Civil Society: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract:
Civil society organizations are playing important role in the present day society. Although, it is undeniable fact that civil society play an important role in various purposes, but there is a need of proper conceptualization of civil society to analyses its role in society. This paper attempts to have a theoretical understanding of the concept of civil society.

Key word: Civil society)

Conceptualizing Civil Society:

There are lots of disagreements about the definition of ‘civil society’. There are multiple interpretations of the term ‘Civil Society’ by the various scholars depending on their perspective and socio-cultural context.

According to the concise oxford dictionary, etymologically “the objective civil is derived from middle English via old French from Latin civils, meaning citizen. It literally means ‘of or relating to ordinary citizens, as distinct from military on ecclesiastical matters’; hence the derivatives civil rights, civil wrong, civil liberty, civil marriage, civil war, civil law. The English phrase ‘Civil Society’ is more or less a direct translation of Cicero’s Societas civils and Aristotle’s Koinoma politike. In German and French these are translated as burgerliche Gcssellschaft and cetal cival respectively”(Jayaram, 2005, 38).

Jean Francis Bayart in applying the concept of civil society in Africa uses it in two different senses. He initially defined civil society not as a set of institution but as a social space after following Robert Fossaert. He defined it provisionally as ‘Society in its relation with the state…..in so far as it is in confrontation with the state, on the process by which society seeks to ‘breach’ and counteract. The simultaneous tantalization unleashed by the state. But for him there are also situation when civil society became the collective will of the people say as in Iran or Poland in recent year, when it is meaningful to speak of entire civil societies being in opposition to states”(Baruah, 1994, 664). Thus we see that the civil society is understood as the collective will of the people vis-à-vis state as if it is in confrontation with the state.

The concept of civil society is sought to be clarified by understanding it in opposition to other concepts, which are presumably clear. For example, Neera Chandhoke lists the following conceptual opposites. She understands the civil society “as an attribute of advanced nations as opposed to ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric societies’, as characteristic of modern bourgeois society as opposed to earlier society, as opposed to the state of nature, as distinct from either household or the state, as an autonomous arena of economic in charge which is dominated by the commodity principle. It is distinct from earlier form where political and economic power collapsed and is seen as a property of sophisticated opaque states against transparent and openly coercive states. Furthermore, she argues that it is sphere which is flanked by the domain of particularistic loyalties and the state”(Chandhoke, 1995, 251). Thus it is clear that civil society emerged as a modern phenomenon which is distinct from other similar concept in the primitive society. According to political theory, civil society gained importance mainly in the writings of modern philosophical and political thinkers John Locke, Adam Ferguson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant and George Friedrich Hegel etc. According to them civil society is the outcome of the process of civilization that got momentum from the enlightenment movement since the Renaissance. It is a social system closely associated with economic advancement of the people (Bhargava and Reifeld, 2005,62-63).

The history of civil society has conceptualized it as an alternative to the state or as independent of the state. For De Tocqueville (1835, 1840) civil society “limits the state”, for Hegel Civil Society is “a necessary state in the formation of the state”, for Marx Civil Society is “the source of the power”, and for Gramsci (1929-1935), civil society is “the sphere where the state constructs its hegemony in alliance with the dominant classes”(Chandhoke, 2007, 609). However, the state and the civil society work together and most of the time civil society is seen as an agreeable alternative to the state. Today, civil society is smoothly presented as an answer to the anxiety of the contemporary world.
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Dictionary Com’s 21st century Lexican defines civil society “as the aggregate of non-governmental organization and institution that manifest interest and organization in the society” (Bhargava and Reifeld, 2005,62). (Here civil society is defined as an arena in which individual associate to advance their common interests. Sometimes, it is referred to as the third sector of society which include the family and private sphere and different from the government and other organization. Sometimes it also denotes the element of a democratic society such as freedom of speech, independence of judiciary etc. Civil society ensures the victory of a democratic society by providing the values, the space, and inspiration to battle for democracy.

Croissant defines the term civil society as “comprising of non-state actors and association that are not purely driven by private or economic interests, are autonomously organized and interact in the public sphere” (Barash and Webel, 2002, 6). Civil society organizations reject the organizing principle of the state. In many times it works as a totally anti-state group. In the context of state, civil society can play moderating influence and can exert pressure on the state to do its duty. In this context civil society is considered as necessary organizations and it must be independent from the state so that it is not influenced by state to do its duty. But in some extent it cannot be clearly say that civil society is completely independent from the state. Because in many times it is seen that civil society is closely interact with the state and the political sphere.

According to Samir Kumar Das, the term ‘Civil Society’ can be defined in two different senses. In narrow sense it refers as a ‘Society where the state recognizes and guarantees the right of the individual, primarily the right to self determination which is considered as crucial for every individual’ (Das, 2005, 24) ‘Thus in narrow sense civil society is a community struggle for self determination (Ibid). Self determination means privacy of individual will and freedom (Alistain and McMillan, 1996, 843). In broad sense civil society is defined “as a sphere in which the contending claims to self determination put across and advanced by various communities are negotiated and settled by them without the mediation of the state” (ibid). Here civil society is seen as an alliance of anti-state force and considered as the necessary first step towards the resolution of the question of self determination.

Civil Society also helps in participatory socialization and its functions are seen as democratic apparatus from which people learn about the democratic right and execute the democratic rights even on a basic level. Civil society can integrate or helps building the community of any society. Civil society is seen as a “catalyst of civil virtues, as an antidote, both to individual; retreat the family and to pure state orientation”(Mukhim, 2010, 110). Thus civil society creates civil virtues helps to bridge social split and also satisfies the needs of modern individual to develop linkage and co-operation among them. One of the most important functions of civil society may refer to as ‘public communication’ i.e. the transfer of public views. It has a major role to establish a public sphere and it perform its function through public platform.

Thus civil society has come to signify as formal, nongovernmental voluntary organization where people voluntarily organize to defend their common interests or work for social and political change. Civil Society actors influence the public opinion as a pressure group which can be regarded as most essential element of rebuilding a peaceful society (Orjuela, 2003, 195-212).

According to Neera Chandhoke, civil society itself has to be a peaceable arena. The founding principles of this arena are that of peaceable activity such as the use of violence to adjudicate conflicts, where the individual used their rational argument and persuasion as the weapon. It may be seen as a challenge to the all mythologized institution of a modern world. Civil Society provides a peaceable space where discussion and debate, argument and peaceful protest etc. are allowed to individual to use as weapon. These weapons may be reflective of a general pacification of a modern society. Thus, civil society as the arena of the right bearing individual where a political community come into existence and they have the liberty to actively engage in debate and discussion about the internal arrangements of society and about society’s relationship with the state. Though civil society enables the formation of the right bearing community, it also permits the reproductions. Thus, a state centric theory of rights, oppression occupies civil society. However, the presence of civil society provides the opportunity for popular classes to re-appropriate the space, to mediate the politics of the dominant classes. The values of civil society can access the space of democratic assertion. Recent human rights initiatives are those self confident citizens who mainly struggle to advance their legitimate rights to service their well being. Thus civil society has been seen as political engagement, the occupation of the political space and a public sphere which can control the political agenda (Chandhoke, 1995, 200).

As a key concept in the attempts to capture the essence of dissident politics and to introduce democracy in Europe since 1989, civil society is viewed as useful idea in mobilizing citizen against coercive state. From the late 1990’s its meaning and reference began to the vehemently discussed among the intellectuals of India. Key thinkers associated with the discourse on civil society in India include political scientists like
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Rajni Kothari, Gurpreet Mahajan, Sudipta Kaviraj and Neera Chandhoke etc. (Jayaram, 2005, 15-16).

Thus, we see that civil society is a modern concept which is associated with the renaissance. Civil society is understood as public domain outside the state which as independent of the state shapes the working of the state. It is also the dynamic side of the citizenship. Being the representative of the common people; the civil society organizations can better represent the voices of the common people. Civil society organizations have been becoming part of the dissident politics all over the globe. Besides it has a role in the peace process as it can work as mediating space between the state and the public.

In the Indian context, the emergence of the concept of civil society has its association with recognition of the vernaculars in every sphere of life language, politics etc. “The struggle of civil society in India during the modern period runs parallel to the rise and recognition of the vernaculars and vernacularism everywhere in languages, labour and culture, and it is the story of religion and politics proceeding from Kavir to Mahatma Gandhi” (Uberoi, 2005, 77-78). Gandhi led the movement in civil society through his gospel of truth, non-violence, swaraj, self-rule or home rule. In Gandhi’s conceptualization of the civil society, the self always look the other in the eye as its second self. According to Gandhi, self reform and self rule of civil society offer dialogue and non-violent conservation without any fear of possible consequences. For him the national freedom movement of Swaraj meant “essentially the self-reform and self-rule of civil society and Ram Rajya was to bring the rule of salvation in society, a kingdom of heaven, in politics viewed as self-management of the institution of civil society rather than of the state” (Ibid., 77-79). Thus civil society has the inherent power to change, as in the Gandhian view of self rule and self reform (Ibid., 77-79).

On the other hand, for Gramsci, the state cannot be understood without an understanding of civil society. He said that the private tools of hegemony or civil society is not only the tool of the government. Civil society provides the acceptance of policies and programmes of states. In liberal theory, civil societies protect the individual from the repressive power of the state and thus work as protective filter for the individual. In Gramsci’s formulation, civil societies safeguard the state. The main value of Gramscian’s concept of civil society intertwined with the theory of hegemony. For Gramsci, civil society is best described not as the sphere of freedom but of hegemony. Hegemony depends on consent. “His purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather to develop a revolutionary strategy that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the condition that could giving rise to consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern status” (Buttigieg Joseph A, 1995, 1-7).

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and his concept of civil society interlink with each other. Hegemony is non-coercive power and the non-coercive, non-violent character of the hegemony obtains only in civil society. On the other hand, although hegemony is non-coercive power but most of the time it provides most effective protection to the dominant groups of society. Whenever a particular social group becomes hegemonic, in Gramscian sense, it has assumed leadership in the cultural sphere. But it does not refer civil society as a neutral zone where different elements of society compete freely to holds a dominant position in government. “In reality Gramsci writing aims to expose how reinforce each other” (Ibid., 28). Gramsci regards political society and civil society as the constituent elements of a single entity. For him, hegemony in civil society and domination of political society go hand in hand. Gramsci also identified many aspects of corruptions in civil society. He regarded those corruptions as the lack of integrity of political and intellectual leaders, the weakness of the political parties who exercised poor leadership in civil society etc. It is seen that critical analysis of civil society is the need of the time. Gramsci’s distinctive approach to the analysis of civil society provides a new series of enquiries into the present condition of civil society in different part of the world (Ibid., 28-32).

Thus civil society provides an analytical category for understanding the dissident politics and the state in the modern times. As a dynamic side of the citizenship, it provides ample scope for the development of the individual freedom vis-a-vis state. As a precursor to the public sphere, the role of the civil society lies in representing the voices of the society through dialogue and negotiation.

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