

Popular Responses in Civil Society

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Introduction

The year 1991 represents a turning point in India's development trajectory. Faced with economic crises, the government introduced structural reforms emphasizing deregulation, privatization, and integration into the global economy. The consequences were multidimensional: economic growth accelerated, the private sector expanded, and consumer markets diversified — yet disparities widened, informalization of labour increased, and public welfare systems encountered strain.

In this context, civil society emerged as a major arena of collective action. Civil society refers to the sphere between the state and the market where citizens organize themselves voluntarily to articulate interests, resist injustice, influence policy, and deliver social support. In post-liberalization India, civil society actors became watchdogs, service providers, reform advocates, and mobilizers of public opinion.

This paper explores the ways in which Indian civil society has responded to liberalization — not as a single unified reaction, but as a complex mosaic of resistance, cooperation, innovation, and contestation.

Understanding Civil Society in India

Civil society refers to organized social life that is voluntary, autonomous, and public-oriented. It includes:

- Non-Governmental Organizations
- Trade unions and farmer unions
- Self-help groups and cooperatives
- Student movements
- Women's and Dalit rights organizations
- Environmental networks
- Professional associations
- Digital communities and citizen journalism groups

In India, civil society has deep historical roots in the freedom movement, Gandhian constructive work, cooperative movements, and voluntary social service organizations. Post-liberalization, this sphere expanded significantly due to:

- Growth of educated middle classes
- Access to global networks
- Media visibility
- Donor funding
- Decentralization policies
- Right-based legal frameworks

Civil society became both a critical watchdog and a partner in governance.

Liberalization and Its Social Implications

1. Opportunities

- Enhanced economic growth and entrepreneurship

- Expansion of urban middle classes
- Technological innovation and digital connectivity
- Rise of corporate philanthropy and CSR
- New spaces for global networks and transnational advocacy

2 Emerging Challenges

- Regional and class inequalities
- Displacement due to infrastructure and industrial projects
- Informalization of labour and precarity
- Privatization of essential services
- Environmental degradation
- Erosion of traditional livelihoods
- These contradictory trends shaped the terrain on which civil society began to act.

Civil Society as a Rights-Based Actor

Right to Information Movement

The Right to Information (RTI) movement in India emerged as a powerful grassroots struggle demanding transparency and accountability in governance. It began in the 1990s, led mainly by civil society organizations such as the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan. Villagers and activists exposed corruption in local development works and argued that citizens, as taxpayers, have the right to know how public money is used. Public hearings (Jan sunwais) became a key tool to reveal fraudulent records and fake expenditures.

The movement gradually expanded, mobilizing journalists, lawyers, students, and social activists across the country. It transformed the debate from charity-based governance to citizens' entitlement to information. After sustained campaigns, protests, and policy dialogues, the Government of India enacted the Right to Information Act, 2005. The Act empowers people to seek official records, inspect files, and question delays or misuse of funds. It has helped uncover scams, improve delivery of welfare schemes, and strengthen democratic participation.

However, challenges remain, including delayed responses, reluctance from officials, and threats faced by RTI activists. Despite these obstacles, the RTI movement stands as one of India's most significant democratic reforms, enabling ordinary citizens to become watchdogs of public institutions.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005, is one of India's largest rights-based social security programmes. Its central objective is to provide livelihood security to rural households by guaranteeing at least 100 days of wage employment per year to adult members who are willing to do unskilled manual work. Unlike earlier welfare schemes, MGNREGA treats employment as a legal right, meaning citizens can demand work from the government, and compensation must be paid if work is not provided on time.

The programme focuses on creating durable community assets such as ponds, roads, check dams, water conservation structures, and soil improvement works. These projects not only generate income for poor families but also strengthen local resources and agricultural productivity. Panchayat Raj Institutions play a key role in planning and implementing works, promoting decentralization and local participation.

MGNREGA has been particularly significant for women, marginalized communities, and small farmers by offering income stability, reducing seasonal migration, and enhancing bargaining power. However, challenges persist, including delayed wage payments, inadequate awareness, corruption leakages, and uneven implementation across states.

Despite limitations, MGNREGA remains a landmark initiative for rural employment, inclusive growth, and democratic accountability in India.

Right to Education Act

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, commonly known as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, came into force in 2009 following the 86th Constitutional Amendment, which made education a fundamental right for children aged 6–14 years. The Act mandates that every child must have access to free, quality, neighbourhood schooling without discrimination based on caste, gender, religion, disability, or economic background.

Under RTE, government schools provide education free of cost, while private schools are required to reserve 25 percent of seats at the entry level for children from economically weaker and disadvantaged groups. The Act also lays down minimum infrastructure norms, including classrooms, qualified teachers, playgrounds, drinking water, and sanitation facilities. Corporal punishment, mental harassment, detention, and board examinations up to Class 8 are prohibited to create a child-friendly environment.

RTE emphasizes continuous and comprehensive evaluation, inclusive education, and community participation through School Management Committees. Although the Act has significantly improved school enrollment and awareness, challenges remain—such as teacher shortages, quality gaps, uneven implementation, and dropouts in some regions.

Overall, the RTE Act represents a landmark effort to ensure that every child in India receives equitable, accessible, and dignified elementary education.

National Food Security Act

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), enacted in 2013, aims to ensure that every citizen in India has access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food at affordable prices. The Act legally guarantees subsidized food grains to approximately two-thirds of the population through the Public Distribution System (PDS). Under NFSA, eligible households are divided into priority and Antyodaya (poorest of the poor) categories, receiving fixed monthly entitlements of rice, wheat, or coarse grains at highly subsidized rates.

A major feature of the Act is the recognition of food as a legal right rather than a welfare benefit. Special provisions are made for women and children, including maternity benefits, hot cooked meals for pregnant and lactating mothers, and supplementary nutrition through Anganwadi centers. Children aged 6–14 are entitled to mid-day meals in schools to address hunger and malnutrition.

The Act also emphasizes transparency, grievance redressal, and accountability by mandating social audits and establishing state-level food commissions. However, challenges persist in identifying beneficiaries accurately, preventing leakages in the supply chain, and ensuring nutritional diversity beyond staple grains.

Despite these obstacles, the NFSA remains a landmark initiative toward food security, social justice, and the right to live with dignity in India.

Forest Rights Act

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, was enacted to correct

historical injustices faced by tribal and forest-dwelling communities. For decades, colonial and post-colonial forest policies restricted access to forests, leading to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and conflicts between communities and the state. FRA recognizes that people living in forests for generations have legitimate rights over land and forest resources.

The Act grants individual and community rights, including rights to cultivate forest land, collect minor forest produce such as bamboo, tendu leaves, fuelwood, and honey, and access grazing and fishing areas. It also empowers communities to protect, manage, and conserve forests sustainably. Importantly, FRA requires that no forest land be diverted for development projects without the prior informed consent of affected gram Sabha's.

Implementation takes place through village-level committees, district authorities, and verification processes. While FRA has helped many communities secure land titles and assert resource rights, challenges remain, such as delayed approvals, bureaucratic resistance, conflicting conservation policies, and inadequate awareness among beneficiaries.

Despite these hurdles, the Forest Rights Act represents a significant step toward social justice, environmental stewardship, and the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems in India.

Environmental and Livelihood Movements

Post-liberalization industrial expansion intensified land acquisition, mining, and mega-projects. Civil society responses included:

- Struggles for sustainable development and environmental justice
- Community-based resistance against displacement
- Advocacy for impact assessments and accountability
- Networking with global climate and indigenous rights movements

These movements reframed development debates by insisting that growth must be equitable, ecological, and participatory.

Anti-Corruption Movement in India

The Anti-Corruption Movement in India gained national prominence in the early 2010s, reflecting widespread public anger over scams, misuse of public money, and lack of accountability. Triggered by a series of high-profile corruption cases in sectors such as telecommunications, natural resources, and infrastructure, citizens across classes felt that corruption was undermining development, eroding trust in institutions, and deepening inequality.

Civil society activists, most notably Anna Hazare and associated groups, launched mass protests demanding stronger anti-corruption laws and the creation of an independent ombudsman, popularly known as the Lokpal. Peaceful demonstrations, fasts, social-media campaigns, and large gatherings in cities and towns drew remarkable participation from youth, professionals, women, and middle-class citizens. The movement brought questions of ethics, transparency, and public accountability to the center of political debate.

In response, Parliament passed the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act (2013), establishing mechanisms to investigate complaints against public officials. Although implementation has been gradual and corruption has not disappeared, the movement significantly changed public expectations. Citizens became more aware of their rights, the media intensified scrutiny of public affairs, and government agencies faced pressure to be more transparent.

Overall, the Anti-Corruption Movement demonstrated the power of collective civic action in reinforcing democratic accountability in India.

Gender Justice and Inclusion Struggles

Civil society organizations worked toward:

- Women's political participation
- Campaign against domestic and sexual violence
- Support for survivors and legal reform
- Empowerment through SHGs and microfinance
- LGBTQ+ and disability rights advocacy
- Dalit and Adivasi rights mobilization

Liberalization opened economic spaces but also intensified vulnerabilities; civil society mediated both realities.

Labour and Farmers' Mobilizations

1. Labour

- With outsourcing and flexible employment increasing, unions and NGOs focused on:
- Informal workers' rights
- Minimum wages and social security
- Gender-based labour discrimination
- Migrant workers' vulnerabilities

2. Farmers

Price fluctuations, debt dependency, and agrarian distress triggered large protest coalitions and policy dialogues. Civil society organizations supported farmers through advocacy, legal aid, and awareness building on sustainable agriculture.

Gender, Justice and Social Inclusion

Gender, justice and social inclusion are central pillars of an equitable and democratic society. Gender refers not only to biological differences but to socially constructed roles and expectations that shape opportunities, power, and resources. Historically, women and gender-diverse groups have faced discrimination in education, employment, property rights, politics, and personal safety. Achieving gender justice therefore means challenging unequal norms and ensuring fair treatment, equal opportunities, and protection under the law.

Social inclusion goes beyond eliminating discrimination; it seeks to guarantee that all individuals — regardless of caste, class, ethnicity, disability, religion, or gender identity — can participate fully in economic, social, and political life. Inclusive policies promote access to basic services, decision-making spaces, and dignified livelihoods.

In India, progress has been made through laws and programmes addressing domestic violence, workplace harassment, political reservations for women, self-help groups, scholarships for marginalized communities, and affirmative action. Yet persistent barriers remain, including patriarchal mindsets, unpaid care burdens, digital exclusion, and intersectional disadvantages faced by Dalit, tribal, and minority women.

True gender justice requires not only legislation but sustained investments in education, healthcare, economic independence, and voice in institutions. When societies embrace inclusion, they unlock broader social cohesion, innovation, and sustainable development.

Media, Digital Public Sphere, and New Activism

Digital technologies transformed civic engagement. Civil society now mobilizes through:

- Online petitions and campaigns
- Social media awareness drives
- Crowdsourced monitoring of public services

- Citizen journalism and fact-checking networks
- While digital tools amplify voices, they also produce misinformation, polarization, and surveillance concerns — complicating the democratic landscape.

State–Civil Society Relations: Cooperation and Conflict

Civil society does not merely oppose the state; it frequently collaborates in welfare delivery, policy consultations, and innovation pilots. Yet tensions persist over:

- Funding regulations
- NGO accountability
- Political suspicion
- Risk of co-optation by state or corporate interests
- Thus, civil society navigates a delicate balance between autonomy and partnership.

Challenges Facing Civil Society

- Civil society today confronts:
- Elite dominance by urban NGOs
- Donor-driven agendas
- fragmentation and competition
- uneven rural participation
- political co-optation
- financial vulnerability
- Despite challenges, grassroots organizations continue to innovate new democratic practices.

Critical Reflections

Civil society in post-liberalization India is dynamic but fragmented. Urban-centric organizations may overshadow rural voices; donor agendas sometimes shape priorities; grassroots groups face resource constraints. Nonetheless, the sector remains essential for democratizing debate, amplifying marginalized perspectives, and challenging unchecked market power.

Conclusion

Post-liberalization India has undergone profound economic, cultural, and political transformations. Civil society has not been a passive observer; it has emerged as a crucial arena of negotiation between citizens, market, and state.

Its contributions are visible in:

Rights-based legislation

Expansion of transparency norms

Mobilization of marginalized communities

Gender and environmental justice campaigns

Digital civic participation

Yet, civil society is also constrained by regulation, co-optation, funding pressures, and fragmentation. The future of democratic India depends significantly on whether civil society can retain its autonomy, inclusiveness, and grassroots character while adapting to new technological and political realities.

Ultimately, the lesson of post-liberalization India is that economic reforms alone cannot define development. Democratic participation, social justice, ecological sustainability, and citizen

agency are equally essential. A vibrant civil society ensures that liberalization becomes not just a story of markets, but a story of people.

Post-liberalization India has witnessed profound transformations in both economy and society. Civil society has emerged not as a passive observer, but as an active arena of negotiation — questioning policies, demanding rights, offering alternatives, and sustaining democratic accountability.

Its impact is evident in rights-based legislation, environmental justice campaigns, transparency initiatives, labour and farmers' mobilizations, gender justice struggles, and digital activism. Despite regulatory pressures, internal fragmentation, and market co-optation, civil society continues to shape governance outcomes.

Ultimately, a robust civil society remains indispensable to ensure that liberalization serves citizens, not merely markets, and that development remains people-cantered, inclusive, and sustainable.

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