CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDIA

Necessary ingredient in development or a Contested Idea?

Introduction

Recently, a renewed focus on the essential contribution of civil society to a resilient global system alongside government and businesses has emerged. COVID pandemic has also witnessed universal niche contributions of civil society in providing assistance in the provision of essential health and social care services. In India too, there is exceptional work being done by leading civil society organisations (CSOs) in areas such as education, healthcare and financial inclusion and several CSOs have developed models that can be scaled up and adapted in other developing countries.

Alongside this, however, both the concept of civil society and the activities of civil society organizations (CSOs) have generated substantial controversy and debate. While the supporters of CSOs claim that CSOs are promoting grassroots development, checking corruption, and defending the vulnerable segments of society against exploitative practices, some among the political class, including members of the govern-

ment, question the legitimacy of their actions.

In this backdrop, it is crucial to understand what is civil society and how the concept evolved? What role does civil society play in a democracy? What are the barriers impacting the efficient functioning of civil society organisations and What is the way ahead to strengthen civil societies and explore potential opportunities? In this edition, we will try to provide answers to these questions.

What is civil society?

- Civil society is the **non-state and non-market part of the public domain** in which individuals get together voluntarily to create institutions and organisations. It is the **sphere of active citizenship** where, individuals take up social issues, try to influence the state or make demands on it, pursue their collective interests or seek support for a variety of causes.

  ★ For instance, Doordarshan is not part of civil society though private television channels are; a car manufacturing company is not part of civil society but the trade unions to which its workers belong are.

- The Roman word *societas civilis* was the root word of it having a synonymity with a good society.

- **Hegel,** the German philosopher has **coined the term 'civil society'** and the meaning of it that we understand today.

- **Definitions as given by the Institutions:**

  ★ **World Bank:** The wide array of **non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations** that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.

  ★ **African Development Bank:** Civil Society is **a voluntary expression of the interests and aspirations of citizens organized and united by common interests**, goals, values or traditions, and mobilized into collective action either as beneficiaries or stakeholders of the development process.

- **Types of Civil Society Organisations**

Type	Function
Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)	They mobilize communities by expressing demands, organizing and implementing participatory processes, accessing external development services, and sharing benefits among members.
Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)	These are professional, intermediary, and non-profit organizations that provide or advocate the provision of services relating to economic and social development, human rights, public welfare, or emergency relief.
Faith-Based Organizations	These are religious groups organized around a place of religious worship or congregation, a specialized religious institution, or a registered or unregistered institution with a religious character or mission.
Foundations	Philanthropic or charitable organisations set up by individuals or institutions as a legal entity (a corporation or trust) and support causes consistent with the goals of the foundation.

International NGOs (INGOs)	Resolution 288 (X) of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (1950) defines it as: "any international organization that is not founded by an international treaty." Typically headquartered in a developed country, INGOs include ActionAid, the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International, Mercy Corps, Plan International, Save the Children, Transparency International, and World Vision.
Labour Unions	These are formally organized associations of workers who have united to advance their collective views regarding wages, hours of work, and working conditions. Labor unions are often organized on an industry or occupation-specific basis. They frequently associate themselves with umbrella federations, congresses, and networks such as the Indian National Trade Union Congress.
People's Organizations (POs)	These are grassroots volunteer organizations that advance the economic and social well-being of their members. While in some countries the term "PO" is used interchangeably with "CBO," POs are more likely to be organizations that address concerns relating to a particular sector, such as artisanal fisherfolk, rather than a particular geographic location. Other examples of POs include those formed by farmers, local laborers, or indigenous peoples.
Professional Associations	These organizations represent the interests of their members who typically engage in a certain occupation, or practice a particular profession. Examples include associations of architects, certified public accountants, and economists.
Social Movements	These large informal groupings of individuals or organizations attempt to effect social change through sustained, organized, collective action. Social movements are not permanent institutions, but instead tend to coalesce, pursue their aims, and then dissolve. Examples include movements to end slavery, capital punishment, apartheid, and economic liberalism. The largest civil society movement calling for an end to poverty and inequality is the Global Call to Action Against Poverty.

Ideas of various thinkers on State-Civil Society interplay

- **Thomas Hobbes and John Locke:** A functioning civil society would be impossible without protection from the state.
- **Thomas Paine:** State is seen as the anti-pole of civil society. Paine warned against the despotism of the state and stressed that both the individual citizens and the people as a collective unit would benefit immensely from a state which keeps its influence over civil society to a minimum.
- **Hegel:** Civil society is a sphere situated between the family and the state, inhabited by individuals and associations, but which does not necessarily contribute to the general development of society. Therefore, it is necessary for the state to supervise and control the civil society.
- **Tocqueville:** Although the state in general works for the benefit of all, it constitutes a threat towards both individuals and civil society, and that the democratic state may be extra dangerous as it has both the urge and capacity to control all spheres of social life.
- **Karl Marx:** He denied the existence of civil society as an independent sphere. According to him, civil society is not primarily an arena for voluntary meetings between groups and individuals, but for exploitation, due to its inherent inequality, based on various roles within the capitalist system. The

state cannot work as the remedy for the inequalities and possible unrest in the civil society as it not universal, and is influenced by the capitalist power structure and would therefore reinforce rather than resolve conflicts within civil society.

How the concept of civil society evolved in India?

Civil society is evolving in impactful and dynamic ways. India has a long history of civil society based on the concepts of daana (giving) and seva (service). Over the period of its evolution, the concept has seen various developments in its understanding as well as proliferation.

- **Ancient and Medieval Era:** During ancient and medieval period, the work of civil society was manifested in diverse forms. Voluntarism was visible extensively in the fields of education, medicine, cultural promotion and even succour in crises like droughts, floods, epidemics and foreign invasions or depredations by robbers and criminals.

  - ★ During this period, the community organized and established centres of learning and research where free food and accommodation were given. They also raised funds through their own organizations to distribute grants to hospitals, schools, colleges and orphanages.

- **British Era:** The voluntary organisations proliferated to improve social welfare, literacy and pursuing relief projects. As a result,

  - ★ During the second half of the 19th century, nationalist consciousness spread across India and **self-help emerged as the primary focus of socio-political movements.**

  - ★ Numerous organizations were established during this period, including the Friend-in-Need Society (1858), Prathana Samaj (1864), Satya Shodhan Samaj (1873), Arya Samaj (1875), the National Council for Women in India (1875) etc.

  - ★ The **Societies Registration Act (SRA)** was approved in 1860 to confirm the legal status of the growing body of non-government organizations (NGOs).

  - ★ **Servants of India (1905)** laid a firm foundation for secular voluntary action in India.

- **Post-Independence Era:** After independence, the Government of India increased its presence in social welfare and development but recognized the potential for civil society to supplement and complement its efforts.

  - ★ **1953:** The **Central Social Welfare Board was established** to carry out social welfare activities. This was the **first initiative taken by the Govt. of India, to set up the organisation based on the principle of a non-governmental organization.**

  - ★ **1958:** Further decentralization was achieved with the **introduction of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system** in the rural areas. Around this time, networking was very prominent in civil society and many unions and agricultural cooperatives were formed.

★ **1965-1967:** International NGOs entered India in significant numbers to provide drought relief during two consecutive agricultural seasons, 1965–1966 and 1966–1967. Many of them established permanent local operations thereafter. Moreover, **foreign funds began flowing to domestic NGOs in India, changing the character of civil society.**

NGOs Today

◆ Today, about 1.5 million NGOs work in India (i.e., non-profit, voluntary citizens' groups organized on a local, national, or international level).

◆ Most NGOs in India are small and dependent on volunteers.

   ★ According to a survey conducted by society for Partici-patory research in Asia (PRIA), 73.4% of NGOs have one or no paid staff, although across the country, more than 19 million persons work as volunteers or paid staff at an NGO.

★ **Post 1970s: NGOs began to be formally recognized** as development partners of the state. Their work was increasingly characterized by grassroots interventions, advocacy at various levels, and mobilization of the marginalized to protect their rights.
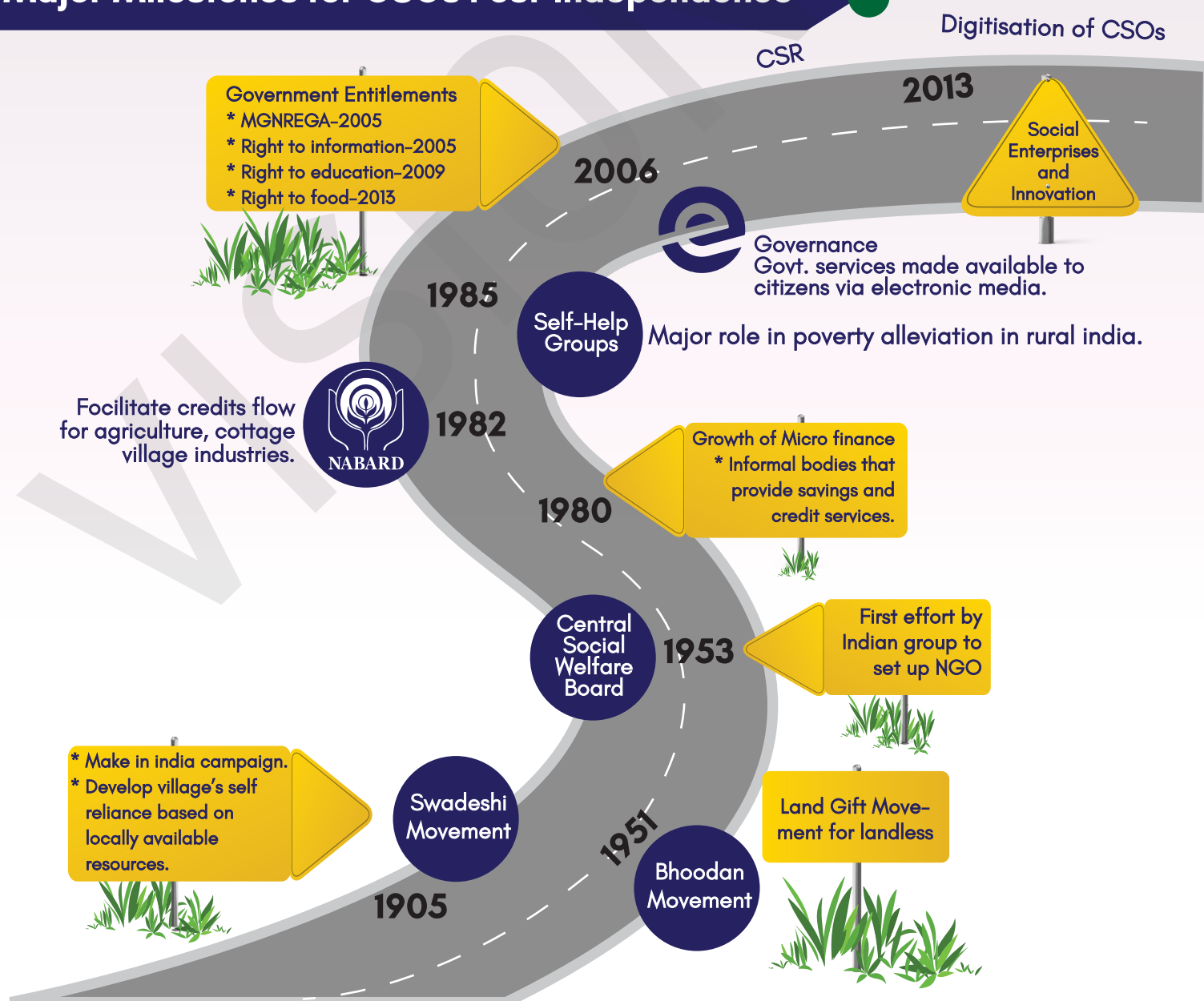
★ **Post 1990s:** Several forums were established to promote dialogue between the government and NGOs.

   ★ For instance, the erstwhile Planning commission initiated an NGO- government interface through a series of conferences and was appointed the nodal agency for NGO–state interactions.

Major Milestones for CSOs Post-Independence

Digitisation of CSOs

CSR

2013

Social Enterprises and Innovation

Government Entitlements
* MGNREGA–2005
* Right to information–2005
* Right to education–2009
* Right to food–2013

2006

Governance
Govt. services made available to citizens via electronic media.

Major role in poverty alleviation in rural india.

1985

Self-Help Groups

Focilitate credits flow for agriculture, cottage village industries.

NABARD

1982

1980

Growth of Micro finance
* Informal bodies that provide savings and credit services.

Central Social Welfare Board

1953

First effort by Indian group to set up NGO

* Make in india campaign.
* Develop village's self reliance based on locally available resources.

Swadeshi Movement

1951

Bhoodan Movement

Land Gift Move-ment for landless

1905

In the recent times however, the definition of civil society is changing as civil society is recognized as encompassing far more than a mere "sector" dominated by the NGO community: civil society today includes an ever wider and more vibrant range of organized and unorganized groups. New and emerging civil society actors today have blurred the boundaries between sectors and are experimenting with new organizational forms, both online and offline.

What role does civil society play in a democracy?

Civil society is seen to add significant value to other sectors, whether as an official partner, through informal collaborations or through "spillover" effects. Experts from business, government and international organizations have highlighted the importance of the roles that civil society plays as part of the broader governance system.

- **Social Basis for Democracy:** Civil society represents a fundamental part of the democratic system and highlights issues of importance. It has the ability to express dissenting views; represent those without a voice; mobilize citizens into movements; build support across stakeholders; and bring credibility to the political system by promoting transparency and accountability.

- **Policy Formulation and Implementation:** Civil society is a valuable partner in providing deep subject-matter expertise based on first-hand experience, trialling and scaling up innovations in social services and facilitating citizen engagement. Similarly, CSO activities, both alone and in public-private partnerships, often complement (and frequently supplement) government's efforts in providing a wide range of services to populations.

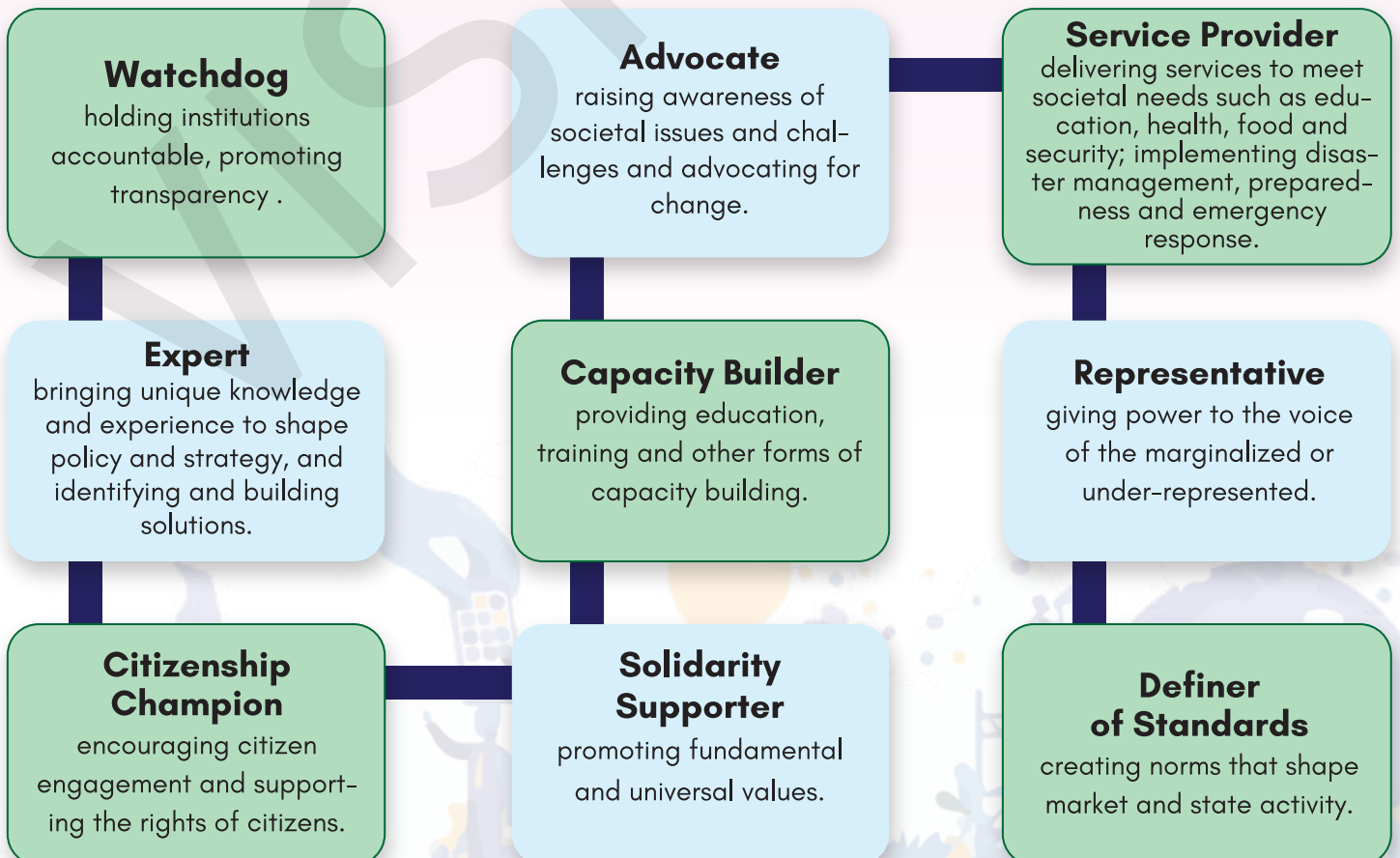## The dark side of civil society: Are they a threat to democracy?

Structural/institutional deficiencies of political and party systems, technological and digital revolution, fragmented media landscape and the expanding social media scene plays an important part in growing political polarization, leading to the emergence of the **illiberal pillar of civil society** that may facilitate the downgrade of democracy and contribute to authoritarianism.

- In places where political institutions are not able to accommodate a proliferation of voluntary associations or translate popular demands via democratic channels of interest, nor find remedies for civil society's politicization and polarization, the development of a strong and mobilized civil society may give rise to authoritarianism or fascism.

- For example, in **Brazil,** where conservative groups helped push then President Dilma Rousseff out of power in 2016 and now challenge core liberal democratic norms.

- Also, in **Uganda,** where different types of conservative civic groups have formed effective alliances against efforts to advance gender equality.

- Pillarized civil society has emerged in **Poland** since country's transition to democracy in 1989. This vertically divided civil society has enabled extreme cultural and political polarization of Polish society, mobilization of far-right, nationalist and conservative religious movements and contributed to country's recent turn towards authoritarianism.

- The emergence of such **pillarized civil societies** has crucial political consequences:

★ Their actors, driven by a zero-sum vision of politics, **fuel cultural and political polarization** and **undermine centrist political parties.**

★ They can be the **source of political instability and electoral backlash against liberal values** and the affiliated political forces.

● **Act as Important Pressure Groups:** Civil societies mobilise public opinion against government's policies and actions therefore works as a counterweight against the state, which is necessary in order to counter the state's ambition to dominate.

★ They also mobilize and organize the poor to demand quality service and impose a community system to accountability on the performance of grassroots government functionaries.

● **Drivers of Change:** CSOs can act as an enabler of and catalyst for cross-sector change, creating for governments the political and policy "space" to make difficult or otherwise unpopular decisions. Many civil society initiatives have contributed to some of the path-breaking laws in the country, including the Environmental Protection Act,1986; Right to Information Act,2005, Forests Rights Act,2006 and Right to Education Act, 2009.

● **Strengthen the feeling of Civic Solidarity amongst the Citizens:** Civil society opens up a space for interaction between citizens and associations, stimulating interactions that help to create a feeling of "civicness", including the respect for democracy, which cuts across various cleavages in society.

● **Promotes Frugal Innovation:** Civil society provides legitimacy, assets, intelligence and is used to doing "more with less" to deploy innovative solutions to societal challenges. Civil society has incubated product and service areas that have led to commercial applications.

● **Inclusion of Local Knowledge:** Civil society organizations and activities are also often able to access local knowledge, expertise and insight to reach "the last mile", providing connections with and under-standing of potential consumer bases.

Various Roles Played by Civil Society

Watchdog
holding institutions accountable, promoting transparency .

Advocate
raising awareness of societal issues and challenges and advocating for change.

Service Provider
delivering services to meet societal needs such as education, health, food and security; implementing disaster management, preparedness and emergency response.

Expert
bringing unique knowledge and experience to shape policy and strategy, and identifying and building solutions.

Capacity Builder
providing education, training and other forms of capacity building.

Representative
giving power to the voice of the marginalized or under-represented.

Citizenship Champion
encouraging citizen engagement and supporting the rights of citizens.

Solidarity Supporter
promoting fundamental and universal values.

Definer of Standards
creating norms that shape market and state activity.

Case Studies

● **Right to Information Campaign:** Beginning with an agitation in rural Rajasthan for the release of information on government funds spent on village development, this effort grew into a nation-wide campaign. This struggle was led by a people's organisation, the Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan (which literally means 'organisation for the empowerment of workers and peasants'). Despite the resistance of the bureaucracy, the government was forced to respond to the campaign and passed a new law formally acknowledging the citizens' right to information.

● **Lokpal/Anti-Corruption Movement:** The Lokpal bill was first introduced in 1968, and however was left pending since. The issue of Lokpal came to the centre stage in 2011, when Anna Hazare, a civil society activist, sat on an indefinite hunger strike in Delhi, demanding that the civil society draft or the Jan Lokpal bill be passed. The movement went 'viral', spreading to other cities, neighbourhoods and small towns, building a 'spectacular' mobilisation made visible by mainstream and alternative media and brought to the fore a new form of 'citizens' activism.

★ Subsequently, The **Lokpal and Lokayukta Act, 2013** was passed which provided for the establishment of Lokpal for the Union and Lokayukta for States.

Examples of this sort illustrate the crucial importance of civil society in ensuring that the state is accountable to the nation and its people.

Other prominent examples of CSOs operating in India and playing an integral part of India's developmental journey:

● **Swayam Shikshan Prayog(SSP): It promotes inclusive sustainable development by empowering women** in low-income and climate-threatened communities and regions. SSP's model transforms women into entrepreneurs to tackle complex challenges across sectors such as health, water and sanitation, energy, food security and agriculture.

● **Pratham Education Foundation: Pratham is known for pioneering two high-quality, low-cost and replicable interventions to plug gaps in education systems** — the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER); and Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) programme.

★ ASER is the only source of data on children's learning outcomes in the rural areas of country, and has had a major impact on national policy and discourse. TaRL on the other hand builds foundational skills in numeracy and literacy in children with inadequate learning levels, a problem that is common in all developing countries.

● **Operation ASHA(OA): It aims to eradicate tuberculosis (TB) by solving the 'last mile' problem** through community-based and technology-aided high-quality doorstep diagnosis and treatment services.

★ OA establishes community centres in urban slums in partnership with local community entrepreneurs, unemployed talent, merchants or religious institutions to serve 5,000-25,000 people within a 1.5-km radius. In rural areas, smart young adults from within the community are onboarded to ensure diagnosis and care of TB patients by transporting vital medicines to patients' homes, monitoring compliance and assisting patients if travel to health facilities is necessary.

The process of influencing both state and market institutions, to retain and sharpen focus on the issues of the socially disadvantaged, and on the environment, would require CSOs to be more effective. However, along with the perennial problems faced by CSOs, slew of actions taken against them (CSOs) by the government in the recent times threatens the existence of civil society in India.

What are the barriers impacting the efficient functioning of civil society organisations?

- **Inadequate financial Resources:** Most of the CSOs don't have adequate funds to carry out their work, as the people they serve lack the capacity to pay. Hence, they depend on receiving funds from the government/non-government bodies/international institutions. Now, with a simultaneous cut in the international funding, the problem of financial inadequacy of CSOs is the only increasing.

- **Lack of Competent Volunteers:** Partial failure of the state to address social and economic needs has had effects on the levels of development, but also on the quality and character of civil society. In some sense this failure has spurred groups and individuals to engage in civil society, but the inability to provide basic education and other forms of social services has seriously hampered the development of civil society, with lack of adequately qualified volunteer workers being a case in point.

- **Accountability Issues:** There have been increasing incidences of misuse of funds by these organizations. In the recent CBI report, it was highlighted that over 31 lakh NGOs, which receive funds from the country and abroad, 90 percent of NGOs do not file annual financial statements.

- **Influence of Society:** Due to the inherent social, religious, ethnic and economic cleavages of Indian society, the civil society is permeated by inequality and various forms of conflict. The presence of vertically segmented civil society enables extreme cultural and political polarization and facilitates mobilization of far-right, nationalist and conservative religious movements.

- **Government-Civil Society Interface:** CSOs have also successfully engaged with government in formulating various national level policies. But this interface between the CSOs and government seem to be clouded with an overbearing attitude of governmental officials, bureaucratization, and inertia that has led to a gap in the interface between the two.

- **Negative Perception:** CSOs are demonised as **"anti-national" and "anti-development"** and accused of serving the interests of foreign forces who want to halt India's economic development.

  - ★ For instance, a report by Intelligence Bureau called NGOs such as Greenpeace, Cordaid, Amnesty, and Action Aid as a threat to national economic security, citing activities ranging from protests against nuclear and coal plants and funding of sympathetic research, to allegedly helping out political parties in the elections. The report claims that such activities impact India's GDP by 2-3% per year.

- **Overregulation by Government:** In recent times there has been increasing instances of oppressive state that has been arresting activists, raiding CSOs, and curbing sources of foreign funding while imposing onerous reporting and operating conditions. This **impacts independence and autonomy of CSOs.**

  - ★ Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) recently issued new regulating guidelines to banks under **Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010** which proposes to reduce the use of foreign funds to meet administrative costs by NGOs from the existing 50 per cent to 20 per cent and to limit the use of foreign funds for administrative purposes.

- **Elite Domination defeating the very Purpose of Civil Society:** The process of structural adjustment that begun in the early 1990s—and the more recent approach of bilateral and international donors channelling funds directly through the government, NGO networks, and large corporate NGOs—have somewhat pushed peoples' organizations into the background. Small, spontaneous initiatives at the community level, as a response to social and economic exploitations at the community level, are no longer the hallmark of the NGO sector.

Present Legislative framework for civil societies in India

- Laws in India classify organizations working in development into three categories:
  - ★ Charitable trusts,
  - ★ Societies, and
  - ★ Section 25 companies.
- NGOs are not required to register with the government. However, registration allows an NGO to deduct expenses from income for tax purposes, receive foreign contributions, facilitates domestic fundraising and be considered for government grant-in-aid schemes.
  - ★ Whether registered as a trust, society, or as a company, NGOs are subject to the **Societies Registration Act of 1860** and the **Income tax Act of 1961.**
  - ★ Trusts are further subject to the **Public trust Act (1976)** and are, in addition to federal regulations, governed by the state office of the charity commissioner.
  - ★ Organizations receiving foreign funds must abide by the **Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) of 1976,** and are regulated by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Coordinating and Support Bodies for civil societies in India

- **Indian Centre for Philanthropy, the Center for Advancement of Philanthropy, Charities Aid Foundation (India), National Foundation for India, and the Society for Service to Voluntary Organizations** are among the non-profit organizations that provide information resources, services, and networking opportunities to NGOs.
- **Credibility Alliance** is an initiative by a group of NGOs committed to enhancing accountability and transparency in the voluntary sector through good governance. It was registered in 2004 as an independent, not-for-profit organization and operates as a standards-setting body, and aims to build trust among all the stakeholders. Its members include nearly 600 organizations.
- **Association for Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development** (AVARD) is an association of more than 650 NGOs engaged in rural development in India.
- **Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology** (CAPART) was formed by mandate of the 7th five-year Plan in 1986 as a nodal agency for catalysing and coordinating the emerging partnership between voluntary organizations and the government for sustainable development of rural areas.
- **Voluntary Action Network India (VANI)** is a national apex body of NGOs in India. It is a network that comprises 237 organizations, 2,500 NGOs (in 25 states), network federations and individuals. It is a platform for national advocacy on issues and policies confronting the development sector, and for coordination and action to promote and support volunteer involvement.

What is the way ahead to strengthen civil society and to explore potential opportunities?

Governments should view civil society not as a threat but as an asset. A genuine democracy is like a three-legged stool. One leg is responsive, accountable government; the second leg is a dynamic, job-creating private sector; and the third leg is a robust and vibrant civil society.

- **Mutual Understanding:** Civil society organisations (CSOs) share a symbiotic relation with government. A strong civil society can only exist within a democratic framework guaranteed by government. CSOs need to acknowledge that law-making should be the domain of elected representatives in a democracy, rather than un-elected ones. Similarly, civil society's role as a facilitator of democracy and development and a watchdog must be acknowledged by the government.

- **Campaign for More Government Transparency:** There is still a lot of information on legal and financial compliance that the NGOs don't have easy access to. There is a real need for transparency on the processes and decision making by the government and such information should be easily accessible to NGOs.

- **Granting Legal Personality Status:** While civil society organizations have an inherent right to exist and operate as informal organizations, a formal recognition of "legal personality" status to these organizations protects their principals from personal liability for the affairs of the organizations and allows the organizations to enter into contracts, incur debt, sue and be sued, and engage in other transactions in the name of the organization without putting the personal assets of their trustees, directors, or officers at risk.

- **Transparency, Reporting, and Accountability:** Government should establish procedures for receiving and storing required reports from civil society organizations, and for making such reports available to the public in an easily accessible manner. The latter can include mandatory display of information through platforms such as village notice boards, web sites, and information centers, which can be accessed easily by all organizational stakeholders.

- **Advocacy and Civic Engagement:** While confirming the basic right of civil society organizations to engage in advocacy and lobbying, governments can limit civil society advocacy to non-violent means, encourage credibility on the part of civil society organizations, and restrict civil society organizations from engaging in political campaign activity on the part of particular parties or candidates.

- **Exploring New Opportunities for Engagement:** Action through technology; new sources of inspiration and activity driven by younger generations and players in emerging economies; and new methods for measuring and demonstrating impact.

- **A learning Model for the World:** While CSOs solve problems contextualised to local settings, their learnings and lessons can be scaled in the developing world, or at least inspire and provide ideas for counterparts in these regions.
  - ★ For instance, Organisations from 13 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia are designing and implementing ASER surveys through the People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network (a south-south network of organisations from three continents that are replicating and adapting Pratham's ASER work in assessing learning outcomes.) Similarly, OA's model has been replicated in many other countries such as Cambodia.

- **Spur Collective Action for a Transformational Recovery Post COVID:** In a time when economic and social issues are worsening and the vulnerability of individuals is increasing, a stronger sense of social cohesion has also emerged that strengthened trust. This was exemplified by many solidarity initiatives and the mutual aid that was established. Going forward, actively including citizens, communities and civil society can help unearth early warning signs and help us understand where, as societies, we are vulnerable, and how best to respond to that vulnerability.

- **Exploring Civil Society's Role in Shaping India's Development Partnerships:** Given the experience of Indian civil society in actively engaging with various developmental issues ranging from poverty to water management and microfinance, inputs from civil society in the form of technical research as well as service delivery can guide the Indian state in formulating development agreements with its partner countries, particularly in South Asia and Africa.

  ★ For instance, given the high prevalence of TB in Africa, OA's work and global experience could be vital for the continent. In this regard, organizations like VANI (Voluntary Action Network India) can provide a pluralist (combing and joining of power resources for the people) as well as educationalist function as civil society outreach functionary.

Conclusion

With the changing notion of state, the civil society's role and importance has increased manifold. Civil society is now considered a critical third pillar of the samaj-sarkar-bazaar (society-state-market) triangle, without which no society can function. Even in most successful countries across the world there will always be people who are marginalised, and issues that are not on government or company radars. Hence, the real vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat would be achieved when each stakeholder in the larger socio-economic ecosystem of the nation viz. corporations, academic and research institutions, the government and civil society can collectively contribute to creating implementable solutions using their core competence to address key socio-economic challenges facing India.
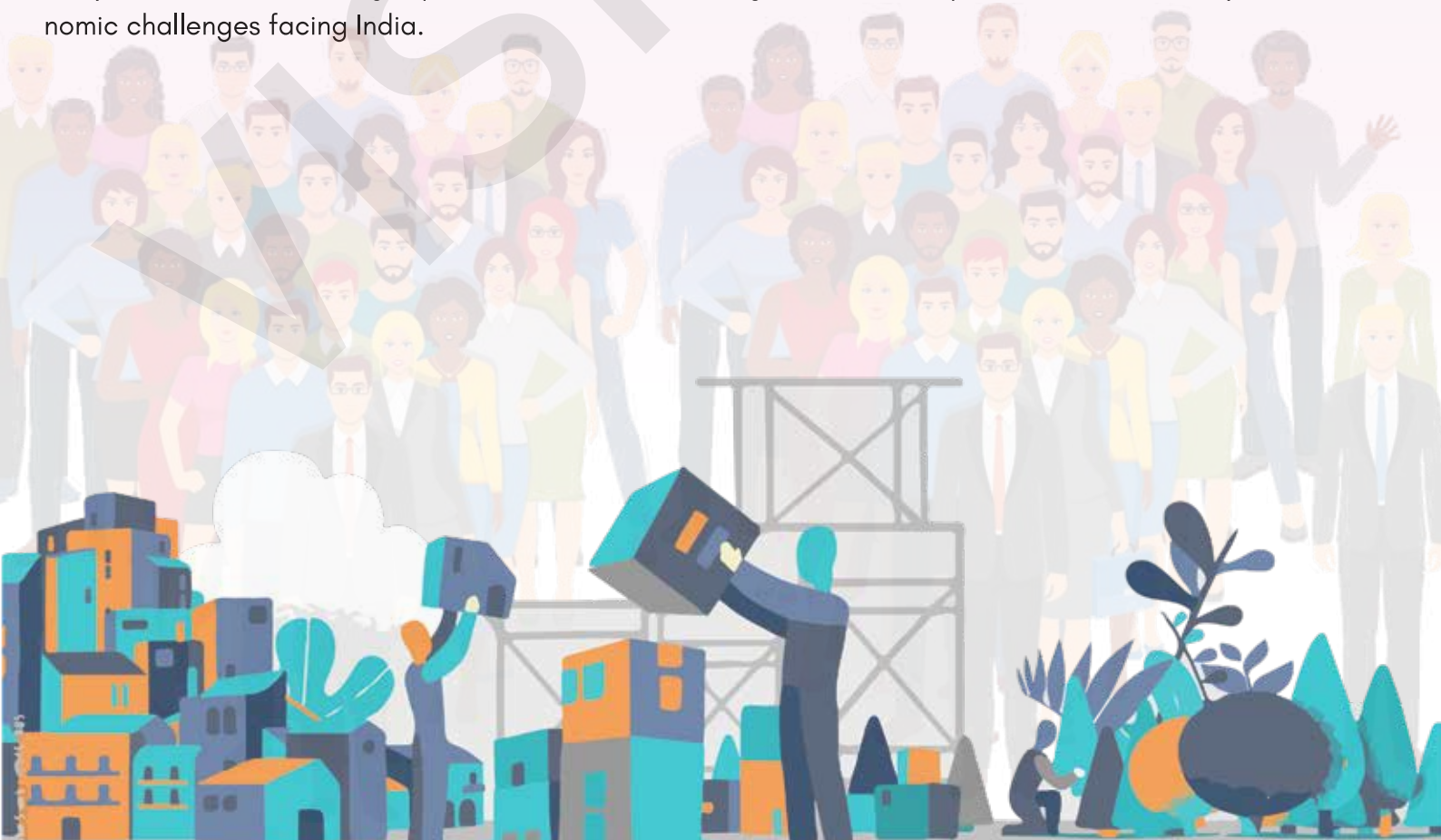
TOPIC AT A GLANCE

Ideas of Various Thinkers on State-Civil Society Interplay

- **Thomas Hobbes and John Locke:** A functioning civil society needs protection from the state
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CIVIL SOCIETY

Non-state and non-market part of the public domain where, individuals take up social issues, try to influence the state or make demands on it, pursue their collective interests or seek support for a variety of causes.

Evolution of Civil Society in India

- **Ancient and Medieval Era: Voluntarism was visible extensively** in the fields of education, medicine, cultural promotion etc.
- **British Era: Self-help emerged as the primary focus of socio-political movements** resulting in establishment of numerous organizations such as Friend-in-Need Society (1858), Prathana Samaj (1864), Satya Shodhan Samaj (1873), Arya Samaj (1875), the National Council for Women in India (1875) etc.
- **Post-Independence Era:** Government of India increased its presence in social welfare and development but recognized the potential for civil society to supplement and complement its efforts.

Role of Civil Societies in a Democracy

- **A Social basis for democracy** as they highlight issues of importance and bring credibility to the political system by promoting transparency and accountability.
- **Valuable partner in policy formulation and implementation.**
- **Act as important pressure groups.**
- **Act as an enabler of and catalyst for cross-sector change.**
- **Strengthen the feeling of civic solidarity amongst the citizens.**
- **Promotes Frugal Innovation.**
- **Inclusion of local knowledge.**

Barriers in Efficient Functioning of Civil Societies

- **Lack of competent volunteers** impacting quality and character of civil society.
- **Accountability Issues** as there have been increasing incidences of misuse of funds by these organizations.
- **Inherent social, religious, ethnic and economic cleavages of Indian society** generates inequality and conflict within CSOs.
- **Overbearing attitude and overregulation by government** impacting independence and autonomy of CSOs.
- **Negative perception** of CSOs where these are demonised as "anti-national" and "anti-development" and accused of serving foreign interests.
- **Elite domination** defeating the very purpose of civil society.

Way Ahead to Strengthen Civil Societies and Explore Potential Opportunities

- **Mutual understanding** of the symbiotic relation between Civil society organisations (CSOs) and government.
- **Need for transparency on the processes and decision making by the government.**
- **Granting Legal Personality status to CSOs.**
- **Ensuring Transparency, Reporting, and Accountability in functioning of CSOs.**
- **Limiting advocacy and civic engagement** of civil societies.
- **Exploring new opportunities** for engagement.
- **Spurring collective action for a transformational recovery post COVID.**
- **Exploring civil society's role in shaping India's development partnerships.**