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Q10

"In the Indian governance system, the role of non-state actors has been only marginal." Critically examine this statement.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · GS II · 12 marks · Governance and Policy

Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

Core demand of the question

- "In the Indian governance system, the role of non-state actors has been only marginal." Critically examine this statement
- Test the claim against NGOs, SHGs, media, business, and statutory partnerships, and show where the State still dominates

Revision summary

Non-state actors include NGOs, SHGs, media, companies, unions and community bodies that shape public decisions.

MGNREGA social audit, NRLM, RTI, RTE partnerships and CSR show they are not merely marginal in delivery and voice.

The State still monopolises coercion, tax and all-India administration, and can shrink NGOs through FCRA.

Informal power groups can capture local governance without being democratic non-state actors.

- **The statement is therefore half-true at best:** marginal in sovereign core, substantial in social-sector governance.

Introduction

Non-state actors are organisations and groups outside the formal executive, legislature and judiciary that still shape public decisions: voluntary agencies, self-help groups, trade unions, companies, media, professional bodies, and community organisations. The statement that their role in Indian governance is only marginal is too sweeping. They are central in several delivery and accountability spaces, and still weak where the State monopolises coercion, tax and all-India services.

Body**Where the statement is too strong**

- The 73rd and 74th Amendments brought elected local bodies, but implementation of many rural programmes runs through self-help groups, mahila samitis, and NGOs; the **National Rural Livelihoods Mission** treats SHGs as a governance infrastructure, not as decoration.
- Social audit under the **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005**, and gram sabha roles under PESA, 1996, in **Fifth Schedule** areas, give non-state and community actors a legal place in watching the State.

- The **Right to Information Act, 2005**, was itself the product of a grassroots movement; media and civil-society users of RTI are now routine actors in accountability, which is governance, not a side hobby.
- Service delivery in education, health and disaster relief often depends on charitable trusts, missionary and community schools, and philanthropic hospitals, especially where public facilities are thin.
- Corporate social responsibility under **Section 135** of the Companies Act, 2013, and public-private partnerships in infrastructure pull companies into quasi-public roles, for better or worse.
- Trade unions, farmer organisations, and professional regulators (Bar Councils, Medical Council / **National Medical Commission**) make rules that the State then recognises; that is shared governance, not a margin.
- International non-state actors - rating agencies, standard-setting bodies, and global NGOs - influence Indian policy through markets and treaties, which a purely "marginal" thesis cannot explain.

Where the statement still has force

- **The core of the Weberian State remains with the Union and the States:** defence, currency, All India Services, criminal investigation, and the power to tax. Non-state actors do not replace the district magistrate or the police.
- Many "participatory" committees are invited, funded, and dissolved by departments; they advise, they do not allocate the Consolidated Fund.
- The **Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010**, licence and FCRA cancellation practice can shrink advocacy NGOs, which shows that the State still sets the legal room for non-state politics.
- Informal actors - caste panchayats, strongmen, and unregulated contractors - can capture local governance in ways that are powerful but not legitimate; "non-state" is not always civic virtue.
- Policy design in finance, defence and external affairs is still closed; think tanks comment, they rarely co-author the Cabinet note.

A critical balance

- Indian governance is a State-centred system with a thick non-state fringe that is sometimes the real delivery system, especially in social sectors and in information politics.
- The statement would be accurate for the 1950s licence-permit administration. It is inaccurate after rights-based laws, SHG-led livelihoods, RTI, CSR, and 24-hour media.
- **The fair examination is therefore:** non-state actors are no longer marginal in voice and last-mile delivery; they remain marginal in sovereign functions and in binding allocation of public money, unless the statute expressly partners them.

Flow diagram

State core tax police AIS -> Indian governance
 NGOs SHGs media CSR unions -> Indian governance
 NGOs SHGs media CSR unions -> Delivery and accountability
 State core tax police AIS -> Sovereign functions
 FCRA and department control -> NGOs SHGs media CSR unions

Conclusion

The claim that non-state actors are only marginal does not survive MGNREGA social audits, SHG missions, RTI, CSR, unions and the media. They still do not hold the police power or the budget. Indian governance is State-led and society-entangled. Calling that entanglement "marginal" hides both the democratic gain and the capture risk.

Facts & figures

MGNREGA, 2005

Statutory right to work that mandates social audit and gram-sabha processes, giving community actors a legal watchdog role.

Right to Information Act, 2005

Creates a justiciable information right used heavily by media and civil-society groups to scrutinise public authorities.

Section 135, Companies Act, 2013

Mandates corporate social responsibility spending by qualifying companies, pulling firms into publicly visible social expenditure.

Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010

Regulates foreign funding of associations; licensing and cancellation are a major State control on NGO room to operate.

National Rural Livelihoods Mission

Union livelihood programme that organises women into self-help groups as the delivery unit for credit, skills and some public services.

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