Global Civil Society, Globalisation and Nation-state

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There is witnessed growing popularity and visibility of the global civil society (GCS) in the recent years. GCS is generally perceived as following a “morally good mission”. But there are also found critical questions raised regarding GCS in the recent times. There is, in fact, observed contrasting views about GCS in the growing literature in this area. Drawing on the existing literature, this paper presents a critical view on GCS against the backdrop of globalisation with a focus on the implications for the nation-state and the developing countries in particular, and the world in general.

The paper is divided into four parts. First, it briefly discusses the issue of conceptualisation of GCS. Second, it examines in detail the question of linkages between GCS, globalisation and the emergence of embryonic global governance. The focus here is on analyzing the role of CSOs/NGOs in relation to the Bretton Woods institutions (like the World Bank) and the United Nations (Toulmin 1994; Paul 1996, 2000; GPF 1999; Korten 2000; Naidoo and Heinrich 2000; WEED 2001; WFM 2001, Korten et al. 2002). Third, it deals with the predicament of the nation-state with a focus on the developing countries in the context of the growth of GCS and globalisation. Finally, it emphasizes the need for strengthening a kind of GCS which has transformative potential and agenda.

It is observed in the paper that the concept of GCS lacks conceptual clarity as well as theoretical formulation (Taylor 2002) and moral positioning. GCS is largely used as a catchall term encompassing individuals, groups, organizations, networks and social movements of widely varied nature – both the reformist system maintenance type and the transformative type. This gap needs to be bridged. Further, it is held that GCS has close linkages with the process of globalisation and increasing thrust towards global governance which is being largely shaped by the dominance of major global powers through the multilateral agencies (Khor 2001). Most actors of GCS are part of the existing international system as manifested in the close linkages between the donor agencies, states, and NGOs/CSOs. Most of them essentially represent the voices of and communication among the articulate elites. Moreover, most GCS actors seriously lack in terms of representation of and accountability to the primary stakeholders (Batliwala 2002; Edwards et al. 1999; Rootes 2002). They are highly dependent, for their functioning, on the international institutions and powerful national governments. Most of the dominant types of GCS actors do not work for destroying the nation-state. However, they put pressure more on the weaker countries for policy changes through mobilizing international institutions and the dominant countries.

Broadly, the GCS today can be placed into two categories, reformist and radical, based on the stance towards the multilateral institutions. The Reformist type can be sub-divided into: a) the Consultative-collaborative type, comprising those having consultative status, and b) the Oppositional-reactive type, consisting of those engaged in protests and campaigns for reforms. The Radical type comprises those calling for abolishing the Bretton Woods institutions, strengthening the UN system, rejection of the neo-liberal capitalist model of development, and working for People-centred development. Further, it is observed that the reformist type are
largely issue-based in their approach, though there is noticed shift in the issues undertaken by them, from ‘soft’ to ‘hard’, for espousal in the recent years. The radical type adopts a comprehensive perspective, but offer only limited scope for freedom for the weaker countries/nation-states and the poorer people.

So, the need of the hour for the GCS is, it is affirmed, to set their own agenda (not merely reactive) with a vision of transformation of the system of global governance geared to build a just world order with an alternative development paradigm. The world is presently facing a serious moral and valuational crisis. The currently dominant paradigm of neo-liberal capitalist development is characterized by hedonism, consumerism, materialism, militarism, commodification, atomization, alienation, hegemony, exploitation, oppression and discrimination. This system empties and trivializes the very human essence of human society and dehumanizes the humans. The task is to humanize the humans by making social the core of life and putting the economic at the periphery. The society needs to be rebuilt on the basis of an alternative set of values, such as, peace, happiness, empathy, equality, and dignity and respect for all individuals irrespective of their identities both at national and global levels. In this enterprise both the East and the West can work jointly drawing the required elements from their culture and adding newer progressive elements to create a common core of social life and culture on the basis of the values mentioned already.

In this way both the East and the West can relate to each other on equal footing. The intellectuals, peoples, and the CSOs from the East would be able to overcome their so-called backwardness and ‘Third World-ness’ and contribute, along with the West, to the making of a balanced happy peaceful human order free from criminality, terrorism, oppression, exploitation and discrimination at both national and global levels. GCS needs to work on this kind of an alternative agenda to build a just human world. However, it should be clear to us that all CSOs may not like to participate in creating such a new world order because of their own interests. However, it is essential to be as inclusive as possible in this task of this great reconstruction. Such GCS actors require a strong “grassrooting” so that they would have a representative and accountable character. Reformist efforts on the part of GCS can only reduce the pains but cannot eliminate the diseases plaguing the contemporary unjust world order. There is no choice. The GCS can first focus on addressing the current global moral crisis and the further steps can unfold and follow as required in time. This would also ensure the autonomy of the Third Sector as it will not require much material resources and hence the dependence on the powerful countries and dominant social classes who would obviously be interested in protecting and promoting their own interests.