



Civil society as a concept and analytical category in social sciences

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Abstract

In the context of the increasing salience of the civil society in liberal democracies, the concept of civil society is examined as a concept and analytical category in social sciences. The conceptualization of civil society in the existing literature remains wide and imprecise. The essential characteristics of civil society as reflected in the contemporary usage of the term are delineated. The social movements are considered to be the most significant actors in the realm of civil society. A distinction is made between the old and new social movements by highlighting the characteristic features of new social movements in contemporary liberal democracies. Within social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are considered as the most important actors as they represent the organizational nodes. These NGOs cover a wide spectrum: from grassroots organizations to national to international nongovernmental organizations operating across continents. The nature and forms of NGOs are also examined. The last section concisely reflects on social and political dynamics of social movements in the Indian context. The conclusion reflects on the democratic deficits of the civil society and the way forward: need to reconceptualize social movement in the context of changes in the national as well as the global system.

Keywords: civil society, social movements, non-governmental organization, social movements in India

Introduction

Civil Society as a Concept

Civil society is an old concept but has recently been revived in domestic politics across the world. The civil society as a contributor to democracy was widely recognized in the positive role that the civil society played in the 1980s in Eastern Europe and Latin America against the oppressive regimes. The origins of the idea of civil society can be traced back to Roman political philosopher Cicero ^[1] as well as the English theorist John Locke ^[2]. The contemporary conceptualization of civil society builds on the classical usage of the term. However, the meaning and usage of the concept has changed over the years and there is still no agreed definition of the term amongst analysts. It remains a large, imprecise and fluid concept.

The historical evolution of the term and its contemporary usage suggests that there are certain essential features which define civil society. In contemporary usage, the concept of civil society has six fundamental features. First, it is a free association of a group of individuals in pursuit of a common aim. Membership in civil society is voluntary and not based on coercion. Second, civil society is a sphere distinct from the state. The non-state character of civil society is an integral feature of contemporary usage of the concept. Third, contemporary civil society occupies a sphere different from the market. Civil society is frequently distinguished from commercial or profit-oriented realm and is described as the non-profit sector. Fourth, civil society is not a single entity but a political sphere inhabited by a variety of civic associations. Therefore, civil society is that voluntary sphere in which individuals come together from outside the state and the market in order to promote common interests. Fifth, it relies on persuasion and peaceful means to achieve its objectives. This feature distinguishes it from organizations (such as terrorist organizations, fascists

and racist groups) which use violence, as opposed to consent, as a norm to achieve their objectives. Sixth, because of rapid changes in communication and transport technology, it has acquired the form of a network society whereby the actors within civil society exchange ideas and views on issues of common concern.

In contemporary discourse, there is consensus on these six main characteristics of civil society. The discourse also lays considerable emphasis on the relationship between civil society and democracy. The role of the civil society in the construction of democratic politics is increasingly recognized by international organizations. The United Nations as well as other international organizations have granted observer status to non-governmental organizations to democratize the process of decision-making within the organization. The multilateral economic organizations, such as International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, have begun to engage, though at differential levels, with social movements. And it is expected that civil society represents a space of civility and a channel for democracy, and a mode to redress democratic deficits in a modern liberal democracy.

Civil society's related conceptualization of global civil society is increasing in salience in global politics. There is neither any clarity on the varying terminologies used to denote activism of non-state actors at the transnational level nor their categorization in the context of the global system. Analysts have used different terminologies in relation to their specific research context. For example, the terms used by analysts include global civil society ^[3], global society ^[4], transnational social movements organizations ^[5], world civic politics ^[6], and transnational advocacy networks ^[7]. Of all these terminologies, global civil society has become the standard usage in academics ^[8]. However, the conceptualization of global civil society remains imprecise.

In the definition of global civil society or even civil society, it is normal to come across that it constitutes 'vast array of actors engaged in civil society or global civil society'. Which are these numerous actors remains largely unclear. Within the socio-political realm of global civil society, it has become a standard practice in academics to refer to two sub-set of actors: global social movements and NGOs. Here again, the question that comes up is that are NGOs not part of the social movements.

Social Movements

Civil society as a socio-political space implies the existence of civil society actors. Although there are a variety of actors engaged in civil society, the most important being identified by analysts are social movements. Social movements are a subset of many actors that function within the space of civil society,^[9] and are considered powerful because they have the power of popular mobilization. They rely on persuasion and mobilization because they do not have the levers of power that the state apparatus has. They can be distinguished from interest groups as their vision is wider and seek major transformation in the society. They are anti-systemic and often work on priorities which are at odds with the prevailing organization of the system. Also, they do not have the resources which the business interests rely on^[10].

Contemporary social movements are classified into two analytical categories: old social movements and new social movements. The new social movements seek social transformation; they raise issues cutting across all strata of society; they are anti-systemic, espouse a new politics thesis and challenge the mainstream democratic forms; question the materialistic assumption underlying economic growth and challenge the prevalent economic paradigm; advocate post-material culture to seek changes in cultural values and lifestyles; operate in the realm which falls outside the state and established parties; are usually informal, decentralized, and participatory organizations; and are geared to public sensitization and mobilization. Once the new social movements are established, they must reflect 'upon on how it is to affect the social and political environment'^[11]; and they often make changes by taking recourse to conventional organizational structures and strategies. In the Indian context, Shah avers that the typologies in relation to social movements such as reformists, reformatory and revolutionary, or accumulative, alternative and transformatory are useful but do not explain the dynamics of the movement which undergo change in the course of time. These typologies tend to ignore those movements whose objectives change during the development of the movement^[12].

New social movements, such as peace, anti-nuclear, feminist and environmental movements, began in Europe in the form of collective protests in the late 1960s and spread to other parts of the world. Old and new social movements are also distinguished by analysts according to their location, aims, organizational forms, and medium of action.^[13] For example, Trade Unions that are considered as part of old social movements are located within the polity and essentially seek to influence the social democratic parties for legislative reforms and economic rights of the workers. The new social movements on the other hand operate outside the established parties and try to mobilize civil society; and focus on defending civil society against the excessive political power of the state, and strive for cultural

changes and lifestyles, and question the materialist assumptions such as economic growth. As for the organizational structure, the Trade Unions accept the bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational structure prevailing in the society. The new social movements are usually informal, decentralized and participatory organizations. Lastly, trade unions operate within the existing political institutions. The new social movements are at odds with the system and often resort to confrontation and direct action.

Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs are important organizational forms in social movements. NGO is an organization with a formal structure formed by private individuals for the purpose of engaging in non-profit-making activities. These NGOs vary in ideology, size, resources, organizational forms and activities but share common values and commitment for far reaching changes in the social system. NGOs could range from Community Based Organizations, Micro Credit Organizations, and Grassroots Organizations to national and international level organizations. And these NGOs cover most of the issue areas in social life. For example, NGOs in diverse fields of social life include academic and research institutions, charitable foundations, development groups, human rights groups, child rights groups, environmental groups, women's groups, religious organizations, and social reformist organizations.

NGOs are categorized according to the expertise and the focus of their activities related to the area of social life. NGOs vary a great deal in size and the resources that they rely on. Grassroots organizations working at the village level in the developing countries are small with limited resources compared to large national NGOs in the developed world with adequate resources to pursue their objectives. However, enormous disparities exist in resources between national and international NGOs. International NGOs are normally well funded compared to the national NGOs. Here, there is also a distinction between the Southern NGOs and the Northern NGOs. The Southern national NGOs normally suffer from resource constraints compared to the Northern NGOs that possess adequate resources to pursue their goals. The resource constraint of the Southern NGOs is important for three reasons. First, underfunded Southern NGOs cannot pursue their goals effectively. Second, they are unable to fulfill their requirement of trained personnel in their office or to work in the field. Third, resource constraint precludes them from effectively participating at the global level to incorporate specific Southern concerns on issues that are vital for the developing countries. The concerns of the Southern NGOs are filtered through the Northern NGOs operating at the global level. These Northern NGOs have the expertise and experience of participating in international negotiations and engaging with the multilateral international organizations. The influence of NGOs at the national as well as international level depends on three main factors. First, NGOs normally possess expert knowledge because of their years of work in the issue area of their specialization. Second, NGOs are perceived to be above narrow sectoral or national interests. In other words, they have a wider perspective on issues. Third, they have the ability to shape public opinion and mobilize masses on issues of collective

interests and therefore have the capacity to influence policy makers, and even elections.

NGOs are usually categorized into three broad categories. This categorization is more relevant to the developed countries than the developing countries. The first category is that of International Nongovernmental Organizations (INGOs). These INGOs have branches in different countries. These large INGOs focus on specific domestic issues as well as issues that are of global importance. The second category is that of NGOs as research organizations and they primarily derive their influence from scientific research and their dissemination through publications to influence public opinion and policy formulation. The third category is of large national NGOs which focus on domestic issues.

INGOs cover all the major the major issue areas of social life such as human rights, women's rights, global environment, and development issues. The three-fold categorization of NGOs can be elaborated on, for example, in context of environmental NGOs. The environmental INGOs with branches or affiliations in countries across the continents are: Friends of the Earth International (FOEI), World Wide Fund (WWF), Greenpeace. FOEI, has presence in more than seventy countries, including developing countries. The WWF is world's largest environmental INGO with offices in more than ninety countries across the world. It is headquartered in Amsterdam. It covers a large number of global issues that include climate change, forests, fresh water, marine resources, biodiversity, and toxic contamination. The Greenpeace is also one of the largest environmental INGO, also headquartered in Amsterdam, with offices in more than forty countries.

The second category of environmental INGOs focus on their scientific knowledge and research programs to influence the course of global environmental politics. The prominent INGOs in this category are: World Resource Institute (WRI), International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), and International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). WRI conducts research and produces reports and policy studies on global environment that are well regarded. IIED is based in London and is known for its innovative approach to global environment and had highlighted the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation in the developing countries. The SEI, based in Sweden, and IISD, based in Canada, are government funded autonomous institutes that strive to influence their governments on environmental issues. These organizations consult and collaborate among themselves and with environmental groups in other countries forming what is now termed as 'network society'. In the Southern countries, Centre for Science and Environment (India) and Third World Network (Malaysia) are well known INGOs

In the third category are large national NGOs that have international programs also. They are mainly located in the United States. For example, Sierra Club and National Wildlife Federation, founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focus on conservation issues. Friends of the Earth USA played an important role in international negotiations on ozone regime, and made serious efforts to reshape the policies of the multilateral banks.

Reference to India

The contemporary social movements in India are at variance with those in the western world. The organizational nodes, the NGOs, vary in size from grassroots NGOs such as community-based organizations, micro-credit organizations to national and international NGOs. In addition, there is substantial presence of foreign INGOs across issue areas with offices or branches or affiliations in India. Examples of such foreign NGOs are Oxfam and Greenpeace. The resources that the Indian NGOs possess are limited and are sometimes supplemented by the foreign NGOs.

The social movements in India are classified either on the basis of issues around which the participants are mobilized or on the basis of participants. In the first classification, the participants are mobilized around issues such as forests, and civil rights. In the second classification, participants themselves constitute the social movement such as peasants, tribals, dalits, and women. Old social movements are organized more on the basis of participants and new social movements, such as environmental social movements and human rights movement, are based on issues around which participants are mobilized. The contemporary classification of social movements in India is in general based on socio-economic characteristics and the issues involved. This classificatory schema has led to identification of the following social movements: peasant movements, tribal movements, dalit movements, backward caste movements, women's movements, industrial working-class movements, students' movements, middle class movements, human rights movements, and environmental movements. The leadership of these movements is generally attributed to the middle-class of the Indian populace^[14].

In the past few decades, there has been an exponential increase in groups engaged in social activism in India. These groups are of three types: organized groups (NGOs), unorganized groups and spontaneous groups. According to the Indian Statistical Institute Report on NGOs in India (2019), there were thirty-one lakh registered NGOs in India. The spontaneous groups of citizens concerned with socio-political issues are also increasing and were witnessed, for example, during the candle light processions in Delhi on the issue of murders of Jessica Lal, Nirbhaya, and Radhika Chauhan (student of Delhi University, South Campus), and in major cosmopolitan cities during the Mumbai bomb blasts. In sum, social movements in India comprise common individuals and groups, organized as well as unorganized, that rally around common issues of concern. To exclude spontaneous groupings of people on issues of collective concern would be intellectual lethargy as protests movements involving spontaneous groupings of individuals is on the increase and may account for a substantial number of the people involved in social movements. The dynamics of social movements change reflecting the changes in the national and the global system. Therefore, it is important to comprehend the changing nature of contemporary social movements.

Conclusion

The biggest limitation of civil society across the world as well as in India arises from the lack of transparency and accountability among the organized civil society groups. Civil society itself has been unable to evolve a system whereby this democratic deficit can be addressed. The second important issue is: who do particular civic

associations represent? Do they represent middle-class, upper-class, intelligentsia or the masses/working-class? As the salience of domestic civil society is increasing in India^[15], it is likely to become an important actor in domestic politics. With a variety of civic associations constituting the civil society in India, a democratic system has to be evolved whereby the views of not only the prominent civic associations which are financially well endowed and well connected with the media are heard by the state but also of the ones which represent the masses, and have acquired expertise on specific social issues, get an opportunity to interact with the state to evolve socio-politically acceptable policies.

To address these glaring democratic deficits within the civil society, it might be a good idea for the civil society to evolve a framework to ensure transparency and accountability of NGOs in India. Equally important would be to undertake a research exercise to identify the representativeness of the NGOs claiming to represent the masses.

The first immediate task of the researchers and analysts should be to identify NGOs which have acquired social legitimacy due to knowledge and expertise through hard and sincere work among the masses on diverse social issues. The context for this is provided by rise in the number of NGOs established by business interests and politicians.

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