

THE MAKING OF CIVIL SOCIETY¹

B.DEVI PRASAD

It is now increasingly realized that a nation's political future, its economic strength and its identity will be shaped by the creation of better, more transparent government in partnership with a vibrant civil society.

*-Brian Atwood
(USAID, 1997)*

The phrase civil society is taken from the European history books and became current in the discourse of social activists, NGO functionaries and even among a few academic circles. Currently it is also one of the most important categories in political discourse. If the representative government was the great social invention of the 18th century, and the bureaucracy – both public and private – was the invention of the 19th century, the civil society can be designated as the innovation of the 20th century.

The word “civil” denotes citizen or issues pertaining to citizenship. In a way, civil society refers to legally valid free associations, and interactions of citizens in communities, for common aims. The term thus covers a multitude of private, non-profit and non-governmental organizations that have been emerging in virtually every corner of the world providing means through which citizens can exercise individual initiative in the private pursuit of public purposes (Salamon and Anheier, 1997).

In order to understand the concept of civil society, one needs to go into the context and definitional issues of it.

Context

The past decade in particular has seen dramatic changes at the global level which have had a significant impact on societies everywhere. The most important of these changes have been: (i) globalization of economies, (ii) information revolution and global telecommunications, (iii) erosion of State's capabilities and efficiency.

- (i) It has been evident that the policies of the World Bank and the, IMF often have more impact on the economies of countries than those of the national governments. The growth of transnational corporations has also increased the effects of external influences on national policies. These trends, in globalized economies, have important implications for governments. Increasingly the governments have found that their ability to influence what happens at national levels has, over the course of time, been eroded – sometimes slowly and at other times quickly.

¹ From Lal, A.K. (2003) (Ed.) *Social Exclusion*, Vol. I (pp.11-117), New Delhi: Concept

- (ii) The telecommunications too has become global. As cultural influences come through the same route and cannot always be controlled, this is resulting in the homogenization of the social diversity of societies. Indian society is not an exception to this. In this sense, even post-modernization is also a kind of socio-cultural and economic homogenization at the international level. Similarly, access to new technology through these communications has created new opportunities and advantages, and disadvantage to those who lack them (Ball and Dunn, 1995, p.9).
- (iii) In many parts of the world, the State is not even performing its basic functions, i.e. maintaining the law and order, protecting property rights, managing the macro-economy, providing basic social services, and protecting the disadvantaged and the poor. There are instances of State collapse which seem to have become more common in the 1980s and 1990s than in the earlier post-war years. Collapse of governments in countries such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Rwanda, Somalia and in certain parts of South Asia (e.g. Sri Lanka) can be cited as examples. They have been settings for some of the worst human rights violation of recent years. What all these countries have in common is a fundamental loss of institutional capability (World Bank, 1997:158-160).

The efficiency of the State is also being questioned in many quarters. In the 1950's and 60s, the concept of a welfare state gained widespread acceptance. But today that concept is seriously questioned. For the last decade and a half, withdrawal of the State from social service activities has been going on because the cost of provision of services became too high. In India, this has been evident in the drastic cuts in the welfare spending and in others social sectors such as health, education and so on.

In fact, in most of the Asian societies, the State had been the dominant actor and still continues to be so. It had allowed or disallowed market forces as well as civil society. But today, the role of State in these areas needed redefinition. Now, a balance between the State, the market forces, and the civil society is becoming increasingly important as the economic development would be controlled and determined by the market forces in the years to come (Tandon, 1991; Ball and Dunn, 1995). In general, three observations can be made about the impact of the above trends:

- (i) As more globalization occurs, more national governments lose control over national affairs, whether or not they want it or like it.
- (ii) Globalization tends to increase the gap between rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged and so on. Ordinary citizen is increasingly becoming a consumer-objectified, instead of continuing his/her role as a citizen or as an active actor in the spheres of community, culture and economy.

(iii) There is new thinking about the role of government—that it should be more of a policy-maker and less of a provider. Thus, the role of the State in the social sector is gradually diminishing. The more advanced countries have passed through this phase of decline of welfare state ideology and shifted to a new paradigm of socio policy with more reliance on local and private initiatives and greater use of market allocations for public purposes (Edwards et. al., 1996). It is in this context that the emphasis on civil society has come into existence.

Thus, among the most significant changes of the past half a century has been the emergence of a vigorous global civil society. Disillusionment about the State as a powerful agent of change along with decreasing confidence in the capability of the state institutions to promote development on their own shifted, the attention to civil society organisations (CSOs) including NGOs. In the current socio-economic scenario, these organisations are to serve as vehicles for citizen participation in the social, political, economic and cultural life of their communities and nations. Some even emphasize the pre-eminent role these civil society organizations can play in ensuring and sustaining democracy and in finding solutions at the local level (Hall, 1995; Atwood, 1998).

In other words, the reinforcement of civil society is seen as a way of increasing the resilience of social institutions so that they may be able to prevent anarchy even if the State is weak. It is hoped that a rich associational life may enable communities to maintain law and order, support a safety net, and resist official corruption or exploitation.

What is Civil Society : The Third Sector?

There exist in the society three dominant sectors, namely: the State, the Market and the Civil Society. Put simply, the State and Market are sectors driven respectively by power and profit. The civil society in contrast is motivated by social vision.

Civicus, the world alliance for citizens' participation (Fernandes, 1994), attempted to differentiate among these sectors on the basis of the ends for which they work. Thus:

While the State has public agents for public ends, the Market has private agents acting for private ends, and the Civil Society has private agents acting for public ends.

Hence the civil society, it is argued, comprises the third sector. However, it may be mentioned here that the civil society sector is not a homogeneous sector. It consists of multiple, frequently non-rational and often contestatory organizations comprising private, non-profit initiatives for public ends (Jacobs, 1996:1239). Salmon and Anheier (1997) broadly defined the civil society sector as the “organized, non-profit, private activity for public purposes outside both the market and the State”. In this sense, a variety of people's initiatives at different levels, including the NGOs, form a part of the total fabric of organizations in civil society.

In fact, organizations of all kinds, formed voluntarily by citizens, come into the fold of the concept of civil society. According to Ball and Dunn (1995, p.11), the civil society organizations fall into three broad categories:

First, organizations formed out of concern to assist the needy or disadvantaged including those formed for self-help purposes among the disadvantaged people.

Second, organisation which is formed on the basis of a common interest in and/or to take action on a particular subject or issue.

Third, organizations through which people engage in a common pursuit.

Thus, the term civil society covers a multitude of institutions such as voluntary associations and related networks, trade unions, savings associations self-help groups, social clubs, charities, users' groups, housing cooperatives, religion-based associations, educational institutions, chambers of commerce, cultural associations, professional associations such as those of doctors, lawyers, teachers and so on.

On the other hand, Ball and Dunn (1995) differentiated NGOs as those organizations in civil society, which are:

Formed to assist the needy or disadvantaged or those which are formed to pursue a common interest in and/or to take action on a particular subject or issue which causes disadvantage or is detrimental to the well being of people or society as a whole.

Another dimension can also be used to help us understand the differences between NGOs and other civil society organizations. Thus, there are four key defining characteristics of non-profit organizations. These are: (i) voluntary, (ii) independent, (iii) not-for-profit and (iv) not-self serving in aims and related values (Ball and Dunn, 1995, p.19). Salamon (1998) argues that on the basis of the fourth defining characteristic there can be two categories of non-profit organizations. One type is called public-serving organizations, which exist exclusively to serve the needs of a broader public. They do not serve their members' interests but are concerned in one way or another with the disadvantaged or a disadvantage.

On the other hand in civil society, there are other groups which are self-serving or member-serving organizations. Primarily, these organizations, while serving some public purpose, meet the interests, needs and desires of the members of the organization. Included here are social clubs, self-help groups, business associations, labour unions, chambers of commerce, users' associations, political parties and so on.

While the concept of civil society encompasses organizations from both the categories, NGOs are those which fall into the former category and operate at the

interface between government and its institutions on the one hand and the wider fabric of civil society on the other.

The Civil Society: Some theories of its origin

Two theories broadly explain the circumstances responsible for the emergence of this third sector (Salamon and Anheier, 1997:64).

The dominant “market failure/government failure” theory puts forward the idea that the non-profit sector is a response to the market’s inherent limitation in generating an adequate supply of “collective public goods and services”, and the government’s increasing inability to respond to collective public needs. According to this theory, the civil society essentially “fills in” this gap and comes to exist where the government’s activity is most constrained. Alternatively, the civil society sector is most constrained where the government is most active.

Another line of thinking faults the State stating that the State, among other reasons, is instrumental in displacing voluntary groups and in disallowing the non-profit sector to come up. According to this view, the State is a bureaucratic monolith inherently hostile to alternative centres of power. As it expands, it renders the voluntary initiative functionally irrelevant and thus undermines the spirit of community, which sustains such initiatives.

However, Salamon and Anheier (1987), on the basis of the data gathered about the non-profit sector in a broad cross-section of countries around the world, found that the State is not a displacer of civil society organizations but is contributing significantly in extending their outreach. The study findings seem to suggest that the term civil society would not apply to a particular sector. Rather it is a relationship that not only acknowledges the legitimacy of a civil sector, as well as the market and government sectors, but encourages active cooperation among all of them in addressing public problems (Salamon, 1998).

Role of Civil Society Sector

The concept of civil society is not new to the Indian soil. In fact the socialist leader, Jayaprakash Narain’s vision of lokshakti as a measure of bringing about good governance, and vigilance over the affairs of the State; and Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of rural reconstruction and Sarvodaya are examples of movements to build and promote civil society initiatives in Indian society.

Today, in Andhra Pradesh, the Janma Bhoomi programme and other related initiatives taken up by the political executive can be considered as efforts to invoke the civil society initiatives among the people. The thrust under this programme has been to motivate and mobilize the people’s groups to solve local problems through local initiative. In the process, an effort has been made to demystify the bureaucracy and to encourage people to participate in finding solutions to immediate problems that affect their communities. The issues addressed are diverse such as: the need for good schools, health centres, better environment, better streets and transportation, better sanitation and water supply, and so on.

Besides, at an individual level, Mr. Anna Hazare in Maharashtra, Dr. Jayaprakash narayan, a former civil servant, in Andhra Pradesh (Foundation for Democratic Reforms, 1997) have been involved with efforts to broaden the base of civil society. Their aim is to properly design and harness the people's power for good governance, better life and sustainable democracy.

The current social conditions are propitious for the emergence of a civil society sector. Therefore, the broad scenario of the CSOs need to be seen as a potential area of relationships to be explored for building bonds of trust and cooperation which are so essential for the democratic functioning of our society.

Indian has one of the most complex and diverse civil society sectors in the world, including a rich tapestry of Gandhian rural development organizations as well as numerous empowerment oriented associations linked to various political, religious and ethnic movements.

The civil society organizations are recognized as crucial institutional mechanisms in encouraging and sustaining democracy. They provide an important means of enabling citizens to participate in the social, political, economic and cultural life of their communities and nations. More specifically, the civil society organizations play several important roles. Some of them are:

- promoting good governance
- strengthening democracy
- citizen participation
- social safety-valve role
- community building role

An active civil society can make governments accountable and make them function better. Civil society can play a significant role in public advocacy, policy analysis, and mobilize opinions in support of issues of public concern. Thus, a strong and active civil society can foster three elements essential for democracy. They are (i) accountability, (ii) participation and (iii) a proper climate for political reform.

A well-organized civil society empowers the poor and enhances their collective voice in political processes. The civil society organizations serve as means through which the citizen participation can take place in a wide variety of settings.

As a social safety-valve, this sector can be the principal vehicle through which communities can give voice to their concerns. Broader public attention to societal problems and needs can be mobilized through the civil society.

The CSOs can play a vital role in creating and sustaining what scholars have come to refer as the "social capital" (Blomkvist and Swain, 2001) i.e., those bonds of trust and reciprocity that are essential for a democratic society. In other words, the institutional capabilities are effectively built by the CSOs. In social work parlance

we call this as community building role which is assuming increasing significance in the current era of diminishing State responsibility in the governance and provision of social services (Weil, 1996).

What is needed now is a dynamic balance between the state, the market and the civil society and not a dominance of one over the other. It is now increasingly realized that a nation's political future, its economic strength and its identity will be shaped by the creation of a better and more transparent government in partnership with a vibrant civil society. It is our responsibility to strengthen the civil society in the new millennium to play that role effectively.

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