

FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS, VALUES AND MOBILISATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Report of a Dissemination Event

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Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) occupy a considerable space in the domain of development in most parts of the world. Their involvement in development activities is vast and diverse, ranging from service provisioning like education and health to conflict resolution. Social science research in the recent past has attempted to address questions such as interrelationships of values, organisational characteristics and performance of FBOs, their similarities and dissimilarities with other secular NGOs and advantages and disadvantages in improving living conditions of people. While some argue FBOs have advantages in particular circumstances; are closer to the poor and have more positive outcomes than those of secular NGOs, apprehensions regarding the very ideological propaganda (religious and political) inherent in the development agenda of certain FBOs also exist.

Discussions on the influence of FBOs in development perhaps take its departure from the distinct beliefs and values attached with a particular religion that the organization belongs to or part of. This is also applicable when we extend it to the individual perception of values, development and its relationships. Values are formed by and feed into perceptions of how people view their current life and visions of how they would like their world to be. In other words, the visions people describe of the world they would like to live in also reveal concepts of development.

In certain cases, religions/faith communities have been instrumental in mobilizing people politically to get their development concerns included in the governance agenda of the state, for instance, Dalit religious movements in India. As Prof Jodhka's study shows, this has also resulted in these groups taking a radical position of rejecting caste. This not only invigorated the sense of confidence among members but strengthened the community networks too. The study of Ad Dharam/ Ravi Dasi movement among the Chamars of Punjab, and Neo-Buddhist conversions among the Hindu Mahars of Maharashtra for instance, revealed that the newly developed community networks and resources gave them a sense of confidence and pride about their identity. Further, the investments they have made in developing educational institutions and other supporting systems made it easier for them to move ahead economically and diversify into different activities for livelihood and well being.

In other cases, social movements that are largely secular in nature have strategically engaged with religion as part of their advocacy and organizing strategies. In the case of the women's movement, religion has historically been viewed as an impediment to the achievement of women's rights. However, on the issue of Muslim women's rights, the women's movement has been forced to engage seriously with the question of religion in a communalized atmosphere. Muslim women-led networks such as the Muslim Women's Rights Network (MWRN) and the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) are negotiating new pathways for engaging with religion through diverse complimentary and conflicting strategies. These networks are changing the face of the women's movement and are creating a space for dialogue about the interplay of religious identity and gender within the wider polity (Nida Kirmani's study in the RaD Programme).

Religions and Development Research Programme, University of Birmingham and Indian Institute of Dalit studies in association with Manuski, Pune organized a one day workshop to discuss the above questions further in the light of the following research studies conducted in India.

- I. Relationships between religious values and development concepts and practices: FBO Interventions on education
- II. The development activities, values and performance of FBOs and NGOs
- III. The role of faith communities in contemporary social movements

Sessions and Discussions

I. Inaugural Session

Chair: Dh. Lokmitra, Founder President, Jambudvipa Trust

Welcome and Introduction to the Workshop:

**Surinder S. Jodhka, Country Coordinator
(India), RaD**

Prof. Surinder S. Jodhka in his introductory speech gave a brief background of the project and explained how researches in India addressed the questions of religions and development. He noted that Indian scholarship tended to look at religion and development separately since development was considered more in the form of economic sense; per capita income, for instance. It is also true that in India religion is not talked about on open platforms, perhaps due to the experiences of partition in 1947, which was on the lines of religion. Most of the Indians believed that if politics and religion come



together it would produce communalism, he added. Development was always seen from a secular view point where religion had no role to play.

Taking Sachar committee report as an entry point, the project attempted to look at development as a process of inclusion of religious and caste groups, who have been suffering from a 'development deficit'. The three studies carried out in Maharashtra broadly looked at the role of Faith Based Organisations in development. The studies specifically examined role of FBOs in education and mobilizing people.

He welcomed everyone to the workshop and stressed the importance of dissemination of these studies in the context of the need of evidence based research for policy formulations and meaningful feedback from the community.

Religious Values and Development: Concepts and Practices by Zara Ramsay

The study attempted to compare Buddhist values and notion of development among Tibetan Buddhists at Dharmasala and Ambedkarite Buddhists in Pune.

The study conducted among Ambedkarite Buddhist in Pune showed that caste is still a major obstacle to development. They look at Buddhism more as the religion of Justice, of human rights, and social change. It is more focused on practical ethical system and not much about spirituality. But still the people who embraced Buddhism have not become 'completely Buddhist' as their Hindu identity persists behind closed doors.

Therefore, for them Buddhism is a political image. Religious identity as

Buddhist has become way of accessing the resources through FBO and other development projects. The study highlighted the messages such as "Buddhism erases castes", "we are poor because of the caste system" and "Buddhism opens doors towards the development opportunities" which were heard from people.



Field study conducted in Dharmasala highlighted that the primary development concern of Tibetan Buddhist was independence of Tibet, though basic problems such as food and shelter persisted. Here faith is something that gives them strength to fight for independence even in exile. The study further posed the critical question that independence being the priority question for Tibetan Buddhists and associated NGOs, whether would it stop them from focusing other key developmental concerns of the refugees?

Drawing from the fieldwork in Pune and Dharmasala, the study summarized that Buddhism and Development have very different relationships with each other depending on the social and political circumstances. She argued that the research on religion and development therefore must always be context specific.

Session II: Role of Religion in Contemporary Social Movements by Surinder S. Jodhka

Chair: Rajeshwari Deshpande

Prof. Jodhka presented the findings of the comparative study of Dalit movements in Punjab and Maharashtra that he conducted as part of the research programme. The study specifically looked at the Ad Dharm/Revidasi movement among Chamars of Punjab and the movement for neo Buddhist conversion among Mahars of Maharashtra.

The ad-dharma movement was started by Mangooram in Punjab in 1920. Mangooram himself was a Dalit who got secular education and exposure in the US. During 1920's and 1930's ad-dharma movement was emerged as a separate religious community in Jalandhar, Punjab. Around 80% chamars from Punjab listed themselves as ad-dharmis in 1931 census. Later, it took a new form and known as the Ravidasi movement. They stated themselves identifying as a separate religious group and founded own Deras. With the support of Ravidasi Diaspora in Western countries, they engaged in development activities by establishing schools and hospitals. The Buddhist movement in Maharashtra was initiated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who was also a product of colonial education. The new religious and social identity increased their sense of self confidence and even mobilized them politically to negotiate with state actors. Like Ravidais, they have also established educational institutions through a network of faith based and community based organizations.

The study also drew following comparisons:

- Both are not merely religious movements; but advocated for social and economic mobility and engaged in actively in the field of development. However, both the movement looked at Religion as an instrument
- Both movement realized that it does not long last with secular identity and imagined an alternative community with a distinct religious identity

Both the movements have a modern imagination and stressed on Communitarian aunothonisation.



Discussions

Prof. Suhas Palshikar while discussing the paper invited attention to the following questions.

- Are faith based organizations movements?
- Do they have political potentials?
- Can FBO be a democratic organization and can they do the mobilization?
- Is FBO merely a product of middle class?
- Is there any space and relevance identity politics with the FBO?



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Session III: FBOs and Education in Maharashtra by Martin Rew (Presented by Zara Ramsay)

Chair: Prof. Suhas Palshikar, University of Pune

The study highlighted following major findings:

Government Schools

- SC/ST's children's enrollment in schools is still very low in India as well as in Maharashtra
- 20% children going to school are from the lowest income group
- Despite the demands from NGOs to improve infrastructure facilities in the school , the State does not seem to listen to NGOs
- Teachers in schools are not motivated and they discriminate against Dalit children and do not teach properly in schools

Schools run by FBOs

- Christian schools conveying the Christian message
- Muslim schools are becoming more religious
- Massive increase in size of FBOs

Schools run by Hindu organizations

- Sadhu wasvani right wing but they call themselves as secular; however, the study highlighted that they are not secular
- Hindu middle class engagement
- Charity approach or service just to help people

Discussions

Prof. Rajeshwari Deshpande while discussing the paper noted that following aspects could be discussed in the report.

1. Role of the state with the educational system and right to education as a fundamental right
2. Article (29) and (30) of the Indian Constitution, which talks about the religious association
3. Limited role or spread of NGOs as Only 18% of the secondary education system is covered by NGOs
4. Nature of organization and Cultural politics of the organizations which are involved in developmental activities
5. Detailed pedagogy practices in the schools that are run by FBOs



Concluding Session:

The workshop concluded with an open discussion.

The potential of FBOs as the agent of development and change was a major area of discussion. Many participants expressed their concern on the 'agenda' of FBOs and noted that right wing

FBOs have a strong agenda of Hindutva in their engagements. One participant highlighted that FBOs' engagements in education should be looked at carefully as they can use it as an effective medium for professing their ideology. Some respondents, however, emphasized that FBOs are network building and strengthening organisations, which can engage with questions of development meaningfully, taking the examples of organizations like Jambudvipa and Manuski. Prof. Jodhka while responding to the questions noted that FBOs are not a homogenous category and religious values might play its role in it. He also emphasized that FBOs are not a valid sociological category and there is a need of more research on it.

Many participants responded to the argument “movements used religion as an instrument for mobilization” that Prof. Jodhka made in his presentation. Major reference in the discussion was to the Neo-Buddhist movement, which was pioneered by Ambedkar in Maharashtra. Some of the participants noted that Ambedkar embarked Buddhism as an alternative to Hinduism. Prof. Jodhka clarified his argument further and noted that the new religious identity in fact strengthened the movement.

Prof. Jodhka thanked all participants and especially Dh. Lokmitra, Prof. Suhas Palshikar, Prof. Rajeshwari Deshpande for attending the workshop and contributing to the discussions. He also thanked Manuski team who did the excellent job of coordination.





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