



BLOCK 5
CONCEPT AND ROLE OF CIVIL
SOCIETY

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UNIT 11 CONCEPT AND ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Structure

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the concept of civil society,
- examine the role of civil society in India, and
- highlight the various issues affecting their effective functioning and suggestions to lessen them.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘civil society’ can be traced back to the works of classical Greek and Roman philosophers like Aristotle and Cicero. As a matter of fact, Aristotle is credited with the very first usage of the term. The term, which at that period of time was taken, as synonymous to political institution, has developed a completely opposite meaning in today’s discourse and is referred to, as an autonomous body, distinct from the state.

The modern idea of civil society saw its genesis in the Scottish and Continental enlightenment era of the late eighteenth century. An idea of civil society being parallel but distinct from the state was developed by the political theorists’ right from Thomas Paine¹ to George Hegel². According to them, civil society was a domain, where association of citizens takes place in accordance with their interests, desires, and wishes. Reflections of this changed school of thought could be seen in the changed economic realities like rise of bourgeois, private properties, and market competition.

¹ Thomas Paine¹ was an English American political activist, philosopher, political theorist and writer whose writings influenced the American Revolution and helped pave the way for the Declaration of Independence.

² Hegelianism is the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, which can be summed up by the dictum that the ‘rational alone is real.’ This means that all reality is capable of being expressed in rational categories.

But in the middle of the 19th century, the term was deserted because the attention of the political philosophers turned to the social and political repercussions of the industrial revolution. But, the term revived during the Second World War, when the Marxist theorists Antonio Gramsci³ resuscitated the idea of civil society in order to represent civil society, as an exclusive centre of independent political activity against tyranny. Gramsci ideas were a source of influence for the persons fighting against dictatorship in central Europe and Latin America in 1970's and 1980's. Even "Czech, Hungarian, and Polish activists wrapped themselves in the banner of civil society, endowing it with the heroic quality, when the Berlin Wall fell" (Carothers, 1999).

It was in 1990's that the phrase 'civil society' became the buzzword in the global arena with every one right from political scientists to an average citizen using it, as a 'mantra' (key) and became a significant constituent of the 'post-cold-war-zeitgeist'.⁴ Elena Triffonova has mentioned post-cold-war-zeitgeist in that all the European countries worked towards reconstructing civil society. Since 1990s, NGOs have emerged, as an important force working to democratize the decision making process, protect human rights, and provide essential services to the most needy. The civil society is conceived, as an essential condition of democracy.

11.2 CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is generally defined, as the space, which is outside the realm of family, market, and state. There is no single definition of civil society. It means differently to different authors.

As per Sussane Hober Rudolph⁵ "civil society... includes the idea of a non-state autonomous sphere; empowerment of citizens; trust building associational life; interaction with, rather than subordination to the State". Dipankar Gupta⁶ defines civil society, as "not a thing but a set of conditions within, which individuals interact collectively with the state."

To Larry Diamond⁷, it is the "realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, and autonomous from the state, bound

³ Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist philosopher and communist politician. He wrote on political theory, sociology and linguistics. He broke away from the economic determinism of traditional Marxist thought and so is considered a key neo-Marxist.

⁴ Post-cold-war-zeitgeist in, which zeitgeist is a concept from 18th to 19th century in German philosophy, meaning 'spirit of age.' It refers to an invisible agent or force dominating the characteristics of a given epoch in world history. In contemporary world, it prescribes what is considered to be acceptable for an era.

⁵ Sussane Hober Rudolph was an American author, political thinker, and educationist. She was actively interested in politics, political economy, and political sociology of South Asia. Her writings were compiled by OUP in 2008 into a three volume publication under the name, 'Explaining Indian Democracy: A Fifty-Year Perspective.'

⁶ Dipankar Gupta is an Indian sociologist and public intellectual. He was formerly Professor in the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, JNU, New Delhi. He has written a number of books such as 'Mistaken Modernity, 2009;' 'The Caged Phoenix: Can India Fly? 2009;' 'Revolution from Above' 2013, Political Sociology in India: Contemporary Trends, 1996, and many more.

⁷ Larry Diamond is an American political sociologist and leading contemporary scholar in the field of democracy studies. He is a professor of sociology at Stanford University and teaches courses on democratic development and supervises democracy programs at the Centre of Democracy, Development, and Rule of Law. He has published extensively in the fields of foreign policy, foreign aid, and democracy.

by a legal order or a set of shared rules. It is distinct from the 'society' in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas; exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold the state officials accountable. Civil society is an intermediary entity standing between the private sphere and the state. Civil society is concerned with public rather than private ends...civil society relate to the state in some way but do not aim to win formal power."

According to Jeffery Alexander⁸"civil society is an inclusive, umbrella-like concept referring to plethora of institutes outside the state."

Niraja Gopal Jayal envisions civil society to cover "all forms of voluntary associations and social interactions not controlled by the state."

To Michael Bratton ⁹civil society is a "social interaction between the household and the state characterized by community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication."

The World Bank has adopted a definition of civil society that was developed by a number of leading research centers, "the term civil society refers to a wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious, or philanthropic considerations. Civil society organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide of array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations."

The European Union (EU) considers CSOs to include "all non-State, not-for-profit, non-partisan, and non-violent structures through, which people organize to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic These CSOs are membership based, cause-based, and service-oriented. Among them are the community-based organizations, NGOs, faith-based organizations, foundations, research institutions, gender based organizations, LGBT organizations, cooperatives, professional and business associations, media, and non-for-profit organizations. Trade unions and employers' organizations, the so-called social partners, constitute a specific category of CSOs."

A civil society ecosystem usually includes within its ambit¹⁰:

- 1) NGOs, non-profit organizations, and community based organizations that have an organized structure or activity and are typically registered entities and groups.
- 2) Online groups like social media communities with activities that can be organized, but may not necessarily have physical, legal, or financial structures.

⁸ Jeffery Alexander is an American sociologist and one of the world's leading social theorists.

⁹ Michael Bratton is University distinguished professor of Political Science and African studies at Michigan State University. He has been an author of books mostly with 'Voting and Democratic Citizenship in Africa,' 2013; A Power Politics in Zimbabwe, 2014; and articles in The American Journal of Political Science, Comparative Political Studies, and other journals.

¹⁰ World Economic Forum, 2013, The Future Role of Civil Society-Weforum, Switzerland

- 3) Social movements of collective action, which can be online or physical.
- 4) Religious leaders, faith communities, and faith-based organizations.
- 5) Labor unions and labor organizations representing workers.
- 6) Social entrepreneurs employing innovative approaches for positive social and environmental outcomes.
- 7) Grassroots associations and activities at the local level.
- 8) Cooperatives owned and democratically controlled by the members.

From the above we can deduce the following characteristics of a civil society:

- 1) It consists of non-state institutions.
- 2) It consists of a plethora of organizations and institutions outside family, state, and market.
- 3) It is an organized society.
- 4) It is voluntary.
- 5) It is autonomous body.
- 6) It is a nonprofit entity.
- 7) It enables citizen's interaction with the state, thus, facilitating citizen participation in the governance process.

11.3 CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDIA

India has a long tradition of civil society activities and movements going on since centuries. The roots of civil society in India can be traced to the Vedic times. Various religions in India like Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Buddhism, and Jainism-all stress on behavior that is ultimately beneficial to society and mankind. The concept of 'giving' for others is very much embedded in our religions. We have 'Daan' in Hinduism, 'Dasvand' in Sikhism, and 'Zakat' in Islam connoting benevolent giving. In medieval period also, voluntary organizations were actively involved in welfare activities pertaining to education and health.

In the 19th century, the popular mobilization vis-à-vis CSOs took place, which saw the emergence of various social groups like 'Brahmo Samaj,' 'Arya Samaj,' 'Theosophical Society,' 'Ramakrishna Mission,' which were behind different reform movements in India. Active participation of various NGOs and voluntary organizations was witnessed during India's struggle for freedom. Voluntary sector gained momentum under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. He mobilized masses and created a space for civil society, which successfully carried out the movements like Satyagraha (truth and non-violence), non-cooperation, and civil disobedience. His school of thought continued to inspire people even after independence, reminiscences that can be seen in movements like Chipko movements led by Sunder Lal Bahuguna or more recently anti-corruption protests by Anna Hazare, social audit movement by the rural workers and such others.

After independence, the union government set up Central Social Welfare Board, and began the Community Development Programme, and National Extension Service. These efforts were basically to involve and increase people participation

in the social welfare developmental programmes. After establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India in 1958, various farmers and their co-operative societies came up in good numbers and gave fillip to networking in the civil society organizations. The incidences of droughts, famines, and engagement in wars in the sixties gave further boost to voluntary action in the country. In 1970's and 1980's, the number of CSOs, especially, NGO's grew in the areas of poverty alleviation, development and growth, access to education, empowerment of poor, protection of civil liberties etc. and were recognized, as crucial partners in development of the state.

With LPG in the nineties, the role of the NGOs increased. As international organizations like World Bank and IMF giving aids to developing nations showed their inclination to work with non-state actors, the number and significance of NGOs increased. The dawn of 21st century saw civil society in India undertaking a major initiative to the enactment of Right to Information Act (RTI) 2005.

According to Dr. Ramesh Sharan, CSOs in India can be classified under following types:

- 1) Voluntary groups influenced by Gandhian thought.
- 2) Professional rural development agencies
- 3) Civil and political rights groups
- 4) Missionary organizations
- 5) Students, workers, and women movements associated with political parties
- 6) Independent social movements of dalits, adivasis, women, and environmentalists.
- 7) Movements of minority groups (Muslim, Christian, Buddhist)
- 8) Religious movements including both spiritual and fundamentalist.

11.4 ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

For democratic state to function well, presence of strong civil society is a must. Let us now discuss the role of civil society in detail:

1) Policy Advocacy

CSOs are engaged in policy dialogues with government in areas of poverty alleviation and empowerment of the disadvantaged sections. These organizations help the government in not only framing the policies in these areas but also help policy execution and policy monitoring and review. 'Save the Children India' is a NGO that works towards the restoration of the rights of children.

2) Protection Role

Association for Protection of Democratic Rights helps provide legal aid to those who have no access to courts of law. Usually such types of CSOs enable legal services and protect the citizens against the repressive attitudes.

3) **Promotion of Transparency**

The CSOs have enabled the enactment of RTI Act, 2005 and Lokpal and Lokayukta Act, 2013.

4) **Mobilization of the Citizens and Resources**

These organizations involve communities in development works by engaging them in planning and designing the same. This even helps the government to back track some of its policies that are not people friendly. They have used community resources to undertake initiatives like building community infrastructure, houses, toilets, and in providing basic services like water, electricity etc.

5) **As an Active Partners in development**

NGOs like 'Asha,' 'Pratham' are actively involved in providing education to the children in rural areas and slums in the country. NGO like 'Rural Health Care Foundation' is providing health care services to the people in rural and remote areas.

11.5 ISSUES FACING CIVIL SOCIETY

The main issues faced by CSOs in their working are discussed, as follows:

1) **Civil society organizations lack adequate financial resources**

Most of the CSOs don't have adequate funds to carry out their work, as the people they serve lack the capacity to pay. Hence, they depend on receiving funds from the government/non-government bodies/international institutions. Now, with a simultaneous cut in the international funding, the problem of financial inadequacy of CSO's is only increasing.

2) **Inadequate professional and trained staff**

There exists a huge shortage of professional and trained personnel in the voluntary sector. Most of the personnel are unqualified and unskilled. Inadequate salaries do act, as a deterrent in appointing of a skilled work force. Also, professionally qualified and trained individuals have a preference and inclination to work in high profile cities and offices than a backward and underdeveloped region.

3) **Accountability Issues**

One of the issues plaguing CSOs is the accountability issue in their own operation and working. Accountability and transparency, especially, in financial matters are found lacking. There have been increasing incidences of misuse of funds by these organizations. In January 2017, the Hon. Supreme Court of India called for an audit of nearly 30 lakh NGOs. This move was taken in the background of the NGOs failing to give an account of expenditure made out of the moneys they had received.¹¹

4) **Government-Civil Society Interface**

The partnership of CSOs with the government has helped in successful implementation of many welfare and developmental programmes. CSOs

¹¹ <http://www.thehindu.com/todaypaper/SC-orders-audit-of-30-lakh-NGO/artical1702095ece>

have also successfully engaged with government in formulating various national level policies. But this interface between the CSOs and government seem to be clouded with an overbearing attitude of governmental officials, bureaucratization, and inertia that has led to a gap in the interface between the two.

11.6 CSOS: A WAY FORWARD

Civil society is a vast and diverse group encompassing various organizations within it. It plays significant role in representing the interests of depressed and oppressed classes, mobilization of resources, policy advocacy, and regulating and monitoring state action. It has become one of the key instruments of good governance worldwide. With involvement of stakeholders, there is always a space for inclusiveness. Prof. John Keane (founder of the Centre for the Study of Democracy in London), a British theorist stated the emerging consensus that civil society is a realm of freedom correctly highlights its basic value, as a condition of democracy. Where there is no civil society there cannot be citizens with capacities. It enables the citizens in choosing their identities, entitlements, and duties within a political-legal framework (paraphrased).

The CSOs have been facing issues like inadequate finances, untrained and unskilled staff, lack of accountability, and strife with the government that ultimately leads to a very peripheral achievement of laid down goals. Having a platform for discourse and dialogue between the CSOs and government, skill development and capacity building through various programmes, and also by having a provision of social and performance audit of the Organisations can resolve such issues.

Activity

You can present a case study on a specific CSO.

11.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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