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The Contours of NGO Activism against Sumangali Bonded Labour in Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract:

Sumangali Bonded Labour arrangement in the textile mills of Tamil Nadu has caught the public attention due to the continuous activism of different NGOs in the state. The NGO activism is largely characterized by an approach aimed at raising public awareness and putting pressure on the state and industry through lobbying rather than any form of mobilization of the workers. This paper shows that the limited forms of engagement is further circumscribed by the social character of the NGOs. Also the civil society engagement in its initial phase was characterized by human rights and labour rights discourses in tandem with coordination with mainstream leftist trade unions and political parties. However, the discourse as this paper argues has recently taken a turn towards stressing corporate social responsibility over co-ordination with left political actors. This paper attempts to bring into picture the nature of the day to day NGO activism in the anti-sumangali campaign and chart the contours of the NGO-Trade union interaction in the campaign.

Keywords: *Sumangali, NGO, trade union, caste, intervention*

1. Introduction

Sumangali scheme refers to a new form of bonded labour practiced primarily in the yarn spinning mills in Tamil Nadu. Girls between the age group of 14 and 24 are recruited through job brokers and workers for a period of three years using Tamil Nadu Industrial Employment Standing Order Rules 1947 a Model Standing order (TNMSO RULE 1947, Section 21(g) SMW 715 dated: 04.10.1977) which has fixed apprenticeship in textile industry at three years. More than 2 lakhs girls are estimated to be employed under this arrangement. The girls are highly exploited economically in various ways: 12 hour working days with one holiday per week; no adequate pay for over time; complete power of mill's over girls' physical mobility; high disciplining of day to day life and control over sexual autonomy etc. (SOMO & ICN, 2011, 2013, 2014). There are several reported cases of mysterious deaths and sexual harassment in the industry. The illegality and impunity enjoyed by the mills largely stays unchallenged. However certain changes have occurred in the industry thanks to the activism of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which brought the issue to the public. The initial phase of this engagement saw considerable co-ordination between NGOs, other civil society organizations, and trade unions in practice and rhetoric. However, a recent shift is noticed in the NGO discourse around sumangali towards corporate social responsibility (CSR), antithetical to trade union politics.

This study is primarily concerned with mapping the nature of the anti-sumangali scheme campaign in Tamil Nadu. The study on the one hand will try to identify the nature of NGO activism and their limits in the anti-sumangali scheme campaign. The study is concerned with analyzing the interaction between NGO and left political and trade union activism in the context of evolving CSR narrative within the campaign. For the most part of the campaign, the two mainstream left parties were considered the political partners in the campaign. The campaign fundamentally run by NGOs provides ample space for documenting the nature of such interaction in contemporary Tamil Nadu. This article argues that the NGO activism in sumangali scheme falls short of any meaningful change for the workers because of its unrepresentative character. It also observes that contrary to the often states antagonism of left politics towards NGOs, the interaction between the two exists especially in the face of challenges faced by trade unions in mobilizing informal workers. The data for the article were collected as part of the research conducted through network approach and observation and interview based field work. The article will proceed largely with a critical approach towards NGOs in the neoliberal order.

1.1. Social Character of NGOs

John Harriss (2005) in his study of civil society organizations in Chennai has utilized the distinction introduced by Lavallo and Castello (2005) between two forms of civil society organizations namely the civil associationalism and social associationalism. Civil associations refer to organizations that have professional staff, that work to benefit others specializing on a particular set of issues. Social association on the other hand refers to 'associations that represent their members or communities and mobilize for their own

demands' (Harriss, 2005:4). The organizations that are the subject of this study can be more or less categorized to fall under the former category.¹ However, it will be shown that the social character of the civil association could make a significant difference.

Harriss identifies two distinct streams of NGOs in Chennai based on the caste of their directors/proprietors - advocacy groups run by upper middle class Brahmins and grass root activist groups run by Christians. He observes a close networked and complementary relationship among the Christian run NGOs. Their reach to the society and state are also considerably wider than the Brahmin run NGOs. Of the eight NGOs representatives who were interviewed and their work observed as part of the study, six belonged to Christian religion whereas of the remaining two non-Brahmin run NGOs, one was run by a person belonging to Pallar caste, a Dalit community. However, both were relatively minor partners in the Sumangali Scheme activism. In this paper it will be shown that these identities of the directors of the respective NGOs play a determining role in the anti-sumangali scheme activism.

Most of the grassroots NGO activism is targeted and oriented towards the welfare activities among the Dalit community. This scenario has created varied responses from political and social actors active among the Dalit communities. The perception of the left, one among the many political actors which carry support among sections of Dalit population in Tamil Nadu derives its perception of NGOs from its critique of voluntary organizations in the capitalist economy and especially in neoliberal framework (Karat, 1986). The animosity between left and NGOs is rooted in the different political projects both represent. The relationship is best reflected in the words of David Harvey (2002):

They (NGOs) tend to be elitist, unaccountable (except to their donors), and by definition distant from those they seek to protect or help, no matter how well-meaning or progressive they may be. They frequently conceal their agendas, and prefer direct negotiation with or influence over state and class power. They often control their clientele rather than represent it. They claim and presume to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, even define the interests of those they speak for (as if people are unable to do this for themselves). But the legitimacy of their status is always open to doubt (2002:177).

Further the insistence on individual by NGOs discounts and disbelieves democratic structures including elected representatives and as one of its results rests its expectations on the empowered individual who can approach the judge and receive justice. However, the majority of the individuals lack the wherewithal to individually approach the judiciary. This in the event of dismantling of trade unions and separation of politics and labour, produces the need to form advocacy groups and NGOs well within the neoliberal paradigm (Harvey, 2002:177). Such tensions are also found in other movements with radical political programmes. Hugo Gorringer in his study on Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) in Tamil Nadu argues that there is a perennial tension between movement activists with transformatory and revolutionary goals and NGOs which are considered as piecemeal, reformist, foreign funded in nature.² (Gorringer, 2005:75). However, in practice such dichotomies are non-existent. What one observes is a much complex interaction between trade unions and NGOs marked by conflict and collaboration (Gorringer, 2005; Kudva; 2005). Gorringer points out that in Tamil Nadu, the publication of well-researched and systematic reports by the better-equipped NGOs provided the information with which movements can castigate the government' (2005:76). Kudva argues that 'the roles and activities of some movement organizations and selected NGOs intersect particularly in the spheres of fundraising, outside support, and organizing practice (2005: 235).

In the following sections the paper will consider the role of different NGOs working largely in coordination with each other in the anti-sumangali campaign in Tamil Nadu. It will delineate the basic characteristics of the anti-sumangali NGO activism. This will be followed by the evolving discourse between NGOs, mainstream left organizations on the backdrop of the recent stress of NGOs on CSR.

2. The nature of NGO Activism in Anti-Sumangali Campaign

2.1. The Tiruppur Peoples Forum

NGOs play a major role in the development discourse of Tamil Nadu. The Human Development Report (2003) of the Tamil Nadu Government puts enormous stress on the role of NGOs in issues and areas of policy and programme implementation. Programmes as diverse as AIDS control and flagship schemes aimed at women's development are run in partnership with NGOs.³ The HDR remarks that NGOs help in social mobilization, formation and nurturing of the self-help groups through government administrative and financial support. NGOs in specific have become one of the fundamental means through which the state in Tamil Nadu connects with the citizenry. The NGO Activism against sumangali scheme is carried out through a wide range of NGOs differing in their focus areas, social character and size. But they are largely co-ordinated through NGOs associated with Tiruppur Peoples Forum.⁴

Tiruppur Peoples Forum for Protection of Environment and Labour Rights (TPF) was formed in 2006. TPF has around 42 NGOs as its constituents in 17 districts in southern and western districts of Tamil Nadu. In its pamphlets TPF claims itself to be 'formed by the

¹ Civil associationalism, as Harriss notes, is closely linked with the neoliberal conception of the functions of NGOs and civil society (2005:5).

² My own experience during fieldwork reassures similar attitude among activists belonging to another Dalit political formation I've interacted during the research. The activists of a national Dalit political party who were also present during my stay at Satyamangalam as part of youth career orientation programme among Arunthathiyars also evinced similar distrust about NGO activism.

³³ The scheme not only identifies NGOs as partners but also envisages training the NGO staff for its programme implementation. In fact NGOs have played a considerably significant role in the formation of self-help groups across Tamil Nadu promoted by the state government.

⁴ TPF is only the major co-ordinator. TPF is only an umbrella body of independent NGOs. There are other NGOs which work independent of TPF especially in southern Tamil Nadu.

coordination among what they claim to be 'social development organizations engaged in protection of water resources, environment, child rights, women's rights and labour rights (Interview, March 13, 2014). The major plank of the TPF campaign had been to highlight the human rights violation occurring at the mills under the scheme. The pamphlets and poster of TPF uses the word *kothadimai* meaning bonded slave. The TPF employs basically two pronged strategies in this campaign. One, to raise public awareness through public meetings, seminars, and advocacy along with other stake holders like trade unions largely those that are affiliated with left political parties. This also includes collecting statistical and qualitative information about the extent and characteristics of the scheme labour mainly in large mills along with international labour. Two, to pressurize the major firms through dialogue and lobbying. As a result of dialogue and lobbying these NGOs have initiated third party inspection of labour standards in certain mills with their consent. The discourse of labour rights is argued both in the language of labour rights and CSR. In an interview to a prominent magazine in India, TPF director states: 'there is no corporate social responsibility, no initiatives in health and education' (Outlook, 23 June 2008:17). Interviews with two other NGO directors closely associated with TPF also revealed the growing stress on CSR as the emerging framework within which the campaign against scheme labour is shifting to.

2.2. Pudukkottai NGOS

The NGO Green is situated at Pudukkottai district. The researcher spent around a month in Pudukkottai and collected information through unstructured interviews with the employees and director of the organization complemented with on-field observation method. The employees of the organization have also assisted the researcher as interpreters during interviews with ex-sumangali workers. The Green is involved in NGO activities in Pudukkottai district for more than a decade. The NGO was very active in its early days specializing in organizing women under micro-credit schemes among the remaining female workforce in the gem-cutting industry and the horticulture sector in the district. With the disappearance of gem-cutting industry from these regions, the NGO has also become less active in the recent years. It is now engaged in awareness programmes like water-shed management, and district level monitoring of child labour. It's campaign on Sumangali scheme labour is only one among the many issues in which it intervenes. The NGO has five directly employed workers all – four women and one man - and are headed by a male director hailing from Pallar caste, the most numerous of the Dalit castes in Pudukkottai district. The NGO also employs volunteers at specific villages indirectly. The engagement of GREEN on Sumangali was more vibrant during the period beginning from July 2011 and ending by September 2013. The NGO conducted a survey across several villages in three block of Pudukkottai namely Kunnandarkoil, Viralimalai and Iluppur to identify sumangali scheme workers.

In Pudukkottai two other NGOs named TREE and ROOTS have also engaged in the sumangali awareness campaigns. TREE, run by non-Dalit Christian couple is primarily involved in campaigns against corporate farming technologies primarily genetically modified crop varieties. Alternatively, it promotes organic farming among the farmers in Pudukkottai district and distributes traditional seeds among them. Campaign against Sumangali scheme labour is also one among the many issues the NGO deals with. The NGO however is not part of the TPF initiative thus limiting its participation largely at the district level. The most active period of intervention by the NGO was also limited to the years from 2010 to 2013. The Third NGO that took the initiative in anti-Sumangali scheme campaign is ROOTS. The ROOTS was one of the most active NGOs in the initial stages of the anti- Sumangali Scheme campaign. Initiated and run by a non-Dalit Hindu couple, the NGO was very much in the limelight during the days of Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) in Pudukkottai (Athreya & Chunkath, 1996; Cody, 2013). These NGOs imparted skills like tailoring and embroidering.

The response of both the major NGOs in Pudukkottai, one of the major recruitment districts or source area for mills in both Dindigul and Coimbatore region offer insights into a portion of the contemporary activism related to Sumangali Scheme in Tamil Nadu. Both the NGOs are not single issue organizations that specialize on Sumangali Scheme. Moreover, both the organizations also do not specialize in issues that directly overlap with the Sumangali Scheme. No updating or earlier survey or fresh surveys are conducted by GREEN after 2012. Till 2013 all the employees of the organization were employed in the anti-Sumangali Scheme programme along with other programmes. However, during the second visit in 2014, it was discovered that only one of the employee is engaged in overseeing the program.⁵ The area covered by the NGO has been reduced to only two blocks from three. A similar trend is also perceptible with the NGO TREE. By 2014 the organization has stopped its major participation in anti-Sumangali Scheme campaign. In fact, ROOTS which initiated the first campaign against Sumangali Scheme has withdrawn from the campaign due to downsizing of the organization.

2.3. NGO at Dindigul

The NGO CESCO is an organization established in Dindigul district.⁶ Compared to other NGOs interviewed CESCO is an organization with fewer employees. Most of the works associated with the projects it has undertaken are performed by the organizational head himself. Second to Coimbatore region, Dindigul hosts the most number of textile mills. And the industry in Dindigul is more notorious for labour abuse and not so infrequent registered cases of suicides and unnatural deaths of girl hostellers. The organization specializes in campaigning for organic food practices and promoting organic farming practices among farmers in Dindigul district. Most of the campaigns on sumangali scheme by CESCO are conducted not as specific campaigns but as part of other routine programmes. One of the major modes of functioning of the CESCO is to campaign among school children on the ill effects of

⁵ It has to be mentioned that CESCO has initiated changes in its organization by departmentalizing its projects under specific project heads. This fact however does not affect my observation that there is a reduction in its anti-sumangali campaign activities.

⁶ There are few other NGOs focusing on sumangali related activism in the district institutions which I couldn't approach due to the contingencies involved in network approach.

the contemporary food habits and benefits of following traditional and organic farm produced foods. The fact that the NGO's sites of engagement are schools apart from villagers makes it capable of targeting the most relevant segment from which most of the recruitment to textile mills happens.⁷

The interaction between the NGO personnel and the students occurred for about an hour in each school – two government schools and an aided school. The programme was composed only of verbal interaction. The NGO personnel renders a lecture on the ill effects of modern scientific agriculture on both ecology and health. The lecture is composed of narratives on the decline in soil quality and resultant decline in production both qualitatively and quantitatively due to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The narrative is also interspersed with details of the benefits of the traditional food habits. The lecture for most part is conducted in an interactive manner. Questions are posed to the students to mull over and answer. At the end of the lecture the topic changes from the promotion of organic farming to the issue of child labour. Questions are posed to students about whether they have any of their friends or neighbours in their villages who have dropped out of school before finishing higher secondary education and have begun to work. In all the schools the students recognize some of their friends exclusively joining textile mills in Dindigul. However, the interaction on child labour in textile mills did not last longer for more than 15 minutes. The interaction was relatively less interactive on behalf of the personnel compared to their interaction on the core subject matter of organic farming. Another form of intervention the NGO carries out with respect to Sumangali scheme labour is among the ex-labourers. The NGO runs tailoring coaching centres in specific villages as rehabilitation measure for the workers but not exclusively for them.

2.4. *The Activism of SEED*

The NGO named SEED is part of the Clean Clothes Campaign. It is situated at Satyamangalam in Erode district concentrating its work in the Satyamangalam block and nearby regions. I spent two months at SEED and the field work at Satyamangalam was done with the assistance of the entire staff in the NGO. SEED is involved in promoting literacy and education among Arunthathiyar children. Though initiated with the agenda of promoting basic education among Arunthathiyars, the role of SEED has expanded to include among its objectives, issues like child labour, women empowerment through self-help groups, activism against manual scavenging, and legal assistance in the implementation of SC/ST Atrocities Act etc. Most of these issues are interdependent like education and child labour and the target population under all these schemes are Arunthathiyars. In fact, the focus area of SEED maps over the predicaments of Arunthathiyar community.

Promoting education among children has invariably resulted in interventions in child labour. It has also led to education of girls who have finished secondary and higher secondary schooling to learn professional skills like tailoring and embroidering that provides them with employment opportunities. SEED is also part of a larger national alliance of organizations called Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) led by a prominent activist named Bezawada Wilson, campaigning against the practice of manual scavenging. It also has engaged in micro-credit programmes through women's self-help groups. The director is known for his attempts to incorporate Ambedkarite symbols in his organizational activism. He is also member of an umbrella platform floated by one of the major national left parties to intervene against caste discrimination and atrocities. Left parties had been part of the anti-sumangali campaigns of the organization.

2.5. *The Role of the Trade Unions*

Coimbatore similar to other textile centres like Ahmedabad and Bombay witnessed intense strike action by the trade unions in the mid-80s. The strike that lasted for 100 days in Coimbatore and Tiruppur marks the watershed in the labour movement in the industrial towns and resulted in what is called Tiruppur Wage Accord every three year. This was the last biggest strike action conducted by the trade unions. In the emerging context of government allowing mills and factories to be opened under SSI category resulted in the industry fragmentation into small scale and medium scale industry. The mill owners responded with shutting down mills started shifting to rural areas in Coimbatore and Dindigul (Interview March 4th, 2013). The problems trade unions in textile industry in Tamil Nadu faces are also part of the larger scenario they face at the national and global level following informalization of labour. Currently relegated only to the few public owned NTC mills and few large private mills, the textile mill unions are unrepresentative of the vast spinning mill sector in Tamil Nadu. At present the major six existing trade unions have formed a Joint Action Council through which they conduct campaigns and negotiations with the mill owners and the government. The JAC apart from organizing the workers in the mills aforementioned is also involved in campaigns for compensation for the workers who were retrenched gradually in the 1990s when feminization of the workforce began under Textile Workers Rehabilitation Fund.⁸ The campaign against Sumangali scheme is also one among the aforementioned issues that JAC undertake along with these other issues.⁹

The major contribution of the Joint Action Council in textile industry is credited with launching the legal proceedings against the Sumangali Scheme in High Court which resulted in major legal victory for workers.¹⁰ The JAC met the then Industries Minister

⁷ The field interview was conducted during the National Science Week in 2014. The researcher travelled with the NGO personnel to the schools as part of the NGO's programme to educate school students on organic food practices and raising awareness on modern fertilizer and pesticide based intensive farming methods.

⁸ There are around 43 mills in Tamil Nadu under non-SSI category that are identified as closed mills. But the State government has not yet proclaimed these mills to be closed. It was estimated in 2008 that if proclaimed totally 17,094 displaced workers will benefit under the scheme..

⁹ Information availed through aforementioned interviews and from pamphlets issued by CITU at Dindigul district.

¹⁰ The judgment led to the Tamil Nadu government fixing minimum wages for apprentices in textile mills.

Anbarasan and appealed to reduce the apprenticeship period in textile industry to 3 years and pressed to restrict apprentices at 10% of the total workforce. The Tamil Nadu State Government on 14-05-2008 passed a bill unanimously L.A Bill 47 OE 2008 that amended the Industrial Employment Standing Order Rules reducing the apprenticeship period to 12 months. And the Bill decided to fix a fixed percentage for recruiting apprentices. The Bill was later forwarded for President's approval through letter no.13011/L&E(D&FG)/ 08 dated 04/06/2008. However there has been no action on this bill from both the state and the central governments.

2.6. Trade Unions and NGOs

It can be summarized that all the NGOs that has been interviewed perceive the left trade unions and the left political parties especially CPI and CPI(M) as major stakeholders or partners in the campaign against Sumangali scheme. The most prominent reasons that is provided for such support for left organizations are based on two of their characters i.e. their organizational capacity and also intellectual contribution. It is observed that most of these NGOs are found to employ the discourse of human rights in their campaigns. On the other hand, the representatives of left organizations provide a more nuanced and informative contribution through their experience and knowledge of labour laws and regulations (Interview, March 4th 2014).

Contrary to the NGO response the trade union response had been more ambiguous towards the NGOs. The NGOs are viewed as both revisionists and potential allies. There are two factors that account for the ambiguous approach of trade unions towards NGOs. On the one hand the trust deficit towards the NGOs deriving from the larger perception of the role of NGOs in the contemporary political economy of Tamil Nadu. As noted earlier larger number of NGOs are perceived to be implementing the neoliberal agenda of depoliticization and passive consensus to the existing order. Unlike trade unions, the NGOs largely resort only to 'voice' the grievances of the young girls as they perceive rather than enable them to voice their grievances and demands. Trade unions raise a wide array of doubts over the democratic character of NGOs (Sundar, 2006:907). Many left trade unions perceive NGOs as agents of neoliberalism as several of the NGOs are involved in implementing the policies of world bank and other associated neoliberal agendas (Sader, 2002; Sahoo, 2013). On the other hand, there are questions raised about the NGO practice of bargaining on behalf of victims several of them being accused of acting out of self-interest. One of CITU pamphlets published in 2013 reads: 'In the garb of unions several organizations and in the name of NGOs, some engage in activities are aimed at only exploiting the spinning mill workers to bargain with the mill owners for their self-interests'. It has to be noted that while individual NGOs are accused of the later charge, the NGO activism per se is accused of the earlier charge. However, being the only active institutions engaging with the sumangali scheme workers and the absence of trade union activism among sumangali workers the left trade unions have little to do other than stand with the larger NGO platform.

3. National Consultation on Sumangali Scheme

It is in this background that the 'National Consultation on Ending Forced Labour in Garment Sector in Tamil Nadu' conducted by SEED in May 2015 at New Delhi has to be understood. The consultation was conducted by SEED in collaboration with International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) based in UK and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). The banner also had the logo of a funding organization based in United Kingdom. The program had around 80 participants. The program begins with garlanding a large portrait of B.R. Ambedkar and members from SEED singing songs asserting Dalit and Arunthathiyar identity.¹¹ Apart from speakers belonging to major NGOs involved in the campaign in Tamil Nadu, the other major speakers consisted of representatives of a global trade union- IndustriALL; a former member of National Women's Commission; a representative of National Dalit Movement for Justice; representative of All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch and others. There were representatives from Fair Labour Association, Fair Wear Foundation, BSCI (Business Social Compliance Initiative), Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI), SOMO-ICN and industry representatives of global retail brands. However, the meet was conspicuous for the absence of left trade unions.

The consultation was remarkable for several reasons. First, for bringing the different stakeholders including the brands and retailers for the first time. Second, unlike the earlier meetings where the left trade unions were active participants, the consultation was attended by no left trade unions.¹² IndustriALL, part of what is called global trade unions was invited. (IndustriALL). A non-militant trade union, IndustriALL is considered to be one of the actors in the Bangladesh Accord signed in the aftermath of Rana Plaza incident in Dhaka, Bangladesh.¹³ Third, throughout the entire consultation the issue was consulted largely in terms of the Dalit aspect of the issue. It saw three Dalit NGOs respectively located and functioning at local, national and international level coordinating their actions on this issue. It evidenced IndustriALL representatives observing that ignoring identities like caste and gender had been one of the major reasons for the failure of the trade union movement in India.¹⁴ The deliberations throughout the consultation however where

¹¹ Cultural symbolism associated with Ambedkar and Buddhism find prominence in many of the activities of SEED. Apart from the celebration of Ambedkar's birth anniversary, despite being a practicing Christian, the director conducted the 'bhoomi puja' (rituals related to foundation laying ceremony) for the construction of new office building for SEED with a Buddhist monk.

¹² The director of SEED informed that the invitation was given only to only one trade union –AITUC and a national leader associated with its political party Communist Party of India. Also

¹³ On April 24, 2013, an unauthorized building where a garment factory engaged in production for global brands collapsed killing around 800 workers at a Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The accord signed between global brands and global unions to improve the working conditions in garment industry in Bangladesh is known as Bangladesh Accord.

¹⁴ However it is not evident how IndustriALL has approached and intervened effectively with respect to caste.

conducted within the framework of human rights than labour rights. The acerbic attacks on the mill owners was tempered with mild accusations on brand owners and requests for cooperation except for the members of national Dalit rights organizations.

Two major dissonances were observed in the deliberations. One, between the NCDHR and other NGOs. Second, between the NGOs and the brands and retailers. The divergence of ideological perspective on sumangali scheme between the other NGO participants and participants from NCDHR become more pronounced in the course of the deliberations. Contrary to others the perspective of NDMJ representative reflects one of the major perspective prevalent among the Dalit political activists. He reflected that migration to cities is viewed as liberating from the clutches of the 'feudal' caste relationship existing in villages. It provided the only opportunity to learn skills which otherwise was prohibited for Dalits. He specified especially the case with Arunthathiyars who were not allowed to work on par with Gounder and other caste Hindu workers and so had to migrate to Chennai to work in footwear and leather industry, a craft associated with their caste but practiced and acquired in modern setting. NCDHR representative pointed how neoliberal reforms have raised questions about its effects on Dalit women. She stressed that the neoliberal reforms have empowered only a small section of the populace whereas it is time to inquire how subjugating it had been for Dalits especially Dalit women. Both the speakers from NCDHR hinted at transplantation of exploitative relations from farm lands to industries. The dissonance between the NGOs and Brands was reflected when certain NGOs asked for engagement by the brand's ethical trade representatives with the ground reality rather than implementing their codes of conduct only through the voluntary implementation of the mill management.

The SEED intervention is relevant in terms of caste not only in the local setting. In fact, the SEED's engagement with the anti-sumangali campaign is backed by partnership of two unlikely entities – IDSN, an international Dalit NGO and CSR. Through the international organizations what is emerging is a caste discourse on CSR. The development of CSR code by the IDSN to check caste discrimination in private business named Ambedkar Principle represents this latest development.¹⁵ Ambedkar Principle recommends proactive measures from the business to address forms of negative discriminations practiced against Dalit individuals and community. It identifies exploitation and seclusion of workers from caste affected communities including child labour and debt-bondage; active discrimination against Dalits in skilled jobs; discrimination in services and utilities like housing, health care, education etc.; and misappropriation of land belonging to caste-affected communities (IDSN, nd)¹⁶. The Ambedkar Principle, however, is yet to find endorsement from the industry.

4. Conclusion

The most dominant theme that emerges in the NGO discourse in dealing with the Sumangali Scheme is the focus of campaign away from the factories TPF has focused on general campaigning among the larger public in recruitment districts than building pressure against the mills that employ women under illegal terms and conditions. The campaign strategy had always been to attract the larger public attention towards the problem and create indirect social pressure rather than mobilization of workers against the industry or the state. The problem according to the NGO activists lies in the high impossibility of mobilizing girls working in the mills. Among the NGOs, SEED due to its anchored nature in the community stands out as more contributive to the NGO intervention and discourse around sumangali scheme. On the whole however the inter-NGO functioning reflects Tina Wallace's observations on NGOs: 'These campaigning efforts are also often marred by the lack of co-ordination between NGOs: competition for hearts and minds as well as funds, and a desire to raise NGOs' profiles, diminish the impact of some of this work, as does the fact that NGOs increasingly rely on those they are critiquing for funding and for access to the corridors of power.' (Wallace, 2004:204). The interaction between different participants and stakeholders is rife with internal competition over funding. A development of much more concern in the anti-sumangali activism is the increasing resonance of CSR over coordination between NGO and left political forces.

¹⁵Details on Ambedkar Principle can be accessed at : <http://idsn.org/key-issues/caste-business/ambedkar-principles/>

¹⁶ Though out of the scope of this study it would be an academically fruitful study to analyse the compatability between Ambedkar's ideas on business, capitalism and regulation of labour and IDSN's Ambedkar principle.

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