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Complexities of Collaboration, Negotiation and Contestation: *Agragamee* and the State

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COMPLEXITIES OF COLLABORATION, NEGOTIATION AND CONTESTATION: *AGRAGAMEE* AND THE STATE

Ambuja Kumar Tripathy∗

Abstract

Agragamee is one of the better-known civil society organization in the country. It is located in the tribal hinterlands of the state of Odisha. Since its origin in the late 70s and early 80s, this sociallycommitted organisation has witnessed different phases in its relation with the state while performing its developmental functions. The trajectory of relation with the state for the organisation began with collaboration in the early phase. Then, as the organisation matured with emphasis on a rights-based approach, the relation got transformed into negotiation and expression of differences and finally into contestation and resistance. This paper aims at analysing the dynamics surrounding the changing relation of the NGO with the state and their implications for Agragamee's political and developmental characters in a nuanced way.

Keywords: civil society, state, tribal development, contestation, advocacy.

This paper is about one concrete expression of the grassroots activism of the late 70s and early 80s, that of the non-governmental organisation (hereafter NGO) *Agragamee* and how that moved, from dealing with state-directed development of those decades to engaging with the neo-liberal strategy of the state in the 1990s, offering an analysis of the shifting implications of such collaboration and contention, for the politics of development. It takes Agragamee as a political actor, as an "*important institutional vehicle in shaping political discourse and in mobilising collective interests*."[1] On the basis of extensive fieldwork, the article makes an attempt to look for the transformative possibilities of the NGO through its ability to both empower people and contribute to alternative discourses of development following the literature of the 1990s and later, by analysing its history and organisational aspects as well as ideological bases, developmental initiatives, and strategies while focusing on the complexities of its changing relation with the state. The discussion in the paper is informed by the framework of questions as raised by William Fisher (1997: 456) from an institutional perspective: are NGOs doomed to repeat the patterns of the societies within which they emerge? Can they empower without simultaneously victimising? Can they enable as well as constrain? Can they do good without doing wrong?

Agragamee was founded and continues to be run by Achyut Das and Vidhya Das. Agragamee means 'pioneer' or 'marching forward', one who takes the first step forward. Situated in the tribal KBK region, the organisation strives to engage with the question- what is self-sustaining development for the tribals and the rural poor? "*Over its nearly three decades of intense involvement in the tribal regions, Agragamee has sought to define what should be people-centered development*" (Agragamee 2010: 2). In the age of NGO-triggered "*associational revolution*" (Salamon 1994: 109), the organisation takes the

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label NGO as an externally imposed classification and instead designates itself as a social action group or a grassroots organisation (GRO) in order to distinguish itself from what it sees as more conservative associations.

The Genesis of Agragamee

The beginning of this civil society initiative needs to be seen as a part of the broader process in the country that began with a growing realisation in the 70s, especially after the declaration of the state of Emergency in the mid-70s, that the state had failed to deliver development. Anil Bhatt argues that "*this realisation and deep pessimism about politics and government that led middle class, highly-educated, sensitized youth to go to villages and urban slums and start voluntary action separate and independent of existing political and governmental establishments*" (1995: 870). This new trend is also known as the "*spurt in voluntarism*" or "*grassroots politics*".[2]

The organisation was set up in 1981 as Odisha chapter of the Social Work and Research Center (SWRC) of Tilonia, Rajasthan. In April 1987, it established its own identity by registering itself as a separate civil society organisation called Agragamee. Agragamee initially worked in Kashipur in Rayagada district of the KBK region and then gradually expanded to other areas. Certain factors in Kashipur, in the then undivided Koraput district of the state, in the late 1970s and early 1980s attracted the SWRC team led by Achyut Das. First, in Odisha SWRC wanted to confine itself to a tribal Block informed of its work done elsewhere in the country. Kashipur Block is a region of 70 percent Adivasis and 20 percent Dalits. Second, the area was challenging on account of lack of communication, infrastructure, and other basic facilities. Economically, the region was depressed and poverty levels were chronic. The poor were found eating mango and tamarind seeds as staple food while the great amount and variety of forest produce was striking. Multiple forms of exploitation were commonplace as a consequence of the dominance of the local sahukars and moneylenders. The forest cover was declining because of unregulated shifting cultivation practice of the tribals and indiscriminate felling by the contractors. This was leading to ecological disturbance in the area. Further, due to distress in the region, periodic and permanent out-migration were increasing. Third, SWRC got interested in taking up the tribal issues at this micro-level because, as per its understanding, the administration had ignored the tribals and some special agencies launched for them had not delivered the required benefits. Although there was a history of voluntary action in the locality, that had failed to make an impact. Thus, "*impressed by the levels of poverty and the persistence of many traditional elements" (*Van Niekerk quoted in Bebbington and Bebbington 2001: 10), Kashipur was chosen as the site on the basis of a preliminary survey conducted by SWRC in April 1980.

The Vision and Values

It becomes important to look at the original mission and underpinning values of Agragamee because, as Joan Mencher argues, "*in discussing NGOs and issues of change, the question arises immediately from whose point of view a specific development or change is desirable, and how would any specific change affect each of the stakeholders involved*" (1999: 2081). The baseline survey imparted the conviction and a sense of urgency to the SWRC team as to the need to have a particular development or change in the

region. A discussion of the ethical aspect of Agragamee leads us, first of all, to its vision; the organisation stresses that it "*does not have a clear-cut goal but a vision*" (Giri 2005: 55). The Agragamee vision emerges from its understanding of the nature of state intervention and the nature of conventional voluntary action given its knowledge about the complexities of the locale through the baseline survey.

The SWRC team realised that in spite of the initiation of several comprehensive development programmes, such as community development programme and other welfare measures under special agencies, the state policy had fallen short of achieving the goal of poverty alleviation and empowerment in this tribal region. The block of Kashipur had by then been the centre of special development programmes for years. It was one of the 43 special multipurpose tribal blocks in the country during the mid-1950s. Later on it was included as one of the Tribal Development Blocks meant for areas of higher tribal concentration. During the Fifth Five Year Plan, Kashipur Block was included in the Rayagada ITDA (Integrated Tribal Development Approach). It may be noted here that Kashipur Block is the key agency to execute poverty alleviation programmes like RLEGP (Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme), NREP (National Rural Employment Programme), and DRDA (District Rural Development Agency) besides other special development programmes. However, these programmes had consistently disappointing results because of the adoption of a modernising and homogenising path of development at the cost of social diversity and self-determination aspects of groups and communities. D L Sheth attributes such failure at a general level to elite knowledge based on a distinction between knowledge and empirical reality: "*the objectives and strategies of development were designed by elites without consultation with those whose lives would be most immediately affected by development schemes… As a result, decisions are taken in which the rights of ordinary people are ignored"* (Sheth cited in Joseph 2002: 301).

Conventional voluntarism in the region aiming at charity and relief, social welfare, and social reform was found vastly inadequate by the SWRC team. It was inspired by idealism rather than ideology (Baxi 1986). There was a need to shift the focus to development in order to change the social, economic and political position of the poor and the weak. In other words, there was a need to move to modern voluntarism. Thus, there was a realisation on the part of the SWRC team that the key political agency had failed to do much about poverty, inequality, and injustice because of its "*top-down approach that often excludes the local community from programme design and implementation*" (Subramaniam 2007: 552) and earlier voluntary organisations engaged in relief and charity had failed because of the lack of a political nature. Based on this understanding of the nature of the micro-context, state intervention and voluntary action, Agragamee made an effort to articulate a broad perspective that would form the underlying basis for its vision and strategic plan. Vidhya Das told me, "*Agragamee vision is premised on the strong feeling of the organisation that the tribals of the region have been oppressed for centuries and in spite of the rhetoric of the post-colonial state about their all-round development their basic right to a life of dignity has been systemically denied*" (interview in Kashipur, February 12, 2012). Menon and Schenk-Sandbergen observe: "F*ood and voice has been the animating vision of Agragamee"* (Menon and Schenk-Sandbergen cited in Giri 2005:43). Once the mission defined its chief purpose, the valuational structure evolved. The key underlying bases of the

Agragamee vision are human liberation, participation of local communities, decentralisation, tribal empowerment, and rights.

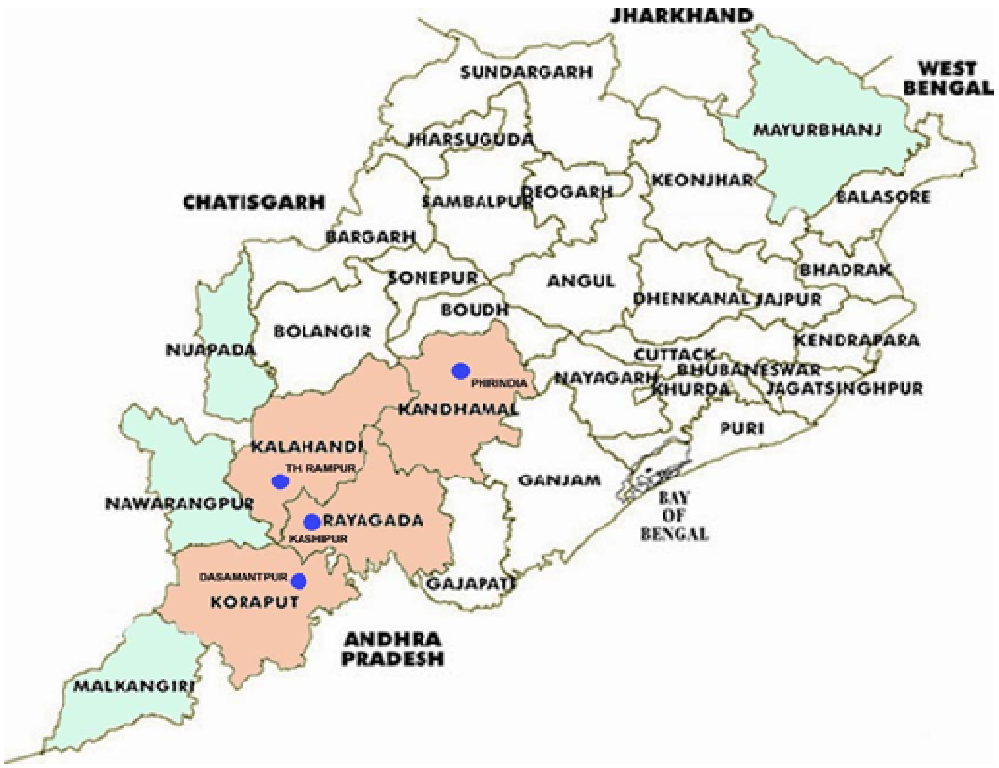
The broad perspective underlying the vision was perceived by the organisation as an alternative to the top-down model of the state. This alternative approach avoided any strong ideological or dogmatic position and relied on participatory methods, unlike the hierarchical methods of the state. The alternative approach of Agragamee entails theory and practice of planned intervention as articulated in the 1980s. While the idea of planned intervention of the 1960s and 1970s "*was to conceptualise the process as essentially linear in nature, implying some kind of step-by-step progression from policy formulation to implementation to outcomes",* in the 1980s the argument was *"that implementation should be viewed as a transactional process involving negotiation over goals and means between parties with conflicting or diverging interests, and not simply as the execution of a particular policy*" (Long and Ploeg 1989: 227). The SWRC explains the idea of planned intervention as "*the effect of a cause; it is the manifestation of an involvement… planned intervention is the interaction with the praxis, i.e. the action-reflection orientation. If the poor and exploited can be made aware of their situation by a set of their own motivated actions with natural responses and analysis, conflicts and compromises, then the challenges for them will look clear"* (Agragamee 1983: 2.3). While making a planned intervention, the fundamental strategy of the organisation is to reach maximum people in all the interior areas untouched by the state, make local people aware of the situational challenges and build their skills so that there would be the optimal management of local resources. Also, the strategy focuses on countering the unjust and exploitative structures in the countryside by means of mobilisation, building up pressure groups within villages through certain educational activities, and strengthening of village-level organisations.

History and the vision of the organisation and situational dynamics determine its membership, organisational pattern, finances, interventions and their outcome, and focus.[3] In terms of geographical scope, Agragamee is confined to the tribal districts of Rayagada, Koraput, Kalahandi, Kandhamal, Malkangiri, Nawarangpur, Nuapada, and Mayurbhanj (see Map), but it has made its presence significantly felt over the years in the NGO spectrum in India. Over the last three decades, Agragamee has undertaken an enormously varied range of activities such as implementing sustainable development initiatives like micro watershed management, family farm, grain bank and women's collective, promoting education and awareness, and protesting neoliberal policies. Broadly, the interventions of Agragamee can be labeled as "developmental", "mobilisational", and "political" roles although they are not mutually exclusive (Bhatt 1995: 870). The developmental role is concerned with programmes aimed at raising the physical quality of life. This may be done by influencing the existing development programmes and their delivery systems or by directly demonstrating alternative designs of development. The mobilisation role attempts to mobilise the beneficiaries of development so that they can influence the government's delivery system or look after their own development. In the political role, the approach is to influence the political system: either its policies, laws and legislations or its processes and performance.

The developmental interventions of the organisation are to be seen in connection with the "*duality of state strength, where states seem able to penetrate society extensively yet are unable to implement goal-oriented change*" (Migdal 1988: 8-9). These interventions revolve around two major

concerns and resultant imaginings of the organisation. First, the situation of food insecurity and the consequent endemic hunger and deprivation in tribal villages led the organisation to question the viability of highland livelihoods based on shifting cultivation and identify economically-viable alternatives for the local population. Second, since the local common-pool resources were found gradually getting degraded, upon which local people depend, the importance of redevelopment of agroecosystem and natural resource management on the basis of twin principles of ecological sustainability and participatory decision-making was realised. In order to develop sustainable village-based livelihoods, the organisation began engaging with questions: "*who claims these resources, how are they appropriated, how are they maintained and how are they seen by different user groups or users within the community?*" (Bardhan and Ray 2008: 4).

Map: Presence of Agragamee in Odisha



- Dark colour areas (Rayagada, Koraput, Kalahandi, and Kandhamal) are core areas of work for Agragamee.
- Light colour areas (Malkangiri, Nawarangpur, Nuapada, and Mayurbhanj) are expanded areas of work for Agragamee.

Source: Agragamee. 2010. *Agragamee Report 2009-10*. Kashipur: Agragamee Publication.

The Changing Relation with the State

Agragamee's relation with the state changed from initial collaboration to negotiation in policymaking to contestation in the 1980s and 1990s. The approach of Agragamee in the early phase was to have close collaboration with the state since it found through its studies that the state was implementing a number of community and beneficiary-oriented schemes for the upliftment of the people in this region, e.g. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP), Economic Rehabilitation of Rural Poor (ERRP), and National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) in continuation of the earlier Community Development Programme of the mid-1950s. Agragamee believed that those programmes could not benefit the people of the area and there was immense scope of collaboration with the state for the reason that if the state resources were fully and properly utilised then the state intervention would be able to make a marked improvement in the conditions of the people. With the passage of time, a few critical encounters with the state surfaced that tested the original vision of the organisation and imparted the organisation a new shape.

Odisha Tribal Development Project

Involvement in the activities of the Odisha Tribal Development Project (OTDP) is an instance of Agragamee's close collaboration as well as negotiation with the state while representing the interests of the local people, which can be seen in the light of the argument "*that NGOs represent the interests of the broadest swath of people, the poor and underprivileged of society, who tend to have no structures of representation in public affairs*" (Kamat 2004: 159). The OTDP, as a programme of tribal development for the region, came into being after an agreement was signed between the Government of India and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on February 4, 1988. The project was approved by the executive board of IFAD in December 1987. The IFAD loan became effective in May 1988 and closed in December 1997. The OTDP aimed at ensuring ecological rejuvenation of the project area in order to achieve a sustainable economic uplift of the tribal population. The primary objective was, owing to the prevalence of strong feudal power structures in Kashipur, to reduce the non-tribal intermediaries so that tribal people could get better remunerative price for their agricultural as well as minor forest produce. Accordingly, the project was designed to invest in certain sectors such as agriculture production, natural resources development, human resource development, rural infrastructure, land survey and settlement, and implementation management support. Suguna Pathy explains: "*the (IFAD) appraisal mission emphasised human resource development of the target group (tribal people)… unless a judicious planning is made from now onwards (1989-90) to preserve and upgrade the existing natural resources and to maximize production on a sustained basis the area and the people may deteriorate rapidly with time resulting in chaotic condition by the beginning of the 21st century* (2003: 2834). Agragamee joined the OTDP but withdrew later. Agragamee's involvement (joining and withdrawal) in the JFM programme throws up a few questions: did the state go wrong in this initiative at local resource management? Was Agragamee right in joining and later withdrawing from the IFAD? I take up these two questions in the following sections.

The OTDP underscored the importance of the human resource development (HRD) component with a strong view that people should be involved in the planning and decision-making stages of the

programme. Hence, two members from the local communities (Sumoni Jhodia and Loki Majhi) were taken in as the members of the steering committee for the OTDP. The OTDP invited Agragamee to carry out the tasks under the HRD component and ensure people's participation, the involvement of village committees, and transparency while delivering. The OTDP came to an end in December 1997 and it, Deba Sarangi notes, "*took up the work of infrastructure development, irrigation, plantation, etc., and it spent to the tune of Rs 66 crore and after seven-eight years of development work and expenditure of such huge amounts of money people are dying in Kashipur. As the special relief commissioner's report finds, out of 221 projects implemented in the block, 217 projects should be examined in fresh. In the block according to government estimates below poverty line families have increased from 15,471 in 1992 to 24,582 in 1997*" (Sarangi 2002: 3241). Similarly, a report by the deputy chief administrator holds that the "*project has created a large number of contractors and suppliers… No significant intervention in terms of increase in income and sustainable agricultural productivity has been achieved which was the prime objective of the project"* (cited in Pathy 2003: 2835).

The evaluation study of the OTDP in 1992 emphasised the human element for better implementation- by recognising people as subjects and active participants, not as objects and passive receivers.[4] The study also highlighted the point that people want more food crops than cash crops while the OTDP stressed the latter. The study expressed serious concerns concerning the land question as taken up by the project and inadequate follow-up action. Furthermore, the IFAD Completion Evaluation mission for the OTDP, which visited the area in 1998, came across certain shortcomings in the implementation of almost all the major components of the project.[5] The mission states that the project was relatively successful in the infrastructure development component and in land surveying and settlement activities. While the project made some achievements in the agriculture and natural resources development component, it performed below expectations in the HRD component. The significance of human resource development was not recognised and the degree of beneficiary participation was limited in all stages. It unambiguously expresses that tribal development projects and programmes should be designed with due attention to the socio-cultural and political contexts, and safeguards should be introduced to ensure that the existing local power structures do not become the main beneficiaries.

Now, let us see the nature of Agragamee's involvement in the project. When Agragamee was invited by the OTDP to take care of the HRD component, Vidhya Das explains, "*Agragamee had much hesitation and conducted a long and involved debate within itself. The challenge was to ensure that the resources coming into the block reached the poor and the needy. Would Agragamee be better able to ensure this if it stepped in and agreed to take up the HRD component, and take up training, capacity building, and information dissemination on the OTDP project? The question was really troubling, and finally, hoping for the best, but knowing the situation all too well to expect anything much, Agragamee agreed"* (2003: 82). Agragamee is of the view that the OTDP, like other development programmes of that period, came as a top-down approach, and local people were excluded from planning and conceptualisation processes. This exclusion was primarily responsible for the failure of the development programmes of the OTDP to reach the targeted population and to ensure long-term or even short-term benefits. It also made the whole process open to rampant corruption and misappropriation. Large-scale

misappropriation and irregularities, which came to light towards the end of the project, were widely reported.[6] Agragamee also aired its views against the extensive coffee plantations that were supposed to be the part of the project and, consequently, the OTDP changed the natural resources development plans to accommodate agro-forestry. Vidhya Das explains the tension between the organisation and the project management unit of the OTDP, "*Agragamee joined the project but since the beginning it had tensions with the local project management unit. Owing to Agragamee interventions, village level planning was in place, and people were taking up development works through the village committees, identifying beneficiaries in collective meetings with complete transparency, people were able to handle work orders and work estimates, and ensure proper completion of works, and there was much pressure for proper payment of wages"* (2003: 82).

In the process of implementation, more differences cropped up. The OTDP insisted on engaging private contractors for the village development work while Agragamee supported the local people's demand that development work should be given to village committees. And the OTDP did not approve the emphasis laid by Agragamee on transparency and people's training. Such differences gave rise to opposition and hostility, and even there was a physical assault on the organisation staff by the vested interests as Agragamee states. All those developments eventually led to the withdrawal of Agragamee from the OTDP. Ananta Giri observes, "*the encounter with IFAD was a critical turn in the history of Agragamee not because it had to return the already sanctioned grant to IFAD but because of its perception that IFAD continues to systematically destroy the ethos of developmental action based on mutual responsibility that Agragamee had cultivated over the years"* (2005: 53-54).

Minor Forest Produce

In the early 90s, the policies of the Odisha government concerning collection, sale and processing of minor forest produce (MFP) were challenged by the *Mandibisi* M*ahila Mandal*, a women's group in Mandibisi village formed in 1992 with the training by Agragamee. For the forest-dependent tribal people of the region, the collection of MFP is a vital economic activity. They collect mahul flowers and seeds, tamarind, mango, hill brooms, Sal leaves, fibre, Kusum, fodder, gum, and fuelwood from the forests. Among these, hill brooms, mahul flowers, Sal leaves, and tamarind are collected in large quantities, since they have a decent market value. Collection of MFP is primarily the occupation of women. MFP collection is undertaken by the poorest sections of the villages as it is labour intensive, and the returns are quite low.[7] However, the tribal people are not allowed to stock, process or sell the MFP in the open market. Vidhya Das explains, "*the government controls these activities through a system of leases and permits which are granted on the whim of political leaders with no clearly defined criteria. Beyond the levy of a fixed amount of royalty, there are no terms and conditions either. The lease from the government amounts to a virtual sanction to exploit and loot the tribal people in tribal areas with regard to the particular item of forest produce"* (1996: 3227).

The state government set up the Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation (TDCC) in the 60s with the explicit purpose to facilitate marketing and ensure a fair price for primary producers or collectors. The key role of the TDCC was to uplift and boost the tribal economy and to safeguard the interest of the tribals by means of providing a reasonable support price for their surplus agricultural

products and MFP. However, Agragamee noticed major problems with the functioning of TDCC. In principle, the procurement prices of MFP items were fixed by a price fixation committee formed by the government at the district-level every year and the agency having the lease was supposed to pay the prices so fixed to the primary tribal collectors. But in practice, the primary collectors sold most of the MFP items at rates less than 50 percent of the fixed procurement price. The actual price varied from one-third to half the procurement price in the case of hill brooms. Das argues, "*the TDCC's inefficiency in procurement has enabled the petty traders and the local businessmen to secure a major market, amounting to more than two-thirds for most part of the items held in lease by the TDCC… Government policies and their misuse is increasingly denying the tribals the access to their livelihood needs. As a sequel, the government has been able to ensure neither the due revenue nor the conservation and protection of the forest resources. All this amounts to a blatant violation of the human rights of these communities"* (1996: 3228-29). In such a situation, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) policy was also not of much help. While the JFM policy provided the rights over MFP to the village groups who form the *Vana Samrakshan Samiti* (Forest Conservation Committee), it also mentioned that village groups could collect minor forest products as and how they would like but could dispose of that only through the authorised leaseholder.

Against this backdrop, in the year 1993 there emerged persistent struggles of village communities, with massive involvement of tribal women, across the state to access and use their forest and land resources. Women's mobilisation in Mandibisi village in Kashipur block for rights over hill brooms was the most important example of those struggles. While hill grasses are so commonplace in the tribal region of Odisha, the Rayagada forest range consisting of Kashipur is particularly favourable for producing the best quality hill brooms. The livelihood of most of the tribal people in this region is solely dependent on the collection and sale of hill grass. It was a long drawn-out struggle of seven years for Mandibisi Mahila Mandal to get the rights over MFP. In the early 90s, *Ama Sangathan* (Women's Federation)) was formed as a registered society and Mandibisi Mahila Mandal became a member of the federation. It grew out of the efforts of 1,225 women from Kashipur block and Ama Sangathan society networks with 17 mahila mandals of different panchayats in Kashipur block.[8] The hill broom movement, led by Ama Sangathan, is well documented. The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) now recognises the critical importance of forest and forest-based resources in the lives of the tribes and grants rights over MFP to the Panchayats. And, Odisha became the first state to change the MFP policy to make it in consonance with the PESA. The policy document of Odisha government stops the monopolistic leasing out of MFP items to private interests and corporations, enables mahila mandals, village groups and Panchayat-level organisations to collect and sell minor forest products in the open market at a competitive price, and prohibits entry of large-scale operations into those areas of processing of MFP which can be taken up only by small-scale industries (Das 1996).

Anti-Liquor Movement

After the hill-broom movement, Mandibisi witnessed another major movement- the anti-liquor movement. The massive agitation against the sale of liquor in the region was organised by Mandibisi Mahila Mandal with the active support of Agragamee. Agragamee considers it as a successful example of women's struggle against liquor supported by its staff. The movement raised wider questions of social and political importance. With the help of Ama Sangathan, Mandibisi women took up this matter after the Pali Sabha and Gram Sabha resolutions failed to make any impact on the liquor brewers who were carrying on their illicit business in collusion with the local police and administration. Processions and meetings were organised at different venues and finally the picketing of liquor was undertaken by women despite the presence of the contractors' goon squads. For the tribal women, this was a major victory. The brewing of illegal country liquor has not, however, come to a standstill. But women can confront the local breweries without the threat of being harassed by litigation. Local women, as Achyut Das and Vidhya Das note, "*broke the pots of the local liquor vendor and thus strengthened their hold over the tenuous village economy and initiated a chain of reactions for social action*" (1992: 1373). The situation reminds us of Kancha Iliah's observation in the context of Andhra Pradesh that the women "*who never figured in the political discourse of the state suddenly found a definite place*" (1992: 2406).

Kashipur Movement

The Kashipur movement marked a critical turn in the relation between the NGO and the state. Agragamee entered a new phase in its development discourse and witnessed a dramatic transformation in its relation with the state. While it developed a complex and dynamic relationship with a social movement on the one hand, it opted to contest the state acting in collusion with the global capitalist forces. With the neoliberal project of the Indian state, Agragamee notes, "*tribal lands, tribal resources preserved over centuries came under increasing demand, and tribal communities began to be pushed out, as rail-lines, power projects, industries, extractive mines and refineries came to be prioritised over people. All this has had repercussions for the welfare of local rural and tribal communities, and protests and dissent began to be voiced in different regions across the state of Odisha, and the country as a whole.*"[9] Faced with this new situation in the mid-90s in the micro-context of Kashipur, the organisation actively participated in mass mobilisation against the neoliberal development strategy "*leading to direct intervention in political conflicts*" (Korten 1990: 125). The NGO emerged as an, to use Gerard Clarke's words, "*important new arena of political contestation*" (1998: 45).

Mining operations began in Kashipur in the early 90s by the bauxite mining and processing company, the Utkal Alumina International (UAIL). The UAIL started its survey work in Kashipur block in 1993. With its own model of development for Kashipur, the UAIL wanted to set up a mining and processing unit for 1 million tonnes per annum (mtpa) alumina to be expanded to 2 mtpa in the second phase with bauxite mine from the *Baphli Mali* plateau and a refinery and the accessories in the *Doraguda* valley in Kashipur. The Baphli Mali plateau in the border areas of Rayagada and Kalahandi districts have about 196 million tonnes of bauxite and, by estimation, this bauxite reserve with ore to alumina ratio of 3:1 gave the project a life of 30 years (Das 2001: 2613).

The UAIL mining project led to strong opposition from the local people. In 1993, a team of 18 members from Kashipur met the Chief Minister demanding information about the implications of the mining for the local communities. When they did not receive any response, people presented petitions and appeals to the government and, as the state indifference continued, they organised peaceful demonstrations, rallies and roadblocks. From 1995 onwards, people in different Panchayats began a series of movements to resist mining in the bauxite plateaus of the region. Fighting collectively, they formed the *Prakrutik Sampada Suraksha Parishad* (PSSP- Natural Resources Protection Council) in 1996. Under the banner of the PSSP, the local people organised several public meetings, demonstrations and protests against the UAIL mining project. The agitation of the project-affected people against coercive and forcible eviction from their lands and homes, gradually gathered momentum. However, the growing opposition to mining did not stop the state and company from proceeding with their plans. The state did not hesitate to take coercive action against the movement. At this, the anger, resentment and indignation of the local people grew for being deprived of their habitation and livelihood and, thus, the situation in Kashipur became explosive towards the end of the 1990s.

The state also launched retaliatory measures against local NGOs, including Agragamee, for standing by and supporting the movement. In 1998, the Odisha government issued a show-cause notice against these NGOs for preventing industrial development in the districts and instructed all government departments and offices not to have any dealings with them. Agragamee campuses were raided by the police and several workers were arrested. Also, criminal cases were instituted against many workers including the NGO director. On December 16, 2000, the police fired at a gathering of protestors in the *Maikanch* village at the foothills of the Baphli Mali plateau and three tribals were killed. It was widely condemned by civil society at the national and international level. In 2001, the state government appointed a judicial commission of inquiry and the commission in its report justified the state policing. There were major agitations against the killing and the commission report, but hereafter the movement lost steam. At the time of my third visit in 2012, the movement was in disarray and the mining activities were on. Now, we will turn to the perspectives of the NGO, UAIL and independent fact-finding teams on the issue.

Agragamee Position

Agragamee takes the position that as per its vision it has a moral responsibility to be on the side of project-affected persons (PAPs) of the region in their movement for the rights and livelihood. Vidhya Das states, "*we have given ourselves a constitution that enshrines equality and freedom for every individual, even as it upholds the rights of local people to govern themselves. It enshrines the Mahatma's idea of Swarajya, a vision that has been left for us to realise. These are things we should fight for. Not something that we should fight against… People in the tribal regions are making a bid to realise the rights and provisions in the Constitution… tribal communities are standing up and demanding that the state treat them as human beings and allow them to exercise their rights as human beings"* (2003: 83). This new role of the organisation is an extension of its alternative approach, as discussed in earlier sections, involving the theory and practice of strategic action to achieve social justice for the people. As a part of this approach, Agragamee has supported the right of local communities to resist

the loss of their traditional livelihoods and environmental resources. Das argues, *"using provisions such as the 73rd Amendment and subsequently the PESA Act, it helped panchayats gain constitutional validity for their resistance against the mining companies through resolutions in the gram sabhas. It encouraged local leadership to carry their fight forward constitutionally and peacefully, involving people from other organisations and groups, as also drawing the attention of bodies like the NHRC, the SC and ST Commission, etc."* (2003: 83). Das strongly argues against the position of the state in accusing civil society organisations, like Agragamee, who have stood by the tribal people in their struggles, of inciting people to violence. Agragamee believes that it is a peaceful and legitimate movement of some of the most marginalised communities in the state (Das 2001).

Agragamee justifies its opposition to the joint strategy of mining-led industrialisation pursued by the state and the company in the micro-context of Kashipur on the following grounds. The first of these is the issue of the lack of transparency. The UAIL has violated the provisions of Right to Information Act (RTI). It provided vague answers to the questions of the local people concerning the environmental impacts of the mines and the refineries although it claimed to have conducted several studies for Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and others. In spite of several requests, it did not make any of those documents public. Even the mandatory public hearing has not been conducted by the company. Achyut Das and Vidhya Das (2006: 25) elaborate:

> *UAIL does not even appear to have obtained environmental clearance for the project. According to a Canada-based Kashipur solidarity group,..despite earlier verbal agreements, Alcan, UAIL's Canadian partner, has refused to disclose any part of the 1995 Environmental Impact Assessment prepared by Engineers India Ltd., during their meeting with Michael Hanley, CEO of Alcan's Bauxite and Aluminium Division on June 16, 2004. According to Hanley, the project's governmental approval had expired three years ago and was thus no longer relevant to the proposed project.*

Second, the resultant dislocation and destruction of the local populations and ecologies is expected to be large. The refinery and the accessories that the company intends to set up would take away 1000 ha of the most fertile land in the Doraguda Valley acquiring land of 12 villages. Bauxite mining is one of the most environmentally-destructive processes known. The slag to ore ratio is 3:1 that means for every tonne of alumina produced, there are three tonnes of highly caustic slag which would be then dumped in downstream areas destroying agricultural land, surface and sub-soil water, and causing unnamed diseases and ailments. The most visible adverse impact on the environment of mining and processing for alumina is red mud. Although UAIL proposes a 'dry mud stacking' method for managing this waste, Das (2001: 2612) argues:

> *studies indicate that dry red mud stacking would give rise to huge amounts, nearly 150 tonnes, of sodium hydroxide everyday… Dumping it into the rivers would raise the pH of the steams in the vicinity of the plant to 13. As per acceptable norms of the CPCB (Central Pollution Control Board), the pH should be maintained within 9… The matter would be further aggravated as substantial quantities of water from these streams (Sana Nala and Bara Nala) up to 13,400 cum/day will be tapped for the refinery and facilities by constructing a weir across the Sana Nala. At least 11 villages*

downstream to the refinery, with a total population of more than 2,000 would be affected by this discharge.

Reports from the National Aluminium Company (NALCO) refinery in Koraput district, which is just about 100 kms from Kashipur, indicate that villages downstream of the plant will get severely affected by the pollution of their streams by plant effluents. Even though the NALCO factory has an ash pond and red-mud pond, effluents are being discharged into the river regularly, causing cattle deaths and crop loss. Das says, "*alternatively, the alkali may be neutraliszed by acids. This would generate huge amounts of salts, more than 200 tonnes per day, in the form of sodium sulphate that would need disposal as effluent, and would raise the dissolved solid content of water in the streams to 4,437 ppm, more than four times the CPCB norms of 1000 ppm rendering it unusable for irrigation or domestic purposes, and causing death of all aquatic life forms… the UAIL only has access to two streams, the Sana Nala for its water requirements and the Bara Nala for its effluent discharge. When the plant is expanded to the 2 mtpa stage, twice the quantity of effluents will be produced. Where will it be dumped, what would happen to the surroundings then?"* (2001: 2612). Further, extraction of bauxite from the Baphli Mali plateau would be through opencast mines that would have its own environmental implications such as siltation and drying up of rivers, crop damage, and dangers of dam break leading to the destruction of villages and loss of life. According to Vidhya Das, "*the villagers in Maikanch, the foothill of the Baphli Mali are fighting against just such dangers. The water and silt run off from these mines given the heavy rainfall in the region would be difficult to check, and likely to cause untold damage to villages at the foothills of the Baphli Mali. It would force the people in these villages to sell their land and move out eventually* (2001: 2612).

Then, there would be rehabilitation and resettlement problems. Agragamee finds many of the claims and declarations of the UAIL concerning displacement baseless. For instance, the UAIL claims that the project is displacing only 148 families from three villages- Domkaral, Ramibeda and Kendukhunti. But Agragamee quotes studies by independent groups, which clearly indicate that in the alumina refinery area there are another eleven villages, including Kucheipadar, whose land will be acquired. The residents of these villages will be losing more than 75 percent of their land. Then regarding resettlement, the company claims that it has a resettlement plan for the displaced with housing, a tank for bathing, a community centre, a pond for bathing and washing, school, playground and other facilities. The rehabilitation plan says that each family will be provided with nearly 10 cents of land and a house of 300 sq ft. Agragamee finds these measures inadequate and also raises the question as to "*what would happen to those families whose land is being acquired but not the household plots. Even the people who are displaced as per the definitions of the company will have scarcely any survival supports, as the company has only promised them rehabilitation colonies in return for their land, homesteads, forests, rivers and hills. The NALCO project in Damanjodi offered one job per family of the displaced. And this package was only partially implemented but the UAIL does not undertake to provide even this much for the displaced*" (Das 2001: 2613). Additionally, Agragamee staff point out that the tribal people in the Rayagada district have for long cultivated the slopes in their villages with no record of rights. When revenue laws were imposed on the tribal communities by a colonial regime, the best low-lying lands were appropriated by the non-tribal settlers, records of rights were not sanctioned, and

are still not sanctioned on slopes on grounds of environmental protection. Hence, Das argues: "*now when the tribal people will be displaced, the majority of them will not get any compensation, as they have been cultivating land only as 'encroachers' and not as owners"* (2001: 2613).

Third, Agragamee challenges the claims of the UAIL concerning employment. Although the company says it would provide employment to about 1,000 people, one has to see that it is going to affect the lives of more than 5,000 tribal families. And almost none of those 1,000 employed would be from the 5,000 affected since they do not have enough education or skills required for employment in the company. To sum up, Agragamee (Das 2001: 2613) gives a balance-sheet of the mining project:

> *The UAIL is a 100 percent export oriented unit. The state gets a royalty of about Rs 42.00 per tonne of bauxite, which would amount to about Rs 12.6 crore a year and perhaps some returns in terms of taxes. For which they would have lost at least 2,700 hectares of land to the company, and god knows how much more to siltation, and effluent discharge. Several perennial sources of the river would dry up, thousands of people would have lost their land and livelihood to displacement, pollution of waterways, siltation of agricultural land, and loss of cattle, and several species of endangered wildlife would have been deprived of their natural habitat.*

Utkal Alumina Response

The Utkal Alumina argues that it is committed to sustaining the environment, controlling pollution and minimizing disturbance to the local society. First, the site of bauxite mine, which is a plateau, has no human habitation. It has been chosen with a view to minimize human displacement and loss of agricultural land or forest. The company argues, "*the technology to be used in the plant as well as in disposal of red mud waste is more advanced than any other in India. That is why this present project, despite being larger than the NALCO plant, is going to use approximately 55 percent less land. The people likely to be affected are from one hamlet of Korol, one hamlet of Dimundi and Ramibera village. They have been explained in detail by our people and shown the alternative land for their resettlement"* (Choudhary 1995: 1538).

Second, the UAIL believes that there would not be much environmental impact since the mining lease does not fall within any declared forest area. UAIL states, "*about 100 hectares fall within the category of 'village forests' (under the state revenue department), for which we have… developed alternative compensatory afforestation plans, and identified land for the same in the surrounding areas. Ground and surface water studies… have confirmed that soil contamination will be negligible… The 'dry stacked' red mud storage area will be properly restored after use, through extensive plantation"* (Choudhary 1995: 1538). Further, the UAIL cites studies showing that there would not be any adverse impact of the alumina plant on the drainage system. The question of carbon residue, fluoride emission and other effluents associated with smelters does not arise. It argues, "*Utkal will be minimizing the 'drill and blast' mining method. As a result, the noise level will not be more than the existing ambient levels. The dust in the mining area to be controlled through the atomised dust suppression system,… the run-off water from the mine will be guided through check dams, siltation tanks and a network of garland canals so that solid particles are captured and retained… At Baphlimali too, the environment/pollution*

monitoring will be by external agencies and the records will be open to scrutiny… There will be plantations along the plateau slopes as well" (Choudhary 1995: 1538).

Third, regarding employment generation and community work in the region, the company is of the view that the project will generate some direct as well as indirect employment opportunities. Further, the company officials state that they have a plan to upgrade the Industrial Training Institutes in the region. Selected youth from the local area would be trained in these institutes. The UAIL also claims that it has started community development work in the form of health camps, vocational training in pottery, improved drinking water supply to some villages, and spreading improved agricultural practices" (Choudhary 1995; interviews in Kashipur in 2009 and 2012).

Position of Fact-Finding Teams

Several teams from the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and others visited the mining site, analysed contesting claims and counterclaims, and prepared reports. These reports mostly support the arguments put forward by Agragamee. First of all, the reports point out the lack of clarity and transparency on the part of the UAIL. For instance, the PUDR report states, "*clearly, there is no precise idea about the number of affected people. This lack of information is one of the characteristic features of the project. Worse,… the official estimates leave out a huge number of those who will obviously be affected in many ways… What is significant is that the affected people are never consulted, they are always told. Their opinion is never sought prior to starting work on the projects…In such a situation there is hardly any opportunity for the people to make informed choices."*[10]

Second, although the UAIL claims to have conducted several studies on the environmental impact of the mines and refineries, there is silence on the part of both the UAIL and the state government on the environmental consequences of this project in terms of adverse impact of open cast mining on human life and livelihood, health, air quality, ecology and biodiversity, natural resources and infrastructure. These reports take a serious note of the red mud, one of the by-products of open cast bauxite mining. Despite the UAIL claim that it would manage red mud and other solid effluents by stacking that in large open ponds, it is estimated that this would cause nearly 150 tonnes of sodium hydroxide to be leached into the soil every day. This, in turn, would raise the pH levels of the soil in the region much beyond acceptable limits leading to severe environmental damage. Then, there is the problem of large-scale loss of vegetation and natural habitat. Manufacturing of aluminium, including the intermediate processes of bauxite extraction and conversion to alumina, is an extremely resource-intensive one requiring vast amounts of water, electricity, land, and other natural resources. Thus, the project would result in the desertification of the region with increased risks of landslides, flash floods and loss of cultivable land and forest resources that are crucial to the lives of the local communities.

Certain major flaws have been noticed in the rehabilitation policy. While the UAIL document says (PAPs), those who lose their lands and to whom compensation would be paid, would be given preference in jobs after the displaced people (DPs), those who lose their homes, but this provision is made subject to availability and skill. Further, as per the UAIL package, each displaced family would be given 1/10th of an acre for homestead purposes, pucca houses of 480 sq feet with facilities. And both

DPs and PAPs are eligible for, PUDR team notes, "*land for land to the extent government cultivable land is available. But in none of the villages we visited has land for land actually been offered*" (2005: 25). Although the UAIL document lays down several rates of compensation for 11 different categories of land, depending on their quality, the compensation package ignores those who currently cultivate the *dongar* (hill) constituting a fair number among the PAPs.

From Contestation to Advocacy

In the early 2000s, as the Kashipur movement was in decline, gradually the relation between Agragamee and the state improved-- state government began making overtures and Agragamee started realising that "*an NGO cannot*", as Achyut Das told me, "*afford to have a direct confrontation with the state for long*" (interview in Kashipur, February 11, 2012). Agragamee softened its stand after witnessing the phase of severe repression, but the original resolve of the organisation did not change. The mode of resolve changed from direct confrontation with the state to a mode of advocacy. Agragamee maintains the position that it "*will continue to uphold the rights of tribal other indigenous underprivileged and deprived communities to their land, water and forest resources, to determine their path of development and wellbeing without coercion. Despite all odds, Agragamee will continue on its chosen path of tribal development, combining programmes and projects for the welfare and wellbeing of the tribal community, with advocacy for rights, and helping local communities fight injustice and exploitation*."[11] Advocacy of various forms are attempted to build public opinion and to assist in the formulation of better public policy. Agragamee strives for coalition-building, evolves epistemic community and tries to exert collective influence on the state in policy-making as well as implementation levels. In recent times, advocacy has been combined with collaboration and negotiation with the state. Currently, Agragamee is working in collaboration with the state government and central government on millet mission and reviving traditional agriculture practices project respectively. At the same time, Agragamee is supported by Karl Kubel Stiftung (KKS), a German agency, in the eco-village project, premised on the ideas of food and nutrition security and food sovereignty.

Conclusions

Agragamee has turned out to be a major intervening agency over the last three decades in the tribal region of Odisha. While hill broom and anti-liquor movements against specific state policies are success stories, Kashipur movement made Agragamee realise about its limitations as an NGO in direct resistance against the forces of globalisation. Chambers and Kopstein note that civil society plays several kinds of roles in relation with the state which are not mutually exclusive -- in "partnership" with the state, in "support" of the state, in "dialogue" with the state, and in "opposition" to the state (2006). There are four distinct moments of political action of Agragamee as we saw in the preceding sections -- joint forest management (JFM) programme, minor forest produce and hill broom movement, anti-liquor movement, and Kashipur movement. In the initial phase, the organisation played the role of a supporter and partner with the state. Then increasingly it became a critic and an opponent. In recent years, in addition to organising capacity-building and training programmes, Agragamee plays the role of public sphere -- a site for the production of a rational critical discourse in a creative and critical dialogue with

the state. The new role of Agragamee, Achyut Das said in a conversation, "*advocacy needs to be seen in continuity with its original vision and the earlier role of mobilisation involving capacity-building, self-reliance, community participation and empowerment in the light of the setback to the organisation in the late 90s and the interest of the funding agencies*" (interview in Kashipur, July 6, 2019). This is less radical and more pragmatic approach as compared to direct contestation based on the Kashipur movement experience. However, it does not make Agragamee less political since advocacy "*does not perceive people as passive recipients of benefits and services but as active participants demanding rights from the system… people are conscientised, mobilised and organised to fight against corruption, oppression and injustice*" (Bhatt 1995: 871). Thus, advocacy, along with collaboration and negotiation with the state, does not have any adverse impact on the political and developmental character of Agragamee.

A critical dilemma that Agragamee started facing in the late 90s was a crisis of funds and the ways to deal with that. The problem began when the organisation experienced state repression in connection with the Kashipur movement. Although there is a clear improvement in the relation with the state and a revival of the contact with the donor agencies, resource crunch continues to be a reality given Agragamee's radical commitment in spite of adopting advocacy. A major concern for the organisation is restrictions and conditionalities imposed by the funding agencies. For instance, funders emphasise advocacy and campaigning and disfavour mobilisation on the part of NGOs. Vidhya Das argued in a conversation, "*what if some of our campaigns inspire local people to fight for their rights?*" (interview in Kashipur, February 15, 2012). If advocacy is a framework of depoliticisation diverting NGOs away from sensitisation and social mobilisation toward the provision of services, it becomes a major concern for NGOs with a commitment to social transformation like Agragamee which are experimenting with alternative development initiatives on the ground. This dominant instrumental view of NGOs makes it extremely difficult for Agragamee to work with a focus on rights, participation, empowerment and social mobilisation. This validates a concern expressed in the early 90s that, as D L Sheth and Harsh Sethi note, "*what is needed is not only a more detailed empirical examination of foreign funding and donor agencies and their impact on the thought and working processes of different NGOs, but reflections on the larger political and ethical implications of constantly relying on grants to engage in social interventionist activity*" (1991: 63). This concern, increasingly felt in recent times, is making the organisation reflect on and explore possibilities of enhancing its bases of self-reliance. Strengthening the internal mechanisms of revenue generation and reducing dependence on external funds remain key challenges for Agragamee.

Endnotes

[1] Clarke, Gerard. 1998. 'Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Politics in the Developing World', *Political Studies*, XLVI: 39.

[2] This was taken as a new style of politics by a group of social scientists whose views have been published in *Lokayan Bulletin* and *Alternatives*. This *Alternatives* group is mainly represented by Rajni Kothari, D L Seth, and Harsh Sethi.

[3] The data on membership, finances, specific interventions with outcomes are available in Agragamee annual reports. The situational dynamics refer here to the dynamic conditions at micro, meso and macro contexts.

[4] For elaborate discussion, see Pathy, S. 1992. *Tribal Communities, Tribal Development and Social Production in Kashipur, Orissa: A Profile, An Evaluation Study of Orissa Tribal Development Project*. New Delhi: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

[5] Details borrowed from Das, Vidhya. 2003. 'Kashipur: Politics of Underdevelopment', *Economic and Political Weekly* (4 January): 81.

[6] *The Dharitri* (Odia Daily), 4 September 2001.

[7] Details borrowed from a study by NGO Vasundhra (Bhubaneswar, Odisha) which can be found on the India Environment Portal: http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/feature-article/fighting-it-out, last accessed on 2 May 2019.

[8] **'**Innovative value chains ensure sustainable livelihoods', https://leisaindia.org/innovative-value-chains-ensures-sustainable-livelihoods/ , last accessed on 7 May 2019.

[9] The Agragamee blogsite *Agralog: agragamee.wordpress.com/about,* last accessed on 19 October 2019.

[10] PUDR Report entitled "Halting the Mining Juggernaut: People's Struggles Against Alumina Projects in Odisha" (2005) available at *https://pudr.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/kashipur%20Struggles%20Against%20Alumina%20Projects%20in%20Orissa.pdf:* 3. Last accessed on 19 October 2019.

[11] Ibid.

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