



**Short Review Paper**

## **Political violence and civil society in India**

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### **Abstract**

*The global phenomenon of Political Violence which has been witnessed in different time-spaces has become a major trend for the recalcitrant groups of the society to achieve the desired political ends. Political Violence can be a one-sided affair which involves only the state repression on the disgruntled and enemy groups in the society. However, the recent trend has been the two-sided violence, where the state sponsors the violence on the one hand whereas on the other hand the armed groups or the non-state actors can also be seen confronting the state and its institutions on the ground. Such a confrontational violence has been termed as the civil-war. The origins of the political violence in the Indian union can be traced back to the mid 1960's when the popular armed uprisings started in the state of west Bengal by the dissatisfied rural poor, influenced by the moist doctrines. In the same period there was another armed uprising against in Jammu and Kashmir. The late 1970's saw the movement for the independent Khalistan by the Sikh groups in the Indian held Punjab. These movements not only undermined the state sovereignty but also led to the institutional breakdown of civil society.*

**Keywords:** Civil society, violence, state, India, conflict.

### **Introduction**

Political Violence occurs in polities having feeble institutions. Besley and Persson in a paper entitled, "The Logic of Political Violence" argues, 'Counting all countries and years since 1950, the average yearly prevalence of civil conflict, according to the Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD), is over 10%, with a peak of more than 15% in the early 1990's<sup>1</sup>.

The story of Indian politics since independence has not been devoid of the above-mentioned phenomena. Post-independent India witnessed the rising armed conflicts challenging the state sovereignty in different parts of the union. Chandhoke charges postcolonial India with having an abysmal record of achieving the kind of threefold equality justice demands as "millions of Indians continued to suffer from conceivably every ill of the human condition"<sup>2</sup>. The politics of the Indian state since 1947 is also marked by many significant developments which were directed towards the conformation of a democratic civil society for the effective implementation of law and order and holding the "state-nation" together. "It has generally been assumed that a vibrant civil society is one of the essential preconditions of democracy"<sup>3</sup>.

However the state politics didn't go well in many parts of the union and the post-independence period saw the intensification of movements against the Indian state in the parts of north-east, the Naxalite movement, the Khalistan movement of 1970's in the state of Punjab, and the Kashmiri movement for the right to self-determination, where not only the democratic ideals faced a stiff resistance from the discontented groups, acting as armed

non-state actors but also some severe jolts were witnessed by the civil society which hampered its development as an effective institution of 'civility'. The reasons for the intensification of such movement's ranges from the compound social inequalities and faulty execution of laws to the constant neglect of political aspirations of people.

The origins of political violence in India lay in its 'legitimation crises' which the Indian state has been facing in different regions since the time of its independence. This finally culminated and flared up in different civil-wars and public uprisings since mid-1960's. The Indian state responded to these crises with 'iron hand' and we saw how parallel govts were established for short periods in different parts of the union. The political violence in the union sprang from the crises in the hierarchical social structures- the popular red corridor, and the constant neglect of people's aspirations of self-determination- the Kashmir dispute.

The paper is an attempt to analyse the viability of the civil society in India in the backdrop of the political violence witnessed currently at many parts of the union, the various reasons which contributed to the rise of these political movements and the moral evaluation of such violence can also be analysed.

### **Ongoing Instances of Political Violence in India**

The politics in the North-Eastern part of the union is trapped in the sub-nationalist insurgencies and ethnic conflicts. The region witnessed its first armed uprising shortly after the India's

independence in the part of Nagaland. However, contrary to the popular notions of non-existence of civil societies in the region, 'between a militarily-willed state and violent insurgencies lie very many formal associations and informal networks that organize the space for a civil society'<sup>4</sup>.

The grim and constant political violence in the region has not been able to obliterate the informal institutions entirely. Under such conditions the civil-society has a dual function, i.e. initiating the peace processes which can involve both the govt and the rebel groups and negotiating peace between the groups and communities at the local levels, thus promoting mutual co-existence.

The popular 'red corridor' stretching from Eastern parts of the Indian union and involving the central and southern part has seen the extreme levels of political violence since 1960's. the revolutionary violence of these armed groups has its roots apart from other factors, in the structural injustices compound inequalities, the triple failure (check where it is) etc. however, the major contributing factor is the failure of civil society to reach to these marginalized tribal poor. The state crackdown on the movements of civil society organizations has led to a 'near-total information blackout in the state'<sup>5</sup>.

In short, the civil society in India at large has relatively failed to address and highlight the systemic neglect and aspirations of these tribal Adivasis resulting in the mirage of dual political violence and effective breakdown of the institutions of civil society.

The Kashmir dispute being internationally recognized has been a point of much political violence. Neera Chandhoke argues that the uprisings in Kashmir reflect the condition of democracy in Kashmir. She further maintains that in Kashmir not only did the state violate the social contract, but also the democratic institutions and organisations failed to channel political restiveness<sup>6</sup>.

Civil society as such didn't emerge as a powerful institutional force in Kashmir due to the sustained political mayhem and institutional breakdowns after repeated interludes in the state. However, its role to mediate the political tensions between different actors on the scene can't be denied as such. 'There are a handful of youth groups, blood banks and orphanages, but no development NGOs or trade associations'<sup>7</sup>.

### **Evaluation of Political Violence in India**

The moral evaluation of any political violence should be determined by two facts i.e. whether it is used to counter the larger violence of the state and its institutions or to overcome the bigger injustices structured inequalities and constant neglect of popular aspirations.

Chandhoke in one of her articles very lucidly tried to exhibit a much coherent picture where she argued that,

*Considering the extent of ill-being that stalks the lives of the poor, considering that both the state and civil society groups have done little to ensure the well-being of the poorest of the poor, and considering that among the SCs and the STs living in central and east India there is more denial of self-respect, more infant mortality, more malnourishment, more ill health, more illiteracy, and more premature deaths than the rest of the population, it is difficult to definitively pronounce that violence is illegitimate<sup>8</sup>.*

She charges the Indian state for neglecting the political and social identity of these deprived people and the flawed mechanisms of law implementation, the agrarian crises and appropriation of the lands of these tribal Adivasis. There has been a very little progress on the ground where the role of the state to empower and address their issues was quite remarkable.

The constant denial for recognition of the distinctive character of the tribal communities in the North-Eastern part resulted in a still unresolved civil war. The Indian state's use of different special and colonial policies to curb the rising voices in the region relegated the civil society to the wall, where any move to divulge the wrongs wreaked upon the innocent people are pigeon-holed as suspicious, anti-national and threats to the national security of the Indian state.

The role of the civil society organisations, to consolidate or rebuild the social harmony and democratic participations, hampers when the possibilities and sentiments are systematically obliterated by the state repressions and the use of repressive laws.

Chandhoke writes that 'the main reason for political discontent and resort to violence in Kashmir has to do with repeated infringement of the social contract by the central government of India, acting often in tandem with the state government. This has been accompanied by the insistent erosion of the democratic space that permits articulation of political discontent'<sup>5</sup>.

The perpetual cycle of violence in Kashmir has resulted in the thousands of deaths, the mass killings and the blatant violation of human rights in the state. Under the conditions of constant denial and address of the political problem of the state, the incessant suppression of basic human rights, the crackdown on democratic dissent and the long-standing betrayals, violence has become necessary to break the shackles of Indian control, "Occupation". Quoting Chandhoke, 'In societies where some groups experience nothing but violence in their daily lives, political violence might be one strategy to fight for one's self-esteem.

### **Conclusion**

Civil society as an institution is a necessary precondition for the establishment of any democratic order. The post independent Indian state however, witnessed a constant breakdown of civil society institutions in different conflict-hit regions. This resulted

not only in the state's outreach programme but also the overall legitimization crises which were dealt by the Indian state with 'iron fist' and thus the intensification of the political violence. The critical voice from the civil society organisations is constantly choked thus relegating the already marginalized people to the background. Neera Chandhoke holds the argument that 'the mandate of civil society can be realised only when at least three preconditions have been met. The first being that the ramifications of any identity centric political process should be arbitrated outside the counters of civil society. Secondly, state should exercise the maximum control, disposition and directives of such a violence. Thirdly, Third, the attempts should be made to avert the transformation of a democratic polity into a majoritarian populism<sup>3</sup>.

The political violence emanating from different corners of the union have a well-established context under which it operates. the effects of this two-sided violence on the civil society has been severe, where the democratic deliberations have been made to disappear and thus the rebel groups resorting to deadly armed uprisings. The essential prerequisite is to support and encourage the civil society institutions to arbitrate the political and social discontents where a peaceful dialogue can be possible. The denial of this condition will only proliferate this vicious cycle of political violence and the remaining possibilities of any political movements undertaken by the union will reach its fag-end.

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