Understanding Civil Society: Contributions & Challenges in Contemporary World

By Rajesh Tandon

Context

We are living in rapidly changing times. Rapid economic growth is spreading across much of Asia today. India is being proclaimed to be one of the future economic superpowers of the world. New patterns of production and consumption are sweeping across the country. The wave of liberalization and globalisation has created new industries and new opportunities. The service sector has begun to dominate Indian economy, leaving agriculture and manufacturing/ industrial sectors way behind. There is a new buzz of optimism and energy cutting across our society today.

In this progressive environment, there is also the stark reality of hunger, poverty and deprivation. Nearly a third of India's districts are facing growing violence feeding on such frustrations of the youth. Around the world, security concerns are dominating the policy makers. Terrorism in its myriad manifestations is spreading across the globe. Rapid economic growth is associated with growing inequalities of income & wealth, around regions, countries and communities. Environmental degradation and climate change are another consequence of this growth trajectory.

In this milieu, new societal challenges are emerging; and many of the old challenges have been persisting. Governments are attempting to balance policies for change with a measure of continuity. Unlike an earlier era where governments, specially democratic ones, were seen as agencies working to bring about improvements in the lives of its peoples, they are now becoming a part of the problem. Democratic accountability and efficient use of public resources are the twin challenges of modern states, including the Indian state.

In some respects, the new era has legitimized the roles of the for-profit private sector in contributing towards this rapid economic growth. The governments alone cannot do it, so private sector is seen as a partner. In a similar vein, the new era has begun to legitimize the role of civil society as a partner in the process of inclusive growth and democratic governance.

History

Many scholars tend to argue that civil society is a phenomenon of the modern capitalism and formal democracies. It is argued that civic associations are emerging as arenas for collective actions by people themselves. New forms of non-governmental and non-profit organizations are emerging in response to new challenges facing modern societies. While this is true to some extent, it would be incorrect to equate civic associations with modernity itself.

In many societies around the world, including Indian society, civic associations have played many important functions historically. In several regions of India, management of common resources---land, forest, water, etc-was carried out through well-structured civic associations which had evolved differently over time. Many such associations can still be found actively engaged in such pursuits in tribal areas of

In the Indian context, people's organizations and other NGOs have played these roles in respect of raising issues related to the marginalized groups in society---tribals, dalits, minorities, child labour, women, etc.

the country.

Historically, all religions which grew and spread in the Indian sub-continent, provided explicit support to acts of volunteerism. In such a religious sanction, volunteerism was seen as contribution to the well-being of others, to help the needy, assist in the welfare of society at large, etc. Private, selfish, narrow gain was seen as limited in its contribution to individual development and well-being. Unless people contributed to the well-being of others in society, they were not seen as reaching salvation.

In the 18th and 19th century, bulk of the social reform movement in different parts of the country was led by volunteers. Ideas of liberty, fraternity and freedom began to influence Indian scholars, thinkers and reformers. Raja Rammohan Roy in the early 19th century influenced voluntary work in Bengal and also other parts of the country. It inspired large numbers of educated and concerned Indians to work towards eradication of various social evils then prevalent in India, like child marriage and sati. This period also witnessed the rise of literary associations as well as indigenous newspapers and periodicals in various parts of the country, including Bengal like Samachar Darpan, Sambad Pravakar, Tattwabodhini Patrika. They served to bring together people with common objectives, ideas and pursuits, transcending physical and cultural distances during a period of limited communications in India. Voluntary samitis (associations) and organizations proliferated in Swadeshi Movement of Bengal in bewildering number and varieties. They organized efforts to promote self-help in economic and social life and the development of samitis with a wide range of activities. In 1905 the three leading organizations in the field were the British Indian Association, the Bengal Landholders' Association and the Indian Association. District Associations were set up in many districts of West Bengal which called for self-help and sustained social and political work through village associations. They promoted swadeshi industries and agriculture, national education, arbitration courts, cooperative banks, community grain stores and sanitation measures in the villages (Tandon, 2002).

Freedom movement, in particular under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, emphasized volunteering as a part of social struggle for improvement in society. Mahatma Gandhi called it 'constructive work' and encouraged all political activists to contribute to the well-being of others while maintaining their struggle against British colonial rule.

In other regions of the country too, several such voluntary civic initiatives were emerging during this period. Dayanand Anglo Vaidic Society began to set up primary and secondary schools under the aegis of DAV in the west. Social and literary associations sprung up in different regions to respond to differing traditions and concerns.

After Independence, the Indian constitution was adopted to give the Indian state the central and dominant role in addressing societal problems. The welfare state in India gradually took over the management of all aspects of human and communitarian life. This trend began to displace local civic efforts of the past, and replace them with governmental delivery machinery.

By the end of 1960s, the limitations of a state-led and state-controlled model of development and governance had begun to show cracks.

> **The second big challenge being faced by civil society, in India as elsewhere, is the diversity within its fold. Public goods are constantly changing and evolving; differing priorities are attached to various public goods by different stakeholders.**

Around the middle of this century, several voluntary organizations grew in response to the needs of relief and rehabilitation of large numbers of people affected by floods, drought and other calamities. This period also saw the rise of philanthrophic, charity oriented voluntary organizations. These NGOs developed and implemented programmes to help enhance short-term gains in education, income, health, nutrition of the poor and deprived. Since the middle sixties till the middle seventies of this century, several voluntary organizations began to emerge who experimented with different approaches to problems of development. Several innovations in developmental issues were a product of these organizations. From the middle seventies, there emerged a new type of voluntary agency more appropriately called Social Action Groups. These groups emerged in the context of rising frustration with existing approaches and models of development and demonstrated ineffectiveness of those in so living the pressing problems of poverty, deprivation, hunger, unemployment, etc. It became clear that conscientization and organisation-building of the poor and the oppressed and enhancing their collective empowerment to struggle to demand their just rights and to acquire resources for their own development is perhaps the only long-term strategy of sustaining people centered development process in the country.

Fractured through the Jai Prakash Narain's movement for 'total revolution' and the proclamation of emergency in the seventies, there began to emerge a realization among policy makers and development planners that people's participation in and ownership of development was essential for ensuring equitable and efficient use of public resources. Participatory development began to be introduced in several sectors---health, education, water & sanitation, forestry, etc. Such experiments with participation in forestry sector made promising impacts in many parts of the country, specially West Bengal.

In promoting such community-based and community-owned development programmes, the government agencies began to lean on the small pilot efforts made by many voluntary organizations in the country. It also began to become clear to policymakers and development planners that government's own machinery was designed to deliver a pre-packaged scheme, but not equipped to nurture local participation. By mid 1980s, therefore, many government programmes and agencies began to include a complementary role for voluntary agencies in promoting participation of local communities.

By early nineties, several dramatic changes had begun to occur nationally and internationally. The fall of Berlin wall had triggered independence movements in many former Soviet Union states in Eastern Europe & central Asia. Pro-democracy tidal wave had begun to sweep away authoritarian regimes in Latin America; apartheid in South Africa was abolished. Indian government began a process of liberalization of Indian economy. Local governance institutions-panchayats and municipalities-had been given statutory mandates in India. The new Information Technology had begun to take hold of global economic and communication activities.

It is in this milieu that the phenomenon of 'civil society' and 'social capital' were rediscovered in development discourse. In the now common trinity model of sectoral perspectives of development, the civil society had acquired an independent status along with the market/private sector and the state/government sector. It then began to

be argued that balanced and sustainable development required a healthy and inter-dependent contributions of the three sectors-the state, the market & the civil society (Tandon, 1991).

Civil Society

In contemporary Indian context, civil society is interpreted to mean different 'things' by different commentators. The most common interpretation refers to organizations of civil society. These are formally organized entities pursuing a wide variety of public purposes; some such organizations are legally incorporated, and some are not. A nationwide pioneering study of the scale and size of the 'non-profit sector' showed that nearly half of the 1.2 million such organizations in the country were not legally incorporated (Srivastava and Tandon, 2005).

The data from this study for West Bengal showed that the state had nearly ninety thousand such organisation in 2001, more than half unregistered. The most common activity pursued by such organisation was recreation, sports and culture (34%), followed by religion (27%) and education (23%).

The second interpretation of civil society is a public sphere. This is the 'civic' space where deliberations, ideas and contestations about relevant public goods are held (Edwards, 2004). It is in this public sphere that problematiques of societal dynamics, nature and impacts of government policies and consequences of market economies are debated. This is the space between formal politics (political parties and their front organizations) and government's proclamations (including the use of state-controlled media---radio & TV in particular).

A third interpretation of civil society is the active citizenship. In formal democratic systems, it is assumed that elected representatives act to voice the interests and priorities of their constituencies. So, citizens really do not have much active roles in governance after they have elected their representatives. However, this is now being questioned, since citizens want to engage with processes and structures of public decision-making on a regular basis. Citizen leaders and civic initiatives are increasing in scope and scale at an unprecedented level (Knight, et. al. 2002).

In these differing interpretations of civil society, the current realities in the country vary significantly. Some regions have a higher density of civil society organizations (like Andhra Pradesh & Orissa); some others have a more active citizenship (like many urban centers). Some regions have many active traditional associations (like north-eastern states); some others have a more actively utilized public sphere (like Maharashtra). Whatever be the variations across regions and expressions, it is important to redefine civil society in a simpler and direct manner. The most inclusive formulation seems "to view civil society as individual and collective initiatives towards common public good" (Tandon and Mohanty, 2002). This definition includes both individual efforts at promoting common public goods, as well as more collective ones. It does not imply that collective ones are only those which are legally incorporated. It also clarifies the reference of initiatives as public goods; thus these initiatives, to be classified as civil society initiatives, must have public good as their purpose. Thus, it attempts to focus attention on certain public goods---health, education, sanitation, poverty, etc.

Contributions

The discourse on civil society has begun to highlight several important contributions. As can be noticed from the brief historical enumeration of the evolution of this concept, civil society organizations are primarily associations; they represent the associational life of people and communities Tandon and Mohanty (2002) argue:

"In applying this framework of association as the basis for classifying civil society, both the nature of associational process as well the purposes of association need to be kept in view. In reality, individual choice to associate is also exercised within a given cultural-social context. In contemporary Indian society, individual choice is not exercised in absolute freedom; family community and society have moderating and restricting influences on the exercise of such choices. Hence, the classification of civil society as an association included many 'hybird' types as well."

As can be seen from the above, the most significant contribution of civic associations is to channel and aggregate collective energy of ordinary people towards pursuing some common public purposes, in the domains of sports, culture, community action, national development, etc. These associations thus make enormous contributions towards enriching the life of citizens by creating such opportunities for mutual engagements (Salmon and Anheier, 1996).

In addition, many of these associations act as a buffer between the powerful state institutions at the macro level and the households at the micro level. Thus they act as a bridge and a channel and at times as a shield between the aspirations and needs of the citizens and the actions, programmes and authorities of governments.

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roles in respect of raising issues related to the marginalized groups in society---tribals, dalits, minorities, child labour, women, etc. They have also supported the empowerment of such exploited groups and households who are deprived of their basic rights---minimum wages, food rations, mid day meals, immunization, etc. These associations can thus be of several different types, based on purposes and structures.

Several types of 'association' are thus active in India today. Traditional and religious associations represent a long historical trend; social movements are issues focused and transient associations; formal membership association include representational, professional, cultural and self-help categories; intermediary association comprise of mobilisational, service delivery, research, advocacy and philanthropic kinds.

It is indeed heartening to note that the recent National Policy on Voluntary Sector in India (July 2007) actually supports several such meanings and contributions of civil society.

"In the policy, Voluntary Organizations (VOs) mean to include organisations engaged n public services, based on ethical, cultural, social economic, political, religious, spiritual, philanthropic or scientific and technological considerations. VOs include formal as well as informal groups, such as: Community-Based Organisations (CBOs); Non-Governmental Development Organization (NGDOs); Charitable organisations; support organizations; networks of federations of such organisations; as well as professional memberships associations."...

"The policy recognizes three instruments of partnership, viz-(i) Consultation, through a formal process of interaction at the Centre, State and District; (ii) Strategic collaboration to tackle complex interventions where sustained social mobilization over the long-term; and (iii) project funding through standard schemes. The government will ensure that these three instruments of partnership are given due attention in Annual Plans prepared by Ministers and States."

The 11th Five Year Plan by the current government at the Centre further invites active contributions from civil society in various different ways, particularly in strengthening civic participation in local governments.

In recent years, the social and political discourse has moved away from the centrality of governments to the desirability of governance. Various prescriptions and interpretations of 'good governance' are now being offered. However, at the heart of good dem-

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ocratic governance is the role of citizens and civil society. The most direct reference to this approach can be seen in the recent Commonwealth document on democracy and development (2003); headed by Hon'ble Dr. Man Mohan Singh , the Task Force Report says: "Civil society is the third pillar of pro-poor development and democratisa-
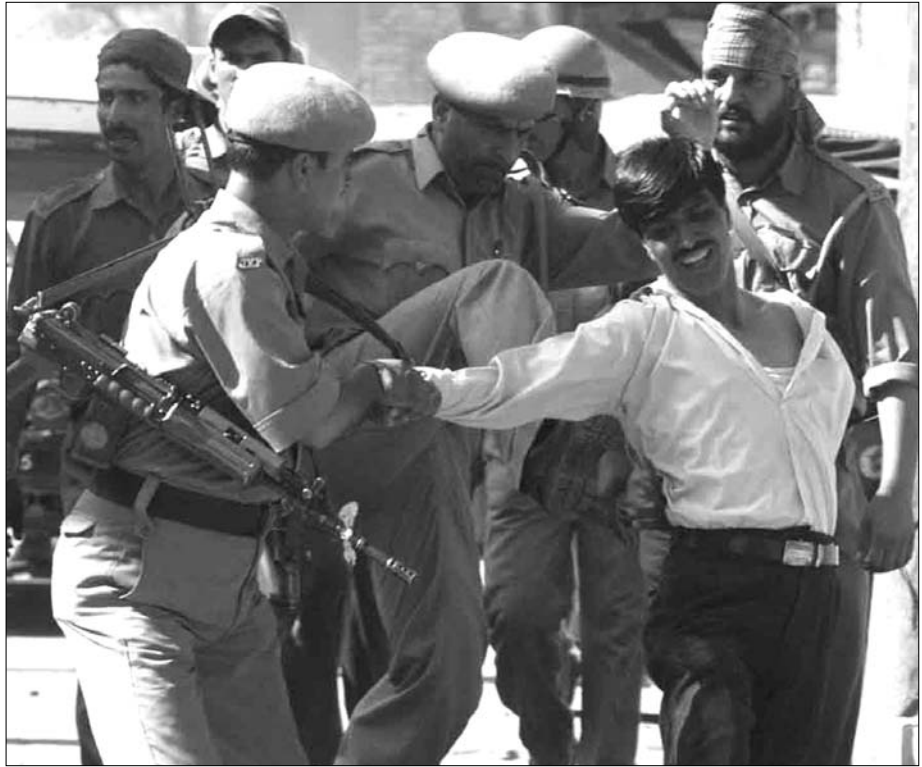
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tion. Building the capacity of citizen's organisations and a free and well-informed media are critical for prompting citizen participation, holding government to account and empowering poor communities. Poor people and poor communities, for example, are in the best position to understand and articulate their own needs, and their voices should be heard directly within government. Often they are not, however, and here political rights and opportunities can be bolstered through community

action."

As in the above, it is now being universally acknowledged that strengthening democratic roots, deepening democratic institutions and universalizing democratic culture in all institutions of society, in the society itself, requires widespread and inclusive citizen participation in the various processes and structures of decision-making related to the advancement of public goods. This is as true at the local level, as it is true at the national and global levels.

Challenges

The above mentioned contributions of civil society in the contemporary world, in India and elsewhere, may appear to be so positive that one may loose sight of the serious challenges being faced. The most visible and pressing challenge is the response civil society receives from the state agencies, and the political leadership of the regime in power. Those in formal positions of state authority do not generally like being 'questioned' about their decisions and actions on public matters by ordinary citizens. This is specially resisted by those who have been democratically elected by the people, as they seem to proclaim 'unquestioned' authority to act on public affairs for the duration of their elected position. This view of democracy is not only out-dated, but also the very reason that government institutions, political leaders/parties and public officials are the least trusted segments of any society today. Such an attitude is also the reason for significant anger

and frustration that hitherto excluded citizens are expressing through various means-abstaining from formal institutions, engaging in informal associations, resistance to official policies and authority, and even acts of violence against such authority. The right to question, to disagree, to articulate an independent position on public issues is the essence of democracy; yet, most formally elected representatives attempt to silence such voices, by means fair and foul.

The second big challenge being faced by civil society, in India as elsewhere, is the diversity within its fold. Public goods are constantly changing and evolving; differing priorities are attached to various public goods by different stakeholders. While girls' education is important to some, human rights are 'far more' important to some others. Within the field of human rights, civic and political rights are important to some; and social, cultural and developmental rights (like right to land, forest, water, etc) to some others. Even within a specific domain of public good (for example pollution), differing perspectives and strategies are not uncommon (some would like reduction in emission through new technologies while others would propogate simpler, less consumptive life-styles). In some respects, such a plurality of agendas and positions within civil society is very natural, though it creates confusions and tensions within the civic actors themselves. It further confuses those in government, since there is no single 'chain of command' in the civil society.

The third challenge facing civil society is the internal tensions and contradictions within. There are some associations which may be advancing certain parochial (or population specific) public goods. These may reinforce narrow sectarian identities at the cost of respect for diversity and inclusion. In addition, many associations are based on a specific religious or spiritual inspiration and tradition, and they may be perceived as outside the space of civil society. Likewise, certain movements and

associations actively pursue a 'political' agenda for advancement of their constituency (like the recent movement for advancement of land rights among tribals and dalits), and use 'political' mobilization strategies to pursue the same (like rallies, demonstrations, strikes, etc with strong media coverage). Such associations and movements become 'suspects' in the eyes of formal political organizations, parties and leaders as competitors in electoral politics.

Finally, the public sphere of civil society is not static; it continually shrinks, expands and moves in the face of changing contours of political economy at the local, national and global levels. As a consequence, those within such public spheres have to navigate their efforts in an informed manner; and those outside such spheres, specially in the government institutions, have to learn to respond to such efforts in more nuanced and complex manner. This is becoming a huge challenge, as the complexity of human societies increases. The civil society in tribal regions of Jharkhand is likely to look, speak and act in a very different manner than the civil society of urban neighbourhoods in Bangalore. It is not two different civil societies; it is two different manifestations of the nature of civil society as it emerges from, and responds to, two very different societal realities in 2007.

The important thing to remember is that both such civil society actions are legitimate, useful to their constituents, and important for democratizing governance and society in the country today!

– Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Chairperson, VANI

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