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Q8(c)

Highlight the roles and functions of civil society in a democratic system.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the role of civil society in a democracy
- Keep the examination within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Civil society is associative life between family and state.

It trains citizens, hosts public argument, and makes hegemony contestable.

Indian movements, RTI, SEWA, and COVID care illustrate.

Uncivil groups and donor capture are the dark side.

Necessary to democracy; not a replacement for parties and votes.

Introduction

- **Civil society is the field of associations between household and state:** unions, NGOs, professional bodies, movements, and the press. In a democracy it organises consent, contest, and care. **Antonio Gramsci**, Jürgen **Habermas**, and Alexis de **Tocqueville** name different virtues. Uncivil associations name the dark side.

Body

What civil society does for democracy

- **Tocqueville:** voluntary associations train citizens in self-rule and check despotism.
- **Habermas:** a public sphere of argument, ideally, turns private people into a public that can criticise the state.
- **Gramsci:** civil society is where hegemony is made. Parties and pressure groups already sit here, dialectically, as the previous question required.
- Robert **Putnam**'s civic trust and networks can support institutional performance, though the measure is debated.

Indian and contemporary roles

- Social movements on environment, gender, and farmers articulate interests that elections alone do not.
- RTI-type transparency campaigns and professional media scrutinise files of the Weberian state.

- SEWA and SHGs organise informal women whom parties often ignore.
- During COVID-19, langars, NGO oxygen, and neighbourhood care filled gaps. That is welfare from below, not a substitute for rights.

Limits and uncivil society

- **Marx** treated bourgeois civil society as a mask of class. Corporate-funded NGOs can be pressure groups of the core.
- Communal associations and captured media can destroy the public sphere they claim to be.
- Donor-driven NGOs may bypass democratic mandate. Dependency of funds is a global-scenario fact.
- Lockdown also showed a weak civil voice for walking migrants compared with professional WFH classes.

Examination

- Democracy needs civil society to pluralise power, as Pareto's elites otherwise circulate only among themselves.
- Civil society cannot replace parties and the vote. It is a condition of their honesty, not their substitute.
- The test is whether associations include informal labour, women, and minorities, or only the credentialed.

Flow diagram

Civil society -> Public sphere
Civil society -> Check on state
Civil society -> Interest movements unions
Uncivil capture -> Democratic harm
Democracy -> Civil society
Civil society -> Democracy

Conclusion

Civil society's role in democracy is to organise public argument, check the state, and represent interests that office neglects. **Gramsci**, **Habermas**, and **Tocqueville** remain the frame. Indian movements, SEWA, and pandemic care show the work. Uncivil and class-skewed associations show the limit. It is necessary, not angelic.

Facts & figures

Gramsci

Hegemony is organised in civil society; the state is not the only site of power.

Habermas

Public sphere: critical debate among private persons as a public, a democratic ideal often distorted.

Tocqueville

Associations as schools of democracy and checks on central power.

Putnam

Social capital: trust and networks that can support democratic performance.

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