

CSOs: Mirrors, not just handmaidens

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When debate and dialogue and protest are discouraged, governments and societies can make huge mistakes like the Emergency era in India. Photo: HT

We cannot imagine democracies without a vibrant civil society. In a socially and economically diverse country like India, civil society plays a key role in voicing the needs and aspirations of different communities. The world over, it is understood that civil society organizations (CSOs) provide checks and balances to counter the unbridled power of the state and any abuse of that power. They also act as a deterrent to the unlawful accumulation of power and resources by markets.

Is the nation making social progress? Who is being left out? Are there risks that have not been understood and mitigated? If we care to listen, CSOs provide a set of diagnostics that let us understand the health of a nation or society.

The ideas, interests, individuals and institutions that make up civil society deliberately or unintentionally help nations in many ways: By exposing corruption; by upholding the rule of law, promoting good governance and upholding human rights and environmental justice; by putting out data, research and analysis so people can make better personal and political choices and by mediating across conflicts and

paving the way for just trade-offs.

CSOs can innovate more easily than a government can. They have the freedom to experiment, take risks, develop and prove models on the ground—and, therefore, inform society and markets and the government of various choices. India's experience has been particularly notable on this front. Many progressive policies have come from non-governmental organization (NGO) advocacy.

Non-profits are not just about antagonism. CSOs often create a bridge between the government and citizens. The most activist of organizations often work with government agencies on specifics.

However, when a government limits the freedom of NGOs to criticize, by creating a chilling effect on dissent, as seems to be happening now, it prevents CSOs from doing what the government needs them to do—perform the bridging role. CSOs cannot just be handmaidens of governments; they must be the mirrors too. Sometimes, they may go too far, sometimes they may overreact or make the wrong decisions, as they do. But it is better for society at large that they be allowed to do so, within the framework of law, than be suppressed. When dissenting voices are silenced, when debate and dialogue and protest are discouraged, governments and societies can make huge mistakes. History shows us this. Think of China and the cultural revolution, US and the Joe McCarthy Era, USSR and the Stalin purges, India and the Emergency.

When India is making big bets on the economic front, we need critics more than ever. In such a fast-changing situation, we need to know that genuine progress is being made, that swathes of people are not being left out, that the rule of law and natural justice will prevail. We need strong and healthy institutions of the *samaj* (society) to ensure that the *sarkar* (government) and the *bazaar* (markets) are actually serving the public interest for which they have been created.

India appears to move slowly, but with its extreme diversity, it also moves in multiple small ways at once, where local contextual solutions that work often get scaled through CSOs. Though sometimes frustrating, because it is the opposite of the big-bang, one-size-fits-all approach, it might be a better way to build a 21st century society—flexible, decentralized, de-risked and innovative. Strong, committed and fearless CSOs are an inevitable part of this design. And so, the recent crackdown on certain kinds of NGOs and their funders, which had already begun at the end of the previous regime, is pretty hard to defend.

When the Indian government is so open to every manner of foreign investment, why is it so opposed to foreign philanthropy of a certain kind? Why are self-interest and anti-national intent assumed in one and not in the other? Is foreign investment coming into local markets for national interest or for the interest of the foreign capital itself? We cannot make one argument without encountering the other. Just as international capital flows across nations and geographies, creating a complex, interdependent world, so also issues of society and the environment flow beyond national boundaries.

Let us not confuse the foreign funding of local activist organizations with the importance of dissent itself. Governments do have the duty to

protect national interest. But we should not be afraid of foreign funding of Indian CSOs, unless malintent can be proved. And when governments begin to decide which CSOs are good and which bad, which ones can receive foreign funding and which must not, it is often at the risk of democratic freedoms.

On the other hand, it is perfectly correct to expect Indian philanthropy to step up to support the activities of Indian NGOs working on environmental and inter-generational issues.

Indian philanthropy is growing, and is at a very exciting stage with Indians looking to give to causes besides just education and healthcare. Perhaps this crisis will provide further impetus. New institutions seem to be coming up every day with innovative ideas on improving access to energy and ensuring government accountability. Many of these are backed by local philanthropic capital.

Urban middle-class activism is also growing and new institutions are emerging to challenge old power structures. After all, it is not only in the coal-mining areas and the forests and dam sites that protest is building. Resident welfare associations in cities that protest new roads that raze their members' homes are no different from people fighting against dams that take away their livelihoods.

Rich or poor, we all need organizations that can represent us; we all need modes of collective action when individual action does not yield justice. And so, Indians who want to give more to create a just, equitable and transparent society should look at the recent government action with concern. When a government is in fear of dissent from its own citizens, and when its reaction is to shut out that dissent, we should all worry.

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