

# Troubled Terrain of NGO Credibility in Public Arena-A need for Technology Application



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**Abstract:** *The debate about NGO credibility has become more forceful and flashing in recent years. On one side there are prominent scholars who accredit the NGOs with 'social skill' and potential to make the development more humane and delivering. At the other extreme there are scholars who maintain that NGOs do not qualify the 'distinction of their own claims'. The findings of the investigating agencies in some Third World nations have unearthed the 'secret agenda' and unholy alliances of the foreign funded NGOs. Such contentions call for micro level analysis of NGO credibility, particularly, in the context of sustainable development. The present study is a scientific attempt in this direction. The authors have adopted an explorative-cum analytical study design with the tools of content analysis of the 'media portrayals' of the NGOs and field observation for a holistic analysis. The findings of the study underline the need for adoption of innovative technology by the NGOs for refreshing their public legitimacy in the changed socio-economic setting.*

**Key Words:** 'NGO credibility', 'Public legitimacy', 'media portrayals' 'social skill', 'culture of skill work', 'felt need'

## I. INTRODUCTION

Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) are no more sheer philanthropic platforms, they have acquired political, legal and diplomatic importance as well. In the age of global economy, philanthropy has become a strategy of showing 'good gesture' and 'looking good'. Though neo-liberal ideologies, bypassing traditional loggerheads between Leftist and Rightist regimes have brought in some consensus about potentials of NGOs in attainment of sustainable development goals (SDGs), still credibility and dependability of NGOs in recent days is wedged in in the troubled terrain of controversies with arguments and counter arguments. While at one end there are opinions that NGOs are potential civil society groups with intrinsic 'social capital' for making democracies more humane and delivering (Putnam, 1993; Kothari, 1998; Frumkin, 2002; Fisher, 2003).

The scholars like Bebbington and Riddell (1995) opine that NGOs can invoke participatory management of developmental matters, boost local initiatives and reach the underserved more effectively. Improving functioning of democracy requires 'activating the civil society' in which NGO is a major player (Swain and Blomkvist, 2001).

At the other end, there are contradicting opinions about their 'latent intent', 'disguised agenda' and 'trouble creating activities' which nullify their claim of 'public good' (Kabra, 1984; Sen, 1984; Ziadi, 1999; Singh, 2017). There are findings that "NGOs are turning to sleeper cells-working against the public interest and plotting against the government in potential collusion with foreign powers" (Singh, 2017). NGOs are mastered by foreign funding agencies and "their entire existence, not merely dependency is on donor money" (Ziadi, 1999: 271). They are "favored child" and "handmaidens of global imperialism" (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, Karat 1988). Still another spectrum of opinion argues that it would be wrong and dangerous to put the State on the "back burner" and set civil society to work in its place. If basic functions of State are undermined, the civil society itself will "wither in its bud" (Beteille, 1999). This will amount to reduction of faith in the State and democratic institutions leading to anarchy and chaos (Beteille, 2001). Ghosh (2009: 46) opine that though NGOs seem to have potential to reach out to the poor and needy, in reality many of them do not "qualify the distinction". Pointing to erosion of values in the voluntary sector some scholars have gone to the extent of calling them as "false alternative" and concluding "nothing doing about them" (Sen, 1984; Kabra, 1984; Ziadi, 1999).

2.0. It is in the background of this unresolved debate that the present study has been undertaken with the basic objective of assessing credibility and dependability of NGOs at empirical level and to find out what interventions are necessary to utilize this 'prospective social force' in nation building more effectively ducking the controversies around voluntarism.

**The specific objectives of the study are:**

- i. To assess the public image of NGOs through media reflections
- ii. To assess the prospect of NGOs in present policy and economic scenario of Odisha.
- iii. To explore the socio-technological means for scaling up the public image of Odishan NGOs

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II. METHODOLOGY

An explorative-cum- analytical study design has been adopted for realization of the above objectives. A two pronged approach viz. content analysis of media frames and observation of changing developmental scenario in Odisha.

In the first level, content analysis of the ‘media portrayals’ about NGOs over last four years has been undertaken for material collection and data extraction. Content analysis has been chosen for because of its "non-invasive nature, in contrast to simulating social experiences or collecting survey answers" ( Weber, 1990) The media portrayals over last four three years have been collected through a process of rigorous scanning of media both print electronics.

The ‘media from widely circulated media having a perceivable degree of public have been selected through a multi-stage sampling methods. The 'media portrayals' so arrived have been analyzed in their historical and contextual specificity following the technique of “interpretative understanding” (Weber, 1949).

3.1. Why content analysis of 'media frames'

Generally, the viewpoints, opinions and findings about NGOs and their activities are noticeably ventilated and contended on the canvass of mass media. It is through the media lane that these are transmitted to people and transformed to ‘public opinion’ in course of time. In the cycle, again the media disseminate this ‘public opinion’ copiously, which in turn, ignites new action, new views and fresh opinion with changing reality. In today's ‘information age’, media constitutes the ‘public sphere’ and it “shapes the changing public opinion” (Sorokin, Rybakova & Popova, 2019). It has become a powerful instrument of ‘perception molding’ and ‘image making’. In this process, editorial

media content (published in shape of news) is more significant and effective than the advertorials (Macnamara, 2005). The effects of mass media on people’s perception have been sufficiently proved by scholars from mass communication, social psychology, public administration and management. The leading scholars in this field include C.H. Cooley (1902) and Herald Lasswell (1948). In sociological literature, the analysis of ‘media contents’ as a method of measuring the “cultural temperature” of society in the study of social change has gained popularity from the time of Max Weber in early 20<sup>th</sup> century ( Hansen, Cottle, Negrine & Newbold,1988).

The portrayals of NGOs in media have great significance not only for consumers of the news but also for the NGOs themselves. Consistent media reflections has a direct bearing on ‘social legitimacy’ of the NGOs; which in turn, has critical implications on their ability to augment funds, stimulate ‘policy making’ and win the confidence of the community to whom they serve (Souza, 2010). This relates ‘media reflections’ to the social, economic and political conditions of specific societies requiring micro level analysis of ‘media frames’ for their proper appreciation.

In present age of ‘information society’, each media house has competitively enhanced its speed, ‘content framing’ and transmission to reach the audience first with real time happenings. India has more than 1.18 lakhs of newspapers and periodicals (RNI, 2019) and 902 satellite television channels (GoI, 2019). Apart from this there are around 18 noted daily digital publications at national level. Over 100 million copies of various newspapers are sold in Indian market every day (BBC News, 2012). Odisha being a rising ‘aspirational society’ also presents an increasing trend of media circulation a brief of which is presented in the Table No-1.

Table No-1: Presence of Media in Odisha.

Sl No	Description	Quantum
1	Daily News Paper	99 (Odia 82 + Other language 17)
2	Weekly (news and views)	61 ( Odia 61+ Others 0)
3	Fortnightly	15 ( Odia 15+ Other 0)
4	Monthly	19 ( Odia 19+ Other 0)
5	Quarterly	1 ( Odia 1+ Others 0)
6	News Agencies	7 ( National 4 + State 3)
7	Circulation	6833422 ( Dailies- 5823905 + periodicals 1009517)
8	Audio-visual Media	18 ( Television Channel 14 + Radio wave 4)
9	Journalists and Reporters enlisted*	6007 ( Accredited 247 + Operating 5760)

(Source- Government of Odisha: Information and Public Relations Department, 2019. This is a dynamic number. The figure is as of December, 2018).

Each of the major media houses in Odisha has its own source of information from village to global levels. Growth of information technology has added arms and muscles to it. Because of their profuse and pervasive reachability media today catch almost all major happenings ranging from micro to mega, from village club to world federations. NGOs being a body of ‘collective social force’ do not escape the eyes of the media.

3.2. Sampling.

From among these varied mass media, the present study has largely drawn on print and audio-visual media because of their relative advantage over other media in the perspective of content analysis. The “media framing” including agenda, priming and framework (Smith, 2011) in print and audio-visual media is relatively definite and impersonal. Those are generally archived and amenable to objectivity, verifiability, generalizability and replicability.



On the reverse, the “media framing” in social and online media are more anonymous, fleeting, subjective and delicate. (Sorokin et al, 2019: 82).

In the entire process a multi-stage sampling methods have been followed to do the data extraction from ‘media frames’. In the first level 17 widely circulated and trusted media India and Odisha have been chosen on the basis of purposive sampling. The selected media houses include 12 print, three audio-visual and two news agencies.

In the second stage, ‘media frames’ about NGOs over last three years (beginning from December, 2018 in descending order) have been collected and enlisted on the basis of survey method. A total number of 150 published news have been enlisted.

In the third stage, the ‘media frame’ samples have been drawn on the basis of the principles of ‘representativeness, disconformity and discrepant’ as followed in media studies (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Care has been taken to avoid repetition of the same/similar news unless the subsequent news speaks about another new dimension. From among a total of 150 ‘media frames’ 68 (around 30% viz. 34 from pan Indian context and 34 from Odishan context) samples have been drawn on the basis of their potential for shaping the public opinion. The sampled ones include ‘media frames’ from Times of India News (TNN), The Statesman News Service ( SNS), The Economic Times ( timesgroup), The Hindu, The New Indian Express News (ENS), Press Trust of India ( PTI), Odisha Post News (OP), The Samaj ( Odia daily), Pragativadi News Service ( PNS, Odia daily), zeenews.india.com, kanaknews.com, The Sambad ( Odia daily), Tathya.com, The Prameya ( Odia daily), observer.com. The selected samples spread over different dates in these media.

III. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Attempt has been made to make a ‘contextual scanning’ of the published media frames before factoring them to the analysis. The content analysis of these ‘news frames’ juxtaposed with the technique of contextual scanning and ‘interpretative understanding’ reveal eight different kinds of media reflections about the NGO activities ranging from salutary descriptions to the most denigrated allegations. For the sake of a scientific analysis, these have broadly been categorized under following heads.

(A) Positive and salutary reflections.

1. Concerted activities with Government and statutory bodies in the areas like rescuing children from streets, prevention of child labor, prohibition of liquor, eradication of malaria and TB, fighting out malnutrition, promotion of Joint Liability Groups (JLGs), formation of SHGs, disaster management etc.
2. Innovative initiatives for creating awareness about clean water and air, providing quality care and education to the children of poor and marginalized, mapping the human trafficking from village to brothel, preparing audio text books for visually impaired, involving people in plantation, creating awareness against acid attack, skill development of grown-up orphans and differently abled persons,

protection and care of animals, popularizing the philosophy of the ‘art of giving’ etc.

3. ‘Social Watch’ like moving to Regulatory Bodies and Courts against adulteration, safe transport of the items meant for human consumption, contending ‘honor killing’, spending of treasury money for image building of specific political party, legality of the actions of Public Sector Unit and Development of Authority, taking necessary measure for checking pollution generated by industrial units, conservation of natural environment etc.

(B) Negative and Deleterious Messages.

- a. Secret engagement in anti-national activities, creating social tension, fanning people’s discontent in for violent action against industrialization, blaming and pressurizing Indian Government in international forums, engaging in secret religious conversion, unholy alliances with vested interests for money garbing, developing alliances with terrorist groups etc.
- b. Jeopardizing developmental works through litigation, sponsoring and igniting the so called protest movements, unauthorized use of NHRC logo for exerting influence and extracting money, miss utilizing the provisions of ‘Public Interest Litigation’ meant for ‘public good’.
- c. Adopting corruptive practices, duping the innocent tribal and misappropriation of Government grant.
- d. Sexual exploitation and corporal torture of the inmates of NGO run shelter homes/ CCIs.
- e. Non-compliance to law of land under the disguise of social service.

Table No-4: Comparative view of the Media Portraits of the NGOs

Type of Reflection *	India	Odisha
Concerted Activities	9 (26.47%)	14 (41.17%)
Innovative Initiatives	3 (8.82%)	2 (5.88%)
Social Watch	6 (17.64%)	0
Positive Total	12 (35.29%)	16 (47.05%)
Secret agenda	8 (23.52%)	2 (5.88%)
Jeopardizing Developmental projects	4 (11.76%)	0
Corruptive Practices	3 (8.82%)	8 (23.52%)
Sexual Exploitation	3 (8.82%)	6 (17.64%)
Non-compliance	4 (11.76%)	2 (5.88%)
Negative Total	22 (64.70%)	18 (52.94%)
Grand Total	34(100%)	34 (100%)

Source: Derived from the data extracted from content analysis by the authors.

4.2. Observation of Odishan Policy and developmental scenario reveals that in the recent decade Odisha has overcome its dubious distinction of being a state of extreme poverty and backwardness. overcoming the erratic growth rate till 9<sup>th</sup> Five year plan, the State has started its journey with higher growth trajectory.



During 10<sup>th</sup> Plan period Odisha witnessed a higher annual growth of 8.82% in real terms of 2004-05 prices. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan because of global economic slowdown the growth rate came down to 7.13% (GoO, 2015). During this time the India has recorded a growth rate of 8% against the targeted 9% (PTI, 2014). The State has now targeted to sustain the higher growth rate during 12<sup>th</sup> Plan period with emphasis on agriculture and allied sectors, human resource, health index, infrastructure, 'ease of doing business', higher private sector investment and partnership with people. In the changing scenario, the initial hesitation between Government and NGO (mutual suspicion, lack of trust, gap in objective sharing) is gradually getting diluted with the realization that growth and development is a mutual phenomenon, and in its happening, everybody gains. Government itself has also set up many people's organizations like Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Farmers' Clubs, Common Interest Groups, Producer Federations and Joint liability Groups through active involvement of the NGOs. Government has also introduced a dedicated chapter on voluntary sector in its annual plan (GoO, 2017). State Government has also clearly spelt out the broad principles of (i) executing developmental works through NGO and SHGs: (ii) adopting modalities of NGO selection for assigning the works and placement of funds (GoO, 2018). In the NGO sector there is also in-house effort for vertical and horizontal connections among the NGOs operating at different level. With onset of neo-liberalism the old type of unilateral voluntarism in Odisha unified by the 'common sentiment' of *Jagannathism* is changing towards multilateral activities with a degree of professionalism (Mohapatra, Rath and Priyabadini, 2018). On the whole, the present economic and Governmental policy scenario in Odisha is conducive for fostering of voluntary activities in different sectors.

#### IV. FINDINGS

- As the content analysis of 'media frames show, negative depictions about NGOs in media far outweigh the positive ones both in terms of number and gravity in pan Indian context. The positive messages are either about some 'tiny island of success' or some small beginnings. The deleterious projections sting the 'common consciousness' of a civilized society. The acts like sexual exploitation, sex trade, illegal human trafficking, plotting against Indian Government, syphoning of the fund, unholy alliance with politicians and officers etc question the basic philosophies of the voluntary sector. These reports throw staid marks on 'social legitimacy' of NGOs.
- Media reflection in Odisha shows a slightly different trend. The positive messages are comparatively higher and negative messages are lower than national scenario. However, frequency, profuseness and tonality of positive news are few. The positive acts of many NGOs get a little space in one or two media; whereas, the negative acts of few NGOs are reflected copiously in different media with more frequency. Such a scenario is because of two main reasons- (i) the silent and non-assertive nature of 'Odisha voluntarism' (Mohapatra, Priyabadini and Rath, 2018); (ii) reactive 'social conscience' of

Odisha about sexual exploitation and physical torture; and, (iii) the rush of media to reflect more hotspot news for quick 'rating points'.

- An observable degree of difference is also found between the media projections of NGOs in pan-Indian and Odishan context with regard to the activities NGOs. The NGOs in Odisha are generally system conformists. They complement and supplement the Governmental efforts in developmental landscape. They generally do not challenge the public authority through litigations nor do they want to overthrow the system. Rather, they strive to innovate within the system. The cause of this difference lies in the 'historic and cultural specificity' of voluntarism in Odisha (Mohapatra, Rath and Priyabadini 2018: 210).
- In recent days, the philanthropic model of Foundation/Trust managed by women members of the business families is coming up in Odisha. Other two models like 'philanthropy through corporate social responsibility' (CSR) mostly outsourced to NGOs for implementation; and, a 'hybrid model of family trust and CSR activities' (Bhasin, 2018) have also made their appearance in Odisha because of growing industrialization and business activities. Voluntarism in Odisha offers a typical equilibrium between individual 'economic pursuit' and 'public good'.
- An analysis of their activities show that NGOs in Odisha are mostly hybrid type developmental NGOs. There has been no media report about the activities of any specialized NGO in some specific field.
- NGOs in Odisha project themselves as apolitical at least in their external activities.
- NGOs in Odisha are operating like 'social contractors' for state actors or other funding agencies. As such, the 'autonomous institutions' operating between State and citizens are now being mastered by agenda of the funding agencies.
- No observable 'social innovation' or community based innovative projects of Odishan NGOs have been reported in the public media
- NGOs in Odisha are mostly complying with the 'pre-decided guidelines' of the projects against which they avail grant. Media Reports about mass awareness activities in developmental matters are very rare. This is one of the reasons for low 'developmental awareness' among the people in spite of a moderate level of 72.87% literacy (Census, 2011) and good density of NGOs (around 1.33 lakh) in 314 blocks of the State (Government of Odisha, 2008).
- As media reports show, NGOs in Odisha are not free of corruptive practices. This demystifies the common assumption that 'voluntarism eludes corruption'.
- Erosion of humanitarian values in NGO sector is observable and some NGO masters are seen seeking erotic satisfaction with inmates of shelter homes.
- 'Money making attitude' of NGO owners in Odisha is getting precedence over 'service rendering mentality'.

## V. CONCLUSION

As the above findings show, the 'social legitimacy' of the NGOs is tainted because of the deleterious media flashes about the NGOs and their activities. Such deleterious messages should be judiciously overcome and its damaging impact on civil society organizations should be truncated particularly, in the context of global emphasis on 'localization of sustainable developmental growth' (SDGs). In absence of the corrective measures this 'prospective social force' having great potential for catalysing development and serving as 'community watch dog' will lose its 'public legitimacy' leaving some diacritical marks on already complex course of rural development.

## VI. SUGGESTIVE MEASURE- THE NEED FOR TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

Such realizations underline the need for adoption of innovative technological tools by the local level NGOs for refreshing their 'social legitimacy'. Since the local level NGOs cannot compete with the philanthropic associations of corporate bodies in terms of money and influence, the only option left with them is to develop expertise for 'need based service delivery' at the grass root level.

- Today's need is to connect the people to welfare measures and developmental initiatives of Government. The NGOs can fill this gap with a robust data base of the people, their socio-economic condition and family details at the local level. Such data base needs to be built on a digitized platform for continuous updating through 'mobile apps'
- The other area of necessity is making available the modern agricultural technologies, low cost equipment, calamity resistant seed varieties, nano technology based fertiliser and feed etc for agriculture, fishery and animal husbandry. The geo-climatic conditions of Odisha bestow the land with great potential for fishery and animal husbandry. The socio-cultural patters of Odisha are also akin to these activities. Since a large portion of the famers with small land holdings cannot afford for the modern tools and equipment, the local NGOs can fill the gap by operating agro-service centres on 'no profit no loss basis' so that farmers can hire the services at affordable price.
- Another area of emerging requirement is post-harvest processing of agricultural products and direct marketing link facility to the farmers. The low educated poor farmers can hardly afford for this. Local level NGOs can fill the gap by imparting training on post-harvest technologies like grading, packaging etc. NGOs can set up common facility centres (CSCs) with modern equipment by mobilizing Governmental assistance for such works. With new 'information technology', they can connect the farmer to the interstate and national level marketing chain; and, open new opportunities for selling their produces at a higher price.
- Now, the Governmental departments and the corporate bodies are opening up online system for delivery of services at the door steps. Enactment of Odisha Right to Public Services Act-2012 by Government of Odisha has

made mandatory provisions for online delivery of services within prescribed time schedule against each service. Around 333 services of 24 departments have been notified for online delivery (GoO, 2019). In near future more public services are likely to be brought under its orbit. The rural populace can hardly approach these facilities mainly because of the lack of 'digital learning' and 'data connectivity' to many rural pockets. The local level NGOs can fill the gap through setting up of the CSCs with Wi-Fi connectivity. A model for self-sustainability of these CSCs has also been worked out by the Government. The Government has also made normative provisions for extending the public services like miscellaneous certificates, licenses, permits, driving licenses, payment of land revenue, electricity dues, booking of train, bus and air tickets through CSCs. Provisions for easy bank loan for hardware components for CSCs and technical training for software skills have also been made. The local NGOs can fill the gap by setting up such CSCs to deliver direct service to the people.

- The felt need of the farming community at village level is 'value addition to their products' which can fetch them better price. No small and marginal farmers can afford for 'food processing technologies' Even the big farmers are unable to do it owing to capital requirement, their inability to harness banking and marketing support to make it sustainable. The NGOs can take the lead of setting up primary-food processing units and cold chains for value addition.
- Still another felt need of rural people is to avail advanced clinical care and getting connected to the doctor and tertiary care hospitals. Government is coming up with provisions for involving private partners in extension of these types of services (Draft Odisha Health Policy, 2019). The technology of 'telemedicine and interactive video conferencing' will open the gates for people to get specialty service. Government has made the provisions for viable-gap funding and service charges. The NGOs can fill the gap by mobilizing such Governmental support.
- 'Skill training as per the job-market' is another demand area that needs socio-technological intervention. There is rising demand of 'skilled workers' in both the urban and rural centres. But, because of socio-historical reasons the skill occupations like repair, maintenance, housekeeping, nursing, wiring, welding servicing etc are not socially looked up. These are not considered as dignified occupations in comparison to so called *babugiri* (the personnel in Government and corporate sectors are generally called *Babus* in Odisha), even though the people engaged in these skilled sector earn more. This 'social ice' need to a broken and a 'culture of skill work' need to be created at social level. The NGOs can provide the fillip through their 'social skill' of opinion making and awareness building.

Along with mobilization they need to set up micro level 'skill training centres' with necessary technical tools and equipment by mobilizing Governmental support to provide the actual skill training and link the skilled youth with the employment market.

- The observations of the present authors show that in recent years there rising media reports about 'farmers' suicide' in Odisha which has as emerged a puzzling concern both for the people and the Government. This problem can be dealt by the NGOs by maintaining a data base of the farmers and their their vulnerability; so that they can be counselled at the appropriate time with extension of compensatory benefits in case of crop loss.

Gone are the days when people looked at NGOs for some 'charity support' like food, cloth or medicine. With new democratic welfarism, Governments and corporate bodies have lent hand in these matters. Partnerships and collaborations from community to national and international level is the necessity for realization of SDGs which can be mastered only through adoption of appropriate technology.

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