Inclusive, just, plural, dynamic: building a 'civil' society in the Third World

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Introduction: six popular movements

I shall begin by briefly citing six among thousands of recent events which highlight the efforts of civil society in the Third World[1] to reaffirm its democratic and political potential and which underscore the endemic problems in the dominant economic and political processes — problems which are severely constraining and, in many cases, destroying, the very basis of survival on the planet. These events give us a profound insight into the struggle to build a 'civil' society in the Third World.

Pakistan: the Alternative Development Network

Some three years ago, 40 representatives of Pakistani NGOs gathered in Islamabad to discuss how their various activities could be restructured and better coordinated, in order to move from being conventional development or social-action groups to becoming a social and political movement that could redefine and democratise the relationship between the state and civil society. They represented a cross-section of a new national alliance — the Alternative Development Network — an initiative with the powerful potential to recover politics from politicians and political brokers and establish a more egalitarian and democratic order in Pakistan. Part of the agenda of this gathering was to discuss ways to strengthen the Pakistan–India People-to-People Initiative which had evolved a year before in a climate of mistrust and hostility between the political élites (including religious hard-liners) of the two countries. This climate had adversely affected both the realisation of a more democratic

and peaceful interrelationship between the peoples on both sides of the border and the restoration of democratic and tolerant societies within each country.

Since the Islamabad gathering, participants worked to establish the critiques and strategies that they had discussed in several further meetings. The Pakistan–India People-to-People Initiative for Peace and Democracy has since been institutionalised and has subsequently gathered in Delhi, Lahore, and Calcutta and in smaller meetings. The next event was held in November 1998 at Peshawar. Its significance was marked by the courage and perseverance of citizens' groups in Pakistan in inviting 200 Indians from vastly diverse backgrounds, at a time of growing cynicism and mistrust among the political élites in both countries. That the implications of the recently exploded nuclear devices were among the central elements of the agenda underlined the importance of this initiative.

Nepal: The People's Plan for the Twenty-first Century

The second example is the convergence in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu of over 500 representatives of women's organisations, trade unions, fishing communities, indigenous and tribal peoples, farmers, child workers, human-rights organisations, and support groups working among and with them. The occasion was the third General Assembly of the People's Plan for the Twenty-first Century (PP21), an 'alliance of hope', an Asia-wide loose association of citizens' groups. The participants shared the lessons learned from their long struggles to establish more accountable governance, as well as their own autonomous initiatives towards building a 'society which is gender just, culturally plural, socially equitable, politically participatory, peaceful, democratic and ecologically sane … based on life-centred values — compassion, caring, nurturing and sharing'. The resulting Sagarmatha Declaration[2] outlines both a powerful critique of the dominant economic and political system and the vision towards which the members will be collectively working as they move into the next millennium (PP21 1996).

Mexico: the Zapatista rebellion

The third example arises from the years that have passed since the extraordinary revolt of peasants — 'Zapatistas' — in the Chiapas region of Mexico, a revolt that took virtually everyone by surprise. Subsequent

developments in 1995–96 point to the evolution of a radical new politics that is being simultaneously articulated by the local peasants, and by numerous other Mexican movements and groups, as well as their supporters around the world. In their call to all Mexicans to participate in a broad movement for 'jobs, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace', the Zapatistas gave primacy to resisting anti-democratic trends and developments (like the abrogation of agrarian reform or their forcible 'integration' — via the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) — into the world economy on terms over which they had no control; or against the ruling trends in the Mexican economy which had resulted in the rapid extraction of the oil, timber, minerals, and labour of Chiapas, with the benefits and profits predominantly accruing to large landowners, ranchers, merchants, and politicians; or the continuing human-rights violations, including massacres, by representatives of large landowners, often supported by the Mexican army). They also helped to place popular and democratic movements at the centre of Mexico's political process. In essence, the movement and its widespread support highlighted the central importance of democracy, justice, and dignity. A government that initially responded with military force eventually backed down and engaged in a series of crucial public dialogues, thus accepting a majority of the Zapatistas' demands. Though there is still far to go before the radical agenda is implemented (the negotiations keep being stalled by official intransigence or violence), the revolt and its aftermath have had an exceptional impact in Mexico and beyond. In doing so, it has strengthened civil society in Mexico (Collier 1994).

India: the National Front for Tribal Self-rule

The fourth event involved people belonging to tribal groups and movements from all over India representing the recently formed National Front for Tribal Self-rule, who converged in Delhi to seek the implementation of an official commission's report on tribal self-governance. They were also asserting their primary rights over productive natural resources and an end to the state's treating them as trespassers in their own lands and forests. For, since 1865, the forests of the Indian sub-continent had been placed under state control 'for reasons of empire' — a policy process that was adopted with minimal changes by post-independence governments.

Three years earlier, responding to widespread protests by tribals against continued violations of their customary and resource rights by state and non-state actors, the Indian parliament had set up a committee

headed by a tribal. His report argued that tribal society had been marked by its own representative systems of governance through the *Gram Sabha* (village council), which should be legally recognised as the primary centre of tribal governance. He also argued that the long-standing demand for tribal control over productive land and forests should be conceded, and that administrative interference in tribal affairs should be minimised. The government largely ignored his report—hence the mass gathering.

The tribals' assertions were powerfully summed up in the slogan, 'Our Rule in Our Villages'. This declaration did not imply secession from India but, rather, the assertion of relative autonomy from what was experienced as an intrusive and exploitative state apparatus and the unjust social and economic order that it legitimised at the expense of their livelihoods, identities, and systems of self-governance (Kothari 1994). The demonstration partially achieved its goal after a week in Delhi: the central government acceded to the demand to recognise the primacy of the *Gram Sabha* and in December 1996 cleared the way for an historic amendment to the Constitution, recognising the tribal right to self-rule. Significant activities are now underway to give substance to the promise of greater political autonomy in tribal areas. The movement has also influenced the views of civil society as a whole about the need to rethink democratic institutions, so that they nurture greater control by local communities over their resources and over external decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods.

Similar mobilisations have been witnessed in indigenous and tribal regions world-wide, and several major global alliances have been formed. These, coupled with the efforts of many groups to articulate their concerns before a special sub-commission and the human-rights committee of the UN, can also be seen as part of an effort to build a global civil society that is firmly rooted in local democratic processes.

India: People's Global Action

The fifth example is of farmers in the Indian state of Karnataka, who laid siege to the first Indian franchise of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) in Bangalore. KFC, operated by Pepsi Cola Co., was forced temporarily to shut down. The action was symbolic of protest in different parts of the country against handing over control to transnational corporations (TNCs) in critical areas like food supply. It specifically opposed the mass marketing of chicken by a centrally controlled corporation using, it was alleged, chemical additives that were in violation of national standards. These

farmers had earlier successfully protested against the US-based Cargill Corporation for aggressively marketing hybrid seeds at the expense of locally controlled and produced food crops. Cargill was forced to withdraw from Karnataka. Recently, farmers' movements across India have been protesting against Monsanto Corporation's plans to introduce its 'terminator' seeds, which would inhibit the new crops' germination, thus compelling the farmer to buy fresh seeds. The Indian government had to assure parliament that it was officially banning Monsanto from importing any such seed. The concerns underlying these protests are central to the building of a civil society, a major issue being that of who should have rights over resources that are critical to the lives and livelihoods of a majority of people on the planet. Should these rights rest with private corporations and an international institutional system that privileges private accumulation and profit, or should they be under the primary protection and care of communities whose economic and cultural systems are so integrally linked to access to those resources? How justified is an international patent regime that permits the private patenting of the blood-line of indigenous peoples and of seeds and medicinal plants that are an integral part of their knowledge and culture? (Brush and Stabinsky 1996). The mobilisation in Karnataka goes to the heart of these questions of justice and democracy.

Similar mobilisations against the loss of control over productive natural resources and the victimisation caused by economically unjust processes have taken place across the less industrialised world. Hundreds of groups, coalitions, and alliances have linked together not only to hold multilateral banks and TNCs accountable, but also to evolve alternatives to centralised economic decision-making and the spread of monoculture, where the needs of the market predominate over concerns for democratic control of productive resources and the respect for crop and biological diversity. One such forum is the People's Global Action, which draws together hundreds of grassroots movements and groups working for a more democratic, just, and transparent international and global system.

For the past decade, groups from all over the 'South' have linked with support groups in the G-7 countries and held parallel meetings during the annual Aid Consortium and World Bank–International Monetary Fund (IMF) meetings. More importantly, they have outlined an alternative structural adjustment which leads to the wider realisation of social justice and ecological sanity. In mid-1998, a People's Summit was organised during the G-7 meeting to celebrate the numerous ways in which local communities are recovering control over their economies and their lives.

The farmers of Karnataka are one part of this global effort not only to hold corporations and states more accountable, but also to question who should control intellectual property with respect to genetic resources, and to highlight the need to rethink the very basis of centralised corporate control over the seeds of life.

Beijing: the fourth World Conference on Women

The final example is of the popular mobilisation before the Beijing women's conference in 1995. On an unprecedented scale, the preparatory process moved beyond urban-based activists and scholars to involve tens of thousands of women who had hitherto rarely moved out of their communities and villages. The voices and concerns of these women 'from the margins' influenced both independent national agendas and the popular agenda in Beijing. In numerous countries, women vocally contested the official government presentation. In almost all cases, they achieved an impact on the content and thrust of their respective governments' submissions, and also contributed to the development of alternatives to the dominant economic, religious, cultural, and political institutions and processes, widening the critique of their repercussions on the families, communities, areas, countries and regions in which they lived. They gave voice to a growing realisation that all over the world — from the spaces of inter-personal relationships to the global economy — the democratic process was itself under threat (*Lokayan Bulletin* 1998).

A diverse and innovative struggle for a democratic polity and a humane society

The six events or movements highlighted above represent something of the vast outpouring of democratic activity in the civil society of the Third World.[3] It encompasses a staggering diversity of innovative endeavour which ranges from democratic control over local governments and productive resources to building transnational alliances; from hitherto subjugated communities and minorities asserting their democratic rights to the struggles of women to recover their dignity and rights over productive resources; from efforts to nurture folk and indigenous traditions of song and theatre to alternative networks of decentralised communication; from local actions seeking prohibition of the production, sale and consumption of alcohol to collective efforts to ban joint-venture licences to domestic and TNC enterprises; from building democratic producer cooperatives to collective actions against the

privatisation of profitable public corporations; from campaigns against the use of amniocentesis tests to identify and abort female foetuses to regional campaigns against permitting Western drug corporations to patent and penetrate a low-cost and indigenous medicine system; from campaigns against irresponsible and destructive tourism to struggles against ‘destructive’ development projects; from prolonged local agitation against corrupt officials to massive national support to weed out corruption in public life; from initiatives to restore control over local forests to massive collective effort to draft ‘people’s’ policies; from people’s tribunals to ‘try’ those guilty of violating human rights and the environment to efforts to form joint management systems to conserve and nurture fragile ecosystems; from efforts to educate farmers and workers about the impact of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or NAFTA to mass public demonstrations against the policies and conditionalities of the international financial institutions (IFIs).

These diverse activities indicate the potential of civil society coming into its own but, more importantly, they teach us lessons about the limits of representative democracy, the adverse implications of the current patterns of development, and the responsibility of citizens in contemporary society — lessons that are fundamental to the building of a democratic polity and a humane society.[4]

Triumphant capitalism and civil strife as threats to civil society

In the best sense, then, a ‘successful’ and dynamic civil society would build democratic relational networks to nurture or protect diverse religions, belief systems, communities, families, and political and economic pursuits. The greater the success in democratically developing and sustaining this diversity, the more mature a civil society would be. Given today’s juncture of triumphalist capitalism, homogenising cultural and consumerist values, highly inegalitarian societies, the steady withdrawal of the state from its democratic and welfarist roles, and the explosion of civil strife and ethnic conflict, such a conception of civil society may seem utopian. While there is undoubtedly some truth in this, it is in understanding and contesting the structures which legitimise inequality, undemocratic practices, and ecological destruction — as well as in celebrating the diverse attempts to sustain ethical, democratic, and ecological spaces — that our defence of civil society should lie. It is to that end that I make the following observations.

There was significant expectation, in the immediate post-war decades and the successful anti-colonial struggles, that modernising, benevolent states in most of the Third World would usher in a more just and democratic society; and that, in the process, they would create conditions which would gradually facilitate a democratic and self-confident civil society — a civic space that would in turn keep the state in check, ensure its role as a non-partisan arbiter, and progressively nurture plural social, cultural, and economic activities.

Almost without exception, this expectation lies in tatters. Society today is arguably more conflict-ridden, more thoroughly penetrated by intrusive and exploitative economic and political interests, and more replete with extremist and reactionary forces than at any point in the past 50 years (if not more). Witness the complex conflicts in Bosnia, Angola or Rwanda, or in large swathes of Latin America, South Asia and Africa. The social movements of reactionary and culturally violent forces are pervasive in many countries. For instance, one of the most successful social movements in post-colonial history in India does not represent women or subjugated communities but the forces of Hindu right-wing reaction—a movement that has mobilised millions of people across caste and class (though primarily among the upper and middle classes) and whose efforts generated the groundswell that led to the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1991 (Kothari 1994). The movement draws its strength and in return sustains some of its social force in a complex web of local and national level relationships with the state, and with political parties like the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) (Indian People's Party) and the Shiv Sena (The Army of Shiva, based primarily in the state of Maharashtra, where it rules with the BJP).

So, while democratic struggles attempt to give content to building a civil society, numerous forces, nationally and internationally, are rapidly thwarting the potential of Third World nations to become relatively self-reliant, inter-dependent polities which nurture the democratic interests of diverse communities living within them. These forces can be characterised as a 'regressive' mobilisation: this ranges from religious extremists mobilising mass support to undermine the peaceful coexistence of different religious and ethnic groups, often fuelling inter- or intra-country conflict, hatred, and 'cleansing', to the use of 'land armies' to protect the interests of large landowners against demands for economic justice and land redistribution; from the whipping up of hate against poorer classes and minorities to numerous forms of violence against women and other vulnerable communities; from armed gangs ruling

neighbourhoods and unleashing a wave of terror on local citizens to public announcements that call on supporters to participate in pogroms or to purge areas of particular communities; from forcible eviction of city residents by land sharks to networks that benefit from the trafficking in women and children; from civilian support for military action against democratic and non-violent protest to support for investments and technologies that are clearly undermining the economic and ecological endowments of poor countries. The list is long and represents forces and trends that inhibit the longer-term realisation of a democratic polity.

These forces of democratic closure, if I may call them that, have arisen in contexts that are rooted in complex historical, colonial, and developmental factors. They are also both fed by, and are often a reaction to, the perpetuation of a homogeneous consumer culture and desires kindled by a homogenising popular media. While the initial fascination for the John Wayne–Dynasty–Baywatch type of Western programme is waning in favour of 'indigenous' content, let us not be fooled. Overwhelmingly, what dominate are soap operas, grossly simplified and distorted religious teleplays, escapist song-and-dance, fist-and-gun cinema, and official propaganda—much of it interspersed with advertising which promotes aspirations for the magic of consumer choices. Papanek was right when he wrote, over a quarter of a century ago, that advertising 'makes you buy what you don't want with money that you don't have' (Papanek 1971). Global corporate spending for advertising, packaging, and promotions totals over US$500 billion annually. That so many of us so uncritically accept this climate of psychological persuasion is itself a contributing factor in keeping civil society weak and fragmented.

The myths of 'free choices' and 'free markets'

Many, however, argue that the best judge of good civil society is how 'freely' the market-place functions: the primary indicator of the good life then becomes the range of choices available to the individual consumer. Societies where these choices are limited are then, by definition, 'lesser' societies. It does not particularly matter if a just and plural political order prevails, or even if the country concerned sinks ever deeper into external debt. Maximising production and maximising profits almost become ends in themselves. The market is given greater value than the building of democratic political community and a cooperative economy that privileges both producer and consumer in a relationship of mutual responsibility (Ichiyo and Kothari 1996). It does not particularly matter

that neither the market nor international trade is really ‘free’, or that choices of material objects are not equally accessible and available. It does not particularly matter if market processes pollute and violate the natural regenerative capacities and sustainability of the earth’s ecosystems — ecosystems that are themselves the immediate life-source of a majority of the world’s population (Durning 1992). It is indeed sad that we have moved to a point where even democracy is equated with consumer choices and not with political freedoms and social justice, and far less with ecological justice (Kothari and Parajuli 1993).

The problem is not one of distribution. Even if some goods and foods were subsidised and made accessible to the poor and the lower-middle classes (as with India’s state-run ration shops), the lack of purchasing power for hundreds of millions of people means that they cannot buy those products. Again, what rarely gets questioned is that the production of commodities is itself iniquitous, with benefits accruing unequally and with labour so undervalued. For instance, the daily wage of a hard-working marginal peasant with deep knowledge of the complex cycles of life is thousands of times less than the hourly fee of a city lawyer.

What is hidden in the assumptions of ‘free choice’ and ‘free trade’ is that capitalist development itself inhibits the realisation of a vibrant and democratic civil society. For instance, it engenders displacement, dispossession, and marginalisation of millions of people annually. In India alone, over half a million people each year are forcibly displaced by planned development projects. Even if the displacement were justifiable, most do not even get adequate cash compensation (which is itself so demeaning to culturally and ecologically rooted communities) (Kothari 1996).

Economic centralisation, ecological degradation, and civil society

Further, since so much modern industrial production and commercial activity is contingent on the intensive and extensive extraction of natural resources, and since a majority of Third World people still depend for their subsistence on the regenerative capacities of their natural resource base — whether land, forests, rivers or the ocean — ecological degradation, misuse, and despoliation inevitably force them to live an increasingly untenable life on the periphery of society.

Yet, even in these margins, they are evolving complex new forms of economic and social subsistence. Even from the margins, many of them

contribute more to developing civil society than do those with privilege and power. However, their capacity to play an active role as full participants in building a vibrant civil society is discounted by the centralisation of economic and political power, primarily because of the critical loss (and lack) of control over productive resources.[5]

In fact, most of the Third World has experienced a process whereby economic decision-making is shifting from the hands of primary producers to national governments, private entrepreneurs or TNCs. Indeed, control is even slipping away from national governments as faceless financial bureaucrats, economists, and TNC executives increasingly decide the direction of national and global economies (Kothari 1994; Cavanagh and Barnet 1994). For instance, TNCs today control 70 per cent of all the land in the Third World that grows export crops. They control 80 per cent of international trade and are the prime beneficiaries of this control. Not only are local (particularly small) producers more vulnerable as a result, but the capacities of national governments to monitor and regulate these corporate activities are inevitably inadequate (Korten 1995).[6] Even this level of hegemony does not seem to satisfy the dominant economic actors: witness the pressure they exerted on the OECD countries to draft and approve the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). If not for a remarkable global mobilisation that included concerned legislators, the draconian MAI would have become international 'law'. In October 1998, campaigners from all over the world met at a major workshop in Paris to ensure that instruments like MAI should not become a reality (*Lokayan Bulletin* 1998, 14(4):6).

A democratic civil society cannot be built without holding corporate activity accountable to a framework of democratic rights, including those enshrined by the UN, and to transparent public processes in whichever country that they operate. It is no exaggeration to say that governments which permit rapacious corporate activity (including the financial institutions which support this activity) are guilty of undermining both their own sovereignty and the security of present and future generations.

The state stepping back?

Across much of the Third World, the pressure from TNCs, IFIs, and others who directly and indirectly support their agenda is to 'roll back the state' and permit free access to markets, resources, and labour. Even in relatively strong democratic societies like India, with strong internal legislation to protect the interests of national production and patents, pro-privatisation and 'free market' voices call for a 'stepping back' of the

state. Western governments and IFIs concur. There are clear double standards here, since the pressure on the Third World to open its borders to powerful corporations and other financial interests is not reciprocated in the form of reduced protectionism at home. Countries like the USA and France impose stringent barriers against the entry of goods and services from the Third World. Ironically, while no effort is spared to assist TNCs and other economic interests to 'open up the Third World' in order to gain access to its resources, markets, labour, and sites to dump industrial waste, there is no counter-mobility granted to the workforce. Capital and goods must be free, and labour must be kept bounded inside national frontiers unless selectively required by the industrial, agricultural, or service sectors or as domestic labour.

In country after country, business interests are being equated with national interests, while social and cultural interests are demoted to a secondary position, if not sacrificed altogether. Further, states go out of their way to use their military, police or other coercive means to facilitate the entry of entrepreneurs carrying foreign exchange. A few years ago, India's ex-Finance Minister, echoing this spirit of deregulation, stated that power should increasingly move from the state to 'the Boardroom', following an earlier announcement that the Indian police would be trained by Western security experts to protect the 'life and property of foreign investors'. Sustaining this status quo is antithetical to the building of a democratic civil society.

The goal of building a civil society is for all people to have modest economic and social security. This inevitably means that the top-down, welfarist, waged-employment option looks less and less attractive. Strategies which address both structural inequalities and the lack of rights over productive resources will have to be mainstreamed. The wholly abominable polarisation of wealth — which has doubled almost everywhere in the past 30 years (UNDP 1995, 1997) — and the grossly inequitable sharing of economic and political power will have to be transformed. Only then will an egalitarian order, which is a prerequisite of a 'successful' civil society, come into being. Economic democracy implies an acknowledgement that state safety-nets and temporary entitlements merely serve to hide the dominant economic ethos which is rapidly colonising much of the world, and alienating ever more people from their sources of subsistence and meaning. For instance, most credit and reform programmes have primarily benefited intermediate classes and rarely provided poorer producers with sustainable livelihoods. True democratisation demands a restructuring and socialising of the economy

and its embedding in the values of social responsibility and ecological sustainability (Robertson 1990; Daly and Cobb 1989).

It is precisely towards that end that the initiatives outlined at the beginning of this essay were focused. These and similar voices within civil society are part of an important political expression that argues against a unipolar vision of the world, in which the market must define economic behaviour and where the state should facilitate the 'freeing' of the market and intervene only minimally in the immediate and longer-term interests of its citizens — particularly those who are vulnerable and poor. Markets cannot guarantee equitable distribution, nor should states be reduced to promoting the interests of national and global capital. These voices argue that states must have the ability to hand over and defend the control of local communities (with mutually agreed norms of conservation and use) over biological and genetic resources within its bounds. They also argue that there is no single linear process of development and that there are diverse ways of working towards a preferred society. The numerous efforts world-wide — from producer–consumer cooperatives to alternative agricultural movements to worker-controlled production systems — point to growing efforts to build alternatives to the dominant unsustainable institutional and production processes.

Situating civil society and the state

It is evidently crucial to strengthen and build associations and alliances through which civil society can be nurtured, where socially and politically committed individuals organise themselves in democratic forums, institutions, and associations within a democratic state, almost harking back to Rousseau's portrayal of a moral citizen striving for a truly democratic goal. Many of the efforts of hitherto neglected or excluded communities (such as those with which this essay began) can be seen as part of this endeavour. At a time when there is so much fragmentation and mistrust in society, the ideal of becoming responsible citizens with rights and obligations seems particularly relevant.

However, the modern state, particularly in the Third World, has not only grown substantially, but remains to a considerable degree outside the control of its citizens. States have acted coercively to oppress and contain sections of civil society. Societies also continue to witness the persisting power of both traditional feudal and upper-class networks as well as of predatory and polluting industrial and economic élites.

In the complex societies in which we all live, it is inconceivable that the state will wither away. While global (and some national) economic forces would like less state intervention in the functioning of the 'free market', in reality the state continues to be intrusive. This is precisely why it is an important political challenge to build a democratic state that can act as a buffer against predatory capital (domestic and transnational) and as a non-partisan arbiter in domestic conflicts. Simultaneously, civil society must continue to engage in democratic struggles for justice and ecological sustainability.

In some of these struggles, it has been suggested that the state has become irrelevant or too deeply embedded in the dominating system. Thus, if governance were to be truly de-centred (in fact, non-centred), with a complex array of representative mediating institutions, there would be no need for a state. At present, however, it is dangerous to think of a state-less society, since whatever regulatory institutions are formed would play roles that the preferred state would perform anyway. Given national and global inequity and injustice, it would be better to struggle towards a democratic state than to delegitimise it further.

Nevertheless, it is the failure of the state to democratise itself, to make itself into a neutral arbiter in civilian affairs, to intervene in favour of the underprivileged, and to contain predatory economic interests that has impelled the creation of a wide variety of popular movements seeking democratic control over their resources and their lives. In numerous cases, from Peru to Mexico to India, communities and culturally defined groups are increasingly demanding democratic autonomy from the state and greater control over their own affairs. These campaigns have taken two major forms:

- *Movements for redefining the internal boundaries of the nation (either for the redrawing of internal boundaries of provinces, states or regions, or for the creation of a new territory comprising parts or wholes of existing geographical entities).* The underlying logic of such movements is that internal boundaries were defined by the colonisers or in the post-colonial period, on the basis of the dominant language and culture, thus discriminating against 'other' cultures and identities. Examples are the struggle in Chiapas or the campaigns of several tribal groups in Africa who were divided or forced into territorial boundaries created by colonial powers, or the demand for the past 40 years to carve out a new state in India — Jharkhand — based on predominantly tribal identities. In 1997, the government recognised demands for the formation of an autonomous Jharkhand Council to govern a new territory which cuts across the older

internal boundaries. Similar demands had already been conceded to the Gorkha National Liberation Front (Gorkhaland) and to the Bodo community.

■ *Movements to secede from the nation-state.* These movements can be witnessed within Kashmir, Punjab, and Mizoram in India, within Sindh in Pakistan, within Northern Ireland in the UK, and among the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the Catalans and in Basques in Spain. Such movements have usually faced brutal repression by the state (which often allows the movements to exhaust themselves, while simultaneously encouraging its own militant groups and waging an active propaganda war). In many cases, these movements have never enjoyed majority support. Eventually, under state repression, selective accommodation of their demands, the sustained generation of a climate of fear, as well as declining popular support have weakened their effectiveness and reach.

Such movements are obviously not always distinct from one another. Secessionist groups may accept compromises with the state and, conversely, movements for autonomy may become secessionist. What is important is that most of these movements are direct consequences of undemocratic economic and political processes.

So, where does all this leave us? We must acknowledge that in much of the Third World, civil society is still nascent. In addition to all the external actors who constrain and restrict it, civil society is full of passive clients of the state and the market. In an aggregate sense, these forces induce or support the closure of democratic political space. They inhibit (through fear, coercion, or ideology) the realisation of the full democratic potential of members of society in the pursuit of a democratic polity. They inhibit or destroy the strength of civil society that lies in inclusiveness, in pluralism, in the numerous efforts to foster associations, institutions, groups, and alliances that can nurture and democratise a pluralist ethos (Walzer 1995; Keane 1988). Thus, the real task of democracy has just begun — from building democratic relations in the family, the community, and the workplace to democratisation of global institutions.

Portents and challenges for the future

It is precisely this challenge that communities all over the Third World have taken up. Refusing to become 'victims' of undemocratic political and economic processes, they are asserting greater autonomy as well as mobilising themselves to confront the processes that marginalise them.

Crucially, for many, the primary goal is no longer the 'seizure' of the state. Like the tribals affiliated to the Indian National Forum for Tribal Self-rule or the peasants of Chiapas, they assert that in their demand for greater control over their productive resources and for their own political and social institutions they are fighting not just for their livelihoods but also for their identity. In that respect, they seek to strengthen plural institutions. However, the questions of what processes of democratic functioning they evolve internally, and how they define intra-group relationships towards a democratic civil society, are challenges that they and others like them must increasingly face.

These are issues that encompass all of humanity. The pursuit of wider public freedoms in civil society also requires a reciprocal responsibility to contribute to the 'larger good'. For instance, those seeking greater autonomy also have to give up some of their own freedom of action, for the sake of what I would call responsible autonomy — an autonomy where rights are coupled with sacrifices and duties.

In fact, the challenge in creating a dynamic civil society is to accept that any collective endeavour which pursues both the interests of the specific community or group or association as well as the 'larger good' will have to make compromises. If a truly plural and democratic civil society and state is the goal, then creative methods of accommodation as well as inclusive (rather than exclusive) strategies will be needed. This will require collective endeavour that both democratises the state and rule-making initiatives in civil society and formulates monitoring and mediating institutions. Any process that generates or legitimises iniquitous relationships or consequences — between classes, women and men, communities, associations, nations and regions — will have to be contested. So, for instance, if a new national or international legal regime (like the WTO) were established, comprehensive national and international debate would be mandatory. Even after this debate, if the new regime is shown to be affecting a given group, community, or country adversely, mechanisms for generating correctives will be required. (For a positive approach to protectionism see, for instance, Lang and Hines 1993.) Extractive processes that exploit natural resources without the consent of the communities that primarily depend on them and without a wider public debate would not be permitted to go ahead. Even here, principles will have to be evolved that test developmental interventions on the basis of their cost to present and future generations. All this points to the massive possibilities available to all those committed to the building of a democratic polity.

Political and economic democracy

These challenges sound daunting. The task of creating a socially just, ecologically sane, and politically democratic polity demands that we accept nothing less. The dominant myths of the market and of 'development' and the claims for capitalist paradigms of growth will have to be confronted and alternatives devised within thousands of democratic and culturally plural popular forums. Much of this will also need creative responses to the conflicts that will inevitably ensue as dominant interests are made to relinquish their undemocratic controls. As countless struggles for justice, whether in the family or in the workplace, have shown, rarely do those in power willingly surrender it to those they have dominated. But the more the forces of domination and divisiveness are permitted to prevail, the more they will succeed in controlling society for their narrow economic and political ends. Without challenging dominant patterns of economic development and the individuals, institutions, and corporations which justify them — nationally and internationally — it will not be possible to strengthen and build truly democratic societies. The present patterns of industrial and capitalist development are not just unsustainable but also inhibit the realisation of a politically active and vigilant civil society, since the colonisation and the destruction of livelihoods and ecosystems are inherent in them.

There has been a relatively recent trend to involve representatives of NGOs (rarely social and political movements) in joint forums with government or IFIs. While accountable and transparent joint committees have an important function in democratising the policy-making processes, increasingly loud voices among civil society actors in the South are arguing that efforts like, for instance, the World Bank–NGO Committee (set up almost a decade ago) have done more to legitimise the Bank than to yield significant changes in Bank practice in countries and in national policy processes (Rich 1994). And, while the Bank has moderately reformed itself (more because of sustained social protest than because of the work of the Committee), it continues to propagate a world-view of economic development which is antithetical to evolving effective strategies to use natural resources in a sustainable fashion, to democratise control over these resources, to reduce substantially the polarisation of wealth, and to make corporate activity transparent and accountable. In addition, so many of the activities of daily life are not driven by the state or the market. These are precisely the spaces where

creative and innovative initiatives (that are neither governmental nor economic) are struggling for political and human rights, seeking to influence policy-making processes and public opinion, as well as working to transform the system itself. Women have played and will have to play an even more central role in challenging dominant economic and cultural systems and in safeguarding sustainable livelihoods.

Unless groups in civil society as well as sensitive politicians, policy-makers, and representatives of donor agencies and IFIs heed the call from the margins (where they will discover a flourishing civil society) and their alliances, the planet will continue to hurtle towards greater turmoil, exclusion, injustice, social conflict, and ecological collapse. This is not a doomsday prediction. It is an appeal to listen to the voices from the movements of the Third World (including the Third World in the First World) and to the growing evidence from countless studies that underscores the implications of the dominant patterns of economic development. Only a democratic civil society and a democratic state can provide an alternative. Pointing to the success of East Asian economies is not a solution, since those 'successes' have been achieved under largely authoritarian governments and by the colonisation of millions of people whose forests, lands, and rivers have been taken over to provide for these engines of growth. According to an official 'Taiwan 2000' report, the lower reaches of all 44 of Taiwan's rivers are biologically dead.

Despite some environmental awareness, much of the earth's resources continue to be exploited beyond their capacities for natural regeneration, thus undermining the very future of life on earth. So much of the world and so many of its peoples continue to be colonised and exploited, with the justification that these are necessary sacrifices for growth. Is this the legacy we want to leave for our future generations? Or do we want to challenge the forces of power and privilege and join hands with those who, often against overwhelming odds, are showing the way towards a society that is marked by gender and social justice and ecological sustainability? The choice seems to be an easy one. The tasks are at once profound, essential, and imperative.

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Notes

1 I use the term 'Third World' (or 'less industrialised nations') instead of 'South' or 'developing countries' for two main reasons. Firstly, because there is a growing 'South in the North' and vice versa. The two Norths look increasingly similar and have similar aspirations, while the Souths are being victimised by and organising resistance to dominant developmental paths. Secondly, the term 'developing countries' is insulting to the peoples of the Third World, since it denotes a linear path to development, with the 'developed' as the end model to which to aspire.

2 The Sagarmatha Declaration was published in *Lokayan Bulletin* (March–April 1996).

3 The brief description of these six events entails some simplification. For instance, many activists are also raising significant issues concerning internal democracy — either along property and class lines, or in their families, communities, organisations, and associations. This process of internal democratisation is also a crucial element of the 'thickening' of civil society.

4 Other controversial and important Third World actors are militant political groups like the New People's Army in the Philippines or the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in India — many of whom enjoy substantial public empathy among oppressed and subjugated peoples in the context of sustained repression by state forces, upper-class/caste groups, and predatory economic interests.

5 In addition to (and often compounded by) this corporate onslaught, what has also declined are the complex ways in which voluntary action was sustained among communities across the Third World. Communities had evolved codes which provided an ethical and normative framework for themselves, governing how individuals within it related to each other and to the 'outside world' or with nature. Undoubtedly, communities were also sites of other forms of oppression and exclusions. But the fact that collectives and collectivities in civil society, through a process of what I call mutual accountability, can provide ethical and democratic norms for a just and ecologically sane interaction with others is crucial in the long struggles ahead.

6 As so clearly evidenced in the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and powerfully highlighted in the first case adjudicated by the WTO in April 1996.

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