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Article

Performing Agency in Shrinking Spaces: Acting Beyond the Resilience–Resistance Binary

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Abstract

Civil society occupies a significant space in any dynamic political landscape. However, in recent years, governments worldwide have attempted a shift away from activism and advocacy among civil society organisations (CSOs), favouring the apolitical service-driven organisations while disabling those perceived as “political.” This process has incapacitated civil society of its political habits, tendencies, and potentials and turned CSOs into infinitely malleable and adaptive subjects, tamed and governed by institutions. Not only has this functioned to create a discursive expansion and valorisation of the concept of “civil society resilience” as an alternative political vision for “resistance,” but it has also led to the inclusion of CSOs in the political system on conditions of their exclusion from political participation. Using the case of India as an example of a shrinking welfare state—with its burgeoning poverty, repressed civic space, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) banned, and NGOs abrogated from foreign funding on “anti-national,” “anti-developmental” charges—this article captures the rapid symptomatic depoliticisation of civil society, its resource dependency on CSOs, and their potential political exclusion and disengagement. The research builds on a qualitative exploration of the transformative journey of ten highly-influential INGOs in India to offer a distinct perspective toward effecting systemic change by repoliticising CSO resilience as an enhanced strategy of practicing resistance. In doing so, the article bridges the gap between the neoliberal manifestation of resilience and resistance by reconceptualising how and if CSOs co-exist and navigate between competing visions of resilience (as institutionalised subjects of neoliberalism) and resistance (as political subjects of change).

Keywords

civil society; development; politics; exclusion; inclusion; India; neoliberalism; resilience; resistance

Issue

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1. Introduction

Civil society occupies a significant place in any dynamic political landscape. While civic rights organisations have grown significantly over the past several years, these developments have coincided with rapid changes in jurisprudence and legislative reforms driven by neoliberal, nationalist, and neo-colonialist forces (Bruff, 2014; Ismail & Kamat, 2018). Monitoring the civic space, nurturing discontent against a free civil society, or deliberately attempting to restrict its operations have become a global phenomenon extensively debated publicly and across scholarly traditions. However, since the turn of the century, what attracted much scholarly attention

is how the pushback trend against civil society that was once prevalent in authoritative regimes, particularly targeted towards those pursuing democracy and right-based agendas, has started to gain momentum in fully consolidated and functional democracies (Aho & Grinde, 2017; Carothers, 2016; Toepler et al., 2020). An increasing number of democratic governments who had previously engaged in rights promotion and protection are now introducing a series of constraints hindering the activities of the civic space. The past decade has reported a considerable backlash against civil society, with more democratic states emulating the footsteps of authoritarianism by introducing restrictive legislations and arbitrary interventions in the civic space

(Clark, 2011; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). These include violent repression of civic dissent, judicialised bans, administered crackdown and arbitrary interventions on civic spaces, mass vilification of INGOs as “foreign agents,” abolition of funds and restrictions on receiving foreign funding, harassment and intimidation of civil rights activists (Carothers, 2016; Froissart, 2014; Lewis, 2013; Mati, 2020; Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017; Toepler et al., 2020). This, alongside the rising “democratic deficit” (Johansson & Kalm, 2016), heavily influenced by a growing array of populism, illiberalism, and the overall ruptures in the fundamentals of politics and development worldwide, has drastically altered the trajectories of state–civil society relations. Academia refers to this phenomenon as the “shrinking space,” a metaphor widely embraced to describe a new generation of restrictions on political struggle (Hayes et al., 2017). As the trend unfolds, the wave of autocratization seeks to dismantle the multiple facets of democracy by undermining the space for civic dissent and organised collective action in which civil society worldwide faces systemic efforts to reduce their legitimacy and effectiveness (Brechenmacher, 2017).

The rhetoric and reality describing the belonging or un-belonging of the civil society to the nation-states pertain to questions on the fundamentals of democracy and civic space—its rights, representation, resistance, and justice. However, what makes India a fascinating example of this phenomenon is its reputation of being the largest democracy in the world and a fast-turning “electoral autocracy” (V-Dem Institute, 2021) for vigorously curtailing civil and political rights. In recent years, the landscape of Indian civil society operations has undergone massive transformations driven by the authoritative efforts to produce a single and monolithic narrative of the civil society as apolitical aid-givers of the government. This process has generated a highly fragmented and depoliticised civil society (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015) that is infinitely malleable, adaptive, and constantly in need of reshaping its institutional, administrative, functional, philosophical, and philanthropic propositions in order to be conditionally included in a highly restrictive political space. Not only has it functioned to create a discursive expansion and valorisation of the concept of civil society “resilience” as an alternative political vision for “resistance,” but it has also led to the inclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the political system on conditions of their exclusion from political participation (Chandler & Reid, 2016). In drawing out the ontological and epistemological assumptions and their implications vis-à-vis the drive for resilience among civil society, this article captures the paradigm shift taking place in the functional framework of CSOs today vis-à-vis their engagement with the grassroots, particularly in terms of their efforts towards becoming resilient subjects who are more likely to adapt or adjust to the changing demands posed by its environment than resist it. I study the concept of resilience through the lens of governance and

governmentality to analyze its entry into the political vocabulary of civil society practices.

The following sections discuss the current demands of reshaping civil society to become more “adaptable” by forgoing its political potentialities, leading to the heightened insecurity among CSOs due to a lack of collective identity, the embedded notion of self-containment, and their struggle for survival. Drawing from Foucauldian works on governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2010), this article captures what the crackdown on civil society and the effective valorisation of “resilience,” as opposed to “resistance,” tell us about the current trajectory of state–civil society relations in India. In doing so, it reflects on the neoliberal urge to limit the political horizon of civil society practices and provoke disenchantment with the political itself as an expression of “CSO resilience.” Finally, the article demonstrates how the inclusion of civil society within the realm of power and governance is fundamentally structured on the condition of its multi-dimensional exclusion from political power and the struggles taking place within civil society and its endeavours to shift the binary between the institutionalised form of resilience and organised acts of resistance.

2. Research Design

2.1. Contextual Locale: The Case of India

In India, the “conceits of civil society” have emerged vis-à-vis the variegated geographies of fractured sovereignties (Chandhoke, 2003, p. 71). The postcolonial governmental rationalities (Heath & Legg, 2018) concerning the persecution of civic dissent and its “retrospective reflection on colonialism” (Said, 1978, p. 45) emerged alongside the synchronic resurgence of neoliberalisation of the nation-state and its ambiguous relation to global capitalism (Mezzadra et al., 2013). While colonial governance inflicted multiple forms of violence on the colonised subjectivities to incapacitate them from collectively resisting its established governmentality. The postcolonial governmentality, on the contrary, limited the horizon for creating political subjectivities by degrading the idea of politics itself and provoking political disenchantment.

In the first fifty years of Indian independence, the introduction of social development manifesto and implementation of social welfare schemes have been mediated through state–civil society collaborations. The postcolonial predicament unfolds with the introduction of liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation, and multiple structural adjustment programs in India. Post-liberalisation, with the advent of “globalisation and its discontents” (Stiglitz & Pike, 2004, pp. 321–324), (re)territorialisation (Appadurai, 1996) of the Indian nation-state, and rising populism (Basu, 2015) led to constant reproduction of the “postcolonial variegated sovereign” (Ong, 2006, p. 292), rendering political-civic relations further antagonistic. Capital accumulation juxtaposed with exploitation,

disenfranchisement, and the silencing of subjects for nationalist and capitalist ambitions turned CSOs into “the missionaries of the corporate world” (Roy, 2016, p. 104). Neoliberalism extends this process of fabrication of civil society into “doing good” as an embedded form of neoliberal governmentality by which governments are pushing for a particular agenda far from giving civil society the power to make informed and agentic decisions. The postcolonial implications of colonial laws of sedition (Sinha, 2019) and the “fear of a foreign hand” (Chandra, 2013) in internal affairs, especially reflected through its judicial-legal frameworks (laws and policies), administrative directives (labelling and institutional narratives), reorientation of social movements, silencing of dissent, and neoliberal promises of development, has further reshaped and compromised the space for civil society activism and advocacy.

In recent years, civil society in India has been subjected to restricted or abolished funding, judicialised bans, and administered crackdowns through arbitrary, illegal, and unconstitutional interventions (Mohan, 2017). The Indian government has introduced several repressive legal frameworks and made amendments to existing policies which further singled out rights-based CSOs on the grounds of national security (Ganguly, 2015). Since 2014, going by the government’s own admission, over 20,000 NGOs and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), including reputed human-rights organisations such as Amnesty International, the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, Greenpeace, and Compassion International, among notable others (Kumar, 2019), have been blacklisted, abrogated from foreign funding, and banned (partially or completely) from operating in India. Naming international and transnational NGOs a “foreign agent” and shaming them on anti-national and anti-developmental charges has strategically delegitimised INGOs from operating in the country and further widened the cleavage between the Global North and the Global South, hindering their cooperation and interactions.

CSOs advocating for rights promotion and protection are targeted by draconian laws (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2020) for alleged non-compliance with norms that in themselves contribute to regulatory ambiguity and fragmentation within the voluntary sector. Furthermore, the existing laws and policies have undergone multiple amendments in recent years, making it even harder for CSOs to ensure compliance due to the lack of an effective system of knowledge generation, training, and awareness of the actual legal provisions. This has triggered the problems of dissonance between competing visions of resilience vs. resistance. CSOs are facing unprecedented challenges in securing regulatory compliance to ensure accountability, which further damages the capabilities of the sector to perform its fundamental duties of democratic deepening. Instead, CSOs are increasingly encouraged to adapt, circumscribe, and abandon their political aspirations—visions, directives, and frameworks—to meet the demands of

the government. Such an attempt to pigeonhole civil society based on their political participation (or lack thereof), thereby demarcating limits on their autonomy and agency, makes it imperative to ask what qualifies as “political” and how it interacts with the neoliberal approach to resilience.

3. Data and Methods

This article is a qualitative exploration of an assemblage of ten CSOs (INGOs), their logics and practices characterised by resilience (adaptation) and resistance (friction) in which the dominant hegemony is sometimes supported and at times subverted. The research is influenced by Foucauldian governmentality and Foucault’s works on discourse and power to analyse how discourses legitimise and sustain dominant power relations and how subjects may discursively challenge and transform the prevailing hegemony (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010). In building an analysis of resilience in civil society practices, this article interrogates what aspects of civil society’s behaviour are constructed and influenced by the neoliberal doctrines of resilience, which are held necessary to respond to the external threats and pressures from the political space.

The method employed for this study is the examination of “actually existing civil society” (Mohan, 2002), the transformative journey of their contested emergence over the past decade (from 2014 up to the present), and their experiential vulnerabilities in the face of government restriction and dominant social and political norms. The empirical material that informs this research was collected over a period of eight months between 2021 and 2022. The data comprise semi-structured interviews with leading representatives from ten INGOs operating in India who are authentic and credible in their actions and considered highly influential in their own rights and vastly diverse in their levels of engagement. The selection strategy serves several analytical purposes as all ten INGOs exhibit variation in their mode of operations, level of outreach, focus, and access to resources while wielding considerable influence on human rights issues concerning international human rights standard settings, rights monitoring, and enforcement. Furthermore, the selected INGOs have a high degree of membership and considerable transnational recognition, which attracts external support across multiple stakeholders and humanitarian networks. In recent years, their work as “watchdogs” and “humanitarian gatekeepers” with particular emphasis on promoting democratic governance and social justice in India has made some of these organisations more susceptible to political violence than others. Therefore, investigating how organisations operating in a similar geo-political environment experience variegated forms of restriction is particularly salient in understanding the effect of internal structure on numerous outcomes, including organisational survival, practices, and impact (see also Scott, 1995).

The interviews were thematically clustered around three core issues, with particular emphasis on understanding how the organisations self-identify themselves (identify “who” they are) and how that shapes their behavioural tendencies and performative outcomes. The interview guide has a narrow thematic focus to primarily examine the organisations’ identity based on their predominant ideological positionality and political opinions, that is, if they have a political ideology or lack it (political vs. apolitical). Secondly, we examined the organisations’ level of engagement in political participation, collective mobilisation, and how they interact with competing logics and demands from multiple stakeholders (confrontational vs. collaborative). Thirdly, we look at their organisational response strategies and navigating techniques, as situated under the category of impact assessment and risk evaluation (risk-takers vs. careful manoeuvrers).

Given the sensitivity of the current political situation in India—and to avoid the risk of identity disclosure—organisations selected for this case study and individual informants are not mentioned by name. The data analysis is based on a collective case study of ten highly-influential INGOs operating in India based on their nearly perfect fit to one of the three organisational types derived from their primary domain of action and engagement. Participants were chosen to elicit broad-based knowledge of selection (see Table 1). They include current and former members of executive management, program and policy advisors, and deputy directors. The fieldwork was conducted in two phases: The first half took place in India over five months between March 2021 and July 2021, in which in-person interviews were the method of choice, followed by a Covid-19-led transition to using virtual platforms (Zoom, in particular) as the primary source for data generation.

4. The Neoliberal Logic of Civil Society Resilience in India

Resilience, as propounded by neoliberal rationalities, is a fast-becoming “key term of art for neoliberal regimes

of governance” that people and individuals worldwide must possess to become whole and developed subjects (Reid, 2013, p. 6). Neoliberalism is widely understood as a theory of political economic practices proposing that maximising entrepreneurial freedoms can best advance human well-being within an institutional framework characterised by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2007, p. 22, as cited in Chandler & Reid, 2016, p. 74). The condition of resilience as an expression of neoliberalism is based upon a fundamental rejection of the subject’s unique capacity to reason and knowledge, and their potential to make autonomous and independent decisions. Instead, the making of resilient subjects within the doctrine of neoliberalism requires them to be in a permanent state of adaptation which implies political passivity, de-subjectification, and constant reshaping of the self to adapt to its enabling conditions by embracing insecurity and accepting its inability to resist (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Mezzadra et al., 2013). In other words, comprehending how resilience functions in creating a reflexive model that enables subjects to react to external threats and pressures (Gunderson, 2003) requires us to examine its constitutive function of making subjects capable of adapting to radical uncertainty (O’Malley, 2010). This study approaches the concept of resilience as a new form of neoliberal governmentality and conceptualises it in relation to a set of civil society practices that explain why the logic of resilience emphasises the responsibility of the subjectivities to govern themselves most appropriately.

In its essence, the existence of civil society within the neoliberal governmentality has primarily taken shape around the discourse on “development” used by governments to legitimise their right to exercise governmental technologies on their citizens, ostensibly in order to develop them. The Indian government has been utilising development doctrines to proliferate and feed their hegemonic political imaginary, coupled with systemic depoliticisation of civil society space (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015), to naturalise the neoliberal framework of governance. The correlation between propagating

Table 1. Anonymised list of interview participants.

Organisational type	No. of organisations	Interviewees (with designation)
Humanitarian aid/Service delivery (HASD)	Three	HASD 1: Senior policy advisor HASD 2: Managing director HASD 3: Associate director
Health, education, and environment protection (HEEP)	Three	HEEP 1: Executive member HEEP 2: Deputy director HEEP 3: Divisional director for program
Human rights and democracy promotion (HRDP)	Four	HRDP 1: Senior policy advisor HRDP 2: Executive director (CEO) HRDP 3: Unit director HRDP 4: Senior policy advisor

development doctrines and the neoliberal attempt to attend to the forms of subjectivities it attempts to bring into being, where subjectivities are “self-made and being-made” (Foucault, 2010, p. 12), and regulated and appropriated by the institutions that govern them, seems to be foundational to the neoliberal logic of resilience in India. In the continuum of resilience, the government is constructing a sphere of governance that forces civil society to self-censor their activities (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017), adopt various shielding strategies, and reorient their agenda from advocacy to service delivery (Broeckhoven et al., 2020). For Foucault (2008), *laissez-faire* governance based on liberal political economy finds its best expression in regulating civil society. Although the state that must not “govern too much” is legitimised through the liberal principles of modernity, real governance happens through active intervention in civil society operations that opens up a new logic of discipline and control (see also Foucault, 2010). In the neoliberal discourse of resilience, civil society assumes a more proactive engagement with the government by being “accountable” to the nation-state and “regulated” by their global partners while being “efficient” in dealing with a crisis (Mitlin, 2008). To a certain extent, this trend represents a popular discursive framework that defines social-sector engagement and social work institutions in India (Chandhoke, 2003). The neoliberal manifestations of CSOs are heavily regulated and governed by the extensive bureaucratic tentacles of the governing bodies within which they operate, and their accountability lies with the donor agencies for funds and sustenance. Such rapid depoliticisation of civil society’s engagement and intervention has generated a highly fragmented and adaptive civil society, either compensating for the dysfunctionality of the government or acting as an extension of neoliberal governmentality.

This etymology is suggestive of the shifting governing rationalities and their assumed functional dichotomisation of CSOs into political (as advocacy) vs. apolitical (as developmental). However, understanding the resilience of civil society through its coping capacity and potential to adapt to the conflicting interests and demands of various stakeholders as “an element of transactional reality in the history of governmental technologies” (Foucault, 2008, p. 297) oversimplifies the complexities of neoliberal resilience and its strategic depoliticisation of the subjectivities. The resurgence of neoliberal framing of resilience in the institutional approach to organisational studies has focused on the need for organisations to develop the faculties of resilience and adaptive efficiency to enhance capabilities, resource accessibility, and professional productivity. In effect, the neoliberal aspiration to form new public management programs has diminished the normative values and political potentials of CSOs and reduced their contribution to community resilience into quantifiable numbers measured through annual reports and spreadsheets (Carothers, 2016). This has transformed the operative framework of CSOs as

apolitical service providers, providing social assistance without directly influencing the broader polity, and their beneficiaries turned into customers receiving welfare as incentives to further enable their adaptive capacities. The potentially devastating effect of this shift turns civil society into a neoliberal subject of institutional resilience that continues to have political aspirations for a just and equitable future, while its practice and praxis become apolitical and adaptive to the will of the government (Froissart, 2014). This turn from the “political” to the “developmental” has problematised civil society’s scope and the extent of its democratic engagement, its potential to counter-conduct (Foucault, 2007), thus reinforcing the systemic and structural asymmetries of the neoliberal systems of governance and institutions. In the critical language of Foucauldian analysis of power, he claims that neoliberal governmentality is inseparable from and exists within the realm of power relations (Foucault, 2008). The neoliberal regimes of governance constantly evolve by integrating conflicting ideas and interests of multiple stakeholders in society. In doing so, it absorbs and diffuses any acts of resistance by appropriating and even hybridising itself to stay in control of the development-power nexus to govern the subjectivities. This makes development a political process insofar as it involves allocating resources that generate power relations between the caregiver and the beneficiary (Mati, 2020). Thus, civil society involved in developmental activities is neither devoid of politics nor stands immune to power relations. Neoliberal governmental rationality, through its indefinite state of exception, reproduces itself through different exclusionary practices and situated acts of subjugation, surveillance, and institutional resilience to live up to its political promise of development. The discursive space of social inclusion offers an “alternative political engagement” and a “development alternative” instead of an alternative to the development itself (McFarlane, 2004, pp. 890–916). This neoliberal effort of depoliticising development (Mezzadra et al., 2013) has been of fundamental significance to the growth of resilience as a discursive framework that glorifies “the imperative of adaptation rather than resistance to change” (Handmer & Dovers, 1996, p. 483). Building an apolitical and adaptive civil society, thus, implies CSOs being in a permanent state of adjustment (principally that of resilience) and accepting the deliberate disabling of their political habits and potentials through the choices and behavioural agency of civil society itself.

5. Inclusion Through Exclusion

The profound paradox that undercuts the entire liberal project is its capacity to broaden the parameters of social inclusion and exclusion, whereby conditional inclusion of the dis-appropriated subjects takes place through the coercive exclusion of the “political” in them, which is inherently bound to the social fabric that foregrounds the significance of civil society’s existence. The neoliberal

governing rationality creates variegated possibilities and conditions for inclusion and exclusion that emerge as a new site for political negotiation, thereby reshaping the civil society landscape. This correlates to the neoliberal strategy of “inclusion through exclusion” by which the inclusion of civil society within the political space is fundamentally structured on conditions of its exclusion from political participation. By this logic, the inclusion and exclusion of civil society within the political space can be interpreted as informed and reinforced by its degree of adaptation to and acceptance of existing social norms and policies as propagated by the neoliberal governing rationalities. Here, inclusion/exclusion is taken from a macro socio-economic context and seen as a question of civil society’s political participation and choice-making capabilities.

Interviews with leading representatives of four out of ten INGOs selected for the case study, specifically those fitting the humanitarian aid/service delivery (HASD) and the health, education, and environment protection (HEEP) organisational type, reflect a vivid fragmentation among civil society practices that allows engagement in welfare provision but disallows political participation. During interviews, although respondents held strong political opinions and showed sentiments of frustration with the current government, however, on directly questioning their predominant ideological positionality and political opinions as an organisation, they answered in somewhat ambiguous ways expressing a politically impartial/neutral take on things. At the same time, they fully comprehended the volatility of the current political space and their own vulnerabilities:

The biggest issue for the NGO community in India has been the same thing from day one—whether to ask political questions or not...We have argued over that for donkey’s years. Talking about problems is becoming politically incorrect these days and could get you blacklisted. This is a serious problem, and this is dangerous to all NGOs that are trying to point out errors, or asking difficult questions to the country’s “supreme leader” [Prime Minister Modi as referred to by state-sponsored media houses]. The space for dissent in India today has shrunk tremendously. We are simply not allowed to ask questions. That’s the reality of where we are headed, and that we need to accept. (HEEP III, interview)

We are working under enormous pressure, and there’s been constant cumulative efforts to scale down our work and reduce our presence in the sector. If you got no resources and funds to sustain, at one point, you are certain to hit bottom from where it is impossible to go on. So as much as we like to plan out things our way, we need to consider the aspect of partnership and who we can collaborate with...The question is not always about what is right, but about what is achievable at this point, and who does it bene-

fit. What is negotiable, and what is absolutely beyond compromise? That’s everything we are about, finding the balance between accountability and quality. We are well aware of the risks in such collaborations, but our organisation excels at playing the game by the book. (HEEP I, interview)

These statements open up the black box of conflicting interests and logic formations produced in the form of exclusionary inclusion of civil society within the political system. They highlight the emergence of a consensus within the larger civic space which conforms that NGO credibility is determined by its inclusiveness to the institutionalised norms of governance. At the same time, civil society remains superfluous, continuously adjusting and adapting to new ideas, practices, and actions which produces a fluid effect. This fluid or adaptive nature of civil society essentially disallows the possibility for organised acts of resistance that could serve as a mechanism for “counter-conduct.” At the same time, the CSOs struggle to address the paradox of their own exclusion in political participation by being an adaptive subject while comprehending the material and ideological conditions of their inclusion.

Following the Foucauldian analysis of “discursive formations” (Foucault, 1972), which lead to the production of particular statements that control what can and cannot be linguistically expressed, talked about, and practiced—the NGOs occupy a complicated space in neoliberal politics. Foucault famously argued that “nothing has any meaning outside of discourse” (Foucault, 1972, p. 45) and power is fundamental to Foucauldian understanding of discourse. Therefore, if power holds the capacity to legitimise the delegitimisation of those perceived as a threat to its own position of authority, the legitimacy of civil society rests on its ability to correlate practices that serve as an extension of governmental values and ambitions. The perception of civil society as shaped by governing rationalities determines what could be considered legitimate behaviour and how an admissible civil society should act. In this sense, the CSOs willingly conforming to the governmental decisions and cooperating to participate in self-governance will most likely attain their goal of “earning” legitimacy from the state, unlike those monitoring and advocating for rights will face assured coercion and delegitimisation for having conflicting interests than the government. This allows us to further recognise how the relationship between the state and civil society keeps oscillating between dominant modes of control, i.e., coercion or consent (Gramsci, 1971; Mati, 2020), in which the hegemony of the state is continually renewed, reproduced, and institutionally inscribed.

One senior policy official from the human rights and democracy promotion (HRDP) organisational type, and involved in their organisation’s agenda-setting, recalled that the risk of selecting a politically sensitive issue “to an astonishing level depends on the government’s own

perception of threat. We need to make an informed evaluation of risks and severity that could certainly weigh into the choices we make in selecting an agenda.”

Another primary concern for officials from the HRDP organisational type was the potential loss of funds and resource dependence among NGOs:

We cannot downplay India’s lack of a robust philanthropic culture. So, coming at a clash with the government means not only placing our funding streams at risk but also damaging our organisation’s reputation and support system by alienating potential foreign donors. (HRDP II, interview)

Suppose the donor has a particular agenda in mind regarding where the money should be spent. In that case, that decision needs to be considered over our mission logic, and the money is used for the purpose they [donors] have specified. They tend to engage with issues that are popularly discussed across the state-owned media houses and want quick and measurable impact for their money. We like to select issues that are silenced and ignored. Our volunteers have been lobbying with the government on particular rights issues for years and sometimes decades. That’s the difference. This is a very paradoxical situation. (HRDP I, interview)

The immediate sense of these quotes identifies two mechanisms that capture the aspect of resource dependency among NGOs and the paradox of neoliberal governmentality, which seeks to govern subjectivities through economic surveillance. First, the government can discipline NGO activities and control their access to vital resources via implicit or explicit threats to withdraw funding should the organisation become political (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Ruggiano & Taliaferro, 2012). Second, they illustrate how disembedding the domain of “political” from the socio-economic conventions of civil society is precisely the condition of their social inclusion, whereby the government might regulate and control the economy—unavailability of resources, curb funds, a ban on operations—to reinvigorate the adaptive capacities among subjectivities and intimidate them into submission. The state, as a resource provider, can deter NGO advocacy (Li et al., 2017) as much as it could restrict the flow of resources and funds made available to the NGOs as part of international solidarity through laws and policy transfers that are designed to stifle the voice of civil society (Amnesty International, 2019). Therefore, NGOs operating in a constrained political environment need to secure external funding sources to survive and sustain their operations while carefully transforming their activities from “confrontational to palliative” (Jalali, 2013) to reduce the risk of a political crackdown by the government (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). This explains what is at stake in the neoliberal discourse of resilience, in which “to be resilient is to

forego the very power of resistance and accept one’s vulnerability to that which threatens” (Reid, 2013, p. 360). At the same time, those being governed entirely comprehend their vulnerability and lack of subjective choice-making capabilities, thus, explaining the spatial and temporal limits to civil society’s political existence.

6. Repoliticizing Resilience: Creating Space for Activism

There is a growing consensus among scholars that a resilience approach to CSO practices runs the risk of striking an over-optimistic tone regarding local capacities to overcome and adjust to complexities in their outer environment while pushing for a dehumanising political agenda and the continuity of the state’s dominance (Chandler, 2015; Duffield, 2012; Walker & Cooper, 2011). Resilience as a “rolling-out neoliberal governmentality” (Joseph, 2013, p. 51) demands subjectivities “to live up to their responsibilities by accepting the conditions of their own vulnerability” (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 96). The neoliberal strategy of generating “resilience” through development agencies, particularly civil society interventions, shifts the burden of development from the state to the people (Duffield, 2012). This allows temporary empowerment by making resources available for consumption by maximising entrepreneurial freedom within an institutional framework characterised by private property rights, free trade, and individual liberty (Harvey, 2016). The neoliberal model of resilience has turned CSOs into apolitical and adaptive subjects, tamed and governed by institutions (Baker, 1999). A resilient civil society cannot “conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility” (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 83), as they are busy accommodating themselves within the existing worldview, changing their desires and expectations to fit in.

However, understanding civil resilience as a neoliberal doctrine that forces its subjectivities to become active participants in their own depoliticisation where the resilient subject has “accepted the imperative not to resist” (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 85) oversimplifies and overlooks the relational dependence of resistance upon resilience by reducing them to being adaptive vs. non-adaptive. This artificial binary results from competing visions of resilience and resistance as mutually opposing, wherein resilience demands apolitical adaptation and compliance to their attendant governmentality. In contrast, resistance is perceived as a medium for revolutionary change that incites political intervention and civil participation by which politics regains its material dimensions. While civil society’s symptomatic adaptation and coping mechanisms may be seen as its effort toward “resilience-building,” it can pose differential challenges and possibilities for civil society to operate within and engage with diverse and conflicting interests of varied stakeholders.

Drawing from the empirical evidence revealed by the Indian civil society captures the political deployment of

“performativity” as an analytical bridge that binds the resilience-resistance nexus where resilience subsumes resistance. In the context of civil resistance movements in India, practising resilience becomes the mode for resistance that enables operating between “external control and organisational autonomy” (Arvidson & Linde, 2021, p. 208) by opening up space for transformations that are intimately tied to the policy and practice mechanisms. From the interviews:

Our motto is to bring change on a systemic level. We also don't believe that change is going to come from any one organisation or one person, it requires a social movement. Our task is to bring problematic issues to the limelight, and we speak about those issues on behalf of thousands of millions of Indian citizens in which our role is to catalyse change, and we are willing to engage with everyone to do so, including the government and corporations as long as they are willing to look beyond their own interests and are eager to fix things. (HEEP II)

Our organisation puts a lot of value on setting the right goals that we can look back at in five to ten years as a success strategy. Right now, the political climate is too sensitive to be seen as politically advocating for big policy changes concerning poverty reduction, ecological extraction and degradation, displacement, and forced migration. It's like fighting in the fog, where you cannot predict what could go wrong. So we have started operating at the intersection of advocacy-on-alert and active service delivery. Our expert affiliates constantly lobby with the government and big donors to curate a strategy we can make the most out of. (HEEP III)

Resilience, as demonstrated by the Indian civil society, attempts to manoeuvre and navigate exogenic challenges by implementing various adaptation and mitigation techniques, shielding strategies, reorientation of their agenda from “advocacy-on-alert” to service delivery, and enhancing aspects of transparency, accountability, and performance across transnational civil society networks. This process is highly suggestive of the current shift in civil society practices, whereby CSOs comprehend the struggles for political and democratic transformations and are engaged in (internally) decoupling actions from the institutional structure to maintain their credibility. Here the concept of resilience becomes a performative process by which civil society revisits its own tendency of submitting to the state of adaptation, dealing with the question of its own systemic depoliticisation, destabilisation, insecurities, and passive participation in the “political society” to revitalise its strength and potential to change. It unpacks a broader dimension to resilience thinking that transcends beyond the institutionalising effects of self-discipline and serves as a more powerful medium for effecting systemic political change.

Two INGO leading activists who have been collectively engaged with the rights and service sectors for over two decades expressed hope that the ongoing struggles, bargaining, and negotiations with multiple stakeholders' logic would alter the existing political dynamic:

Human rights issues are personal. To our members and affiliates, it is more than just an issue they work for. It is something they care about deeply. We have been publicly shamed and vilified, and our activists have been put behind bars, harassed, and intimidated. Our funds are restricted. In the past, we have attracted a lot of media visibility for campaigning against some serious human rights violations in the country. If there is something we could add value to, something that delivers human rights impact, we have the courage to act. And the fact that even though we are hounded by the state and big businesses but not hounded off the political scene gives us the confidence and credibility to go on. (HRDP III, interview)

We are being demonised for doing charity. It's excruciating how there is a growing dislike for international organisations as India is trying to uphold its primordial identity as a Hindu nationalist nation. Our intervention on humanitarian causes concerning discrimination against minority women and children, Dalit and Tribal populations are being framed as political and divisive. But we have a spiritual commitment to our vision and, luckily, the support of a bunch of transnational donors who have the best interest at heart and the utmost faith in our values....This is a tough fight, but giving up is not an option here. (HASD II, interview)

These experiential vulnerabilities among CSOs and their exhibition of tremendous commitment and courage towards upholding their values as social work institutions amidst complexities of violence and arbitrary interventions capture the resilience of civil society as a dynamic and integrated process of their survival strategy. It is influenced by multiple discursive and contextual factors wherein resilience is about adaptation and maintaining the existing status quo as much as it facilitates the employment of powerful tools that create grounds for active resistance. It encapsulates how civil society might not necessarily be at the receiving end of institutional politics. Instead, the knowledge of resilience can be practiced and reproduced by CSOs to survive beyond the institutionalised modes of governance. Enacting resilience practices while operating in a contentious status quo that necessitates the adaptation of newer frameworks of multilateral accountability reflects an inherently political strategy. Here, the knowledge of their own subjugation and adjustments to the existing power relations becomes “a tactical choice born of prudent awareness of the balance of power” (Scott, 1995, p. 183),

which transcends a singular logic of adaptation and may act as a precursor for an enhanced strategy for resistance wherein resilience becomes a condition for resistance. Therefore, resilience, when brought under neoliberal governmentality through economically rationalised disciplinary interventions, seeks to police, regulate, and control the subjectivities. However, the resilient subjectivities on fully comprehending the volatility of the situation and their own vulnerabilities to call for active resistance has a larger potential for initiating effective re-politicisation as a response to institutionalised depoliticisation. In this sense, resilience could also mean a capacity embedded in human nature that enables them to anticipate and respond to complex situations while creating the possibilities to incite popular resistance that emerges out of the regulatory state of adaptation, thus, making re-politicisation possible (as seen in Figure 1). Here, the process of politicisation, depoliticisation, and re-politicisation becomes part of a continuum that emerges in relation to the transformations in state–society relationships. Therefore, the political acts of resistance could emerge out of, rather than operating outside, the limits of resilience. The strategy of practicing resistance can be envisioned by reconciling the knowledge of resilience to invoke change and incite collective mobilization, thus creating a new field of political intervention.

Despite the persistent and systemic efforts to undermine free civic space and depoliticise social work practices, the last decade in India saw powerful anti-establishment protests and social movements led by CSOs demanding social justice, rights, and equality. CSOs are increasingly embracing resilience thinking as a more iterative approach that is derived inductively to shape, evolve and reevaluate the civil society’s engagement with competing logic and interests from multiple stakeholders, as well as adopting a “strategies-as-practice” approach (Jarzabkowski, 2004) to influence and alter the existing institutional order, which is precisely an act of showing resistance against institutionalised control.

7. Conclusions

The task of renovating the “political” in the “civil” requires a fundamental shift away from the biopolitical dependence on development. More specifically, the corporatised understanding of development as an apolitical project-based process concerned with building resilient subjects that need technological knowledge, ample resources, and tailor-made professionals to achieve pre-set goals and agendas—is an inherently flawed perception of development as promoted and propagated by the neoliberal governmentality. When these highly calculated and polished designs/strategies meet the complex societal and cultural contours, it widens the cleavage between intentions and outcomes. As Ferguson (1994, p. 17) said:

Whatever interests may be at work, and whatever they [development practitioners] may think they are doing, they can only operate through a complex set of social and cultural structures so deeply embedded and so ill-perceived that the outcome may be only a baroque and unrecognisable transformation of the original intention.

Governmentality acting as a tool to the neoliberal market forces intimidate its subjects into a state of submission. These newly formed subjectivities are disabled of their political habits, potentials, and tendencies to resist societal odds. Instead, they are framed within the mindset of adaptation, constantly re-adjusting their needs in the face of everyday injustices. Ultimately, “development has always been about changing the people so that they can be brought into the system instead of changing the system itself” (Darby, 2009, p. 705). Therefore, it is crucial to recognise the tools and tactics of neoliberal resilience within the broader context of depoliticised activism and the related shift away from “government to governance” (Rhodes, 1997) that has led to

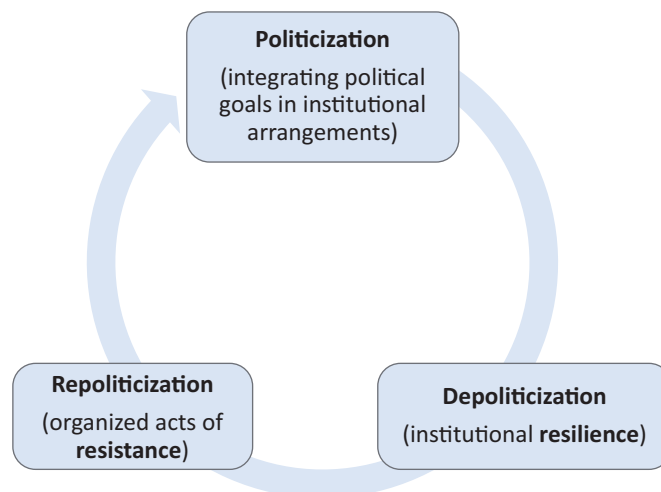


Figure 1. Resilience–resistance nexus in politicisation processes.

the permeation of neoliberal logic of governance within political systems and institutions.

The civil society-organised collective mobilisation and capacity building are being replaced by the neoliberal model of resilience, whereby accepting the necessity of adaptation to the realities has become an endemic condition for development (Chandler & Reid, 2016). In this sense, understanding neoliberal resilience as one of systemic adaptation implies the strength to withstand exogenous shocks as much as it runs the risk of misinterpreting resilient subjects as “adapt and capable in their dealings with the world” (Chandler, 2015, p. 30), leading the way for “taken-for-grantedness” whereby the needs and demands of resilient subjectivities are constantly negotiated and often unheard. Therefore, resisting neoliberal governmentality in the postcolonial present requires rejecting the development alternatives that intensify the socio-economic vulnerabilities with the political promise of resilience and refocusing our attention on the resilience-resistance nexus and its interaction with the emerging modes of governance and the contemporary forms of anti-politics that neoliberalism demands. To repoliticise, the act of resilience requires reinvestment in manifesting political subjectivities by deploying new political strategies that revitalise and recover their capacity to think and act politically and to resist, subvert, escape, and defy the imposition of the exclusionary modes of power and governance that neoliberal regimes insist on.

Despite multiple attempts to streamline and improve the relationship between the Indian state and civil society, many challenges remain, including a feeling of mutual distrust and hostility, a lack of shared understanding of their roles in social transformation and in addressing crucial issues concerning the fundamentals of democracy, social inclusion, rights, and justice. As Hulme and Edwards (1997, p. 23) point out, civil society today is inherently inconsistent in performing operations that claim to promote qualitative change because “it is not about what is included, but rather about what is excluded by their model, and particularly its impact on the capacity of poor people to organise themselves independently of vested interests and structural inequalities.” Therefore, it is essential to identify and address these gaps to enable CSOs to contribute more meaningfully to a politically and socially vibrant democratic society. At this critical juncture when democratic principles are increasingly threatened by the endorsement of a politically disenfranchised civil society that could otherwise represent the value of the Indian secular democracy and its inclusivity within the political-economic context, civil society must engage with the question of its own systemic depoliticisation.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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