

Whatever Has Happened to Civil Society?

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Compared to the grand revolutionary imaginaries of an earlier era, the demands of civil society campaigns in India today are practically tame, limited as they are by the boundaries of what is politically permissible and feasible. They do not demand ruptures in the system, all that they urge is that social issues be regarded as of some import and something be done about them. Perhaps campaigns for the efficient delivery of social goods belong to a post-ideological era: an era where the State is no longer seen as the object of political contestation, but as a provider of social goods. And the citizen is seen as the consumer of agendas formed elsewhere, not as the maker of his or her own history.

The quite unwarranted furore in Parliament over a rather delightful cartoon in a school textbook sketches in fine detail the angst and the paranoia of our “august” representatives in Parliament. For more than a year now, these representatives have been at the receiving end of some choice invectives hurled by members of the Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev groups, both of whom belong to what sections of the media call “the civil society”. The demands and the language in which these were uttered set off a number of alarm bells. Were these epithets not highly subversive of the dignity of our lawmakers, who are after all the embodiment of our popular sovereignty? What could these allegations amount to except high treason, if not something more?

The ever voluble Laloo Prasad Yadav cautioned that any design to target the Constitution and Parliament should be decisively thwarted. A move is on to destroy the country and parliament in the name of Lokpal, he said. They are calling us thieves and dacoits, he exclaimed unbelievably and wrathfully. He may well have been speaking of the Maoists who want to overthrow the State, rather than of what at best can be called a civil society event. Disbelief further mounted in parliamentary circles as Ramdev, otherwise in the business of saving people’s souls, unleashed a volley of abuse on parliamentarians. What is this civil society, the said parliamentarians began to wonder. “We are all civil society”, complained Pranab Kumar Mukherjee plaintively, “no one is uncivil” (Biswas 2011).

It was this accumulated resentment that overflowed on the floor of Parliament when someone daring to create trouble for intellectuals, and the civil society organisations supported by these intellectuals, raised the issue of a cartoon that was

drawn in 1949 and a textbook that was published six years ago. Now even schoolchildren would learn to poke fun at the august members of the legislative body! This was not to be tolerated. In a classic instance of shooting the messenger but not heeding the message, our parliamentarians decided to ban cartoons from school textbooks, following the exemplary precedent set by Mamata Banerjee who managed to read between the lines of a cartoon and see a death threat.

The ban on cartoons is the latest in a series of rash and arbitrary actions targeting civil society and its organic intellectuals. Pilloried for being corrupt, and worse, ever since the Hazare phenomenon hit the streets of Delhi in 2011, the government proceeded to discipline and penalise civil society. Civil society might be a good idea, but the time to tame this idea had come. So every financial transaction of the Anna group was scrutinised, the social media, after a page on Facebook reportedly attacked Sonia Gandhi, was censored, and a draconian law was employed to charge four non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Tamil Nadu for opposing the setting up of a nuclear power plant in the state. The love affair of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) I and II governments with civil society agents, who had been invited by Sonia Gandhi during the first stint to form the National Advisory Council, has obviously ended, and as all love affairs end, this one too seems to have ended rather badly.

Many-tasselled Whip

One of the most creative of Marxist theorists, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), had warned us that liberal democratic states possess formidable capacities to harness civil society to their projects of domination. Civil society, according to Gramsci, is the space, where the state and the dominant classes produce and reproduce projects of hegemony. And this is exactly what has happened in India. The rush of political theory that acclaimed civil society in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 eagerly claimed that it is only the third sphere that can take on the state and the market. The participants

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in the debate had forgotten Gramsci. And they paid a heavy price for this, because liberal democratic states – and India is one of the most sophisticated of this genre of states – quickly moved to neutralise civil society by laying down the boundaries of what is politically permissible and what is not.

Consider how the Indian state, which readily accepts service providers, organisations that advocate the expansion of rights to sometimes absurd limits – for not every claim is a right – rabidly intolerant faith-based groups, and even groups that demand a ban on “this” or “that” book or work of art, or “this” or “that” artist or writer, is quick to crack down on organisations that protest against, say, land acquisition and brand them Maoist. History shows that the state has proved notoriously coercive when it comes to movements of the landless peasantry seeking redistributive justice. But it is scandalously soft towards the rich peasants when they demand free power, or a waiver of loans.

Or to take an example from our recent history, the moment thousands of people began to protest against the establishment of the Koodankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu, the government flourished its many-tasselled whip. Three civil society organisations associated with the project came under fire, police and court cases were filed against them, and they were accused of receiving funds that came from abroad. This is ironic considering that the nuclear power plant is being set up with the financial help of Russia. The anti-Koodankulam protests are more than justified. The establishment of the nuclear plant violates all the stipulations laid down by IAEA. One million people live in the 30-mile radius of the proposed plant. Further, the plant is being established in an earthquake- and tsunami-prone zone. Disregarding the very legitimate considerations put forth by the protestors, the government’s response has been rankly authoritarian. What could be more illustrative of the selectivity with which the government treats civil society activism?

There is more. Gramsci had suggested that civil society is to liberal democratic states what trench systems are to modern

forms of war. This, the Indian state has understood too well, though I doubt that any member of the government has read Gramsci. But they have certainly learnt from the example of the very bourgeois states that were theorised by Gramsci, and proceeded to incorporate major sections of civil society into structures of domination. When the state wants to banish the poor, slums, and vendors from urban spaces, NGOs are brought into the picture to partner it and, thereby, provide legitimacy. What these organisations simply do not seem to realise is that they might be providing legitimacy to the state by partnering it in, say, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, but they lose legitimacy in the eyes of the poor citizens of India who pay the costs for prettifying the city.

Boundaries of the Trench

For these reasons and more, civil society organisations need to understand that civil society cannot be conceptualised in abstraction from the state, because it is the state that establishes the boundaries of civil society activism. The penalties for transgressing these boundaries are far too high. Groups who transgress these boundaries are always likely to be excluded to a space which happens to be dark, damp, and rather mouldy, much like the medieval dungeons in Europe to which the Catholic Church expelled “heretics”. Here we find neither rights nor justice, just the naked exercise of brutal police and paramilitary coercion. And if this is so, then civil society does not really appear before us as the answer to the problems raised by the state, it may well appear as part of the problem itself, fated to resist the state only in ways that are permitted by the same state.

That the actions of the government are both ill-advised and anti-democratic goes without saying. Parliament is the main but not the sole representative of the people of India. Whereas periodic elections are indispensable, they are not a sufficient condition for democracy. Between elections, citizens have the right to intervene in the way an activity called politics is conducted through modes of direct action such as dharnas, street corner meetings, demonstrations, strikes

and representations, as well as through other channels provided by civil society organisations. The space of civil society provides room for a multiplicity of agents – professional associations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, film clubs, reading groups, citizen organisations and social movements. Citizens, to put the point across baldly, have the democratic right to intervene in issues that are crucial to public life and shape them, and they have the political competence to do so. To challenge this is to deny the basic right of citizens to participate in the making of a public and a political discourse that affects them individually and collectively.

At the same time, all does not seem to be well with our civil society. The spectacle of thousands of people participating enthusiastically in the meetings called by the Anna Hazare group, and the groundswell of anger and resentment that found expression through slogans, posters, and symbolic acts such as havans – the last no doubt meant to purify the government of corruption – and the chanting of hymns, took the political class by surprise. It also seemed to have astonished civil society organisations, many of whom had not been consulted by Anna Hazare. Had they missed out on something? Why were people swayed by the rhetoric and the fasts of Anna Hazare, who is clearly a political innocent? A simple-minded person who believes that errant ministers should be slapped not once, but twice, and preferably thrice – a nice take on the Biblical injunction of turning the other cheek – or that the corrupt should be put to death, or that the establishment of yet another organisation should be able to take care of corruption, Hazare is naively convinced that politics can be subordinated to management. Yet his often clumsily worded sentences touched a chord in the minds and in the hearts of Indian citizens. A pox on the corrupt, and let the government ensure the return of black money stashed in foreign banks became the popular refrain. The upsurge of anger against the government was cause for surprise. “Why this *kolaveri, kolaveri, kolaveri di?*” civil society organisations might well have asked. Obviously they had missed out on something that was of tremendous

significance. What had they missed out on? And why? Has something gone wrong with civil society? This essay attempts to deal with this question.

But before I do that, two points are in order. The first point is minor. The print and visual media repeatedly referred to “the civil society” of either Hazare or Ramdev. There is something wrong here, apart from that the use of “the” before civil society is grammatically incorrect. Civil society is a space but more significantly a set of political values, and no one group, or movement, or campaign, or struggle, or association is civil society, per se. Each of these organisations is a component of a plural, contentious, fractious and a messy, but an occasionally creative, civil society. Secondly, civil society does not admit of every form of politics; it is not a remnant of everything that does not fall within the provenance of the family, of the market, or of the state. It does not include the armed struggles of the Maoists and it does not include formations that seek to take over political power or the state. What it does include should become apparent below.

What Is Civil Society After All?

Much like Moliere’s *Bourgeois Gentleman* Jourdain who recognises with some surprise that he had been speaking prose all his life, for long scholars have documented, analysed, and conceptualised associations, political movements, social engagements, confrontations, and the politics of contestation and affirmation in India, without realising that they were theorising, describing and filling in a space that came to be known in the 1970s, but more particularly in the 1980s, as civil society. The reasons why this concept was catapulted to the forefront of political imaginations and political vocabularies are well known. One, successful struggles against authoritarian state power in central and eastern Europe as well as in Brazil had been waged by civil society organisations, which belonged neither to the domain of political parties nor trade unions. Two, profound disenchantment with the developmental state, the welfare state and the socialist state motivated activists and scholars to look elsewhere for a resolution to their political

predicaments. This “elsewhere” they found in associational life and social movements in civil society. Three, the English-speaking public across the world was introduced to two significant works, Antonio Gramsci’s *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* and Jurgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (translated into English in 1971 and 1989 respectively), both of which foregrounded the concept of civil society/public sphere. Finally, developments in the socialist world had sharply illustrated the problems that class projects and revolutionary transformations had brought in their wake. The lesson was well learnt. The future of political engagement with power belonged to loose coalitions of issue-based and identity-based movements, campaigns, and civic associations, to projects that sought to monitor the state rather than take over the state, and to self-limiting political agendas. This realisation signified the arrival of civil society.

Notably, the concept of civil society does not only abstract from, describe or conceptualise particular sorts of phenomenon such as civic activism and collective action. It specifies that associational life in a metaphorical space between the household, the market and the state is valuable in itself. Associational life neutralises the individualism, the atomism and the anomie that modernity brings in its wake. Social associations by bringing people together in multiple projects engender and nurture solidarity and empathy. The projects themselves might range from developing popular consciousness about climate change to discussing and dissecting popular culture, to supporting needy children, and to organising neighbourhood activities. Or projects might simply intend to enhance sociability and dissipate alienation. It does not matter. Whatever be the specific reason why people get together, for a determinate purpose or for mere sociability, associational life is an intrinsic good.

Associational life is a good in another sense inasmuch as networks of associations facilitate collective action. And participation in collective action enables the realisation of human agency insofar as citizens recognise and appreciate that they possess the right to take part in

decision-making, and that they possess the competence to do so. In other words, collective action brings to fruition the basic presumption of democracy – popular sovereignty. It follows that unless people are willing to come together across all manners of economic, social, and cultural divides, civil society cannot even begin to engage with the state (Chandhoke 2009). Conversely, though associational life is of value in its own right, if we delink this aspect of civil society from the struggle for citizenship rights, the state might, as Gupta puts it, be “let off the hook” (1997).

Why is not letting the state off the hook important? The one idea that arguably lies at the heart of the civil society argument is that states that claim to be democratic are likely to be imperfectly so. Democracy is a project that has to be realised through collective action as well as sustained engagement with the state. Citizen activism, public vigilance, informed public opinion, a free media and a multiplicity of social associations are necessary preconditions for this task. But, precisely at this point, one question arises to bedevil the civil society argument. Do all organisations of civil society bear the same sort of relationship with the state? Do all organisations follow the democratic script in terms of their constitution, decision-making, perspectives, commitments and the tasks they set for themselves? That is, can we assume that all organisations in civil society are agents of democratisation (Mahajan 1999: 1194)? Let us address this question through a brief study of civil society in India.

Civil society organisations in India were not a distinct outcome of bourgeois society or what Hegel had termed *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. These organisations were neither born out of the experience of an “autonomous” market nor were they a product of a juridical order, of property relations, of individuation, and of the language of abstract rights. They emerged out of the twin processes of resistance to colonialism and the development of a self-reflective attitude to traditional practices that were increasingly found unacceptable in the light of modern systems of education and liberal ideologies. In the pre-independence period, at least seven categories of associations constituted

the space of civil society (on this, see Behar and Prakash 2004: 196-97; Jayal 2007: 144-45). One, in the 19th century, social and religious reform movements (for example, the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj) that worked for the education of the girl child and for widow remarriage, and opposed the caste order, ritualism and idolatry, and tried to rationalise and restructure Hinduism. Two, in the early decades of the 20th century, Gandhian organisations engaged in what was euphemistically termed the "social uplift" of the doubly disadvantaged castes and the poor (for example, the Harijan Sevak Sangh). Three, a number of self-help organisations that grew up around trade unions in industrialised cities such as Bombay and Ahmedabad (for example, Swadeshi Mitra Mandal, Friends of Labourers Society). Four, movements against social oppression, particularly the anti-caste movement, that sought to overturn the hierarchical social order and establish the moral status of the so-called lower castes (for example, the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu). Five, professional English-speaking Indians formed a number of associations to petition the colonial government to extend English education and employment opportunities to the educated middle classes (for example, Bombay Presidency Association). Six, the Congress Party that led the freedom movement established a number of affiliated groups such as women's and youth organisations. And seven, social and cultural organisations committed to the project of establishing a Hindu nation (for example, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) formed the nucleus of what can be called uncivil organisations in civil society.

After independence, as the leaders of the freedom struggle took over the reins of state power, organisations in civil society more or less retreated from engaging with the state. Since the leadership of the freedom struggle that had now taken over the state was generally seen as legitimate, these organisations simply did not feel the need to politicise the people, make them conscious of their rights as citizens, or create a civic community in which the newly independent

citizens of India could engage with each other and with the state. The situation was dramatically transformed barely two and a half decades after independence. In the early 1970s, socialist leader J P Narayan tapped simmering discontent and launched a massive political movement against the authoritarianism of the central government headed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Success of Democracy?

The movement provided one of the reasons for Indira Gandhi's government to impose an internal emergency from June 1975 to January 1977. The Emergency, which suspended constitutional protections of civil liberties, was marked by a high level of repression. Paradoxically, however, it also animated an entire range of social struggles outside the sphere of party politics (Parajuli 2001). If there is one lesson that we have learnt from India, as well as from other parts of the world, it is that authoritarian states trigger off the development and the assertion of civil societies. In effect, civil societies come into their own when they confront authoritarianism. That is perhaps the finest hour of the set of practices we term civil society. Recollect the popular uprising led by the lawyers' movement against President Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan. What happens to civil society

once democracy is restored is another story, to be narrated on another occasion.

To return to the argument, in India, civil society organisations took root both to confront violations of democratic rights and to fill the void caused by the development deficit of the state. Social activism at the grass roots prompted some scholars to acclaim the "non-party political process" and see it as an alternative to the state (Sheth 1983; Kothari 1989). By the late 1980s, Kothari (1988), the most respected political analyst in India, was to suggest that new arenas of counteraction, countervailing tendencies and countercultural movements provided an alternative to the state.

From the late 1970s, the struggle for gender justice, the anti-caste movement, the movement for protection of civil liberties (the People's Union for Civil Liberties; PUCI and the People's Union for Democratic Rights; PUDR), the movement for a sound environment (the Chipko movement), the struggle against mega development projects that have displaced thousands of poor tribals and hill dwellers (the Narmada Bachao Andolan), the campaigns for the right to food, to work, to information, for shelter, for primary education and for health have mobilised in civil society. These movements have, on the one hand, brought people together across social and class



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divides, and on the other confronted state policies. By 2000, it was estimated that grass roots groups, social movements, non-party political formations and social action groups numbered almost 20,000 to 30,000 (Sheth 2004: 45).

The 1990s heralded a novel turn in civil society, and a striking shift from the vocabulary of social service and reform to that of development, governance and accountability marked the advent of new forms of civil society organisations and activism. Political democracy had been institutionalised in the country and yet large numbers of people continued to exist on the margins of bare survival. Consequently, a number of civil society organisations became involved in the delivery of social goods to the people and in development projects. Experiments in alternative models of development had been initiated in the 1970s by educationists, scientists, engineers, environmentalists and social activists (for example, the Social Work and Research Centre in Rajasthan and Kishore Bharti in Madhya Pradesh). Increasingly, however, the field of development came to be dominated by professionalised NGOs, often sponsored and funded by donor agencies in the west and willing to partner the state in the delivery of social goods. The shift gained official recognition in the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-1990) and the government has since then sanctioned considerable funds for service delivery. A 2004 study calculated that the total number of non-profit organisations in India is more than 1.2 million and that 20 million people work for these organisations either in a voluntary capacity or for a salary (PRIA and John Hopkins University 2003: 5, 11). If one set of civil society organisations began to partner the state in service delivery, another set began to engage in the politics of advocacy, such as the right to food campaign or the right to health. In the process what happened to civil society was the professionalisation of civil society agents.

The Professionalisation of Civil Society

In *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville had suggested that “in democratic countries the science of association is the

mother science, the progress of all others depends on the progress of that one” (2000: 492). For modern societies, his observation proved more than prescient. Social associations are of value for many reasons, but above all because they encourage citizens to participate in the making of a critical political and public discourse, and because they enable collective action that seeks to engage with the state. Participation contributes to the making of not only informed public opinion, but also informed and democratically aware citizens who are conscious of their right to participate in the political process. More significantly, participative associations have the potential of limiting the power of elected representatives and holding them accountable.

In the 1990s, however, this aspect of civil society was sidelined as professional and well-funded NGOs that claimed to speak on behalf of constituencies appeared on the scene. It is not that NGOs are not civil society organisations, but that they are different from social associations, or movements, or citizens’ groups, or professional associations. For they may not be membership-based organisations. A reading and a discussion club is based on membership and at some point in time it has to be responsible to its constituency. Think of the management of a reading club which buys James Hadley Chase rather than Orhan Pamuk when the latter’s books are in demand. The management will not last too long. Therefore, when a development agency comes into the space of civil society and proceeds to act on behalf of citizens, we are entitled to ask – who have these organisations consulted and to which constituency are they are responsible? These organisations may be doing very good work, from women’s rights to development. But where do their agendas come from? This is some cause for worry because we simply do not know what the mandate of these NGOs is.

Interestingly, the entry of professional NGOs to civil society has brought a qualitatively different way of doing things – campaigns rather than social movements, lobbying government officials and the media rather than politicising citizens, reliance on networks rather than civic

activism, and a high degree of dependence on the judiciary rather than direct action. Since 1999, four campaigns have focused on upgrading the directive principles of state policy to the status of fundamental rights. They have foregrounded the right to food, the right to employment, the right to information and the right to education. These campaigns have borne notable results in the form of specific policies and it is noteworthy that they have connected with citizens’ groups.

However, these campaigns have been successful only when the Supreme Court has intervened on the issue. That is perhaps why the right to health campaign has not succeeded in its objective of making health a right. This is particularly evident in the case of the right to food campaign. In response to a writ petition filed by the PUCL in 2001 in Rajasthan, in a series of interim orders the Court directed the central and state governments to ensure nutritional security, including mid-day meals for school-children. The Court ruled that the right to food directly emanates from Article 21 of the Constitution of India, which protects the right to life, and from Article 47 of the directive principles of state policy, which inter alia provides that the state shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health among its primary duties. The Court has in effect accorded legal backing to the right to food. In May 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that village self-government bodies shall frame employment-generation proposals in accordance with the Sam-poorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana.

And earlier in 1993, the Supreme Court in the case of *Unnikrishnan J P versus State of Andhra Pradesh* had ruled that though the right to education is not stated expressly as a fundamental right, it is implicit in and flows from the right to life guaranteed under Article 21. The Court further declared that the directive principles of state policy form the fundamental feature and social conscience of the Constitution and the provisions of parts III and IV are supplementary and complementary to each other. Fundamental rights, ruled the court, are means to ensure the goals laid down in part IV

and must be construed in light of the directive principles.

Though court interventions have helped campaigns to achieve their goals, the intervention of the judiciary illustrates the paradox of civil society mobilisation. In much of the literature it is assumed that civil society groups have the capacity to address the state and to oblige it to heed their demands. However, the Indian state has proved more responsive to Court injunctions, compelling more and more groups to appeal to judicial activism. In part, the Court has adopted a proactive stance because the agenda of contemporary civil society mobilisation is self-limiting and confined to the framework of the Constitution.

But social movements that demand a radical restructuring of power relations in the country have just not fetched the required response from the judiciary. This is most evident in the case of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a movement that has concentrated on the plight of the thousands of people who have been displaced by the building of the gigantic Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) on the river Narmada in western India. The project, part of a larger Narmada development plan that visualised construction of 30 large, 135 medium and 3,000 small dams, has displaced more than 44,000 families in three states. In 1994, the Narmada Bachao Andolan approached the Supreme Court and asked it to order the government to stop construction of the dam. In October 2000, however, the Court permitted raising the height of the SSP to 90 metres. The ruling not only resulted in the displacement of more families, but also was a serious setback to one of the most spectacular movements that had challenged both iniquitous development planning and the power of the state to do with its people as it willed (Chandhoke 2007). This is not to suggest that judicial activism is not important, it is to propose that too much reliance on judicial interventions can tame the agenda of civil society and force it to conform to what is politically permissible.

Civil society groups have certainly succeeded in bringing the issues of poverty, marginality and deprivation to the forefront of social attention, urged

the government to enact social policy to neutralise ill being and focused on violations of human rights. In a substantial sense, NGOs that dominate civil society have tried to deepen democracy by focusing attention on issues that have been left untouched by political representatives, whether the issue be civil liberties, or communalism, or the right to food, or the right to work, or the right to information.

Two New Dilemmas?

However, democrats can rightly wonder whether they are confronted by the makings of two new dilemmas. One, NGOs are increasingly in the business of service delivery. Therefore, they are hardly in the business of acting, as one insider puts it, as “a catalyst for social, economic, and political changes favouring the poor, marginalised, and disadvantaged” Behar and Prakash (2004: 199). In any case, can we seriously expect the NGO sector to mount a critique of the state when this sector is funded by the state?

Two, whereas our parliamentary representatives have not proved democratic enough, organisations that seek to deepen democracy may not be representative of the political will at all. Most NGOs are manned by technical experts, who have their own ideas of what a problem is and what should be done about it. The political context of citizen politics has been transformed. It is simply no longer enough to concentrate on elected representatives, how they perform their tasks and how systems of representation can be made more democratic because non-governmental agents “stand in” for citizens, speak for them, engage in the politics of advocacy and often make and

unmake policy, without ever having been in touch with the constituency they purport to represent. And they are not likely to do so because this is simply not their job and not their mandate. This really means that while NGOs may be in the business of democracy, they are not in the business of being representative, or accountable to citizens for their acts of omission and commission.

Some theorists may rightly disagree with this worry. How does it matter, they may ask, whether the new organisations in civil society are not representative or insufficiently participative, as long as they can deliver basic goods to citizens? Political parties that have traditionally represented citizens have been unable to deliver these goods in the long history of representative democracy; why should other organisations that can do their jobs well be prevented from doing so on the ground that they are not elected by the people? This is a serious issue, for the provision of social goods is of course important, but we would do well to remember that this aspect of governance is by no means peculiar to democracy. Authoritarian governments have delivered social and economic goods to their people and done so better, consider Singapore. What they have not delivered is the equal right of participation to the people. Concentration just on the delivery of social goods can miss out on vital aspects of democracy – the mobilisation of citizens into awareness of their political competence; that they have the right to participate in a public discourse on how things are and how they should be.

Further, too many activities of the non-governmental sector are localised affairs; some of the groups prefer to lobby

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policy-makers, rather than politicise civil society; personalised divisions often crop up among their leadership; and some of the leaderships have exhibited a somewhat unfortunate readiness to be incorporated into the state either as service providers or in an advisory capacity to draft policy. But civil society should not be in the business of making policy; this task is best left to elected representatives who can be made accountable to the people, at least during elections. More important, the making of policy demands open, accessible and public deliberations. No civil society organisation can possibly provide the conditions for such widespread discussions. Civil society, it must be stressed, is in the business of creating, fostering, nurturing and reproducing an informed public opinion that can be brought to bear on the making and implementation of policy.

Limits to the NGO Sector

Above all, let us admit that there is only so much that the NGO sector can achieve. These agents are just not in a position to summon up the kind of resources that are required to emancipate 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. NGOs can hardly implement schemes of redistributive justice that involve transferring of resources from the better-off to the worse-off sections of society. And the non-governmental sector cannot establish and strengthen institutions that will implement policy. These tasks simply lie outside the pale of civil society activism. NGOs should be mobilising people for a number of causes. That is the mandate of civil society.

More significantly, most NGOs concentrate on either one or a cluster of immediate issues, leaving the big issues untouched – the huge inequalities of resources in the country, for instance. And where there is inequality there must be unfreedom. Nor do these organisations touch on the source of powerlessness and helplessness, in, say, skewed income patterns. These actors just do not dream the large and expansive dreams that were dreamt of by earlier generations of social activists – restructuring existing structures

of power and forging new and equitable structures of social relations. That is of course the nature of civil society intervention. Eschewing grand dreams of social transformation, civil society would rather concentrate on the affairs of everyday life (Chandhoke 2007: 186).

Yet there is regret because in contrast to social struggles that demand a restructuring of power (such as the struggle for land rights), campaigns initiated by the NGO sector would rather ensure that the state delivers what it has promised in the Constitution, that the state enlarge its agenda to cover issues that are implied in earlier promises, that local authorities be made accountable, that the functioning of the government be made transparent, that mid-day meals be provided to children in primary schools, that the poor get jobs for at least 100 days a year, and that children outside the school system are brought into school. Compared to the grand revolutionary imaginaries of an earlier era, the demands of civil society campaigns are practically tame, limited as they are by the boundaries of what is politically permissible and feasible. They do not demand ruptures in the system, all that they urge is that social issues be regarded as of some import and something be done about them. Perhaps campaigns for the efficient delivery of social goods belong to a post-ideological era – an era where the state is no longer seen as the object of political contestation, but as a provider of social goods. And the citizen is seen as the consumer of agendas formed elsewhere, not as the maker of his or her own history. And this is the problem with the current avatar of civil society in the country. When politics is reduced to the provision of 100 days of work, what is missed out is the right to work per se, when the government wants to dish out cash instead of strengthening the school system and the health system, what is missed out is that it is defaulting on its duties.

And when civil society organisations do not ask these questions, when they do not raise issues that are uncomfortable for the government, and when they become partners of the government, the constituency of civil society is depoliticised. Human beings are political animals, but

the kind of politics we do depends on the political context that offers some choices and not others. So when Anna Hazare raises the banner of corruption people rush to acclaim him simply because he has taken on the state. That democracy is more than the eradication of corruption is forgotten, because few civil society organisations have put forth, in the words of Behar, “big ideas” before them. And that is the irony of civil society in India today.

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