



INFOCHANGE

Agenda

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We, the people

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT, both central concerns of the Indian polity and society, depend on a proactive citizenry, and in order to act effectively, citizens had best act in groups rather than singly. The 'NGO' has become an important fixture in most post-colonial settings, speaking for alternative views of a better life, articulating concerns about policy choices and global issues and/or serving as a lightning rod in debates about what is appropriate, what is indigenous, and what is politically acceptable.

But what exactly is civil society and what is the range of organisations and activities that people include under this rubric? What should civil society do, and what does it do? What is its role in society? What is the nature of its interface with other actors? These questions confront you squarely as you step beyond the platitudes in the first paragraph.

We invited activists, media persons and scholars to reflect on these questions in their contributions to this issue of *Infochange Agenda*. There are common reference points here, theoretical and empirical, but there is a great plurality of perspective and politics, which reflects the very nature of civil society. Indeed, more than arriving at a consensus definition, the articles in this issue define civil society and its work simply by presenting such a broad range of sometimes mutually incompatible views.

This issue is organised into six sections, five of which cluster articles around particular questions and the last a compilation of introspective essays about changes and trends in civil society. What follows is merely an indication of the richness that has resulted from this symposium of views, and far from a good summary of the contents.

Nuanced reflections that draw on histories of events and ideas answer the definitional question, "What is civil society?" that was posed to the writers in the first section. Civil society, T K Oommen points out, exists in a relationship of reciprocity with the state and the market. In India, civil society organisations have worked in a cooperative relationship with the state on development issues, and in confrontational mode on issues relating to democracy and civil rights. Samir Kumar Das argues that the moral uncertainty involved in compromising some part of our principles or customs in order to work with others is an essential predicate for a good civil society. When this ambivalence is crowded out by certainty and absolute views, there is no space for civil society. That civil society cannot replace the state is reinforced by Neera Chandhoke, who also assigns to civil society the task of providing "but the political and the politicised context for the state". Amitabh Behar points out that civil society goes beyond working with and against the state to also working on its own to transform society. His contribution includes an overview of the main relationships and issues with which civil society might engage.

The three articles that follow reflect on the ways in which civil society has been able to address social issues. Kamla Bhasin tells her interviewer that the issues raised by the women's movement 20 years ago have finally made it into the statute books, even as she rues the nexus between patriarchy and corporate interests. Jyoti Punwani writes about initiatives that have worked to build bridges between communities in a climate of increasing communalism, but she also argues that in addition to sustained effort, a broader and grassroots-driven approach, it is important to tap into the "solid foundation of Hindu-Muslim ties among ordinary people". She asks: "Is there such a total disconnect between what is called 'civil society' and the people it seeks to represent?" Suma Varughese asks the same question in another context. She writes about how she has seen spiritual organisations organise and carry out their *seva* (service) projects. The spirit of *seva* inspires generosity and hard work, she finds, asking why this is not better harnessed towards developmental goals.

Dunu Roy sees that while civil society is acquiring prominence from the point of view of certain sections of society, the space for its activity is physically shrinking. Citizenship is acquiring a technocratic dimension. Aseem

Sudharak Olive



Shrivastava wonders if civil society is no longer able to play the liberal role that it has been assigned by theorists and is now fated to play a supporting part to present-day power structures. Nityanand Jayaraman and Yashashree Gurjar present opposite perspectives on corporate social responsibility, which is the most common mode now whereby the market sector engages with the social sector. For Jayaraman, CSR is window-dressing as long as companies are not publicly accountable for their actions. For Gurjar, CSR allows companies to give back to the communities in which they are located, and, candidly, is a channel through which they can build trust and credibility. The section concludes with Sunita Narain challenging the private-public partnership idea altogether, suggesting that in India, those who most need services are not in a position to pay for them.

How to make civil society work for democracy is the concern of the next two sections. Rudi Heredia states: "Civil society is the social infrastructure on which the political edifice must be built." His concern is that democracy will be limited to its procedural aspects without a strong civil society that is able to set the political agenda. Yamini Aiyar describes several tools that civil society organisations use to promote accountability — budget analysis, social audits and policy evaluations. Through a symposium of five interviews, Pamela Philipose explores the relationship between civil society and the media, both of which are ostensibly interested in accountability and democracy.

Aruna Roy says that rising public awareness is what has brought about a climate in which accountability is important, and differentiates between campaigns and movements, saying that the latter create democratic space. The next two articles by Rajesh Tandon and by C V Madhukar and Tonusree Basu argue that civil society must actively engage with the political process in order to further democratise it. Capacity-building through training and providing information are the means their organisations adopt at different levels of the political system.

Pradip Phanjoubam reflects on the nature of civil society in a conflict setting, drawing on Manipur and northeast India's experience to argue that the media, professionals and youth organisations should be included in the rubric of civil society which tends to become polarised to reflect the lines of conflict. Swarna Rajagopalan argues that civil society's engagement with security should not be sporadic but sustained, because security issues impinge on the community in multiple, profound ways.

In the final section of this issue, we invited senior practitioners and scholars to reflect on changes in civil society. John Samuel considers that civil society has gone from being an analytical construct in critiques against authoritarianism to being an instrument and space for socio-political transformation, locally and globally. Ingrid Srinath enumerates opportunities (political, technological) in a world that is opening up and shrinking at the same time, and

wonders whether civil society organisations are up to seizing the day. Vijay Nadkarni recounts a growing willingness among Indian civil society organisations to adopt transparency and accountability practices. These are standards they would like to impose on states and corporations, and with which they are now choosing to comply. Pratap Bhanu Mehta thinks it's time that professional associations acted beyond their narrow interests and became part of 'civil society'. And Anmol Vellani closes the issue by cautioning civil society against developing a vested interest in the very miseries it seeks to abolish. In his words: "Working for the interests of the disadvantaged, committed to a certain understanding of development and democracy, civil society actors must believe that they could find nothing more fulfilling than to become inconsequential!"

What is civil society? The essays in this issue unpack the term and draw our attention to actors and initiatives it might not bring right away to mind: umbrella descriptions like 'women's movement' which subsume a plurality of initiatives and groups; citizen and neighbourhood initiatives; spiritual organisations; organisations set up through corporate initiatives; the media; professional organisations; family roles extended to the public sphere. It could be argued that arriving at a comprehensive final definition is actually not important at all. Perhaps, those who value inclusion should work with a definition that is open and inclusive!

Other issues are flagged as arguably more important to those concerned every day with civil society and democracy, their work and their survival. It is important to understand the circumstances in which civil society is able to play a positive role. It is equally important to recognise that not all civil society actors have values conducive to democracy, sustainable development or even co-existence without violence. The middle class, often seen as the heart of civil society, also has its vested interests which in India might be opposed to those who most need state and social assistance. Civil society does not exist or work in isolation; how to facilitate the most socially beneficial relationships between civil society organisations and other actors is a question that needs further exploration.

This issue is only the point of departure to a broader and longer-term conversation about not just civil society but citizenship, democracy and the institutions and structures of convenience and control that we put together around us. Civil society, whatever it includes, is a handle to describe our various collective attempts to navigate this maze of choices that we have created. — **Swarna Rajagopalan**

Swarna Rajagopalan is a Chennai-based political scientist. She is the founder of Prajnya Initiatives for Peace, Justice and Security, a Chennai-based non-profit

A fine balance

Only an equipoise between state, market and civil society can produce a 'good society'. The state and civil society may be compelled to become allies to protect the consumer in a rapacious market. The market and civil society may have to jointly confront the state to get citizens' entitlements implemented. And, the state and market may have to cooperate to moderate violent tendencies erupting in civil society

T K OOMMEN

CIVIL SOCIETY IS A TERM in wide currency not only in the social sciences but also in everyday conversations in contemporary societies. Yet it cannot be asserted that the term has acquired the required level of clarity. Why is it so?

For one thing, the notion of civil society is of recent origin; it originated only in the 18th century. For another, it developed in association with a particular class — the bourgeoisie, and its characteristic activity. For example, for Marx and Engels, civil society "...embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals...", it is "...the social organisation evolving directly out of production and commerce and it... is the true source and theatre of all history". The fundamental flaw in Marx's conception of civil society however is its reduction to the capitalist mode of production.

Tocqueville too conceptualised civil society as the theatre of private interest and economic activity, but he distinguished it from 'political society' in which he included activities undertaken by political parties, local self-government, religious groups, moral crusades, literary and scientific societies, the press, professional and commercial organisations, clubs and associations for recreation, etc. But taking into account contemporary developments, it is more appropriate to designate Tocqueville's political society as civil society. Why?

Contemporary societies stand on three relatively autonomous but necessarily interdependent pillars — state, market and civil society. Therefore, instead of encapsulating the market, that is, the economy, into civil society, it is more relevant to consider it as falling "...between the economic structure and the state" as proposed by Gramsci. But the precision that Gramsci obtained by bifurcating the economic structure and civil society is lost through his conceptualisation of state, which incorporates both political society and civil society. In Gramsci's rendition, political society is the arena of coercion and domination, and civil society is that of consent and direction. But the incorporation of civil society into the state robs the latter of its legal autonomy and the former of its real purpose, namely functioning as a countervailing power to the state as and when required.

John Keane's perspective accords well with this: "Without a

secure and independent civil society of autonomous public spheres, goals such as freedom and equality, participatory planning and community decision-making will be nothing but empty slogans. But without the protective, redistributive and conflict-mediating functions of the state, struggles to transform civil society will become ghettoised, divided and stagnant, or will spawn their own new forms of inequality and unfreedom." But it is necessary to bring in the third dimension — namely economy/market — to inform contemporary societies with the required completion.

What I am suggesting is that for an adequate understanding of civil society the discussion on the conceptual trilogy of state, market and civil society is an imperative because of their intricate interrelations. Limitations of space prevent me from undertaking this task, but it is absolutely necessary to characterise the three entities in terms of their contents. The state encapsulates parliamentary institutions, courts, government bureaucracies and defence forces. The market refers to the arena of production, exchange and consumption of goods and services. Civil society consists of political parties, voluntary associations, the media and the wide variety of non-government organisations. Each of these entities — state, market and civil society — operates in reciprocity while retaining its autonomy.

It is necessary to dispel a widely held naïve notion about civil society at this juncture — namely that it is always and necessarily positive in its orientation. This is a simplistic view. Just as a state may be democratic or authoritarian, and the market could be competitive or monopolistic, civil society will invariably consist of 'negative' and 'positive' or 'democratic' and 'authoritarian' elements. The position that negative and authoritarian elements should be exorcised from society is a laudable one, but freedom of expression and association cannot be denied to any collectivity in a democratic society. What is available to men, secularists, brahmins, bourgeoisie or nationalists cannot be denied to women, believers, dalits, the proletariat, religious fundamentalists or homosexuals. However, one can insist that all social groups should pursue their goals through legitimate and peaceful means. This is the fundamental requirement of civil society in an open democratic society.

Another crucial clarification needs to be made about civil

society. In conventional understanding, the acknowledged hero of civil society was the individual. However, all individuals were not entitled to the freedoms of civil society, be it ownership of property or exercise of franchise. In fact, only property-owning males were given these entitlements in the beginning although these privileges are extended to all, irrespective of gender, class, religion, caste, race, language, tribe and other identities. But if individuals are denied equality precisely because they belong to particular groups, these groups, as groups, should be recognised as inhabitants of civil society. To ameliorate group-based deprivations we need to consider them as units of policy formulation and implementation.

Such steps may not be required in all societies. For example, if a society is only stratified along gender, age, class, rural-urban differences and the like, by extending individual-based equality to all, a firm foundation for the crystallisation of civil society can be laid. But if a society is heterogeneous, consisting of race, religion, caste, language, tribe and the like, the principle of equality of opportunity in itself will not lead to the formation of a robust civil society. For this to happen, the identity of the traditionally disadvantaged

groups should be taken into account. That is to say, the idea of groups surrendering their identity in order that they be treated as equal individual citizens is no more an acceptable one. Citizens insist that they be allowed to retain their group identity but at the same time be entitled to all the privileges of citizens. This is the conundrum between equality and identity which renders civil society an intricate and complex entity.

With this general understanding of civil society as a space between the state and market as well as the recognition of the need to maintain reciprocity and autonomy between the three entities, let us look at the situation in independent India.

Broadly speaking, there were two competing models of society when India achieved political freedom. One model was that of the capitalist democracies of the West. These polities had evolved gradually on the principle of separation between state, market, and civil society. The underlying assumptions of this separation were the following. First, the state is a coercive agent and is motivated by power. Therefore, the process of acquiring and exercising power should be well-defined and checked through legal

Sudharak Ohwe



mechanisms. Second, economic activity is motivated by material incentives and is to be regulated by market mechanisms in terms of free exchange of goods and services. Third, civil society is the space for free voluntary activity for citizens, between the state and market, the zone in which a variety of political actions could be initiated to moderate the potential authoritarianism of the state and the likely rapacity of the market. In the West, state, market and civil society emerged successively and each of these spheres acquired a certain level of autonomy.

In contrast to the separation principle of capitalist democracies, socialist states functioned on the institutional principle of fusion of the state, market and civil society. The party-state monopolised all powers and regulated the market and civil society. From the command economy of the socialist state, the market disappeared and civil society was absorbed by the state. The conjoint activities of the one-party system and its numerous front organisations came to be christened 'people's democracy'.

In the beginning, capitalist democracies were mainly concerned with creating congenial conditions for their citizens to pursue their preferred pattern of life, protecting them from external aggression and providing them with internal security. But the emergence of socialist states, which put the economic welfare of citizens on the state agenda, posed major challenges to capitalist democracies. Understandably, 20th-century capitalist societies reinvented themselves as welfare states wherein civil society assumed an important role. What were considered to be the private worries of individual citizens became public issues to be handled by the state. Most of the colonial states became politically independent by the mid-20th century and took over the agendas of socialist and welfare states in different combinations. And India was no exception.

Independent India opted for what came to be characterised as the 'third way', that is, combining multiparty democracy, one of the distinctive features of capitalist states, with a planned economy, the hallmark of socialist states. This was indeed a challenging experiment in that the best of both models were attempted to be incorporated into one model. However, it was planned economy and state-centrism that assumed salience in the first three decades of independent India. The state promoted economic development and initiated a series of measures to introduce and institutionalise people's participation. The state thus partly took over the functions of the market and the role of civil society, and occupied the commanding position.

However, by the 1970s a large number of protest movements and civil society organisations started interrogating the development goals as they diluted, if not abandoned, the thrust of distributive justice. Some of them criticised the state-initiated 'destructive development' leading to a ravaging of the ecology and argued for sustainable

development. Prominent among civil society actors were women, students, dalits, adivasis, religious minorities, rural poor, urban slum-dwellers, and ecologists. They heralded a new beginning and manifested a new stirring — the emerging vibrant civil society. However, only a few were explicitly anti-state; quite a number only wanted the state to adhere to the constitutional vision. For its part, the state responded by declaring a larger role for civil society.

For example, the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1980-85) document recognised that the Plan "...can be implemented successfully only with the involvement of the people. The Plan proposes to do this through effective steps for the decentralisation of planning and development administration as well as by increasing the involvement of voluntary agencies on the implementation of Plan programmes, particularly in the rural areas".

While those civil society organisations involved in development activities invariably worked in close collaboration with the state, those that interrogated the state were mainly opposed to its predatory tendencies. The declaration of internal Emergency during 1975-76, the manner in which Operation Blue Star was conducted in 1984 in the Golden Temple and the failure to punish those who whipped up anti-Sikh sentiments resulting in large-scale violence, the failure to prevent the dismantling of the Babri Mosque in 1990, the Gujarat carnage of 2002, and the recent (2008) anti-Christian violence in Orissa are some glaring examples of the failure of the state and civil society, not to mention preventing recurring religious, linguistic and caste violence.

The point I want to make is that state authoritarianism and violence occurring in civil society are two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, a non-violent civil society and a democratic state reciprocally reinforce each other.

It is far from my intention to suggest that civil society emerged in India only three decades after India became independent. Indeed, civil society in India has a long tradition of anti-establishment mobilisation. However, two points are to be noted: one, the state and civil society reinforced each other in many contexts in independent India, and, two, the two entities also became estranged and functioned as enemies in several contexts. There are several implications of this, some of which are noted here.

First, collective mobilisation, an important dimension of civil society, can be anti-state or pro-state. Which of the orientations particular collective actors partake in depends on the actions of the state and their impact on specific groups and communities.

Second, the agenda of civil society may undergo substantial changes over a period of time depending on the demands people make, which are anchored to the nature of their deprivations. This may lead to the emergence of different

political parties and civil society organisations with differing, even contradictory, orientations, rendering the relationship between the state and civil society complex and complicated.

Third, if some of the elements in civil society become explicitly pro-state they may lose their legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public. Conversely, those elements of civil society that oppose the state without rhyme or reason are likely to experience an erosion in their credibility. That is, an equipoise in the relationship between a democratic state and civil society is a prerequisite for maintaining the authenticity of both.

Fourth, the liberal understanding that civil society occupies the space between the state and the family is not necessarily correct; family may also become part of civil society depending on what transpires within it, ranging from incest taboo to dowry deaths. This in turn obliterates the distinction between the private and the public. The private space can remain so only if its inhabitants perceive that the institutions concerned are just and fair to all of them.

Fifth, it is wrong to characterise the state and civil society as monoliths. If they are internally differentiated it is quite possible that the nature of relationship between the different elements within them also vary. For example, if the Indian state is conceived as a multi-layered system — federal/union, state/provincial, district and panchayat — it is likely that civil society's relationships with different levels of the state are different.

Sixth, the enemies of civil society are not always external to it; some of them could be internal as well. Internal rivalries between the different elements that come to constitute civil society may adversely impact on its capacity to challenge the state.

Having noted the complexity of the state-civil society relationship in independent India, it is necessary to recognise the fact that these two entities gradually and progressively insisted on their respective spheres of autonomy. But the story of the market is almost the reverse. The Bombay plan of 1944, conceived by a few captains of Indian industry, wanted state intervention in planning, financing and managing industrial development. But it may be noted here that the 'economic nationalism' articulated in India had two slants. While the big bourgeoisie wanted protection from the state vis-à-vis their foreign counterparts, the small bourgeoisie from different linguistic regions wanted state protection from the big Indian bourgeoisie. This internal tension within the Indian bourgeoisie impacted on the functioning of civil society.

The dilemma civil society faced was to choose between big (all-India) and small (regional-linguistic) bourgeois camps. Generally speaking, civil society organisations mobilised in favour of regional-linguistic elements, that is, the 'sons of

the soil', manifesting in regional, linguistic, tribal and/or caste groups. In contrast, the state in India favoured the big bourgeoisie, although the rhetoric of curbing monopolistic tendencies was loud. The restrictions imposed on private companies did not produce the intended results as licensing favoured big business. Not only that, the disparity between rich and poor in the population widened; even the absolute proportion of the population below the poverty line increased. These developments prompted the liberalisation of the economy, conceding considerable autonomy to the market. Thus, while civil society struggled to wrest autonomy from the state, autonomy was bestowed on the market by the state.

The implications of the progressive reduction in state-centrism and autonomisation of civil society and market may be noted here. First, the state is increasingly compelled to share its sovereignty not only with the national market and civil society but also with other powerful sovereign states and global institutions. Second, while the market in India has achieved a certain degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the state, the Indian market's autonomy is substantially eroded at the instance of the global market. Third, civil society has to fight its battle on two fronts, the state and the market.

The process of autonomisation is likely to produce new alliances between the different spheres. The state and civil society may be compelled to become allies to protect the interests of the consumer vis-à-vis the rapacious market. Similarly, the market and civil society may have to conjointly confront the state so as to get citizens' entitlements implemented by the state. Finally, the state and market may have to cooperate to moderate the violent tendencies erupting in civil society. The point to note is that none of them — state, market and civil society — is likely to remain without blemish and, therefore, privileging any one of them irrespective of the contexts and contents of their actions would be a rash and unsustainable pre-judgement. Indeed, only an equipoise between them can produce a 'good society'.

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Putting civil society in its place

Over the last 25 years, civil society has come to be seen as the counterpoint to non-performing governments, indifferent political parties, and hierarchical bureaucracies. This burden on civil society is out of proportion with its capacities. Crucial issues related to democracy and livelihoods are the responsibility of the state, not civil society. Is it time to put civil society in its place, and reinstate the state to its rightful position?

NEERA
CHANDHOKE

THE PACE AT WHICH THE CONCEPT of 'civil society', which was rediscovered and reinvented in the 1980s, came to take over political imaginations is indeed astonishing. The reasons for this development are fairly clear, in retrospect: tremendous disenchantment with the 'overreach' of the state in the advanced capitalist, the erstwhile socialist, and the developing world. The revolution 'from above' in the shape of the interventionist state — whether Keynesian, welfare, developmental or socialist — had lapsed into status-quoism and the unabashed pursuit of power, at the expense of the interests of citizens. The revolution 'from below', or the freedom struggle in the colonised world, had trailed off and come to rest in a state of profound inertia.

It was around this moment that the civil society argument was propelled to the centre of political imaginations, strategies, and energies. Forged initially in the context of Stalinist states in Eastern Europe, the argument promised no great ruptural breaks in the lives of people. What it did suggest was that a limited and accountable state, rule of law, constitutionalism, political and civil liberties, a free media, un-coerced associational life, and a vigilant civil society formed essential prerequisites of democracy and citizenship rights. Given the success of the 'Velvet Revolutions' against authoritarian state power in erstwhile socialist societies, the concept of civil society attracted considerable attention, as well as a fair amount of enthusiasm, among democratic theorists and activists. In policy circles it came to be widely felt that civil society agents, particularly the non-governmental sector, could deliver social goods, empower citizens, safeguard human rights, and raise issues of public concern better than traditional agents of political society such as the political party, and the state. Consequently, the non-governmental sector was encouraged by multilateral agencies, governments, and donor organisations to play a large role in collective life. The state, in the process, was pluralised, sharing functions that had traditionally fallen within its jurisdiction with a host of agents.

In India, the turn away from the state and to civil society could perhaps be foretold as early as the late-1960s, when political institutions began to decline rapidly. In particular,

citizens began to lose confidence in the Congress party, which, in its earlier avatar, had mobilised millions of people in and through the freedom struggle, and which in the post-Independence period dominated Indian politics. By the late-1970s, however, the party came to be characterised by atrophy and lost touch with its constituency. Members of the party were preoccupied more with accessing the supreme leader, and less with representing their constituents. Notably, the decline of the Congress took place at precisely the time when popular expectations had risen dramatically. In the two decades following Independence, the Congress was considered legitimate by a majority of the people because it had led the freedom struggle against British colonialism. By the late-1960s, an entirely new generation had grown to maturity in post-Independence India, a generation that had no memory of the freedom struggle, a generation that measured the legitimacy of a party according to its skills in meeting popular aspirations. Moreover, the rhetoric of Nehruvian socialism and the idea of planning for development had generated a sense of entitlement. Driven by populist imagery and radical demagoguery, the people had come to expect that the state would deliver primary education and subsidise higher education, guarantee health, remove poverty, generate jobs and incomes, institutionalise inter-group equalities, remove inequalities within the group, and protect the needy, the vulnerable, and the poor. But the Congress, which at that time controlled both power and resources, had not only failed to emancipate the country from poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment, it had, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, become authoritarian. And this led to restlessness in major parts of the country.

Simmering discontent came to pervade large parts of the country as groups mobilised to target an unresponsive state and an equally unresponsive party system. Expectedly, the politics of protest spilled over fragile and shaky political channels, and took to violence. Theorists attributed this phenomenon to the disintegration of major political institutions. The Congress could no longer contain the explosion of political discontent through democratic means. By the early-1970s, political discontent had escaped all bounds and students in Gujarat and Bihar took to the

streets. Even as disgruntlement coalesced rapidly under the leadership of J P Narayan to mount a challenge to the political system, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed an internal Emergency from 1975 to 1977. The Emergency not only suspended representative democracy, it pulverised civil liberties and froze political activism.

The paradox however is that though the Emergency suspended constitutional democracy, an entire range of social struggles outside the political sphere of party politics erupted to raise questions about the state of democracy in the country. This development further reinforced the belief that the party system was neither here nor there when it came to representing political demands. On the other hand, a number of social movements such as the anti-caste movement, the struggle for gender justice, for civil liberties, for the environment, for food security, for the right to work, for the right to education, for the right to information, and

movements against huge development projects that displace thousands of poor tribals and hill-dwellers, and against child labour, have mobilised in civil society.

India is not alone in this. Analysts of western societies were to make roughly the same complaint: unresponsiveness of the state, indifference of the bureaucracy, and pulverisation of the party system. In the US, theorists had complained for long that elections and political parties seemed to have become pawns of the political elite. In the 1960s, the 'new left', the 'sit-ins', the 'direct action' movements had already brought into question the efficacy of representative democracy. In Eastern and Central Europe, from the 1970s onwards, citizens who had turned their face away from the state, parties, and trade unions, came to reinvent civil society as the locus of sociability, civility, and trust. In countries ruled by military regimes such as Brazil, by the mid-1980s citizens' groups had come together in a space they called



The rhetoric of Nehruvian socialism had raised the expectation that the state would rid the country of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment

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Independence Day celebrations in Bombay on August 15, 1947

'civil society', to demand democracy. Civil society accordingly came to be seen as the counterpoint to non-performing governments, indifferent political parties, and hierarchical bureaucracies. The burden placed on civil society was indeed immense. Moreover, expectations were completely out of proportion to the capacities of the sphere.

The civil society argument has now been around for more than 25 years. But the problems of the world remain as intractable as ever, even as the numbers of agents who seek to negotiate the ills of the human condition have expanded exponentially. Moreover, there seems to be no reason why crucial issues relating to democracy and livelihoods should not be resolved by the state. These are simply its responsibility.

Is it time that we begin to reconsider the role of civil society? Is it time to once again put civil society in its place, and reinstate the state to its rightful position?

Perhaps, because the one question that confronts us at this juncture is: How much can the non-governmental sector

achieve? What are the limits of civil society interventions?

Among other limits to civil society activism, in particular the social sector, the following appear most significant. Firstly, civil society agents are just not in a position to summon up the kind of resources that are required to emancipate Indian citizens from poverty and deprivation. It is only the state that can do so through widening the tax net, and through monitoring the collection of revenues to fund social sector programmes. Secondly, civil society agents can hardly implement schemes of redistributive justice that involve transferring resources from better to worse off sections of society. This particular job, which arguably is the essence of social equity, falls within the provenance of the state. Thirdly, the non-governmental sector cannot establish and strengthen institutions that will implement social policy. These tasks simply lie outside the pale of civil society activism. Civil society organisations can lobby for and mobilise people to demand the realisation of fundamental rights from the government. But, ultimately, the realisation of these rights depends largely on structures of governance,

which seem to escape the control of civil society agents.

What exactly then is the mandate of civil society? For one, in democratic states, civil society is expected to keep watch on violations of democratic norms by the state, through citizen activism, the making and circulation of informed public opinion, a free media, and a multiplicity of social associations. Only a vibrant and watchful civil society can prevent the political elite from lapsing on its commitments and responsibilities. In 1790, the eminent Irish orator, wit, legal luminary, and member of the British parliament, John Curran (1750-1817) suggested that “the condition on which god hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance”. This is the historical mandate of civil society. However, the task of civil society does not end here. Given the plural nature of the sphere, it is almost certain that some organisations within civil society will carry within them the seeds of authoritarianism and a 'will to power'. Democratic organisations in civil society, therefore, have to be Janus-faced, with one face turned towards the state, and the other turned inwards towards its own members.

There is a second dimension to the civil society project. It is here that people, who may well subscribe to different persuasions, occupy different niches in the economy and in society and who may well be unknown to each other, can 'come together' in a series of distinctive and overlapping projects. This is not to say that people do not 'come together' in a competitive electoral and an equally competitive market system. The logic of civil society, or so it is expected, runs in a direction that is qualitatively different to that of the market and the state. Compared to the power-driven state and the profit-driven market, the ethos that imbues civil society is that of sociability and solidarity. These properties of social relations are a necessary outcome of participation in shared projects: safeguarding the fundamental rights of citizens, keeping a watch on the state, protecting people against the exploitative market system, or simply encouraging discussion and debate among participants.

Two implications follow this brief depiction of what civil society in democratic polities ought to look like. We cannot assume, for one, that all civil society organisations will always be democratic. Undemocratic organisations, therefore, will have to be engaged with, countered, and even neutralised by groups committed to democracy. Civil society as the site of multiple projects, some of which will necessarily conflict, is a contested space. The realisation of the mandate of civil society, accordingly, demands intentional and determined political action, a fair degree of toleration here, some amount of intolerance there, a readiness to engage with others, and an extraordinary amount of political courage and will to battle both undemocratic states and undemocratic groups within the sphere. So, although we cannot assume that civil society will

always be democratic, we presume that organisations are ready to do battle with undemocratic agents.

Two, the second dimension of civil society — the willingness of people to engage with others in and through multiple projects — is an essential condition for the realisation of the mandate of the sphere: that of vigilance. Or that unless people come together across religious, caste, and other ethnic divides, civil society can hardly keep watch on all manners of transgressions by all sorts of agents. Conversely, if civil society is not constituted as a space of sociability and solidarity by associational life, then organisations can prove to be fairly indifferent to the plight of some of its own members.

Conclusion

Across dominant streams of thought and policy prescriptions, the general consensus seems to be that the government is the problem. Instead of trying to make the state deliver what it has promised through constitutions, laws, and rhetorical flourishes, policymakers and advocates of civil society organisations would rather establish parallel systems that can substitute the state in areas of service delivery and other fields. And yet, one significant factor inhibits the realisation of this plan — civil society agents are neither in the business of making policy, nor in the business of implementing these policies. They are in the business of upholding and defending democratic norms.

More significantly, we should not lose sight of what the state's obligations to its citizens are. The state enacts, implements, and adjudicates policies in our name, and governs in our name. We, therefore, have the right to ask why we should accept unjust and arbitrary policies. Citizens have the right to challenge the arbitrary inequalities produced and reproduced by the economic, the social, and the political order, because in a democratic state this order is constructed in the name of the citizens. Not only does the state have the power to institutionalise and mandate a just order to remedy the ills of the human condition, it has the obligation to do so. It cannot call upon the NGO sector to bail it out of its current difficulties, which have been created by its own incompetence, corruption, and insensitivity to the needs and the aspirations of the citizens. Nor should the NGO sector believe that it can provide an alternative to the state. This is not to say that civil society does not matter. Yet, whatever be the virtues of civil society, civil society provides only the political and the politicised context for the state. The responsibility for making and implementing policy remains with the state. This is what we expect of the democratic state.

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Civil society as a moral moment

The moment of civil society deserts the social space when our moral certitudes rule out self-doubts, internal churning and, most importantly, dissents that are otherwise supposed to mark it

SAMIR KUMAR
DAS

CIVIL SOCIETY is usually defined as a space that — although it lies between the state and the veritable maze of ethnic communities existing in a society as diverse and heterogeneous as India — is distinct from both of them. While the articulation of this space allows people to make certain claims to rights that are not particular to any of the groups and communities, the very act of making these claims keeps the state from becoming authoritarian. At one level, it liberates the individual self from the 'exogenous' influences of the groups and communities she belongs to. The 'disembodiment' of the individual, in other words, is seen as a precondition of her liberation and autonomy. At another, it keeps the state from turning authoritarian by making these rights claims and asserting its autonomy. The very fact that it occupies, or at least is expected to occupy, the middle ground without being collapsed into either is what makes a body politic both 'civil' and 'democratic' respectively. Civil society is a watchdog of democracy.

This paper seeks to argue that unlike what the great theoreticians of civil society would have us believe, (a) the liberation-seeking individual as the irreducible unit of civil society will have to be first and foremost a morally uncertain being, (b) the rules and norms that civil society sets for itself while asserting its autonomy from both ethnicity and the state are neither given nor unalterable but are constantly defined and redefined — thanks to the churning and struggles that take place within it, and (c) civil society has to put in place an auto-critical mechanism that guards it from turning into another state. This article, accordingly, develops these three sets of arguments in the following three sections.

Civility as moral uncertainty

The individual who seeks to liberate herself from the influences of her groups and communities is assumed to be a fully formed and self-sufficing entity who, being completely sure of her own self-interests, hardly nurtures any doubt about her own self. All interpersonal relationships within the space of civil society have to be 'mutually fulfilling' so that none of the individuals comprising it is either left out or breaks away. Civil society viewed in this light is based on a 'system of needs'. The liberation of the individual has two-

fold implications for society: for one, since all relationships within civil society are defined by individual interests, these are seldom governed along any given and predefined ethnic lines. That two individuals belong to two otherwise rival communities like Hindus and Muslims should not come in the way of their signing a business deal or protesting against the state excesses that both of them have to suffer. Thus, civil society as a normative concept calls for distinguishing those whom 'we want to deal with civilly' from those whom we like for being members of the same ethnic community or group we belong to. The distinction coincides with the one between ethnicity based on some kind of dualism and opposition to what it perceives as its other, and civility based fundamentally on a kind of non-dualistic orientation towards others.

Viewed thus, I propose to argue that the rudiments of a non-dualistic ethic are implicit not so much in our otherwise distinguishable ethnic identities but in the very ethos of everyday living that ties people of otherwise rival ethnic communities together and makes them live together within the same locality or neighbourhood. The imperative of everyday living also advises us against rendering our ethnic identities enumerable in ways that mark the 'we' sharply from 'them'. In West Bengal, for example, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee recently referred to the dissenting intellectuals on the Singur-Nandigram issue as 'them' (*ora*). This reference does not allow the non-dualistic ethos to grow. Any such ethos makes us appreciate our differences from others and vice-versa without being hostile towards them. As we discover grades of difference so we make compromises in our everyday dealings with others. This takes place on what a perceptive Bengali commentator calls "the shifting ground of morality". The moral uncertainty of our demand calls for a moral commitment to others. Moral commitment to others is a tribute to our moral uncertainty.

In 2003, the organisers of a Durga Puja committee in Belgachhia on the outskirts of Kolkata reportedly ran into huge debt and decided to put off celebrating Durga Puja — West Bengal's biggest Hindu festival. The area is a mixed locality where a few Hindu households are literally encircled by a large number of Muslims. When the Muslim neighbours

In 2003, the organisers of a Durga Puja committee in Belgachhia on the outskirts of Kolkata reportedly ran into huge debt and decided to put off celebrating Durga Puja — West Bengal's biggest Hindu festival. The area is a mixed locality where a few Hindu households are literally encircled by a large number of Muslims. When the Muslim neighbours came to know of it, they demanded that the festival be celebrated with the same fanfare and gaiety. They helped raise funds and came to the rescue of their Hindu neighbours

came to know of it, they demanded that the festival be celebrated with the same fanfare and gaiety. They helped raise funds and came to the rescue of their Hindu neighbours. They did so not because their religion said so, for it is non-idolatrous in principle, but because they responded to the call of living as good neighbours and preferred to 'forget' the otherwise stricter rules and norms that separate them from their Hindu neighbours. These examples are by no means rare.

Civil society as a site for struggle

The space of civil society is supposed to be governed by certain rules and norms that lend it its 'civil' character. The presence of these rules, as I have argued elsewhere, makes it impossible for certain kinds of claims to qualify as rightful claims to rights and hence being voiced in the first place. What if claims are voiced at a time when the conditions for

such voicing are simply denied? It involves great personal risk.

The vast array of reports on human rights violations in India emphasises the inability of state institutions to operate within the given framework of the Constitution and the body of laws. They point out how the multiplication of extraordinary legislations (Prevention of Terrorism Act, Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Disturbed Areas Act, etc), institutions like the unified command structure and practices like 'unconventional killings' (a euphemism for secretly killing the relatives of people associated with insurgent organisations) in Assam have rendered the everyday constitutional and legal reality 'shapeless' and 'fictitious'. Violation of rights, we are told, presupposes the presence of a rights-bearing subject — dead or alive. Violations are after all etched in concrete human bodies. The disappearances and highly charred and mutilated bodies of the victims make identification impossible and violations difficult to establish. The killing of family members of cadres of insurgent organisations is meant to numb people into a state of shock and submission in which they will refuse to believe that the victims ever existed at all. It raises, as Hannah Arendt puts it, "doubts in their minds about their own truthfulness". They simply lack the right to rights. In simple terms, these rights claims circulate within society without the freedoms, that is to say the conditions necessary for their circulation. A movement essentially with an alternative agenda of rights thus either goes underground or gets completely insulated and distant from the mainland.

As part of my fieldwork, I frequently visit river islands of varying shapes and sizes in the central and north-central districts of West Bengal. These islands are submerged and surface every so often thanks to river swings and large-scale riverbank erosion, particularly in recent years. I will never forget my experience of December 8, 2007, when, accompanied by some of my old contacts, I spent the entire day with villagers in Khasmahal Char, one of the newly-emerged islands. It was a pleasant winter day. The sun was about to set over a 14 km meandering belt of the river. As darkness slowly set in, we took leave of the villagers whose hospitality we had thoroughly enjoyed the whole day. The boat, fitted with a motor presumably discarded from a bike, roared to life and as we leapt one by one into the narrow keel we looked back one last time at the group of villagers, which included elderly women and little children, who had flocked in hordes to the ghat. Had they all come, we wondered, to see us off? None of them — even the three-year-old child — was wearing woollen clothes in the punishing cold. To our surprise, we discovered that each of them was armed with whatever they had — *lathis*, machetes, spears and sickles, etc. The eldest — a lean, shadowy skeleton of a man with only one hateful eye — came forward and slowly became audible. He seemed to

Ironically, the strength and vibrancy of civil society can also be cause for alarm. A strong civil society is genuinely welcome. But a civil society that is too strong ceases to function as a civil society and shows a tendency to mimic — if not actually become — the state. An overdeveloped civil society does not allow democratic institutions to take root and become strong. Authoritarianism survives under the guise of a strong, overdeveloped civil society. Insofar as it becomes strong, it starts replacing the existing state and shows a tendency to project itself as one of its new incarnations

speak on behalf of the villagers and bluntly wanted to know the purpose of our visit. We groped for words, for we had no real answer. Research was mumbo-jumbo to them. Thankfully, he himself broke the silence: "You (*aapnera*) come and go. But our life remains unchanged. We are yet to figure out why outsiders come to visit us." It had already become dark. The boat started inching forward. We felt relieved. After a while, the faces turned into what they look like from the mainland — ghostly pale shadows. These people, who otherwise remain outside the pale of civil society — 'political society', as an eminent commentator terms them — simply refuse to enter into any kind of strategic negotiations with the captains of civil society, he argues, and seem to be striking back with a vengeance while asserting their right to be left alone. Do they live in 'liberated areas', I asked myself.

Civil society, in other words, is not defined with reference to any given set of rules. It could just as well be a site where rules themselves have become an object of struggle and interrogation.

Civil society as auto-critique

Ironically, the strength and vibrancy of civil society can also be cause for alarm. A strong civil society is genuinely welcome. But a civil society that is too strong ceases to function as a civil society and shows a tendency to mimic — if not actually become — the state. An overdeveloped civil society does not allow democratic institutions to take root and become strong. Authoritarianism survives under the guise of a strong, overdeveloped civil society. Insofar as it becomes strong, it starts replacing the existing state and shows a tendency to project itself as one of its new incarnations.

At the peak of the anti-foreigners movement (1979-1985) in Assam, when hundreds of people were rendered homeless (if not killed) on grounds of being 'Bangladeshis' and took shelter in relief camps, a delegation from a medical students' association visited some of the camps, which housed only Assamese-speaking victims. On being asked why they had not visited the Nalbari camp, they said they had no desire to go to the 'Bangladeshi camps'. Nirupama Borgohain, the famous Assamese novelist and litterateur, reminded them of what she called '*daktoror dharma*' (doctor's ethic) in these terms: "You are doctors, you are respected; to render service to the affected people is your religion; you should therefore make no discrimination..." At a time when society is highly ethnicised, such advocacy obviously fell on deaf ears. She describes the boy who humiliated her ("pierced her heart," as she puts it) by using a very insulting word "in the presence of a bus full of passengers" as one "of the age of my eldest son". It of course takes a lot of courage to stand against the diktats of civil society and voice one's dissent. Borgohain had persistently held the 'flag of dissent' aloft, and thereby suffered a lot, while others remained — as one puts it — "safely indifferent". It is this small minority of dissenters who keep civil society active even in the most difficult of times. Civil society, in other words, does not exist out there. It does not refer to any determinate space that can easily be identified or for that matter protected against onslaughts from outside. It exists as a moment, for it appears insofar as it creates the prerequisites of its own production and carves out a space for itself. Civil society thus explains its own being. A social space can be drawn only on the basis of moral certitudes. The moment of civil society deserts the social space when our moral certitudes rule out self-doubts, internal churning and, most importantly, dissents that are otherwise supposed to mark it.

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Re-imagining civil society

South Asia has witnessed unprecedented changes in the last two decades, including globalisation and the shrinking role of states. How should civil society respond to these changes?

AMITABH BEHAR

THE HISTORY OF SOUTH ASIAN CIVIL SOCIETY strongly underscores its active role in the region's struggle against imperialism and for social justice. Civil society has continued to play a very important role in these post-colonial societies and can be given significant credit for deepening and strengthening democracy in the region. The level of influence and success of civil society in deepening democracy and the movement for social justice varies from country to country and depends on the level of democratisation of polity and the state in each country. However, the vital role of civil society in this quest is unquestionable, as we saw most recently in the people's struggle in Nepal. This role of civil society in deepening democracy remains significant, notwithstanding the new definitions of civil society which are including identity-based non-transformative groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) (Neera Chandhoke refers to these groups as 'a-civil society groups').

In post-colonial times, civil society in the region has primarily played three kinds of roles. First, and most significant (particularly in a country like India), has been its critique of the state and its functioning from the perspective of marginalised people, while seeking rights (including basic services) and justice for all. The second role has been of working in alliance or partnership with government to ensure effective and quality delivery of services, particularly to the last frontiers of survival. Third has been a non-state-centric role, where the focus has been on transforming society to achieve a just and humane order, countering social and cultural conditions and structures from the perspective of equity and justice. Several examples from the women's and dalit movements can be identified to illustrate this aspect.

Civil society has been successful to an extent in fulfilling these roles; on the other hand, the continuing colonial and feudal character of all South Asian states, polity and society also reflects the limitations of civil society in the region. Similarly, in spite of the third role of civil society — of engaging with social processes with a transformative agenda — it has experienced serious limitations due to the state-centric social and political discourses of these countries. This

limitation becomes more glaring when we look at the engagement of civil society with markets, political parties, mainstream political systems, and religious spheres.

Changing socio-economic and political context

In the past couple of decades, South Asia has witnessed unprecedented changes in almost all arenas of society, polity and economy. Globally also, this has been a period of rapid change, leading to globalisation, rise of neoliberal ideas and a unipolar world order, which have had a serious impact on the operational spaces of civil society, presenting new challenges. It would be worthwhile to flag some of the key changes to help us in our endeavour to re-imagine civil society. The following is not an exhaustive list and should be viewed as just a starting point for discussion.

- The role of the state is shrinking. The state is moving towards the role of facilitator, with limited arenas for state action. Many would view this as an abdication of the state's primary responsibilities as it moves away from providing even basic services like education and health.
- The spaces being vacated by the state are being occupied by the market and large private corporations (often operating without boundaries as transnational corporations). The private sector is growing in size and clout and has much more direct impact on the lives of people than before, even in poor regions like South Asia. Ideas of free market and trade, which are being promoted by agencies like the WTO, are deeply impacting, influencing and altering governance and economy in all countries, including South Asia.
- Rapid technological changes and growth have had a deep impact on the societies and polities of South Asia. The growing power and impact of the media after the satellite and Internet boom is a case in point. The role of the media has become extremely significant in these countries and it needs to be viewed as an independent and important actor in guiding the destiny of the region.
- Post-liberalisation and globalisation policies have given rise to an extremely large and powerful middle class, which has benefited tremendously from these processes of 'opening up'. The middle classes are extremely vocal and have a

disproportionate impact and power in the country, compared to their size.

- Politically speaking, ideas of democracy have taken root and more and more marginalised groups are getting empowered. The dalit movement and the women's movement are examples of the democratisation of polity and society. On the other hand, we are also witnessing the rise of fundamentalist movements like Hindutva in India.

Questions for civil society

It becomes imperative for civil society to adapt to these fundamental changes by quickly re-imagining and redesigning itself in order to continue to work towards the core objective of social justice. How should civil society respond to these changes? What could civil society's new role/s be, and how could these be operationalised? What are the possible strategies and challenges for civil society in the new context? What are the new innovations and ideas already being experimented with in response to these changes? Below are some critical areas for discussion:

- *Engagement with the state:* In the new socio-economic and political milieu, how should civil society continue to engage with the state and simultaneously work towards state accountability?
- *Engagement with social structures and religious fundamentalism:* Many scholars believe that civil society focuses too much of its energies on engaging with the state and is unable to address the basic questions of inequity emerging from social structures like caste and patriarchy. In the changed context it would be important to continue working on these themes. An additional challenge would be to deal with hierarchical and primordial identities being promoted through fundamentalist movements like Hindutva.
- *Engagement and expansion of the base amongst the middle classes:* Civil society needs to find new ways of engaging with the influential middle class. It would also need to identify ways of expanding the base of civil society for social justice amongst the middle classes.
- *Engagement with the media:* We are all aware of the power of the media and its role in deepening democracy and making governments accountable in countries like India. However, the engagement of civil society with the media is limited and sporadic. It is important to find organic linkages with the media and build a systematic strategy for this engagement.
- *Engagement with the private sector and markets:* This is one area in which civil society has the least experience. Given the growing importance and clout of the private sector, meaningful engagement is essential to build a robust civil society. But our limited experience of dealing with the market and private sector often leads to a confrontationalist approach. There is no doubt that civil society must invest

significant time and energy in understanding and building a grammar for this engagement. This does not mean that confrontation as a strategy should be given up; in fact, new forms and strategies are required to handle this confrontationalist engagement with the markets. On the other hand, it is equally important to find spaces for constructive engagement with the private sector, which could lead to greater accountability of markets and strengthen the contribution of corporate bodies towards social justice.

- *Engagement with the political system:* This is, again, an arena where civil society work in South Asia has remained weak. Given the important role political parties play, there has to be a conscious attempt to engage with the political system with the objective of democratising them. Similarly, in spite of a lot of talk over the past decade, civil society has not been able to engage with other actors in the political system like trade unions, farmer groups, etc. This could also be viewed as an attempt to broaden the base of civil society.
- *Accountability of civil society:* Looking at the lack of accountability and transparency in some sections of civil society, it would be equally important to work towards building strong and clear strategies for accountability within the sector.
- *Expanding space for democratic action:* In nascent democracies like the ones in South Asia, civil society has an additional responsibility of deepening democracy and enriching the language and tools for democratic action. In the subcontinent, new initiatives like budget analysis, right to information, etc, have added value to the range of democratic actions. These must be further enriched. It is equally important to view the protection of civil society's operational space (both in political and legal terms) as an integral part of expanding the country's democratic space.

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'What civil society said 25 years ago has become law today'

Civil society has managed to push through far-reaching legislations on dowry, domestic violence, sex ratios and other issues related to women, says women's rights activist Kamla Bhasin. But, however progressive, legislation alone cannot be expected to change patriarchal mindsets

RASHME SEHGAL



Kamla Bhasin is a renowned feminist activist and gender trainer in South Asia. She has written extensively on gender issues. Most notable among her publications are Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition, co-authored by Ritu Menon, Rutgers University Press, 1998, and What is

Patriarchy?, Kali for Women, 1993.

To what do you attribute the increasing clout of civil society?

The main reason for its growing clout is that it has succeeded in empowering larger and larger cross-sections of citizens. Take the example of the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and how it has succeeded in providing employment to millions of people across the country. This did not happen overnight. It came about because of sustained agitation which was launched in the 1960s and resulted in the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act being passed in 1972. Once this was passed, it was decided that a similar Act would be passed in other states as well. Over 100 organisations under the National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM) came together to press for a nationwide scheme.

But this was not the only issue that they were pressing for. NAPM has been pressing for better facilities for dam oustees; they continue to demand a better relief package for victims of the Bhopal tragedy, just as they have been supporting Sharmila Irom in the northeast. Sharmila has been on a fast for the last seven years, demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

The National Advisory Council (NAC), with members like

Aruna Roy and Jean Dreze, was set up by the UPA government led by Congress President Sonia Gandhi during its earlier tenure, so that the powerful voices of its members could be heard in government. In fact, the NAC was seen by many to be the nation's primary advocacy body. The NAC helped consolidate development advocacy in a manner not seen in recent times and, before Sonia Gandhi's resignation, I would say that the NAC was seen to even carry a political momentum in the way it went about doing its work.

The minimum agenda of the UPA government in more recent Lok Sabha elections has also been influenced by civil society. The government recognised that speaking on behalf of civil society organisations helped it win votes.

But not all civil society organisations are promoting equitable development.

No, of course not. There are several right-wing organisations led by the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) which have been demanding the building of a Ram temple. In no sense can we say that they are following a secular ideology.

Civil society organisations can be characterised by contradictory demands because they include both extreme right-wing, left-wing and middle-of-centre organisations. There are all manner of religious organisations functioning under this banner. Look at the most recent issue of decriminalisation of homosexuality under Section 377 which, again, is being supported and opposed by all manner of organisations. In no sense can we say that civil society operates in a uniform fashion over different issues.

I would say that they have succeeded in building up strong centres of influence. The better organised the group is, the more influential its voice. Take the case of Swami Ramdev who has succeeded in mobilising a huge amount of public opinion, so much so that no government in power can afford to ignore what he says. Even the judiciary can no longer ignore public sentiment.

We have been fighting to get justice for Sikhs killed in the 1984 massacre. It was because of sustained public pressure that Sajjan Kumar and Jagdish Tytler were denied tickets in the last Lok Sabha elections. But there is a constant tug-of-war going on between these different groups. For example,

Christians, Muslims and civil society groups came together to oppose right-wing forces when Christians were being targeted last year in Kandhamal, in Orissa. Now, the religious groups have closed ranks and are opposing civil society groups over the issue of Section 377. We can't agree on all issues. All we can hope to do is build up broad alliances on some issues.

Nevertheless, when it comes to women-related issues, civil society has not had complete success.

What civil society was saying 25 years ago has become law today. This is true for a whole spectrum of laws on the issue of women's rights, including cases of domestic violence and dowry. Earlier, people would say: Why are you airing a family's dirty linen in public? Today, all the different women-related ministries are working on these issues.

Twenty years ago, we were warning about the declining sex ratio and look at the startling situation today. Our lack of success on this issue is simply because the development paradigm being pursued today is completely capitalist-oriented. It may sound simplistic but the government is giving SEZs (special economic zones) land at subsidised rates. Now, the majority of land is owned by men and not women. As the price of land goes up, it is women who may end up becoming dispensable objects. Men are now demanding a higher dowry, so families do not want girls anymore.

But you have to admit that it has failed to really impact the individual woman's acceptance of a patriarchal system and roles...

I don't think it has failed to impact an individual woman in such a comprehensive manner. After all, the law is a tool that has to be used by society. Legislation, in many cases, is quite progressive but it cannot be expected to change the mindset of every individual. Just look at where our daughters are today, in comparison with our own position 40 years ago. But this is not true for girls across all sections of society. The mindset of everyone has not changed. We still have an occasional judge saying that if a woman is raped it was because she was wearing jeans!

To look at the overall situation today, I would say that if many of our structures, including patriarchy, continue to remain entrenched it is because they help reinforce our corporate industrial base. For example, patriarchy remains hand-in-glove with the beauty industry. If girls become anorexic, it is because of the demands being made on them by the beauty industry, and the problem is that adolescents and young women do get influenced by all this. We are not islands, and patriarchy keeps changing its face in very subtle ways. Why is the advertising industry so important? It influences young people to behave in a certain way.

Can you elaborate on this a bit more?

Look at the kind of society we have become. We have grown so individualistic that we have ended up destroying our community spirit. We no longer like to fight for anything. Even our resident welfare associations no longer speak up on issues. The question to be asked is: Why have we become so de-politicised? Why have we become so crassly individualistic?

A son will not talk to his mother living in the same house, but he will talk to 500 people on Facebook. Families are talking less and less to each other but getting more active with their social networking.

What would you say are the major weaknesses of the civil society movement?

Many of the issues that have been raised have become completely mainstream. What started off being influenced by Gandhian ethics has ended up becoming one more (instance of) bureaucracy. Let us not forget that the government will not give money to any NGO that does not toe the line. Look at the way Dr Binayak Sen was jailed for two-and-a-half years without bail simply because the BJP government believed he was challenging the way they were handling the whole Naxalite issue.

There is a huge difference between an NGO and a people's movement because the latter does not take money from the government. Activist Medha Patkar remains fearless because she is not the recipient of government funding. This is not to criticise all organisations. Look at the way our struggles with RTI and its implementation are continuing. There will always be a dichotomy between state and people's power, and this will continue.

What role do you see the media playing in increasing the clout of civil society?

It's difficult to generalise about the media as a whole because even within the media there are different kinds of people. There are some sections of the media that owe their allegiance to the BJP and its right-wing ideology. Then there is a whole section of the media that goes the whole hog in supporting the corporations. Basically, I would say, the progressive media supports progressive groups while the more conservative media elements support conservative civil society groups. I think the media industry needs to develop a more pro-people policy and steer away from its focus on making larger and larger profits. Overall, of course, the media cannot afford to completely avoid focusing on the development agenda and those who represent it.

Rashme Sehgal is a journalist and writer based in Delhi

A disturbing disconnect

Mohalla committees and occasional workshops for the police and communities do work to promote communal harmony. But their target group is limited. On the other hand, there exists the vast foundation of Hindu-Muslim ties among ordinary people. Why has that reservoir not been harnessed? Is there such a total disconnect between what is called 'civil society' and the people it seeks to represent?

JYOTI PUNWANI

LATE LAST YEAR, soon after the myriad Indian Mujahideen modules were “busted” and all their masterminds “ nabbed”, a meeting was held in Mumbai’s Islam Gymkhana. Organised by influential Muslims in the city, ulema and ‘social workers’, its main theme was: How long will Muslims continue to be targeted by the establishment as terrorists? How should they cope with the constant stigmatisation? How can they convince the media to stop labelling them?

These were not English-speaking Muslims cut off from their community, part of the city elite. They were another kind of elite: Urdu-speaking, well-off community leaders, the kind that went in delegations to chief ministers; who were called by the police to restrain their community every time communal tension arose in the city. Yet they seemed helpless, up against a fortress of prejudice.

The state has long discriminated against its largest minority; denied it some rights taken for granted by the majority, mainly the right to protest on the streets. The anti-Muslim conduct of the most powerful arm of the state, the police, is by now an unchallenged fact. The media by and large toes the police and government line on matters such as terrorism and riots, but being intrinsically sensational, magnifies these prejudices and displays them to the world.

So where do we go, asked the Muslims present there. Their anguish was disturbing, reflecting the failure of ‘civil society’ vis-à-vis its largest minority. The meeting organisers had specially invited a few non-Muslims to advise them. These included retired judges, non-party political activists, a journalist, and an academician-turned-activist. The meeting was startlingly frank — the non-Muslims telling their hosts the problems they faced working with them; the Muslims admitting that some of their youth had indeed gone over to Pakistan for training.

It was ironic that the Muslims could bare their soul (almost) to these Hindus, yet not find reassurance in the relationship. To them, all that mattered was the attitude of the establishment. One of the Hindus present pointed out that society was more than the government; ordinary people continued to relate to each other with mutual trust and genuine good-neighbourliness, unaffected by the acts of a few terrorists.

“Mutual trust and good-neighbourliness have become empty phrases to lull us,” countered one of the Muslims cynically; others kept silent but were obviously not convinced.

Why? Constantly, one finds evidence of the deep bonds between Hindus and Muslims among the uneducated poor. A Muslim taxi driver married a Hindu. When her brother died, he entrusted his two daughters to his Muslim brother-in-law. The taxi driver, a “typical *Mianbhai*”, did not convert them, and got them married to Hindus according to Hindu rites. Ironically, the taxi driver was an accused in a communal riot case (he was acquitted).

A traditional Hindu woman fasts regularly all through Ramzan because her wish was granted the first time she went to a dargah. A Hindu would travel 38 km to attend every hearing of the trial of his Muslim co-worker because he knew the latter was innocent. The charge against his Muslim co-worker? Rioting against Hindus. A Muslim never failed to bow her head before the Ganpati idol installed in the building where she worked as a domestic. Asked if this was not against Islam, she shot back indignantly: “Ganpati too is God. I bow my head at all the temples I pass.” Her daughters waited eagerly for the festival of Raksha Bandhan to tie *rakhis* to their Hindu neighbour.

Even among the educated, there is enough evidence of Hindus fasting during Ramzan and going to dargahs — of all places, in Ahmedabad, even after Godhra; of Muslims immersing their Hindu neighbours’ Ganpati idols. After the Mumbai riots, not all Hindus sacked their Muslim employees, even if those employees lived in neighbourhoods that had become bywords for violence. A young Hindu chawl resident rushed to the police with the names of her Hindu neighbours who had stripped and beaten a Muslim mother and daughter. Another Hindu slum-dweller testified in court against her co-religionists whom she had seen lynching the Muslim mason who had repaired her hut. All these incidents seem like miracles, but to the Hindus and Muslims involved they are nothing to wonder about, just part of daily life.

Yet, why didn’t these make a difference to the Muslims quoted above? Could it be that most of them have no routine interaction with Hindus at all; live in Muslim-only areas and, in accordance with the new trend, send their



children to Islamic schools? A suggestion was made at the meeting: to have small Hindu-Muslim get-togethers during Diwali, with the Muslims taking the initiative in different areas of the city. Such get-togethers might have helped demonstrate that, notwithstanding terrorists' bombs, Muslim leaders continued to care about their fellow citizens. The suggestion was met with an embarrassed silence. Obviously these Muslims craved endorsement from the establishment, not from ordinary citizens.

Against the backdrop of these fears, what role have mohalla committees played? With the police as their pivot, they should have been a source of reassurance, especially in troubled times. The police select mohalla committee members to be their eyes and ears, helping the police prevent minor conflicts from becoming major riots. This concept is intrinsically flawed, given the relationship between the police and Muslims, in Mumbai. The police are comfortable dealing only with certain types of Muslims: sycophants, informers and criminals. That's the reason the so-called 'peace committees' that existed everywhere did nothing while Mumbai burnt in December 1992-January 1993.

The mohalla committees worked like a charm when they were first introduced. The reason was that they were the result of a genuine desire by two policemen to resolve the deep hatreds that divided Bhiwandi, the powerloom township outside Mumbai that was practically wiped out in two major riots in 1970 and 1984. The brainchild of Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Suresh Khopde, they were put to the test during the 1992-93 riots. Under DCP Gulabrao Pol, Bhiwandi didn't witness even a *lathi*-charge while Mumbai burnt. Keeping both communalists and criminals out, these committees, instead, involved the township's respected as well as ordinary Hindus and Muslims. At regular meetings, committee members talked about their problems, while policemen, instructed by their seniors, listened. The entire exercise was aimed at making the policeman a friend of the people.

After the 1992-93 Mumbai riots, when Muslim-police relations were at their lowest, the idea was adopted by citizens and police officers similarly motivated by a real desire for harmony. The mohalla committee movement continues to be active, headed by people still driven by the same desire — former Commissioner of Police Satish Sahney, Julio Rebeiro, K M Aarif, Maria Easweran. It has worked phenomenally well in several crises long after the riots — Bal Thackeray's arrest (2000), the VHP's many provocations — and it continues to work every day, unnoticed.

But these committees are successful only in areas where dedicated people have remained in charge. Elsewhere, they have collapsed into committees of informers and police *chamchas*. The degeneration started in 1996 under

Commissioner R D Tyagi, who sidelined the existing members and started appointing local-level politicians. When Bhiwandi erupted in violence in 2006, it became clear that even in its place of birth, and the arena of its most spectacular success, the mohalla committee had failed. Respected citizens had been sidelined by the police; fanatical, rabble-rousing leaders had been given undue importance. As one youngster put it: "Previously, if we got into a minor fight, the police would take the help of the committee elders and lock us up for a few hours to teach us a lesson. When we were tempted to take to the streets, the same elders would warn us: 'Go at your own risk. We won't bail you out.' But when the police stopped listening to them, they stopped getting involved, and we too stopped bothering about them. Now there's no one to guide us." The latest nail in the coffin is the demand by a Muslim minister to scrap all mohalla committees.

There have been other initiatives to improve communal relations. Asghar Ali Engineer has been conducting workshops for the police, college students, and community workers since the 1992-93 riots. Here, he counters myths about Muslims and historical figures such as Shivaji. According to him, policemen have told him how attending these workshops has helped change their image of Muslims. In the last couple of years, Islamic scholar Dr Zeenat Shaukat Ali has organised a series of activities in Mumbai attended by the clergy from every community. These have helped tremendously in influencing those who are stepping into the priesthood. I cannot forget what a young boy from Gujarat, training to be a priest at Mumbai's Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, told me: "I had never thought these people (madrasa students training to be imams) would be just the same as me. Back home, we were told all sorts of things about them."

Though these 'civil society' initiatives may be valuable, they need to be sustained for years before they can begin to have any widespread impact. A few committed people will have to continue putting in money and effort. Also, their target group is limited, and they work top-down. On the other hand, there exists the vast, solid foundation of Hindu-Muslim ties among ordinary people; ties that have survived the worst riots. Why has this reservoir not been harnessed? Is there such a total disconnect between what is called 'civil society' and the people it seeks to represent?

Jyoti Punwani is a Mumbai-based freelance journalist who specialises in communalism issues

The spirit of seva

Spiritual organisations naturally generate a desire for *seva* and a capacity for committed sustained action. Activists in the NGO field frequently talk about compassion fatigue, but this is a syndrome that rarely affects those in spiritual organisations. Spiritual activists, as opposed to NGOs, understand that the biggest contribution to changing the world is self-change

SUMA
VARUGHESE

AROUND 13 YEARS AGO I left mainstream journalism and joined a start-up body-mind-spirit magazine. It did not take me long to discern that I had actually penetrated a subterranean domain of reality where people were connected to something higher than themselves, and that this connection inspired them to contribute to society.

After a lifetime of being around people who were preoccupied with their own self-interest, I met people who were busy promoting vermiculture, teaching reiki for free, helping the underprivileged, supporting the education of the girl-child, helping the farmer — all sorts of benevolent activities. It struck me then, that it was this subterranean vein that was actually keeping the country going. Silently, unobtrusively, a flow of goodness was nourishing and nurturing the country and restoring its resilience and life force.

Over time, this conviction was further reinforced when I got better acquainted with spiritual organisations. Without exception I found that spiritual organisations ran like clockwork. Whether it was the Brahma Kumaris down at Mount Abu, the Art of Living organisation in Bangalore, the Oneness University in Andhra Pradesh, the Sadhu Vaswani Mission in Pune, I found a happy joyous community whose zest for service was apparently endless. I still remember

going to the Brahma Kumaris during a youth conference. Many women from the village were offering the *seva* of rolling out perfectly round *chappatis*. One of the renunciates came around and asked them what they would prefer — lunch or more *seva*. My jaw dropped as they responded in unison: *seva*! At the same ashram, a young renunciate working in the accounts division said that he worked for more than 15 hours a day. However, he added, the work did not seem like work at all!

During an international conference on education at the Art of Living ashram in Bangalore, I watched as the media cell slaved for hours on end, taking care of journalists, preparing daily reports, fixing interviews and meetings for the journalists and so on. None of them seemed to get more than four hours of sleep, but their fresh smiling faces never lost their enthusiasm.

The same can be said of the silent and sublime guides of the Oneness University. *Seva* is their middle name as they spend hours explaining the teachings to students both within and without the study course, counselling those in need, and giving *deekshas* for all who need them. They appear to be awake right through the night and yet exude a freshness and energy at the dawn of a new day.

The point I am trying to make is that spiritual organisations



Baba Ramdev at a spiritual lecture

naturally generate a desire for *seva* and a capacity for committed sustained action. Activists in the NGO field frequently talk about compassion fatigue, but that is a syndrome that rarely affects those in spiritual organisations, for the simple reason that these people constantly work on themselves. Spiritual activists, as opposed to NGOs, understand that the biggest contribution to changing the world is self-change. The focus on self-change keeps them humble, inner-directed and service-oriented. It also cleans up their motives. As they grow in spiritual maturity, the doing is less and less ego-driven and becomes more and more selfless. A newfound clarity dawns, which enables them to re-evaluate what they do and how they do it. After all, doing things for others without reducing their sense of self and without increasing your sense of self is not an easy balance to find. Love for the guru or for God is another tremendous motivation that enables them to perform almost superhuman tasks with a smile. I don't of course mean to imply that spiritual *sevaks* are beyond the pale. There are many who falter, but by and large it is my contention that they are more sincere in their service.

It is no wonder therefore that many spiritual organisations immerse themselves in social activities and contribute substantially to society. Mata Amritanandamayi has an ashram in Kerala which is renowned for its outreach. Amma is once heard to have said: "If it is someone's karma to fall into a ditch, then it is our karma to help him out", and the range of her helping hand is immense. In healthcare there are a number of hospices and hospitals, including the Amrita Institute of Medical Science, a superspecialty hospital in Cochin which offers the best of medical care at affordable rates and offers the poor charitable help. She also runs a number of educational institutes across the country and has contributed generous amounts for disaster management including over \$300 million for tsunami victims in South Asia. She assists with social support, offering pensions and

homes to the disadvantaged.

Similarly Sathya Sai Baba, whose ashram is in Puttaparthi, has done outstanding outreach work in Andhra Pradesh, including a massive water project that cost \$63 million and provides water to over 700 villages in Andhra Pradesh. Other areas include educational initiatives such as Sri Sathya Sai University where holistic education is rendered and the Sathya Sai Institute of Music. The organisation also focuses on medical care, ranging from dispensaries, medical camps to treat cataracts and collect blood, general hospitals as well as superspecialty hospitals. Free treatment is the norm in all these places. His recipe for spiritual service: "Service is effective only when I and mine are replaced by God and God's."

"Our first and foremost commitment is to do *seva* to the world," is the founder of Art of Living, Sri Sri Ravi Shanker's motto. He lives up to it with a plethora of service initiatives which include supporting rural and farming communities in becoming self-sufficient in water, in sanitation and, above all, in returning to organic farming. The organisation also trains rural youth through leadership programmes called Youth Leadership Training Programmes, organises Art of Living programmes in prisons, brings warring communities together, and provides education for underprivileged children. They also do considerable disaster relief work especially during the Mumbai floods of 2005 and the 2004 tsunami.

The Sadhu Vaswani Mission in Pune is far smaller in size, but it too is staunchly dedicated to the ideal of service, not just to humanity but to the animal and bird kingdom as well. Vegetarianism is an avowed ideal of the organisation, and daily feeding of birds and animals is a ritual. Daily feeding and service is also offered to the poor, the homeless, the sick, and the elderly. The organisation runs several educational institutes in Pune, including a college called Mira College. It runs several medical camps in and around Pune, and a prestigious hospital in the city.

Similarly, the Brahma Kumaris of Mount Abu, Jaggi Vasudev of Isha Yoga, Rishi Prabhakar of Siddha Samadhi Yoga, the Chinmaya Mission, the Ramkrishna Mission, the Swaminarayans of Ahmedabad and various other spiritual centres, both large and small, strive to serve the world every way they can. With millions of devoted *sevaks* at their disposal, generous funds pouring into their coffers, and little red-tapism to dampen their spirits they fan out into the world, a real force for the good.

I personally am convinced that the Indian can only respond to inspiration, and that he or she works best when he or she is in *seva* mode. How can the rest of civil society make use of this unique temperament? It's worth thinking about.

Suma Varughese is Editor-in-Chief, Life Positive magazine

‘Civil society is only geared to the needs of the elite’

Democratic processes in our country are being dismantled, says Dunu Roy who has been working with the issues of displacement, urban habitat, and pollution for the last four decades. Citizens are being replaced by coterie of bureaucrats and the technocrats who run CSOs. It is they who are deciding on the urban renewal plans, and they who are disbursing Rs 95,000 crore without any consultation with the people

RASHME SEHGAL



Anubrotto Kumar Roy, popularly known as Dunu Roy, has been in the field of rural development for over four decades. A chemical engineer, he has provided technical expertise to rural communities, carried out prolonged experiments in environmental planning, and now works with issues related to toxic hazards in Delhi. Even while at IIT, Roy and a

group of fellow students were trying to assess how their knowledge could help solve the problems of the poor.

Roy runs an institution called the Hazards Centre which provides free services to citizens in the fields of public health, environment impact, pollution control and urban architecture. The Centre works particularly with the poor who settled in Delhi after 1990 and who are being displaced in an increasing number of legal verdicts. According to a study done by the Hazards Centre, there are about 300,000 families in Delhi that have no place to live. The Centre is trying to provide them shelter and has given a plan to the Metropolitan Council of Delhi (MCD) suggesting how they too can share the same space with the city's more well-heeled inhabitants.

How would you define the term 'civil society'?

There is a transition taking place in the term itself. The Constitution of India starts with the Preamble “We, the people”, and it was these words that helped create a feeling of national resurgence in the hearts of our people.

A distinct change has however taken place in the way people are being projected today. The classic example is that of the bhagidari system which was put in place by the Delhi administration. The bhagidari has been extended to those who live in built-up colonies, which means that two-thirds of the people who do not, have been excluded from such participation. The word 'citizen' has disappeared from our

present lexicon. The point I am trying to make is that our Constitution confers only political equality on its citizens. There is no clause in it which speaks of social or economic equality, as has been laid out in the Constitutions of South Africa and Venezuela. Our citizens are entitled to vote, but that is all. They have been displaced by all the so-called “stakeholders” who come from the corporate world or government.

Civil society organisations are gradually replacing the voting citizen. CSOs claim they represent the people, but since these are unelected bodies how can they claim to be representative bodies? These organisations have never fought an election. The 73rd and 74th amendments which brought in panchayati raj have been sidelined completely because when it comes to making economic and environmental assessments which will impact the lives of villagers on the ground, the panchayats have not been given the right to vote. Their votes no longer count.

The Supreme Court, in a series of decisions, has set aside their voice on matters that concern them. For example, the Supreme Court set aside panchayats' concerns over the depletion of groundwater when it ordered that Coca-Cola was entitled to access groundwater around its factories. The democratic process has been replaced by a self-appointed group of people who now claim they are stakeholders for society at large.

Are you then saying that civil society has failed to create a more transparent and accountable form of governance?

Democratic processes in our country are being dismantled. Take the example of our National Urban Renewal Mission being run by a small coterie of central- and state-level bureaucrats. Their findings on how our cities will be run are now binding on all municipal corporations in the country.

The terms and conditions under which money is being distributed have been set down by this coterie of bureaucrats. They have done so without engaging in any debate on any issue of vital importance in any of our corporations. The money being given by these urban missions amounts to Rs 95,000 crore. This money will be disbursed in the form of a loan, but it is the bureaucrat and the consultant who is deciding how the urban renewal plan will be formulated as also how the money will be spent. No



public hearings are taking place on issues that will touch the lives of millions. As a result, the government refuses to listen to a public protest being organised regarding these city development plans.

The reason for such apathy is simple. The public is no longer considered part of civil society. Only those who agree to the diktats of this small coterie are invited to attend their meets. A charade is being conducted in the name of civil society.

Does civil society in the larger sense of the term have no clout whatsoever?

We have succeeded in carving out a space for a small minority which is largely upper middle class in character. Look at the example of the Citizenship Act which Nandan Nilekani, former CEO, Infosys Technologies, is trying to introduce. He is saying that only those who are born in the country are entitled to get this card, and that such a rule would be applied rigorously. Only 30% of our population have birth certificates, the remaining do not. Under such a criterion, I fear that only those who have money in the bank will be entitled to become citizens.

I may sound like a doomsday prophet but to carry this anomaly further, the Bandra-Worli sea link can be used only by car drivers whereas providing proper drainage to the entire city of Mumbai could have been accomplished at one-twentieth of this cost. But it was not.

In the same way, the metro is the most expensive option to provide transport to our cities. We have chosen to devastate our cities in order to get a metro. And since we are buying such incredibly expensive machinery to build this metro, we then need to build more metros in more cities in order to recover the cost.

Are you saying there is no equitable development taking place in the country?

In which state is the third tier of governance, where adults of a village can gather and discuss issues, actually taking place? The 74th amendment pertaining to our cities is not in place in Delhi. In that sense we are violating the Constitution every day, and this failure is not highlighted in the media.

The prejudice against the poor is amazing. The Delhi Municipal Corporation has set a cap of 50,000 rickshaw licences in Delhi. But 500,000 rickshaw-pullers are servicing the needs of the people. By virtue of this fiat, 450,000 rickshaw-pullers have become illegal. In the same way, the poor will not be able to access the biometric identification cards because, in order to get one, they have to name a place of residence. Now, 50% of the population in our urban areas consists of migrant labour that has no fixed place of residence. What address will they give on their cards? The government admits that we need 24 million homes to accommodate all the poor people in the cities, but it is in a position to build only 2 million homes. This means 22 million families will not be able to meet the criterion that has been set for these cards.

Surely civil society has had some success? Was it not instrumental in introducing progressive legislation, including the RTI Act?

As I said earlier, civil society is geared to serving the needs of an elitist section of society. Are our judges prepared to declare their assets? Of course not. I have been informed by several activists that the RTI Act is being amended and file notings, which form the heart of this Act, need not be shown in future. The bureaucracy and politicians have joined hands and this amendment (of the RTI Act) is expected to be introduced in the present session of Parliament. Some civil society organisations, whose names I will not disclose, are pushing to rush the amendment through.

The National Advisory Council has been dismantled and the government is showing no enthusiasm for putting it back in place. Earlier, people could protest in several places including India Gate. Today, the only place left for them to protest is Jantar Mantar. How can a country follow any democratic traditions if the public is given no place to protest?

A quiet coup?

Following globalisation, states have been reduced to handmaidens of the investor class. Interceding between the state/corporations and the teeming public are layers of NGOs, many of which, according to this writer, are converting the million mutinies of contemporary India into harmless 'partnerships' with corporations or the state

ASEEM
SHRIVASTAVA

WE LIVE IN STRANGE TIMES indeed when our intelligentsia and educated elites have no trouble accepting that society is little more than the “social sector”, a head under which expenditures are allocated (primarily for health and education) by the state. When did such a designation gain currency? One cannot recall that it existed a generation ago. ‘Society’ in those days was a term of relative sanctity, invoking an obligatory sense of regard. Today, it is an all-but-forgotten beast, remembered only in times of elections, or if there is the annoyance of a more serious crisis than the usual ongoing ones we are all accustomed to.

“A market economy can exist only in a market society,” warned Karl Polanyi, writing several decades ago. The great economic anthropologist predicted that subjugation to the laws of the market was destined to lead to “the demolition of society”. Society would lose its very “substance” when labour and land (technical terms for human beings and nature) become mere “fictitious commodities”, “factors of production”, accessories to the profit-maximising calculus of businesses. Little wonder then that society has been whittled down to the “social sector”. It is relevant only insofar as it is an item of cost on the negative side of government and business ledgers. The irony is that the private sector is in actual fact a subset of society, not the other way around, a fact well-forgotten today. And a fact charged with destructive possibilities.

Prior to 1991, India was a society. Since that date it has been rapidly transformed into a market — to be milked by corporations with global reach. We must come to terms with the fact that globalisation has changed the very terms in which public discussion of every kind is conducted nowadays.

The globalisation juggernaut

Globalisation, after all, is not just a designation for a specific set of economic arrangements. It is unabashedly a prescription for a particular way of life centred around consumption. For, if human beings can't be universally converted into eager workers and greedy consumers, corporate globalisation does not have a future. The entire advertising industry is dedicated to this perpetual project of turning human beings into consumers willing to slave and buy in order to make corporations wealthier. This is their

assigned duty. To refuse to slave and consume is to invite the worst name-calling.

The end of the Cold War made way for what came to be called “globalisation”, American and western economic dominance over the world under a new imperial rubric. It was launched two decades ago over the heads of the public in virtually every country. Major policy departures were made by national political elites at the beckoning of the so-called international financial and multilateral institutions, the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO. This is what formed “the Washington Consensus”. The public was never part of the consultations and deliberations which led to what has appropriately been named “stealth reforms”. Democracy — understood as political processes well beyond periodic voting — was conspicuous by its absence from the decision to globalise.

National governments have been made hostage to policy directives serving the interests of global investor elites, the bulk of whom reside in the western world. As a result, there has been a definite shift in the locus of power from the state to the corporate sector. Looked at another way, the state itself has changed character. From being the overarching institution guaranteeing security, human liberties and the pursuit of fairness and justice, it has become a handmaiden of the investor classes. It has become an enterprise for “political entrepreneurs” and “business leaders”. It is now managerial and corporatised, democratic rhetoric and rituals (like elections) being a mere façade for its corporate patronage. This too is the case only in formally democratic societies like India and those of the western world.

Following from the above, there is a growing blurring of the time-honoured boundary between the public and the private realm. A “revolving door” appears to exist between positions in the government and in the corporate world. Like in the US, many of the top planners in government today are unelected officials, unaccountable to the people whose lives they affect directly through the decisions they take. The distinction between the public and the private realms is not only sacrosanct for a democracy. Indeed it has traditionally been a healthy operating principle for any political set-up, keeping in check potential abuses of power. Violation of this principle is

leading to a predictable rash of such abuses these days.

Interceding between the state and the corporations on the one hand and the teeming public on the other are to be found growing layers of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Their political status is uncertain, since they are not technically accountable to the public. If anything, their funding norms oblige them to report to their funders and patrons. Through the “partnerships” that they form with people's groups, they often inadvertently do the work that their corporate patrons would like them to do. Today, NGOs are made up of the widest possible range of organisations — from business associations and lobby groups to community-based and self-help groups, advocacy groups, coalitions and campaigns of various kinds, not to forget that important species “movement-based NGOs” which appear to sponsor social and political movements themselves! What Arundhati Roy has called the “NGO-isation of politics” is thus an obvious corollary of the evolving institutional pattern.

Movements have traditionally been the springboard of social change. In fact, it is difficult to see how democracy itself could have emerged in the western world without the long history of people's struggles in that direction over the past few centuries. The “NGO-isation of politics” has essentially meant that the “million mutinies” that is India today are sought to be somehow converted into harmless “partnerships” with corporations or the state. The political fact that there is a legitimate contestation over spheres of decision-making is ignored under such a view, thus reinforcing the injustices that make up the status quo.

According to the Washington Consensus, domestic state actions in the economy are meant to shrink, making way for “the free market”. Wherever there are deficits, NGOs have come to be seen almost everywhere as substitutes for state support of social services like health and education, when in fact they are at best complements.

It need not be emphasised that these trends continue in the face of what is probably history's greatest “market failure”: the great financial and economic crisis that has engulfed the world today. Despite historic state interventions in every economy in the world, few doubts are being expressed from the high offices about the essential correctness of the world-view that has been bequeathed by the Washington Consensus.

And yet, doubt is very much in order. For what is one to make of the celebrated doctrine of “consumer sovereignty”, the boast of microeconomic theory and liberal individualism alike, when it is actually “investor sovereignty” which calls the shots everywhere, as the approach of various governments to the present financial and economic crisis testifies so amply? When it is corporate supply, and the capitalist imperative to sell, rather than consumer demand, which drives the key economic policy decisions of most

governments around the world? When corporations are all too often being seen as “too big to fail”, aren't they, as many people have found fit to say, simply “too big”? Or as others have said “too big to be private”? Moreover, let us not forget that the corporation has the legal status of a person in US law since the late-19th century.

Civil society in the age of globalisation

The term “civil society” is of ancient lineage. In classical times it was used to denote a “good society”, usually indistinguishable from the state itself. In Socratic Athens, for instance, it meant resolving public issues through open dialogue and discussion. Civility consisted in the proper discharge of one's duties as a good citizen.

Modern usages, dating from the time of Tocqueville, make a sharp distinction between “civil society” and “political society”. Classical liberalism believed that the latter was part of the structure of the state, and given to excesses of power, while the former constituted the realm of “democratic sentiments”, where people could express their views and sort out social conflicts in a rational manner, often standing against the state in order to do so.

Living in arguably the most illiberal phase of European history, Antonio Gramsci was more sceptical that civil society could perform this designated function. To him, civil society was essentially the locus around which the cultural and ideological conceptions suited to the hegemony of capital cohered in the public imagination.

What has to be asked in the phase of history that we are living through — in India as much as in the world as a whole — is whether the reigning theory and practice of civil society (and its institutions) is performing the liberal, possibly radical, role that Tocqueville expected it to. Or is it the case that the cultural, ideological and institutional role of civil society has essentially become one of legitimising the unjust socio-economic order of global capitalism?

The question cannot be answered in a theoretical manner, since it is ultimately an empirical one. We have to look around us today and see whether the myriad organisations, institutions and forums which constitute the thickly-braided fabric of civil society are decisively supportive of people's struggles for justice. Or do they simply constitute a smiling mask which knowingly or inadvertently reinforces the hegemony which sustains the routine injustices we can all see?

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The CSR charade

**NITYANAND
JAYARAMAN**

Capitalist guru Milton Friedman says that a corporation is simply an artificial legal structure, neither moral nor immoral. There is nothing in the make-up of the corporation that imposes an obligation on it to behave responsibly or in the public interest. So, civil society actors who may be appealing to the corporate conscience may be barking up a non-existent tree, says this writer

HOW SHOULD PROGRESSIVE 'CIVIL SOCIETY' relate to corporations? To answer this, one needs to understand corporations for what they are and are not. Human they are not. So, using adjectives like responsible, considerate, evil, selfish is, strictly speaking, meaningless. If corporations were human, they would be diagnosed as psychopaths, says Dr Robert Hare, a renowned criminologist and one of the FBI's top consultants on psychopathy. Dr Hare applied his checklist for psychopathic tendencies to corporations and concluded that corporations, like psychopaths, are superficial, grandiose, manipulative, predatory, unable to empathise or feel remorse, don't accept responsibility for their actions, and will put others at risk. That a corporation by definition lacks responsibility should not be dismissed as the rantings of an anti-capitalist. In the celebrated film *The Corporation*, capitalist guru Milton Friedman says: "If a building can't have responsibility, what does it mean to say a corporation can? A corporation is simply an artificial legal structure. It is neither moral, nor immoral."

There is nothing in the make-up of the corporation that imposes an obligation on it to behave responsibly or in the public interest. The corporation's primary legal obligation is to maximise profits for its shareholders. And if that means externalising certain costs — labour welfare, safety, environmental protection — then doing that within the framework of law, where necessary, and violating the law if that were a safe risk is what a corporation is programmed to do. Robert Monks, an investment manager interviewed in *The Corporation* says it simply: "The corporation is an externalising machine, in the same way that a shark is a killing machine. There isn't any question of malevolence or of will. The enterprise has within it, and the shark has within it, those characteristics that enable it to do that for which it was designed."

People who work in corporations, however, are not all psychopaths. But, they cannot allow emotions to guide their performance while working within corporations. A compassionate CEO who refuses to fire workers because of his empathy with their mid-life obligations will be considered irresponsible, and promptly replaced.

If corporations do not have a soul, appealing to them is pointless. So, civil society actors who may be appealing to

the corporate conscience may be barking up a non-existent tree. Scaring the management that their profits could take a beating may help improve your bargaining position, but one would still need to contend with the fact that a psychopath doesn't value promises too highly. Any promises you get from a corporation would have to be ratified by a government or a court for it to have a chance of being fulfilled.

Engaging in stakeholder dialogue with corporations may be an option, just as clutching at straws is an option. The stakeholder framework is itself a product of the much used, little understood concept of 'civil society'. The phrase 'civil society', grounded as it is in western citizenship notions of individualism and private property rights, may not be well suited to the Indian context. Here, the starkest conflicts involving corporations and people are being played out amidst communities that are seeking to retain community control over resources — land, water, forests and minerals. Guhagar, Kashipur, Kalinganagar, Singur, Nandigram, Chengara, Bhopal, Raigad, Mettur, Jadugoda, Plachimada, Narmada valley, Niyamagiri. Many people from each of these places have died violent deaths as a result of their conflicts with the state or the corporate sector, or both.

By conceding a 'civil' dialogue among stakeholders, 'civil society' actors willy-nilly legitimise the existence of the externalising machine. That machine can very simply address the rights of the stakeholder: through stakeholder consultations, promised extension of compensation to stakeholders. But all this is conditional; one or more of the stakeholders must give up his stake over the resources. Not giving up the stake is not an option.

The corporation too, by perpetrating the stakeholder concept, insinuates itself as a stakeholder on a par with citizens and communities asserting an equal if not greater right to resources that were never its to begin with.

When a corporation or the government makes a bid for the land used by indigenous peoples, peasants, landless agricultural labourers, forest-dwellers or cattle-herders, the latter are not given a chance to reject the proposal. Indeed, in the instance of Tata's Singur car factory, the Calcutta High Court ruled that the peasants could not refuse to yield their



land because the land was being acquired for a “public purpose”. Tata Motors’ Nano factory had been transformed into a national project.

The phrase ‘civil society’ is seldom used by community groups in conflict with corporations or the state over resources — land, water, forests, minerals. Such groups describe themselves as ‘community groups’, ‘grassroots organisations’ or ‘struggle groups’, and usually articulate demands to retain community control or wrest control for the community over natural resources. Eminent social scientist Partha Chatterjee sets apart such groups as part of ‘political society’ rather than ‘civil society’. This distinction may be vital to those who consider themselves part of ‘civil society’.

The dynamics between members of political society seeking to assert rights over resources and corporations looking for the same resources is, broadly speaking, confrontational. Instances where such interactions seem cordial and resemble a consultation or negotiation often happen only after the former has lost a lot.

Civil society, even progressive civil society, is not a homogeneous entity. Many members of civil society ally themselves very closely with community struggle groups, to the point of dissociating themselves from civil society and identifying only with political society.

Among those that identify themselves as ‘civil society’ groups, there are some that believe that corporations can be reformed, and others that believe that corporations have to be rejected and redefined.

Groups like the World Wide Fund for Nature openly collaborate with corporations. Groups like Greenpeace confront corporations through dramatic action, do not touch corporate or government money and seek legitimacy by raising their funds largely through individual donations. At the same time, they are also comfortable occupying the same stage and congratulating corporations for small acts of mercy. For instance, if Coca-Cola — a company accused of robbing communities of scarce groundwater — were to refrigerate the cola made using the allegedly stolen groundwater without using ozone-depleting refrigerants, Greenpeace would congratulate the company and call it a “tactical move”. It actually has.

Companies like Tata and Infosys may have CSR mission statements that would put Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity to shame. “As a corporate citizen with a conscience, Infosys strives to cultivate a sustainable approach to conducting business. In our interactions with stakeholders within and beyond the sphere of business, we recognise that we shoulder a larger responsibility,” Infosys says on its website. The company also donates liberally to rural education, extending computer facilities to educational institutions. People love these acts of charity. Then, how do members of civil society react when they read a headline that says ‘5 killed in mishap at Infosys campus’? The article is about five construction workers who were killed while fixing the glass facade of an Infosys building. Construction workers are the marginalised among the marginalised; construction accidents with loss of life or injury are a daily affair. Most of

them are migrant workers, living in worse-than-prison makeshift shanties. For risking life and limb, they often fail to get paid even the minimum wage. Children of construction workers are very unlikely to get any formal education.

If the media were taken to be a representation of civil society's views, one finds a disturbing level of comfort with corporate charity. Demands for corporate responsibility are seen as unrealistic or unreasonable. Responsibility in the Infosys example would be to ensure that your construction is carried out in a safe manner, with workers earning living wages, and living in liveable conditions, with facilities for clean water, drainage, children's education and healthcare as a minimum.

Doing this doesn't take much, and is well within the discretion of Infosys to ensure. Companies exercise tremendous diligence in hiring candidates; they invest in the capacity-building and oversight of their employees. So why don't they apply the same due diligence in their choice of building contractors? The answer is simple: one act contributes to the bottomline, the other takes away from it.

The government that should ensure that labour laws and environmental laws are enforced is usually in bed with the corporation, or totally absent in its role as regulator. How else would you explain the fact that companies that tout glowing CSR credentials operate unlicensed factories?

Even as I write this, the UPA government is adding the final touches to an amended version of the Atomic Energy Act. The key purpose of the amendments is to allow the private sector to participate in atomic energy projects. The draft on which the Bill is said to be fashioned was crafted by FICCI, with representatives of Gammon India (of Delhi Metro notoriety), NPCIL, L&T, Tata and Reliance as the lead authors. The proposed amendments will not only allow the private sector to participate in nuclear energy projects, it will also immunise equipment suppliers and construction companies from any liability in the event of a nuclear disaster. The main beneficiaries of such an Act will be companies like the authors of the FICCI report, GE and Toshiba Westinghouse, which can now peddle products and services to the nuclear industry without worry. Flaws, even fundamental defects in their products, will not translate into financial liability for the companies in the event of a disaster. The proposed law would require taxpayers to shell out the bulk of the compensation if a nuclear meltdown happens.

What I'm getting at is this. If you want to engage with the corporate sector with a view to making this world a better place, do it with an intent to dismantle this uncontrollable behemoth and reclaim our democracy. Anything that we put in place of the corporation must be amenable to public control, not merely control by shareholders.

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Partners in sustainability

NGOs have realised that the participation of business is essential to the development of any long-lasting solutions

**YASHASHREE
GURJAR**

AS GLOBALISATION GATHERS PACE, the world around us is increasingly adopting collaboration as a way of doing things. A lot of the issues that organisations face today, whether they are businesses, government or civil society, cannot be resolved by any one individual entity. Business-to-business collaborations like co-branding are becoming common; so too are partnerships between businesses and NGOs.

International institutions specialising in aid and economic development have recognised the value and importance of cooperation between sectors in promoting sustainable development. In December 2005, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution, Toward Global Partnerships. The text of the resolution describes the joint role of organisations and businesses in the eradication of poverty and national development.

One of the reasons why businesses are seen as having a big role to play in development is the diminishing role of government in the context of an increasingly 'globalised' international economy. In the last few decades, the world has seen the unprecedented power that corporations — especially large multinationals (MNCs) — have gained in terms of their access to resources and their ability to influence governments.

Because of their ability to have far-reaching effects, there is a growing sense that business has a responsible role to play in promoting development. Simultaneously, NGOs are seeking new ways to achieve their goals. John Elkington and Shelly Fennell, in *Partners for Sustainability*, argue that NGOs worldwide have become frustrated in their efforts to improve environmental practices through legislation, and, as a result, some are attempting to work directly with business to achieve their goals. Quite simply, NGOs have realised that the participation of business is essential to the development of any long-lasting solutions.

This expectation from various stakeholders, combined with the pressure to play an effective role in development, has seen many corporate organisations and NGOs getting into partnerships.

Businesses and civil society (non-profit/activist) organisations are discovering that despite very different goals, they can often produce more impressive outcomes in collaboration than they can on their own. This type of relationship is based

One of the reasons why businesses are seen as having a big role to play in development is the diminishing role of government in the context of an increasingly 'globalised' international economy. In the last few decades, the world has seen the unprecedented power that corporations — especially large multinationals (MNCs) — have gained in terms of their access to resources and their ability to influence governments

on the concept of mutual gain, in contrast with traditional business-civil society relationships based upon concepts of philanthropy or responsibility. A mutual gain process draws from traditional business concepts that link strategy to distinctive resources, capabilities and competencies.

How corporations gain

Partnerships with NGOs can bring many benefits to a corporation, an important one being management and reduction of risk. Relationships with NGOs can help corporations reduce general operating risks, and risks on specific projects. The NGOs represent stakeholders outside of the core corporate structure, and provide a sort of early warning network of potential problems with the activities of a corporation.

Gaining competitive advantage is another area of benefit to the corporation. It includes understanding markets, new product development, building barriers of entry to other corporations through distinctive cause-related marketing in products that might otherwise be difficult to distinguish from each other. Corporations are using CSR and partnerships with NGOs as a strategic tool for business enhancement.

Also, corporations are getting into partnerships in order to

help resolve some of the social problems faced by developing nations — poverty, illiteracy, lack of governance — which, in turn, are seen to be crucial to their own development. Corporations are becoming more concerned about the health of the communities in which they operate. One unique advantage that NGOs offer their corporate partners is professional expertise to respond to the needs of communities in which corporations are or wish to be active. Corporations gain from this in terms of enhanced image and a social licence to operate.

A number of corporations also see NGO partnerships as a way to strengthen their own corporate governance. An increasing number of corporations are using volunteer programmes or seconding their employees to NGO partners; this influences the company's and employees' attitudes towards communities and, by extension, influences the environment within the company.

How NGOs benefit

NGOs are quickly beginning to realise that there are several gains for them too in partnerships with corporations. Access to funds and the ability to influence the social agenda are some of the more immediate benefits of being in a partnership with a corporate body. Apart from these, there are several other benefits for NGOs.

An NGO can benefit from the skills present in a corporation. Tadashi Yamamoto and Kim Gould in their article 'Corporate-NGO Partnership in Asia-Pacific (APAC)' (1999) illustrate how corporations in the APAC region are beginning to view partnerships with NGOs as beyond the traditional approach of philanthropy. "NGOs badly need certain management skills such as financial management, information technology, and strategic planning, which are essential to building a stronger institutional infrastructure. Strategic partnership with corporations provides NGOs with access to skills and training that they would otherwise not be able to afford."

Corporations are focused on bottomlines and therefore can bring to the NGO a sense of accountability, a focus on deliverables and the need to stress timelines.

BILT-in partnerships for sustainable development

Ballarpur Industries Ltd (BILT) is one of the largest manufacturers of paper in India. It is a part of the \$3 billion Avantha Group which has a presence in ten countries. At Avantha, sustainability is about how the group develops its business towards ecological, social and economic viability. All of these are recognised as shared responsibilities within the group, enabling the continuous improvement of its operations. The sustainability of BILT's operations is linked to its ability to address the issue of sustainable development of the communities it works with and the environment in which it operates.

BILT has active partnerships with 18 NGOs across India, operating at six of its manufacturing sites. Most of these

partnerships are focused on working in communities where BILT has its locations.

Communities around the manufacturing units are one of the most marginalised stakeholders of BILT. Specific engagement strategies have been drawn up to empower them, helping them enter the mainstream of society and thus break through the poverty cycle. Due to the prevailing poverty in the area, BILT's CSR programmes deal mainly with empowerment through livelihood-creation, education, health, and natural resources management. BILT reaches out to more than 250,000 people living in 270 villages and 20 urban slums. Annual stakeholder dialogues serve as an effective tool to incorporate feedback from communities and modify the strategy of involvement.

As a manufacturing industry based in backward areas, there are several challenges BILT faces vis-à-vis the communities in which it operates. The NGOs are credible organisations that have been able to work with communities and convince them of BILT's interest in community development; they have been instrumental in building trust between communities and the company. One of the most evident advantages of BILT's partnerships with NGOs is its ability to handle community expectations, especially some of the negative impressions the community has of BILT.

Sankalpa Bahu-Udeshiya Sanstha, a small grassroots-level NGO based in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, has been partnering with BILT for the last five years in developing a joint education intervention that started in ten villages and reached 300 children in its first year. Pre-intervention data in 2005 showed that 30% of children in the age-group 6 to 14 were out of school; even amongst school-going children, about 80% were unable to read or write well. Today, almost 98% of children in the 25 project villages can read and write well and also solve basic mathematics problems. School enrolment figures have reached 100%. The number of children out of school is almost zero. Till date, 7,000 children have been reached through this project.

Over the last few years, BILT has directly partnered to form organisations within communities, such as farmers' cooperatives and women's credit cooperatives, and has seen them successfully manage programmes that are in the larger interests of their villages and communities. The community-based organisations (CBOs) start off as informal groups and go on to become village-level institutions; some get themselves registered so that they can access funds from several donors. All the 40 CBOs formed by BILT are working independently or with minimal support from the company.

In 2003, women from Ashti village, Gadchiroli district, established their own credit cooperative society to fulfil the credit needs of an area where few banks were willing to extend loans due to the area's 'disturbed' status. After successfully running self-help groups for two to three years, members of the groups had the confidence to start their own

'bank' to resolve the larger credit needs of the community. The credit cooperative started with a share capital of Rs 20,000, collected from 201 women members. Today, 375 women are members of the society which transacts loans at a volume of Rs 1 crore per annum. In fact, the total cumulative transactions of the credit cooperative reached Rs 8 crore as of June 30, 2009. This cooperative venture has made significant contributions to the lives of over 350 families that are proud members of the cooperative. It has been of huge value to the local economy which is now self-sufficient in meeting its credit needs. Such effective partnerships have been a win-win situation for all associated stakeholders.

Overall, NGOs and CBOs gain from their partnerships with BILT not only in terms of funds to fulfil their development objectives but also in terms of capacity-building through training and exposure. BILT encourages volunteering; many employees regularly volunteer their skills in the community, making programmes more robust.

Partnerships over the years have helped BILT develop programmes that reflect the needs and aspirations of each of its stakeholders. The focal point has been the transparency and openness with which BILT has dealt with its stakeholders, by engaging them in a dialogue process throughout the project lifecycle. Opportunities for communication and dialogue as a part of the partnership initiative with stakeholders, in areas where the company operates, are of immense value in fulfilling CSR. From these talks with individuals and groups the company can assess what is of interest and concern to every member of society. This allows the company to share its perspectives on social issues, which are then tied into an organisational approach so that what is learnt is reflected in the management goals of each unit in the company. BILT believes that this form of stakeholder engagement, in which the stakeholder is given a role and a say in what impacts him/her and the group, is a way to realise the goal of being a sincere, trusted company.

Conclusion

NGO-corporate partnership is an idea whose time has come. More so because CSR has become critical to the sustainability of the corporate sector as a whole. Corporations are realising that it is not enough for them to grow without society around them growing as well. Growing in isolation is just not viable anymore because it will lead to shrinking markets and talent pools in the future. Just as corporations have begun to realise that they need to be "part of a solution... and not part of the problem," NGOs too have come to realise that the participation of the corporate sector is necessary to resolve the myriad problems faced by the country.

Yashashree Gurjar is Chief Executive, Avantha Foundation

'Civil society is a cacophony, not an orchestra'

Sitting around and talking with cola or automobile companies just won't work, says Sunita Narain, director of the Centre for Science and Environment, explaining why CSE always takes an adversarial position with big business. CSE's role, she says, is to put their point of view across in the public arena, and they are willing to use any strategy to do that

RASHME SEHGAL



Sunita Narain, Director, Centre for Science and Environment, has been actively involved in research, communication and advocacy on environmental issues. She has also co-edited a range of publications on the state of India's environment as well as advocated environmental issues at major international fora. Narain has helped build the CSE into a premier institution with a staff strength of around 100. She has also been publishing the fortnightly

newsmagazine, Down To Earth, since 1992.

How would you define civil society?

Civil society is a cacophony, not an orchestra. There are different kinds of voices speaking for different segments of society. We have been witness to so much change in the last five years. I would describe it as a growing civil society movement. A great deal of this focuses on middle class issues and is about defending the rights of the middle class. Take the example of the residents' welfare associations (RWAs) that have taken up the whole power rates issue, or the Jessica Lal murder case and the way it was highlighted by the media.

Would you agree with the perception that civil society is becoming more and more powerful?

There was an empty space which is now being filled. My fear is that India remains an inequitable country. It also remains a very rural country. If civil society is able to represent the voice of this vast majority then it is a good trend. Then the pressures being exerted are for the good. But this is not always the case. The BRT corridor is a classic case of car versus bus. Here, what civil society is doing is trying to protect the rights of people who drive cars. Here, civil society is not pushing the voices of the poor; rather it is pushing the voices of an elitist class of people.

Is this a global phenomenon?

In the US, the middle class comprises a key component of

civil society. It has been in the forefront of major campaigns including the way garbage is collected from homes. But in India the situation is very different. Take the example of the ragpicker. How concerned is civil society about his situation? Who is speaking on his behalf? Everyone here follows the NIMBY (not in my backyard) principle. We don't want something uncomfortable to happen in our own backyards.

But you can't dispute the fact that civil society has had its share of successes...

There is no doubt that initially we were driven by the Gandhian culture, but the situation has changed over the years. Today, one of the key questions facing civil society is: Where is the money going to come from? People talk about corporate social responsibility, and high-profile bodies like the Planning Commission also talk about a bulk of the money coming from the corporate sector. My question is: How are we going to be allowed to create structures which will allow dissent? How are corporations going to be persuaded to pay for such institutions realising that this is also part of a democratic process?

In other parts of the world, the government will give civil society agencies a certain amount of money. But in India the situation is different. Take an umbrella organisation like CAPART. We know, through our own experience, that no NGO that raises its voice on independent issues will receive funding. I believe the government must give civil society a space in which to operate. As a government, the Congress party is more open to dissent, but the issue before us is how can different points of view be promoted? The Planning Commission talks about allowing many voices to speak out, but we believe it is always the same kind of voices that get a hearing in India.

How strong is the emphasis on creating more transparent and more accountable governance?

We at the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) have helped build an understanding on issues relating to the environment. This has now emerged as an issue of prime concern in developing nations. Earlier, people believed that the environment mattered only if you became rich. Today, the situation is different. Millions depend on the environment to survive.



The CNG (compressed natural gas) campaign to clean up Delhi's air was a major gain in environmental terms. The whole campaign for public transport also requires a major transition, forcing the government to depart from its car-centric approach. It is keeping this in mind that we have been demanding an increase in the number of buses and bus lanes, as also the integration of bus and bicycle tracks and walking lanes. We have also been demanding an increase in taxes being levied on car owners. In Bangalore, the tax is around 114% but in Delhi it is around 4%. We wanted it hiked in Delhi but the lieutenant-governor shot it down. The car lobby is extremely strong. The bus is treated as a commercial vehicle that has to pay an annual passenger tax; car owners can get away with a one-time tax. We need to highlight that cars and two-wheelers transport only 20% of Delhi's people. Over 38% walk to work and another 10% of the population are cyclists.

Why does the CSE tend to adopt an adversarial position while raising issues with industry, as we saw during the cola exposé? What have these exposés achieved in the long run and, in retrospect, do you think adopting a less adversarial position might have helped?

Every group has its own role to play. We believe in pushing the envelope; our aim is towards pushing the biggest and mightiest. If we had written a letter to Coca-Cola, it would not have worked. We need to have public advocacy in order to make big changes. We also need to strategise to come up with the most effective way of dealing with a situation. Even with automobile companies, we may sit around and talk to them but our role towards them continues to remain adversarial. We don't want money, we don't want to be chummy with them or part of the cocktail circuit. Our role is (out there) in the public arena, and we are willing to use any strategy to put our point of view across.

As regards the specific question of colas, we had received

emails to check colas (we have a laboratory). When we decided to check colas for pesticide content we did not know that there were two American cola companies (operating) in India. Our findings turned out to be dead right. A joint parliamentary committee was set up against us in 2004. It went on to uphold our findings that colas contained dangerous levels of pesticide, thereby exonerating our claims.

We are still fighting to ensure cola companies agree to formulate standards for finished products. People ask us why we are so obsessive. I maintain that if we can get them to adhere to standards, it will be a first in the world because there are no standards for finished products. If we do succeed, India will be the first country to have these standards.

People have asked us why we have not conducted a similar campaign against municipal corporation water. I would like to point out that this would require us checking the water content in many locations. We are a small company; this would require a much larger operation than we can handle. We need to strategise and come up with effective action. Our role is that of a watchdog. People levied all kinds of charges against us. We were accused of being a pseudo NGO, *jholawallahs*, and so on. But I would like to ask: Did I get my science wrong? In what way have we polarised the debate that pesticides in colas are bad for health?

Do you feel there should be greater public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the future?

Let me ask you a counter-question. Where have these PPPs worked? The only place where it seems to be working is outside urinals where an ad has been put up outside the urinal announcing the price to be paid to use that space. In all these PPPs, we are talking about profit. Public good in India represents the very poor. In the US, the middle class are in a position to pay for services, but that is not the case here. I don't think the PPP model works here and the UPA government has little to show for it.

Society and state

A multiplicity of civic associations of involved citizens is critical to the functioning of a modern state, both to support and contain it so that it serves and does not alienate its citizens. The state must be under the command of society, and not the other way around

**RUDOLF C
HEREDIA**

MOST RECENT DISCUSSIONS on our 'infotainment' TV channels and Page 3-dominated newspapers, as elsewhere, about whether or not the great pageant of parliamentary elections in India testifies to the success of our democracy, seem to miss the point. They sound more like a commentary on the Indian Premier League's 20-20 cricket jamboree than a debate on pertinent election issues. All this hype fails to confront the quintessential paradox of Indian democracy, namely that in spite of regular free and fair elections, of which we can justly be very proud, there is a growing disenchantment with politics and politicians. This is strong evidence that something is severely wrong in our democracy.

The crisis is precipitated by confusing procedure with substance, as the compulsions of our electoral politics do. We flatter ourselves about being the world's largest democracy. Perhaps we are better than many but hardly the best we can be, if 'We the people of India' would but measure ourselves against the republican ideals and principles of the Constitution we gave ourselves. Credible electoral procedure is in the order of necessary means, the necessary precondition to democratic governance, which is in the order of ends, the defining purpose of a democracy. Means must never displace or dictate ends; if they do they betray and subvert the very reason for their use.

So where have we gone wrong? Why do vital questions remain unaddressed, while vacuous slogans like 'India Shining', 'India Arising', and 'Jai Ho India' become the electoral tricks of performing politicians? How can the state be democratised and strengthened? How do our people, the last and the least first, affirm their rights without neglecting their civic duties, as the high and mighty so often do? How do we promote their integrated welfare and interests without negating the common good and the greater good? An effective response to such questions requires that we address substantive issues affecting our people, not just electoral procedures. This is the great failure of our democracy, which is not in any way to negate its real successes. But this failure confronts us with an urgent and pressing collective task: building civil society so that we can impact our present electoral politics and make it a means to fulfil the many broken promises and betrayed hopes that once were the very substance of the democratic aspirations

of our freedom struggle.

However, the old adage that the only remedy for a failing democracy is more democracy is still pertinent. But this does not distinguish the type of increased democracy that would be remedial. Rajni Kothari and others have characterised ours as plebiscitary democracy! The voters have a chance every five years in an election to "throw the rascals out"! But one set of rascals gets replaced by another, sometimes in the same election, because the voters have so few choices. This is very far from Ernest Renan's ideal of a nation as "a daily plebiscite". Direct democracy would be possible on only a limited local scale, not on a national one. Representative democracy gets too easily enmeshed in party concerns, which eventually displace citizens' interests. Thus, votebanks and closed-door negotiations are hardly able to cope with real economic concerns or chauvinistic ethnocentric groups. Such political problems are particularly acute in the new democracies of the third world. But even in the more mature ones of the first world, there is increasing citizen alienation.

Civil society

Civil society is still a somewhat controversial term, precisely because of the ambiguities associated with it. Though it is differently defined by various theorists, "the minimal definition would include the idea of a non-state autonomous sphere; empowerment of citizens; trust-building associational life; interaction with rather than subordination to the state," (Rudolph and Rudolph 2000: 1762). Thus the idea of free association within a legal framework is essential to the concept of 'civil society'.

In the context of the modern state, civil society refers to all social groups and institutions located between the family and the state. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his pathbreaking study of democracy in America in the 19th century, argues that a multiplicity of civic associations of involved citizens is critical to the functioning of a modern state, both to support and contain it so that it serves and does not alienate its citizens. Such strongly organised non-state interest groups are capable of checking eventual abuses of power by those who control the means of administration and coercion, as also to facilitate a balanced pluralism among civil society interests so that none can establish absolute dominance.

Civil society is still a somewhat controversial term, precisely because of the ambiguities associated with it. Though it is differently defined by various theorists, “the minimal definition would include the idea of a non-state autonomous sphere; empowerment of citizens; trust-building associational life; interaction with rather than subordination to the state”

Thus, civil society is the bulwark against abuse by centralised authority, whether democratic or dictatorial, the most effective protection against what Tocqueville called “the tyranny of the majority”, which goes by the euphemism ‘majoritarianism’ in our country. But more positively, civil society is the best guarantor and promoter of liberty, equality, fraternity, as substantive democratic values, protecting citizens from the state, from themselves, and from each other.

However, if civil society is located in the social space between kinship systems and political ones, it cannot but influence and be influenced by both sides — patriarchy and caste on the one hand, feudalism and authoritarianism on the other. We need to be more critical of, and sensitised to, such regressive forces, distorted by class and caste, religion and region, and other such vested interests. Much political reform has crashed on the rock of an intransigent and regressive civic order. Thus, it is hardly possible to have a polity premised on universal suffrage and fundamental rights when this is countered by particularistic solidarities and obscurantist faith, caste hierarchy and patriarchal authoritarianism. So too will a corrupt and criminalised political system undermine and erode civil society.

If civil society is to be a positive condition for democratisation of the state, then its shadow side cannot be ignored. A reorientation here may be a necessary requirement. But the positive and negative in terms of the social norms and cultural values must be sorted through.

For, civil society can be a tightly-knit network, a seamless robe that will not easily yield to incisive dissection, and, especially in traditional societies, even when these are changing, civil society there tends to fall back into the old stable equilibrium rather than find a new dynamic one.

Social capital

The attempt to focus on the more positive dynamic aspects of civil society has given rise to the concept of ‘social capital’. This represents more the perspective of the economists, just as ‘civil society’ did that of the political scientists on much the same phenomena. For, ‘social capital’ focuses on the positive aspects of sociability, placing them in a broader non-monetary context. Pierre Bourdieu defines it as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition,” (Bourdieu 1985: 248).

Robert Putnam has a positive understanding of social capital as ‘civiness’. He defines this as “features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, trust, that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit,” (Putnam 1993: 35). Essentially, it is a matter of investing trust in one another resulting in mutually beneficial returns. It is such social capital “primarily defined as interpersonal trust that makes it easier for people to do things together, get rid of freeriders and, for instance, agree on sanctions against non-performing governments,” (Tornquist, 1998: 109).

Alexjandro Portes puts together the present consensus thus: “Social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other structures,” (Portes 1998: 6). However, the sources of such social capital are ambiguous and admit of negative consequences for the economy. Thus, internalised norms can be seriously inhibiting, group solidarity can make for particularistic demands, social integration can stifle individuality, and community sanctions can become regressively oppressive. Such negative characteristics amount to negative social capital and correspond to the negative aspects of civil society.

Democratising democracy

There is an obvious parallel, even an overlap, between civil society and social capital. Civil society is the social infrastructure on which the political edifice must be built. Social capital, in stressing the non-monetary aspect of economic behaviour, can be similarly considered as those social assets that are crucial for a functioning economy, and more so for any kind of economic growth. But we still must ask how civil society can be effective in “democratising democracy” as urged by Anthony Giddens (1994). Also, how social capital can be best invested for ‘socialising’ the market by more constructively embedding it in society.

A vibrant civil society, as explained earlier, provides the

necessary wherewithal for a state to cope democratically with this dilemma, and adequate social capital is the essential infrastructural investment for both the polity and the economy. If to re-embed the economy in society is a *sine qua non* of humanising and socialising the market, then political intervention in civil society may be needed to eliminate all its “institutionalised inequality” and other forms of structural injustices, lest these compound rather than resolve issues of economic poverty and political marginalisation.

A civic state

The subtle mix of coercion and consent that underpins the hegemony of dominant elites does not negate possibilities for a counter-hegemony built up by concerned intellectuals on the critical commonsense of the masses. For, in the various contradictions inevitable in any society, there are the interstices in which such a counter-hegemony can be grounded. In many situations this will call for a reform, if not a revolution, of civil society, especially when there are such entrenched and resistant social institutions like caste, patriarchy, intransigent bureaucracies, authoritarian kinship structures, and political parties.

The basis for revolutionary change would be the older Indic civilisational order in which the state did not order society, rather it is the order of society that the state maintained. D L Sheth observes: “The state was under the command of the society and not the other way around. Indeed, several political orders survived and competed with one another in these societies, in the past. But they were all subject to a larger civilisational order in which governance was not defined as a monopoly of the state,” (Sheth 1989: 625).

It is possible then, in this reformed indigenous model, to consider “the state not as an instrument of an ethnically defined nation, but a political entity functioning under the control of a civil society. It will be a state for and on the behalf of civil society: in brief a civil state and not a nation state,” (*ibid*: 626).

But this can be premised not on a narrow aggressive nationalism, but only on a broad inclusive patriotism, such as Gandhi and Tagore espoused. For both “in this ideology of patriotism rather than of nationalism, there was a built-in critique of nationalism and refusal to recognise the nation-state as the organising principle of the Indian civilisation and as the last word in the country's political life,” (Nandy 1994:2).

This is a viable vision for which we must muster the social capital to build a new civil order for an authentic democratic politics and, in the bargain, eschew a chauvinist nationalistic one.

Procedure and substance

Democratic substance as summed up in the revolutionary shibboleth — liberty, equality, fraternity — demands another

level of engagement if it is to be authentic and sustainable. This requires not just a rigorous assertion of civil rights as a protection for democratic ones, but even more so a faithful exercise of civic duties as the very basis for the credibility and viability of these rights. This is precisely what civil society is all about. There is deep wisdom in Gandhiji's insistence that if we took care of our duties, rights would take care of themselves.

Clearly this goes beyond mere structural changes in the polity; they cut deeper to demand radical ones in civil society as well. Certainly, no genuinely generative politics can be sustained without an actively engaged civil society, with all that this implies. It is “the heart of liberal democracy and its indispensable condition,” (Randall and Theobald 1998: 263); in other words, to make our politics more responsive to our citizens. If celebrity electoral candidates were committed to the long haul that any constructive politics demands, building civil society would be a far more effective point of entry than media-grabbing short-lived electoral campaigns.

This is the substantive democracy that electoral procedures are meant to eventually reach, just as it is such substantive democratic values that effectively refine our electoral politics. There is a virtuous circle here, which has unfortunately turned into a vicious one, and now this must be reversed. Time will tell if we are moving towards this goal. If we don't, history will judge us severely for having perverted and betrayed the legacy of our founding fathers and the freedom they struggled for.

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From vote to voice

Across India, civil society has been mobilising and empowering India's *aam-aadmi* to question their government and hold it to account. The new accountability agenda marks the beginning of a process to deepen democracy in India where people participate in government not just through their vote but also through their voice

YAMINI AIYAR

IT IS A HOT SUMMER'S DAY in April 2009. Palaspani, a sleepy village tucked in the far corner of Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh, has been brought to life by a motley crew of activists and researchers. They have spent the last three days making report cards on the learning levels of children at the government-run primary school. The crew spoke to parents, teachers and others. They gathered information on school expenditures, the Parent-Teachers Association (PTA), and other school-related activities. The exercise is about to come to an end with a village meeting to share the findings.

Less than 50% of the children can identify letters, words and numbers correctly. Most PTA members rarely meet or interact with the school. People seem to know little about where and how money has been spent. A discussion ensues. For the first time, people in the village begin to ask questions: Why don't our children learn? What does the school spend its money on? As the sun sets and the meeting comes to an end, the PTA resolves to monitor the school and hold it accountable for teaching the children.

Palaspani's story is not unusual. Across the country, India's civil society has been actively mobilising and empowering India's *aam-aadmi* to question their government and hold it to account. Through these efforts, it has gone beyond its traditional watchdog or vigilance function to involve itself directly in the everyday functions of the state. These initiatives have empowered citizens to engage directly in budget-making, planning, auditing and monitoring the performance of public sector officials. Citizens are now asking questions and demanding answers directly from their governments. In the words of political scientist Anne Marie Goetz, this hints at the emergence of a "new accountability agenda", one that will fundamentally redefine how accountability is sought.

Civil society's accountability efforts are premised on the recognition that information is power. People have a right to know what their government does and how government funds are being spent. Information allows people to question government and to participate in government. Most importantly, it allows people to hold government to account for its promises.

But public access to information has never been easy. In the

early-1990s, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), the now-famous people's organisation in Rajasthan, led what is undoubtedly civil society's greatest victory in the struggle for accountability: the movement for the right to information. It took over ten long years of mobilisation, agitation and activism before the Government of India passed the Right to Information Act in 2005. The Act is now being used regularly by civil society organisations across the country to encourage a culture of transparency and expose wrongdoing in government functioning.

Civil society organisations have drawn upon a number of innovative tools to pursue the new accountability agenda. One innovation is budget analysis and advocacy. Budget analysis aims to demystify the budget and present it in a comprehensible manner for the general public. It also involves finding out how much has been allocated to the social sector and holding the government to its commitments to the poor. The Delhi-based Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) is one example. CBGA organises an annual consultation where civil society organisations come together to place their demands for the budget, in order to involve them in the budget process. Another innovative strategy adopted by CBGA is the annual people's debate on the budget. This debate takes place the day after the budget is presented to Parliament and is an effort to strengthen the *aam-aadmi's* voice in budgetary debates.

Social audit is another powerful tool. Pioneered by the MKSS, a social audit is a process whereby citizens compare state-reported expenditures with actual monies spent. Evidence is gathered through interactions with participants in development projects, physical verification of schemes, and interviews with local-level panchayat members and line department officials. Findings from the audit are then shared with government officials in a public forum. The public hearing is the most powerful aspect of the social audit. By bringing people together to directly engage and question government officials, it immediately challenges entrenched power relations and empowers the poorest and most marginalised sections of society. Social audits are now mandatory, by law, under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Since its

Courtesy PACS Programme



launch, civil society organisations have been conducting social audits all across the country often in partnership with local administrative officials.

The government of Andhra Pradesh has gone a step further by institutionalising social audits. To do this, it has collaborated with CSOs to build up a 35-member team that facilitates and manages the audit process. The team trains educated village youth who conduct the actual audit. Andhra Pradesh now holds an average of 64 audits a month.

Apart from tracking expenditures, CSOs are also involved in efforts to engage citizens in evaluating outcomes of public expenditures. One innovative effort is the Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER), facilitated by Pratham, a Delhi-based CSO working to strengthen education in India. ASER is a countrywide survey that collects data on learning levels among schoolchildren. They have developed a simple tool that tests the learning levels of schoolchildren in reading, comprehension, and arithmetic. Started in 2005, ASER involves over 15,000 CSOs and volunteers. As a result, it is now possible to measure the yearly progress of learning levels across states, draw inter-state comparisons and, most importantly, make policymakers answerable for the funds being spent on primary education.

Civil society has also begun to engage with the electoral process to push for greater political accountability. This involves monitoring elected representatives, publicising

information on their performance, and pushing for public disclosure of a candidate's assets, as well as criminal and financial records. The run-up to the recent Lok Sabha elections saw the emergence of a number of new efforts to improve the standard of candidates contesting the elections and to keep criminals out of the electoral fray. This work is still in a nascent phase. However, it marks an important transition in civil society activism, which had stayed away from engaging directly with political parties.

These are just a few examples of the new accountability agenda. Its greatest strength is that it empowers citizens and deepens democratic action. These initiatives have challenged the deeply entrenched power relations in which much of India lives, by opening up spaces for the poorest and most disempowered to participate in governance and by supporting them in demanding their rights. The new accountability agenda marks the beginnings of a change in mindset towards the state. It shows a recognition of the right to participate and the right to have one's voice heard. Most importantly, it marks the beginning of a process to deepen democracy in India where people participate in government not just through their vote but also through their voice.

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Media and civil society

If civil society refers to the arena of voluntary collective action around shared interests, purposes and values, the media help create the public sphere within which such action takes place. Therefore, it would appear that these two institutions complement each other and are, in fact, natural partners. But is that really the case? We explore this proposition through a series of conversations

PAMELA
PHILIPOSE

'The media fail to pick up silent deprivations'

A K SHIVA KUMAR



A K Shiva Kumar is a noted development economist. In addition to serving as an advisor to Unicef, he teaches economic and public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and is a visiting professor at the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad.

The media, as opposed to civil society organisations, are much more focused on information-gathering. This may entail some analysis, but their overriding concern is to put out timely

information. Civil society organisations, in contrast, see for themselves a role that has much more to do with public education. Information is, of course, the first step in awareness-building, but, beyond that, there is the business of influencing public reasoning and debate.

The second aspect is that the media, because they are driven by concerns of topicality, don't see the entire story through. They may mount a short campaign, but they don't have a long-term interest in systematically or strategically influencing policy. Although it is also true that just as there is evidence-based policymaking — that is, you don't make policies without evidence to support them — there is policy-based evidence-making. The media, to some extent, do that. They may be in favour of a policy, say privatisation, and they constantly ferret out information that supports that position. But the good thing is that readers invariably discern this. Today, there are so many different sources of information that I don't fear that the position of one newspaper or TV channel is going to make a great difference.

We must also remember that in a country as large as India, media discourse tends to be variegated. If you are sitting in Delhi, the main discussion about security would be around Pakistan and Kashmir, but if you are located in Chennai,

coverage of issues like Kashmir is minimal, while that of the Tamil crisis would be much wider. So location matters for the media. Anything that is distant in time and space does not make an impact for the media, while that is not the case with civil society groups.

Then there is the fact that the media are definitely driven by the need for financial sustainability. They cannot do what a lot of civil society groups and NGOs can, or try to do, of managing on low budgets. The way in which the media are organised, their motivations, and so on, make the compulsion of financial sustainability crucial. This means they always have to move on. They cannot afford to harp on a particular issue. This also means that the media fail to pick up silent deprivations. Malnutrition, responsible for hundreds of thousands of child deaths, for instance, is not big news. If, however, ten children die of a wrong vaccine, it is.

It is important to understand why this is the case. I think this is not so much the fault of the media as the fault of the nature of public discourse. After all, the media will only report what exists. If there is a public debate generated by civil society, it will get reflected in the media. For instance, when the Right to Information and National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) Bills were being discussed, or when the CNG controversy hit Delhi, or when there was a public outcry against domestic violence, these issues did figure in the media. But given that the volume and quality of public debate in India is so poor, it may not be realistic to expect more from the media which are essentially reactive, not proactive.

Having said this I would add that if I were a development NGO I would definitely have a well-thought-out strategy on partnering the media. A strategy that puts forward information and issues that would appeal to them. And because India is so big it makes no sense for an organisation to have a national strategy. The media are very differently developed in Chennai than they are in Jharkhand. So there is need to think through how one partners the media to take a particular issue forward.

'The media is responsible for the conflation of Islam and terrorism'

SYEDA HAMEED



Syeda Hameed has just been appointed Member, Planning Commission, for a second consecutive term. She founded the Muslim Women's Forum, which has been involved in legal literacy for Muslim women, and is a Founder Trustee of WIPSA, which works for people-to-people contact in South Asia.

The important question is how does one define 'civil society'? Non-governmental sector? Too negative a way of seeing things. Voluntary sector? Then there is the differentiation between funded and non-funded organisations, between being a charity and working to a business model. 'Civil society' is a very broad category indeed.

For me, civil society is an entity that articulates concerns that affect the entire community. At this very moment, the people of Sikkim are protesting the building of a hydroelectric project on the Teesta. It is the classic clash between 'progress' and 'environment', 'modernity' and age-old beliefs. Many in government critique such activism, seeing it as some people making it their business to egg local people to voice disgruntlement. I don't buy that argument because ordinary people don't know how to work the system. They need to be taught how to express and fight for their interests.

Now, ideally, the media should help in articulating these social concerns but I don't see that happening. The media, especially the mainstream media with their enormous powers of influence, either fail to articulate these concerns or articulate them in a way designed to cater to their own interests and drive up their TRPs. They thus end up ignoring concerns that are life and death matters for people whose lands are being inundated, or whose hold on life is slipping. Take the state of Benaras' handloom weavers. I believe the next spate of suicides will be from here. There is some very good and courageous work being done by civil society organisations in that area, but I don't see mainstream media paying much attention to the specific factors that have impoverished these weavers, or indeed the important work being done by groups here.

I have seen such great developments in the most unexpected pockets of this country, thanks to civil society organisations. Take healthcare. Some initiatives have amazingly halved the level of infant mortality or taken health delivery to the hinterland. If these practices and strategies are adopted across the country, they could make a huge difference to India's health profile. But the media do not do their bit, and these examples remain largely unknown.

I understand, of course, that the media are not totally free to do what they want and that journalists work under many constraints. But a great deal depends on those at the top. If the signal from the top is all about shoring up the entertainment quotient and milking the vicarious pleasures of reflecting the lives of the famous, nothing is going to happen. There is a small percentage of the media, some of them with very limited reach, which keeps working at transforming society. But it is so insignificant.

Nothing to my mind reflects the state of the mainstream media today better than the coverage we got of 26/11. It disturbed me greatly, both as a Muslim and an Indian. As a Muslim, I was perturbed by the anti-Muslim sentiments that were whipped up. Today, if Islam and terror have become conflated, the responsibility for it lies to a great extent on the media. Then, as an Indian, the way everybody reacted worried me a great deal, given the fragile security situation on the subcontinent.

If media and civil society were to be partners, they could potentially be a very strong force. But we must also recognise that the resources that are driving the media today come from the commercial sector. How then can the Lepchas, who want to protect their sacred groves against the move of a big corporate giant to build a hydro project on those very lands, expect to get media support?

'We run with the hounds and hunt the hares'

TARUN TEJPAL



Tarun Tejpal is Editor-in-Chief of the news magazine Tehelka. He is also a well-known commentator and novelist. Tehelka has broken new ground with its strong public interest journalism and sting investigations. Asiaweek listed Tejpal as one of Asia's 50 most powerful communicators in 2001.

The media today have become a purely commercial construct. Civil society, in contrast, is not — there is no money to be made out of the activities that civil society is involved in. I think that this has become the fundamental difference between the media and civil society organisations.

Ideally, civil society should be amplifying what the media do, and media should be articulating the concerns of civil society. But today this complementarity is not very evident. Of course, there will always be issues on which journalism and civil society find themselves on the same side, but when this happens it is largely because the media do not see those issues as handicapping them commercially. So, on Jessica Lal, for example, everybody is on the same side and all the big media houses clamber to project the story. But if it is about a

SEZ acquired by Reliance, it's another story.

I always say, in the last 25-30 years we have seen many political exposés but you will find it difficult to get five big exposés of corporate wrongdoing in that list. This journalistic atmosphere has been teeming and growing by the day. The Indian media constantly focus on soft targets and completely steer clear of hard targets. So if television happens to get a rabbit in its crosshairs, it will run the rabbit down until it is dead. But it will never take on the hound, because the hound can hit back. So we run with the hounds and hunt the hares; that's what we do, and we make a virtue of it.

Also, many in the profession have come to believe that if you can stick a microphone in somebody's face you become a journalist. This is absurd. If you want to be a purposeful journalist, it is critical you understand the framework of Indian democracy.

I am not being wholly disparaging, I am only trying to see what is happening. The model of the media today is so flawed. All your money comes from advertising, and so journalism becomes not what the reader wants but what the advertiser wants. If readers today begin to pay the entire cost involved in generating good journalism, things may change. But if the reader pays Rs 2 for a newspaper that costs Rs 20 to produce, the role of the advertiser becomes that much more crucial.

Also, unfortunately, the idea of public space, the idea of public good, is still so underdeveloped in this country. And this is ironical given the fact that the idea of India emerges from the idea of the social contract. Our national movement is full of examples of people who emerged from backgrounds of privilege and wealth and who rejected their wealth and privilege in order to create a public good.

The best thing that can happen is for the media to amplify civil society's battles and understand how very crucial they are. But the challenge really is that there are not enough people in both journalism and civil society who are able to articulate arguments in a manner that forces both money and power to be accountable.

'Work by NGOs like National Election Watch and Lok Satta is an enormous resource for media'

SEVANTI NINAN



Sevanti Ninan is a columnist and author who focuses on media issues. She writes columns on the media for The Hindu and Hindustan, and is the Founder Editor of TheHoot.org, a media watch website.

I believe that, increasingly, the media have been forced to reach out to civil society. Take television. There is a

constant seeking out of data and opinion from those in the field, whether it is for a panel discussion or simply to keep programmes going. After all, civil society groups are the people with the data; they are the ones who interact with those on the ground and understand local issues. The media have to always seek out people who have done the ground-work for them.

Take the recent elections. An NGO like National Election Watch was constantly sending information to the media. They were the people scrutinising affidavits, doing specialised research and generating information. Such work is an enormous resource for the media, given that there is so much competition and given the fact that they have to churn out so much stuff in so little time.

Civil society, too, needs the media. After all, anything it does, whether it is a time-bound intervention linked to the general election or something broader like dalit welfare, requires it to reach audiences and draw more people into its own work, something that is difficult to achieve without the media. So there is a potential partnership here.

Take Lok Satta, set up by social activist Jayaprakash Narayan. He began election.com about ten years ago, using the Internet effectively to send out timely information to various media houses and individual journalists. In this way, Lok Satta was able to build up awareness on the need for electoral reform. The media gave the initiative a lot of coverage.

Of course, I also believe the media don't critique themselves as rigorously as they should. We set up The Hoot specifically to create a space in which the media can cover and critique themselves. Have you, for instance, seen in any newspaper a story about how much selling of media space took place in these elections? It happened in five or six major states, and some of the biggest newspapers in India did this. The media in India have become decidedly more self-serving. Look at the way some newspapers work. If they need to run a discotheque to get new clientele, they will. There are also no ethical moorings of any kind, although the nature of the media demands them. And this lack of ethical moorings is contagious. If the big guys don't have them, everybody happily follows.

The media are often criticised for being commercial. This is an old, well-worn argument. But people forget the competition media houses face today. There are far too many media products chasing far too few resources. Everyone wants a piece of the commercial action and that leads to the inevitable scramble for advertising. An important contributory factor for this is that media consumers refuse to pay for their media content. If everything has to be cheap, if you switch to a newspaper when it drops its cover price by a rupee, you'll find that the media too will search for unorthodox ways to raise finances.

But I believe one central concern — that the media routinely

ignore the Other Half in a country like India — is not so apparent anymore. Even commercial newspapers do a lot of that kind of social development reporting because they realise that middle class consumers have a social conscience and are interested in social issues too. In the old days, newspapers did see themselves as playing a broader social role, but they fulfilled it in a distant sort of way. Today, you will be amazed at how good some of these regional channels are in covering the hinterland. Criticise the media by all means, but do it for the right reasons!

'Civil society has taken on the mantle the media once wore'

LYSA JOHN



Lysa John, Global Campaign Director, Global Call To Action Against Poverty, coordinated the Wada Na Todo Abhiyan initiative, which has been recognised for its efforts to broaden and influence the public policy debate in India. It has focused on decentralised state campaigns on governance accountability by developing an extensive network of organisations and activists.

Civil society as a concept has come into use only in the last few years. It needs to be interpreted much more broadly, in terms of citizen action for society, than is generally the case. This is not just about the contributions of traditional NGOs but encompasses any kind of citizens' formation which looks at larger issues of social or political change — work that is not being done through the government or private sector.

If you consider civil society and the media today, it is almost as if civil society is at the point where the media were some decades ago. For instance, a number of media organisations came up during the nationalist movement and articulated important public concerns. Today, the media are much more commercial in their orientation — and not just in a negative sense because, after all, they need to sustain themselves. But they now no longer consider it necessary to speak or work for the poorest of the poor.

It is almost as if civil society has now taken on the mantle the media once wore. I think this is also interesting for us in civil society because it shows us the challenges we need to watch out for as we evolve — like ensuring financial sustainability, for instance. Already, you see some civil society organisations privileging profitable avenues or getting attracted to glamorous agendas.

I also find today that the media have a very simplistic

understanding of civil society organisations — they end up over-simplifying their efforts or portraying them in very stereotypical ways. They project civil society groups either as harmless do-gooders or extremist elements that spell harm for society. Also, usually the media individualise effective civil society campaigns and attribute their success to the efforts of one great leader. These campaigns are never represented as a collective and professional effort.

But I don't blame the media completely for this. Civil society organisations are often unable to articulate what they are thinking. They really need to show that they have a wide reach and impact, and are able to make a difference; that their initiatives are more than just "doing good", they also have a political and social relevance. This is also a question of how civil society organisations engage with their external environment, because even within civil society there is an obsession with internal priorities.

The media, for their part, may want to be seen as proactively engaging with a social cause. But the problem so far is that they have always looked at civil society as the implementing arm of a concept that their business counterparts have created. I think both the government and the media don't realise that the most progressive, far-reaching and visionary ideas today come from civil society. The media are largely falling in line with the interests of the powerful. The only people who are thinking out of the box to transform lives and existing structures are the people who constitute civil society.

Also, the perception that the only way to get people and policymakers to listen is through the media is simply not true. A lot of the policy advocacy we have done has been through direct engagement with policymakers. As for making contact with people on the ground, I don't think the media have helped at all. We have really not cracked the formula of using mass media to get people involved and engaged. The only thing, perhaps, that has worked to an extent is online mobilisation. But even here there are limits. You may contact a huge number of people through the Net but none of them are physically available to you when you want to work for change on the ground.

So there is no replacement for actual physical mobilisation. Take the example most quoted — the Barack Obama campaign. It went beyond online campaigning; there was a lot of door-to-door effort put into it. In any case, if you are talking of representing the interests of the most marginalised, most of them do not have access to the media that we are talking about. I would say, therefore, that for civil society groups, a media strategy is important but it can only be one among many others.

These interviews were conducted by Pamela Philipose, Director, Women's Feature Service (WFS), and coordinated by WFS (<http://www.wfsnews.org/>)

Politics for people

Workers, peasants and landless labourers are never included in 'civil society' because they are not considered citizens but subjects of India, says socio-political activist Aruna Roy. She explains why development workers in NGOs are quite the opposite of people's movements, which are the real harbingers of change in India, working to create more democratic spaces in the country

RASHME SEHGAL

Aruna Roy is a political and social activist. She served as a civil servant in the Indian Administrative Service from 1968-1974, before resigning to become a social activist working to empower villagers in Rajasthan. She heads the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana, which she founded in 1990, and which worked towards the successful enactment of the Rajasthan Right to Information Act, precursor of several state Acts and then the national legislation on RTI in 2005.

In 2000, Roy was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership. In 2005, she was amongst the 1,000 women from 150 countries nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

What does the phrase 'civil society' mean to you?

Civil society is a very ambiguous phrase. The people I work with are seen as workers, peasants and landless labourers who have no role in civil society. Upendra Baxi's phrase applies to this segment of society — they are not citizens but subjects of India. It is with these people that I have spent my entire life. My intellectual abilities may have been acquired from studying in a college, but the rights and wrongs of politics have been learnt through my interactions with these people.

Would you subscribe to the perception that civil society is acquiring more and more clout?

One needs to understand these phrases from the point of view of an average villager. Civil society will never put this question before a villager even though he may have done a great deal of work. I do not think people ever think about the phenomenal amount of work these people have done. We are representatives of these people because we have opted to live with them. We understand their politics and that is much more than can be said about civil society at large.

Can you elaborate on this point?

A village woman called Sushila defined RTI in the most succinct manner possible. When we went on a 40-day strike in Beerawar, there were hundreds of our supporters demanding the *suo moto* right to the disclosure of all public records. It was at this time that Sushila said: "If I give Rs 10 to my son and send him to the market to do some shopping



then when he returns surely I have every right to ask him to give me *hisaab*. *Hamara paisa, hamara hisaab*. Why should I not do the same with the government?" This assertion was supported by people across all sections of society. We had the support, in 1996, of V P Singh and a whole host of other politicians.

I must clarify that I am not part of an NGO movement. I'm part of a people's movement. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, the fish workers, the construction workers agitation for rights can all be described as people's movements. By contrast, NGOs take money to do development work. We do not operate like that.

I would describe myself as a socio-political activist.

But both NGOs and people's movements have helped ensure a more equitable paradigm of development.

These (NGOs and socio-political activism) are two separate and distinct factions. Sometimes these two groups may come together for a particular purpose, but they follow two distinctly opposite processes. We do not take part in specific development issues. Nor can we be described as purely politically motivated activists. In the final analysis, just how much work have trade unions done?

Let me illustrate this with an example. Take the whole campaign to end female foeticide. A campaign is very different from a movement. My involvement is with

movements. The RTI has been a movement; the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) has also been a movement. These are movements to create a more democratic space in our society.

Are you saying that there has been an intensification of people's movements across the country?

Yes indeed. It is because of the widespread movement for more democracy that we succeeded in the setting aside of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). In the same way, it was because of pressure from the people that we were able to get the government to introduce the NREGA.

All these have involved huge movements where the issues have gone beyond individual sectors. Civil society played a limited role in helping us get the requisite legislation. This included the participation of people in government, members of political parties in their personal capacity, as well as an increasing understanding of the role of electoral politics and of panchayats.

That may well be, but has RTI remained a people's movement or has it become a largely urban-based phenomenon?

I think this is one more sweeping generalisation being made against RTI. Activist Shekhar Singh has been conducting a major evaluation of the whole RTI Act and how it is being used. Thousands of RTI applications are being filed at the public distribution system (PDS) level and do not reach the commission. What comes to the commission is only the tip of the iceberg. To cite some examples, the issue of non-construction of roads, the cleaning of village tanks, or the issue of muster rolls in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan are not going to be reflected in the central commission. These are dealt with at the public information officer (PIO) level. We have more than 300 applications at the PDS level. When these are filed, the people at that level get scared and generally end up providing the requisite information.

Has this helped promote more transparent and equitable governance?

Well, I will answer this question by emphasising three issues. The first is that ordinary people must be allowed to exercise their sovereignty. Secondly, they must be given the right to intervene and ask for transparency of accounts, of service delivery mechanisms, and ensure greater sharing of information with the beneficiary. The third point I must emphasise is that there has been a change in the nature of governance. People today can talk to those who govern them. Earlier, they would ask for an explanation but would get no reply. Today they are bound to get a response.

We are fighting to end the arbitrary use of power, whether it is by fighting on behalf of victims of genocide, where we went in for RTI against the paramilitary forces, or by ensuring that SEZs (special economic zones) were thrown out of Goa, or, to cite the example of Greenpeace activists,

putting pressure on the government to prevent the sale of genetically modified seeds.

A lot of questions have been asked about how the NREGS still remains largely unaccountable.

I do not agree with this criticism at all. The NREGS is one scheme where every single transaction can be traced. The amount of money being given to every single family across the country can be found out; this is not being done in any other government department.

Activists have been highlighting the shortcomings of the NREGS, however.

They are doing this because it is obvious they have never lived in a village. Nobody wants to step out and see how it is working at the grassroots level. Let me cite the example of a woman who belongs to the lowest caste — a Kanjar — who used to beg for money to survive and was not allowed to work. Someone like her was not allowed to own land either. For the first time in her life, she did not have to beg for food. Eleven lakh people in the country who were carrying excreta have now been given dignity of work. For them it has been a quantum leap.

There used to be a lot of corruption in the past. We never knew what went in and what went out. Today we can trace it. People are investigating every case of fraud and all such cases are being unearthed. I would like to emphasise that this is the first honest programme that has been provided at the ground level. We accept that the delivery mechanism can be corrupt, but the public is in a position to find out. You tell us what can be a greater partnership than this.

What is happening in the NREGS are small bits of corruption in comparison to the massive corruption in our banks and so on. It is for this reason that I believe that the government must be very circumspect when it decides to enter into any partnership with the private sector. We can hold government responsible but that is not true with a private partner.

What would you describe as your biggest achievement?

I have struggled hard all my life to see that my brother does not get hurt. This paradigm has allowed me to work with issues of paramount importance.

Would you say there has been a phenomenal change?

Yes, the public is far smarter than people had imagined them to be. They know how they are being used and people cannot take them for a ride anymore. Today, there is a tremendous shortage of jobs. Today, the average worker is faced with an alternative and that is because the NREGS provides them with a safety net. People in urban India do not realise this. The economic meltdown has affected urban, not rural India. The markets in rural India are prospering. People have surplus money and are going to the markets to shop. It is the jewellers who are raking in the largest profits!

The politics of social transformation in India

Gandhiji, Vinoba Bhave and J P Narayan knew the importance of balancing political transformation with social transformation. But over the last few decades there has been a clear separation of political society — which runs the state — and civil society — which is concerned with bringing about changes in society itself. This article outlines the efforts of PRIA to get people to participate in governance

RAJESH TANDON

DURING THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT, Gandhiji would suddenly ask the political workers of the Congress to stop the political disobedience movement and dedicate themselves to 'constructive' social work in the villages for a year or so. Much of this 'constructive' social work was addressing problems of illiteracy, ill-health, lack of sanitation, etc. In this approach, direct political action against colonial rule and supportive social action with the poor were seen as two sides of the same coin — transformation.

After Independence, however, many Gandhians joined the government, while just a few (Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan notable among them) remained dedicated to 'constructive' social work in the community. Over the past six decades, the politics of social transformation has gradually become disconnected from the politics of governing the Indian state.

This has resulted in a separation of political society from civil society — the former is focused on 'capturing' and 'running' the state, while the latter is concerned with bringing about changes in society itself.

When PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia) began its work 30 years ago, I was quite surprised to note this distinction among the voluntary organisations. When PRIA championed the cause of authentic participation of citizens in determining their own affairs, it was implying that citizens have a role in governance. The people of India are not just voters (periodically electing representatives and then going to sleep); nor are they mere beneficiaries (for whose welfare distant bureaucrats plan one-size-fits-all programmes); they are citizens who have an ongoing right and responsibility to engage with the processes and structures of decision-making that affect the common public good in their localities — governance *per se*!

PRIA decided to engage with institutions of local governance (panchayats and municipalities) soon after the Constitution mandated them in 1993. We felt that citizens who had been consistently marginalised and excluded could now exercise legitimate political authority in these democratic institutions. PRIA experimented with a three-pronged strategy to make political authority more democratically accountable.

First, we mobilised community groups and local community leaders to participate in PEVAC (Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaigns) in 16 states of the country during the

previous two rounds of elections, in 2000-02 and 2004-06. These campaigns were aimed at i) making citizens aware of their rights to elect their leaders in panchayats and municipalities, ii) enabling 'good' candidates from marginalised sections — women, minorities, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes — to file their nominations, iii) strengthening civic processes to focus electoral politics on issues of development and not on caste, religion and corruption.

A coalition of nearly 300 civil society organisations was formed in each state, which received formal recognition from the state election commissions, and the media and others mobilised to carry out the campaigns. During the last round of local government elections in 12 states, more than 300 million voters were reached through such campaigns.

The second approach focused on building the capacities of elected representatives to enable them to perform their new public roles effectively and accountably. PRIA partnered with state and national government agencies, as well as civil society organisations, to design and conduct initial orientations — PRJA (Pratinidhi Jagrukta Abhiyan) — of all elected representatives in the 12 states. In addition, PRIA piloted ongoing support of information, skills and connections to elected representatives (especially women and those from marginalised sections) through village- and block-level panchayat (and urban) resource centres (numbering nearly 200 and spread over 12 states). Later, these capacity-building approaches and models were incorporated into national policies and programmes.

Third, PRIA focused its attention on enabling citizens to continue to interact with, and demand accountability from, elected representatives through regular mobilisation of gram sabhas (and mohalla samitis in municipalities). Such campaigns provided knowledge about the rights and responsibilities of citizens and political office-holders in a manner that enabled ongoing monitoring and systematic disclosure of information on various development programmes.

Although numerous practical and policy gains have been achieved through this methodology over the past 15 years — under the rubric of Governance Where People Matter — we have also faced several challenges along the way.

First we had to overcome our own cynicism about politics and political leaders in India; many of us felt that engaging with electoral politics would 'dirty' our hands. Once we did



this, we had to convince other civil society groups to join in the effort by overcoming their hang-ups.

Second, joining in with others was strategically important because engaging with political processes of this nature requires operating at scale. Even the smallest political parties have a presence in hundreds of constituencies. So, building and sustaining state-level coalitions and platforms was essential for this strategy to work.

Third, we had to jealously guard against succumbing to political inducements. In these coalitions and platforms, strict codes of conduct were established and monitored so that no civil society actor was seen to be favouring any particular political party or political interest. Often, civil society activists themselves became candidates. We had to then ask them to disassociate themselves from these coalitions and platforms.

Fourth, direct interactions with senior state- and district-level political party leaders had to be initiated before the campaigns began. It is important to keep the formal political parties and their leaders adequately informed about our purposes and activities so as not to be seen to be competing against their electoral interests. Such interactions also enabled us to appreciate their priorities and interests, which, in many ways, were not against our own purposes in these campaigns.

Fifth, credibility in the eyes of the formal electoral and official machinery was an important factor in effective implementation of this strategy. PRIA's track record, and that of its many partners, has been characterised by a serious, professional,

unbiased and long-term approach to social transformation, which places citizens at the centre. Where such credibility was absent, this methodology of work suffered.

Finally, there was the challenge of resources. Not only did PRIA need resources for its own teams, many of the small community-based groups had no access to funds to enable them to disseminate information and travel around in the block or municipality. Even printing of posters and handbills, or production of music cassettes and jingles for radio and television required funds. Government funds have been scarce for such activities (though we managed to access some from the ministries of rural development and panchayati raj, and some state governments); foreign funds are seen to be 'anti-national', and there are many legal restrictions to FCRA. Public or corporate donations for such interventions at the local government level are rare.

Civil society interventions aimed at democratising democracy in India are still poorly resourced.

What have we learnt? Civil society and political society, both, are essential for inclusive social transformation in India. Whenever they appreciate each other's distinctive roles, complementary and synergistic outcomes follow. Where that is not the case, adversarial interactions have to be contended with. But as civil society actors, representation is not the basis of our legitimacy. Our values, our work, our commitment to the democratic transformation of our societies constitute the basis of our voice.

Rajesh Tandon is President, Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), New Delhi

How to engage with the political class

Thanks to a widespread distrust of politicians, CSOs in India have a weak record of engaging with the political class. But such engagement is vital in a democracy. In the recent general elections, CSOs mobilised citizens to vote. Now that the elections are over, there should be sustained efforts to watch the performance of the government and advocate for policy changes and proper implementation of programmes

TONUSREE BASU
C V MADHUKAR

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS in India have had a relatively weak record of organised engagement with the political class, in recent years. There are very few organisations in the country that have a good conception of the nature of engagement that is required with the political classes to bring about desired change. Even when civil society groups have been successful at getting certain policies changed, in the overwhelming majority of cases the engagement and 'advocacy' has been with the executive (government, ministers, civil servants, etc) and not with the legislative (MLAs/MPs).

There are systemic reasons why the executive tends to dominate the policy space in India. But it is also true that the common perception of politics and politicians in India is one of distrust and disenchantment. The stereotype of the corrupt, self-serving politician is typically reinforced through representations in popular culture. The news media also tends to unduly highlight the horse-trading and mudslinging between various political leaders and parties, and neglect issue-based debates between politicians when they happen. For instance, the debate on the Indo-US civil nuclear agreement last year was one of the finest hours in parliamentary debate in recent years. But that went largely unreported in the media, whereas the 'cash-for-vote' video was played over and over again, etching it permanently in our consciousness.

Even as distrust of politicians among citizens persists, a handful of groups have worked towards mobilising efforts for positive change in our democratic process. At one level, the discourse on strengthening democracy has converged around ideas of encouraging greater participation in the electoral process. For some, this has been a long-held passion which has resulted in systematic work over the years. For others, at least in some measure, the Mumbai terror attacks came as a wake-up call. Several people who were otherwise indifferent to politics and politicians suddenly realised that their own safety and security was integrally linked to the politics of the country.

This past election is a good case in point. Ahead of the Indian general elections this year, the efforts of civil society groups towards mobilising voters were significant, especially in urban areas. These efforts focused largely on

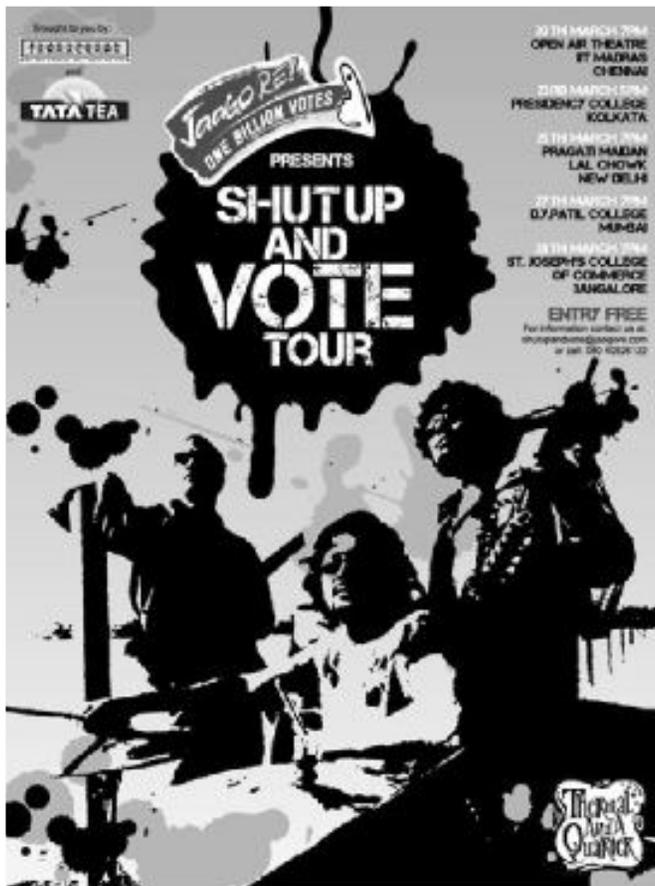
sensitising young voters in various ways. Campaigns such as 'Lead India', 'Jaago Re', 'No Criminals', the 'National Election Watch', and other awareness campaigns were activated through print advertisements, televised ad films, an interactive web presence and cell phone messages. The campaigns focused on encouraging citizens to register to vote, urging political parties not to field criminal candidates, collating and disseminating information about candidates — their parliamentary performance, criminal records (if any), assets, liabilities, etc.

Engaging with policymakers

Now that the elections are over, these campaigns need to make way for sustained efforts to closely watch the performance of the government and advocate for policy changes and proper implementation of programmes on the ground. There are a growing number of groups that have begun to focus on 'watching' government, analysing its performance, and advocating for social justice measures. But these efforts need sustained work over the medium- to long-term, to deliver results.

Over the past three years, our work at PRS Legislative Research has largely focused on analysing pending Bills and briefing MPs and political parties on the implications of legislation. Nearly 200 MPs have used our material in preparing for their work in Parliament, in the 14th Lok Sabha. And in our interactions with MPs, we have learnt a few things about our elected representatives.

- No individual can be an expert in every subject; this is also true for MPs. However, they have to take policy decisions on a wide range of issues in Parliament and for this they need easy-to-understand, succinctly presented, research support from individuals and groups they can trust.
- MPs are often extremely sharp in intuitively understanding new concepts. Many have expertise in the subject areas, which they may have practised as a profession (law, agriculture, finance, etc) or in areas where they have done serious legislative work in the past. They are very clued in on a wide variety of issues, to the ground realities, and how things play out.
- MPs are very busy individuals. So, if we want an MP to



read a document, it is best to keep it as short as possible — preferably limit it to one page. Long reports and publications are kept for reading 'later' on the shelf and are rarely utilised effectively.

- MPs often get a lot of reading material from various groups recommending what action is to be taken on a certain issue. They also get reports from NGOs, many of which advocate a particular cause. While these may be useful to the MPs, they deeply value meetings with people who can explain a complex concept or issue without trying

to push a point of view.

- There are a number of MPs across the political spectrum who invest the time required to understand issues and reflect on them before taking decisions — even though the decision might be a view that is different from an option that some people might think is right. This may not be the perception that most educated people share about MPs, but it is something we can say after having worked closely with them.

Even as PRS engages with MPs in Parliament, more such groups must emerge and provide support to our lawmakers in the years to come. There is also the need for similar work in state legislatures where MLAs are supported by groups, to help them understand issues.

Engaging citizens

PRS sees itself as a 'resource' group that is available primarily to provide research support to MPs, but also with a keen sense of the need to engage with civil society groups. PRS seeks to be a key resource on the Indian Parliament for various stakeholders — citizens' groups, the media, and activists. Providing information on the process and content of legislation and the performance of Parliament as an institution is key to creating a more participative environment for lawmaking.

As part of our efforts to reach the broader civil society, we have held numerous workshops for journalists and NGO groups. Typically, when we conclude a workshop with journalists, participants are already thinking about the next story and series they would want to write about MPs or issues in Parliament. In the case of NGOs, most often the question of resources comes up. Engaging with elected representatives is a medium- to long-term effort, and quite rightly, as NGOs have often said, it requires significant focus and resources.

There is another way in which NGOs can benefit from PRS's work. PRS puts out a regular stream of data and statistics in the public domain about the performance of MPs or about Parliament. The series of primers that PRS has produced is also aimed at interested citizens, and seeks to explain parliamentary procedures or institutional arrangements that exist in the service of Parliament. These and other products of PRS aim at engaging a larger set of citizens, beyond MPs.

The three years of work with MPs have only reinforced our conviction about the need for a greater level of engagement with MPs and MLAs across the country. Given that laws that are made now will provide the framework for governance, often for more than 100 years, there is good reason for all actors to engage in this process to ensure that we pass on a better world to our children in the years ahead.

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Pawns in conflict zones

In conflict areas such as Manipur, civil society is transformed into an extension of the conflict zone, with each conflicting party setting up its own 'civil society' proxies — including student wings, women's wings and civil rights campaigns — realising how powerful these bodies can be in multiplying the agenda

PRADIP
PHANJOURAM

THE DEBATE on who or what should constitute 'civil society' gets all the more intriguing in a conflict zone such as Manipur. The question is: Should civil society have a normative definition and be treated as the occupant of a space earmarked between the state and vested-interest power players such as militant challengers to the state's authority and legitimacy, private business houses, etc? Or should it be the space between mutually feuding non-state combatants? While this definition of civil society as a definite space may not be everything, it is a convenient one. The trouble is, when there is a normative definition of this space, this space invariably becomes hotly contested and often readily transforms into an extension of the conflict zones they are supposed to be standing between and arbitrating. Rather than being peace agents, they thus often come to be an instrument of what Sanjib Baruah calls "war by other means".

Manipur is familiar with this phenomenon. There can be no argument that the 'civil society' space has been deeply fissured along sectarian lines. As a result, wars by other means are fought on practically every issue involving any two or more communities of the state's multitudinous communities. This sectarian divide is also seen along other broader lines such as between the hill districts and valley districts, between tribals and non-tribals, etc. It is not uncommon to hear of self-proclaimed human rights organisations speaking two different and mutually hostile languages on many issues. It is as if there is nothing universal about such supposedly shared values as the powerful notion of human rights. How can any meaningful, problem-solving discourse ever occur under the circumstances?

The technical earmarking of a so-called 'civil society' space leads to another familiar problematic situation. The conflicting parties themselves begin to contest this space by putting up their 'civil society' proxies, having realised how powerful these bodies can be in multiplying their agenda through precisely the "war by other means". Again, this is a phenomenon not unfamiliar to Manipur at all. The result is not only a complication of the conflicts themselves, but also a discrediting of this very same 'civil society' space, ultimately tarnishing the image of the civil

society movement itself.

There is a fierce contest amongst conflicting parties to absorb student movements into their networks. Some even float their own 'civil society' bodies, and this is not difficult considering the definition of 'civil society' as merely an organisation positioned within a certain space. For instance, the minute a civil rights campaign body is formed, or a student body constituted, it is assumed that it automatically qualifies as 'civil society' regardless of whether it has any interest in civility! This makes the notion of 'civil society' vulnerable to being reduced to the status of a mere tool for conflict.

Must this not be considered a corruption of the popular



understanding of 'civil society'? The need then is for a rethink on what 'civil society' should ideally consist of.

Needed: A moral element

As a rule of thumb, civil society should have some qualitative elements over and above just the quantitative. The issue must be made to become a moral one as well. Only such an approach can make the discourses generated within this space have a vision beyond the immediate or community interest. Otherwise, it would be forsaking its exalted objective of being an impartial arbiter wherever conflicts of interest arise, and will instead become "war by other means".

If such a definition is agreed upon, then the ambit of the space called civil society would broaden considerably. It can and would then include many more people from walks of life other than organised 'civil society' bodies or professional members of 'civil society' acting as watchdogs of the establishment and society at large. Professions such as journalism, whose credibility equally depends on neutrality, and which also draws succour from its image as a watchdog of society, would definitely come to be included.

But the dangers of the larger civil society being drawn into the "war by other means" would remain, as many instances prove. Media reporting of the aftermath of the Naga ceasefire extension beyond territorial limits, in June 2001, by newspapers in Nagaland and Manipur, for instance, was starkly different, as many media observers now point out. The facts were the same, but the way the stories were told, displayed or nuanced, conjured up totally different pictures of the same incident. Unwittingly, the media too was drawn into the conflict and fought the same "war by other means". The challenge then is, once again, to restructure our notion of the contentious civil society space so as to unambiguously distinguish the tools of war from those of peace.

Making civil society 'civil'

Civil society in the entire northeast is badly fractured and ethnically fissured and may not be quite what the term is generally understood to be. Indeed, in this theatre of conflict, it is almost an axiom that civil society is not always 'civil'. Civil society vigilante-sponsored blockades, *bandhs*, strikes and other disruptive activities are more often than not for sectarian reasons. The term 'civil society' presupposed certain shared values and qualities, regardless of religious and community affiliations. These values have been relegated to the background in our context.

So when we talk of students' communities or youth or women in more ideal situations, there ought not to be any need to prefix these understandings with community- and religion-specific qualifications. This, however, has been far from the truth in the northeast, with Manipur

being no exception.

There is therefore very little prospect for generalising the problems. A few examples will illustrate this point. When we say student or youth or women's communities, the nomenclatures themselves ought to be self-explanatory. The reality is quite different in the northeast, where every ethnic community forms its own student, youth, women's organisations, each pursuing very different and more often than not sectarian agendas. Often these different 'civil society' entities work at cross-purposes, accentuating rather than solving problems. In Manipur too, clashes over sectarian agendas frequently occur. The almost entirely different objectives of organisations such as the United Naga Council, the United Committee Manipur, All-Manipur United Clubs Organisation, the Kuki Inpi Manipur, etc, to name just a few, should suffice to make this point clear.

The scenario would virtually be the same if we were to list the various student organisations, or women's organisations existing in the state. Under the circumstances, there can be no general understanding of the term 'civil society' as all institutions formed in this important sector of society are always and necessarily coloured by ethnic tints. The general understanding of the term becomes split into numerous smaller ethnic-specific organisations.

While it may not be desirable to advocate for a total generalisation of the energy of civil society bodies in the northeast, as there are area- and ethnic-specific problems to be tackled, it would be short-sighted to totally ignore the commonality of all such organisations the world over. Hence when we say 'youth problem', there must be a general thread that binds it to the more broad-based understanding of the problem. Our youth must be able to identify, empathise and sympathise with national and international youth movements. Only when this happens can a reverse flow of the same sentiments become possible. The need of the hour then is for an effort to reconstruct Manipur's civil society. Its civil society movements must be put back on a track that will integrate the place with the mainstream of humanity.

The upsurge in ethnic identity being what it is, this is not going to be easy. But it is one of those vital and urgent issues that Manipur cannot shy away from. It is also the only way it can make its civil society 'civil' in the true sense of the word.

Pradip Phanjoubam is Editor of Imphal Free Press

Civil society and the production of (in)security

Civil society must hold the security sector accountable. It must show a sustained interest in security issues and support informed public debate on them. It must take the initiative to foster creative thinking and action for a sustainable peace. And in doing all of these, civil society must and will democratise that last bastion of power and privilege: security

SWARNA
RAJAGOPALAN

AS THE SRI LANKAN ARMY campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) waged over months, tens of thousands of people went from being citizens, albeit in an embattled state, to being internally displaced persons (IDP). Across the Palk Straits in Chennai, politicians went into activist mode and the public were mobilised to express solidarity with their ethnic kin whose lives were being changed, again, irrevocably. Chennai-based newspapers and magazines reported the crisis at great length. Human chains, rallies on the beach, public meetings, and that Chennai art form, the hoarding, made the Sri Lankan IDP crisis hard to ignore.

Can we characterise these as civil society responses to a security crisis? How does civil society generally concern itself with security issues?

Two conventional definitions form the point of departure of this essay. The first is an understanding of civil society as 'not state, not market'. This umbrella understanding not only includes a wide spectrum of individual and collective actors but also leaves us with several grey areas when applied to a consideration of security issues. The second is the adoption of the traditional state-centric view of security as a filter for initially identifying actors and issues to include. The 'security sector' thus comprises the military, paramilitary, police and related armed agencies which execute the monopoly of the state over legitimate violence (which Weber considered a characteristic of statehood), and those organs and offices of government that make decisions about interstate relations, law enforcement and the use of force. Since this essay is part of a collective reflection on civil society, I will use this limited, traditional definition of security.

So what has civil society to do with security (and insecurity)? The first part of this essay pivots around six circumstances that raise important questions about this relationship. These inform the questions raised in the latter section.

Circumstantial evidence

Family matters

In 1990, Parveena Ahangar's second son, only 14 years old, was taken by Indian forces who were looking for her neighbour's son, a militant bearing a similar name. The distraught mother went from prison to prison across India, meeting officials and asking for her son. She filed a writ petition seeking information about him. In 1996, the

Association of Relatives of Disappeared Persons was formed, bringing together families whose relatives had been similarly lost. Parveena Ahangar has become its best-known symbol.

Losing children or other family members, especially losing them to an unknown fate, changed the lives of many individuals who had hitherto been completely apolitical and whose concerns were almost entirely related to the private sphere. They stepped into the public sphere to search for family, but this personal quest often caused them to join the peace movement or to work with human rights organisations. The Association of Parents of Missing Soldiers and the Mothers' Fronts in Sri Lanka have similar histories.

The Naga Mothers' Association offers a variation. Their Shed No More Blood campaign has taken them across conflict lines to share the experience of bereavement and suffering with leaders and combatants, building lines of communication and trust. As part of their peace work, they also arrange funerals for conflict victims who remain unidentified. They have engaged with other social challenges too, such as drug addiction and trafficking.

Private grief and household hardship transform family relationships into core units for political organisation around human rights, conflict and peace concerns. The line between private and public is obfuscated because these private experiences remain the main agenda of very public, occasionally confrontational, activities.

The faith factor

In 2008, the Dar-ul-Uloom of Deoband issued a *fatwa* against terrorism, declaring it an un-Islamic act. The move was widely welcomed as evidence that the canon evoked by *jihadi* groups did not, in fact, support their acts. Commentators expressed hope that this would dissuade potential recruits. The intrinsic value of the *fatwa* and its efficacy are both beside the point; what is important is that Deoband is an influential seminary, whose conservative interpretations of the Islamic canon are considered authoritative far beyond South Asia. This influence extends to madrasas in the areas from which the Taliban and other *jihadi* groups recruit their soldiers.

Not just Islam; the authority of religious and spiritual leaders is sought to further the polemics of war and peace in other faiths also. Religious leaders participated in the *kar sevas*



and *yatras* that preceded the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and several witnessed the demolition as well. Buddhist monks have spoken up at critical junctures during hostilities and peace negotiations in Sri Lanka.

Communities of faith and followers of spiritual teachers also engage in peace work. Quaker Peace and Service volunteers kept the lines of communication open between Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups and their various interlocutors for years, as they have in the Naga peace process. Art of Living volunteers have worked in conflict zones like Bosnia, Iraq and Kashmir, locating the source of conflict transformation in personal wellbeing. Development and rehabilitation work is undertaken as a service activity by faith-based and spiritual organisations and not just in the aftermath of disaster or war.

Shadow-boxing

In times of social and political conflict, hostilities extend beyond the use of violence into platforms like public debates, special magazine issues and, certainly, social activism. There may or may not be formal links to the political parties or militant groups, but their ideology is clear and they become identified with one side or the other.

VIGIL-Public Opinion Forum organises debates, seminars and lectures to which the public is welcome. VIGIL's political positions are broadly resonant of those of organisations in the Sangh Parivar. They take up issues of national importance, frame their debates and arguments along the Parivar's ideology and, often, their speakers and writers are from the RSS, BJP or VHP. On VIGIL's website, there is a section called 'NGO Watch' in which articles critical of NGO activities and reports auditing NGO expenditures are linked. Foreign funding is an important issue here, as is the credibility of left-liberal organisations and individuals. VIGIL obviously furthers a certain worldview and is well within its rights to do so; but that viewpoint is so easily identifiable with one strand in Indian politics that it is tempting to characterise it as a 'front organisation'.

So closely is Rev Jegath Gaspar Raj known to be involved with the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that all of his other enterprises carry the shadow of those links. Tamil Maiyam is a non-profit organisation for the promotion of Tamil language and culture on the one hand and rural development on the other, both unexceptionable objectives. He has also launched a CSR initiative called Give Life which organises a fundraising marathon in Chennai. On the board of his organisations are eminent people from business and public life, including Kanimozhi Karunanidhi.

Even without formal affiliation, it is sometimes hard to overlook the ideological closeness of civil society organisations to more contentious actors. Whether in the middle of a conflict or just the usual push-and-pull of politics, questions about ideology, questions about sourcing and spending money, and questions about connections always remain in these cases.

The press and the people

Since the Kargil war, Indians have become accustomed to

live reportage shot just a short distance away from every crisis. During the Mumbai terror attacks, it was possible to see the fire, to spy human silhouettes at windows, to hear gunshots as they rang out, and to see guests being stealthily ushered out of hotels and into buses. Television viewers also watched CC-camera footage of the terrorists attack Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus shortly after the crisis had begun. These images, and those of the anguished news anchors who waited for news outside the hotel buildings with the relatives of those trapped inside, will remain vivid memories for some time.

More to the point, they created a brief period in which citizens were determined to engage with security policy decision-making. The state was to be held accountable for this lapse in security. Citizen action took the form of candlelight vigils, mass attendance at the funerals of slain police officers and also symbolic gestures like black ribbons at Eid celebrations soon after. Television channels invited viewers to contribute suggestions towards enhancing security.

At other times, citizens have acted to prevent violence rather than to respond to it. The mohalla committees of Bhiwandi and Mumbai are celebrated instances, discussed elsewhere in this issue. Individual acts of protection and prevention are also known to happen wherever there is a riot or conflagration.

People-to-people initiatives

In the 1990s, South Asia witnessed a dramatic increase in people-to-people initiatives, usually in the context of the India-Pakistan conflict. Experts and retired officials met and continue to meet at Neemrana. Young professionals — in academics, media and government — from many South Asian states attended summer workshops and winter courses together on security-related topics. Random groups of pacifist individuals have taken trains across on peace-building journeys and attended peace conferences on either side of this beleaguered border. There are regular candlelight vigils at the border crossing in Wagah.

Terrorism and diplomatic tensions (and dare we add, belligerent television anchors) seem unable to dim the slowly and steadily growing tendency to take for granted some degree of contact and exchange between Indians and Pakistanis. On a PIA flight from Lahore, this writer even met people who said they came to Delhi every few months to shop! On this side of the border too one comes across a familiarity with food and shopping in Pakistani cities that belies the undercurrent of tension always prevalent.

Multi-track diplomacy is to international relations what the mohalla committees have been to communal riots — they are civil society's vehicle for engaging, in ever-larger numbers, with foreign policy and security.

Thinktanks

India offers an interesting paradox. For decades, consensus was the order of the day on foreign policy and security issues, with some voices being granted a monopoly over authoritative opinion. These voices usually belonged to

experts who had served in government or the armed forces at some time and who wrote prolifically in the media, and became associated with founding and/or building the first thinktanks on security. The paradox is that notwithstanding their claims, Indian thinktanks probably have less influence over policy than their counterparts in other countries.

Thinktanks are public policy research institutes that employ experts on cognate policy areas with the express mandate of generating policy ideas. They are most effective in the US, where the system allows experts to be absorbed on assignment both into the bureaucracy and into the cabinet and where there is space in legislative procedure for formal consultations and depositions by experts. In the absence of these channels in India (and I would venture to say South Asia), the influence of thinktanks depends primarily on personal networks. The preponderance of former government officials in thinktanks lends them leverage but not much room for departures from the consensus mode.

Reflections on civil society's engagement with security issues

How does civil society concern itself with security and insecurity? The situations described above yield a grab-bag of insights. Family and personal concerns motivate people to think beyond their situation and act in the larger interest. But family is not usually considered a part of civil society, nor are individual actors. Familial relationships and traditional roles provide a structure for and validate individual action in the larger external context. Religious and spiritual teachers and the communities of faith they lead contribute significantly to the creation of security and the proliferation of insecurity. Non-governmental organisations explicitly associate themselves with or appear closely identified with ideologies or agendas that have security consequences. 24-hour news coverage of events like the 26/11 terror attacks prompts spontaneous citizen action and provokes a public response which is organised in the moment but may not be preceded or followed by sustained action. People-to-people interaction gradually alters the context of security and insecurity. Thinktanks have the potential to make an impact on the security situation around them, through their sustained engagement with policy issues.

One challenge is that many of these actors and groups are not usually recognised as constituting civil society. Family and interpersonal relationships are relegated to the private sphere, which is the invisible element in these discussions. Faith, religion, spirituality and the communities they bind are usually left out of analyses as pre-modern or reactionary. 'Front organisations' belong to a netherworld between the political system and civil society. Mainstream media may as well belong to the market sector, notwithstanding their role as a pillar of democracy. Thinktanks, staffed by professionals with expertise in policy areas, are not quite state or market; their engagement with state agencies and their consultative or fundraising models place them apart from the sorts of non-governmental organisations that usually represent the

term 'civil society'. Spontaneous civic actions or civic actions designed to look spontaneous — such as candlelight vigils and human chains — are one-of events intended to draw attention. Sometimes they marry the organisational ability of the state with the brand-building skills of the market, and yet, because it is individual citizens that make them happen, they are not entirely in the personal sphere either. But without all of these, what is civil society?

Moving on from this, we can also identify a variety of roles that civil society can play vis-à-vis security.

To the extent that 'civil society' can be reified, one of its *raison d'être* might be said to be active citizenship. Keeping the state accountable for its decisions, insisting on some degree of transparency, and insisting on the rule of law — these citizenship duties must apply to civil society as well. Civil society organisations can offer spaces for learning about security-related issues and for debating alternatives. Professional and expert groups can gather and disseminate information so that the ability to discuss and debate extends to a wider circle. More critically, they must think independently and creatively of ways in which citizens and communities alike can enjoy a secure life.

Locating the origins of insecurity in some of the areas that most commonly concern civil society organisations, such as development, injustice and civil liberties, this sector is uniquely placed to push the envelope on how we understand security and, therefore, insecurity. A broader understanding of security — both in terms of whose security and in terms of what would make them secure — is also an argument for a broader-based engagement with security issues for all of civil society.

Civil society also pays the price for the state's security concerns, and examples of this are legion. Dr Binayak Sen's case is one; a doctor serving the poor in areas where the Maoists are active, he was arrested on the grounds that he was a terrorist. Freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of movement can all be curtailed in the name of a security emergency. In tense times, such restrictions are not imposed just by the state but also elements of civil society itself. States place tight restrictions around the flow of money into the social sector as a whole, out of concerns about the flow of money into the hands of antisocial elements. Financial strain causes the closure of programmes and projects, which, in the development, public health and education fields contributes to another tier of insecurity altogether.

While resisting these pressures, civil society — in its broadest sense, the citizenry organising variously — must engage with the security sector. It must hold the sector accountable. It must show a sustained interest in security issues and support informed public debate on them. It must take the initiative to foster creative thinking and action for a sustainable peace. And in doing all of these, civil society must and will democratise that last bastion of power and privilege: security.

How civil society has changed the world

Eleven million people across the world marching against the war in Iraq; thousands protesting in Seattle against unjust WTO policies; people-centred advocacy prompting the enactment of the RTI and NREG Acts in India... There is little doubt today about the impact of civil society on politics and societies

JOHN SAMUEL

Civil societies: A pluralistic view

Civil society is not a colourless or odourless gas. Civil society is not an abstract academic concept anymore. Civil societies have colours and cultures, contexts and contours, gender and grounds, and politics and passion.

Civil society is plural. The theory and practice of civil society is plural in concept, genealogy, history, form, locations, content and politics. Its validity is partly due to this plurality at its conceptual core and the sheer diversity in its praxis. There is no single theory of civil society. And no single politics of civil society. This fluidity and fuzziness of the term is, paradoxically, what makes it significant.

Civil society signifies diverse arenas and spaces of contested power relations. So the contradictions and contestations of power, culture and economy are reflected in the civil society discourse of a particular country or political context. Civil society has now become an arena of praxis wherein theory is continually negotiated and re-negotiated based on the evolving practice in multiple social, economic and cultural contexts.

The idea of civil society is used for political subversion, political reform as well as political transformation. Proponents of various ideological streams from conservatism to neo-liberalism and from liberal reformists to radical socialists have been using the idea and practice of civil society to legitimise their respective political projects and programmes.

This dynamism, pluralism and diversity to a large extent shape the emerging civil society discourse across the world. In South Asia, civil society may reflect the feudal and post-colonial tendencies within its own power spaces. In many countries of Africa, community differentiations based on tribal identities may influence and shape civil society discourse as well.

How civil society has changed the world

If we consider civil society discourse as a pluralist network of citizens and associational spaces for social and political action, then one can begin to appreciate the contribution of such discourse in shaping and influencing the politics and policy processes in many countries and the world.

There are five specific areas where civil society discourse and initiatives have made very important political and social contributions. These are: a) women's rights b) ecological justice and environment protection c) human rights of

ethnic, religious, race, and sexual minorities d) movements for citizens' participation and accountable governance and e) resistance and protest against unjust economic globalisation and unilateral militarisation. In fact, even in these specific areas there is a multiplicity of civil society discourse.

However, over the last 30 years, if women's rights and green politics are at the centre of all political and policy discourse, it is indeed due to the consistent mobilisation and advocacy by thousands of organisations and millions of people across the world. On February 15, 2003, more than 11 million people across the world marched against the war in Iraq and unilateral militarisation. In fact, the unprecedented, coordinated global mobilisation happened on the same day largely due to digital mobilisation and partly due to the rather spontaneous coordination among social movements and civil society actors who met during the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2003.

In India too, in the last 25 years, most of the innovative policy framework and legislation happened due to consistent campaigning and advocacy by civil society organisations. It is the people-centred advocacy, campaigning and mobilisation by hundreds of civil society organisations in India that prompted the Indian government to enact the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Right to Education, the new Act to stop domestic violence, and the one aimed at protecting the land rights of tribal communities. It is due to the efforts of women's rights organisations and civil society initiatives that women's political participation and 33% reservation for women in Parliament are at the centre of political discourse in India.

In many countries of Asia and Africa, civil society activism has become a countervailing political force against authoritarian governments. It has also sought to challenge unjust economic globalisation. This was evident in the citizens' and civil society struggle against monarchy in Nepal and authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world. In many countries of Latin America, civil society became the common ground for diverse interest groups and political formations to act together to challenge authoritarian regimes. In fact, civil society played a key role in shaping the political process in Brazil, where social movements, progressive NGOs, progressive factions of the church, trade unions and public intellectuals came together

for political and policy transformation. The World Social Forum process originated in Brazil partly due to these historical and political conditions, and it helped the transformation of state power in Brazil.

With the advent of the Internet, digital mobilisation and relatively cheap air travel there is an increasing interconnectedness between civil society initiatives and movements across the world. The unprecedented mobilisation and campaigns against the unjust WTO regime and for trade justice and fair trade demonstrated the power of citizens' action and mobilisation beyond the state and market. The diverse range of mobilisation against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, Cancun, and Hong Kong influenced the political and policy choices of many countries and the G20 process. The Jubilee campaign for cancelling the unjust debt of poor countries attracted the support of millions of people both in rich and poor countries and in remote villages and megacities. The successful campaign against landmines proved to be another example of civil society mobilisation and action across the world. The World Social Forum emerged as an open space and platform for the exchange of ideas, coordination of action, and collective envisioning beyond narrow ideological and political divides. The emergence of a global justice solidarity movement influenced the political process in many countries in many ways.

A time for change: Civil society and international relations

In the last 15 years, there has been a resurgence of political consciousness in civil society. A whole range of new associations, citizens' formations, new social movements, knowledge-action networks and policy advocacy groups have emerged at the national and international level.

This was partly due to the shift in international politics in the aftermath of the Cold War and a consequent shift in the aid-architecture, with a stress on local ownership in the development process. The new stress on human rights in the aftermath of the Vienna Human Rights Summit, in 1993, gave new spaces and international legitimacy to new human rights movements, integrating civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. A series of United Nations conferences, starting with the Rio Summit in 1992, created an enabling global space for civil society processes and organisations. The Beijing Summit in 1995 on women's rights, the Copenhagen Summit on social development in 1996, and the Durban Summit on racism provided a global platform for civil society movements to advance a new discourse on politics and public policy. The exchange of knowledge, linkages and resources began to create a new synergy between countries and communities in the South as well as in the North. In fact, the United Nations became a key mediating ground between civil society and various governments.

Such a mediating role between civil society and state provided a new legitimacy and role for the United Nations. The new stress on human development, human rights and global poverty created a legitimate space for global action

and campaigns for civil society. New technological and financial resources helped international networking and a new trend of globalisation from below. As the new hegemony of power politics driven by unilateral militarism, conservative politics and a neoliberal policy paradigm began to dominate the world, the new social movements and consequent civil society process became the arena for a new politics of protest and resistance against unjust globalisation. Such a new civil society process was driven by communities, communications and creativity. New modes of communication, networking, campaigning and mobilisation made civil society discourse one of the most influential political and policy discourses in the 21st century.

There is a significant difference between the civil society discourse of the 1980s, 1990s and that of the last 10 years. Unless we understand and appreciate the multiple political shifts at the national and international levels, it might be difficult to understand the consequent shifts in the practice and theory of civil society. In the 1980s, civil society was more of a conceptual tool to legitimise and organise the protest movement against authoritarian governments in Latin America and Central Europe. In the 1990s, the term 'civil society' became an instrument of policy and politics at the international level, supported by both aid and trade. And in the last 10 years, the idea of civil society has been increasingly contextualised to become a plural arena of political praxis for transformative politics in multiple contexts. The old civil society discourse was submerged in new movements for radical democratisation, feminist politics, and ecological, social and economic justice. It is the new emerging discourse on civil society that seeks to address the issue of democratic deficit, and crisis of governance.

So it is important to reclaim civil societies — as plural and diverse spaces for collective human action — as an arena for transformative politics. The reclaiming of civil societies would mean a reassertion of the dignity, sovereignty and human rights of all peoples. The ethics and politics of the idea of civil society need to be reclaimed to humanise the state, market and the political process. There is the need to reclaim a new political consciousness driven by freedom — freedom from fear and freedom from want; freedom of association and freedom of beliefs. The idea of civil society needs to be reinforced by new civil values and virtues: the values of equality and justice; values that would help us fight all kinds of injustice and discrimination — based on gender, race, caste or creed. Civil society can be transformative when it combines the politics of protest and the politics of proposal. Civil society will become an arena that can help combine the politics of people and the politics of knowledge. Civil society becomes a transformative space when it can help to create the politics of dissent, politics of association and citizens' action against monopoly of power and spaces for counter-discourse and counter-hegemony.

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Good governance in our own backyards

Accountability and transparency are vital in every sphere of public life — in government and public administration, in corporate and institutional affairs. But most of all in the voluntary sector. In 2004, Credibility Alliance was formed for self-regulation in civil society organisations in the areas of governance, transparency and accountability

VIJAY NADKARNI

THE COLLAPSE OF BANKS and financial institutions in the recent past; the uncovering of scams and frauds in the world of finance and corporate affairs; various scandals, including those that were exposed and those widely believed to be covered up, in the political or administrative set-up. All these point inescapably towards the need for good governance and accountability. The practice of good governance and acceptance of principles of accountability and transparency is acquiring greater significance in all spheres of public life: government and public administration, corporate and institutional affairs as also in civil society organisations. In fact, the need to commit to these values is more pronounced in the voluntary sector for various reasons.

The corporate world, no doubt, needs to be accountable to society at large. But the need for accountability to the entire community is restricted to broader aspects of its functioning insofar as the effects of its actions are expected to affect the community. For example, the corporate organisation needs to be law-abiding, ethical in its operations, sensitive to issues — including cultural issues — of importance to the community in which it operates, committed to preserving the environment, and willing to contribute to the betterment of the community in which it operates. The primary accountability as regards the performance of its operations and results is, however, restricted to investors and regulators. The very nature of its competitive operations allows, rather, makes it imperative for a business organisation to keep some of its operations beyond public scrutiny. Nonetheless, experience has shown that the misadventures of a few corporate organisations can prove disastrous for society at large. The failure of a bank or the closure of a company are no longer issues concerning only the business that has closed shop, they impinge on various segments of society with wide-ranging implications. These factors underline the need for a wider interpretation of the term 'accountability'.

As regards government and political organisations, the importance of public accountability cannot be overemphasised in an era when a democratic way of life is accepted as the natural form of political organisation almost across the globe. The challenge today is to widen the scope of accountability of the government and of the political apparatus towards the public and, more importantly, to

ensure effectiveness of action for redress.

Why is it that issues related to governance and accountability assume greater importance for civil society? Is it because the organisations working in this sector mostly draw their sustenance from public grants and donations? While this is an important enough reason, does it demand accountability from the organisations only towards donors? If voluntary organisations accept that the mission they have adopted is not a favour extended to the community in which they operate, that the community is an integral component not only of their machinery for implementing the programmes but of the very universe defining their philosophy, their accountability towards all stakeholders becomes a logical corollary. Voluntary organisations aim to bring about a better world, in some form or the other. The very purpose of their existence makes it imperative for the sector to be in the forefront of the crusade for good governance and transparency in public life.

The point sought to be made is that voluntary organisations have to lead the rest of society in the journey towards governance and accountability, not follow the others. The practices put in place for ensuring good governance and accountability in the voluntary sector should set an example not only for the political system but also the corporate world. It is not uncommon today to find that discussions on accountability in the voluntary sector tend to be based on parallels drawn from the corporate world. In the absence of a regulatory system for the voluntary sector and in contrast to an elaborate statutory framework drawn up for the corporate sector, it is inevitable that the voluntary sector should look to emulate the practices of the corporate world. Ideally, it is the voluntary sector that should assume the mantle of leadership and set precedents in accountability and good governance.

How do we ensure all-round adoption of good governance and accountability in the voluntary sector? In the absence of any statutory regulations (except the requirements of the current laws for societies, trusts and not-for-profit companies) how can the sector regulate itself? How do we identify organisations committed to accountability from amongst organisations which may not recognise any such obligation to stakeholders? How do we prevent the image of

the entire sector being tarnished on account of the wrongdoings of a few? Such questions kept reappearing in the minds of some people in the civil society sector at the turn of the millennium. Various meetings, mails and consultative workshops eventually led the group to decide on the formulation of certain norms of governance and public disclosure for compliance by the sector.

The need was felt for an independent body to promote these norms, which led to the birth of a consortium of organisations called the Credibility Alliance, in May 2004. This is perhaps the only initiative born from within the sector for self-regulation on the basis of certain norms. The norms broadly cover the areas of governance, transparency and accountability along with norms related to identity and legal status, vision/mission/objectives and operations. They are in some ways basic but nonetheless very important for transparent functioning marked by a commitment to accountability. For example, some of the norms related to governance require that the governing body meets at least twice a year (with meetings suitably spaced), that the minutes are recorded and circulated. There are norms ensuring that the governing board is adequately involved in functions such as programmes, budgets, annual activity reports and audited financial statements. The independence of the board is assured by the norm requiring that no more than half the members of the governing board should have remunerative roles. Norms related to operations emphasise the need for participatory decision-making processes, compliance with the laws of the land, maintenance of proper accounts with audit over a certain level of budget, etc.

Transparency is one of the core values for ensuring accountability and credibility. A number of Credibility Alliance norms require disclosure, especially in the annual report, on various issues. One of the most fundamental requirements of transparency and good governance is the quality of disclosure about the governing board. The norms lay down that the organisation should not only disclose details about the gender, age, position of directors but also indicate the remuneration drawn. As the annual report is one of the principal means of communication for an organisation, details of an organisation's activities and plans are to be included in the report. It should also include brief financial details. Besides the minimum norms, which all organisations that join the alliance have to comply with, there are desirable norms, some of which are enumerated above. The desirable norms of governance require that at least two-thirds of the board members are unrelated by blood or marriage, and that a board rotation policy exists and is practised. Desirable norms of transparency require disclosure in the annual report about the gender-wise break-up of salaries of staff in certain slabs and disclosures about international travel by all personnel.

As a mark of recognition of organisations complying with these norms, Credibility Alliance also accredits organisations

based on these norms. This is a process that begins with self-assessment by an organisation about its compliance with the norms. A form filled up by the organisation for this purpose, and the necessary documents, are then reviewed by Credibility Alliance. If the review indicates compliance with the norms, it is followed by a visit to the organisation's office and its projects by an independent assessor who is a person experienced in the voluntary sector either in the management or audit of organisations. The report prepared by the assessor is then submitted to a Central Accreditation Committee consisting of experts in the field of voluntary sector management, academicians and chartered accountants. The committee takes the decision on accreditation of the organisation based on its compliance with either the minimum or desirable norms. It is worth mentioning here that the application for accreditation is not rejected but is kept on hold until the organisation achieves compliance.

The norms and process of accreditation ensure a certain level of transparency and governance. A remarkable feature of the norms is that they have been formulated after extensive consultation within the voluntary sector. A stakeholder today is reassured about the functioning of the organisation if he is convinced about the organisation's commitment to transparency. Credibility Alliance's norms aim to achieve this level of transparency and governance which provides a reassurance not only to the stakeholders of an organisation but the entire voluntary sector and those interested in seeing the rise of a strong and committed voluntary sector.

The promotion of norms of transparency and accountability purely as an initiative from within the sector is a concept that will take time to be firmly rooted across the sector. A beginning has been made, and the movement needs to be strengthened with active participation from all players. There is also a need not only for improving upon the norms and the accreditation mechanism by a continuous process of consultation, but also for devising innovative measures to promote a culture of accountability and transparency.

The voluntary sector in India has displayed remarkable resilience over the decades while responding to the challenges posed by deep-rooted changes and developments in the economic, social and political landscape. It has also demonstrated its capacity to accommodate diverse viewpoints and practices in the course of its journey towards making society more just and humane. It has to redefine itself continuously to strengthen its role in the polity to be able to contribute more effectively. In discharging its role of ushering in changes in society, it will have to demand good governance and accountability from all segments. It will be in a position to do this with authority only when it demonstrates its own commitment to these fundamental tenets of responsible citizenship.

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The dog that did not bark

Societies cannot be held together only by coercion (state) or money (markets). Something more is required — intermediate professional groups of lawyers, doctors, accountants, etc, who provide the enabling conditions for a society to flourish, who give it a functional and institutionalised morality. The crisis of the professions is the dirty open secret that no one in India will discuss

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THERE IS A STRANGE ABSENCE in the civil society discourse in India. Most references to civil society conjure up images of voluntary associations coming together to do good, or induce accountability in the state. These are associations that exist outside the market and the state. These civic associations, whether they do public service or social audits, come in many different varieties. But a lot of recent discussion focuses on the role of professionals in these movements. The benign face is the active engagement of a large number of professionals in the NGO movement. There is an astonishing range of experiments going on, driven by young people: from Janaagraha, to Lok Satta to groups valiantly working on producing accountability in health, education, RTI, NREGA. These interventions are political in the sense that they want to penetrate to the core of politics, producing accountable institutions. But they are driven by what some might call an overinvestment in professionalism: they are not so much about wielding power as improving the process. They are driven largely by people with professional backgrounds, many of whom have returned

from abroad after giving up glittering careers. They are confident about their own skills and have something of a sense of what the future should look like. The extent of their impact is an open question: their social base is very thin, the terms in which they understand the purpose of politics is at odds with the obsession with identity and partisanship that drives so much of our politics, and they are undermined by the political economy of power. To what extent they can fill gaps left by the decline of social movements in the classic sense is a debatable question. However, the phenomenon is very real.

But the striking absence is this. In some ways the core of civil society is professional associations. It is important to distinguish between the professionalisation of social movements and the idea of professions as civil society. In the 19th century, when the debate over modernity first gained ground, professional associations were thought to be a crucial site outside of states and markets that would constitute a locus of identity, mobilisation and accountability. But in recent discussions of civil society there is a striking absence of two issues that are enabling conditions for both markets and states to succeed. Both of these issues were very much part of the consciousness of all great theorists of modernisation, from Adam Smith to Durkheim. And they were very much part of public discussion in the work of, say, Radhakamal Mukherjee. These two issues are as follows.

The first issue is the role of the professions (law, medicine, accountancy, management, academics, etc) in providing the enabling conditions for a society to flourish. Beyond the state and market, these professional groups, with their own norms and identities, are absolutely central to the functioning of any modern society. It could be argued without too much exaggeration that these groups are the principal source of a functional and institutionalised morality in modern societies. These groups are not defined by self-sacrifice — far from it. They are, in principle, defined by certain activities. They participate in civic life and contribute to society through their profession. Well-functioning groups will be driven by a respect for the norms and standards of the activity. So, to simplify, lawyers will act as 'officers of the court', doctors will be in the business of saving lives, accountants exposing fraud, etc. The existence of professional communities in which norms and standards are

The biggest crisis we may be facing is not that of the state or market, but in the idea of professionalism. At a mundane level, the Enron debacle in the US was traced to the perfidy of accountants; and when the full history of the current financial crisis is written, the conflicts of interest of academics and other 'professionals' will play a prominent part

There is a lot of false lament over how the middle classes lack social and civic commitment. But this task is not well served by exalted calls for self-sacrifice: it will be better served by myriads of doctors and lawyers and accountants and journalists restoring moral clarity and romance to their professional practice

maintained is crucial in two respects: both states and markets rely on them, and it is largely professional communities that can create compliance with norms.

The biggest crisis we may be facing is not that of the state or market, but in the idea of professionalism. At a mundane level, the Enron debacle in the US was traced to the perfidy of accountants; and when the full history of the current financial crisis is written, the conflicts of interest of academics and other 'professionals' will play a prominent part. But in India, arguably, the crisis of the professions is the dirty open secret we never discuss. There are good individual lawyers and law firms, but the legal profession is in a serious state of professional breakdown. This is not just manifest by high-profile cases like R K Anand. It is manifest in daily practice in big and small ways; the Bar Association is hardly the purveyor of professional standards.

Take one small example. During extensive interviews on the legal profession I was struck by the fact that only a minuscule number of prominent lawyers thought it was their obligation to give their clients 'objective' legal advice. Of course lawyers should defend clients if asked to, but in the first instance, particularly in civil matters, clients ought to be given an objective assessment of the plausibility of their claims. My colleague Jishnu Das, along with Jeff Hammer, produced one of the most rigorous studies of the quality of medical advice rendered by doctors in Delhi. While some were dedicated and excellent, the results were startling: the quality of advice, particularly where poor patients are likely to end up, was poor. Similarly, there are huge conflict of interest issues in prescribing certain courses of treatment and so forth. One could go on about other professions as well. The extent of the malaise within and across professions varies, but to deny it exists would be setting oneself up for a serious disaster.

The cause of this crisis of the professions is complex: it has to do with everything, from the type of education to the internal political economy of these professions. But as we focus on states and markets, let us not forget that society is held together by and depends on this plethora of intermediate professional groups, and their state of disrepair will subvert any aspirations we have for the state and the market.

The second issue pertains to the professions, but also more generally to the crisis in government. It is a commonsense proposition that incentives matter to people. And much of the discussion on institutional reform, whether of bureaucracies or professions, now has a simplistic mantra: get incentives right. Indeed, institutions are pretty much now reduced to incentives. But, as Adam Smith knew, there is something paradoxical about the idea that we can create integrity only by incentives. By definition, an individual who responds only (and I repeat only) to incentives lacks integrity, because his commitment to ends and norms is entirely externally-driven; it's as if he can be honest only when he is paid for it.

Societies cannot be held together only by coercion (state) or money (markets). Something more is required. In a broader sense, it requires internalisation of norms and values that set limits on what can be bought and sold. It requires the thought that not everything is merely instrumental. But in a more narrow sense, the idea of a professional identity was precisely the mechanism by which the gaps between norms and incentives could be filled. Unless professionals have a sense that the norms of their activity ought to have some presumptive claims on what professionals may or may not do, no amount of incentives will work. Again, paradoxically, market societies need an even stronger idea that professional norms are not something that can be always sacrificed to calculations of interest. If a society sends signals that only incentives matter, it will undermine its own foundations.

Many studies have argued that clarity over the purpose of one's profession, and a sense that society values that profession, is far more promoting of integrity than merely incentives. One of the crises the bureaucracy is facing is precisely that there is no sense of what it is for: no clear articulation of the ends it is meant to serve, no clear professional identity in the true sense. There is a lot of false lament over how the middle classes lack social and civic commitment. But this task is not well served by exalted calls for self-sacrifice: it will be better served by myriads of doctors and lawyers and accountants and journalists restoring moral clarity and romance to their professional practice. The big mystery of Indian civil society discourse is that it focuses on the professionalisation of voluntary associations, not on the professions themselves.

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Under pressure

As recognition of their significance grows, CSOs have found themselves under pressure to enhance their accountability, measure and report their impact in corporate terms, compensate for failures of market and state, and face unprecedented threats to their freedom to exist, express and engage. In 2008 alone, CIVICUS tracked 61 countries that imposed greater restrictions on civil society

INGRID SRINATH

IN HIS BOOK *Civil Society*, Michael Edwards describes civil society as “the story of ordinary people living extraordinary lives through their relationships with each other, driven forward by a vision of the world that is ruled by love and compassion, non-violence and solidarity”. He goes on to list three different uses of the term:

- As a description of varieties of association.
- As a value advocating the advantages of cooperation.
- As a democratic ecosystem — a public sphere in which engagement with the whole future and shape of society takes place (or could take place).

In academic parlance it has become customary to use the term to describe all manner of associations and groups that are not primarily businesses or organs of the state. In popular parlance, the term is often used synonymously with NGOs.

Regardless of the particular definition one subscribes to, it is clear that civil society in the 21st century has emerged as a significant, if not always coherent or cohesive global player. Policy development in any country with pretensions to democracy requires at least the semblance of civil society engagement. International institutions, from the World Bank to the World Economic Forum, too must at least be seen to engage with civil society.

As recognition of their significance has grown, especially since the 1999 WTO in Seattle, civil society organisations have found themselves at the receiving end of ever greater attention and scrutiny. Simultaneously, they have found themselves under pressure to enhance their accountability (to donors in particular), improve their capacity to measure and report their impact (ideally in quantitative funding cycle-linked metrics), to compensate for all manner of failures of market and state in a global neoliberal regime, and face unprecedented threats to their freedom to exist, express and engage especially under the guise of the so-called “war on terror” and its ripple effects.

Unsurprisingly, there has also been a proliferation of BONGOS (business-owned NGOs) ranging from corporate foundations to exercises in green-washing or other forms of PR, GONGOS (government-operated NGOs), especially in

repressive regimes that wish to simulate the appearance of civil society engagement while exercising absolute control, QUANGOS (government departments that take the form of NGOs), a rash of social enterprises operating at the intersections of market and state with civil society, and thinktanks entirely dedicated to promoting a particular ideology or lobbying for a particular interest group. An acquaintance claimed recently that civil society grew faster than the GDP of China in the past decade!

This has inevitably led to cross-pollination, usually donor-driven, between habits and attitudes across sectors. NGOs have been urged to adopt practices that make them more “business-like” in their measurement of impact and compelled to “manage the ratios”, whether these be headcounts, overheads to programmes or narrow definitions of impact, in their quest for the “efficiency” so highly valued by the new technocrat philanthropists in particular. Every NGO, national or international, of significant scale or ambition has worked with management consultants from the business sector in strategy development or review.

While this has had some positive effects, chiefly in enabling greater scale, it has also had unfortunate consequences. It has, for instance, privileged those organisations and causes that are “marketable” over those that address more complex, slow-burn, unfashionable issues that achieve serious systemic and structural shifts in the balance of power. There’s always plenty of support for another non-formal school where donors or their employees can volunteer, less so for mobilisations to ensure the right to education for all; plenty for a programme to distribute vaccines, less so for campaigns to give communities a say in determining health policy.

In the worst cases it has co-opted, silenced or marginalised those voices that could and should require greatest amplification — women, children, indigenous communities, lower castes, and poor nations. Add the predominance of an increasingly corporate media focused on profit over purpose, controlled by a few large conglomerates with narrow self-serving interests. Add repressive legislative and fiscal constraints imposed in the name of the “war on terror” or “national security” that restrict freedom of association, permissible activities and funding mechanisms.

In 2008 alone, CIVICUS's Civil Society Watch Programme tracked 61 countries that imposed greater restrictions on civil society. These included not only those conventionally labelled rogue regimes but many self-proclaimed bastions of democracy. The risks to civil society as a force for justice, equity, social cohesion and participatory democracy are greater than ever before.

These risks have been partially mitigated by the increased capacity for communication and collaboration provided by easier access to communications and networking technologies. The ability to work across national boundaries, language barriers and geographical divides has permitted some access to voice, funding and solidarity for otherwise muted groups.

As with blogging, digital photography and citizen journalism, it could be argued that this too has negative effects, in particular, the 'Facebookisation' of both advocacy and philanthropy. In a time when anyone with an Internet connection can create and promote a civil society entity, it is increasingly hard to distinguish the wheat from the chaff or to differentiate authentic activists from mouse-potatoes.

But the greatest impetus and threat to the development and effectiveness of civil society today comes, in my view, from the current confluence of crises — food, energy, climate and the financial and economic meltdown. This "perfect storm" has enabled mobilisation and collaboration on a far greater scale than ever, as its combined impact reaches every corner of our globalised world. Never before have such numbers of people been affected. Never have the stakes been higher. Never has change seemed more possible. Never has it been clearer that at the root of the myriad problems lies a common factor — the takeover of governance by private elites at the expense of the vast majority of people and the planet we call home.

From slums to forests, fishing communities to assembly-lines, indigenous peoples to suburbia — the people we so often refer to as ordinary are increasingly aware of the connectedness of their causes. And increasingly, though more slowly, willing to mobilise in solidarity with each other. As the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, and mobilisations around the G8, the WTO and the climate conferences have proved, civil society now has the reach, the connectivity, the tools, and the networks to achieve the critical mass necessary to effect substantive change. And it is, in my opinion, albeit at a glacial pace, demonstrating the capacity to overcome traditional divides — philanthropist versus activist, faith-based volunteer versus radical trade unionist, Northern versus Southern — to grasp the opportunity.

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Planned obsolescence

Civil society actors must believe that they could find nothing more fulfilling than to become inconsequential

ANMOL VELLANI

DOES CIVIL SOCIETY have a larger purpose? I shall endeavour to answer that question by first asking another, perhaps surprising, question: Can civil society exist under an authoritarian regime, under a dictatorship or a fundamentalist state? Authoritarian states typically deny legitimacy to the public sphere — the sphere that lies between the family and the state — wherein private citizens connect or associate with one another to pursue their common interests or those for the good of society.

Nonetheless, even under the most repressive regimes, civil society activity can and does endure. Think of what came to light once the Taliban's cover of darkness had been lifted in Afghanistan in 2001. I am not just referring to the music that survived, or the dancing that went on in secret rooms, or the beauty parlours and video parlours that kept on doing business. I mean also the women's groups that quietly educated girls in opposition to the Taliban's diktat, risking their wrath and terrible vengeance.

Such activity is treated as illegitimate by the 'absolutist' state. It is thus forced to go underground and its role is inevitably oppositional. What does it oppose, however? Clearly, on the one hand, it challenges what the 'absolutist' state projects and promotes as the 'public good'. But it also challenges something else. A fundamentalist or dictatorial state does not just define the public good; it insists that defining the public good is solely its preserve. A clandestine civil society is opposed, therefore, to regarding the public good as the state's, or for that matter anyone's monopoly.

Consider the implication of thinking that it is enough if civil society's opposition to an authoritarian state were to rest on a single but rival vision of the public good. Civil society would then be committed to replacing the existing state by one that, while promoting a different understanding of the public good, would be like its predecessor in refusing to accommodate other ideas of the public good. It would favour a state that says 'I'm right and you're wrong', even if it stops short of saying — as fundamentalists and dictators do — 'I'm right and you're dead'.

However, it is hard to defend the idea that civil society must owe allegiance to a particular conception of the public good and therefore that its purpose is to realise it. By its very nature, civil society is committed to creating space for

Foundations and NGOs might argue that they will never become obsolete because no society can ever be free of the needy and dispossessed. I really do not mind if civil society professionals make that argument, as long as they do not make it with a sense of relief. I do not mind it also because my argument is not that foundations and NGOs will become irrelevant, but that they must want to become irrelevant. They must visualise the ideal state of civil society as one in which the poor and disadvantaged are themselves able, fully and properly, to represent their own interests and struggle for their rights

multiple visions of the public good. There can be no civil society without a right of association, but what would be the point of giving people the right to associate if they can only come together to pursue the same thing?

Civil rights are meant to widen our choices, not restrict them. It is for this reason that civil society is most compatible with democratic forms of government. Democracies acknowledge that individuals and groups within society might have competing interests and differing conceptions of the good.

But is civil society compatible with any kind of democracy? Can foundations and NGOs, which mostly see themselves as

working on behalf of the poor, the dispossessed and the marginalised, accept the idea that the function of democracy is to accommodate and facilitate the expression of competing interests? Competitions are generally won by the rich and powerful. In most functioning democracies, not surprisingly, the interests of the influential and powerful are consistently privileged.

For this reason, I believe that civil society must support the idea that democracy's fundamental purpose is to promote active citizenship. The poor, after all, are disenfranchised because they are subjects rather than citizens, because they lack the power to participate in the making and shaping of the public sphere. Such a vision of democracy, moreover, is alone consistent with rights-based views of development-as-empowerment.

But the agents of civil society have good reason to resist this idea: if active citizenship were to be fully realised in our societies, would they not all be out of a job? As a professional class, is it not in their interest to reproduce the conditions that demand their continuing intervention on behalf of the disenfranchised? It is only in the absence of any progress towards active citizenship that civil society organisations, which are dominated by middle class professional elites, can sustain a culture of dependency.

There is, in other words, a palpable tension between what we must take to be the larger purpose of civil society and the self-interest of developmental professionals. Working for the interests of the disadvantaged, committed to a certain understanding of development and democracy, civil society actors must believe that they could find nothing more fulfilling than to become inconsequential!

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(Excerpted from a keynote address delivered at a conference on 'A Dialogue towards an Effective Grantmaker and Grantseeker Relationship' in the Philippines in 2004)

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