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Sushil Samaj: The Civil Society and Its Controversy in Contemporary Bangladesh

Md. Rahamatullah[1], Sabuj Mondal[2]

ABSTRACT

The concept of civil society in Bangladesh remains conceptually ambiguous due to its multifaceted nature, contested meanings, and diverse interpretations in contemporary social and political discourse. In Bangladesh, civil society is commonly translated as sushil samaj, nagorik samaj, and other related terms, each carrying distinct linguistic and ideological connotations. The political contestation surrounding these translations further complicates the understanding of the concept and often obscures its theoretical significance and practical manifestations in everyday life. This study analyses a wide range of secondary sources, including NGO reports, media accounts, academic literature, constitutional documents, and critical scholarly commentaries, to explore the concept of civil society. Employing a qualitative and interpretive research approach, this study investigates four key dimensions: the contested translation of Sushil Samaj, the conceptual debates surrounding civil society, institutional roles, and media-driven popular perceptions in contemporary Bangladesh. The analysis highlights the ambiguities surrounding the institutional functions of civil society, the contradictions inherent in NGO activities, and the continuing theoretical tensions between liberal-democratic and Marxist perspectives. The findings demonstrate that although civil society is widely regarded as an important force for promoting democracy, human rights, and public accountability, its effectiveness is constrained by elite dominance, political co-optation, donor dependence, and institutional corruption. This article argues that the limited accountability of civil society in Bangladesh results from both internal organizational weaknesses and external political and structural pressures. It concludes that strengthening civil society requires greater institutional autonomy, inclusiveness, democratic accountability, and independence from both state and donor influence.

Keywords: Civil Society; Sushil Samaj; Democracy and Governance; NGOs and Institutional Role

INTRODUCTION

The English word 'civil society' generally corresponds to the Bengali term 'sushil samaj'. Many people use 'civil society' to refer to nagorik samaj, jano samaj, loko samaj, besamorik

[1] Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi-110068.

[2] Department of Sociology, Rabindra University, Bangladesh; Shahjadpur, Sirajganj-6770.

Corresponding Author's Email Address: sabuj.soc@rub.ac.bd

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samaj, and similar terms. Some also mix English and Bengali, using the term 'civil samaj'. In contrast to military rule and military work, civil society was established primarily to assert the authority of unarmed citizens within the state and society at large (Chandhoke, 1995; Cohen & Arato, 1997). The term "civil society" can have different connotations in different countries. There is no universal definition of civil society. However, there is a consensus that it is an optional association free of regulation. A well-governed public association is considered far more beneficial than state centralism (Edwards, 2011; Cohen & Arato, 1997).

Civil society is generally concerned with essential issues such as democracy, human rights, and citizen participation. It may also include non-governmental organizations, professional organizations, trade associations, legal associations, and privately owned media (Hai, 2000; Chandhoke, 1995). Additionally, it is an organized group of individuals who come together spontaneously to seek civil rights from the government. Civil society also serves as a channel between individuals and governments. Alongside, civil society sometimes plays a vital role in resolving the dialectical relationship between the government and the people (Gramsci, 1971; Habermas, 1989; Chandhoke, 1995). They generally believe in multi-party democracy (Chandhoke, 1995; Edwards, 2011). In this essay, the terminological and perceived meaning of civil society in contemporary Bangladesh is discussed. Here, the argument is that the term sushil samaj is problematic both in its terminology and in its perceived meaning. It can be suggested that, in the context of Bangladesh, using 'Civil Society' is more appropriate than the Bangla term' sushil samaj' (Ahmed, 2020; Sen, 2006). This essay also explores the nature of civil society in contemporary Bangladesh. In contemporary Bangladesh, the role of civil society is controversial (Tasnim, 2022). Civil society plays a role from both liberal and Marxist standpoints (Chandhoke, 1995). The significance of civil society in Bangladesh in relation to the state, market, and democracy remains poorly established. (Tasnim 2022, 2024; Lewis, 2011) The role of civil society in Bangladesh is now under threat.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

1. To find out the perceived meaning of the civil society in contemporary Bangladesh, highlighting the ambiguities and public perception.
2. To portray and analyse the fundamental functions of civil society in Bangladesh, with specific clarification to their relationship with the state, market, and democracy.

METHODOLOGY

To study the practical and conceptual dimensions of civil society, this writing employs qualitative and interpretive approaches. As it is needless to say that the concept of civil society is embedded in a historical, political, and cultural context, the article focuses on understanding its institutional practices, popular perception, and terminological meanings in Bangladesh.

Research Design

The study is designed as a documentary and discourse analysis, drawing on secondary sources, including academic literature, historical texts, constitutional references, news

reports, and survey data. This approach enables a critical understanding of how the concept of sushil samaj (civil society) is interpreted, misused, and contested in Bangladesh.

Data Sources:

The research depends on the following sources of information:

Areas	Description
Academic Literature	Theories of civil society from classical thinkers (Aristotle, Hobbes, Hegel, Tocqueville, Marx, Gramsci, Habermas) and contemporary scholars (Chandhoke, Cohen & Arato, Edwards, Sen, Ahmed).
Policy and Constitutional Texts	Relevant articles from the Constitution of Bangladesh, particularly those addressing the term civil servant and its misuse.
NGO and Civil Society Reports	World Bank (2006). CIVICUS and Tasnim (2022) survey findings on the number, roles, and activities of civil society organizations.
Media Sources	Newspaper articles, television talk shows, and online discussions reflect the everyday perception of civil society.
Critical Commentaries	Scholarly critiques of NGOs and donor-driven development (Karim, Paprocki, Cons, Dewan, Lewis).

Analytical Framework:

The analysis is guided by a thematic approach, focusing on four major dimensions:

Areas	Description
Terminological Analysis	Inspecting the contested meaning of civil society and its Bengali equivalents (sushil samaj, nagorik samaj, etc.).
Popular Perception	Reconnoitering how civil society is understood in everyday discourse, particularly in media and rural contexts.
Institutional Role	Evaluating the functions, strengths, and weaknesses of NGOs, trade unions, professional bodies, and other voluntary organizations.
Theoretical Standpoints	This study examines the role of civil society in Bangladesh through liberal-democratic and Marxist perspectives, highlighting tensions among the state, the market, and civil society.

TERMINOLOGICAL MEANING AND PERCEIVED MEANING OF SUSHIL SAMAJ

The Misuse and Conceptual Confusion of "Civil" and "Civil Society" in Bangladesh Constitutional Interpretation and the Misuse of "Civil."

In recent years, the term civil has been misused in various ways in Bangladesh. A notable example can be found in bureaucratic discourse, where some officials have started using the term Sushil Sevak as a synonym for Civil Servant. Afroza Sultana, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Law at South Asian University, New Delhi, from Bangladesh, highlighted this misuse while discussing the meaning of Sushil Samaj in the Bangladeshi context. Before

joining her Ph.D. program, she worked as a legal officer at Somoy TV, a prominent news channel in Bangladesh.

According to Sultana, such usage constitutes two significant conceptual and legal errors. First, using Sushil Sevak as a synonym for Civil Servant violates Article 153 of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Article 135 of the Constitution uses the term Civil Servant in the sense of ausamorik pod (civilian post). Within the constitutional framework, civil refers to civilian in the context of employment, not sushil (gentle or polite). Furthermore, the word servant itself does not appear in the Constitution. Instead, Article 133 substitutes the word kormo (work) for service. Therefore, the constitutional equivalent of a Civil Servant would be a person engaged in civilian work.

Second, labelling government employees as civil servants carries ideological implications and may be considered propaganda. As often remarked about the British Indian Civil Service— "they were neither Indian, nor civil, nor servants"—the same criticism can apply in the Bangladeshi context. The British officers were not Indian; many were uncivil in demeanour, and they ruled rather than served. Likewise, in Bangladesh, the use of the term "Sushil Sevak" not only misrepresents the meaning of "civil" but also symbolically glorifies bureaucratic authority. Sultana argues that such misrepresentation could even constitute a violation of Section 420 of the Penal Code as a form of deception.

The Semantic Ambiguity of the Word "Civil."

The confusion surrounding civil society begins with the multiple meanings of the term "civil" itself. In English, civil can mean polite, courteous, or non-military. In Bangla, however, these distinctions are blurred, leading to widespread misinterpretations. For instance, in legal terminology, the term' Civil Court' refers to the Dewani Adalat, which deals with land-related disputes. Similarly, civil war is translated as griho juddho—a domestic or internal war. However, no one refers to civil marriage as sushil bibaho.

A humorous illustration of this linguistic confusion is found in a story by Gopal Bhar. Gopal once told the king that he had met a "civil boy." When the king inquired how he knew the boy was civil, Gopal explained that while working in the field, the boy respectfully asked his father to step aside before smoking cannabis, as one should not smoke in front of elders. The story's irony highlights the absurdity of equating "civil" with merely polite or rule-following behaviour, raising the question of whether members of the so-called civil society actually act in ways consistent with civility.

The Concept of Civil Society: Meaning, Debates, and Misconceptions

The most contentious misuse of the term sushil appears in the phrase Sushil Samaj, or civil society. The concept of civil society has deep philosophical roots but remains contested in meaning and scope. Two enduring ideas define its theoretical basis: first, civil society seeks to establish a "good society"; second, it upholds civility, which entails tolerance and respect for diverse political and social views. As Elliott (2006) notes, "Civility implies tolerance, and mostly the compliance of individuals to accept diverse political views as well as social attitudes." Thus, civility extends beyond mere politeness to encompass an ethical orientation toward pluralism and coexistence.

However, in practice, the ideal often diverges from reality. Not all civil society organizations (CSOs) embody democratic or progressive values. Carmen, Malena, and von Heinrich (2007) question whether all civil societies are genuinely civil, noting that some institutions within civil society propagate intolerance, violence, or corruption. Civility, therefore, is an ideal rather than a consistent reality.

The conceptual confusion is not unique to Bangladesh. The German philosopher Hegel was among the first modern thinkers to articulate the role of civil society as an intermediary sphere between the state and the individual. He observed that as the state became more powerful, individuals sought to preserve autonomy through associations and institutions outside both the family and the state. For Hegel, the state must regulate civil society, just as civil society monitors the state (Chandhoke, 1995). Right-wing theorists argue that, because markets promote individual rights, market institutions should be regarded as part of civil society. Critics, however, highlight the exploitative nature of markets, citing Smith's (2003, p. 177) classic observation that "People of the same trade rarely meet together… but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public." Thus, including market actors in civil society risks legitimising institutions that undermine collective welfare.

To address such ambiguities, CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, defines civil society as the sphere outside the influence of the family, the state, and the market, in which individuals organise themselves to advance their common interests. This broad definition encompasses religious, cultural, educational, and professional associations; NGOs; grassroots movements; trade unions; and independent media. The public sphere—as theorised by Habermas—functions as the structural foundation of this domain, where individuals deliberate and form public opinion through open communication and debate (Chandhoke, 1995).

Civil Society: A Sphere of Ideals and Contradictions

According to Edwards (2011), civil society encompasses three interrelated components: goals, means, and structures. Its goals include promoting political equality, respect for opposing ideologies, and conflict resolution through dialogue—ideals traceable to thinkers from Aristotle to Hobbes (Cohen & Arato, 1997). The means to achieve these goals are voluntary associations, which Tocqueville viewed as essential mechanisms for realising the purpose of civil society (Chandhoke, 1995). However, these associations often diverge in objectives and interests, creating internal conflicts and necessitating frameworks for exchange and negotiation—the public sphere itself.

Ultimately, all conceptions of civil society converge on a single normative goal: ensuring the accountability of state power. As Chandhoke (1995) emphasises, civil society is central to democracy because it demands citizen engagement and oversight of governmental authority.

The Terminological Debate: "Sushil Samaj" or "Civil Society"

The term Sushil Samaj fails to capture the depth and breadth of the English term civil society. In everyday Bangla, Sushil often carries moral or elitist connotations and is even used sarcastically in political discourse. An alternative translation, Nagarik Samaj (citizen society), is more semantically accurate but still problematic, as it implies unity where civil society is, in fact, fragmented by diverse and often conflicting interest groups. Therefore, retaining the original English term civil society is both practical and conceptually precise. Just as words like table or chair have entered the Bengali lexicon, so too can civil society remain untranslated to preserve its theoretical nuances.

In essence, the diversity of definitions and interpretations of civil society mirrors its diverse roles in contemporary Bangladesh, ranging from advocacy and accountability to contestation and contradiction.

THE POPULAR CONCEPTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, the concept of civil society has developed into a compound and tangled discourse in the public sphere. Popular discourses around the sushil samaj (civil society) adopted a distinctive local exposition that branches considerably from its canonical theoretical formulation. In everyday discourse, the term 'sushil' denotes 'gentle' or 'civilised', which encompasses a category of people who are concerned and often critique the state's policies and practices. This category may comprise individuals or groups. This notion of criticism in everyday life reflects what Gramsci (1971) represented as a sphere of consent and contestation. In this realm, the dominant ideology is practised and negotiated by intellectuals and various social actors.

In common parlance, those who come into contact with various media or online platforms, such as television talk shows, newspaper interviews, and online discussions, are often considered part of the sushil samaj. It aligns with Habermas's (1989) conceptualisation of the public sphere, in which civil society actors intervene between the state and its citizens through 'rational-critical' debates. In Bangladesh, this intimacy is sometimes perceived negatively. In rural settings, progressive and reformist attitudes are often considered sushil in a pejorative sense, as they may conflict with traditional social norms, ideologies, and values. It supports Chatterjee's (2004) idea that, in postcolonial society, civil society is often considered an elite domain, differentiated from the 'political' society, in which a significant section of marginalised people come into contact with the state through informal and negotiated modalities.

Furthermore, in the context of Bangladesh, the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) complicated the idea of civil society. Due to their frequent involvement in development activities, policy formation and review, and advocacy, NGOs are considered a significant force within civil society. However, NGOs' activities are often criticised and generate public scepticism due to their efforts to fulfil donor objectives and align with the state, as well as their tendency to establish transitional governmentality (Moose, 2005). Devine (2006) and Lewis (2011) draw attention to understanding the politics of NGOs as civil society. NGOs occupy an ambivalent position, functioning both as agents

of social transformation and as extensions of the neoliberal governance structure (Moose, 2005; Devine, 2006; Lewis, 2011). People perceived that, under the ruling government's regimes, civil society sometimes benefits from state patronage. It further led to the establishment not only of their autonomy but also of their moral authority. It creates a legitimacy crisis within civil society in the Global South and blurs the boundary between the state, market, and its citizen actors (Chandhoke, 1995).

However, in Bangladesh, the concept of civil society is understood in multifaceted ways and is intricately intertwined with theoretical ideas and lived realities. Although civil society is theoretically conceived as a site of democratic engagement and resistance, its local manifestations and interpretations are shaped by tensions arising from power structures, media portrayals, and socio-cultural norms, values, and practices. Thus, the intersection between the state and civil society remains a critical subject in the praxis of academic scholarship, helping to understand how sushil samaj operates within the larger governance and socio-cultural framework in Bangladesh.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH

The use and practice of the concept of 'Civil Society' in Bangladesh is relatively recent. In the context of pre-independence and post-independence Bangladesh, there is a wide gap between the concept and practice of 'civil society'. Pre-independence 'civil society' referred to the conscious student society—the collective, coordinated unity of the masses against West Pakistan (Mamun & Kumar, 1995). Because then the rulers were West Pakistanis and the 'civil' were East Pakistanis (now Bangladesh). As a result, 'representatives of civil society', as the phrase implies, were actually 'representatives of civil society' or 'civil society'. Before independence, civil society representatives (such as activists, intellectuals, and social leaders) may have been more in touch with, or more reflective of, the broader society. However, the chaos started after independence. In post-independence Bangladesh, there has been a radical change in the form, essence, and flavour of 'civil society'. Representatives of 'Civil Society' continue to come from the 'Elite Society'. As a result, the practical and theoretical meanings of 'Civil Society' began to prioritize the interests of elites and the ruling class over those of ordinary people.

So, in whatever sense it is used, under the siege of class interests, 'civil society' changes its inherent character. 'Civil society' is no longer in the purview of civilians or ordinary people. A section of society has hijacked the noble spirit of 'Civil Society' and embraced it. It is the 'elite class who hold the signboard of 'civil society' in this country. They sit in a comfortable room, wet their throats with mineral water, give lectures on social problems as indigenous donors funded by foreign donors, hold seminars and symposia, and beat the drum of 'civil society'. Moreover, they sleep amid a dispute.

Hai (2000) has profiled the character and functioning of 'Civil Society' in Bangladesh. Within 'civil society', he includes 'the media (press, radio, and TV), trade unions, professionals, private voluntary organisations, sports and cultural figures, and social welfare organisations' (Hai, 2000). This is our ideal 'Civil Society'. He also did not mention that the civil society network in Bangladesh comprises retired bureaucrats, NGO representatives, retired military officers, and representatives of multinational companies.

Imtiaz Ahmed (2020) discusses civil society from the perspective of a civilizational quest. His argument on the classical Indian contribution focuses on the differences between rashtra and samaj. The ruling parties, especially the foreign rulers, did not disturb South Asia, the samaj. As a result of our society, civil society passes through the ages without significant change or arbitration. He also pointed out some civil society institutions, namely masjids, waqfs, and madrasas, which have been independent of the state for a long time. His argument about Western contributions also illuminates the secular formation of Western society as a civil society. In his discussion, he prefers civil society over a sushil samaj. Academic arguments suggest that the ambiguity of sushil samaj forces academics to grapple with the term' civil society'.

Rangalal Sen (2006) advocated using the term' civil society' rather than 'sushil samaj' or other connotations of 'nagorik samaj'. His discussion focuses on the debate over Adam Ferguson, widely regarded as the first academic to discuss civil society. He suggested that we use civil society in our discussion of Sushil Samaj.

All these buzzwords have nothing to do with the so-called 'civil society' and the real civilians. They do not know the cruelty of exploiting the labour of peasants, labourers, and day labourers. When the houses of the minorities were burnt, they prepared for the talk show on the TV channel. They are Bangladesh's 'Representatives of Civil Society' or 'Civil Society'. Moreover, today, the educated urban citizen class, or 'civil society', is the 'elite society' or 'elite classes of the society. They are, in fact, friends of the ruling class.

Some researchers and intellectuals in Bangladesh have sought to examine the relationship between good governance and 'civil society'. Civil society often serves as a watchdog, monitoring the activities of state entities. It aims to build a transparent government and reduce corruption and misuse of power and resources by formulating, evaluating, and monitoring various policies and legal frameworks (Sen, 2006). That being said, an effective 'civil society' can ensure good governance in the state. However, the existing and active 'civil society' of Bangladesh is a part of the state apparatus. A state that protects the interests of elites cannot care for the welfare of civilians. Moreover, since 'civil society' is the 'elite society' of the society, it is their 'work' to show the interests of the state. This is the real ‘work', while the mask above is 'show up'. The role of the current 'civil society' is to favour the elite by dominating civilians and betraying them (Tasnim, 2022; Tasnim, 2024).

It is tough to estimate the exact number of civil society organisations in Bangladesh. NGOs, or non-governmental organisations, are part of civil society. However, there are many types of NGOs in Bangladesh. Some NGOs have fewer than 100 members. There are also NGOs like BRAC, which has a membership of several lakhs and is considered one of the largest NGOs in the world. Aggregating small and large civil organisations together yields no meaningful data. According to a World Bank (2006) report, there were about 45,000 NGOs in Bangladesh in 2000, most of which were inactive (an estimated 1,200 were active). Among them, around 2,000 NGOs are registered to receive foreign aid. At least 90 per cent of villages in Bangladesh have at least one NGO presence. Therefore, the importance of NGOs cannot be assessed solely by their number.

On the other hand, according to the theory, *somobai somiti* [3](cooperative society) It is classified as a form of civil society. According to the government, there are about two lakh cooperative societies in Bangladesh. According to the theory of civil society, cooperative societies are considered voluntary organisations. However, this assumption does not align with the realities of Bangladesh. At least 99 percent of cooperative societies in Bangladesh are government-initiated, government-financed, and government-controlled. They are not voluntary organisations in any sense; they are a kind of branch of a cooperative department. In addition, most of them are bankrupt and inactive for extended periods. There is no justification for considering them civil society organisations.

Tasnim (2022) shows that the number of civil organizations registered in Bangladesh in 2007 was 2,59,776. This number is exaggerated. Tasnim's list includes 1,89,847 cooperative societies. Excluding cooperative societies, the number of civil society organizations is estimated at approximately 70,000. Of this number, 45,508 social welfare organizations are inactive. If such institutions are excluded, the number of civil organizations in Bangladesh could reach 1,500. However, the expansion of civil society organizations in Bangladesh cannot be measured solely by this number. It includes many NGOs with hundreds of branches. The NGO survey indicates that civil society organizations are present in 100% of cities and in at least 90% of villages in Bangladesh.

Time	The total number of civil societies	After the Independence (1970-2006), the number of civil societies in %	Cumulative percentage
1970-1975	38	7.6	7.6
1975-1980	40	8.0	15.6
1980-1984	70	13.8	29.4
1985-1989	67	13.3	42.7
1990-1995	50	9.9	52.6
1995-1999	90	17.8	70.4
2000-2006	115	22.8	93.2

The table presents trends in the establishment of civil organizations in Bangladesh since independence. The data in this table is collected based on a sample survey of 504 establishments. (Sources: Tasnim, 2022).

In Bangladesh, civil society organizations emerged mainly after the 1990s. A significant reason for the expansion of civil society organizations during this period was that

[3] The literal meaning of *somobai somiti* (cooperative society) is an autonomous association of people where they meet to fulfill their everyday economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned as well as democratically controlled enterprise.

the concept of civil society gained favour among donors following the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Before the 1990s, there was a proliferation of non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh. However, since 1990, voluntary organizations have undertaken new activities in Bangladesh. Such activities are known as civic advocacy or citizen campaigns for various political and social demands. Some civil society organizations undertake such work alongside other activities. Some organizations engage themselves only for their branding. However, private organizations are closely involved in such work (Tasnim, 2022).

A World Bank report (2006) indicates that 42 percent of NGOs in Bangladesh negotiate with the government regarding their demands, and 93 percent raise awareness among their members of these demands. However, NGOs do not always choose to engage in politics. In many cases, they are forced to engage in conflict with the government at various levels, even though they do not want to.

In the last two decades, civil society in Bangladesh has attracted political attention by articulating a range of demands. In particular, women's organizations have achieved significant success in advancing women's empowerment. Some organizations are skilled in creating public awareness in particular areas. For example, Transparency International of Bangladesh, in case of corruption, Centre for Law and Arbitration in case of human rights, FEMA or Fair Election Monitoring Association in case of elections, SUJAN and SUPRO in case of good governance, democracy, voting, and political rights, CPD (Centre for Policy Dialogue) works for the government. State's economic policy formation, BELA (Bangladesh Environmental Law Association), in the case of the environment, BAPA (Bangladesh Environment Movement), etc., are examples of organizations that played a leading role in restoring democracy in the early 1990s. Again, during the last caretaker government (2006-08), such organizations were vocal in demanding various reforms (Tasnim, 2022; Tasnim, 2024).

A review of recent activities of civil society organizations in Bangladesh indicates that civil society is highly vibrant and influential, with a significant role. This assessment has several weaknesses. First, the role of civil society is not always effective. When societies become depoliticized or when autocratic governments weaken political parties, the importance of civil society increases. For example, the rise of civil society organizations was significant at the end of the Ershad regime and during the military-backed caretaker government. However, their role is limited under political rule, as political parties sometimes influence civil society (Tasnim, 2017).

Second, civil society organizations in Bangladesh are preoccupied with minor issues. A tiny part of them is interested in political demands. The table below presents the results of a survey on the demands and contributions of civil society organizations in the presentence phase.

Demand/working sectors	Economic	Educational and cultural	Organization for achieving demands	Organization for Welfare and Development	Total
Village Development	20.7	6.1	0	24.1	16
Local demand	20.7	6.1	25	27.2	18
Empowering Women	25	12.2	12.5	54.5	31
Education & Literacy	32.8	81.6	50	62.5	44
Health service	46.6	57.1	50	66.5	46
Law, democracy, and human rights	12.1	20.4	25	28.6	17
Economic empowerment	65.5	28.6	37.5	57.6	44
Social & political awareness	26.7	36.7	50	42.9	33

Table: Analysis of demands and contributions of civil society organizations. Source: Tasnim, 2022.

A survey of 500 civil society organizations shows that only 17 percent are conducting activities aimed at achieving legal, political, and human rights. However, 46 percent of the organizations provide health, education, and services. 44% of organizations are interested in advancing members' economic empowerment. Forty-four percent of organizations are enthusiastic about education and literacy programs. The table above shows that protecting the political and human rights of members is the least popular activity among civil society organizations in Bangladesh. So, what is said about the vibrant political role of civil society in Bangladesh is primarily an exaggeration. A significant reason for this is that non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh are cautious about taking on controversial political roles (Tasnim, 2022).



Image: Some leading news headlines about the Civil Society in contemporary Bangladesh.

On the one hand, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are the most significant force in Bangladesh's civil society. More than two crore citizens are participating in NGOs' activities. On the other hand, NGOs are the greatest weakness of Bangladesh's civil society. A World Bank study (2006) reports that 92 percent of NGO branches engage in lending as their primary activity. These institutions aim to provide loans on a commercial basis. This epistemic shift towards commercial finance has significant implications for NGOs' understanding of the civil society sphere. It addresses lending activities in which many NGOs are, directly or indirectly, driven by profit-seeking logic and seek financial benefits. At the same time, the empowerment of marginalized groups and the reform of the political sphere remain in the shadows (Karim, 2011). This nature creates a paradoxical situation for civil society that often reinforces economic dependency rather than building a sustainable solution and an equitable sphere. Building sustainable organizations through proper management is a novel approach (Devin, 2003). However, one of its major problems is that a stable social and political environment is essential for implementing a successful credit program, yet it is difficult to achieve. One of the responsibilities of civil society is to effect social change; if necessary, it can destabilize the country. They are not afraid of doing this. However, for NGOs, such instability is detrimental to securing donor funding. In addition, NGOs undertake numerous activities funded by the government. In many cases, they have to comply with government regulations. Based on experience over the last decade, it is clear that NGOs seeking to exert control over the government or to oppose it face government action. In this context, Grameen Bank's experience is notable. Scholars also critique NGOs. Dewan (2021), Paprocki (2021), and Cons (2022) argue that in coastal areas, various NGOs and donor agencies employ developmental interventions. For example, establish embankments that cause flooding rather than protect against it. Additionally, various NGOs and development agencies use this coastal area as a site for experimentation. They are branding shrimp cultivation as a climate mitigation tool, despite studies showing that it is one of the leading causes of salinity in the water and soil. Karim (2011) argues that NGOs primarily rule over women rather than emancipate them. Therefore, most NGOs in Bangladesh, whether consciously or unconsciously, become prominent defenders of the status quo and of controversial issues. It is, therefore, open to question whether NGOs should be considered part of civil society (Stiles, 2002, 2002a).

Civil society gains power by creating unity among citizens. Civil society in Bangladesh is fragmented and, in many cases, in conflict with itself. In this context, Stiles (2002, 110) rightly writes that the degree of political penetration of civil society is extreme. Labour unions, professional organisations, universities, trade associations, and newspapers are all marked by political identity. Advancement in most professions largely depends on the superior's preferred politics, and even NGOs seek to join with political groups. A civil society divided along political lines is unable to undertake meaningful initiatives for change. According to Habermas, civil society builds consensus in favor of the rule of law. However, politics in Bangladesh has also made the judiciary controversial. In such an environment, it is not possible to develop public opinion through consensus in Habermas's imagined public sphere (Chandhoke, 1995).

Most of the civil society organizations in Bangladesh are losing strength due to competition among themselves. However, in most cases, their power is minimal. A survey of 500 civil society organizations shows that 86 percent have fewer than 1,000 members. 65% of civil society organizations have fewer than 100 members (Tasnim, 2022). Large voluntary organizations are NGOs that prioritize business over social services. In this situation, it is tough for small civil society organizations to lead large-scale change.

Another weakness of civil society organizations in Bangladesh is corruption. Tasnim (2022) analysed the coverage of civil society organizations across three newspapers in three selected years (2001, 2006, and 2007), totalling 18 months. This analysis found 122 news stories about anomalies and chaos within civil society organizations. On average, every 14 days, there is news about NGOs' anomalies and chaos. Among them, 69 were allegations of corruption. There are allegations of corruption against various civil society organizations. However, the highest number of corruption allegations is against labour unions. Education and cultural civil society organizations ranked second in terms of the number of corruption complaints. Allegations of corruption range from cooperatives to trade unions—all types of civil society organizations. Sometimes such organizations are owned by the founders and their families. In these cases, transparency, accountability, and internal democracy are not always present in the organization's work. The image of civil society organizations as a whole is not above question in many cases. Civil society organizations need to reform themselves before changing the world around them.

Drawing on the above discussion, it can be seen that in Bangladesh, the nature of civil society is embedded in the liberal and Marxist traditions and is broadly connected to the theoretical frameworks of Tocqueville, Mill, and Gramsci. Scholars such as Mill and Tocqueville adopt a liberal view of civil society as a sphere of voluntary activity that enhances the democratic environment, protects individual freedom, and serves as a counterbalance to the state’s absolute power. In this case, various activity groups, rights-based organizations, and NGOs often promote pluralism and public deliberation. On the other hand, Gramscian philosophy often characterizes civil society as a sphere of ideological struggle in which the dominant group seeks to establish hegemony and the marginal group seeks to resist it. In Bangladesh's political culture, various student groups, workers' parties, and advocacy coalitions play multifaceted roles, often serving as civil society actors and frequently becoming sites of contestation, negotiation, and power struggles. Thus, in contemporary Bangladesh, civil society can be understood through both Marxist and liberal lenses, which describe how it simultaneously interacts with power, hegemony, and democratic participation.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Bangladesh is undergoing a period of transition across its economic, social, political, cultural, and religious life. Instability, corruption, dishonesty, and intolerance are rampant in every nook and cranny of society. People's sense of responsibility, devotion to duty, and truthfulness are mainly absent from society today. At such a time, when the state is supposed to be the friend of the people, the state has become the enemy of the ordinary people.

Ordinary citizens expect a little peace, hope to be peaceful, and entrust the management of this state to a political party. However, when they come to power, they all become exploiters rather than servants of the people.

In such a desperate situation, the need for a strong 'Civil Society Representative' or 'Civil Society' is essential. It is they who will direct or compel the government to act as the state's guardian. Will strive to protect the interests of the ordinary people (civilians). Be the true representative of the people and motivate and persuade the government to prioritize the people's welfare. A 'Civil Society Representative' or 'Civil Society' will act as a fraternal bridge between the government and the people, or between the state and the people.

They will not only prevent the government from becoming arbitrary but also guide the people in maintaining law and order and promoting the country's development and prosperity. A 'Civil Society' can make the state a true friend of the people through its positive role. It will be possible to make the government a servant rather than a ruler of the people. Moreover, if the activities of 'representatives of civil society' can play a positive and qualitative role, their inherent, traditional, and historical greatness will be successful.

In Bangladesh, civil society is embedded within both liberal (Tocqueville and Mill) and Marxist (Gramsci) traditions. Sometimes civil society operates as a voluntary association; at other times, the state rules over it, and civil society works in favour of the elite and the state. Also, in contemporary Bangladesh, civil society is present in the state, democracy, and the market, but it is not as significant as observed in the table above.

It is undeniable that all theories are created for the welfare of people. Because people use it for their own benefit through practice, the theory's benefits are felt and realised in the lives of ordinary people. In the case of 'Civil Society', there is also a wide gap between theory and practice in Bangladesh. Also, the term sushil samaj, used as a synonym for civil society, is contradictory. So, it is better to avoid the contradictory Bangla meaning and use it directly in civil society. However, a beautiful, happy, and prosperous Bangladesh can be built only through a comprehensive, mutually beneficial partnership between the state and civil society.

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