although among other sectors was in effect the overarching frame. The Dalit Sector Support Team (DSST) became the most important of (seven) such support teams each of which was located in one of the NESA member NGOs; and in ___ the DSST leader became the Chairman of NESA.9 By 1999 there was a clear programme focus on Dalits (93 per cent of beneficiaries) overlapping with that on (Dalit) women (95%). Even if when evaluated in 2000, this rights approach was judged not yet the emphasis of all NESA programme and support work, it had become a ‘powerful integrating perspective’ (Barton et al. 2000). NESA’s DSST was directly involved in promoting and monitoring Dalit rights perspectives across NESA’s programme, arranging training, building a common perspective, facilitating lobbying for pro-Dalit policy change, for the prevention/mitigation of atrocities, and the retrieval of Dalit land and livelihood resources. There were campaign events on issues such as the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, the

9 An evaluation in 2003 in fact suggested retaining only the Dalit (and Adivasi) ‘sector’ and making the others resource centres for this core NESA constituency. (2003 New Entity for Social Action (NESA) Dalit Sector Support Team (DSST): A Review Towards Strategic Planning. p 33.)
alienation of Dalit (Panchami) land, or against the state’s programme of wasteland development which involved putting land under communal use into the hands of corporations.

As a vehicle for the articulation of a Dalit perspective, NESA set out not only to demonstrate what might be meant by the increasingly popular ‘rights based approach’ to development, but also to connect this to the cultural-political assertions of Dalit movements and politics. Through its activities in the 2000s, DSST worked to develop and represent a common agenda (out of a diversity of organisations and activities) for which purpose considerable energy went into training, seminars, meetings, research and the production of films and books to develop a shared understanding of caste as a human rights and development issue, and Dalits as a constituency, as well as to explain the context and significance of NESA’s work with Dalits. NESA’s agenda-making work involved a blurring of boundaries between categories: donor, NGO, CBO, movement, party, and the promotion of further ‘network’ entities. These included a support forum of Dalit Panchayat Presidents which came out of the first State-level Convention of Dalit panchayat presidents in April 2001 (in October 2001 over 1000 Dalits contested elections), and which by 2003 had some 700 members across 11 districts; and an expanding Dalit Lawyers Forum with some ___ members; a forum for Dalit women, community groups, lawyers, local political leaders, and most prominently a state-level umbrella network of Dalit NGO networks – the HRFDL-Tamil Nadu—to which I return below. Before turning to the nature and relationships of NESA and its derivative networks, let me take stock of some of the discursive and organisational implications of the shift to an explicit Dalit rights NGO agenda that emerged from interviews with network members across Tamil Nadu in 2009-10.

7 DEVELOPMENT AS DALIT RIGHTS - IMPLICATIONS

The first thing to point out is that there is little consensus about what a Dalit approach to development means. It may be more helpful therefore to think of key ideas and areas of argumentation, beginning with four: the importance of dignity, the centralisation of caste, the relationship with the state, and with political parties.

As one network leader explaining his changed perception having experienced casteism as a Communist Party (CPI (M)) worker put it, ‘dignity is first, then organisation and struggle.’ He maintained that once people feel assured of their dignity then they can move forward, organise for fair wages, or assert their right to equal shares in common resources (e.g., water) or lay claim to land (that ‘belonged to our forefathers’). Behind these resource exclusions, as well as elevated Dalit school dropout rates are often hidden experiences of humiliation (Dalit children avoiding school because of such experiences at school, not poor motivation at home). His point is that in all struggle for political power at Panchayat or other levels, ‘dignity is the moving force.’ Dalit NGO workers have come to understand the denial of dignity — most forcefully in anti-Dalit atrocities — as an abuse of human rights, and the Prevention of Atrocities Act as ‘a temporary tool for the pursuit of dignity’ (interview, Kalam network members, Tirunelveli, 9 November 2009). The language of Dalit rights probably first entered NGO discourse in the context of ‘upper’ caste aggression against Dalits – rapes, murders, the destruction of property, extreme acts of untouchability – as well as the documented failure of the police and judiciary to deliver protection and justice.10 Indeed, it was this failure — which is structural (see Ramaiah 2007: 225) — that made NGO intervention necessary. ‘It is only

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when NGOs and other bodies intervene that atrocities against Dalits get registered under the POA Act. Otherwise, the police use only IPC.’ (Shanmugavel, State Secretary Tyagi Immanuel Peravai [a Dalit social movement], Paramakudi in Ramaiah 2007).

Making development a matter of dignity centralised caste identity. Dalit NGOs began to ground the claims to various resources — land, water, education or other services — in the historical experience of untouchability. This borrows from the ‘private’ sphere an insistence on the collective and communal rather than the ‘public’ assertion of rights as an aggregate of individual citizens (Krishnan 2011). The same logic lies behind the separate mobilisation of castes among Dalits, especially the subordinated Arunthathiyars. But in practice, the extent to which untouchability (in its various forms) should be the framework for development is much debated. There are those who argue that victimhood constrains development visions or that ‘shouting hoarse’ on specific manifestations of abuse (either defensive posturing or offensive retaliation) diverts from constructive action plans. Some point to the fragmentary tendency of caste-specific organisation that has troubled Dalit political formations. Others are drawn away from a caste focus by the nature of their programmes. This is especially true of NGOs significantly involved in microfinance schemes (of various kinds) which individualise benefits and cannot remain caste (Dalit)-exclusive. Micro-finance programmes in fact tended to lead to centralised control and rapid institutional growth (staff, offices, vehicles), and the specific requirements for financial monitoring, accountability to financing institutions and a banking ‘Chettiyar’ culture involving patronage styles, and sometimes religious gifting. Because of their inclusive constituency and the need to maintain relationships with the state bureaucracy, public protest is less prominent among their practices.

The relationship to the state is a third area of debate. Small NGOs certainly feel vulnerable to intimidation. ‘If you take up the land issue and confront the police…Dalit NGOs do not come, they are not even contactable by phone, they are frightened,’ complained one Dalit human rights activist. Dalit NGO network members interviewed across the state commonly see their failure to obtain registration under foreign contributions regulation legislation (FCRA), or to gain approval from the state Women’s Development Corporation (which gives access to certain subsidised credit streams) as evidence of the political risks their work involves. It was suggested that even if senior levels of government see the merits of encouraging and co-opting NGOs having constitutionally mandated (and nationally enacted) rights-based policies (which unlike Naxalite or Maoist rebellions make state-legitimising claims), the more local sub-district bureaucrats were intolerant of disruptive challenges to their executive powers. The degree of dependence of government funding and orientation towards the state (whether adversarial or cooperative) has become a criteria of differentiation and mutual judgement within (and between) Dalit NGO networks. One network leader summed up the issue differently by saying ‘you can work for Dalits; but to work as Dalits is politically dangerous.’ While this reinvokes a distinction between development and (caste) politics, he also believed that system-preserving organisation around separate caste identities — of Paraiyar, Arunthathiyar or Pallar — attracted less state harassment than ‘organising around

11 This was, as Rajan Krishnan (2011) puts it, assertion of one of ‘[t]he various communal affiliations exorcised from the individuated citizen in the public domain’.

12 For example the large scale food preparation and distribution at the Tirchirapalli headquarters of the Dalit-led micro-finance giant ASA/Grama Vidiyal.

13 Some Dalit NGO leaders interviewed take a different view and see ways of linking access to credit specifically to Dalit empowerment or to behavioural changes (school-going, attending meetings, family budgeting, addressing alcohol use, political participation [in Gram Sabha meetings]).
‘Dalit’ [when] I face a lot of challenges…if you put “Dalit liberation” on your board in the village, they [the police] attack you.’

The orientation towards Dalit political parties also now divides NGO Dalit activists. The importance of backing the assertion of Dalit political rights through Panchayat elections is undisputed. But NGO views on state-level party politics, and particularly the role of the “Liberation Panthers” or (Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi [Viţutalai Ciṟuttaikal Kaṭci] — VCK), now dominant in Dalit politics are far more complex. At one extreme, there are NGO leaders who having long regarded Dalit politicians (e.g., within non-Dalit ruling parties) as serving party as against Dalit interests, or being involved in the swindling diversion of Dalit development resources, now regard Dalit political parties themselves as antithetical to Dalit interests. Many regard VCK in particular as co-opted and compromised by the political system — ‘those VCK politicians who ten years back struggled for one meal [are] now enriched by katta panchayats’ comments one NGO leader. A sharper criticism is that the party is working against Dalit NGOs locally, for example (to cite cases given), undermining Dalit land claims by doing remunerative deals with non-Dalit land occupiers. ‘We believed in the DPI leader, says one deeply frustrated senior NGO head, ‘but he has become the most unbelievable person. [He has] joined hands with the people with knives in their hands to cut off the heads of Dalits.” A milder NGO criticism of the role of Dalit political parties, is that the use of links to party networks to solve local caste problems weakens Dalit NGO platforms. At the other end of the spectrum of opinion are those who say that the political party (VCK) is the next logical step for Dalit empowerment. At the level of the state assembly, Dalits need ‘to intervene in the political arena where policies are formulated, where laws are enacted without being dependent on non-Dalit parties,’ says a VCK-oriented NGO head, maintaining that NGOs have created awareness at the village level, but their own legal status (as civil society organisations) does not allow the consolidation of Dalit political rights. Only the networks of the Dalit political party can lift local issues to the state level which is necessary for effective advocacy. So speak those, such as former NESA President, DSST head and HRFDL adviser, who have themselves become functionaries in the VCK. But while articulating a familiar Dalit agenda, they become constrained by the logic of electoral politics to de-focus Dalit issues in terms of broader constituency-building discourses such as Tamil nationalism. For example, in this particular interview, the language of Dalit land struggle changed subtly from anti-untouchability to the cultural nationalist rhetoric of ‘retrieval of the soil, mother soil.’

Whatever position Dalit NGO workers took on the issues of Dalit dignity, caste identity, the state or Dalit party politics what they shared were common organisational forms, processes and problems. Above all, these can be seen as responses to the heightened uncertainty brought by the development turn to Dalit rights. This uncertainty arose simultaneously from political risk, threats of ‘upper’-caste retaliation, and from financial insecurity. First, the political risks involved in Dalit rights work produced a characteristic doubling of organisation identity. NGOs were registered as societies whose names referenced education, development or welfare and which related to bureaucrats or donors; but they also took the form of movements (or fronts, iyakkam or peravai) formed out of local activists or federated village-level youth and women’s groups under which banner public action on land or water or against atrocities was taken up. Second, contending with retaliatory action, the failure of district level police to respond to caste atrocities, and to the criminalisation of activism (the counter-cases against NGO leaders pressuring the police to register Prevention of Atrocity

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14 Ubiquitous criticism of Dalit political leaders is that they are involved in lucrative dispute settlement and informal deals outside local courts and police stations known as kattā pātiçayattu or “kangaroo courts.”
cases through public action) encouraged Dalit NGOs to associate into district-level ‘networks.’ Third, Dalit rights work restricted NGO access to officially-sanctioned finance. Horizontal links were thus necessary so as to connect to resources indirectly via Foreign Contributions Regulation Act registered ‘nodal’ NGOs. Higher-order networking (below) allowed linkage to legal/institutional support from human rights organisations at state level, and from them the possibility of extending these local possibilities of protection, effectiveness and resource access.

8 NESA – IDEA AND RELATIONSHIPS

To return to NESA, it is possible to regard this new entity as operating on two different levels (or in two different modes). On one level, NESA was a vehicle for ideas about Dalit development, rights and ‘post-donor’ NGO relationships. Born out of a critical reaction to vertical donor-NGO relations (dramatized in Oxfam’s unilateral withdrawal), NESA was self-defined as a ‘value-based network’ (NESA 1998: 11). Its documentation invokes ‘Oxfam values’ – accountability, transparency – as a donor critique. The path towards its systems of representation, decision-making and mutual monitoring, its ‘disempowered Secretariat’ and its Executive Director (ED) without voting rights, were carefully documented. At this level, NESA was as much a unifying idea as an organisational structure. As such it offered loose affiliation, solidarity and identity (a kind of institutional capital) to a large number of small, especially Dalit-led, NGOs (in part through the autonomously operating Dalit Sector Support Team -- DSST15). ‘If you are a part of NESA, it carries some power’, as the ED put it (he spoke of ‘power contagion’). Through NESA-made connections, Dalit NGOs in Tamil Nadu (and Karnataka) became part of imagined collectives at state, national and international levels, represented by events such as the Asian Social Forum (2003, Hyderabad), and the World Social Forum (2004, Mumbai), for which NESA organised and funded Dalit NGO participation; and especially the third United Nations Convention on Racial Discrimination at Durban in August 2001, which involved NESA-supported rallies and signature campaigns under the slogans: ‘Dalit rights are human rights; caste is a form of race.’ Of course, NESA’s aim was equally through such connections to bring national or international campaigns to the local level in a manner that demonstrated its own large and growing constituency -- ‘a grassroots base.’

When these events are now narrated it is the reach of the networking, the expansion of the field, the scale and effervescence of the event that is emphasised, rather than the detail of any particular advocacy agenda.16 Such mobilisation, seen as unmatched by antecedent or subsequent Dalit NGO associations, and the envy of national organisations, invokes a scale of power and value characteristic of other realms of politics or religion: party conventions or festival processions (Bate 2009). For some involved, it was a surprise that what had begun as a protest against Oxfam’s decision to close down could turn out in this way. At this level, the continuing role and relevance of NESA and its Secretariat depended not upon administrative control, but on the constant devolution of power and resources, forging widening connections and creating public events – conventions, rallies, national and international forums – that merged NGO, CBO, movement and party in symbolic expressions of Dalit empowerment.

15 The DSST operated through SASY, an NGO revived for the purpose. DSST was also directly involved in arranging training, building a common perspective, facilitating lobbying for pro-Dalit policy change, the prevention/mitigation of atrocities, the retrieval of Dalit land and livelihood resources, and conflict resolution among Dalit organisations.

16 Indeed, one of the evaluations reported less advocacy than expected, and that NESA’s Advocacy Sector Team had not taken off [Barton et al. 2000].
NESA’s was an expansive and incorporative strategy of enrolling more and more people in larger scale and more public activities. Such too was the ED’s own nodal capacity, seen as due to his independence: Tamil but in Bangalore; non-Dalit and so standing outside the caste divisions; the retention of a donor identity (rather than a competing NGO one); having a relationship with senior Dalit figures (NGO and movement) while also fostering a new generation of Dalit NGO leaders.17

At a second level NESA, was (still) a funding mechanism, a donor with an inherited set of projects or programmes run by established ex-Oxfam NGOs. The NESA idea of a flexible network was imported into a structure of relationships established by a donor field office which entailed fund-mediated (client) relationships with the Secretariat, and inter-group competition. Patterns of funding arose as much from the pragmatic need to keep the partnership together as from any centrally defined process (Barton et al 2000). NESA’s organisational exigencies made urgent demands: grant-making accountabilities involved difficult practicalities of power; the different interpretations of ‘Dalit development’ – sustainability, rights or struggle – appeared as organisational tensions that NESA needed to mediate. ‘Conventional’ development programmes such as those on micro-finance, HIV/AIDS and natural resources management were a challenge to a common Dalit vision and approach,18 and had, ‘to be infused with the fight for rights for them to have any credibility with the strong Dalit networks,’ as the evaluation study noted (Barton et al 2000:13). Ex-Oxfam NGOs who found it difficult to ‘operationalise’ a rights-based conflict-oriented approach came to occupy a separate space. Meanwhile, within its Dalit work, it was ‘particularly important for DSST to manage its political and development “wings” in ways that emphasise[d] synergy and reduce[d] conflict’ (Barton et al. 2000: 13). Categorical boundaries blurred in the ‘network’ – donor/NGO, NGO/CBO, NGO/party – thus reappeared at an organisational level.

This disjuncture between network idea and organisational logic meant that after two years of NESA (in 2000) it was apparent that there was impressive participation in wide-reaching forums on Dalit rights, yet in practice limited sharing of proposals, peer monitoring; and that ‘practical exigencies’ limited participation and decision making (Barton et al. 2000). The GB and EB decisions ‘were mostly approvals’ of plans proffered by the Secretariat, and ‘in practice the Executive Director retains a lot of decision making because of his knowledge of the programme’, or more importantly because of a set of conflict-prone relationships within

17 Here too was a style of leadership (in the context of NGOs) familiar from analyses of other Indian and regional political contexts and historical moments, where it rests not on the control of efficient and accountable administrative systems but requires that a leader ‘keep escalating his command…simultaneously getting and giving more…[and engaging] in expansive and incorporative activity’ (Dirks 1987: 48).

18 Microfinance, for example, ought to be about building alternatives to financial institutions that excluded Dalits, demonstrating their creditworthiness and even pooling resources to create an Ambedkar (Dalit) Bank. The training, outreach and advisory work of the Micro-Credit SST through its Micnet network were widely valued, but those inside and outside NESA began to worry that a narrow range of microfinance models had established itself in agencies that were perceived as functioning independent of the Dalit struggle agenda, ‘diluting the rights based approach’, losing focus on the poorest or ensuring money reaches women, or submitting to the pressures of repayment (see Barton et al. 2000:8-9). Focusing on Dalit rights was also a challenge in HIV/AIDS programmes, producing sometimes confusing notions. The evaluation study in 2000 reported that while some in the network regarded Dalits as exposed to HIV because pushed to marginal migrant livelihoods, others claimed HIV/AIDS as an upper-caste imposition on Dalits, having themselves ‘a better code of conduct’ (2000: 11). In the area of natural resources management (the Natural Resources Management SST) the effect of the Dalit rights agenda was clearer: it gradually shifted the focus from infrastructure and management to the Dalit struggle for land.
which he had the role of ‘trusted broker.’\(^{19}\) ‘Only the ED,’ the evaluation report notes, ‘has the overview of allocation, conflict resolution and strategic advice’ (Barton et al. 2000).

The difficulty characteristic of such ‘network’ forms is that the idea, for example of NESA promoted by donors and evaluators, is far too abstract to accommodate actual organisational relationships and interests. The ‘strategic’ value of NESA was seen as ‘the self-organisation of the oppressed within a rights based approach.’\(^{20}\) But as the evaluation study itself asked, ‘how will individual NGOs remain part of NESA as a strategic entity [a Dalit rights advocacy network] if they do not get individual benefits.’ Yet more ambitious (or abstract), was the idea of NESA as (the prelude to) a mass organisation; that is, ‘handing over the network to CBOs over a period of time’\(^{21}\) (Barton et al 2000:16). This idea of a people’s organisation was built into the rules of representation on the Governing Body, pursued through a state-wide CBO federation or Nayaya Sangama and the setting up of a Fellowship programme to support community-level leaders, especially Dalit women, directly, in order ‘to move beyond the stage where CBOs “belong” to NGOs’ (Barton et al. 2000:19). The socially significant goal of being a ‘mass organisation’ overlooked some organisational realities such as the well-established institutional self-interests of NGOs, and the fact that rather than NGOs giving way to people’s organisations, in practice ‘CBOs [were] being created in the form of NGOs’ (ibid: 20), by Dalit individuals who had a quite different understanding of ‘sustainability.’

While dissolved in the NESA ‘network,’ the distinctions between donor, NGO and CBO reappeared at the organisational level through concrete exchanges involved in fund flows and programme accountability. Of course it was also clear from studies at the time that NGOs and CBOs had persisting differences in perspective and priorities. One study, or example, pointed out that ‘[c]ontrary to NGOs’ emphasis on rights-based approaches, the CBOs/POs stress economic empowerment,’ and that ‘while NGOs emphasise their role in training and capacity building, the CBOs prioritise the NGOs as sources of resources,’ and further that while NGOs emphasise networking, CBOs do not (and that NGO networks do not generally lead to CBO networks) (Wichterich et al. 2006: 22, 26-8). A rather similar list of differences could be drawn up for the INGO donors and local NGOs.

The point to emphasis is that between 1998 and 2006, NESA was extraordinarily successful in carving discursive space for Dalit development within the field of south Indian NGOs, and that this depended upon (rhetorically) subordinating the boundaries of donor, NGO and CBO and various other organisational tensions. NESA itself was not born out of Dalit political struggle, but from the specific dynamics of donor-NGO relations. The tensions between ‘network’ and ‘organisation’ (evident by the year 2000 and continuing in the years that followed) were not ‘correctable’ or resolvable, but were a condition of NESA’s success as well as its limitations. These issues would deepen and produce more damaging effects in the experience of the Dalit NGO ‘network of networks’ which NESA promoted.

9 **HUMAN RIGHTS FORUM FOR DALIT HUMAN RIGHTS- TAMIL NADU**

In April 1999, NESA-DSST brought together some 12 district-level networks, each formed through organic links arising from the already-mentioned vulnerabilities associated with Dalit

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\(^{19}\) The negative associations of the term ‘broker’ in the Indian context generated some subsequent debate between staff, evaluators and the donor, NOVIB.

\(^{20}\) Barton et al 2000: 16, Also ‘Crossing the Rubicon: NOVIB Policy in India 1997-2001’

\(^{21}\) Barton et al 2000: 16, Also ‘Crossing the Rubicon: NOVIB Policy in India 1997-2001’; The NESA Process. p11
human rights work and the need for collective action, to form the Human Rights Forum for Dalit Human Rights- Tamil Nadu (HRFDL-TN) (In 2000 a parallel forum that was focused more on individual activists than on NGOs was initiated in Karnataka). This forum, also conceived of as a ‘network’ of some 180-200 inter-linked Dalit-led NGOs, was to act as a ‘state level political platform on behalf of Dalits,’ a collective voice of Dalits for advocacy on issues such as allocating Panchami or ‘waste’ land to Dalits, the implementation of the 1989 SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act or certain reservations policies(to cite cases from the HRFDL Reports of 2006 and 2007). HRFDL representatives in alliance with other bodies (the human rights group People’s Watch, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights [NCDHR] and the VCK political party) used formal procedures -- state-wide consultations or public hearings with jury panels that reported to national bodies (such as the State Human Rights Commission, the National Human Rights Council, the National Commission for Women, the SC Commission) as well as international ones (such as the UN Commission on Human Rights). These addressed matters such as the persistence of illegal manual scavenging, Dalit land rights, departure from obligatory state budgetary allocations for Dalit development, abuses in Panchayat elections, or Dalit women’s empowerment (ibids). In June 2005, for example, there was a public hearing on the exclusion of Dalits from Panchayat elections in southern Tamil Nadu; and in August of the same year one on ‘discrimination against Dalits in tsunami relief and rehabilitation’ (see below).

HRFDL organised the support of local networks (or ‘sub-networks’ as they were sometimes called, Chellathurai et al. 2006) with training, the monitoring of Dalit human rights, the arrangement of fact finding missions and legal backup (DSST Review, 2003); while these local member networks took a lead on specific issues. The Forum aimed to support Dalit local government office holders, elected Dalit presidents and ward members facing threats or obstruction from an anti-Dalit bureaucracy or from non-Dalit political parties. One of the specific demands was power for Panchayat presidents to administer funds for development and common natural resources, plus removal of the unconstitutional power given to District Collectors (in the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act) to dismiss elected leaders which had been used against Dalits. DSST organised training programmes (and Training of Trainers) and a manual on Panchayat Raj and Dalit participation. In these ways HRFDL promised to expand the capacity of local NGOs to respond to injustice, violence and anti-Dalit abuse, while the networked NGOs themselves represented a legitimising constituency for public action.

The formation of HRFDL was linked to the establishment in December 1998 of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) as an affiliated but locally-based process, and it also found form in the context of the unifying pre-Durban conference rallies and signature campaigns. HRFDL was behind the Tamil Dalit presence (81 people with cultural teams and an all-women Dalit band) at the 2003 Asian Social Forum and the 2004 World Social Forum. While this linked the Dalit rights campaign to others such as the anti-globalisation agenda, its significance was really in staging a Dalit presence at such venues/platforms, whose organisers — from the international political left — had otherwise excluded Dalits (e.g., from preparation meetings). HRFDL provided a broadened based that legitimised such high profile advocacy.

By the end of 2004 when I first visited, NESA-HRFDL comprised a powerful representational machinery. Through the networks, trainings, fellowship programmes,
research and documentation and the high profile events – rallies, public hearings, the Social Forums – HRFDL did much to raise the profile of Dalit issues and the establish Dalit rights as an optic through which to view a variety of development issues – not only the struggle for dignity, but also natural resources management, HIV/AIDS, micro-finance and the discriminations of other minorities (e.g., transgender). Backed by NESA/DSST, HRFDL made it clear that in south India caste discrimination was an issue of development, and development and issue of caste discrimination. Moreover, through association with HRFDL, some 200 NGOs could claim interlinked capacities to act within the Dalit rights frame: ‘now we own the issue’, said one NGO Secretary.

Behind this successful expansion of HRFDL was the same tension between the ‘network’ as a discursive effect (Riles 2001), and underlying organisational dynamics. Funding flows are critical to this tension. One of NESA’s accomplishments was to have shaped the Dalit rights discourse into a form that would attract international donors. Indeed, almost as soon as HRFDL-TN took shape independent of NESA, it became an object of donor support. The principal funding relationship was with the French Comité Catholique Contre la Faim et Pour Le Développement, or CCFD, an association of 29 movements of the Catholic Church in France. CCFD remained the principal funder of HRFDL for the next decade. Just when most European donors agencies were re-focusing away from south India, CCFD prioritised work with Dalits in Tamil Nadu on the grounds that it was the strength and potential of the Indian partner organisations not the poverty of the region that was important; not the size of the problem but the capacity to address it. CCFD explicitly moved into the space left by donors such as Oxfam, becoming the major donor of NGO Dalit rights work in the state, especially prioritising networking, advocacy and lobbying work (Interview, Lawencia Kwark, Geneva, June 2011).

CCFD aimed to fund the ‘network’ as a self-organising system for Dalit capacity building and empowerment. But the funding arrangement meant bringing this mobilising metaphor to the level of a concrete set of organisational links structured by relationships of finance and power that would have their own effects. Since HRFDL-TN did not exist as a registered organisation it was (between 1999 and 2007) funded as a programme of an NGO, the Village Development Society (VDS) in Nagapattinam district. The funds for individual ‘sub-networks’ were likewise channelled into FCRA-holding nodal Dalit NGOs within them. HRFDL’s various ‘network’ activities were organised and financed through VDS. VDS in

**Box 1:** As young woman Shanti Jagan found herself threatened with prison and the accusation of being a Naxalite for her village-level protests against bonded labour and exploitative wages. The Dalit-led SEED Trust offered her work as a women’s organiser which left her less exposed to police intimidation and able to participate in, and travel widely for, a range of NGO training, which she speaks of as immensely empowering. On the back of her social work (with the backing of the NGO) she was elected (an independent candidate) as the first Dalit woman panchayat president in the locality. Her forthright actions thereafter as a Dalit woman in reclaiming encroached tank bed and common land for Dalits brought organised opposition from dominant castes, which was resisted with the solidarity and support of DSST-HRFDL. With her ever-supportive husband she had earlier registered an NGO – WORLD (Women’s Organization for Rural Literacy and Development) Society, which now became the funded focus of the WIND network of women led Dalit NGOs across three districts, leading public protests on issues of domestic violence, the abuse of children, dowry cases, counselling of women and men, AIDS education for sex workers, close work with family histories, heath referral counselling, training for adolescent girls. (Interview, November 2009)
Uncertain networks

Caste out of development project

turn operated significantly under the tutelage of the DSST convenor (through his NGO, SASY) who had helped set up HRFDL’s bylaws and administrative systems, and who mediated the CCFD funding, as well as facilitating HRFDL’s decision-making meetings and its organisation of policy events.

Then each of the several HRFDL programmes brought particular NGOs to the fore, allowing some power and influence over others, respectively heading ‘thematic groups’ handling funds related to issues such as manual scavenging, Panchayat Raj, human rights violations, or Dalit women’s issues. In the case of the latter, HRFDL established (and DSST promoted) a women’s wing, which itself emerge from a separate network of 16 Dalit women headed NGOs, WIND (Women’s Integrated Networks of Dalits), ‘empowering Dalit women from within Dalit communities themselves’ (DSST Review, 2003). WIND itself was driven significantly by the experience of one Dalit women Shanti Jagan (Box 1).

The relationship between later formalised ‘thematic groups’ and the HRFDL centre (Secretariat) remained an issue for discussion. At different levels the ‘network’ focused on nodal fund-routing NGOs which led to a degree of ‘personalisation,’ and a focus on prominent leaders who acquired power and influence over particular groups. These alliances might have arisen from anterior links, for example, as former workers of the nodal NGO, or being linked to the same donor. Donor agencies could themselves be a source of instability as in cases reported to me where networks were split by the appearance of a new funding source.

While networking NGOs arose in order to deal with vulnerabilities arising from the political context of Dalit rights work, or the problem of accessing finance (for non-FCRA registered groups) (see above), these ‘network’ arrangements could in their turn also generate uncertainties of their own (e.g., in accounting or decision making). It might not be clear, for instance, whether activities, resources or responsibilities rested with an individual NGO or with the wider ‘network’. Was the ‘network’ a programme of the NGO, or the NGO an element of the ‘network.’ While donors viewed the network as extending the agency (power and reach) of individual NGOs, NGO leaders might experience a network as a constraint on their agency. Considerable effort was required with uncertain (often limited) results. As one actor central to the network process put it:

‘…for me addressing the issues through HRFDL, I found it very much more difficult than through the individual NGO, because control is in my hand. With [the NGO] we continued to address the HR (human rights) issue in 6 districts, south, west and north -- atrocity prone areas -- [with] 145 cases, systematic files, reports produced and sent to commissions, legal interventions, follow-up. 25 lakhs [2.5 million rupees] compensation was got from the government. My team is directly under my coordination ... Through the network I found it very difficult because accountability is not direct...I have to depend upon the executive committee...expecting quick results on caste issues is unrealistic, it’s not like [post-tsunami housing].’

What is evident is that like NESA from which it emerged, HRFDL involved a characteristic disjuncture between network ideas and organisational processes. In committee meeting minutes, reports and evaluations, HRFDL is repeatedly bifurcated into the positive ‘network’ and the negative organisational relationships. Thus, when in 2006 a ‘Programmatic/organisational review’ of HRFDL was undertaken, all the ‘Positive Gains’ were found at the level of ‘network’ (e.g., ‘Grounding major Dalit Advocacy issues and processes’; ‘Strengthening and upwardly connecting local Dalit NGOs and networks towards greater visibility, space and perspectives’; ‘Increasing Capacities at lower levels’; ‘Advocating on Dalit issues, in collaboration with others…’); while all the ‘Problematic Areas’ were in the
realm of organisation (‘Ownership, Allegiances and Leadership;’ ‘Organisational Structuring and Streamlining (Secretariat… Forums…);’ ‘Sustainability’) (Chelladurai et al. 2006: 4).

Those working within this system have themselves to work in paradoxical ways. The NESA Executive Director, for example, narrates his prioritisation of ‘process’ in the devolution of information systems to sector support teams (SSTs) deliberately weakening his control of the NESA system. This complied with the ‘NESA Process’ and its emphasis on participative informality over formal systems and procedures. Meanwhile, the CCFD Programme Officer adopted a policy of non-interference in the affairs of the HRFDL network, even threatening to resign rather than intervene in a critical leadership struggle. And yet both exerted concrete influence through organisational processes. As a new donor of the Dalit NGO network in 1999, CCFD profoundly changed the set of inter-agency relationships, for example, enhancing the independence of DSST and curtailing the influence of NESA Secretariat. The NESA Executive Director himself perceived a distinction between CCFD’s network intentions (to consolidate Dalit human rights networking) and the organisation effects of its fund flows (the fragmentation of the collective and the abandonment of joint decision-making) (Interviews, Nov 2009). Network thinking might encourage non-interference and contingent responses to need, or sometimes an approach to budgets and the scrutiny of expenditure which emphasised trust and empowerment of Dalit NGOs, allowing flexibility or permitting the use of resources for institution building including offices, vehicles, and computers (‘…why shouldn’t Dalit NGOs enjoy the facilities that were taken for granted within the offices of non-Dalit NGOs or donors’). But there were also standard donor demands to monitor inputs in relation to outputs; outputs according to plans (etc.). At HRFDL meetings, the CCFD Programme Officer might raise criticism that ‘some of the works related to proposals and annual report of the last year… indicators in the proposals were non-realistic…[or] there were no linkages between last year proposal and the reports’ (HRFDL Executive Meeting, 14th June 2006).

Intentionally or otherwise, NESA or CCFD officers developed strategies to retain charge while appearing not to (trying to reconciling the demands of network and organisation), sometimes exploiting the very contradictions that they had to resolve, such as that between NGO and CBO development. Promoting CBOs through the Nyaya Sangama (NS) and Fellowship programmes -- which the ED regarded as the ‘next phase’ of NESA -- was also a way of re-centring NESA and its Secretariat. When it organised melas and mass meetings at which the Nyaya Sangama, fund accounts were open to public scrutiny, and later when community members asked their own ‘patron’ NGOs to share proposals and budgets, NESA was accused of instigating CBOs against NGOs (interviews, November 2009-March 2010). (Apparently similar tensions between the Secretariat and NGO leaders arose when Dalit women networks demanded an accountability from (male) NGO leaders; meanwhile some Dalit community and women leaders spoke strongly of the importance of being a part of NESA.)

Network ideals and organisational relations clearly intersected in complex ways, such that efforts to embed the process in the community could be perceived as an instrument of control in the field of Dalit NGO relations (as well as means to the resistance of that control). And while CCFD or NESA officers minimised their own agency in the network process, this is contradicted in the narrative of NGO leaders interviewed who emphasise the central roles that they played.

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23 This occurred after the resignation of the first HRFDL convenor and amidst representation by different network members, some of whom made representation to CCFD even in Paris.
In different ways, Oxfam-NESA and CCFD’s intention as donors was to support the move towards a Dalit-focussed development strategy. A self-sustaining Dalit NGO network was the perfect instrument for such an intervention. However, the actual organisational dynamics entailed in funding were not explicitly examined, but treated as contingent necessities. The capacity of NESA-HRFDL to create a significant space for Dalit human rights activism within Tamil Nadu, to project Dalit issues onto larger and larger stages and to sustain a fragile set of institutional relations was in many ways quite remarkable. Quite how fragile was the organisational base upon which these achievements rested was perhaps not realised until a severe crisis affected the network, resulting in a breakdown in the discourse (of Dalit collective action) around which the network cohered (cf. Knox et al. 2006: 131). It began with a physical devastation to the Tamil shoreline

On 26th December a tsunami hit the Tamil Nadu coast, particularly affecting Nagapattinam (Nagai) district and Karaikkal. The international fundraising and emergency response was huge and rapid. It generated resources for immediate relief and longer-term rehabilitation of the affected coastal communities. However, by January 2005, it was clear that caste discrimination pervaded the relief effort. Dalit communities were barred from relief supplies, officials did not visit their hamlets, non-Dalit survivors avoided food touched them. They were sheltered separately since ‘upper’-caste marriage halls and the like refused them accommodation. Their land was used for the burial or cremation of victims of the disaster, while it was Dalits who were called upon to handle the corpses. Later it was apparent that Dalit women were subject to routine sexual exploitation (and HIV infection) by construction workers during post-tsunami building work (Dalton et al. 2009). The impact of the tsunami on Dalit livelihoods was inadequately recognised. Dalits were not compensated as fishermen, fish labourers or saltpan workers, for the loss of livestock, their land flooded by saltwater; nor for the washing away of their children’s schoolbooks or their Self Help Group financial records (Gill 2007).

HRFDL and NESA along with the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights had brought the issue of case discrimination in relief to national attention and were an influence behind Dalit officials in the state (IAS and police); they now convened to plan a response. HRFDL formed itself into a tsunami response network for immediate relief, fact-finding and to represent the experience of discrimination and the needs of Dalit victims to the government, to donors and to a wider alliance of people’s organisations through a state-level consultation, as well as through the media, including television. As the appeal drew resources for Dalits specifically, HRFDL became a conduit for relief funding – the node for Dalit NGO networks working with affected Dalit communities. Even though the vast majority of relief resources went to non-Dalit NGOs, relatively large budgets were made available via HRFDL from donors for housing and fishing equipment among other things. These had to be spent on post-tsunami rehabilitation within a short time-frame. But it soon became apparent that a Dalit NGO network which had evolved as a platform for the Dalit agenda, and which had played a vital role as a Dalit advocacy voice on discrimination in tsunami relief, was not well equipped to act as a relief delivery agency. The increased scale and tempo of disaster mode operations, and the weakly imposed accounting, had a serious impact on the HRFDL network.

24 Here along with fisher communities some 58 Dalit hamlets were affected, 52 died, 370 houses and 345 acres of land were damaged. An External Evaluation of HRFDL – Tamil Nadu: On Tsunami Disaster Responses. p.27-29
Such was the pressure for disbursement of relief that HRFDL was treated as a funding channel not a coordination body. Indeed even within the network, coordination was weak. The loose arrangement that involved nodal convening NGOs worked well when focusing on training, information management and lobbying, but was not equipped to handle large-scale rehabilitation and building projects. The fact that post-tsunami funds were unevenly distributed across HRFDL NGOs created resource inequalities and resentment; for instance between coastal Dalit NGOs who could access funds, and inland ones who could not. With NGOs preferring to receive money directly from donors rather than through HRFDL, and ‘nodal’ NGOs treating funds as single-agency not collective resources, the network itself was undermined.\(^{26}\) Allegations multiplied that convening agencies receiving funds on behalf of the network were treating these as their own resources; that accounting ambiguities allowed money to be invested in institutional development (infrastructure and other capital investments) which rendered these inequalities permanent. Subsequent evaluations concluded that building work was poor, large funds were unaccounted for.

It was impossible for NESA-HRFDL to ignore the tsunami because it had become internationalised as a Dalit cause, but it was not through advocacy and campaigns that HRFDL was mobilised (which might have sustained and built the network rather than broken it down), but as a mechanism to deliver relief. The post-tsunami fund flows and rehabilitation programme permanently undermined the HRFDL network. However, its effect was really to make manifest and amplify existing structural problems (rather than introducing new ones) while weakening the overarching network processes and objectives. Coordination was pushed into the background despite the explicit and repeated demand that HRFDL should have a central organising role in Dalit-focused tsunami relief.

At root, the difficulty arose because donors failed to perceive the nature of the ‘network’ as a discursive effect and treated it as an organisational structure (e.g., capable of routing and executing relief work). Meanwhile, at the organisational level, fund flows simply amplified existing forms of inter-agency or leadership competition—issues that began increasingly to fill donor evaluation studies from 2005 onwards. Donors (Oxfam or Novib or CCFD) who had mobilised resources to fund the network as idea or discourse, without appraising the organisational realities and actual NGO relations through which they channelled funds, now faced this network unclothed in skilful representational practices.

10 ‘RESTRUCTURING’ HRFDL

The donor response to the crisis brought by the tsunami relief was not a recognition of the inherent tension between a ‘network’ as discursive effect (successfully articulating a Dalit rights agenda) and the organisational processes driven by a different logic (dealing with uncertainty and insecurity). Instead, the assumption persisted that network processes and problems were at root structural -- that is that they emerged from concrete inter-agency relations. The solution to HRFDL’s problems was therefore sought in ‘restructuring’ so as to re-create the networks that had been ruptured by the tsunami relief effort. This was the conclusion of CCFD’s major evaluation of HRFDL in 2006. A rationalised structure of district-level networks with centralised coordination was proposed in place of the evolved and overlapping NGO webs. But significantly, the meetings to negotiate and agree the reorganization of the HRFDL network never took place.

\(^{26}\) *An External Evaluation of HRFDL – Tamil Nadu: On Tsunami Disaster Responses.* p19
CCFD’s structural view of the network was nonetheless taken forward through a programme funded by the European Union (2007-9) for the ‘Re-enforcement of Grassroots Dalit organizations in South India for the protection of fundamental Dalit rights and for awareness campaigns concerning an effective consideration of the rights.’ The programme was co-funded with CCFD and the French Agency ADER (Association pour le Développement Economique Régional), which managed the programme out of an office in Pondicherry. The EU programme involved an effort to ‘projectize’ the Dalit human rights agenda – the network -- for example through compliance with agency-standard Logical Framework Analysis. Projectisation meant defining a ‘beneficiary’ population (3,750 Dalit communities with two million people), a goal (Dalit self-respect or access to state programmes), and five themed areas (or activity categories): (1) organisational reinforcement, (2) political influence and local representation, (3) access to legal services and monitoring, and (4) ‘capitalisation’ (meaning analytical documentation and learning). Under each was a defined and monitored set of activities (e.g., strategic planning workshop and capacity building training programmes). HRFDL was now a project implementation agency, selected network leaders being theme coordinators. Measureable outputs and identifiable outcomes allowed the determination and explanation of ‘success’ and ‘failure.’

Needless to say there were severe problems in trying to build an implementation mechanism out of the part-fragmented structure of the HRFDL network. A mid-term evaluation (in 2008) noted ‘quantitative achievement’ — that is records of trainings — but ‘lack of [a] proper follow-up programme.’ Within the Logframe view, the politics of NGO relations registered as the lack of proper management or the “limited understanding of network members regarding the overall project objectives” (2008, p7); responses to instances of untouchability could even be construed as narrow ‘activity-orientation’: HRFDL was “mostly addressing the human rights issue of Dalit communities rather than [being] an implementing agency [for overall objectives]” (p 21). ADER used its veto power to pull back control of implementation through its appointed experts and resource people (e.g., for scheduled training programmes, institutionalising a district level Dalit Panchayat Forum, and a cultural programme). In the absence of a functioning HRFDL Secretariat, ADER (or rather its channelling NGO, SEC [Social Education Centre] appears to have acted as if theirs was the network convening office. It was apparently the centre to which network members were invited to bring proposals and receive funding, although this de-facto reorganization of the network was never negotiated. It lacked General Body oversight and ignored the former State Convenor/Secretariat. The structural thinking that instrumentalised HRFDL as an implementation machinery made a new distinction between ‘means’ and ‘ends’ such that the Dalit NGO network processes were no longer coterminous with Dalit empowerment, but rather readable as defective project management or implementation, or the lack of strategy or long-term sustainability. In this case failure was co-produced by network actors and the donor framework.

By 2009 a formal structure had been put in place with district and state bodies, and registered NGO status. The EU’s final evaluation was able to rehabilitate optimism: structural obstacles had been overcome, leadership renewed, and new rules and regulations established, to ‘reinstate trust and confidence of member organisations.’ While EU reporting mechanisms allowed a conspiracy of success and effectiveness, towards the end of 2009 it was evident to anyone involved that the HRFDL had lost coherence and credibility both as a network idea and a viable set of organisational relations. It was a donor audit fiction reported by ADER to

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27 The ‘Re-enforcement of Grassroots Dalit organizations in South India for the protection of fundamental Dalit rights and for awareness campaigns concerning an effective consideration of the rights’
EU and relating to its ‘restructuring solution’ to the problem, that “the new structure …is equipped to take on its role as an implementing agency” (2009 p17).

Without funding, the activities that had sustained the ‘network’ idea ceased, leaving behind a fragmented set of inter-NGO relationships and a storehouse of resentments and recriminations. A few regional leaders tried to float inheritor or alternative fronts. Thus with the backing of some of the member NGOs, HRFDL was registered with office bearers and an office located centrally in the state to which assets from the EU project were transferred. The ‘new’ HRFDL was publicly launched amidst real uncertainty as to its future. Other hopeful but equally uncertain umbrella networks appeared to fill the space, some tapping donor funds, notably the Alternative Forum for Dalit Liberation (AFDL). Meanwhile local Dalit NGO networks come together periodically, as earlier, to address issues in their districts. By this time, several of the key HRFDL players – those most successful in putting the Dalit rights discourse in place and mobilising financial resources – redirected their energies by joining political parties.28 The HRFDL State Convenor resigned (informally) becoming youth state secretary of Thol Tirumavalavan’s Liberation Panther Dalit political party, and the DSST head its State Organising Secretary.

‘DE-DALITIZATION’ (AND ISSUE-BASED COALITIONS)

From a CCFD point of view, the fallout from the disintegration of HRFDL was not just the fragmentation of an interconnected field of Dalit NGOs, but also a crisis in the Dalit development narrative itself. In 2009, following the EU project, in the light of the HRFDL experience and with a change of staff, CCFD, still one the most significant donors for its specific focus on Dalit development in Tamil Nadu, began to rethink its policy on caste and development. What emerged from a programme review was a critical re-assessment of the consequences of Dalit-focused and network approaches to development. Position papers argued that the politics of recognition had become divorced from the politics of redistribution producing a ‘communitarian’ development approach that was divisive and fragmenting. This approach (like the SC reservations policy) drew resources to middle-class, articulate representatives strengthening Dalit politics and activism while failing to fundamentally change the socio-economic situation of the majority. At worst, narrow caste identities were reinforced and fragmentation and conflict were deepened or reproduced in development institutions including NGO networks making cooperation impossible. The narrow identity focus of Dalit development was thought to have stifled creative search for alternative development and aligned NGOs with a damaging ethnicized politics.

CCFD representatives worked with partners to develop a new approach. Firstly this was territory- rather than identity- focused, based on an analysis of regional patterns of poverty and exploitation. Second, it sought to bring together NGOs and social movements based on different identities and with complementary skills to address these issues (for example Dalit NGOs working on land rights, fisher movements on coastal struggles, farmer and urban land struggles, adivasis mobilised for forest rights or Dalit Panchayat presidents). The approach was identified as ‘trans-casteist,’ linking Dalit and non-Dalit groups. This was ‘de-Dalitisation’

28 If NGOs in India were long regarded as substituting for the failures of political parties (Jenkins 2009: 419), here the party substituted for the failing of NGO forms. This is only one of many ways in which NGOs have contributed to the emergence of Dalit political parties, even though, significantly this role is systematically downplayed by parties to historicise their origin in popular movements (the NGO is still politically embarrassing, cf. Jenkins 2009: 413).
in that it departed from the *exclusivist* Dalit approaches, arguing that only through wider coalitions of the poor would Dalit interests truly be served, and the Ambedkarite annihilation of caste be advanced and an effective strategy against poverty and social exclusion. Identity-based approaches of caste and religion (Dalit, Christian) only deepened socially fragmentary and conflict-prone ‘communitarian’ approaches, which donor funding patterns had encouraged.

The strong emphasis on common interest coalitions of NGOs and social movements, together with a practice of mass action, public campaigns and high profile public agitation on livelihood issues had two further implications. First, it implied a criticism of personalised, clientalist and competitive forms of NGO networks which fragmented civic action into organisational self-interest while failing to bring about significant material or social transformation anywhere. Second, the strategy was a response to the poor management by Dalit NGOs of the tension between fighting for rights, on the one hand, and leveraging resources for government programme resources, on the other; which had too easily turned activists into sub-contractor roles, closing rather than opening progressive spaces within the state system. Reflecting on the experience of HRFDL, CCFD staff spoke of the need for a sharp turn from NGO networks to mass-action. As the Dalit rights discourse which had launched NESA and HRFDL lost focus, the conceptual distinction between movements and NGOs was again underlined.

CCFD also wanted to turn to regional social researchers for a closer examination of the context and consequences of social actions. But perhaps, most significantly their appeared to be willingness to be more explicit about the donor’s own role as a stakeholder within the process rather than as a hidden hand without.

The new approach needed a practical focus. The issue of *land rights* (and allied concerns) was a good way to unite the separate struggles of Dalit, adivasi, fisherfolk and others and the issues of panchami land rights, forest rights and coastal protection and the common concern with state and corporate land grabs under provisions for Special Economic Zone. These were among the issues discussed in the September 2010 workshop that brought together representatives from such NGOs and movements and led to the formation of the Tamil Nadu Land Rights Federation (TNLRF). The coalition would coordinate NGOs and social movements at district as well as state-levels, study the context of its key issues, facilitate the exchange of experience between activist groups and build capacity among activists for collective action. The anti-caste discourse is not absent from this proposal, and the Federation is convened by a senior Dalit NGO leader, C.Nicholas (and to this extent conforms to the CCFD insistence that it has not left the Dalit perspective). However, this does mark a departure from the separate Dalit development discourse and networking.

It was underpinned by a popular anti-colonial, anti-globalisation stance and specific criticism of Indian land reform which far from securing the livelihoods of the rural poor, presaged unequalizing commercial agriculture, and a subsequent growth strategy through industrial and infrastructure development which dispossessed rural and urban poor people in a denial of rights to land, water, health. Among the first cases to concretize these issues and the coalition building was a widely shared opposition to Special Economic Zones and one particular case near Chennai that involved the dispossession of land from Dalits in the village of Thervoy, around which mass protest and peaceful land occupation was planned, backed by social research and CCFD mediated lobbying in France against the tyre manufacturing giant, Michelin, whose plant was the largest to be situated on the Dalit land. The issue demonstrated how different NGOs, social movements, left (and Dalit) political parties and the Federation of Dalit Panchayat Presidents could be brought together.
The NESA-HRFDL and CCFD processes are only one albeit significant strand in a complex field of Dalit NGO activism in Tamil Nadu, and there is no doubt about the major impact of this initiative in consolidating a Dalit rights approach and transmitting this to a wide range of NGOs and donors in a manner that has changed on-going programming. While optimism about the transformative potential of Dalit NGO networking has undeniably been dented, the HRFDL experience has also led to alternative approaches to advancing the Dalit development agenda. First, as mentioned, there are efforts to draw Dalit NGOs into wider non-exclusive alliances involving mass action on key issues. It remains to be seen whether such an approach will overcome the tensions generated by organisational uncertainty. Meanwhile, new dilemmas arise as to how to articulate a broad-based approach to local activism with national (or international) advocacy which return the focus to caste discrimination, Dalit rights and centring Dalit experience both historically and in contemporary economic practice. Second, directing efforts towards such lobbying, campaigning and advocacy avoids some of the problems of inter-agency networking demonstrated with HRFDL, although there may be costs to disengagement from the broad base promised (if not always delivered) by an NGO forum. The experience of the NCDHR — an issue umbrella without an affiliated member base — might be a case in point. A third, current is to develop a tighter issue-focus. An example would be the Dalit budgeting or the Special Component Plan which requires the work of dedicated agencies such as Social Watch- Tamil Nadu. Each of these approaches which have developed in parallel or post-HRFDL are the focus of analysis within the Caste Out of Development research consortium.

12 CONCLUSIONS

The central problem that this paper addresses is that Dalit NGO ‘networks’ have been remarkably successful in creating space for a Dalit rights approach to development, interlinking the agendas of development and Dalit political aspirations; and yet these initiatives are fragile, short-lived and tend to fragment. I have suggested that to understand this dilemma it helps to see Dalit NGO networking as a two-level process, involving two kinds of analysis. At one level, HRFDL (and to a degree NESA also) was a ‘network’ in the sense of a powerful ‘mobilising metaphor’ (such as ‘community’ has also been). As such it was it was conceived as a ‘self-organising system rather than a control centre’ (Knox et al 2006: 132). At this level, the network is understood as a ‘discursive effect.’ It was not a descriptive label for an actual set of NGO relationships, but rather a ‘storied network’, a construct that did not pre-exist (or exist outside) its enactment in happenings, events, meetings, conversations, reports. HRFDL came into existence episodically in what the NESA Director later referred to as ‘bouts of visibility.’ To say that the ‘network’ is an abstraction is not however to deny that it has powerful effects – it articulated a coherent discourse on Dalit rights; it mobilised a range of supporters, and it was the network concept that was the object of financial support from international donors. The network provides means for an imagined global polity (a Human Rights agenda) a way to interact with its constituency (Watkins et al 2011: 50). Goals that are vague or unreachable generally encourage mobilisation rather than doing. As Watkins et al. put it

“…NGOs whose goals are to transform individuals and communities over the longer-term lack specific technologies with known relationships between inputs and outputs. This causes NGOs to behave in ways that resemble culture-producing organizations, such as
those that create and market films or women’s fashion: these organizations also cannot establish a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the technologies they employ and the outcomes they produce (Hirsch 1972).”

NESA and HRFDL can to a degree be seen as ‘culture-producing organisations’ in this sense. Analysis at this level, has then to look at the discourse, events and mobilisations and culture produced as ‘the network’.

At a second level, HRFDL (and NESA) was a set of exchanges between NGOs (or donor-NGOs) that can be understood in organisational terms. In this view, what seems most evident (corroborated from other NGO contexts) is that “uncertainty is a major determinant of the structures and practices of NGOs” (ibid: 46). First, there is uncertainty across the ‘input boundary’ of the NGO organisational field, sometimes generated by the ‘capricious nature of funding’ (ibid: 17): donors expect sustainability and so provide only short-term or programme-specific funding (ie., not recurrent costs); they expect NGOs to adapt to policy changes or even withdrawal entirely. This does not allow for specialisation — NGOs have to become generalists, adaptive and self-reinventing. We have seen how Dalit NGOs link horizontally to try to mitigate uncertainty through multiple collaborations, but also how this can increase insecurity, the result being ‘that the funding environment becomes even more chaotic than the hierarchical term “aid chain” suggests’ (ibid: 19-20). At the same time, funders seek to embed NGOs (and their networks) in the community by giving ideological preference to CBOs; but this tends to have the reverse effect of encouraging community groups to turn into NGOs perhaps separated from their villages. As Watkins et al. note from broader comparative analysis, ‘[i]ronically, an NGO that began as a membership group then is encouraged by contractors to “ empower the community” and “encourage ownership” through “participation” (2011: 17).

Second, are the uncertainties around the ‘output boundaries’. It is hard to demonstrate the relationship between inputs (finance, trainings, meetings) and outputs (land acquisitions, convictions, empowered Dalit panchayat presidents etc.). Typically Dalit NGOs are expected to have ambitious goals (social transformation) while remaining adaptable to shifting (or multiple) donor demands. This pushes most to become generalists offering mostly talk-based ‘technologies’ — meetings, workshops, trainings etc. (ibid). The relationship of these activities to social change is unavoidably ambiguous. Donors have uncertain knowledge about what is going and which goals are being met. This ignorance and ambiguity can allow a degree of autonomy of action (or inaction) locally; but it also increases reputational risk, given that the outcome of evaluations is uncertain and dependent upon specific interpretations and arbitrary judgements, and that output uncertainty spreads mutual scepticism among NGOs. Of course, there is always an incentive make impressive claims of success, but equally common are those who delight in puncturing them. ‘Monitoring? We are clever, we can manipulate,’ says an old NGO hand, before scoffing at how ‘an NGO gets 10 acres of panchami land by spending 10 lakhs [and] keeps telling this for another five years as an achievement;’ and then goes on to explain that if you align the budgets of the hundred NGOs in his district working on Dalit rights with yearly budgets exceeding 20 lakhs with the total amount of land that has been recovered and distributed to Dalits, with half that money more Dalits could have benefitted if land had been directly bought and handed to them. Or on another occasion, scorn is poured on the idea that Dalit Panchayat presidents really got elected because of NGO interventions, when he sees only ‘normal political processes – patronage, spending money, payoffs – normal dirty politics so you cannot claim [this] as the benefit/outcome of the movement.’ Of course, it is not necessary to be critical to realise that
any NGO input produces its effects only through intersection with existing social and political processes (Watkins et al 2011: 3).²⁹

In the end, the experience of NESA and HRFDL is important because it is placed at the centre of a wider dilemma regarding the contribution of NGOs to Dalit empowerment: should they broaden the scope of their work through advocacy and campaigning on Dalit rights; should they broaden their base through transforming into people’s movements or move closer to Dalit party politics? The problem is that success in the field of advocacy and lobbying, such as that achieved by NCDHR, has been attained with the loss of a broad organisational base. On the other hand, HRFDL which served the purpose of drawing national and international campaigns to local civil society through its NGO affiliates, found itself caught in the difficult organisational relations produced, especially, through funding flows. NGO activists who escape from the uncertainties of NGOs into party politics (or operate on both levels) are drawn into other compromises. The strength and advantages of coordinated civil society action through NGO networks are not so self-evident. New NGO networks, coalitions, fronts, or federations continue to be formed with the promise to deliver on particular Dalit agendas. The conclusion here is that these are likely successfully to combine the campaigning clarity of a ‘network’ and an credible organisational base only if careful attention is paid to organisational relationships along with the clarity of issue analysis and strategy (which is the usual focus). If issues at the organisational level are to be anticipated and dealt with, it may be helpful to begin with a broad mapping of the ‘distribution of uncertainty in the organisational fields of NGOs’ (ibid: 46). This might involve tracing exchanges through the paths of funding. This is just one element in a now needed awareness of the organisational complexities of federated civil society action that to date has too easily been dismissed in the vague judgements of ‘poor leadership’, ‘ego problems’ and the like.

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