Civil Society Associations and Political Participation: A Normative Exploration

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Abstract:
This paper aims to explore the relation between civil society associations and political participation in a normative framework. Civil society associations are widely regarded as the basis for citizen involvement and participation, and as the location for democratic action. There is an increasing scholarly recognition that associationalism is essential for a healthy democratic society for the reason that it tends to strengthen democratic political culture. Associations encourage citizens to take part in public discourse and civic projects. And, thus they shape civic engagement. Through such participation and communicative interaction, identity formation also takes place. Associational members, as a result, learn public-spiritedness and democratic art of participation. It leads us to the debate on ascriptive and voluntary associations in civil society. At the same time, the notion of associational dichotomy is much contested. It is argued that exploration of the link between civil society associations and political participation calls for a much more intricate analysis that would entail going beyond associational dichotomy, particularly in the Indian context. The research presented in this paper, based on analysis of some prominent and relevant theoretical conceptions, aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the relationship between civil society, active citizenship, and democracy.

Keywords: Ascriptive associations, citizenship, civil society, political participation, voluntary associations.

Introduction
Civil society has become central to contemporary democratic imagination. The discourse on democracy views civil society as a concept of critical importance based on the idea of the ‘citizen as joiner’. Not surprisingly, the normative perspective on civil society assumes that domain of civil society is the foundation of democratic citizenship. Associations of civil society are widely regarded as the basis for citizen involvement and participation, and location for democratic action. There is an increasing scholarly recognition that associationalism is essential for a healthy democratic society for the reason that it tends to strengthen democratic political culture. Associations encourage individuals to take part in public discourse and civic projects, and thus cause civic engagement. Through such participation and communicative interaction, identity formation also takes place. Members develop a sense and understanding of themselves. Their collective action in an interactional process helps them construct associational identity and develop civic-mindedness and trust. Thus, members of civil society organizations learn public-spiritedness and the democratic art of participation. Fine and Harrington argue:
providing a structure for affiliation and cohesion, groups offer both a model and a reason for participation in larger social domains. What one learns within the group context can be generalized to other domains; it becomes a resource that can be harnessed for public participation (2004: 350).

What they state about groups of civil society, or “small publics” as Cohen and Arato (1992) call them, can be applied to associations as well. In this way, civil society associations produce the background conditions necessary for active citizenship and constitute an antidote to political apathy.

The relation between civil society associations and political participation is investigated in a normative framework in this paper. Previous studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between citizen participation in civil society associations and political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963; Putnam, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Teorell, 2003; Lorenzini & Giugni, 2012; Quintelier, 2012; Lundasen, 2014). It is understood that participation in civil society associations provides citizens political resources (Verba et al., 1995) or particular skills useful for political participation (Quintelier, 2012). Drawing on both from the perspective of theories of civil society in the west and from the perspective of theoretical conceptions in the Indian context, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the relationship between civil society, active citizenship, and democracy. Given its nature and objectives, the article uses qualitative research with secondary data. The scope of the research is primarily exploratory.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section includes a brief overview of the trajectory of associationalism and contemporary revival of associationalism. It also highlights the key terms of the research question. The second section outlines theoretical conceptions pertaining to associational dichotomy. When it comes to civil society associations, a first line of research has tried to demonstrate associational dichotomy—ascriptive and non-ascriptive associations. Another line of research questions associational dichotomy, which I discuss in the third section. The paper expands on this latter research line and questions the premise of the first research line.

Concept of civil society: Theoretical evolution

The theoretical evolution of the concept of civil society from Locke through Montesquieu and his disciple Tocqueville, the associational theorist, to Hegel is very complex. Taylor (1990) identifies two important historical traditions in the Western political theory, one derived from Locke and the other from Montesquieu. Both devised ways to curtail the potential for despotism of an absolutist state. Hegel combines both the traditions in his concept of democracy. In the Hegelian framework, civil society is a system of rights—a form of ethical life in which the subjective and the objective coexist in harmony. He was the first to make civil society an integral part of the Western project of modernity. While Tocqueville established the significance of civil society for a democratic society. According to Tocqueville, civil society consisting of free human associations instills democratic values, provides coherence to public life, cultivates civic virtues, and nurtures the habit and capacity for self-rule. He makes an important point that participatory citizenship, active in a range of associations, could further active engagement with politics and thus strengthen a democratic state. Tocqueville, in this way, contributes substantively to the contemporary debate on the relationship between civil society, active citizenship, and modern democracy.

Contemporary Revival of ‘Associationalism’

The revival of neo-Tocquevillian associationalism is commonly associated with Putnam (1993; 1996; 2000). Putnam is concerned with the role of institutions as a dependent and independent variable in democratic development. His theory of social capital assumes that the more we connect with other people in the form of associations, the
more we trust them and vice-versa. Generalized social trust in each other, trust in public officials and tolerance which trust requires as a precondition are integral components of social capital, which has in turn a beneficial effect on citizen participation. Thus, social capital has been widely lauded as the source of a healthy democratic activity that breeds participation. Civil society, consequently, is supposed to have a positive impact on political participation in the sense that voluntary associations, by virtue of the social capital they generate, drive substantially their members towards political participation with a sense of public spiritedness. Gradually, the concept of trust became the principal subject of study as one of the critical components of social capital. For example, Fukuyama (1995) shows the significance of ‘generalized trust’ built up in civil society.

Cohen and Arato (1992), building upon Tocqueville’s approach, refer to civil society as an arena of public activity involving a range of groups and associations distinct from the state and market. They consider this field as essential for a healthy democracy since it permits participation and communicative interaction of individuals. Similarly, Salamon (1996), a pioneer in the empirical study of the nonprofit sector, conceptualizes civil society as the third sector, distinct from the state and market. His approach includes organizations characterized by five crucial features, namely, formal, private, non-profit distributing, self-governing, and voluntary. Salamon and his colleagues have produced a substantial number of quantitative studies of the nonprofit sector in various regions of the world.

Apart from these neo-Tocquevillian exercises, several other theorists have highly valued the associational life. A prominent communitarian scholar, Walzer (1995) stresses that all the comprehensive and singular answers to the problems of modern society proposed by four ideologies, each with its own claim to completeness and correctness, are inappropriate. One is the communitarian idea of full engagement with politics, second is the socialist suggestion of elimination of the state and creation of a cooperative economy, third is the capitalist notion of citizen as a consumer choosing from a set of options, and fourth one is the nationalist response supporting community solidarity. While civil society, where voluntary groups with their differing ideas of good life have pluralist competition, does not make such singular claim. He locates good life in this fragmented, contingent, and localized site of civil society where individuals connect and thus become sociable. Rosenblum (1994), an advocate of pluralism, also gives an account of how associational memberships may benefit individual citizens. She notes that changing associational memberships help individuals enlarge their personal capacity for self-reflection and freedom, and a plurality of associations with flexible boundaries allowing exit as essential to train citizens for democracy.

Hirst (1994), a British sociologist, put forward the model of “associative democracy” in the light of both collapse of state socialism as a political project as well as exhaustion of liberal democratic capitalism at the end of the twentieth century. He puts hope in the agencies of civil society as he observes that the highly centralized and bureaucratized state does not consent to participation and self-governance of citizens. So, he seeks to curtail the state by giving powers of decision-making to “communities of place and interest” (1994) since these communities make it possible for citizens to discuss and contest the issues, which have an effect on their lives and immediate surroundings. Hirst’s associationalism views voluntary associations as an alternative to the fragile and rigid bureaucracy and as an effective agent in the delivery of services. Civil society containing voluntary self-governing associations, in Hirst’s conceptual articulation, becomes the primary basis for democracy. The state turns out to be of secondary in importance, with the critical task of supervising and regulating the self-governing civil society.

The associational perspective on democracy has been empirically supported in India by several scholars over the last couple of decades. Blomkvist (2001), as a part of the Uppsala University project *Democracy and Social Capital in Segmented Societies*, empirically tests Putnam’s
thesis in five states of India. His data add credibility to the correlation between social capital produced by associations and government responsiveness within the democratic framework of the country. Furthermore, *Interrogating Social Capital: The Indian Experience* (2004), edited by Bhattacharyya et al, revives the debate on Putnam model in the Indian context.

Thus, civil society associations are considered, from theoretical as well as empirical perspectives, as the context of civic engagement. They constitute a discursive space where civic life is actualized in the form of citizen commitment and involvement. In this way, we can say that civil society ‘performs the functions of socialization and pedagogy. Civil society organizations cultivate care and concern for others, impart citizenship skills and train people in the art of participation’ (Chandhoke, 2003). Because of these inherent properties, civil society is widely privileged as an agency that regulates asocial individualism and makes civic or collective projects possible. Against this background, this paper aims to reflect on the link between civil society associations and political participation, especially in the Indian context. The underlying assumption of this research argues that there is a positive correlation between civil society associations and citizen engagement in political participation. Thus, the main research question herein involves two critical terms- ‘civil society associations’ and ‘political participation’. I briefly discuss the term ‘political participation’ below. I focus on the other critical term in the next section.

Here, it is important to note that political participation does not merely mean electoral participation. Although political participation chiefly stood for voting and electoral participation in the decades of 1940s and 1950s, there has been continuous extension in the repertoire and domain of political participation in the last few decades (van Deth, 2001). As definition of political participation has become wider in scope, it encompasses a wide range of conventional and unconventional modes of activities by citizens such as voting, campaign, contacting, protest, petitioning, and so on. Only by taking into account these different forms of political participation, we can investigate whether the involvement in civil society associations shape political participation.

**Associational Dichotomy**

‘Civil society associations’ is a highly problematic category. Every society consists of diversified associations that range from groups that are based on ethnicity and religion to more fluid voluntary groups rooted in professionalism, ideology, interest, or social activities. The classic modern social theorists, for example, Tonnies, Durkheim, and Weber, construct their social theories on conceptual dichotomies such as community (*Gemeinschaft*) versus society or association (*Gesellschaft*), mechanical versus organic solidarity, and communal versus associative groups respectively (For details, see Tonnies (1963); Durkheim (1964); Weber (1978); Shils (1992)). While a fluid civil society is fundamentally marked by plurality of voluntary associations (representing ‘Gesellschaft’, ‘organic solidarity’, and ‘associative groups’) that give priority to personal autonomy, a segmented civil society manifests itself in associations that are closed restricting membership by ascriptive traits or status. In this theoretical framework, as voluntary associations permit individuals to choose their identities, they are seen as the domain of freedom or embodiment of the idea of individual choice. On the contrary, ascriptive associations are seen as imposing identities on individuals representing the domain of unfreedom and tyranny. Associations in a segmented civil society can take highly uncivil forms. As they are marked by a deep sense of belonging to the group, what Schmalenbach (1977) calls ‘bund’ (communion), they can advance exaggerated sense of particularity and loyalty to their own organizations, and even endorse cultural particularism or ethno-nationalism. As a result, they undermine democratic values and civic identification. Voluntary associations, according to this formulation, form civil society and ascriptive associations form community.
Decades later, inclusion of ascriptive or particularist associations in the concept of civil society continues to be debated. On one side of this debate are those theorists who would include all the associations in civil society. For instance, Putnam does not make any distinction among associations while reducing social capital to associational life per se. His notion of associationalism encompasses a huge variety of associations and activities from bird-watching societies and bowling clubs to unions and church groups. Since Putnam does not differentiate democratic from antidemocratic activities and values in different networks and associations, we can say that according to this view all these groups can add equally well to democracy by promoting collaboration and association among people. In a similar way, Walzer (2003) argues that, ‘ideally civil society is a setting of settings: all are included, none is preferred’. He supports the idea of a civil society where people freely associate and communicate with one another, and form and reform groups of all sorts. “The words “civil society”,’ says Walzer (1995), ‘name the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks- formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology- that fill their space’. Thus, scholars on this side of the debate include almost all kinds of social associations in civil society.

On the other side of the debate are the scholars who take a modernist view of civil society associations, originally credited to Hegel. Gellner’s (1994) work on civil society is one of the clearest expositions of this line of thought. He makes an effort to distinguish ‘civil society’ as an arena of individual freedom and pluralism different from other forms of plurality based on blood and kinship. He emphasizes the ‘voluntary’ nature of civil society as he argues that “modularity” makes civil society while “segmentalism” defines a traditional society. Modularity stands for the ability to transcend traditional or ascriptive occupations and associations. Civil society, for Gellner, is not only modern but also based on associations that reflect voluntary choice of individuals, rather than what they were born into. It does not, therefore, include associations formed on the basis of ethnic or religious considerations.

Young (1999) tries to refine Walzer’s definition of civil society in two steps. First, by following Cohen and Arato, she distinguishes civil society from both the state and economy. Distinction by Cohen and Arato, in turn, is based on the Habermasian distinction between “system” and “lifeworld”. In the Habermasian scheme, state, economy, and civil society correspond to three distinct ways of coordinating action- state through the medium of authorized power, economy through money, and civil society through communicative interaction. State and economy are included in the “system” because the actions of a large number of people are conditioned by system imperatives of bureaucratic routine or profit making, and those coordinating their actions need not directly communicate with one another. While “lifeworld” stands for the activities and institutions structured essentially through communicative interaction. Civil society corresponds to associative activities of the “lifeworld”. While distinguishing civil society from the state and economy, Young states that rather than ‘think of state, economy and civil society as distinct spheres or clusters of institutions, we should think of them as distinct kinds of activities’. Second, she distinguishes levels of associative activity: private association, civic association, and political association. Private association is self-regarding, inward-looking, and particularist that includes families, social clubs, private parties and gatherings, and many of the activities of religious organizations. Civic association is primarily directed outward, and it stands for activities with a civic purpose that aim to serve not only members, but also the wider community. Political association aims to influence state policy formulation or implementation, for instance, parties and lobbying organizations, and special-interest associations organizing to influence or protest state policy. Young (1999) concludes that private association ‘contributes little to the good of the wider society. Private association, moreover, is sometimes depoliticizing or brazenly self-regarding’.
From the Indian perspective, an important body of work (Chandhoke, 1995; Chandhoke, 2001; Chandhoke, 2003; Gupta, 1997; Gupta, 2003; Beteille, 2000; Kaviraj, 2001; Mahajan, 2003) adopts a more cautious and restrictive use of the term civil society. For instance, Mahajan underlines the Lockean and Hegelian ideas of civil society as a collectivity predicated on the principle of individual rights. She subscribes to the Hegelian conception of civil society, which embodies the spirit of freedom. Indeed, from this standpoint, she argues that Putnam’s appreciation of voluntary associations is not applicable to the Indian context where numerous associations are hierarchical, and they are based on ascriptive ties. She is also quite skeptical about relevance of Hirst’s model of associative democracy to the study of Indian context. Since a shift to an associative model of democracy makes civil society the arena of voluntary associations, church, and family, she gives a compelling argument that this model makes sense only in democracies of the west where it emerged due to the fact that they had witnessed democratization of the state as well as society. There, Mahajan points out:

associational ties have been modernized; traditional structures of loyalty and community identity have, to a considerable extent, broken down; and the principle of formal equality, rooted in the notion of equal rights of citizens and an individualistic ethic, has been widely accepted and incorporated in the practices of the state’ (2003: 182).

So, if we neglect this aspect, as Mahajan insists, it would result in legitimization of groups and associations that do not operate on democratic principles of equality and freedom.

In like manner, Gupta invokes the Hegelian understanding of civil society and views civil society as one of the moments of ethic of freedom. He points out the deep connect between civil society and citizenship- citizens develop a strong sense of fraternity based on equal rights, not on blood relations, in civil society. Gupta argues that in order to save the project of civil society, we need to make the civil society institutions responsible to citizens’ freedoms and equal citizenship. Beteille also states that emergence of open and secular institutions, which are not rooted in relations of kinship, caste, or religion, is conducive to growth of civil society.

Chandhoke argues that the Walzerian definition of civil society implies that civil society organizations need not be democratic at all. She differs with Putnam’s idea that healthy associational life is determined by thickness of bonds within associations since the most communal or fundamentalist organizations are also marked by thick bonds of social solidarity. If we recognize that civil society contains associations of every stripe and hue, it will mean that the sphere, according to Chandhoke (2003), ‘far from being the realm of solidarity and warm personalized interaction, is itself a fragmented, divided, and a hierarchically structured realm’.

In Kaviraj’s view, civil society can mean two different things. It can stand for all type of social organizations other than the state, including those based on Gesellschaft principles as well as the ones based on Gemeinschaft principles. Alternatively, it can mean the sphere consisting of only the Gesellschaft associations that embody autonomy and individuation. The problem with the Gemeinschaft associations is that they may demand a totalist commitment that is antagonistic to any concept of individual rights. While associations, which act on the basis of voluntary and retractable membership, cannot make large and comprehensive demands on commitments for the reason that autonomy implies that commitments are neither comprehensive nor final. ‘The voluntariness of the associational principle,’ argues Kaviraj (2011) taking the Kantian view, ‘is thus fundamentally linked to a conception of the individual or the self. This is a self constituted by an individual by his own rational and deliberate choices, and since such choices are provisional and revisable, so is this individual self’. Importantly, the debate on inclusion of ascriptive associations in civil society is not settled yet.

On the basis of discussion above, I agree at this point that in order to contribute to the democratic structure, civil society has to be
democratic since ‘only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society; only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state’ (Walzer, 2003). On a similar note, Rosenblum and Post (2002) suggest that a democratic civil society implies voluntary associations that are open and permeable in the sense that their ‘membership is consensual and exit possible without loss of status or public rights and benefits… associations serve to underscore individualism, voluntarism, self-construction, and self-expression’. In such a civil society, citizens can freely move among associations and shift contingent commitment and involvement among them. So, I consider civil society as a dense array of modern, voluntaristic, and non-ascriptive associations based on modularity and choice. Likewise, they are based on horizontal bonds and not on hierarchy. With this position, in line with the work on civil society associations referred to above, I deal next with another line of research.

**Questioning Associational Dichotomy**

Several perspectives, especially multiculturalism and communitarianism, pose some formidable questions to the individualist and voluntarist accounts of civil society that assign utmost priority to personal autonomy. The problem with voluntarist conception of associations is that it does not adequately respond to the issue of capacity to provide firm and enduring identities to individuals. The conceptual dichotomy having ideal types (‘associative’ or ‘gesellschaftliche’ and ‘communal’ or ‘gemeinschaftliche’ groups) attempted by modern social theorists is highly contested in recent decades. In particular, social behaviour cannot be explained by the dichotomous categories. Social reality, in fact, is too complex to be compressed into such conceptualization of associations- domain of freedom and domain of unfreedom. Both kinds of associations are rather a fact of life in any society. In practice, as Rosenblum and Post argue:

> fluid and segmented civil societies exist on a continuum, voluntary and ascriptive associations, open and closed groups, coexist in any given civil society in different proportions. The identities constituted by and affirmed in groups develop out of history and available norms and social forms… But identity is not exhausted by history; individuals are not “radically situated” (2002:6).

It is also not clear whether the close connection between ascriptive associations and a profound sense of belonging to a community among its members is sacrosanct. Schmalenbach (1977) suggests that communion can as well arise out of voluntary and instrumental associations or societies as from communities.

Moreover, associational conceptualization and analysis need to be context-specific. Socio-cultural conditions and politics of a country significantly shape nature and role of civil society. Can we apply then associational dichotomy, as discussed in the previous section, to the Indian context without any major modifications? With reference to the context of developing countries, Varshney states that ‘both informal group activities and ascriptive associations should be considered part of civil society so long as they connect individuals, build trust, encourage reciprocity, and facilitate the exchange of views on matters of public concern—economic, political, cultural, and social’. He provides several arguments for this position. First, scores of ethnic and religious associations reveal a blend of ascription and choice. Many ethnic associations also perform several modern functions, for instance, participating in democratic politics. Second, in a great part of the developing world, especially in their rural areas and small towns, formal associations simply do not exist despite presence of civic engagement. With empirical evidence, he argues that the chief determinants of such engagement include degree of urbanization and economic development and nature of the political system. Thus, Varshney draws the conclusion that purposes of activity rather than forms of organization should be considered the deciding factor for civic life, at least in the social and cultural sites of the world that are far removed from that of Europe and North America.
In this connection, Parekh (2004) argues that in the majority of Western countries, traditional communities have largely vanished, and almost all social relations including family have been so transformed that they can be cast in the mould of civil society. But communities of various kinds are found strong while civil society remains weak in most of the non-Western countries. According to Parekh, while these non-Western countries ‘need to foster civil society, there is no obvious reason why they must be expected to declare a war on communities. They can create a space for civil society by loosening up and restructuring rather than destroying these communities, as Indians are doing with castes’. On this view, the Western model of civil society is a culturally and historically specific one with its obvious limitations. Hence, we must not accept it as a universal model.

Furthermore, if we accept the conventional associational dichotomy uncritically, the question then arises: how could we explain hybridization of associations? For instance, Susanne Rudolph puts forward the idea that the dichotomy of voluntary and ascriptive associations does not exhaust conceptualization of associational life as it tends to exclude those communities that are imagined or constructed rather than primordial and innate, namely, hybrid or constructed forms of associations or “intentional associations”. Intentional association, according to Rudolph, combines ascriptive and voluntary features. Put differently, it negotiates between biological givenness and psychological act of social and political choice of its members. Consequently, intentional association ‘blurs the distinction, important to civil society discourses, between arenas of freedom and choice and arenas of unfreedom and determinism’ (Rudolph, 2000). In this regard, she cites caste associations in India because caste identity (or even ethnic or religious identity) can be the product of intention as much as birth. Thus, caste associations challenge the long-held distinction between inherited and chosen identities. Chandhoke agrees with Rudolph that such hybrid associations are nowadays widely prevalent in India. Civil society in India is seen as a fluid association of social groupings which are based on caste and kinship linkages, or on religious mobilization as much as on voluntary social associations’ (Chandhoke, 1995).

It is useful to note at this juncture that the conceptual dichotomy concerning associations is derived from the polemical debates between liberal individualists and their communitarian critics of the Left and the Right in the West. It, hence, cannot be transferred unreservedly to India where the intellectual discourses and political practices are embedded in a different cultural context. Indeed, the complex social order in India is characterized by coexistence of ascriptive and voluntary associations. And, given the extensively diverse nature of the Indian society exhibiting heterogeneous nature of communities and significant role of communal symbols and identities, existence and important role of ascriptive associations based on caste and religion cannot be underestimated. Hence, when it comes to political participation, we need to look at composition and position of voluntary as well as ascriptive associations. To put it differently, we need to figure out whether ascriptive associations also mediate between individuals and the state and whether they contribute to democratic values and structures through investigation and evaluation. Accordingly, we just cannot construct a priori judgment in this context. The above strongly calls for a comparative analysis of the role of both kinds of associations- ascriptive and nonascriptive or voluntary association- with regard to political participation in the country.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that civil society has developed into “chicken soup’ of the social sciences… the locus of what there is of utopianism in contemporary political thought’ (Rosenblum & Post, 2002). As such, it is almost universally used with positive implications. It becomes, in view of the foregoing, extremely important that cautious studies have to be conducted with regard to the internal structure of civil society associations including their value structure, the wider setting where they operate, and their autonomy dimension in connection with donors. So, it remains to be seen whether civil society associations, voluntary as well as
ascriptive, have internal democracy and civicness. Social capital could be created in all kinds of associations, and it can be used for completely nondemocratic purpose as well. In this respect, Putnam’s distinction between bridging or inclusive social capital and bonding or exclusive social capital appears to be quite appropriate. Similarly, a useful distinction can be made between personal trust, which is expressed in trust in fellow citizens or members, and institutional trust manifest in trust in the various institutions in a democratic society. Personal trust corresponds to, what Tocqueville (1969) says, ‘an effect on the inner moral life of those who participate, enhancing their sympathies and understanding for fellow humans’, while institutional trust broadly corresponds to, what he says, ‘an external effect, nurturing their engagement with a wider community of purposes and making common purposes more effective’. It is, therefore, vital in a democracy that civil society associations, whether voluntary or ascriptive or intentional, must generate bridging social capital and institutional trust in addition to personal trust.

**Conclusion**

In the course of exploring the link between civil society associations and political participation, this paper shows that associational dichotomy has extremely limited legitimacy in the Indian context. As stressed in the previous section, different kinds of civil society associations—ascriptive and non-ascriptive—have a major presence and role in the country. We need to acknowledge this, in general, in order to explore the possible relationship between civil society associations and forms of political participation in all its complexity. Accordingly, we need to revise our earlier position, as discussed in the second section, that only voluntary associations of civil society rooted in the democratic ethos can promote political participation.

At the same time, this conclusion should be interpreted with caution given the limitations of this study. Rather than focus solely on ascriptive or non-ascriptive associations, research needs to provide more and serious attention to ethnographic detail—a proper documentation of associations and creation of an association index. And, it seems to me that there are good reasons to conduct studies involving state- or region-wise analysis or sub-population analysis and even case-by-case analysis of associations to justify what is said in this paper in general terms. It is proper to state that these may help us arrive at a more rigorous analysis of the impact of civil society associations on forms of political participation in India.

To conclude, let us suppose that both ascriptive and non-ascriptive associations matter in India as far as political participation is concerned. All this position demands is that we must rethink the conceptual treatment of civil society associations in terms of ‘associational dichotomy’, particularly in the Indian context. This, then, raises the question of differential weight of ascriptive and non-ascriptive associations. Do ascriptive associations cause free political participation or promote participation based on ascriptive factors such as caste and religion? Does it explain the significance that ‘identity issue’ has acquired in organized electoral politics? Most importantly, these questions are not free from difficulty. Here, I suggest that instead of limiting ourselves to the use of either qualitative or quantitative research, it is important to adopt mixed methods research to address these complex questions.

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**Conflict of interests**

No conflict of interest.
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