

UNIT 18 CIVIL SOCIETIES: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, NGOs AND VOLUNTARY ACTION

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18.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a total rethinking of the developmental strategies we adopted in the post-independence period. This rethinking has been partly stimulated by the still persisting socio-economic problems of both rural and urban masses as well as the neglected tribes of the hilly regions. These developmental strategies have not only failed to solve the problems of poverty, illiteracy and health insecurities but also instead added newer problems to the existing list of issues.

In attempting for an introspection as to what went wrong with the whole exercise, invariably the state emerges as the anti-hero at the end of most of the analyses. The state-centric developmental approach followed by the post-colonial Indian state has been held accused for all the misadventures. Though the development has been carried out within the ideological framework of as well as the functioning of a vibrant democratic Indian polity, the central role given to the state and its bureaucracy in the development project seems to have precluded any real democratic participation of the masses-the local communities -whose living space has been the site of developmental activity. Though it was in their names it was not in their interests, critics complain.

This is the historical background, which is seeing the emergence of many new social movements and voluntary sectors focusing on specific issues for the furtherance of the values of democracy. A resurgence of the category of civil society has been the response to these experiential developments from the domain of theoreticians. The eclipse of civil society due to the towering figure of the state is held to be responsible for the developmental approach not reaching its proclaimed destination of the welfare of the masses. So a revival of and reconstruction of an active civil society supposed to be a precondition for the realisation of true democracy and development, are advocated by the proponents of such views. In this unit we will attempt to look into the conceptual as well as the practical issues that inform this kind of alternative framework of development and democracy.

18.2 CIVIL SOCIETY: CHANGING NOTIONS

The contemporary hype about civil society has been caused by the break-up of the socialist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe and the revival of Tocquevillian tradition of celebrating the associational pluralism in the U.S. It has been surmised that the Soviet-type experiments have failed because of the absence of civil society in such states. Civil society has been hailed as the property of the liberal democratic states and a flourishing civil society has been considered as the precondition for the existence of democracy.

The concept of civil society has an 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.

The early Marxist conception of civil society as one, which plays a facilitating role for the functioning of the capitalist economy, delimits the scope of civil society too much. But it was successful in its attack on Hegel for subordinating the civil society to the state. Hegel saw in civil society the mediating domain where the particular interests of the individual and the universal interests of the state could be reconciled in producing an ethical basis for the modern society. Hegel was concerned about the loss of morality in modern society due to the non-availability of traditional community relations to the modern humans. However, civil society characterised by its particular tendencies if left alone will destroy itself. So, in Hegel's view, though civil society embodies the unique achievement of modernity that of the individual, it has to be organised and institutionalised through the state.

Gramsci deepened our understanding of the civil society by extending the Marxian logic. Instead of depicting civil society as only embodying the practices of production and exchange relations, the Gramscian notion characterises it as a set of social relations that stand between the individual and the state. Consent is produced for the dominance of the state through the hegemonising impulses of the various institutions, practices and the concomitant myths and symbols at the site of civil society. Gramsci claims that a hegemonised civil society or captive civil society is responsible for revolutions not taking place even under classic cases of the presence of required economic crises. According to Gramsci, hegemony is a strategy which could very well become a property of the proletariat and the subaltern masses. In his revolutionary strategy Gramsci demands an alliance of all the opponents of the bourgeoisie to be led by the proletariat. This alliance, Gramsci argues, should hegemonise the civil society in order to challenge and reorder the political society.

The political implication of the Gramscian notion seems to be crucial. Though historically the space provided by the civil society has been appropriated and hegemonised by the dominant classes, it suggests possibilities for the reappropriation of civil society by other social actors as well. However, in recent times, theorists like Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj have given interesting arguments regarding civil society in the third world countries in general and

India in particular. They point out the fallibility and incompatibility of the Western ideas and forms of governance that have been imposed through colonial intervention. At the same time, this imposition, for quite a long time has initiated various processes in its attempt to introduce political modernity in these societies. So the western notions of the state and civil society are not useful categories in understanding the Indian situation since the nature of these institutions have become substantially different from those of their European counterparts. The uncritical application of the concepts of state and civil society to evaluate the Indian situation has caused many distortions. They view with skepticism the attempts of those scholars who are privileging the civil society by decrying the dominant role of the state. According to them, the state in India is less extensive than those its Western counterparts. Using the western critique of the state to argue for the withdrawal of the state is spurious. Partha Chatterjee hopes to understand the Indian situation by devising a new concept called 'political society' distinguishing it from civil society. He attributes the rise of various forms of populism within Indian democracy to the evolution of political society by which he signifies the special relationship between the state and the masses. Kaviraj's final statement about the debate on civil society is quite instructive which is as follows:

"It is in the nature of the problem that the debates about civil society remain inconclusive; but these are not, for that reason, fruitless. After all these debates form parts of a collective reflection on the nature of the conditions which political democracy requires to take root and flourish. Precisely because of its elusiveness and intractability the idea of civil society in the third world forces us to think about the social terrain behind explicit political institutions and try to explicate what happens in that essential but relatively dark analytical space".

18.3 NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The earliest of social movements in India could be traced to the Gandhian efforts of Sarvodaya. Gandhi recognised the need for social change. But he believed that the change has to come from the bottom to top if it has to be non-violent, successful and permanent. Sarvodaya was the direct offshoot of Gandhi's constructive programme. According to Radhakrishna, the ideological paradigm of Sarvodaya sought to create a stateless and classless society of Gram Swarajya, establish the principle of sharing voluntarily such as through Bhoodan and Gramdan, develop village industries and agro-industrial communities and apply the Gandhian concept of trusteeship in industrial activities. But the limitations of this approach of moral persuasion have been well documented by history. Though it evoked much hope in the beginning the gross failure of Bhoodan in land redistribution through voluntary means has evaporated that hope.

Since 1970s a number of social movements emphasising on a range of basic issues have come to animate the sphere of civil society. They are 'new' in contrast to the old trade union and working class movements, which were political in the sense of having an alternate political vision of the state itself with revolutionary ideals. But the people's movements, as they are called, are the result of broader-based people's responses to ecological or gender or caste conflicts. The distinguishing feature of these movements is that they are not homogeneous and differ in their origins. As Wignaraja notes, some are the result of romantic and idealistic approaches taken by charitable institutions, religious institutions, the 'small is beautiful' advocates, etc., which have tried to teach the people to do 'good' things often treating the village as a harmonious entity or community. In many cases the local initiatives merge and give rise to the

formation of a large-scale movement at the intervention of intellectuals backed with media support.

As Wignaraja further points out only 'some of the people's movements have been sustained over time, others are eruptions and die down after a while..... Similarly some of the grassroots experiments represent seeds of change, while others are mere bubbles'. He further elaborates on how to differentiate between a seed and a bubble. A seed can be identified with such broad aims as equality and access to resources; equality of social, political, cultural rights; real participation in all social decisions affecting work, welfare, politics etc; the end of division between mental and manual labour and the use of technology appropriate for this purpose. It is not, however, merely a matter of stating these objectives: genuine participation, self-production and self-management, autonomy, solidarity and innovativeness. A bubble on the other hand, is a soft process and may not last, for a variety of reasons. However, he alerts us to the fact that bubbles should not be outrightly dismissed as they may represent entry points to change and some can be transformed into seeds through additional sensitisation and conscientisation programmes, training of facilitators and change agents. Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA), the Chipko movement, the Kerala Science movement (KSSP) and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) Samiti are seeds in point. There are innumerable other movements as well differing in degrees of mobilisation, conscientisation and organisation for development and democracy.

All these initiatives may not always proceed in a uniform pattern of development. Within the political space available, there have been interventions in the socio-economic system. In the case of smaller experiments, someone with an advanced consciousness initiates dialogue and a group activity, for example, landless labourers, poor women or a (youth) group trying to do something as a means of living, or a social activity, such as a health or environmental sanitation programme; the process can move forward to become a seed or stay as a bubble until it bursts.

Now we shall look into some of the movements that have highlighted issues of great concern to people and ecology. Chipko deserves to be listed foremost them all. Chipko as a spontaneous movement started in the early 70s and got organized under the able leadership of Sunderlal Bahuguna. It was ignited by the opposition of the people of the Tehri-Garhwal region to the felling of trees by outside contractors. In the Himalayan regions forests form an indispensable source of livelihood for the mostly tribal population living there. Chipko literally means 'hugging' the trees. The movement articulated the concerns of forest-based communities such as depletion of forests, erosion of soil and consequent landslides, drying up of local streams and other water resources and shortages of fuel and fodder for domestic consumption. It also fought against the construction of the Tehri dam which threatened the eviction of around 25,000 hilly residents. Though the movement has not succeeded in all its endeavours it has achieved some commendable victories. Getting ban on felling trees above an altitude of 1000m and making the government to announce certain forest areas as protected regions are some of the successes of the movement.

Chipko being a non-violent resistance movement embodies the Gandhian spirit of struggle. Chipko movement inspired green cover movements elsewhere in the country the most important being the Appiko movement in the Western Ghats against the over-felling of trees and covering

forest lands with commercial trees replacing the natural ones. The slogan of Chipko movement is 'ecology is economy'.

Another major social movement has been that of Anna Hazare who has been fighting since more than two decades for bringing about transparency in bureaucratic apparatus of the state. His movement has changed his village Ralegon Siddhi in Maharashtra into a model village. His movement emphasises the right of the common people to know the information regarding government initiatives and the implementation procedures of the welfare schemes. The government is being pressurised to enact the 'Right to Information' act. This legislation would entail the right of the people to gain access to government records and thereby bring transparency and accountability in the functioning of the government. This would ultimately serve to check corruption and rent-seeking practices.

Yet another important movement of the present times is Narmada Bachao Andolan Samiti. This movement, led by Medha Patkar, has sensationalised the issue of building huge dams as a solution for growing stress on water resources. This movement is in opposition to the construction of nearly 3000 major and minor dams across the river Narmada which would submerge an estimated 3,50,000 hectare of forest land and 2,00,000 hectares of cultivated land. About one million people are estimated to become ousters.

There have been a number of other struggles prioritising issues related to women, dalit empowerment, land use and pollution related issues. Women's movements, though lacking a tradition equivalent to that of French and English feminist movements, have reached a point where they are able to identify common cause with all those movements which would further the advancement of the values of democracy and sustainable development. Dalit movements are also heading forward in the same direction.

However, movements fighting for separate statehoods and autonomy also come under the broad rubric of social movements. Though their source of origin could be the same that of uneven development and the failure of the state to respond to their specific problems, these sub-nationalist and autonomy movements fundamentally differ from other types of social movements. Whereas all other social movements are inclusive i.e. open to all, these movements are exclusive and have particular objectives rather than universal principles.

18.4 NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AS AGENTS OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have attempted to theorise the phenomenon of the emergence of new social movements. Their primary concern is to offer an alternative social imaginary to both capitalism and socialism as they view both the systems to be retaining the elements of domination and unfairness. Taking the cue from Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe call for hegemony through a process of political coalition of various discrete social groups but without the assertion of leadership within the coalition by any specific group such as working class as it is in the Gramscian revolutionary strategy. Thus they call for the construction of a consensus acceptable to all rather than a quest for supremacy by some ideology or group over other ideologies or groups, in consistent with their radical egalitarianism. Also influenced by the Foucaultian notion of power they argue that social power can no longer be seen as centrally

located in the state or the economy but instead it is exercised as well as resisted at the societal level. The political implication of such an argument being the negation of any privileged arena of political struggle. Laclau and Mouffe praise the new social movements for their particularities as against a unified vision or project.

The new social movements are indicators of the pulse of the people that they are no longer ready to accept the developmental paradigms that keep them out and preclude their participation. They may not be concerned with the capturing of the state power through revolution. Yet they may be building consciously or unconsciously a countervailing power to the dominant state power. The new social movements also represent ways to humanise the larger macro developmental processes in order to demonstrate the fact that the modes of incorporation into the modern world at all levels could be altered. These movements also show how people cope with multiple and simultaneous crises and move on.

People's movements are emerging out of peculiar contradictions within societies and cultures in transition. They may also arise out of contradictions and weaknesses that appear in the role of the state and in the division of labour resulting from the intervention of transnational capital. The new social movements are also bringing about the horizontal integration of people instead of hierarchical integration. According to Rajendra Singh, "ecology movements constitute transnational, biophilic, universalised and moral movements. Their basic commitment and fundamental ideology not only transcend the human categories of caste, class, race, religion and nations but also the categories of species divisions and the divisions of the organic and inorganic world also. This movement is a unique event which brings together the otherwise divided humans on one platform around a single issue, mobilises them to struggle for one cause the defence of all living beings born and unborn".

18.5 NGOs AND VOLUNTARY ACTION

The modern notion of voluntary action has its origins in Protestant Christianity. Conceptually, it just means anything we involve out of our own choice without any compulsion. Having a purpose or meaning in the action is important for an action to be voluntary. The need for voluntary action arises when individuals feel that the existing socio-political and economic structures of the society are not paying sufficient attention towards some aspects of the society. Or it could be that those structures are not in a position to respond to some issues arising in the society. The motivation to do such action is very often unrelated to one's self-interest.

However, Rajni Kothari argues that voluntarism is the essence of Indian civilisation. He argues that the core of the Indian civilisation is cultural rather than political. He further argues that historically in India states were always marginal and limited in their sphere of action. The real functioning of the society was enabled by voluntary organisations that are based on caste, religion and commercial interests. He also claims that "if one says that voluntarism has been an enduring feature of India, it only means that many people at many places are engaged in multifarious action without being asked to do so by an external agent-political, bureaucratic or market-propelled. The perception of a dichotomy between state-directed and voluntary initiatives has arisen only in recent decades after the modern state and its institutions either began to impede the voluntary ethos of Indian society or forced themselves on what people

did on their own". So Rajni Kothari finds the contemporary interest in voluntary action as something like going back to indigenous Indian tradition of community management of social life.

Now let us have a brief look at the present day voluntary organisations, which are considered synonymous with Non-governmental Organisations, though there is a subtle difference. NGOs are not the only form of voluntary action. NGOs could be a part of voluntary sector. Being non-governmental is only one among the many aspects of voluntary action. The activities of the Christian missionaries in providing health, education and various other facilities are also viewed upon by some, to be the first of voluntary actions in India. But their marked difference lies in the value framework within which they function. Their services are located within the Christian worldview of spreading the message of Christ and ensuring redemption to all. The contemporary NGOs have their origins in 1970s and 80s. This is the period when the state initiatives were increasingly being looked at with skepticism. It was a response and reaction to the failure of the State and its policies. From then on there is a virtual multiplication of NGOs. Though only about 15,000 NGOs have been registered, it is estimated that their number could range anywhere between 50,000 to 1,00,000. NGOs are increasingly being viewed as having an indispensable role to play in supplementing the developmental initiatives of the state.

The co-opting of NGOs by governmental agencies in implementing its policies has evoked mixed response from the scholars. While some view it as a positive development some do not share this view. They feel that this is an encroachment in the sphere of civil society by the state and it is done by the state for encouraging neo-liberal agendas. Sarah Joseph claims that "the spurt in voluntarism, or what came to be called 'grass roots politics', after the emergency in the late 70s provided the hope for a while that a new style of politics was emerging which would regenerate democratic institutions in India. A more participatory model of democracy would emerge it was hoped as a result of popular pressures and the work of voluntary organisations which were involved in organising and mobilising the people, was extolled. Their intervention could, it was felt, help to articulate the needs and priorities of the people and lead the state to devise more people-friendly schemes". Though the governmental and the international agencies also have noted the phenomenon of grass roots activism and the role of NGOs, she points out that the official interest was in using them as sub-contractors for more targeted and efficient delivery since it was felt that they might be more committed and honest and acceptable to the people than the bureaucracy.

The importance of NGOs in the developmental terrain does not, however, lie in the quantity of their work but in quality. As Anil C. Shah and Sudarshan Iyengar point out, there have been many instances where the people once served by the NGOs subsequently demand the same standard in the performance of the government apparatus and agitate for the same. Though, by way of quantity their share has been negligible when compared with that of the government, the quality of the work done by them is impressive. The works done by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in Gujarat is telling in this regard. They propose six parameters in judging the quality of NGO activities which are as follows:

- i) People's participation
- ii) Technical excellence

- iii) Cost-effectiveness
- iv) Equity-concern for the deprived, and for women
- v) Institutional, financial, and environmental sustainability
- vi) Accountability

They argue that the greatest of the NGOs is their approach and method for enlisting people's participation. "Working informally in a friendly manner, they do not undertake development as government agencies generally do, with the primary concern being the achievement of a certain target irrespective of the needs and priorities of the people". This shows the need for a change in the attitude of the government agencies involving in the task of development. However the emphasis on the attitude instead of larger socio-economic structural changes is seen by the advocates of a radical change as a neo-liberal conspiracy to legitimise its expanding role and also to bail out the state, which is collaborating to this effect.

18.6 SUMMARY

The catapulting of civil society to the centrestage of political discourse on political processes is like a double-edged sword. While it holds the promise of democratising the development phenomena by increasing popular participation it also possesses the danger of undermining the legitimacy of the state. Though many NGOs are doing commendable service in the promotion of the values of freedom, democracy, social justice and sustainable development, it has to be kept in mind that they can never have the reach of the governmental apparatus. As one author notes, 'even thousands of NGOs cannot replace the role of the government'. The accountability of the NGOs is also another issue of concern. As already noted, a majority of them are not registered under the Foreign Currency Regulation Act (FCRA). But their importance lies in demonstrating to the public the possible democratic ways of development with their participation and thereby make the people to pressurise the government to bring constructive changes in the modes of development. One also has to share the optimism of Rajni Kothari towards voluntary action. He claims that though the contemporary interest in voluntary action is seen as a reaction to the failure of the state, we are very soon likely to discover a more positive and liberated sense of what voluntarism involves. Only the unfolding political events of the future can either vindicate or refute such claims.

18.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Do you share the arguments of many of the critics regarding the supposed negative role of governmental apparatus in India's development process? Give valid arguments for your stand.
- 2) Discuss the changing notions of civil society and critically evaluate the contemporary importance attached to it in this era of globalisation.
- 3) Critically analyse the role of new social movements in promoting the values of sustainable development and empowerment of marginalised communities.
- 4) Discuss the role of NGOs in supplementing the developmental task of the governmental

agencies and the promise held out by the voluntary sector in the present global era.

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