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Review Article

Grassroots Democracy and Civil Society in India: A Symbiotic Relationship

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamic and symbiotic relationship between grassroots democracy and civil society in India. It argues that the institutional framework provided by Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), established through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, creates vital spaces for participatory governance. Civil society—comprising NGOs, self-help groups, advocacy networks, and citizen movements—functions as a catalyst in this process by mobilizing marginalized communities, promoting transparency, and holding local institutions accountable. Through case studies from Kerala, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, the study highlights how civil society has reinforced grassroots institutions by facilitating social audits, participatory planning, and community monitoring. Simultaneously, grassroots democratic structures provide civil society with formal platforms for engagement and activism. The paper also discusses key challenges such as political interference, elite capture, limited institutional capacity, and shrinking civic space. It concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen this interdependence and argues that deepening democracy in India requires institutionalizing and protecting this synergy at all levels of governance.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, voluntary associations, social movements, Urban Local Bodies

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, in its truest form, thrives not only through periodic elections and representative institutions but also through active and continuous participation of citizens in governance at the local level. In the Indian context, this vision of participatory democracy has been institutionalized through grassroots democratic structures such as the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), aimed at empowering local communities and decentralizing power. At the same time, civil society—comprising non-governmental organizations (NGOs), voluntary associations, social movements, and community-based groups—has emerged as a crucial actor in enhancing democratic engagement, mobilizing citizens, and advocating for accountability and transparency.

The relationship between grassroots democracy and civil society in India is inherently symbiotic. On one hand, civil society plays a pivotal role in strengthening local democratic institutions by promoting awareness, encouraging participation,

and ensuring that governance mechanisms remain transparent and responsive to local needs. On the other hand, the institutional framework provided by grassroots democracy offers civil society actors a platform to engage with governance, influence policies, and empower marginalized sections of society.

This synergy has proven essential in addressing the democratic deficit often seen in top-down governance models. Particularly in rural and underserved regions, civil society interventions have helped democratize access to services, amplify local voices, and foster a culture of participatory governance. However, this relationship is not without its challenges. Issues such as political co-optation, limited institutional capacities, and shrinking civic spaces pose significant threats to the effectiveness of this collaboration.

This article seeks to explore the dynamic interplay between grassroots democratic institutions and civil society in India. It aims to analyse how both reinforce each other in practice, what challenges hinder their potential, and what strategies can further strengthen their collective role in deepening democracy. By drawing from case studies across various Indian states, the study provides insights into how grassroots governance and civil society can work together to build a more inclusive, accountable, and vibrant democratic polity.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the role of civil society in promoting grassroots democratic practices in India.
2. To analyse the impact of grassroots democratic institutions (like panchayat Raj and urban local bodies) on the functioning and expansion of civil society.
3. To explore the mutual interdependence between civil society and grassroots democracy in ensuring participatory governance and democratic deepening.
4. To evaluate case studies that illustrates the effectiveness of civil society in strengthening local governance in different regions of India.
5. To identify key challenges and limitations faced by civil society and grassroots democratic institutions in India.
6. To propose policy recommendations for enhancing the synergy between civil society and grassroots democratic institutions.

❖ Definition and Scope

Grassroots democracy refers to a system of governance that operates at the local level, encouraging direct participation of citizens in political and developmental processes that affect their everyday lives. It emphasizes the decentralization of power, allowing communities to take part in decision-making through institutions such as Gram Panchayats, Municipalities, and Ward Committees. In India, this model was constitutionally formalized through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, which led to the creation of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). These institutions aim to enhance democratic participation by bringing

governance closer to the people, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

On the other hand, civil society encompasses a wide range of non-state, non-market actors that operate in the space between the individual and the state. It includes non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), self-help groups, advocacy networks, social movements, trade unions, and various citizen forums. Civil society plays a crucial role in voicing public concerns, protecting rights, promoting civic education, and advocating for social justice. These organizations function independently, often acting as facilitators, mobilizers, and watchdogs of the democratic process.

The scope of the relationship between grassroots democracy and civil society is both dynamic and interdependent. Civil society enhances the functioning of grassroots democratic institutions by mobilizing marginalized groups, creating awareness about rights and entitlements, promoting transparency, and ensuring accountability in governance. In turn, grassroots democratic structures provide institutional spaces where civil society can operate more effectively—engaging with local authorities, influencing public policies, and monitoring the delivery of services. This symbiotic relationship creates a more participatory and responsive democratic environment, contributing to democratic deepening, especially in rural and underserved regions of India.

❖ Constitutional and Legal Framework

The foundation of grassroots democracy in India was laid through two landmark constitutional reforms — the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, enacted in 1992. These amendments institutionalized local self-governance by providing constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural areas and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in urban areas. The 73rd Amendment introduced a three-tier structure of rural governance: Gram Panchayat (village level), Panchayat Samiti (block level), and Zilla Parishad (district level), along with provisions for regular elections, reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women, and the establishment of Gram Sabhas as forums for direct democracy. Similarly, the 74th Amendment established urban governance through municipalities, municipal councils, and corporations, ensuring elected representation and decentralization in city administration.

These amendments created a legal and institutional framework for the decentralization of power and decision-making, making the state more accessible and responsive to local communities. By mandating the devolution of powers, responsibilities, and finances to local bodies through State Finance Commissions and District Planning Committees, the Constitution aimed to foster democratic governance from the ground up. Importantly, the legal framework provided a structured platform for civil society engagement at the local level, enabling citizens and organizations to participate in planning, monitoring, and implementation of development programs.

In addition to these constitutional provisions, laws such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005, and various state-level participatory governance acts have further strengthened the role of civil society in promoting transparency and accountability. These laws empower citizens to seek information, monitor public services, and demand accountability from local governments. Thus, the constitutional and legal framework in India not only supports the functioning of grassroots democracy but also legitimizes and facilitates the active involvement of civil society in democratic governance.

❖ **Mutual Reinforcement**

The relationship between grassroots democracy and civil society in India is one of mutual reinforcement, where each strengthens and complements the other in advancing participatory governance. Civil society organizations play a critical role in empowering citizens, particularly marginalized groups such as women, Dalits, Adivasis, and the urban poor, to engage with local democratic institutions. Through awareness campaigns, legal literacy drives, community mobilization, and capacity-building programs, civil society helps people understand their rights and responsibilities and encourages them to participate actively in Gram Sabhas, municipal meetings, and local planning processes.

Conversely, the existence of institutionalized local governance structures—such as Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies—provides civil society with formal platforms and entry points to engage with governance processes. These bodies offer structured spaces where civil society can interact with elected representatives, influence local policies, and monitor the delivery of public goods and services. For instance, civil society groups have played key roles in facilitating social audits under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), ensuring that funds are used effectively and corruption is minimized.

This dynamic synergy enhances transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in governance. Civil society acts as a watchdog, pressuring local authorities to function ethically, while grassroots institutions benefit from the expertise, innovation, and community linkages that civil society brings. Moreover, by working together, they can develop locally appropriate solutions to social, economic, and environmental challenges. This collaboration also helps to build democratic culture and trust among citizens, which is essential for the long-term sustainability of democratic institutions.

In essence, grassroots democracy provides the institutional scaffolding, and civil society provides the activating force that brings it to life. When both operate in harmony, they not only strengthen local governance but also contribute to the deeper consolidation of democracy in India.

❖ **Participation and Inclusiveness**

Participation and inclusiveness lie at the heart of any functioning democracy, and in the Indian context, grassroots democracy and civil society play a vital role in making this principle a lived reality. While constitutional provisions have mandated the decentralization of governance, it is the active involvement of civil society that has made participation more meaningful and inclusive. Civil society organizations (CSOs), especially those rooted in local communities, have worked extensively to mobilize marginalized groups—including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, religious minorities, and economically weaker sections—to engage with local governance institutions.

Through awareness campaigns, leadership training, and advocacy efforts, civil society has helped bridge the gap between formal democratic rights and actual political participation. For instance, many NGOs and community-based organizations have trained women elected representatives in Panchayats, enabling them to overcome socio-cultural barriers and assert their voices in decision-making processes. Similarly, social movements have empowered tribal and Dalit communities to claim their rights to land, education, and basic services, thereby enhancing their participation in local development planning.

Grassroots democratic institutions, by design, offer inclusive representation through the reservation of seats for women, SCs, and STs. However, without civil society's intervention, this representation often risks becoming symbolic. Civil society plays a crucial role in transforming passive representation into active engagement by encouraging dialogue, enabling access to information, and building the capacity of these groups to participate effectively. Moreover, participatory mechanisms such as Gram Sabhas, Ward Committees, and public hearings are often activated and strengthened by civil society actors, making local governance more transparent and responsive to community needs.

In this way, the collaboration between grassroots democracy and civil society contributes not only to wider participation but also to substantive inclusion, where all citizens—regardless of social identity or economic status—can influence decisions that shape their lives. This inclusive participation is essential for the legitimacy, effectiveness, and sustainability of democratic governance in India.

❖ **Transparency and Accountability**

Transparency and accountability are fundamental to the functioning of a democratic system, particularly at the grassroots level where governance directly impacts citizens' daily lives. In India, the collaboration between civil society and local democratic institutions has been instrumental in promoting both. Civil society organizations (CSOs), acting as watchdogs of democracy, play a crucial role in monitoring the performance of Panchayats, municipalities, and other local bodies. They expose instances of corruption, inefficiency, and malpractice, while also demanding corrective action and institutional reforms. Their efforts help ensure that power is exercised not arbitrarily but in accordance with democratic norms and public interest.

One of the most impactful tools for enhancing accountability has been the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, which

empowers citizens to seek information from public authorities. Civil society has been at the forefront of popularizing RTI at the grassroots level, training people to file applications and use the information to challenge irregularities. Similarly, civil society-led social audits, particularly under schemes like MGNREGA, have become powerful mechanisms to track public expenditure, detect fraud, and improve service delivery. Organizations such as the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan have demonstrated how community-driven accountability tools can bring greater transparency and responsiveness to local governance.

Moreover, civil society facilitates community monitoring of health, education, sanitation, and welfare programs, ensuring that state resources reach the intended beneficiaries. By organizing public hearings, citizen report cards, and participatory budgeting exercises, CSOs create platforms for dialogue between the people and their elected representatives. These efforts not only check administrative abuse but also build a culture of openness and responsiveness among local officials.

While grassroots democratic institutions provide the legal and institutional framework, civil society brings the activating energy needed to enforce accountability. Together, they help build a governance system that is not only closer to the people but also more ethical, efficient, and responsive. In an era where public trust in institutions is declining, this partnership serves as a critical pillar for safeguarding democratic values at the local level.

❖ **Case Studies and Regional Examples**

The synergy between civil society and grassroots democratic institutions is best illustrated through real-world case studies and regional examples across India. These instances demonstrate how collaborative efforts between civil society and local governments can lead to more participatory, accountable, and effective governance. One of the most notable examples is the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, initiated in the late 1990s. Under this campaign, civil society organizations played a central role in mobilizing communities to participate in local planning and budgeting processes. Citizens, with the support of NGOs and volunteers, were involved in identifying development priorities, preparing local plans, and monitoring their implementation—marking a significant shift toward participatory governance.

In Rajasthan, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) pioneered the use of social audits as a tool to expose corruption and ensure accountability in public works programs. Their grassroots activism led to the institutionalization of social audits under the MGNREGA scheme. Today, many states have adopted social audits as a formal mechanism to review implementation of welfare schemes, with civil society playing a leading role in facilitating them.

Karnataka also provides a compelling example, particularly in Bangalore, where citizen groups such as the Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy have worked with Urban Local Bodies to promote participatory urban governance. Through initiatives like Ward Committees and citizen report cards, civil society has helped improve urban service delivery, enhance budget transparency, and promote civic engagement in city governance.

In Maharashtra, the success of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and community-based monitoring in health and nutrition programs illustrates the role of civil society in enhancing service delivery at the grassroots. Women's collectives have collaborated with local Panchayats to monitor Anganwadi centres and health sub-centres, ensuring better access to maternal and child health services.

These examples reflect the diversity and potential of civil society–local government partnerships across different states. They also highlight the importance of state-specific contexts, political will, and the capacity of both institutions and citizens in shaping the success of democratic deepening at the grassroots. While outcomes vary, these case studies affirm that when civil society and grassroots democratic institutions work in tandem, the quality of governance improves significantly.

❖ **Challenges and Constraints**

Despite the promise of a symbiotic relationship between grassroots democracy and civil society in India, several challenges and constraints hinder its full realization. One of the foremost issues is political interference and elite capture within local governance structures. In many cases, the decentralized institutions created to empower ordinary citizens are dominated by local elites, political families, or dominant caste groups, reducing the space for genuine community participation. As a result, civil society organizations often face resistance when they try to mobilize marginalized voices or challenge entrenched interests.

Another significant constraint is the lack of capacity and resources within both civil society and local democratic institutions. Many Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies lack trained staff, adequate funding, and technical expertise to implement development programs effectively. Likewise, grassroots civil society organizations often operate with limited financial support and struggle to scale their interventions or engage with formal governance mechanisms in a sustained way. This lack of institutional and operational capacity weakens their ability to influence policy or monitor implementation.

Additionally, there is a growing concern over the shrinking space for civil society in India. Increasing regulation of NGOs, bureaucratic hurdles in accessing foreign funding (such as through the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, or FCRA), and the stigmatization of activism have created a more restrictive environment for civil society engagement. In some cases, civil society groups face surveillance, legal action, or delegitimization, especially when they critique government policies or advocate for marginalized communities.

Lack of coordination and trust between local governments and civil society also acts as a barrier. In many instances, local officials view civil society actors with suspicion, seeing them as adversaries rather than collaborators. This lack of synergy limits opportunities for co-creation of development plans or monitoring mechanisms. Moreover, participatory forums such

as Gram Sabhas or Ward Committees are often irregular, poorly attended, or tokenistic, undermining the spirit of grassroots democracy.

❖ **Policy and Institutional Recommendations**
To strengthen the symbiotic relationship between grassroots democracy and civil society in India, it is essential to introduce policy and institutional reforms that empower both actors and foster meaningful collaboration. First, there is an urgent need to ensure genuine devolution of powers, functions, and finances to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). Many local bodies still function under the shadow of state governments, with limited autonomy and inadequate resources. Implementing the recommendations of State Finance Commissions in a timely and effective manner can help ensure that local governments are financially empowered to undertake development work and collaborate with civil society organizations.

Second, it is crucial to institutionalize spaces for citizen participation. Mechanisms such as Gram Sabhas, Ward Committees, social audits, and public consultations must be made mandatory, regular, and well-publicized. Civil society can play a key role in facilitating these forums, but state governments and local authorities must provide logistical support, ensure transparency, and treat citizen inputs as integral to the decision-making process. Legal mandates and guidelines should be strengthened to prevent tokenism and ensure accountability in participatory processes.

Third, capacity-building programs for both civil society actors and elected local representatives are necessary. Many newly elected members, particularly women and individuals from marginalized communities, lack the training needed to effectively participate in governance. Similarly, civil society organizations often require technical support to engage with government systems and monitor public service delivery. Investing in training, digital literacy, participatory planning skills, and institutional networking can enhance the capabilities of both sides.

Fourth, protecting the autonomy and vibrancy of civil society is essential. The regulatory environment must encourage civic engagement rather than restrict it. Simplifying the procedures under laws like the FCRA and ensuring transparent guidelines for NGO-government partnerships can help create a more enabling ecosystem for civil society. Legal protections should also be strengthened to safeguard the rights of activists and citizen-led movements working for democratic accountability.

Finally, building trust and formal partnerships between civil society and local governments should be a policy priority. Governments can develop structured frameworks for collaboration through memoranda of understanding (MoUs), consultative platforms, joint planning committees, and participatory budgeting processes. Recognizing civil society as a legitimate stakeholder in governance, rather than a challenge to authority, will help build a more inclusive and responsive democratic order.

By institutionalizing participation, enhancing capacities, ensuring autonomy, and fostering cooperation, India can unlock the full potential of grassroots democracy and civil society working together to deepen and sustain its democratic foundations.

❖ **Democratic Deepening**
Democratic deepening refers to the process of making democracy more participatory, inclusive, responsive, and accountable beyond the mere conduct of periodic elections. In the Indian context, this deepening is significantly driven by the interaction between grassroots democratic institutions and civil society. When local governance bodies are empowered and work in synergy with civil society organizations, democracy transcends formal structures and becomes a living, everyday practice embedded in people's lives. This interaction enhances political awareness, civic engagement, and social accountability, particularly among historically marginalized communities.

Civil society contributes to democratic deepening by broadening the scope of participation beyond electoral politics. It facilitates ongoing dialogue between the state and citizens, creates platforms for collective action, and promotes a rights-based approach to governance. At the same time, grassroots democratic institutions serve as decentralized arenas for such engagement, ensuring that governance is not only top-down but also bottom-up. Through participatory planning, local decision-making, and community monitoring, people gain a direct role in shaping public policy and holding institutions accountable.

The real test of democratic deepening lies in its ability to empower citizens, especially those at the periphery, to influence decisions that impact their lives. Whether it is through women's increased representation in Panchayats, Dalit mobilization through local movements, or citizen participation in urban ward committees, the convergence of civil society and grassroots democracy has proven to be a powerful driver of inclusive development and social justice. This has also contributed to a growing democratic consciousness among citizens, who no longer see governance as the sole domain of the state but as a shared responsibility.

However, for democratic deepening to be sustained, the relationship between civil society and grassroots institutions must be actively nurtured. This requires a supportive legal environment, political will, and institutional reforms that reinforce their collaboration. When this symbiotic relationship is protected and strengthened, democracy in India moves closer to its ideal—where power is genuinely with the people, and governance is a participatory, accountable, and just process at every level.

CONCLUSION
The relationship between grassroots democracy and civil society in India is both vital and dynamic. Together, they form the foundation of a participatory and inclusive democratic process that empowers citizens, enhances transparency, and promotes accountability. Grassroots institutions like Panchayats

and Urban Local Bodies provide the institutional framework for decentralized governance, while civil society infuses this framework with energy, vigilance, and community participation. Their symbiotic interaction is crucial for ensuring that democracy is not confined to electoral procedures but becomes a continuous, everyday practice that includes the voices of the most marginalized.

Despite significant achievements, this partnership faces persistent challenges such as political interference, elite domination, lack of capacity, and shrinking civic space. Addressing these issues through policy reforms, capacity building, and institutional innovation is essential to unlocking the full potential of this relationship. Strengthening the autonomy of both local democratic institutions and civil society, while institutionalizing mechanisms for meaningful collaboration, will go a long way in fostering democratic deepening.

In an era marked by increasing centralization and democratic backsliding in many parts of the world, India's experience offers a compelling model of how democracy can be sustained and deepened from below. By nurturing the synergy between grassroots democracy and civil society, India can build a more participatory, just, and resilient democratic order—one that truly reflects the spirit of swaraj, or self-governance, envisioned by the framers of its Constitution.

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