

Role of Civil Society:

Civil society is the most important part of the whole political process of the body politic. But the term civil society may not exist in this name everywhere. However, it performs certain important functions which help the administrative authority in various ways and it is a vital part of public administration.

An important function of civil society is it politically socialises the political community, political socialisation is its function. What is political socialization Political socialisation may be defined as the process by which individuals in a given society become acquainted with the political system and which to a significant degree determines their perceptions of politics and their reactions to political phenomena.

In every society-both developed and developing-political socialisation has a very crucial role. All the political systems of the world are not same or of equal type and nature. It is essential that the citizens must be well-acquainted with the nature, ideology and functioning of the body politic.

All the citizens may not possess all these qualities but the political sociologists claim that individuals must have clear and thorough knowledge about the political system in which they live and political socialisation performs this job. In the second half of the last century people and academicians began to emphasise the idea that for political stability and successful working of political system people of all walks of life must be made suitable for the political system and only civil society in all its forms can do the job.

The civil society holds the middle position between citizens and- state. The citizens do not have the scope to ventilate their grievances and convey these to the competent authority in the proper way. Whereas the grievances are to be redressed. In this situation there is a great necessity of civil society.

Normally in all political systems and particularly in democracies the civil societies have enough freedom to do their duties. The civil society conveys the grievances to the proper authority and puts pressure upon administration to take proper action. Needless to say that in this field civil society is closely linked with the state administration.

In all liberal political systems civil society is a powerful and effective link between general public and state administration. It has been found that the civil society creates pressure upon p.a. to meet the demands of people. If it fails then the civil society does not hesitate to start movement.

The civil society is a stabilising force in many political systems, particularly the capitalist systems. Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is the pioneer figure in this field. He was the first man to draw the attention of academic circles to the fact that in spite of crises on economic field, capitalism or the capitalist system has not collapsed. The reason—according to Gramsci—is that in bourgeois state the civil society always plays as “stabilising force”

The civil society helps both central or state and local administration. Civil society maintains a close relation with the local bodies of central or state administration and municipalities or rural administrative organisations. Therefore, whenever any problem regarding implementation of any law or administrative principle arises the civil society comes to the rescue of the state or local administration.

It is said that civil society has considerable influence over the locality and naturally the administration—both central and local—does not like to ignore the civil society. In many countries pressure groups and interest groups are parts of civil society and on complicated and vital national issues the help or intervention of civil society appears to be vital. This is the general picture of civil society of capitalist state structure.

Role of Civil Society in Governance:

On several occasions we have noted that the chief objective of public administration is good governance. Apparently the term may appear misleading, but the prominent public administrators know what the term really means. The term governance means several things and some of these are accountability, transparency, predictability, and participation. Here accountability and participation are very important rights of citizens.

The public administration must be accountable to the general public. The Weberian model of bureaucracy is criticised because it is not accountable to the general public. But accountability is an important aspect of bureaucracy. Similarly it must have transparency and public administration must make ample scope of people’s participation. Broadly speaking if civil society does its duties properly it provides ample opportunities for good or desirable governance.

In liberal democracies and other systems, civil society performs its duties on behalf of the general public. It is a common sense matter that even in small democracies all citizens have no scope to ventilate their grievances or problems. But the ventilation is essential because without it the grievances cannot be redressed.

The civil society (or it may be pressure groups) convey the problems of people to the proper authority and by doing this the civil society ensures justice for common people. The civil society is, in this sense, the friend and guide of people. Civil society is the friend in need. So it is a friend indeed. This immense importance of civil society is found.

The public administration shall be accountable to the people for all its activities. It is the general and most vital principle or aspect of democratic administration. If there are any lapses on the part of public administration and if these lapses affect the vital aspects of citizens that must be rectified. But it is not possible for individuals to fight against the bureaucracy or state administration.

Naturally an agency or organisation is essential and on experience it has been found that civil society raises the issues and calls for an explanation from the concerned authority for lapses or dereliction of duty. It may also be that the civil society may ask the proper authority to rectify its policy and amend the course of action.

On behalf of the citizens the civil society reminds the bureaucracy of what it should be or it should have done. The civil society or pressure groups or interest groups are very active and alert and they stand by the side of people. In this way the civil society, to a large extent, makes possible the accountability of public administration to the general public.

Theoretically, the participatory administration is badly needed and it constitutes the vital part of democracy. But the problem is the realisation of this noble objective poses difficult problems. Without peoples' participation in public administration the whole administrative system appears to be defective and undemocratic because the people have right to know the public administration and to participate in it.

The absence of participation makes the whole democratic system defective. In the field of participatory administration it has a important role. Very often it acts on behalf of the citizens and participates in the policymaking functions of public administration. Sometimes in crucial or problematic issues it wants to form public opinion or inspires the people to participate in debates and discussion.

In a word, it is the civil society that enthuses the general public in burning national and international issues. If citizens are deprived of participating in the management of public administration and policy making functions that will create disinterestedness in their mind which will be an unhealthy sign for democracy. But the civil society does not allow the policy-making affair to be a mere window dressing. To sum up, the alertness of civil society prevents the authority from adopting a defective public policy or anti- people decision.

There must be transparency in the functions of public administration. The meaning of the word transparent is allowing light to pass through so that objects behind can be seen distinctly. In public administration the bearing of the word is that each and every act or policy must be clear, that is, there shall not be anything hidden or suspicious. It is said that there shall not be any difference between promise and performance.

Every act of public administration shall be open to all and all citizens have their right to know everything of public administration. If any information is withdrawn or kept in secret people have their democratic right to know it. But public has no time and energy to investigate the function of public administration.

Whereas, justice claims that administrative authority must keep everything open to the public. For this reason civil society appears in the scene. It demands or can demand necessary information from the authority regarding policy-making and implementation of policy-making and implementation of policy. Civil society acts on behalf of citizens. An important aspect of public administration is that government spends huge amount of money for society and public administration is at the helm of all financial activities.

The principle of transparency claims that the public administration must disclose all the financial activities to the general public. Very often this is not done. The civil society then appears and takes initiative in forcing the public administration to keep open everything to the public. It is because the civil society is a powerful organisation and closely linked with the people.

The civil society has another important role. Changes are always taking place in every sphere of society. Though all changes are not important, some are so important that those cannot be ignored. It means that the administrative authority must take necessary action. The authority does not always respond to these things and in that case the civil society on behalf of the citizens, takes action, that is, asks government or public administration to take proper measures in response to the changes. This is particularly relevant for developing or transitional or prismatic societies. The civil society asks the public administration to take necessary action in response to changes.

It is generally, found that the public administration performs its duties in the environment of serious and contradictory forces. This situation prevents it from taking necessary action demanded by new changes and situation. The consequence is, people are deprived of their legitimate dues. The whole situation turns complex. Peoples' rights are neglected. The civil society in this situation appears in the picture. It mobilises men to extract certain benefits from the authority. In fact, the civil society provides leadership.

Civil society performs increasing role in welfare activities. If a civil society is imbued with some noble purposes (and many fall in this category) it performs many welfare activities such as serving the downtrodden people, spreading education among the un-read masses, to take care of health problems of unprivileged and under privileged people of society.

These are very vital social services and civil societies of developing and developed societies do all these. Many civil societies have been found to be active at the time of natural calamities such as devastating flood, storm, or cyclone, drought etc. A civil society stands by

the side of destitute and helps them in all possible ways. In many states, ethnic and religious skirmishes erupt among various sections or groups.

These forms of trouble not only disturb the unity among various groups but also adversely affect the unity and brotherhood among people. The civil society promptly takes action against these untoward incidents and tries to stop them so that these cannot further damage the unity and integrity of the body politic.

Civil society has been found to set up liaison between various social groups and organisations on the one hand and the state administration on the other hand. The civil society develops and maintains effective and constant liaison between public administration and society.

The purpose is to influence the administration for taking action against undesirable incidents or avert any crisis. State government and state administration, in the strictest sense, are not separate entities. The duty of public administration is to execute the policies of the government and, chiefly for this reason, civil society develops relation with public administration.

In Larry Diamond's view, civil society performs following important functions:

1) To limit state power - By checking its political abuses and violations of the law and subjecting them to public scrutiny. Diamond maintains, "a vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than initiating it."

2) To empower citizens by "increasing the political efficacy and skill of the democratic citizen and promoting an appreciation of the obligations as well as rights of democratic citizenship."

3) To inculcate and promote an arena for the development of democratic attributes amongst the citizens—Such as tolerance, moderation, a willingness to compromise and respect for opposing viewpoints." According to Diamond, this is an important function as it allows "traditionally excluded groups— such as women and racial or ethnic minorities— access to power that has been denied them in the 'upper echelons' of formal politics."

4) To provide avenues for political parties and other organisations allowing them to articulate, aggregate, and represent their interests- This enhances the quality of democracy as "it generates opportunities for participation and influence at all levels of governance, not the least the local government."

5) To function as a recruiting, informational and leadership generating agency especially in economically developed societies—Where, Economic reform is sometimes necessary, but often difficult to bring about if it threatens vested economic interests. The massive economic

collapse in Indonesia unleashed mass discontent and made President Suharto suddenly vulnerable. This transformed the environment to allow civil society groups and opposition parties to mobilize citizens in an unprecedented fashion.

6) A well founded civil society could act as a shock absorbing institution, where wide range of interests that may cross-cut and mitigate the principal polarities of political conflict.

7) To generate public and political support for successful economic and political reforms—which require the support of coalitions in society and the legislature.

8) A well-rooted civil society also helps in identifying and train new political leaders-As such, it can "play a crucial role in revitalising...the narrow and stagnant" party dominated leadership recruitment patterns.

9) Election monitoring— Many non-partisan organisations engage in election monitoring at home and abroad. Such efforts, says Diamond, "have been critical in detecting fraud, enhancing voter confidence, affirming the legitimacy of the result, or demonstrating an opposition victory despite government fraud." The Philippines in the mid 1980s and Panama in 1989 are cited as examples. a) Strengthening citizen attitudes toward the state— Civil society enhances "the accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, effectiveness, and hence legitimacy of the political system." In so doing it gives citizens respect for the state and positive involvement in it. Here, civil society is crucial to the development and maintenance of stable, quality sensitive democracy.

10) In addition to this, other scholars have also come out with their view point on the subject. Borrowing from Robert Dahl's classic work on democracy, Alfred Stepan in his work, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation, states that among the basic requirements for democracy "is the opportunity to formulate preferences, to signify preferences, and to have these preferences weighted adequately in the conduct of government."

According to Robert Dahl for the proper functioning of the government, it should ensure the following institutional guarantees which include: 1) freedom of association and expression; 2) the right to vote; 3) run for public office; 4) free and fair elections; 5) the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes; 6) alternative sources of information; 7) policy making institutions dependent on votes; 8) Other expressions of preference.^{29 38 H}

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