



THE IDEA OF CIVIL SOCIETY: A GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Civil is a precondition for the realization of true democracy. Civil society – a new social movements in India. Gandhi's Sarvodaya Movement, Bhoodan movement, Chipko movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Anna Hazari's movement against corruption are some of the examples which emphasize the right of the common people to implement different welfare schemes and Government initiative for betterment of the people. It would encourage the citizens to fight for common cause and try to establish true democracy in India. Gandhi never talked about civil society explicitly but his action of including all in the society and respecting each others views made him an exponent of civil society in India. His Ashram society and fight against social evils based on civic virtues created a civil society in India. His concept of civil society is totally different from the western concept because he always made a critique to modernization. The civic virtues like toleration, mutual respect, self-sacrifice are the basic tenets of Gandhi's civil society. His concept of civil society is based on live-and-let-live where the violence between groups would be ended.

KEYWORDS: Civil society, True democracy, India, Independence, Post-Independence, Modern

INTRODUCTION:

The concept of civil society has interesting history. It has always been a part of liberal democratic theories. The liberal notion conceives of civil society as a sphere independent of but to be protected by the state wherein the rights bearing individuals are free to pursue their private interests in free association with others. This definition reduces civil society to that of free market or free economy. Later liberals like J.S. Mill and Alexis De Tocqueville conceived civil society as a domain of social associations, which would check the excesses of the state. They were concerned about the growing power of the state and held the view that without active social associations, even democracies could become despotic regimes, so a revival of and reconstruction of an active civil society supposed to be a precondition for the realization of true democracy and development.

Gandhi is one of the pioneers who were critical of the modern civil society at a time when nobody dared to do so. This he did it through his seminal work, Hind Swaraj on the one hand and by adopting constructive work

based on non-violence on the other. This is where Gandhi becomes important for understanding civil society. 'The Gandhi' the man of action rather than the man of thought, the actor of real life, who attempted to transcend the class conflicts of society by his own method. Gandhi meant to change the world as well as interpret it, and he did. His ideas of individual community relationship, concept of a civilized society, freedom and state individual relationship still has the relevance, particularly in today's diverse and complex world. He taught us the method of celebrating diversity in a uniform manner. According to him, What is crucial to the notion of civil society is that families and individuals connect with others beyond homes and talk about matter of public relevance without the interference or sponsorship of the state. Here Gandhian notion of state follow the path of civil society because Gandhi sees state as the tool of violence and coercion. It is true that Gandhi has grown beyond the boundaries of India -not only during his life time but also after his death. He has become truly global. This is obvious from the way the United Nations General Assembly, on 15 June 2007, declared to observe 2nd October as the International Day of Non-Violence. He was the man who believed in peaceful revolution. "Gandhi was a revolutionary" it makes some dilemmas but if one studies about Gandhi and his action there are a lot of his revolutionary ideas which led India on the path of liberations. The Masses began to enter in Indian Politics from the time Gandhi appeared on the political scene. He believed that no one can represent the masses unless he identifies himself with them. Gandhi is very much apparent in the Global Peace Movement, Ecology movement, anti-war movement, anti-globalisation movement, and also movement against nuclear world. His influence has surpassed nation, nationalism, ethnicity including nationality too. Gandhi never explicitly talked about the civil-society but implicitly it is mentioned in his action and thought, like his approach of conflict management or conflict resolution, theory of tolerance, solidarity, and establishment of Ashram society etc. Here, civil society insists that each leave room for the others. He treated ethics as the guiding star of all human behaviour, including politics, because his definition of "Democracy" has a wider connotations like- democracy is the art & science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the service of the common good of all. This makes us to argue that there are "multiple Gandhis"- Gandhi of the State, Gandhi of the masses, Gandhi of the civil Society and Mythic Gandhi. It is true that Gandhi was for permanent global peace and was against tyranny and oppression. His engagement with Hitler and other fascists during his life time clearly shows that Gandhi was against tyranny and authoritarianism and also that he believed in everlasting global peace.

EVOLUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY:

- a) **Feedback and Grievance redressal system:** The model envisages the setting up of a feedback and grievance redressal system at the center level which would be a body along the lines of corporate consumer courts that would allow individuals to file specific problems regarding conduct of their elected representatives.
- b) **E-governance:** Pushing for e-governance in remote areas that lack access to all levels of administrative solutions as they have a limited outreach to only their local elected officials and bureaucrats, puts them at the risk of being subject to the whims of a few officials. It also deprives them of effective representation and redressal. India is suffering significantly due to consequences resulting from mass dissent as the sections of the public feel deprived of representation and administrative attention. E-governance would bring the executive

closer to the people and reconstruct faith. Civil society would play a crucial role in establishing e-governance and aiding its effective functioning.

c) Incentives for participation: Taking cue from the petitioning system called “we the people” established in the U.S.A wherein every petition that earns more than 25,000 petitions must be considered, reviewed and addressed by the government.

d) Right to Services: The right to services ensures the delivery of efficient services within a stipulated time with an aim to reduce corruption and increase accountability and transparency. This right also makes people aware and vigilant thus ensuring that no officer can remain unaccountable for his inaction or wrongdoing. By empowering citizens to demand efficient services that they are rightfully and legally entitled to provides for ways to voice out their dissatisfaction and with civil society involved the government officials would be urged to act thereby promoting good governance. Bihar is a model example of the implementation of the right to services act as it makes it mandatory for the police to submit verification report for people seeking passport, arms licenses etc. within 7 days.

e) Social Auditing: Social Audits to conduct an analysis and accounting of the effect of government action on the people were made statutory in a 2005 Rural Employment Act but most states failed to implement it due to the usual reasons of lack of political will or vested interests. The state of Andhra Pradesh however has successfully conducted social audits through the Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency . It has successfully conducted 3,200 social audits and more than 38,000 disciplinary cases have been brought against officials involved with the MNREGA jobs scheme. Hundreds have been suspended or punished. In the past three years, the team has been able to recover almost a quarter of the \$24m of irregularities detected (Patnaik, 2012). The Comptroller and Auditor General of India Vinod Rai, head of the CAG, says: "All over the world, there is a growing perception among the supreme audit institutions that it is important to partner with civil society to ensure the latter's participation in service delivery and public accountability." Thus social auditing is an apparatus that must be employed by the civil society to identify irregularities and hold the right people accountable.

GANDHI AND CIVIL SOCIETY:

Gandhiji's views was that willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well- being of the whole society enriches both the individual and the society of which one is a member. Bringing civil society into operation means creating a more active and more participatory role for the common people and especially for the poorest and downtrodden among them one can easily detect the influence of Gandhian thought in this perspective, although Gandhi himself did not use the concept of civil society explicitly. It is civil society that gives freedom to the citizen. A citizen is not just a free-market agent, nor just a rational legal human being. The freedom that the state gives to its citizens is the freedom to develop socially valuable assets irrespective of the accidents of birth. Gandhiji always preferred moral individualism which is the strong demand of civil society to include all people. Through the concept of Swaraj, he demanded moral independence.

In Hind Swaraj, he wrote that power should be dispersed into a large number of self- governing village communities. In this way Gandhi emphasized the significance of groups over individuals. As Rajni Kothari

sees civil society as an alternative to the state's role (see Munshi and Abraham. 2004:9). Gandhis insistence, by this way on power to the people rather than to the state and it is the first and the foremost demand of civil-society.

Twenty four hours before his death on 30 January 1948 at the hands of Nathuram Godse, Gandhi had proposed to the Indian National congress (INC) be dissolved and replaced by a Lok sevak sangh, a people's service organization, controlled from below by a governance structure dominated by village communities. He was a tireless creator of civil society. Wherever he went whatever he did, he created voluntary self-help organizations. Gandhiji's ashrams were energizing centre for associational life, social movements, sending out hundreds of volunteers, who in turn generated micro-associations dedicated to social and economic reform at the village level. He was of the view that civil society is a more effective agent of social action than the state, creating more appropriate consequences. His civil society also springs from his identification of moral reasoning with voluntarism. Gandhi set-up Ashram as a Public sphere where ashrams provided retreats to those who wished to join a community dedicated to a new form of life, a life of simple living, service, and political activism. His ashrams and satyagraha expanded the concept of public sphere beyond discursive exchanges of educated men. Ashrams prefigured how those from diverse social backgrounds could choose to live a new form of life.

Gandhi had tried to accommodate difference by civil society institutions, for example by opening so many Ashrams not only in India but in South Africa as well. It is only the civil society's capacity to accommodate multiple associations and voices. He suggested that all the diversities of India like culture, Religion, Language, caste, Minorities etc must be accommodated on the equal basis of rights and must be protected. This is the true essence of civil society. The Ashram is the special institution of Gandhi's civil society Gandhian Ashram is about civic virtue, service to a general interest and the creation of a just society.

Gandhi did not believe that there could be one perfect religion for all human beings. He told that religion could be preached and practiced by so many persons with different interpretations that necessitated the cultivation of spirit of difference. Here Gandhi, tried to remove religious fundamentalism by the means of toleration because he knew that religious fundamentalism poses the greatest challenge to civil-society. Religious tolerance is the keynote to social harmony and solidarity. He knew that well being of civil society depends upon the emergence of an open and secular institutions.

According to Gandhiji, Independence required a collective capacity for building and maintaining a strong civil society. The constructive programme of Gandhi gave a brief outline of what civil society in India urgently needed. It needed peace between Hindus and India's minorities; removal of the caste system and untouchability, small scale industries, village sanitation; adult education and literacy, emancipation of women; education in health and hygiene etc. strengthening civil society was the way to attain Poorna swaraj or complete independence by truthful and non-violent means. Main argument was that without a strong civil society independence would benefit mainly the upper castes and would lack a positive content beneficial to the people of a whole.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDIA:

Civil Society has been widely recognized as an essential “third” sector. The role played by Civil Society in building and strengthening of our democracy are as follows:

1. Its strength can have positive influence on the state and the market. Civil Society is therefore seen as an increasingly important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness, and accountability.
2. Civil Society first has a role of enabling the voiceless and unorganized communities interests to be represented. In other words, the sphere of civil society has a goal of empowerment for local communities.
3. Civil Society can further guide for good governance, first by policy analysis and as participants in the design of strategies; second by regulation and monitoring of state performance and the action and behaviour of public officials; third, by building Social Capital and enabling citizen to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices; fourth by mobilizing particular constituencies, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized sections of masses, to participate more vibrantly in politics and public affairs; and fifth, by development work to improve the well being of their own and other communities.
4. Civil Society finally has a role of ensuring the accountability of state in different spheres.
5. Civil Society ensures the right to access to information that is a first step into the state accountability in a country where the official secrecy Act predominates.
6. In a more general way, Civil Society has the monitoring function of holding the law and order machinery, accountable. This function implies the control of political parties and electoral process, the control of local bodies etc.

Political participation in India has been transformed in many ways since 1960s. New social groups have entered the political sphere. They have begun to use their political resources to shape the political process. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Previously excluded from politics because of their position at the bottom of India’s social hierarchy, now they have begun to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by India’s democracy.

Women and environmentalists constitute new political categories that transcend traditional distinctions. The spread of social movements and Voluntary Organisation has shown that despite the difficulties of India’s Political Parties and state institutions, India’s democratic tendency continues to thrive. Beginning in 1970s, activists began to form broad based social movements, which proved powerful advocates for interests that they perceived as neglected by the state and political parties. Perhaps the most powerful has been the farmers’ movement which has organized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in New Delhi and has put pressure on the government for higher prices’ on agricultural commodities and more investment in rural areas.

In the years after independence our India is experiencing a steady rise of Civil Society. From “Chipko Movement” led by Sunder Lal Bahuguna, Narmada Bachao Andolan led by Medha Patekar and Right to Information movement by Arvind Kejariwal India has come along way. Environment Movement in India is strong now and has led to cancellation of multiple projects in India after Civil Society agitation. In state level we also see the local activists, those who are working to save Chilika Lake, to save Khandadhar Fall Protect,

Olive Ridley Tortoise, Coastal Beach Protection Movement etc. Their numbers are not small but eye-catching in strength.

Similarly on political front true movements starting from Jayprakash Narayan's total revolution to recent movements for RTI Act and NREGA by various Civil Society activists like Aruna Roy and Jean Dreze have strengthened Indian democracy. The most recent movement by India against corruption "for Lokpal Bill in India is also a glorious chapter in long list of citizen movements in India. This movement has brought civil society for the first time in Indian history in the ambit of framing legislation as five Civil Society members are now part of Joint Lokpal Bill Drafting Committee. Similarly, the way for the first time it has brought Indian middle class out of their comfort zones and right in front of confrontation against social ill like corruption makes its achievement even more laudable.

- a) **Civil Society and Independence:** The first half of the 20th century again saw another major transformation of voluntary action. Social reforms inspired the recognition and demand of basic rights- violation of which led to strong dissent towards the British rule. As the struggle for independence saw the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi, voluntary action took on a whole new meaning. Mahatma Gandhi's leadership to mobilize the masses into simple as well as effective protests brought to the arena of civil society phenomenon like civil disobedience, non-cooperation, satyagraha. Gandhi's civil rights movements and his methodology is still seen to inspire protesting through peace protests, candle march, fast unto death etc. that are the most common mode of protests in India. Movements like Chipko movement, and Jail Bharo Andolan were inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's methods. His ideologies behind protesting must be contrasted against the present trend of strikes, violent protests, rioting, and vandalism. What was unique about Gandhi's leadership in contrast with leaders of today was his ability to inspire large masses and keep the movement sustained for decades to achieve the ultimate goal envisioned by him.
- b) **Civil society post-independence:** Immediately after independence attention was shifted towards issues of national importance like development and economic growth. The membership of most freedom activists into the government caused activism to decline. By 1960s the development model of the government failed as the poorest people failed in benefitting from government schemes. General public dissatisfaction led to mass protests and movements the most extreme one being the Naxalites. At the same time Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty of violating electoral laws. Jay Prakash Narayan called for her resignation and launched the "Total Revolution" movement. The National Emergency that was then imposed met with strong opposition of the people of India. Jay Prakash Narayan mobilized a lakh of people against the emergency. His arrest caused another protest called "Free J P" to be launched. India is one of the few countries to have never been subject to military or authoritarian rule. If the National Emergency is regarded as the one time it came closest to such a rule, the strong opposition and

pressure by the civil society of India against the curbing of fundamental rights indicates a strong civil society with strong leaders.

- c) **Modern Civil Society of India:** The present day civil society of India has been greatly active in arenas fighting for a vast variety of issues. The agenda of civil society transformed over the years from fighting to establish democracy to preserving it. That being attained the civil society of today focuses on issues ranging from social, economic, environmental, law and policy making et al. The greatest trophy of civil society of India was the RTI act. The civil society has recently mobilized to fight corruption in India with the Lokpal Bill under Anna Hazare. The activism of civil society in India brought its capital to a standstill with non-profit organizations, activists, students, and many other civil society organizations protesting against the lax government machinery to ensure security of women after the rape of the 23 year old student. The civil society must credit itself for mobilizing such large masses to speak up for the security of women in India but the ten day long protests caused much more loss due to services being shut and property being damaged without much concrete response from the Government.

The demerits of protests and strikes can be studied through another example- the north eastern state of Manipur faces year round protests where people enforce a blockade of the National Highway 2. The only link of Manipur with the state of Assam, a blocked highway causes efficient supplies of goods to suffer resulting into higher prices the brunt of which is borne ultimately by the public. It is high time the approach and methodologies of civil society organizations are improved to ensure that an effective impact is made without any adverse effects. The modes of engagement of the civil society with the authorities also need to be strengthened to improve the articulation of public dissent with the government. The modern society of India at present is enjoying the advantage of the demographic shift of the population towards becoming members of the middle class. As a section of the population whose numbers and powers are increasingly growing, there is an urgent need to capitalize on their abilities in ushering public action towards ensuring good governance. This primarily involves a revolutionary approach towards building awareness of their rights, powers and most importantly, their duties.

CONCLUSION:

Civil society in India has shown considerable response to the political, social and economic problems in the post independent India and has been able to influence policies, demanded accountability and also created social harmony in the wake of communalism and fundamentalism in the country. The growth of the civil society organizations and change in their composition in India can also be traced at the changing scenario. However, a number of internal and external constraints limit the effectiveness of the interventions of civil society in governance. Civil society act as a balance of power between state & society. It makes a change in the nature of associational forms and associational civic order. Before Gandhi, there was no any strong associational civic

order in Indian society it is true that good life can only be lived in a civil society. Gandhiji's concept of moral individualism heralded the path of a strong and vibrant civil society, which is necessary for working a democracy. Through the Ashram society, he created a public sphere where diversity and difference can be accommodated in the name of humanity. In Gandhiji's view state as such is not an enemy of civil society, he just wanted to remove the domination of state by the way of co-operation. He wanted that state should work on the consent rather than coercion. To Gandhi, civil society means a new social order, which is based on mutual respect and tolerance, open and secular institutions where people will learn the lesson of accommodating together. All these will be based on the truth and non-violence on the one hand and the notion of co-operation and social feeling on the other. For Gandhi, civil society is a place of deliberation where people understand each other and respect the views of others.

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