

## **Civil society's role in democratizing governance: an analysis of the Soochana Adhikar Abhijan movement in Odisha**

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**Abstract:** Civil society is the fulcrum of today's democratic polity. It strengthens and sustains the democratic fabric of society. In fact, we cannot think of a democracy today without active involvement of civil society groups in the decision-making process and governance. In other words, for democratic politics and governance to prevail, the existence of civil society organisations is inevitable. This paper explores the interplay between civil society and state in the context of the Soochana Adhikar movement in Odisha and underscores its significant role in democratising the governance process by promoting citizens participation, transparency and accountability in the state administration. It also briefs the institutional aspects of this grouping by analysing its structures, functions, and role in managing the movement. Then It proceeds to highlight the challenges faced by the activists and argues that a robust civil society is essential for building a vibrant democracy that fosters citizens' engagement and holds the government accountable.

**Keywords:** Civil Society, Citizens, Governance, Democracy, Transparency, Accountability

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### **Introduction:**

Recently, civil society has garnered significant attention from a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, policymakers, government bodies and international organisations, due to its crucial role in fostering and reinforcing democracy, emphasising responsible government, and tackling global issues. It is essentially a complex and contested concept that encompasses a broad spectrum of interpretations and conceptualisations. For the purposes of this paper, it can be viewed as a "third sphere" of governance where the state and society interact and influence each other. In other words, it constitutes the collective forum of people that operates outside of the formal institutions of state and market, where people congregate to deliberate and discuss various issues pertaining to them and initiate actions based on their shared interests and values. They strengthen the democratic governance by promoting the participation of citizens, defending human rights, upholding the rule of law and ensuring that collective interests prevail. In addition,

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civil society groups also play a vital role by acting as a watchdog to ensure that democratic norms are followed in the process of governance in the state. In the event of any deviation, they democratise the governance by exposing it to the larger public and put a check on such maladministration and authoritarian exercise of state power with an advocacy of transparency and government accountability in the process of governance. A host of institutions, starting from universities, clubs, media and non-governmental associations to various social movements, constitutes the sphere of civil society. This paper centres its focus particularly on Odisha's Soochana Adhikar Movement as a major civil society organisation of the state that has played a major role through the RTI Act in democratising the governance process by promoting citizen participation and exposing corruption and irregularities of the government officials, local politicians and the mafias. Along with this, the paper proceeds to underscore the challenges that the organisation faces on its way, and finally, it concludes with the underlying importance of a robust civil society.

### **The Soochana Adhikar Abhijan Movement:**

Inspired by the National RTI campaign of organisations like the Mazdoor Kishan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), the Soochana Adhikar Movement of Odisha had a modest beginning in 2006, a year after the passage of the Right to Information Act. It started with very few activists and public-spirited citizens. The architect of the movement was Chiita Behera, a social scientist who provided an intellectual contribution to it. Their initial objective was to sensitise the people through campaigning about the Importance of the RTI Act. With the passage of time, it turned into a major civil society grouping at the state level in Odisha that operates through its institutionalised forum of Odisha soochana adhikar abhijan (OSAA).

### **Structure and Functions:**

This institution lays down the border framework within which the movement activities function. The highest decision-making body of this institution is the State Working Committee, which consists of the state convener, ex-officio members and elected members. The state convener of the committee presides over the meetings that sit quarterly in a year. The major function of the committee is to delineate policies, plans and programmes for the successful running of the organisation. Along with this, the committee finalises the budget and expenditure of the organisation and issues publications and materials. Despite top-



down styles, the institution takes all its major decisions in a democratic way by seeking inputs from various of its stakeholders. Though it had a very modest beginning, the movement has reached out to every corner of the state, with a significant number of activists working for it tirelessly today. The membership of the organisation is open to all. Any individual who abides by the institution's ethos is eligible for taking membership.

### **Objectives and Strategies:**

Over time, their objective has also been broadened. Apart from organising campaigns to make the people aware of the RTI Act, which fosters citizens' engagement in the governance process, it exposes the corruption practices and irregularities of government officials and holds them accountable. In order to realise these fundamental objectives, activists have employed numerous strategies. In order to generate awareness of the RTI Act among the people, they organise campaigning programmes at multiple locations, including villages, bus stops, dairies and government offices. They utilise various campaign materials like booklets, posters and pamphlets and distribute them to the general public in the course of their campaigning. They conduct training programmes and seminars to disseminate knowledge of the Act and conduct workshops to educate people on its implementation and various ways of addressing the challenges emanating from it. Public meetings and rallies, door-to-door campaigns and community-based initiatives are also organised by them to engage the public in the process. So as to better utilise the technological platform, they outreach to the local and national media outlets for broadcasting their activities and launch campaigns on social media platforms to raise awareness. They issue newsletters and publications online to share their best practices with the people. In addition to this, they also strategies by developing networks with other compatible organisations to augment the movement advocacy efforts. By using all these tactics, they achieve their objectives.

### **Significance and Achievements:**

The significance of this movement lies in its role to democratise the governance process through the RTI Act by compelling the government authority to strictly adhere to the democratic norms while performing their duties. It takes the forefront to ensure that democratic principles are followed in the governance process by empowering citizens through awareness of the act on the one hand and, consequently, exposing



corruption of the government officials on the other. Armed with the information obtained through the RTI Act, the movement employs the aforementioned strategies and tactics to expose and check the corrupt practices and maladministration in the state's governance systems. It has been effective to a greater extent in exposing corruption and irregularities of government officials, local politicians and the mafias. It has succeeded in exposing irregularities in various government initiatives in the state, including MGNREGA, ICDS, and PDS. Additionally, it has revealed the instances of favouritism, nepotism and manipulation in government appointments; unlawfulness in the allotment of mining operations to the companies; illegal occupation of government quarters by former MLAs and government officials; and illegality in land allotment by the General Administration Department and State Housing Board, Bhubaneswar Development Authority (BDA), Cuttack Development Authority (CDA) and Odisha Infrastructure Development Corporation (IDCO) to politicians, bureaucrats and private educational institutions like KIIT, KISS and Sri Sri Rabi Shankar University. In order to take up the issue for justice, it has approached the High Court, Human Rights Commission, Central Vigilance Commission, Central Bureau of Investigation, and National Green Tribunal with the information obtained through RTI. One significant achievement of this movement in this regard is the Green Tribunal's order of 2017, where the government of Odisha returned the 18 acres of forest land unlawfully acquired by KIIT and KISS.

### **Challenges:**

Notwithstanding these initiatives and successes, the movement faces multiple challenges on its way to promote transparency and accountability in governance. Physical attack, threats, harassment and registration of false cases against activists pose a serious challenge to the movement. Some of the notable instances to cite are the attack on Sarbeswar Behura, humiliation of N. A. Saha Ansari and a false allegation registered against the state convener of the Sookhana Adhikar Abhijan. Sarbeswar Behura had to suffer a bomb attack because of his activism in exposing corruption and irregularities of government projects in Jajpur District on March 27, 2021. He had faced a similar attack twice before this event. His activism has exposed the destruction of road scams, irregularities in housing allotment and misappropriation of funds by OAS officers in Jajpur Tehsil. Pradip Pradhan, a prominent activist and state convener of the movement, against whom a false case was registered in revenge for his activism against corrupt practices. The instances of humiliation include N. A. Shaha Ansari, who was harassed by BDO for seeking information under RTI in 2008. Despite such threats, attacks and humiliation being a mundane affair, the movement lacks



cooperation from the government and suffers from inadequate protection for its activists. In addition, the movement confronts financial and resource limitations that make it challenging to sustain. The technological access too is limited, as most of the citizens live in rural areas. The power dynamics also Present a hurdle to the movement where certain individuals or groups hesitate to provide information in order to intimidate and silence the activists. Along with this, delays in adjudicating appeals by the inefficient government system and the exemption of some government entities from the purview of the RTI Act also put them in difficulty.

### **Conclusion:**

In the contemporary times, Indian democracy is struggling with corruption. It has posed a serious threat to democratic politics and permeated every aspect of governance. Odisha, being a state of this larger entity, is not exempt from its impact. Generally, it is observed that the state does not adhere to the democratic norms like fairness, equality and rule of law in the administration of the public. Therefore, civil society like Sookhana Adhikar Abhijan in Odisha continues its significance in democratising the governance process that strengthens the democratic fabric of society. Its role in ensuring transparent and accountable governance in the state cannot be undermined. Given its significance, the state should enact a whistleblower act in light of threats and attacks against activists to ensure that a vibrant and robust civil society operates inside the state and the democratic governance is upheld.

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