

# On the difficulty of studying 'civil society': Reflections on NGOs, state and democracy in Bangladesh

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*In common with most countries of South Asia and indeed the rest of the world, discussion of the concept of 'civil society' has emerged recently in Bangladesh among academics and activists. Much of it has been generated by the international aid agencies and their 'good governance' policy agenda of the 1990s, and is concerned primarily with the increasingly high profile community of local and national development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which have emerged in Bangladesh since 1971. But there are also local meanings to the term derived from the independence struggle and the construction of a Bangladesh state, from local traditions of urban and rural voluntarism and from the organisation of religious life. The concept of civil society in contemporary Bangladesh is therefore best understood as both a 'system' and an 'idea', consisting of both 'old' and 'new' civil society traditions, resisting tendencies to privilege only one (external, policy-focused) definition of the term. By recognising these different understandings, the concept of 'civil society' can help illuminate aspects of the changing relationships between citizens and the state, the formulation and implementation of public policy, and the shifting dimensions of the institutional landscape. But it would be wrong to overestimate the contribution of 'civil society' as currently configured in the building of democratic processes, since there is a weak state and pervasive patron-clientelism. There is little sign of the more optimistic accounts of Putnam and others concerning the relationship between civil society and democracy.*

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## I

*Introduction: The re-emergence of a concept*

**This article explores** the concept of civil society in relation to Bangladesh's politics and development. Although sometimes dismissed as merely another political fashion, the subject is important because 'civil society'—usually the English term, but sometimes translated into Bengali as *shushil shamaj*, literally 'gentle society'—is increasingly audible in public debate in Bangladesh at various levels. Most obviously, international donor agencies have pushed the idea of civil society in relation to the 'good governance' political and institutional development agendas of the 1990s. At the same time, articles regularly appear in the newspapers in Bangladesh which debate the possible meanings and roles of civil society. For example, *The Daily Star* (18 February 2000) carried a long article by the eminent academic Professor Rehman Sobhan setting out the potential role of civil society initiatives to challenge the prevailing pattern of confrontational politics in the country. This was followed by an in-depth response by writer and journalist Iftekhar Sayeed (10 July 2000) arguing that civil society was simply another of the many 'eccentric ideas' exported by the West which was leading people into a 'wild goose chase'. Even the government has taken to mentioning the need, from time to time, for consultations 'with NGOs and civil society' over a number of policy issues and the GO-NGO Consultative Council (GNCC) was established by the government in the mid-1990s, with the assistance of various donor agencies, as a committee to build better complementarity between the government and NGOs.

Bangladesh has an extensive NGO community and many of these organisations have enthusiastically embraced the concept of civil society as part of their own quests for identity and legitimacy. Some of these NGOs speak of constructing alliances between different groups within civil society in order to mobilise citizens in support of political or social objectives. For example Proshika, one of the country's largest and most active NGOs, ran a campaign for pro-poor financial reforms under the banner of '*kaemon budget chai*' ('what kind of budget do we want?') which brought

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a range of individuals and organisations from political parties, trade unions and community groups—including landless rural women leaders—face to face with the Minister of Finance in 1997 and helped set in motion at least the rudiments of a more consultative budgetary planning process. Another current Proshika campaign against religious extremism and intolerance led to a demonstration in Dhaka in August 2001 by a broad coalition against the local use of unofficial *fatwa* rulings by rural community leaders against local women, in support of a High Court ruling which had stated that these were unlawful, but about which the government had remained silent.

However, there has been relatively little research on civil society in Bangladesh, either as an idea or as an empirical reality, through ethnographic work, theoretical analysis or historical study. While the recent rise of the concept is linked to Western development fashions, to which Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable due to its position in the international aid system (cf. Sobhan 1982), it is also an idea with multiple local meanings and histories that are both politically contested and continually transformed. The concept of civil society may therefore have the potential to illuminate important aspects of Bangladesh's social and political processes, both past and present. It is instructive to compare the debates in Bangladesh with recent discussions in India. For example, Gupta (2000: 164) has shown the ways in which a 'contemporary conjoining of tradition with the concept of civil society' among social movements fed by disillusionment with the state has built a romantic vision of 'society' and 'cultural roots' which appears to unite both conservative and radical elements within Indian society. In their counter-arguments to this type of perspective on civil society, Mahajan (1999) and Bêteille (2000) emphasise its interdependence with the state and with the modern concept of citizenship.

Civil society as a concept is neither straightforward nor new. Definitional debates about civil society would require an article in themselves and have in any case been summarised effectively elsewhere (Hall 1995; Keane 1998; Van Rooy 1998). Civil society is commonly understood as 'the population of groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside of the state and marketplace' (Van Rooy 1998: 30) or as 'an intermediate associational realm between the state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy from the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society' (White 1994: 379). The roots of the idea of civil society are various and scattered. From the position of the 18th century Scottish enlightenment, Adam Ferguson viewed

civil society in terms of the growth of moral responsibility, as a socially desirable alternative both to the state of nature and the growing individualism of emergent capitalism. On the other hand, G.W.F. Hegel argued that if the emergent organisations of civil society were not balanced and ordered by the state, they would become self-interested and unlikely to contribute to the common good. Both types of approaches shaped the early evolution of the concept of civil society. Alongside such ideas, Alexis de Tocqueville's 19th century account of the positive role played by associationalism in the United States brought an organisational focus to the idea of civil society. He stressed volunteerism, community spirit and independent organisational life as a form of protection against state domination of society, and indeed as a counterbalance which could help keep the state accountable and effective. These latter ideas in particular have become highly influential today in discussions of social cohesion in Western societies and among international development donor agencies.

There are two main problems which arise from this general frame of thinking on civil society. The first is its normative character, which implies that civil society embodies particular types of organisational form and certain 'positive' values. Such normative accounts of civil society as a 'good thing' have been influential in the ways in which the concept has recently been taken up by policy makers around the world, leading to efforts to 'build' civil society where it has been considered 'absent', and to strengthen civil society where it is thought to be 'weak'. These ideas are premised on the view that civil society can balance the state and the market in political terms by reducing the abuse of power, and in economic terms by becoming a third source of social service provision. While such ideas may resonate in industrialised liberal democracies—although even here they are hotly debated—they may have limited value in countries where the state itself remains weak and limited in basic capacity.

The second central problem is the notion of public space, which in civil society theory normally excludes the organisation and ties of family and kinship. Civil society is usually seen as being situated *beyond* the household and Putnam (1993), for example, argues that civil society is composed of groups whose horizontal ties cross-cut, contrasting these with communities of kinship. This idea is drawn from Putnam's reading of Banfield's notion of 'amoral familism', which painted a picture of nuclear families whose values led them to maximise short-term self-interest at the expense of wider altruism. Putnam also argues that the organisations

and networks of civil society generate horizontal relationships of trust and reciprocity, which can then form the basis for collective action, and contrasts these with the vertical relationships of patronage, which he sees as fostering dependence and self-interest rather than mutuality.

A different strand of civil society thinking, which is far more ready to acknowledge conflict and ambiguity, has also been influential around the world. Drawing on the work of Gramsci, this perspective argues that civil society is the arena, separate from but enmeshed with state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested, implying that civil society contains a relatively wide range of organisations which both challenge and uphold the existing order. Gramsci's ideas about civil society were taken up by dissident intellectuals and activists in the resistance to totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. These two different civil society traditions can therefore usefully be distinguished—the liberal and the radical.

It has been the liberal, organisational view of civil society exemplified by de Tocqueville which has been most enthusiastically embraced by development agencies during the past decade in relation to countries such as Bangladesh, where NGOs have been extensively funded and efforts to build their organisational capacity and, sometimes, to widen their political roles have been made (Davis and McGregor 2000). This preference can be clearly seen in relation to efforts by development policy makers to promote democratic institutions and market reforms in developing countries—the so-called 'good governance' agenda made popular in the early 1990s—which suggested that a 'virtuous circle' could be built between state, economy and civil society which would balance growth, equity and stability (Archer 1994). As a 'new policy agenda' took root during the rest of the 1990s, stressing good governance on the one hand and neo-liberal economic policies on the other, NGOs became viewed as alternative or substitute service providers in health, education and agriculture, sometimes as part of the privatisation policy (Fisher 1997; Robinson 1993). The dominance of this ideology obscured the potential value of other understandings of civil society alongside or in place of the neo-Tocquevillian one. For example, a Hegelian concept of civil society may be useful in understanding how access to and exclusion from public space and citizenship rights is historically organised within colonial and post-colonial contexts. Béteille (1999) draws attention to the limited extent of citizenship rights accorded to 'native subjects' by the British in India. Gramscian ideas about civil society are relevant to understandings of

organised resistance to systems of authoritarian repression and Jahangir (1986) highlights the long tradition of resistance to colonial domination in Bengal .

There are two other broader issues which are relevant to contemporary discussions of civil society. One is the idea that civil society is essentially fragile. This view is reflected in Putnam's (2000) anxieties surrounding the 'collapse' of community in the United States. Putnam suggests that associationalism has declined considerably in the United States, famously exemplified by his observation that people now go 'bowling alone' rather than in the organised groups of the 1950s. This view of decline problematises and even contradicts the efforts of governments and funders around the world to 'build' civil society because, even in Putnam's account, the historical accumulation of social capital is conceived as a locally specific and essentially slow process. Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) point out the irony that while policy makers have become interested in how to 'build' civil society in countries where it appears weak or non-existent, such as areas of the developing world, a high level of anxiety is being generated in parts of the West where there is a belief that this scarce resource has somehow been 'lost'.

A second concern is whether a concept which clearly has its roots in the West has relevance outside this context. Hann and Dunn (1996: 22) acknowledge that a more generalised notion of civil society as 'the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life' is useful, but they are sceptical of its ability—at least in the concept's narrower forms—to provide useful analytical insights even in its original European context. Hann and Dunn point critically, for example, to the way in which the civil society concept has come to imply a simplistic dichotomy with the state. Blaney and Pasha (1993), perhaps more realistically, acknowledge the increasingly universal relevance of the concept in relation to citizen rights within the post-Cold War landscape, but they also argue for the need to locate the analysis of the ideas and practices of civil society more fully within both local and transnational historical contexts and processes.

In an influential article on 'the difficulty of studying the state', Abrams (1981) wrote of the need to understand both the 'state-system', as constituted by the existing institutional structure and practice which was visible in any society, and the 'state-idea' which is projected and believed among people at different levels of society and at different historical points. It is possible to overcome some of the difficulties of studying civil society by using a similar distinction in which we disentangle the system of

organisations and practices which may be said to comprise civil society in Bangladesh, from the different understandings and perceptions of the civil society *idea* which also shape policy and practice.

## II

### *State, NGOs and donors in Bangladesh*

Formerly East Pakistan, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation in 1971, after a prolonged two decade struggle for autonomy which culminated in a nine month war with the Pakistan army. A 'least developed country' according to the United Nations' categorisation, Bangladesh has a population estimated at almost 140 million, a per capita income of US \$369 and an economy which remains heavily dependent on foreign aid and is predominantly rural in character. While the majority of the population are Bengali Muslims, there are a significant number of Hindu, Christian and animist minorities who, it is estimated, make up approximately 15 per cent of the population.

Unlike many other countries around the world where international and Northern development NGOs tend to predominate, Bangladesh has an unusually large number of 'indigenous' development NGOs. One report recently estimated that there were 22,000 organisations in the region (DFID 2000). Most of these are local, very small and voluntary but a few have grown dramatically in the past two decades to become some of the largest indigenous NGOs found anywhere in the world, with multi-million dollar budgets, high-rise offices and not-for-profit business concerns. Between 20 and 35 per cent of the country's population is now believed to receive some services—usually credit provision, health or education services—from an NGO. NGOs began working predominantly in rural areas, but have now expanded their programmes into urban contexts. The reasons for this distinctively NGO-centred organisational landscape in Bangladesh are varied, but include a combination of (a) the existence of local traditions of voluntary action, deepened through recent extreme experiences with natural disaster and war; (b) the massive influence of foreign aid since independence in the form of both resources and a foreign organisational presence; and (c) the existence of a state formation that is characterised by limited service provision and a rigid bureaucratic structure.

Before Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation there had long been traditions, as found in most societies, of community organisation

and voluntary action. Private voluntary work was undertaken by better off members of the community in organising schools or mosques and relief was provided for the victims of natural disasters. Religious charity has long been part of rural life. The Islamic duty of *zakat*, the payment of one-fortieth of one's income to the poor, is an important and obligatory part of social life for Muslim Bangladeshis. Among Hindus, it has long been customary to provide food to *sadhus* and *faqeers* (Zaidi 1970). From the colonial period onwards, Christian missionary work embodied elements of voluntary activity in the fields of education and health and contained antecedents of some of the community development approaches of contemporary NGOs. Self-help village level organisations, such as the *Palli Mangal Samitis* (Village Welfare Societies) became common in many districts from the 1930s onwards, often encouraged by local administrators in combining local good works with the building of local patronage relationships. Later, in the Pakistan period, the village farmer cooperative model was introduced, although this was more a mechanism to distribute government patronage in the form of subsidised agricultural inputs than a spontaneous form of self-organisation by farmers (Khan 1989).

The national emergency which followed the war of independence and the cyclone which came immediately afterwards was formative for the sector. Writers such as Korten (1990) have pointed out the ways in which large-scale disasters may lead to collective efforts which provide the foundation for an NGO sector to emerge. The massive international relief effort which followed independence provided familiarity with and experience of the 'aid industry' and facilitated subsequent access to funds. The opportunity to gain access to external resources led to a new group of organisations, often led by a single entrepreneurial founder-leader, which built further on the local traditions of voluntarism and self-help outlined above, as well as the growing influence of ideas such as those of P. Freire and E.F. Schumacher. At the same time, new vertical relationships were created between groups of local people and external service providers (Hasan 1993; Lewis 1993).

The second factor in the rise of Bangladesh's NGO sector is the powerful role played by foreign aid. Bangladesh has since 1971 remained heavily dependent on international aid at a level of just under US \$2 billion per year, according to Hossain (1990), although it is now declining both in real terms and as a proportion of gross national product (GNP). There has been a large increase in funds going to NGOs, from US \$120 million in 1991 to US \$188 million in 1994–95 (World Bank 1996). It is now



estimated that NGOs receive about 17 per cent of the total aid flows disbursed to Bangladesh (DFID 2000). Nevertheless, the study reports that of the 22,000 NGOs active in the country, only 1,250 receive foreign assistance (*ibid.*), implying that many of the country's NGOs rely on voluntarism, government funds or philanthropy. Of those organisations which do receive foreign funds, the distribution is heavily skewed towards a relatively small number. Although there has been a proliferation of local NGOs in Bangladesh, figures indicate that more than 85 per cent of all funds are consumed by a group of about ten large Bangladeshi NGOs. Of these, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Proshika are perhaps the best known. These NGOs are now comparable in size and influence to some government departments, bringing fears in some quarters of a 'parallel state' and the lack of accountability to citizens implied by the strong historical links with international aid. However, it is important to note that many of Bangladesh's larger NGOs are achieving considerable success in reducing their dependence on foreign donors, partly through levying administrative charges on their revolving loan funds which are used for credit programmes, and partly through increasingly successful business ventures—such as the Aarong department stores run by BRAC—the profits from which can be ploughed back into the organisation.

Third, state failure is a commonly cited explanation for the growth of Bangladesh's NGO sector. Although there were many international NGOs which arrived in Bangladesh in the wake of the humanitarian crisis of 1970–71 produced by the aftermath of war and a massive cyclone, Hasan (1993: 94) shows that relatively few indigenous NGOs were established immediately after independence in the period between 1972 and 1975 when 'there was a great deal of expectation that the government would take care of the rural people'. The rapid evaporation of such high expectations and the gradual narrowing of the available democratic political space led activists and social entrepreneurs to search for new organisational structures with which to address public problems and to build personal careers. The efforts of Sheikh Mujib, increasingly challenged by political opposition to his regime, to create a one party state in 1975, led to the reintroduction of military-bureaucratic rule which lasted until 1990. NGOs became attractive to those activists who were inspired by progressive political or developmental agendas but were unwilling or unable to enter formal political institutions. Continuing levels of widespread poverty across the country led, in the 1970s and 1980s, to widespread disillusionment with the government's efforts at rural development which

consisted of half-hearted attempts to build formal village cooperatives, a reliance on trickle-down economics for the poor and seemingly endless reorganisations of local government structures aimed at penetrating rural society more fully.

The Bangladesh state can be characterised as both 'strong' and 'weak' depending on whether this is assessed according to its formal presence and power or according to the quality of the services it provides its citizens. According to Davis and McGregor (2000: 56), the state in Bangladesh remains a source of 'considerable bureaucratic power, underpinned by a latent military threat', though extensively penetrated by wider social relationships of patron–clientism, rent-seeking and corruption, and patriarchal ideology. McGregor's notion of the 'patron state' (1989) puts forth the argument that:

... the state is seen to organise the delivery of development resources so as to act as the patron of last resort, thus securing micro-level patron-client relations which contribute to the reproduction of poverty. (Davis and McGregor 2000: 56).

While seeking to build and maintain strong patronage relationships, and directly or indirectly backed by the military, the state nevertheless remains weak in terms of citizen accountability, its capacities to provide social welfare provisions or ensure an independent judiciary, to collect taxes or to represent the interests of the poor. In a similar vein, Wood (1997) argues that Bangladesh could be moving towards having a 'state without citizens'. The state has, as a result of these patronage relationships and the ideology of structural adjustment, 'discarded' its responsibilities for service provision and citizen accountability through the 'franchising out' of certain key state functions to NGOs and the private sector, which now cater—inadequately—to citizens as 'consumers' (ibid.)

Following the work of Migdal (1988), White (1999: 10) identifies Bangladesh as a 'weak state' in a 'strong society'. For example, the government's repeated attempts through successive regimes to reorganise local administrative units, prohibit dowry or redistribute *khas* land (land which emerges from changing river and coastal systems which the government has earmarked for distribution to the poor) have all proved largely unsuccessful. In terms of legitimacy, the Bangladesh state after thirty years of independence is still engaged in a search for a Bengali identity that is distinct from India and a Muslim identity separate to that of Pakistan. The existence of a range of social, economic and political interests, which act effectively upon the state, suggests a dynamic and strong society which

is apparent from both the social entrepreneurship apparent in the formation of so many NGOs, as well as in the political mobilisation and the persistence of widespread corruption. This view is also supported by the work of Blair (1997), who suggested that the proliferation of interest groups in civil society potentially creates a political 'gridlock' which can then paralyse democratic processes and economic life. In Bangladesh, interest groups in the form of political parties and associated groups frequently call for stoppages (*hartals*) and pursue political action outside formal political institutions. Indeed, the political opposition in Bangladesh has since 1991 routinely boycotted parliament, lending Bangladesh's democratic institutions a hollow shell quality through which very little 'real' democratic process is visible. White suggests therefore that 'civil society' has encroached on the state which '... is unable to guarantee the basic rights of any who have not the power to seize it for themselves' (1999: 10). The logic of this position in policy terms is not to 'build' civil society, as the good governance agenda has argued, but instead to strengthen the accountability and effectiveness of state provision.

The NGO sector in Bangladesh is diverse in terms of organisations and approaches. Most NGOs in Bangladesh can still be broadly situated along a continuum which runs from primarily economic activities such as service delivery, credit and income generation to more radical 'political' approaches which emphasise Freirean notions of 'conscientisation' and 'empowerment'. For example, the Grameen Bank was initially established by Chittagong University economics professor M. Yunus as an 'action research' project. It went on to develop a model of credit provision for landless women without demanding collateral as an alternative to traditional moneylenders who demanded high interest rates and other favours, or formal banks which catered only to the elite (Holcombe 1995). On the other hand, Nijera Kori is an example of the more radical empowerment-based NGO. It has been active, for example, with a strong local political protest against shrimp production in the south west of Bangladesh, and with the struggle to gain access to government *khas* land for the landless. However, the majority of NGOs have opted for the credit-based approach, which is both economically sustainable for the organisations themselves and highly attractive to government and foreign donors due in no small part to its non-political character (Hashemi and Hasan 1999).

Until recently, the NGO sector remained somewhat isolated from elements of wider society and made little explicit reference to the idea of civil society in terms of discourse or practices. For most of the 1980s,

the activities of NGOs tended to be met with scepticism by activists, the middle classes and the media, which saw NGOs as self-interested and over-accountable to foreign donors. Confining their work to narrowly defined development activities, most NGOs played no role in the mass movement against General Ershad between 1987 and 1990, belatedly lending their name to a statement of support in the last days of the campaign when it was finally clear that the government was going to fall. From the mid-1990s this began to change, with the global fame of the Grameen Bank and the efforts of NGOs such as Proshika to seek a higher public profile and to build alliances with women's organisations, the media, trade unions and political groups. This was encouraged by the 'good governance' aid agenda, which has supported the addition of a third type of strategy for NGOs—that of policy advocacy and influence. For example, Proshika added a new dimension to its work with the creation of an Institute for Development Policy Analysis and Advocacy (IDPAA) in the early 1990s. IDPAA and its allies have campaigned on a wide variety of social, political and environmental issues.

The mass movement which emerged against the Khaleda Zia regime in the mid-1990s also made it clear that some NGOs, through the umbrella organisation Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), were indeed prepared to play a more proactive role in national politics. In the elections of 1996, ADAB coordinated a Democracy Awareness Education Programme through which 15,000 trainers ran awareness workshops across the whole country, contributing to an impressive voter turnout of 74 per cent (Ashman 1997). While these kinds of activities have generated only low levels of conflict with established interests, others have not. For example, the efforts of Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (GSS) to promote its landless group members as candidates in local union *parishad* elections in Nilphamari were met with violent resistance by local landlords, who burnt down the NGO's schools, attacked staff and members and conducted a house search to confiscate books and publications (Hashemi 1995). Partly as a result of this more 'political' role, public perceptions of NGOs have been dramatically enhanced in recent years, but there has been a price for increased political involvement. Certain organisations, such as Proshika and Nijera Kori, became identified in the public mind (rightly or wrongly) with the then ruling Awami League.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) returned to power in the 2001 elections, the Government has begun taking steps to marginalise certain NGOs which it associates with the former Awami League regime.

Also, local critics of the role of the aid industry in Bangladesh are sceptical of this new idea of *shushil samaj*—popularised in the press by some radical, nevertheless donor-funded NGO leaders—as just another example of the ways in which powerful local clients of the aid machine are seeking to insinuate a new vocabulary of rather suspect ideas into social and political life.

The expansion of NGO roles into new societal ‘spaces’ is not confined to the political sphere. Economic activities by NGOs are also growing. For example, BRAC has recently established its own university, partly in response to the closure of public space within the old universities which have been paralysed by continuing political violence. New private universities for the growing urban middle class are also proving highly profitable, tapping a market in which relatively high fees are payable which, however, are still considerably lower than overseas alternatives. Several of Bangladesh’s NGOs have trading concerns (such as printing, clothes, computer services) through which they are progressively reducing the dependence on foreign aid and building a stronger local resource base. These business concerns, while raising NGO profiles, also face accusations of profiteering for personal gain from sections of the public and allegations of unfair competition from the business community.

Bangladesh is commonly regarded as possessing a ‘strong’ civil society in terms of its NGO sector. But the commonly held view of Bangladesh as having a vibrant civil society oversimplifies because (a) all too often only NGOs are equated with ‘civil society’, thereby ignoring other organisations and forms of action (Howell and Pearce 2001); (b) analyses of civil society in Bangladesh tend to see it as a new phenomenon and pay insufficient attention to wider historical and political processes (Hashemi and Hasan 1999); and (c) because it is generally unwise to assume—as liberal accounts of civil society tend to do—a simple dichotomy between civil society and the state, between kinship communities and civil society, or between vertical and horizontal ties (Chandhoke 2002). The following section briefly explores some of this complexity.

### III

#### *Unpacking ‘Civil Society’: ‘Old’ and ‘New’ civil society in Bangladesh*

The tendency simply to equate the high profile NGO sector in Bangladesh with a resurgent civil society brings the danger of obscuring the long

history of state-society struggles. What Hashemi and Hasan (1999: 130) call ‘traditional’ civil society organisations—students, lawyers, journalists, cultural activists—etc.,

... have historically played a monumental role in the struggle for Bengali nationalism, for building a secular society and for democratic rights. In fact the movement against the military dictatorships of Ayub Khan and HM Ershad, and even the war of independence, were often led by civil society organisations rather than narrow political parties.

The role of these ‘old’ pre-NGO civil society organisations of course changed over time, as what began as a relatively diverse range of citizen groups and interests gradually became part of a narrower, organised political movement under the Awami League.

Organised resistance in the cultural sphere in the form of the ‘language movement’ in the 1950s (which asserted the Bengali language against the Urdu imposed by the West Pakistan leadership) gradually took on more explicitly economic and political dimensions, and subsequently became absorbed into the post-1971 state apparatus. It also took the form of a nationalist civil society rooted in the democratic struggle for autonomy and eventually independence (Rahman 1999). As Jalal (1995: 90) shows, after the liberation of Bangladesh, Mujib was able to use the Awami League’s party organisation at least in part to ‘establish state control over society’. Jahangir (1986: 44) describes the ways in which the Awami League Government by 1975 secured the ‘suspension or destruction of rival trade unions, student and youth fronts’ and the control of ‘pressure groups and potentially alternative points of organised political power’. In Blair’s (1997) distinction, this eventually led to the co-option of much of ‘traditional’ civil society into official organisations and party-affiliated groups in the fields of rural development, welfare, arts and culture. Jahangir (1986) also describes the militarisation of Bangladesh’s ‘civil’ society in the 1970s under the military regime of Zia Rahman; military priorities took precedence over social priorities for example in changing budget levels.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The contrasting of ‘civil’ with ‘militarised’ society is another common way in which the idea of civil society is understood in some quarters in Bangladesh. Since the end of military rule in 1990, many have seen the challenge of building democracy in the post-military era in these terms. For example, this perspective comes across in the recently published memoirs of Siddiqi (2001), a former Vice Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University and Government Advisor.

But it also contributed to the emergence of 'newer' organisations of civil society in the form of development NGOs, pressure groups and various umbrella organisations which are concerned with poverty, civil rights, gender and democracy. The broadening of these struggles against military rule at the domestic level, and later in support of a greater level of engagement between citizens and democratic political institutions, has gradually expanded and diversified civil society action to include a wide range of organisations and viewpoints, with many of the NGOs as well as a range of other secular and religious organisations taking part (Rahman 1999).

The boundaries between state and civil society, arguably always ambiguous as Hann and Dunn (1996) point out, are constantly shifting over time. Such blurring of boundaries is apparent in the ways in which elements of 'old' civil society were absorbed into the post-1971 state, but it is also apparent among many of the 'new' civil society organisations. Although the relationship between NGOs and the government is still normally characterised as one of tension and distrust, White (1999) argues that the oppositional relations between NGOs and the state are largely 'mythic', linked as they are through family ties, contracting relationships and an often overlapping dependence on foreign donors. At the same time, the depoliticisation of development problems through the now ubiquitous policy language of government/NGO 'partnership' brings NGOs and the state together into relationships of collaboration, for example, in state contracting to NGOs for service delivery—what Sanyal (1991) has termed 'antagonistic cooperation' and the World Bank (1996) terms 'pursuing common goals'. White (1999) argues that both common interest models of state and civil society partnership *and* simple oppositional models of civil society balancing the state will therefore need re-examining.

Religious organisations and philanthropic activity may also be included in civil society and here the distinction between 'old' and 'new' civil society may easily become blurred. On a recent visit to the village where I conducted my fieldwork in Comilla in Eastern Bangladesh in August 2000, I found a substantial growth since the late 1980s of NGO-based activity in the area by at least four different organisations, coexisting with other forms of organised self-help, individual elite philanthropy and local patronage at the community level. For example, a village association had been started amongst a small group of the better off youth to provide sports facilities and a youth club and to generate savings. A local

doctor, now ill with cancer, who had left the village many years ago for a successful career in Dhaka and who had earlier funded the village *madrasa*, had provided funds for an orphanage to be built in the village. Another successful villager who became a chief of police in Dhaka had established a secondary school in his name, and secured municipal funds for its running costs through his relationship with local political leaders in the nearby town. This link was now part of a wider effort to bring the village under the local municipality which would bring new services, such as gas supply, to the village.

We have examined how relationships within civil society may be characterised by conflict as well as by harmony. The work of NGOs in rural Bangladesh has generated some well-publicised cases of violent conflict between local religious groups and NGO field staff and clients. These cases have sometimes been used as evidence that NGO programmes which challenge local gender norms (female literacy and education, awareness building in relation to women's rights) are proving influential. In 1994 women field workers of an NGO were assaulted in Manikganj and Sitakanda, and more recently, in Brahmanbaria, BRAC schools and staff were attacked (Rahman 1999). For some, this is evidence of clashes between the forces of local religious conservatism and NGOs as purveyors of Western modernity, perhaps best symbolised by growing numbers of female NGO field staff now visible riding motorcycles in remote rural areas. Others have sought to explain such incidents as part of ongoing disputes over patron-client relations or land-related conflicts, perhaps by threatening established interests by positioning themselves as 'new patrons', as Devine (1998) has argued. The NGOs are merely convenient scapegoats. Religious organisations may also be considered a part of civil society and such cases are examples of the intra-civil society conflicts we would expect to find in accordance with radical theories of civil society. Like NGOs, religious organisations may also see themselves as acting in pursuit of the public good in response to local problems. For example, during 2001 in the Gopibagh area of Dhaka's Mirpur district, the leader of one mosque helped organise a community initiative designed to resist the problem of organised crime (believed to be linked upwards to political parties) experienced by local traders and residents in the neighbourhood. Having issued whistles to local shop keepers and provided wooden clubs to the congregation of the mosque, the activities of local touts and extortionists were believed to have been successfully reduced. A number of those



accused were pursued and then beaten to death by a group of angry citizens carrying out a form of 'instant justice'.<sup>3</sup>

Conflicts within civil society are not confined to tensions between religious and secular organisations or perspectives. In the 1980s, one NGO campaigned for an essential drugs policy which would limit the importation of costly branded medical products, primarily used by the urban elite, and produce a list of widely-used medicines which could be produced more cheaply locally. This was resisted by the Bangladesh Medical Association, the professional association of a medical establishment which stood to lose financially from any tampering with its lucrative relationship with international pharmaceutical companies (Chowdhury 1995). In the NGO community, too, there have regular allegations of misbehaviour, such as the well-publicised case of the fall from grace of one major NGO, GSS, in the late 1990s, over various allegations of mismanagement, corruption and scandal. Such cases serve to remind us of the dangers of the liberal vision of a too-benign view of civil society and the existence of what Keane has termed 'uncivil society', though such judgements about actions taken by organised groups in pursuit of their own or a community's interests depend very much on the values and beliefs of the observer.

Earlier analyses of the rural power structure by NGOs (for example, BRAC's 1978 study of 'The Net') emphasised patron-client relations as a key problem, justifying the need for NGOs to challenge rural informal moneylending institutions by providing an alternative source of low cost loans. On the other hand, Devine (1998) and others have emphasised the roles of NGOs themselves as resource providers and, therefore, as potential patrons. In addition to opening up new political spaces, some NGOs

<sup>3</sup> There are of course complex debates about whether or not religious assemblies and organisations should be considered a part of civil society or not. Gellner (1995) has argued that civil society is a modern, secular, Western concept. I would take a view closer to that of Bêteille, who draws attention to the civic contribution of many religious organisations (such as the Mirpur example cited here) but is also concerned about the various ways in which certain kinds of religious organisations may also be used to 'close off' public space and limit civic action and pluralism. An-Na'im (2002: 71) makes a convincing case for doing away with the simple 'are they in or are they out?' arguments along similar lines in relation to the concept of global civil society, arguing in relation to Christianity, Hinduism and Islam that '... there are regional manifestations of global civil society that are rooted in a religious discourse'. For Uberoi (2003: 114), civil society is taken as a universal category of human societies and one which can only be sustained through the continuous evolution of 'new forms and concepts of pluralism, mediation of the one and the many, and of the common usage or custom of the people ...'

may have also come to occupy more familiar older ones as they, rather than government or traditional moneylenders—become important in distributing resources and mediating with other power structures on behalf of ‘the poor’. There are increasing allegations that certain NGOs have begun to encourage their group member clients, whom they provide with credit and other services, to vote for a particular political party at the coming general elections in return for continued support from the NGO. The idea of NGOs as patrons is supported and developed further in a work by Karim (2001) who found evidence that some NGOs used their economic power as lenders to exercise political influence by delivering votes to political parties.

Furthermore, the internal structures of NGOs may also reproduce patron–client ties within. Some advocates of civil society have seen organised groups as microcosms of democratic governance and egalitarian practice, which are then likely to contribute to wider norms of reciprocity and trust. For anyone who has worked with the larger NGOs in Bangladesh, such expectations are not widely observable. As White (1999) argues, the informal familial terms of address common in NGOs of *bhai* and *apa* contrasts with the formal ‘sahib’ of the government office; however, they also reflect the personalised, charisma driven power relations which exist within most NGOs. Wood (1997) sees patron–client relations as being transferred from wider contexts of social relations into these NGO structures despite the appearance of the latter as rational bureaucratic systems. However, he also acknowledges the practical role of kinship and patronage networks in the recruitment of staff by NGO leaders in order to ensure loyalty and reduce risk within an often hostile wider institutional environment. This is a point borne out also by Béteille (2000), who argues that the idea of civil society is Western, modern and inextricably bound up with citizenship. If civil society requires the characteristics of openness and voluntarism (in contrast to kinship or traditions of caste), he argues, then it is apparent that many NGOs in India do not necessarily embody these characteristics. Although NGOs are often taken to be key civil society representatives, many—particularly those with a local, less professionalised or formal character—find it difficult to free themselves from the ties of kinship loyalties in their structure and management.

The crucial turning point for bringing the ‘old’ and ‘new’ streams of civil society closer together, and into a more mainstream position in relation to the general public, was the ‘people power’ protests which brought

down the military regime in 1990 and returned Bangladesh to a democratic system. Although they joined at the last minute, the NGOs were publicly seen to play a political role alongside the rest of civil society concerned with challenging the 'military' with the 'civil'. Today there are tentative new links between old and new streams of civil society in the form of alliances which stretch between left-leaning NGOs, trade unions, women's organisations and sections of the press. An example is the Oikabaddo Nagorik Andolan (United Civil Society Movement) in which Proshika and a range of other civil society actors mobilised more than half-a-million people in February 2001 with a comprehensive set of demands to the Government on democratisation, human rights and poverty reduction.

Whether the state—and ultimately the donors—have 'captured' NGOs and civil society in Bangladesh, as Hashemi and Hasan (1999) imply, or whether society has 'captured' the state in White's (1999) Migdal-derived model, is a question that requires a more detailed analysis than is possible here. It depends on distinguishing more carefully both the strong and weak characteristics which can coexist simultaneously in different levels and dimensions within Bangladesh and in analysing the ways in which power is exercised within and between different institutional sectors.

#### **IV** ***Conclusion***

Much of the discourse of civil society in Bangladesh which emerged in the 1990s originated from the agendas of international donor agencies. These agendas have included the ideology and policy of structural adjustment, mixed provision of welfare services, in some cases at least models of citizen action designed to improve processes of democratic accountability. This article has attempted to explore the political, historical and cultural limits of such conceptions of civil society. Newer analytical accounts of civil society in Bangladesh are becoming more sophisticated in providing a critique of the imported donor model of civil society which tends to obscure issues of patronage, conflict and power and which privileges the 'new' civil society represented by the country's high profile NGO sector (Davis and McGregor 2000; White 1999).

Civil society in Bangladesh cannot be really understood without exploring the organisational and moral diversity of civil society, the ways

in which state and civil society are often closely interlinked with each other in relations of both cooperation and conflict and the manner in which these changing relationships within both 'old' and 'new' civil society have played out over time. Nor can we ignore the ways in which a range of conflicts are reproduced within civil society itself, and the need to acknowledge the existence of 'uncivil society'. The concept of 'civil society' has normative dimensions, but these are clearly open to contestation and negotiation. For some NGOs, the language of civil society has been attractive because it has helped with the process of legitimising organisations which have recently been seeking to build clearer links with the rest of 'society', and some which are aspiring to become less dependent on the aid industry. For certain other NGOs continuing to work within more traditional welfare activities, the new interest in the civil society may not be seen to have much relevance at all.

A clearer understanding of the distinctive aspects of Bangladesh's civil society also requires investigation which goes beyond the activities of NGOs and the governance models of foreign donors to include a detailed examination of the operations and evolution of local institutions, citizen associations and religious groups. One example of a recent distinctive local civil society innovation is the set of principles and mechanisms, adopted since 1990, of the ninety-day neutral caretaker government, appointed in order to ensure that fair elections take place. This was an outcome of the engagement between citizen groups and the state in the mass movement against General Ershad. The system was successfully operated during elections in 1991 and 1996, although in 2001 there was considerable controversy surrounding allegations from the defeated Awami League that the caretaker government did not observe impartiality and had been captured by opposition interests.

Another would need to be a close investigation of the transnational flows of what might be termed 'Eastern aid' from the Gulf states which, for example, has for many years been strengthening the power of village *madrassa* schools and local religious leaders. The analysis of areas of transnational resource flow would also need to include the increasingly important economic role of remittances from Bangladeshis residing overseas. Such flows may also have organisational implications. A newspaper article written from the perspective of the Bangladeshi community outside the country advocates the creation of a new generation of transnational non-resident Bangladeshi NGOs which can harness 'the energy and

expertise of the non-resident community' and such organisations are beginning to become influential.<sup>4</sup> For example, Bangladeshi organisations in Britain were highly visible in mobilising resources in the 1998 floods; in the United States, they are currently active in lobbying with the government and international community over immigration issues. The transnational dimension of civil society is an increasingly important area for analysis and, as Ferguson (1998) shows, the increasing importance of horizontal, transnational identities and linkages complicates further the idea of a simple state/civil society dichotomy.

Despite the growth of local and international civil society debates in relation to Bangladesh, the deepening of the democratic process beyond the merely formal remains elusive, and patronage is still the institution that is most useful for understanding social and political life in Bangladesh. As Chandhoke (2002) shows, it is not useful to conceive of civil society as a realm separate from and 'uncontaminated' by the power of states and of markets (as much donor and some academic discourses imply); it is also necessary to emphasise the centrality of patronage relations as a dominant mode of the exercise of power. There is all too frequently a confusion in the literature between 'society' and 'civil society'. If *society* has encroached upon the state, can we say, as White (1999) seems to argue, that 'civil society' has also done the same? In Putnam's version of civil society, patronage and kinship are explicitly excluded from the horizontal ties of trust and reciprocity which characterise it. In Gellner's (1995) writing, civil society stands in opposition to the 'tyranny of cousins', while Béteille (2000) links the concept explicitly to citizenship and the state. If one takes on board such ideas of civil society and its necessary relationship to democratic institutions, it is clear that much of so-called 'civil society' in Bangladesh is really nothing of the kind.

There is still much to be learned from other local 'versions' of the civil society concept, if only as a potentially useful alternative route into analysis and understanding of political processes and social relationships. A more inclusive, locally adapted idea of civil society might acknowledge the role of vertical social relations, the blurring of boundaries in Bangladesh between civil society and household and kin networks, as well as with the state and the market, and ongoing relations of conflict and contestation

<sup>4</sup> Friday supplement, *The daily star*, 9 July 1999, 'After NGOs, NRBOs?' by Mahmud Farooque.

between. Within such a view, civil society becomes an entry point for the analysis of important social, economic and political themes, such as the changing expectations on the part of citizens towards the state, the changing influence of transnational actors on social and economic realities and the changing nature of the patronage systems which help to structure political and economic life in Bangladesh. In future research on these themes, it will no doubt be wise to distinguish the *idea* of civil society in relation to values and beliefs from the *system* of civil society structures and practices.

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