

# Essay 8

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## Civic Driven Change for Deepening Democracy

### From Voting to Voicing

#### Look Around

As I sit down to draft my contributions to a civic-driven change narrative, I glance at the daily newspapers. Several bold front-page headlines catch my attention. One story is about the first anniversary of police firing at unarmed protesters in Nandigram, West Bengal, India. The citizens' committee against forced displacement in Nandigram was commemorating martyrdom of their brethren, with clear resolve to carry on the struggle. The Marxist government in West Bengal was trying to use its administrative authority to acquire agricultural land from these peasants for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

The second story had a visual of Buddhist monks in Lhasa, capital of Tibet, protesting in front of Chinese troops, demanding that injustices against and violations of freedoms for Tibetans be stopped by the government. The contrast between peaceful postures of Buddhist monks and armed Chinese security guards was quite telling.

Two other stories seemed to focus on employment in India. One described how central government's employment guarantee programme was unable to utilize massive budgetary resources properly due to lack of ownership by people at the local level. Another proclaimed how growing private investment in the service sector was creating thousands of new jobs for young people in small towns.

I began to think about these stories as reflections of what is going on in contemporary societies. It appears market principles are being encouraged by governments to capture the entire space for economic activity, thereby relieving the state of its responsibilities. In this era dominated by a neo-liberal policy environment, the credibility and visibility gained by the private sector as engines of development is somewhat staggering. Even

the Marxist government of West Bengal is going overboard in wooing the private sector, both domestic and foreign.

Second, most prominent stories of citizens' actions - in India or China - are narratives of protest and resistance. Does it imply that the primary manifestation of contemporary civic action is to protest against and resist state-driven or market-driven change? In Nandigram, West Bengal, citizens were protesting take-over of agricultural land by a multinational company; in Tibet, Buddhist monks were protesting against Chinese government's policies of assimilation of Buddhist culture into the mainstream. I began to search the newspapers for any other 'positive' story of citizens' actions. With some effort, hidden deep inside in small print, was a story of 20 illiterate women in a village in Bihar (our most backward province today) who had organized themselves to build water harvesting structures in the village to ensure year-round availability of potable water for all households of their hamlet.

This story (and many others like this) suggests that civic-driven change was indicating something qualitatively different from other stories. In this story, women themselves were the main actors, whose actions reflect efforts to 'co-create' solutions for collective well-being; state- and/or market-driven change may or may not really matter for these women.

There are two other differences in these stories. First, as you can notice, government-driven change efforts are huge, macro, all-encompassing, and so appear to be scaled-up market-driven interventions. The Nandigram project will displace thousands of households; the Chinese security apparatus comprises of millions of soldiers. The market-driven change is about large corporations and huge projects, in which the state is largely in command over territories, resources and authority. In comparison, the change efforts of rural women in Bihar are at micro, civic level. By this, I mean a scale initiated and managed by people themselves for their own

advancement, akin to the ‘winnable’ changes described by Harry Boyte. There may well be hundreds of such civic-level change efforts by citizens on their own, but they do not appear significant. Why? Is it because they are not represented as aggregation, nor have a systemic impact? Is it because, as micro efforts, they appear ‘small’ and immaterial? Does it imply that we live in a period of human history where large-scale aggregation of interventions, institutions and projects alone matters? Does it mean that, as Rakesh Rajani, suggests ‘small is no longer beautiful, or effective, or meaningful’? Does it indicate privileging macro over micro initiatives, collectives, projects, habitats?

Second, it raises questions about the roles of modern-day media. What story, in what manner, is highlighted? And, which is obscured? Why should protest and resistance by citizens receive front-page attention, while stories of creativity, self-organization, and mutual cooperation by citizens themselves be relegated to small print in inside pages? Does such portrayal of civic action in media create narrow public understandings of the totality of civic-driven change? Does it create an impression in the public mind that civic-driven change is about resistance and protest against injustices, while state and market-driven change efforts are ‘constructive’? Why does this ‘bias’ in media portrayal of civic-driven change occur?

### Alternative Conceptions

Two plausible theses follow from the above. The first thesis may suggest that civic-driven change in the contemporary context, as highlighted in the introduction, is about ‘fighting injustices’. This line of argument may imply that contemporary neo-liberal and statist paradigms are perpetuating the forces of marginalization, exploitation and exclusion. As a result, a vast proportion of citizens feel discriminated against, living lives as victims of social and economic injustices. Civic-driven change is a response to such experiences of discrimination, unfairness and exclusion. Resistance and protest are its potent methodologies.

Another thesis may view civic-driven change efforts ontologically, not merely reacting to state-driven or market-driven change programmes. This thesis may imply that civic agency for public good has historically embedded cultural and spiritual roots in all societies. Its contemporary manifestation is the opportunistic claiming of public spaces, resources and institutions by citizens themselves. In this way of conceptualizing civic-driven change, it would be imperative to situate it in relation to the actions of state and market institutions. The analysis of power relations in specific contexts carried out from the vantage point of citizens may yield answers to such questions as what opportunities, spaces, allies and resources can be mobilized by citizens to drive their own visions of change?

This is not to imply that resistance and protests are not relevant in the second thesis. But the important distinc-

tion is about primacy and centrality. In the former thesis, primacy of state-led and market-driven change is assumed. In the second thesis, primacy of civic-driven change is argued. What are the historical roots and contemporary consequences of these two contrasting conceptions? How can civic-driven change ‘reclaim’ its primacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### Citizen-State Dialectics

Modern nation-states are a relatively recent phenomenon in human evolution. In most parts of the world, communities organized themselves historically around a particular eco-geographical zone and attendant mode of livelihood. They evolved their own ways of dealing with common issues, such as protection and allocation of collective efforts. Over centuries, myriad different models of ‘self-governance’ emerged. Households and communities maintained a substantial degree of autonomy in managing their own affairs. A fundamental break to this trajectory happened with the signing of Westphalian Treaty in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The essence of this treaty was to proclaim the ‘sovereignty of state’ in order to curtail and manage the - often religiously inspired - attempts at territorial transgressions by kings, monarchs or invaders. Thus emerged a new compact between individuals, households and state which slowly replaced feudal subordination with a socio-political status of citizenship to those acknowledging the latter’s sovereignty.

Over time, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many European states were constructed around specific nationalities, thereby creating ‘nation-states’. This concept implied that a singular political authority had the ‘mandate’ to govern a given territory inhabited by a certain nationality. This conception of nation-state was further reinforced with the form of securing a ‘democratic mandate’ by the political authority. Thus, the European state gained its legitimacy to govern citizens through the process of democratic elections. The model gave enfranchised citizens the vote and right to periodically choose those who would be responsible for governing using the instruments of state. In this democratic construction of statehood, citizens of a territory ‘voluntarily’ authorize selected representatives to act as time-bound rulers.

After the end of the Second World War, countries gaining independence from the colonial rule began to ‘construct’ their own nation-states. New ‘independent’ nation-states began to organize their territories and govern their citizens from within this geo-political perspective. In many regions of Asia (and Africa), new boundaries were drawn which artificially created new nation-states. In the process, many communities, tribes and kinships were artificially and forcibly merged together or separated from each other. Most countries labelled today as ‘failed’ or ‘failing’ states have had such pedigrees. In Asia, the list of such states is pretty long - Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tibet, Indonesia, Philippines. What has been happening in certain ‘separatist’ regions of India, like in

the northeast and in Kashmir, is a further reflection of a similar phenomenon.

Let us now go back to our earlier discussion and ask the questions again: why are citizens in Nandigram in India and Buddhist monks in Tibet protesting? And, why are women in Bihar working together to harvest water?

### Imposed or Imbided Citizenship

The post-colonial Indian state went about organizing itself to govern its new territory and its people. The central political authority - central government in Delhi - was reinforced with an official machinery for maintenance of law and order internally and border security externally. It adopted a constitution - derived largely from colonial masters - to act as a 'welfare' state, that is, a government shouldering a collective responsibility for the well-being of all citizens. It adopted a parliamentary form of democracy, which gave universal adult franchise. A new government was elected for the first time in India when all its citizens were asked to vote. The ideas of development were just gathering momentum in the early 1950s. In its quest to act as a welfare state, over the next decades duly elected Indian governments went about planning and implementing a vast array of development programmes. Under the banner of 'nation-building' a similar process occurred in most newly liberated and constructed states of Asia and Africa during the 1950s and 1960s.

Several interesting consequences of this trajectory of democratic development, largely led and managed by the state institutions, unfolded in these countries. Several positive outcomes emerged for the state and its citizens. Many social services such as education, health, etc., became professionally organized. Central political authority became competent enough to undertake many responsible governance functions. Voting, elections and democratic process of formation of governments started to become established as a norm in such societies. Economic development, social welfare and societal stability began to manifest themselves in many countries of and beyond the region. To achieve social justice and equitable development, these newly democratic states legislated several elements of universal rights for their citizens. India's history followed such a trajectory.

However, negative consequences of this project to construct and strengthen democratic nation-states also became evident. First, because they received reinforcement from authoritarian traditions of Asian cultures, central political authorities became very strong. As a descendant of God, a king could do no wrong. New rulers began to behave, as well as were viewed, as the 'new' emperors.

Second, the pervasive state-led and managed large-scale development programmes undermined initiatives of people themselves. The capacity, talents, knowledge, dignity, creativity and agency of ordinary citizens were gradually eroded. Externally designed, expert-driven, universal policies and programmes expected passive consumption by ordinary folk. This was particularly so for the poor,

who were supposed to be mere 'beneficiaries' of state-led change efforts. Since the state, its rulers, officials and agencies knew precisely what was good for them, the poor had to simply do what they were told. Consequently, the poor, and even others, quickly learnt to behave like 'helpless beneficiaries', waiting to be 'rescued' and uplifted by development programmes. They began to lose faith in their own capabilities and agency. They began themselves to devalue their own knowledge and resources. Such strategies of state-driven change resulted in ordinary citizens losing their dignity and self-respect while accessing such welfare programmes for their families and communities.<sup>1</sup>

In some significant ways, the experience of citizenship was also not quite the same as that mandated by successive governments. Through their constitutions and laws, democratic states conferred many rights on their citizens. Despite rights and equality on paper, given the enormous socioeconomic inequalities prevalent in many such societies, many categories of citizens experienced discrimination and exclusion. Women most of all felt endemic patriarchy limiting their access to services and rights. Even today, in India and elsewhere in Asia, for the most part, girls remain undereducated. In most societies, women are still denied property rights. In many democratic states, the status of women continues to be subordinated in relation to men.

Indigenous communities have largely experienced displacement from their native lands and alienation from the natural resources. They have been experiencing 'second-class' status as citizens. Low-caste and untouchable - dalits and scheduled caste - households in India and Nepal still experience indignity, humiliation and violence. They are seldom able to exercise their constitutional rights. Rural populations face greater resistance to accessing rights than their urban counterparts. In several Asian societies, religious minorities face discrimination, exclusion and harassment. Thus, for a large cross-section of Asian societies, realization of state-conferred citizenship rights are still a myth, not reality.

This situation is further aggravated for migrants across countries and regions. Millions of refugees, displaced forcibly from their homeland, do not even have basic citizenship rights. Thus, citizenship is not universally realized in practice for people who are poor, marginalized and deprived. Historical inequalities, structural discrimination and the dynamics of marginalization and exclusion have resulted in a large section of citizens in many countries unable to realize the rights accorded by their respective states.<sup>2</sup> So, what do people do?

Tibetans monks in China are protesting because they see their rights to practise their own religion and culture are being denied because of the state's quest for unified nation. Farmers in Nandigram are protesting because they do not want to sell their agricultural land, yet the government is forcing them to do so. The government in China is saying that its policies would mean better economic development of the Tibetan region. The government of

4 West Bengal is telling those farmers that employment would be generated if private investments are made in that region. The citizens, in both cases, disagree. They perceive that peaceful, democratic and dialogical avenues are closed for them; hence, protests, continued protests.

The underlying reason of this dynamic is the incongruence between imposed and imbibed citizenship. A state seeks to impose universal standards and practices which are not consistent with the aspirations and experiences of all groups, classes or other categories of citizens. Hence, they (re)act for their collective good on their own terms. That is the motivation for illiterate rural women in Bihar to 'co-create' water harvesting arrangements for their households. They are doing it themselves. A state may provide an enabling framework, but it is the collective assertion of their citizenship that is behind their water harvesting initiatives. They are 'driving' their own development; they are 'fuelling' their own enterprise; they are managing their own affairs; they are governing their public good - water, in this case.

The state-conferred and -imposed rights, rules and responsibilities defining citizenship are at variance from the actual, lived experience and identities of people as citizens. Citizens thus evolve their own meanings of citizenship through their practices in everyday life. This is the imbibed and learnt meaning of citizenship, quite at variance with statist mandates. This incongruence becomes the trigger for 'co-creation' in civic-driven change.

### **Civic Drivers and Religious Tradition: Citizenship for Society before the State**

A spirit of cooperation and solidarity, and limits to citizenship are driving rural illiterate women in Bihar to work together on water harvesting. Farmers of Nandigram in India are resisting government's coercive efforts because their rights as citizens are violated and subordinated to that of the state political and official policy-makers. The Buddhist monks in Lhasa are protesting because they are experiencing being 'second class' citizens, a minority denied the right to practise its own religion, language and culture. In each case, the essential premise motivating civic action is a sense of disrespect for their citizenship - what they see as a fundamental tenet for expressing and fully enjoying their rights. This conception of citizenship is somewhat different from the legal-judicial notions, where state conferment is the sole and exclusive basis for determining this dimension of personal identity.

The cultural and religious traditions of Asia, as well as the intellectual and philosophical traditions of Europe, provide ample support to a broad and inclusive concept of citizenship beyond the legal. Asiatic religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism - defined the principle of 'Dharma' as a spiritual duty towards both the ruler/regime as well as to fellow human beings. Their scriptures and teachings also implored the 'Dharma' of the rulers as creating, acknowledging and respecting the basic

humanitarian rights of fellow citizens. The enunciation of the principle of 'Dharma' basically implies that it is the duty of every citizen to show respect to common codes of behaviour set up by collective regimes, as well as show respect to the dignity and well-being of others. Thus, citizenship in the interpretation of Indian religious traditions implied enjoyment of common rights codified and defended by the regimes. It calls for a duty to accept and respect the rules of living together enforced by the regimes, and obligations towards other citizens as fellow human beings. Still today, these religions call upon followers to practise 'Dharma', specifically by helping the needy and giving time, money and other resources as philanthropic contributions towards society's well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Islam expresses a similar tradition. Adherents are expected to live in a manner that is consistent with the tenets of respect for legitimate authority and solidarity towards fellow believers.

Likewise, Confucian philosophy emphasizes citizenship in society as being a primary requirement for each person. The principles required to guide such citizenship are social relations and communal harmony. In this sense, each citizen has social and communitarian obligations. These principles are also important in organizing public affairs. Thus, according to Confucius teachings, citizenship in society precedes citizenship in the state.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the driver for civic action in the Asiatic religious and philosophical traditions is a sense of solidarity with fellow citizens, a moral obligation towards society, a spiritual responsibility. The influence of these 'spiritual' elements of people's world view in many Asian societies, including India and China, are still very strong. The farmers of Nandigram in India are expressing moral indignation by organizing against sale of their lands. The Buddhist monks in Lhasa are acting in consonance to their religious principles to support fellow citizens in their quest to practise their own culture. The rural women in Bihar are expressing solidarity towards their fellow neighbours by organizing water harvesting. They are all driven to act in public domain because it is their 'Dharma', their 'calling'.

Interestingly, one strand of European intellectual and philosophical thought also looks at citizenship more holistically than a mere attribute accorded by a state. In this tradition, both vertical relations with the central political authority - the state - and the horizontal relationship among fellow citizens are emphasized. In the vertical dimension, the state confers certain rights to all its citizens, and guarantees to protect them. In return, citizens are expected to perform certain duties voluntarily so that the affairs of society (public space) and the affairs of the family (private space) mutually support and reinforce each other. In the horizontal realm, citizens are expected to show solidarity, fellowship and support to others. Thus emerged the ideal of a 'commonwealth of citizens' in Europe.

Similar arguments support the notions of a more inclusive and participatory view of citizenship. The idea of citizenship as a social belongingness, with communitarian

rights and obligations, is much broader and richer than a legal state-centric attribution. This conceptualization leads to the notion of 'thick', as opposed to 'thin', citizenship. It implies that 'thick' practice would entail both relating to the state as central political authority as well as to fellow citizens. The 'thin' is needed, but it is not the totality of citizenship. Individual rights and obligations are important, and the state must ensure that each citizen in its jurisdiction is able to realize them. But, collective fellowship and solidarity is also important, and citizens must act in ways that make it happen.<sup>5</sup>

This is the basis of civic-driven actions to bring about change in society. This is the rationale for situating civic agency in the communitarian context. The roots of this drive and agency are quintessentially moral and spiritual. They receive their nourishment from those elements of human spirit which are seated deeply within each person - past, present and future. We may have lost touch with it; we may have lost sight of it; the rise of individual consumerism and secular-intellectual discourse may have put a thick blanket over it. But, it is still there, and with a sensitive touch, can be recovered and reclaimed by all human beings.

### Reclaiming Primacy

In light of the above, how can civic-driven change reassert its primacy? This question is even more pertinent in contemporary contexts where 'securitized' strengthening of states and unleashing of private enterprise are seen as *sine qua non* of progress in human civilization.

The argument I set forth here is to 'reclaim' the primacy of civic-driven change for the good of all - social justice, inclusivity and decent life. The starting point of the argument is to acknowledge the significance of a democratic state. Unitary authority is required in each country, but guided by a political authority that is democratically constituted. It should have the capacity to mobilize and utilize public resources for common public good.

In a citizen-centric view of this unitary, democratically-determined political authority, several characteristics become salient. First, the mandate to govern should make political authority practically accountable to the polity. Western mechanisms presume that periodic elections in a multi-party system are the best means of fulfilling the condition. In today's contexts, this requirement is only partially satisfied, if at all. That notwithstanding, periodic voting is a thin and inadequate method of ensuring accountability. As farmers of Nandigram in India learnt to their dismay, the elected government of West Bengal belonging to left coalition parties did not think it necessary to consult before making a policy that would force them to sell their land to make way for private investors.

Distortions in voting have been studied, and debated at length.<sup>6</sup> Voter turn-outs are declining in many countries. Citizens do not think anything will change if parties or governments change. Vote-bank politics has accentuated minority interests. In many elections, winning candi-

dates and parties secure less than a quarter of eligible voters. They focus on narrow identity- and interest-group politics for securing a small, but 'marketable' percentage of votes. Votes are being solicited on the basis of religion, caste, language, migration, region - just about anything that will enhance narrow and parochial identities. Such strategies and tactics multiply and enhance difference, cleavages and socio-political conflicts. Fear, threat and anxiety are mobilized for capturing that thin wedge of vote needed to win elections by majority or negotiate a place in coalitions. Despite necessary political promises, rhetoric and spin, democratic elections are less and less about hope, quality of life and justice for all.

Even when electoral democracy is working well, the accountability of officials and experts in the government is not assured. Lack of transparency and accountability in government bureaucracies is rampant and widespread. This has led to huge and continual corruption in government agencies and programmes. Public resources have been siphoned off for private gain by politicians, officials and their collaborators around the world. Both old and new democracies are facing this malaise.

It is the citizen-centric view of democratic accountability which focuses on accountability of governments to people in everyday life. Methods, tools and practices of citizen-centric social accountability have come to gain greater acceptance. Citizen report cards, budget monitoring, participatory planning, citizen-led visioning, etc. are illustrations of this perspective in practice. Social audits, right to information, right to participation and consultation are new principles of governance procedures and methodologies. Democratic accountability is more than voting.

Democratic accountability is also about voicing. Citizens have a right and an obligation to voice their opinions on an ongoing basis about the functioning of government programmes and agencies and holding them to account. Citizens have the right and duty to provide inputs into policy-making and programme-planning, not just abdicate it as an exclusive responsibility of elected representatives and unelected, appointed officials.

By focusing a citizen-centric lens on change, democracy can acquire deeper and practical meanings. Democracy is not merely about institutions set up through a process of elections. Democracy is particularly about its practice in everyday life, as experienced by all citizens. Civic-driven change thus contributes to deepening the roots of democracy through its practice in the daily life world of citizens.

Another important dimension of reclaiming primacy of civic-driven change is the significance of local sphere. As has been argued earlier, initial attempts to construct a singular political authority as a nation-state in different countries created forces of homogenization that dwarfed local and regional diversity. Community-level, small human-scale mechanisms and systems of governing relations across households and with the natural environment, appropriate to the cultures of each community,

6 were thus submerged under national singularities, crushing enriching diversities. This is what Buddhist monks in Lhasa are protesting about. They want to have the freedom and capability to organize their communities according to their own priorities and cultures. Thus, local spheres of governance became barren as the authority to mobilize and utilize public resources was forcefully centralized in the consolidation of statehood.

Civic-driven change helps reclaim the local sphere of public discourse and action. Thus, the perspective of civic-driven change can be applied to establish the principle that the foremost sphere of public decision-making is local government. Local-level democracy is likely to be more relevant to the needs of citizens. Local elections demonstrate greater voter participation; the local public sphere is more approachable by ordinary folk. Expressions of solidarity and fellowship are more meaningful; ensuring ongoing social accountability is more feasible at the level of local governments.

Applying the principle of 'subsidiarity' should help determine arenas for decision-making at provincial or regional levels of administration which cannot be adequately addressed at the local sphere. Likewise, national political authority should only be responsible for those functions which cannot be adequately decided upon by more citizen-proximate levels of authority. But this simple and compelling logic of creating interrelated layers of governance starting from below can only make sense if the purpose of public sphere is seen through the eyes of citizens. This way of viewing arrangements and structures of democratic governance in societies would also leave a portion of public sphere for civic engagement. It is the reclaiming of this public sphere, which is essential for deepening democracy discussed above. And, the perspective of civic-driven change helps to focus sharply on the agenda of reclaiming the public sphere in the Habermasian sense of sites for 'consensual communicative actions'. As Habermas argued, such open locations are crucial for acknowledging and reinforcing citizens' collective discourse and actions in shaping the common public good. Reclaiming primacy of civic-driven change over statist perspectives, therefore, helps to reclaim the public spheres for civic engagement.

Contemporary forces of globalization, however, are further complicating such possibilities. Globalization has resulted in 'pushing up' spheres of decision-making on important issues of our times away from national political authorities. The power and capacities of national democratic governments to influence supra-national forces and institutions are highly asymmetric, favouring the already empowered. Global capital flows and multinational corporations are making decisions affecting citizens around the world. But, citizens are not able to either influence those decisions, or to hold those actors and institutions to account for their actions. Intergovernmental mechanisms at international levels have become weaker as the United Nations system clearly manifests. This trend poses further challenges to the efforts to reclaim the primacy of civic-

driven change as singular democratic political authority does not exist at the global level. Global civic movements, campaigns and coalitions have been gaining greater voice in asking questions, if not in influencing policies and actions of such unaccountable global players in the marketplace. There is some evidence of a trend towards global citizenship, as citizens of the world have demonstrated solidarity actions for distant others unknown and unseen. In the process of reclaiming primacy of civic-driven change, we may as well be strengthening such process of emerging global citizenships described in the essay by Teivo Teivainen.

### Reimagining Voice

The foregoing discussion provides basic strands of what needs to happen for gaining primacy of civic-driven change. In addition to periodic voting to elect a government, the ongoing voice of citizens needs to be raised. The local sphere of governance is more relevant and accessible to citizens for such voicing and engagements on an ongoing basis. Citizens' voices are expressed in several different ways and forms: protest is one such form, reconstruction is another.

Two sets of questions relate to how voicing would matter or become important. The first deals with the roles of media in contemporary societies; another deals with the dialectic of local and global.

It has been argued that 'the media is the message'. Media shapes our thinking; it is defining our identities. Media is the most active producer of knowledge in contemporary societies. It co-determines who will become president of America. Media controls which 'happenings' become prioritized as important news; media characterizes hopes and fears of humanity. Correspondingly, citizenship is increasingly an identity constructed by media but, as the essay by Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron argues, it can also serve as a cost-effective instrument of civic connectivity and influence.

The ever-growing proliferation of different forms of media today is massive worldwide. The print media of newspapers and magazines is growing in many countries of the south, especially in vernacular languages and idioms. The radio is expanding beyond the national radio to community radio, local radio, satellite radio - airwaves criss-crossing around us. The phenomenal expansion of television throughout the world has made visual impact more impressionable than the accompanying audio. The Internet, web, podcasting, YouTube and blogs are ever-increasing domains of a new age of digital media. How does the voice of citizens get spoken, shared among fellow citizens and heard by those who shape macro-policies and strategies? The essence of the answer to this question is communication. Media in contemporary societies is the vehicle for such communication.

While local community-level interaction, fellowship and solidarity among citizens can still be best expressed through face-to-face communication, going to distant oth-

ers - citizens and policy-shapers - requires such vehicles of communication. In situations of disasters, like a tsunami, media has played an important role in communicating the human consequences to distant audiences instantly. This facility has contributed to massive solidarity and compassionate actions by unknown citizens around the world. Global media has brought in sharp focus to the international community the massacres in the Darfur region of Sudan. These stories and many more examples illustrate the power of the media in contributing to the practices of learning global citizenship. This is how citizens in distant locations learn to express fellowship and solidarity to unknown others. This is how the local voices of citizens reach global spheres of attention. This is how importance of global media is manifest in support of voicing by citizens.

However, there are several impediments to authentic voicing by citizens through the media as it operates today. First, media workers are operating in highly competitive environments. The quest for bottom-line results has become all pervasive in media organizations. Commercialization of media, therefore, predisposes towards selecting, spinning or manufacturing news that is provocative, shocking, unique and urgent. How many times you and I have been told by our media advisors that the good work of community is not newsworthy; show something dramatic, please. It is this trend that focuses media attention primarily on the protests, resistances and violence. Thus, citizens' voices which are expressed through dramatic protests gain media attention and coverage. So, the protest marches of Buddhist monks in Lhasa and violence during resistance by farmers in Nandigram in India become news, and get communicated to distant others. That is why the struggles of rural women in Bihar to create a water harvesting system are not considered newsworthy. It, and efforts like it, remains communicated to the local spheres of citizens alone. This trend creates an impression in the public mind that civic-driven change essentially implies protest and resistance against a government or a company. This is how policy-shapers begin to equate civic-driven change with resistance from citizens' collectives.

Protest is and will remain an important component of the voices of citizens. Media needs to continue to highlight such protests from far and wide, and do so in a manner that creates universal access for the voices of citizens. But the positive, constructive and creational efforts of citizens and their collective agency also need to be communicated far and wide. Constructive efforts by citizens are a significant component of civic-driven change. In fact, constructive 'co-creation' is intricately intertwined with protest and resistance. Citizens struggle to co-construct as much and as often as they struggle to protest. This constructive component of citizens' voices needs to be more widely, regularly and visibly expressed by the media to distant citizens and policy-shapers so that a more holistic appreciation of civic-driven change develops around the world.

Another dimension of media's influence in defining what citizens voicing is all about is its fleeting attention to happenings. The protests of Buddhist monks in Tibet no longer make news; the resistance by farmers in Nandigram is not hitting the headlines anymore. Such fleeting attention in the media seems to convey a sporadic and temporary nature of civic-driven change efforts. Not only do farmers in Nandigram and monks in Tibet continue to struggle to protest, rural women in Bihar also continue to struggle to maintain their water harvesting system. There is a sense of continuity over time in the voicing of citizens, which does not get communicated by media. Civic-driven change is not sporadic or occasional. In reality, it is continuous, ongoing and widespread. It is not just events in certain sites on certain dates. It is this distortion of citizen voicing through the media that must be overcome if authentic communication about civic-driven change is to alter people's understanding of what they themselves do to reach the world of their imagination.

Media creates another impact on the understanding about voicing. The hierarchy of media globally creates a hierarchy of voices too. What is reported on BBC and CNN is assumed to be the most important voice of civic-driven change efforts. What is written in New York Times, International Herald Tribune and Le Monde is considered to be most authentic manifestation of voicing. The filters, assumptions, biases and politics of global media today significantly privilege one voice over another. In a way, this reality not only suppresses certain types of voices reaching other citizens; it tends to legitimize some voices as more authentic, so de-legitimising other voices. Hence, is it really conceivable to explore citizens' voices for holding the media to account? Can media be made more responsible to citizens, not just to regulators and shareholders?

These are urgent media-related challenges that need to be addressed if citizens' voices in democracy are to be recognized more universally as important manifestations of civic-driven change. They call for a more coherent and nuanced understanding of civic-driven change to be created among both citizens of the world as well as its policy-shapers, who are themselves citizens and not detached from the policies they promote.

Another important aspect of how to reclaim the primacy of civic-driven change is to face the dialectic of local and global. As we have discussed earlier, civic-driven change is most commonly practised in local spheres. It is in the micro-contexts of a neighbourhood, community or village that the daily practice of voicing and struggling with 'co-creation' takes place. Millions of civic-driven change efforts are going on throughout the world at this moment. But together, their range, impact and vision is not adequately known or understood. How to imagine civic-driven change as a global driver of deepening democracy without it necessarily operating at a global sphere? How can the actions of farmers in Nandigram and rural women in Bihar be accessible simultaneously to other similar efforts happening elsewhere around the world?

There are two commonplace responses to such a question in recent years. The first is the practice of networking, coalescing and alliance-building from the local to the global spheres. This is how millions of voices were mobilized in opposition to Iraq war or in favour of banning land mines. Building coalitions of ever-growing spirals of connectivity among very local initiatives of civic-driven change is an important methodology. It requires specific capacities and resources. In the digital world, mobiles, sms, web, facebook, and chats are all new forms of such networking and coalition building that have yet to make their global democratic mark.

The second commonplace approach has been through visionary leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela who give global visibility and connectivity to such local initiatives. Gandhi mobilized millions of Indians to engage in constructive social work to help fellow citizens. Gandhi's political strategy of challenging the British Empire was rooted in his deep conviction in citizens' own initiatives to improve their conditions. He was an archetypical believer of civic-driven change based on values of truth and non-violence. His leadership galvanized a wide range of civic-driven change efforts in rural India. Likewise, Mandela became a rallying point for resistance against apartheid. Small and invisible actions by millions of citizens around the world coalesced together to create that push to dismantle it finally in his lifetime. Mandela inspired a vision of freedom of citizens not just in South Africa, but worldwide, through his support to voices at local spheres. His leadership continues to recognize and galvanize such citizen voices till today.

It is important that leadership contribute and use its influence to link the local initiatives to a global vision. It is also true that deliberate networking and coalition-building brings about a global voice and visibility to civic-driven change efforts carried out at merely local levels. Strong charismatic leadership sometimes is the anti-thesis of the very same principles that drive civic initiatives; deliberate coalescing has the risk of gathering the converted alone. Are there other ways that the problematic of aggregation of local spheres of civic-driven change can be addressed? Is it possible to imagine a new way of gaining engagements of local civic-driven change initiatives with global spheres? Is it possible to re-imagine voice as numerous particles orbiting together, attracted to and spontaneously self-organizing around common issues and human concerns such as environmental destruction, child trafficking or the insecurity or livelihoods everywhere, as chaos theory seems to posit? Re-imagining civic-driven change as a driver for democratically deepening the behaviours of the state and market entails greater creativity.

There may well be other ways of imagining still open for exploration. What is needed is the momentum towards imagining, and re-imagining the primacy of civic-driven change in the contemporary world where there is a bewildering fetish towards large scales and global spheres. The challenge of deepening democracy in contemporary contexts is to promote the primacy of citizens' voices at

local as well as global spheres. These voices are manifestations of civic-driven change, in resistance as well as 'co-creation'. It is this civic-driven perspective which will ensure that the farmers of Nandigram, the monks in Lhasa and rural women in Bihar are valued as agents of change based on principles of solidarity and fellowship, to create a society that is just, inclusive and respectful for all. The farmers in Nandigram, the Buddhist monks in Lhasa and rural women in Bihar are quintessential practitioners of civic-driven change. Their practice is their imagination. Their actions are their voice. They are not writing a narrative about civic-driven change. They are living it in everyday life.

The challenge before us is to dare to imagine a narrative that can capture the essence of their actions in everyday life. Are we ready? Are we able??

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harry Boyte's essay in this volume explores this phenomenon at greater length, by examining the planning and implementation of public works in American context. The dynamics explored by Harry is acutely relevant to many new democracies in Asia and Africa.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon, readers can refer to a growing body of literature arising from recent studies and debates on the theme of citizenship, participation and democratic governing. In particular, see Ranjita Mohanty and Rajesh Tandon (eds) (2006) *Participatory Citizenship*. New Delhi: Sage. Likewise the study of nomadic communities in India by Mandakini Pant in Naila Kabber (ed.) (2005) *Inclusive Citizenship*. London: Zed Books. Further materials on this theme can be accessed from the website of Development Research Centre on Citizenship being hosted by IDS, Sussex-www.ids.ac.uk.

<sup>3</sup> The exploration of the concept of 'Dharma' has been the essential feature of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The essence of this concept is a set of spiritual principles which guide human actions. 'Karma' is the practise of everyday life expected of every follower of Hinduism. It is the spiritual principles, moral codes and social ethics, as enshrined in 'Dharma' which facilitate performance of 'Karma'. For reflections on these discourses, see Rohit Mehta (1970) *The Call of the Upanishads*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on Confucian thought is huge. The interpretation of Confucian philosophy as it unfolds in Chinese practice of citizenship is well argued by A.T. Nuyen, 'On the Confucian Idea of Citizenship', in Sor-Hoon Tan (ed.) (2005) *Challenging Citizenship*. Aldershot: Ashgate. In an interesting analysis of Chinese Diaspora, Aihwa Ong, in her 1999, book, *Flexible Citizenships*, Duke University Press, Durham, argues that social networks and cultural norms shape meanings of citizenship among Chinese families living under different states and regimes outside the country.

<sup>5</sup> European intellectual traditions on the meanings of citizenship have been well analysed: see Derek Heater (2004) *Citizenship*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Paul Clarke (1996) *Deep Citizenship*. London: Pluto Press; Keith Faulks (2000) *Citizenship*. London: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Many studies have brought forth problems of contemporary democracies. Covering nearly 10,000 citizens in 45 countries of the Commonwealth, the seminal study reported in Barry Knight, Hope Chigudu and Rajesh Tandon (2002) *Reviving Democracy: Citizens at the Heart of Governance*. London: Earthscan, demonstrates how widespread civic distrust of governments has become. In a more recent study of 2008, *State of Democracy in South Asia*, Oxford, Delhi, citizens' responses to the practice of electoral politics reveals ambivalence towards evoking narrow identities by political parties and lead-

ers. On the one hand, citizens show deep disaffection towards political leadership. On the other, citizens - especially the more marginalized - would prefer strong, almost autocratic, leaders to guide public affairs.

### **Further reading**

Bard, A. and Söderqvist, J. (2002) *Netocracy: the new power elite and life after capitalism*, Harlow: Pearson Educational.

O'Shea, T. (2007) 'The Doors of Perception and the Language of Spin: Why Americans Will Believe Almost Anything', <http://www.thetruth-seeker.co.uk/article.asp?ID=185>.