

# DIGITAL CIVIL SOCIETY

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last 25 years, the Internet, as we know it today, has come a long way. In India, public Internet entered a few years later—in August 1995 (Rao and Manzar, 2011)—and has since remained largely a luxury. However, in the last few years a change is visible, courtesy the mobile Internet. While the mobile phone is the fifth source of mass communication in terms of evolution—after the radio, newspaper, television and computer—it is the first tool of communication for many across the world (including India) in terms of access. While the individual penetration of information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital tools is increasing even in India, the country is yet to leverage the power of digital tools and technologies in a sectoral manner. While the business sector is leading innovations, the government, although slightly behind, is following through by promoting ‘Digital’ India and making available online more and more governance-related information and services. However, we are yet to integrate technology with the sectors of health, education and agriculture, among others. Civil society, too, has not been able to leverage ICT within this sector.

The etymology of the term ‘civil society’ goes back to the phrase used by Aristotle—*koinōnía politikē*—that refers to a ‘community’, corresponding to the Greek city-state characterised by a shared set of norms and ethos, in which free citizens on an equal footing lived under the rule of law. In simpler words, the dictionary defines civil society as the ‘aggregate of non-governmental organisations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens’.

And so, in the last few decades, there has been a significant expansion of the size, scope, reach and impact of civil society organisations (CSOs) across the world. One key reason is the ongoing process of globalisation and the growing divide between the haves and the have-nots. Civil society—the ‘third sector’ of society after government and business<sup>1</sup>—has become a significant stakeholder in global development, delivering social services and facilitating access to public entitlements and citizen or human rights.

The World Bank has long recognised that civil society organisations have a growing influence in shaping global public policy around the world:

The term civil society refers to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.<sup>2</sup>

However, in an increasingly digital ecosystem it is important for civil society to go digital as well. This is not just to keep up with the digital content and services available online, but also to leverage the available digital technologies for effective project management and implementation, and to ensure that their beneficiaries, too, can leverage the opportunities that ICT, and particularly the Internet, hold for them.

In a report, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) recognises that

India has a long history of civil society based on the concepts of *daan* (giving) and *seva* (service). Voluntary organisations—organisations that are voluntary in spirit and without profit-making objectives—were active in cultural promotion, education, health, and natural disaster relief as early as the medieval era. They proliferated during British rule, working to improve social welfare and literacy and pursuing relief projects. During the second

half of the 19th century, nationalist consciousness spread across India and self-help emerged as the primary focus of sociopolitical movements. Numerous organisations were established during this period, including the Friend-in-Need Society (1858), Prathana Samaj (1864), Satya Shodhan Samaj (1873), Arya Samaj (1875), the National Council for Women in India (1875), and the Indian National Conference (1887).<sup>3</sup>

Today, India is home to over 130 crore people, with more than 32 lakh NGOs and voluntary organisations registered in the country. Less than 10 per cent of them file tax returns.<sup>4</sup> In the last few years, there has been a massive crackdown against civil society organisations—some legitimate, some not.

### **THE PROBLEM**

Most civil society organisations do not have a public face. They neither have a website nor a social media presence. The staffers and volunteers at the ground level do not know how to operate a computer effectively, let alone access the Internet. They do not have enough resources—human, financial, educational or technological—to disseminate information about their work. It is the niche few, usually located in urban settings with a dedicated communications team, who can create a virtual identity for themselves, which translates into an amplified offline identity as well.

One of the reasons that information dissemination from civil society's end is absolutely necessary is because civil society largely stands for accountability, transparency and efficiency. And civil society must ensure the same at its end. The Indian government, too, expects the same from non-profit institutions (NPIs), NGOs, voluntary organisations, advocacy groups and social enterprises. They are required to file income tax returns and make financial and donor details public, especially for foreign donations.

The problem of invisibility—or lack of adequate visibility—brings with it the problem of lack of funding. There are thousands of organisations that are doing excellent and meaningful work on the ground. Nevertheless, most of the major funding—national, international or individual—usually goes to those who are able to present their work to a wider audience, thus reaching out to potential donors who might be interested in funding an initiative.

A significant majority of civil society organisations are positioned at the village, panchayat or block level. They work in remote and difficult areas, navigating diverse anthropologies, challenges and developmental issues. Most of them are dependent on grants and donations, but lack resources for efficient documentation and reporting purposes. The funding struggle became an even bigger challenge for civil society when corporate social responsibility (CSR) was introduced under the Indian Companies Act, 2013. The corporates were required to invest 2 per cent of their net income for public good. There were crores of rupees waiting to be disbursed among credible organisations, but not enough information was available about those organisations which had not been successful in creating visibility for themselves outside their geographical region of project implementation.

Furthermore, the kind of information held by civil society in any part of the world is massive and integral to both local and global development. If this information cannot be shared with the government, policymakers or other relevant stakeholders for collaboration, it is a loss to both civil society and the government.

### **THE SOLUTION**

A partial but significant solution to these and other problems that civil society faces lies in adopting digital tools and technologies, and adopting them fast. However, mere knowledge and availability of digital tools does not help as much as their integration would. The digital media offers plenty of opportunities that civil society can leverage and benefit from.

If every NGO comes online and sets up its exclusive website, it will bring in first a greater sense of transparency and accountability—a challenge that India has been facing for the last couple of years with the ongoing government crackdown on civil society. Through their websites, NGOs can share their registration certificates, financials and annual reports in a public space. Once trained in digital content creation, representatives of NGOs can share updates about their activities and progress with a larger audience and be appreciated for their efforts, and at the same time receive feedback and suggestions for improvement. An online presence also opens doors to NGOs with regard to institutional funding, individual donations and crowd funding campaigns.

This can be especially motivating for grassroots NGOs that operate on very small budgets and have limited access to big and credible funders. Moreover, with the right guidance and technology, civil society can even strengthen its on-ground implementation plans with tools for geo-tagged staff attendance, real-time reporting, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and management information systems (MIS).

In 2007, the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) launched an initiative called the eNGO Programme to digitally empower civil society organisations with a dedicated web presence. The initiative was first launched in partnership with the National Internet Exchange of India (NIXI), tasked with taking 500 NGOs online. Our team bought the domain name and hosting space, and took on the responsibility of designing their websites with some basic and necessary information. While the services were available free of charge in the first year, NGOs were required to pay the renewal cost from the second year onwards. Much to our surprise, and beyond our expectations, as many as 80 per cent of those NGOs paid the renewal cost. This shows the impact of the Web presence, which convinced them to invest in their digital identities.

Two years later, with support from the Public Interest Registry, we began to conduct a series of workshops on how to manage websites independently and to curate content for them. These workshops were able to mobilise thousands of NGOs to come online across India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Cambodia, South Africa and Kenya. Some years later, we included a social media presence in our training. While we continued to make websites for NGOs, we began focusing on workshops on social media presence for which we had noticed a demand. While it was clear that the grassroots organisations had been willing to pay a nominal amount for these services, until then almost all Web and content service providers had been catering exclusively to an urban audience. Rural India was missing from the Web and so was information about them. Soon, we were not just helping grassroots NGOs set up their Facebook and Twitter pages, but also training them to curate content for social media, sharing techniques to take better photographs and videos, assisting them in writing impactful case stories, helping them to plan their crowd funding campaigns, and building a digital network of all partner organisations.

Ever since, the eNGO Programme has become a self-sustaining structured initiative that offers a range of content and digital services to grassroots organisations, including a 24x7 troubleshooting service, ranging from ₹3,000 to ₹10,000 a year. So far, the eNGO Programme has been able to take 5,000 NGOs online with a dedicated website.

For DEF, the mission has been clear: bring in more visibility and transparency in the sector; share the knowledge and experience of grassroots civil society with the digital world; and connect global audiences with organisations that are carrying out impactful work on the ground.

## **THE DIGITAL SOCIETY**

While there are thousands of civil society organisations that are yet to go online, here are many which have jumped onto the digital bandwagon.

### **ANNAKSHETRA**

With its mission to 'save food and save life' and a vision to 'end hunger', the Jaipur-based organisation collects leftover food from ceremonies/functions and makes it available to those in need through a network of volunteers. Annakshetra receives information about surplus food via its helpline or social media handles, which are monitored 24x7. After the information is received on either platform, a van is sent to the location to collect the food, which is then stored in freezers before being distributed. At the time of writing, Annakshetra has served more than 40 lakh meals from surplus food.

### **YUVA VIKAS SAMITI**

Three weeks after his first workshop on crowd funding in 2016, Brihaspati Kumar Pandey, Secretary, Yuva Vikas Samiti (an organisation based in Uttar Pradesh), launched a social media campaign for Ajay Kumar. Kumar, a resident of Sahpur village, was 18 and wanted to pursue engineering, but could not afford the fee. He had passed as many as six entrance examinations to engineering schools. Determined to pursue his dream, he had approached two government banks for an educational loan but was turned down by both because of his family's poor financial status. K. C. Mishra,

a retired colonel and local social worker, heard Kumar's story and approached Pandey for help. Pandey reached out to his online networks on various social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and WhatsApp—to share Kumar's story and seek funds. In less than three days, the campaign was able to raise ₹3 lakh. Today, Kumar is pursuing engineering at the Buddha Institute of Technology in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.

#### **VOICE OF AZAMGARH COMMUNITY RADIO STATION**

Started in 2011 with the vision of holistic development for the community members of Anjan Shaheed village, Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, this community radio station has become the real voice of the community and has dedicated shows to create awareness about pertinent everyday issues, to identify local talent, to preserve regional culture, and to empower the marginalised, especially women. Besides using community radio as a prime medium for the dissemination of information, Voice of Azamgarh uses social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to build an online community of conscious citizens, to empower them with information, and to encourage a problem-solving approach. This social media presence is used to talk about health, hygiene, voters' rights, democracy, government schemes and other local issues, thus encouraging community dialogue and participation that is no longer restricted to the geographical limitation of the community radio.

#### **AMAN BIRADARI**

Initiated by the Delhi-based organisation in the light of rising crimes against minorities in India, 'Karwan e Mohabbat' is a journey of shared suffering, of solidarity, of atonement, of justice, and of love. In September 2017, Karwan began its journey across eight states to meet families affected by mob lynchings and hate attacks. As a first step, Karwan's social media presence on Facebook and Twitter was used aggressively to reach out to the online community to create an awareness of rising intolerance in the country. Next, the campaign raised ₹18 lakh in a month's time through a dedicated social media campaign, which also brought together more than 50 travellers, writers, poets, photographers and videographers. Finally, social media helped take the stories from the ground—of families

affected by communal violence and hate—onto the phone screens of thousands of readers across cities, states and countries.

#### **SAAHAS**

Survivors who have faced violence either do not know where to go for help, or do not have the resources to find out where to seek it. Sometimes their very situation prevents them from finding help and that can be extremely dangerous to their safety. Saahas is a Facebook chatbot and a mobile and Web-based app, conceptualised by the Red Elephant Foundation, which provides counselling services for survivors of gender-based violence and child support. Additionally, the Saahas digital directory of support comprises over 40,000 organisations across 196 countries, offering medical, legal, educational and employment services, besides food, shelter, clothing and emergency support. So far, Saahas has been able to reach out to 3,000 survivors worldwide, primarily through Facebook.

#### **SAFA**

This Hyderabad-based NGO works on the socio-economic empowerment of women through skill training and capacity building programmes, and by sponsoring the English-medium education of girls. The organisation aims to assist illiterate and semi-literate women from Muslim minority groups to become secondary income earners in families through tailoring, teaching and marketing skills. Safa's website generates business, helps in fund raising and volunteer acquisitions. It also creates an awareness in communities through public service announcements, using mobile technology. The programme 'Raabta' reaches out to 900 beneficiaries, twice a week, in the form of an incoming call, which gives them nuggets of information on government schemes, new policies, scholarships, health, etc. The weekly programme for children features 'Burkha Avenger', a supergirl who uses a flowing black burkha to hide her identity as she fights local thugs seeking to shut down the girls' school where she works.

#### **K-LINK FOUNDATION**

Based in Bhuj, the K-Link Foundation aims to mainstream ICT in governance. The foundation uses a GIS (geographic information

system)-based bilingual Web application and Local Governance Support System (LGSS) to address the needs and challenges of panchayati raj institutions. The GIS tool enables elected representatives and *gram sabha* members to view the panchayat in a pictographic format and prepare informed plans and budgets. With a network of 38 NGOs and 17 rural-info ICT kiosks, they reach remote communities and conduct meetings through Skype.

### **SOUNDS OF SILENCE**

In the heart of India's financial capital, Sounds of Silence is using digital tools for the deaf and mute. Two years ago, they launched a mobile app that allowed the deaf and mute to converse among themselves and with others.

Across the border, too, there are revolutions taking place. Search English is a platform for Bangladeshis of all ages, genders and professions to learn English. Through constant practise, users of the platform develop their level of proficiency in English reading, writing, speaking and listening. Without the fear of being ridiculed or intimidated, users can also engage in peer-to-peer learning through a closed community group on Facebook. Search English's Facebook group has created an environment for the practise of English writing, while its website-based forum allows for video-based practise in speaking English. The group has more than 3.5 million members, most of them aged between 18 and 24, who publish more than 600 posts every day.

On the other side of India, the Citizen Archive of Pakistan is a world-class portal of the digital documentation and archive of the oral history of Pakistan, listed and digitally displayed on Google Cultural Institute. The portal documents the birth of Pakistan, its history and heritage, with a special project on minorities in the country and galleries of photos, videos and story-telling records of various cultural programmes and festivals.

### **CONCLUSION**

The case studies shared in this article are a small representation of civil society's abilities once it realises the potential of ICT and digital tools. In times to come, we expect that the inclusion of digital tools by civil society will not only allow it to become a mass producer of digital content, but will also help make the voices of civil society

and its beneficiaries louder and equal to those of government and business.

As appropriately put by Bernholz, et al. (2013), 'Civil society is an intermediate sphere—a sphere of mediation—between private interests and the public good. It is also the space for private action on behalf of a public purpose'. To truly enable communities at the grassroots level to adopt technology, to find its contextual relevance, and to leverage it for a larger impact, it is necessary for civil society, too, to go digital. Considering the massive numbers dependent on civil society interventions, the adoption of digital tools by civil society organisations will not only be able to improve their visibility, resources and efficiency, but will also go a long way in bringing about a socio-behavioural impact among beneficiaries on the ground.



#### NOTES

1. 'Civil Society.' United Nations. September 2009. [www.un.org/en/sections/resources-different-audiences/civil-society/](http://www.un.org/en/sections/resources-different-audiences/civil-society/).
2. 'Defining Civil Society.' World Bank. 2016. [www.worldbank.org/](http://www.worldbank.org/).
3. 'Overview of Civil Society Organizations: India.' Asian Development Bank. June 2009. [www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28966/csb-ind.pdf](http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28966/csb-ind.pdf).
4. See U. Anand (2015). Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2pqeKti>.

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