

Civil Society Organizations and Communal Harmony Building: Strategies and Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the various dimensions of Civil society engagement in a country like India where low intensity conflicts between the two main religious communities in India. The paper uses Thania Paffenholz's categorization of the functions of civil society organizations work in peacebuilding to understand the role that organizations can play in a changed context. The paper looks at organizations in Hyderabad and Ahmedabad to examine each category in the functionalist approach. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section talks about the functional approach to peace building. The second section draws on extensive fieldwork conducted through in person interviews, participant observation and report analysis in the two cities of Ahmedabad and Hyderabad with four organizations. It highlights the importance of the context of peace building and the reasons why civil society activism for peacebuilding remains limited in capacity.

Keywords: Sustainable peace, civil society organizations, functional approach to peacebuilding, democratization of peace process

INTRODUCTION

Seventy five years after independence, communal discord between two of the main religious communities of this country still remains one of the most important issues in contemporary Indian politics. Low-intensity conflicts continue to disrupt the social fabric of this country and threaten to destabilize the country internally. While local peace processes, interventions of local administration and governments are

important, an equally important part is played by civil society organizations who work at the grassroots level and at the national level to ensure that sustainable peace is achieved. There are many well-documented studies on the role of civil society organizations in peacebuilding in deeply divided societies and high intensity conflicts (Orjuela 2008, Moaz 2004, Kurtenbach, 2011, Chalmers,2011). This paper uses insights drawn from the work of civil society organizations in Hyderabad and Ahmedabad to highlight some of the strategies and dimensions of civil society organizations in India to bring about sustainable peace.

What is a Functional Theory of peacebuilding?

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the origin and development of the functional theory of civil society peacebuilding. The second section applies the functional theory to civil society activism to India and in the third section the paper will look at some of the inferences that can be drawn from the current study. The functional approach to peace first developed by Merkel and Lauth (1998). This initial model was based on their research on system transformation in Eastern Europe. The model was further nuanced by the experiences from case studies in other contexts. The model considers civil society as an "analytical category" rather than a specific "historical form" and thus helps to understand civil

society as it relates to the functioning of democracy as well as to specific societal conditions and regional contexts (Ibid,p.21). Merkel and Lauth identified five essential functions of civil society: Protection, Intermediation between state and citizens, Participatory socialization, Community-building and integration and Communication (Ibid).

A second attempt was made by Michael Edwards (2004) to understand the workings of civil society. His ideas on the categorization of civil society roles stem from the understanding that civil society may "mean different things to different people" (Ibid,p.22). Edwards thus propounded three roles for civil society: Civil Society as associational life (a sphere where voluntary associations work towards spreading values such as cooperation and tolerance), Civil Society as the Good Society (where in the civil society associations work towards achieving certain social and political goals which are beneficial to all) and Civil Society as the public sphere (civil society as a space for citizens to debate and discuss questions of common good and public interest). In Edward's understanding, in order to achieve any meaningful social change, none of these roles can function in isolation. A constant "integration or synthesis" between these various roles will help negate the inherent weakness within a particular role and help maintain a balance which will ultimately contribute to the task of bringing about a positive and meaningful social change (Ibid,p.23).

Thania Paffenholz suggests that there can be two major approaches to such analysis - "actor oriented" and "function oriented"(Paffenholz,2011,p.20). The actor oriented approach which basically looks into the "performance and features of civil society actors" has some inherent shortcomings (Ibid). This approach often concentrates on the "civil" aspect of organizations and hence ignores actors which may fall outside the ambit of civil behavior but actually has a greater impact

on the workings of civil society. Important actors often get sidelined and not so important parties are given undue importance. This may often "conceal rather than explain realities" (Ibid).

In order to come up with her version of the functional approach, Paffenholz also undertakes a review of civil society in development cooperation. Two important factors that emerge out of this are the civil society's role in service delivery and in monitoring government functions and maintaining transparency. Thus, Paffenholz comes up with her "extended functional approach" by combining Merkel and Lauth's categorization with Edward's approach and these two new categories which emerge from the development cooperation. The new model thus had seven functions: Protection of Citizens, Monitoring and Accountability, Advocacy and Public Communication, Socialization, Building Community, Intermediation and Facilitation between Citizens and States and Service Delivery.

Examining Civil Society peacebuilding in India

Based on this understanding, if we examine the methods and strategies of civil society organizations in India, we will realize that in this changed context as well, the functionalist approach to civil society holds true. One important aspect of any peacebuilding exercise is the context. Paffenholz points out that understanding the context is a means to understand the role that civil society can play in peacebuilding within the context of its operation. First and foremost, is therefore, an understanding of the "sociopolitical, cultural, economic, regional and global environments" of the state where the conflict is taking place (Ibid,p.66). Secondly, it is also important to examine the "understanding of peacebuilding within the county being studied" (Ibid). Here, an examination of the various stakeholders to peacebuilding - various strata of society, international and regional actors - help determine the nature of peacebuilding within the given context

and also the "short term, medium term and long term" goals of peacebuilding as suggested by the stakeholders of peacebuilding itself (Ibid). A third component in the context analysis process is the analysis of the nature of civil society itself. The composition of civil society, that is the kinds of organizations in operation, for example: NGOs, self-help groups, unions and associations, religious groups and the like.

The Seven Peacebuilding Functions Of Civil Society Organizations

In this next section, the paper looks at each individual function of civil society as proposed by the functional model and how the context contributes towards changing its meaning in the conflict situation in some of the major cities in India. The paper looks at works of organizations like Confederation of Voluntary Associations (COVA) and Aman Vedika in Hyderabad and Center for Development (CFD) and Janvikas in Ahmedabad. The paper examines civil society organizations activities in harmony building in six categories - protection, monitoring, advocacy, in-group socialization, social cohesion, facilitation and service delivery.

Paffenholz suggests that in times of armed conflict protection of civilians in these zones becomes a necessary prerequisite in order to fulfill the other roles and duties that civil society ought to play in conflict areas. Paffenholz elaborates further stating that in zones of armed conflict the state machinery is often rendered weak or ineffective and hence is not able to protect either itself or its citizens. Hence, "the provision of security and the reduction of violence are necessary for effective peace work" (Ibid,p.67). The major protection functions of civil society include "international accompaniment, watchdog activities, the creation of "zones of peace", humanitarian aid, and civil society initiatives for human security" (Ibid). Paffenholz suggests that the protection functions are often fulfilled by external NGOs who work together with local civil society actors either "indirectly"

or more "directly" (Ibid). Indirectly, civil society organizations work in the capacity of a watchdog in the conflict zone ensuring that humanitarian aid is uninterrupted and human security is maintained. Direct involvement in the form of international accompaniment is another important tool for protection.

Protection is an important precursor to civil society intervention into peace-building. However, the extent to which civil society can perform its function is context dependent. In the context of Ahmedabad, state machinery to a large extent was not able to protect or provide for its citizens during the riots and in the days following as well. Most of the people displaced as a result of the widespread violence, found refuge in camps run by "self-help community leaders and Muslim *Jamaats*" (Oommen,2008,p.78). There were three camps in Ahmedabad itself - *Shah Alam*, *Daryakhan Gummat* Relief Camp and *Aman Chowk* Relief Camp. The three main concerns at this stage were "relief, rehabilitation and reconciliation" (Ibid,p.78). International agencies such as Care and ActionAid were heavily involved in providing relief to the affected people. Both *JanVikas* and CFD were working as part of NGO collectives being financed by international donor agencies. Most of the initial protection functions were carried on by Muslim Religious Organizations.Helping people file cases, FIRs in the immediate aftermath was an important function. In the aftermath of violence, certain NGOs were involved in getting justice for the victims. This involved long drawn court battles and providing protection to key witnesses. Although *JanVikas* and CFD were not directly involved in the process, this was a major function of Civil Society in Ahmedabad. In Hyderabad the nature of conflict was very different from that in Ahmedabad. Sporadic conflicts meant that there was no large-scale displacement of people. However the main protection functions were directed towards protecting

the Muslim minorities from false cases and police brutalities.

Monitoring is a necessary prerequisite in order for NGOs to fulfill their functions of protection and advocacy and public communication. Monitoring helps in making the government accountable for its actions. Paffenholz further suggests that in the context of peacebuilding and civil society action, monitoring is "closely related to protection, advocacy, and early warning as a means for action" (Paffenholz, 2011,p.68). Conflict situations are closely monitored by local and international groups who then pass on their recommendations to decision makers. These groups also provide information to human rights and other advocacy groups. Due to the large number of people who were displaced and living in camps in Ahmedabad, the main activity in the post-conflict situation in Ahmedabad was to make sure that the allocated relief was reaching the people. A second aspect of monitoring during the initial days was also making sure that the compensations allocated were being received by those in need. A hefty compensation package was announced for the dependents of deceased, widows and children, loss of property totaling to around 150 crore. However, when various NGOs and media houses looked into the disbursement of said funds it became clear that there were various issues with the compensation process. Properties were undervalued, compensation was inadequate in some cases and victims were subjected to many bureaucratic hurdles. For example, a survey conducted by PUCL in Vadodara and Shabnam Hasmi in Panchmahal and Dahod district brought out the disparities in the compensation process where on an average the people were being paid 5% of the actual losses incurred (Oommen, 2008,p.80). In the months following the conflict, civil society organizations continued to monitor the conditions of those living in the camps. The surveys conducted by civil society groups continued to expose the extreme conditions under which the internally displaced were

living and the state apathy towards these people. For example, a survey of 13 camps in Ahmedabad conducted more than 3 months after the violence indicated that 40,000 people were living in conditions which were below the international standards (Ibid,p.79). In this sense, monitoring and protection functions go hand in hand. The other important aspect of the monitoring function is making sure justice is delivered. NGOs helped file cases and kept on pushing for justice. Over the years civil society organizations such as *Nyayagraha* and *Sabrang* trust have continued to fight the battle for justice, helping victims fight long drawn court cases. *JanVikas* continues to work with the IDP, monitoring their status and bringing out reports on the same. Monitoring crimes against minorities and making sure that false cases are dropped were all part of this particular function. In Hyderabad, *Apna Watan* and COVA worked hand in hand to make sure that the Muslim youth caught in the Mecca Masjid blasts were given a fair trial. They were successful in standing up for these boys and exposing the custodial torture on them. Since most of the violence in Hyderabad took place around the celebration of festivals and elections, civil society organizations have always been on high alert during these times. Monitoring the political atmosphere and working with the local administration, police and community leaders, civil society organizations have kept a close eye on volatile situations and prevented the escalation of violence.

The advocacy and public communication functions of civil society entails bringing to the fore relevant social and political issues which could be of significance to the general public. This is one of the "core functions" of civil society in peace building. One of the main kinds of activities include campaigning by local actors to bring "these to the national agenda in conflict countries" (Paffenholz,2011,p.69). Campaigning for greater civil society involvement in peace processes and creating a public opinion for peace negotiations and end of violence are

all part of the process. Advocacy can be of "nonpublic" or of "public" in nature. Public advocacy involves a very public show of support towards a specific cause. Paffenholz suggests that the most effective forms of public advocacy is "mass movements and street agitations" (Ibid). Nonpublic advocacy refers to the civil society's informal intervention into the peace process through "private" communications with actors in the political system (Ibid). Civil Society organizations are most involved in India mostly in the "public" advocacy. Once the immediate work of providing relief is taken care of, the attention turns towards the reconciliation process. Both *JanVikas* and *CFD* conducted intense programs working with various sections of the society to start the reconciliation process. Any effort towards reconciliation cannot be fully effective without an understanding of the causes of violence itself. Hence civil society organizations engage in fact finding as a first step towards understanding the causes of violence. The Gujarat violence of 2002 is very well documented with several organizations coming up with detailed reports on the victims and the aftereffects of the violence. Similarly, *COVA* and *Apna Watan* in Hyderabad have been involved in various fact finding committees. Although reconciliation without justice seems to be meaningless, it is worth noting that reconciliation is a long term process that requires constant engagement with communities. However, a first step towards an attempt towards creation of sustainable peace, especially in ethnic and religious conflicts, is the creation of a public opinion for peace. Advocacy is directed towards achieving precisely this. In Ahmedabad, the *Aman Pathiks*¹ kept on working with people affected by violence till 2007. During this time, *Aman Patiks* worked towards a reconciliation process taking the help of door to door campaigns, open air meetings in areas where Hindus and Muslims lived in close proximity. Shenaz, a former *Aman Pathik* while talking about her experience in *Gayatrinagar* and *Sundarnagar*, points out

that the door to door campaigning and open air meetings were initially met with a lot of hostility when the program began in 2003. But slowly people started showing up for meetings and a process of reconciliation started (Personal Interview, Ahmedabad, July,2015). *COVA* uses its children's theater group *Koshish* to spread the message of the importance of harmony and peace with the help of street plays during *Ganesh Chaturthi* celebrations. Non-public advocacy is directed majorly towards government agencies such as Minority Commissions and Human Rights Commission. Organizations in both these cities have constantly put pressure on Minority Commissions and Human Rights Commission to keep a tab on any emerging situation and take into account any human rights violations in cases of large scale violence. As in other cases, in India also organizations conduct fact finding missions in violence affected areas in order to understand the root cause of violence and in turn pressurize the government to take action and create a public opinion for peace. Socialization is a prerequisite in spreading a culture of peace. The need to inculcate "democratic values" and "democratic attitudes" is of utmost importance and this can be achieved through citizen's participation in "associations, networks and movements" (Paffenholz,2011,p.70). The aim here is to bring about attitudinal change within the society by devising a plan towards a "peaceful conflict resolution and reconciliation" (Ibid). Rather than focusing on improving relations between two conflicting communities, here the concentration is to bring about changes within groups. Traditional methods of peace education like training in conflict resolution and negotiation can be used for achieving "in-group social capital" (Ibid,p.70).The culture of peace practices are often sporadic, lack continuity and hence are mostly not able to "create a critical mass for change" (Ibid,p.71). Hence even when they succeed at the local level, they are not able to achieve much at the national level. In the

case of all the organizations working in Ahmedabad and Hyderabad the impact of this function is quite limited as has been pointed out in the case of most other case studies. The in-group socialization is limited to the intervention of religious leaders in making people understand the need for peace. In Hyderabad such efforts were taken up by COVA where religious leaders visited violence affected areas to talk to people and mediate peace. Educating and inculcating democratic values in the population is another way in which in-group socialization is achieved and COVA through its campaign for greater participation in the area *sabhas* and other local administrative bodies tries to achieve this. Since empowering the people towards understanding their rights is an important part of the socialization process, a lot of effort is put towards protecting minority rights. As has been pointed out addressing the issue of minority rights goes a long way in consolidating group identity and this becomes a precursor to the reconciliation process.

As opposed to in-group socialization which aims towards building "bonding ties" within groups, social cohesion is aimed towards "bridging ties" (Paffenholz,2011,p.71). In other words this is an attempt towards starting a process of community building through integration. Social Cohesion activities could be of three kinds - "Relationship-oriented cohesion for peace, Outcome-oriented cohesion for peace, Outcome-oriented cohesion for business or development work" (Ibid,p.72). A large part of NGO and Civil Society Groups activities are usually directed towards this function. In the case of India, civil society organizations direct a lot of attention towards creating spaces of dialogue between communities. Most of these activities are concentrated in disturbed areas where Hindus and Muslims live in close proximity. However civil society organizations also work with students in schools and colleges in creating an opinion for peace and social integrity. The major tools for this sort of activities are

myth busting exercises, peace education, vocational training, street theater, joint celebration of festivals and such other activities. In Ahmedabad such activities started in the period following the violence in 2002. In Ahmedabad, youth from Muslim areas were encouraged to step into Hindu areas and vice versa as an effort to understand the similarities between the two communities. Many respondents suggest that this was an eye opening experience for both communities and helped overcome fears about the other community. Workshops bringing together Hindu and Muslim youth were conducted keeping in mind the agenda of getting to know the other community better and to open channels of communication. CFD was involved in one such exercise. COVA's training for trainers was directed towards creation of a leadership who would be able to then go into communities and start a process of dialogue creation. Most of these activities are concentrated at grassroots level and are directed towards strengthening intercommunity ties. Joint celebration of *Eid*, *Ganesh Chaturthi* and kite flying has also figured majorly in the agenda of NGOs like CFD, COVA and *Apna Watan*. COVA and *Apna Watan* along with other NGOs conducted programs such as street theater and pamphlet distribution during *Ganesh Chaturthi*. These programs always carried the message of peace and harmony and the importance of peaceful coexistence. CFD's community library and COVA's vocational training workshops for women and youth are also platforms which were created in hopes of myth busting and dialogue creation platforms. All these activities are directed towards opening up informal spaces of dialogue exchange which then contribute towards reconciliation and harmony building process.

Intermediation and facilitation are an important function of civil society which under normal circumstances acts as an intermediary and facilitator between the citizens and the state. In case of peace negotiations civil society actors can act as

facilitator "between or among groups and at different levels of society" (Paffenholz, 2011,p.73). Civil society's role in diplomatic conflict management however remains limited. Civil society can act as facilitators "between armed groups, between armed groups and communities and among armed groups, communities and development agencies" (Ibid). However such activities are most often undertaken by state governments or the United Nations. Although international civil society organizations have a more direct and primary role in facilitation, local community based organizations can have a limited role to play as well. In the context of India, the facilitation process is mostly directed towards the conflicting communities. However, civil society's engagement with the state power is limited in the context of India. Facilitation becomes a part of the general reconciliatory process where constant efforts are made towards opening channels of dialogue between conflicting parties. One of the after effects of violence has been cities being divided into clear cut Muslim areas and Hindu areas. Only in very limited areas both these communities live in close proximity. In such cases civil society organizations have tried to initiate a reconciliatory process. For example, CFD worked in two such areas in Ahmedabad: Abadnagar and Bhilvas. These were areas where tribal, Dalits and Muslims lived in close proximity and was one of the worst affected during the riots. Social Reconciliation Committees (SRC) and Micro-level Youth Groups (MLYG) were two approaches taken towards the reconciliation process. SRCs worked as the "apex bodies" at the grassroots level who were in charge of determining activities directed towards reconciliation at the community level (Oommen,2008,p.133). The committees included people from every community in the area and concentrated on the specific issues of those areas. Through the SRC, CFD established MLYG which again had youth from various social categories (Hindus, Muslims, Dalits) come

together and participate in various activities in order to open a channel of dialogue creation. One such initiative was the opening of area libraries. This was based on the concept of informal get-togethers in *mohollas*. Rafi from CFD says that the libraries were devised as the focal point of interaction between the youth of the area (Personal interview, Ahmedabad, July,2015). The library became the focal point of many community activities such as film screening and study circles. The youth groups now run 10 libraries, known as "Knowledge Based Center " in Ahmedabad. In some places the libraries are in buildings in *moholla* which are rented to the youth committee free of cost. In others where there is no designated place, CFD has provided the youth group with a soft board which has been placed at the "*chauraha*". Often community leaders and religious leaders become part of the dialogue facilitation process. COVA has in the past, engaged the help of religious leaders from Hindu and Muslim communities to initiate dialogues when the communal situation has become volatile. Community based organizations at the grassroots level also play a role in facilitation. International and national NGOs often depend on local community based grassroots organizations to gain access to communities. This can be seen in the case of both Hyderabad and Ahmedabad. COVA has an entire network of smaller grassroots level organizations which become part of the facilitation process in case of any communal escalation. In the case of Ahmedabad, organizations like CFD and JanVikas were able to carry on their reconciliatory work only because they already were involved with the communities. The other important aspect of facilitation as has been mentioned is training for facilitators. *JanVikas* and COVA have their own training for trainers programs which is directed towards capacity building of smaller grassroots organizations with the objective of facilitating the long term reconciliatory process. COVA has also been working towards making some positive

policy interventions. One such instance is the COVA's recommendations to the government regarding the financial inclusion of the poor. These recommendations were directed towards ensuring small and petty businesses access to easy bank loans. This effort of COVA was successful also as the government accepted 8 of the 12 recommendations.

Service delivery becomes an important civil society function when governments are weakened or completely broken down due to armed conflict. Often NGOs and other faith based organizations help provide necessary aid to the population affected by war along with undertaking other peacebuilding exercises. However, if and when service delivery becomes a civil society peacebuilding function is a matter of debate. Paffenholz suggests that there are various strands of arguments in this regard. A line of argument suggests that aid delivery is a "separate function" of civil society (Paffenholz,2011,p.74). Since service delivery is able to provide necessary humanitarian relief and in the process save lives it is considered as a necessary "precondition for civil society to exit" (Ibid). A second line of argument views service delivery as "fulfilling an economic, social and humanitarian objective" and hence cannot be really labeled as civil society support (Ibid). Yet another line of argument suggests that aid delivery becomes an important function of civil society only when organizations use aid delivery as "entry points" for peacebuilding activities (Ibid). In the case of both Hyderabad and Ahmedabad civil society organizations have used service delivery as an entry point into the harmony building process. In conversations with several organizations one key point emerges: engaging with communities on the basis of developmental work helps organizations gain greater access to communities. Organizations find that the developmental approach is far more effective than a more direct approach to harmony building. Along with delivering essential services,

organizations were involved on the ground in trauma counseling. Programs such as *Aman Bhoj*, *Iftar party* and *Sarva Dharma Sabhas* were conducted (Oommen, 2008,p.242). Youth peace volunteers from various communities were brought together and made to participate in various kinds of interactive activities. In the period following the violence, *JanVikas* and CFD have worked towards understanding the needs of the communities and have designed programs in accordance. Similarly COVA has also worked with communities addressing their needs and developing programs to address those needs. The most common activities are education for children, vocational training for youth and women, empowering women against domestic violence, healthcare, sanitation and infrastructure related issues. A lot of effort is also directed towards equipping the local population to place their demands with the concerned government officials. COVA has worked with local communities to strengthen participation in the area *Sabhas*. Financial security of the poor is a very important step towards ensuring their empowerment. In the process, civil society organizations hope that they will be able to open up enough platforms of communication between communities, bringing them together on common woes and get a dialogue going.

CONCLUSION

It is very evident from this above discussion that civil society work changes as the context changes. The meaning of functionalities of civil society peacebuilding is altered as the conflict itself changes. In deeply divided societies facilitation could mean bringing two or more warring parties to the dialogue table for the peace process. In a low intensity conflict like that in India, facilitation assumes a totally different meaning where it becomes the process of facilitating dialogue between two communities in localized areas of conflict. In a similar manner each of the

functionalities has to be tailored to meet the needs of a specific situation.

One aspect that has remained a problem with this kind of an approach to understanding peacebuilding is that the approach identifies civil society as inherently "good" completely ignoring the fact that there could be "uncivil" civil society which could in fact be detrimental to the entire project (Ibid,p.65). It also fails to acknowledge other actors apart from civil society who could have a more significant role to play and also be crucial to determining whether civil society is active or not. The third limitation of the approach is the "underrepresented role of the state" which more often than not determines the role civil society will play (Ibid). The gap between state and civil society also means that all the groundwork that civil society organizations do in India do not translate into any kind of guidelines for official policy or a concrete policy document towards maintaining and furthering peace. The localized efforts of civil society organizations therefore have remained more reactionary rather than evolving to long term strategies at the national level, thereby limiting their reach.

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