Disasters and the Civil Society: Reflections on the Response to the Gujarat Earthquake

Dr. Sanjeev Kumar

Associate Professor, Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi, (Delhi) India

Dr. Kumar Rahul

Associate Professor, Ramjas College, University of Delhi, (Delhi) India

Dr. Abhay Prasad Singh

Associate Professor, PGDAV College, University of Delhi, (Delhi) India

Abstract

The close association between development, governance and hazard mitigation has led to a growing level of interest in civil societytoday.This article aims to examine the role of civil society/ non-profit organizations with specific reference to the catastrophicGujarat earthquake of 2001 in Gujarat a state in the western part of India.The Earthquake marked a significant watershed for the state in terms of its political response to disasters, partnerships with civil society and the framing of the larger disaster management agenda for the country. The article lays out the increased importance of civil society in governance todaythrough a detailed examination of the involvement of Kachchh Nav Nirman Abhiyan, (a district wide civil society network), in the recovery of Bhuj seeking to highlight its positive contribution in disaster governance.

Key Words: Disaster, governance, earthquake, civil society, rehabilitation, state

Introduction

Although the concept of civil society is in very wide circulation today, it has eluded consensus among scholars regarding its definition and attributes. Nevertheless, those who use the concept seem to agree that it refers to a reality that is important that civil society is fundamental to democratic governance. It has assumed as Carolyn M. Elliott notes mythic proportions as a tool of the social imagination, an ideological construct for a good society (Elliott ed., 200, p- 3).

Theoretical works on the concept of civil society have been very rich.The earliest attempts have come from the western philosophy, in the rich works social *contract theorists* who tried to "show how rational human beings exchange their insecure 'natural rights' for civil rights secured by a state."[1]

While Hobbes argued about the 'indispensability' of authority of the state, John Locke put constrained on the untrampled power of the sovereign stateespousing the natural right of freedom of individuals to "lives, liberties, and possessions". Locke is very categorical that the very existence of the civil order depends on their 'consent'. David Hume and Adam Smith saw civil society in a broader context of economic and social transactions. [2] Immanuel Kant's engagement with the concept of civil society was not elaborate, but, he observed that it is "the greatest problem for mankind to accomplish a civil society administering justice universally." [3] Kant's principal concern regarding civil

society was that people should consider other people as ends in themselves rather than means to the ends of others. While Locke's conception of civil society emphasized its autonomy from the state and its function in the protection of individuals' autonomy and interests, Hegel gives emphasis to the limitations of liberal civil society and is in favour of a political role for the state:

"The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom consists in this, that personal individuality and its particular interests not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition for their right (as they do in the sphere of the family and civil society) but, for one thing, they also pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal".[4]

Another strand of liberal thinking comes from Tocqueville's notion that civil society is an intermediate *third sphere* of voluntary association (Tocqueville, 1990).The state belongs to the firstcategory, economythe second and the civil society constitutes the 'third sphere' wherein through varied groups/ association such as political parties, religious institutions, professional groups etc. the excesses of the authoritarian state can be brought to check.Marxist philosopher Gramsci explained civil society in cultural and ideological terms through his conception of 'hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971). According to Gramsci, hegemony was a form of control exercised basically through a society's superstructure which included media, churches, trade unions, and schools.

Civil society and Governance

Despite the varied theoretical debates concerning civil society, civil society in recent years, has ascended to a fundamental position within the lexicon of both the social sciences and development policy-makers. Indeed, it is the Tocquevillcan model which has emerged as dominant. It has been the prime beneficence of wider political and ideological changes that have redefined the powers and responsibilities of states, markets and voluntary associations over the last three decades (Edwards,2004).The rise of neo-liberalism, the New right and the ideology of the small state, strengthened, as Omar Encarnacion observes, 'the sense that the government was untrustworthy, wasteful and best kept to a minimum essentially drove the rise of civil society to the top of agenda'(Enacarnacion , 2003,pp- 705-720).

(An invigorated civil society was also seen as a force of reference to the declining dictatorship of Eastern Europe and as a means of democratic transition within the developing world. It was frequently seen as a means of mediating the views of masses and restraining the arbitrary governance of a despotic or unaccountable state. Robert Putnam asserts on Tocquevellian lines: "Democracy is strengthened not weakened when it faces a vigorous civil society such a view has been accompanied with considerable optimum across the globe. In embracing civil society liberals policy makers believe they have found panacea for society's veining problems from poverty to racism to environmental degradation that do not invite further intrusion of the state"(Putnam,1993, p-43).Civil Society have, over the last twenty years, been vigorously promoted by developed countries as a means of both nurturing interest in public administration and local decision-making domestically and strengthening democratic accountability within the developing world. Numerous civil engagement programmes have

emerged across the world leading to off sited notions of an emergent global society (Tandon Oliveira &Miguel. (eds.) 1995).

Today the vision of civil society sees voluntary associations as the fundamental organisational expression of non-state power. In keeping with the Tocqueville's view that it serves the dual purpose of representing the masses and resisting or scrutining governmental extraction and legislation, civil society is regarded as part of society rather a neutral space or a utopian future. The repository of such civil, or 'good', governance, is in most Tocquevillen Formulations, the 'Third Sector', defined by Alison Van Rooy as *'advocacy groups, non-governmental organisations, social movement agents, human rights organisations* and other actors explicitly involved in "change work" (Rooy, 1998a, p-15).

Of these various groupings many have been highly active in the area of disaster mitigation and response. For example, many *religious and community groups* have traditions of supporting disaster affected populations. [5] Virtually in all disasters, *the 'local communities'* participation provides a vast majority of support to victims, in crucial acute stage. The mass media have also been closely involved in disaster management activities from raising public awareness and acting as a pressure group to forming communications in emergency relief. Academia and research institutions have similarly contributed by attempting to develop a better understanding of vulnerability and cooperate in training public awareness programmes. The types of services that NGOs typically provide include disaster relief, microcredit systems, health care and education. Many also maintain a commitment to advocacy

through which they lobby states to reform policies and increase expenditure.

Civil Society and the Gujarat Earthquake

The earthquake that hit Gujarat on 26th January 2001 caused massive destruction. In all, 21 districts, 182 Talukas and 7904 villages were affected to varying degrees. The district of Kachchh accounted for 97% of the deaths and 82 percent of injuries. (GSDMA 2001). The response of civil society organisations to the Gujarat earthquake varied according to their own area of expertise, the resources they would mobilise as well as their analysis and understanding of the situation. The wide spectrum of civil society meant an equally diverse number of approaches to the question of relief, reconstruction, rehabilitation and development.

The spectrum of civil society organizations included:

- Charitable trusts and philanthropists, including corporate bodies/ foundations and religious groups.
- Humanitarian aid agencies and international development funding organisations.
- Local development organizations and their networks.
- Interest groups and associations as well as local self-help groups and community.

Rescue, relief and the Reconstruction effort

The immediate aftermath of disaster witnessed a pouring in of relief on a massive scale. There were truly inspirational acts of solidarity by ordinary people who reached out to the victims in enormous stress. As is typical in disasters,

the community members immediately mobilized to help themselves, digging out people from the rubble, and providing whatever assistance they could. The community groups not only arranged of immediate medical and food assistance but also contributed to the arrangement of interim shelters.Various NGOs, UN system, and Internationalcommunities, Indian diaspora rushed to help out Gujarat from disaster. They involved in whole spectrum of activities ranging from rescue, retrieval and disposal of bodies and debris to the provision of food and essential medical care, construction of temporary shelters, psycho-social interventions, setting up relief camps, etc.

As soon as the earthquake was reported, the Government of India deployed the defence services to the affected areas. Though there was the usual delay incoming to the rescue, the different departments of government became active later. Within three days, power and telecommunication features were restored, people were provided with temporary shelters and community kitchens sprang in no time. The government rapidly mobilized the public distribution system, distributing 15,000 terms of foods within a month of the disaster, three times the normal rate.

Among the NGOs, the Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan represented the collective interest of several NGOs and functioned as a coordinating agency. It had already been working in the region prior to the earthquake and as a collective was capable of influencing policy and programmes to suit the felt needs of the affected people. Other NGOs and agencies who worked independently included the Vivekanand Research and Training Institute, SEWA-Ahmedabad and Swadhya Parivar. While most of the groups left after the initial rescue phase few International NGO's like the Care, Caritas, Oxfam and local rooted organizations like SEED, SEWA, Abhiyan remained active even during the entire rehabilitation process. A majority of the agencies providing relief were religious organizations. Of the 25 such institutions, 15 were Christian agencies, and eight were Hindu organizations. Religious organization such as Ram Krishna Mission, Sewa Bharati, Mata Amritanandmayi, math, BAPS, and many others played important roles in providing relief to the affected people. There was also spontaneous response from the corporate sector. Reliance, the Tata Groups, Larsen and Toubro (L & T), Gujarat Narmada Valley Fertilizers Company Ltd (GNFC), Zydus Cadila, Indian Airlines, Hinduja Foundations, The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Care, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), and a number of public sector undertakings played on important role in the relief process. Corporate entities responded quickly with assistance in cash and kind in the form of critical needs equipment, machinery, vehicles, and experts and volunteers. In rescue work and in the restoration of critical infrastructure – power, communication and water supply – the role of the corporate entities was next only to that of the army and fire services and the civil defence team. They supplied diesel generating sets for power supply; skilled human resources to manage the restoration of communication supply equipment; and rescue machinery for persons trapped under the debris. They airlifted seriously injured persons to hospitals in Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

After the Bhuj earthquake the need for coordinating bodies and interface forum was recognized. A *state-NGO coordination cell* was thus set-up. It was expected these bodies would intensively engage with the administration in processes related to relief and rehabilitation. The meetings of this coordination forum were convened at regular intervals. Collectors played a major role in shaping civil society interventions through these fora. Indeed, in many cases, the District Administration headed by collectors and other officials identified communities and villages that needed support and asked the NGOs to direct their intervention accordingly. The cell focused its effort on mobilising affected communities to ensure effective right-based rehabilitation and development. Some of the groups affiliated to the cell also involved in the implementation of housing and livelihood rehabilitation. The body also engaged in policy overview looking at relevance, standards, transparency and democratic functioning of both the government and non-government agencies.

Civil Society-Forging Alliances /Partnership

The massive damage posed a huge challenge to the state administration and civil society to evolve and execute a comprehensive relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction programme. Realizing the magnitude of problem state and civil society groups became active and entered into partnership to draw upon the strength of one another. The nature of partnership varied. The initiatives in partnerships are those within the NGO sector, between the NGO networks and other stakeholders like the government, international organisations and the private sector, and also between the government and individual NGO's.

Few examples of partnerships would be discussed in this section. They are based on my field visit and observations in Kachchh.

(1) Government-NGO Partnership

The government of Gujarat announced a scheme for involvement of the NGOs called *"Public-Private Partnership Scheme for Total Rehabilitation of Villages"*. The major guidelines of this partnership included:

a) Active participation by the people in the planning and implementation of all aspects of resettlement programmes.

b) The decision to relocate will be a joint community-government decision. Selection of new village site will be made with the involvement of village Samiti or Gram Sabha of the concerned village and the NGO involved.

c) Provision of Basic minimum infrastructure in the new resettlement site, comprising a primary school, community center, water storage, stand posts, electricity, roads inside etc. provision in villages for economic rehabilitation of artisans (handloom and handicrafts).

d) Inclusion of seismic resistant features in all houses.

e) Provision for different housing options for beneficiaries.

f) 50% of the cost of the housing is borne by the government and the rest 50% by the NGO.

(2) Abhiyan (NGO Network) – Partnership within and with other Stakeholders

NGO involvement is very crucial in the partnership with the government, as they are close to ground reality and can ensure people's participation. In formulating the rehabilitation policy and packages the NGOs played a key role. For example in the beginning right after the relief phase, the government announced relocation of all villages. The Abhiyan (network of 29 NGOs) came up with their survey findings and informed the government that not all villages wanted to relocate **(Abhiyan and UNDP, 2001).** About 70% of the villages wanted in-situ rehabilitation. The shelter policy on cost sharing was also the contribution of the Abhiyan network and some of Kutchch based NGOs. Government resolutions were accordingly formulated.

The Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan (popularly known as *'Abhiyan'*) a network of 29 grassroots NGOs galvanized highly effective disaster relief operations by close coordination between NGOs, the district administration, health services, donor agencies and the disaster-affected. The network had 22 member organizations but during the rehabilitation phase, the members increased to 29. All the member organizations were Kachchh based, dedicated to its development. The network first came into being after the first cyclone hit Kachchh in 1998. Since then, it has emerged as a major network undertaking coordination, planning, lobbying and capacity building activities on a range of development concerns in rural areas of Kachchh.

The role of Abhiyan during the post-quake phase in Kachchh was two-fold:

I. As a network *of 29 member organizations* it supported the other member NGOs in their efforts to undertake effective rehabilitation activities;

II. As a *coordinating umbrella organization*, it set *up Setus* (Earthquake Rehabilitation Support Centres), which worked as rural information and coordination centers, also mandated by the State.

Even though the memberorganizations of Abhiyan came from different ideological inclinations and had worked in different development sectors[6] yet they were able to work as a unit for recovery and reconstruction. All the member organizations were guided through common policies of the Abhiyan for the different programmes. Abhiyan allowed the NGOs to retain their identity and helped them in capacity building and raising funds for rehabilitation works.

(3)   Setu Approach to Partnership – An Innovation by Abhiyan

During the relief phase of around one and half months after the quake Abhiyan set up several sub-centres for distribution of relief materials in 6 talukas of Kachchh. The objectives of these sub-centres set up in a temporary shelter or a tent were to identify representatives of all communities residing in the village, set up a system of coordination among them, assess the needs of the village and match them with relief supplies sent by different agencies, and holding regular meetings with the village committee. At the peak of the relief phase, the number of sub-centres increased to 33 working in 350 villages of Kutchch. These sub-centres were manned by personnel drawn from the member organizations of Abhiyan and a few volunteers from outside. Gradually Abhiyan and its partners (donors, government and NGOs) realized that the sub-centres could not be

merely visualised as depots for relief distribution, but their capacity should be developed to involve local people in the planning, design and implementation of overall development of the area. Based on dialogues with the donors and the government, Abhiyan came up with a novel concept called *Setu* (meaning bridge).

Setu emerged as a pivot of partnership between NGOs, donors, government (local) administration, and the quake affected people/villager [7] The donors supporting the establishment, capacity building and functioning of the Setus were Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and the UNDP.

Around 22 Setus were set up by the Abhiyan in 6 talukas of Kachhh district. Each Setu covered around 15 to 20 villages. Abhiyan has placed professionals to manage the functioning of the Setus. As already mentioned the Government of Gujarat has recognized the Setus and mandated them as Earthquake Rehabilitation Support Centres, which had to serve as a link between the government and the people. In this context, the broad approach of the Abhiyan was marked by a fundamental belief in self-help, confidence building and enabling local villagers to meet, organize and carry out their own needs assessment and rehabilitation works with professional and technical support from Setus.

Setus engaged in different functions related to rehabilitation. They served as sub-depots for materials for rehabilitation and development, provide and oversee the non-material inputs for empowerment of village 'samitis', facilitate village level planning, offer continuous support through technical teams at all stages of the rehabilitation process, and collate and disseminate information and create mechanism for this purpose. Thus Setus provided the backward and forward linkages (people to government and NGOs and, government and NGOs to people) that are essential for effective coordination of the rehabilitation process. Emphasis was given on ensuring transparency and ensuring right to information to the people. Partnership was promoted by Setus in mobilisation of financial resources and also in implementation of different rehabilitation programmes such as construction of houses, health, education, etc. The primary areas of working of the Setus included mainly the following See Abhiyan and UNDP (Sept, 2001), Coming Together, Bhuj.

    a. Information Management
    b. Stakeholder Coordination
    c. Grievance redressal / Transparency
    d. Advocacy

The following is a brief update on the developments that were initiated by the *Setus* in the above fields.

Information Management

Information management was one of the core activities of the Setus. As the nature of information coming into the Setus turned complex, so did the demand for increasing levels of technical expertise in database management. It became imperative to transfer information to various levels of district and state administration, as well as the community. This compelled Abhiyan to envisage a solution for connectivity that could do justice to the decision-making mechanism. UNDP responded to this need of the hour by partnering with USAID to bring in the required resources to address the above issues of software development and

connectivity. To help implement this activity, private sector organization – Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) was involved.

A two-way information flow was put in place from the government and the NGOs to the village and vice versa. The databases set up by the Setus pertained to the following information:

a) Damage assessment data

b) Government's adoption policies

c) Government Resolutions

d) Other schemes of the government

e) Information about NGO expertise/operations to the villagers and district administration

The following are some of the data that the Setus collected from the field as part of the rehabilitation monitoring process:

a) Village profiles

b) Construction progress (temporary, semi-permanent and permanent shelter)

c) Health infrastructure

d) Educational infrastructure

e) Health status

f) Organisational data

Stakeholder Coordination

The functioning of Setus was closely linked to the whole spectrum of agencies engaged in the rehabilitation process from the district collectorate to international and local organizations. Towards this, the Setus were providing linkages between the following:

a) Government and the people so that the latter could make maximum use of the schemes that are meant for them

b) The government and the NGOs that helps the former in keeping track of the rehabilitation process in Kutchch and supports the latter by streamlining the working procedures

c) The NGO and the village community, by facilitating the entry of different organizations to work in villages that are entirely unknown to them.

Grievance Redressal/Transparency

In the rehabilitation process of such magnitude, several grievances were raised by the people especially in relation to the post-quake support and aid from the government as well as NGOs as part of the rehabilitation package. Many such cases were reported to the Setus. The Setus took up the case with the district administration and facilitated in their redressal. No sooner had the Government embarked on the process of assessing the damage to houses than the complaints started to flow in. By the Government's own admission, it had been overly hasty with damage assessment, and far too many houses were mistakenly classified in the G1-G3 categories, indicating less damage and proportionately lower compensation than those classified as G-4 or G-5. The setus investigated several such complaints and their findings, conveyed to government agencies, were such as to warrant a re-assessment of the damage. As a result, several families were granted higher financial assistance to build seismically safe houses.

Advocacy

The Setus attempt to focus on rehabilitation issues in appropriate forums which either needs to be brought to the attention of NGOs or the district administration. The purpose is to identify

villages for adoption and suitable interventions through advocacy. Apart from their core activities of information management and supporting/coordinating between stakeholders, the Setus have undertaken the following implementatable initiatives in the villages:

a)   Conducting physiotherapy sessions in Adhoi, Kabrau and Kharoi Setus

b)   Identifying of villages for debris removal in Boladia and Kodki Setus

c)   Implementation of temporary shelter programme in 4 villages in Adhoi and 11 villages in Kabrau.

d)   Implementation of retrofitting project in 6 villages covered by Khambra, Boladi,

Pragpar and Nilpar Setus

e)   Setting up of information boards in 140 villages for public display of their information and progress.

f)   Support villages in forming information samitis in their jurisdiction

g)   Rapport building with village communities through cultural programmes

(4)   Kachchh Ecological Fund

The NGOs received a lot of funding from external agencies, especially from the Abhiyan network. There came a time when the NGOs did not know how to make use of the money and accommodate it in their recovery and reconstruction plan. Some did not accept the money as they did not want to work in Kutchch on a long term basis. Abhiyan along with its partners (donors) came up with the idea of creating a *'Kutch Ecological Fund'*. The purpose of setting up such a fund was to help and promote NGOs working in Kutchch not only for rehabilitation but also, for development of the district in general in the next three years. The main objective of creating this fund concerned ecological planning for long-term recovery. The Environment Planning Collaborative was identified as the nodal agency for planning activities. Phase 1 of this project focused on developing perspective plan towards long-term drought proofing and is being carried out in collaboration with Abhiyan and two other NGOs.

(5)   Kachchh Rehabilitation Information Cell (KRIC)

Information became the basis of the entire rehabilitation process in Kutchch. With a number of organisations working in Kachchh, there was a need for using and sharing a common understanding of the quake related situation. This helps organizations to channel efforts in the right direction to meet their objectives. In the first six months, *Abhiyan*, *UNDP* and Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority *(GSDMA)* made individual efforts for data collection and processing, limited to their respective areas of work. But that led to duplication of efforts. In order to synergise their efforts and resources and to make the necessary information available to the government, NGOs and the village communities, all the three bodiescame together to set up a cell called the 'Kachchh Rehabilitation Information Cell *(KRIC)'*. This cell comprises competent professionals from all the three organizations. The cell had a customer-centric focus and was intended to understand the needs of different organizations working in Kutchch. The cell worked at preparing and compiling allneed based data and support in the form of hardware and software especially those relating to the progress and monitoring of rehabilitation activities for easy access to all.

Concluding Remarks

Post-disaster reconstruction is a complex process. It requires multi-sectoral involvement, very significant resources and a wide range of skills. Successful disaster reduction strategies involve careful efforts to combine knowledge, technology, expertise, institutional capacities, management skills, and practical experience for optimum results, which would not be possible without proper collaboration between the two key players: state and civil society. The state can effectively link up knowledge, technology, skills, resources, expertise offered by specialist institutions with grassroots experience, organisational capacity, participatory management skills, and community based initiatives of NGOs for disaster reduction. NGOs can be innovative, rooted to the ground and participatory in their approach while government can replicate best practices for larger impact.

The success of the reconstruction programme relies on having an effective partnership between government and CSGs. The above case study brings out the important role that Abhiyan played in the development of the quake affected rural Kachchh. Realizing the magnitude of the problem Abhiyan effectively build up a pool of several agenciesthat came together and entered into partnerships to draw upon the strength of one another. The example of the Abhiyan network and its effective partnership with several stakeholdersboth within the voluntary sector as well as between the voluntary sector, the government, the local people and other stakeholders (national and international organization) provides an encouraging experience of disaster governance. The networks created by Abhiyan *(Setus)* have in fact strengthened the link between the state, community and NGOs.In forging and working an effectivedisaster management in a country like India which is prone to disasters both natural and man -made the above example therefore could be of some value.

Notes

[1]See Sudipta Kaviraj, In search of Civil Society, in Kaviraj & Khilnani (eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Foundation Books, New Delhi, 2002, p.289; also see Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association*,Blackwell,Oxford, 1975.

[2] David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H.Nidditch,Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975. p.188.

[3]Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Civil Society in the Scottish Enlightenment Tradition, in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani eds., Civil Society: History and Possibilities, Foundation Books, New Delhi,2002, p.81.

[4]For his elaboration of the concept see G. W. F. Hegel, The Philosophy of Right ed. and trans. T. M.Knox, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952. For commentaries on his treatment of the subject see http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/index.htm.

[5]In India Seva Bharati, a wing of cultural, religious organization, (RSS) is found to be actively involved in the rescue, relief operations during disaster across India though more for political gains than for humanitarian reasons.

[6]Abhiyan primary partners include the Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority, Excel group of industries, Jan Vikas (Ahmedabad), and Drishti Media Collective (Ahmedabad), UNDP, Housing and Development Finance Corporation, American India Foundation, Save the Children Fund, National Dairy Development Board, Janpath Citizen's Initiative, National Tree Growers' Cooperative Federation, Swiss Development Cooperation, Prime Minister's Relief Fund, CARE and a few others.

[7] The panchayat elections were not held during this period, this provided opportunities for Setus active involvement in village rebuilding.

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