

Civil Society and Its Role in Preventing Tyranny

A strong civil society will not easily allow democratic institutions to be captured by the state or political parties.



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A defining feature of development and modernisation is the splintering of communal forms of social organisation on the one hand, such as the extended family, the influence of caste and the pull of religious bodies, and the rise of civil society centred on the individual, on the other.

This was facilitated both by new ways of thinking (the Western Enlightenment) as well as new technology (the Industrial Revolution). The traditional economy was centred around the family, be it farming, hunting, crafts such as spinning, weaving, black smithy, tanning, etc. Outside contact was limited. There were no mass production centres, such as factories, and even plantations were operated through family labour. Means of communication were slow, based on animal, water or wind traction. Most people therefore never travelled very far from their homes in their lifetime, and that too in limited numbers as vehicles were small. The state too was functionally decentralised, with local chieftains enforcing order and administering justice.

This gradually changed with the emergence of factories, and mineral-based rapid modes of traction such as coal, oil and gas. Masses of people could now move across vast distances rapidly in trains, cars, buses, ships and aeroplanes. This decreased the pull of local familial, kinship and communal relationships on one hand, and increased that of external secular bonds on the other. The new technology also facilitated the rise of centralised states administering through bureaucracies that replaced autonomous local chieftains who exercised state functions.

Civil society in Kerala

As society became more atomised, new civil society organisations took root that supplanted the social space formerly occupied by family, kinship and religious bodies. I was particularly impressed by the range and strength of civil society organisations in Kerala. A rank outsider, I was what anthropologists call a participant observer since I served as a civil servant in the state for several years. I was more impressed by Kerala civil society, than by the state, including the state bureaucracy that often viewed these associations as irksome.

The manifestations of a strong civil society were several: libraries,

clubs, NGOs, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, cinema, vibrant tea-and coffee-shop culture, sectional labour and office unions, multiple political parties and factions, etc. Local state-like autonomies were swept away through comprehensive land reform. All this laid the foundations of a robust civil society.

A developed society is one where civil society is strong in relation to the state, politically speaking (as in the West). The state's capacity for delivery – of order, justice, physical social and economic well-being – on the other hand, must however become stronger, and that's a function of the bureaucracy. That had happened in Kerala, but I also sensed that much of the improvement in the standard of living was through civil society initiative, including pressuring the state, more than by state dynamism.

India, however, is subcontinental in size, with all the diversity and uneven development that goes with it. In northern India, where I grew up, the balance between state and civil society was very different. Not only was civil society weak, but the state has in fact grown politically stronger. And its delivery mechanisms are much weaker. It lags in land and social reform and is increasingly falling behind the South in economic growth and socio-economic parameters.

The rise of civil society redefined the roles of religion and the state in society. Robust civil society did not develop overnight in Kerala. Modernising influences, through the activities of Christian missionaries and British Residents, such as Col John Munro, had a big influence on local rulers who reformed temple administration, and set up schools and hospitals. Modern Christianity separated church and state, and now has a modernising appeal and value system supportive of civil society. The Church has become a healthy, modern medium for civil society mobilisation. Islam is a laggard and geographically uneven in this disintermediation, but is gradually moving in the same direction.

Hindutva in India, on the other hand, is a reaction to reforming trends within Hinduism (such as the Bengal Renaissance), and as such remains part of the state and is antithetical to civil society. It mobilises through civil society but uses the medium of the state to delegitimise competing civil society organisations. Hindu nationalism is the flip side of Hindutva.

In the south, where the self-help movement reformed Hinduism, and where there are a number of temple-based civil society organisations such as Iskcon, Lingayat, Vokkaliga, Kanchi mutts, Vivekananda and Sai Baba foundations, Hindutva is unable to make headway except in

isolated pockets. Civil society south of the Vindhyas is stronger in relation to the state than it is in northern India.



File photo from June 2016 of BJP national president Amit Shah during a visit to the Sivagiri Mutt at Varkala, Kerala. Photo: PTI

Civil society and tyranny

There is also an inverse relationship between civil society and tyranny. The Greek philosopher Plato had cautioned long ago that democracies are susceptible to tyranny through the rise of demagogues. But full-blown tyranny is unlikely where civil society is strong. During the 1930s in Europe, fascism, with its demagogic dictators, briefly supplanted democracy in some countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain, where modern civil society was still to grow deep roots in rapidly atomising societies.

The cardinal difference between the US and India today, two electoral democracies currently beset by demagogues, lies in their civil society. In India, where civil society is still relatively weak, especially in the north, there is descent towards greater tyranny. In the US, and to some extent in southern India, on the other hand, civil society is strong, resulting in a pushback against a similar threat of tyranny. A strong civil society will not easily allow democratic institutions to be captured by the state or political parties. The price of freedom is constant vigil by a robust civil society. This is still weak in northern India, and it is this that needs to develop, along with social and land reform, sustained economic growth and improved state capacity, to win the war against tyranny going forward.

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