

# Civil Society, Citizenship and Subaltern Counterpublics in Post-colonial India

Sarbeswar Sahoo\*

## Abstract

*Taking into account the growing social mobilizations and large-scale transformations in the society and polity in last few decades, the paper looks into the issues of how the 'civil public' gets transformed into, what Habermas calls, the 'political public'? How do the marginalized and subaltern groups in civil society use the language of rights to decenter domination, assert selfhood and chart out democratic discourses affecting the politics of everyday social life? And, how the morphology of the public sphere, which was restricted among the elites as an agency of upholding capitalist state hegemony (Gramsci) instead of mediating between civil society and the state (Habermas), has gone through a metamorphosis over time? Addressing these questions, the paper argues that the post-colonial welfare state in India which assumed the role of provider of social services created a mass of depoliticized citizenry incapable of their own social reproduction. The rolling back of the welfare state from the socio-economic sphere and the penetration of market mechanisms carried serious implications for the public and political life of the nation. This led to the assertion of right based mobilizations at the grassroots level (democratization) which had significant effects on liberal democracy and local governance in India. India during the same period also witnessed the upsurge of communal and sectarian movements or what Radhika Desai (2004) calls systematic 'saffronization' of state and civil society. Despite of the existence of such uncivil social elements within the civil society, the 'subaltern counterpublics' have been successful in carving out a space for themselves and widening the scope of democratic participation. The potential of the subaltern classes and their ideologies of discontent and resistance in reshaping the state have prevented the bourgeois in instituting its hegemony over civil society. The legitimacy of democracy no longer depends on the hegemony of the elites but on 'the politics of the governed'.*

**Key Words:** *Civil Society, Citizenship, Bourgeoisie Public Sphere, Democratization, Globalization, Subaltern Counterpublics, the Politics of the Governed, India.*

## Introduction

Taking into account the growing socio-political mobilizations and large-scale transformations in the society and polity in last few decades, this paper<sup>1</sup> examines the changes in the nature of democracy in India. The central argument of the paper is that when passive citizens who were merely the consumers of state welfare programmes turn into active citizens, being aware of their oppressive social conditions and rights, an active civil society movement emerges at the grassroots level which transforms the nature of democracy. Defining civil society in

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\* Doctoral Candidate, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 117570. E-mail: [sarbeswar@nus.edu.sg](mailto:sarbeswar@nus.edu.sg). This paper has been published as "Civil Society, Citizenship and Subaltern Counterpublics in Post-colonial India" in Ajaya K. Sahoo, ed. (2006) *Sociological Perspectives on Globalization*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, pp. 57-88.

Habermasian perspective, the paper argues that the idea of public sphere is grounded on the principles of active citizenship, and it is difficult to create a universal bourgeois public sphere (as argued by Habermas) in a plural and unequal society like India where exclusion and welfare has created a mass of passive citizenry, and thereby calls for the mobilization for multiple interest groups. It is evident that in the past few years, as a response to the rolling back of the state and onslaught of globalization, various marginalized groups have been active in the political arena. The rise of these 'subaltern counterpublics'<sup>2</sup> or 'proletarian public spheres'<sup>3</sup> have been the major catalysts in democratizing and decentralizing Indian democracy. Simultaneously, Indian society has also witnessed the upsurge of various communal and sectarian movements which undermine the edifice of democracy. As the Indian case suggests, despite the existence of such uncivil social elements within the civil society, the marginalized interest groups have been successful in carving out a space for themselves which changed the nature of governance from a nationalist elite serving model to a more radical form of social democracy<sup>4</sup> through political mobilization and grassroots political movements and there by transforming towards what Giddens (2000) calls the *democratization of (Indian) democracy*.

This paper is organized in eight sections. The second section deals with the Habermasian understanding of public sphere and civil society as a bourgeois rationality. The third section explains the politics of exclusion and exploitation which ceased the possibility of a universal public sphere in India. The fourth section looks at citizenship rights and the mobilization of subaltern counterpublics. Increasing proletarian participation in electoral politics, and the rise of grassroots movements have been examined in fifth and sixth section respectively. The seventh section examines the rising anti-democratic forces within civil society, and the final section provides some concluding remarks.

### **Civil Society as Bourgeois Rationality**

Jurgen Habermas's public sphere belongs to the same theoretical family of civil society which provides a common platform for the representation of common interest in the public. For Habermas, the coffee houses in England, salons in France, and table societies in Germany embodied the public sphere, and provided significant ground for democratic participation in the eighteenth century Europe. In his book *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*<sup>5</sup>, he focuses on the bourgeois public sphere which was conceived as a sphere where private people transcending their private preoccupations come together as public and form an interactive body of citizens engaged in rational-critical discourse addressing common purposes. Communicating with each other, social actors learn to share ideas and create a unified public. Their communication was marked by certain features, by rationality, by disinterestedness, by irrelevance of inherited identities to their deliberation, and by rigorous separation of private and public spheres (Rudolph and Rudolph 2003: 3).

The classical bourgeois public sphere was constituted around rational-critical argument where the exercise of reason occupied supremacy. For Habermas (2000: 29), the educated middle class learnt the art of rational-critical debate through their contact with the modern 'elegant world'. Public sphere is not based on the common sense of the ordinary people. Tracing back the intellectual history, he argues that the core ideas that shape the constitution of public sphere are the development of the notion of 'public opinion' as opposed to 'mere opinion'. Mere opinions

are the arbitrary views of isolated persons taken in the aggregate (Calhoun 1990: 313). It consists of “things taken for granted, normative convictions”, and “collective prejudices” (quoted in Rudolph and Rudolph 2003: 4). Where as the public opinion is the outcome of ‘the deliberated, reflective consideration of the bourgeois educated persons’ (quoted in Rudolph and Rudolph 2003: 4), or/and communicative rationality which is ‘the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech’ (quoted in Flyvbjerg 1998: 212).

Habermasian public sphere presents a catalogue of fundamental rights in defense of public sphere (freedom of speech, opinion, press, assembly, association, etc.) and the intimate sphere (inviolability of person and residence, etc). Emphasizing the autonomy and citizenship rights of the Individual, he recognizes the constitutional rights of individuals to engage in political activity in the public sphere (right of petition and suffrage, etc) and economic activity in the private sphere (equality before law, right of property, etc.).<sup>6</sup> In public sphere, the idea of ‘publicity’ in principle is opposed to all domination (Cohen and Arato 1995:227). Habermas’s account of bourgeois conception of public sphere requires bracketing inequalities of status and to deliberate ‘as if’ they were social equals (Fraser 1990:62). The only ‘force’ which is active in the ideal speech situation and in communicative rationality is ‘the force of the better argument’ (Flyvbjerg 1999: 213). For Habermas, the proliferation of multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy, and that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics (Fraser 1990: 62). He also assumes that the discourse in public sphere should be restricted to the deliberation about common good, and that the appearance of ‘private interests’ and ‘private issues’ is always undesirable (ibid).

To summarize, Habermasian understanding of public sphere is an arena where citizens agree voluntarily in the public sphere to discuss common issues as opposed to private interests. This is a comprehensive and universal sphere of literate people who belonged to the bourgeois middle class engaged in deliberative exchange in which rational-critical arguments rather than inherited ideas and personal statuses could determine agreements and actions. Thus, the notion of public sphere in civil society implies: (a) it is universal in nature; (b) it is accessible to all; (c) people come together in an arena of common concerns; (d) it is an independent sphere outside the state; (e) it belonged to the bourgeois middle class; (f) it is a space for the literate people who have the monopoly over producing ‘public opinion’; (g) people in the public sphere exercise certain rights.

### **Civil Society, Citizenship and Public Sphere in India**

Indian Constitution, by recognizing the rights of Individuals and ensuring equality, established the foundations for a universal public sphere. Despite of these provisions, civil society was divided on power relations and public sphere remained confine to a small section of bourgeois middle class interest groups who, unlike Habermasian public sphere, happened to be a part of the state. The public sphere was in true sense a kind of *bürgerliche gesellschaft* which was inaccessible to the ordinary masses. There could be two interrelated reasons which closed the ‘space’ for public participation and created an exclusionary public sphere. The first is the development of a strong welfare state and the legacy of colonialism which kept the politicized Indians apolitically busy and produced a *depoliticized* citizenry, and the second is the exclusion of the common people from the public sphere on the basis of standards set by the virtues of modernity.

Sudipta Kaviraj (2001) argues that the confinement of civil society to a certain section was due to the belief of the masses in the nature of the post-colonial state and the illusion provided by the state and ruling elites. It was the modern elites who mobilized the masses and spoke for them against the tyranny of the colonial state, and thus enjoyed unquestioned legitimacy to power in the post-colonial period. Thus, as Alam (2004: 3) points out, post-colonial democracy in India began as a tryst between the elites and the masses where the masses were promised of welfare and in return delegated the elites the power to rule. The emergence of a strong welfarist post-colonial state ensured the provision of services such as social, economic, education, health, and cultural aspects of governance. Since the state and the elites assumed the role of provider, protector and regulator of social welfare, the citizenry became passive and *depoliticized* which created an illusion of consensus that an active civil society distinct from the state was unnecessary. Civil society as a sphere of rights legitimized the domination of the upper castes, and upper classes. And it is through the same civil society, as Gramsci argues, capitalist state established its hegemony over society in India.

The second reason was more contradictory to the very nature of citizenship rights ensured by the Constitution and democratic state. As Partha Chatterjee (1998, 2004) argues, Indian civil society was confined to a small section of English educated middle class elites who dominated the social, literary and political life and played an important part in the anti-colonial struggle. For him civil society refers to 'those institutions of associational life originating in Western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision making, recognised rights and duties of members and such other principles' (Chatterjee 1998: 42). Although the Indian Constitution<sup>7</sup> and the laws guarantee everyone as a citizen with fundamental rights, but, most of the inhabitants are deprived of exercising such rights due to the pervasiveness of various traditional exploitative practices related to caste, tribe, class, community, religion, ethnicity, education, gender, etc, which ceased the possibility of developing a common and comprehensive public sphere, as proposed by Habermas. Gupta (2000: 243) argues that these bonds are not, in themselves, conducive for creating ties of citizenship that the public sphere promotes. And 'the greatest threat to civil society in India today comes from the intrusion of collective identities based on caste and community into domains that ought to be governed by the rights and obligations of individuals' (Beteille 1999).<sup>8</sup>

Under Indian Constitution, every individual is guaranteed with citizenship rights (Article 5 –11) and fundamental rights (Article 12 –35) such as right to equality, liberty, right against exploitation, right to freedom of religion, and cultural and economic rights. Any kind of discrimination against citizens on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth is prohibited under law. The question arises that to what extent have the liberal spirit of constitutional provisions, institutional guarantees and the language of rights, strengthened and shaped the public sphere in India? As Ashis Nandy (2002: 4) observes, the mainstream social theories give everyone the right to vote, but not the right to bring their odd cultural ideas and morality into the public sphere. It is observed that despite of all these legal and constitutional provisions, social relations are inherently hierarchical, and certain groups are denied of basic liberties to education, freedom of speech, freedom of opinions, and the equality of opportunity in the civil society on the grounds of ascribed identity. Thus, the mere acceptance of rights does not mean that the problem of inequality and exclusion has been resolved.

Caste is one such factor which discriminates the people of lower castes<sup>9</sup> and strictly denies their participation in the public sphere. As R.M Pal observes<sup>10</sup> that the caste system has created impregnable walls between groups of human beings where birth solely determines the social position in society. Caste system denies basic education to lower castes and women. The literacy rate for Scheduled Castes (SCs) in 1991 was 37.4 per cent as compared to 57.7 per cent for others.<sup>11</sup> They were excluded from the mainstream life of the village and forced to live as untouchables. They are often denied the right to vote and forced to work without remuneration as bonded labourers. For example, on the Independence Day during 1998, a woman *sarpanch* (elected village council leader) was striped naked while unfurling the national flag in a district of Rajasthan.<sup>12</sup> Dalit officers and elected leaders are publicly humiliated, for which they believe that public sphere is full of caste discrimination that denies them equal social standing. It is this apprehension of humiliation that prevents them from participating in the political realm, and makes them 'exiled citizens' or 'stigmatized citizens' (Guru 2005: 267). Thus, the public sphere in India is imbued with the ideology of purity-pollution which destroys the possibility of any intimacy (ibid).

Not only the caste, but also gender, tribe<sup>13</sup>, religion<sup>14</sup>, property and education were other basis of exclusion, inequality and exercise of power in India. Women are considered as the symbols of the private. Education for girls is not accorded a high importance by many families. The disparity between male and female is very high (21.70 percent) in terms of the literacy status.<sup>15</sup> In the patriarchal ordering of society, the relegation of women to the private sphere of family based on compassion, affection, emotion and unreflective loyalties are in sharp contrast to the rational-critical principles of public sphere. They are denied of equality and agency in the public sphere of civil society. The *purdah* (veil) system denies women of Muslim community from the public space. The practice of *sati*<sup>16</sup> was very much a part of the tradition. Violence<sup>17</sup> acts as a weapon through which society exercises its power and keeps a section of the population excluded from the public sphere. Discrimination and hatred also continues on the basis of religion. The wave of sectarianism and communal riots became frequent feature of the society. According to the Planning Commission Report more than a quarter of the Indian population do not own any property and are living below poverty line, which makes them over-dependent on economic activity and deprives them entering into non-economic relations with other human beings. Poverty and lack of property does not allow people to participate in the public sphere in Habermasian sense.

The idea of a universal public sphere as the site for dialogue and communication seemed impossible due to the existing incompatibility and conflict among multiple languages<sup>18</sup> in India. Although Hindi is considered as the national language, is the mother tongue of only 18 percent people. The regional languages of self-determination are either subordinated by the legal and bureaucratic languages or not recognized in the public domain. Many people lack verbal skills to carry on a critical public discussion. Speaking of different languages indicate not only the presence of incommensurable tongues but also incommensurable beliefs which sadly disprivileged certain groups reasons beyond their control and rational-critical communication in the public sphere proved to be the ultimate chimera (Chandhoke 2005: 332). Thus, many subalterns simply 'lack voice' inasmuch as they are unfamiliar with the terms of the dominant language.<sup>19</sup> Speakers of subaltern languages simply loose out in the power of linguistic politics because the spaces of communicative ethics have already been colonized and the procedures of exclusion have already been institutionalized.<sup>20</sup>

Over-dependent on the state for welfare and lack of politicization on the one hand, and discrimination of people on the basis of social statuses excluded a vast majority of population from the public sphere. Individuals placed in unequal conditions are unable to participate in political life on the basis of equality and freedom (Chandhoke 1995: 164), and the non-participation of people implies the restrictive nature of public arena. The long-term dependency on welfare produced a mass of 'passive citizenry'<sup>21</sup> incompatible to the idea of public sphere. Difference in interest and identity did not bring people together into a public domain to engage in rational-critical communication on 'common issues' which potentially concern everybody. The normative ethos of public sphere was fashioned purely out of the inter-personal communication between a certain classes of people, which are not antagonistic to the oppressive state as it was in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but were in conjunction with it for the fulfillment of sectarian collective interest. As Gramsci conceptualizes, the state in India exercised its hegemony through the bourgeois public sphere. It provided moral and ideological legitimacy to state and bureaucracy to exercise power and the common masses in society were protected neither by the state, nor by the civil society. The bourgeois middle class attain the political legitimacy of the common people either through consent by providing economic opportunities or through coercion by using oppression and violence.

Thus, the very essence of universal public sphere of Habermas was not realized in the empirical context of India as (a) it is not accessible to all, (b) ascribed identities are not bracketed but play significant role in inter-personal exchange, (c) majority of the population are illiterate and property less (poor)<sup>22</sup>, (d) conflicting of interest and identity does not recognize common issues, (e) groups are excluded on ascriptive statuses to participate in rational-critical debate, (f) there is no 'common language' for communication, (g) the public dimension to constitutional rights on the autonomy of the individuals are not accomplished, (h) the logic of power is never absent from public domain of deliberation, and (i) the 'public' and 'political' was confined among the modern, educated elites and dominant classes in India.

### **Active Citizenship and Subaltern Counterpublics in India**

As a response to the institutional confinement of public life to a single, comprehensive public sphere based on rationality, class status and education, Nancy Fraser (1990: 66-67) develops the idea of multiple public spheres. For her, plurality of competing publics are the result of mechanisms of inequality and domination that are deeply ingrained in modern liberal societies (Rabinovitch 2001: 345) which better promote the idea of participatory parity than does a comprehensive, overarching public in both stratified as well as multicultural societies. The members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies as the public sphere tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups. Thus, there is a need for alternative public spheres, or what Fraser calls *subaltern counterpublics* which represents 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate their counter discourses based on oppositional identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990).

In a stratified and multicultural society like India where diversity and inequality are the basic norms of everyday social and political life, it could be argued that multiple public spheres could provide space of representation for the subalterns against exclusion and marginalization, and

help making claims for citizenship and inclusion. Thus, civil society<sup>23</sup> is defined as a sphere where groups organized on class and other social bases – gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and environment – engage in political and ideological struggles (Chandhoke 1995: 168). Along the lines of Nancy Fraser, it is argued in India that if the different identities are not recognized and measures not adapted to protect their distinct interests, then equality of rights and equality of treatments would effectively reinforce the dominance of majority<sup>24</sup>. Informed by group differences and assigning differential system of rights and obligations of citizenship, Indian constitution provides the legitimacy for the creation of multiple public spheres. Differential treatment to different groups created differential identity, affiliations and mobilizations. This diversity of interest produced specific community publics for representing different interests.

The question here is that what led to the mobilization of multiple publics in India during the 1990s? And how do the issues become public and political? Although rights were recognized by the constitution since the beginning, the overarching dominance and assurance of the welfare state made people passive recipients of the government programmes. An explanation to this could be made through Alam (2004: 76) while he argues that it is not just the granting of citizenship, but actualizing the exercise of rights, becomes the key component in the ongoing journey of democracy. But, one of the most important reasons of the rising of multiple groups demanding citizenship entitlements is what Rajni Kothari (2001) calls the ‘decline of the moderate state’<sup>25</sup>. For him, Indian state after 1960s moved away from the pluralistic and inclusive model of politics followed by the Congress Party which marked the trend towards deinstitutionalization process. The state suffered from both a ‘crisis of governability’ as well as a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ (Chandhoke 2003) and failed to keep its promises with persistent poverty (260 million people), malnutrition and hunger (268 million), unemployment (75 million), illiteracy (48%), rising corruption scandals (2.8 CPI), crisis of communalism (80456 affected), caste discrimination, gender inequality, dominant caste democracy, criminalization of politics, rigid bureaucracy, and ineffectiveness in enforcing the rule of laws.<sup>26</sup>

The failure of the centralized state marked two essential developments which had implications for democratic citizenship in India. Firstly, the people in civil society were left to be responsible for their own social reproduction; and secondly, the state had to enter into partnership with organizations in civil society, market, and with transnational organizations. In the first context, the rolling back of the state from many areas of welfare and the decline of political process necessarily involves the decline of interest in the poor (Kothari 1997: 229). This carried serious implication for the disadvantaged groups, who were not in a position to ensure their social reproduction, and who had been enabled to do so by the welfare state, were now thrown upon the not so tender mercies of the market and a rather uncivil society (Chandhoke 2003). This geared up the communities as politically significant rather than being mere ritual status groups, and led to the rise of various social movements concerning citizenship rights at the grassroots to represent the interests of ordinary people and their aspirations for carving out an autonomous space to discuss the essence of freedom, autonomy, and dignity of human existence. It was in this precise context that non-state agencies whether national or international movements, pressure groups, human rights organizations and non-governmental organizations representing the issues on behalf of the disadvantaged in civil society, became a partner of the state in governance. They assumed the role of development work and delivery of services as well as

worked with the grassroots movements to advance citizen's rights through legal reform and strategies to empower the poor (ibid).

Although the service delivery by non-governmental organizations provided solutions to the problems of welfarism, it was feared that the society would continue with passive citizenry. But non-governmental associationalism's continuous involvement in empowerment and grassroots mobilization created an active citizenry which provided sites for the development of alternative politics and the circulation of counter-discourses. They also articulated diverse concerns, negotiated alternative views and offered the training ground for participatory democracy which strengthened active citizenship (Brown, Kenny, Turner and Prince 2000: 204-205).

With the rolling back of the state, the marginalized sections became more vulnerable and the legitimacy of the state was questioned. Issues affecting different sections like caste, tribe, gender, ethnic and religious groups, became the part of a generalized discourse of discussion and interrogation which gave them a 'public' character; and the collective demand for rights and the struggle for empowerment made it 'political'. The common good of one group was different from the common good of others. Multiplicity of problems pluralized the public sphere and created multiple sites of collective resistance within the civil society. This did not create a universal public sphere because, as Chandhoke (1995: 199) argues, 'a space can not be public in conditions where the individual is socially unequal and culturally marginalized, edged out ideologically and deprived politically'.<sup>27</sup>

The state which also used to be the single locus of power and authority started sharing power with multiple actors and became pluralized.<sup>28</sup> The people who had been *depoliticized* and remained as passive citizens by the policies of the state rise to demand justice, equality, and freedom. The 'individual' made a transition to the category of 'right bearing citizen'. This transformation came largely from the exploited stratum of society in their struggle for rights and entitlements which provided the institutional channel for (a) the participation of citizens, (b) for the representation of their interests, and (c) for clear lines of accountability (Chandhoke 2003). Citizens represented themselves and their interests, which *politicized* their existence in the public sphere. Rights acquire political edge and political clout when individuals assert and articulate these rights in the form of claims upon the polity; and when the democratic state recognize these rights, when they grant status in the form of law, and when the judiciary defends these rights against violations.<sup>29</sup> The politics of struggle did not remain confined within the political and civil rights but widened to the social and economic rights of the marginalized. The subaltern struggle for rights has expanded the capacity of civil society and widened the scope of democratic participation. The non-party political formations and grassroots mobilizations provided a *political* alternative, opened up a democratic space and transformed the nature of polity from what Rudolph and Rudolph call *command polity* to *demand polity*<sup>30</sup> and Kothari calls *politics of the classes* to *politics of the masses*.

### **Subaltern Participation and Democracy in India**

The 1990s witnessed electoral upsurge of the disadvantaged groups and radical transformation in the nature of politics in India with increasing participation of the marginalized people and rising grassroots political movements. Democracy no longer requires clutches in the shape of powerful



leaders – as guardians of democracy and as trustees of people – in order to survive.<sup>31</sup> It has become internal to common people's political consciousness, not because it has solved all the problem of society, but because it has provided them a space to fight for their dignity, rights and entitlements.<sup>32</sup> It has become a mode of organizing power or a space for struggles for the marginalized.

Alam (2004: 27) argues, although the voting percentage has not changed significantly between 1971 and 1996, the internal composition of voting-public has changed in a dramatic manner. In 1971, there were more upper caste, urban and college educated voters, where as in 1996, there are more non-literate people, rural based people, Muslims, tribals, scheduled castes and OBCs. The social foundations of political power today – as distinct from the class character of the state – comprise more of vulnerable sections than in 1971 (ibid). The caste composition of voting pattern reflects that

...beginning with the OBCs versus the upper castes, in 1996, there were 59 percent OBC votes against 56 percent upper caste votes. Compared with the average polling of 58 percent, there is 1 percent more in OBC votes and nearly 2 percent less of upper caste votes. The difference becomes more pronounced when we look at the scheduled castes, whose votes are 2 percent above the average, that is about 60 percent of them voted, in comparison to the upper caste votes of 56 percent. In 1971, the difference was not so conspicuous. Both the OBCs and upper castes were 1.5 percent below the average, but the scheduled castes were only half a percent above the average (Alam 2004: 29).

Similarly, there is a more pronounced shift in voting figures between the non-literate and the educated. To quote from Alam (2004: 29)

In 1996, the non literate vote is half percent more than the voting average, and surprisingly the educated vote is 5 percent lesser than the average. On election day, 60.5 percent of the non-literate, and only 55 percent of the educated choose to vote. In 1971, the educated voted 6 percent above the average of 55 percent, and non-literate voted 3.5 percent below the average.

It is also observed that the Adivasis (tribals) and Muslims are participating increasingly in the election process. To quote

In 1996, the aggregate vote of the various Adivasi communities was slightly less than one percent (57 percent) below the national average of 58 percent. In 1971, it was below the average by 6.5 percent; on an average polling of 55 percent, the tribal vote was 48.5 percent...In the case of Muslims, it was exactly one percent below the average in 1996; where as in 1971, it was seven percent below the average (Alam 2004: 31).

Although, the urban people have more access to the media networks and seems to be more politically sensitized, it is observed that their voting percentage is lower than the rural people. To see

The votes of those residing in rural areas is one percent higher than the average in 1996; where as in 1971, it was lower than the average by one percent. This is not significant shift in the case of some of the other pairs we considered. But it acquires significance in relations to the votes in urban areas. In 1996, the vote of the urban residents was lower than the average by about 3.5 percent, but in 1971, it had been higher by 4 percent (Alam 2004: 32).

It is observed that most of the privileged sections of society are getting alienated from democratic process, and the legitimacy of the democratic system, now, derived from the vulnerable sections of society. Thus, today, as Zoya Hasan (2000: 29) claims, the historically disadvantaged groups are among the more active and enthusiastic participants in the political process. As a result of this participation, the locus of power has shifted from the established upper-caste elite to new upwardly mobile groups, and from the centre to regions and localities (ibid).

### **Globalization and the Politics of Micro Democratic Movements**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and India's adoption of the policies of economic liberalization effectively signaled the demise of the hegemony of the language of socialism in Indian politics (Yadav 1999: 23). The subaltern struggle around identity and exclusion took a new form with the arrival of globalization. The entry of the global forces in local spaces without much mediation by way of protection or control from state has brought sharp divide between the classes and the masses<sup>33</sup> and pushed the marginalized into a state of destitution. With the decline legitimacy of political practices and fewer state intervention, the rich getting richer by the logic of accumulation and market, and the poor getting poorer through the logic of exploitation, exclusion, and growing alienation from centers of power and decision-making (Kothari 1997: 229). Globalization was seen as an incarnation of the old idea of development which disrupts communities, cultures, and livelihoods of the poor without offering them any viable and dignified alternative (Sheth 2004). The policies of trade liberalization and corporate globalization led to the rising cost of production and the falling price of farm commodities which resulted in the suicide<sup>34</sup> of many farmers. Large-scale development projects such as construction of big dams and mining industries were devised with international agencies which evicted indigenous people from their land and livelihood.<sup>35</sup> The democratically elected government is now at the service of the corporations, controlling with guns and police the very citizens who 'freely' elected them.<sup>36</sup> Liberal democracy acted as market democracy, and openly protected the interest of the MNCs instead of the citizens. Local democracies were viewed as roadblocks to the expansion of market democracy.

Thus, as a response to the exploitative state and globalization process, multiple grassroots social movements have been active in challenging the prevailing establishment and throwing alternative possibilities. The growing disparity between liberalization's economic agenda for profit and subaltern's empowerment agenda for social justice has translated the submissive language of mass alienation into assertive mass mobilization. According to some guesstimates, there are 50,000 to 100,000 movements groups<sup>37</sup> active in the country today. As Sheth (1995: 32) argues, social transformation for these groups is not an apolitical activity, but a live political agenda for changing the terms of discourse on democracy in India. This, however, does not mean that they define the politics of movements in direct opposition to the institutional framework of democracy. In fact, they view institutional democracy as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for pursuing their parallel politics of micro-movements, through which they seek to raise the social consciousness of people and democratize the hegemonic structures of power in society (ibid: 32-33). The movements against bauxite mining in the tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, against dams in the Narmada valley, and the peasants and laborers

movement against the corrupt political and bureaucratic structure in Rajasthan are some prominent political mobilization for grassroots democratization in India today.

The globalization-related policies of the state opened up a space for transnational corporations and help them acquiring the land for their industrial establishment in the resource rich areas. One such project is the bauxite mining project in Andhra Pradesh<sup>38</sup> which planned to displace 50,000 tribals and create massive deforestation. The state, whose prime duty is the welfare and protection of the citizens, is now using sovereign powers to protect the MNCs and TNCs to crush the citizens (Sahoo 2005). In opposing the project, in 1991, a walkathon (padayatra) known as *manya prante chaitanya yatra*, a consciousness raising walk was organized by SAMTA and SAKTI around tribal livelihoods, identity, culture, ecological destruction, and fundamental rights ensured by Indian constitution. Over 50 other social action groups also joined the movement which is still continuing. Largely accepting SAMTA plea, the Supreme Court of India gave a 400 page judgment in 1997, outlining the steps which needed to be taken to make the tribals as partners in the development of scheduled areas. Thus, the court recognized the local people as legal-stake holders in the development of the area they live in (Sheth 2004). A similar struggle against bauxite mining is still continuing in securing the economic, ecological and cultural rights of the Adivasi communities in the tribal areas of Orissa against the Utkal Alumina Industries Limited which plan to displace 60,000 people from their land and livelihood.<sup>39</sup>

In another instance, largely victimized by the political and bureaucratic system, the peasants and laborers, in Rajasthan, have launched a mass-based political movement under the banner of Mazdoor Kishan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)<sup>40</sup> or organization for the empowerment of the workers and peasants around the issues of corruption, bureaucratic unaccountability, right to information, and minimum wages for the laborers. Besides being underpaid, people in the area did not get enough work through the year, often because sanctioned development programmes often remained on paper, with the allocated money being pocketed by government officials and elected leaders (Sheth 2004). When they demanded to be paid minimum wages, they were refused on the grounds that 'they did not work' as per official records, which led to the demand for having access to public records and right to information. Various sit-ins, rallies, demonstration and public hearings were organized in the state level demanding comprehensive legislation granting citizens the right to information. The struggle of MKSS resulted in the passing of state legislation on right to information. This culminated in half a dozen other state assemblies passing similar legislation. In the central level, the Right to Information Bill got the assent of the President on June 15, 2005 and has been enforced on October 12, 2005. Thus, being recognized by the state, the creative politics at the grassroots around citizenship rights and entitlements has acquired political edge and changed the nature of democracy in India, making it more participatory and responsive to the demands of the marginalized. The potential of the subaltern classes and their ideologies of discontent and resistance in reshaping the state prevented the bourgeois in instituting its hegemony over civil society.

### **Saffronization of Civil Society**

Not only the subaltern grassroots movements, but also various sectarian and religious fundamentalist movements have become a significant feature of Indian society since the 1990s. The elevation of communal forces (Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies) to power witnessed,

what Radhika Desai (2004) calls, a systematic ‘saffronization’ of state and civil society in India. The civil society was fragmented on religious lines where the minority religious groups were relegated to the status of second class citizens. This period marked the highest point of communalism in Indian history. For example, in a single and intense anti Sikh pogrom (1984) around 3000 Sikhs were butchered in most merciless fashion.<sup>41</sup>

The rise of Hindutva, which stands for the disenfranchisement of those whose loyalty to the nation it holds in suspect, has spread the ‘politics of hate’ in society and has been responsible for many Hindu-Muslim riots in the country. On 6 December 1992, 30,000 Hindu nationalists demolished the Babri mosque in the Indian city of Ayodhya which witnessed massive rioting across the country. The Christian communities working in the remote areas were accused of conversion and have also been subject to violence which manifested its brutal form with the burning alive of Pastor Graham Stuart Stains along with his two sons, Philip and Timothy (Ages 11 and 7) in Orissa on 23 January 1999. Recently, in Godhra riot, according to the official acknowledgement 850 persons and as per unofficial estimates 2000 people were killed.<sup>42</sup> As per the National Crime Record Bureau: 2000, the number of riot victims has increased into 80,456. Since 1998 the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had also been indulging in armed communal mobilization through its trishul (trident) distribution to awaken the Hindus.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the hate politics of the Hindutva project leaves no space for any kind of dialogue, and rational-critical communication within civil society. The public sphere of the civil society has been flanked by communal discourses which have given rise to counter civil society and anti-democratic movements.

### **Towards Conclusion**

It is evident from the preceding discussions that social exclusion and discrimination ceased the possibility for creating a universal public sphere in India. The mobilization of the marginalized grounded on multiple interests, pluralized the public sphere within the civil society. Civil society became the playing field for both democratic forces in the form of subaltern assertion for citizenship rights, and anti-democratic forces in the form of rising communal and sectarian groups. Not only the structure, but also the very nature of the public sphere in India has been transformed. Unlike the homogeneous and universal public sphere of Habermas, the subaltern counterpublics are based on the politics of difference and heterogeneity. The deliberations in these public spheres are neither grounded on the qualifying characteristics of educational achievements nor on property relations reflecting the person’s class status. ‘Public opinion’ is formed out of common sense, which has broadened the scope of public sphere to illiterate mass-public in the rural areas and transformed its nature from being merely a space for opinion formation (weak publics) to influencing the decision-making and public policy (strong publics).

Thus, despite the existence of some anti-democratic communal forces within civil society, the politicization of rights and the social struggles at the periphery made public spheres of civil society arenas of political democracy. The struggle groups who were previously out side the arena of power, in most cases, have been successful in articulating their needs and press their claims in the political terrain not as passive subjects but as self-confident citizens. The publicization and politicization of issues through various grassroots movements have challenged

and, in most cases, redressed the arrangements within the civil society and the state. The legitimacy of the modern state and democracy in India is neither any longer dependent on the hegemony of the elites, nor an act of faith granted from above. It is rather now firmly grounded on the idea of popular sovereignty and/or what Partha Chatterjee (2004) calls ‘the politics of the governed’.

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## Website Links

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- <http://www.literacyonline.org/products/ili/webdocs/daswani.html>
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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Assoc. Prof. Vedi R. Hadiz for dispelling various doubts on the confusing and complex relationship between the idea of civil society and democratization, and to Prof. Bryan S. Turner for comments while writing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> As these subaltern and marginalized groups were mobilized under different interests against the dominant classes, and the state, I equate them with Nancy Fraser's (1990) idea of 'subaltern counterpublics', and Negt and Kluge's (1972) idea of 'proletarian public sphere'. Writing a critique of universal and bourgeois public sphere, Fraser develops the idea of 'subaltern counter-publics' as an alternative vision to Habermas. For more see Fraser, N (1990).

<sup>3</sup> In opposition to Habermas's bourgeois form of public sphere, Oskar Negt (his student) and Alexander Kluge (1972) advocate for a public sphere which is not bourgeois in form. They saw that a proletarian public sphere has already begun to appear which will assert its claim to leadership in the future. For more see Hohendahl and Russian (1974)

<sup>4</sup> For Kothari there has been a shift from Nationalist Democracy to Radical Social Democracy. This is a transition from top-down elites centered model to a more bottom-up, people centered and participatory form of democracy achieved through the struggle of the masses and grassroots political movements for rights.

<sup>5</sup> First published in German in 1962 as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* and translated into English in 1988

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, J and Arato, A (1995), pp. 226

<sup>7</sup> To have access to Indian Constitution, see: <http://pib.nic.in/feature/feyr2003/fjun2003/f100620031.html>

<sup>8</sup> To some extent, Beteille is right in his argument. But the evolution of citizenship and citizenship rights in India cannot be understood detached from community-based claims for rights and entitlements. Unlike Western Democracies, in India, rights and entitlements are claimed in the name of communities as well. See Alam (2004). Although Beteille sees ascribed identities as problem for civil society, I would argue, that these identities constitute significant factors for civil society mobilization in India today.

<sup>9</sup> As per 2001 census, lower castes or the scheduled caste constitutes 16.2 percent (166,635,700) of Indian population. They are also popularly known as 'dalits' or the oppressed castes

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Mathew, 2003

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.literacyonline.org/products/ili/webdocs/daswani.html>

<sup>12</sup> In another case in Melavalavu (Tamil Nadu), the dominant castes of the area murdered the panchayat president and the vice-president who both belonged to a lower caste, merely because they dared to fight the panchayat elections. For a detail analysis on panchayati raj and human right see Mathew, G (2003)

<sup>13</sup> According to the 2001 Census the tribals, commonly characterized as the Scheduled Tribes (STs) by the constitution of India constitute 8.2 percent (about 84.3 million) of India's population. See Sahoo, S (2005)

<sup>14</sup> As per the 2001 census, there are Hindu 80.5%, Muslim 13.4%, Christian 2.3%, Sikh 1.9%, other 1.8%, and unspecified 0.1%. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/in.html>

<sup>15</sup> According to the Census of India 2001 only 54.28 percent of the female population is literate while the literacy rate in case of male is 75.96 percent.

<sup>16</sup> It means woman committing suicide in the pyre of the husband. Although the practice of *sati* was abolished in 1829 by Lord Bentinck, but it was still prevalent when on September 4, 1987, in Deorala, a nondescript village in

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Rajasthan, 18 year Roop Kanwar burnt to death on the pyre of her husband Mal Singh. For more details about this case see <http://www.countercurrents.org/gen-shukla190304.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Here I talk about violence against the women and lower caste people. According to the data 4 molestation cases, 1 sexual harassment case, 6 cruelty cases by husband and relatives, 1 dowry case, and 2 rape cases are occurring every hour against Indian women. A total of 143795 crimes against women were reported in the country during 2001 as compared to 141373 during 2000 recording 1.7 percent increase. It is also observed that every hour 2 Dalits are assaulted, every day 3 Dalit women are raped, everyday 2 Dalits are murdered, and everyday 2 Dalit houses are burnt down.

<sup>18</sup> There are 18 major languages recognized as “National Languages” by the Constitution of India. There are 22 official languages spoken through out the country. There are 24 languages which spoken by a million or more people. Some of them are Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Urdu, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kannada, Punjabi, Assamese, etc. See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_languages). There are 1600 mother-tongues in India (Sheth, 1995)

<sup>19</sup> For a brilliant analysis on tribals and the representation of their language in the public sphere see Chandhoke, (2005). Gayatri Spivak also claims that subaltern can't speak in a way that would carry any sort of meaning for us without altering the relations of power that constitutes him/her as a subaltern. Once he or she begins to speak, their constitution as subaltern will no longer hold.

<sup>20</sup> When two unequally placed languages meet in the public sphere of civil society, the more powerful of the languages has already set the terms of exchange. The languages that do not meet the standards of the dominant language, or those that express different understandings, are doomed to marginality and loss. For example: languages of women in a male-dominated society, or languages of lower caste in a high caste dominated society. For more details on linguistic exclusion see Chandhoke, (2005).

<sup>21</sup> A passive citizen hardly plays any role in the public or the political sphere but receives certain benefits from the state in order to live and act freely (voluntarily) in private spaces protected by the state. The active citizen, on the other hand, takes part in common deliberations on his own good and the good of all, has an interest in who governs him and why, which policies have been adopted and why, and is prepared in the last instance to exercise power himself. For more details on ‘active citizenship’, see Bhargava, R (2005), and Brown, K, Kenny, S, Turner, B, and Prince, J (2000).

<sup>22</sup> For Habermas literacy and property are two of the basic criteria for participating in the public sphere and generating ‘public opinion’ different from ‘mere opinion’.

<sup>23</sup> Here civil society is a much broader concept than public sphere. Many public spheres coexist within the arena of civil society. Here public sphere I mean a group of people mobilized on a particular issue such as gender, caste, religion, environment, which is common to the interest of the community. Multiplicity of issues created multiple public spheres. Public sphere primarily understood as issue based mobilization of people out side the arena of state. Thus, it includes the social movements by the marginalized sections.

<sup>24</sup> For a debate on the differential, and universal conception of citizenship rights see Rodrigues, (2005), pp: 209-235

<sup>25</sup> By moderate state he means a state which despite the powerful tendency towards centralization and homogenization, acts as an instrument of social justice and human freedom. The Indian state between 1947 and 1967 (partly up to 1975) was such a state. For him, the deinstitutionalization process inaugurated by Mrs. Gandhi's premiership

<sup>26</sup> For a detail explanation of Indian state and its failure in fulfilling the popular promises see Chapter. 3 on ‘State and Development Planning in India: A Critique’ in Sahoo, S (2004a). See also Sahoo, S (2004b)

<sup>27</sup> Chandhoke (1995) does not talk about multiple public spheres. There existed inequality among different groups which has little possibility of creating a universal public sphere. As the people within a particular groups share more



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or less equal status, and as the group is affected by common problem, it is possible to mobilize people for a public sphere.

<sup>28</sup> For a brilliant analysis of the pluralisation of state apparatus see Chandhoke (2003).

<sup>29</sup> See Chandhoke (2003). In the section on democratic movements, I will discuss with concrete instances that how different marginalized sections of the society have been able to assert their rights before the state through social mobilizations and in turn compelled the state to take positive actions to protect the rights of the poor and marginalized in India. Some such movements are the tribal movements in Andhra Pradesh, Right to Information in Rajasthan, etc.

<sup>30</sup> Command Polity is where state hegemony dominates over society and Demand Polity is in which societal demands expressed as electoral pressure dominate over the state. See Rudolph and Rudolph (1987)

<sup>31</sup> Alam, Javeed (2004), p.17

<sup>32</sup> See the series editor Neeladri Bhattacharya's preface to Alam (2004), p. x

<sup>33</sup> See Kothari, R (1986) for an extensive discussion about the relationship between classes and the masses in Indian society. By classes he refers to the upper and middle classes. He argues that the 'classes' are to wallow in the imported mass culture of consumption and the masses are to be left to the playground of the market and that, too, largely in the unorganized sector.

<sup>34</sup> It is estimated that more 25,000 peasants in India have taken their lives since 1997 when the practice of seed saving was transformed under globalization pressures and multinational seed corporations started to take control of the seed supply. For details about the impact of globalization on farmers suicide see Shiva, Vandana (2004): <http://www.countercurrents.org/glo-shiva050404.htm>

<sup>35</sup> According to an estimate in the last 40 years 15.5 million populations have been displaced, and out of which 74.52 percent populations are still awaiting for rehabilitation. For details see Sahoo, S (2005)

<sup>36</sup> See Esteva, Gustavo, and Prakash, Madhu Suri (2004). They also discuss how globalization has got legitimacy after four failed Development Decades and constituted a timely substitute for the now frayed flag of development.

<sup>37</sup> See Sheth, D.L (1995), p. 31. Some of them are Chipko environmental movements, Save Narmada Movement, anti-mining projects in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, MKSS's movement for anti-corruption and right to information in Rajasthan, Tarun Bharat Sangh's movement for water conservation in Rajasthan, rights to food by Akal Sangharsh Samiti in Rajasthan, right to health by Jan Swasthya Aiviyan, peasants and farmer's movement, women's movement, dalit movements, tribal movements on culture, development and displacement, movements related to identity politics, citizenship and human rights, anti-globalization movements, and several others.

<sup>38</sup> The detail description about this movement is reproduced from D.L. Sheth (2004)

<sup>39</sup> For displacement and bauxite mining projects in the tribal districts of Orissa, see Sahoo, S (2005)

<sup>40</sup> For a case study on MKSS and its struggle for right to information see Sahoo, S (2004b) [http://www.commart.chula.ac.th/revisiting/pdf/32\\_SARBE.PDF](http://www.commart.chula.ac.th/revisiting/pdf/32_SARBE.PDF)

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.countercurrents.org/comm-puniyani150905.htm>

<sup>42</sup> On 27 February 2002, 60 passengers most of them are *kar sevaks* (worshippers of lord Ram of Hindu religion) were burnt after the Sabarmati train caught fire near Godhra, Gujarat, while returning from Ayodhya. Suspecting this act by the Muslims, a communal carnage was broke out by the Hindus which marked heavy rioting and destruction. <http://66.102.7.104/search?q=cache:ICdD4D8KomQJ:www.hrw.org/reports/2002/india/gujarat.pdf+Number+of+riot+victims+in+2002+in+India&hl=en>