



A Space for the Underprivileged: The Work of Two Community-based Organizations in Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

West Bengal was a pioneer in democratic decentralization in India, but the dominance of one political party and its hierarchical institution structure have thwarted the scope for effective bottom-up planning in its principal city, Kolkata (formerly, Calcutta). Nevertheless, new local organizations have undertaken the task of creating space --social and metaphoric-- for the underprivileged. The paper looks beyond normative expectations and analyzes actually existing civil societies, and to see what civil society actually does or does not do for different people who inhabit the sphere. It demonstrates how one organization - the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) fought for the legalization of prostitution, the reduction in police harassment, and ordinary human rights for sex workers.

But not all organizations have been able to negotiate space for underprivileged people. Unnayan is a NGO the leadership of which comes from western-educated elites with its grassroots workers being mostly ex-radical naxalites. As Unnayan chose to address issues that related to housing, infrastructure, land tenure etc. that was part of an already politicized public agenda, it failed to find the needed political space for it to make any significant impact in Kolkata's planning. The political parties, especially the ruling Communist Party of India - Marxist dominated most spaces of civic action in the city. The paper observes that partisan political class have primarily tried to address issues relating to the mainstream conservative Bengali society and have not wanted to be associated with stigmatized people --from a mainstream standpoint-- such as prostitutes. The author draws from the comparison of the workings of both DMSC and Unnayan to argue that the marginalization of the sex workers has prevented them from being incorporated into the mainstream politics, although this has also provided DMSC with the much needed political space for successful collective social action to improve their lives without being co-opted by any political party.

INTRODUCTION

As has been noted earlier (Pal 2006), there is a growing awareness among development institutions and scholars of the need to empower individuals and households by addressing

what Arjun Appadurai calls “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004), in order to go beyond relationships of patronage between local elites and ordinary citizens. This “capacity to aspire” is conceived by Appadurai as a cultural capacity. In a detailed ethnographic account of a pro-poor alliance of housing activists based in Mumbai who are building a global coalition to serve their vision, Appadurai sees a kind of grassroots globalization (Appadurai 2001) that has replicated itself in more than a dozen countries in Africa and Asia (notably in India, South Africa and Thailand). He points out:

“In this ongoing exercise, which is a textbook case of what ‘empowerment’ could really mean, important segments of Mumbai’s slum dwellers are exercising collectively the sinews of the capacity to aspire, while testing their capacities to convince skeptics from the funding world, the banking world, the construction industry and the municipality of Mumbai that they can deliver what they promise, while building their capacities to plan, coordinate, manage and mobilize their energies in a difficult and large-scale technical endeavour.” (Appadurai 2004 p.73)

It is reasonable to ask the question: if grassroots mobilization was so successful in “empowering” marginalized communities in Mumbai to negotiate in metropolitan decision-making, why has it failed to have a similar impact in Kolkata, a metropolis of similar size in the same country? Indeed, civic activism in the area of urban planning in Kolkata has been documented as having failed (Mageli 2004). This is despite the fact that the state of West Bengal, of which Kolkata is the capital, has had an elected communist government advocating democratic decentralization and bottom-up planning in the state for the last 28 years. West Bengal is widely believed to have provided the longest and most elaborate experiment in local democracy in India (Thomas Isaac and Franke 2002). The stark contrast of Kolkata’s failure in relation to Mumbai takes on added significance when we note the international recognition of the Mumbai Alliance model. There is a need for comparative research in order to better understand the differences in contexts that might explain the differences in grassroots empowerment in cities in India.

What is interesting is that until not so long ago, Kolkata had no less an active urban social movement in the form of NGO activism and voluntarism than Mumbai. Eldrid Mageli has described the long and rich tradition of associational life from the colonial times in Kolkata, which contributed to the use of the term “Bengali Renaissance” to characterize this epoch (Mageli 2001). She also describes the disillusionment with the government performance in substantially improving the lives of the poor in the late 1960s and 1970s in West Bengal. Economic crises and political instability, droughts, floods, price rises and the influx of refugees after the liberation of Bangladesh contributed to the emergence of a new generation of social and political activists. In Kolkata, numerous civil rights groups were formed to protest the imposition of a national state of emergency in 1975. Soon after, people’s participation and the empowerment of the poor became part of the new rhetoric among NGO activists in the city. In particular, an alliance similar to the one in Mumbai evolved under the initiative of a Kolkata-based NGO called Unnayan (a Bengali word meaning “development”). It consisted of a community-based organization (CBO) called Chhinnamul Sramajibi Adhikari Samity and the National Campaign for Housing Rights, which engaged in advocacy and lobbying within the government’s policy-making process. The launch of the National Campaign for Housing Rights at the national level led Unnayan to be regarded as significant in the urban social movement, not just in Kolkata but also throughout India. Eventually, in the late 1990s, the NGO and the campaign lost steam and disintegrated.

If we delve deeper into Unnayan’s failure to sustain a significant role in metropolitan planning, we find hints of political fragmentation discussed in the later sections of this paper.

Many of the Unnayan workers were members of the radical Naxalite movement¹ of the 1960s and 1970s, and the general perception among these fieldworkers was that the organization was being driven by foreign-educated, upper middle-class elites, a trend which seemed to result in class fragmentation and the ultimate demise of the organization (Mageli 2001 p.221).

Non-partisan, non-governmental organizations in Kolkata existed not just in the past. In areas other than urban development planning, Kolkata still has examples of successful civic activism. A case in point is HIV/AIDS prevention among the prostitutes of Kolkata's red light district of Sonagachhi. Instead of using health extension workers to spread AIDS awareness and increase condom use, in 1992 a team of doctors trained a small group of 12 sex workers as peer educators, to pass on information to their co-workers. This mobilization of sex workers for HIV/AIDS intervention led, over a period of two or three years, to a metamorphosis in the sex workers' aspirations. They founded a union called Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC – literally meaning Powerful Women Coordination Committee) to fight for legalization, a reduction in police harassment, and other rights (Rao and Walton 2004). The mobilization of this marginalized and stigmatized population has been widely acclaimed, not just nationally but internationally. Now, sex workers from all over Asia visit Kolkata to learn from DMSC how to organize themselves to demand legal rights and protection, how to practice safe sex and how to resist those who try to take away their hard-earned incomes.² My hypothesis is that DMSC's success is attributable to the political space around these marginalized women. In the absence of large grants from international donor agencies, and a leadership that grew within the community unlike one that is imposed from the outside, these women were successfully able to carve out the required political space to mobilize themselves. The social stigma attached to prostitution in Kolkata's conservative society discouraged political parties from co-opting HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness activities among prostitutes. This allowed NGOs and civic activists to become involved and to work with the sex workers in a way that was hugely successful.

The next section elaborates on the rationale for selecting the two cases. The third section of this paper presents the political and social context of Kolkata within which the two cases emerge. The subsequent sections briefly describe the two organizations. The last section concludes by drawing from the comparison of the two organizations and presents policy implications for researchers, governments and other civil society organizations.

SELECTION OF THE CASES

There are a number of similarities between the two organizations that I choose to compare. Both organizations grew out of a belief in the potential of locally generated social movements, over the years, that have come to be reflected in development theory in general (Korten 1990). In the 1990s, "empowerment" of the people, "local knowledge", "participation" and development "from below" became part of the theoretical discourse on development for the poor (Long and Villarreal 1993). Unnayan's Chhinnamul experiment and DMSC were both in line with this - an emphasis on people's participation through social action and grassroots mobilization. Also, both emerged in the same city and around the same time thus

¹ This movement started in West Bengal in 1967 and spread to other parts of India, particularly to Andhra Pradesh. The movement consisted, for a large part, of students who established strongholds in rural areas. Using guerrilla tactics, they engaged in the killing of individual landlords and, branded as terrorism, the movement was severely repressed by the Bengali government in the early 1970s. See Banerjee, Sumanta (1980), *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising*, Zed Books, London.

² Bhaumik, S (2005), "India sex workers demand rights", BBC News On-line, accessible at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4256412.stm

allowing us to control for cultural, institutional, time and geographically sensitive variables. Both grew out of middle-class activism with similar goals of empowerment and greater voice for the marginalized sections of the society in public decision-making. DMSC and Unnayan/Chhinnamul were both partly a movement – for empowerment and community building – and at the same time, a service provider with funding from outside source for accomplishing specific goals or services for their own sets of target populations.

Despite sharing the above similarities, the two cases differ in important ways. First, they exhibit very different outcomes. Unnayan and Chhinnamul, after an initial success in mobilizing the poor slum-dwellers in Kolkata, disintegrated as an organization. DMSC successfully continued and scaled up its activity of mobilizing the prostitutes of Kolkata and other cities in India and the subcontinent. Second, the two organizations differ in the ways they were funded or not funded through external agencies. Third, their choice of target groups (stigmatized prostitutes versus a broader socio-economic group that also constitutes a substantial vote bank for political parties) was significant in influencing the trajectories these two organizations followed. Fourth, the two cases differed significantly in who took the driver's seat. This had the potential to create conflicts in institutional logics of different kinds of organizations within the movements, along with issues of who controls the networks that are created as part of the mobilization.

Kolkata – the city

Politically, Kolkata and the rest of West Bengal have been through a number of periods of turmoil in the first three decades after India's independence. First, the partition of Bengal led to two massive influxes of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), once in 1947 and again in 1971. This put additional pressure on the already crippled infrastructure of Kolkata. Second, the violence of the radical Naxalite movement of the 1960s and 70s and its brutal suppression and the rise of "electoral communism" posed challenges to the existing Congress Party's grip on the state. Finally, the electoral victory of the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPI-M)-led coalition of left parties in the West Bengal legislature in 1977 and its subsequent consolidation of power at all governmental levels within the state has led to its continuing in office for six consecutive terms spanning 30 years.

The initial electoral successes of CPI-M have been largely due to the popularity of its land redistribution policy mostly among the rural poor. Over the last twenty-eight years, it has consolidated its power-base throughout the state including in the urban areas, not always by fair means. The sheer length of time that the party has maintained its hold on the state administration has made the line separating the party and the state's administrative machinery (including the police) less distinct (Sanyal 2005). Both the local and the national media have time and again reported wide-spread electoral irregularities - rampant rigging, booth jamming, casting of false votes, voter intimidation, assault of opposition candidates by CPI-M cadres and the police etc. – in both municipal and state legislative assembly elections (Statesman News Service 2005).

Although these allegations cannot be independently verified – and for that matter the CPI-M also alleges that opposition parties indulge in poll-related violence – a matter of greater concern is the number of uncontested seats. In the local elections held in West Bengal in May 2003, about 6,300 seats (nearly 11 per cent of the seats) went uncontested, and most of them went to the CPI-M and its allies (Mathew 2003). Although one can only speculate about the reasons for opposition parties not fielding candidates for these seats, the fact remains that one party has held sway over the state administration for a long period of time, and that this one-party dominance has led the state to a condition that can best be described as a pseudo-democracy.

It would be wrong, though, to assume that fraud and the threat of violence are the only reasons for the Left Front's continuous electoral victories. The opposition parties in the state are disorganized and highly fragmented. Internal divisions between factions in the main opposition party (the Trinamul Congress – TNC) and divisions among different opposition parties have helped the Left Front in the elections (Statesman 2002). In addition, in sharp contrast to Bangalore where a significant number of municipal councilors are elected as independents without political affiliations (Benjamin 2000), Kolkata's electoral politics are extremely partisan in nature with very few independents winning elections.

Table 1: Number of state assembly seats won by CPI-M out of 294 total seats

Year	1977	1982	1987	1991	1996	2001	2006
Number of CPI-M seats	177 (230)	174 (238)	186 (251)	189	157 (203)	143 (199)	175 (233)

Source: Basu, 2002, Chaudhuri, 2001, and the Election Commission of India website. Figures in parentheses are total number of seats won by the Left Front coalition of which CPI(M) is the dominant party.

In addition, a recent article (Sarkar 2006) argues that economic stagnation and increasing informalization of West Bengal's economy, far from weakening the Left Front's hold in the state, have actually helped enhance its powers. Using social, economic and election data for West Bengal, Sarkar infers that the vulnerability of those who depend on the informal economy have made them increasingly dependent on the Left Front for protecting their livelihoods. He argues that if formal sector jobs were readily available in the state, and if the formal legal system were less costly in terms of time and money so that the common citizen could seek its protection, the people would have enjoyed a more secure life and hence dependence on politics would have been minimal. Even many among those who are employed in the formal economy in West Bengal – particularly those in state government institutions – believe that they owe their employment to the Left Front. A Class-IV staff member from a local state-run university in the municipality of Kalyani confided during an informal interview that he voted for the party that he believed was his *annadaata* (a Sanskrit word for “food provider”, referring here to the CPI–M). He believed that “the party” hired him to work for the public university because he sees no difference between the party and the administration. This is an evidence of paternalistic relationship (as described by Rudolph 2000) between the state and many of its citizens.

In the following sections, I describe the origins, organizational structures, areas of work and their successes and failures of the two community-based organizations based within the socio-political context of Kolkata described above.

Unnayan/Chhinnamul³

In 1977, the same year when the Communists came to power in West Bengal, an interesting experiment began in the city of Kolkata with the founding of an NGO called Unnayan (which means “development” in Bengali). Unnayan's main concerns were the deteriorating urban situation in Kolkata and the lack of city planning for the poor. From the start, funding was secured from the Dutch aid organization NOVIB and, over the next 20 years, Unnayan was extremely active in housing issues. It was not distinguished by its size (there were a number of larger voluntary organizations in Kolkata) and the total number of its workers rarely

³ The information in this section extensively draws from Eldrid Mageli's work on Unnayan. Mageli, E. (2001). NGO activism in Calcutta 1973-1997: Exploring Unnayan. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oslo, Oslo; and Mageli, E. (2004). Housing mobilization in Calcutta - empowerment for the masses or awareness for the few? *Environment and Urbanization*, 16(1), 129-137.

exceeded 25 and, compared to influential NGOs in, for example, Bangladesh, it was small and possessed limited resources. However, Unnayan initiated two distinct and contrasting movements in the area of housing that involved several thousand people overall, not only in Kolkata but also in a number of other Indian cities. One movement was Chhinnamul Sramajibi Adhikar Samity (Chhinnamul for short)⁴ and the other the National Campaign for Housing Rights (NCHR). While Chhinnamul was mainly concerned with the housing situation in Kolkata, the NCHR was a nationwide campaign launched to strengthen the legal rights of the houseless.

For Unnayan, the aim was to mobilize the poorest of the poor to argue their own case – through Chhinnamul – and to engage in lobbying and academic discussions at a nationwide level – through the NCHR. The initiation of both of these movements represented enormous challenges for a small organization like Unnayan. After some years of intense activism and campaigning – from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s – activities slowed down, differences and conflicts within the organization increased, the NCHR moved its secretariat to Mumbai, and Chhinnamul broke with Unnayan. Partly as a result of all the organizational problems, NOVIB cut its financial support to Unnayan in 1997.

Unnayan's attempts to mobilize around the issue of housing, both on a micro and a macro level, were highly significant as an innovative case of urban activism. As the movements unfolded, it became clear that a number of contradictions proved difficult to solve. However, the overall experiment in mobilization should prove highly valuable for others concerned with NGO activism and housing. Some of the complexities and challenges connected with this kind of mobilization will be outlined later.

Through Chhinnamul and the NCHR, Unnayan wanted to highlight the extremely difficult situation facing around one-third of all Indian urban residents. Chhinnamul was an attempt to involve Kolkata's squatter population directly as political activists, through demonstrations and street protests. The NCHR, on the other hand, was a nationwide campaign concerned with lobbying for the right to housing for all. The main activists within Unnayan and the NCHR were not squatters but middle-class intellectuals, who numbered among them several prominent legal experts. The NCHR's goal was to have passed in Parliament an alternative bill on housing rights, one that would make the right to housing a fundamental right in the Indian Constitution. Although this goal was not fulfilled – the bill was never passed – the issue generated heated discussions in a number of fora, and put the question of poor people's right to housing on the political and legal agenda in the country.

From the start, Unnayan was a social experiment that attracted various well-educated individuals, including well-known intellectuals and researchers. Its founders consisted of a group of middle-class individuals, among them architects and town planners, who possessed visions for housing and urban development and who needed an organization to carry their ideas forward. Originally, the idea was not to effect mass mobilization around a single issue. The first handful of Unnayan members did not see the organization as a social activist group but, rather, as an enterprise that could offer professional solutions to issues of urban development.

In the early 1980s, Unnayan workers realized that the organization's largely technical approach to urban planning was inadequate; housing and the general life situations of the squatters were political issues that had to involve the city authorities. Political and social activism and empowerment of the marginalized urban poor was needed in order to focus on the enormous problems of lack of housing and lack of security of tenure for the urban

⁴ "Chhinnamul" means "pulling up by the roots". The full name means "uprooting for the rights of the laboring people".

squatter population. As a consequence, Chhinnamul was founded in 1984. It was intended to be a mass movement focused on the poor housing conditions in squatter communities, where the community dwellers themselves would take a leading role in articulating their problems and demands. The idea was that Unnayan would give the new organization infrastructural support and guidance. In addition, a number of left-wing political groups in the city offered their support to strengthen Chhinnamul, something which had a significant effect on the development of the movement. Otherwise, the idea was that Chhinnamul would function as an independent organizational entity, in other words, it would be a movement “from below”, with Unnayan merely playing the role of catalyst, mainly in the initial stages. Unnayan’s workers were aware that specific projects in limited areas would bring about only small changes and not do anything to alter a situation in which a large number of the city’s population lived in appalling conditions. They therefore wanted to initiate a process of empowerment at the grassroots level.

Through Chhinnamul, Unnayan attempted to make use of people’s local organizational capacity to create new channels of influence. Unnayan invited both left-wing political activists – mainly people who adhered to a Marxist-Leninist ideology – and people from the squatter communities to create Chhinnamul. Several of the central actors in Chhinnamul – squatter members or intellectual “guides” – had political affiliations.

Unnayan had broad contacts with left-wing groups, trade unions, civil-rights organizations and intellectuals. In particular, people who had been active in the Naxalite guerrilla movement were influential. But the problem that emerged was people’s diverging opinions of what kind of forum Chhinnamul should be. Various interests were at stake. Unnayan was already an NGO of moderate fame. Would Chhinnamul mainly enhance Unnayan’s image as a successful NGO working for the poor? Should it be part of a wider left-wing political movement in Kolkata which already had a left front government? Should it only focus on housing issues or should it include other issues as well? Should it extend material support to the communities, or merely encourage the inhabitants to articulate their demands? Chhinnamul was an Unnayan-initiated organizational entity dependent on Unnayan’s infrastructural support. One big issue was economic. Chhinnamul activists – who were mainly squatters – received no remuneration for their activism; Unnayan workers – who had middle-class backgrounds – received a monthly salary to undertake Chhinnamul work. Community dwellers found this highly unfair; they knew Unnayan was funded by foreign donor and wanted a share of the donor flow. However, Unnayan was not willing to accept this, as one of the basic ideas was that Chhinnamul would not receive financial support from Unnayan. The point was not to effect material improvements in the squatter communities but, rather, to assist squatters on a mass basis in their struggle for a higher standard of living. Basic funds for Chhinnamul were to come from collections, with each settlement making a contribution to the central body. If there was a rally, a particular settlement would collect money for it.

Chhinnamul’s general aim, and a significant element in all its areas of work, was to create awareness, self-confidence and motivation among the squatters. It was on the basis of these general activities that it was possible to mobilize the community dwellers to become social and political activists.

Over a period of four or five years, Unnayan assisted Chhinnamul in launching rallies and protests opposing government housing policies. With Unnayan’s support, Chhinnamul was able to form links with squatter settlements in different parts of the city.⁵ From smaller demonstrations consisting of a couple of hundred dwellers, numbers grew to as many as

⁵ Unlike Delhi and Mumbai, squatter settlements in Calcutta are small and are found in pockets scattered all over the city.

5,000 by 1986–87, with people from different communities in Kolkata demonstrating with banners and shouting slogans. Sometimes, there would be encounters with the police and people would be beaten up. On the whole, however, the authorities took little notice. As one activist pointed out, in an Indian context a demonstration of 5,000 people is small; the larger political parties can easily draw more than 100,000 to a gathering. This showed that the scale of mass mobilization that Unnayan and Chhinnamul was conducting was far below what the larger political parties controlled.

There is also evidence of conflict of institutional logics⁶ of local accountability on the one hand and the logic of scaling up on the other in the case of Unnayan and Chhinnamul that remained unresolved. Unnayan was an advocacy organization constituting of urban intellectuals. Chhinnamul, a creation of Unnayan was supposed to be an organization of the poor with leaders from within the poor communities who would articulate their shared needs and priorities and coordinate action in the form of protests with Unnayan. By the early 1990s, it was evident that cooperation between Unnayan and Chhinnamul had become problematic. This was partly due to Unnayan's increased focus on the NCHR – The National Campaign for Housing Rights. Another reason was the actors' different perceptions of what kind of organization Chhinnamul should be. The movement was soon seen as a platform where diverging and partly contradictory interests were articulated. The left-wing political activists had their own agenda; they viewed Chhinnamul in the context of a wider class struggle. For them, Chhinnamul was part of a larger political alliance against the ruling Left Front government, and both Unnayan and the squatters were necessary in this regard. Community dwellers had their own expectations – that to address their immediate material needs of clean drinking water, adequate sanitation and housing. Some saw Chhinnamul as a possible place of employment; others hoped that their activism would generate material benefits in their communities. Since every day was a struggle for survival, they found it difficult to work for long-term goals. Their first priority was to improve their standard of living. They looked to Chhinnamul as an organization that, with Unnayan's backing, would provide better housing for them.

Eventually, the conflicts within the Unnayan/Chhinnamul grew to the extent that key members left the organization and NOVIB cut its funding. Soon after, the organization ceased to exist.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC or 'Durbar', which in Bengali means un-stoppable or indomitable)⁷ is a forum of 65,000 sex workers based in West Bengal, India. DMSC is active in challenging and addressing the structural barriers that form the everyday reality of sex workers' lives as they relate to their material deprivation or their social exclusion with the aim of altering them.

DMSC is explicit about its political objective of fighting for recognition of sex work as work and, of sex workers as workers and, for a secure social existence of sex workers and their children. Among DMSC's agenda is de-criminalization of adult sex work. In much the same way as Unnayan's efforts towards a national campaign for housing rights, DMSC has sought

⁶ For a discussion of competing institutional logics ref. **Friedman, R. and Alford, R. R.** 1991 'Bringing Society Back in: Symbols, practices and institutional contradictions', in W. W. Powell and P. J. DiMaggio (eds) *The New Institutionalism in Organisational Analysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **Thornton, P. H.** 2004 *Markets from culture : institutional logics and organizational decisions in higher education publishing*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Business Books.

⁷ This section is compiled based on information from <http://www.durbar.org/> and <http://www.nswp.org/rights/dmsc/mahila.html>

to reform laws that restrict human rights of sex workers, tend to criminalize them and limit their enfranchisement as full citizens.

The founding members of DMSC, who were sex workers themselves, had come together through their active involvement in a STD/HIV Intervention Program (SHIP) which has been running in Sonagachhi⁸ since 1992. SHIP began as a government-sponsored public health project, not with any ambitious idea of empowering the prostitutes of Kolkata but to educate them about the menace of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. The strategy adopted for this purpose was to train a few sex workers to become peer-educators among their communities and spread awareness on STDs. The peer educators were obviously more effective than having outside health workers come in to do the same job.

SHIP provided the immediate context within which DMSC came to be formed. The operational activities of the program were designed around centralized clinical services, which are supported by a team of outreach workers who are all sex workers, active or retired. These sex workers, the peer educators of SHIP, were instrumental in forming DMSC. Their recruitment as workers in a program run by a government institution gave them new identities that did not carry the traditional stigma of their profession, at least within the context of the program. It was perhaps the first time in India that sex workers were directly involved in a developmental project which accepted them as sex workers and did not aim to reform or rehabilitate them. Instead, their particular abilities and skills were acknowledged and put to use for actualizing the program objectives. They were paid a daily stipend to compensate for the custom they would lose during the working hours of the program which created the opportunity for them to think beyond their immediate survival. All this gave them the initial impetus and a supportive space to reflect on the conditions that control their lives and take steps to change them. In 1999 the ownership and management of SHIP (also known as the Sonagachhi Project) was taken over by DMSC from the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, a central government public health training and research institute based in Kolkata, which had initiated the program in 1992.

In order to motivate the larger body of sex workers to change their sexual behavior and also to enable and encourage them to participate in SHIP's activities and best take advantage of the services provided by it, the peer educators had to ensure that the entire body of sex workers in the locality developed a positive self-image, had self-esteem and confidence and had increased access to power so that they could articulate their needs and have an interest in investing in, and planning for, the future. They also realized that, given the asymmetrical power relations within the sex industry and given its social exclusion, the only way that sex workers could gain greater control over their own bodies, sexuality, income, health or lives was through mutual support, collective bargaining and united action.

It was this realization that prompted the peer educators to form Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee as a forum of their own, distinct from the funded program SHIP. DMSC at present is involved in crisis mitigation on behalf of its sex-worker members and has been taking steps to improve their immediate working conditions. The members of DMSC have organized protests against specific instances of trouble caused by local hooligans, extortion and harassment by the local police, forcible AIDS surveillance and an unauthorized vaccine trial; they have stopped the eviction of individual sex workers from their homes. They operate a helpline, mainly for seropositive sex workers and their families to help them cope with the social and psychological traumas associated with being HIV-positive.

The basic approach of DMSC's program is pivoted on the principle of "3 R's" - *Respect, Reliance* and *Recognition* - Respect towards sex workers, Reliance on the knowledge and

⁸ Sonagachhi is the red-light district of Kolkata.

wisdom of the community of sex workers and, Recognition of sex work as an occupation, for protecting their occupational and human rights. The organization is active in building broader alliances to promote HIV prevention, care and support for HIV infected and affected individuals and families both at the regional and national levels.

Currently, DMSC is in the process of recruiting brothel-based, as well as floating sex workers, from all red light districts of Kolkata and other districts of West Bengal and has opened branches in all of these areas in order to offer their services to as many sex workers as possible and also to consolidate their numerical strength in order to fight their long-term political battle. An important development in the movement is marked by male sex workers coming to join DMSC on their own accord. They now represent the interests of a particular section of sex workers whose needs, and in fact whose very existence, is commonly denied. All this illustrates their success in gradually scaling up their operation without losing the focus or abandoning the community that they have chosen to serve.

DMSC is quite explicit about its political objectives of fighting for a more secure legal status for sex workers and their children, and the protection of their own rights. Their long-term political goals are to fight for full legal recognition of prostitution as a profession and to demand decriminalization of adult prostitution. They feel that the ambiguous legal status of sex workers make them vulnerable to extortion of all kinds and pushes them to the margins of the society. They demand abolition of existing laws controlling the sex trade as these laws have historically acted against the interest of sex workers rather than penalizing those who exploit them. Also, they feel that, as citizens of the country, they are already under the purview of the general civic and criminal laws and that the existence of laws specific to prostitution only further limits their rights as full citizens and increases their stigmatization. Finally, DMSC aims to work towards forming a self-regulatory body constituted solely by sex workers, along the lines of other professional bodies such as the Indian Medical Council or the Bar Association, which will act as the principal arbitrator of the sex industry. This professional body of sex workers would be responsible for ensuring that the industry abides by some minimum guidelines to safeguard the interests of working sex workers and also to prevent the forcible entry of unwilling women and minors into the profession. As in other professions, this body would also stipulate some minimum qualifications for entry into the profession, one of the principle ones of which would be age. The members of DMSC contend that this will act as a much more efficient deterrent to underage prostitution than state-imposed laws and police action, particularly since the members will restrict entry of young children into the profession not only because they are against any form of child labor and child abuse on humanitarian grounds, but also in the interest of eliminating competition from younger sex workers.

In conjunction with its goals for empowerment and mobilization, DMSC realizes the need to also serve as a service provider to provide specially targeted services to their community members. One of the most significant steps that the members of DMSC have taken is to increase the economic security of its members by registering a consumer co-operative (Usha Co-operative and Multipurpose Stores limited) in their own name in August 1995. They had to fight a long battle with concerned authorities to force them to accept the group's member's professional status as sex workers, rather than hiding behind the more 'virtuous' label of housewife, as was suggested by the officials. Through this co-operative, they plan to start a crèche facility for children of sex workers during business hours which will also give employment to out-of-work sex workers. They have already started a savings and credit scheme for co-operative members. They have also undertaken a social team of members — the Basanti Sena. They are very emphatic that the co-operative is not meant for economic 'rehabilitation' of sex workers who are in the trade, but is designed to provide a financial resource for them to fall back on in moments of crises, to minimize their economic desperation and create space for negotiation. Moreover, they hope that the Basanti Sena will

not only travel around different parts of the country for social marketing of condoms, but will also help in acquainting more and more sex workers with the aims and objectives of the Committee.

The registration of the co-operative also marks an important strategic advantage for DMSC in their struggle to re-frame the definitions and meanings of their occupation. Members of the committee hope to use the fact that a state institution has formally recognized prostitution as the co-operative member's profession as leverage in their campaign for complete legalization of prostitution. This they see as a crucial gain as they realize that, in order to improve the material circumstances of their lives and their working conditions, they have to first gain recognition as legitimate workers and therefore, legitimate agents of the civil society. This realization is in sharp contrast to the Chhinnamul and the leadership within Unnayan.

The process of struggle that the members of DMSC are engaged in has only just begun. It has thrown up a whole host of issues about gender, poverty, and sexuality that have to be debated, defined and re-defined within the process of the struggle itself. The experience of DMSC shows that, for a marginalized group to achieve the smallest of gains, it becomes imperative to challenge an all-encompassing material and symbolic order that not only shapes the dominant discourses outside but, and perhaps more importantly, historically conditions the way the participants negotiate their own locations.

CONCLUSIONS

Mitlin has classified the orientation of NGOs working with the urban poor to highlight the different ways in which they interact with urban poor groups - market orientation, welfare provision, claim-making on the state, strengthening the bargaining power and capacity of marginalized groups (Mitlin 2001). Within this context, the two organizations studied here had different relationship with their urban poor. While DMSC became a force for strengthening the bargaining power and capacity of the prostitutes, Unnayan/Chhinnamul tended to focus on claim-making on the state through its activities for the National Campaign for Housing Rights.

There were other important differences between the functioning of DMSC and Unnayan. We can only speculate on the reasons for the different trajectories that the two organizations followed based on the information available. As a conclusion, I discuss below some significant differences between the two cases that offer lessons for other urban civic movements.

1) Whether the middle-class activists are seen to be in the leadership ranks within the mobilization or the poor themselves, is a critical factor in the whether or not these organizations succeed in deepening democracy. There is an inherent conflict of interest between middle and higher-income sections of urban residents on the one hand and the urban poor on the other; the middle-class has been seen to have avoided paying for greater coverage of piped water and sanitation that benefits the urban poor (Satterthwaite 2007). This creates mistrust among the poor communities in the middle-class-led efforts for empowerment. Unnayan, for example, established contacts in several squatter communities in Kolkata and facilitated a broad platform for mobilization for community dwellers, so that poor people themselves could articulate their demands. But these mobilized community dwellers still remained dependent on Unnayan's leadership, not just for articulating their long term visions, but also for their immediate actions.

“Although Unnayan workers and Chhinnamul-organized community dwellers shared a vision of a better and more human urban development, it proved impossible to transform the poor people into social and political activists who could independently demand that city authorities recognize their existence, stop evicting them and upgrade their communities. One aspect of Chhinnamul that proved to be a weakness was the

fact that it was not initiated from below but, rather, facilitated from above; its very existence was conceived by social and political activists from the middle classes. In that sense, Chhinnamul was not a “genuine” community organization, able to define its own identity.” (Mageli 2004, p. 136)

In sharp contrast, DMSC was founded by few of the members of the sex workers' own community and the leadership has remained within the community who have incrementally developed their ability to articulate their collective needs and aspirations. They themselves formed alliances with sex-workers in other areas of Kolkata and even other cities and controlled these networks themselves, unlike Chhinnamul where the networking and alliance-building was left to their NGO arm, Unnayan.

2) Based on the experiences of Unnayan and DMSC, we note that excessive politicization of public decision-making along party lines prevents access to the political space needed in order for non-partisan, non-state civic associations to participate effectively in the planning process in Kolkata. That is, party politics within local decision-making is in fact detrimental to the cause of decentralized participatory decision-making. Mass mobilization outside divisive political party-affiliated structures is critically important if they are to remain immune to state co-optation. This is particularly significant in political contexts such as Kolkata's where there is very little opposition to the hegemony of the ruling party.

In election manifestos and state policies in the 1990s, several of Unnayan/Chhinnamul's demands were recognized and became part of politicians' vocabulary, particularly within the parties of the Left. These parties were also the dominant political force – the ruling coalition - within the state. This synergistic relationship with mass mobilization of Chhinnamul and institution-building of the political parties in power did not however translate into a successful and sustainable campaign for improvement in living conditions for the slum dwellers. Instead, political affiliations and class-consciousness of some of the Chhinnamul's workers, led to divisions among themselves and between Chhinnamul and Unnayan and the subsequent disintegration of the alliance. On the other hand, DMSC's members remained independent, partly because of the stigma attached to them within the society making political parties less inclined to be seen to associate with their cause. DMSC, on their part, chose to work with the authorities only when they saw it as conferring recognition of their livelihood as a legitimate profession.

3) Outside funding as a source for initiating mass mobilization seemed to have a detrimental effect on empowering communities. Unnayan workers never intended Chhinnamul to be a place of employment for squatter people. Unnayan could not and would not fund Chhinnamul with NOVIB's money. Increased material welfare was not the immediate issue at stake for Unnayan; awareness, consciousness and empowerment were needed first. They were encouraged to engage in social and political activism on a voluntary, unpaid basis. If Chhinnamul, with Unnayan's sanction, doled out money, building materials, food and medicines, it would be contrary to Unnayan's central idea of the need to empower community dwellers. It would make Chhinnamul an implementing agency for Unnayan's social welfare measures. However, as Unnayan workers realized, if Unnayan did not contribute to material improvements, the squatters would lose interest in Chhinnamul. They wondered: why should poor people lose a day's wages to engage in street demonstrations? Unnayan, through the establishment of Chhinnamul and the grant money from NOVIB, had created expectations of a better life in the squatter communities. This contradiction between the community dwellers' impatience and the actual organizational reality proved impossible to overcome.

On the other hand, DMSC's founding members had already realized the importance of solidarity, empowerment, and awareness while working as peer-educators within the Sonagachhi Project (SHIP). Although SHIP was a central government-funded project, the funding was meant for STD/HIV intervention and not meant to be spent for mobilization of sex-workers. The mobilization of these marginalized women and men and the formation of

DMSC was a by-product of SHIP and was not originally planned. Thus, when DMSC started the actual mobilization of the sex-workers, its members did not see the organization as a place for employment, but as a means for collective action and empowerment.

Some scholars have noted that the development of the NGO movement has served to demobilize civil society in a phase of struggle. Through professionalisation and projectisation brought about by donor-funded attempts to promote 'civil society', a process of NGOisation has taken place. The progressive de-politicisation of the movement has removed aspects of "power" from the empowerment process (Jad 2007). This indeed seemed to be the case of Unnayan where the urban professionals who took the initial leadership in its alliance with community-based organization (Chhinnamul) failed to field the community-based leaders in positions of decision-making within the alliance. The leadership visibly remained with the urban professionals who did not belong to the community that they professed to be working for. In many ways, this process can be described as de-politicization along with re-politicization at the same time; de-politicization in the sense that empowerment and community building is taking a back seat and service provision for the urban poor taking center-stage; re-politicization in the sense that partisan politics have crept into the civil society movement, thereby making the movement more divisive and prone to cooption by the ruling party in cases where they have stayed in power for too long.

This is in sharp contrast to the case of AllIHPH-funded ⁹SHIP project in Sonagachhi, which was not originally intended to be an empowerment experiment, but eventually led to raising the self-awareness and confidence among the prostitutes and helped them gain trust and a sense of solidarity among other members of their community. This implies that successful cases of empowerment are sometimes accidental and unintended. The case of Unnayan suggests that many of the NGO projects that specifically aim for community mobilization and empowerment fail to have the desired effect when its leadership fails to transform itself from being elitist "outsiders", to someone seen as being part of the community being empowered. Public and people-centered advocacy are shaped by the political culture, social systems, and constitutional framework of the country in which they are practiced. It is the practice of advocacy that determines the theory, and not vice versa. If advocacy is not rooted in grassroots realities and is practiced only at the macro level, the voice of the marginalized is increasingly likely to be appropriated by professional elites. However, the very credibility of advocacy practitioners depends on their relationship with mass-based movements and grassroots perceptions of what constitutes desirable social change (Samuel 2007).

This of course does not suggest that successful empowerment cannot happen when initiated by an expert-led NGO. Indeed there have been successful attempts by professional social workers who have initiated and provided support for community-based organizations that have led to significant empowerment in these communities (the Mumbai Alliance of NSDF, Mahila Milan and SPARC is an example). The two cases compared here therefore only imply that *intent* for empowerment by professionals is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for successful civil society empowerment.

Policy implications:

What does all this imply for future action?

For future research:

There are a plenty of case studies of community based organizations in cities within the developing world with varying impacts (Appadurai 2001; Boonyabancha 2005; Dawson

⁹ AllIHPH stands for All India Institute for Hygiene and Public Health, a central government funded institute based in Kolkata.

Landers 1992; Desai 1995; Lee-Smith 1997; Mageli 2001; Magutu 1997; Weru 2004). There are some city- or country-specific studies of civil society in general in places where they have traditionally been absent (Brook and Frolic 1997; Shomina, et al. 2002). What these studies suggest is that in many settlements there may be a multitude of local associations and that the presence of some form of grassroots organizations is the norm rather than the exception (Mitlin 2001 p.154). What is lacking is more of systematic comparative study of civil society organizations that specifically examine the underlying reasons for differential capacity of civil society organizations to represent the poor within the institutional spaces for citizen participation. (Exceptions are Mitlin 2001 and Acharya, et al. 2004).

A challenge in analyzing the wealth of knowledge about civil society organizations is the uniqueness of each experience. This research highlights some of the dimensions on which many of these organizations differ, for example, what particular issues or areas they chose to work on; what are the institutions of internal decision-making within the organization, who is the initiator and who is the funder, etc. What is needed is a rigorous multi-case comparative analysis of a carefully selected pool of cases that would facilitate lesson drawing and national and international exchanges on successful empowerment of the marginalized urban population by community organizing. Similar comparative research has been done in areas such as participatory budgeting (Cabannes 2004). An example of such a study on poverty reduction strategies is a study by Satterthwaite which illustrated the contributions of civil society organizations in urban poverty reduction in seven cases (Satterthwaite 2002). But there remain quite a few questions about civil society organizations to which we do not have adequate answers. For example, we do not fully understand, under what political context, successful civil society organizations develop. Or why some of them fail to scale up while others succeed within similar contexts? Or how do NGOs truly support participatory processes?

For civil society organizations:

The research vividly illustrates the importance for community based organization of being strategic in carving out the political space within which to operate without getting co-opted by the state. Other studies have highlighted the need to be politically sophisticated in creating a broad constituency of allies (d'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005). But the issue of co-option by the state is as significant as the issue of confrontation with the state - both are problematic for the survival of a politically independent civil society. This is especially true in political contexts where political parties can mobilize far more support than their civil society counterparts.

In addition, federations of the poor must strengthen the bargaining power and capacity for organization and action of low-income groups. And such empowerment should lead to emergence of leadership from within these organizations. Outside experts, middle-class professional or elites should only play supportive role without being seen as supervising or micro-managing their projects.

This research also supports the arguments for new models for donor support as suggested by Mitlin (1999 p.17). But unlike merely channeling more funding that goes outside government to the nongovernmental institutions, a more careful evaluation of the relationship between local NGOs and urban poor groups is needed before providing support through NGOs. In fact, there needs to be a recognition that sometimes donor funding to some of the NGOs have detrimental effect to community empowerment and mobilization of the poor.

For states:

It is very important that there be a genuine political will within the government for greater empowerment of the community based organizations for them to succeed. They need not necessarily be seen as adversaries of state power. More needs to be learnt from

experiences from Brazil and other countries where the state has been more willing in partnering and encouraging civil society independent of the ruling party in participatory decision-making. In the absence of such a political will among those in the government, many good initiatives from the civil society sector will fail to deliver.

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