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Source of Life or Kiss of Death: Revisiting State-Civil Society Dynamics in India during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: As COVID-19 spread through India, Civil Society Organizations (CSO)s mobilized resources to support the efforts of the Government by playing the role of an active partner in providing social and economic welfare to the affected population. This paper aims to provide a concise overview of the response of civil society to the pandemic situation at the grassroots and policy level. Further, the authors discuss the paradox in demonstrated efficiency and commitment of civil society, which follows a crackdown on civil society organizations by the state through silencing voices of dissent and regulating the shrinking civic space. The strained relationship between the government and civil society organizations in India is also examined against the backdrop of draconian legislation and policies framed during the time of COVID-19, proscribing debate, review or consultations. In the context of the pandemic and the subsequent phase of recovery, such actions of the Government will have deleterious effects on the relationship of trust between civil society and the state. Through this paper, the authors argue for a more tolerant and co-operative approach to the functions of civil society organizations by the Government, thus effectively reducing mistrust and suspicion in the intentions of the state.



Keywords: COVID-19, civil society response, relationship dynamics, NGO and state, support functions, civic space, contested spaces

1 Introduction

In the last week of December 2019, the first case of SARS-CoV-2 (re-named as COVID-19) was detected in Wuhan province of China. Since then, the infection has

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spread to different locations, irrespective of geographical boundaries, causing severe damage in terms of health and economic welfare. The first case of COVID-19 infection was reported from India in late January 2020 after an Indian student, who had travelled from Wuhan tested positive. In contrast to previous pandemics like Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 and the H1N1 influenza in 2009 to the more recent case of Nipah virus outbreak in India in 2017, all of which were more localized and specific to regions, COVID-19 outbreaks and rate of mortality associated with it have been found since then to increase at an alarming rate across the world. At the time of composing the article, India's COVID-19 cases were reported to be among the fastest growing in the world. Infections had crossed 6 million, and fatalities were nearing one hundred thousand, surpassed only by Brazil and United States of America.

Given the unprecedented nature of this disaster and its simultaneous global outreach, the Indian Government responded with measures immediately, as others around the world. Since March, the serious nature of its impact in India also witnessed unprecedented mobilization of citizens and civil society to provide relief and welfare to fellow citizens. Working under conditions of complete lockdown for first 10 weeks, the national and provincial governments took measures to contain and mitigate the impact of disease outbreak. While supporting the efforts of the governments in these efforts, civil society also undertook initiatives that produced evidence, models and policy recommendations based on ground realities. Given the recent history of 'love-hate', cooperation and contestation between the state and civil society, new aspects of the dynamic also became manifest during the past six months. The paper analyses this complex relationship between civil society and Indian state during the period of the pandemic since March 2020.

2 Government Response

The National Disaster Management Act, 2005 was invoked on March 24, 2020, under the administrative control of the Ministry of Home Affairs (Chauhan 2020); in turn, provincial and district disaster management authorities were announced to take responsibility for the implementation of these measures.

India's response to COVID-19 can be classified into three phases, depending on the actions and policy measures that were taken at different points in time. During the first phase (Late January to late March), the first reported case in Kerala led to preliminary efforts at containment, with the Government of Kerala declaring the corona virus outbreak a 'state calamity'. However, more calibrated efforts, throughout the country, at prevention were initiated after the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared 100 countries of the world to have reported at

least one case. As the spread of infection took the form of a pandemic, the Government of India imposed a 'national lockdown' (referred to as Lockdown 1.0), on March 25, that was considered 'the most stringent in the world',¹ and enforced curfew-like regulations, which included sealing inter-state borders, shutting down economic activity, restricting movement of people and confining them within the precincts of their homes. The lockdown, which was to continue until April 14, was preceded by 'Janta curfew' on March 22, a 14-h voluntary curfew practiced by Indian citizens in response to a call by the Prime Minister of India.

During the second phase (early April–mid May), the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) the apex medical research body, admitted to India entering the third phase of the pandemic transmission. By the first week of April, the death toll due to infection had touched 100. Testing facilities were opened up in all states across the country. With rising cases of infections and a high-test positivity ratio of 4.7%, the second phase of the lockdown (Lockdown 2.0) was extended until May 3, resulting in ambiguous announcements by Central government and various state Government to open up 'essential services', without explicitly stating exceptions to the rule. Lockdown 2.0 was marked by the partial lifting of restrictions with colour coding of 'zones' (red, green and orange), based on their success in containment, a fortnight after the phase began.

The second phase also saw the Government of India respond to the economic disruption caused by the pandemic with a \$22 billion fiscal and monetary package (Dev 2020). Announced by the Union Finance Minister, the welfare measures, in the form of cash incentives, were released through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) and, in the form of food grains, through a Public Distribution System (PDS) aimed at relief for millions of people hit by the pandemic. The large-scale adoption of DBT, during the pandemic, is evident from a Government statement, which enumerated 420 million people having been provided financial assistance of \$8 billion under the terms of fiscal package (Kapil 2020). Monetary incentives to workers employed in agriculture sector, free cooking gas to the poor families for 3 months, state-sponsored contribution to retirement funds of workers belonging to organized sector, medical insurance cover worth \$70,000 to frontline health workers were among some of the welfare measures that were announced (Singh 2020).

In the third phase (Mid-May to Early June), the confirmed cases of COVID-19 had increased substantially, with national lockdown being extended to May 17 (Lockdown 3.0). Post the third phase, the phased 'unlocking' of the economy

¹ The University of Oxford's CoViD-19 Government response tracker has published their Stringency Index, which has assigned a score of 100 out of 100 for India, based on a ranking of 17 indicators. <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker>.

began with the central government devolving the powers to the provincial governments to decide the future course of lockdown. The partial lifting of the restrictions came after 60 days of centralized control over containment efforts.

In order to effectively control the spread of disease, India had adopted the ‘Wuhan model’, which was a combination of enforcement of strict nation-wide lockdown, operationalization of social distancing norms (to be more correctly referred to as ‘physical distancing’), and restrictions on economic and social activity (Ghosh 2020). The abrupt imposition of the national lockdown, with only 4 h’ notice, created fear among people prompting a situation of uncertainty in the market, beginning with instances of ‘panic buying’ reported from across many cities. Absence of clear directives from the Government and the sharp digital divide exacerbated the chaos, which ended in massive migration of workers employed in urban areas to their villages.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) began the task of under-taking last-mile delivery of ‘essentials’ like cooked meals, dry rations, masks and sanitation kits to the sections of population immediately hit by the effects of the abrupt lockdown. Most of the organizations worked at the community level for supply of essentials, while organizations specialising in disaster relief were able to leverage their national networks to better co-ordinate services (Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy 2020). Due to the stringent nature of the lockdown, initially, civil society organizations worked with the district and local government machinery to negotiate permits for movement of relief material and staff, which hastened the process of relief work. Referrals of suspected cases to the nearest COVID facility and provision of shelter to the needy helped to alleviate a mass disaster.

3 Government-Civil Society Cooperation

Within a week of implementing lockdown provisions, the Central Government mandated that the NITI Aayog (NA) planning body in Delhi set up several coordination mechanisms to operationalise various relief, welfare and health measures. One of these coordinating committees focused on NGOs and included some civil society representatives as well (PIB 2020). The NA had been creating a data base of NGOs on its website under ‘*Darpan*’ label and had listed about 92,000 NGOs before the pandemic began. An immediate appeal was sent to all these NGOs by the CEO of NA to provide support to affected households and widely spread the messages for preventive health measures announced by the government. In addition, the Ministry of Home Affairs (responsible for administration of Foreign Contribution Regulation Act—FCRA) requested all NGOs receiving foreign funds to

deploy some towards immediate relief and welfare measures (Chopra 2020). Even as the bulk of resources of the nation was deployed towards mitigating the effects of the pandemic, the period also saw the occurrence of several devastating disasters, like cyclones (Nisarga and Amphan), floods (in Mumbai and Assam), landslide (in Kerala) and locust attacks (throughout North India), thus furthering the need for more intervention from the state and civil society. The demands posed by the arrival of multiple disasters, especially water-related, proved to be quite overwhelming for the civil society organizations at a time when physical distancing norms were being strongly implemented in all states in India (Alex and Mohan 2020). In addition to helping with mass evacuation of people living along coastlines and disaster-prone areas, civil society groups also set up rehabilitation facilities distinct from quarantine centres, and safe transportation of people through water-laden streets and damaged roads (Alex and Mohan 2020).

.....at the onset of water-related disasters, people will be evacuated in large numbers to emergency shelters. Balancing the nature of facilities in such shelters while maintaining social distancing poses a challenge, especially when COVID-19 cases are seeing a resurgence.

While the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)² guidelines on management of Biological Disasters stipulate a greater role for the Central Government, the primary role of managing disasters, as floods, lies with the state Government (Alex and Mohan 2020). Thus, operating within the purview of two authorities during times of emergency, it is imperative that the analyses of civil society response to the pandemic not be viewed in isolation with regard to COVID-19 fire-fighting alone, but as a broad spectrum of mitigation measures aimed at tackling the disparaging effects of multiple calamities.

3.1 Relief Actions

The rapid response of civil society, on its own and at the request of the government, resulted in widespread mobilisation of volunteers, community leaders, and staff to provide basic food or ration, water, masks/PPE, sanitiser and support in practicing immediate preventive hygiene behaviour country-wide. Massive philanthropic and individual donations, which saw an upward surge during the time of pandemic, were mobilised by the civil society and channelised towards purchase

² The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), headed by the Prime Minister of India, is the apex body for Disaster Management in India, mandated to plan and issue guidelines during disasters.

and import of essentials, especially testing kits, which faced shortage within days of opening up the health system to accommodate COVID-19 cases (Desai 2020). Within the first two months, by end of May, civil society responses had begun to gain public recognition and government appreciation. A report by Azim Premji University titled “COVID-19 Pandemic: Civil Society Response and Challenges Ahead” had pointed to high level of difficulty faced by the states in procuring food grains and other items to be distributed through PDS, until about two weeks after the lockdown regulations came into effect (Das and Pardeshi 2020). The civil society organizations, through their wide networks, were able to address the gap in welfare service delivery by the state Governments. In a report filed with the Supreme Court in April, the Central Government submitted that NGOs across the country had served 3 million meals during the first phase of lockdown, even noting that in many states, they were ahead of the government in providing this relief (Rawat 2020). Apart from facilitating movement and availability of essential food items, civil society groups have been actively setting up community kitchens and health camps in co-ordination with district administration, providing shelter to the homeless and rehabilitating persons with disabilities, thus effectively demonstrating the strength of ‘horizontal partnerships’, which the Government has institutionalized with stakeholders (Kant 2020).

The disruption caused by COVID-19 has revealed the sharp divide in digital revolution, which had severely impaired the ability of small civil society organizations to keep abreast of guidelines and policies with regard to COVID-19. The lack of digital capacity had also impacted the rural, tribal and poor urban communities. In the absence of information, connectivity and awareness, the newly announced Government schemes run the risk of being unutilized due to lack of information (Bansal 2020). The system of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), through initiatives like Jan Dhan financial inclusion program for transferring cash entitlements, did not benefit the families that were unable to reach the bank, even though they were expected to be operational (“COVID 19 relief scheme” 2020) during the period of lockdown.

In this regard, civil society organizations worked jointly with the local and district government machinery to identify the beneficiaries in the community and to link them to services or enroll them in schemes, in case of incomplete or missing documentation. Massive mobilisations provided essential items, in short supply like For providing information on benefits of Government schemes, helping communities avail themselves benefits of monetary incentives and engaging ‘*banking correspondents*’, who would act as a bridge between the beneficiary and the community by reaching out to the banking system representing the “*financially illiterate*” sections of the population (PRIA 2020).

3.2 Awareness Generation

The presence of COVID-19 in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) is raising important concerns about pervasiveness of misinformation (Lau et al. 2020). The lack of information leaves vast sections of the population vulnerable to high health and financial risks. Civil society organizations worked with ‘*Health Missions*’ of state Governments to provide vital information regarding health services and health policy, using behaviour change communication materials designed in the native language to ensure maximum coverage and reach. Organizations at the ground level leveraged their communication and social outreach network to disseminate information about COVID-19, potential sources of spread and the precautions to be taken, including home quarantine and testing (PFI 2020).

Several provincial NGOs worked with communities to create awareness about the disease in vernacular. Instant messaging services like WhatsApp and SMS facilities were used to inform people about healthy practices to be followed, like handwashing techniques, frequency of hand wash and the need for “physical distancing”, especially while travelling or standing in queues in shops etc. (PRIA 2020). While many NGOs transmitted the information through their networks by phone calls and social media, others created more elaborate systems of information dissemination like ‘hotlines’ and toll-free helplines. A report, jointly published by PRIA and VANI, titled ‘*Response of Indian Civil Society towards COVID-19*’ states that around 64 percent of civil society organizations surveyed started helpline facilities to reach out to the beneficiaries during the period of lockdown. Most of the helplines were multi-lingual and provided information in the vernacular language (PRIA 2020).

Additionally, a number of organizations with technical expertise in community health came together to identify and tackle ‘fake’ news and dispel myths leading to stigmatization of professionals like domestic helpers and positive cases of COVID-19. The period also saw an upsurge in innovation in mediums of communication for information dissemination, especially the use of traditional radio leading to wider outreach.

This capacity of India’s vibrant and locally rooted civil society to respond quickly, efficiently and consistently was due to the long history of building and supporting local community associations and local leaders, especially women and tribal people. Tandon (2020a, b) analyses this phenomenon critically:

Civil society organisations have been investing in building local leadership in communities and among the elected representatives of local Government. Since mid-90s, in some states, they have been working to strengthen participation of elected women representatives. Over the past four decades, the capacity building efforts of civil society organizations has resulted

in approximately 20 million active civic leaders in their own communities. NGOs and civil society were able to mobilise these local leaders to respond immediately to the distress caused by sudden lockdown due to pandemic.

3.3 Advocacy for Migrant Labour

India has a population of over 400 million migrants, a large proportion of which is estimated to be internal migrants. The sudden and continued lockdown affected India's migrant labour, which shifts to urban-industrial centres in search of seasonal or regular livelihood. A vast majority of them, nearly two-thirds, work in insecure, vulnerable, temporary, informal occupations, with no security of tenure or contract, and no access to social security benefits. Therefore, millions of migrant laborers became jobless, wageless, shelter less and hungry as soon as the effects of lockdown began to set in. This was specially so in major urban centres like Mumbai, Pune, Ahmedabad, Surat, Delhi/NCR, Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, etc. Desperate to return home, with no cash, food or shelter, and scared of the virus infection, nearly 20 million migrant labour tried to return home, in whatever way they could, from mid-May onwards (Khanna 2020; PRIA et al. 2020).

The sharp digital divide (Pandey 2020), evident during the pandemic, was further exposed as part of the civil society organizations' efforts at facilitating the contact of estranged migrant workers with their families by recharging their mobile accounts. These calls accounted for the bulk of the distress calls made to emergency helplines. Before the workers began their journey, civil society volunteers came together to arrange for bus travel and subsequently, travel by train, once the railways resumed services.

During the transit period, the problem of acute hunger and exhaustion resulting from heat and foot travel threatened to be a 'killer' in addition to the virus. Civil society organizations averted the mishap of death due to hunger by setting up facilities for food and water along the highways and at bus and railway stations. Migrant workers were also provided with footwear and clothes by civil society volunteers, working at ground level.

Border management was crucial since the migrant workers were harassed by the police due to the strictness of the lockdown. Local organizations made representations to the state Government to ease the restrictions and to enable movement, while following the protocol and physical distancing norms (Kundu 2020).

The most sustained and impactful advocacy efforts began by a coalition of civil society and academics to influence the government to respond to the continuing

crisis of migrant labour. Tandon (2020a, b) highlighted this strategy of ‘feedback from ground up’:

At the height of the lockdown during end of May, ground reports and studies undertaken by a consortium of civil society groups through a series of nation-wide digital consultations shared a set of recommendations with Vice chairman of NITI Aayog on policy and legal changes required in the implementation of Inter-State Migrant Workmen (ISMW) Act and Board of Construction Workers (BOCW) Act. Procedures in these Acts were archaic, implementation was ignored and diminished concern for millions of informal migrant workers had weakened coordination between central and state governments. Regular feeding of ground realities from across the country, as demand for return of workers to urban/industrial zones increased, has now been continued with parliamentary standing committee by this consortium.

The role of media in supporting the efforts of civil society was unprecedented, considering the frequent, visual and colloquial reportage of ground realities, thus affording wide outreach and sympathy for the affected. The issues highlighted by the media served to bring attention to various causes on which advocacy was sought as part of COVID-19 alleviation efforts. Finally, the Ministry of Labor of Indian government convened a national workshop to identify short-term and long-term measures to support meaningful livelihood and decent living for millions of migrant labour and their families in India (PRIA et al. 2020). Regular dialogues with key policy-makers, feeding of ground reports to media and political leaders and public campaigning to highlight the distress faced by them were sustained during May to September.

As demonstrated through this brief sketch above, India’s civil society acted both independently and in close cooperation with national, provincial and local governments to respond efficiently and speedily to the distress caused by the pandemic and lockdown on mobility and economy. For the first 6 months through the end of July, contributions of civil society were being encouraged and cooperation across various government departments and agencies was generally harmonious. However, continued economic and health distress of rural and urban poor began to change the dynamics. Severe economic downturn since April and shortage of resources within the federal government resulted in simmering public unrest.

Resources for continuing and deepening the work of civil society were also diminishing as donors and funders, local and international, were also experiencing financial pressures in their own business and home countries. The pandemic affected all countries and all sectors of society concurrently. Demands for bold and forward-looking policies for economic and social revival and renewal were emerging in public domain. With continued shutdown of schools and colleges, children and youth were feeling restless, and families over-burdened with

‘work from home’, ‘learn from home’, ‘eat from home’, ‘stay at home’ were beginning to accumulate stress and mental tensions. The ‘new normal’ was being experienced as ‘very abnormal’ by end of 6 months, as no improvements were in sight.

4 Contestations between State and Civil Society

Several issues emerged during the lockdown from a number of recent government actions that have created serious confrontation between the government and civil society. Due to the lockdown and restrictions on mobility and gatherings, government agencies began to take decisions of great significance without much public consultation. Parliament was not meeting for any debate or scrutiny by its sub-committees; and only a few ministries and the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) were fully functional. This began to create further mistrust between government and civil society. In addition, certain actions of the Government during this period created an environment in which police action was used to ‘silence’ dissent in public spheres. Some of these bases of contestation are highlighted in this section.

4.1 Restricting Public Consultations

Three major decisions by the government during the lockdown have come for criticism by the experts and civil society for not undertaking serious stake-holder consultations about their potential adverse impacts on the communities.

First are changes made in the new regulations and procedures for Environment Impact Assessment (EIA). These allow post-facto approvals for industry, if it has started without approvals; they reduce the time and space for public consultations with local communities and exclude several categories of projects (highways, irrigation, etc.) from the purview of EIA itself. Commenting on these changes, Mohanty (2020) argued:

The new draft Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) 2020 proposed by the Union government is a regressive departure from the 2006 version that it seeks to replace. It is an attempt to weaken environmental regulation and silence affected communities. The draft seems to favour the industries and seems to be largely neglecting the balance between sustainable development and environment protection.

Second relates to major changes in labour laws. The government was revising labour codes during 2019, and the parliament had approved one of the four laws before lockdown began. However, the process of approving the other three laws

occurred quickly when the parliament re-convened. The drafts were not discussed with trade unions and other civil society groups working on issues of labour rights. This was particularly problematic as the lockdown had demonstrated the distress that millions of migrant workers, domestic workers and informal workers in construction, agriculture and sanitation were subjected to, as discussed by Working People's Charter.

Ironically, there has been absolutely no consultation with the representatives of workers nor state governments while drafting the new Codes that were passed on Wednesday. Given that the present political regime has not organised the highest tripartite labour policy decision making body, the Indian Labour Conference, for a single time in the past five years, it is clear that the Union government does not believe in extending democratic decision making to the working class (Working People's Charter 2020).

During the height of distress migration of labour in June, some provincial governments even suspended implementation of labour laws so that employers can 'forcibly' get work done for economic revival. The classic case is from the state of Gujarat where the Government's Labour & Employment Department, through a notification on April 17, 2020, had exempted all factories in the state from their obligations under Factories Act 1948, in respect of working hours, rest periods, weekly offs and overtime wages. The Supreme Court of India (Talwar 2020) squashed this notification which had stated that 'Covid19 is not a public emergency' and then adding:

The shocking extension of working hours is being directed at a time when the most basic medical and scientific advice to contracting the deadly COVID-19 is to take rest and stay as healthy as possible. This new regime ensures the complete opposite. As per the notification, these workers will now be overworked without being compensated for the same as per law which will only ensure that both their physical and mental health deteriorate.

Third, the parliament approved, without debate and voting, major laws reforming existing systems of pricing and marketing of agricultural produce. Nation-wide protests by farmers' organizations have since created further resentment in society. Several civil society organisations have been supporting small and marginal farmers to improve productivity, adopt organic farming and secure better prices for their produce, by eliminating trade intermediaries, through cooperatives and farmers producer organisations (FPOs). These sudden changes may cause severe disruption to their support to FPOs.

The process of taking such critical policy decisions during the lockdown have created an impression that the government does not want to hear any dissenting voices or critiques of its proposals. The use of police and security agencies during this period to restrict demonstrations, protests or convening of public

consultations, under the pretext of disaster management to deal with the pandemic, has created frustrations and resentments amongst media, academics, students, unions and development NGOs.

4.2 Squeezing Resources

Within a week of the lockdown, media reports indicated that a new fund had been set up by the government to secure donations for providing relief during the pandemic. Labelled Prime Minister's Citizens Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM-CARES) Fund, it soon began to mobilize huge donations nationally and internationally. As civil society was getting deeply involved in responding to the pandemic, the need for quick, flexible and adequate funds to continue their work on the ground was felt. Many national and international donors and philanthropists soon began to shift their funds to PMCARES Fund, instead of donating directly to civil society and in some cases diverting funds meant for other social causes towards COVID-19 relief (Srinath 2020). The diversion of social welfare funds impacted not only the programmes, but also affected the capacity of grassroot organizations to deliver services, putting their very sustenance at stake. As weeks went by, criticism of the purpose (Nandrajog 2020) and nature of this Fund began to emerge:

The PM CARES Fund is not a public authority under the Right To Information Act. But it functions like a government entity, using protected national symbols, gets legal defence from the Solicitor General, commandeers senior bureaucrats and functions from the Prime Minister's Office.

By one estimate, nearly \$2bn have been collected in PMCARES Fund since its inception on March 28, 2020. This money has been donated by many foundations and philanthropic individuals, in addition to corporations from their CSR funds, which used to be donated to civil society during preceding years, after the Companies Act, 2013 was enforced in India (Desai and Randeria 2020). The PMCARES fund appropriated around one-third of India's annual CSR grants, thus starving civil society organizations of funds at a time when it needs them the most, given the continued distress during ongoing pandemic (Marfatia 2020).

The epitome of this phenomenon is illustrated by the sudden and secretive passing of significant amendments to Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, 2010. Introduced in the Parliament suddenly one day, the Act was passed by both houses within 3 days and received Presidential assent, and implemented on September 29, all within a week. The consequences of these changes in the law have been clearly described by Srinath and Shetty (2020):

The bill will have far reaching consequences for civil society organisations and the communities they serve across India. It will cause smaller non-profits to downsize or shut down their programmes, result in job losses at the frontlines, and reverse years of hard won progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, already under threat from the impact of COVID-19. Reductions in international funding to non-profits in India will also exacerbate the impact of reduced support from business – in the form of the two per cent mandatory philanthropy – reeling under the steep decline in profits due to the pandemic.

Coming on the heels of news that Amnesty International India had been forced to shut down its office, the strain in the relationship between civil society and government has become mutually hostile (Ayyub 2020). Such actions of the national government have created fear amongst a large section of civil society which has been directly involved in responding to the local needs of the marginalised households due the pandemic and consequent lockdowns. The International Commission of Jurists issued a strong public statement:

Today, the ICJ joined fourteen other human rights organizations in condemning the Indian government's actions against Amnesty India and pledged to continue support for local human rights defenders and organizations against the recent crackdown.

5 Conclusions

From an international consultation of development NGOs in late 1980s, PRIA produced an analysis entitled “NGO-Government Relations: A Source of Life or Kiss of Death?” The dynamics of cooperation and contestation between the state and civil society is not unique to India, nor to these ‘abnormal’ times. The above analysis of events, episodes and actions in responding to the pandemic and its consequences by both government and civil society once again manifests the complexity of this dynamic in India.

The trajectory of the past nine months has shown how responsive, flexible and grounded Indian civil society is in its everyday operations and commitments. The outreach to remote communities, to households in distress, to women and men facing hunger and infection has been phenomenal by Indian civil society. Its relevance and contributions to Indian society have been better appreciated by citizens during the pandemic.

While a section of the government, in central and provincial governments, continues to work with civil society locally, there is growing intolerance of questioning, critiquing and commenting by civil society of policies, programmes and procedures that do not help the poor and the excluded. The tendency to silence any dissenting voice has become officially institutionalised and mandated. While

journalists, intellectuals, unionists and students bear the brunt of such authoritarian heavy-handed actions of the police and security machineries of the state, key leaders and dissenting opinions in civil society have also been targeted.

The experiences of the pandemic needs to be understood in the backdrop of recent public concerns and protests against the moves by central and state governments to bring in citizenship laws last year (Ayoob 2020). The pandemic followed immediately major violence in eastern parts of Delhi in February. During the past few months, police actions and arrests of activists associated with such movements have been criticised as unjust (Ribeiro 2020). The relationships of trust between civil society and the state have been further dented through such measures.

In the best of times, civil society–state relations are a combination of cooperation and contestations around the world. Providing access to basic services to the poor and the excluded and creating innovative models for finding solutions to intractable challenges have been two arenas where civil society and government goals and actions most often converge. Discord and mistrust emerges from those actions of civil society which produce evidence to hold the government and political machinery and actors accountable (Goswami and Tandon 2013).

In increasingly authoritarian and centralising regimes within electoral democracies, such demands of accountability from citizens are unwelcome. This is currently the situation in India, as in many other electoral democracies around the world. A recent issue of TIME magazine identified “100 most influential people” around the world in 2020. An octogenarian Muslim woman, Bilkis Bano, among the dozens of women campaigning in the national capital against the (widely perceived as anti-Muslim) amendment to the 1955 Citizenship Act, was named alongside the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi (whose government brought this amendment forth in late 2019). This pretty much sums up the present state of state-civil society relations in India.

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