

# Understanding ‘Civil Society Puzzle’: An Evolutionary Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*The career of the concept of Civil Society has undergone profound changes over the years. Beginning with a journey from comprehending the state society divide in Greek understanding, notably Aristotle, a tradition that continued in the Middle Ages, which presumed that the state was the protector of society to the conceptual understanding of civil society that gradually emerged through the Hegel-Marx trajectory, espousing the idea of a self-regulating complex of associations, that constitutes a separate terrain, as distinct from the state. But the present day discussion on civil society begins with the assumption that states are by their very nature coercive bodies and it seeks to oppress the people at large. Civil society now basically shifts our attention to the voluntary sphere of the individual initiatives outside of the state, and it also focuses on how this sphere functions to check the state’s power and authority. As such, the discussion on civil society today readily transform itself into an understanding that the state and civil society definitely stand in an oppositional relationship, and that civil society is the site as well as the shield of democracy against the authoritarianism of the state. Thus, a historically formed conceptual understanding of civil society has now been transformed into a mere strategic understanding, and the very nature of the discourse has been changed altogether. The present paper seeks to explore the evolution of the conceptual understandings on civil society, and highlight the shifting emphasis on the different shades of opinions in this regard.*

**Keywords-** Civil society, Self-regulating associations, State, Democracy.

Civil society has become a buzz word today and it has acquired a centre place in all of our popular discussions and academic discourses on political life. It has also become one of the most contested concepts in the fields of social sciences with contrasting perspectives which have been evolved in course of its long history. Although the debates and discussions on the concept have not been constantly taken place all through its career; in recent times, however, there have been renewed interests in it both in popular as well as in academic discussions of political life, and it has become one of the most debated concepts in social science today. With the rise of multiple perceptions and subsequent explosion of literature in the field, we are now in the midst of a ‘civil society puzzle’, and in view of it one is compelled to say that ‘civil society is much talked about, but rarely understood’. (Edwards: 2004)

In such a state of affair, considering the importance of the concept, it is imperative to gain at least some amount of clarity about it because of the fact that if an idea conveys so many things, one may run the

risk of meaning nothing. Hence, in order to comprehend the very essence of the current debate, one has to initiate the discussion on civil society by looking back at the evolution of its conceptual understanding. It may help one to understand the transformation of the very idea of civil society over the year and also to have some insight about the current usages of the term as simply a matter of strategic importance. In view of it, the present paper tries to look at the concept of civil society from a historical perspective, and seeks to unfold the changing perspectives which have developed in course of its evolution with special emphasis on its transformation from conceptual to strategic considerations.

## **Civil Society: The Glimpses of Intellectual History**

While studying the evolution of civil society, one may start with the contributions of Aristotle and explore the development of the idea in the writings of many a political philosophers and social scientist. According to Professor Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, it

necessarily leads to an exploration of the following in a neat sequence: the undifferentiated understanding of the state society divide in Greek understanding, notably Aristotle, a tradition that continued in the Middle Ages, the presumption being that *the state was the protector of society*. Then, between 1750-1850, when the present day conceptual understanding of civil society gradually emerged through the Hegel-Marx trajectory, which espoused the idea of a self-regulating complex of associations that permeates the bourgeois society in the west, but which constitutes *a separate terrain, as distinct from the state*. This meant the discovery of the site of the civil society, its locational sphere and its parameters. (Datta Gupta: 2008). Keeping in view such a career of the concept, one has to look at the important milestones towards its evolution.

#### a) Civil Society : The Classical Wisdom

Intellectual History of the civil society in classical political theory begins with Aristotelean notion of *koinonipolitike*, although he did not speak of anything as civil society in contrast to political society. He considered man as essentially a political being, and, as such, considered the state as an institution capable to realize or actualize the potentials inherent in him. The Roman era similarly regarded politics as the primary activity of the individual through which self-realisation would be attained. The civil society as a modern concept actually emerged only in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and it reflected an important breakthrough in the notion of the rights as being individual, his relationship with the state and with others in society. It began with the writings of Thomas Hobbes who used the term *civitas* or *commonwealth* to refer to a society which was formed by individuals living in a *stateofnature* to get rid of their untenable pre-social and pre-political condition. John Locke's concept of civil society also implies the imputation of a common substantive purpose to society and the realization of that purpose by common consent. It is the principle of consent that for Locke linked the purposes of society and that of the state and government. He, however, was of opinion that the power of the state should be so limited as not to threaten the basic rights of the citizens. But, the

distinction between *civil* and *political* was unclear as yet, because both Hobbes and Locke used the two words interchangeably and as a consequence ambiguity resulted from their understanding of civil society as opposite to *stateofnature*.

It was with the contributions of Adam Smith and Ferguson, that there occurred an important shift in conceptualization of civil society. If, in earlier explanations, the idea of political man was envisaged, the society now could be understood in terms of its economic activities, and as such, civil society carved for itself a separate space as distinguished from the state or political society. Montesquieu offered a political explanation of this trend and treated civil society as equilibrium with the government. To him, its functions are to protect individual liberty and to preserve the virtues of moderation, trust and reason in government. In this sense, the values that civil society seeks to preserve are dependent on its capacity to stamp those values on the government it seeks to restrain.

#### b) Civil society: Hegel-Marx Trajectory

German philosopher Hegel was the first to put forward a full-fledged theory of civil society and viewed it as the realm of individuals who had left the unity of the family to enter into economic competition in contrast with the state or political society. It is an arena of particular needs, self interest and divisiveness, with a potential for self-destruction. It is to be remembered that, for Hegel, it is only through the state that the universal interest can prevail. As against Hegel, Marx did not view the state as an ethical entity. Based on the perspective of modern property relations, he associated the emergence of civil society with the destruction of medieval society and identified it as an arena for selfish competition, wage-linked exploitation, and, as such, is amenable to it. So, the very essence of the modern state is to be found in the characteristics of the civil society, in its economic relations. He argued that for ending the conflict of civil society and for releasing the full potential of the human being, both the civil society and its product, the state, must be abolished. Marx, however, did not insist on civil society in his later writings although it may be said that his basic position in this regard remain unchanged.

### c) Antonio Gramsci and the Renewal of Civil Society Language

Even in the Marxist circles, there has been a lull in original writings on civil society till Antonio Gramsci took up the issue again in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although from a different perspective, to refer to the private or to the non-state sphere including the economy. To Gramsci, it is not simply the sphere of individual needs, but of organizations, and has the potential for rational self-regulation and freedom. He insisted on the complex organization of the civil society where the capitalist state constructs its project of hegemony. Interestingly, apart from the basic philosophical differences between Hegel and Marx, we find a striking similarity as both of them viewed civil society from a negative standpoint. But, the basic difference between Marx and Gramsci lies in the fact that while Marx considered civil society as belonging more to structural sphere - to the base rather than to the superstructure; in Gramsci's parlance, it is just the opposite. Moreover, the theme of hegemony, which is very central to Gramsci, actually makes it a question of political strategy. It is said that Gramsci's key contribution to the conceptualization of civil society was his emphasis on its 'politically relevant cultural dimension' as against the 'economic reductionist' approach of the classical Marxists. However, to both Marx and Gramsci, the moot question of theorization in this regard is the agenda of social transformation. So, the conceptualization of civil society made by both of them may only be understood with reference to their views on class struggle and social change.

### d) Civil Society as 'Public Sphere'

Notable in this context is another key contribution, which may be described as the 'communicative, deliberative conception of the public sphere' as developed by Jurgen Habermas and his followers. It tries to bring together 'the normative and the empirical, the universal and the particular'. It is said that it represents 'the normative core of the idea of civil society and the heart of any conception of democracy'. (Cohen : 1999:58-59) In his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1989), Habermas identified a 'social space' where consensus emerges on matters

of political morality, and this 'public space' embodies the idea that normative statements are to be argued and justified publicly, before the audience. It is actually contemplated as an area of society where the private citizen could freely and critically deliberate on practical issues of importance. However, it may be mentioned in this connection that although the Habermasian concept of 'public sphere' reveals some similarities with 'civil society', it was not defined as a sphere autonomous from the state.

### e) Civil Society : Contemporary Interpretations

The present day discussion on civil society begins with the basic assumption that states are by their very nature coercive bodies and it seeks to oppress the people at large. Sometimes, it is said to be brutal, particularly in authoritarian regimes. In some analysis, state-civil society relationship is depicted as zero-sum-game, so that the stronger the state, the weaker the civil society is. Thus, in contemporary discussion, there always exists a degree of force in state-society relationship. Civil society now basically shifts our attention to the voluntary sphere of the individual initiatives outside of the state, and it also focuses on how this sphere functions to check the state's power and authority. As such, the discussion on civil society today readily transform itself into an understanding that *the state and civil society definitely stand in an oppositional relationship*, and that *civil society is the site as well as the shield of democracy against the authoritarianism of the state*. The phrases like the 'rise of civil society against the

state' or the 'rebirth of civil society' testifies such transformations in the sphere of our perceptions of civil society, and it is now being treated as 'the primary locus for the expansion of democracy and rights'. (Cohen and Arato: 1992) Needless to say that such an assumption does not logically and necessarily follow from the historical definition and emergence of civil society. It is specifically for this reason, it is said that the "current usage of civil society is to be explained in terms of how a historically formed conceptual understanding has been transformed into a strategic understanding over centuries."(Datta Gupta: 2008)

This process of transformation of the idea of civil society in contemporary world is well- understood

if one looks at the *different* phases of the contemporary renaissance of civil society, the first of which is evident in the writings of Yoshihiko Uchida and Kiyooki Hirata in the late 1960s and early 70s, who have used the term 'civil society' from a neo-Gramscian sense, and tried to portray the images of Japanese capitalism from a new angle. This phase of the renaissance of civil society was, however, short-lived and was confined only to the country of its origin. The *second phase* of the contemporary revival of interest in civil society and the state began during the 1970s in the central eastern half of Europe. It was primarily associated with the reactions to public criticisms of the 'despotic' state-power and the radical defence of civil society as 'an indispensable moment of a democratic political and social order'. But, the *third phase* of the renaissance of civil society might have started in the decade of the 1990s, when such discussions have spread well beyond the boundaries of Europe. During phase three, the language of civil society has also spread to an unprecedented variety of geographical contexts resulting in varied contributions in the field from different angles. (Keane : 1998 : 12-14)

Analysing the reasons for the re-emergence of civil society in recent times, Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani also identified three strands of the contemporary discussions on it: Firstly, the over-extended legal jurisdiction and effective control of state institutions in societal sphere in the erstwhile communist regimes in the former USSR and East European countries. After the collapse of such regimes, there arose the tendency to encourage the institutions of 'civil society' as the domain of 'freedom' outside the jurisdiction of the state. Secondly, the disillusionment with the idea of socialism and soviet experiment has also contributed to the radicalization of the idea of democracy by re-invoking the civil society discourse. Added to it was the retreat of the welfare state in the face of the neo-conservative trend under Thatcher-Reagan regimes which has also led to the invocation of the British pluralist tradition. Thirdly, the developing notions of 'New' social movements in the west have also some important bearings on the civil society discourse because the emergence of such movements presupposes the existence of viable civil society Institutions. (Kaviraj & Khilnani:2001)

The contemporary approaches to civil society, thus, have shifted their emphasis from conceptual to operational attributes. It is argued that for a long time, our 'great theories' as well as the theorists dealt with a 'two sector world', viz, the state or government on the one hand, and the market and economy on the other; and the society was pushed to the sidelines which ultimately become a very abstract notion. It caused 'disastrous consequences' for our understanding of many burning problems. Designating the 'societal sphere' as the 'third sector, it is expected to fill in the gaps in a very large way. In fact, the focus on this sphere has partly been a reaction to the 'overarch' of the state in East Europe; and partly the result of a profound dissatisfaction with the 'developmentalist' states in the post-colonial world. (Chandhoke: 1995: 27-33) Again, in a new world situation, it is, from the perspective of the neo-liberals, an excuse for 'rolling back the state' to ensure the spread of market economy and free follow of private capital; and from the left perception, a mechanism to oppose state oppression. Hence, in a very broad sense, it now generally refers to the arena of voluntary participation of average citizens and groups and this does not include behavior imposed or even coerced by the state.

Thus, many people, disillusioned with highly centralized state machinery entrenched in societal spheres; now look to the civil society as an arena of freedom and democracy. Many look at it for regeneration of political life, providing the context for renewing the civic spirit of individuals and promoting them to greater engagement with political life. It is also increasingly seen by sections of scholars and policy-makers as the vital source of 'social capital'.

### Conceptual Confusions

From the foregoing analysis, it is interesting to note that the term civil society has been understood differently by different quarters over the years. While the contemporary wisdom largely concerned with the division between state and civil society, early social theories regarded the existence of a powerful state to be a necessary pre-condition for all forms of social life. Unless the very nature of the transformation of the concept is followed, one may

suffer from conceptual confusions in understanding civil society. Even if the changing contour of the civil society is understood, some questions still remained unresolved. Generally, the term civil society today refers to voluntary participation by average citizens and thus does not include behavior imposed or even coerced by the state. For some, it only includes political activity engaged in through non-profit organizations, such as NGOs, while some others like to include all forms of voluntary participation, whether in the public and private sector, political or apolitical. Again, civil society includes not just the individuals, but also the institutions and the strength of it actually depends on the very nature of involvement of the individuals and institutions in it.

But, with the proliferation of debates and discussions on civil society over the years, myriad definitions of it came into being and it become very difficult to reach a consensus in this regard. One such effort states: Civil society refers to the arena of uncovered collective act on 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 the organizations such as registered charities, developmental and non-governmental organizations, community groups, women organizations, faith based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups. (LSE, Centre for Civil Society)

This is of course, a very broad definition, which, at times, may not help us to deal with many of the intricacies associated with state- civil society interactions. This is very much apparent if we simply explore some of the basic points raised in this connection. As for example, it may be said that while some intellectuals claim that civil society is a specific product of the nation-state and capitalism; others see it as a universal expression of the collective life of the individuals, at work in all countries and stages

of development but expressed in different ways according to history and context. Some see it as one of three separate sectors; others as intimately connected or even inter-penetrated by states and markets. Is civil society the preserve of groups predefined as democratic, modern and 'civil', or is it home to all sorts of associations including 'uncivil' society-like militant Islam and American militias- and traditional associations based on inherited characteristics like religion and ethnicity that are so common in Africa and Asia? Are families in or out, and what about the business sector? Is civil society a bulwark against the state, an indispensable support, or dependent on government intervention for its very existence? Is it the key to individual freedom through the guaranteed experience of pluralism or a threat to democracy through special interest politics? Is it a noun- a part of society, an adjective, a kind of society, an arena for societal deliberation, or a mixture of all three? Can you build a civil society through foreign aid and intervention, or is this just another imperial fantasy? What is to be done with a concept that seems so unsure of itself that definitions are akin to nailing jelly to the wall? And in any case, do these questions really matter, except to a small band of academics who study this stuff for a living? (Edwards: 2004)

As such, when the civil society is being considered by many as 'new analytical key to unlock the mysteries of the social order', differences arose as to whether it has been 'fundamentally rescuing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty' or it is 'the single most viable alternative to the authoritarian state and tyrannical market.' As regards the constituting elements, differences are there over the inclusion of families, business sectors, trade unions, political parties etc. Debates are also there as to whether it includes only the pre-defined modern, democratic and 'civil' groups; or all sorts of pre-modern, fundamentalist and 'uncivil' groups too. Doubts are also being raised as regards the feasibility of building a civil society with organizations financed by 'foreign agencies' or organizations amenable to 'imperial interventions'. Over and above all these, one must have to remember that the expressions like the 'civil society against the state' may sometimes help us to focus our attention to the very nature of state oppression, but offer no clear indication of the very complex

and even contradictory nature of the two spheres. As it is very difficult to solve these questions and to reach a consensus given the range of views available, it is said that the civil society is riddled with danger 'since it gives freedom to despots and democrats' simultaneously. Hence, in order to avoid confusions, one must have to concentrate on the issues involved to gain at least some amount of clarity in this regard.

**a) Civil Society: 'New' Remedies for 'Old' Problems:** Robert Putnam, Benjamin Barber, Amitai Etzioni, Jean Elshtain, and many other contemporary social and political theorists have embraced the idea of 'civil society' as remedies for the shortcomings of liberal democratic institutions. To them, intermediary institutions like the family, church, political party and other voluntary associations appear well positioned to mediate the self interest and privatism of an essentially atomistic and soulless liberalism. They, however, admit that such attempts are not altogether new, because the roots of the explorations of the gaps of liberalism in these scores may well be identified in the 'pluralist' contributions of Tocqueville, Maitland, Laski, Cole and many others long ago.

**b) Civil Society : 'Middle Ground' for Convergence of 'Libertarians' and 'Communitarians'**

It is often said that the civil society now has become a middle ground where previously opposed 'libertarians' and 'communitarians' may converge. It is particularly because of the fact that liberalism's critics always used to draw our attention to the tensions between liberal philosophy and the claims of communal life. With its sole emphasis on the ideal of an 'unencumbered individual', its essential hostility to inherited or ascriptive identities, and its affinity for the modern, contractual understanding of politics and society, liberal philosophy has neglected the communal bonds of our life. Naturally the question arises as to how the concept of civil society, associational life, and pluralism are compatible with such explanations of liberalism. The most important among the questions raised is the relationship between one understands of group rights and

liberal commitments. A scope for identifying a 'middle ground' through convergence of liberal and communitarian views logically follows.

In this connection, we may refer to the 'three models' of defining civil society, viz. a) the libertarian model where civil society is seen as a synonym for the private sector; b) the communitarian perspective, where it is regarded almost a synonym for community; and c) the contemporary 'democratic' outlooks in which civil society is envisaged as a 'mediating third domain' between government and market. It is said that in the libertarian perspective, Civil society is understood as a surrogate for the private sector, which presents freedom in a strong sense, but sociability in its very thinnest sense. Thanks to its formal institutions, consumers become voters, but voters, satisfied as 'clients' of government, do not become citizens in any deeper sense. Civil society under libertarian model, thus, narrowed down the 'social sector' and geared only to get something from a 'service station state', whose campus of activities, again, must always be kept minimal. It can envision only a rudimentary form of social relations that remains shallowly instrumental: the citizen as client, the voter as customer, the democratic participant as consumer. It yields a version of liberty that is hyper-individualistic. The communitarian perspective seeks to answer the frustrations arising out of liberatarian experiences, but the very idea that the society is sharply divided into two domains, one governmental, the other private is hardly abandoned. Communitarians begin with the idea that most human associations are 'given' (ascriptive), rather than 'chosen' (voluntary). As such, the defining actors of civil society under this model are the clansmen, tied to community by birth, blood, and bathos. There can, of course, be 'democratic communities' in different senses of the term; but democracy is neither a necessary, nor even a probable attribute of communitarianism per se. Civil society under communitarian perspective is the community of all communities, the source of all moral and political authority, including governmental authority. Thus, whereas libertarians worry

about state bureaucrats imposing substantive values on free individuals and groups, communitarians fear that the state may be corrosively agnostic and possess no guiding values at all. In view of such two-celled models represented by libertarians and communitarians, there developed the 'strong democratic' three celled model which construed civil society as a mediating third domain between government and market. The proponents of this model argue that it is the domain which may be defined by both publicness and liberty, by egalitarianism and voluntarism; a domain of citizens who appear neither as consumers of government services and rights bearers against government intrusion, on the one hand, nor as mere voters and passive watchdogs to whom representative government elites retain some vestigial accountability, on the other. To them, citizens here appear as members of civil society because they are active, responsible, engaged members of groups and communities devoted to exploring common ground and pursuing common relations. (Barber: 1999:11-27)

- c) **Civil Society and Democratic Politics :**  
**Contemporary Focus :** The return of civil society in social science discourses may have some important bearing on the question of dismantling of 'authoritarian regimes' and consolidating 'democracy' in a 'new world'. Hence, democracy and civil society are seen today as integrally related to each other. Thus, civil society is often seen as the key to a successful democratization, as open, pluralist and internally democratic groups organize the citizens as a counterweight to the state. It is said that modern democratic states are characterized by plurality of incompatible beliefs. Pluralists believe that the multiplicity of cultures can co-exist within the boundaries of a single political order. With the slogan of 'bringing pluralism back in', it is conceived that civil society may provide an arena for finding a common ground, and integrative and collaborative modes of action. It is desired that civil society may mediate between government and private sector, and help to develop mutually acceptable formula for operation in a situation of conflicting belief systems and perceptions. In this connection, it

should be remembered that civil society is very often considered as the property of the democratic states; because it is believed that in a democracy a 'rule bound space independent of the state' and yet protected by the state is available, where individuals may pursue their own private interests in association with others. Larry Diamond argues that civil society is conducive for democracy as it allegedly opens up a space for interaction between citizens and associations, interactions that helps to create a feeling of 'civiness', including the respect for democracy, which cuts across various cleavages in society. To him, a strong civil society further increases the possibility of political participation of the citizens, as it provides an alternative channel for interest articulation outside of the political parties. (Diamond: 1994)

- d) **Civil Society and Good Society: 'Civility' of Civil Society:** There may be different conceptions of good society to different sections of society. Yet, it may be possible for us to agree on some basic features of a good society, which are very often ascribed to our notion of civil society today. It is now said that civil society has very little chance to grow and develop under a 'totalitarian' regime, where one or uniform conception of good society is imposed from above. Thus, it is said that 'civil society nourishes not under totalitarian regimes but under liberal, pluralist and secular regimes'. (Beteille, 2001:286). However, if we explore the career of the concept of civil society, we may identify some sort of oversimplification in such statements. In fact, there was no agreement among the scholars through the different ages on the very connotations of civil society. It is said very often that civil society is not always marked by civility. For Hegel, Marx and Gramsci, the domain constituted as it is by the logic of the capitalist economy is an unequally constructed space, where social and economic practices functioning according to the principles of market evaluation constitute individuals hierarchically. For Marx, civil society while formally displaying many of the features of civility and democracy was essentially class oppression. (Chandhoke: 37 : 1995) Thus, if

one goes deep into the issues involved in this regard, we may run the risk of exploring such a 'great debate' that may defy any attempt to develop a consensus in this regard. Again, the recent debates centering round the issue of the 'civility' of civil society needs to be taken note of in this regard. However, in contemporary discourses on civil society, in a very limited sense, it is believed that civility ensures the free and frank exchange of opinions among persons with divergent political attachments and with divergent conceptions of good society. It also ensures a certain basic equality in interchanges among persons occupying unequal positions in society and its institutions. Civil society cannot prosper unless its members are able to put themselves, at least to a certain extent, in the positions of their political opponents and their social inferiors. It is, in view of such perceptions, civil society comes closer to that of good society.

- e) **Civil Society and Globalization:** The idea of civil society gained an altogether new shape particularly in the context of globalization, which is, no doubt, increasingly challenging the nation state. The role of the state in encouraging voluntary associations and allowing their unhindered competition is now regarded as the basic task for a liberal democratic socio-political order. As a natural corollary, the operation of many a trans-national and multi-national organizations having free access to any part of the globe with their huge resources added new dimensions to our reflections on civil society. The emergence of the idea of a 'global civil society' and its far-reaching implications for the 'new world' needs our attention in this regard. In this connection, it is very important to note that in the context of globalization, in the 'Third World' countries, the very idea of civil society is being invoked by the international donor agencies like the World Bank and others to bring the non-state actors (like Non-Governmental Organisations, Community Associations etc.) in the process of development. What is more important is that the very idea of civil society has now been associated with the development models which are designed by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) etc. The

World Bank now, through the application of the concept of 'good governance' has given neo-liberalism the shape of a more complex economic and social theory influenced by institutionalism and civil society theory. "Through its enormous direct and indirect influence", wrote Henrik Berglund, "the World Bank more or less forces its debtors and its member countries to accept 'good governance' as a key component of both developed and developing economies, thereby also assigning importance to the role of civil society as a facilitator of both democracy and market economy." (Berglund: 2009:01)

- f) **Civil Society and its Critiques Today:** While the 're-birth' civil society has been welcomed by different quarters, it was also criticized from several viewpoints. A major critique has been directed against the use of the concept by the Marxists, post-Marxists and others who reject the liberal definition of politics and civil society. They are not in a position to accept civil society as a separate sphere independent of existing power relations. For Marxists and feminists the unequal relations between workers and capitalists, as well as between women and men, are mirrored also in civil society, which makes this sphere less relevant for explaining the consolidation of democracy (Phillips: 2002; Berglund: 2009:01). To many a scholar, the present day usages of the term 'civil society' and the 'democratization theory' associated with it is actually 'ideologically loaded' explanation representing the 'neo-liberal agenda' in the 'global era'. (Ayers: 2006; Beckman et.al.: 2001; Berglund: 2009:01; Williams et.al.: 1994). The role of the World Bank and the IMF are also seen in this perspective, not so much for its role in strengthening the democratic process but for its ability to off-load the state, particularly in 'third world' countries. Apart from ideological points raised from different quarters, questions are also raised as regards the types of organizations that qualify for membership of civil society. As said earlier, whether these associations be internally democratic in order to qualify? Should we allow also associations which exclude members on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race etc? What should be our stand

relating to the groups representing a quite narrow agenda based on caste, religion, ethnicity etc.? Do we include profit-making institutions in our broad canvas of 'civil society organizations'? Such questions are no doubt, very important for our understanding of the very composition of the civil society. But, those still remained unresolved and consequently we are yet to get rid of the 'puzzle of civil society'.

### Concluding Observations

Although civil society has been understood differently across different periods, places and perspectives; and, consequently no commonly accepted definition of it emerged; it is no denying the fact that it provides a framework – a space – where citizens argue with one another about the great issues of the day, and negotiate a constantly evolving 'common interest'. However, as the civil society is not a homogeneous entity, one may also have to take note of 'conflicting interests', which very often tend to collide in the given space, and here lies the very importance of it both in terms of democracy and in regard to social change. As there is no consensus on the very composition of the civil society, one may try to understand it by emphasizing what it is not. First, it is not the state, since it is neither its formal part, nor it seeks to get control of the state offices, at least directly. Thus, it lies outside the public sector. Second, it is not the market, as it belongs to the non-commercial domain which does not seek profit. The debates on 'borderline' cases such as media, business sectors etc. indicate that the civil society lies outside the 'private' sector of the market economy. In this sense, it is the 'third sector', but even not one of residual category, because it definitely has a 'positive' content. Civil society actually exists only when people make concerted efforts through 'voluntary action' to mould state activities. It is a collective noun- a part of society; an adjective- a kind of society; an arena for societal deliberation.

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