

## NGOs as *thekādārs* or *sevaks*? Identity crisis in Nepal's non-governmental sector

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### Yogis and stomachs<sup>1</sup>

It's staff meeting day in the field office of BEACON, a national NGO. Around 12 p.m. staff drift into a small square room, with chairs and benches scavenged from other parts of the cement office. The office head, Dharma, opens the proceedings: "You, Ram Chandra, take the minutes" and to staff, some sitting two to a chair, caps bearing the NGO's logo, others sitting on a mat in the centre of the room, he says: "We'll go on until 3.30 p.m. Say anything you want inside this room and time, but tomorrow do not go and say something else outside. What's the agenda today? What will we discuss?"

"I have one, sir: Budget and programme?" says Kiran. Dharma writes on his notepad. (There is no board in the room.)

"I also have something, sir, it's for example—"

"Don't explain it now!" Dharma interrupts him.

"Ticket" corrects the first.

Dharma writes the word 'ticket' down. "*Aru* (anything else)?"

Another member of staff suggests:

"*bhāt* (cooked rice)."

"What do you mean, *bhāt*?"

"Say DA (daily allowance)," a third person urges the first.

"When one comes to the meeting one has to eat, one needs DA," the first explains.

Dharma jots down 'DA'.

"And in relation to trainings, sir."

"And communications."

"Torch batteries."

"Cycle repairs!"

<sup>1</sup> A *yogi* or *jogi* generally refers to an ascetic, a religious mendicant. This passage, as all narratives of the field in this paper, is based on my fieldnotes. All details are as recorded at the time of fieldwork (October 1996–December 1997) and verbal exchanges are verbatim. A list of acronyms used appears on pp. 32–3.

"And sleeping bags!"

Dharma lifts his head from the notepad:

"Are we going to spend half an hour on agenda-making too?"

Pell-mell, staff call out their items: staff evaluations, the date for the next staff meeting, trainer allowances, Non-Formal Education (NFE) class fees, division of labour, and wages. The meeting roller-coasters along, with staff bickering and late arrivals, until eventually the sticky matter of bills and transport is broached.

"When we go to areas where our community is, we can get food [for free] but bus and lodging can add up to 500 rupees per field trip," says Dhruva.

"There is no policy of reimbursing staff when coming to staff meetings," Dharma responds to an earlier query. "They must come at their own expense."

"The budget given is not sufficient," says Madhu. "You do not realize how expensive travelling is, how much is expended on going to the field, because you always travel in the donor's car..."

"We do realize the cost of field trips." Dharma is interrupted by another wave of staff protestation:

"The budget is not sufficient," says Charan. "We also have kids, a stomach; we don't want to make our kids *kamaiyā*<sup>2</sup> by doing social service!"

"Backward, backward, it's the staff who are backward here!"<sup>3</sup> says Ashok.

"It's the staff who are oppressed!" says Hridaya.

Dharma finally breaks through the laughter. "You have all only talked about facilities; only one or two have brought issues related to the programme!... We are social servants (*samāj sevak*); we are *yogis* too."

In a more sober tone, Mani states: "We must make a request for a budget because it costs 100 rupees to go to area D."

"Well, let's propose this at the policy review meeting. Next point?"

"Training," proposes Mahanta.

"Yes, we don't get training" says Charan. "We field staff just run the field and cannot [for lack of training] explain to villagers when they ask particular questions. Training is only for senior staff; when will we junior staff get any?"

"We have taken so many trainings; but have you been able to use them?" Sita, from the top of the room, responds to the field supervisor from area D.

<sup>2</sup> A bonded labourer; the statement was meant as an ironical one as the *kamaiyā* were in fact among the NGO's beneficiary groups.

<sup>3</sup> Again, an ironical statement: the NGO defined its target group as 'backward people'.

"People on training also get allowance; that's the organization's money," says Charan. "They get this allowance [DA] on top of their wage. This money could, rather, be used elsewhere, why give an allowance when it's staff's duty to go on training?"

"You will all get a chance to go on training," says Dharma. "The reason why area A has had more opportunities is that information about the training is received at just a day's notice, so we cannot inform and get people from area D..."

"Still, *bhattā* (allowance) could be better spent..." argues Charan.

"Just say [what you mean] direct!" says Dhruva.

"I heard that in some training some people had eaten 4000 to 5000 rupees, when the money could have been used for such things as waterproof bags. I was caught in the rain and all my files got wet!" says Charan.

"When a member of staff goes on training, it's out of his home, he has to eat, and stay out; allowance is provided for in the budget, it's policy," says Madhu.

"Yeah; the allowance should be given but then shared with staff in that area," says Bhuvan.

"Why should it be shared?" says Madhu. "The trainee is the one who has done hard work in the training, so he should get the allowance!"

"Allowance is a facility not a right," argues Dharma.

Ram Chandra lifts his head up from the meeting record book and asks:

"Er, so what's the decision here?"

No decision was settled that day. The meeting went on to issues of budget decentralization, diary keeping, a joint bank account for all staff in this office and in sub-offices. Before the meeting broke up at around 6 p.m., Dharma had a last word for his staff. Pointing to the photos of the project beneficiaries displayed on the wall, he reminded them: "We must look there and remember them and work, it's for them that we do it!"

### Introduction

With the restoration of multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990, and the restitution of fundamental rights such as the right to organize, there was an immediate change in attitudes towards organizations. As early as September 1990, a mere four months after the successful outcome of the

Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), a task force was created with the specific objective of drawing up guidelines for the non-governmental sector. Co-operation with NGOs was prioritized and made government policy; legislation was introduced to create an environment conducive to their full participation; and the government drew up specific areas and sectors in which NGOs could contribute most effectively. The change in government attitudes towards the third sector was so marked that

There are today few countries in the world in which a government has given so prominent a place in development and where NGOs are allowed to operate so freely (following far from cumbersome registration procedures) than Nepal. (Ridell 1994: 8)

The NGO sector boomed: numbering less than 250 in 1989, by 1993 1,210 NGOs could be counted, and there were an estimated 1,800 by 1994. By late 1997, the number of NGOs registered with the Social Work Council (SWC)<sup>4</sup> totalled 5,978, and the figure for NGOs in the entire country was reported to range between 20,000 and 30,000. In 2001, the number of SWC-affiliated NGOs stood at 12,600.

The phenomenal growth of non-governmental organizations worldwide has been hailed in international development circles as the rebirth of civil society and as holding the promise of democratization.<sup>5</sup> In Nepal, however, public attitudes towards NGOs were already less than celebratory in the mid-1990s. Commentators report that NGOs were widely suspected and often publicly accused of narrow self-interest, lack of concern for the poor, and corruption (Mikesell 1992, 1993; Aryal 1992; Shrestha 1994; Lohani 1994; Ridell 1994; Rademacher and Tamang 1993). The images of NGOs as 'family businesses' (i.e. closed off access, but also nepotistic, corrupt) and 'dollar farmers' (or again 'begging bowls' stretched out to or handmaidens of international organizations) were commonly used to denigrate these organizations. There were reports of government officials cashing in on donor enthusiasm for NGOs worldwide by instructing 'their nephews' to 'open an NGO' whenever new funding opportunities for the NGO sector arose; of unscrupulous politicians setting up their own NGO to garner votes; of 'ghost' and one-(wo)man operations with fancy reports and

<sup>4</sup> The Social Welfare Council is a semi-governmental body with representation from the NGO sector. Affiliation with the SWC is only compulsory for NGOs seeking foreign financial support, optional for all others. SWC affiliation also allows for tax exemption on equipment imported for projects, visas for foreign nationals to work with the NGO, government funding for NGO projects, and training in subjects such as project formulation, account keeping, orientation on NGO formation, and management.

<sup>5</sup> See Clark (1991) for an early statement on the subject; Fisher (1997) for a review of the literature on NGOs; Van Rooy (1998) for details of understandings of, and policies towards, 'civil society' in the international development circuit.

letterheads, but no projects. But if NGOs were viewed with suspicion in many quarters, it was also because of the confusion surrounding the very meaning of the term 'NGO'. NGOs were facing not just a credibility crisis, but also what Yogi (1996) terms an 'identity crisis'. In a recent interview (Pokharel 2001), the member-secretary of the SWC argued that the 'confusion' that still prevails concerning the nature and purpose of NGOs is due to the 'double registration system' that applies to non-governmental organizations, and to inconsistencies in SWC and DAO (District Administration Office) criteria for registration.<sup>6</sup> This definitional uncertainty is also a testimony to the relative novelty of the 'NGO concept' in Nepal.

This paper brings an anthropological perspective to the crisis. I attend to the confused and contradictory understandings and representations of 'NGO' on the ground.<sup>7</sup> I contrast what is locally known as 'NGO' (*en-ji-o*) with other kinds of non-governmental organizations, and try to bring out the specificity of this form of organization. The case for paying attention to such understandings is well made by Abramson (1999). Drawing on his fieldwork in Uzbekistan, he shows how conceptual ambiguities surrounding the terms of civil society and non-profit organizations can lead to the corruption of entire aid projects, as processes of cultural (mis)translation generate new forms of knowledge and practice, and new alignments and interests. It is the aim of this paper to describe some of the forms that these new kinds of knowledge and practice have taken in Nepal. This paper is primarily intended as a contribution to the ethnographic record, as there is still relatively little work by anthropologists on NGOs (Fisher 1997, Lewis 1999, Markowitz 2001). The work that has been done, moreover, has focused very much on 'front stage' practices and official 'NGO culture'—whether documenting the history or activities of NGOs or agency-beneficiary relationships (e.g. Hinton 1996)—and has left questions about the meaning of the NGO itself largely unexplored.

The paper is based on research carried out for a doctoral dissertation (Heaton 2001). The aim of this study was to investigate the various ways in

<sup>6</sup> NGOs are required by law to register with the District Administration Office in the district in which their central office is based.

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the present paper falls squarely within the agenda that Lewis (1999) sketches out for anthropologists with regard to 'third sector' research. Existing and potential contributions are listed as "reveal[ing] more of the sector by providing detailed micro-accounts", "widen[ing] the scope of third sector research by throwing light on the diversity of organizational life and challenging Western bias and ethnocentricity", and "deepen[ing] the analysis of third sector research through its distinctive use of an actor-centered, processual analysis of highly complex issues such as organisational culture, and values" (1999: 73).

which members of 'elite NGOs',<sup>8</sup> drawn predominantly from the upper echelons of Nepali society, dealt in everyday life with the considerable social distance that separated them from their intended beneficiaries. Developments in the non-governmental sector were, in the 1990s, beginning to intensify these distinctive social groups' engagement with each other, and this was exacerbating questions of meaning of identities and opening up new avenues for the expression, exploration, and even exploitation of perceived social and economic differences.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, questions about the nature and purpose of NGOs featured centrally in the everyday exchanges and negotiations between these various parties. In this paper, I have chosen to highlight representations of organizational, rather than personal, identity. The representations of the NGO described in this paper are those of staff, beneficiaries, persons involved with the NGO on a day-to-day basis, and as they occurred in everyday life. These representations are informed by, and in turn inform, representations of NGOs in the national press, but media representations do not constitute a primary source for the data presented here.

The research for this project was carried out over the course of 15 months (October 1996 to December 1997), and took me to the offices of over 30 Nepali NGOs, both national and local and spanning Nepal's hills and lowlands, but predominantly in the mid- and far-western districts of Nepal. The core of the study consisted of intense fieldwork in the headquarters and field sites of two large, donor-funded, development NGOs. I refer to these as BEACON and CART in the text.<sup>10</sup>

### **Situating NGOs conceptually: a historical overview of non-state organizations in Nepal**

#### **A very complex sector**

The first challenge to my intention to conduct research among the staff of Nepali NGOs was the fact that there was, despite the efforts by bodies such as the NFN<sup>11</sup> to give NGOs conceptual clarity, considerable disagreement as

<sup>8</sup> Also called 'power NGOs', a term used by Frederick (1998) to refer to high-profile, Kathmandu-based NGOs which monopolize international funds and eclipse smaller, rural NGOs.

<sup>9</sup> See Gellner *et al.* (1997) on cultural politics in the wake of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy.

<sup>10</sup> These are fictitious names.

<sup>11</sup> The NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN) is one of the larger NGO networks in Nepal. According to the NFN any organization claiming the label 'NGO' should not be involved in party politics, personal benefit or proselytization; should give priority to people-centred sustainable development, improve the capacity of poor and marginal groups to meet their basic needs and aim at self-reliance, encourage pluralism and be democratic in

to what the label 'NGO' should include. Commentators agonized—in newspapers, in seminar rooms—over the meanings of 'national', as opposed to 'regional'; whether all non-governmental endeavours—professional associations, youth clubs, and the like—qualified or not; whether the term 'NGO' should be reserved for organizations involved in social and economic development alone (NGDOs) or not. They worried, too, about the voluntary (i.e. unpaid) component of the non-governmental sector, the extent of which was still largely undocumented, as against its remunerated component, and so on. In practice, remarked an eminent NGO activist, almost any organization could call itself an NGO without being challenged (Chand 1991), provided it possessed the 'right connections' at local governmental or international levels.

Today the non-governmental sector still presents a complex profile, in terms of social composition, the size of organizations (from pocket offices to large multi-sited organizations employing hundreds of workers), funding and support systems (from local fundraising at festival times to funding by international government and non-government agencies), working styles (from occasional voluntary inputs to full-time professionals), and ideologies. There is, indeed, no single school of thought nor even an identifiable political orientation, as displayed, for instance, by Thailand's non-governmental sector.<sup>12</sup>

And yet, in spite of this professed uncertainty, there was, and still is, a sense in which an 'NGO' was a distinct kind of organization, still in search of an identity. Before I turn to the main features which dominated popular and managerial representations of the NGO, I give a brief account of formal organized life in the 30 or so years that preceded the NGO explosion of the 1990s.

form and function; should have transparency in formation, criteria for community selection, income, and expenditure, financial management rules, annual audit report, experience of successes and failures, evaluation reports and process criteria, and a number of general members; should encourage people's involvement and decision-making in needs assessment, prioritization, action plans, group selection, selection of group leaders, resource generation and allocation, implementation and evaluation; should build coalitions to safeguard autonomy and facilitate image-building; should resolve mutual problems and promote mutual welfare; should monitor relationships with people, government, and donors; and should share experiences as a mutual learning process (NFN Newsletter, *Proaction* issue 1, September 1993).

<sup>12</sup> See Nartsupha (1991) for a description of Thailand's Community Culture school of thought, to which most local NGOs subscribe.

### Historical antecedents

During the thirty years preceding the 1990 MRD, non-governmental activity in Nepal had been relatively muted, a function, primarily, of the strict control the Panchayat regime sought to exercise over public life. Under this system of 'guided democracy', introduced by King Mahendra in 1960, all political parties were banned, and any formal organization was regarded with suspicion by the authorities.<sup>13</sup> With the Organization and Associations (Control) Act of 1962, the state sought to ensure that no organization would be set up without the prior authorization of the government. The Act principally targeted political parties, but also resulted in the dissolution of all organizations capable of competing with official organizations, and organizations with objectives that could be regarded as political, such as peasant and workers' unions and non-governmental students' and women's associations. In 1977, with the establishment of the Social Service National Coordination Council (SSNCC), non-governmental activity was dealt a further blow. Rather than a means to 'coordinate' and facilitate the social service of private Nepali citizens, its lengthy registration and registration-renewal procedures meant that the SSNCC operated as a further obstacle to such initiatives. Activists today feel that the SSNCC was little more than a controlling mechanism instituted to quell opposition to the Panchayat regime and a means for the queen to distribute patronage (Rademacher and Tamang 1993).

In order to allow for the expression of individual interests, the state set up a number of 'class organizations' representing, respectively, peasants, labourers, women, students, youth, children, ex-servicemen, and, after 1975, 'adults' for professions such as medicine and law. But these official organizations proved to have little popular appeal beyond their central, Kathmandu-based committees, where they were perceived and utilized by budding politicians as a platform to access the National Assembly or Rastriya Panchayat (Sharan 1983).

The only operational, non-state organizations that survived this period were organizations characterized as 'private', in the sense of 'self-interested',<sup>14</sup> organizations whose members were also its beneficiaries. These included,

<sup>13</sup> Under this system, all powers of government were vested in the king, and the national assembly, the Rastriya Panchayat, possessed only advisory powers. A main feature of Panchayat democracy was a ban on all political parties. The lifting of this ban was the basic goal of the 1990 Movement for the Restoration of Democracy or MRD (Hoftun 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Burghart (1994) points out that, under the Panchayat regime, the state did not aim to control people's minds, but rather the public expression of 'private', 'particularistic' interests; and it was only when non-state elements attempted to enter the public realm—whether by setting up organizations or through the activities of the private newspapers—that their efforts were met with repression.

for instance, the numerous forms of indigenous self-help documented by anthropologists doing research during this period: the *guthi* associations of the Newars of the Kathmandu valley (Vergati 1995, Toffin 1984); the rotating credit association found among Thakalis, the *dhikur* or *dhikuti* (e.g. Messerschmidt 1978, 1981, van der Heide 1988, Chhetri 1995); and the many forms of labour exchange such as *parma* found among both caste and non-caste groups, or the more elaborate *nogar* arrangement of the Gurung (Messerschmidt 1981). The 1960s and '70s also saw the establishment of a number of profession-based welfare associations,<sup>15</sup> but their functions were severely limited as they received little support from authorities in the face of pressure from powerful vested interests in the private sector. Several government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) were set up by the government during this period, partly to generate employment opportunities for the elites who supported the political system of the day. These GONGOs included the Nepal Family Planning Association (NFPA) in 1959, Nepal Red Cross Society in 1960, Nepal Children's Organization in 1964. Shrestha and Farrington (1993) also report that a number of PDROs (Professional Development and Research Organizations) were set up during the 1970s to absorb skilled labour that could not or could no longer find employment in the public sector. This concerned, principally, the growing middle class and well-educated government officials displaced by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) measures of the late 1980s and the growing problem of chronic underemployment in the bureaucracy (Shrestha 1990). PDROs were registered as private companies under the Department of Industry, rather than social service or social welfare agencies. They focused on the preparation and implementation of action oriented projects catering for the poor, and were primarily motivated by profit (CECI 1992).

Organizations with a more public agenda, i.e. those that sought to engage with the state on matters of public concern, only started to emerge in the late 1980s. As opposition to the Panchayat regime was gathering momentum and repression was becoming more severe, a number of human rights organizations were established, notably HURON (Human Rights Organization of Nepal) and INSEC (Informal Service Sector Center), both of which still exist today. During the MRD, they monitored human rights abuses, and mobilized national and international opinion and media coverage of the movement. They played a key role, too, in the drafting of the new constitution, ensuring the inclusion of internationally recognized human rights; and they mobilized staff and resources to ensure that the first general elections of 1991 would be free and fair, organizing voter education

<sup>15</sup> E.g. the Transport Workers' Welfare fund, set up in west-central Nepal in 1974, or the Rickshaw Pullers' Association of Bhairawa, founded in the early 1970s.

prior to the event and acting as observers during it.

While these organizations display features of what are termed Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)—in that they serve to ‘keep the state in check’ and seek to ensure the accountability of government officials to the general public—today these are not recognized as ‘NGOs’, but are popularly known by the title ‘human rights organizations’.<sup>16</sup> In contrast with human rights organizations, today’s NGOs strive towards political neutrality. The NGO sector in Nepal characteristically seeks to avoid overt identification with one or the other political ideology, and its relations with central government are publicly accommodating rather than oppositional in tone. NGOs are, moreover, appropriating idioms and functions formerly monopolized by the state, as we will see.<sup>17</sup>

#### ‘Serving outsiders’

The dominant form of organization during the Panchayat years was the Membership Support Organization (MSO), whose members were also its principal beneficiaries. In contrast, the typical post-1990 NGO is a Grassroots Support Organization (GSO), a service organization whose beneficiaries are not its members.<sup>18</sup>

#### NGO work as *sevā*

A remarkable feature of the Panchayat regime was the fact that the state claimed a monopoly on the ‘legitimate expression of public service’, or *sevā* (Burghart 1994),<sup>19</sup> and it was on this terrain that opposition to the partyless regime was often expressed. During this period, ‘public’ services or goods, in the sense of ‘something to which all people had right of access’, were referred to as *sarkārī*, literally ‘governmental’. Public and governmental on the one hand, and non-governmental and private on the other, were conflated. *Sevā*, moreover, has a long history in governmental discourse where it has been associated with the idea of ‘nation-building’, of *deshprem* or ‘love of the country’ (Adhikari 1996). In this case, *sevā* was envisaged as charitable actions carried out by individual citizens, while political and other interest groups were not seen as having a legitimate part

<sup>16</sup> In the literature they are known as ‘human rights NGOs’ but staff I encountered in the field were keen to emphasize that they were *not* an NGO.

<sup>17</sup> No attempt is made here to discuss the institutional articulation of NGOs and the state. On this subject, see Shrestha and Farrington (1993) and Dahal (1995).

<sup>18</sup> ‘GSO’ and ‘MSO’ are terms coined by Carroll (1992).

<sup>19</sup> *Sevā* is rendered as ‘service’ in English, and is used in Nepali in the context of government service (civil service), but also service to a deity, and service to society (*samāj sevā*).

to play in the process (Burghart 1996).

Today, *sevā* also forms part of official definitions of NGOs in Nepal. The Samāj Kalyān Ain (Social Welfare Act) of 1992, which regulates NGOs, places much emphasis on *sevā* in its definition of the kinds of activities (*samāj kalyān kārya*) it regulates. At the time of research, the NFN was lobbying government for an act specifically to set up a *samāj bikās* (‘social development’), rather than *samāj sevā* (‘social service’), organization (*sansthā*)—yet *sevā* was still presented as a motivation and description of NGO activity, including those of NGO members of the NFN. During the course of a seminar, the search for Nepali language alternatives to NGO (*en-ji-o*) led a prominent NGO activist to coin the phrase ‘*samāj sevā garne sansthā*’, literally, ‘organization doing service for society’.

NGO members would highlight the *sevā* aspect of their work in various ways. Official NGO discourse identified the *swayamsevak* (persons doing *sevā* voluntarily, volunteers) with the NGO, while other categories of workers were pushed into the background. In managerial speech, staff were ‘mere implementers... instruments’, and the names of volunteer board members, not those of staff, adorned brochures, newsletters, and occasionally the posters on the walls of NGO offices. In the field, staff would remind beneficiaries ‘it’s for you that we have come’, while NGO staff and management were dismissive of suggestions that they themselves might have received any benefit from the work of the NGO. And when describing their work or the rewards they had gained from it, NGO staff would avoid using words with an explicit connection to profit, in favour of the euphemistic *subidhā* (‘facilities’), *sahayog* (‘help’), or the ambiguous *sevā*.

*Sevā* distinguishes NGOs from *thekādārs*, the licensed middlemen who are generally attracted to infrastructural government projects, and today to NGO construction projects. Staff in CART reported that several local *thekādārs* had made repeated requests to them: ‘Give us the project; it’s difficult for you, it’ll be easier if we do it.’ Despite the pressure applied on the NGO, it had stood firm in its resolve not to utilize contractors. Locally powerful individuals, *thekādārs*, were infamous for making profits by paying labourers as little as possible and saving on materials. The likening of NGOs to *thekādārs* was not flattering and NGOs sought to avoid the comparison. Staff would point out that they did ‘awareness *ko kām*’ (the work of awareness): ‘we bring light’, they stressed, while *thekādārs* did not.

But NGOs are not *sevaks* in the conventional understanding of the term. That the notion of *sevā* was ill-suited to the task of representing NGO praxis was evident in the way *sevā* was used by different members of the NGO to refer to their own practices. The speaker always made clear that *sevā* was used metaphorically: their work was 'like' or 'ought to be like' *sevā*, rather than literally being *sevā*. As Mayer (1981) and Parry (1989) found elsewhere, it was expected of *sevā* acts that they be carried out by individuals, rather than by an organization, and out of public sight. There was also, among informants, a general view that the proper recipient of *sevā*, when carried out by non-state actors, was the kin or ethnic group.<sup>20</sup>

#### NGO social profiles

While legal definitions of NGOs<sup>21</sup> and NFN definitions do not state that they should serve 'outside their community', these do stress the service of 'others'—'the weak', 'the helpless', and 'socially backward groups'—and refuse affiliation to 'caste development' organizations. Traditional organizations and forms of self-help, moreover, are disqualified from the label 'NGO' by their 'membership' status, the fact that they serve their 'own' community or *sampradāya*, a term that is often taken to signify 'caste group' (*jāt*). Contra Shrestha and Farrington (1993), many NGO activists in Nepal today do not consider these organizations to be precursors of the current NGO movement. Rather, they inscribe themselves in a tradition of pre-1960 social movements associated with the struggle for democracy in Nepal and claim links with the Arya Samaj in India and Gandhi's work.

The idea that NGOs may be 'closed' or exclusive is a sore point with many activists and members of staff, and they are keen to rebuff public suggestions that they serve primarily 'their own', whether this group is defined in terms of kinship or ethnicity/caste, *āphno mānche* relations or *jāt*.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the NGOs in the study, management recognized only two criteria for membership and mobility within the NGO social space: qualification and competence. Management would strongly deny that any other consideration had influenced staff recruitment and they were quick to point out that some members of staff were from one or another ethnic group and that the numerical predominance of one ethnic group was an accident of which management had not been aware.

<sup>20</sup> In this *sevā* differs from ideas of disinterested action reported among Himalayan people. Fürer-Haimendorf (1967), for instance, noted that among the Sherpa merit flowed from activities benefiting the general public, even complete strangers.

<sup>21</sup> Social Welfare Act 1992, section 2(ka).

<sup>22</sup> *Āphno mānche* means literally 'one's own people', and refers to the close circle of kith and kin which regularly exchanges favours and information. See Bista (1991), Kondos (1987), and Adams (1998) for descriptions of the institution of *āphno mānche*. *Jāt* means, literally, 'species' or 'kind' and is rendered in English as both 'caste' and 'ethnic group'.

A number of scholars have expressed the view that Nepali society is characterized by an ethos of 'amoral familism' (e.g. Bista 1991) and that the notion of the public good is alien to Nepal (Macfarlane 1994, Burghart 1994). The cynicism with which NGO claims to altruism were received in many quarters suggested that, for local observers too, the NGO project of serving outsiders, through organized effort and in a non-partisan manner, was challenging and unprecedented. A look at the sociological profile of NGOs, their staff and their beneficiaries, requires that the views that NGOs are a 'closed shop' on the one hand, and a totally open organization, on the other, be revised.

Like the GONGOs and PDROs of the previous era,<sup>23</sup> the bulk of today's NGOs' founders and senior staff, and a number of fieldworkers, are drawn from the urban middle classes. The more senior NGO staff, NGO founders and directors in CART and many other elite NGOs, had in fact undergone their early professional training among the corps of 'modern bureaucrats' that emerged during the years of Panchayat democracy. But NGOs are not sociologically homogeneous, and they are providing new opportunities for a whole range of persons who cannot access government employment. These include: the young (post-SLC);<sup>24</sup> students not yet sufficiently qualified to enter government service; recent graduates; those qualified in 'modern subjects' like zoology, microbiology, or environmental science, who would find few outlets in the government sector, as it privileges qualifications in subjects such as commerce or administration; persons entering the job market without the several years of experience in remote areas required before settling in semi-urban work. Most members of staff in the NGO case studies were between twenty and thirty years old; only senior staff (including managers) exceeded forty years of age. CART staff had entered the NGO either straight after finishing their studies or while studying part-time, or had worked in both government and non-governmental organizations, international and national, often as consultants in the case of senior staff or as fieldworkers in the case of junior staff. CART core staff had come from families with a history of government work or were former *jamindār* (landlords) in Nepal's Tarai districts. Many members of the field office staff had practised agriculture, although none had done so as their primary occupation. Rather, field office staff who had

<sup>23</sup> A study by PACT in 1988 (quoted in CECI 1992) found that the staff of 'service type NGOs' and nationally registered organizations were highly educated (65% with tertiary education) and predominantly 'middle class'.

<sup>24</sup> The school leaving certificate or SLC is obtained by means of an examination at the end of 10th grade in secondary school and is the rough equivalent of GCSE level.

not been able to secure work in government organizations or NGO projects in their home area, nor migrated in search of work had, for the most part, held teaching jobs in local private or state schools.

The second NGO case study revealed a similarly varied sociological profile, and many members of staff, like many in CART, would not have been able to access government employment. In BEACON, few members of staff had ever held a post in government or other non-governmental organizations, whether national or international. Many had practised agriculture as their main occupation, a few had sufficient land to rent out and worked as 'managers' of that land. A very large number of staff had also worked as local teachers, one as a school headmaster, several more as NFE teachers in INGO, government, or NGO projects, including those of BEACON. As in CART, a number had come straight from school or 'campus'. BEACON senior staff and founders, on the other hand, formed part of a 'local gentry'. Drawn from the most influential (and often economically most secure) members of local society, they included sons and daughters of village notables such as former *pradhān panchas*, and were informal leaders in their own right as local teachers and social workers. What is true for occupational history also applies to the ethnicity of NGO members. While it was the case that the larger, donor-funded NGOs were run and staffed, at the central office level, by members of high castes and the Newar *jāt*,<sup>25</sup> at the field-office level, 'local' or 'ethnic' staff were given preference. The same logic applied to the regional identity of NGO members: most of the central office staff were Kathmandu residents, while field office staff came from very different areas, mostly rural, from the Tarai to the far-western hills or the eastern mountain zone. While it would be incorrect to claim that *āphno mānche* considerations played no role in the staffing of NGOs, at least initially in the search for suitable candidates, NGOs do seem to recruit their members from a sociologically broader pool of potential employees than the governmental sector.

NGOs are also seeking to expand, socially, the reach of their programmes: they seek to serve 'outsiders'. In these two case studies, as in many NGOs in the research, the social distance between staff and beneficiaries, gauged principally with reference to the notions of *jāt* and *āphno mānche*, was considerable. NGO projects targeted an 'area', and within given localities, criteria such as educational level ('the illiterate'), economic status ('the poor'), and gender ('women') were used to whittle down the group that qualified as 'beneficiaries'. No organization—with the exception of the Dalit

<sup>25</sup> There were notable exceptions: FEDO (Federation of Dalit Organizations) or BASE (Backward Society Education) are examples of highly esteemed NGOs run by, respectively, untouchables and Tharu people.

organizations—defined their target group officially in terms of *jāt*,<sup>26</sup> nor on the grounds that the target population included *āphno mānche* to established members of the organization. This focus on the geographical area in defining their target group led, both in CART and in BEACON, to an over-representation of low castes among project beneficiaries. And instances of kin or *āphno mānche* relations between staff and beneficiaries were very few and more likely than not to be fortuitous. Senior project staff, co-ordinators and 'technical' staff or 'specialists' were generally outsiders to the project district. In the NGOs considered in this study the majority of field staff was not recruited 'locally', i.e. from the district in which the project was implemented. Moreover, where 'local staff' such as junior staff, NFE supervisors, 'peons',<sup>27</sup> and lady staff, were recruited by the project, these persons generally did not work within 'commuting' distance of their home village. This meant that even 'local staff' had to take up rented accommodation (*derā*), returning home at weekends.<sup>28</sup> Only the organization's 'paid volunteers' (women Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) in health/family planning projects, or NFE facilitators, either male or female) worked in their home village and area.

In adopting the language of public service to speak of their own activities, and redefining their target group as 'the public', NGOs were, therefore, taking on functions formerly monopolized by the state. At the same time, NGOs were trying to distinguish themselves from the state, from its work culture, and from its approach to development.

#### Developing a unique work culture

Senior members of NGOs have brought with them to the NGO sector the experience of government and INGO sectors, and these have informed their vision of the NGO and their own work practices.

<sup>26</sup> This can open an NGO to accusations of 'communalism'. The exception were the Dalit organizations. There are several Dalit organizations in Nepal (FEDO, Women's Dalit Organization) and numerous INGOs as well as governmental organizations worked with the Dalits. Besides the 'special case' that untouchables represent, working for the Dalit to the exclusion of other *jātis* was felt to have been made acceptable by 'national and international frameworks' that legitimized concern with the issue of untouchability.

<sup>27</sup> The Hobson-Jobson defines 'peon' as a Portuguese word meaning 'footman, foot soldier' and, by extension, 'orderly or messenger'.

<sup>28</sup> This pattern is consistent with the governmental recruitment practice that has been in force in Nepal since Rana times (see Caplan 1975 for a description of Rana and Panchayat era practice). A similar pattern prevails today: top officials such as the Chief District Officer, Local Development Officer, District Forest Officer, Chief of Police, and the various semi-governmental corporations are outsiders to the district, being assigned to their posts by the Public Service Commission in Kathmandu, but recruit menial staff themselves locally.

### NGOs as 'international organizations'

The beginning of direct and close relations with international development organizations and charities was another novel development for the non-governmental sector in the post-1990 setting. This was a reflection of both the changed legislative and policy environments in Nepal and the increased interest on the part of donors and governments worldwide in working with these organizations. Whereas during the Panchayat years donors were required to deposit development funds with the SSNCC, which then redistributed the funds as it saw fit, today funding details are settled between the INGO and the NGO and funds deposited directly into an NGO bank account. The role of the SWC in the relationship between INGO and NGO is limited to the assignment of an NGO 'counterpart' to INGOs (from a list of NGOs included in the INGO project proposal) to implement approved projects. The financial contribution of foreign donors to Nepali NGOs is considerable: in 1997, it was estimated that the total funds channelled through NGOs amounted to US\$150 million, while the total official development assistance to Nepal totalled US\$391.8 million (*The Rising Nepal Friday Supplement* November 7 1997). Despite the absence of 'hard data', most NGO specialists agree that the vast majority of Nepali NGOs are financed almost wholly by INGOs. Ridell in a 1994 report placed the percentage of foreign funds in the overall NGO budget at 88 percent, and the contributions from local and governmental sources at 8 and 4 percent respectively.<sup>29</sup>

A cartoon published in the national daily *The Kathmandu Post* (November 1997 vol. 5, N<sup>o</sup> 274) depicted the reception area of a five star hotel, crowded by scores of Nepali men in suits carrying briefcases. One man turns to another standing expectantly next to him and asks: "Heard that there's a millionaire from abroad and I've come here to solicit some donation for my pet NGO. Are you all guys for [sic] the same mission?"

<sup>29</sup> This applies mostly to 'elite' NGOs. Local non-governmental organizations such as youth clubs, on the other hand, have long been raising funds locally through organizing games or 'lucky draws' during the main festive season (*bhailo māgne*), giving private tuition to high school students, or in one case running a small shop in the bazaar and putting the profits into the organization's fund. Some NGOs generate resources through general assembly membership fees or donations or money saved from regular project grants by keeping 'overhead costs' (mostly salaries) low. The projects implemented with these locally raised funds, I was told, were necessarily less ambitious than INGO funded schemes. Typically they would consist of literacy or other kinds of educational programmes, as, for instance, environmental awareness campaigns in local primary and secondary schools. In the case of one wealthier NGO, internally generated resources were routinely used to carry out surveys or small pilot projects in order to appear attractive to donors. The NGOs in the study received funds from a variety of sources, both bilateral and non-governmental.

The briefcases all bear the letters 'N-G-O'.

Comments such as these, on the common cultural style of NGO and INGO, were a leitmotiv of lay discourse on NGOs. In the project area INGO patronage was perceived by staff to be central to the identity and the standing of their organization. Kishor, an NGO fieldworker, explained: "Look, if a donor gives money, the community has the misguided belief that we have made progress; and if the donor stops funding, the community may think we [the NGO] are done for (*khatam*)."<sup>30</sup> The director of another organization, which had successfully established itself without donor support, expressed the view that "[Not having a donor] is difficult for management and from identity point of view. People from NGO say we're not an NGO because we don't take money from donors, and government say we are a business." His organization, significantly, did not label itself an NGO but presented itself in its own literature as a 'Social Development Organization'.

Generally, and as the commentators above indicate, NGOs and INGOs were noted for what they shared, rather than for their differences. They shared, first of all, a common language: English. Rarely used in office conversation, English was the language of NGO writing culture. NGOs' written material was almost wholly scripted in English, except for documents destined for HMG consumption, such as NGO constitutions. Administrative rules and regulations, contracts, newsletters, brochures, project proposals and reports—many of which were produced for the NGO or INGO public—were all in English. Very few NGOs had a written culture that did not produce the majority of its texts in English. Some INGOs had begun accepting proposals in Nepali and have considered developing 'partnership manuals' for their NGO counterparts in Nepali, so as not to disadvantage grassroots organizations. Generally, however, status was still attached to English-writing organizations, as it indicated a highly qualified workforce and the promise of competently implemented projects. Many NGOs would seek out and recruit at least one English graduate to polish their reports.

INGO-NGO similarity was also explicit in the timetabling of the office day. The NGO working day would begin, as in INGOs, at an early 9 a.m. to 9.30 a.m., well before government organization staff had finished their morning meal (the latter would then make their way to their office for a 10.30 a.m. to 11 a.m. start). NGO staff often would forgo the large 'morning meal' of *dāl*, *bhāt*, *tarkārī*, opting for an earlier, smaller meal at home and 'tiffin' during a 'lunch hour'. 'Tiffin' would consist either of a larger meal at a nearby restaurant or of some items bought from a local

*bekari*: cakes, pastries, or chocolate-chip cookies. "I have got used to eating lunch," Samriti once told me: "When I was at St Mary's, there we'd have toast for breakfast and a proper meal at lunch time."<sup>30</sup>

NGO/INGO material resemblance was even more striking when contrasted with HMG offices: the whitewashed walls, grey carpets, green plants, and wicker chairs, the jeep or Hero Honda motorbike parked outside modern, cement 'villas' which housed INGOs and NGOs, contrasted sharply with the large Rana buildings of government ministries, their long corridors, and austere décor. The local government office shared with these grander departments a taste for armchairs and cushions clad in white, locally stitched cotton covers, which were all but absent in NGO offices. In NGO offices INGO-compatible software and computers with 'qwerty' keyboards, faxes, and photocopiers, replaced the manual typewriters, one set with roman lettering and another with devanagari, found in HMG offices. The *topi*<sup>31</sup> was remarkably absent in NGO premises, while the place was replete with fashionable 'jean pants', 'sweaters', or shirts, and, on rare occasions, suits; females would wear fashionable women's clothing, either recognizably Western or Indian (*suruwāl kurtā*), and saris on occasions which called for a more formal outfit. In the field 'baseball caps' with backpacks in some synthetic material were the norm.

The main distinction between GO<sup>32</sup> and NGO material culture is that, while GOs stressed the 'local', 'hand-made', and 'traditional', NGOs used modern, machine-made materials. Where NGOs did have recourse to 'traditional' materials and designs, this was generally in less public areas of their organizational life. In BEACON, an organization that placed much emphasis on its 'grassroots orientation', only the less accessible offices were made with local labour, materials, and design. Unlike NGOs from Thailand's Community Culture school of thought, or non-governmental organizations working to promote the culture of one or the other ethnic group in Nepal ('cultural associations'), NGOs did not generally seek 'more authentic ways of life' in the rural or the traditional. Their resemblance to their INGO patrons was perhaps less a product of their desire to flatter their donors through mimicry than a means to distance themselves from the 'traditional' image of governmental praxis.

INGO-NGO similarity was not perceived, by NGO members, as a product of the imitation of ways of being and doing that were the property of foreign organizations. English, in particular, was not seen as the exclusive

<sup>30</sup> One of the most popular girls' schools in the country, located in Kathmandu and run by Jesuit missionaries.

<sup>31</sup> The traditional Nepali hat, worn by men; it suggests a 'formal' dress.

<sup>32</sup> Abbreviation for 'government organization'.

property of INGOs and their staff, but a *lingua franca* of the world of development agencies. Rather, these persons saw INGOs and NGOs sharing a common, transnational, and progressive 'cultural style'.<sup>33</sup> The element within Nepal's non-governmental sector that was explicitly opposed to foreign funding and denounced INGOs as hegemonic was not very pronounced. For some members of BEACON and field staff in CART, one of the prime benefits of becoming an NGO worker was the opportunity this offered for meeting Westerners and practising English. At the same time, NGO members would seek to distance themselves from INGOs, disclaiming too much familiarity with INGO languages and ways. One session of an INGO-organized INGO-NGO conference I was privileged to attend happened to be facilitated by a member of a private, Nepali, management consultancy organization. Concluding the first exercise through which he had just guided participants using both English and Nepali, he commented: "There is a need to contextualize—conshextualize," he giggled, as he sought to play down his all-too-correct English usage. "It's my second language, *testai cha*,"<sup>34</sup> he added. NGO members pointed to differences in the scale of their respective practices: while NGOs organized their infamous 'talk-fests' in five star hotels, INGO staff would eat there on a daily basis;<sup>35</sup> INGOs were housed in large cement villas in the more upmarket areas of Kathmandu or Lalitpur (Baluwatar, Kopundole), NGOs in smaller cement houses clustered in desirable but less sought-after quarters of these cities (e.g. Naya Baneshwore, Babar Mahal); NGO office-workers made do with a single jeep, INGOs had a fleet of vehicles to ferry their staff to and fro; INGOs paid their staff higher wages; and whereas NGOs provided a chance to study locally or in neighbouring countries, INGOs were known to sponsor 'study abroad', by which was meant rich countries of the West.

#### NGOs as field organizations

For many NGO workers NGO work was as different from GO work as it was close to that of INGOs. Most expressed a dislike for the proceduralism of government jobs; the practice of promotion via political connections; the paucity of opportunities for training, compounded by a general 'disinterest in learning'. NGO members would draw attention to their work ethic: "Look, everybody here is busy; if you go into HMG offices, you will find no one is working; they will be chatting, drinking tea." In the NGO there was no room nor time for chat; a stroll through the office would find staff

<sup>33</sup> This expression is used by Gupta and Ferguson (1997) to point to a logic of surface practices without necessarily mapping such practices onto a 'total way of life' encompassing values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. as in the usual concept of culture.

<sup>34</sup> 'That's the way it is'.

<sup>35</sup> This is the case for (some) expatriate staff, not the INGO's Nepali staff.

bent over their desks, sitting at a computer, answering business phone calls or running out of one meeting to another. Directors' exhortations to staff during meetings emphasized 'good time management'—meeting deadlines, beginning and finishing meetings at a set time—and diligence: working long hours, keeping busy at all times, reading the literature on a given development subject during slack periods. For these persons, government work, whether they had experienced it as an employee or as the consumer of public services, was plagued by 'hypocrisy', 'a sense of wasting your time', 'no discipline'.

At any point in time, NGOs tried not to run programmes in the same places as either government organizations or other NGOs, but in practice avoiding duplication was made difficult by GOs' and NGOs' preference for 'responsive populations'. This meant that, to a great extent, non-governmental and governmental development activities overlapped in physical space. But NGOs and GOs did not frequent these same spaces in the same manner. NGO staff reputedly spent more time in individual sites, had more contact with beneficiaries, including those frequently by-passed by government projects, namely low-caste and non-caste groups. Government workers, I was told, would either remain in their office or call beneficiaries to a location nearby the office. "*Rājāko kām*," said one fieldworker, explaining the attitude of government workers, "*kahile jālā ghām?*"<sup>36</sup>

For many in the NGO sector, what distinguished NGO organizational culture from GO culture above all else was the NGO attitude towards the rural or 'the field'. NGO development work distinguished itself from past development efforts through this increased attention to the *gāun*, or rather, the *phild* ('field'), which they travelled on foot, rather than on horseback like erstwhile Panchayati officials, or in an air-conditioned 4x4, like many INGO employees. The NGO was first and foremost a field organization. In official NGO discourse, the mastery of the *phild* constituted an NGO's principal challenge, but also a seal of its authenticity and worthiness as an NGO. The *phild* and its challenges were the focus of an NGO's investment in its staff: the value placed on the *phild* is further stressed by the fact that many of the recipients of field training were not, in fact, fieldworkers, but higher status staff who were not required, according to their job descriptions, to spend much time in the *phild*. Training given to staff in the NGO concerned almost exclusively 'fieldwork skills' (PRA training, gender-in-development training) while lacunae in staff's accounting or management skills were expected to be made good 'on the job'. After 'donor time', the time of the *phild* was the most significant means through which NGO work

<sup>36</sup> A proverb: literally, 'the work of the king, when will the sun go down?' The reference was to government work involving little more than whiling away the hours until the end of the day.

was organized. "We fit our time around theirs [field staff]," I was told by CART's director; I was encouraged to schedule my own research according to the same principle. In the field the exact date and time for monthly meetings were set by beneficiaries, and working hours had to be modified in accordance with beneficiaries' agricultural calendar and the weather. In everyday exchanges, moreover, social hierarchies were to some extent reversed. NGO staff and beneficiaries were very aware of the relative social distance separating them. In an earlier period of development work, this distance would have been accompanied by specific patterns of deference. There was still, on the part of senior NGO fieldworkers, an expectation that they should be 'respected' by project beneficiaries. While in government service, Mahesh, a field-worker, told me, beneficiaries would kill a chicken and cook it for the field worker: "They would call you *hajur* ('sir') and offer you rice beer with both hands," he reminisced.<sup>37</sup> The younger fieldworkers had no such experiences to recall and the considerations of status and behaviour befitting the different statuses of beneficiary and benefactor that concerned Mahesh were alien to them. Some did complain of a lack of 'respect' on the part of beneficiaries, and were irked by the fact that beneficiaries 'always want[ed] to bargain for more'. Yet, many would have been as embarrassed by shows of deference as Mahesh would have been pleased, and did not expect beneficiaries to behave in this way.

The idea of grassroots participation in development is not new to Nepal. Panchayat democracy itself was officially defined as a 'grassroots' or 'village' democracy; Nepal's Small Farmers' Development Programme (SFDP), a governmental programme that has been hailed as one of the best models in participatory rural development in Asia, was launched in 1976; and the language of 'mass participation' in development activities featured prominently in the 6th Five Year Plan (1981-1985). NGO and government development practices differ not so much in terms of the premises of the ideology of development to which each subscribe, but in terms of the intensity of their adherence to this ideology. A more thorough adherence to ideals of participatory development and the value of the grassroots was evident, for instance, from the way in which NGO activists extolled fieldwork and fieldworkers—frequently and emphatically—while such enthusiasm is lacking from the accounts of participants in government-run programmes.<sup>38</sup> Through this more intense commitment to field practice,

<sup>37</sup> *Hajur* is the highest honorific form of the personal pronoun 'you'; offering an item with two hands rather than one is also a mark of respect.

<sup>38</sup> See Pigg (1992) for an account of the negative values associated with the *gaun*, Brown (1996: 47) on the failure of the Back to the Village National Campaign launched in 1967 by King Mahendra, and Dhungel (1986) on the unpopularity of Tribhuvan University's National Development Service scheme, under which students at TU were sent to villages for one academic year and required to teach and engage in various

NGOs are further distinguishing themselves from past development praxis and are developing a culture which, NGO members claim, is unique to the NGO.

### NGOs as development resource

Like Ridell in 1994, I found that it was difficult to gauge the contribution of NGO project activities to their beneficiaries for lack of sufficiently conclusive data: NGO members were remarkably upbeat about the very positive changes they had seen in beneficiary communities since the beginning of the programme, while members of beneficiary communities would, again and again, play down the contribution of the NGO to these changes. A large farmer was already producing the crops the NGO claimed to have introduced prior to the NGO's arrival; a beneficiary village had already been operating a village-wide fund-raising and credit scheme, prior to the onset of the NGO's SCO (savings and credit organization) project. On the other hand, NGOs in the research were prized as a source of employment and cash as well as a number of services, including transport and communications, which were hard to come by in the areas in which they implemented their projects.

### Income generation

I have two friends who are now working for the World Bank; they say they don't know what the WB has done to alleviate poverty but it has alleviated their own poverty very well!

Mr Bista, NGO director

The director's remark captures the essence of popular conceptions of NGO work. On the whole, NGO wages were higher than government wages. Field supervisors in one NGO obtained a monthly salary of Rs 1,200, a peon in the central office, Rs 1,600. A technical staff member in the same organization received a monthly wage of Rs 6,000; a technician in another NGO could earn up to Rs 8,000 a month, a project manager over Rs 20,000, while in a third NGO salaries ranged from Rs 3,000 to Rs 10,000 per month. In contrast, an officer in an HMG office could expect no more than Rs 3,400 to Rs 5,000 per month.

Besides their regular staff, NGOs also relied on a number of 'casual workers'. An NFE facilitator working on the NGO's project could get from Rs 400 to Rs 450, a 'child development' class facilitator Rs 800 per month, in one NGO. Another NGO would pay its NFE facilitators Rs 600 per month. Beneficiaries providing voluntary labour for NGO projects (*shram*

development activities in the village.

*dān*) were paid for some, but not all, tasks (e.g. carrying cement was remunerated, getting stones was not; the rate was between Rs 40 and Rs 45 per bag carried).

For both staff and beneficiaries the TA/DA or *bhattā* (travel and daily allowance) given out by the NGO to its staff and beneficiaries when they were required to travel for work-related purposes and on the occasion of office-based (rather than village-based) trainings, represented another valued source of cash. In one training in CART's project area, two men almost came to blows when it was realized that one of them would not get a *bhattā*; both men had come from the same users' group when the NGO had specified that each user group should send only one representative. A local school teacher explained: "Women feel '*hāmilāi ke pāine ho?*' (what is there for us to get?) about NFE. If we say it's education, they will not be interested, but if we give each woman Rs 5, they'll come in great numbers." Again, levels of TA/DA varied, from around Rs 200 for staff, and Rs 80 for beneficiaries. During group meetings called by the NGO and village-based trainings, a 'snack' (*khājā*), often a packet of biscuits, was provided to each of the participants.

The provision of financial rewards to staff was not seen as 'profiteering' but as a means to sustain the high quality of NGO staff's work, which ultimately benefited not staff, but the project beneficiaries. Management claimed high wages were necessary in order to attract competent, qualified staff and preventing them from looking for 'other opportunities' to make ends meet while carrying out the NGO's work. Government staff, infamously, were frequently forced by their low wages to take other opportunities, e.g. consultancies while on leave from their government job, or in their spare time, as university teachers were known to do; or to take bribes. Several members of project staff were actually working with the NGO while on 'unpaid leave' from their permanent government post elsewhere in the country. NGOs in the study were relatively untouched by the absenteeism that plagued the governmental sector.

### Service provision

In addition to good salaries and international patronage, NGOs are, in the general public's view, synonymous with a plush working environment. It is, in fact, part of the appeal of NGOs to prospective employees. This distinguishes them from 'indigenous' or 'grassroots' organizations. A senior staff member of BEACON recalled how its transition from social movement to NGO was marked by the acquisition of 'facilities':

We used to work 24 hours; we didn't know where to eat, where we'd stay; we'd forget anything other than the community; wherever we went they would welcome us and cut a chicken. Nowadays we have become big (*thulo*) and do not go everywhere. If people get *subidhā* ('facilities'), they want more *subidhā*... Then we were totally 'volunteer'; we didn't go by bus because we didn't have any money, but we walked everywhere. Nowadays I don't go if there is no bus... I myself say I won't go if I don't have a sleeping bag. I need *bhattā* to eat, a sleeping bag, a motorcycle... Today expectations are a bit high. We say BEACON *aphīm khāyo* ('it has eaten opium'). It has taken money from the donor and now it can't live without it—like heroin.

NGOs are bringing to rural areas material goods and facilities of different sorts, which are often not available locally, either in the bazaar or in government offices. In the cases of CART and BEACON, these facilities included the office's transportation facilities, its 4x4 or motorcycle; the office's fax, phone, photocopier, or computer; office and project stationery, notebooks with or without the NGO's logo, good-quality pens; shoulder bags, trainers, caps, sleeping bags earmarked for field staff; sewing machines, rickshaws (reputedly), broom grass rhizomes, pipes or cement destined for one or the other project activity; kerosene to light up night NFE classes. Beneficiaries and staff did not have equal access to these material goods. Beneficiaries were rarely able to acquire much more than NGO stationery, and only beneficiaries who happened to be related or a neighbour of a member of staff would be able to access facilities such as the office's photocopier or a ride in the NGO's 4x4. Beneficiary access to project resources was also more limited in time than staff's access to these resources. In CART, stationery was given to user groups without charge for the first year of the project; thereafter, groups were expected to purchase their own.

NGOs had to protect such riches from pilfering, whether by staff, friends, or beneficiaries. Receipts were issued with each item of stationery handed out to staff or beneficiary. The same applied to the NFE classes, which were supplied with a blackboard, chalk, and record books. The NGO's storekeeper was remarkably attentive to staff's stationery use, and at least on one occasion thwarted some staff member's plan to offer his cousins new office fountain pens on his return home. BEACON resorted to painting serial numbers and the name of the NGO on office furniture to guard against the accidental 'borrowing' and 'loss' of any item of furniture. Faxes were put under lock and key, phones had their 'long distance calls' facility removed; and people wandering in from the bazaar in search of a photocopier that worked would be told that ours had, unfortunately, just

broken down. Always on the look out for possible beneficiary misappropriation of project 'goodies', staff in BEACON redoubled their vigilance after it was discovered that one water tank had been built with hardly any of the cement given by the NGO. Under the cement plastered surface of the tank lay almost dry stone walls, while the cement economized in the process had all but vanished. It was presumed sold.

### Training

NGOs are also a source of specific and valued kinds of knowledge. New technologies of fieldwork being developed in various institutions around the world were being made available to Nepali NGOs, principally through their connection with donors and international networks. The financial outlay required to access trainings, publications or WWW sites dealing with cutting edge development debates and training in field methods (RRA, PRA, Focus Groups, Gender Training)—and develop one's own training materials—meant that they were available to few organizations other than donor-funded NGOs.

Opportunities for formal training were regarded by various *karmāchārīs* from governmental as well as non-governmental offices as one of the principal features distinguishing NGO and GO work environments. Local government officials in the CART project area welcomed the occasional GO-NGO workshops organized by the NGO, and were keen for CART to provide more regular opportunities for acquiring new skills and knowledge. Such opportunities were few in GOs, while it seemed, during field research, that I spent most of my time sitting in trainings of various kinds; staff training and beneficiary training succeeded each other with clockwork predictability. The most telling illustration of the significance of trainings in NGOs was a CV showed to me by a friend and INGO staff member. His personal details, work experience, and education, which occupied a tightly packed two pages, were dwarfed by the 'trainings taken' section of the CV, a five-page listing of training after training. NGOs brought to development work not just expanded opportunities for learning, but a real training culture, and this fact had pushed many NGO staff into NGO rather than GO work. Being staff meant not only that one would 'learn many things', but also acquire a taste for learning itself, as Surya, an assistant to an NGO accountant, pointed out:

I have learnt a lot since being staff... I've learnt how to write what paper in what way and how to speak in which place and how to do what type of 'motivation' with which type of person; what kind of education will be of benefit in what place. These things can be learnt in organizations, with members, with *aguwā mānche* ('leader

people'). The benefit I've gained is the notion that one must study, one must do a job, or do some business. One cannot raise one's family by depending on agriculture and I can show this to others in my village.

#### Accessing middle-classness

Field staff often stated that the financial benefits they gained from the NGO were negligible, insufficient to affect their material lives back home in significant ways. Their choice of schooling, clothing, however did change; as did the facilities to which they had access. In BEACON *kāryakartā* would point to changes in the clothes and lifestyle of central office staff: their wives discarding the traditional dress in favour of more costly saris (a garment associated with higher castes and sophisticated urban dwellers); their children's recent enrolment in private, English-medium schools ('boarding schools'). These choices and the use of (modern, high-status) office facilities allowed staff to enhance their standing, locally, through the performance of everyday tasks such as writing letters or travelling short distances. Liechty (1994) defines middle-classness as an attitude towards education, and many in rural areas who aspire to urban middle-classness pay for private education for their children. The specific work and learning culture of the NGO meant that staff, particularly those members without a history of salaried employment, as they entered this sector of activity also gained access to many of the trappings and values of middle-class Nepal. NGOs, it seems, are acting as an alternative to the educating, in private or state schools, of the next generation: they are providing a fast lane to modern, 'developed' (*bikāsīt*), middle-class lifestyles, for members of rural society. For many in rural areas, the path to development lay not so much in the NGO drinking-water projects, the modest sums available through NGO SCO activities, but in accessing the various resources and facilities that NGOs brought to rural areas.

#### Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have sought to describe the many and differing understandings of 'NGO'. I described the themes that dominated representations of the NGO, and how NGOs both resemble and differ from other kinds of organizations, past and present. Using both etic and emic criteria, I have shown how NGOs distinguish themselves from these organizations in function, ideology, and membership, and also through their 'modern' material life, their field-orientation, and their 'training culture'. I have suggested, too, that NGOs are struggling to create a unique identity for themselves, and it is with this purpose in mind that I recounted the staff meeting in BEACON's field office. As Dharma, the field coordinator, and

his staff, battle it out over whether staff are yogi or employees motivated by self-interest and profit, whether NGOs are *sevaks* or *thekādārs*, it becomes clear that the confusion as to the nature and purpose of NGOs goes right to the heart of the NGO itself.

This state of confusion has profound consequences for NGO activity. It encourages suspicion of these ill-defined organizations and their ill-defined—hence suspect, ulterior, because undisclosed—motives; this, in turn, saps the morale of activists and hampers staff's attempts to establish good working relations with their beneficiaries. It also provides a rich ground for the playing out of the various rivalries that plague the sector as well as its relations with government organizations. As such, it is clear that NGOs are ill-fitted to play the 'civilizing' role—the building of trust and cooperation between members of society—that CSOs are expected to play by the international community. It is telling in this respect that many in the INGO sector in Nepal were loath to apply the label 'civil society' to the NGOs with which they dealt. If these organizations were seen by donors to play a vital role in the development of civil society in Nepal, it was principally in their capacity as intermediaries: NGOs were charged with the task of strengthening grassroots organizations, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), indigenous organizations, co-operatives of various kinds, so that these could develop classic 'civil society' functions, such as enforcing greater accountability, on the part of local government bodies, to the local population and ensuring transparency in the latter's operations.

I noted also that, in the late 1990s, there was no clearly spelt-out alternative to the models of development agents as either private businesses (*thekādār*, 'licensed middlemen'), one or the other branch of the public services, or individual 'social servants' (*sevak*), unattached to any organization and involved in social service for their own community. And yet, there was a sense in which NGOs were unlike other kinds of organizations. Many younger 'core' staff saw NGOs as a real alternative to GO employment and could not conceive of themselves working in a sector that they considered old-fashioned and corrupt. The NGO, distinguished principally by its material and work cultures, was fast becoming the heart of the identity of a newer generation of job-seekers. The most senior NGO members, founders, and board members, stated explicitly that, for them, the NGO represented a means to distance themselves from governmental practice and the traditional, state elite. For these persons, the NGO was an important institutional as well as ideological resource as they sought to re-situate themselves in the fast changing political landscape of the 1990s. Evidence suggests that the sociological impact of the 'NGO phenomenon' may be greater still. I have pointed out that NGOs in the study were providing

opportunities for social as well as economic accumulation for persons who would not have made it into the government or INGO sector. I suggest that this is likely to continue as NGOs are generating a demand for new skills, aptitudes, attitudes—the ability, for instance, to move with ease between the world of five-star establishments and the field, or, as I showed elsewhere, the ability to ‘bracket’ social and cultural differences.<sup>39</sup> It is early days yet for the NGO sector in Nepal, and recent political developments may radically alter the character and evolution of the sector; but in the mid and late 1990s it was certainly the case that NGOs, rather than “reinforc[ing] caste and class distinctions” (Mikesell 1992: 3), were paving the way for a new set of actors to make a mark on public life in Nepal.

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#### Appendix: Acronyms used in the text

CBO	community-based organization
CHV	community health volunteer
CSO	civil society organization
DA/TA	daily allowance/travel allowance
DAO	district administration office
GO	government organization
GONGO	government-organized NGO
GSO	grassroots- support organization
INGO	international NGO
MRD	movement for the restoration of democracy
MSO	membership support organization
NFE	non-formal education
NFN	NGO federation of Nepal

<sup>39</sup> See Heaton (2001) for discussion of the notion and practice of ‘bracketing’.

NGDO	non-governmental development organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
PDRO	professional development and research organization
PRA	participatory rural appraisal
RRA	rapid rural appraisal
SAP	structural adjustment programme
SCO	savings and credit organization
SFDP	Small Farmers’ Development Programme
SSNCC	Social Service National Coordination Council
SWC	Social Welfare Council

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