

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE IN MIZORAM

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Abstract

Recently the terms “governance” and “good governance” are being increasingly used in development literature. The concept of “governance” is not new. It is as old as human civilization. People and governments are looking to civil society as active partners in the delivery of services. The article looks at the role of civil society in promoting good governance in Mizoram. The role of the Civil Society in the State started when the Church tried to bring peace due to insurgency. The real role played by the Civil Society for good governance came into prominence with the rise of the consciousness of the people in the late 1990s. People became more aware of good governance and various NGOs have taken up the cause for good governance.

Keywords: Civil Society, Good Governance, NGO's, Mizoram.

Introduction

The notion of civil society has gained ascendancy in the past decade. It is now being equated with a variety of different tendencies that have existed in societies throughout the world. In the development discourse, it is being argued that civil society provides a third leg to the 'trinity' model of development. The state led public sector model has

been called as the first sector, the private sector model for economic development and for profit enterprises as the second sector and civil society as the third sector of non profit associational life. In political discourse, the meaning attached to civil society is somewhat different and linked to the processes of democratisation and participation in a given context.

Civil Society

Civil society as an intellectual construct gained prominence with the advent of modernity in the western world during the 17th century. The concept evolved with the developments in other spheres such as, economy, polity and knowledge. Events like the growth of the institutions of private property, spread of urbanisation, replacement of the despotic state by the liberal state etc. contributed immensely to the meaning of the term civil society. The rise of capitalism had, however, led to clear distinction between political and non-political and thus prepared the ground for the emergence of civil society as a separate domain from, the state. Since then, the term civil society has also undergone several transformations. The concept of civil society, according to Satish Saberwal, is a social space which has three qualities. Its first quality is that in this social space, decisions and choices have to be made on the basis of reason and of knowledge. The second quality of civil society space is that its members have to relate to each other open-endedly, without exclusion on the grounds of religion, gender and so forth. The civil society space, consequently, can carry a great variety of associations whose membership is open. The third quality is in the decision making and choices. The civil society, space should be free from coercive pressures which may take various forms emanating from such agencies as

the state, terrorist, family, caste/class or organised religion.

Civil Society thus refers to the set of institutions, organisations and behaviour situated between the State, the business world and the family. Specifically this includes voluntary and non-profit organisations of different kinds, philanthropic, initiations, social and political movements, other forms of social participation and engagement and the values and cultural patterns associated with them.

Civil society is composed of autonomous associations which develop a dense, diverse and pluralistic network. Such civil societies are formed by people who have common needs, interests and values like tolerance, inclusion, cooperation and equality; and development through a fundamentally endogenous and autonomous process which cannot be easily controlled from outside.

Some of the important components of Civil Society are community based organisations such as youth organisations and groups, women groups and organisations, religious associations, cooperatives, trade unions and farmers' organisations.

Civil society can have positive influence on the state and market and increasingly recognized as important

agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability. Civil society can further and improve governance, first, by policy analysis and advocacy; second, by regulating and monitoring of state performance and the action and behaviour of the public officials; third, by building social capital and enabling citizens to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices; fourth, by mobilising particular constituencies, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized section of masses, to participate more fully in politics and public affairs; and fifth, by development work to improve the wellbeing of their own and other communities.

Governance

The growing disenchantment with governmental institutions, its failure to meet expectations, the persistent problem of poverty, increasing distance of the elite dominated institutions of the government and other such negative factors and on the other hand the increasing awareness of the limitations of the government and development of national and transnational business interests have led to emphasis on good governance. This in turn led to awareness of the obligation of the citizens and institutions in the society along with

governmental institutions to ensure good governance.

The World Bank first brought about the concept of “good governance” into development discourse. The bank’s experience of failure of its economic policies in African countries led to the Bank to attribute the failure to “bad governance” indicating administrative inefficiency, corruption, lack of transparency and other administrative shortcomings in these countries. The conceptualisation of “bad governance” then leads to the conceptualisation of “good governance” which includes parameters like administrative efficiency, rule of law, accountability and transparency.

UNDP defines good governance as the existence of a network of institutions of government coupled with laws and regulations that together create and maintain a social environment in which human development takes place and for all groups of society. Good governance is thus, a subset of governance, wherein public resources and problems are managed effectively, efficiently and in response to the needs of society. Public Participation in influencing decision making, transparency, and accountability are thus the hallmarks of good governance.

The following points need to be kept in mind while elaborating the principles of good governance:

- a) universal protection of human rights;
- b) rule of law that is implemented in a non-discriminatory manner;
- c) efficient, impartial and quick judicial system;
- d) accountability of decisions made about public issues and public resources by public leaders and officials;
- e) devolution of resources and decision-making power to local levels and bodies in rural and urban areas; and
- f) participation and inclusion of all citizens in debating public policies and choices.

State and Civil Society

The civil society has always been looked at a sphere distinct from the State, ignoring the important linkages between the two. Many social theorists have considered the state as the creation of civil society for protecting the life and property of citizens. While championing the sovereignty of the state, they did not deny the ruler's obligation to assure rights to the civil society. In recent times, the concept of State has undergone considerable change. Sociologists no more use the term as the embodiment of coercive power and sovereignty, but as a system having several parts and operating

within a larger social system. The State operates through its various elements – legislature, executive, judiciary and, in a democracy, political parties.

One of the most conspicuous role played by the civil society is in the area of articulating the citizens' interest and demands. The importance of civil society can be better appreciated when State policies and programs of the government do not take account sufficiently of needs of the poor or some vulnerable sections. Civil society bridges the gap by way of representing the interest of the people.

Civil society plays the crucial role in mobilizing social capital. Social capital is a resource that any community possesses to some level and it can help in resolving multiple problems of a collective nature. Civil society can improve the accountability profile of the government.

Role of Civil Society in Good Governance

The strength of Civil Society depending on its strength can have a positive influence on the State and the market. It has become an increasingly important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability.

Governance has three level – (a) internal system and procedures; (b) cutting edge systems and procedures; and (c) check-and-balance systems.

At level (a), Civil Society can influence policy and project formulation through membership of committees, submission of memoranda directly or through elected representatives, and interactive rule-making in the implementation of policies, projects and schemes affecting citizens. At level (b) the maximum day-to-day interaction between the government and the citizens takes place and the popular image of governance is formed at this level. Interaction of Civil Society with level (c), infrequent but important, will be more of an exposure of irregularities rather than steps for improvement in the quality of governance.

Civil Society can further good governance, first, by placing policy analysis and advocacy; second, by regulation and monitoring of state performance and the action and behaviour of public officials; third, by building social capital and enabling citizens to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices; fourth, by mobilizing particular constituencies, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized sections of masses, to participate more fully in politics and public affairs; and fifth, by development work to improve the wellbeing of their own and other communities.

The functional contributions of Civil Society to Good Governance are (i)

Watchdog – against violations of human rights and governance deficiencies; (ii) Advocate – of the weaker sections' point of view; (iii) Agitator – on behalf of aggrieved citizens; (iv) Educator – of citizens of their rights, entitlements and responsibilities and the government about the pulse of the people; and (v) Mobilizer – of public opinion for or against a programme or policy.

Role of Civil Society in India

When India became Independent the initial role played by the voluntary organisations was to fill the gaps left by the government in the development process. They organised handloom weavers in the village to form cooperatives through which they could directly market their products in the cities. The volunteers also helped in other areas of development like education, running literacy classes for adults at night.

However, in the 1980s these volunteers who were better known as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) became more specialised and their work was divided into three major groups. There were those which continued to concentrate on the traditional developments of NGOs, who went to villages and run the literary programme. Then there were those who researched a particular subject in depth, and then lobbied with the government

or with the industry or petitioned the courts for improvement in the lives of the citizens. Third, there were those volunteers who saw themselves more as an activist and saw activism as their primary means of reaching their goals, because they believe that they could get the authorities to move in any other way.

India is a representative democracy. Once elections are over, politicians do not really go back to the electorate for every major decision. As a result, the NGOs and parts of the media are often the only means available to the citizens to voice their opinions on any decision taken by the government.

In India, there are numerous gaps left by the government in the development process - sometimes by intention, sometimes due to lack of funds, sometimes due to lack of awareness. These are the gaps that NGOs try to fill. Some work in areas where the government does not want to get into. Many politicians do not want to upset existing caste hierarchy in their constituency as they are dependent on them for their votes. Then there are NGOs who work in the fields where the government efforts are found to be inadequate. Two well-known examples are the areas of education and healthcare. In the last two decades a large number of NGOs in India have been active in the area of environmental protection. They have been in the forefront of reforestation

campaigns they have lobbied against deforestation, overuse of pesticides and pollution caused by Industries.

In this sustained campaign, these NGOs have often been helped by the judiciary whenever the government proves unresponsive. India has developed a device called the Public Interest Litigation, by which any citizen can petition a court to intervene where they feel it is in the public interest for the court to intervene.

Role of Civil Society in Mizoram

In recent times the use of civil society in exerting organized pressure on autocratic and unresponsive states and thereby supporting democratic stability and good governance has received critical attention. The fact that civil social institutions can also be vehicles for participation in development programmes has also been noted. Owing to this fact we try and look at how the various organizations have played a vital role in the context of Mizoram. This would enable us to link the concept of civil society with the pragmatic reality that obtains in Mizoram.

The Church

The Church has played vital roles in the development and promotion of the socio-economic and political status of the state since their inceptions. Among them,

the role played by the Church, as well as its efforts and involvement in the politics of the state in general, and the electoral politics in particular is noteworthy. Initially education upto Class VI then the Primary Schools and Middle Schools were in the hands of the Church and the two of the earliest hospitals

The most notable contribution and involvement of the civil society organizations, particularly, the Church was to be seen when the socio-political environment of the Mizo Hills District was turning and pointing towards a period of prolonged insurgency, initiated and spearheaded by the Laldenga led Mizo National Front (MNF) party in the middle of 1960s. It was during the insurgency period that the Church started actively involved in the politics of the state with the objective of bringing peace and normalcy in the District. In fact the valiant and brave efforts of the Church leaders to bring about peace, stability and harmony in the state was one of the important reasons that brought the Government of India and the MNF to negotiating tables many times, and ultimately to the signing of the Peace Accord in 1986.

The initiative taken by the Church started in the year 1966 itself with the establishment of the Lunglei Citizens' Committee and the Aizawl Citizens' Committee. With the launching of armed insurgency movement by the

MNF on the night of 28th February, 1966, most of the residents of Aizawl fled to nearby forests and villages and the security forces and other miscreants ransacked their houses. Aizawl remained deserted for a few days. The Aizawl Citizens' Committee came into existence on 12th March, 1966 due to the initiatives taken by the Church, namely the Synod Standing Committee, and individually Rev. Lalngurauva, Rev. Alwyn Robert, the then Moderator of the Mizoram Presbyterian Synod and Mr. Sainghinga played significant role. The Committee then set up various cells or sub-committees such as Public Relief Committee and Public Grievance Cell, and they disposed human and animal corpses lying scattered across the streets of Aizawl. They also often submit memorandums and complaints to the army Brigade and Battalion officers about army personnel acting illegally. At Lunglei, the Lunglei Citizens' Committee was already formed on 8th March, 1966 on the initiatives of the Baptist Church leaders. Hence, the Citizens' Committee was the first instance where the Church took active part towards the maintenance of social and political order within the District.

With reinforcements the counter-insurgency measures being intensified immediately armed encounters also took place more frequently in the whole of Mizoram, the Standing Committee of the

Presbyterian Synod held another meeting on 14th March, 1966, which decided a 'Christian Peace Committee' to be formed with members drawn from both the Presbyterian and Baptist churches. This Committee thereafter, supervised all relief efforts for the welfare of the Mizo people. It had also initiated a number of peace missions during the insurgency period, between the Indian Government and the MNF that spanned for almost two decades, pleading both sides to take their problems to negotiating table and work out acceptable solutions to such political problems that had triggered the insurgent movement. In such way, the Church has widened the scope of their influences to cover the whole of Mizoram to the relief of the people from many serious adverse consequences of the insurgency.

The first visible engagement of the Church or the civil society, for that matter, in the electoral process of the State was in the year 1972, when election was held for the first time in the newly formed Union Territory of Mizoram. In this election, the Church leaders issued a statement, appealing and urging the politicians, candidates and the members of the Church for a clean, free and fair election. Since then, issuing election messages prior to elections had become a regular activity of the Church in their efforts to ensure free and fair elections till today.

The Mizoram People Forum (MPF)

Apart from such issuing of statements in the form of requests and appeals to the public on the eve of every election to ensure conducting of free and fair election the Mizoram Presbyterian Church organizes seminars and political education campaigns through one of its wings- the Synod Social Front, at various places across Mizoram. Until 2003, the Presbyterian Church in particular, and the various churches in Mizoram in general, confined their involvement in the electoral process to such requests and appeals. However, the state general election of 2003 changed their attitudes and perceptions regarding their participation and involvement in the electoral process. In the wake of the emergence of various untoward incidents such as illegal selling of votes, threats, fake kidnappings and the alleged involvement of some underground organizations marring the 2003 State Assembly election of Mizoram in 2004, decided to study the issue in details and make more meaningful plan for future endeavour for political reform. Besides, before the 2003 General election, the churches and most of the prominent NGOs of the state worked tirelessly together for a free and fair election. They had political education campaign in almost all local congregations in the rural and urban areas. But it was found that all these campaigns did not bear much fruits as expected, greatly due

to such unwelcome incidents during the election and free and fair election seemed a distant dream.

Hence, bearing all these circumstances and issues in mind, the Synod Executive Committee (SEC) set up a Working Committee in 2004 who took up the task of negotiating with the major Churches and NGOs in Mizoram, and invited them to join and agree to their plan of constituting a common platform where they would work together to bring about a peaceful, free and fair election in Mizoram. After series of joint meetings with the leaders and representatives of various churches and NGOs, an agreement was being reached to constitute a common platform as proposed by the Synod Working and Drafting Committee. Finally, at their fifth meeting, the leaders of the major NGOs and churches in Mizoram unanimously agreed to form the Mizoram People Forum (MPF) on 21st, June, 2006.

Today, the Mizoram People Forum (MPF), an association formed by the conglomeration of major civil society groups in Mizoram, established on the initiatives taken by the Presbyterian Church Synod has now become the administrative arm of the Church in its effort to bring free, clean and fair administration in Mizoram. In fact, with the establishment of the MPF, the Church has now widened the scope of

its involvement and started initiatives to bring about good governance, freedom, sustainable socio-economic development which is participatory in planning and implementation including administrative reforms.

The impact and influence of the MPF in the administration and politics of the state lay basically, not in the nature and extent of its various activities, but on the status and respect received from the people by virtue of being a church-sponsored organization nearly equating its activities to that of the Church in the minds of the common people. This has often yielded positive results as well as harsh criticisms and serious controversies.

The steps taken by the MPF on the basis of the 'Election Guidelines', a sort of a Memorandum of Understanding agreed upon both by the MPF and major political parties in the state, abolished such malpractices like buying of votes, public feasts, house to house campaign, providing transportation of jhum products, financially hiring singers and other entertainers, the overwhelming use of flags, posters and banners by fixing the size and numbers of banners and posters etc, has contributed in largely reducing many of the usual electoral malpractices and misconducts that often characterized the earlier elections. The MPF further organized joint platforms during election campaigns for candidates of major

political parties and stop the traditional independent party campaigns through public meetings. It even restricted and prescribed the topics of the public speeches of the candidates in such joint platforms. Notable changes as a result of such efforts of the MPF have been that the election expenditures has considerably come down and elections have become peaceful, free and fair. This opinion is shared by citizens and politicians as well. The extent the MPF and its activities received support and respect from the citizens, although not having any legal binding or authority to enforce its demands and expectations made in the form of appeals and requests indicates that the Church would continue to occupy an important position in the political and administrative deliberations of the government in the future.

Young Mizo Association (YMA)

The Young Mizo Association (YMA) is the largest and most comprehensive non-profit, secular and nongovernmental organisation of the Mizo people. It was established on 15th June 1935, originally as the Young Lushai Association (YLA), which was later replaced with the "Young Mizo Association" in 1947. It was initiated by the Welsh Christian missionaries who understood the need of cultural conservation of the Mizo tribe, who were

under pressure of political and social modernisations. It was registered as SR No. 4 of 1977 under Indian Societies Registration Act (XXI of 1860) on 14 May 1977. The YMA which plays a crucial role in the Mizo society has become one of the main civil society groups in the state.

The YMA has always played an important role when sporadic, spasmodic natural calamities or famines strike the state of Mizoram. In the immediate aftermath of such calamities when the State fails to provide immediate relief, the YMA fill the gap and help the affected people continuing its efforts to the extent needed. Even the state has made use of the YMA to provide relief in times of crisis. Training in disaster relief is now being provided by the state administration to the YMA members.

YMA is involved in many activities of the government like the conservation of wild life and forest. Since 1974 it has taken up the Green Mizoram Project. Under this people are taught the importance of preserving wildlife and forest and the role they play in their life. Village water resources and now even rivers are preserved by the YMA all on a voluntary basis. The YMA encourages people to maintain health and sanitation. Voluntary blood donations are organised by the YMA. Many of these activities are taken up with the support of the State

which makes use of these services either directly or indirectly.

The YMA is actively involved in the fight against narcotics and other abusive substances. They detect persons involved in such activities, seize and hand them the substances over to the authorities. A sub group within the organisation initially known as Supply Reduction Squad (SRS) now called Central Anti Drugs Squads (CADS) who are actively involved in rooting out the evils of the abused substances, sometimes acting in tandem with the government agencies, which has drastically reduced the supply. This is done with the active support of the government. During the time of the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition (MLTP) they were instrumental in destroying many illicit liquor manufacturing units.

The YMA is also increasingly involved in detection of illegal foreigners. This is done at each local level and their recordshelped government in having quick survey of foreigners. The state government at times makes use of services of the YMA in identifying beneficiaries various schemes and also in the implementation of such schemes. The YMA also has taken the initiative for skill development of the youths and organised training for carpentry and masonry. The YMA has been made a member of certain government committees on

matters relating to collective lives of the people and even like the Multi-Disciplinary Committee on Tuirial Hydro Electric Project. The government and the YMA have signed several memorandums of understandings in the fields of distribution of LPG gas with the FC&CA, in the field of education with the SSA and preservation of water resources with the PHED. The government at times consult the YMA for their opinions on certain policy matters.

Peoples Right to Information and Development Implementing Society of Mizoram (PRISM)

The PRISM, formed in August 1st, 2006 is a group which is mainly a watchdog looking into the day to day functioning of the government. In its fight against corrupt practices PRISM took recourse to Social Audit, RTI Act and visited different government undertakings. It also investigates in various allegations of corruption of officials and according to its own report, submitted 53 suggestions and 43 complaints, till date, to the government and also submitted 67 FIRs to the Central Bureau of Investigation and to the state Anti Corruption Bureau. It has also submitted 2 PILs in the Supreme Court and 11 PILs in the Gauhati High Court.

As a result of these actions according to PRISM, again according to

their report the government has found 297 officials to indulge in corrupt practices and 57 officials have been dismissed from service. It has also claimed that 293 families who claimed compensation from the state government due to implementation of various government projects were not required to be compensated and that 107 families who were due to receive money from the government have not received any compensation though the records showed them as already paid. It has also found out that some departments were keeping undisbursed crores of government money in their official custody. They have organised so far three seminars on the prevention of corruption.

PRISM, since 2009, brings out a report called 'Mizoram Watch' in the months of April, October and December. The April and October report shows what has been so far achieved by the government corresponding vis-a-vis their Election Manifesto. They list out the various policies that have been implemented and which have not met by the government. In the December edition they highlight the various activities of the Chief Minister and his Council of Ministers including the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker of the State Assembly.

PRISM is a member of the National Election Watch. At the time of elections they release a manifesto called "Mipui

Manifesto" (loosely translated as Peoples Manifesto) where they highlight the various expectations of the people including suggestions for implementation of the political parties. They also bring out booklets where the bio-data of the contesting candidates are shown.

Student Bodies

There are two main student bodies in Mizoram, the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) and the Mizo Students Union (MSU). These student bodies have taken up several issues connected with good governance and mostly issues related to the students' interest. They have taken up the cause of establishing UPSC coaching centre in the state and posting of permanent Principals in the State run government colleges. They have worked for enforcing common fee structure in the schools as there are appreciable discrepancies in the fee structure of schools especially of the private run institutions. They insisted upon the government to have a proper recruitment rules with regard to the appointment of teachers and also the proper distribution of the teachers in the government schools especially in the interiors of the state. They have pressurised the education department to open more seats at the college level as the present colleges are not able to accommodate all the college admission seekers. They have asked government to root out the various fake

educational certificates available in the state. In connection with these they resort to the meeting of the concerned ministers and government officials.

Conclusion

The contributions of the various civil society organization and the crucial roles that they played in the history of the political and economic development of Mizoram till today, deserved credit to the members of the society. The state being located at a strategic point of the country, sharing two international boundaries, possible increase in illegal immigration, expansion of the state's economy with the arrival of Corporations and private firms in increasing numbers etc, the socio-political situation and the developmental and economic policies of the state will be altered, reshaped and remodeled in the near future and the forces of globalization will come into play. Hence, criticisms from the civil society organizations, including the Church, and their concerns raised in their objective of achieving good governance, administrative reforms and sustainable and participatory-oriented development would be increasingly important and hopefully their influence would increase. It is, therefore, important the Church and the civil society organizations on one hand and the state on the other hand establish a workable and practicable relationship in order to

protect the Mizo identity, culture and integrity including the values they cherish.

A portion of the state administration often consider the civil society organizations as crossing into the spheres of policies and principles and even sometimes undermining the operation and the rule of law in connection with some of their activities in recent years in their efforts and to attain their objectives. It is sometimes a matter of doubt if any advantage or benefit is derived by the society as a whole as a result of some of their intense struggles which seemed to wear down any opposition or serious criticisms. There is no doubt that some of the activities of the civil society organizations undoubtedly created doubts, confusions and controversies, not only in the minds of the general public, but also among their own members as well. Some leaders of the Civil Society often have doubts whether civil society organizations have sometimes crossed the limit in pressing the government for their demands. However, they feel that if ever such doubts or questions arise, it would be due to the incapacity and weakness on the part of the government. They further opine that since the government is the one who enforces the law and if it is not able to maintain law and order, social problems eventually arise, and this sometimes have compelled the NGOs

and civil society organizations to step forward and take initiatives. Nevertheless, it is healthy that they occasionally ask themselves whether civil society organizations, have ventured far too far in their actions in dealing with and pressurizing the government.

In regard to the Church the respect and goodwill that it has received from the people and the popular support that it has received on its standpoint in

various socio-political and economic issues will not easily diminish even in the future. It is therefore necessary, with the forces of globalization making increasing inroads into the economy and social life in the state, to find a way for mutual understanding and co-operation between the civil society and the state for the achievement of an efficient socio-political administration and sound economic development.

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