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Selective privatisation and changing civic spaces
in India: The government takeover
of an erstwhile NGO-run child helpline

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Abstract

Much scholarship has critiqued the fact that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as a result of global neoliberalism and consequential state retreat, have become private service providers of children's protection rights. But how can we explain the situation when neoliberal states also undergo autocratisation and take back service provision from NGOs, while at the same time preserving the privatisation to for-profit companies? This tendency, I argue, can be conceptualised as 'selective privatisation'. To make this point, this article draws on ethnography and policy analysis and showcases how India's national helpline for children went from being an NGO-state partnership to a fully state-controlled service. When CHILDLINE was a NGO-state partnership, its employees experienced challenges such as limited job security and advocacy restrictions, but they still considered the partnership positive in terms of its ability to influence the state's child protection policies. In the new state-controlled set-up, however, civil society is diluted to 'volunteers' and 'communities' who, without formal organisation and funding, do not have the means to walk the difficult but useful tightrope between being implementers and advocates. Instead, they are *de facto* silenced. The article thus contributes to the literature on 'changing' civic spaces by concentrating on the roles of non-profit private service providers for children in neoliberal and autocratising India.

Keywords: Selective privatisation; NGOs; India; autocratisation; child protection; changing civic spaces

1 Introduction

In 1996, a group of social workers from Mumbai made available a 24-hour helpline for the megacity's street children in collaboration with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the police. The goal was to fill a gap in child protection services for the city's most vulnerable children, namely those without a safety net who often needed help at night when other services were closed. Over the years, CHILDLINE became a large national partnership between NGOs, academia, and all levels of the state, catering to children from all over the country. Its inception coincided with the liberalisation of the

Indian economy, and CHILDLINE became a prime example of a privately delivered child protection service financed by the state. In 2022, the Indian government proclaimed its intention to take over all operations of CHILDLINE so it would no longer be implemented by NGOs, but directly by the state.

The aim of this article is to unpack this sudden shift from an NGO-state partnership to a fully state-controlled child protection service. Much scholarship, including that focusing on India, has critiqued the fact that NGOs have become private service providers of children's welfare and protection rights, while the state has liberalised its economy and retreated (Kamat, 2004; Pradhan et al., 2023). At the same time, regulatory restrictions on international NGOs in India leave the country among a group of democracies experiencing a 'shrinking civic space' (Banerjee, 2025). 'Shrinking civic space' refers to 'attempts by governments to disrupt international funding flows to local civil society organizations (...) and further reduce their political voice through legal restrictions and other forms of repression' (Toepler et al., 2020, p. 649). Civic space in India, however, is not only 'shrinking' but also 'changing' more broadly. The term 'changing civic space' recognises that the state is not the only agentic actor, but that civil society responds and thus also shapes its own conditions (Biekart et al., 2023). 'Changing civic spaces' also encompasses the complexities when the same government that shrinks civic space for some NGOs supports others (Moldavanova et al., 2023; Banerjee, 2025). How does the case of CHILDLINE¹ – involving the state taking back services from a national NGO-state partnership – fit into these narratives? Through the case study of CHILDLINE, the present article sets out to add further nuance to the understanding of what kind of 'changing civic space' is at play in contemporary India.

In addition to 'shrinking' and 'changing' civic space, three concepts are key to this endeavour: 'autocratisation', 'hybrid regimes', and 'selective privatisation'. 'Autocratisation' is the gradual move from democracy to autocracy and can take place in several arenas, such as elections or civic freedoms (Grahn et al., 2022). This article focuses on when autocratisation takes place in the arena of freedom of association and expression, or, in other words, when governments gradually restrict the civic space within which associations operate. When a state is neither fully autocratic nor fully democratic, it is a 'hybrid regime', a regime type which Anderson and Gaventa (2023) have called the 'new normal'. Looking to India, it has been documented that 'stringent regulatory and financial restrictions' have been imposed on NGOs, including changes in foreign funding regulation, which leads to labelling many international NGOs 'foreign agents' and 'anti-national' (Banerjee, 2025). NGOs such as Greenpeace India, the Public Health Foundation of India, and the Lawyers Collective have had their Foreign Contribution Registration License withdrawn. Some international NGOs have experienced 'judicial bans, arbitrary interven-

¹ CHILDLINE should not be seen as representative of the diverse Indian NGO sector, but it is a significant case because of its size – it catered to all of India's children and was a partnership of hundreds of NGOs – and uniqueness, as it was India's only child helpline, thus playing an important role in the country's child protection system. Many NGOs have rightly been critiqued for corruption or political co-optation, but CHILDLINE has, in previous research, generally been considered a successful partnership between state and civil society (Teron et al., 2021), and CHILDLINE's database of calls has been used widely as credible information about issues such as human trafficking (Sekhon, 2020), child marriage (Ghosh, 2022), and child abuse (Seth, 2015).

tions, restricted resources access, frozen bank accounts and other significant legal constraints undermining their work' (ibid., pp. 4; 7). If such restrictions happen simultaneously to the removal of state funding for implementing social services, such as child protection services, NGOs will, without access to funding, find it very difficult to continue their work. If we add the continuation of privatisation to for-profit companies to this mix, this is arguably a case of 'selective privatisation'. 'Selective privatisation' is thus proposed in this article as a term that describes the emerging trend when neoliberal and autocratising states continue privatising social services, making them for-profit providers, but simultaneously restrict this privatisation when it comes to not-for-profit organisations. As will be detailed below, for- and not-for-profit social services in India have undergone significant privatisation since the 1980s. What is new with the case of CHILDLINE is 'de-privatisation' in the not-for-profit sector specifically, and this is what the article will unpack by linking it to the changing civic space in India. The article documents how selective privatisation has taken place in India, but proposes the term for possible wider use.

After contextualising neoliberalism and autocratisation in the Indian context (section 2), the first empirical part of the article (section 3) is based on interviews and ethnographic material collected from different CHILDLINE branches in 2019-2020. I examine how the NGO-employed but state-paid child protection workers perceived the fact that the helpline was a privatised service. My material shows that they saw both advantages in being an NGO-run, state-sponsored helpline, such as being dedicated workers, having flexibility in their approaches, and being closer to beneficiaries, but also challenges, such as low salaries, insecure employment contracts, and difficulties in critiquing the state that funded them. But overall, the semi-governmental employees identified their public role in providing the state's helpline for children, thereby being an almost symbiotic part of the state apparatus. The second empirical part of the article (section 4) then considers the political changes imposed by the present autocratising government on NGOs. In particular, it discusses the state's takeover of CHILDLINE. It does so through an analysis of the two policy documents in which CHILDLINE is envisioned as a purely governmental service. This analysis finds that civil society input and partnership in the new setup is watered down to the involvement of 'communities' and 'volunteers', dismantling the NGO-based setup that was built over decades. The article suggests, in the discussion in section 5, that civic space in India is indeed changing – a trend perhaps also evident in similar 'hybrid' contexts (Toepler et al., 2020) – as service-providing organisations are also experiencing restrictions (as also made evident in Banerjee, 2025). Part of the changing civic space is also that the Indian state is only *selectively* retreating in favour of for-profit service providers. The paper thus challenges the view that reversing privatisation back to state-run services should merely be considered part of the embrace of a larger welfare state – it may also be an example of a changing civic space.

2 Neoliberalism and autocratisation in India

In this section, I introduce the political context of selective privatisation in India by locating it in relation to neoliberalism and autocratisation. In the Indian context, neoliberalism is commonly used to describe the period beginning in the late 1980s that broke from the

previous tradition of state-sponsored developmentalism and continues until today. Economic reforms opened up the economy to more foreign investment, and the list of policy spheres restricted to the public sector was reduced (Corbridge, 2010, p. 305).² Not only were previously state-owned companies in sectors such as oil, air travel, banking, and telecoms over the years privatised to for-profit companies (Naib, 2022), but also social services such as health (Hooda, 2020) and education (Deshpande, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2024).³ The privatisation of social services to for-profit organisations has been argued to have economic advantages for the state, but also to bring with it social inequality (Thapliyal, 2016; Naib, 2022, p. 25). Privatisation to not-for-profit organisations, on the other hand, is usually legitimised using the language of NGOs' 'closeness to the poor' (Lewis, 2006, p. 184). Despite the fact that voluntary organisations have had a long history in India (Sen, 1992), neoliberalism has packaged their service provision as 'contractual partnerships' between state and civil society (Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, 2020; Mortensen, 2023b). And while for-profit and not-for-profit privatisation are different in many aspects, both processes have diminished the role of the state in public provisioning. Economic liberalisation has thus led to a broader neoliberal shift in Indian politics, which is still permeating society today (Kaul, 2017).

This neoliberal turn was, of course, not unique to India (Pradhan et al., 2023). Neither was the resulting 'NGO boom' when NGOs took over service provision and became part of a both rhetorical and practical shift in responsibility away from the public and towards the private sector (Schuller, 2017, p. 24). This is indeed a global trend which we have seen from Eastern Europe to Latin America (Bernal & Grewal, 2014). However, perhaps unlike some of its global counterparts, in India, the state's withdrawal from public provision curiously occurred at the same time as the recognition of new social and economic rights such as the rights to food and education (Nilsen, 2018). This 'rights revolution' (Das, 2013) in the early 2000s has, in large part, been attributed to the establishment of a National Advisory Council (Chandhoke, 2019, p. 52), whose members were indicative of an overlap between state and civil society. Grassroots citizens' movements have indeed had 'substantial influence over national policy making resulting in the successful passage of legal entitlements to welfare' (Madhok, 2021, pp. 102-103). Thus, while there are many critics of the neoliberal turn in India, the fact that neoliberalism coexisted with the adoption of new social rights is quite remarkable. One vehicle for such co-existence has been the numerous partnerships between state and civil society in social sectors, such as child protection, which I return to in the next section. As we will see below, the case of CHILDLINE India is an example of a civil society organisation closely knitted into the state's welfare architecture, and this is what is currently being dismantled when the state selectively privatises for-profit and de-privatises non-profit social services.

² These concrete economic reforms are often talked of as the 'liberalisation' of the Indian economy. With 'neoliberalisation,' I refer to the consequential propagation of a 'doctrine of market principles in all sectors of society' (Pradhan et al., 2023, p. 566).

³ Primary education in India, even when delivered by the private sector, is not allowed to be for-profit. As such, registered trusts or societies (often NGOs) run many private schools. Some research has pointed to the fact that there is 'de facto' privatisation of primary education in India (Tooley & Dixon, 2006) and that low-fee private schools may also exacerbate inequality (Srivastava, 2013).

If neoliberalism has been a trend in India for decades, spanning governments from across the political spectrum, autocratisation, on the other hand, is primarily associated with the current market-oriented and Hindu nationalist government (Grahn et al., 2022, pp. 6-7). Grahn et al. (ibid., p. 5) define autocratisation as a process involving the move from democracy towards autocracy, regardless of where the starting point was. As such, autocratisation does not necessarily require an autocracy, but a state which is moving in that direction (even if it only moves from a 'liberal democracy' to 'electoral democracy'). Autocratisation can happen in the arenas of elections, political competition, governmental autonomy, civil liberties, and executive checks. Tudor (2023) has documented how the arena of civil liberties is especially under threat in India. International democracy and civic freedom indices, such as Freedom House, CIVICUS and V-Dem, also express worries about India's democracy and, in particular, civil liberties. For instance, CIVICUS redefined India's civic space from the category of 'obstructed' to 'repressed' in 2019, thus characterising it as a space where 'civil society members who criticise power holders risk surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury and death'.⁴ Tudor (2023, p. 126) argues that especially sedition laws and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act are used to repress dissent. The increasing parliamentary mandate obtained by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014 has (until the elections in 2024 when they lost seats but remained in government) thus led to rising hostility towards civil society organisations and a consequential chilling effect on freedom of expression and assembly (Chandhoke, 2019, pp. 40-41; Grahn et al., 2022, p. 8; Tudor, 2023). In other words, India exhibits certain autocratising traits, such as a shrinking civic space, and these are the focus of this article. It is not a straightforward authoritarianism that characterises the present Indian government, but a combination of 'strong leadership' (Sinha, 2021), authoritarian populism, neoliberalism, shrinking civic space, and developmentalism (Chacko, 2018) – thus becoming what democracy scholarship calls a 'hybrid' regime (Toepler et al., 2020; Tudor, 2023). Such a combination results in a selective expansion of the state (increasing control of civil society) and retreat (handing out welfare provision to 'liked' private actors, which are mostly for-profit, but also government-friendly NGOs). Joshi (2022, p. 25) explains this process as creating a state that allows 'some space for civil society associations to organize independently and occasionally critique the government but they also use an array of direct and indirect means to limit the political capacity of autonomous organizations', including 'going after foreign-funded non-government organizations' which is exactly what we see in the Indian context (Banerjee, 2023). It is thus clear that the rhetoric of 'partnership with civil society' that dominated in the 1990s and 2000s has now changed. The privatisation of social services to for-profit providers continues in fields such as higher education and health, but many NGOs that were earlier considered 'partners' are being targeted and de-funded (Mortensen, 2023b). This is what the empirical example below will focus on, first presenting fieldwork from before the government takeover of CHILDLINE and then a policy analysis from after the takeover.

⁴ See <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/india/> and <https://monitor.civicus.org/about/how-it-works/ratings/> (accessed 17 March 2025).

3 ‘The halfway model is best’: India’s national child helpline 1996-2022

This section draws on a mix of traditional and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork⁵ conducted over four months from 2019-2020.⁶ At the centre of the fieldwork was CHILDLINE. From its inception in the early 1990s – coinciding with the liberalisation of the Indian economy – to the government takeover in 2022, CHILDLINE was a helpline service for children defined as a ‘partnership’ between the state and civil society. It started as a small project for street children in Mumbai, but during the 1990s, its founders worked towards integrating the helpline into the central government’s child protection services. In 2000, the CHILDLINE service was written into India’s Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, and in 2009, it became part of the national Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). Becoming part of a government scheme was a great achievement for CHILDLINE. My interview with CHILDLINE’s founder confirmed that CHILDLINE, as an ‘invited’ civil society partner, had been central in giving input to and formulating the ICPS (Interview with CHILDLINE’s founder, 20 September 2020). The ICPS overarched different public child protection services such as Child Welfare Committees, Juvenile Justice Boards, child care institutions, foster care, and the child helpline. Through their inclusion in this government scheme, the NGO CHILDLINE India Foundation had state-approved legitimacy for operating India’s national child helpline.

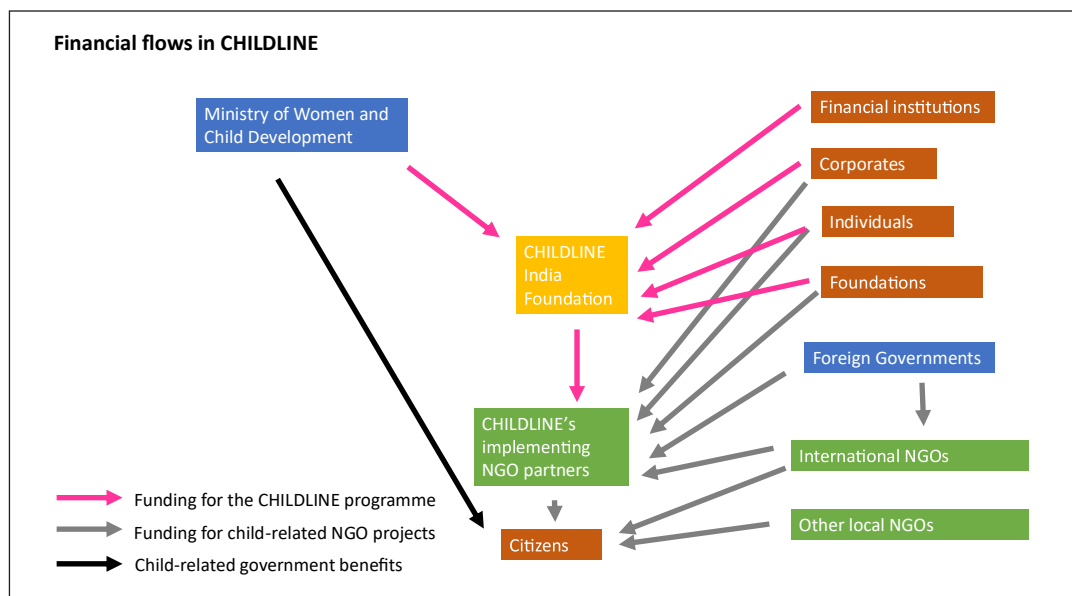


Figure 1 Financial flows in CHILDLINE (made by author)

⁵ By ‘traditional fieldwork’, I refer to immersion into a physical place and practice (see e.g. Madden, 2017). With ‘multi-sited fieldwork’, I refer to a mobile ethnography that chases and tracks ideas and practices in several sites (Goodale, 2006).

⁶ Parts of the findings presented in this section have been published in Mortensen (2023b).

During my fieldwork in 2019-2020, the bulk of the funding for CHILDLINE came from the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the helpline was managed by the NGO CHILDLINE India Foundation in Mumbai, but funding also came (in much lesser amounts) directly and indirectly from elsewhere (see Figure 1 above). The calls which arrived on the free number 1098 went to regional call centres, which then transferred those calls that required intervention (as opposed to only counselling on the phone) to the closest of hundreds of small, local ‘NGO partners’ (see Figure 2 below).

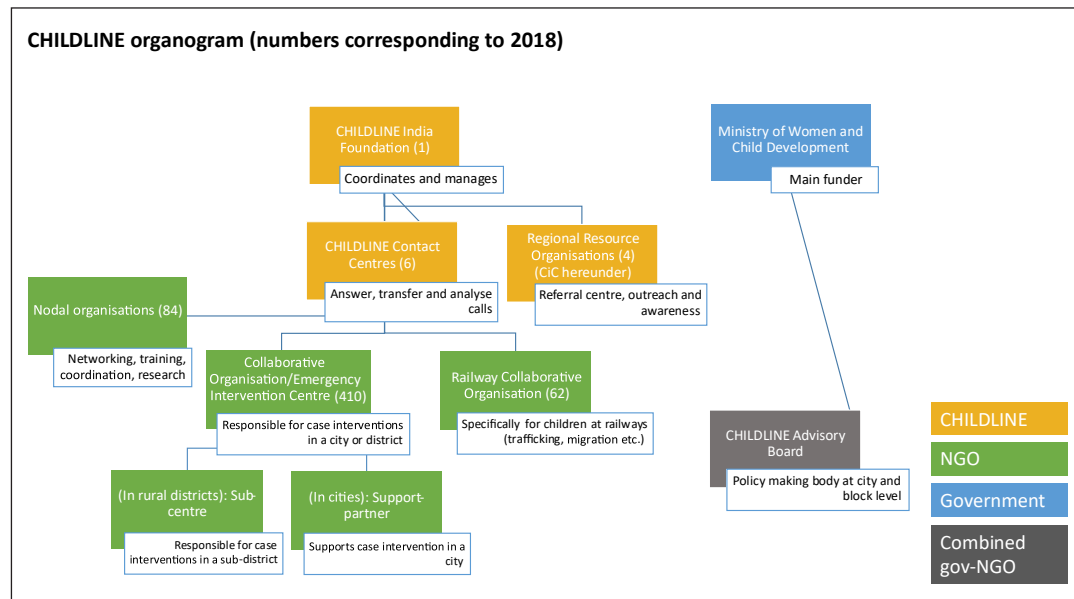


Figure 2 Simplified CHILDLINE organogram (made by author)

The NGOs would then visit the children whom the calls concerned within one hour, categorise the case (e.g. ‘child marriage’, ‘child labour’ or ‘education’) and take appropriate steps to counsel the children and connect them to the correct authorities. The NGO would continue to follow up with the child until the case was deemed closed (see Figure 3 below). CHILDLINE was thus an emergency child protection service that dealt with those children who had not been taken care of through ‘the system’. Until 2022, CHILDLINE worked very much as a ‘hybrid’ operation (Brandsen et al., 2005), somewhere between a state-run and an NGO-run child protection service (Mortensen, 2023b).

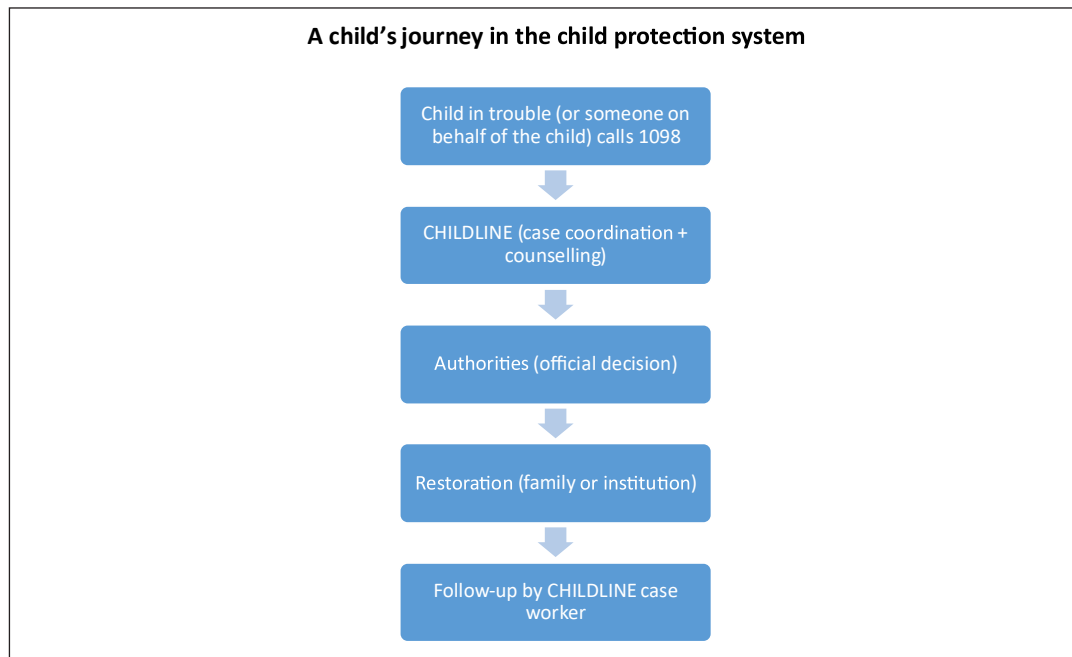


Figure 3 A child's journey in the child protection system (made by author)

My main field site was one of CHILDLINE's partner NGOs in the state of Madhya Pradesh, where I, for three months in 2019, conducted participant observation of routine job activities such as staff meetings, office work, field trips, phone calls etc., as I worked there as a volunteer six days a week. I also conducted ten individual interviews and two group interviews with staff members; a group interview with the local Child Welfare Committee; and a group interview with CHILDLINE's beneficiaries (women and children). Furthermore, I collected and analysed documents such as the NGO's promotional material and internal management documents. I visited several other CHILDLINE NGOs in three different states (Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu) where I conducted five individual interviews, interviewed the helpline's founders and senior staff (four individual interviews), and collected documents such as reports, promotional material, and government policies and laws where CHILDLINE was mentioned. Each interview was between 30 and 60 minutes long. Based on this, I now turn to illustrate how the workers who were employed by CHILDLINE's partner NGOs, but paid indirectly by the state, perceived the privatisation of social services to NGOs.

3.1 Benefits of NGO privatisation

The helpline's employees saw many benefits in being able to 'wear different hats' according to need (Interview with former senior CHILDLINE India Foundation employee, 31 March 2020). The 'NGO hat' helped them build people's trust in a way that, for instance, the state-

run District Child Protection Unit did not (Interview with Team Member of CHILDLINE-contracted NGO, 23 March 2019). Yet, the 'government hat' gave them authority. Consider this example of CHILDLINE employees coming back from a case visit where they had convinced parents to send their daughters to a school exam rather than to work in the fields:

'How did you convince them?' I asked. 'We need to have attitude', Radha said. I laughed, as it was hard to imagine sweet, smiling Radha with 'attitude'. 'But we do have attitude', she continued, 'because when someone comes from the government, people get scared and do what you say'. 'So you are from the government?' I asked. 'Yes', she said and proudly showed me her CHILDLINE-ID with the word '*sārkār*' [government/state] on it. 'But is this a government job?' I continued, with a feeling of contradiction due to a conversation we had had earlier about her colleague, Aditya, looking for a government job because it was more stable than this. 'No', she said. 'Is it an NGO job?' 'Yes, NGO job'. (Fieldnotes, 14 February 2019)

The way in which the helpline's employees switched between representing a 'tough' government and a 'softer' NGO resonates with previous studies of 'semi-governmental' work in India where workers have been observed to strategically shift identities between a nongovernmental and a governmental one (Rai & Madhok, 2012; Rajaram & Zararia, 2009; Sharma, 2006). The common perception was that NGOs were more flexible, faster and dedicated in their approaches than the government, and therefore it was logical that NGOs were the on-the-ground implementers.

In addition to this identity shifting in small NGOs, the managing NGO, CHILDLINE India Foundation, also saw many benefits in close collaboration between NGOs and the state. Because they had goodwill from the government through their large-scale helpline implementation, they also had a 'seat at the table' when national child protection policies were being drafted (Interview with CHILDLINE's founder, 20 September 2020). Furthermore, when children called CHILDLINE, a vast amount of 'incredible data' was generated (Interview with former senior CHILDLINE India Foundation employee, 1 April 2020): which issues children faced, where in India each issue was prevalent, the gender and age groups that were most affected, etc. According to one former senior employee, this data was what made CHILDLINE India Foundation a credible advocacy organisation – not doing the kind of advocacy that would threaten the state, but the kind that could be used to ask for more funds for service implementation: CHILDLINE 'can literally present a watertight case, say, "when we have more money, this is what we are able to do"' (ibid). The employees thus saw the importance of being implementers and advocates simultaneously.

3.2 Challenges with NGO privatisation

The helpline workers also identified challenges with NGO privatisation, namely the low salaries and lack of job security. Prashant, a CHILDLINE Team Member, expressed this well when asked why he thought the government had privatised services to NGOs: 'Because the work will be done properly, with less money, on time, and there will be good results. They don't have to give a permanent salary, just money to a project' (Interview with Team Member of CHILDLINE-contracted NGO, 27 March 2019). Another challenge was the limited possibility for conducting activism and advocacy when one was a government

programme implementer. This was not a problem for less activism-focused NGOs, but some CHILDLINE NGO partners had more activist ambitions – for instance, a South Indian NGO which had roots in a Christian and Dalit [previously ‘untouchable’] movement. This organisation’s work with the state had, after becoming a CHILDLINE implementer, been limited to being more of a convener than a critic (Interview with NGO Director of CHILDLINE-contracted NGO, 23 March 2019).

3.3 Arguing for the ‘halfway model’ between state and NGO

Despite being able to identify both advantages and disadvantages of NGO privatisation, a common conclusion in all my interviews with CHILDLINE employees was that for children’s protection rights to be implemented most effectively, a ‘halfway’ model between state and NGOs was the best option in India. Julian, a CHILDLINE Team Member, answered silently when asked who would be best at securing children’s rights: he held up his hand, spread his fingers and pointed at them one by one with the other index finger, implying that only together could we secure children’s rights (Interview with Team Member of CHILDLINE-contracted NGO, 23 March 2019). Prashant, another CHILDLINE Team Member, when asked who would be most effective at ensuring the respect of children’s rights, said: ‘Government work through NGOs. It will be done fast through NGOs. (...) Governments do it in a “government” way. In NGOs, there is a force to do work’ (Interview with Team Member of CHILDLINE-contracted NGO, 27 March 2019). Or as a former senior CHILDLINE employee expressed it: ‘I do think that this halfway model is (...) better (...) than, you know, the full government one (...). This thing of ensuring the government meets its obligations while maintaining enough independence to be able to (...) play an advocacy role. I think that balance is ideal’ (Interview with former CHILDLINE India Foundation employee, 1 April 2020). Another argued that the CHILDLINE model worked because of the status it had built up during her years of activity on the helpline in the early 2000s:

We [civil society] are really looked at as implementers. And to *that* extent, I think CHILDLINE was different. CHILDLINE India Foundation was not looked at as an implementer, not in the initial years. Because the idea came from CHILDLINE India Foundation, the whole movement came from CHILDLINE India Foundation (...). They [the government] really looked at us as someone they could respect and as a potential partner, if not equal. (Interview with former CHILDLINE India Foundation employee, 31 March 2020)

In sum, while there are many disadvantages of NGO privatisation, my informants on the inside of such a model reported that the CHILDLINE model was the best possible option in India because it had become a symbiotic part of the state and yet had enough independence to draw on ‘NGO virtues’ and ‘state virtues’ when required. As one interviewee argued:

... on the one hand to be the face of the government and on the other hand to be the voice of its civil society partners. You know, you’re representing on one hand, and you’re critiquing state performance. It was a bit of a, you know, wearing all these hats, yes, [it] could be

confusing, but I think a lot of the team and the leadership at that point in time [thought] that the tension was good for us (Interview with former senior CHILDLINE India Foundation employee, 31 March 2020).

But this situation of ‘good tension’ between being ‘the face of the government’ and ‘the voice of its civil society partners’ was dismantled in 2022.

4 The state takes over the operations of CHILDLINE

In 2022, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme that CHILDLINE was part of was replaced with a new policy, Mission Vatsalya. Mission Vatsalya is in many ways the same as the erstwhile ICPS – it still governs Child Protection Committees, Juvenile Justice Boards, alternative care, and other national child protection mechanisms. The most significant changes concern the share of funds (now tilted towards the central government rather than state governments) and, indeed, the setup of India’s child helpline. With Mission Vatsalya, CHILDLINE’s number (which thus far had been a separate phone number, 1098) was to be integrated with the state’s emergency number, 112, and the service handed over from NGOs to local state departments. While it is common for new governments to re-brand policies – the BJP government also did so with other social schemes such as Mission Shakti for girl empowerment and Jal Jeevan Mission for clean water during the same years – the dismantling of CHILDLINE was not something the hundreds of NGOs were prepared for or had even heard of prior to it being announced. Indeed, the announcement of this news, followed by the publication of the Mission Vatsalya Implementation Guidelines in July 2022, came as a shock to many NGOs that implemented the service. Child rights activists expressed uncertainty, critique and worry (Chandra, 2022; Mantri, 2022; Pandit, 2022). In a press release, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2023b) saw the need to rebut the critiques and state that CHILDLINE India Foundation had endorsed the state takeover. In March 2023, the Ministry issued the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), Child Helpline, Mission Vatsalya Scheme (ibid., 2023a). The Mission Vatsalya Implementation Guidelines (ibid., 2022) and the SOPs (ibid., 2023a) represent policy articulations of ‘selective privatisation’ since they involve converting an erstwhile civil society-state partnership into a fully state-run service in a political context where civil liberties in general are restricted and privatisation to for-profit services continues (see section 2, above). The following section analyses these two policy documents, demonstrating how, in Mission Vatsalya, civil society is no longer considered a ‘partner’ in child protection, but is *de facto* silenced.

One of the biggest differences between ICPS and Mission Vatsalya is that ICPS was a civil society-government partnership (ibid., 2009, p. 6; 25), and Mission Vatsalya is exclusively a government scheme. In ICPS, civil society was described as having the role of implementers, partners (e.g. ibid., p. 23), watchdogs, and lobbyists (ibid., pp. 26-7). Civil society has not disappeared completely in Mission Vatsalya, but it is mentioned less frequently and only as a potential implementer, ‘volunteers’ or ‘communities’. For instance, volunteer groups are called upon to encourage public participation (ibid., 2022, p. 43).

Communities are encouraged to 'take ownership' (ibid., pp. 18, 41). This is a promotion of a service-based, neoliberal version of civil society that rhetorically outsources responsibilities to communities (Kaul, 2017; for similar conclusions in another context, see Nieuwenhuys, 2001). The promotion of a neoliberal version of a non-threatening civil society is not a new development in India, and it was clearly evident in CHILDLINE's earlier years as well (Mortensen, 2023b). What is striking now is that it is the only version of civil society left: before, CHILDLINE was able to manoeuvre by being simultaneously an implementer and an advocate. Now, since the helpline service has officially been transferred to the District Child Protection Units and the free number '1098' (that children could call to reach an NGO worker) is closing, CHILDLINE can no longer exist as a partnership between NGOs and the state, and civil society is diluted into unorganised 'communities'.

In the new set-up outlined in the Standard Operating Procedures, NGOs are not mentioned at all, not even in reference to the earlier set-up of the helpline, or as part of a guide to how to transition from a vast NGO system to a state system. The previous CHILDLINE setup with regional call centres and various levels of implementation, all managed by different types of NGOs with different types of grassroots bases and expertise, is now combined into the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU). There might be some benefits associated with this: it may ensure better convergence between different parts of Mission Vatsalya, and NGO workers will no longer need to spend time on writing letters and seeking access and permits through government offices, as they did before. Furthermore, the helpline's employees will be government employees and will receive better social security benefits than NGO workers (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023a, p. 15). However, the SOPs mention nothing about what will happen to existing CHILDLINE-implementing NGOs and do not take into account the NGO infrastructure which was built up over decades. The NGO system was necessary, as we saw above, because people trusted it. As the honorary director of CHILDLINE Pune expressed to the Times of India: 'If Childline's partner NGOs are linked with DCPUs, many children will hesitate to seek help. They and those wanting to help abused children trust NGOs. They avoid help from government machinery, fearing insensitive questioning and long-drawn[-out] procedures' (Times of India, 2022; see also 3.1 above). Furthermore, as CHILDLINE India Foundation is no longer the 'Mother NGO' overseeing the helpline, it is not only the actual service at the NGO level on the ground that is lost, but also core departments such as Research and Development, and Awareness and Advocacy. For CHILDLINE specifically, awareness and information about the existence of the helpline number were crucial.

The most alarming aspect of the policy change becomes apparent not simply by reading the related content, but by taking the content together with timing and context. The removal of NGOs from the scheme comes at a time when, as described above, many NGOs are being forcibly closed, raided, and having their Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) license withdrawn (Banerjee, 2023; Tudor, 2023). Thus far, such treatment has been reserved for advocacy and rights-focused NGOs (Banerjee, 2025; Toepler et al., 2020, p. 651). CHILDLINE was rather a service-providing nonprofit of the kind that Toepler et al. argue receive support in hybrid regimes. The closing of the NGO part of CHILDLINE is concerning because it is evidence that even service-providing NGOs are considered threatening. Furthermore, while Mission Vatsalya is an example of a state takeover of a previously public-private partnership with NGOs, we have not seen similar state takeovers of

public-private partnerships from the for-profit sector. Indeed, Mission Vatsalya itself ‘encourage[s] private sector partnerships’ and calls for private sector support for augmenting resources (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022, p. 2). The next section will use the empirical case of CHILDLINE to expand on the article’s argument about selective privatisation in hybrid regimes.

5 The dangers of selective privatisation

This paper has conceived of ‘selective privatisation’ as a way for autocratising regimes to sustain a neoliberal market economy through privatisation to for-profit organisations, but at the same time roll back privatisation from not-for-profit organisations due to the perception of the potential threat from the latter. In this final section, I discuss why CHILDLINE is a prime example of selective privatisation and why this tendency is alarming. The empirical sections above have demonstrated that CHILDLINE’s employees argued that the ‘halfway model’ was a good way for NGOs to be integrated within state services and play simultaneous advocacy and implementation roles. The transposition of the halfway model into a fully state-controlled model indicates, at least at the level of intention, a state that takes responsibility for children’s protection rights. Whether such rights will be better ensured by the state setup is yet to be seen, but there are reasons to be sceptical about the dilution of civil society that the takeover of the helpline represents.

First of all, we should note that the exclusion of civil society from service provision is rarely a characteristic of democratic welfare states. Democracy includes civil liberties such as freedom of association, assembly, and expression, and once civil society organisations are formed, they can choose to engage in service provision and advocacy. Of course, just as with state-provided services, there may be problems with service-providing NGOs, such as the misuse of funds and political co-optation.⁷ Neither state-provided nor NGO-provided services can avoid the phenomenon that corruption is a large problem in India.⁸ That fact should not, however, entitle the state to limit civil society’s freedom to organise and express itself in general. Indeed, a vigilant civil society can also help put an end to corrupt or abusive practices, as CHILDLINE did in a case of abuse in a shelter home (Mortensen, 2023a). As shown with CHILDLINE, when NGOs receive state funding, it can lead to them becoming so closely knit within the state’s service provision mechanisms that they do not have the means or access to do advocacy without the funding and contacts that come from being the state’s service providers. Removing state funding from NGOs is in itself not a violation of civil liberties. But it should, I have argued, be analysed in light of the restrictions of the civil liberties of other NGOs. Together, the direct restrictions on government-critical NGOs and the indirect restrictions on service-providing

⁷ A truly horrendous example of the misuse of state funds by NGOs in India is the rape case at the Muzaffarpur shelter home from 2018 (see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51172513>, accessed 25 February 2025).

⁸ According to Transparency International, 89% of Indians think that government corruption is a big problem (<https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/india>, accessed 21 February 2025). There is no data on NGO corruption.

NGOs such as CHILDLINE significantly diminish opportunities for civil society to receive funds from foreign and state sources, and thus to operate. A chilling effect is also likely to affect unfunded dissenting activities (Banerjee, 2025).

Another reason to be sceptical about the intentions behind the government takeover of CHILDLINE is the lack of similar initiatives aimed at rolling back privatisation from for-profit sectors. A key to understanding this argument is considering what types of services are profitable. Sectors like education and health are highly profitable when privatised. Even if education in India is not allowed to be for-profit, studies have shown that both primary (Tooley & Dixon, 2006) and higher (Gupta, 2022) education are often *de facto* profit-making. Child protection, on the other hand, is rarely a service that richer echelons of society will pay for (except for when it is for others through charity). CHILDLINE's work was aimed almost exclusively at supporting impoverished and marginalised children who had fallen through the cracks in existing systems and therefore needed emergency protection. This is not a type of service that lends itself to profit, and in a state like India, where NGOs are largely seen as potential threats, this is therefore a sector that is likely to be 'de-privatised' – as opposed to education or health. What we lose, therefore, is what one informant called the 'development sector', which, in his view, people have trust in:

Trust is a driver of the development sector, which neither the government [controls] fully nor the private sector [...] Therefore, it [is] a good intermediary to have in the country. I feel the development sector is a very important player in the market, particularly when you have issues where lots of groups don't access their rights. (Interview with former employee at CHILDLINE India Foundation)

A central point here is that reversing privatisation back to state-run services should not merely be seen as an embrace of the welfare state but can also be seen as part of a wider tendency to restrict civic space. CHILDLINE's employees highlighted positive aspects of NGO-state partnerships: that the threshold for people to approach a 'government' service was lower when it was implemented by NGOs; that children's rights in India were more secure with a network of watchdogs and service providers that try to supplement a reluctant state than without it; and that the NGOs they worked for were faster, more flexible, less bureaucratic and had more field experience than the civil servants working within the state's child protection agencies. It may be unsurprising that CHILDLINE's employees had positive views of their own organisation. Still, their views are worth keeping in mind, as they point to the fact that NGOs may be important upholders of rights, without whom many rights would effectively not be enjoyed. As my interviewees reminded us, it was the tension arising from being both implementers (thus legitimate in the eyes of the state) and advocates (able to keep the state in check) that made NGO privatisation fruitful concerning the fulfilment of children's protection rights. It should, of course, be noted that not all service-providing NGOs in India have undergone the same treatment as CHILDLINE. There are still many not-for-profit service-providing NGOs (Banerjee, 2025). But what happened to CHILDLINE is a warning of what more may come if the reelected BJP government continues on the road they have followed thus far. This is a road which, I have argued, represents a process of selective privatisation into for-profit service providers, and the selective de-privatisation of NGOs that are seen as potential critics of the state.

6 Conclusion

Through the empirical case of the Indian state's takeover of the operations of CHILDLINE, a nation-wide, large-scale state-civil society partnership, this paper has argued that de-privatisation of social services from NGOs to the state should not simply be considered an embrace of a larger welfare state but may represent an example of a changing civic space in an autocratising state. When civil society organisations in general are restricted, they are also likely to lose their service provision mandate from the state. Although being a state-funded service provider leads to difficult tightrope-walking between advocacy and implementation, as CHILDLINE's former employees formulated it, it ultimately gives NGOs legitimacy and the ability to be part of a vigilant civil society – which now risks being *de facto* silenced. The article proposes the term 'selective privatisation' to capture the trend when neoliberal and autocratising states restrict the privatisation of social services to non-profit organisations while sustaining privatisation for for-profit companies – a trend which may also be evident in other 'hybrid' contexts.

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