

Civil Society Organizations in India



For Prelims: Civil Society Organizations , Brahmo Samaj , Ramakrishna Mission , Chipko Movement , Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)

For Mains: Role of Civil Society in strengthening democracy in India, Challenges faced by CSOs and their impact on governance

Source:TH

Why in News?

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have once again come into focus for its role in **mobilising communities, protecting rights, and filling gaps in governance**. Beyond the state and markets, it drives collective action, ensures citizen participation, and strengthens democracy in India.

What is a Civil Society Organization?

- **About:** CSO society refers to **non-state, non-profit entities** that unite people voluntarily to work collectively toward shared social, cultural, or ethical goals.

Types of Civil Society Organizations



• Evolution of CSOs in India:

- **Ancient-Medieval Roots:** Civil society in India has deep roots in the ideas of dharma (duty), daan (giving), and karma, which encouraged service to others through religious and social movements.
- **Pre-Independence Era:** Reformers challenged caste discrimination, untouchability, and other social evils, linking voluntary action to social reform.
 - **Brahmo Samaj (1828)** (promoted social and religious reform), **Theosophical Society (1879)** (spread spiritual and educational reform), and **Ramakrishna Mission (1897)** (emphasized service to humanity).
 - Efforts were often unorganized and relief-based, but they laid a moral foundation for later mobilization.
 - Gandhi's philosophy of self-reliance, upliftment of the poor, and constructive work inspired mass participation and voluntary service organizations.
- **Post-Independence:** The new Indian state expanded welfare but recognized the supporting role of voluntary organizations.
 - **First Five-Year Plan (1951-56)** emphasized cooperation between government and NGOs.
 - Decentralization through the **three-tier Panchayati Raj system** gave space for cooperatives, farmer unions, and local associations to flourish.
 - During the 1965-67 droughts, many **international NGOs entered India with foreign aid** and later set up permanent offices, reshaping civil society funding.
- **Contemporary Era: Civil society shifted from welfare delivery to a rights- and empowerment-based approach seen in movements like Chipko (1973) and Narmada Bachao (1985).**
 - Civil society broadened its agenda to include **rights to food, work (MGNREGA), education (RTE Act), health, and information (RTI Act)**.
 - CSOs recognized as development partners of the state. NGOs expanded into **gender, caste, environment, and marginalized issues**, becoming key watchdogs of democracy.
 - **India with around 3.3 million NGOs Today, India has around 1.5 million NGOs involving over 19 million volunteers and staff, though most remain small and volunteer-driven.**

Regulatory Framework for Civil Society in India

- **Societies** : Societies Registration Act, 1860; for literary, scientific, and charitable purposes.
- **Trusts** : Indian Trusts Act, 1882; states also have Public Trust Acts (e.g., Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950).
- **Companies** : Section 8 of Indian Companies Act, 2013; for not-for-profit activities like education, social welfare, environment, etc.
- **Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), 2010**: Applies to all CSOs receiving foreign contributions.

What is the Role of Civil Society in a Democracy?

- **Ensuring Accountability**: CSOs act as a watchdog, scrutinizing state actions and checking political abuses and corruption.
 - The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Rajasthan, was instrumental in the passage of the national Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005.
 - CSOs play a crucial role in monitoring elections, detecting fraud, and affirming legitimacy.
- **Empowering Citizens and Promoting Democratic Norms: Educates citizens about laws, rights, and governance , sustaining an informed citizenry.**
 - Fosters tolerance, respect for dissent, and compromise , promoting democratic social norms.
 - Provides platforms for **marginalized groups** (women, poor, persons with disabilities) to participate in governance, as seen in the role of CSOs advocating for the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016**.
- **Women Empowerment: Organizations like Jagori and Swayam have raised awareness about women's rights and promoted political participation.**
 - The Institute of Social Sciences' "Women's Political Empowerment Program" has trained over 15,000 women for leadership roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
 - PRIDE India has supported advocacy for women's rights through research and data collection.
 - SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) empowers women in the informal sector, helping them gain economic independence and social status.
- **Leadership Development and Representation**: Facilitates articulation and aggregation of **diverse societal interests**.
 - CSOs act as a training ground for future political leaders, breaking traditional party monopolies.
 - CSOs act as a shock-absorbing institution by cross-cutting rigid political polarities. Helps maintain social cohesion in conflict-prone settings.
- **Supporting Reforms and Public Service Delivery: Mobilizes public opinion for economic and political reforms .**
 - CSOs fill gaps in essential services like healthcare, education, sanitation, and disaster relief (e.g., During the Covid-19 pandemic, Goonj launched the 'Rahat' initiative to support vulnerable communities).
- **Global Governance**: Civil society not only promotes national democracy but also influences global

governance.

- International norms on human rights, women's rights, disability rights, and environmental concerns are leveraged to shape domestic policies.

What are the Challenges of Civil Society in a Democracy?

- **Undermining Democratic Values** : Not all CSOs pursue democratic purposes, some promote **private interests, racism, nationalism, or fundamentalism**, undermining democratic values.
- **Funding Constraints** CSOs face financial instability due to limited foreign funding (post **-FCRA 2020 amendment**) and inadequate domestic philanthropy.
 - State funding can corrupt CSOs, diverting focus from democratic objectives to short-term gains.
 - Additionally, many CSOs lack effective monitoring systems, making it difficult to assess their impact and attract funding.
- **Inadequate Government Response** : Government agencies may be **ill-equipped to handle CSO inputs** , resulting in friction, ineffective policymaking, and undermined democratic engagement.
- **Inadequate Representation** : Lack of equal access for marginalized groups in civil society can **perpetuate structural inequalities** and undermine democratic inclusivity.
- **Cultural Insensitivity** : Global civil society efforts may overlook **local cultural contexts**, especially in the **Global South** , leading to ineffective or irrelevant interventions.
- **Internal Undemocracy** : Many CSOs lack internal democracy, such as transparency or inclusive decision-making, contradicting the democratic principles they advocate.
- **External Manipulation** : Civil society organizations may be influenced or used by **foreign powers to advance political or economic agendas** , distorting their role in promoting democracy.
- **Volunteer Retention** : High volunteer turnover and inconsistent engagement make it difficult to sustain long-term projects and community relationships.

What Measures can be Adopted to Enhance the Role of CSO?

- **Enhance Transparency and Accountability:** Develop a **national CSO database** including financial reports, program outcomes, and impact assessments. Standardized reporting and voluntary third-party audits can build credibility.
- **Support Evidence-Based Policymaking:** Institutionalize CSO involvement in policy through **representation on government committees, consultation forums, and the use of CSO data** in decision-making.
- **Diversify Funding Sources:** Encourage domestic philanthropy, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) partnerships, and social impact investments to reduce dependency on foreign funds.
- **Simplify Regulatory Framework:** The government could simplify FCRA and streamline CSO registration and compliance through a single-window digital system,
- **Boost Volunteerism:** Launch national campaigns to promote volunteering, integrate community service into education, maintain volunteer databases, and use digital platforms to connect volunteers with CSOs.

Conclusion

Civil society remains the **heartbeat of participatory democracy** , bridging gaps between the state and citizens. Strengthening CSOs is not just about governance, it is about **empowering society to shape its own future**. A vibrant civil society is the **true measure of a resilient democracy**.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. Discuss the evolving role of Civil Society Organizations in India and their contribution to participatory democracy.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Mains

Q. Discuss the contribution of civil society groups for women's effective and meaningful participation and representation in state legislatures in India. **(2023)**

Q. How can the role of NGOs be strengthened in India for development works relating to protection of the environment? Discuss throwing light on the major constraints. **(2015)**

Q. Examine critically the recent changes in the rules governing foreign funding of NGOs under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 1976. **(2015)**

Q. Can Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations present an alternative model of public service delivery to benefit the common citizen? Discuss the challenges of this alternative model. **(2021)**

Q. In dealing with socio-economic issues of development, what kind of collaboration between government, NGOs and private sector would be most productive? **(2024)**

SC Calls for Regulating Social Media



For Prelims : Supreme Court of India , Social media , Information Technology Act, 2000 , Section 69A of the IT Act, 2000, Section 79(1) of the IT Act, 2000, Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 , *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017)* , Article 21 .

For Mains : Regulation of Social Media in India, Impacts of Social Media on Different Sections of Society.

Source: TH

Why in News?

The **Supreme Court (SC)**, while hearing a **case against comedians for derogatory remarks** , observed that **social media influencers commercialise free speech** , cautioning that such content can **harm the dignity of vulnerable groups** and urging the government to frame **effective guidelines** to balance free speech with societal sensitivities.

Key Observations & Recommendations of SC

• Key Observations:

- **Commercialisation & Accountability** : Social media influencers **monetise free speech** , often creating an overlap with **prohibited speech** . The Court cautioned that such expression cannot be used as a **shield** to target **vulnerable groups** (disabled, women, children, minorities, senior citizens).
- **Humour vs. Dignity** : While **humour is vital** , **derogatory jokes** and **insensitive remarks** perpetuate **stigma** , **discrimination** , and undermine the **constitutional mandate of inclusivity** by “smashing” the goal of mainstreaming disadvantaged sections.
- **Clear Boundaries in Digital Space** : The Court emphasised the need to delineate **free speech, commercial speech, and prohibited speech** , as **irresponsible online remarks** erode **dignity** , **social harmony** , and **community trust** .

• Recommendations:

- **Guidelines with Consequences** : Directed the Union Government (in consultation with the **National Broadcasters and Digital Association**) to frame **regulatory guidelines** for influencers/podcasters with **proportionate and enforceable consequences** , avoiding “empty formalities.”
- **Sensitisation & Responsibility** : Stressed the importance of **awareness** , **sensitisation** , and **digital ethics** among social media users, while ensuring **accountability** of violators for societal harm.
- **Apology & Balance of Rights** : Ordered influencers to issue **unconditional apologies** via their platforms, clarifying that the Court does not seek to **curtail free speech** but to **balance liberty with dignity** , protecting **community rights** in a diverse society.

What are the Key Regulations Governing Social Media Usage in India?

Key Legislations:

- **Information Technology Act, 2000** is the **principal legislation** governing electronic communication and social media.
 - **Section 79(1)** provides “**safe harbour**” **protection to intermediaries** (e.g., Facebook, X, Instagram) against **liability for third-party content**, provided they act as neutral platforms and do not control or modify content.
 - **Section 69A of the IT Act, 2000** allows the Government to **block online content** for protecting **sovereignty, security, defense, foreign relations, public order** , and preventing **incitement to offences** .
- **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021** mandates social-media platforms to ensure **user safety** , removal of **unlawful content** , and awareness on issues such as **privacy, copyright, defamation, and national security** .
 - The **2023 Amendment** to these rules **obligated intermediaries** to take down **false or misleading content related to the Government of India** . However, its enforcement has been stayed by the **Supreme Court (SC)** , citing concerns of misuse.

Key Judicial Pronouncements:

- In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015)* , SC struck down **Section 66A of the IT Act, 2000** for vagueness, reaffirming that criticism, satire, and dissent are protected under Article 19(1)(a) , unless falling within reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2) .
 - **Section 66A criminalized sending offensive, false, or objectionable information via computers or electronic devices** , prescribing up to **3 years’ imprisonment** .
- In *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017)* , SC recognised **privacy as a fundamental right** under **Article 21** .
 - It shaped later data protection measures, including the **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023** , and influenced regulation of **WhatsApp privacy policies** and **Aadhaar data norms** .

Why is there a Need for Regulating Social Media?

- **Protection of Vulnerable Groups** Unregulated platforms enable **derogatory content, cyberbullying, trolling, and exploitation** , particularly of **women, children, senior citizens, minorities, and persons with disabilities** .
- **Curbing Misinformation & Hate Speech:** The rapid spread of **fake news, deepfakes, hate campaigns, and extremist propaganda** undermines **social harmony, democratic discourse, and national security** .
 - Effective regulation can check **disinformation ecosystems** and maintain **public order** .
- **Safeguarding Mental Health & Ethical Values:** Features like **endless scrolling, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and curated identities** drive **addiction, anxiety, and depression** among youth.
 - Regulations can promote **digital well-being** , responsible design, and **ethical communication standards** .
- **Ensuring Accountability of Influencers:** With the rise of **influencer marketing** , users are misled into financial risks by **undisclosed paid promotions** and **illegitimate products** (e.g., betting apps). Regulation ensures **transparency, disclosure norms, and consumer protection** .
- **Data Privacy & Security:** Social media platforms collect vast user data, often without informed

consent, leading to **privacy violations, surveillance, and misuse for profit or political influence** . Regulation is essential to uphold **constitutional rights to privacy** under **Article 21** .

- **Balancing Free Speech with Responsibility:** While **Article 19(1)(a)** protects free speech, it is subject to **reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2)** (public order, morality, decency, security of the State). Regulation helps draw the line between **legitimate free expression** and **harmful/derogatory content** .

What are the Key Challenges in Regulating Social Media in India?

- **Volume & Anonymity:** The **sheer volume of online content** makes continuous monitoring difficult. Added to this, **anonymity of users** emboldens hate speech, misinformation, and harmful content, straining regulatory capacity.
- **Transparency & Accountability Gaps:** Social media platforms lack **transparency in decision-making** and **accountability in content moderation policies** . The **absence of independent oversight** raises concerns about opaque practices and arbitrariness.
- **Defining Harmful Content:** There is **subjectivity in defining harmful content** , as differing social, political, and cultural views complicate consensus. This ambiguity creates **grey zones** between legitimate expression and prohibited speech.
- **Free Speech vs. Censorship:** Any attempt to regulate risks being seen as **censorship** or a **curtailment of free speech** , especially when criteria are not **clear, objective, and proportionate** .
- **Cross-Border Jurisdictional Issues:** A large share of harmful content originates from **outside India's jurisdiction** , making enforcement and regulation difficult under domestic law.
- **Political Neutrality Concerns:** Content moderation decisions are often accused of **political bias** , raising questions about **platform neutrality** and undermining trust in regulatory mechanisms.

What Measures Can be Taken to Improve the Credibility and Utility of Social Media in India?

- **Robust Legal-Policy Framework** : Update the IT Act, 2000 through the **Digital India Act** , ensuring platform accountability, **data protection** , and **freedom of expression** , backed by **judicial oversight** to avoid overreach.
- **Algorithmic Transparency & Accountability** : Mandate **algorithm audits** , **transparency reports** , and independent oversight bodies; encourage the use of **AI-driven moderation tools** to ensure neutrality and quick redressal.
- **Technological & Institutional Capacity** : Expand **cyber forensic labs** , enhance agency capacity, and integrate **AI-enabled monitoring systems** while safeguarding **privacy and encryption standards** .
- **Digital Literacy & Ethical Usage** : Launch nationwide **digital literacy campaigns** against misinformation, deepfakes, and cyberbullying; promote **responsible online behavior** and **ethical design practices** prioritizing user well-being.
- **Global & Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation** : Strengthen **international collaboration** on cross-border regulation and involve **civil society, academia, and industry** to create an inclusive, **future-ready digital ecosystem** .

Conclusion

Regulating social media is essential to balance **freedom of expression** with the **dignity and rights of vulnerable groups** . A combination of **robust legal frameworks, technological solutions, digital literacy, and ethical practices** can ensure accountability, curb misinformation, and foster a **safe, inclusive, and credible online ecosystem** .

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the challenges in regulating social media platforms in India, considering the balance between freedom of expression, privacy concerns, and the need for accountability.

[Watch Video on YouTube:

▶ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/Do7AxTL5500>

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UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question:

Mains

Q. What are social networking sites and what security implications do these sites present? (2013)

Q. Child cuddling is now being replaced by mobile phones. Discuss its impact on the socialization of children. (2023)

Samudrayaan Project



Source: IE

Why in News?

Two Indian aquanauts dived into the **Atlantic Ocean** aboard **France's submersible Nautilus** as part of preparations for the **Samudrayaan Project**.

What is the Samudrayaan Project?

- **About: Samudrayaan** is India's first human deep-sea mission. It is a key component of the **Deep Ocean Mission**.
 - The project aims to send **three humans in a manned submersible (Matsya-6000)** to a depth of **6,000 metres** in the ocean by 2027.
 - It will strengthen India's strategic position by joining the select group of countries (US, Russia, China, Japan, France) with manned deep-sea capability.
- **Key Objectives: Develop technologies for deep-sea mining, submersibles, and ocean robotics**.
 - Conduct surveys for mineral deposits, especially polymetallic nodules (containing iron, manganese, cobalt, nickel, rare earths).
- **Matsya-6000:** It is India's first self-propelled manned submersible . It is made of titanium-alloy in a spherical shape and can carry three aquanauts for 12 hours, with the capability to sustain them for up to 96 hours in emergencies.
 - It is expected to withstand an external pressure up to **600bar under low temperature conditions of -3°C**.
 - **It is equipped with life-support, acoustic communication, Li-Po batteries, drop-weight escape, and bio-vests for crew health monitoring** .
 - The development of MATSYA 6000 is a collaboration between the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), and the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) of ISRO.



What is the Deep Ocean Mission?

- **Objective:** Launched by Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) for a period of **5 years (2021-26)** to develop technologies for exploring and sustainably utilizing the deep ocean's living and non-living resources
 - It promotes **India's Blue Economy** , covering marine industries like fishing, shipping, biotechnology, and tourism
 - It supports climate change research and aligns with **UN's 2021-2030 'Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development'**
- **Mission Components:**
 - **Deep Sea Mining & Manned Submersible:** Development of submersible to reach 6,000 m and mining of polymetallic nodules. Prepares India for future commercial deep-sea exploration under **International Seabed Authority rules**.
 - **Ocean Climate Change Advisory Services:** Observation and modeling of climate variables for seasonal to decadal projections, aids **Blue Economy** and coastal tourism.
 - **Deep-Sea Biodiversity:** Bio-prospecting and sustainable use of deep-sea flora, fauna, and microbes.
 - **Deep Ocean Survey & Exploration:** Identifying multi-metal hydrothermal sulphide sites along Indian Ocean ridges.
 - **Energy & Freshwater from Ocean:** Feasibility studies for **Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion (OTEC)** desalination plant, supports offshore energy development.
 - **Advanced Marine Station:** Build talent in ocean biology and engineering; turn research into industrial products via on-site incubators.
- **Progress:** Under the mission, the deep-water **Autonomous Underwater Vehicle (AUV) Ocean Mineral Explorer (OMe 6000)** was deployed for exploration.
 - In December 2022, it surveyed mineral-rich zones at a depth of 5,271 meters in the **Central Indian Ocean Basin Polymetallic Manganese Nodule (PMN) site**.
 - Using the research vessel **SagarNidhi** , the AUV OMe 6000 conducted a 14 sq. km survey to assess **polymetallic nodule distribution and deep-sea biodiversity**, paving the way for future exploration and resource mapping.

[Watch Video on YouTube:

▶ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/-7NndA1teil>

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UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q: With reference to the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea, consider the following statements: (UPSC Prelims 2022)

1. A coastal state has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles, measured from a baseline determined in accordance with the convention.
2. Ships of all states, whether coastal or land-locked, enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea.
3. The Exclusive Economic Zone shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baseline from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (d)

Q: Consider the following statements: (2021)

1. The Global Ocean Commission grants licences for seabed exploration and mining in international waters.
2. India has received licences for seabed mineral exploration in international waters.
3. "Rare earth minerals" are present on the seafloor in international waters.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

CDS Released 3 Joint Doctrines for Armed Forces



Source: HT

Chief of Defence Staff released **3 joint doctrines for armed forces** to enhance integration, interoperability, and operational effectiveness **across land, sea, air, space, and cyber domains**.

- **Joint Doctrine for Special Forces Operations: Aims to ensure interoperability of Para Special Forces (Army), Marine Commandos (MARCOS) (Navy), and Garud Commando Force (IAF).**
 - Recommends Joint Service Training Institutes (JsSTIs) as Centres of Excellence.
 - It focuses on advanced joint training for night operations, adverse weather missions, electronic warfare, and precision-guided munition support.
- **Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations: Stresses on integration of advanced technology , joint services training , and tactical synergy .**
 - Ensures readiness from peacetime engagements to high-intensity conflicts .
- **Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) Doctrine :** It covers integration across land, sea, air, space, cyber, and cognitive domains . Aims to empower decision-making and enhance battlefield responsiveness.

Chief of Defence Staff

- The **CDS** is the highest-ranking military officer in India, serving as the principal **principal military advisor to the Defence Minister on all tri-service matters** and heading the **Department of Military Affairs (DMA)**.
 - The position was created to enhance jointness and coordination among the three services – Army, Navy, and Air Force.
- CDS is the Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee and a member of the **Defence Acquisition Council** .

Read more: Inter-Services Organisations Rules 2025

USD 125.8 billion by 2032



Source: PIB

The **National Highways Authority of India (NHAI)** has launched **Project Aarohan** to support the education of **children of toll plaza employees**.

Project Aarohan

- **About:** It is a **scholarship and mentorship initiative** in partnership with **Vertis Infrastructure Trust** , implemented by **SMEC Trust's Bharat Cares** , aimed at children from **economically weaker sections** .
- **Objectives:** To **eliminate financial barriers** , **ensure equal access to quality education** , and **nurture talent** , thereby **bridging socio-economic disparities** .
- **Key Features:** Supports **500 students** from Class 11 to undergraduate level with an annual scholarship of **Rs 12,000** , and **50 postgraduate students** with **Rs 50,000** each.
 - It provides **mentorship, skill development, and career guidance** .
 - It gives priority to **girls, first-generation learners, and students from economically weaker sections (EWS), SC, ST, OBC, and minority communities** .
- **Significance:**
 - **Promotes Educational Equity:** Provides **financial support** and **mentorship** to children of toll plaza employees from **EWS** , ensuring **access to quality education** .
 - **Fosters Inclusive Growth:** Prioritizes **girls , first-generation learners** , and students from **marginalized communities** (SC, ST, OBC, minorities), helping **bridge socio-economic disparities** .
 - **Develops Human Capital:** Enhances **career opportunities** , **skill development** , **talent nurturing** , **employment & entrepreneurship** , contributing to **nation-building** .

National Highways Authority of India (NHAI)

- **NHAI** was established under the **NHAI Act, 1988** to oversee the **development, maintenance, and management of national highways** .
- National highways span **132,499 km** , carrying **40% of India's road traffic** while accounting for only **2% of the road network** .

Read More: National Highways Authority of India