1. Examine the concept and meaning of Civil Society.

Ans: A civil society is comprised of groups or organizations working in the interest of the citizens but operating outside of the governmental and for-profit sectors. Organizations and institutions that make up civil society include labor unions, non-profit organizations, churches, and other service agencies that provide an important service to society but generally ask for very little in return.

Civil society is sometimes referred to as the civil sector, a term that is used to differentiate it from other sectors that comprise a functioning society. For example, the United States is made up of three sectors: the public sector, which is the government and its branches; the private sector, which includes businesses and corporations; and the civil sector, which includes the organizations that act in the public’s interest but are not motivated by profit or government.

The term civil society is derived from the Latin word civil is societies which means associations or communities that work above and beyond the state. Civil society thus consists of a host of institutions that look after the activities, which are not taken up by the state. These may relate to various religious, cultural, economic and other activities of society. The medieval church of Europe, Hindu Maths, Sikh Gurdwaras, Muslim Mosques, and other religious trusts in India, caste and kinship associations, business, sports, cultural associations, etc., represents the civil society.

It is important that civil society is also referred to for its moral value and authority; as the state is more akin to an administrative unit. Civil society, in opposition to the state, lays the moral foundation of society. It is in this sense that civil society has widely been viewed as an epitome not only of moral authority but also as a bastion of culture against the state, the law and capitalism. However, the dimension of opposition in civil society has been in a state of flux as its relationship with the state, the market and capitalism has not always been the same everywhere and every time. However, today we tend to see civil society as the home of culture, of freedom, of independence, which enables us to rein in the state.

Importantly, Civil society has long been playing a pivotal role in influencing the state’s policy on social welfare, articulating views on current issues, serving as the voice of constructive debate, providing a forum for the exchange of new ideas and information, initiating social movements by way of creating new norms, identities, institutions. Civil society is, together with the state and the market, one of the three spheres that interface in the making of democratic societies.

Civil society is the sphere in which social movements become organised. The organisation of civil society, which represents many diverse and sometimes contradictory social interests, is shaped to fit the social base, constituency, thematic orientations (e.g. environment, gender, human rights) and types of activity. They include church related groups, trade unions, cooperatives, service organisation, community groups and youth organisations as well as academic institutions. Civil involvement has always been an inseparable part of the development process of human society. In Putnam’s argument, higher levels of civil involvement gives rise to “social capital” which in turn makes possible more civic involvement.

In Gramscian sense, civil society is the terrain where the state, the people and the market interact and where people wage war against the hegemony of the market and the state. The status of civil society organisations has been widely explained in terms of their relationship with the state and the market. In Tocqueville’s view, civil society represents a vision of politics and democracy that is non-state centred and that has taken root in contemporary social movements and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

However to the liberals and the neo-liberals, civil society is organised around the market economy as a non-political privatised delivery system for services such as welfare, education, healthcare, clean water and so on. In recent years, there has been a phenomenal proliferation of the civil societies all over the globe. Social scientists have attributed this phenomenon to the crises in the states on the one hand and the market triumph on the other. At times the state is beset with a legitimisation deficit that destroys the conditions of its own stability, paving the way for the civil society.

Notwithstanding such a debate on the pro or anti State stand of civil societies or that of State failure of legitimisation crises, civil societies have been viewed as a force for democratisation, counterweights to the state and economic power and have emerged as alternative vehicles of citizens’ participation at both the national and international levels of governance. Their activism and initiatives have also been viewed as a movement for transformation of regional, national and global politics and economics. Many scholars, however, see the civil society beyond the state and market syndrome, as the state and the market contribute something, but not everything towards the cohesion and the dynamics of the society.

Indeed there is a need to view the civil society both as a structure of organisation, social and political space and relationship and also as a process (the ways in which the elements of structure come into being and interrelate). In the wake of globalisation, introduction of the structural adjustment programme and paradigm shift in the social development strategy there has been an attempt to redefine the role of the state and the civil society. In the emerging state to the emphasis has been (a) on the increasing roles of the civil societies “to take the burden off the state, by involving citizens and communities in the delivery of the collective goods” and (b) on “strengthening of the abilities and opportunities of civil society and local communities” to ensure the process of empowerment of the marginalised in society. However, in the contemporary development discourse, there has been a process of involvement of civil society organisations along with the state in the formulation and implementation of development initiatives. What have been the relationships of the civil society with the people on the one hand and the state on the other.

In the context of globalisation or otherwise there have been claims of universality of civil societies. It is argued at one point that specific economic, social and political conditions influence the growth and functioning of the civil societies and thereby it can’t be universal. On the other hand, there has been the argument that as there have been universal processes like modernisation, secularisation, democratisation, globalisations and so on the claim of universality of civil society has emerged to be a reality.