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Q1(d)

Democracy needs a vibrant culture of civil society in order to strengthen its foundation of citizenship. Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Politics and Society

Politics and Society: Sociological theories of power; Power elite, bureaucracy, pressure groups, and political parties; Nation, state, citizenship, democracy, civil society, ideology; Protest, agitation, social movements, collective action, revolution.

Core demand of the question

- Define civil society as associations, public debate and organised life between family and the state
- **Link it to citizenship:** rights, duties and the habit of claiming them
- Show why democracy needs this culture, and note risks of capture and exclusion
- Use Tocqueville, Gramsci or Habermas and an Indian illustration

Revision summary

Civil society is organised life between family and the state.

Citizenship is a practice of rights and claim-making, not only a legal status.

Tocqueville, Habermas and Gramsci show associations as schools of democracy and as fields of hegemony.

Indian movements and campaigns illustrate how publics train citizens.

Civil society can exclude or become communal, so vibrancy must be judged by openness.

Democracy still needs this culture to keep voting tied to everyday citizenship.

Introduction

Democracy is more than periodic voting. It needs citizens who can associate, argue, watch the state and claim rights. Civil society is the sphere of unions, associations, newspapers, social movements and voluntary groups that sit between the household and official power. A vibrant culture in this sphere trains people in citizenship. Without it, the vote can remain a lonely act and the constitution a paper promise.

Body**Civil society and the foundation of citizenship**

Alexis de Tocqueville saw American democracy as a school of associations. People learned public spirit by joining groups. T. H. Marshall described citizenship as civil, political and social rights that grow over time. Those rights stay alive only when people use them. Jurgen Habermas described a public sphere where private persons debate common affairs. **Antonio Gramsci** treated civil society as a field of hegemony, where consent is organised, not as a purely innocent space. Neera Chandhoke and Indian debates after the 1990s placed NGOs, people's movements and the media in this field.

Citizenship is therefore a practice. The Right to Information campaign, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, SEWA, and local resident associations show how organised publics teach claim-making. A quiet population that only consumes news does not deepen democracy in the same way.

Why vibrancy matters, and its limits

A vibrant civil society watches elections, documents police abuse, defends minority rights and supplies welfare where the state is thin. It also produces counter-publics for Dalits, women and Adivasis when the official public is captured by dominant groups. Partha Chatterjee's argument about political society reminds us that many poor Indians meet the state through informal negotiation rather than civic association. Civil society can itself be exclusive, donor-driven or communal. Hindu and other identity associations are also civil society. Vibrancy is not automatically liberal.

The comment asked by the question is still sound. Democracy's foundation of citizenship weakens when associations shrink, when fear replaces debate, and when the only organised voices are those of money and majorities. A culture of civil society does not replace parties and parliaments. It keeps them honest and keeps citizens in training.

Flow diagram

Civil society -> Associations movements media
Civil society -> Citizenship as practice
Citizenship as practice -> Democratic foundation
Capture exclusion -> Civil society

Conclusion

Democracy needs a living culture of association and public argument if citizenship is to be more than a legal label. Civil society is that training ground. It can be captured or exclusive, yet without it the democratic foundation stays weak.

Facts & figures

Marshall on citizenship

Civil, political and social rights that become real when people can actually use them.

Habermas's public sphere

A space of argument among private persons about common affairs, distinct from the state and the market.

RTI campaign

An Indian example of civil society turning transparency into a citizen's everyday tool.