CIVIL SOCIETY IN ORISSA
Rebuilding Its Identity

CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report for Orissa

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Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD)
CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The civil society index (CSI) project is a modest one, yet a groundbreaking assessment of the state of civil society ever conducted in Orissa. The decline in the welfare role of the State, a fall in the quantum of aid from developed countries, and the growing influence of market forces have brought about the emergence of citizen groups, organisations and movements as an influential alternative counter-force. There is a growing global realisation of the potential of civil society as a change agent and catalyst in the development process. However, whether this potential force is in a state to really effect any change has been a topic of debate. The CSI research, which intends to assess the status of civil society in different countries, is the first and only such endeavour with this intention. The exercise was initiated under the aegis of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, in 54 countries of the world. In India, The Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD) in Orissa implemented the study between June 2004 and May 2006.

The CSI project is an information-gathering exercise and an action-research project with the ultimate goal of strengthening civil society and defining its relationships with key players of development and other dominant entities in the larger public arena. The research methodology used in the exercise includes a review of existing information, regional stakeholder consultations (RSCs), a community sample survey (CSS), a media review and fact-finding studies. The research is unique in the sense that it includes several civil society actors to validate the study findings at various stages. The study uses participatory methods of research. Individual and group responses are collected using the questionnaire method. Both closed- and open-ended questions are asked on the following four key dimensions:

- Structure of civil society,
- Civil society’s external environment,
- Values upheld by civil society and
- Impact of civil society’s activities.

Information on these dimensions is obtained by further dividing them into 25 sub-dimensions and 74 indicators. The findings of the research are validated by RSCs survey participants and members of the National Advisory Group (NAG), consisting of representations form civil society, the media, academia, government, and the private sector, who examine whether the findings are representative of the civil society in their respective regions or not. The reported discrepancies and feedback given by the participants are duly incorporated into the report. Shortcomings from primary and secondary sources are improved upon by seeking the opinions of various other stakeholders and experts in specific fields. Finally, the findings are shared with key civil society actors from the state and national level to not only validate the report but also chat a way forward for civil society strengthening.

These findings are captured in a Civil Society Diamond, which depicts the status of the civil society in a particular country. The scores of the four dimensions are plotted on a four-point scale of 0 to 3. A Diamond with vertices farther from the origin, i.e., near 3, depicts a vibrant civil society. On the other hand, a Diamond whose corners lie closer to the origin (a value of 0) depicts a dormant or inactive civil society.

The following figure depicts the status of civil society in Orissa with respect to the four dimensions that form the basis of the study.
Despite the presence of several interesting features of civil society in Orissa, the Civil Society Diamond depicts a still-developing civil society. All the dimensions are represented in the range of 1.2 to 1.5. These scores raise the following questions: Where does civil society in Orissa stand? Does it possess the requisite potential to be a critical element in the development process? Does it have any bargaining ability to bring about social change?

The findings of the CSI research study in Orissa are summarised below.

1. The structure dimension of civil society in Orissa is a weaker dimension than are the external environment and values dimensions. The factors responsible for structure being a weak dimension are 1) lack of collective community action for any common social concern, 2) more charitable giving for religious and spiritual purposes than social purposes, 3) voluntarism for personal reasons rather than for common social cause, and 4) lack of representation of all social groups in both membership and leadership. In addition, the inadequate financial and technological resources of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Orissa are daunting factors that make the structure of the civil society weak.

2. The external environment in which civil society operates is found to be quite enabling with respect to factors like political rights, civil liberties and press freedom. However, certain factors like corruption, deteriorating rule of law, indifferent attitude of business organisations, socio-economic environment, and low levels of trust and public spiritedness among the people have a debilitating impact. Despite its facilitating features, the detrimental factors lead to an environment that is only moderately supportive.

3. The values dimension of civil society in Orissa shares the highest score with the environment dimension. Factors like tolerance, non-violence and environment protection strongly dominate the civil society characteristics. Some major issues of concern, however, are corruption, gender inequity and lack of transparency within the civil society arena. All these concerns justify an average score of 1.5 for the values dimension.

4. A weak structure, an only partially enabling external environment, and modest values score lead to a low level of impact as reflected in the Diamond. There are many areas of concern within the impact dimension of the civil society, such as low level of capacity-building initiatives, inadequate efforts of lobbying for social service provisions, lack of efforts in influencing public policies and making the state and business organisations responsible and accountable.

The study findings indicate that there is a need to strengthen the structure and impact dimensions for a vibrant civil society in Orissa. A healthy external environment and a sound value system seem to act as facilitators for a strong and resilient civil society. Some typical characteristics of the civil society in Orissa with respect to the four dimensions are described below.
1. Tolerance and non-violence: Civil society in Orissa exhibits a high level of tolerance where people from different races, religions, castes and creeds coexist. Non-violence within the civil society arena clearly distinguishes Orissa from other states in India, though recent instances of activism by extreme forces like Naxalites in the southern and western parts of the state have been issues of concern. In general, however, the civil society is violence-free.

2. Continued efforts for sustainable development: The past few decades have witnessed continued efforts by civil society actors concerning issues of sustainable development. Activism with respect to environmental protection or protests against setting up of mineral-based industries is on the rise. Issues of protection of natural resources like lakes, mountains and minerals have been a priority for civil society. Such concerns are combined with other crucial issues like the displacement of people. This vigilant stance of civil society has caused the state government to bring about commendable changes in its Resettlement and Rehabilitation policy, as well as to take cautious steps regarding setting up of mineral-based industries.

3. A cash-strapped economy, yet a highly charitable community: Orissa is one of the most underdeveloped states in India. A state where every second person lives below the poverty line, it is interesting to note that 79% of the sample population supports charity and this is surely an encouraging indicator. A higher percentage of urban population supports charity as compared to the semi-urban and rural areas.

4. Free press: A high level of press freedom is certainly an encouraging feature in Orissa. However, inadequate and ineffective portrayal of critical civil society issues in both electronic and print media is a matter of concern.

5. A fledgling civil society: Not all is well with the health of civil society in Orissa. The civil society is yet to become active enough to boost development initiatives. Sustained efforts towards common issues of social concern are lacking. Adequate voluntary collective efforts towards common social concerns are required.

6. Transparency and accountability: Transparency and accountability issues are a matter of concern not only to the state machinery but also to the CSOs. Though some discussions are going on in the civil society space about such issues, there is as yet neither any system in place to ensure self-regulation of CSOs nor have there been any efforts in this direction.

7. Corporate apathy: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a grey area among the business organisations operating in Orissa. There are not enough CSR initiatives by the business community and there is limited civil society initiative to bring in required changes in the corporate strategies.

8. Gender sensitivity and civil society: Gender inequity at both the social and institutional levels is a matter of concern. Civil society action to promote gender equity at the societal level in Orissa is not very satisfactory. In a society where preference towards a male child is high, suitable actions by CSOs to ensure gender sensitive policies and equitable representation of both the sexes at membership and leadership level are missing.

9. Networking and communication issues: Inadequate networking among CSOs on common issues and the ineffectiveness of existing networks are two important factors that jeopardise any collective effort by CSOs towards development. Poor communication among the CSOs and insufficient resources are other serious lacunae, which prove to be a handicap for effective networking.

10. Declining faith in the state machinery: The judiciary in Orissa is one of the most corrupt institutions in the country. The society has less faith in the police, government, people’s representatives, and political parties than it does in non-government organisations (NGOs) and press. Voluntary organisations are believed to be better service providers than the state.
CSI research study resulted in interesting revelations about civil society in Orissa. The documentation of civil society actions and the resultant impact had never before been attempted, except for few cases of documenting people’s movements, during and after independence. Civil society seems to be quite unaware of its potential in effecting any change. In this context, this report can serve as a reference for finding details of the initiatives and activities undertaken by civil society in the state. These findings can be used to devise action plans for future interventions. Capacity building initiatives can be designed keeping in mind the shortcomings of current civil society practices.

This study is not, however, an end in itself. It is rather a beginning of an understanding about how powerful the civil society space can be for bringing about a desired socio-economic change. In addition, the study findings can be used to assess how the potential of civil society can be better harnessed to bring about such change. Further studies can be carried out on specific local issues and better intervention strategies can be designed around those issues by mobilising local resources. Wider dissemination and sharing of the report is expected to further endear the ideas and goals of civil society in Orissa to the people. The study will go a long way in building a strong, vibrant and resilient civil society.