Civil Society: Inclusiveness of Excluded Sections in Democratic Governance

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Abstract:

The issue of the potential of civil society in influencing governance is at the core of development thinking and practice today. It has gained currency in academic and policy debates in the recent times. This becomes particularly relevant in an old democracy like India where the state has not been able to meet the basic needs for water, shelter, education and even the food requirements of a large section of society. But a democratic framework of India provide space and freedom for people to engage in collective action to question the state, to demand a revision in policy, to implement the laws which are so elaborately codified in the Constitution and to improve the functioning of its institutions. This makes the interface between civil society & governance in India somewhat different from countries which share a different political, economic and social context.

This research paper addresses how a dynamic, strong and progressive civil society, by enhancing the capabilities of citizen collectives, by the process of social mobilization and by democratizing governance, can ensure inclusion of interests of the excluded and marginalized sections in public policy and their participation in governance.

Keywords: Civil society**,** Women, Dalits, Tribals, Minorities, Governance, Citizens Collectives

Introduction:

Concept of Civil Society: Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

Civil organizations also vary in the nature and range of their objectives. Some of them have explicitly 'systemic' aims in the sense that they seek to make an impact on broad political and social structures and processes: for example, by changing an authoritarian into a democratic regime; by deepening the democratic character of an existing democratic regime; changing socio-economic circumstances by improving equity or stimulating particular kinds of developmental action which improve the well-being of poor and excluded people. Others may have relatively wide social aims, seeking to represent and improve the condition of other social groups beyond their own personnel or membership. Still others may be concerned with more limited goals, seeking to maximize the narrow interests of their own members without concern for, and sometimes at the cost of, external organizations and groups.

Examples of Civil Society Institutions

- Academia
- Activist groups
- Charities
- Citizens' militia
- Civic groups
- Clubs (sports, social, etc.)
- Community foundations
- Community organizations

- Consumers/consumer organizations
- Cooperatives
- Cultural groups
- Environmental groups
- Foundations
- Intermediary organizations for the voluntary and non-profit sector
- Men's groups
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

- Non-profit organizations
- Policy institutions
- Private voluntary organizations
- Professional associations
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- Religious organizations
- Support groups
- Trade unions

Social Exclusion: Social exclusion relates to the alienation or disenfranchisement of certain people within a society. It is most often connected to a person's social class, educational status, relationships in childhood and living standards, and how these might affect their access to various opportunities, whether they are in the field of political, economic, social, public or private spheres. It also applies to some degree to people with a disability, to minority, men and women of all races and to the elderly. Hence anyone who deviates in any perceived way from the norm of a population can become subject to coarse or subtle forms of exclusion. Women, Dalits, religious minorities, scheduled tribes and scheduled castes, can be considered to be the most excluded sections of the society, as their participation in governance process is almost negligible because their demands and concerns are suppressed both at the individual and institutional levels.

What can be the role of a civil society in enhancing their inclusion in governance process?
In recent years, there is an increasing realization of the role of civil society in promoting the participation of the marginalized and excluded sections in governance process. Small, local and informal associations and their alliances are playing a key role in policy formulation and implementation from the vantage point of the marginalized and poor invisible citizens. Many of these collectives have come out of the result of the growing demands of the local self – governance through a variety of legislative and constitutional provisions for devolution and decentralization. Some of them are the result of the development programmes like promoting Self help groups (SHGs), many more have been promoted by intermediary voluntary development organizations as new collectives like *Sangham, Mandal, Sangathan, Sanstha, Samiti, Manch, Andolan,* etc. It is assumed that citizens are able to voice their concerns in a more articulated manner when they are organized and when they are a part of the group or collective. Hence these collectives who provide membership to Women, Dalits, Tribal's, religious minorities and other similar marginalized groups can play a vital role in addressing their concerns and introducing their identity in decision making process. Neighborhood organizations, a local union, a youth group, a village committee, are all examples of various types of collectives. But these associations or collectives or networks of formal or informal nature remain fragile and weak, due to lack of capacity building support in the form of information sharing, exposure, networking, handholding, and train

Impact of forming such collectives

When such collectives are formed a feeling of collectivization of being one for one goal exist among different groups like the SHGs, *Aganwadi* workers, elected representatives and others. This promotes solidarity in the society who are otherwise divided by caste, religion, and geographical boundaries and different ideologies and perceptions. While working together they are not only exposed to the community problems but also to their own personal concerns, which indirectly strengthen the collective. Secondly in such collectives when women and dalits also join along with other marginalized section of the society, then itself it is the first step of empowering them and joining the mainstream. Finally these networks can be used as a platform through which issues of women, dalits, old age, physically challenged, widow and other marginalized can be addressed either in the form of rallies, *dharna,* or through participation of *gramsabha.*

Some of the measures which can enhance the process of social inclusion through these collectives are:

Strengthening Capacities of Citizen's Collectives:

Capacity building actually means building on the existing capacities of the collectives, association, and networks so as to get improved effectiveness in pursuit of its purposes and missions. It also empowers them to question the government agencies as well as to engage with them. Therefore capacity building is a continuous and ongoing process. Capacity building inputs provided to women networks have helped in the formation of SHGs, *Mahila Mandals,* and *Kishori* groups at the grass root levels. Similarly capacity building of dalit elected representatives have enabled them to participate with full confidence in gram Sabhas as well as at various level of Panchayati Raj after the 73 Constitutional Amendment Act.

Some capacity building inputs

1. Trainings

In order to orient members of the collective about the reporting and documentation skills a programme can be organized. In this exercise an effort should be made to enhance their capacities, so as to assure that they should learn to document the best practices of their collective, in such a way that their practices of successfully running a collective or a network can be inhabited at other places also. Apart from this such types of trainings provide a platform to the members to share their experiences and work related problems and to informally review the progress of their collectives. Leadership training should also be organized in with the purpose of building perspective of the need for women to be organized, and to build leadership capacity. These trainings should be organized into clusters for ensuring the convenience as well as better participation of women from the network.

2. Orientation on the subjects related to Panchayati Raj: - In addition to the above inputs orientation programmes should be organized after every 3 to 4 months in which all the members of collective can be invited to participate in the programme. Such capacity building programmes shall continue and are repeated after regular intervals. The issues raised are

- Discussion on PRI Act/ 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Social justice
- Discussion on problems faced by Gram Panchayats
- Transparent and accountable leadership
- Information on various schemes
- Dissemination of information
- Open discussion with Government officials
- Who are the excluded sections of the society?
- What can be done to include them at individual and institutional level?
- To whom we do consider weaker sections of the society?
- How to conduct regular meetings?
- How to raise issues and at what platforms?
- What are the rights and privileges enshrined in the Indian constitution which talk about the weaker sections of society?
- What are the laws related to women, dalit, disabled, widow, and other marginalized sections?
- How to organize small group discussion?

3. **Interface meetings:** In addition to it some Interface meetings should also be organized among the members of the collectives and with different government organizations for the purpose of initiating the process of formal linkage. For example

1. Interface meeting of collectives with *Krishi Vigyan Kendra*
2. Interface meeting of collectives with *Zila Saaksharta Samiti*
3. Interface meeting of collectives with Women Development Corporation
4. Interface meeting of collectives with District Industries Center
5. Interface meeting of collectives with ICDS

Initiating social mobilization process through advocacy and campaigns

Social mobilization includes mobilization of the poor and marginalized for collective action. Collective action and collective empowerment are powerful tools to change the fundamental structural differences, injustice and discrimination in society. The purpose of social mobilization and collective action may range from engaging in self help construction work in a village or neighborhood to exercising rights over natural resources, to large scale protests activities. Over the past several years, a group of civil society organizations have initiated various interventions that have aimed at mobilization of the marginalized to participate actively in the process of governance, with special focus on gram sabha.

Some of the communication tools for the campaign can be

- Cultural shows at regular intervals in the villages, including street plays, puppet shows, and folk songs.
- Door to door canvassing
- Cycle rally
- Wall writing
- Distribution of pamphlets, and hand bills
- Pasting of the posters
- *Nukkad Nataks*
- Group Meetings and Discussions

Democratizing Governance: Making Public Institutions responsible, transparent and accountable

Another important way, through which a civil society can enhance the participation of the marginalized, excluded and deprived section of the society in the democratic process and decision making is by making public and governance institutions accessible to them. The first route is to value, promote and broaden what has come to be called "participatory democracy" or "participatory governance" (Tandon & Mohanty, 2002; Fung & Wright, 2003). This route implies that the representative forms of democratic governance are not sufficient and must be complemented and conjoined with direct, participatory forms of democratic processes. Several efforts are currently being made towards promotion of direct participation of citizens in debating and contesting common public goods and negotiating and monitoring the mechanisms for their delivery by the elected representatives and the government machinery they oversee. Some have called it "deliberative democracy" (Newell, 2001); others have labeled it as "Empowered Participatory Governance "(Fung & Wright, 2003).

An important aspect of the above "institutional design as devolution of authority" (Fung & Wright, 2003) is to ensure their mutual obligations and accountability mechanisms. The devolution of political authority without necessary mobilization of resources is surely likely to weaken the governance of public goods (as can be seen in the continuing difficulties being faced by Panchayats in India---see PRIA, 2002). Likewise, inadequate political engagement among different spheres of governance may result in insufficient attention to the diversity of interests and needs of different communities and localities; this may result in certain public goods (particularly those valued by poorer and weaker sections of society) getting "abandoned" or abdicated by governance institutions most endowed with resources to act on them (this where blurring of boundaries between public and

private goods begins to be encouraged; this is how access to clean water and good quality basic education for the poorer sections of society become private goods, which they can not afford!).

The second route towards furthering democratizing governance is what has been called "participatory citizenship" (Tandon & Mohanty, 2003). Various ways of deepening civic engagements have been documented and practiced; Korsgaard (1997) calls it "citizenship in civil society"; Edwards (2004) describes it as the public sphere for civil society engagements. The essence of these arguments is essentially twofold: first, to promote a citizens' countervailing power vis-à-vis formal political authority which is typically influenced by some powerful societal actors (Fung & Wright, 2003). This is the power balancing that citizens need to be able to voice their preferences and perspectives, and be heard, on policies and programs as they are evolved and implemented; this is the bottom-up, empowerment of citizens as citizens, not mere beneficiaries (Tandon, 1999). Civic engagement thus becomes the process of social mobilization, collective articulation and direct participation in formulation and monitoring of policies relevant to the "agreed" public goods. Another aspect of "participatory citizenship" is the enablement of all citizens to be able to engage; economic inequality, illiteracy, absence of authentic information and knowledge, limited access to social and political networks are all impediments to effective and sustained civic engagement in many societies, countries and communities. Investments in improving their economic and livelihood conditions, learning of skills and access to timely and understandable information are key to support learning of such citizenships, thereby contributing to pluralistic perspectives on governance of public goods. This is the essential task for civil society building: to enable inclusive and participatory citizenships for deepening democratic governance. The CF Report on {Citizens & Governance (1999)} called it the twin processes of promoting active citizenry and strengthening citizen leaders.

Conclusion:

At present there are Challenges in Citizen Participation due to which it looks a distant dream to bring every individual of the marginalized section under the ambit of participation in the governance. Groupism, political pressure, Bureaucratic inertia, corruption, financial constraints, illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, indifferent attitude of the government officials, complex procedures, patriarchal society, gender discrimination, administrative insensitiveness towards delivering the services to the public, and many others. Once these road blockers are removed strong democracy is sure to emerge.

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