NGOs in Kashmir
Agents of Peace and Development?

Anirudh Suri
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“In the past five years I have paid more than ten visits to Kashmir, and each time I go there I see the same helplessness, the same fear, and yet the same determination writ large on the faces of its hapless people. But there is little that ordinary Kashmiris seem able to do, as sinister, anonymous forces in Islamabad and New Delhi dictate their fate.”

The Kashmir conflict remains mired in the political offices of New Delhi and Islamabad, and to a lesser extent, Srinagar. Even though welfare and relief work in the country’s most violence-ridden State is at a virtual standstill due to poor governance, militancy and other reasons, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

are considered a non-entity in the State. Not much research has gone into the role that NGOs could play in Kashmir, or into what constraints the few NGOs that do exist in Kashmir are facing today. This paper will strive to address some of these issues, throwing light on the state of some of the NGOs that are active in Jammu & Kashmir, the problems in their functioning, their relations with the Government and their potential. The organizations that fall into the ambit of this study include religious, human rights, community development, charity and voluntary bodies, along with non-political institutions like the Media and the Army.

The refrain that “Civil Society is the new terrain for democratization” is being voiced all over today. India, as the world’s largest democracy, has to shed its inhibitions about NGOs, which are one of the most crucial actors in the establishment of civil society in areas where the State has failed to keep democratic institutions running. This is in accordance with the well-established belief that private actors and organizations are often more efficient than public ones. The role that NGOs and Track II diplomacy can play has been discussed in depth elsewhere. It is well-known that the concept of civil society and the role and importance accorded to NGOs is still in its infant stage, not only in India, but in the whole of South Asia.

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2 Ibid. Among other reasons, Sikand feels that it might be because of the fact that a majority of the suffering population is, or at least, is perceived to be Muslims, or out of fear of the wrath of the State.

3 As defined by the UN Interagency on Integrated Rural Development, there are six defining characteristics of NGOs: they are voluntary, non-profit, service and development oriented, autonomous from the government or political parties, have a high degree of motivation and commitment, and some form of formal registration.

4 This study will not aim to map the entire community of NGOs in Kashmir. It, however, will study their problems and suggest solutions. Systematic mapping and monitoring of NGOs is definitely needed, but the author, due to limited resources, could not embark on that interesting, yet ambitious project. The author hopes that this study will be the basis of amore in-depth and rigorous study undertaken by others.


7 For a historical overview of NGO culture in India and the tradition of voluntarism and general...
‘government centrism’\textsuperscript{8} that makes the growth of non-State actors difficult. The situation is no different in Kashmir, which should not deter us from arguing for a more active role for NGOs in Kashmir, keeping in mind the heightened need for non-governmental actors at all levels in the Valley.

This paper highlights the need for more NGOs to enter Kashmir and act as agents of development and welfare, whilst simultaneously sowing the seeds of peace. Lessons need to be learnt from the experiences of NGOs which have been active and effective in creating constituencies of peace in other conflict areas like South Africa, Palestine and, closer to home, Sri Lanka. Key issues regarding NGOs in Kashmir, such as their evolution over the years, their current state, NGO-Government relations, constraints, and the scope and role of NGOs as agents of peace and development in Kashmir, are addressed in the following sections.

\textbf{Evolution of NGO culture in Kashmir}

To trace the evolution of NGO culture in Kashmir over the past few decades, we need to briefly look at the kind of society that has existed and exists in Kashmir today. The concept of an ‘NGO’ is a relatively new one, even in the international arena. The infusion of this concept of NGO into Kashmir is even more recent. Kashmir has traditionally been a plural society, which manifests itself in the concept of \textit{Kashmiriyat}.\textsuperscript{9} Kashmir has traditionally been a very close-knit religious society. As a result, the need for NGOs in the social sphere had never been felt. For example, an orphan in the pre-1989 period would immediately be adopted by one of his relatives or neighbors in accordance with their religious and social practices; hence the need for orphanages was never felt.\textsuperscript{10} This phenomenon was so wide-spread that every family in Kashmir could be called an NGO, since it had always played this role. Thus, very few social welfare or voluntary organizations had existed in Kashmir before the period of militancy.

The period after 1989 marked a watershed for NGOs in Kashmir and their need was deeply felt for the first time. With violence increasing, the number of casualties and victims of violence continued to rise. Over the next few years, with the Indian army attacking militants and their supporters, Kashmiri society began to feel the brunt of militancy on their lives. Normal life in Kashmir being disrupted with curfews for many days at a stretch became a common occurrence. Life came to a virtual standstill at the height of the militancy as food and other supplies were disrupted, curfews were imposed, offices began to be closed down and the tourist and other businesses that Kashmir had thrived upon began to be adversely affected. With this came the need for someone to help ease the lives of the common people. Problems, like an

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Kashmiriyat is used broadly to represent the idea of a separate identity for all Kashmiris, whether they are Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, based on their distinct language, culture and history. It is said to be on the decline in recent years, which is believed to be the cause of communal tension in Kashmir.
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Author’s interviews with NGO activists, and historians in Kashmir University, July 2003.
\end{itemize}
increasing number of orphans, psychiatric disorders, lack of freedom of speech and expression as well as movement, unemployment and many others associated with the wide-spread violence affected the hitherto peaceful and thriving Kashmiri society.

As more NGOs and local initiatives started coming up to meet the needs of the society, there were other factors at work impeding their growth. Increased violence was a major hindrance in the effective functioning and development of NGOs, as they cannot function in an environment where the lives of its activists are constantly at risk. A second reason relates to the Government strategy to counter the increased militancy and its support among the masses. As the government moved from a defensive policy in the early 1990’s to a more aggressive strategy to root out militancy, it let the people feel the harsh realities of militancy for themselves and refused to provide succor to the victims. The aim was to strike at the roots of militancy and erode the popular local support to militancy. The Government refrained from playing a positive role in the establishment of NGOs as it felt that active and effective NGOs could have cushioned the effects of militancy which would have led the local population to believe that militancy could be sustained without disrupting their lives. Without NGOs working to ease their suffering, the people began to feel the maleffects of militancy and the Government strategy to eliminate support for militancy began to work.

The next big step in the evolution of NGOs started as the political situation came under some semblance of control in the mid-90s after extensive military action and dwindling support for militancy. The Government decided to hold elections in 1996 that would be free and fair, or at least appear to be so. For that, it needed to have other democratic institutions in place, including the media and NGOs, which have increasingly become the forum for projecting a democratic image to international and domestic communities. A study of the evolution of NGOs in Kashmir reveals a dramatic increase in their number functioning in the State starting from the 1996-1997 period. Most of these NGOs were sponsored by the Government or one of the many governmental agencies working in J&K to restore some semblance of peace and normalcy. These NGOs, which have come to be called GONGOs or Governmental NGOs, sprang up in large numbers over a short span of time and exist till date, at least on paper.

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Overview of NGOs in Kashmir

The general trend in the realm of civil society in recent years in Kashmir has been encouraging. The number of NGOs have increased manifold, the reasons for which are many. With the concept of Civil Society gaining a foothold in India and to a certain extent in Kashmir, starting an NGO has “become the fashion.” However, many of the people running these organizations are “not very sincere about it and are just interested in making fast money.” Also, such organizations are often accused of being used by corrupt politicians and bureaucrats to “siphon funds to their favorites.” This is not to say that there are no people or organizations that are making a genuine effort to establish civil society in this violence-ravaged State.

The spurt in the growth of NGOs has been spread over different domains. The intervention of NGOs has been crucial, since the Government was found to be lacking in many areas. An overview of the current state of NGOs shows that the main fields in which they are active in Kashmir are the following: orphanages, self-help groups, dialogue groups, medical care, rural development and employment generation-oriented groups, widow care, disappearances, coalitions of NGOs, ecological and environmental groups, and awareness groups. In terms of geographical distribution of NGOs, there is a clear imbalance between Srinagar and other far-flung areas of the State. Most of the NGOs are based in or around Srinagar, even though the areas worst-affected by militancy are the border areas of Kupwara, Poonch, Rajouri, Baramulla etc. While there are some NGOs working in these areas, they are very few in number and are facing great difficulties. Poverty and extreme backwardness left far-flung areas including the tribal areas of Poonch and Rajouri neglected even by NGOs and deprived of access to basic facilities like drinking water, education, health care, sanitation and means of livelihood.

Among the active NGOs working in Kashmir, orphanages are the most prominent in terms of their work, reputation and goodwill. One of the worst affected groups during this militancy-rife period has been children, who have been rendered homeless, often as orphans. The number of orphans created over the past 14 years of militancy is estimated to be anywhere from 15 to 25 thousand. However, most of the orphanages house only 100-120 children, and the number of orphanages actually working would not number more than ten. It is easy to see that an unacceptably large number of children are still not being taken care of. While the Government too has established a few orphanages, most of them are in a pitiable condition, and many opine that it might even be better for a child to be kept out of such homes.

Some orphanages like the J&K Yateem Foundation, Yateem Khanah, and J&K Amelioration Project, Oxfam (India) Trust recently produced a rather unusual report, *The Impact of Violence on the Student Community in Kashmir* (2003), that documents the opinions of nearly 200 young Kashmiris on how the violence has affected their lives in terms of their education, its psychological impact etc. The primary research was conducted by a group of young Kashmiris familiar with the situation in the State.

12 Dr. Navnita Chadha Behera, Personal Interview, 03 July 2003. Dr. Behera is the author of *State, Identity, and Violence: Jammu and Kashmir* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000) as well as many research papers and articles on Kashmir.


14 Gowher A. Fazili, “Role of Civil Society and the State of Jammu & Kashmir,” *New Hope*, vol. 4, no.1, 2003, p. 71. Gowhar Fazili teaches Political Science at the Government Women’s College, Srinagar. He is a political activist and is deeply interested in ecological issues. He is also the co-author of an important report on the impact of protracted violence on Kashmiri youth.

15 This has been determined on the basis of extensive interactions by the author with the common people in Kashmir and those involved with NGOs, along with visits to the offices and field trips to the sites of operation of many of these NGOs during a field trip to the State in July 2003.

16 Mr. Shabir Kohli, Personal Interview, 27 July 2003. Mr. Kohli is the President of INSAAR, an NGO working in Poonch district for the welfare of tribes, mainly Gujjars.

17 Under its Violence Mitigation and Amelioration Project, Oxfam (India) Trust
Yateem trust have managed to establish a good reputation for themselves based on their selfless work, though they might have their own shortcomings. Yateem Foundation has, within a period of 3-4 years, managed to establish itself as a reputed organization which lays great stress on transparency; this is one quality found lacking in most other NGOs. It was the first orphanage to have established a proper system of handling donations, stressing on transparency to gain the trust of more people and attract more donations. Its public audit system has been adopted by other NGOs. Yateem Foundation famously, and to the amazement of many, collected around Rs. 23 lakhs in the month of Ramazan for its activities. In the process, they set an example for other NGOs who often complain about the paucity of funds and limited ways of raising funds. However, people generally give generously for religious activities, but not much for social causes. Moreover, there is a general consensus that orphans are the children of God and should be helped and taken care of in the best way possible.

Dr. Rouf, who works with Yateem Foundation, represents a generation of Kashmiris who left the Valley when militancy was on the upsurge in the early ‘90s and pursued their studies in different parts of India. They are exposed to different ideas and concepts prevailing in different parts of the country. On returning to their homeland, as many of them did in the past 2-3 years, they brought back these ideas and apply them here. In the words of Dr. Rouf, “the lessons learnt from the outside world” have guided him and helped him gain new perspectives. A graduate from Patna College, Dr. Rouf acknowledges that he got the idea of establishing an orphanage from the concept of ‘anathalaya’ that was prevalent in the Gupta Dynasty. Similarly, Gowhar Fazili, who spent his schooling and college years in Bangalore and Delhi returned with many ideas. He formed a unique group called SPACE (Students’ Platform for Acquiring and Consolidating Experience), which is literally meant to be a space where they could voice their opinions and listen to others without worrying about their implications. College life has to mean more than just classes, according to Fazili, and since colleges in Kashmir are currently not strong on extra-curricular activities, SPACE is a timely initiative to help the Kashmiri students form their own views and express them.

Environmental groups have been active in Kashmir in recent years, especially with the serious ecological problems that the world famous Dal Lake in Srinagar is facing. Therefore, Kashmir needed the immediate attention of environmental NGOs. The Save Dal Campaign was started by an Englishman named Charles Goschen, who was appalled at the condition of the lake during one of his visits to Kashmir. The Green Kashmir movement, started by Charles, managed to build an environment-conscious lobby in the militancy-ravaged State. However, his untimely death crippled the movement. Though it lives on, the Green Kashmir Movement has split and many more environmental groups, claiming to be working towards the environmental protection of the State, have been formed. One of them, HOPE, came into existence in April 1999, and has been working in the field of Solid Waste Management. HOPE also undertook a Solid Waste Management Project for the Dal Lake, handed over to them by the J&K Lakes and Waterways Development Authority. Workers of HOPE go to every individual houseboat daily to collect their waste. HOPE mainly undertakes projects given to them by the relevant official authorities, besides organizing public awareness campaigns. However, the state of environmental NGOs is best summed up in the words of Saquib Qadri, Vice Chairman of Hope, “This is the beginning, much more needs to be done, which is only possible when the people at the helm of affairs, both in governmental and non-governmental organizations, show concern, commitment and competence towards the job assigned to them.”

The need for medical care NGOs has also come to the fore in the violence-ridden State, but NGO efforts are found lacking in this field. Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) is the only international NGO to have started a

19 Dr. Rouf, Personal Interview, 17 July 2003.
20 Fazili, n.14.
psychosocial program in Kashmir, after assessing the mental health situation among the Kashmiri population.\textsuperscript{22} MSF is also one of the very few NGOs that have actually ventured beyond Srinagar into the neighboring districts of Pulwama and Ganderbal block. MSF offers psychosocial services, education and support in these districts, besides undertaking activities to improve psychiatric care facilities in the Government Psychiatric Hospital, Srinagar. Doctors at the Psychiatric Hospital appreciate the work done by MSF in these areas, “MSF rebuilt the hospital building that had burnt down,”\textsuperscript{23} and without their help, medical services would have completely halted. MSF, however, needs to exercise more caution and try harder to blend into the unique social context existing in Kashmir, according to people who have observed it at work. The scope for improvement thus definitely exists not only in terms of the work going on, but also in the number of organizations working in this field.

While human rights have been a very delicate issue, with possibly the gravest consequences, nationally and internationally, not many NGOs are working to act as pressure groups to make the Government and armed forces accountable for their actions. While local groups like the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) are working to provide justice to the families of EID (Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances) victims, restrictions are often imposed on their functioning citing national interests and security reasons. Human rights have been a sensitive issue, and the Government has adopted a high handed approach towards it. NGOs fighting against human rights violations by highlighting such issues are deemed to be working against the State.

International NGOs (INGOs) seem to be having an even harder time in Kashmir. MSF, incidentally, is the only INGO that has not signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government, which stipulates that any international NGO will have to seek the permission of the Government before venturing into sensitive areas, and will have to be accompanied by Government officials. Other INGOs like the International Committee of the Red Cross, which have a token presence in Kashmir, are required to sign the MoU. This translates into limited access to sensitive areas, and limited ability to publish their findings. Human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have produced damning reports of human rights violations in Kashmir by various Government agencies and the armed forces. These reports, many of which were published in the early and mid-90s when militancy was at its peak, caused the Government of India much embarrassment in the international arena. Consequently, the Government of India curtailed the INGO activities. They are allowed to conduct research work in the State, but are not given permission to publish any reports based on their findings. They also have to face restrictions in their field work, such as being taken on guided tours, which are likely to be manipulated to represent something entirely untrue. Thus, several limitations have been imposed on the working of International NGOs in Kashmir on the grounds of “national interest” and “security reasons”: MSF, as mentioned above, has not signed a MoU, and thus enjoys more freedom and flexibility in their functioning. However, MSF does not venture into the political domain, and limits itself to the psychosocial and medical domains.

An interesting phenomenon that has been developing in different parts of the Valley is the concept of self-help groups. As in many other conflict-ridden areas, many humanitarian organizations provide unconditional aid in times of crisis in the form of money as well as essential goods. This backfires as people tend to become dependant, expecting others to come and help them in every moment of crisis. To overcome this problem, which has manifested itself in Kashmir, the idea of building self-help groups has been developed whereby individuals and small organizations go to different villages, especially in traditionally-neglected districts, and help the village people take advantage of the different schemes brought out by the Government and social welfare agencies like the Women’s Development Corporation or the State Social Welfare Board. These


\textsuperscript{23} Dr. Arshad Hussain, Personal Interview, 18 July 2003. Dr. Hussain is a psychiatric doctor at the Government Psychiatric Hospital, Srinagar.
The armed forces should not only aim to win the people to overcome the circumstances. money win the battle with the might of the gun or has changed, and it is no longer possible to project, believes that the role of the Army believed to be one of the official behinds the border management."

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丐.org>, 2003."

Parmar, "Operation Sadbhavana: A Culture of Track diplomacy processes in the South Asian region. Women to form networks and increase their participation to strengthen their role in multi-track diplomacy processes in the South Asian region.

Going by numbers, the largest ‘NGO’ in Kashmir is probably the Indian Army. The Indian Army is considered to be an NGO, broadly speaking, since it undertakes development projects and implements education and health care programs in areas where both the Government and other voluntary organizations have failed to make inroads. One of the recent programs of the Army was the Sadbhavana program in the border areas of Jammu and Kashmir. In Kargil, the locals' implicit support to the intruders was proof enough to the Army in 1999 that it had lost its support base. The army then realized that "security and human development had to be intrinsic parts of border management." Lt. Gen Arjun Ray, believed to be one of the officials behind the project, believes that the role of the Army has changed, and it is no longer possible to win the battle with the might of the gun or money. "It is necessary to win the hearts of the people to overcome the circumstances. The armed forces should not only aim to win the war but to avoid it all together." The Sadbhavana Project focuses on bringing development and dignity to the 109,500 people in the 190 villages close to the 265 km Ladakh-PoK border. All round development of the border areas to sensitize the people, it is felt, would greatly reduce support for the Pakistan-backed militancy.

Another key aim of this project is to check the spillover of militancy into Ladakh. Hence, the Army has undertaken a major human development drive in Ladakh. With cooperation from the Bangalore IT industry, it has installed computers in schools. Volunteers from an NGO, Prakruthi, are teaching students in Ladakh. The main thrust areas of the project are primary education, secondary and tertiary health care, community development and empowerment of women. While the project has been a success and has managed to make Ladakh a militancy free zone, the Army does realize that charity cannot be the engine of sustainable growth in these areas. Without sustainable and equitable growth over long periods of time, the Army faces the danger of losing the goodwill that it has generated over the years. Thus, plans are now underway to ensure the empowerment of the people to ensure growth by themselves through efforts facilitated by the initial help and guidance provided by the Army. Hopefully, the "astounding success" of Sadbhavana will hopefully be emulated in other parts of the Valley.

Also worth mentioning are some other groups which might not fall within any of the above categories but are doing commendable work. Among these is Helpline, an NGO in Bij Behara Tehsil which provides education to children from poor families. It trains a group of volunteers, both boys and girls, to teach children in the evenings. The aim is to create a similar ripple effect that local self-help groups aim to create. Helpline, run by Mr. Javed Ahmed Tak, himself suffering from disability, is planning to co-ordinate with other NGOs like WISCOMP, under its Athwaas project, to broaden the scope of their activities. Other groups like the Jammu & Kashmir Markaz-

people are encouraged, guided and provided basic resources to set up their own small businesses, be it poultry or weaving or starting computer literacy centers, or dealing collectively with the psychosocial problems of individuals in the villages. WISCOMP, under its Athwaas project, is helping the formation of such self-help groups in villages. Athwaas is unique in its purpose as it seeks to empower people who are in a position to empower others in a similar predicament, thus creating a "ripple effect", or a chain reaction. Villages in Kashmir can especially benefit from such projects as many far-flung villages are neglected by most organizations, and self-help groups seem to be the best way to empower the villagers, rather than simply make them more dependent.

24 WISCOMP (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace) is a project of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility, based in New Delhi. WISCOMP strives to support women to form networks and increase their participation to strengthen their role in multi-track diplomacy processes in the South Asian region.

25 Kashmiri for ‘handshake’


27 Ibid.

28 Gen. V.G. Pathankar, former Commanding Officer, 15 Corps, Srinagar in a talk on “The current situation in Kashmir” at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, 6 August 2003.
Behboodi Khawateen (Center for Women’s Welfare) provide training in arts and crafts for women as well as a home for destitute women. Groups like the Zanana Dastkari Production Ltd and the Markaz Industrial Cooperative Society impart training and provide jobs to poor women in the Valley along with providing financial assistance to women and orphans for marriages, medical care and legal awareness. Hussaini Relief Committee, which has been working actively to establish blood banks, has now embarked on awareness programs and is planning to branch out further with the help of funding from national NGOs like the AMAN trust and Oxfam (India).

International NGOs and national NGOs do have a minimal presence in the Valley. Similarly, cases where individuals from other parts of the country have come to Kashmir and settled here to work with the needy are rare, but do exist nonetheless. A couple from Pune, Bharti and Adik, are a good example of this rare phenomenon. A trip with an NGO from Pune to help victims of violence in the Valley had exposed them to the plight of orphans in the Valley. Seeing that their number was on the rise, they decided to stay back to run an orphan home and help widows as well. Despite facing resistance initially from the locals, the Army and the local clergy, they stuck on. Gradually, people accepted them and acknowledged the humanitarian character of their work. Their story, published in the local media, serves as an example for others. Such initiatives are very encouraging for the emergence of a NGO culture and community as a whole; hopefully it will spark off a movement to bring a semblance of normalcy into the lives of the people.

The situation is definitely improving now; with many NGOs initiating work in the Valley by working with and funding local NGOs that they have taken pains to choose. Thus, organizations like the AMAN trust and Oxfam (India), both based in Delhi, have allied with local NGOs to do the kind of work they are interested in doing. The importance of National NGOs is two-fold: not only do they bring with them the benefit of experience in this field, but also, equally importantly, they become a much-needed source of funding for the local Kashmiri NGOs. The experience and guidance provided by the national NGOs will be crucial since a major problem faced by them in Kashmir is the lack of direction, and lack of knowledge in running an NGO effectively. That this problem can be solved in this way is corroborated by the fact that many NGOs in Kashmir that are working effectively and have established an enviable reputation for themselves are being run by people who have worked with NGOs elsewhere, and are familiar with managing an NGO.
NGOs: Constraints and Obstacles

It is important to identify some of the key problems that NGOs face in Kashmir. Firstly, and more importantly, NGO culture has not permeated Kashmiri society yet. As mentioned earlier, Kashmir has not had a history of the presence of NGOs, let alone voluntary organizations, working for the larger societal good in areas where the Government has failed. ‘Each family was an NGO by itself’. This meant that Kashmiri society had never felt the need to organize such help groups on a larger scale. The culture of helping people was limited however to one’s near and dear ones. One exception in the context of Kashmir is the payment of zakat that is generally used for the greater social good. But zakat is usually in the form of monetary assistance to the needy. It does not really help the needy become self-dependant nor does it mean that the donors are actually directing their time and efforts into helping the needy. So the culture of organizing a mass movement to provide organizational assistance to the needy is absent. “People are not ready to make sacrifices anymore,” says an NGO activist. They feel they have suffered enough and lost enough in the resistance movement, which itself has never been able to become mass-based or even indigenous. “As a result, people are indifferent.” Unfortunately, the movement to revive civil society has never been mass-based. It has simply involved and attracted individuals.

Secondly, the work of the few functional NGOs falls much below expectations, though there are exceptions to the rule. By any account, there are hundreds of NGOs registered in Srinagar under the Societies Registration Act, ranging from religious and media organizations to human rights and community-based organizations, all serving a specific purpose. A key point to take note of in the context of Kashmir is that there are several voluntary and charity organizations that are not registered as NGOs, but are doing the same kind of work and addressing the needs of the same kind of people as NGOs in other areas. Thus, any comprehensive list of NGOs working in Kashmir will have to include such organizations as representative of the actual situation in Kashmir. Often, the little work that has been done on NGOs in Kashmir has ignored this important fact, thus making the situation seem gloomier than it actually is.

NGOs in a conflict zone like Kashmir do face unique problems, which obstruct their functioning in various ways. Problems for NGOs start from the time of registration itself. Trust has been the single biggest casualty in the past 14 years. Any new organization or group is looked upon with suspicion and often accused of being a hawala front for militants. Hence, it becomes essential for any voluntary organization to work under legal auspices to prevent being unendingly harassed. Over the past few years, a number of dedicated social workers or retired government servants have formed organizations to work for the welfare of the people. However, they soon realize that it is very difficult to get a society registered in Kashmir. Thus, discouraged from the start, many of them often drop out completely.

Accreditation or registration of NGOs is done under the Societies Registration Act (SRA), 1860, The Public Trust Act, 1882, and the Charitable and Religious Trust Act, 1920 or the Co-operative Societies Act. The SRA stipulates that any association with more than seven members should register. The

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29 Azam Inquilabi, Personal Interview, 14 July 2003. Inquilabi is the ex-chief of the United Jihad Council in Srinagar.
30 Zakat is the contribution/donation that is expected from every Muslim and is usually put at 2.5% of one’s unspent Income.
31 Khurram Pervez, an NGO activist, is a student at the Media Education and Research Center (MERC), Kashmir University, besides working for the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations and Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons in Srinagar.
arbitrary and political nature of accreditation manifests itself in the friction between NGOs and the government and efforts on the part of the latter to scuttle the activities of the NGOs. In Kashmir, the problem is worse than in the rest of the country. Though registration under the SRA usually takes one or two months, in Kashmir it takes much longer. Before submitting their application for registration to the Registrar, applicants have to obtain a “non-involvement certificate” from their respective District Magistrates. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to ascertain the identity of each and every member of a new organization. The problem arises when this process takes a few years. Though the process is being expedited in recent years, it is still a very cumbersome process. This long delay occurs when officials of different agencies like the Police and the CID (sometimes, other agencies also get involved) take an extraordinarily long time to verify the credentials of the members. This, in turn, is used as a tool by these government agencies to harass NGOs trying to work in sensitive areas and delay their registration processes to prevent them from starting work.

Kashmiri NGOs also face major funding problems. The sensitivity and gravity of the conflict in Kashmir is a double-edged sword as far as NGO funding is concerned. Ironically, a lot of money flows into these NGOs because of the fact that Kashmir is in conflict. The wide-spread Kashmiri Diaspora and members of the Muslim worldwide community channel their money to NGOs; whether they suspect it might be used for illegal purposes is another matter. Several foreign donors, including donors from European countries, especially the Scandinavian countries, give money to Kashmiri NGOs because of the conflict in Kashmir.

The gravity of the conflict and the suffering and trauma associated with it is the reason why NGOs need to exist and do exist in Kashmir. While the conflict attracts all sorts of funding sources, the fact that Kashmir is such a sensitive issue in the international arena requires India to tread with caution and take necessary preventive steps in the interests of national security. Thus, strict control and monitoring has to be undertaken for every organization since there is a high incidence of such organizations serving as hawala fronts for militant organizations. The government wants to prevent this, which makes the lives of NGOs difficult in different ways. These include frequent visits of security personnel, refusal to let members travel, or interact with people and organizations abroad, frequent questioning about financial accounts, etc. Foreign funding by legal means is also limited and closely monitored by the government. Any NGO that wants to acquire foreign funding has to obtain an FCRA number. NGOs in Kashmir find it practically impossible to obtain permission to receive foreign funding because the Government wants to keep foreign involvement to the minimum in Kashmir, the idea being that the presence of international NGOs or funding from foreign sources would permit foreigners to get involved in Kashmiri society, and would drag them into the politics of the Kashmir conflict. Since the Indian Government’s political stance is against foreign intervention in the Kashmir conflict, only two NGOs in Kashmir to date have been allotted an FCRA number. Both these NGOs are Ladakh-based ecological groups. The government does not mind foreign donors chipping in to help the ecological cause in Ladakh, which is a militancy-free zone. Thus, with foreign sources of funding being virtually closed, and it being very difficult to raise funds locally, except for religious purposes, NGOs in Kashmir face a huge problem in terms of funding. It is highly likely that this leads some NGOs to turn into hawala fronts for militant organizations. On the one hand, the gravity of the conflict attracts sources of funding, but

34 A detailed examination and listing of problems being faced by NGOs regarding registration can be found in Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), Report of the Task forces to Review and Simplify Acts, Rules, Procedures Affecting Voluntary Organizations (New Delhi, 1994) and VANI, Laws, Rules and Regulations for the Voluntary Sector, Report of the South Asian Conference 6-10 March 1996, (New Delhi, 1996).

35 Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Act, 1976, regulates the flow of foreign funds to organizations and people in India.

36 For a detailed analysis of the problems faced by NGOs/VOs in terms of funding in general and foreign funding in particular, see “Voluntary Agency trends in India and Financial Aspects of the Voluntary Sector” in Dimensions of Voluntary Sector in India, CAF’s Validated Database 2000, (New Delhi: Charities Aid Foundation India, 2000).
on the other hand, the sensitivity and seriousness of the issue forces the Indian Government to keep strong controls over on the sources of funding for NGOs and their functioning.

Though national NGOs could be a good source of funding and experience for local NGOs in Kashmir, by and large, NGOs from the other parts of the country do not seem to empathize with the plight of the Kashmiris. According to Yoginder Sikand, “the absence of any major initiatives from Indian NGOs in Kashmir reflects the way many Indians see the Kashmir question—as a real estate dispute, coveting the land but conveniently dispensing with its people.” NGOs abound in Andhra Pradesh and Haryana, but Kashmir seems to be lagging behind in this regard and national NGOs seem to be conspicuous by their absence. Kashmir has selling value, a brand name in international activism. People and NGOs can and do make money out of Kashmir and the Kashmiris realize this, which breeds discontent and mistrust among them regarding activism as a whole, whether it comes from national or international NGOs. Says an NGO activist, “Are there not enough problems in the areas they come from, that they have come to work with us? Is there not enough misery in places like Bihar? Why do these NGOs like to come to Kashmir then?” Obviously, according to him, they will be suspect in the eyes of the people. “We can understand Europeans coming to help us, but Indians, no.” His statement, besides shedding light on the reasons why people would be generally suspicious of any national NGO, can also be seen as part of the larger antagonism and mistrust associated with anything Indian in the Valley. Obviously, the Kashmiris will not look kindly upon people making a fortune out of their plight. To break this pattern of mistrust, a few NGOs have to work sincerely and affect the lives of the people in a way that reflects positively on their sincerity. The Government can have a crucial impact in changing the nature and the perception of the work of NGOs. The dynamics of the relationship between NGOs and the Government is examined in the following section.

To examine the state of relations between NGOs in Kashmir and the Government, it is essential that we understand the history of voluntary organizations in India, the nature of social movements, and the contexts in which they have evolved and flourished. Also crucial to examine is the current government policy in India towards NGOs, and its impact on Government-NGO relations in Kashmir.

India has definitely had a long culture of volunteerism, which has been well-documented through the 19th and 20th centuries. Even after Independence, there has been a long history of cooperation and good relations between the two, especially with the emergence of a large number of what came to be known as Gandhian organizations. The Central State Welfare Board was set up in 1953 to promote and fund voluntary organizations. The next main spurt in voluntary movements came in 1977, led by Jayaprakash Narayan against the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. Later, under Mrs. Gandhi again, the VOs lost their privileged position and the bureaucracy assumed the responsibility for implementing various developmental programs. However, in recent years, there have again been efforts by the Government to provide support to these organizations.

In 1994, the Government of India came up with an Action Plan to bring about a Collaborative Relationship between Voluntary Organizations and Government. In

According to documents available that detail the social movements in India through the 19th and 20th century, these movements generally emerged in small areas and remained confined to local issues. The pre-independence era witnessed two types of social movements: socio-religious movements aimed at reform in the intellectual and cultural life of India, and peasant and other upsurges like the sepoy mutiny of 1857 which is believed to be the “culmination of peasant movements all over India.” The post-independence era has also not been devoid of social movements, such as the Chipko movement, the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, Bandhua Mukti morcha, the Silent Valley struggle, Narmada Bachao Andolan etc.

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37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., pp. 8-9

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the recently held All India Conference on the “Role of the Voluntary Sector in National Development” on 20 April 2002, K. C. Pant, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, said:

With increasing popular demand for better quality and delivery of public services, governments everywhere are responding by taking steps to involve the civil society. They recognize that the voluntary sector enjoys certain functional advantages, being community based, more accountable and capable of providing services at a lesser cost. More significantly, voluntary organizations have the flexibility to develop innovative projects based on local needs and resources in contrast to the standardization that normally characterizes governmental actions. That is why I feel that there is space for voluntary action even where local self-governing institutions like PRIs are strong as the VOs could work for making the system more participative, transparent and accountable by creating awareness among the people about their rights, their duties and about shortcomings in development. Their roles are, and should be, mutually supportive and symbiotic.

While NGOs, as the concept exists now, are by definition independent and distinct from governmental organizations, it is widely believed that they cannot be very effective without the help and co-operation of their counterparts in India. This is probably due to the fact that after Independence, the fate of VOs and more recently, NGOs, have been dependent on the support they get from the Government. Their fortunes change with changes in Government. Though, this may not necessarily be a bad thing. But there needs to be recognition of the fact that NGOs need to be wholly independent, though co-operation and co-ordination with the Government is also a must in a developing country like India, since the State lacks the resources to implement its programs effectively. NGO culture has not really permeated society all that well; hence, it is necessary for the two to move hand-in-hand for the betterment of the people.

The official website of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Empowerment articulates its official policy and relationship with NGOs in the sphere of social welfare. The Ministry also realizes that there are some areas that need more attention and funds than the others. There are very few states in India that have witnessed such massive violence, destruction of civil society and disruption of the normal lives of people than Kashmir. In view of this, it would be safe to expect that the Government would allocate more funds to supplement its work in Jammu and Kashmir with that of the NGOs. That the government recognizes this fact does not really translate into action, at least in Jammu & Kashmir. Statistics on the official Ministry website show a pathetic number of organizations in J&K that are being funded by the Government. The number of organizations and the amount of funding is much greater in other states like Gujarat and even Punjab. Whether this is due to a lack of interest in the establishment of a civil society, or because the government feels capable of handling the task by itself in J&K, is known only to the Government officials. However, compared to the rest of the country, Kashmir has been neglected and ignored, despite probably being the most in need of such NGOs. The Ministry of Social Welfare and Empowerment provides grants to only five NGOs in the entire State of Jammu and Kashmir, which is negligible compared to grants given to NGOs in other states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat etc.

Government-NGO relations in Kashmir are also adversely affected by the fact that the government does not share an amiable relationship with the people. Almost all the people blame the government for exacerbation of the conflict. Since these are the very people that NGOs are trying to help, a strong NGO-Government relationship places the people in a moral dilemma. They feel constrained to seek help from the same authorities who are the cause of their misery

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39 Panchayati Raj Institutions

42 Ibid.
without moral inhibitions.\textsuperscript{43} Thus, GONGO\textregistered, as the Government-backed or sponsored NGOs are popularly known, find it difficult to make inroads into Kashmiri society. GONGO\textregistered sprang up in large numbers quite mysteriously in and around the period of the 1996 elections, possibly to publicly accept the legitimacy of the newly elected government. However, it is high time the GONGO\textregistered repositioned themselves (and the Government will have to play a role here) as distinct from the Government and work purely on humanitarian issues without pursuing a political agenda. The Government, thus far, has not shown any signs of letting the GONGO\textregistered break free. However, hopes in this regard have risen in the light of the "healing touch" policy of the Mufti government. It remains to be seen whether the Mufti Government’s power and political will are able to free the GONGO\textregistered of their political baggage.

The Government definitely needs to take upon itself the responsibility of promoting NGOs through various schemes. Interviews with government officials from different ministries however show a lack of interest in promoting NGOs in Kashmir. Officials of the Ministry of Social Welfare, when confronted with the dismal figures for Kashmiri NGOs receiving grants, explained that it was not the prerogative of the Government of India to hunt down NGOs to give them grants. Instead, it was the responsibility of the respective State Governments to forward proposals from registered NGOs in the State. "Sitting here, we cannot know who is doing what and how credible he is."\textsuperscript{44} Thus, the Central Government has to depend on the State Government, and the J&K Government has, according to him, failed on this account. There is a lack of proposals forwarded to them from Jammu & Kashmir. He put forward the example of Andhra Pradesh as a state which was receiving several grants for NGOs as the Government there was actively forwarding proposals from these NGOs that were credible and it was thus easier for the Ministry to approve.

However, government officials and State Welfare Board officials in Srinagar tell a different story. While the Board forwarded around 40 proposals in 2000-2001, none of them were processed, that is neither accepted nor rejected, and summarily returned in 2003. While not explicitly stated, it was implicit that the officials in J&K feel that the Centre does not trust their recommendations because they feared the funds would be channeled to the militants. Certain proposals forwarded by the State Board under a program known as NORAD, officials claim were lost or misplaced by the concerned authorities in Delhi. Faced with this kind of attitude from officials at the Center, the State officials refuse to accept responsibility for the lack of governmental support to NGOs in Kashmir.

NGOs complain that the Government does not allow them to work independently, but the Government denies any such interference. While the Directorate of Social Welfare, J&K, cannot speak for NGOs whose work might interfere with the interests of national security, officials in the Directorate claim that "currently there is a big thrust to involve NGOs in implementing many of our schemes. The Government is willing to give up its responsibility in many areas to genuine NGOs if they have the requisite infrastructure."\textsuperscript{45} The Government apparently sees many advantages accruing from an improved relationship with NGOs. As another official says, "we need NGOs to reduce establishment costs to implement schemes that we bring out. We would need to establish infrastructure for every new scheme that we plan to implement, which would eventually become a liability for the Government later on as we wouldn’t have any use for it afterwards. However, if there are NGOs out there with established infrastructure, it would make things much easier for us, and be much better for NGOs also.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} This moral dilemma was articulated by Mr. Pervez Imroze, Patron, Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, and President, Coalition of Civil Society, Srinagar, J&K. Also, victims of violence articulated the same position, though they did admit that there were circumstances where, despite these moral convictions, they had accepted the help of the Government backed NGOs, or GONGO\textregistered since they were in dire need.

\textsuperscript{44} Author’s interviews over telephone with Government officials of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Empowerment, New Delhi, India, June 2003.

\textsuperscript{45} Author’s interview with the Section Officer of the State Social Welfare Board, Srinagar, J&K, 22 July 2003.

However, there seem to be two things stopping the J&K Government from acting on this policy. Firstly, there are an insufficient number of genuine NGOs in Kashmir, and secondly, most of the genuine ones lack proper infrastructure. “We are ready to give help to NGOs, but they have to be there. An NGO is one that has a commitment, a culture; those kinds of NGOs are very few in Kashmir”, claim officials. He admits, “Some religiously-inclined NGOs are sincere but they do not take help from us. If the social ones also become as committed, then relations between the government and NGOs could go a long way.”

Unfortunately, the Government is merely indulging in wishful thinking, hoping that in a violence-ravaged society, genuine NGOs with the requisite infrastructure would spring up suddenly out of nowhere. Not only have bureaucratic hurdles like delays in the second or third installments of long term projects led to stoppage of projects, such delays also inevitably cause liabilities in terms of personnel as well as infrastructure. Another problem with government funding of projects is that such funding is usually project-based, which presumes that the NGO would be well-equipped to cover overhead costs, such as building, maintenance, auditing etc., as is reflected by the desire of government officials to use NGOs to cut establishment costs for themselves. There is very little emphasis on long term planning, in terms of equipping NGOs with the infrastructure that could be utilized by the Government later, as well as by the NGO for other projects.

While officials do not hesitate to admit that red-tapism is causing a lot of problems, they are quick to offer solutions. According to one official, “if NGO funds are given directly to the District Collector, it would result in much more efficient use of funds,” as there would be less layers of red tape that these funds would have to go through. He feels that this would be much better for everyone as all sectors [emphasis added] need NGOs today. Where an NGO needs Rs. 10 to get a piece of work done, the Government spends Rs. 50-60, because of establishment costs as well as layers of bureaucracy. Thus, “even if NGOs are corrupt, more benefits will still reach the people.”

Unfortunately, an atmosphere of mistrust exists between NGOs and respective Governments. The Government has had bad experiences with NGOs, as people have registered NGOs, received grants and fled with the money with no results to show on the ground. Consequently, the Ministry has evolved stringent criteria for sanctioning grants. Registration as an NGO under the Societies Act, a minimum of 3 years’ experience in the field of work, a list of people in the managing committee of the organization, a recommendation and verification of credibility by the respective State Governments and absence of organizations in the particular field of work are some of the criteria that Government officials list. The Ministry of Social Welfare website also provides a list of blacklisted NGOs and the members of their managing Committees, though a study done by VANI on blacklisted organizations says that “both the basis and manner of revocation of the earlier status was improper; organizations were not aware of the reasons for blacklisting and did not even get an opportunity to be heard.”

On the other hand, the NGOs cannot be faulted for not being able to meet these criteria. Local NGOs often started by people with meager resources find it difficult to meet the criteria set by the Government. To work for three years without funding means they have to find their own money, or raise funds from external sources like foreign NGOs. Since they are not allowed to receive funding from foreign sources, and finding their own money is difficultly feasible, NGOs either close down or end up becoming fronts for illegal activities. The government, on its part, is justified in laying down stringent criteria; however, it has to reduce the red tape. This must reduce delays in the verification process, which is often the biggest stumbling block in Government-NGO relations. As regards human rights and other sensitive issues, where NGOs and Government interests often clash, I would argue that only international pressure and a change in the political and security situation on the ground in Kashmir can bring about positive change. The newly elected Mufti Government has to play a role in letting NGOs take an independent stand and

47 CAF, n. 36, pp. 20-21.
48 Ibid.
become a voice for dissent within Kashmiri society for his ‘healing touch’ policy to be effective. At the same time, the Central Government needs to take steps to relax the rules governing the work of international human rights organizations like Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. These groups have in the past produced damaging reports, but the time is ripe in Kashmir to allow these groups to resume work and serve as checks on the government and its agencies. Letting these groups resume their work in J&K will add to the credibility of the new government and restore people’s trust in it. Stronger and fairer NGO-Government relations can thus be instrumental in the restoration of trust; winning the trust of the people would mean half the battle is won.

NGOs, or for that matter, any organization has to take into consideration local factors to function in any part of the world. Often, not taking cultural factors into account can prove to be detrimental to the success of well-meaning endeavors. Kashmiris have high self-esteem and hence nurture a culture not to take to the begging bowl even in harsh circumstances. A Kashmiri prefers not to seek help from outside his own circle of friends and relatives, which explains why NGOs have difficulties in their efforts to create an impact. There have been very few beggars on the streets of Kashmir in the past, as Kashmiri society has generally been self-sustaining, and reasonably prosperous. However, in recent times, beggars have begun to appear on the road. Kashmiri society, reeling under the devastating effects of the conflict, has been deprived of its economic sustenance and finds its traditional support systems, like the family, being made ineffective. This implies that NGOs can start moving in to make an impact as their need is being increasingly felt.

It cannot be denied that NGOs, both domestic and international, have established a presence in India, and are active in several fields. According to the latest estimates, there are roughly 25,000 NGO groups which are active in their respective fields in different parts of the country, though the number of registered NGOs would be many times that number. Kashmir, however, has not seen a proportional rise in the number of active NGOs. Kashmir desperately needs injection of funds, people and organizations

\[52\text{ Kashmir’s economy has traditionally depended on tourism. Other potential income sources include generation of electricity, forest resources, carpets and the rug industry. However, due to the conflict, tourism has been adversely affected, and Kashmir’s economy is in shambles.}\]

\[53\text{ A Directory of Social Work Organizations in Kashmir has been prepared by Yoginder Sikand, where he lists the names of the organizations active in the Valley at the time he conducted the mapping process. Also, the International Center for Peace Initiatives, New Delhi maintains a database of organizations working in the Valley. Both these databases demonstrate the absence of a large number of active NGOs in Kashmir.}\]
to infuse new vigor and relevance into the fledgling civil society. National and international NGOs, the international community, the State and Central Government, the people of India and the people of Kashmir themselves have a big role in reviving the civil society in Kashmir via the NGOs.

At a seminar held in Kashmir on the theme ‘What is Civil Society and how can we turn it into an effective mechanism to further democracy in Kashmir’, it was emphasized that one of the primary functions of civil society, of which NGOs are a crucial part, ‘was to ensure its ability to be a voice of dissent’. People in Kashmir have often expressed their lack of trust in the government, and it is widely believed that ‘when governments come to power, they tend to occupy too much space, illegitimately encroaching upon the individual and community rights. Because of the absence of any controls they tend to become corrupt and inefficient.’ NGOs and civil society, thus, assume a crucial role to keep checks on the government. Kashmiri civil society activists acknowledge that though civil society in Kashmir is “trying to create space for dialogue and dissent”; it has not yet been able to become “a viable force against the abuse of power.” Acknowledging the problem is half the solution, and efforts seem to be underway to form organizations that would be able to stand up to the government and act as pressure groups to prevent any excesses.

Amnesty International can be considered to be one of these organizations. Even though the activities of such international human rights organizations have been limited, these organizations have begun to criticize the Government of reneging on its promises. In a newspaper report published in a major national daily, Amnesty International flayed “the reported statement of J&K Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed of ‘reorienting’ the special operations group (SOG) saying this amounted to backtracking on promises to punish police personnel guilty of committing human rights violations.” The London-based organization also criticized Mufti for allegedly announcing that an amnesty would be available to those who have reportedly perpetrated abuses. Such reports by widely-respected NGO’s are damning to the reputation and image of the Government and force the government to deliver on its promises. Not only have human rights abuses been ignored and gone unreported on various occasions as we have seen, but many organizations and the media have been pressurized into toeing the line of the Government. In another instance, the Human Rights column in the Srinagar-based English daily Greater Kashmir was severely criticized by the Government, and the daily was coerced into stopping the column altogether. Many such instances have occurred, which NGOs would do well to highlight. Thus, NGOs and media have a lot to gain from extensive co-operation as they need each other for their effective functioning.

NGOs can also be a very effective tool to ensure that the voices of the minorities and other communities are heard. Certain communities traditionally neglected by the Government, often find their voice through NGOs or community organizations. Panun Kashmir and J&K Pandits Conference have played this role in the past. However, they often face problems of internal differences and clashes of power, as Pandit organizations based in Jammu have been facing. Panun Kashmir, due to internal differences split, leading to the mushrooming of various Pandit organizations claiming to be working for their welfare. Recently, a report was carried by the Daily Excelsior on how all the Kashmiri Pandit organizations had sunk their differences and “unanimously urged the State Government to extend its healing touch policy to the community as well, which has been the main victim of the 13 year long turmoil.” Unity among such organizations is the key to their success and they would do well to guard themselves against splits to maintain some sort of leverage and legitimacy with government circles.

Extensive interaction with the people of Kashmir and NGO activists reveals the immediate need for NGOs to enter the psychiatric field in a big way. The conflict in Kashmir has taken its toll of lives, but

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54 Fazili, n.14, p. 70.
55 Ibid., p. 69.
56 Ibid., p. 70.
Children especially have been forced to grow up in an environment where there has been no love, no safety, no security, no schools, no colleges, no means of having fun, no mischief, nothing that comes along with a normal life, more so a normal childhood. Thus, to ensure a bright future for the next generation of Kashmiris, it is very important for psychiatric services to be provided on a war footing. While in 1990, there were, on an average, just six patients approaching the Psychiatric Diseases Hospital in Srinagar daily; this number had gone up to 59 in 1994 and at present, on an average, about 200 patients turn up, which predictably enough, is grossly understaffed. While there has been a dramatic increase in psychiatric disorders, mainly the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, there are only 7 psychiatrists and one clinical psychologist for a population of nearly four million.

Very few NGOs have entered this field, primarily due to lack of training to deal with such cases, and secondly, due to social stigmas attached to psychiatry. The general sentiment among Kashmiris seems to be that “if anyone wants to help us, let them come, heal us psychologically, and help by establishing psychiatric treatment centers.”

Another area of concern is that of the welfare of widows and orphans. As mentioned earlier, there are a few orphanages and widow welfare homes that are active in Kashmir. However, the number of orphans and widows that they collectively take care of is abysmally low. Immediate attention of NGOs as well as policy makers is essential to bring back some sense of normalcy in the lives of women and children, both of which are probably the worst affected groups of society in the past 14 years of militancy. While the politics and violence associated with the resistance movement in Kashmir continues it is essential to recognize the importance of maintaining the continuity of programs for the welfare of women, especially widow, and children so as to keep the foundations of Kashmiri society intact. NGOs have a crucial role to play in this ‘damage control’ exercise. More orphan homes and widows homes and opportunities for the women and children to live their lives constructively is the need of the hour.

Employment generation-oriented schemes sponsored either by the government or initiated by NGOs through local self-help groups need to be strengthened and taken to the far-flung areas of the State which remain neglected. Lack of education, sanitation, health care, employment opportunities, safety, and other basic problems continue to affect the people living in border areas, which are also the worst affected by militancy. NGOs need to develop infrastructure, in terms of manpower and facilities to better implement the schemes introduced by the Government. National and International NGOs need to provide guidance and financial support to local NGOs and enhance their capabilities so as to better fulfill their roles in society.

Similarly, on the environment front, there is an immediate need for environmental groups and environmental activists to raise their voices to save the environmental heritage of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. The livelihood of many Kashmiris is dependent on the health of the ecology and the environmental balance. India has witnessed exemplary environmental movements including the Chipko movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan. These should serve as an inspiration for environmental activists to initiate movements on a war footing to save the world-famous Dal and Wular lakes along with the rich forest heritage that Kashmir boasts. The work of advocacy groups, such as those advocating freedom of speech and expression, protection of the freedom of the media, and protection against human rights abuses is essential for restoring the trust of the people in the Government.

The collective aim of all the NGOs in Kashmir should, thus, be to develop and strengthen the civil society in Kashmir.

59 Oxfam, n.17
61 Informal chats with various people from all walks of life in Kashmir, including NGO activists, doctors, and common citizens, July 2003.
**Conclusion**

Many NGOs are unwilling to go into a society that is deeply mired in violence and where the last remnants of civil society have long disappeared. This is an uphill task for any NGO that begins to think about working in Kashmir. This might be one of the reasons for the lack of many NGOs in Kashmir, but it cannot be the only one. Sri Lanka and Palestine, both mired in conflict had also turned violent before Kashmir, but present examples that negate the violence argument. This state of society should attract the attention of even more NGOs.

On the national and international level, there is no dearth of NGOs working in different fields. In view of the improving governance position in Kashmir, the socio-political situation is conducive for more NGOs to enter Kashmir society. It is high time some of the more established NGOs come forward with plans and programs to work in Kashmir, giving special priority to the areas and objectives outlined above. However, Kashmir has a unique culture, altogether different customs, traditions, and a distinct faith. It is, therefore recommended that national and international NGOs tie up with local NGOs to work more effectively for the welfare of the people of Kashmir. While local NGOs might not be able to provide infrastructure support, they can definitely provide invaluable guidance and deeper understanding of the local needs. At the same time, the local NGOs would benefit from the broader learning experience they could gain by working with national and international NGOs.

In recent years, national and international NGOs have started working towards peace and reconciliation. However, they also need to give top priority to working towards relief and rehabilitation of the traumatized victims of the last 14 years of militancy and violence. Once a culture of peace and normal life prevails in Kashmiri society, the work of NGOs can be effective. Financial transparency and working independently of political agendas is essential. Most importantly, the people of Kashmir have to take the lead in the revival of civil society by working towards the larger good of society, and not depend on outsiders to come and help them. Thus, local initiative, commitment and resolve combined with the organizational and institutional guidance of national and international organizations is the way ahead for what is currently a dismal situation as far as NGOs and civil society in Kashmir is concerned.

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62 Author’s interviews with NGO activists, and articles and speeches in Kashmir by local activists on the future of civil society, July 2003.