

The Impact of Samaaj on the Work of Sarkaar and Bazaar

An excerpt from the speech addressing the eGovernments Foundation in July 2019.

Since the past 25 years, I've been deeply involved in the civil society sector of India, which is very thriving and diverse. From listening to people, especially at the grassroots level, reading a lot, talking to people, and observing what's happening around us from the lens of Indian society, I have tried to create a certain philosophy for myself through which I can do my work and see the world.

So, the theory is fairly simple – that there is a continuum of Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar. But we must understand that Samaaj is the foundation, Samaaj is the pillar, Samaaj is the first sector, not the third sector, as people sometimes call it. And over centuries, Sarkaar and Bazaar developed in the service of the Samaaj. The Bazaar and Sarkaar evolved as responses to the needs of diverse societies.

We are citizens first, not consumers or subjects of states and kingdoms. The Bazaar and the Sarkaar are set up and are expected to be accountable to the larger needs of Samaaj. So, this is the starting point of all my philanthropic work which embeds itself in Samaaj and actors of Samaaj. eGovernments Foundation (eGov) is a Samaaj actor that is working with the Sarkaar and the Bazaar.

Over time, this dynamic between Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar obviously keeps evolving and shifting, and there have been many tugs. At the heart of everything is always power and power structures. So, depending on how power structures are playing out, the fluidity, roles, responsibilities, and strength of these three sectors can keep changing. For example, my lessons from the last century is that both Bazaar and Sarkaar became very powerful and extremely oppressive in many parts of the world. With examples like Mao and Stalin, we have seen how the state began to get very powerful and took over people's lives, oppressing the Samaaj they should be serving. Post-World War II, as reconstruction was taking place all over the world, capitalism began to advance and make substantial inroads, to the point of even dismantling the Soviet

Empire. The markets began to gain an increasing amount of power, which we can see even today. Back then, they called it the military-industrial complex, but the fact is that the market had acquired a lot of power even on the consumer side, affecting the Samaaj. Today we know what is being discussed – how a clutch of transnational corporations, tech companies who represent the market, have pretty much decided how we should think.

An Age of Extremes

The pendulum has swung too far that in many cases during the last century, we have observed the market and the state colluding. When that happens, Samaaj must remain happy with crumbs. So, this is really dangerous for Samaaj. And remember, Samaaj is not one homogenous unit. By Samaaj, I mean all the identities. Social identities that we hold, the human identities that we hold, the groupings that we hold, the institutions of society that exist – that's what I mean by Samaaj.

But today, we are finding that individuals in the Samaaj sector are really subject to enormous forces of the state and the Bazaar. In 25 years, with the Internet and the mobile phone revolution, we saw individual liberties being stretched so far as well. Anybody can do anything they want from anywhere, at any time, and that includes the ability to spew hate and encourage violence, without any accountability. So, from the Samaaj side there are issues as well.

On the Samaaj side, we have begun to see a response to this kind of accumulation of power, which strangely enough gave individual liberty one last run in these last 25 years. I feel that we are in the middle of a huge societal correction, where we will see some new societal norms being formed around this notion of individual liberty, market power, and state authoritarianism in a digital age. I don't know where this will lead, but I can see the corrections happening, they look like upheavals right now. Recent advances in technology have led to the fear of the capture of our days, and our hearts, and our minds by the power of the Bazaar through technology and the surveillance state.

Now, while all of this is going on, a lot of other things are happening that are very positive as well. I really don't believe in black and whites unless I'm fighting with my husband, in which case I always do. But otherwise, a lot of very interesting things are happening in the Samaaj sector in response to this accumulation of power. Because when power accumulates, there's always a responsive force that tries to pull it back and maintain a dynamic balance. And so, you're seeing the emergence of many civil society actors around the globe who are responding to this accumulation of power by the state and the market. And that is the interesting space in which I work.

Seeing Like a State

This brings me to the reason why this understanding is so crucial when thinking about organizations like eGovernments. I think eGov has done a fantastic job of working on the supply side for urban areas, which was so broken and almost non-existent before. The pioneering teams here did a successful job of coming from good intentions and were able to gain the trust of the state at all its levels.

eGov was able to understand the political economy and work with the state's institutions, bureaucrats, administrators, and officials to ensure more transparency, efficiency and accountability. But this was done from inside, behind the walls of the state. In James Scott's book, *Seeing Like a State*, he talks about how the state needs to look after equity, since the market is naturally interested in profit. The main responsibility for maintaining equity on behalf of the Samaaj, falls to the state. However, while the state is mandated with the idea of equity, it often is more comfortable with efficiency. This is because efficiency is easy to measure, it is easy to design for, and it is a placeholder for equity. You feel like you're moving somewhere good when you try to put efficient systems in place. So that's what James Scott calls "seeing like a state."

Here, the state looks to organize citizens and issues in a way that is efficient and convenient to deal with. So, you try to create visibility for the state, and not so much for the people. Scott describes many experiments, including Le Corbusier's work, the collectivization of the farms in China, and similar land experiments in the Soviet Union. He talks about the redesign of agricultural places like Tanzania and scientific forestry in Germany as examples of actions that were designed to create efficiency for the state, but did not always translate into public benefit. Even with the best of intentions, the way the state sees us is very different from how we would like the state to see us. So, when eGov is sitting on this side, we have to always keep in mind the original intention of eGov is to genuinely make the state more accountable to the public good in the best way it can. So, no matter what all we do from the supply side, if we don't hold this as a principal value of the design of whatever supply-side work we do, you may end up with unintended consequences.

For example, the Grievance Redressal mechanism, even if it's designed efficiently, unless it actually works on the ground for citizens, it cannot be called a success. It may function beautifully from the state's point of view, and it makes bureaucrats work more efficiently, since they can process 1,000 complaints at a time instead of just one. So, while it brings efficiency, it may not bring equity, it may not bring well-being on the other side. This is why the lens of the Samaaj is

crucial for eGov because you have come very far with bringing supply-side to some point where it understands its accountability, it understands the need for transparency, it understands how technology can transform the needs of the citizen.

So, now we need to identify the actors within Samaaj who can work with eGov to make sure that all the amazing groundwork they've been doing for 16 years gets translated into real public good. This might mean going back to the drawing board, to rethink the designs of some systems that are already in place. From the citizen's side, what are the challenges for them and how can we redesign to their benefit. When we want efficiency, standardizing systems is the most convenient thing to do, but in reality, these need to serve a diverse group of people. And if we're trying to look at Societal Platform Thinking, where the goal is to address complex societal problems, one of the principles of this is to hold on to and cater to that diversity. This applies to the context of eGov as well. Diversity is at the heart of resilience, so if we want to respect and understand the importance of diversity, especially in a place like India, then we have to be willing to design for that diversity at scale.

Diversity at Scale

When we think of designing for diversity at scale, the challenge is figuring out how to standardize change. Cookie cutter standard mechanisms will kill diversity, but if you believe in diversity as a fundamental principle of good design, then you have to design for diversity at scale. Within the Grievance Redressal mechanism, for instance, the diversity of language has been taken care of, but there may be other contextual, cultural things which we might need to redesign for, to make it effective for both state and citizen.

This is what we've tried to do at Pratham Books, where we decided it was time an Indian publisher was able to distribute and democratize the joy of reading. We kept this principle of diversity at scale, to unlock the potential of ordinary people who created a whole reading movement for the children of this country. There are 250 million children in India, the total population of many other countries. So how do we unlock the potential of parents, teachers, writers, illustrators, translators, editors, and storytellers, in order to make a movement of people? We did this by creating an open platform, a Creative Commons platform, which allowed everybody to participate, putting a book or a story in every child's hand.

Since I have left, the next team has done even better. Sometimes you have to leave so that the next creativity can come into an institution. And the next platform, called StoryWeaver, allows

anybody, anywhere in the world to write and publish a story, to translate somebody else's story, and to illustrate somebody else's story. Of course, the original has to be acknowledged. You can print other people's stories, you can sell other people's stories, because once you take greed off the table, once you take certain power ideas off the table, you can unleash public good and creativity. So, tens of millions of children around the world have benefited by unleashing the imaginations of writers, artists, mothers, fathers, and teachers. But all of this comes from the philosophy that the Samaaj must form the base, and the Sarkaar and Bazaar should not oppress them. Instead, they should unleash the potential of Samaaj.

When we think about organizations like eGov, the time has come to shift to the Samaaj side and look at eGov's work from that lens. We need to strive to not see like a state, but see like a citizen.

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