

Contracting Space for Civil Society: Implications for Inclusive Development in India

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ABSTRACT

Civil society organizations (CSOs) engage in the political process and shape the well-being of others, thereby preserving democratic principles and ensuring inclusive development for all, but there is a worrying trend: there is increasingly less and less space for civil society to express its concerns and opinions. It has been observed that when civil society performs its role in significant socio-economic, political, environmental and other challenges, it often faces resistance, coercion, harassment and criminal investigations. Due to this, the social fabric of the Indian nation and the future of Indian democracy are adversely affected. Hence, it is absolutely indispensable to study civil society in light of recent events. India's aspirations for a future global role and its commitment to ensure freedom for all are possibly being neglected due to the shrinking space of civil society. Therefore, the only way out of the conundrum is to assess and reinstate the lost freedom that was once enjoyed by civil society.

Key words: civil society, Indian democracy, freedom

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, civil society organizations have garnered significant attention and interest due to their global recognition as a significant and efficacious player in development. In addition, the growing importance of civil society organizations is also due to the inefficiency of government institutions in delivering service to the common man. Earlier, the developmental model of a nation largely gave priority to the state as an important institution to guide the nation towards development. Subsequently, the market also had a greater influence in strategizing the development model of a state. However, in the last two decades or more, civil society has largely been acknowledged for its contribution and valued as the third vehicle of development along with the state and market.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are understood by the common man as organizations that

work independently of the government but perform the task of meeting the developmental needs of individual citizens by adopting a flexible, participatory, and responsive approach. It is this direct involvement role of civil society to reduce the potential crisis faced by the individual citizens, who are the most marginalized section

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Received	Reviewed	Accepted	Published
03-June-2025	27-Sept.-2025	22-Oct.-2025	01-Dec.-2025
Volume	Issue	December	ISSN
No. 7	No. 2	2025	2583-1852(P), 2584-0878(O)
How to Cite this Article: Sahoo, Rudra Prasad. Contracting Space for Civil Society: Implications for Inclusive Development in India. THE THIRD VOICE REALITY AND VISION. 2025. Vol No-7. Issue No-2. December. Pp: 19-26. DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19411725			

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Available online at :
thirdvoice.voiceforvoiceless.in

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19411725>
Article No - TVRV00093

of society at the grass root level, that led to changing the development discourse, which stressed human-centric to more on the individual at the bottom, to be the main agenda of development, leading to the popularization of the term inclusive development. Hence, development discourse now has a long trajectory from economic development to social development, including sustainable development and human development, and now inclusive development is at the center of development discourse because it gives importance to excluded groups as a part and parcel of the development process in society.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the role and function that civil society organizations play in India, specifically with regards to advancing the inclusive development agenda. It will more accurately evaluate what obstacles or challenges CSOs have in accomplishing their mission of inclusive development in India.

To know more about this, the paper is organized as follows: Section one explains the conceptual aspect of civil society. It also reviews and lays out different philosophical reflections relating to civil society. Section two is devoted to explaining the concept of inclusive development. Here is a sub-section also devoted to explaining the relationship between civil society organizations (CSOs) and inclusive development. Section three analyzes civil society organizations in the context of India: an overview, focusing on their role and the interests they represent and organize. In the fourth section, the shrinking space for civil society's implications for inclusive development in India is examined, and this is followed by a conclusion

CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CONCEPT

In common parlance, it is generally referred to as a voluntary organization since it allows individuals and groups to directly handle their affairs through this association.

Regarding the concept of civil society as a good society, it found strong emphasis in European thinking, most notable in ancient Greece. However, the 19th-century German political philosopher Hegel, in his monumental work *Philosophy of Rights* (1820), simply stated that civil society is a type of social association that stands in between the state and the family. Hegel defines civil society as an ethical way of living that embodies a system of relations built upon mutual recognition of the rights of individuals with those of others to realize freedom (Mahajan, 1999). For Hegel, civil

society is an arena where citizens form associations based on their shared interests, desires, and wishes.

Drawing inspiration from Hegel, Marx also views civil society as a separate sphere from that of a state and an essential step in the state's formation. But Marx contends that civil society is the source of state power. Here, Marx criticizes Hegel and says that civil society represents private interests and not collective freedom, so it represents the voice of the ruling class (Chandhoke, 2007).

However, Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prisoner Notebook* (1971), argues that civil society is the arena in which the state collaborates with the ruling class to build its hegemony. To put it another way, Gramsci defined civil society as a place where hegemony is maintained by the manufacturing of consent, and in this way, dominance is justified. He said institutions of civil society are the church, school, other organizations, etc. It is the responsibility of civil society to establish legitimacy through these institutions. Thus, in the sphere of civil society, the battle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces shapes where the struggle for the legitimacy of the exercise of state authority takes place. Gramsci's use of culture as the tool of critical analysis, as opposed to a simple grasp of economics as the base around which all Marxist ideas revolve, is an intellectual addition to Marxism (Susen, 2021).

Despite differences in depicting civil society in the intellectual domain, the most excellent exploration and explanation in relation to democracy is found in the work of American political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, who advocated that civil society helps individual citizens realize their social freedom and equality. Tocqueville, in his study of *Democracy in America*, provided two solid reasons for "free association" that are found in America: 1) Free association helps free and equal individual citizens solve their collective problems; 2) it helps individual citizens come out of their narrow individual selves and form opinions through reciprocal influence as members of a collectivity or group to promote the common good (Basile, 2017). This means an individual citizen is concerned with their fellow citizens by sharing a public life in common. In this way, it checks the arbitrary power of the government or any kind of despotism by the state. At the same time, it also accepts and gives legitimacy to state authority, which is based on the rule of law. This association helps individual citizens generate trust among fellow citizens, and in this way, through reciprocity, they

develop civic skills (Stid, 2018). This free association of civil society comprises churches, literary and scientific societies, professional recreational groups, etc (Ghosal, 2014).

From this above-mentioned philosophical exploration, each philosopher draws on their own context-specific social reality, but despite differences in conceiving civil society, they all agree that civil society stands for some common features. These are: 1) It is voluntary in nature; 2) this voluntariness facilitates citizens to form various associations depending upon indubitable interests, needs, and desires; 3) they are also engaged in shaping how an autonomous society comprised of free and equal people can be structured.

In recent times, many scholars have described and defined the concept of civil society, looking at liberal (Hegel, Tocqueville) as well as revolutionary traditions (Marx and Gramsci). However, Victor Perez-Diaz gave a broader definition of civil society. He prescribes civil society as “the ideal type of society characterized by a set of sociopolitical institutions such as the rule of law, limited and accountable public authority, the economic market, social pluralism, and a public sphere” (McLavery, 2002). This means civil society is imagined as a sphere where individuals and their fellow citizens form various associations to achieve their social needs by encasing freedom, which is distinct from the power of the state. In order to make it easier to understand the functional role of civil society associations, Basile has identified them at three levels. These include: a) at the economic level, when the state and market are weak, civil society serves as a support system to the state by offering services to individuals and groups; b) at the societal level, it promotes cultural and social interaction; and c) at the political level, it assists the government and acts as a watchdog on human rights violations. (Basile, 2017; 217)

The resurgence of civil society institutions emerged in the 1990s as a reaction against oppressive regimes across the globe, most particularly in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. So civil society, as a kind of institution, bears a resemblance to the associative life of a citizen flourishes and takes on a vibrant function under the rubric of democracy. The process of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe witness to such event. It plays a range of roles, such as: a) form opinion to check the absolute power of the state; b) lobby for good governance by adhering to principles such as sharing information, communication, responsibility, and accountability; c) promote political participation; d) help

to promote democratic values such as tolerance and respect for others among citizens; e) play a significant role in providing democratic civic education; and f) it is the arena of expression of diverse interests (Jama, 2021).

Here it is to be noted that civil society flourishes in a democratic environment, and, by calibrating to the demands of weaker sections of society and pressuring the state, further paves the way for inclusive development.

ABOUT INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

The term “inclusive development” first appeared in academic writing in 1998 and became a crucial component of academic literature from 2008 onwards (Pattberg& Zelli (Eds.) 2015). However, at the policy level, Rauniyar and Kanbur’s (2010) study stressed that inclusive development first appeared in the publication of the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2007). It comes out with a strategy that focuses on “equity and empowerment based on reducing poverty, developing human capital (education and health), developing social capital (community-led participatory decision-making), developing ideas relating to gender (welfare and social development for women), and providing social protections for vulnerable groups” (Gupta et al., 2015).

But in a chapter on inclusive development, scholars such as Joyeeta Gupta, Vincent Cornelissen, and Mirjam A.F. Ros-Tonen offered five reasons for promoting inclusive development. These are the following:

1. Normative ground—justifies the empowerment of the poor on moral ground, 2) legal: making social norms institutionalized, 3) Economic: enhancing people’s material, relational, and subjective well-being by enlarging and increasing their participation in production, consumption, 4) security: focusing on minimizing social conflicts; 5) politics: taking into account the needs of the poorest. (Pattberg& Zelli (Eds.) 2015)

It means the very foundation of inclusive development strategy focuses on the principles of social justice and human rights perspectives, which prioritize the social needs of the most marginalized individuals and groups. Furthermore, some research studies argue that inclusive development is essentially about creating conditions for equitable opportunity, ensuring redistributive justice, and empowering the poor to assert their rights. It also requires addressing the political

process that led to the concentration of power (Pouw and Gupta, 2017).

According to Michael Chibba, the concept of inclusive development means it is seen as necessary by all societies, as it is the moral responsibility of all governments, organizations, and citizens to promote and engage in inclusive development. He emphasized that one of the fundamental policy thrusts associated with the failure of the neoliberal approach is that the market is not self-correcting and doesn't serve the public interest well, hence the need to achieve inclusive development, which requires a strong role for the state to address the fundamental matter at the intersection of society, economics, culture, and development. It is emphasizing pro-poor growth, or, essentially, growth that focuses on the poor in terms of equity (Chibba, 2008.)

Stressing the evolution of the concept of inclusive development in development discourse, scholars such as Gupta, Pouw, and Ros-Tonen argue that this is the latest coinage within development discourse because the idea of promoting sustainable development discourse floated with the publication of the Brundtland report in 1987, stressing fiscal discipline and macroeconomic stability. But in the 1990s, sustainable development was equated with human development and increasing entitlement. In the 2000s, with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the idea of sustainable development was linked to global sustainability, and from the 2010s onward, growing inequality and rising unemployment in different parts of the globe led to global initiatives by different nation states to promote an inclusive development agenda within the UN declaration of sustainable development goals (Gupta et al., 2015).

Now it is essential to see that the impact of civil society on democracy and development largely depends on the nature of the associations and the interests they represent and organize. One of the ways in which civil society and democracy inspire and promote inclusive development agendas is by creating a condition for opportunity for all, thereby making people part of a democratic process in which people from the bottom up, marginalized communities, and the excluded are at the forefront of achieving development outcomes (Raharja, Ed., 2020).

2.a Linking Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) with Inclusive Development

Civil society organizations play a representative role in achieving development objectives. Some scholars construct this representative role as legitimate, and in this way, CSOs play an important role in a democracy (Kamstra & Knippenberg, 2014).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a key role in facilitating inclusive development in a state. The non-electoral representation of CSOs challenges exclusion and advances inclusive development by providing a range of resources, perspectives, and voices to excluded sections of society. The role of representation is very important when looking into context and form (Katyaini et al., 2021). CSO plays some time as a grass-roots technical, knowledge partner, advisor, facilitator, sensitizer, etc.

In recent times, a joint research initiative by NOW (Dutch Research Council), WOTRO (Science for Global Development), and INCLUDE (a platform of African and Dutch professionals working on disseminating knowledge on inclusive development) came out with new evidence-based knowledge about CSOs that used dialogue and dissent frameworks to generate new knowledge in the context of the Netherlands and low- and middle-income countries. This has made an important contribution, especially in relation to CSOs and a range of issues such as power asymmetry, the aid chain, the legitimacy of CSOs, shrinking civic space, etc.

This aforementioned evidence-based study identified three crucial spheres of operation of civil society organizations (CSOs) (Goris et al., 2020). These are as follows:

1, CSOs, and civic engagement

In the sphere of civic engagement, CSOs are to perform as many as five duties. These are as follows:

- a) transforming the power dynamic.
- b) perform four distinct political roles: education, communication, representation, and cooperation.
- c) Different roles call for different capacities and forms of legitimacy.
- d) States and different social groups are to adjust their policies and norms to be more inclusive and sustainable in response to pressure from CSOs.
- e) For this purpose, the CSOs must be locally rooted to perform the political role.

2. CSOs AND THE AID CHAIN

CSOs are voluntary organizations. They need funding from outside for their survival and to carry forward their operational work. External funding can help CSOs in low- and middle-income countries (LLMICs) by helping to enhance their capabilities and advocacy roles. CSOs are activists in their own rights. Promoting the political functions of CSOs in civil society calls for a long-term, situation-specific strategy.

3. CSOs IN AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

External funding can support CSOs in LLMICs in their political obligations by supporting protection in harsh circumstances and campaigning for increased political space.

It has been found that most of the countries in the world are now under the grip of globalization. The neoliberal model's *laissez-faire* approach is fundamentally flawed in such a situation. As a matter of principle and practice, the state must play a central role in matters of government, shaping economic policy, management, and the provision of public goods and services. In such a situation, the state's role in forging public-private partnerships is very important. It also addresses the issues of microfinance and financial literacy as important tools for inclusive development. It has been found that experimentation with microfinance by NGOs plays a critical role in the allocation of resources. In this context, the role of CSOs is much more indispensable, particularly in Asian contexts, because it provides a generic approach that explains how civil society helps the poor be a part of financial inclusion and how states invent financial institutions by addressing issues of exclusion on the one hand and poverty reduction and economic growth on the other (Chibba, 2008).

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS (CSOs) IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

In India, the term "civil society organizations (CSOs) refer to a broad category that includes the "voluntary sector, "voluntary organizations "community-based organizations (CBOs)", "non-governmental organizations (NGOs)", "non-profit organizations (NPOs), as well as social movements.

In the pre-independent era, several social and religious reform movements flourished to fight against social injustice. These organizations were Brahma Samaj

(1828), Theosophical Society (1879), Rama Krishna Mission (1887), etc. All these organizations were engaged in changing social norms by countering age-old blind beliefs and prejudice. Later, different organizations played a significant role in bringing about equitable social order by challenging caste rigidity. In the meantime, there were organizations like Rastriya Swayamsevaka Sangh (RSS) and Hindu Mahasabha that were formed to pursue a distinct vision for India to form a Hindu nation.

In the post-independence period, civil society organizations (CSOs) in India have consistently grown, but the mushrooming of these organizations began after the economic reform period, and their focus has shifted from a welfare approach to one of development. In this period, NGOs are becoming more and more significant because they play a bigger role (combining the traditional role of providing basic services such as health care and education to the poor with new services such as water, sanitation, and housing) in the delivery of public goods. They strive for the advancement of marginalized sections of Indian society and are increasingly focused on reducing inequality based on caste, class, and gender. However, in the late 20th century, the function of CSOs evolved and is now deeply entwined with social movements. The emphasis is moving from a development strategy to one that focuses on rights and empowerment. The Chipko Movement and Narmada Bacho Andolan are the best examples of these movements (Goswami and Tandon, 2013).

In a nutshell, one of the vital functions of CSOs is to perform a representation role in non-electoral space. A study suggests that there are two ways the CSOs discursively constructed their representation function: one is "invented space," which is claimed or self-organized space, and the other is "invited space" (facilitated by the state). In the first space, the formally organized professional CSOs having long-term ties with local communities address the issues of different forms of marginalization in connection with different groups such as dalit, tribe, gender, ethnicity, child, etc. In relation to the second CSO, they perform the intermediary role between constituencies and the state by raising people's awareness about entitlement, articulating issues and needs, etc. (Wessel et al., 2019).

4. SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: IMPLICATION FOR INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

Upholding Indian democracy in its vibrant form lies in the active, diverse, and critical engagement of

people in the civil sphere. This civic engagement fosters participation in the realm of politics and significantly contributes to participation as well as representation within the political and societal decision-making process. The participation of civil society organizations in the political process, indispensable to achieving inclusive development, is a matter in consonance with democratic principles.

However, a worrying trend has emerged: the space for CSOs to express their opinions is rapidly diminishing as a result of the fact that these groups frequently counter coercion, humiliation, harassment, and criminalization when they try to address the issues that are affecting citizens' lives. For example, organizations like Oxfam India, the Independent and Public-Spiritual Media Foundation (IPSMF), the Center for Policy Research, and Amnesty International are alleged to have been harassed by government investigating agencies. These reasons, which Chinmay Bendre and Neelam Pandit very powerfully and forcefully articulated in an article in "The Leaflet," are tied to the emergence of this sectarian politics, the diminishing importance of media ethics, the restriction of academic freedom, etc.

Similarly, an article, Civil society under siege in India, published in "The Hindu" on January 12, 2024, by Rahul Mukharjee and Aditya Srivastava, argues that the government has taken stringent action against civil society in India. The BJP government amended the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) in 2020. At the same time, the act also empowers the Crime Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to look into NGOs, and the people working with this type of organization are under the government scanner. In such a situation, pursuing an inclusive development agenda is a little bit difficult. The possible outcomes of shrinking the space of CSOs are as follows:

1. It is a general belief that the democratically elected government, which ought to grant CSOs unrestricted access to free civil space, is currently employing an arbitrary technique that prevents them from even entering the political sphere. A few examples of such techniques are not only amendments to the FCRA but regulation and restriction in the domain of information technology laws, society registrations, CSOs role in engaging with societal relations, etc. Here, the very "invited space" of CSOs is under threat, as is how it brings the agenda of inclusive perspective into practice. In this sense, the relationship between the state and society has acquired a new

form of contestation. Soumi Banerjee and Rishi Jha describe it as the growing tide of illiberalism in Indian states in a blog post in "The Loop,"

2. The diminishing of the CSO's own control over civil space, as we call it "invented space," led to a threat to their own capacity to engage in the development and empowerment of marginalized communities. CSOs identify vulnerability and social inequality located at the identity level, which is reflected in the form of caste, tribe, gender, sex, region, religion, etc. In order to support their development agenda through community engagement, resources must be mobilized, local concerns must be monitored, and social relations must be analysed with competence. Due to restrictions and shrinking space, it has seriously hampered the CSO's ability to work in diverse fields and their capacity to create the favourable conditions that are necessary for inclusive development, the restoration of human dignity, and realizing the goal of a sustainable future.
3. CSOs largely operate by receiving donations from outside, which Jayant Kumar referred to as "dependency syndrome." in an article published in "Down to Earth" on April 22, 2022. Hence, it is axiomatic that once restrictions are imposed, the CSOs will disappear from the scene. Now, NGOs no longer have access to foreign funding because of the FCRA 2020 Act. Data shows that between 2015 and 2022, 18,000 NGOs had their rights to foreign funding revoked. Restructuring access to resources (including Foreign Contribution Regulation Act clearance, revoking the 12A/80-G license, imposing retrospective tax, and pressuring private companies and philanthropists to redirect funding) has a negative impact on both citizens and societies.

Then the question arises: how to deal with creating space for civil society organizations (CSOs) so that they will regain their lost glory and reinstall the people's hope when the state institution fails to meet the people's aspirations, realizing or achieving the common good? In this regard, the sixth principle discussed by Amitab Behar, CEO of Oxfom India, is relevant here. In his article "Shrinking Civic Space: A New Imagination for Reframing CSO Accountability, he provided a framework that expresses: 1) must align with core values such as justice, non-discrimination, equality, and freedom; 2) strengthen democracy; 3) courage; 4) stand for solidarity; 5) leave no one behind, putting the last first; and 6) meddle. Hence, issues like autonomy, participation,

representation, decentralization in decision-making, devolution of power, communication, and information are the core values associated with CSOs, without which they will not deliver the results for which they have been imagined or practiced.

In addition, CSOs capacity to influence public policy and public discourse required renewed energy, and this is an uncharted territory rather than an easy one. It is important and imperative for CSOs to adopt the Gramscian concept of the “war of position,” as opposed to the “war of maneuver” or “frontal war” (Shah, 2014). In the Gramscian sense, “war of maneuver” refers to the actual physical subversion of state machinery. In the current circumstances, it is extremely challenging to utilize this “war of maneuver”; rather, it is favourable to use his “war of positions,” which entails persistent opposition and resistance in the cultural sphere. In fact, there are many areas that need introspection in relation to foreign funding, and if possible, they should be shorted by taking pragmatic steps. Therefore, pursuing a transformative agenda of CSOs means it should apply all these aforementioned ideals so that it will be an implementable action or practicable one in bringing pro-poor policy change.

All these above principles and strategies will further help CSOs to restore the accountability issue and might offer CSOs a means of revitalizing their functioning and responsibility in realizing the goal of inclusive development in India.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important functions of civil society in contemporary time is to enhance the quality of democratic government by making government accountable and responsive to citizen. In the era of Globalisation civil society supposed to channel peoples voice when a market fails to deliver peoples aspiration. In such situation CSOs act as a lobby group to pressure government by delivering citizen due justice, equality and ensuring inclusion of excluded be it in receiving public good or services or participation in economic sphere when market ignore these peoples. India no such exception where discrimination is still perpetuated on the ground of caste, religion, sex and based on other ethnic consideration.

But the way majoritarian states use a sectarian approach is humiliating and self-defeating in the context of achieving inclusive development in India. The way the state is behaving has been negated by people the

world over. For example, India’s position on the World Press Freedom Index is very deterrent. In the 2022 report, out of 180 countries, India’s position was 142. Take not one of the dismissal records of India’s electoral democracy index 2023, where India’s place is 108. Therefore, it is high time to generate more social capital networks and draw out a critical strategy to counter the challenge coming from the arbitrary law imposed by the state and possibly adhere to democratic principles and values. These are the right weapons to meet the changes faced by the CSO at the juncture to realize the vision of inclusive development in India.

One must take notice that despite repression and coercion from the Indian state, Alok Shukla, a Chhattisgarh-based environmental and forest activist, has been awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize this year for his effort to successfully advocate the right of *adhivasi* for the preservation of 445,000 acres of biodiversity-rich forest in Hasedo, located in Chhattisgarh. This story is illuminating and provides a ray of hope to all CSOs in this period of darkness.

FUNDING :

The authors received no financial support for this “research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

COMPETING INTEREST :

The author declare no competing interests.

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