



Civil Society Organizations in India

For Prelims: [Civil Society Organizations](#), [Brahmo Samaj](#), [Ramakrishna Mission](#), [Chipko Movement](#), [Narmada Bachao Andolan \(NBA\)](#)

For Mains: Role of Civil Society in strengthening democracy in India, Challenges faced by CSOs and their impact on governance

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Why in News?

[Civil Society Organizations \(CSOs\)](#) have once again come into focus for its role in **mobilising communities, protecting rights, and filling gaps in governance**. Beyond the state and markets, it drives collective action, ensures citizen participation, and strengthens democracy in India.

What is a Civil Society Organization?

- **About:** CSO society refers to **non-state, non-profit entities** that unite people voluntarily to work collectively toward shared social, cultural, or ethical goals.

Types of Civil Society Organizations



Evolution of CSOs in India:

- **Ancient-Medieval Roots:** Civil society in India has deep roots in the ideas of dharma (duty), daan (giving), and karma, which encouraged service to others through religious and social movements.
- **Pre-Independence Era:** Reformers challenged caste discrimination, untouchability, and other social evils, linking voluntary action to social reform.
 - [Brahmo Samaj \(1828\)](#) (promoted social and religious reform), [Theosophical Society \(1879\)](#) (spread spiritual and educational reform), and [Ramakrishna Mission \(1897\)](#) (emphasized service to humanity).
 - Efforts were often unorganized and relief-based, but they laid a moral foundation for later mobilization.
 - Gandhi's philosophy of self-reliance, upliftment of the poor, and constructive work inspired mass participation and voluntary service organizations.
- **Post-Independence:** The new Indian state expanded welfare but recognized the supporting role of voluntary organizations.
 - [First Five-Year Plan \(1951-56\)](#) emphasized cooperation between government and NGOs.
 - Decentralization through the **three-tier Panchayati Raj system** gave space for cooperatives, farmer unions, and local associations to flourish.
 - During the 1965-67 droughts, many **international NGOs entered India with foreign aid** and later set up permanent offices, reshaping civil society funding.
- **Contemporary Era: Civil society shifted from welfare delivery to a rights- and empowerment-based approach seen in movements like [Chipko \(1973\)](#) and [Narmada Bachao \(1985\)](#).**
 - Civil society broadened its agenda to include **rights to food, work (MGNREGA), education (RTE Act), health, and information (RTI Act)**.
 - CSOs recognized as development partners of the state. NGOs expanded

into **gender, caste, environment, and marginalized issues**, becoming key watchdogs of democracy.

- **India with around 3.3 million NGOs Today, India has around 1.5 million NGOs involving over 19 million volunteers and staff, though most remain small and volunteer-driven.**

Regulatory Framework for Civil Society in India

- **Societies:** Societies Registration Act, 1860; for literary, scientific, and charitable purposes.
- **Trusts:** Indian Trusts Act, 1882; states also have Public Trust Acts (e.g., Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950).
- **Companies:** Section 8 of Indian Companies Act, 2013; for not-for-profit activities like education, social welfare, environment, etc.
- **Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), 2010:** Applies to all CSOs receiving foreign contributions.

What is the Role of Civil Society in a Democracy?

- **Ensuring Accountability:** CSOs act as a watchdog, scrutinizing state actions and checking political abuses and corruption.
 - The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Rajasthan, was instrumental in the passage of the national Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005.
 - CSOs play a crucial role in monitoring elections, detecting fraud, and affirming legitimacy.
- **Empowering Citizens and Promoting Democratic Norms: Educates citizens about laws, rights, and governance, sustaining an informed citizenry.**
 - Fosters tolerance, respect for dissent, and compromise, promoting democratic social norms.
 - Provides platforms for **marginalized groups** (women, poor, persons with disabilities) to participate in governance, as seen in the role of CSOs advocating for the [Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016](#).
- **Women Empowerment: Organizations like Jagori and Swayam have raised awareness about women's rights and promoted political participation.**
 - The Institute of Social Sciences' "Women's Political Empowerment Program" has trained over 15,000 women for leadership roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
 - PRIDE India has supported advocacy for women's rights through research and data collection.
 - SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) empowers women in the informal sector, helping them gain economic independence and social status.
- **Leadership Development and Representation: Facilitates articulation and aggregation of diverse societal interests.**
 - CSOs act as a training ground for future political leaders, breaking traditional party monopolies.
 - CSOs act as a shock-absorbing institution by cross-cutting rigid political polarities. Helps maintain social cohesion in conflict-prone settings.
- **Supporting Reforms and Public Service Delivery: Mobilizes public opinion for economic and political reforms.**
 - CSOs fill gaps in essential services like healthcare, education, sanitation, and disaster relief (e.g., During the Covid-19 pandemic, Goonj launched the 'Rahat' initiative to support vulnerable communities).
- **Global Governance:** Civil society not only promotes national democracy but also influences global governance.
 - International norms on human rights, women's rights, disability rights, and environmental concerns are leveraged to shape domestic policies.

What are the Challenges of Civil Society in a Democracy?

- **Undermining Democratic Values:** Not all CSOs pursue democratic purposes, some promote **private interests, racism, nationalism, or fundamentalism**, undermining democratic values.
- **Funding Constraints** CSOs face financial instability due to limited foreign funding (post [FCRA 2020 amendment](#)) and inadequate domestic philanthropy.
 - State funding can corrupt CSOs, diverting focus from democratic objectives to short-term gains.
 - Additionally, many CSOs lack effective monitoring systems, making it difficult to assess their impact and attract funding.
- **Inadequate Government Response:** Government agencies may be **ill-equipped to handle CSO inputs**, resulting in friction, ineffective policymaking, and undermined democratic engagement.
- **Inadequate Representation:** Lack of equal access for marginalized groups in civil society can **perpetuate structural inequalities** and undermine democratic inclusivity.
- **Cultural Insensitivity:** Global civil society efforts may overlook **local cultural contexts**, especially in the [Global South](#), leading to ineffective or irrelevant interventions.
- **Internal Undemocracy:** Many CSOs lack internal democracy, such as transparency or inclusive decision-making, contradicting the democratic principles they advocate.
- **External Manipulation:** Civil society organizations may be influenced or used by **foreign powers to advance political or economic agendas**, distorting their role in promoting democracy.
- **Volunteer Retention:** High volunteer turnover and inconsistent engagement make it difficult to sustain long-term projects and community relationships.

What Measures can be Adopted to Enhance the Role of CSO?

- **Enhance Transparency and Accountability:** Develop a **national CSO database** including financial reports, program outcomes, and impact assessments. Standardized reporting and voluntary third-party audits can build credibility.
- **Support Evidence-Based Policymaking:** Institutionalize CSO involvement in policy through **representation on government committees, consultation forums, and the use of CSO data** in decision-making.
- **Diversify Funding Sources:** Encourage domestic philanthropy, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) partnerships, and social impact investments to reduce dependency on foreign funds.
- **Simplify Regulatory Framework:** The government could simplify FCRA and streamline CSO registration and compliance through a single-window digital system.
- **Boost Volunteerism:** Launch national campaigns to promote volunteering, integrate community service into education, maintain volunteer databases, and use digital platforms to connect volunteers with CSOs.

Conclusion

Civil society remains the **heartbeat of participatory democracy**, bridging gaps between the state and citizens. Strengthening CSOs is not just about governance, it is about **empowering society to shape its own future**. A vibrant civil society is the **true measure of a resilient democracy**.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. Discuss the evolving role of Civil Society Organizations in India and their contribution to participatory democracy.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Mains

Q. Discuss the contribution of civil society groups for women's effective and meaningful participation and representation in state legislatures in India. **(2023)**

Q. How can the role of NGOs be strengthened in India for development works relating to protection of the environment? Discuss throwing light on the major constraints. **(2015)**

Q. Examine critically the recent changes in the rules governing foreign funding of NGOs under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 1976. **(2015)**

Q. Can Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations present an alternative model of public service delivery to benefit the common citizen? Discuss the challenges of this alternative model. **(2021)**

Q. In dealing with socio-economic issues of development, what kind of collaboration between government, NGOs and private sector would be most productive? **(2024)**

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