LSE India Summit 2016 Working Paper #2

Rebecca Bowers and Sonali Campion, October 2016

Table of Contents

Executive summary

Economic growth and an aspirational middle class, alongside a hyper-proliferation of preferential digital interconnectivity has been the hallmark of India's modernity over the last two decades, creating harshly uneven and callous forms of development and appropriation. Civil society provides the most effective platform for broad-based action and redressal of grievances in India. However, it remains imperfect and there is increasing confusion about its role vis-à-vis other actors such as the state or corporations.

The Civil Society panel at the LSE India Summit 2016 covered media inclusion, unrepresented disadvantaged and minority communities, the limitations of technology and the roles and responsibilities of political parties. Panellists made recommendations for both civil society groups and policy makers to foster sustained and sophisticated dialogues with marginalised groups and strengthen representative politics in India.

Panellists

Shubhranshu Choudhary, creator of CGNet Swara
Vidhya Das, researcher, journalist and Joint Director of AGRAGAMEE, a grassroots civil society action group in Rayagada, Orissa.
Meera Devi Jatav, activist, journalist and founding member of the Women, Media and News Trust which own the rural weekly newspaper *Khabar Lahariya*.
Priyanka Kotamraju, journalist with *Khabar Lahariya*.
Pratap Bhanu Mehta, political scientist and President & Chief Executive of the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.
Yogendra Yadav, Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi and founder-member and ideologue for the Swaraj Abhiyan, and the Jai Kisan Andolan.

The session was chaired by **Craig Calhoun**, Director of LSE.

Introduction

> "Civil society is self-organising: it is not directed by rulers or the state, or by 'the invisible hand of markets'. Furthermore, it is a form of ideology that society is split into societal, economic, and political spheres which 'obscures the extent to which there is one reality which we may look at with different lenses'. Indeed, the levels of connectedness are multifaceted and cannot be considered in isolation to another."

These opening remarks from panel chair Craig Calhoun set the context for a wide ranging discussion on the role of civil society, whom it does and does not represent and the nature of the political party as a form of civil society in 21st century India.

The challenge of media inclusion

The nature of the relationship between the media and civil society may be affected by a number of factors including the absence of dialogue: 'social media is anti-social in this country' remarked Shubhranshu Choudhary, referring to the vast numbers of Indians (80+ per cent) who still do not have internet access.

Technology can aid in the creation of dialogues, but to do this even the most available formats such as radio must be opened up or 'Dalitised', that is, made available in the languages and dialects spoken by the most marginalised and oppressed social groups. As things stand, India's sole government sponsored news station, All India Radio, does little to reach out to these audiences or make their stories accessible to others. Civil society must explore alternative methods of communication to engage with disadvantaged and minority communities rather than merely interacting with the 'creamy layer' of groups who have some education and speak mainstream Indian languages. CG-Net Swara is one such experiment that enables members of various indigenous communities to communicate their problems and concerns with a wider administrative world. This is achieved through a call-back system after a complainant leaves a 'missed call'. Simple efforts to translate Gondi into Hindi have also facilitated communication significantly.

The language of media inclusion and state interaction (particularly in rural areas) was also explored via panellists representing *Khabar Lahariya*, a Hindi medium newspaper in Uttar Pradesh run by female journalists. Whilst the newspaper covered a number of issues facing women in particular, including sexual harassment and violence, it is often only after the English language press picks up such stories that any meaningful state intervention occurs. For example, stories of violence against Dalit women running for elected office barely make the news and as a result their recourses to justice on a day-to-day basis are severely inhibited. Whilst the spread of new technology may aid in reporting such incidents and holding public officials to account, this is also held back by a lack of infrastructure in rural areas in particular, where electricity is scarce.

Uncivil society

Despite the growth of India's economy, illiteracy and malnourishment persist, while distress migration and joblessness are rising. The concept of 'uncivil society' was raised by multiple panellists regarding the behaviour of the state and neglect by fellow members of civil society itself in addressing this. The continuing influence of corruption on non-elite citizens remains a significant issue, with bribery necessary to get things done, and underpayment of workers in schemes such as NREGA (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) because everyone else has taken a share. Further, the passing and execution of acts that favour elite citizens such as the old Land Acquisition Act are often enforced with vigour, whereas there is a dearth of action surrounding those that do not, such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act.

Many Acts also lack the requisite funding or even duplicate one another. For example, the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act of 2008 was established to provide healthcare and insurance as well as pensions to a wide range of unorganised workers. However, it was not mandated with a cess fund in place so state boards have yet to be established and there is much ambiguity about where the funds should come from. Lessons could be learned from the comparatively successful Building and Other Construction Workers Act of 1996, which is funded by a cess on all construction projects and has been successfully implemented in almost every state, despite some issues with delivery of benefits to workers. However, given that these acts both include construction workers, much more thought needs to be given to efficiency to avoid overlap.

Agriculture is heavily subsidised by men and women, who are paid below minimum wage, and their children, who become 'free labour' assisting their parents. Rural women face multiple negative biases from the government, law enforcement authorities and informal patriarchal hierarchies. Such populations, despite forming the majority of Indian citizens, are routinely excluded from state action, with Yogendra Yadav citing as an example the government's failure to address the persistent drought affecting 39% of the country for the second year running and the resultant deprivation and farmer suicides.

India has had positive economic growth in recent years, but that has been accompanied by growth in unemployment, illiteracy and hunger. These inequalities are attributable to a number of factors explored by panellists ranging from language, the uneven nature of growth in the Indian economy, and the ambiguity surrounding the machinery and functions civil society itself.

Political parties

Emphasis was placed on the need to change the nature of political parties, with Yadav in particular stressing that they were no longer fulfilling their role as a bridge between citizens and the state which aggregates interests, needs and opinions to translate them into policies. He indicated that during the national movement and in the early years of independence there was a stronger connection between politics and constrictive work, which has now been lost.

However, the Q&A highlighted the importance of ensuring that civil society remains distinct from political parties. Pratap Bhanu Mehta in particular argued that strong civil society organisations (CSOs), family structures and schools are needed to build society because political parties alone cannot bear the burden. While politics dances lightly on the surface, civil society creates the depth that informs debates, for example on reforming public universities.

Mehta also pointed to the wider confusion around institutional functions. Rights, law and order, education is the responsibility of the state; revenue maximising falls into the remit or corporates; CSOs should deal in social justice. Yet today the private sector are occupied with corporate social responsibility and social justice, the state is trying to play to role of a revenue maximiser in certain sectors, while civil society is trying to fill in for the state in service delivery. This raises questions about which organisational forms should perform which duties under what conditions?

The panel also discussed the lack of community dialogues required to deepen democracy and build more representative political parties and CSOs. There are hundreds of struggles going on at a very local or even household level - *Khabar Lahariya* journalists for example will often have to stand up to male relatives in order to work and will be the only women on their local press councils, while tribal communities have been fighting for 20 years to get their children access to education with little success. How can civil society be adapted so these battles are represented and supported?

The discussion highlighted in passing many of the attendant problems which plague parties, such as election expenditure and inter-party democracy. This raised questions around the possibilities for institutional reform measures, and where these might come from. Many of those who engage with the electoral process draw their roots of ethical action drawn from religious life. This isn't about being religious, and religion is not the only source, but it is about learning ethical action. When there is no source that provides ethical action is then how we have the crisis that we do.

Recommendations for civil society and Indian policy making

- Civil society needs to expand its reach. There are a lot of people trying to do good for others but this is not fully informed by ground realities due to the urban nature of CSOs and the absence of sustained and sophisticated dialogue

- In order to strengthen female voices within communities and civil society (particularly in rural contexts), there needs to be a greater representation of women in the media. This could be achieved through training and support for female journalists, and the establishment of reservations for women on press councils.

- CSOs should work to foster community dialogues using available communications tools to amplify marginalised voices. CGNET Swara has been experimenting with mobile phone and Bluetooth radio technology to enable rural citizen journalism and the production of broadcasts in local languages and dialects. This mobilisation has the

potential to create the foundations for more representative political movements and parties

- Digital inclusion should be promoted, but CSOs must also be mindful of the limitations of technology when developing campaigns. Websites are of limited use if minority groups cannot access them, either because they don't have reliable internet connections or they are not available in a community's dialect.

- The government should create alternative state news radio stations and allow groups to establish community radio stations to offer local news, shows in Adivasi dialects and promote alternative dialogues.

- The main Hindi/English daily newspaper need to make a concerted effort to cover major stories outside the metropoles which affect the lives of millions, for example the ongoing drought.

- Mechanisms in rural areas need to be improved to enable Scheduled Caste and minority populations to report crimes and file FIRs. *Khabar Lahariya* and other NGOs have established dedicated helplines to serve particular areas, but the government should support recommendations for a nationwide system to be put into place.

- Another solution for reporting sexual assault is to actively train and recruit female police in rural areas, which would also serve the purpose of promoting gender equality in policing.

- Election spending laws need to be revised and procedures put in place to ensure transparency of where both candidate and party money is being spent. This will provide a more level playing field for less wealthy candidates and clamp down on the role of black money in elections

- Contestation within party politics needs to be revived by placing a renewed emphasis on internal party democracy. Given that the impetus for this is not coming from the parties themselves (aside from a handful of Congress experiments with primaries) civil society need to create the pressure.

difficult dialogues
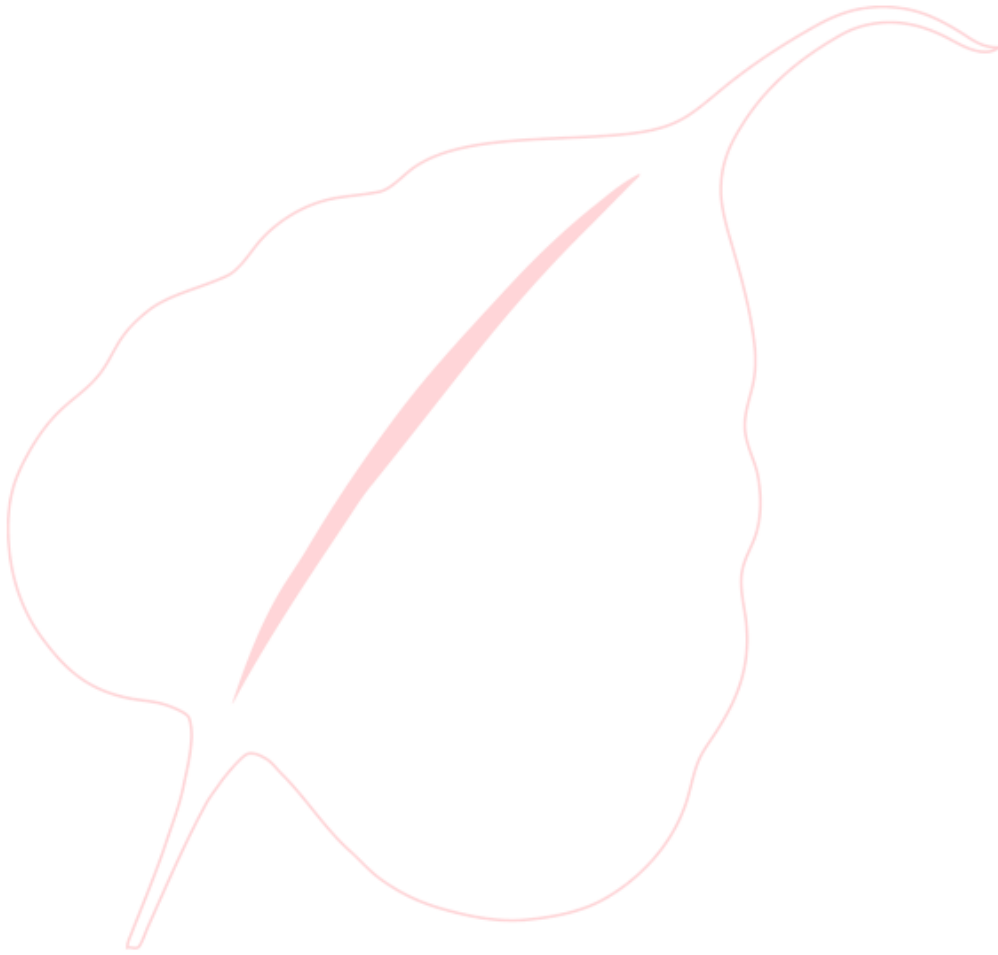
The LSE India Summit 2016 was sponsored in full by Difficult Dialogues LLP

www.difficultdialogues.com
info@difficultdialogues.com

LSE | SOUTH ASIA CENTRE

South Asia Centre
The London School of
Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
United Kingdom

lse.ac.uk/southasia
+44 (0)20 7107 5330
southasiacentre@lse.ac.uk

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia
@SAsiaLSE
facebook/SAsiaLSE