

Civil Society as a Counterforce: Operationalizing Good Governance Against Populist Policies in Post-Liberalization India

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Introduction:

India's economic liberalization in 1991 marked a pivotal shift from a socialist-inspired, state-led development model to a neoliberal paradigm emphasizing market deregulation, privatization, and global integration. This transition, while spurring GDP growth from an average of 3.5% pre-1991 to over 6-7% in subsequent decades (Reserve Bank of India, 2024), also unleashed governance challenges. Populist policies—characterized by electoral handouts, welfare schemes like farm loan waivers and freebies—gained traction, often at the expense of institutional accountability. These policies, rooted in competitive populism, have centralized power, fostered elite capture, and undermined federalism, as seen in the erosion of state fiscal autonomy post-Goods and Services Tax (GST) implementation. Amid this, civil society has positioned itself as a counterforce, operationalizing "good governance" principles—transparency, accountability, participation, and responsiveness—as enshrined in World Bank frameworks and India's own Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC, 2007). Unlike top-down administrative reforms, which produced over 20 commissions since independence with marginal outcomes, citizen-led mechanisms have democratized oversight. The RTI Act 2005, for instance, has filed over 10 million applications by 2023, exposing corruption in schemes like MGNREGA (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan [MKSS], 2023). This paper employs Milton Esman's (1978) framework of "constituency organizations" to analyze civil society as intermediaries fostering solidarity and state-society dialogue. It argues that in post-liberalization India, civil society mitigates populist excesses by embedding good governance into populist regimes. Section 2 reviews literature; Section 3 theorizes civil society; Section 4 contextualizes post-1991 populism; Section 5 examines mechanisms; Section 6 presents case studies; Section 7 discusses challenges; and Section 8 concludes with policy implications.

Literature Review: Scholarship on post-liberalization India highlights the tension between neoliberal reforms and populist politics. Varshney (2013) notes how economic liberalization fueled "aspirational populism," where leaders like Narendra Modi leverage welfare (e.g., PM-KISAN) for electoral gains, sidelining institutional reforms. Chhibber and Verma (2018) document centralization, with the share of central taxes rising from 60% in 1991 to 70% by 2020, enabling elite capture via crony capitalism. Good governance literature, influenced by the UN and World Bank, emphasizes eight principles: participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, equitable, and inclusive (United Nations, 1995). In India, administrative reforms—from the 1949 Gopalaswami Ayyangar Committee to the 2005 Veerappa Moily ARC—promised these but faltered due to political resistance (Misra, 2010). Jayal (2010) critiques this "governance deficit," attributing it to neoliberalism's hollowing of state capacity.

Civil society's role emerges prominently. Kothari (1988) views it as a "third stratum" between state and market, revitalized post-Emergency (1975-77). Esman (1978) conceptualizes constituency organizations as solidarity-building entities interfacing with bureaucracies, a lens

applied here. Empirically, RTI has empowered marginalized groups; a 2022 CIC report shows 40% of queries from rural poor, curbing leakages in PDS (Central Information Commission, 2022). PILs, post-1980s judicial activism, have yielded landmark rulings like the 2G spectrum scam cancellation (Centre for Public Interest Litigation v. Union of India, 2012).

Gaps persist: most studies focus on either populism or governance silos, neglecting civil society's integrative role against neoliberal populism. This paper bridges this by analyzing operational mechanisms

Theoretical Framework: Civil Society as Constituency Organizations:

Milton Esman's (1978) framework from Rural Development: Participation and Linkages posits constituency organizations as civil society entities that aggregate interests, build solidarity, and link citizens to state agencies. Key functions include:

Solidarity building: Creating collective identities against elite dominance.

Participatory decision-making: Enabling bottom-up inputs via forums.

Linkage mechanisms: Negotiating with bureaucracies for accountability.

In India's context, this adapts to urban-rural divides post-liberalization. Populist policies fragment society via clientelism (e.g., caste-based reservations), but civil society reconstitutes it through issue-based coalitions. For instance, RTI campaigns by MKSS exemplify linkage, pressuring Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for MGNREGA audits.

Complementing Esman, Gramsci's (1971) civil society as a "war of position" counters hegemonic populism, while Habermas's (1987) public sphere theory underscores deliberative mechanisms like Citizens' Charters. Together, they frame civil society as operationalizing good governance against centralizing populism.

Post-Liberalization Populism and Governance Deficits:

Post-1991, liberalization under Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh dismantled the "License Raj," boosting FDI from \$97 million in 1991 to \$85 billion in 2022 (DPIIT, 2023). Yet, it entrenched populism. Economic inequality surged; Gini coefficient rose from 0.32 in 1993 to 0.36 by 2022 (World Bank, 2023). Populist responses—UPA's Food Security Act 2013, NDA's Ayushman Bharat—promised inclusion but prioritized electoral optics over sustainability.

Centralization intensified: Article 356 impositions rose pre-1991 but morphed into fiscal dominance post-GST, reducing states' share to 41% (RBI, 2024). Elite capture is evident in electoral bonds (struck down 2024), channeling ₹16,000 crore to parties (ADR, 2024). Administrative reforms failed; the 15th Finance Commission noted persistent corruption, with India's Corruption Perceptions Index at 40/100 (Transparency International, 2023). These deficits manifest in welfare leakages (30% in MGNREGA pre-RTI) and unresponsive bureaucracies, straining democracy.

Citizen-Driven Mechanisms of Good Governance:

Civil society operationalizes good governance via statutory and judicial tools, post-liberalization.

Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005

Enacted amid MKSS agitations, RTI democratized information. By 2023, 32 million applications processed, with 2.5 million appeals (CIC, 2023). It countered populism by exposing DYRK (Direct Benefit Transfer) frauds, saving ₹2.5 lakh crore (UIDAI, 2023).

Other Mechanisms

Consumer Protection Act 2019: Empowers against corporate malpractices in neoliberal markets.

Citizens' Charters (1997 onwards): 1,000+ charters mandate timelines, enforced via civil society.

E-Governance: Platforms like MyGov (2014) integrate feedback, though critiqued for surveillance.

Democratic Decentralization (73rd/74th Amendments, 1992): PRIs empowered, with civil society aiding Gram Sabhas.

Performance Appraisals: RTI-mandated disclosures track officials.

PILs: Over 50,000 filed since 1980s, enforcing environmental and welfare rights.

These tools, amplified by NGOs like Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), pressure populist regimes.

Case Studies: Civil Society in Action:

Case 1: MKSS and RTI in Rajasthan (1990s-2000s)MKSS's Jan Sunwais (public hearings) exposed MGNREGA corruption in Beawar, mobilizing 10,000 villagers. This pressured the 2005 RTI Act, reducing leakages from 40% to 15% nationally (Dreze & Khera, 2009). Esman's linkage is evident: solidarity via dharnas interfaced with state.

Case 2: PILs Against Electoral Bonds (2018-2024)CHRI and ADR filed PILs revealing ₹16,000 crore anonymous funding, favoring BJP (52%). Supreme Court struck them unconstitutional (2024), curbing elite capture in populist financing.

Case 3: NAPM and Anti-Land Acquisition Protests (2010s)Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) challenged populist land grabs for SEZs, invoking Forest Rights Act 2006. PILs halted projects, enforcing participatory governance.

Case 4: Farmers' Protests 2020-2021Farmer unions (Samukta Kisan Morcha) repealed farm laws via sustained agitation, exemplifying solidarity against neoliberal populism.

These cases illustrate civil society's efficacy, with RTI/PIL success rates at 60-70% (PRS Legislative Research, 2023).

Challenges and Limitations:

Civil society faces co-optation (e.g., FCRA restrictions 2020), vigilantism (e.g., anti-CAA protests), and digital divides. Populist regimes retaliate via sedition laws (1,000+ cases post-2014, HRW, 2023). Yet, resilience persists; RTI appeals rose 20% amid crackdowns.

Civil society in India, a vital pillar of democratic accountability, grapples with multifaceted challenges that undermine its autonomy and efficacy. Co-optation emerges as a primary threat, exemplified by the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) amendments in 2020. These tightened regulations mandated prior government approval for foreign funding transfers between NGOs, effectively choking financial lifelines for many organizations. By 2023, over 20,000 NGOs lost their FCRA licenses, crippling advocacy on human rights, environmental justice, and minority welfare (Amnesty International, 2024). Populist regimes leverage such measures to align civil society with state narratives, transforming watchdogs into compliant entities.

Vigilantism further erodes civil society's space, manifesting in mob violence and state-backed intimidation. The 2019-2020 anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests highlighted this peril: peaceful demonstrations in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh faced brutal crackdowns, with over 50 deaths and hundreds injured. Self-proclaimed vigilante groups, often aligned with ruling ideologies, targeted activists, labeling them "urban Naxals" or anti-nationals. This not only silences dissent but fosters a climate of fear, deterring grassroots mobilization on issues like farmers' rights or caste atrocities.

Digital divides compound these woes, excluding marginalized voices from online activism. India's internet penetration hovers at 50%, with rural and lower-caste communities lagging due to poor infrastructure and literacy (TRAI, 2025). During the COVID-19 lockdowns, urban elites dominated virtual campaigns, while Adivasi or Dalit groups struggled with access, widening representational gaps. Populist governments exploit this asymmetry through sophisticated digital surveillance, throttling internet in protest hotspots like Kashmir (2019 onwards) or Manipur (2023 ethnic clashes).

Retaliatory legal arsenals amplify suppression. Sedition laws under Section 124A IPC have surged, with Human Rights Watch (2023) documenting over 1,000 cases post-2014, often against journalists, students, and farmers protesting agrarian reforms. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) amendments in 2019 enable pre-trial detention without bail, ensnaring activists like those in the Bhima Koregaon case. These tools, rooted in colonial legacies, now serve populist consolidation, eroding judicial independence amid rising case backlogs.

Despite these headwinds, civil society's resilience shines through adaptive strategies. Right to Information (RTI) appeals surged 20% from 2020-2023, per Central Information Commission data, even as public authorities delayed responses amid crackdowns. Grassroots networks innovated with community radio, offline fact-checking, and legal aid collectives. Movements like the 2020-2021 farmers' protests mobilized 250 million virtually and on-ground, forcing policy reversals. Hybrid models blending digital tools with local alliances sustain momentum, underscoring civil society's indispensable role in countering authoritarian drifts.

In sum, while co-optation, vigilantism, divides, and legal reprisals imperil India's civil society, its tenacity—fueled by constitutional guarantees and public solidarity—offers hope for democratic renewal. Policymakers must reform draconian laws to nurture this ecosystem.

Conclusion and Policy Implications:

Civil society, as Esmanian constituency organizations, operationalizes good governance against post-liberalization populism, fostering transparency amid centralization. Policymakers should strengthen RTI (e.g., whistleblower protections), decentralize via PRI capacity-building, and regulate populism through electoral reforms. Future research could quantify impacts via governance indices.

As a research scholar, this analysis underscores civil society's indispensable role in India's democratic deepening.

Elaborated Conclusion and Policy Implications

In the intricate tapestry of India's post-liberalization democracy, civil society emerges as a vital counterforce to the twin challenges of populist centralization and governance opacity. Drawing from Milton Esman's framework of constituency organizations—those grassroots entities that represent marginalized voices—civil society operationalizes good governance principles such as accountability, participation, and responsiveness. This operationalization stands in stark opposition to the populist tendencies that have intensified since the 1991 economic reforms. Liberalization unleashed market-driven growth but also fueled a brand of populism characterized by charismatic leadership, majoritarian appeals, and centralized executive power, often at the expense of institutional checks. Civil society, through NGOs, community-based organizations, and activist networks, bridges this gap by mobilizing citizens, exposing corruption, and demanding transparency. In an era where centralization under populist regimes risks eroding federalism and local autonomy, these Esmanian entities foster a bottom-up accountability that deepens democratic norms.

This analysis reveals how civil society not only resists but actively reshapes governance landscapes. For instance, movements like the Right to Information (RTI) campaign, spearheaded by organizations such as the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), exemplify this role. By transforming abstract governance ideals into tangible actions—public audits and jan sunwais—civil society has compelled state apparatuses to align with public interest. Amid post-liberalization populism, which often prioritizes performative welfare over structural reforms, these organizations prevent democratic backsliding. They operationalize good governance by embedding transparency in everyday administrative processes, countering the centralizing impulses that concentrate power in Delhi-centric bureaucracies. As India's democracy matures, civil society's indispensable contributions highlight its evolution from a peripheral actor to a cornerstone of resilience.

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Civil Society's Role

Policymakers must prioritize targeted interventions to amplify civil society's impact while addressing systemic vulnerabilities. First, fortifying the Right to Information Act, 2005, remains paramount. RTI has empowered over 6 million annual filings, unearthing scandals from Commonwealth Games irregularities to electoral bonds opacity. However, its efficacy is hampered by bureaucratic delays, physical threats to activists, and recent dilutions like the 2019 amendments granting government control over information commissions. To counter this, policymakers should enact robust whistleblower protections. This could involve a dedicated Whistleblower Protection Act with independent oversight bodies, financial incentives for disclosures, and fast-track judicial redressal. Such measures would shield civil society activists, ensuring RTI evolves into a proactive tool against populist opacity, where leaders exploit information asymmetries for narrative control.

Second, decentralization through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) demands urgent capacity-building. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment empowered local bodies, yet implementation lags due to fiscal centralization and elite capture. Post-liberalization populism exacerbates this by diverting funds to flagship schemes like PM-KISAN, bypassing PRIs. Policymakers should allocate 10-15% of central grants directly to PRI treasuries, coupled with training programs in digital governance and participatory budgeting. Civil society partnerships—via NGOs like PRIA or Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)—can operationalize this by training panchayat leaders in Esmanian constituency-building, fostering inclusive decision-making. Evidence from Kerala's People's Planning Campaign demonstrates how such decentralization enhances transparency, reduces corruption, and counters central populist overreach.

Third, regulating populism through electoral reforms is essential to prevent its governance-eroding effects. Populism thrives on unregulated campaign financing, media manipulation, and personality cults, as seen in the 2019 and 2024 elections. Reforms should include state funding of elections to level the playing field, real-time disclosure of political expenditures, and bans on opaque electoral bonds (struck down by the Supreme Court in 2024 but needing legislative closure). Additionally, mandating fact-checking units within the Election Commission and penalizing hate speech under Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act would curb divisive populism. Civil society can monitor compliance, as in the Association for Democratic Reforms' voter education drives, ensuring electoral processes align with good governance.

Future Research Directions

To empirically validate these dynamics, future research must move beyond qualitative narratives toward quantifiable assessments. Governance indices offer a promising avenue: scholars could develop composite metrics integrating RTI usage rates, PRI devolution scores (e.g., from the Panchayat Devolution Index), and populism indicators like leader approval ratings versus institutional trust surveys. Panel data regressions across states—comparing high civil society activity

regions like Tamil Nadu with low ones like Uttar Pradesh—could isolate causal impacts. Machine learning models on social media sentiment might quantify populism's transparency erosion, while difference-in-differences analyses of RTI interventions pre- and post-2014 centralization would test civil society's mitigating effects.

Longitudinal studies tracking Esmanian organizations' evolution post-1991 would enrich this. For instance, integrating World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators with India's Local Governance Index could yield state-wise rankings, highlighting civil society's role in democratic deepening. Comparative analyses with Brazil or South Africa—fellow post-liberalization democracies—might reveal generalizable patterns. Such research not only quantifies impacts but informs evidence-based policymaking, bridging academia and practice.

Significance for Democratic Deepening in India

As a research scholar immersed in political science at Kakatiya University, this analysis profoundly underscores civil society's indispensable role in India's democratic deepening. In a federal polity strained by populist centralization—evident in farm laws protests or CAA agitations—civil society operationalizes Esmanian ideals, transforming passive electorates into active constituents. It counters post-liberalization inequities, where economic liberalization amplified inequalities (Gini coefficient rising from 0.32 in 1993 to 0.38 in 2022), by advocating redistributive policies.

This role extends to constitutional safeguards: civil society litigates under Article 32, as in the PUCI vs. Union of India case expanding RTI, reinforcing judicial checks against executive populism. Amid global democratic recessions (V-Dem reports India as an "electoral autocracy" since 2018), India's civil society—vibrant with 3.2 million registered NGOs—offers a model of resilience. It fosters transparency not as an elite virtue but a grassroots imperative, aligning governance with Ambedkar's vision of constitutional morality.

Yet challenges persist: FCRA restrictions since 2020 have curtailed foreign funding, hobbling operations. Policymakers and scholars must collaborate to nurture this ecosystem. Ultimately, civil society's synergy with state institutions promises a more substantive democracy—one where good governance triumphs over populist spectacle. This framework equips researchers like myself to advocate for policies that sustain India's democratic experiment, ensuring liberalization's gains endure through inclusive, transparent rule.

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