EXPLORING CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES IN ASSAM: ISSUE OF PEACE, DEVELOPMENT, AND DEMOCRACY

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Introduction: Civil society plays a crucial role in the functioning of a democracy, and its significance is widely recognized. Advocates of civil society argue that a robust and vibrant civil society strengthens liberal democracy. In order to contribute to the enhancement of democracy, civil society must engage in associational participation, which is characterized by active involvement and cooperation among citizens. The density of associational participation has a direct impact on the success of democracy, as it fosters high levels of citizen engagement. According to Robert Putnam, who introduced the concept of social capital, associational participation encompasses cooperative habits, trust, social networks, and shared norms. Putnam's extensive study on Italy, titled "Making Democracy Work," concluded that civil society plays a vital role in making democratic governance more effective. Social capital, as the foundation of a healthy democratic society, promotes citizen participation by fostering communication and trust among individuals. This paper explores the initiatives of civil society organizations in Assam, focusing on their efforts towards peace, development, and democracy.

The Contestation Between Civil Society and the State: Examining Sites of Conflict:
In the context of India's neo-liberal paradigm, civil society is often seen as the intermediary space between the state and the market. According to neo-liberal thinkers, civil society acts as a mediator between the state and the market, serving to check state power. It is considered a realm outside state control that allows for maximum individual freedom and self-determination (Joseph, 2002). In line with this neo-liberal discourse, civil society can be understood as a network of social relations that exists between the state, the market (driven by profit-seeking activities), and the private lives of families and individuals (Tongeren, Brenk, Hellema, & Verhoeven, 2007). Consequently, the role of the state has diminished in this neo-liberal discourse, while civil society has assumed a more prominent position, exerting a significant impact on the democratic framework and development discourse at the policy level.

In contemporary India, civil society engages in contestation with the state in three principal aspects. Firstly, there is a contested claim to ideological and political supremacy by the Hindu nationalist movement. Secondly, struggles emerge concerning the hegemonic claims of capitalism and the developmental state. Finally, there is resistance to forms of autonomous action that aim to hold the state accountable and responsive to its citizens. In some instances, the state itself becomes a site of contestation based on ideological grounds. Civil society, positioned between the family and the market in classical understanding, endeavors to safeguard citizens from autocratic activities and protect the democratic rights of all individuals.

It comprises human rights groups, women's organizations, citizen's groups, and professional associations, assuming the responsibility to endorse civic action aimed at safeguarding and expanding rights in a democratic society (Chandhoke, 2007). Like other arenas of collective interaction, civil society too is a contested site, and its absence would signify the absence of democracy.

Social Capital in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution:

Contemporary conflicts, as described by Mary Kaldor, are characterized as "protracted social conflicts" (Kaldor, 1999). These conflicts exist in a state of neither peace nor war, requiring a strong and effective civil society to address them. Civil society plays a crucial role in generating social capital, which encompasses trust, cooperation across ethnic and religious divisions, inclusiveness, and open debate (Putnam, 1992). The interconnection between civil society and social capital suggests that civil society operates more effectively when there is a strong foundation of social capital (Mcllwaine, 1998).

In the context of North East India, particularly Assam, the presence of social capital is crucial for peace and harmony among different sections of society. Civil society can facilitate a middle ground that expands during ceasefires and peace processes, providing a space for legitimizing the peace process and fostering political dialogue. However, many peace processes in the region are limited to negative peace, which refers to the absence of active military violence (Barash & Webel, 2002). Stalemates arise among pro-talks groups, such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang), Dima Halam Daogah (DHD), United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), National Democratic Front of Asom (NDFA), and United Liberation Front of India (ULFA), hindering positive resolutions (Mahanta, 2010).

While the state in India's North East typically adopts coercive measures for conflict resolution, civil society organizations often define themselves in opposition to the state. In the face of repressive or authoritarian governments, maintaining an autonomous position aligns with the goals of civil society organizations (Helman, 1992). It is important to note that civil society cannot replace the state but can operate independently to a certain extent, as it interacts closely with the state and the political sphere (Tongeren et al., 2007; Mukhim, 2010). Mutual cooperation between the state and civil society is essential for achieving lasting peace, although barriers to cooperation, such as mistrust, often exist (GPPAC National Civil Society Consultation in Sierra Leone, 2006).

Conflict resolution and peacebuilding literature emphasize the need for responses at different levels. Conflict transformation, a continuous process, involves cultural, political, economic, psychological, regional, and international elements. These elements can be combined and focused to empower parties in reframing their differences (Spencer & Spencer, 1995). Effective conflict transformation requires addressing changes in relationships among people, altering communication patterns, and transforming self-perceptions and perceptions of others (Lederach, date). John Paul Lederach suggests that conflict transformation should occur at both the personal and systemic levels, acknowledging and properly dealing with emotions such as anger, fear, grief, and bitterness (Lederach, date).

Lederach proposes three levels of work for conflict transformation: top policy level, middle range involving community and leaders, and grassroots work. Additionally, multiple tracks of involvement are crucial for enduring peace, encompassing government, NGOs/professionals, businesses, private citizens, research/education, activism, religion, funding, and communication/media. Including civil society in peace processes enhances democratic inclusiveness both in terms of process and content, reflecting the multi-aspect nature of peace and peacebuilding (Mahanta, 2010; Kelman, 2006).

Track I negotiations primarily involve governments, insurgents, or international diplomatic interveners, occasionally including civil society representatives chosen by the government or factions involved. Civil society representatives usually do not play leading roles but provide formal representation and can potentially undermine any reached agreement as spoilers (Stedman, 1997). Track II initiatives engage civil society groups in supporting the peace process, involving scholars, journalists, opinion leaders, former government officials, and representatives from conflicting parties. These initiatives clarify agreements, explore possibilities for resolution, and influence others (Mahanta, 2010; Kelman, 2006).

Track III, known as multi-track or multi-level initiatives for peacebuilding, emphasizes the involvement of all community stakeholders, including government, NGOs/professionals, businesses, private citizens, research/education, activism, religion, funding, and communication/media. Grassroots involvement, or people-to-people initiatives, plays a significant role in conflict transformation and peacebuilding by fostering relationships and mutual understanding (Saunders, date).

Civil Society's Role in Peacebuilding in Assam: A Critical Analysis:

The conflict-ridden state of Assam in Northeast India has witnessed various initiatives by civil society organizations aimed at peacebuilding. However, these efforts have often faltered and failed to sustain beyond the initial stages. This critical analysis aims to identify the problems that have hindered the peacebuilding process and explore the challenges faced by civil society organizations in Assam.

Failure of Civil Society Initiatives: Civil society organizations in Assam, such as Asom Jatiyatbadi Yubo Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Peoples' Consultative Group (PCG), and Peoples' Committee for Peace Initiative in Assam (PCPIA), have taken the lead in initiating peace talks between the government and insurgent groups like ULFA. However, their efforts have been undermined by the state's decision to hold separate talks with the insurgents. Similar instances can be observed in Nagaland, where the government conducts separate talks with different factions of Naga and with the ULFA and Bodo Liberation Tiger Force in Assam (Das). This lack of synergy between government-led and civil society-led peace initiatives hampers progress.

Lack of Recognition and Representation: In a democracy, civil society plays a crucial role in legitimizing the peace process and ensuring representation. However, in Assam, civil society organizations like PCG, PCPIA, and the recently formed Sanmilitio Jatiyo Abhibartan are often deemed inadequate in representing the diverse groups affected by the conflict. The problem of legitimacy arises when certain civil society organizations are accused of having links with insurgent groups, labeling them as mere mouthpieces of rebel factions. The suspicion

surrounding the peacebuilding efforts of organizations like PCG and Naga Mother's Association (NMA) undermines their effectiveness.

Ethnic Concentration and Limited Scope: Civil society formations in Assam often revolve around specific ethnic groups, leading to challenges in decision-making processes that require inclusive representation. Some organizations, such as the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), primarily focus on addressing the demands and welfare of their respective ethnic groups. This concentration limits the broader perspective needed for comprehensive peacebuilding efforts.

Focus on Negative Peace: Peace initiatives in Northeast India, including Assam, tend to prioritize negative peace, which aims to end violence and conflict. However, for durable peace, efforts should also address cultural and structural violence, fostering positive peace. Unfortunately, apart from the Krishok Mukti Sangram Samiti, most civil society organizations in Assam have been reactive rather than proactive in their approach. Preemptive peacebuilding exercises receive insufficient attention.

Conclusion:

The critical analysis of civil society initiatives in Assam's peacebuilding process highlights significant challenges and areas that require attention. The lack of synergy between government and civil society-led initiatives, issues of representation and legitimacy, ethnic concentration within organizations, and the focus on negative peace rather than proactive measures have hindered the progress of peacebuilding efforts.

One of the key findings is the need for greater collaboration and coordination between the government and civil society organizations. Recognizing the value and contributions of civil society in peacebuilding is crucial for establishing a comprehensive and inclusive approach. Efforts should be made to bridge the gap and create synergy between these two actors, fostering trust and cooperation for effective peace negotiations.

The issue of representation and legitimacy within civil society organizations must also be addressed. It is essential to ensure that all affected groups have a voice in the peace process, and their concerns and aspirations are adequately represented. This will help build trust and inclusivity, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives.

The concentration of civil society organizations around specific ethnic groups poses a challenge to the broader perspective needed for comprehensive peacebuilding. Efforts should be made to promote cross-ethnic dialogue and cooperation, fostering a sense of common identity and shared goals. Emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and recognizing the interdependence of diverse communities is crucial for sustainable peace in Assam.

Furthermore, peace initiatives should not only focus on ending violence but also address the underlying causes of conflict, including cultural and structural violence. Proactive measures should be taken to prevent future conflicts, promote dialogue, and address root causes, leading to positive peace. Preemptive peacebuilding exercises should be given due attention to foster long-term stability and harmony in the region.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges identified in this critical analysis and fostering collaboration between the government, civil society, and diverse communities are essential for

successful peacebuilding in Assam. A comprehensive and inclusive approach, coupled with proactive measures, will contribute to lasting peace, development, and democracy in the region.

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