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# Civil Society and the Indian State: From Nation-Building to Resistance in a Shifting Democratic Terrain

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**Abstract**: *This article traces the evolving relationship between public administration and civil society in India—from its early post-independence idealism to its contemporary struggle for space and legitimacy. It examines how civil society has historically engaged with the state, influenced welfare and rights-based legislation, and acted as a vehicle for citizen participation and accountability. Yet, in the face of increasing regulatory restrictions, shrinking civic freedoms, and donor-driven depoliticization, civil society finds itself at a critical juncture. Drawing from historical, institutional, and conceptual sources, the article evaluates the achievements and limits of Indian civil society while mapping out future pathways for reclaiming its democratic role. Ultimately, it argues that a revitalized, unified, and assertive civil society is essential not only for developmental justice but also for the preservation of constitutional democracy in India.*

**Keywords**: Civil Society in India, Public Administration, Democratic Governance, FCRA and NGO Regulation, Rights-based Campaigns, Political Participation

## I. INTRODUCTION

In India, civil society has long been the space where democracy breathes, protests erupt, and alternatives take root. From Gandhi's ashrams to grassroots hunger campaigns, it has played a complex, evolving role: at times a partner to the state, at others its fiercest critic. Yet in today's political climate—defined by majoritarian nationalism, shrinking freedoms, and a crackdown on dissent—this space is under unprecedented pressure.

Civil society in India is not a monolith. It spans Gandhian volunteers, professionalized NGOs, legal activists, mass movements, digital campaigns, and religious welfare groups. It operates in slums, courtrooms, forests, and Parliament corridors. Historically, it has been instrumental in bridging the gap between constitutional promises and lived realities—especially for the poor, the marginalized, and the silenced. But as funding patterns shift, media coverage shrinks, and government regulations tighten, the very meaning and future of civil society is being contested.

This article explores how the relationship between civil society and the Indian state has transformed—from the early post-independence ethos of cooperation and nation-building to the turbulent era of resistance and restricted civic space. Drawing from historical phases, theoretical insights, institutional policies, and contemporary crises, it examines whether civil society in India can still serve as a force for democratic accountability and systemic reform—or whether it risks becoming just another instrument of managed consensus.

## II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Understanding the role of civil society in India requires grappling with its conceptual roots in political theory and its adaptation within the country's unique democratic and socio-cultural framework. Classical Western theorists have long debated the boundaries between civil society and the state. Thomas Hobbes, though he did not explicitly use the term, envisioned a space where individuals pursue private life under the ultimate authority of the sovereign—a space distinct from the brutal "state of nature." John Locke expanded this further by arguing that civil society arises when individuals collectively agree to form a government to protect life, liberty, and property. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was the

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first to distinctly separate the spheres of family, civil society, and the state. For Hegel, civil society represented a realm of social needs, economic interactions, and voluntary associations that mediate between the intimate world of the family and the authority of the state [7].

Later theorists deepened these understandings. Charles Taylor described civil society as a commercial society that includes both economic and non-economic voluntary associations, while Gellner viewed it as a set of diverse, non-governmental institutions strong enough to counterbalance the state—ensuring it does not atomize the rest of society, yet without obstructing its role in maintaining order [7]. Antonio Gramsci introduced a more critical view by situating civil society within the framework of hegemony. For Gramsci, civil society is not merely a neutral space of cooperation but a site of ideological struggle where dominant groups maintain consent through culture and institutions. In this view, civil society may both challenge and reinforce state power, depending on who controls its discourse [7].

These frameworks evolved further in contemporary theory. Jürgen Habermas introduced the concept of the "public sphere" as an essential aspect of civil society—a communicative arena where citizens deliberate on matters of common interest, independent of both the market and the state. In India, this conception has gained traction among scholars analyzing the role of civil society in democratic governance. Sahoo, for instance, argues that the "arena of public sphere" is more apt for understanding how Indian civil society engages with state actors, particularly in the realm of development cooperation and public accountability [3]. Habermas believed that a strong public sphere could act as a check on the unbridled authority of the state by giving voice to rational-critical debate from an informed citizenry [3].

However, critiques of this idealized version of the public sphere point out that it often privileges elite voices. Nancy Fraser, for example, argued that Habermas's original formulation is exclusionary—it reflects the perspectives of the bourgeois class and fails to account for marginalized voices [4]. This critique is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where caste, class, religion, and gender often determine who participates in civil society and whose interests are amplified.

Modern Indian interpretations of civil society acknowledge both its pluralist potential and its embedded inequalities. Rajesh Tandon and Ranjita Mohanty distinguish between civil society as organized groups and as a broader sphere of civic engagement, noting that only a fraction of civil society in India is institutionalized through NGOs or formal associations [6], [7]. In their view, civil society must be seen not just as a collection of organizations, but as a dynamic space for contesting power, articulating public interest, and promoting accountability.

Civil society, then, is not inherently democratic, progressive, or oppositional. It may advance the cause of justice or deepen existing hierarchies, depending on its composition and its relationship with the state and the market. As Edwards argues, civil society is a "magic concept" often invoked without clarity—but its strength lies in its ability to combine associational life, the public sphere, and norms of active citizenship [2]. In India, this trinity is under strain. While millions participate in religious, cultural, and charitable organizations, only a minority engage in active democratic citizenship that challenges state power or advocates for structural reform.

Ultimately, the theoretical richness of civil society lies in its contradictions. It can be both a space of freedom and of domination; a driver of democracy and a buffer for state legitimacy; a platform for marginalized voices and a mouthpiece for elite interests. In India, these tensions are particularly pronounced given the scale of social inequality, the legacy of colonial rule, and the persistence of caste, communal, and gender-based exclusions. These conceptual foundations provide the lens through which we must now examine the historical evolution and contemporary challenges facing Indian civil society.

## III. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE IN INDIA

### a. Post-Independence to 1970s: State-Led Development and Co-option

In the aftermath of India's independence, the new nation-state positioned itself as the primary engine of national reconstruction. Guided by the ideals of democracy, liberty, and social justice enshrined in the Constitution, the state adopted a welfare-oriented developmental model. Civil society, which had been vibrant during the anti-colonial struggle, found itself absorbed into the machinery of governance. Many prominent freedom fighters and activists joined the state, believing that the task of social transformation could best be accomplished through formal institutions. Gandhian voluntary associations were either absorbed into the state apparatus or co-opted through financial and

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administrative support. The establishment of the Central Social Welfare Board in 1953 and the Khadi and Village Industries Commission in 1956 were emblematic of this state-led engagement with civil society [1].

The early years of independence were marked by the dominance of a mixed economy model in which the state assumed a central role in deploying capital and managing public goods. Education, health, infrastructure, and power were largely public-sector domains. Civil society activity remained limited to Gandhian and religious organizations engaged in welfare, literacy, and rural development. These groups, often dependent on state funding, began to lose their autonomy, becoming para-state institutions over time [1]. The cooperative movement, which initially embodied voluntarism and collective agency, was also gradually bureaucratized and brought under state control through systematic financing and regulation [1].

Despite the dominance of the state, India's democratic framework allowed space for civil society to function—albeit within state-defined boundaries. However, this arrangement began to fray in the late 1960s. Developmental programs premised on the "trickle-down" theory failed to benefit large sections of the rural poor, Dalits, and tribal communities. Instead, upper-caste elites and urban-industrial classes emerged as the main beneficiaries. The failure of monsoons, rising inflation, and stagnant economic growth led to increasing public discontent, setting the stage for more assertive forms of civil society activism [1].

**b. 1960s–1970s: Protests, Movements, and the Emergency**

The 1970s witnessed the eruption of popular protests against economic injustice, unemployment, corruption, and state apathy. Two landmark movements emerged: the Naxalite movement, which championed armed resistance against feudal and capitalist oppression in rural India, and the Sampoorna Kranti (Total Revolution) led by Jayaprakash Narayan, which called for sweeping democratic reforms through peaceful mass mobilization. These movements marked the re-entry of civil society as a political force independent of the state [1].

However, this resurgence was abruptly curtailed by the declaration of the Emergency in 1975. The suspension of civil liberties, press censorship, and mass detentions revealed the fragile underpinnings of Indian democracy. It also marked a low point in state-civil society relations. During this period, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) was enacted in 1976 to monitor and restrict foreign funding of voluntary organizations, especially those viewed as politically sensitive or subversive [1].

The end of the Emergency in 1977 triggered a new wave of activism. Civil society emerged with renewed focus on rights, empowerment, and participatory development. Organizations such as the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) were formed to defend constitutional freedoms and challenge state excesses [1]. These grassroots initiatives, often referred to as the "non-party political process" by sociologist Rajni Kothari, reflected a new form of politics that bypassed electoral institutions to engage directly with communities [1]. Activism during this period extended into environmental justice (e.g., the Chipko movement), gender equality, anti-caste struggles, and campaigns against large infrastructure projects like the Narmada dam [1], [5].

Civil society's role was expanding in both form and substance. A wide array of organizations emerged, ranging from welfare-focused NGOs to indigenous development agencies, professionalized action groups, and community-based organizations. These groups combined service delivery with empowerment and rights-based approaches. Despite this dynamism, the state continued to exert regulatory control through funding restrictions, registration laws, and surveillance [1].

**c. 1980s–1990s: NGO Boom, Professionalization, and Policy Dialogue**

The 1980s saw both increased state control and formalized partnership with voluntary organizations. The Kudal Commission, established in 1982, investigated the foreign funding and political activities of Gandhian organizations, casting a shadow over the voluntary sector. Amendments to the FCRA made it mandatory for NGOs to register with the Ministry of Home Affairs to receive foreign contributions. Simultaneously, new nodal agencies like the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) were created to channel government support to rural NGOs [1].

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By the 1990s, civil society in India was undergoing a transformation. The liberalization of the economy coincided with the rise of new-generation NGOs that were better funded, professionally managed, and more focused on development outcomes. Many of these NGOs engaged in both service delivery and policy advocacy, particularly in health, education, and environment. The state, overwhelmed by structural adjustment and privatization pressures, began outsourcing welfare functions to these civil society actors. The Seventh Five-Year Plan explicitly acknowledged the role of NGOs in development implementation [1], [5].

This period also saw the emergence of rights-based campaigns aimed at elevating the Directive Principles of State Policy to the status of enforceable rights. Legal activism, especially through public interest litigation (PIL), became a powerful tool for civil society groups. The Supreme Court, seeking to redeem itself after the Emergency, began issuing progressive rulings on health, housing, education, and food security [4]. Civil society gained legitimacy through legal victories and its contributions to legislative processes, including the Right to Education and the Right to Information [4], [5].

However, as Neera Chandhoke notes, this era also marked the shift from autonomous mobilizations to state-partnered advocacy. Civil society actors increasingly became part of advisory bodies like the National Advisory Council (NAC), diluting their critical edge and binding them to the logic of policy incrementalism rather than structural transformation [4].

TABLE I: Evolution of Civil Society in India (1947–Present)

| Period | Key Features | State-Civil Society Dynamic | Representative Organizations / Movements |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1947–1959** | Nation-building; Gandhian voluntarism; State co-optation of grassroots efforts | Collaborative but increasingly statist and centralized | CSWB, KVIC, Gandhian Orgs, Religion-based welfare groups |
| **1960s–1970s** | Rise of grassroots protests; social justice movements; Emergency crackdown | Tense and repressive (esp. during Emergency); civil society marginalized | PUCL, PUDR, Chipko, Naxalite movement, Jayaprakash Narayan's movement |
| **1980s** | Institutional backlash (e.g., Kudal Commission); rising professionalization; creation of CAPART | Cautious engagement; stricter regulation via amended FCRA | AVARD, CAPART-linked NGOs |
| **1990s–Early 2000s** | Liberalization; donor-driven NGOs; rights-based campaigns; PIL era begins | Mixed: collaboration on service delivery, contention over policy and rights | RTI Campaign, NREGA movement, Right to Food Campaign, PRIA |
| **2010s–Present** | Regulatory squeeze (FCRA 2020); delegitimization; shrinking civic space; emergence of CSR funding | Increasingly adversarial; crackdown on dissent; selective engagement | Greenpeace India, AAP, CSIP, Gateway House, ORF |

## IV. CONTEMPORARY CRISIS: CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER SIEGE

In recent years, Indian civil society has entered a new and precarious phase. While the sector continues to grow in scale, diversity, and outreach, it is simultaneously facing a constriction of space, freedom, and legitimacy. This paradox defines the contemporary crisis: on paper, civil society appears robust—funded, organized, and networked—but in practice, it operates under increasing surveillance, regulatory constraint, ideological pressure, and public suspicion.

A key mechanism of this constriction has been the deployment of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA). Although first enacted in 1976, the FCRA has been significantly tightened in the 2010 and 2020 amendments, giving the state sweeping powers to freeze bank accounts, cancel licenses, and deny registration to NGOs receiving foreign funds. The result has been a dramatic decertification of thousands of organizations, including internationally respected entities such as Greenpeace India, Amnesty International India, and the Ford Foundation's affiliates [6]. These

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measures, while justified by the state as a matter of national security or financial transparency, have had a chilling effect on civil society's ability to critique policy or support unpopular causes, especially those related to minority rights, environmental justice, and democratic dissent [6].

At the same time, a shift in philanthropic trends has reshaped the funding landscape. The rise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), mandated by the Companies Act, has created a dominant stream of "safe" funding focused on measurable, non-political development goals. NGOs seeking CSR funds are implicitly discouraged from engaging in advocacy or confrontation with business and government interests. As the article by the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy at Ashoka University notes, much of this "new philanthropy" reflects the technocratic mindset of the IT and finance sectors—favoring short-term, impact-driven projects over long-term institution-building or rights-based work [6].

This apolitical funding climate is compounded by a broader erosion of institutional checks and balances. Mainstream media, which once played a critical role in amplifying civil society voices, has largely aligned with government and corporate interests. Investigative journalism has been replaced by narrative control, and civil society coverage is often limited to uncritical dissemination of official statements. The judiciary, while still an occasional ally, remains inaccessible for many small organizations due to the time, cost, and complexity involved in legal battles [6]. Although landmark rulings on issues like the right to food or education have emerged through public interest litigation, such victories have become rarer and are increasingly framed within conditional and case-specific remedies, rather than establishing systemic rights [4].

Alongside regulatory and financial pressures, civil society faces an ideological campaign of delegitimization. Disinformation portraying NGOs as corrupt, anti-national, foreign agents has gone largely unchallenged in public discourse. This has led to a noticeable decline in public solidarity—especially among the middle classes who once provided both moral and material support to democratic mobilizations [6]. As Neera Chandhoke argues, campaigns that once pushed the state toward redistributive justice now risk being absorbed into governance structures or sidelined as harmless "policy inputs." Civil society's critical function of holding power accountable is being replaced by a model of controlled participation and co-optation [4].

The fragmentation within civil society has also exacerbated its vulnerability. Responses to the state's tightening grip have ranged from denial to defensiveness to outright retreat. Many organizations have chosen to disengage from rights-based advocacy altogether, focusing instead on deliverables and compliance. Others operate in silos, disconnected from one another and from the broader ecosystem. Solidarity across themes—environment, gender, caste, tribal rights, digital freedoms—remains limited, weakening collective resistance [6].

Nevertheless, there are emerging efforts to reclaim civic space. A small but determined set of civil society groups is beginning to coalesce around core constitutional values—democracy, pluralism, and justice. They are creating new forums for collaboration, investing in second-line leadership, and emphasizing transparency and governance standards within their own networks. Some philanthropists have also begun to support this strategic turn, recognizing the need for systemic change over project-based funding [6].

The struggle, however, is uneven. Civil society today finds itself pitted against a state that is more centralized, more surveillance-capable, and more willing to weaponize laws, media, and bureaucracy to silence dissent. The civic space is still open—but narrower, more volatile, and increasingly contested. Whether Indian civil society can survive and thrive in this environment will depend on its ability to rebuild alliances, rearticulate its mission, and reclaim its role not just as a service provider but as a safeguard of democracy itself.

## V. EVALUATING CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE AND LIMITS

The achievements of Indian civil society in the post-liberalization era are undeniable. It has influenced landmark legislation, delivered crucial services to marginalized communities, exposed systemic failures, and forced public discourse around rights and justice. Campaigns such as those for the Right to Information (RTI), Right to Education (RTE), and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) represent high points in civil society's engagement with the state [4]. These movements, many of them initiated or sustained by civil society groups, used legal

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action, research, public mobilization, and media outreach to push issues of basic entitlements into the political mainstream.

However, these legislative victories also reveal the limits of civil society's power. The Right to Education campaign, for example, succeeded in securing a constitutional right, but failed to ensure systemic transformation. Public schools remain underfunded and poorly managed; teacher absenteeism, infrastructural decay, and administrative neglect continue to plague the system. Similarly, the Right to Food campaign led to the passage of the National Food Security Act in 2013, but its implementation remains patchy, and corruption in the public distribution system is widespread [4]. As Neera Chandhoke argues, legislation in itself is not sufficient—unless it is matched by institutional reform and accountability mechanisms, it amounts to a symbolic gesture rather than a structural shift [4].

This reflects a deeper issue within Indian civil society: the tendency to focus on policy wins without addressing the entrenched power relations that undermine them. Many campaigns, by pursuing specific entitlements through judicial and legislative channels, have avoided confronting the broader social and economic hierarchies—such as land ownership, caste-based exclusion, or corporate capture of resources—that sustain inequality. As Chandhoke notes, these campaigns often operate within the boundaries of what is politically permissible, rather than pushing those boundaries outward [4]. The state, in turn, has shown a willingness to co-opt civil society actors into advisory roles or policy consultations, as seen with the National Advisory Council (NAC). While this inclusion appears to validate civil society's influence, it also neutralizes its oppositional potential, creating a model of sanctioned participation without systemic disruption [4].

Furthermore, the legal route to reform—particularly through Public Interest Litigation (PIL)—has shown diminishing returns. While the Supreme Court has occasionally been an ally of civil society, its interventions are often conditional, narrow in scope, and lacking in enforceable follow-through. In contrast to South Africa's jurisprudence on systemic social rights, India's judiciary has preferred issuing directives to redress isolated violations rather than establishing universal entitlements [4]. Madhav Khosla calls this model "conditional social rights," where access to justice is framed around proving specific grievances rather than affirming a collective standard of well-being [4].

Another major limitation lies in the increasing professionalization and depoliticization of NGOs. As civil society became more structured and fund-driven in the 1990s and 2000s, it also became less rooted in mass mobilization. The transition from social movements to project-based campaigns has often meant a shift in focus—from systemic change to programmatic efficiency. Many NGOs now prioritize technical outputs, monitoring indicators, and donor compliance over grassroots empowerment or political education. While this has improved institutional capacity and transparency, it has also distanced civil society from the constituencies it claims to represent [1], [5].

Moreover, internal fragmentation within the civil society ecosystem has weakened its collective voice. The sector is divided along thematic, ideological, and class lines—with few platforms for cross-issue solidarity. Organizations working on tribal rights may find little resonance with those focused on urban governance or digital privacy. The absence of a shared strategic vision or coordinated response to state repression has made it easier for the government to isolate and discredit dissenting voices [6].

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of these trends is that civil society is increasingly seen not as a necessary partner in democracy, but as a threat to national unity or development. This perception, actively cultivated by the state and echoed in much of the media, paints civil society as a foreign-influenced, anti-growth, or elitist formation. As such, the middle-class public—which once formed the base of many reformist movements—has largely disengaged. The voices of the marginalized have thus become more isolated, and advocacy for justice more easily dismissed [6], [7].

Yet, despite these constraints, civil society remains one of the few arenas in which dissent, accountability, and imagination still find a foothold. Its legitimacy and influence may be contested, but its relevance has never been greater. The question now is whether it can move beyond incremental gains and fragmented activism to rebuild a robust, unified, and transformative political presence—one that can confront both state power and social inequities with equal clarity and courage.

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## VI. FUTURE PATHWAYS: RECLAIMING THE DEMOCRATIC SPACE

For Indian civil society to remain relevant—and more importantly, transformative—it must move beyond its current posture of defensiveness and fragmentation. The task ahead is not merely to survive regulatory and financial constraints, but to reclaim the civic space as a site of democratic imagination, resistance, and reconstruction. This requires a fundamental rethinking of strategy, structure, and solidarity.

First, civil society organizations must prioritize institutional resilience and leadership renewal. As Maja Daruwala rightly notes, scaling up operations, building second-line leadership, and specializing in both policy and grassroots work are no longer optional—they are necessary to withstand state hostility and deliver long-term change [6]. Many organizations still depend heavily on charismatic founders or urban-based intellectuals, leaving them vulnerable to disruption or co-optation. Investing in decentralized, field-based leadership—especially from marginalized communities—can both democratize internal structures and increase legitimacy among constituencies.

Second, there is a pressing need to reinvigorate mass-based civic engagement. Campaigns that rely solely on legal action, elite advocacy, or donor-driven metrics will always be limited in impact. Civil society must reconnect with people's lived experiences—especially those of Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, informal workers, and women—and work to translate everyday struggles into organized political demands. This does not mean abandoning professionalism or policy dialogue, but it requires rooting these efforts in participatory processes that reflect collective agency rather than technocratic solutions [3], [4].

Third, civil society must develop a cohesive counter-narrative—one that defends constitutionalism, pluralism, and justice as foundational values of Indian democracy. The current public discourse, shaped by populist nationalism and media complicity, often reduces dissent to disloyalty. Reclaiming the narrative means communicating clearly and consistently what civil society stands for—not merely what it opposes. As noted in recent commentary by Ashoka University's Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, this involves framing civil society not as a problem but as a pillar of democracy—accountable, transparent, and indispensable [6].

Part of this narrative work also involves demystifying and publicizing the sector's contributions. From delivering education and healthcare to advocating for gender justice and digital rights, civil society plays an essential role that most citizens are unaware of. Data on reach, innovation, and cost-efficiency must be shared more strategically, using storytelling and media engagement that resonates with young Indians and middle-class audiences [6], [7].

Simultaneously, a renewed emphasis on internal norms of accountability and transparency is vital. For civil society to credibly demand openness from the state, it must demonstrate the same commitment within its own operations. This includes clear financial disclosures, participatory governance models, ethical fundraising practices, and inclusive decision-making. Demonstrating integrity builds public trust and makes it harder for the state to delegitimize civic actors as corrupt or opaque [6].

Forging alliances across silos is another critical priority. The isolation of issue-based organizations has weakened collective bargaining power. Building platforms that bring together environmentalists, digital rights advocates, trade unionists, gender rights groups, health activists, and faith-based organizations can restore a shared civic agenda. While ideological differences will persist, shared threats—and shared democratic values—can serve as the basis for collaboration [4], [6].

Philanthropy, both domestic and international, has a vital role to play in this renewal. But the terms of engagement must shift. Donors must be willing to support systemic work, not just service delivery; unpopular causes, not just safe ones; long-term institution-building, not just short-term outputs. Importantly, donors should resist the temptation to impose foreign narratives or conditionalities that risk undermining the legitimacy of local actors. Instead, they can facilitate South-South learning, convene diverse stakeholders, and create protected spaces for civic dialogue [3], [6].

Finally, civil society must resist the temptation to retreat into policy consultancy or crisis response alone. The ultimate function of civil society is not simply to assist the state or substitute its failures, but to challenge its injustices. That means engaging with structures of power, not just symptoms of dysfunction. It means advocating not only for sufficiency, but for equality. As Neera Chandhoke reminds us, civil society must confront the reality that technocratic reform will never substitute for political transformation [4].

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The future of civil society in India is not preordained. It will depend on whether civic actors can reforge their role—not as service contractors or token critics, but as architects of a more just, democratic, and inclusive republic. In that struggle, the stakes are not merely organizational survival—they are the preservation of India's constitutional soul.

## VII. CONCLUSION: CIVIL SOCIETY AT THE CROSSROADS OF DEMOCRACY

Indian civil society stands at a historic crossroads. It has evolved from a space of nationalist fervor and Gandhian voluntarism to a vast, complex ecosystem of movements, NGOs, advocacy networks, and community-led initiatives. It has achieved remarkable milestones—reshaping laws, empowering the voiceless, and building democratic consciousness. Yet, its trajectory has also been marked by periods of suppression, co-optation, and increasing marginalization, especially in recent years.

What emerges from this long and layered history is a paradox: civil society has expanded in form, but contracted in influence. It has become more professionalized but less political. It has gained entry into policy spaces but lost the moral authority that comes from mass mobilization. The state, once a developmental partner, now often sees civil society as a threat to national security or economic progress—especially when it challenges entrenched inequalities or questions the dominant political narrative.

In the current climate of authoritarian drift, shrinking freedoms, and rising inequality, civil society must make a decisive turn. It must reclaim its foundational role: to stand as a buffer between the state and the citizen, to protect the rights of the most marginalized, and to demand accountability from power. This will require not just resilience but reinvention. Building new solidarities, articulating compelling civic narratives, and reconnecting with the grassroots are not just strategic necessities—they are democratic imperatives.

The future of Indian democracy will not be secured solely in elections or courtrooms. It will be shaped in the everyday actions of citizens, in the alliances built across differences, and in the courage of those who choose to speak truth to power. Civil society, imperfect as it may be, remains one of the last standing arenas where these acts of democratic faith can still find voice and force.

In a time of growing silence, civil society must find the strength to be loud again—not only in protest, but in purpose.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

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