

Civilising Dissent

*Civil Society is often posed as an alternative to the militant, often violent, means that were in vogue in the latter half of the 20th century on behalf of the oppressed, be they nations or local communities. The last decade of that same century has seen the **pacification of dissent.***

There is as a consequence a groping for an acceptable alternative that will give the proponents of change some self-respect, and yet which will not actually militate against the existing (international) order. Voila! Civil Society!

This stand is echoed by another well-known analyst of development, Jeremy Seabrook. The opponents of globalization have been, perhaps, too concerned with looking for a new paradigm to justify their challenge. Indeed, there has been something of an obsession with defining an 'alternative'

*The book, *The Conceits of Civil Society*, is a timely reminder that the last word on the subject has not yet been said. There is a fair way to travel before we can say we have understood what Civil Society is all about, if in fact there is such a thing as civil society.*

Debating Civil Society

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The Conceits of Civil Society, Neera Chandhoke, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.278, Rs. 575

CIVIL SOCIETY has perhaps become the most widely discussed theme in contemporary political theory. Since the 1970s, when it became increasingly clear to the modernisation theories of both the Marxist and liberal dispensations that the state would not be able to deliver what is expected of it, civil society was looked upon as an alternative.

In the 1980s the national societies in Eastern Europe activated the associational forms of civil society to undermine a severely bureaucratised political order. In many parts of the 'developing' world this period also saw political mobilisation around issues that fell outside the traditional concerns of political parties. Experiences such as these made civil society embody two ideas at once, the idea of democracy and of autonomy from the state.

Neera Chandhoke deftly criticises both these ideas. She argues that there are problems in conceptualising civil society as a domain of unfettered freedom. Indeed, the associational forms that obtain in this sphere have produced conditions variously for a collective sympathy (Adam Smith), a rights bearing citizen (Hegel), the *unsentimental bourgeoisie* (Marx) as much as a space to counter the hegemony of the ruling bloc (Gramsci) and the disciplinary institutions of modernity (Foucault), but it will be wrong to see too much in these possibilities.

These concepts visualise a simultaneous 'taming' of civil society by a hidden hand, a set of universal principles, or by the rule of property, by the passive revolution of capital, or by the gears of disciplining the self. In the course of such contrary moves signifying a certain ambiguity, civil society became both an exclusive and exclusionary space, with no tolerance for the marginal and the radical, and operated in a hierarchical structure of power occasioned by the state.

It is impossible, Chandhoke tells us, to celebrate civil society either as a symmetric arena of civic association *a la* the theorists of deliberative democracy and social capital, or a domain largely autonomous of the state as

Civil Society is seen variously as a substitute, alternative or counterposed to State. Many NGOs and some peoples' organisations who take on the mantle of representing civil society take the moral high ground on the basis of their "links with the field". Some even engage in service delivery and claim to be superior to State because they deliver better. Thus they are not opposed to being nominated (co-opted?) into official positions. In fact some claim it to be their right – that their voice is not only heard but also followed. Almost all, whether ideologically determined or not, claim that they "know" what is good for people.

What they seem to miss is that by taking on this role, they become a State to themselves. And since their own financial sustenance and appointment comes from sources other than their constituency, any role within the larger State which borders on governance is illegitimate, save for the good intentions and good work of the current protagonists.

And if there are spoils of power to be distributed, these civil society organisations, especially NGOs become fair game for politicians. That is why we see so many NGOs infiltrated or patronised by local politicians and contractors. That is why we see so many struggles ending up in a political favour or in the courts! That is why we see so many Unions in the hands of anti-worker parties. Civil Society Organisations, specially NGOs are therefore digging their own graves, by seeking a more "formal" "legal" role in development, governance, etc.

There is a matrix-like relationship between party, government as its executive or bureaucracy, and people and civil society. What the party is to the government, the people are to civil society. It is people who elect a party to power, and a civil society which legitimises a bureaucracy or executive.

Therefore, when we say we want to strengthen civil society, we mean strengthening those institutions which can remain independent, which can take an independent stand based on the interests of the people they represent at different times on different issues. This role is political in nature, as it has to arbitrate between the formal representative system, and true non-vested representation.

John D'souza

the international donor agencies and the votaries of neo-liberalism would want us to believe.

Chandhoke's project, on the contrary, is to 'democratise' civil society by keeping the state well within reach. This she wants to do both by privileging certain 'accepted' democratic norms (as guards against subversion by communal elements) and turning civil society into a contested site for substantive democracy (so as to widen its entrance).

On reviewing the struggle of the tribal population in the Narmada valley and the informal workers in Chattisgarh she concludes: '*Whereas for most of us, civil society may both be accessible as well as responsive, the subalterns - the*

tribals, the poor, the lower castes, and women have to struggle to enter the sphere' (p.226).

On the face of it Chandhoke's is an anti-elite project. The book has its heart in the right place; it makes sincere pleas to sensitise the public sphere and analyses in detail the problem of epistemic incommensurability that makes the voice of the poor and the marginal inaudible. Although rather thin in empirical evidence, she vigorously argues for understanding the problems of the displaced, the outcastes, the unrepresented and the underprivileged. She also laments the lack of a language for expressing the pain and the anguish of suffering of the subaltern.

"Can someone", she asks at this point, "who is not a subaltern represent a subaltern?" (p.202)

Imposing such moral preconditions, however, will demand that people write only autobiographies! That apart, since she addresses the issue of representation in civil society head on, one pauses to ask, *whose civil society is Chandhoke herself re-presenting?*

Does this work offer an analysis of how a civil society of the colonised obtained its institutional form in a period that was marked essentially by racial exclusion? Is there any attempt to theorise the sphere from which the "subaltern" is expected to make "entry" into the civil society (this is important because such entry demands a precondition of democratic mobilisation in the "outer" sphere)? Does this work, in this context, help us to think of democratic practices in defiance of and external to the norms and protocols of civil society? Are not the bulk of theoretical insights presented here culled out from stories of other societies, belonging to other times, and other continents? Can we discern here an eye to the richly sensitised and widely available storehouses of our vernacular literature? Do we, in short, find in this work an engagement with the specific history of *our* civil society?

Chandhoke has greatly enlarged our expectations with the vigour of her intellect and the sincerity of her conviction; we now truly long to see her overcoming our predicament of being monolingual metropolitan academics. ▶

