Seminar on Democratic Renewal and Civil Society

February 15, 2016
PRIA hosted a seminar on Democratic Renewal and Civil Society on February 15, 2016, which was attended by representatives of civil society organizations and donor agencies working in India.

The seminar focused upon shrinking civil spaces in today’s context. It also highlighted the changing role of civil society organizations (CSOs) due to sudden dominance / emergence of new actors such as media houses and large corporations/ business houses etc. in the development sector space. The seminar stressed upon the point how limiting civic spaces were an area of concern for all in democratic set up.

There were two main panelists, Dr Christina Schwabenland and Dr. Suhas Chakma, who shared their experiences of working in UK and India respectively on this issue. Dr. Rajesh Tandon moderated the seminar.

**Experts speak / Discussions**

Dr Christina Schwabenland, Director of Centre for Leadership Innovation at University of Bedfordshire, UK was the main speaker for this seminar. She has long-standing research experience on analyzing ‘relations between democratic engagement and internal dynamics of civil society.’ She based her discussion on experiences of working on this theme.

Dr Suhas Chakma, Director, Asian Centre for Human Rights, New Delhi shared examples from India in his capacity as the expert panelist for this seminar.

**Dr Rajesh Tandon**, President, PRIA moderated the session. He started the discussion by questioning the nature of democracy and civil society in today’s context. He opined that theoretical basis of having strong democracy and civil society needs to be supported by empirical research since we are facing a situation where there seems to be a feeling of being ‘out of sync’ with current situation.

He linked shrinking of spaces for voicing concerns, especially for civil society organizations, to changing nature of role of private sector for raising concerns related to social issues. He opined that private sector is now taking over the work done by civil society organizations until recently. There has been an attempt to demonstrate that the private sector – market institutions and other big consulting firms – has the capacity to deliver on issues related to social development too.

The dominance of private sector has led us to a state where it has become imperative to critically examine how even maintaining the established democratic institutions such as judiciary, Human Rights Commission, Parliament etc. is becoming increasingly difficult. At state level, the situation is all the more grim and these institutions are becoming weaker day-by-day. Dr Tandon opined that when we talk about democratic renewal, it is not only about civil society but also of state institutions.

He shared concerns on disappearance of our ability to respect personal differences. Citing examples from our daily lives, he stated that today we could not raise our voices even for small matters that affect our lives. The fear of being harmed by those who do not agree with our opinion has taken over us. Gun culture is becoming norm of the day and ordinary people do not have faith in justice systems.

**Dr Christina Schwabenl** and started her presentation with a question on the role of civil society organisations for democratic renewal. She also questioned what is going on inside the organizations. She and her colleagues wanted to have an inside and outside conversation on meaning, conditions, possibilities and promises of democratic renewal within and with CSOs as well.

She shared that in UK, characterized by polarities, a sense of despair has set in. The feeling, that individuals cannot affect the change, has seeped in in the last few years. ‘How am I defined in a larger context of citizens’ has now become a major question. The changing social contract between citizen and state, having mutual responsibility and expectations, has become fragmented now. Public sector has removed itself from public services. People still have expectations from state but the way of expressing it has long gone away. The old ways of expressing in terms of language is no longer there and there is no new language yet.

This state of affairs has led to loss of interest, amongst people, in electing governments through democratic processes of voting. Increasingly, there is a feeling that the governments do not have much power these days as compared to big corporations/ multinationals whose lobby is very strong. Defaulters from these big corporations are easily getting away. She stated that in today’s context neo-liberalism affects every one of us. There is no alternative (TINA) has given rise to feeling of despair as people get affected by the power of big corporations. Increasingly it is becoming difficult to imagine alternatives. Employees owned cooperatives and collectives do exist but there number is insignificant when it comes to voicing opinions. In addition, the existing ones are finding it difficult to sustain themselves.

She concluded her presentation by raising a few queries on how should CSOs respond. How do we imagine alternatives? How do we create spaces for alternatives and protect them? Do we need new tools, methods and approaches and/or just hold on to our nerves? Does the ‘social capital’ argument still have any credibility?
Dr Suhas Chakma highlighted the shortcomings in human rights and democracy organisations in terms of organizing research, limited ability to fact-finding etc. He stated that government’s decision related to working of bilateral donors in India only added to shrinking of space for civil society organizations since they could not match the resources of big corporations. He particularly highlighted the point of media taking over activism on social issues since liberalization in the country. He also opined that even political parties managed to mainstream many peripheral issues. Civil society has no standing on this. In addition, no civil society has the resources to fight the governments. He stated that CSOs are fighting to survive in today’s times. Especially those working in the conflict areas are under tremendous pressure. Taking forward concerns shared by Dr. Christina and Dr. Tandon, he spoke about role of private foundations. He was of the opinion that these foundations belong to big family businesses. Very often, these foundations also fund political activities such as campaign. All this is done in the disguise of corporate social responsibility. Since the negotiation between foundations and political parties take place privately, one can even question it.

He concluded by saying that the story of India’s growth story has completely changed today. One may or may not agree with the percent but international aid has been decreasing. This has resulted in CSOs facing problems and discontinuing work on issues such as human rights and democracy.

Comments from the floor

Participants raised the issues related to shrinking spaces for CSOs, government deficit, dominance of market (big corporations) on the government policies and decisions among others.

Suman Sahay from Gene Campaign raised the issue of shrinking spaces for CSOs. She opined that establishment of corporates above everyone else and no space for civil society is an alarming issue. She questioned how we, as CSOs, can come together to make use of social media to prevent snatching away of civil society spaces.

Dr. N Bhaskara Rao, from Centre for Media Studies, spoke about governance deficits. He stated that the boundaries of challenges, that we are facing today, are blurred. He warned the group that corporate social responsibility is a trap unleashed by government. He raised the issue of not working on and/or talking about role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) etc. in public sphere. Earlier CSOs used to work on these issues but now no one is talking about devolution of functions to local government.

Axel Harneit-Sievers of Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), India office shared examples from Germany. According to him, CSOs operate in the same manner as corporates in Germany and many CSOs are very strong in using media/ market campaigns. They use these resources to their own advantages.

The role of CSOs in the last few years appears to have become more political in nature. There is a need for CSOs to be about their affiliations. Is it political cause or work? Or else they should follow what has been written in the organization mission – vision statement.

Ramit, an independent consultant raised the issue of lack of CSOs’ movements in India in the last few years, especially at the village level. As a result, people seem to have lost faith in the institutions of local self-governance.

Another concern from the floor related to lack of support to each other (as CSOs). Case of Green Peace was highlighted which did not garner any support from other organisations at the time of shutting its operations from India. Even at the global level, there were no voices to support Green Peace.

Ms Vanita from Ford Foundation raised the issue of credibility gap between government’s positioning vs. CSOs opinions. She suggested that an alternative could be to do good work quietly at local level so as not to attract attention. She was of the opinion that we need to celebrate successes also. She cited the example of National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, which has been doing good work without attracting too much attention to itself. At state level also, many CSOs have been working closely with state governments.
Harish Vashistha from Credibility Alliance raised the issue of diversity of organisations with regard to functioning, methodology etc. He questioned if we, as CSOs, have diversity to create spaces for differential realities. He related it with difference in functioning in rural and urban areas.

**Responding to questions and statements**

Dr. Christina while responding to some of the statements and questions agreed that celebrating successes should be part of new methodologies – part of hope. There are organisations who are making headways and showing the path that there are alternatives.

Responding on the issue of national health services in UK, she shared that it is the only thing that hasn’t become fully private as people hold it very closely to their hearts to the extent that it’s almost like devotion. She also stated that it is surprising to note that how ‘diversity’ word is different for different people.

Dr. Tandon, stated that we have allowed our institutions of public service delivery to degenerate e.g. primary schools and banks. There is a need to relook at these institutions. Hope is being expressed through new ways and we need to look at civic spaces because restriction on civic spaces is a bigger challenge than restrictions on CSOs.

**Key takeaways**

CSOs need to have media strategy in place, especially social media, to use it for its own advantages.

Adapting to modern ways of generating resources, such as crowd funding, should be explored to continue to work on issues of social development.

There is a strong need to celebrate successes by civil society organisations.
About PRIA

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) is a global participatory research and training centre. PRIA’s professional expertise and practical insights are utilised by other civil society groups, NGOs, governments, donors, trade unions, private business and academic institutions around the world.

Since its inception in 1982, PRIA has embarked on a set of initiatives focusing on empowerment of the poor and excluded. PRIA has consistently worked on issues of citizens’ access to rights and entitlements, such as basic services in health, education and water in rural and urban areas; women’s literacy and livelihood; forest rights of tribals; prevention of land alienation and displacement; and workers’ occupational health and safety. In all its interventions, PRIA emphasises gender mainstreaming institutionally and programmatically. Its perspectives on participatory research generate innovative participatory methodologies.

The intensive field programmes of PRIA are currently located in the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. In addition, through its network of partners, these interventions extend throughout India. PRIA is also involved in programmes in countries like Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka.