



UNDERSTANDING CIVIL SOCIETY

Conceptual Framework

Though the term ‘CIVIL SOCIETY’ has existed since early times, civil society as an intellectual construct gained clarity and lucidity with the advent of modernity in the western world during the 17th century. Since then the concept ‘civil society’ has been bestowed with many meanings and has undergone many revisions.

The contemporary interest in civil society has arisen out of the collapse of communist regimes in East and Central Europe. Resurrection of this concept and its use in the past decade has been necessitated as significant shifts in the roles of the state and the market began to be articulated.

In the contemporary interpretations of civil society, therefore, three distinctive approaches can be noted. The first approach is essentially derived from the Anglo- American tradition and builds on the work of Tocqueville. In this approach, civil society is seen as an intermediary layer between individuals and families, on the one hand, and state institutions, on the other. Even where state institutions evolve within a democratic polity, they begin to dominate different aspects of human endeavour - health, education, social services and a wide variety of arenas where citizens interact with the state. The representative form of democracy creates a distance between state institutions and their decision making from individuals and families who are relatively powerless. Building solidarity and associations across citizens helps them to mediate and negotiate their aspirations and interests with the state. In this formulation, civil society becomes an arena for expression of common interests of citizens and for empowering them to collectively articulate them vis-à-vis state institutions.

The second meaning of civil society has arisen from the challenge posed by citizens to communist regimes in Eastern Europe. As citizens began to protest against authoritarian states in Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union, on the one hand, and military dictatorship in Latin America, Philippines and South Africa, on the other, these movements began to represent the aspirations of collective forces of individuals. The thrust of these movements was to democratize the state and create fundamental freedoms and liberties for their citizens. In such a formulation, civil society began to be equated with the process of democratization in political structures and systems.

A third approach to the notion of civil society has its roots in the growing universal acceptance of free market and private enterprise as engines of economic development. Public Sector (the state and its institutions) and Private Sector (the for-profit business enterprises) have been undergoing realignments and shifts in their roles and relative contributions to societal development. As questions about the role of the state in economic development began to be raised, there evolved a growing demand for liberating economic activities from the clutches of state hegemony. In this formulation, non-state actors included for-profit private



enterprises, just as it included not-for-profit civil society actions. ‘Third Sector’ (assuming that the state is the first and for profit business is the second) formation is now being reconceptualized as civil the social order. Different perceptions, meanings, and manifestations are thus associated with the term ‘civil society’ in the contemporary context.

Civil society can be defined as the sum of individual and collective initiatives directed towards the pursuit of common public good. This definition of civil society acknowledges the presence of individual initiatives in different cultures. Individual action, howsoever limited and small, contributes to the well-being of society as a whole. This has been reinforced through various religious and spiritual traditions in different societies in different periods of history. Collective initiatives take on different forms in different periods of history. In today’s context, they take on a variety of associational forms based on the nature of association between citizens and their families. Today, traditional associational basis of caste, ethnicity, community is being replaced with more contemporary affiliations based on Neighbourhoods, profession, class and work place.

This definition also points to the varying degrees of collectivization, which may exist in a society. While some collective initiatives are more formally organized, many others remain transient, temporary and informally managed.

The above definition then looks at the meaning and interpretations of public good. Historically, public good has been the domain of public institutions, so-called state institutions and political formations. With a decline of state institutions, on the one hand, and growing differentiation in the needs and interests of diverse population, on the other, it is no longer tenable to repose all responsibility for public good in the hands of public state institutions. However, public good is not a homogenous concept and different sections of the population may interpret public good differently. This may also vary from a local reality to a global issue.

This approach to public good, therefore, implies differences, conflicts and contestations in the very meaning of public good not only among different classes, but also among the socially and economically disadvantaged groups the nature of public good varies. As a result, civil society becomes the space where establishment of common public good is a process of struggle between different sections of society.

The above approach to understanding civil society, therefore, makes it amply obvious that this is not a virtuous concept promoting good and happiness for all. There are differences and conflicts within civil society, there are inequalities and hegemonic forces operating in the functioning of civil society. This is true at the local and national level just as it is happening in the international arena.

A clear cut distinction is thus made between the boundaries and functioning of the state and civil society. It is important to note that while civil society retains its autonomy from the state



that autonomy is rarely absolute. We look at civil society as a relatively autonomous sphere as the boundaries of state and civil society in many instances get blurred.

Our definition of civil society includes not only formal organizations but informal organizations as well. There are a large number of associations, networks, and alliances with varying degrees of formalization. Some of them even lack any organizational form. Many such groups have taken up important issues like forest dependent people’s rights to minor forest produce, the tribals’ right to cultivate on the encroached forest land, etc.

There are also a number of organisations that enable others to play their role effectively by providing them support like the charitable trusts, voluntary development organizations, etc. These enabling intermediaries, as we refer to them, also fall within the broad contours of civil society.

Civil Society Associations

Any profile is based on a classification system. Civil society classifications have used purpose, type, activity, nature of organization, its resource base, etc. What is proposed here is a way of capturing the diversity. The defining concept used in the profile here is the types of association citizens have in society.

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

Five types of associations are elaborated below:

1. Traditional Associations

Such associations existed around a social unit either defined by a tribe, ethnicity or caste. Associations of this variety undertook a wide range of functions in the lives of those citizens. Besides mediating inter-family relations, such associations developed elaborate systems, norms and procedures for governing the use and protection of natural resources. In the course of state expansion in the past five decades, many of these associations have declined or disintegrated as their legitimacy and resource base was undermined by various state agencies and procedures. Forces of modernization and capitalist penetration have further weakened such associations. In several tribal areas, such associations still exist. Several important struggles to protect and advance customary rights of tribals over natural resources in different parts of the country have been led by such associations.

2. Religious Associations

Over the centuries, new sects and religions were born and incorporated into Indian life. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and many other variations challenged Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam for reform and renewal. Charity, help to the needy, service to the poor and ‘Daan’ (giving) have been uniformly recommended by all these religions and sects. Hence, a wide variety of civil society organizations have clear religious and spiritual inspiration and mandate. Education, health care, drinking water, afforestation, social welfare, etc. are numerous arenas of human action where fairly organized forms of civil society activity are carried out by religiously inspired civil society organizations.

The Ramakrishna Mission’s education and health care programmes in Calcutta, social service departments of different diocese in several parts of India, Madarasas (schools) and Unani (traditional) medicine clinics by Islamic institutions, Sai Baba’s schools and drinking water programmes in Andhra Pradesh, are a few of these examples. The Jesuit wing of liberation theologians have influenced the National Fishworkers Federation which led several important campaigns to influence the policies of the government to protect and advance the interests of small fishermen and sustainable marine life in the coastal areas of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

3. Social Movements

In contemporary context, a number of social movements have emerged as major manifestations of civil society. These movements are of several types.

- a) The first category essentially focuses on the needs and interests of a particular group of people. Historically, Indian society oppressed the tribals (indigenous people), dalits (untouchables) and women. In the past decade or so, social movements focusing on the interests, concerns and aspirations of tribals, dalits and women have gained ascendancy.
- b) Another form of social movements has been to protest against a set of practices, institutions, policies or programmes. Social movements to reform social evils have specially been targeting liquor, dowry, inheritance rights of women etc.
- c) The development paradigm and programmes have resulted in mass displacements, especially of tribals and rural poor. Social movements have emerged in protest against or to prevent displacements due to development. Various issues in the protection, preservation and regeneration of environment are triggering social movements throughout the country as well.
- d) A fourth type of social movement has focused upon governance and state accountability. Anti-corruption campaigns against government officials, civil liberties and human rights campaigns, campaigns for right to information, right to education, right to livelihood are some examples of this type.

Clearly, it is not possible to neatly categorize each type of social movement. There is enormous diversity in perspectives and approaches in different streams of a particular social movement. The nature of association by individuals and organizations is determined by the perspective and approach of a particular stream of social movement. It is in this sense that a high degree of voluntary participation characterizes social movements. Temporariness of association, great ideological and personal appeal of the perspective and approach, and commitment of individual energy and resources make the nature of associations in a social movement particularly distinctive. The primary function of social movements has been reform of society, institutions and governance. This is accomplished through mobilization and conscientisation of citizens associated with the movement.

4. Membership Associations

Modern civil society organizations expect individuals to `join' an association. The modern meaning of association is membership. In many modern civil society organizations, therefore, criteria and method of recruiting members, services to members and ways of securing contribution from members are clearly laid down. The degree of formality in membership and the criterion of exclusivity vary greatly across civil society organization types. In today's context, the following types of membership civil society organizations can be identified:

a. Representational

Such membership organizations are primarily set up to represent the opinions and interest of a particular category of citizens. Depending on the strength of the number of their members, such civil society organizations attempt mass memberships and broad coverage to gain visibility, articulate collective voice and advance common interests.

Trade unions are a clear example of this type. A wide variety of industry, location, occupation and skill-based trade unions exist today. Likewise, unions of rural labour, farm workers, vendors, women workers, etc. are examples of the informal sector workers' associations in India.

Various peasants organizations are also set up to represent the interests of middle and large peasants to the government. Political negotiations are key to the approach of such membership based civil society organizations.

A variety of business associations and traders' associations have also been building membership organizations to advance the interests of trading and business community. Such associations are local, regional and national Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Confederation of Industries, the Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), etc. are examples of such civil society organizations. It must be recognized that such associations are 'not-for-profit' in nature, even though their members are profit-making entities.

In recent years, consumers associations are beginning to emerge as new type of membership organizations in the country.

b. Professional

A number of civil society organizations exist as membership organizations around a particular occupation and/or profession. Lawyers, teachers, journalists, doctors, nurses, engineers, managers, all have their membership associations. Medical Association, Management Association, Union of Journalists, etc. are a few examples. Their primary purpose is to advance their professional and occupational identity and visibility in society, provide opportunities for exchange and support to their members, and assure collective voice in raising their demands and concerns.

c. Social-cultural

A number of clubs for sports and recreational purposes exists in India. At another extreme, Gymkhana Clubs serve the purpose of socialization for the elites. Clubs are memberships associations, which meet the social, cultural and recreational needs of their members.

Similarly, cultural associations exist in a wide variety of forms in the country. Modern music, theatre and dance groups in cities coexist with folk, song and drama groups in rural areas. They serve the aesthetic aspirations and support the creative skills of their members.

d. Self-help

Growing categories of membership associations are local self-help groups in a given community. From ward committees in urban neighbourhoods to community-based organizations in hamlets and villages, self-help groups are numerous today. Many of them have been spontaneously formed to serve the needs of their members. Self-help groups help share resources, enable mutual aid and support and build collective strength. Many self-help groups take the initiative to address problems facing their communities.

In recent years, many development programmes of the government and Voluntary Development Organisations (VDOs) have also enabled the formation of community-based organizations. Village Education Committees, Water and Sanitation Committee, Forest Protection Committee, Savings and Credit Groups, etc. are all examples of externally stimulated community based organizations aimed at self-help at local level. Cooperatives as associations are also self-help membership organizations.

5. Intermediary

This category of civil society organizations brings those organizations together which serve an intermediary function among individual citizens, and between them and macro state

institutions like the bureaucracy, judiciary, legislature, police, etc. Such associations are typically formed by a group of citizens (generally middle class) to advance a larger societal cause or broader public good. The citizens forming such intermediary associations are not serving their own issues or needs but those of other or broader sections of society. Several types of intermediary organizations are active today. These are generally labeled as NGOs.

a. Service delivery

Basic human service delivery organizations of civil society have been focussing on education and health care. Many schools, clinics and hospitals operate in rural and urban areas of the country. VDOs have expanded the range of development issues in their purview over the past two decades. Drinking water, sanitation, micro-credit, etc are all covered by VDOs today. Many institutions of care (Orphanage, Homes for Destitutes, Homes for Elderly, etc.) are also run by such intermediary associations.

b. Mobilizational

Several NGOs also help organize and empower local communities and marginalized sections to understand and demand their own rights and to take ownership of their own development. Such an approach may also include service delivery. A variety of educational and organizing approaches have been used by VDOs in different parts of the country to enable the poor and the marginalized to act on their own.

c. Support

Several intermediary civil society organizations have been set up to provide support to other community based organizations or other intermediary organizations in India today. Support functions include research and information sharing, capacity building and networking activities. Such support functions are focused on themes like income generation, environment, health, wasteland development, housing etc. Some support organizations are more generic in nature.

d. Philanthropic

Some intermediary civil society organizations provide resources to other civil society organizations in the country. Wide range of such formations are active in recent years. Several corporate houses have philanthropy programmes. New approaches for mobilizing resources are also emerging.

e. Advocacy

Some intermediary civil society organizations have been set up with the explicit purpose of advocating on a particular cause. Environment, gender, human rights, child labour, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), etc. are a number of issues on which intermediary advocacy civil



society organizations have been active in India in recent years. PUCL (People’s Union for Civil Liberty), CHRI (Commonwealth Human Rights Institute) etc. are some illustrations of this type.

f. Network

Some intermediary civil society organizations are associations of other intermediaries and act as networks to extend their collective voice and strength. Some networks are focused on a theme. Some are generic and cover a specific geographical area. Such networks have begun to extend their membership to cover a wide range of intermediaries.

In conclusion, therefore, it is clear that a wide range of intermediaries coexist today. Several of them undertake a variety of functions as listed above. A neat classification may not exist in reality among intermediaries. Some support organizations perform grantmaking functions also; some networks undertake research and advocacy too. However, as a category of civil society organizations, such intermediaries have a growing influence on the policies and practices of the governments in the country today.

Conclusion

Using the associational framework, the map of civil society can be seen to present a wide array of ‘public good’. From serving the particular interests of a community or a group to those of marginalized and excluded, to those of middle class and elites, such associations vary in their composition, structure, degree of formalization, extent of resources and quality of outcomes. This map is at best an initial guide of associational types today.

However, the above classification leaves out individual initiatives; it also does not capture transient types like a flood relief committee; certain hybrid types may also not be adequately covered in this map. The map also does not determine the degree of autonomy, effectiveness or voluntarism in such associations. Despite these limitations, such a map of civil society emphasizes the nature and range of voluntary citizen associations in pursuit of common public good.