Role of Civil Society in Indian Democracy

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Civil society is the set of civic rights, including primarily everyone’s right to participate in Public life. These rights provide the compass which helps us to steer the right course between system of state with all its competences of power, and the corporate cartel of organizations and institutions which in some circumstances can be equally dangerous to freedom.

Civil society must also have foundation in a mature democracy and a mature political culture. It can be built only if there is widespread determination on the part of society to demand respect for, and observance of, individual rights, and popular will to hold accountable anyone or any institution, which violates them.

India is the largest democracy in the world. But without its lively NGO scene, many ills in society would continue unchallenged. Civil society derives its strength from the Gandhian tradition of volunteerism, but today, it expresses itself in many different forms of activism. Though the term NGO became popular in India only in the 1980s, the voluntary sector has an older tradition. Since independence from the British in 1947, the voluntary sector has a lot of respect in the minds of people – first, because the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi was an active participant; and second because India has always had the tradition of honouring those who have made some sacrifice to help others.

In independent India, the initial role played by the voluntary organizations started by Gandhi and his disciples was to fill in the gaps left by the government in the development process. The volunteers organized handloom weavers in village to form cooperatives through which they could market their products directly in the cities, and thus get a better price. Similar cooperatives were later set up in areas like marketing of dairy products and fish. In almost all these cases, the volunteers helped in other areas of development – running literacy classes for adults at night, for example.
In the 1980s, however, the groups who were now known as NGOs became more specialized and the voluntary movement was, in a way, fragmented into three major groups. There were those considered the traditional development NGOs, who went into a village or a group of villages and run literacy programmes. There are many examples of voluntary organizations of this kind running very successfully in India for the last five decades. Perhaps the most celebrated example would be the treatment centre for leprosy patients run by Baba Amte in central India.

The second group of NGOs were those who researched a particular subject in depth, and then lobbied with the government or with industry or petitioned the courts for improvements in the lives of the citizens, as for as that particular subject was concerned. A well-known example of an NGO of this type is the Centre for Science and Environment. It was a CSE who picked up that sample of well water and then submitted the results of the chemical analysis to a court because the organization had not been able to get the factory to change its polluting practices in any other way.

In the third group were those volunteers who saw themselves more as activists than other NGOs did. Of course, all NGOs undertook a certain amount of activism to get their points across – they petitioned the bureaucrats, they alerted the media whenever they found something wrong and so on. But this third group of NGOs saw activism as their primary means of reaching their goals, because they did not believe they could get the authorities to move in any other way. Perhaps the best-known example of an NGO in this category is the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Campaign), an organization that opposed the construction of a series of large dams in a large river valley of central India. The members of this NGO believe that large dams worsen water scarcity for the majority of the people in the long run rather than solve the problem, and they oppose the displacement it entails upstream of the dam. Most of the NBA member went to jail in number of times as a result. Right now, some of them – including celebrated novelist Arundhati Roy – face the prospect of being jailed again, because they criticized the Supreme Court of India when the court’s decision on dam construction did not go in their favour.

There is no strict boundary between these three groups of NGOs – in fact, Baba Amte is now an important member of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. And whatever be the category a
particular NGO fall into, all of them play an important role in modern India – they hold the politicians accountable to the people.

India is a representative rather than a participatory democracy. Once the elections are over, the politicians who run the federal and state governments do not really need to go back to the electorate for every major decision – there is not tradition of referendums in India, as there is a Switzerland or Denmark. So, in the five years between one election and another, the NGOs – and parts of the media, to some extent – are often the only means available to the citizens to voice their opinions on any decision taken by a government.

In a large developing country like India, there are numerous gaps left by the government in the development process – sometimes by intention, sometimes due to lack of funds, sometimes due to lack of awareness. These are the gaps that many NGOs try to fill in modern India. Some of them may work in areas that the government does not want to get into – like fighting discrimination on the basis of caste. Most Indian politicians do not really want to upset the existing caste hierarchy in his or her constituency, because the politician is dependent for votes on the dominant castes of that particular constituency. In the process, laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of caste are often ignored unless there is an NGO working in the area that is willing to take up the cause of those being discriminated against. Then there are many NGOs who work in areas where the government effort proves inadequate. Two well-known examples are the areas of education and healthcare. In the areas of education, there are often not enough government-run schools, especially in rural regions. Or there may be schools without adequate facilities, because a particular state government does not have the necessary money. There are many situations where the government runs a co-educational school, but the girls do not go there because their conservative parents (the overwhelming majority) refuse to send their daughters where they may meet boys. Then there are many cases where the government runs a largely-empty school, because most of the boys and girls are out working during schools hours. NGOs have played an important role in all these cases – running special classes at night for children whose parents send them out to work. Running special classes for girls and so on. By the large, governments have been supportive of such initiatives by NGOs, and the only problem is that there are not enough NGOs to educate all the uneducated people in India. The mammoth NGO called Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad is largely credited for the hundred percent literacy in that state in the south-western corner of India.
In the area of healthcare, too, NGOs play a stellar role in modern India – by supplementing the government effort to provide health care to citizens, and by raising awareness in society about issues like child and maternal malnutrition, which is perhaps more important than adding a few more clinics. Again, in modern India it is the NGOs who have battled social evils in the area of healthcare, like the neglect of the girl child, which can sometimes take the extreme form of female foeticide or infanticide. It is largely through the lobbying by NGOs through the media that many state governments have now passed laws banning sex-determination tests of foetuses, as such tests were often leading to the abortion of female foetuses.

In the last 20 years of so, a very large number of NGOs in India have been active in the area of environmental protection. They have been in the forefront of reforestation campaigns, they have lobbied against deforestation or overuse of pesticides in agriculture, and they have taken polluting industries to task. In this sustained campaign, the NGOs have often been helped by the judiciary whenever the government of the day has proved unresponsive. For this, NGOs in India have almost developed into a fine art a device called public interest litigation, by which any citizen can petition a court to intervene where (s) he feels it is in the public interest for the court to intervene.

Another fielding which certain Indian NGOs have been active, especially in urban areas, is in trying to turn the right to shelter into a reality. This is an area where constructive work and activism have intermingled most often, as NGOs such as YUVA and SPARC in cities like Mombai (Bombay) repeatedly oppose the demolition of hutments even as they try to improve the quality of life in the sprawling slum clusters.

The struggle by NGOs to make governments more accountable to citizens is an ongoing struggle in India. For years now, NGOs have been lobbying for the right to information to become a legal right, and it now appears that the federal Parliament may soon pass a bill to this effect.

The ‘80s were the hey days of activist journalism in India. NGOs became the media’s key allies in exposing injustice and clear violations of rules. Today, human rights reportage has to fight for column space with a myriad other a myriad other issues and NGOs have to speak louder to be heard by the public but their under a cloud because of alleged misappropriation of public funds. The jet-set life-style of some NGO there is a new category of NGOs “airport NGOs”- who
flit for one international airport to another, hopping from one cause to another, all in the name of the poor and grassroots activism.

Democracy is founded on a self-reflective choice and on institutional arrangements which secure the equal sharing of political, economic and social power. These are just necessary conditions for democracy. The sufficient condition so that democracy will not degenerate into some kind of “demago-cracy”, where the demos is manipulated by a new breed of professional politicians, is crucially determined by the citizens’ level of democratic consciousness.

Non-democratic systems of government limit and restrict people’s political choices. In a dictatorship, a single person makes the decisions that affect the whole country without any of the citizens having their say.

Under military rule, the army rules the country and the citizens have no choice but to accept it. Fascism means that one person, a “strong man” solves all the problems of a country on his own, as long as he receives loyalty and unquestioning obedience.

Democracy is the one type of government that cannot exist without the approval and input of the people. This is because its main characteristic is choice – without active political choices being made by the citizens living in a democracy, a democracy does not really exist.

Recently, Anna Hazare – a modern Gandhian and his team struggled hard to pressurize the union government to pass a strong Jan Lokpal Bill so that bureaucracy, courts and ministry including Prime Minister could be brought within the purview of such a strong law to check corruption in India. Unfortunately the bill could not be passed in the Parliament because some political parties backed out. Let us hope that the movement steered against corruption by the Civil Society of Anna Hazare and his team will succeed in getting the proposed legislation passed to eradicate corruption in India. Let us have high hopes about the role being played by the civil society in India in various fields.

References:


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