Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction
The study first attempts to describe the growth and achievements of two grassroots-based mobilizations that were centred around rights of citizens, one dealing with the right to water of the tribals of the Narmada Basin and the other dealing with the right to information of people. In this chapter, I outline the extent to which these mobilizations have succeeded and the repercussions that this has for the Indian state.

In the second section, I delineate the findings of the study in Palamau in relation to the research questions that I set in Chapter 1. Each question is answered in terms of the finding in the district pertaining to that question. I then summarize my research findings by highlighting the role played by the NGO – funding agency – government tripartite to come together in order to make a success of IDF’s intervention in empowering and building the capacity of rural local women to participate in the local level politics and to play the role of a watchdog that can check corruption at every level of local governance.

Next, I highlight the additional findings of my study, in terms of the theoretical framework outlined in the second chapter and the processes to mobilize people for participatory democracy and good governance described in the third chapter. These are placed under relevant sub-headings and deal with the notion of civil society in relation to its conceptualization in the European and the Indian contexts and the tradition of civil society in pre- and post-colonial India, in relation to what the sphere civil society aimed to achieve then and what it aims to achieve now.

I end this chapter by drawing attention to the areas that still need further investigation, in the context of whether civil society can play a more significant role in terms of achieving for the people, the basic rights envisaged in the Indian Constitution. These rights are the traditional obligation of the state, but the state has failed to achieve them. The reason for this is that as a welfare state, the Indian state has been a failure, especially because it lacks the material resources to make these good intentions of the state a reality.
Findings in Relation to the Grassroots Mobilizations

While the Narmada Bachao Andolan has achieved limited success in terms of international funding agencies withdrawing from the Sardar Sarovar Project, and the right to information movement has achieved moderate success in terms of the enactment of the Right to Information Act 2005 by the Government of India, what this study essentially seeks to enquire into, is the impact of these mobilizations on the Indian state.

The study brings out clearly that people do not, by experience, trust the Indian state, despite its claims of being a pro-poor, just and equitable state. Its role in displacing tribals from their home and livelihood space in the Narmada Basin to maintaining secrecy over government information in order to preserve its exclusivity and elite nature vis-à-vis the people, are not easily scrubbed from public memory.

The mobilizations have, on the one hand, resulted in increased confidence amongst the ordinary people that the state is not infallible and that it can be held accountable for its misdeeds. These movements have been played out in the arena of civil society, where individuals have come together to discuss their common interests. The unique feature of these movements is that they have sought to, by coming together, give voice to the voiceless.

The tactics used by the leaders of these mobilizations included uniting a rather disparate lot who were victims of state apathy, creating communication flows between the grassroots organization and the locals, between the movement and certain sections on a national scale, including the media, the larger public, academicians and other representatives of civil society, and between the movement and the international community, particularly the international funding bodies, international NGOs working towards a similar cause and the international media. All of these put pressure on the national, state and local governments and at the same time inspire the movements and their followers to work harder for their cause.
On the other hand, these mobilizations and their methods have served to wake up the state to the reality of new social movements that have sought to point out the state’s failings with respect to the people who have been left behind in the development process. Thus we see how a legislation to open to the public the rationale behind the government’s actions has become a reality, where even a decade back, this would have been unthinkable. Governments are realizing the strength of these movements in the sphere of civil society, especially their capacity to garner public opinion in favour of or against the state.

In addition to a gradual change in perception of the strength of new social movements, governments are also realizing the practicability of the NGOs, especially those that work in the grassroots level, as a partner in the development process. Such NGOs are better equipped with knowledge about local realities and can assist the government to conceptualize and implement need-based development programmes from below, in a participatory manner. Not only governments, but international funding agencies are also looking towards NGOs as more efficient and accountable partners in the development of poor societies.

This is seen from the findings below, where I elaborate on the NGO – funding agency – government tripartite in Palamau to empower the local women in dealing with needs and concerns, and to prepare them for future elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions, whenever they are held, and participation in the governance process, both from inside the system and outside it.

Findings in Response to the Stated Research Questions
At this stage, it would be relevant to pause and reconsider the questions framed in the first chapter, pertaining to the possibility of success of an NGO’s intervention to empower individuals to become active participants in the democratic decision-making process that has been so far denied to them. Here, I attempt to answer these questions as comprehensively as possible so that the reader gets an idea about the impact of the
NGO’s intervention and the environment around the NGO that helped it to intervene effectively.

I. What are the tools used by the NGO to fill in the responsibility of the state, in order to create socially, economically and politically empowered citizens?

The intervention by a local NGO to build the capacity of elected women representatives (EWR) simply rural local women in the case of Palamau due to the non-existence of EWRs as a result of there not being any elections to Panchayat, was conceived by the UNDP. The UNDP, in its project document\(^1\), outlined the strategy to be followed by the local NGOs. Realizing fully well the relevance of building institutions at the local level such as federations or networks of women for them to act as pressure groups, rather than have individual women whose voice would not carry as much weight, forums or federations or networks of women were formed.

In the case of Palamau, the basic unit was the Self Help Group (SHG) in every village or if the village was big, then in every two or three tolas or settlements in that village. Thus, the larger villages had two or three SHGs. The SHGs were used as points of entry by IDF workers to engage with and gain the confidence of local women.

Every Block had a federation, called Sangh in the local dialect. Each federation had around 20 – 25 members, with one member being drawn from every Panchayat (which is a cluster of about 4 Or 5 villages with a total population of about 5000). In those districts where every Panchayat was not covered, then those that were included demanded that there be more than one representative from each Panchayat in the Block – level federation. In addition to these representatives who were drawn from the SHGs, some women, i.e. the vocal, vibrant, and thereby influential women were also nominated to become a member of the federation. These women were trained and provided orientation on Panchayati Raj, government schemes and programmes, the Right to Information Act, and the importance of elections for the people of Palamau to have their own rural local government to serve their needs.

\(^1\) IND/99/543: Capacity Building of Elected Women Representatives and Functionaries of PRIs
The success of these federations can be seen from the seven case studies elaborated in the previous chapter. These successes have resulted in increased confidence amongst the rural local women and instilled in them a desire to do more for their locality in general and for their own, i.e. women’s issues, in particular. However, such successes are not easy to come by and they require sustained training by committed volunteers to continue the processes set in place, so that once the funding stops, the NGO can move on, with the self-assurance that the trained women will carry on, on their own.

2. Can non-state actors such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) successfully empower citizens?

From the case studies highlighted earlier in the chapter, it is clear that IDF has successfully empowered women to tackle issues relating to their rights, issues relating to corruption and issues broadly related to the social and economic development of their village. As demonstrated, IDF has successfully managed to develop citizen typologies at the grassroots levels, based on criteria as diverse as status groups (membership to the groups is by virtue of being women), class (the women are mainly landless labourers earning roughly Rs. 200 – 300 per month), and caste (these women mainly belong to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities).

However, the reason for the effectiveness of IDF’s project is the fact that the UNDP had envisaged a four – year long capacity building programme for local women for which they also provided support to the NGO in terms of funds, in terms of linking it to a bigger state – level NGO - Participatory Research In Asia (PRIA) in the case of Jharkhand - that would provide support to IDF for documentation of results and lessons learnt, training of local staff and other advise based on its own experience in the field. The state – level NGO was also expected to monitor the progress of the district – based NGO to ensure that it met the expected outcomes of the project. UNDP also engaged independent consultants to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme at the level of IDF at the district and at the level of PRIA at the state.
The role of the government is also significant for the overall effectiveness of such a project. Government and state officials demonstrated support for the project by participating in workshops organized by the NGO and UNDP where issues raised were taken into consideration. However, where they failed was in terms of not supporting IDF in the formation of a State Steering Committee, which was envisaged as part of the UNDP project. The Committee would have representatives from the government and the NGO to monitor and evaluate the progress of the project. However, the local government was not in favour of having NGO representatives on the same panel as them. In spite of this, IDF members said that in the course of implementing this project, they learnt some valuable lessons pertaining to effective interaction with the local government officials.

3. What are the expectations of the NGO from the state and the funding agency?

From the state: Though IDF acknowledges the broadly positive response of government functionaries to their interventions and the impact of these on the rural local women, it notes that the functionaries did not play a proactive role in setting up a Steering Committee, which would oversee the implementation of the project. IDF would like to be considered as a partner rather than merely as an implementing agency and realizes that the local government functionaries must not wash their hands off the project at any stage. Though their participation in the workshops organized by IDF and UNDP to assess the progress of the project and assist the women is appreciated, local government functionaries need to sustain their enthusiasm for the project and believe in the capacity of the NGO to succeed where the state has failed.

From funding agency: Funding should be large scale, the NGO should be capacitated enough – but since there haven’t been any elections, much impact in terms of empowered and informed women candidates may not be seen on the ground. However, these women can work as a pressure group for Panchayati Raj elections to take place. Also they need orientation from time to time, so these forums need to be supported on a continuous basis, at least till they gain the confidence to move away from the shadow of the intervening NGO. Financial support is also required otherwise it is difficult to sustain these forums. Since these forums provide a platform, orientation from time – to- time can
help make a difference when the trained women disseminate information in their respective villages

4. **What is the response of the state to the NGO and the funding agency?**

Response to the UNDP project: According to the Block Development Officer (BDO), the UNDP project has been beneficial since the women are more confident after the training than they were before. He had also attended a UNDP workshop where he told the women present that if they have any problems or issues they must not hesitate to raise those with him. One lady had mentioned to him at the workshop that as a beneficiary of a scheme, she had not received any of its benefits. He mentioned that the lady would not have been aware of the same and had the courage to question him about it, had it not been for the training imparted by IDF under this UNDP project. Thus, according to the BDO, the UNDP project has been very satisfactory.

Response to IDF: The BDO pointed out that IDF has not sufficiently linked SHGs with government programs and schemes. He also voiced his concern about what he called the destructive consciousness of some women as opposed to constructive consciousness. The former, according to him, only care about their rights and how to get them at all costs. A constructive consciousness is exemplified by a request for more skilled economic activities by SHG members. The destructive consciousness is exemplified by a demand for schemes where there are no schemes. He suggested that the SHGs should begin to move towards economic issues and not just deal with social issues.

The BDO also highlighted the problem of the naxalites who threaten those who attend the Gram Sabha. None of the members of the Gram Sabha would dare go against an order or threat of a naxalite. It is very difficult to stop this unless high level of police protection is provided to the villagers, which is not possible.

5. **Is the impact of such role assumption sustainable?**

According to IDF members, the UNDP project is the biggest one that they have undertaken in recent years and has therefore had a bigger impact than any other project.
However, they insisted that the project must be made large-scale and not be focused on merely one district. IDF members feel that the more the number of districts targeted through such projects, the greater the chances of them pressurizing the government to implement elections to the local government.

They however mentioned that documentation is weak. There are case studies of women groups documenting initiatives at the community level to solve issues at that level, which need to be disseminated more widely. In spite of the lack of proper documentation, IDF members believe that unless elections are held, they would maintain the same strategy if given the funds to implement a similar project.

Staff members mentioned that they have been using the learnings of previous projects undertaken such as the Department of International Development - Poorest Areas Civil Society (DFID – PACS) programme in the UNDP project. Clearly, IDF would use the learnings of the UNDP project for future projects that it undertakes. In this sense, one can say that a project can be made sustainable in terms of applying lessons learnt, to similar programmes to make a positive impact.

However, in order to sustain the same project, the NGO would require continuous funding. The idea of continued funding for projects that need to make an impact within a specific time period tends to go against its very rationale. However, though a timeline for discontinuing the funding was not given, they did mention that these programmes help to create pressure groups amongst women.

There can be several suggestions to improve the system of democratic functioning in India. First of all, India being a representative democracy, the issues and aspirations of her citizens lie at the mercy of the representatives to be implemented. In such a scenario, it is imperative that those who wield power are held accountable for their every word and action. In addition to this, their manner of functioning must be made more transparent. Even five years ago, this was a distant dream. However, today, as a result of the activities of some alert and responsible individuals, who raised mass consciousness about the
fundamental right to information, *India has a Right to Information Act* 2005. This Act can be used as a tool by conscientious citizens to acquire various types of information from the government, and in this manner, check corruption.

The heightened awareness of the role of civil society in the Indian corridors of power is evidenced from the fact that the ruling alliance, which came to power in the 2004 general elections, i.e. the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) thought it fit that its National Common Minimum Programme to implement the promises made to the citizens during elections would be realized by expert group of advisors of a National Advisory Council drawing mainly from the voluntary sector. Some prominent names included Aruna Roy of the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* and Jean Dreze, an ardent right to work activist and co-promoter of the notion of "public action".

The ever-increasing importance of civil society comes from the realization that merely drawing back the economic role of the state through liberalization and privatization and increasing the role of markets is not the solution to bad governance. Rather, there is now a need for the state to continuously evolve itself in relation to both the markets and civil society, keeping in view the changing contexts. Such a process is unique to every society, depending on the capacity of its institutions, delivery mechanisms, its executive, legislature and judiciary to adapt to the changing social, economic and political situations.

People's participation in the public sphere can take many forms (*HDR 54 – 55: 2002*); these include debates between individuals known to each other on a personal basis, to expressing opinions in the media, to becoming involved in popular movements against perceived wrongs of the state. The Human Development Report (Ibid.) goes on to note that a public sphere or a "free open space" where people can freely express their opinions is the "essence of democratic" life. It additionally points out that representative democracies cannot rely solely on expert opinion to make decisions that ultimately affect the lives of the vast majority of people in that democracy – rather they require continuous input from the people whose lives are affected by these policies. And, this is where the
significance of civil society or the public sphere where people can express their opinions freely is brought home, time and again.

This study has shown that an active civil society can play to a large extent, and given the right conditions, the role that is traditionally considered to be the domain of the state. Clearly, the study demonstrates that neither can civil society replace the state nor can it be a substitute for it. In fact, civil society negotiates with the state for various reasons, including changing a policy that might be unfair or to pressurize it through the formation of public opinion. Both the Right to Information movement (which sought the repeal of the toothless Freedom of Information Act 2002) and the Narmada Bachao Andolan are prime examples of this.

The case studies are examples of developing citizenship from the grassroots, for the weakest section of rural Palamau, which the state has clearly failed to do. Women, the constituency that was least expected to engage in activism, due to their illiteracy, poverty, ignorance and low status, have, as a result of IDF’s engagement with them, have begun to assert themselves in relation to the state and are also playing the role of watchdogs that closely scrutinize government actions to ensure that they are not given a raw deal.

However, credit is due to the state for giving space to non-state actors such as the NGO, IDF and the international funding agency, UNDP, with which it formed a tripartite that aimed to overcome this failure. The NGO was useful because it was more aware of micro-realities and needs, which it was able to use fruitfully while applying the project goals. The international funding agency was not only credible, but also initiated the work with some strong intellectual inputs on what was lacking and how the lacuna could be dealt with, while at the same time providing strong backing in financial terms, for the project to sustain itself for a period of four years. The state played a proactive role by allowing these non-state actors to take on its role. What the state could have considered as interference, it accepted as much needed support in empowering women and making them active citizens.
Additional Findings of the Study

This section marks out the findings of this study in relation to the themes that were brought up in the course of Chapters 2 and 3. The themes include the European and the Indian conceptualizations of civil society and the findings therein, civil society as an arena of contestation between the individual and the state and the elite and the poor, India as a plural society and its relevance for the definition of civil society and the long tradition of civil society in the Indian context.

Indian Civil Society in Relation to the Contextual Parameters:

The findings of this study in relation to the notion of civil society are in conformity with the Habermasian notion of a public sphere to the extent that it includes the convergence of people with a common interest, who organize themselves to negotiate a better deal for themselves. Again, like Habermas' public sphere, this position of civil society vis-à-vis the state, considerably weakens it while simultaneously vesting the state with the final power, whether it is decision making in favour or against the public opinion, or whether it is to punish those who the state believes to have abused their freedom of expression.

The gap between Habermas’ public sphere and Indian civil society is filled by Chandoke’s explanation. While Habermas’ public sphere is decidedly bourgeois in its nature, with only the educated elite who have access to resources forming an integral part of it, to voice the bourgeois collective opinion, this is not the case in India. Chandoke calls the new social movements, exemplified by the Right to Information movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a characteristic feature of civil society, as they have emerged to articulate the needs of the marginalized.

The distinctive feature of Indian civil society is that one witnesses a bourgeois elite, i.e. the better off and educated sections spearheading the causes of those in the periphery, be it by articulating the demand for the right to water of tribals or the right to wages of poor rural labourers, which is one of its features. In other words, Indian civil society is an arena of contestation between the individual and the state, as exemplified by Habermas
and even Chandoke, Oommen and others for whom social movements were the result of peoples’ discontent with the modern state.

On the other hand, civil society in India is also an arena of contestation between the elite and poor, as explained by Alam (2005). This, according to Alam is played out in the domain of communication, where meanings are distorted to suit the needs of one community or to undermine the aspirations of another. He gives the example of caste-based reservation of the OBCs and the MBCs which are questioned by the upper caste elites as being dubious when it comes to issues of “merit”, “efficiency” and “competence” (Alam 361: 2005). They question its “rational” basis (Ibid.), claiming that these are populist measures for votes by the representative government. On the other hand, the deprived sections counter this allegation by accusing the upper caste elites of denying them the privileges that they have enjoyed, and also highlight equity and social justice as rationale for reservation.

Long Tradition of Civil Society and Volunteerism in India:
This study has shown that civil society is not just a European concept, though the credit for coining the term and attempting to define it certainly goes to the European thinkers. In this study, it is clearly brought out that civil society or the public sphere, though not yet tangible in the sense of a defined concept, was already being used before and during the national movement. In the nineteenth century, it was used by the reformists who formed associations to bring about social transformation of Indian society on European lines, by trying to change mindsets about social evils such as dowry, sati, child marriage and the social ostracizing of widows.

The role of nationalist leaders, particularly Gandhi’s ingenious formation of ashrams which were associations where both the elites and the poor who were inspired by him, came together to join the movement and also to experience working and living with the “other”, including the “untouchables”, demonstrates how in India, commentators on civil society place emphasis on its pluralist nature. This is integral to India, and any study of
Civil society that does not take into account this characteristic of Indian society would be an incomplete one.

Civil society played an important role in the freedom struggle when associations such as the *Charka Samiti* played an important role. The roots of civil society in India are deeper than we know. There is a misconception that civil society in India refers to only NGOs. However, NGOs are only a recent phenomenon and represents one layer of civil society. When one goes deeper, one sees a core layer of volunteerism, which has a strong tradition in the context of civil society in India.

**Difference between Civil Society in Pre – Colonial and Post – Colonial India:**
This study shows that one of the uses of the sphere of civil society in pre – colonial India was for socially transforming Indian society by advocating the removal of some of the regressive social practices of Hinduism. The other use of this sphere was for the freedom struggle, where by using the vernacular media, and by forming associations and ashrams and mobilizing people for *Satyagraha*, nationalist leaders used this sphere to inspire the masses to join the national struggle to overthrow the British and again for socially transforming India by changing mindsets of people towards women and the untouchables or *Harijans* who were also drawn into the movement by Gandhi.

In post - colonial India, the emergence of civil society, in the form of mushrooming of several voluntary groups such as Peoples’ Union for Civil Liberties is seen to be the result of the emergency declared by the Indian state and the related excesses in terms of abuse of state power to bring people in line. These post – emergency movements were characterized by the fact that they were movements to protect the civil liberties of people, and at the same time monitor the government’s (ab)use of power.

**Areas for Further Study**
In the context of the role of civil society, specifically in relation to empowering the people to participate in the democratic process and effectuate good governance, it is very important, first of all, to also excavate the notion of the “public”, since the opinion of the
public is known to sometimes have an impact in the highest corridors of power. The public is not accepted by the state as a legitimate source of power and neither is it given importance by organized religion. However, an in-depth study of the evolution and role of the public is very crucial to in any study of the evolution of modern democracy.

Secondly, there is a need to conduct comparative analyses of the practical workings of civil society in the developing world and in the developed world. This would draw further insights on this concept, as well as the implications for it in different social, political and economic contexts. Not only would this bring about a greater understanding of the concept, but it would also help to expand this notion theoretically. After all, civil society is more active in developing countries where major sections of the population have no access to resources for their upliftment and therefore the level of discontentment with the state is very high, thereby setting the stage for the mushrooming of social movements, rather than in the developed societies Europe particularly, where the level of contentment with the state runs deep.

Finally, studies need to be undertaken on the role played by agencies such as the media and the judiciary in using and responding to civil society. This is especially true in the Indian context in light of the role played by the media in highlighting the leniency of the judiciary and the state in the handling of the murderer's and the murders of Jessica Lal, Priyadarshini Matoo and Nitish Kataria by the power elite who have the clout due to their links with the political elite and by owning huge amounts of wealth. The success of the media in terms of influencing the public and amassing support for the fight for justice of the victims' families and the positive response of the judiciary to this in terms of punishing the culprits after a long and tedious battle are new trends in the sphere of civil society in India. These need to be studied to shed light on these trends and to gauge what they hold for the state, the public, the citizen and the sphere of civil society in India.