A study on the relationship between Civil Society and the State during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The relationship between the state and civil society has always been a subject of insightful discussion. There have been many views and opinions with regard to their relationship. This article seek to understand the kind of relationship that exist between the two, i.e., the state and the civil society organisation in the context of Mizoram during Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Civil society, state, pandemic, lockdown.

Plagues and epidemics have ravaged humanity throughout its existence, often changing the course of history. Similarly in the case of Covid-19 pandemic, it has brought the world to a standstill. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, has made many different governments-imposed periods of lockdown, to restrict the movement of people, not allowing individuals to leave their home and unable to physically re-join their family or their close relations, and most employees resorted to telework instead of going to their usual worksite.

In India too, the Government ordered a nation-wide total lockdown on 24th March 2020, limiting the movement of the entire nation, a step taken towards the preventive measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. From 4[th]May 2020, the lockdown was eased with several relaxations in all zones per Ministry of Home Affair's guidelines.

Under such circumstances, it is no doubt that many of the people would be left with various problems and difficulties specially to meet their daily needs. On the other hand, COVID-19 is a high-risk disease, where oneneeds to be very careful.However, essentialservices also need to be continued.Therefore, there is a requirementto build systems and mechanisms for safe delivery of services, and public servants have to be motivated, and given economic and moral support.Even though this has to be primarily done by the government, civil society has a huge role to play as well.

It has often been argued that the failure of the government sector to meet the high expectations of people has led to the rise of civil society organisations (CSOs) and they have emerged as important intermediary institutions between people and the government. Through diverse people centered developmental strategies these organisations carry out activities for the welfare of the people. They follow both bottom-up and top-down strategies to meet their objectives. At times, they carry out these activities in collaboration with the government and also do not hesitate to confront the government with radical approaches and strategies.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Tuikhuahtlang Locality, Aizawl,Mizoram. The nature of the study is exploratory and descriptive. The nature of the data is both quantitative and qualitative. However, the focus is on the qualitative aspects of the data which were collected from different categories of sample selected purposively.

What is civil Society?

The civilsociety is considered as the third important segment of the society along with twoother sectors such as the state/government and the corporate/business.

Classical political theorists, such as Aristotle, Hobbes and Hegel had viewed civil society as the commonwealth of elites protected by the state, which 'shared in the virtuous tasks of ruling and being ruled' (Edwards 2004:6). In contrast, the liberal democratic framework developed by Madison, Tocqueville and other enlightenment thinkers defined civil society as the aggregate of voluntary associations whose primary role was the protection of local interests from the intrusion of government authority (Bonikowski and McPherson 2007:198).

For Tocqueville, civil society constitutes the third sphere of society whereas the first sphere comprises the state and its institutions and the second the economy. In the third sphere, that is civil society, parties, public opinion, churches, moral crusades, literary and scientific societies and professional and recreational groups possess a superabundant force and energy. Through these associations, the potential excesses of the centralised state can be curtailed (Chandhoke 2003:35).

Civil Society in India

Civil society comprises of a broad range of institutions and organisationsvariously known as the non-profit, the voluntary, the independent, or the third sectororganisations. The success of voluntary action in bringing about social transformationhas to do with both the nature of the associational efforts and a host of conditions – economic, political and socio-cultural – under which they operate. In a democraticpolity, on the one hand, voluntary associations /Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) function in the context of thestate; on the other hand, they work under the constraints of the market. The state withits monopoly of political authority and massive economic resources as its disposal isconventionally viewed as being primarily responsible for social transformation. In thedevelopment discourse, the voluntary associations or the NGOs are thus regarded asthe third sector, playing a crucial role in transformation in the context of the first twosectors, namely, the state and the market (Jayaram2009:1-2).

In recent times, as has been mentioned with the declining role of the state in socialwelfare and social services, NGOs are increasingly gaining attention and prominenceand are looked upon as alternative agencies in promoting awareness, change anddevelopment in society, and therefore, there has been rapid rise of Voluntary Organisations (VOs). The growinginterest in voluntary action and the NGOs has further led to the creation or revival ofcivil society in India. There has been upsurge of NGOs in India in recent times.

Referring to the rise of Action Groups (AGs) and their growing involvement in uplifting the vulnerablesections of the society, Dhanagare says that their growth is the 'striking feature ofcontemporary social reality in India' (1988:39).

In the context of North-East India, the region is characterised by widespreadconflicts related to the geography of the region, the multi-ethnicity of its populationand the political and economic feeding grounds of discontent. Political expediencyand the profusion of imitation have added dynamism of their own. Conflict in theregion ranges from insurgency for secession and autonomy, from sponsored terrorismto ethnic clashes, to conflicts generated by migrant ingress from across theinternational borders and from other states of the country (Upadhyay 2008:65).

Though North-East India is characterised by the existence of multi ethnicgroups and political turmoil, it is also identified by the existence of a strong sense ofidentity and shared tribal customs. Non-existence of ascriptive traditional hierarchies,combined with little or no differences in land ownership, education and incomecontributes to a strong sense of community bond. Strong feelings of nationalism alsoexist (ibid.:65-66). These strong community bonds, in a way have led to the creationof CSOs.North-East India therefore, ubiquitously boasts vibrant civil society, whichimpact the functioning of the state and its institutions significantly. The absence oftraditional ascriptive hierarchies provides greater space for egalitarianism and aculture of oneness that in turn provides greater scope for public action. Higher levelsof literacy and the

relatively higher status of women in decision making in bothprivate and public arenas contribute towards the greater visibility of civil societyinstitutions. Civil society such as the church and other cultural and social associationsplay a major role in the political and social life of the region. The church particularlyis known to have played a very positive role in states like Nagaland, Mizoram andMeghalaya as a 'modernising instrument' actively involved in laying the foundationsof education and healthcare. In a very powerful and profound way the church hasinfluenced the pattern of interest articulation and consequently the creation of theneed for governmental action in building a new and better life (ibid.: 66).

In Mizoram too, there are various VOs such as Young Mizo Association(YMA), Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP), Church andmany others which are active in addressing various issues relating to interest of thepeople. Mizoram is located in the north-eastern part of the country and is bounded by Myanmar (Burma) to the East and South and Bangladesh to the West and by the states of Tripura to the North-West, Assam to the North, and Manipur to the North-East. Aizawl is the capital city located in the north-central part of the state. Mizoram has 8 districts namely Aizawl, Kolasib, Lawngtlai, Lunglei, Mamit, Saiha, Serchhip, Champhai, with 22 towns and 817 villages.

Relationship between civil society and state during COVID-19 Pandemic

The relationship between the state and civil society has always been a subject of insightful discussion. There have been many views and opinions with regard to their relationship. Hobbes and Locke considered the state as the creation of civil society for protecting the life and property of the citizens. While championing the sovereignty of the state, Hobbes did not deny the ruler's obligation to assure civil society rights. Locke considered civil society as having inalienable rights over the state. Hegel however, thought that the superiority of the state will eventually reduce civil society to the level of an instrument of state power. Marx held the view that the civil society represented the interests of the bourgeoisie as revealed through the state; as such both are instruments of oppression. However, Gramsci contested this argument and said that both the state and civil society were created around reciprocal rights and obligations and that one cannot exist without the other. More importantly, civil society provided the normative base for the state (Nayar 2005:129-30).

In recent times, the concept of state has undergone considerable change. Sociologists no more use the term state as the embodiment of coercive power and sovereignty, but as a system having several parts and operating within the larger social system. The state operates through its various elements – executive, legislature, judiciary, bureaucracy, the army and in a democracy, the political parties. Viewed in this perspective, an effective state is central to the functioning of an effective civil society. However, a vibrant civil society requires not just an effective state, but also a political order that is liberal and democratic, a condition which enforces the rule of law and safeguards the fundamental freedom of its citizens. There is also the need for the state to incorporate welfare provisions. Only these qualities of the state will enable Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to coexist and enter into healthy competition with one another *(ibid.)*.

That apart, Indian intellectuals-cum-activists have also played an active role in setting up various independent voluntary associations, people's institutions, non-political party forums, etc, to downplay the highhandedness of the state.

The state's inability to meet the rising expectations of the people has therefore, paved the way for the emergence of an active third sector that exists outside the two domains i.e., public or private or, as some observe it, lies between these two sectors independently in terms of ideology, principles and activities for ushering development and change. NGOs, like other independent agents, can be seen as a force within the civil society. These organisations initiate new collective social actions and hence new types of social movements by focussing on lively, contemporary issues both at micro and macro levels. These organisations tend to build linkages with like-minded NGOs, and eventually set the stage for effective and result-oriented movements (Panda and Pattnaik 2005:40).

Najam (2000:7-10) for better understanding of the complex relationship between the government and the third sector relationships has proposed a 4C framework, i.e., Co-operation, Confrontation, Complementary and Co-optation. According to him, 'a cooperative relationship is likely when, on a given issue, government agencies and non-government organisations not only share similar policy goals but also prefer similar strategies for achieving them. Essentially, a convergence of preferred ends as well as means'. 'A Confrontational relationship is likely when governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations consider each other's goals and strategies to be antithetical to their own. Essentially, total divergence of preferred ends as well as means'. 'A complementary relationship is likely when the governmental and non-governmental organisations share similar goals but prefer different strategies. Essentially, divergent strategies but convergent goals. Lastly, 'a co-optive relationship is likely when governmental and NGOs share similar strategies but prefer different goals. Such situations, based on divergent goals but convergent strategies, are essentially unstable and often transitory'.Before explaining how these diverse forms of relations exist between civil society and the state, it is worthwhile to explain the nature of relations that exist between state and civil society in the context of Mizoram.

For effective civic administration of Aizawl city (the capital city of Mizoram), the Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC) was formed in 2010 with 19 members when the Congress-Zoram Nationalist Party coalition was voted to power in the state legislative assembly. The AMC office is being administered by Mayor Deputy and Commissioner. It consists of 19 elected members representing 19 wards of the city and others appointed by the Governor of Mizoram. One third of the total membership is reserved for women, these seats shall be rotated after every five years. The tenure of the Corporation is five years (https://amcmizoram.com/page/about-us).

The municipal wards in Aizawl are further split into localities termed as Local Council areas. The Local Council are the erstwhile village councils, which are the traditional community governance structures still being followed actively. The Local Councils have a chairman and 3-4 members elected by the community belonging to the Local Council area. The Local Council chairman and members primarily look after the development of the Local Council area. The chairman represents the views and decisions taken, to the respective ward councillors during the ward committee meetings that are held. So, on an overall account, Local Councils are formally recognised decentralised traditional citizen consultative platforms that are completely integrated with the city governance structure. There are 83 local councils in Mizoram. As the CSOsin Mizoram, are very vibrant in addressing the people's centered developmental issues and problems of the Mizos, it is found that the Local Council work in close connections with these CSOs. Since the welfare of the people is their primary objectives, it extends its collaborative role to the state which is the primary sector. It is actively involved in those areas of development where the government has either failed to address or has not achieved much success.

With regard to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Mizoram in its swift action has taken a number of measures in the interest of public health and safety. For instance, the State Task Force on Mitigation of COVID-19 was formedunder the Chairmanship of Chief Secretary of Mizoram, in March, 2020. Under the State task force, for more effective and spontaneous deliberation to contain the pandemic, at the community levelthe Local Task Forcewas formed. The constituents of the Local Task Force comprised of representatives from the Local Council,Health Departments, as well as representatives from different CSOs which include The Young Mizo Associations (YMA), Mizo Upa Pawl (MUP), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP), and the Church.These taskforces are authorised to manage the crisis in its respective areas. The taskforces are supported by respective ward councillors of the Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC) and State Government officials for any form of necessary administrative support.

Findings

For better understanding of the relationship between the state and the Civil society,it will be pertinent to look into the working of local task force to contain the COVID-19pandemic. For the purpose of the study, the researcher has selected Tuikhuahtlang Local Task Force. Tuikhuahtlang isa locality in Aizawl city.

The Tuikhuahtlang Local Task Force is manned by five office bearers and 14 members, thus a total of 19 members form the Tuikhuahtlang local task force. The office bearers of the Local Task Force consist of Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary and Treasurer. As per the guidelines provided by the State Task force, the Chairman of the local task force is the chairman of the local council, Vice Chairman is the President of the Branch YMA, Secretaryis the Secretary of the local Council, assistant Secretary, the Secretary of the Branch YMA and treasurer from Branch YMA.

The local Task force of Tuikhuahtlang further form a sub-committee known as Action Squad. The Action Squad is comprisedof 25 members. The main function of the Action Squad is to mobilise immediate relief to those affected individual and families within the locality. According to Secretary of Tuikhuahtlang Local Task Force, "these action squad are the pillars of the Tuikhuahtlang Local Task force. They spontaneously carry out all essential roles and cater immediate assistance to the affected family within the locality".

When the government imposed total lockdown within Aizawl city, the local task force along with Action squad team strictly monitors the lockdown in the locality by making a duty roster wherein 7 to 10 members within the committeeare detailed for duty. The Safety measures to be followed by the public as well as all necessary information are addressed through the public address system. During this period, people were urged to confine themselves at home, and unless prior permission from the local task force was taken, movement of people within the citywas restricted. They also monitor the opening hours of locality shops. In the case of home quarantinedfamily or individual, the local task force takes extreme care, catering to all their essential needs.

Covid-19 has disproportionately affected poor people. The local task force has therefore, put forth it's services towards such family. According to the Treasurer of the local task force, during the First and Second wave of the pandemic, they were able to render aid (in cash or in kind) to 53 families of the locality.

One cannot ignore the selfless contribution made by members of the local task force. However, it is pertinent to acknowledge the selfless service generated by other actors too. To carry out the roles of service delivery, the local task force manages itself from the donations donated by people, financial assistance from the government such as the Chief Minister's relief fund and from other various Voluntary Organisations such as Church, YMA, India Formosa Foundation, etc.

A councillor from AMC has added that, "All required facilities across the city have been set up under the purview of the government with the help of multiple local task forces. It is owned by the government, but municipal subordinates, Local Councils chairmen and members are overseeing day-to day functions".

Mizoram is one of the few states that do not require external forces or Lathi charges to maintain discipline in times of lockdown imposed by the government in times of pandemic. Several factors contributed to such situations:

i. The co-operative and collaborative relationship that exists between the government and the NGOs, to contain the pandemic.

ii. The obedience portrayed by the local people by respecting and following the safety measures and restrictions put forth by the government and the local level task force.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, one can comprehend that if everything is left to the state, the democratic society cannot function properly especially when situations such as the pandemic arise. From the above discussions, one can realise that the non-state actors toohave responsibilities towards their fellow-citizens. These non-state actors could also contribute towards the regeneration of the democratic government and work collaboratively with the government for the welfare of the society which is evident from the role played by the Local Task Force in Mizoram.

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