

Working for Change in India's Civil Society

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Abstract

This article discusses the working life of a NGO worker in Kerala, South India, who researches, advocates and campaigns for the rights of India's most vulnerable communities. It draws on the personal narrative of an individual to explore the ways in which his life chances and experience of working in a professionalising civil society context have allowed him to construct his own notions of activism and work. This article engages with his life history to understand why he has made the decisions about how he and his staff work to tackle issues of injustice, inequality and exploitation. It analyses notions of activism, work and life history in a context shaped by class, gender and caste divisions.

Keywords

activism, civil society, India, NGOs, work, working lives

Introduction

Hiresh, 40, is a community activist and founder/director of '*Support*', a non-governmental organisation (NGO) committed to fighting for 'excluded communities' in the South Indian state of Kerala. Hiresh's narrative captures the overlap between activism and work. At the heart of this narrative is a reflection on his life with an emphasis on periods of work, including: working for the Communist Party,¹ labouring in an unskilled manual-manufacturing role and then working for a large national NGO. It is these experiences that shape the way Hiresh goes on to create a labour process within *Support*. His

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narrative recognises the impact of neoliberalism on work in NGOs, an area with significant academic scholarship; however, one that rarely addresses the daily realities of working on the front line.

This narrative, therefore, speaks to the themes of constructions of work, the labour process and professionalisation. However, it also demonstrates that literature on work and working lives does not adequately engage with the complex and contested work of NGOs and the motivations and experiences of NGO workers. One reason for this is the complex nature of NGOs as part of a broader civil society (Anderson and Reiff, 2004; Brown, 2008; Keane, 2003) and may also be to do with the diverse range of organisations that feature at a national and global level. These organisations play an important role in Indian society supporting and protecting the rights of minority groups such as Dalits.

While there are some examples of attempts to understand the experience of NGO workers (Roth, 2012, 2015a; Wallace and Bornstein, 1999), what is broadly absent from the sociology of work literature, and therefore a focus of this article, is an understanding of the labour process and how work is constructed. This is of importance to work scholars as the 'impact' of this work is tied up with livelihoods, life chances and the eradication of injustice, inequality and exploitation.

How work is constructed in *Support* is bound up with Hiresh's life experience and past political influences. The significance of this is highlighted in the narrative in three particular ways. Firstly, in how a very direct engagement with the community outside the organisation shapes the need for a flexible, fast and committed organisational response inside. Secondly, and relatedly, in the need that Hiresh sees for a small and non-hierarchical structure (that even includes him cooking lunch) but clearly functions effectively in response to specific demands. Thirdly, in the demands it makes on the individual whose working life, family life and daily routines become entwined and challenging to the setting of priorities.

Neoliberal professionalisation at work

Throughout Hiresh's narrative, what emerges is the experiences and impacts of an NGO worker caught up in a professionalised and expanding Indian civil society. However, Indian civil society is itself undergoing profound change while continuing to grapple with the compounding issue of caste (Baviskar, 2001; Berglund, 2009; Chatterjee, 2009; Oza, 2006). An extensive interdisciplinary literature exists that recognises the impact of neoliberalism on shaping the roles, structures and work of NGOs. At the core of this literature is recognition that NGOs have, since the 1980s, become the preferred deliverer of public services while also retaining their role in advocacy and campaigning (Hickey et al., 2007; Hulme and Edwards, 1997). However, at the same time, the funders of NGOs have, through the provision of funds and commissioning mechanisms, placed significant pressures on organisations to formalise and professionalise. This is understood to meet the perceived needs of donors and funders (Mawdsley et al., 2005; Tvedt, 1998). There is now a significant body of literature that tracks and analyses neoliberal professionalisation that shines a light on the ways in which NGO workers have been co-opted into the mainstream development and aid agenda (Baillie Smith and Jenkins, 2011; Laurie and Bondi, 2005; Roth, 2012, 2015b). Key themes and critiques that emerge

within this literature focus firstly on the mainstreaming or co-option of NGOs into the development agenda (Clark, 1997; Jenkins, 2008), or what Alvarez (1998) refers to as 'NGOization', and, secondly, the imposition of new management principles of accountability and transparency in development practice (Townsend et al., 2002) and the recognition of donor-led 'fashions' (Tvedt, 1998). Finally, the literature emphasises the focus that is placed on the professional 'expert' (Laurie et al., 2005). Each of these, individually and collectively, shape organisational structures and the way that development work is constructed. 'Target cultures' and the market, for example, further shape the labour process outside of civil society and Hiresh's narrative shows their impact on the labour process inside it, as well as the possibilities of resistance.

At the core of this literature is a recognition that restrictions and principles have been put in place that formalise NGO workers while ensuring that they conform to the needs of funders. The importance of this literature is in recognising that Indian civil society has itself undergone a profound process of professionalisation (Roy, 2011; Vasan, 2009). This narrative not only reflects this, but Hiresh's reaction to his professionalisation confirms it. Hiresh's narrative demonstrates the principles and approaches that shape the organisation, how he chooses to direct it and the work that it does.

As the following narrative attests, purposeful construction of the labour process and the relationships that underpin the work are central to Hiresh's approach. Roth (2015a, 2015b) makes important distinctions between different categories of NGO workers; however, the focus here is on Hiresh as the organisation's director. *Support* employs three professional full-time educated staff members who come from and understand the Dalit communities in which they work. In addition to employed staff, volunteers are also involved on an ad hoc basis working at a community level. Hiresh's status as a Dalit has not only shaped his political views from an early age but is the fundamental driver for *Support's* existence.

Bridging the public and private

The narrative here captures Hiresh's life history, covering his routes into work, his experiences of working in India's civil society and his own decision to establish an organisation on his own terms with the flexibility and self-management that has come to characterise professionalised aid work (Roth, 2015a). This also covers the significant impact it has on his working life and that of his staff. At the core of this discussion is an explicit engagement with the interplay of 'private troubles and public issues' (Wright-Mills, 1958). Much of the narrative focuses on growing up in a heavily politicised Dalit community in Kerala in which obstacles, barriers and challenges are understood through the lens of caste and class. With a strong left of centre political tradition in Kerala (Heller, 2013), it is unsurprising then that the Communist Party of India is at the heart of this narrative. It is through his engagement with the party that we learn of his private family troubles as well as routes into civil society, activism and now a position in which he 'creates' a labour process and establishes working relationships.

It would be impossible to explore the full social context of India or even Kerala here. However, it is important to recognise that while Kerala has long been considered a progressive, developed state in India (Dreze and Sen, 1997; Parayil, 2000), it continues to

be divided by contradictions, inequalities and injustice. This is particularly the case for scheduled castes and tribes who are the most politically, socially and economically disadvantaged groups in India as a result of their position in relation to the caste system (Devika, 2010; Rajeevan, 2010). These are the groups that are the focus of *Support's* campaigning and advocacy work. The most recent census data identifies 10.5 per cent of the Kerala population as belonging to scheduled castes or scheduled tribes (of a population of 33,387,677) with, for example, literacy rates that are 13 per cent and 18 per cent lower than the state average of 93.91 per cent (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). Further indicators of the challenges faced by these groups include low levels of educational achievement, unstable work opportunities, high unemployment and health issues. As the narrative below notes, an element of *Support's* work is ensuring that state funds allocated to support these groups is actually spent on scheduled castes and tribes and, when it is not, *Support* highlights this through its direct campaigning and advocacy work. While the government has changed in recent years, to, and then from, a Congress-led coalition, the central aims and methods of *Support's* work has not changed as the experience of Dalit communities remains the same.

This article is based on interviews with Hiresh over a two-year period, initially facilitated by a mutual contact at the University of Kerala. These interviews have allowed for an ongoing partnership to emerge.

Hiresh's story

Routes into work

People in Kerala are born not only into a caste but also into a party. I was born in a village nicknamed Moscow. We have a lot of Ho Chi Minhs, Lenins and Stalins here – one of my friends named their daughter like Stalin's daughter, Svetlana. So Kerala has that left tradition. I was born into a village where more or less everybody leaned towards a particular political ideology. We have many Communist parties. I belonged to the original Communist Party, born in 1925, which split into many. My father was active, a full-time party official.

Initially I was engaged in jobs which are considered to be dirty, like processing coir – coconut fibre. I started working in this fibre factory and I was there almost two years. You had to put the coconut shell in the salt water and firm it for three months and it looks and it stinks like anything. Then you've got to take it to the machine. So I was the boy making it.

I look back now and it was all Communists engaged in this coconut shell preparation, all Dalits or outcasts. In fact, I had actually dropped out from the school. I was not able to continue because my father, by then, had physically, politically and mentally collapsed. He had problems with the party and left. Once you leave the party then you are nothing because the party is central in your life. Somebody had to take care of the family, so I went to work.

I was, however, still able to complete my education, though not by going to school but by learning privately at a night class. When I was 14 I finished my matriculation. Then I moved to the city as per party direction.

College years

A member of the party asked me to continue my study. 'Come to the city and take care of the party office functions and we will pay you. You can continue your study and you can support your family and sometimes be there.' I left my village and moved to the city. I joined a college, which is actually a work place, and the party gave me a night caretaker job of a big party building in the city. My duties were taking care of the office from 5 p.m. until morning. It was a 24-hour office. There were parallel businesses – you had to take care of all those things too.

I was in one college for two years, then another. I was also elevated within the party to the senior, secondary level activists and the student wing of the party. Then, I actually started contesting in college union elections, and was elected as a member of the senate of the university. I was very much part of the student activism. I also moved to college hostels so I left the party job and continued as a full-time paid party worker.

By the time I joined my degree course I was an organiser, and I was staying in a hostel when I realised that everyone, including my comrades, defined and differentiated me as a Dalit. It was a shocking experience and I started analysing things from a different point of view and understanding caste issues. I was so obsessed with a caste analysis of everything despite the fact that I was asked to believe there was no caste in Kerala. You see, the party had decided there was no caste. It was after this that my engagement with the party stopped.

Seven years of my life from the age of 14 was in the party. They provided me my best friends but I moved to a different understanding of society. Now my philosophy, my understanding, everything has changed in that particular area and I left the party. Being an activist from a very early time you cannot just sit, you cannot go back, you have to do something. So I left the party and Kerala for good.

Leaving Kerala

There was a struggle, which was started by a group in the north of India, so I went there. I left Kerala in 2000 and I met many new organisations from across the country and across the globe. Then there was the time of the world social forum, 'Another world is possible', that slogan, so I joined a youth camp. Then, since there was hardly any youth in that, I was asked to coordinate this process in Asia, and then India in 2001.

That gave me a great world of different politics, and I met so many people across south Asia. I'm travelling almost six years, travelling each and every bit of the country, so that's given me a lot of strength because I am interacting with activists, trade unions and in elections. My learning, reading, researching about the past was also carrying on. I was reading book after book.

By this time I was working with different NGOs, different social movements and I was part of the Dalit monitoring process across the country. I joined an organisation named *People's Watch*. It's a huge organisation and that's the one reason I keep my organisation small now. I learnt the hard business of *doing* human rights, not understanding human rights but *doing* human rights. I was given a good opportunity to learn all these things with a really good trainer. However, this organisation collapsed because of

the obesity of it. It was huge, like 200 staff, and that's the first decision I took when I started *Support*: we never will be having more than five staff and, so far, only three.

I was there in a junior way and *People's Watch* was actively negotiating with the EU for a new 'preventing torture' project. It's a huge project and I was asked to be the director: it was a shock to me. So I came back to Kerala after six years.

Back home

When I left Kerala my political understanding was very limited but I come back with lots of new information, knowledge and contacts. I was placed in a different project, and there were some personal conflicts as well. I don't want to hide this – I was getting married so I needed to support myself. By that time I was determined that I'd challenge the caste system in Kerala – I had made my mind up!

I came back to Kerala as a director of an EU project looking into police torture. I recruited these people and asked them to come here and live and work in their home place. Understanding somebody in their own premises, their own locality, with their own parents, it makes you full of a lot of other insights.

Here the atrocities are high and we don't have anything like a criminal investigation. They just bring somebody in and thrash them, 'til he accepts the claim. That's it, that's how it works here. We documented these examples. There was a big team, not only me. That is again bringing back very solid realities, the troubled realities of police brutality.

When the project was over I was offered a higher position. I refused, I said, 'No, I have to do something my own', I will do something in Kerala. Something incredible. By that time I had married so I have two things: sustain the family and make some money. I was also thinking about what to do and we had a long discussion with my colleagues, my friends, and we realised that there's a gap in Dalit activism in Kerala. Here our demands are based on life experiences. We know that it was bad but there was no factual evidence to prove your argument so we decided to step in to provide factual information. That's how we established ourselves. We are now in our ninth year.

Going local: The work of Support

We started *Support* with a single objective: to provide factual and solid information about the existence of caste and discrimination in Kerala – a huge challenge. It's a huge area so we have to limit ourselves based on our human resource and other resources. Funding is an issue for us. We don't have any foreign funds: we are a local Indian-based organisation funded by domestic donors. I don't have any serious problems with foreign funds politically, as long as you are clear what you are doing. The problem comes with running a project. When someone gives you one lakh rupees² then tells you the strings that will be around the law of financial interest, what do you do? In order to spend that money we have to have a different system, so here we have a maximum of 10 lakh rupees per year, that's all. There is a lot of pressure from the financial institutions to actually take money and it's not that they want to run their show, but the moment you say no and the pressure starts building, the bigger problem for me is actually saying a hard *no* to these people. It's a very conscious, political decision we make.

In order to sustain that decision, we make sure the team is small so in nine years we never go beyond five people. We always keep ourselves small and that's also my experience – if you have 10 people, very soon you lose yourself dealing with their problems in the office. Of course there's a protocol. Though I am technically the director, there's nothing like any reporting procedure. Everybody is given the same level job, a job description and we help each other, but that's how we operate. My job description here is director but I used to cook for the team every day!

Our research is basically generating facts and figures but I wouldn't say research, I have to stop using that word, all our inquiries, all our studies (in all our papers we say studies) we call them fact findings. We always cover three communities (Dalits, Adivasis and fishing communities), we always cover geographical differences, we always cover religious differences – for example, among fishing communities, although small, it is divided into three religions, our example is always from those three – and south, north, west, east, all those things are covered. For example, now we are doing a research on uneconomic schools – we have this phenomenon of uneconomic schools in Kerala, a huge number. Now, how come a school is uneconomic? It's an interesting thing because all mixed schools become uneconomic, because all the rich and affluent have migrated to other fancy private schools so these schools become uneconomic and who studies there? Dalits, Adivasi,³ those who are poor. Once the government declared a school as uneconomic, that's it, they are undone. They have no support, nothing. So we are collecting data from 10 schools, including tribal, mainland, Dalit and from the south shore.

We decide that we will work on the street and we also decide we may not be able to work on everything, because then it's not matching your strength and it's also affecting the quality of the stuff you come up with. We are not a radical sort of people's movement, we place ourselves as an organisation in between providing factual information and lobbying.

Communicating is so important for us. I am not a trained academic but I read a lot of research papers, books, journals, and all those things have something wrong – the language. There are a lot of research institutes and they come up with beautiful reports but the language does not connect with everyday people.

In the last five years, I don't want to claim that we have achieved great things but two things are happening. (1) The communities accepted that this is the organisation for factual information. Not only the community, but also the government. We grew up in that state Kerala and we talk to them directly: sit with them and talk to them. (2) We are confident. We give them our information, our publications, our books and anybody can use it. We don't mind if they don't recognise us, we are very categorical in that.

Monitoring and campaigning

We started working on the budgets, the state and government budgets. When you are dealing with the education and the health issues, you have to look into health budgets but also housing budgets. In the beginning, it's actually trying to look into this strange book of numbers,⁴ then we really started reading the book; then we got some people to come and actually tell us how they do all this magic in the budget work. Now we are doing budget monitoring and campaigning. Monitoring budget means that we start

from the pre-budget negotiation with the government, we force budget critiques and monitor throughout.

The government is supposed to spend an equal share on the scheduled tribe and scheduled caste populations and it's mandatory. For example, the Kerala budget for this year is 10 million rupees, so the Dalit population is 10 per cent and Adivasi population is 2 per cent. It's huge money and none of the organisations are actually engaged in monitoring this money, so we started doing that. That's the caste work we do. They said they're not getting the money from the state. They do all the things to not spend it, so we are actually doing all the things to spend the money.

For example, there was a group of Dalits who encroached on a big corporation's land and we completed a door-to-door survey there and we filed a case. The verdict came last week, saying that they need to provide the basic health and education facilities that will benefit at least 500 children there.

Another example: there was something around 12,000 children located far inside forest locations, tribal areas basically, and we just went there and did fact-finding. It's basically human work; we do not claim all the skills and other things.

If you are not able to provide proper education then this is something more which is multi-grade learning centres in which, after fourth class they sit in the one classroom and 12,000 were there learning. Now, one morning the government said, 'We'll close it down', saying that they're out of funds; but we fought the case. We involve media, a few stories and a few facts and figures, and government actually immediately provide something and they cancelled the order to stop the school. Now it's still running.

None of the published reports have been without a human face, the human story, because that's where we are. People often ask me, 'What keeps you moving?'. It's because we keep going back again and again. That gives me strength, that's all. All the information, all those things now – it's a routine. We are also in contact with good people in the government and that will help us. You know, getting information is not as difficult as what we had for the first five years. Everything is more and more like a phone call now and we always call back to the people and that's the only way to make sure your work is actually used by the people. I think that's a positive. Now we are connected with most grassroots Dalits, Adivasis, fishing community organisations, and that's very good. That really helps. For example, on the budget day they will call in the morning, most of them, so by the time the minister finishes his budget speech, we will prepare one page about it, so it comes out in their name not our name.

We do encounter opposition, especially with this budget as it is actually putting needles into their boots because we are also engaging with the state. But let me put it straight, it's not a serious threat. There are threats but they are not able to pull us down. It's not a small thing, especially when we are exposing things. For example, we had come up with a report last year about living in hostels. They are hell, living hells, so there was a lot of media coverage and so the government is not happy. We actually scanned all the hostels. We actually seek a permission from the government, get inside the hostels, and we come out with a report. They're certainly not amicable. The secretary has called me and said that, you know, it's unfair. I said, 'Okay, unfair. Fine'. We expect that. It is a lot to endure but we are not bound to give any explanation to the state. This is just what we do and this is what we will continue to do.

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Notes

1. There are two leading communist parties in Kerala: the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPIM). Throughout the narrative Hires is referring to the CPI.
2. One lakh rupees is equivalent to 100,000 rupees.
3. A collective term for tribal communities in South India.
4. The State accounts produced annually to show public income and expenditure.

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Hiresh Mani (pseudonym) is an activist born in Kerala who has more than 20 years' experience of working in a variety of roles in India's civil society. He is now the director of a regional organisation campaigning on behalf of the rights of Dalits. Hiresh is committed to supporting disadvantaged communities through advocacy work and campaigning activities.

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