

Module name/ title: Civil society, media and margins

Paper: Media and Margins

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**Component II: Description of the Module**

Items	Description of Module
<b>Subject Name</b>	Media and Communication Studies
<b>Paper Name</b>	Media and Margins
<b>Module Name/Title</b>	Civil society, media and margins
<b>Module ID</b>	P9M40
<b>Pre-requisites</b>	
<b>Objectives</b>	
<b>Keywords</b>	

## Civil Society, media and margins

### 1. Introduction

Civil society has always strived to address issues concerning the broader society. Since centuries, civil society has been working towards the betterment of communities. However, the issues varied across times and so did the medium of address. When Raja Ram Mohan Roy led the Brahmo Samaj Movement, he gathered mass support through addressing public meetings. In recent times, the anti-corruption movement was bolstered by social media campaigns which led to the rise of a new political party to power. In the current context, it is very important to understand how civil society is holding hands with media and addressing the issues of margins. Beginning with the concepts of 'civil society', 'media' and 'margins', the chapter would traverse through various types of media which have been used by the civil society in independent India in its deliberations on the margins and the marginalized.

### 2. The concepts

This section would look into the concepts of Civil society, margins and media. Examples are given to facilitate the understanding. Students are requested to think of similar examples.

#### 2.1. Civil society

Many observers state that civil society comprises people that emerged out of the society to address sites and issues left unattended by the state. It is not a singular concept but has several pluralized connotations. Scholars have conceptualized the term in varied ways. Alain Touraine (The Voice and the Eye, Cambridge university press, 1981) terms civil society as 'the locus of light side of collective action'. According to Neera Chandhoke, 'this is the site where the society enters into a relationship with the state.'

What do we understand by the term Civil Society? Who constitutes the civil society? Is it the citizens of the country, the professional population or the Non-government organization? United Nations calls it the 'third sector' thus distinguishing it from the public and private sector. The civil society can be defined as groups or organizations connected by a common cause and working in the interest of the society at large but operating outside the governmental and the profit making sectors. Organizations that make up for the civil society include labour unions, non-profit organizations, non political peoples formations, and other agencies which offer services without considering profit.

#### 2.2. Margins

When we say margins, we mean spaces away from the mainstream. Who are the 'marginalized'? The communities or individuals which are relegated to the fringes of the society by dominant economic and social agendas are the marginalized.

Marginalization could be geographical or structural. It is often found that the communities at the margins of a social or an institutional structure are also located at the geographical margins and vice versa. However, we need to look for exceptions to this.

Let us think of an Indian village where there are various caste groups including a few households of the Dalits. The traditional institutions in the village would offer the ascribed status to the Dalits, forbidding them to use the deep water tube-well used by the higher castes or imposing restrictions in entering the village temple. In terms of landholding or household income, the Dalit households are usually at the bottom. Socially, the traditional systems are so strongly exclusionist that a Dalit can never dream of getting assimilated in the larger village community. These households will be located on the periphery of the villages, thus marginalizing them geographically too. Their power in decision making or their participation in governance will always be negated by the higher caste groups. The Dalits in this case are in the margins, both structurally and geographically and could be said to be held in a marginalized position.

Let us think of a different example: a public bus in a city. There are steps in the bus leading to the floor of the bus. There are seats arranged in two neat rows. The steps are high up and the aisle is narrow. A person with locomotor disability on a wheelchair tries to board the bus. There is no ramp in the bus thus making it inaccessible for him. This person, in the context of the public transport, is in the margins. While the bus is designed keeping in mind the needs of the majority population, no thought was spared for the few with disabilities, thus pushing them to the margins.

Similarly tribal populations of the neoliberal era, women in the patriarchal society, senior citizens with special needs, children, and other groups occupy spaces in the margins at different contexts.

### 2.3. Media

What comes to your mind, when we say the word 'media'? Media can be defined as channels through which information is disseminated. The folk forms of media would be puppetry shows, street plays etc. The traditional forms of media are radio, newspaper, magazines, newsletters and other print publications. The new forms of media are digitized spaces where information is shared. The electronic media (newsrooms), social media (social networks, blogs, podcasts, video sharing etc.) form a part of the new media.

## 3. The intersections between Civil Society, Media and Margins:

In the following section we shall examine how civil society, while using the power of media, plays a significant role in addressing the issues of the margins. While doing so, we will go through the different categories of media.

### 3.1. Folk media:

The use of folk media in addressing social issues is commonly seen in rural areas. **Street plays** involve presenting a narrative through dance, songs and recitations at public spaces. It does not require broad stages to perform neither does it require any expensive gadgets. Using local resources and minimal instruments, a street play very effectively conveys the point. An NGO, Arpan in Mumbai, conducts street play across Mumbai and Thane to raise awareness on Child Sexual Abuse. Another NGO, called Kanchan Foundation based in Vashi, Maharashtra, conducted a play titled “*Haan Haan Mein Ladki hoon*” to address issues of education of a girl child in the country. The NGO Action Aid performed a street play on homelessness, with 14 street children from diverse backgrounds. The play gave a nuanced perspective on street children’s lives and issues related to homelessness. The NGO Jamghat was born from this endeavor, which is since then working relentlessly with street children.

**Puppetry** is also used by the civil society. Puppetry is a form of art and puppeteers are themselves a part of the civil society. Recently the newspapers reported about six tribal teenagers from Koraput district, Odisha, who have been engaging in finger puppet shows conducted in local dialects. Each show is for 5-10 minutes. In 2013 a local voluntary organization with the help of Sir Dorabji Tata Trust taught 25 children the art of finger puppetry. Since then they have done about 40 shows on different themes like, importance of breastfeeding, malaria, maternal infant care, etc. The civil society used folk media to beautifully address the marginalized.

### 3.2. Traditional Media:

The traditional media, like the newspaper, magazines, television, radio etc., has always been very popular to address social issues. **Print media** is a powerful medium to voice the concerns of the society. The civil society since decades have taken the route of print medium to advocate causes of the society at large. In an advocacy campaign, print medium is found to play several roles at different levels. At the initial level, print medium is used extensively to generate public opinion. Civil society members write articles to garner public support and mobilize opinion. At the execution of any policy or legislation, the civil society acts as a watch dog. Any discrepancy or incongruity is immediately brought to attention through the print media. “Pen is more powerful than the sword” is a popular saying of all times.

Magazines like Seminar, Down to Earth, Combat Law, Frontline etc. have dedicated columns to give voice to the vulnerable. On the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, an article titled “*Indigenous people in India and the web of indifference*” was published which highlights the plight of the indigenous people in safeguarding their natural resources from the state machinery. This article is written by grassroots activists and prominent members of the civil society. Academic journal “Economic and Political Weekly” regularly publishes unbiased research work from the academia, highlighting the issues related to the people in the margins.

**Community radio** broadcasts programmes specific to a particular area. The programmes are designed keeping in mind the sociocultural and political context of the place. Though the coverage of community radio might not be too spread-out, the medium is considered to be vertically deep. Community radio is known to be used by the civil society across the world. *Sangam Radio* is a successful community radio

project in India. Launched in 2008, *Sangam Radio* was developed by the Deccan Development Society which works on the issues related to farmers. The broadcasters are two local Dalit women, who do farming during the day and broadcasts programmes in the evening. With a monthly expenditure of Rs. 10000, this community radio station reaches upto 150 villages. The community radio is a perfect culmination point of media and civil society to reach out to the margins.

**Television** is one of the most popular media in modern India. Television came to India in 1959 as an educational programme supported by UNESCO. The programme *Krishi Darshan*, telecasted on Wednesdays and Fridays for 20 minutes addressed the issues of the farmers. This began initially in 80 villages in and around Delhi through community television sets. After being managed by the All India Radio, it became separated from Radio in 1976 and got a new name – *Doordarshan*. Till the period of liberalization, Television was controlled by the government. There were several educational programmes like *Gyandarshan* for students, awareness programmes on family planning, vaccination etc. Most of the programmes in *Doordarshan* were in Hindi. This made the content obscure for the people who did not speak the language. Though it did serve as a medium to disseminate information and raise awareness effectively, the civil society's access to *Doordarshan* was limited.

In early nineties, as television started succumbing to the demands of the market forces, private channels emerged. Programmes like *Satyameva Jayate*, *Nazariya*, *Green Kerala Express*, etc. evolved from the civil society-media synthesis. These programmes gave significant space to civil society to voice out their concerns about the issues of margins. It also has successfully contributed in mobilizing public opinion as well as funds to forward the interventions.

**Film** media has, time and again, proved to be one of the most effective tools to bring forth the issues of margins. Indian cinema has also touched upon the fringes of the society, giving voice to the voiceless. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Bimal Roy and others have constantly strived to tell us stories which mainland India has ignored. Roy's *Sujata*, Benegal's *Ankur*, Ray's *Sadgati* are classic films which had effectively mirrored the caste atrocities of Independent India. In recent times, the documentary format has also been widely used to give the mainland India a peep into its margins. Films like "*Have you seen the Arana*" by Sunanda Bose, "*There is a fire in your forest*" by Krishnendu Bose, "*Only an Axe Away*" by P. Baburaj and C. Sarath Chandran, talk about the constant struggle of the tribal communities to protect their 'home', their forests and their land from the dominant policies of the state. These documentaries have successfully revealed and analyzed the discrepancies in the state policies, which often seem to violate some of the fundamental rights. "*Acting like a thief*" is yet another movie by P. Kerim Freidman and Shashwati Talukdar which aims to banish the prejudices that mainstream societies and the state have towards the certain tribal communities termed as 'criminal tribes' by the British. There are movies on sex workers, people with disabilities, old people, women, and areas in conflict, children in conflict with laws, refugees, HIV positives, minority groups, and others who have been in the margins. These documentary filmmakers are largely a part of the civil society and are also engaged with the issues they have been working on.

### 3.3. New Media:

Modern media, also called as ‘new media’, refers to digital content which is accessible through the internet and involves intense interplay between technology, images and sound. New media theorist Lev Manovich describes new media as “being native to computers or relying on computers for distribution”. The blogs, social networking sites, online newspapers and magazines, emails, online groups, chat rooms, etc. all fall in the category of new media. In recent times, new media is widely being used by the civil society. New media has democratized and revolutionized information dissemination and sharing. It has allowed a transactional mode of communication where the sender and the receiver are engaged simultaneously. There are podcasts where one can access audio files of speeches, lectures or other deliverances. The new media also allows space for instant feedback and there is a scope for anonymity.

Social media, in recent times, has emerged as a very powerful tool and has had a catalytic effect in giving shape to a civil society. The Arab spring was known to have gained ground mostly by the use of social media, which eventually led to the tremendous collective action resulting in the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments. M. Lynch in his paper “*After Egypt: the limits and promise of online challenges to the authoritarian Arab State*” talks about four ways in which social media can contribute to collective action:

1. By making it possible for disaffected citizens to act publicly in coordination;
2. By creating information cascades that bolstered protestor’s perceptions of the likelihood of success;
3. By raising the costs of repression by the ruling regimes; and
4. By dramatically increasing publicity through diffusion of information to regional and global public.

Closer to home, social media has become the most preferred space to voice out dissent or to share grievances. The civil society in Kashmir has been opting for these new media spaces to voice out the concerns of the Kashmiris.

Use of twitter by women activists has been widely noticed in recent times. The ‘*Pinjra-tod movement*’ led by students and alumni of Delhi University connected over social media and deliberated on the differential treatment by hostel authorities between men and women with regard to hostel entry-exit timings and the annual hostel fees. The movement spread to other institutions across the country through social media. The Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) has issued a notice to 23 universities in Delhi to answer the questions raised by the women activists.

To discuss the issues related to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 specifically in ensuring community forest rights, prominent civil society representatives formed a google group. The group has members who actively engaged in the implementation of the Act at the grassroots include people from academia, independent researchers, media persons, Lawyers, Voluntary organizations, villagers,

NGOs, funding agencies, policy advisors, and others. The group members keep posting about the various issues relating to their concerned areas and there are intense deliberations which have also contributed towards policy formulations. The use of new media, in this case the google group, has made people from far flung areas to engage in a dialogue on an issue which is relevant among margins. Similarly, one would find other groups floating in the web, constantly striving to bring out issues out of the closet like, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, marital rape etc. and engage in an open dialogue.

In India, CG-net Swara is an innovative radio space used for information dissemination in the local areas of Chattisgarh state. It was founded by Subhranshu Choudhary in the year 2008. In a published interview, Subhranshu Choudhary shared the motivation behind starting CG-net Swara. He was living among the Adivasis of Chattisgarh when, in the course of a conversation, they told him, *“You should democratize your media communication platform. When we sit in a Panchayat or in a small room, air is the medium and nobody owns it, so we all have equal right to speak and to be heard. But when people sit far away and to hear about us, they need tools.”* Choudhary reflected that these ‘tools’ are available to only few which has caused an imbalance in the media coverage. The mainstream media designs information according to the palatability of the mainstream audience. Adivasis, who comprise a marginal section of our mainstream society both geographically and structurally, are no match to the mainstream audience. For this reason Choudhary thought of giving a new incarnation to journalism. Considering the increasing number of mobile phone users in the rural areas, he decided to shift the nature of journalism to the mobile phones. Thus came about CG-net Swara, which is a voice portal for the citizens and the civil society to report or listen to audio newsbytes using their mobile phones. The language used is Hindi and the local dialect Gondi. A civil society representative has used the medium of mobile phone and given rise to grassroots journalism of the marginalized, for the marginalized and right at the margins.

New media has opened up the spaces of freedom for civil society to connect on several such sensitive issues and culminate the deliberations into actions.

### Summary:

With the increasing use of media by civil society, a new discourse on communication and development has emerged. It engages on strategizing communication campaigns for the purpose of development. The module has explored various types of media - folk media, traditional media and new media and its intersections with the civil society to approach the margins. These sections have highlighted the civil society-media amalgamations through several examples from the contemporary times.