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‘Growing’ citizenship from the grassroots: Nijera Kori and social mobilization in Bangladesh

Naila Kabeer

Formal definitions and lived experiences of citizenship in Bangladesh

The constitution of Bangladesh is committed to uphold certain universal human rights, including the right to life and personal liberty, privacy, equality and non-discrimination, and freedom of movement, religion, expression, thought and conscience, and property. It also contains fundamental principles of state policy that address the need for the state to ensure the availability of food, shelter, employment, health and education for all its citizens. Though non-justiciable, the constitution provides that these principles should be fundamental to the governance of Bangladesh, applied in its laws, and a guide to constitutional and legal interpretation.

The reality, however, bears very little relation to these constitutional provisions. It is characterized instead by corruption and clientelism. The state does not merely fail to protect the rights of citizens, it actively contributes to their violation. The legal system offers uncertain recourse to justice: cases can be dismissed, prolonged or delayed for the right price. Extensive control over the allocation of resources by state officials has given rise to rent-seeking and corruption. There is widespread reliance at every level of society on membership of social networks and the ability to pull strings to get anything done. The poor and marginalized are either excluded from these networks or can only participate on terms that deprive them of independent voice and agency. The pervasiveness of these patron–client relationships serves to fragment and disunite such groups, and prevents the emergence of horizontal, class-based solidarities that could be mobilized to defend and promote their interests.

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The non-governmental organization (NGO) sector, which emerged in Bangladesh in the aftermath of its war of independence in 1971, was partly a response to these institutional deficiencies. It has expanded rapidly in recent decades, not least because of funds made available by international donors seeking to implement a neo-liberal agenda of reducing the role of the state. There are around 22,000 NGOs in Bangladesh today. 80 per cent of its villages have some form of NGO presence, and around 35 per cent of the country's population directly benefit from their activities (Thornton *et al.* 2000). In a country of 130 million people, this suggests an astonishing outreach.

Most NGOs have certain characteristics in common. They are partly or wholly reliant on foreign funding, they see their mission as working with the poor, and they tend to rely on group-based activities to achieve their goals. In addition, over the years they have increasingly engaged in some form of service delivery. The provision of micro-finance services dominates because its stress on building micro-entrepreneurship fits neatly into the neo-liberal vision of a market-based society. However, NGOs are also involved in the delivery of health, education, safety net programmes, low-cost housing and so on.

My focus in this chapter is on Nijera Kori (NK), an organization that is an exception to this general rule in that it has determinedly refused to engage in any form of service delivery. Instead, it concentrates entirely on building up the collective capabilities of the poor to demand their rights. The chapter will draw on both secondary studies as well as primary fieldwork¹ in order to examine NK's vision, goals and activities, and what these imply for the understanding and practice of citizenship within its constituency.

Nijera Kori's vision, goals and strategy

NK has been involved since 1980 with the working poor in a number of districts in Bangladesh.² It defines its constituency as those men and women who have no assets of their own but must sell their physical labour, or its products, to earn a living. Early documents spelt out what it saw as the key factors that led to the disenfranchisement of this constituency (see, for instance, Ahmed 1982).

- In *economic* terms, they had to sell their labour to meet their basic needs, but had little control over the terms and conditions on which this labour was sold. Consequently, they often earned barely enough to feed themselves and their families.
- In *social* terms, their reliance on patron–client relationships served to

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fragment them along vertical lines and prevent the emergence of horizontal, class-based alliances that could challenge these hierarchical structures. Their capacity for agency was further suppressed by norms, beliefs and ideologies that explain and justify their poverty and marginalization as the product of fate, fault or failure, and by practices that kept them ignorant of their basic rights.

- In *political* terms, they were denied voice in the collective structures of decision-making through which rules were made and resources distributed within the society. This was true in relation to decision-making forums such as the *shalish*, the informal body responsible for resolving conflicts and dispensing justice. It was true at the level of local government, which was responsible for the delivery of state programmes, many intended explicitly for the poor. And it went without saying that it was also true in relation to national processes of decision-making.

From the outset, therefore, NK has defined the problem of poverty not simply in terms of lack of resources but also in terms of lack of voice, agency and organization; as the manifestation not simply of individual deprivation, but also of underlying structural inequities. This explains the holistic nature of its vision of social change: 'To establish an exploitation-free society by changing the present system of social exploitation with the aim of emancipation of working class people' (Annual Report 1998–9).

It also explains the holistic nature of its strategy for change. NK believes that the struggle for social transformation has to be carried out in all spheres of life and at all levels of society, starting with the individual and extending to the local, the national and, where relevant, the international. And it explains key aspects of NK's strategy for change: the purposive construction of social relations that reflect horizontal alliances of the poor and that displace the vertical patron-client relations that have kept the poor fragmented and isolated for so long. Consequently, it seeks to nurture the values of solidarity, self-reliance and collective action, rather than those of individual prosperity, personal advancement and competition associated with the neo-liberal vision of social change.

It is this reasoning that has led NK consistently and firmly to reject any form of service delivery role and to remain one of the few NGOs in the country to resist the widespread 'turn to micro-credit' evident in the NGO sector since the mid-1980s. It fears that such a role could create new forms of dependency between NGOs and their constituencies, diverting the energies of both from the larger goals of transforming society and democratizing the state.