Role of Civil Society and Media in Human Rights Awareness in the Contemporary Era: A case study of India

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The safety and the protection of human rights have become more intricate day by day in the 21st century, most probably in contemporary society. There are a number of incidents happening in the changing world, where global disagreement , technological shifting ,economic inequality in all spheres and political polarization hegemonize. In this scenario, there are two pillars: civil society and the media which have emerged and defending human rights. The aim of the paper is to explore the role of these two main actors in empowering deprived populations. The purpose of the study is to engage a multidisciplinary approach and draw from human rights law, communication studies , political science and sociology. Its approach includes not only achievements and awareness campaigns but legal reforms, and civic mobilizations also, A critical examine of current challenges, like crushing, hypocrisy, media disjunction and shrinking civic spaces. The purpose behind the study is to ensure the strategies and strengthen the role of Civil society and Media to elevate human rights in the changing world. **Keywords:** Human Rights, Awareness, Civil Society and Media, Social Movement, Disinformation, Accountability.

Introduction

At both national and international levels, human rights have emerged as a central theme in discussions, particularly during times of war, political upheaval, migration crises, and the resurgence of authoritarianism. In today's world, the growing influence of non-governmental actors has significantly transformed the field of rights advocacy. Civil society organizations and the media, in both traditional and digital forms, play crucial roles in educating the public, raising awareness, and ensuring the enforcement of human rights standards.The media, often called the "fourth estate," not only informs society but also sparks debate and shapes narratives surrounding justice and human rights. Together, civil society and the media form a vital and active force in advancing awareness of rights, promoting accountability, spreading education, and fostering activism. However, in the current geopolitical climate and digital environment, they face considerable challenges. The strength and adaptability of these actors, along with their capacity for collaboration, will ultimately shape the future trajectory of human rights movements across the globe.

In the contemporary era to secure human rights it is authoritative to nurture a strong, empowered, and independent civil society and media ecosystem that can hold power to account, speak reality to propaganda, and represent the most vulnerable voices of our time.

The aim of study is to examine their intertwined roles, highlighting key, challenges, and potential paths with contemporary challenges.

Human Rights in Historical Perspective:

The human rights movement in India has roots in the anti-colonial struggle focusing on mostly political rights before independence and after Independence expanding to address social, economic, and cultural rights . It escalated after the 1975-77 Emergency and was shaped by social movements for marginalized groups such as tribal people, peasants, women, Dalits, and others. Some Key developments including the introduction of Public Interest Litigation
by activist judges to improve access to justice and in 1993 the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to address human rights violations.
Evolution of the Movement

In the colonial era , early human rights consciousness emerged in the 19th century The [Rowlatt Satyagraha](#) against the Rowlatt Act being a significant watershed moment has shifted the focus to civil liberties and opposition to the colonial state.

After Independence,The initial focus was on framing the Constitution to guarantee equality and remove restrictions on different communities. The movement saw a new form of renewed energy after the 1975-77 Emergency. A new phase of activism began in 1980 onwards characterized by the collaboration between civil society and the judiciary leading to landmark judicial interventions such as Public Interest Litigation (PIL).

Various specialized movements have been driven by collective activism such as peasant struggles, tribal rights, environmental protection, child rights,women's liberation, the rights of Dalits and differently-abled persons.

In a third-world context like India, the movement emphasizes economic, social, and cultural rights, recognizing that real development which requires focusing on individuals' capacity to realize their potential.

The movement has a complex bond with the state, usually challenging coercive state actions and emphasised inclusion and justice for marginalized groups.The results was that Human Rights Commission and protection of marginalized rights other commissions was established.

Conceptual Framework of civil society and Media as a Human Rights Actor

Civil society refers to the arena of voluntary collective action around the shared interests, purposes, and values. Unlike the market , civil society includes a wide range of actors from grassroots groups to transnational NGOs at National and International levels like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.As well as civil society Media also includes a broad range as print journalism, radio, television, and increasingly day by day digital platforms and social media. The role of media in human rights awareness in different areas involves informing public opinion, documenting and   giving voice to the voiceless.

Raising awareness is a must and it's the first step towards realizing human rights. Without this, rights remain always abstract. The need of the hour for effective awareness campaigns have led to transformative legal, institutional reforms and social change.

Civil Society and Media in the Human Rights Landscape

India is the world's largest democracy which presents a complex paradox: a strong constitutional commitment to human rights Articles 14, 19, 21, 32 coexists with increasing restrictions on civil society and the press. Civil society has driven significant refinement and legal redress; both media and CSOs face growing constraints under regulatory, political, and digital pressures.

A Journey of Human Rights Development in India after Independence

India's Journey and commitment to human rights after Independence is beautified in its Constitution, especially in

Preamble, provisions and descriptions which

Ensures justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity

Fundamental Rights (Part III)

Right to equality, freedom, protection from exploitation, freedom of religion, cultural & educational rights, constitutional remedies

Directive Principles (Part IV)

Lay foundation for socio-economic justice, right to work, education, and public assistance

Article 21:

Right to life and personal liberty – interpreted broadly to include dignity, livelihood, privacy, clean environment, etc.

Important Key Acts: Supporting Human Rights

(1989)   Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

(1993) Protection of Human Rights Act.

(2005) Right to Information Act,

(2009)Right to Education Act, 2

(2015)Juvenile Justice Act.

(2019)Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act.

Major Commissions of Human Rights Protection:

(1992)National Commission Minorities (NCM)

(1993)National Human Rights Commission(NCHR)

(1993)National Commission for Women(NCW)

(2007)National Commission for Protection of Child Rights(NCPCHR)

(2004)National Commission for Scheduled Tribes.

(2004)National Commission for Scheduled Castes(NCST

Right to Information Act (2005): Spearheaded by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in Rajasthan. This landmark law was a direct outcome of grassroots advocacy. Citizens and Journalists are empowered alike to hold public authorities accountable.

For **Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act(2019)** While it's controversial, this law was also influenced by years of advocacy by organizations like Naz Foundation, Humsafar Trust and Sahodari Foundation,—reflecting how civil society can brought visibility and legal recognition to transgender rights.

A comparative study India's Progress on Human Rights Indicators 2010 to 2020

Indicator
2010
2020
2024
Female Literacy
65%
70.3%
~73.5%

Literacy Rate
74%
77.7%
~80% (estimated)
Access to Electricity
67%
97%
100% (claims as per 2024)

Access to Sanitation (rural)
32%
69%
100% (under SBM claims)
Poverty (BPL)
29.8%
21.9%
~10% (as per 2024 estimates)
Source: NFHS-5, Census data, World Bank, NITI Aayog reports.
Success Stories :
Right to Food (2013) NFSA helped 80 crore Indians access subsidized food.
Digital Human Rights: India Stack (Aadhar, UPI) promotes financial inclusion and access to welfare.
Legal Recognition of LGBTQ+ Rights: Section 377 decriminalized in 2018; Supreme Court affirmed dignity rights.
Environmental Rights: Article 21 expanded to include clean air, water, and a safe environment

Civil society organisations have been involved in advocating for legal frameworks which protects marginalized communities. For example in India, civil society played a role as pressure group in led to the **2013 Criminal Law Amendment Act** after the 2012 Delhi gang rape, incorporating rigorous provisions on sexual violence.Movements like **Narmada Bachao Andolan ,Kisan Andolan etc.** in India shows how a local mobilization can play an important role in the reconciliation process.A large number of organizations run training programs as legal literacy workshops and advocacy schools. For instance in India people' s watch has conducted thousands of human rights education programs.

Civil society as well as Media Investigative reports have exposed many war crimes, gender-based violence, labor abuses,and surveillance overreach. Media frames influence how people perceive issues. Digital media also enables real-time documentation of abuses especially during protests.The media provides a platform for civil society while civil society offers credible information and human interest stories. Together they
Create pressure on governments and institutions,
Raise international solidarity and support and
Influence public policy and court decisions.
For example in 2020 Indian farmers' protest gained broader international attention through media and civil society collaboration.

There are some **regional case studies** on national and International levels. Organizations like PUCL, CHRI, and Amnesty India have worked tirelessly in awareness to expose custodial deaths, extrajudicial killings, rights violations and extrajudicial killings. The coverage of incidents like the **Hathras rape case or Manipur violence** and many more has led to judicial intervention and policy. Tamilnadu (**People' s Watch**) has conducted over 15,000 human rights education programs in rural and tribal belts , focusing on Dalit rights, child labour and custodial violence.

Lawyers Collectively co-founded by Indira Jaising, has played an important role in strategic litigation, especially in some cases of domestic violence, **HIV/AIDS discrimination, and LGBTQ rights.**
Bhim Army and Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch have worked on the ground to provide financial and legal aid to victims of caste-based violence, often taking over whenever the state fails to intervene.

The Wire, NDTV, DD News, and Scroll.in have exposed several cases of custodial deaths, fake encounters, electoral funding irregularities and Aadhaar related exclusions.

In Hathras Case ,The mainstream media, under pressure, initially underreported the brutal rape and murder of a Dalit woman. alternative media and civil society amplified the issue, leading to the Supreme Court-monitored the CBI investigation.

In (2021-22)**Pegasus Spyware Scandal** Indian journalists, activists, and opposition politicians were targeted using military-grade spyware. However, It was uncovered by international collaboration The Wire + Amnesty + Forbidden Stories.

By Regional Media in Manipur (2023–2024) ethnic violence between two groups Meitei and Kuki
was highlighted more by digital media and citizen journalism than traditional channels. Civil society groups like Human Rights Alert (HRA) and Elders for Peace documented violations, and citizen videos forced nationally and internationally media coverage.

If we move on data Over 200 people were killed, more than 60,000 displaced, and over 4,500 arms looted from state armories, as per HRA reports.

During the abrogation of Article 370 Kashmir has been stifled.

Challenges of Human Rights in India
Challenge
Example/Data
Custodial deaths
175 custodial deaths in 2023 (NHRC data)
Freedom of Expression
Decline in Press Freedom Index: Rank 161 (2024)
Communal and Caste Violence
2023 saw over 500 caste-related crimes monthly (NCRB)
Women's Safety
Over 4 lakh crimes against women in 2022
Internet Shutdowns
India had the most shutdowns globally (over 80 in 2023)

7. India's Global Commitments on Human Rights
Signatory to UDHR (1948)
Ratified:
ICCPR (Civil & Political Rights)
ICESCR (Economic, Social, Cultural Rights)
CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women)
CRC (Child Rights Convention)
India also participates in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council.

Latest highlights Data from NHRC Annual Report
Metric
2023−24
Total complaints received
75,000+
Cases closed after enquiry
65,000+
Compensation recommended
₹12.3 crore
Suo moto cognizance cases
300+
Focus areas
custodial torture, bonded labour and Health rights.

Human Rights and the Digital Era: A New Battlefield
A new battle field has started in this new digital world and role of Digital Activism is so vibrant
Movements like #MeToo shows how hashtags can become global movements. The Online petitions, virtual protests and X(Twitter) storms are new tools of awareness.Awareness depends also on awareness .The digital age marked by widespread reach to the internet, smartphones and social media, AI, has significantly enhanced the promotion and protection of human rights. There are some comprehensive explanations which are supported by data and real-world examples.
Enhancing Awareness & Education:
Digital platforms educate a large number of people about their rights and available legal remedies. Government and NGOs bodies use online tools to conduct awareness campaigns.
According to UNESCO over 4.95 billion people had internet access by mid-2023 and facilitating unprecedented access to human rights content (2024)

In 2023, Pew Research studied that 67% of users in developing nations know about their legal rights through social media campaigns.

Digital India campaign and mobile apps like UMANG and MyGov have increased legal literacy and citizen engagement in governance.

Social media and Smartphones allow ordinary people to record and disclose human rights violations instantly.

AI tools used by Amnesty International to verify over 2,000 videos of police brutality, protest and war crimes in regions like Myanmar, Sudan, and Ukraine(2023)

The Shaheen Bagh protests and farmers' protests in India (2020–21) gained global attention through digital platforms which helped prevent escalation and abuse.

Governments and watchdogs publish human rights data on open platforms which shows transparency and accountability.

Citizens can use RTI portals and grievance redressal systems online.

Between 2019-2023 India's RTI online portal processed over 3 million queries digitally.

NHRC (The National Human Rights Commission of India) offers an online complaint portal and tracks actions on digital dashboards and improves accountability.

In Russia Ukraine war since 2022 Russia full-scale capture and the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has verified that more than **12,654 civilian deaths** including **673 children** and over **29,392 injuries**, with a heavy escalation in 2024 and round about 84% of casualties occurring in government-controlled areas and over **14 million Ukrainians** have been displaced in which 3.6 million internally, 6.9 million as refugees while more over **19,500 children** have been deported by force to Russia—with independent estimates placing this number very high **35,000**—only around **1,293 to 388** have been returned, torture, summary executions, and impose disappearances of civilians and attacks on critical infrastructure—including at least **306 medical facilities** and **576 schools** destroyed in 2024 have further effected rights to health, education, and safety.All data and the real ground report possible by Civil society and Media.

.As per the World Economic Forum, In 21st century,digital empowerment is a foundational pillar of human rights protection.It making more transparent, accessible , and participatory. Although, it needed robust data privacy laws and digital literacy to fully serve its purpose.

In current scenario governments mostly use surveillance tools and spyware to monitor the activists and journalists.While challenges are not less Lots of rural areas and women have less access digitally .In current scenario, governments mostly use spyware and surveillance tools to monitor the journalists and activists.

. This digital authoritarianism is like a threat sometimes.

Awareness always depends on access. In many areas especially among women and rural populations, digital access remains very low, leading to information inequality.

Reforms and Future Recommendations for Strengthening Human Rights

E-Governance and Digital India Reduced corruption and improvised delivery of welfare services.

New Criminal Laws like BNS, BNSS, BSA 2024, Aim to be more victim-centric.

For Social Media Accountability IT Rules 2021, amended to protect online dignity and privacy.

AI and Human Rights: Ethical AI guidelines under development to ensure fair use.

Strengthen NHRC & state commissions with binding more powers.

There should be a speedy justice system through human rights courts as well as fast-track tribunals.

Training police and judiciary must be on human rights sensitivity.

Data transparency via regular publication of human rights violations should be enhanced and

Community participation in awareness campaigns must be on large scale.

Conclusion:

In contemporary society the protection of human rights cannot be left solely to the state and its institutions. It requires the active involvement of civil society and the media .They act as watchdogs, advocates, service providers and ensuring that marginalized communities have a voice and governments will always remain accountable to their commitments under international conventions and national constitution. Simultaneously,as it is known that the media acts as the fourth pillar of democracy and raises issues of injustice, shaping public opinion to foster a culture of rights and responsibilities and creating awareness.

The civil society and media together play a complementary role while civil society deploys grassroots support and calls for legal and policy reforms, the media disperse information widely, bring transparency and pressures power structures. In the digital era, the rise of social media platforms, their reach and influence have enlarged further, making them very important allies in protecting and promoting human rights.

In nutshell,the relevance of civil society and media not only in highlighting violations but also in building a proactive, participatory and rights conscious society where human dignity, equality and justice is always protected for all. The real challenge remains ensuring their credibility, independence and inclusivity so that they can productively serve as guardians of human rights in a quickly changing global landscape.

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