

REASSESSING THE RELEVANCE AND ROLE OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNAL SOCIETIES IN POST-INDEPENDENT TAJIKISTAN

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Abstract

The paper reassesses the role of traditional communal societies in post-independent Tajikistan. The author argues that these informal social institutions have become more relevant with dawn of independence embracing new roles and looks at the way in which donors have used traditional aspects, which are replicas of modern civil society. The author also argues that traditional communal societies are being engaged at community level to carry out work of civil society development, democracy promotion and this is how they believe social capital could be strengthened in the Tajik society by installing infrastructure, efficiency, expertise in these age old social practices. Donors have also realized the importance of dialogue with these communities and especially of well-respected male members of the community who sit on the aksakal council and resolve local disputes. Their participation is seen both to legitimise the project in the eyes of the villagers and to ensure that they will be mobilised to participate in it. Often, the authority of the aksakals is needed to persuade community members to contribute their labour and or money to a particular project. Finally the author believes that Tajikistan's social fabric contains elements of civil society even if that is available in rudimentary form or informal practices but we cannot ignore it while evaluating the role NGOs in post-independent Tajikistan.

Keywords: *Communal Societies, Aksakals, NGOs, ashar, Tajikistan, Donors, Mahalla,*

Introduction

The concept of philanthropy which can be defined in general terms as ‘the ethical notion of giving and serving to those beyond one’s immediate family’ has existed in different forms in most cultures throughout history and often driven by religious and kinship based traditions.¹ Central Asia has remained the home for communal² societies throughout history and was serving it, either on self-help or on a voluntary basis.³ In these communal societies, individuals were able to join

¹ David Lewis, *The Management of Non-Governmental Development Organizations: An Introduction* Routledge, 2001, p, 29.

² These are pre-Soviet tradition based social networking initiative groups or mutual aid or localized forms of decision making, based on kinship, neighbourhood, village, blood, and trust, Central Asian society is organized around an array of clan, kin, and Islamic institutions. Social organization is largely ascriptive and involuntary, promoting communal norms and values, unlike the individualist and voluntary associations that de Tocqueville and others have argued are the basis of Western and democratic civil society, Kathleen Collins, *Clan politics in Central Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p, 8.

³ Here in central Asian Context Communal societies should not be taken as something opposed to state but positively in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life. Thus communal civil society was less concerned with state society relations, and the ability of citizens to resist amoral and power hungry political elites, than with relations within society, with community solidarity, self-help and trust. The main aim of this civil society was to ensure that all members of the group had the necessary means for survival. Based on informal mechanisms—family ties, friendship or good neighborliness—it organised to offer

other like-minded people in groups that were based around particular interests (merchants' guilds for example) in order to support each other and perhaps work to promote the interests of the group. It became a leading force for mobilisation on common interests wherein the individuals and groups used to express their solidarity and oneness in Tajik society. Members of these communal societies were obliged to assist one another whenever possible and mitigate the uneasiness in the society. These circles served as an independent channel for the dissemination and discussion of news and current affairs.⁴ Traditions of public self-organization like *hasher* (voluntary Action⁵), *Shariki*, *Avlod* (Clan), *Mashvarat*, *Mahalla* (neighborhood) Councils, *Jamoat*, *Gup*, *Gashtak* (gatherings)⁶ have a long history in Tajikistan.⁷ *Avlod* was dominant group and for generations, this *Avlod* system provided survival, autonomy and adaptability to its members serving traditionalism and sustainability of the Tajik society. The *Avlod* (clan) was a traditional community institution found in Tajikistan regulating relationships among community members who were joined by kinship bonds. These institutions were protecting the interests of its community members and thereby contributed to their well-being. For instance, if a village resident expresses a wish to migrate to find work; this decision must be approved by the *avlod* elders or its head. Their involvement seeks to ensure that the potential migrant (generally male) and his family are to be supported by the rest of the community. As such, the *avlod* raises and manages travel expenses for the migrant and makes arrangements for the care of his family. However, at certain intervals, there were also negative consequences of the *avlod's* intervention in family affairs. There were cases where the *avlod* has prevented wives of labour migrants from selling crops and managing household budgets during their husband's absence. It may happen when kinship affiliation to *avloids* can divide communities and that members may promote their own interests at the expense of broader community needs. It can be argued that communal civil society existed in Tajikistan for centuries, resisting full state capture during the Soviet era. In Tajikistan trust and solidarity networks are primarily built around kinship ties. Through kinship ties (the *avlod*) individuals express and defend their common interests, providing mutual aid and

services, community infrastructure and other essentials. Communal civil society could be located in 'families, communities, friendship networks, solidarity, workplace ties, voluntarism, spontaneous groups and movements' Paul Dekker and Andries van den Broek, '*Civil society in comparative perspective: involvement in voluntary associations in North America and Western Europe*', *Voluntas*, Vol. 9, No 1, 1998, p 13.

⁴ They include the Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic hordes (Zhuz) which were based extended clan networks through which economic, political and social issues were addressed. Amongst urbanized and sedentary population especially Tajik's and Uzbeks, kinship ties were strengthened by links based on proximity in Mohhallas. These were geographic neighbourhood and the site of intensive contacts, information exchange, opinion formation and decision making.

⁵ A pre-Soviet form of collective voluntary work, where groups of people are mobilised, normally to provide manual labour to help family and neighbours. This will be described in much greater detail below.

⁶ The female counterpart of the *Jam'omad*, gatherings organized by women connected by the same sorts of ties as link the men in the *Jam'omad*. They play an important role in the interchange of information and are an effective way of involving women in public life. Like the *Jam'omad*, they can play a key role in stabilization of the social relations in Tajik society. Yusufbekov Yusuff, Babajanov Rustam and Kuntuvdiy Natalya, *Civil Society Development in Tajikistan*, Dushanbe 2007, p. 18. http://www.akdn.org/publications/civil_society_tajikistan_development.pdf

⁷ Yusufbekov Yusuff, Babajanov Rustam and Kuntuvdiy Natalya, *Civil Society Development in Tajikistan*, Dushanbe 2007, p. 18. http://www.akdn.org/publications/civil_society_tajikistan_development.pdf

support. Communal civil society based on kinship has been traditionally strengthened by links based on proximity.⁸

The case study of nomadic life in the said region reveals that local associations were defined either by genealogy or by kinship lineage. In the pre soviet era mahalla developed in urban areas as relatively independent associations of citizens. Mahalla brought people living on the same territory together on a voluntary basis, along interest lines based on profession, ethnic origin or good neighbourhoodness. *Shura Aksakal*, a territorial unit similar to that of neighbourhood or the council of elders, has for a long time served as an organising principle of community life in Tajik society. *Hashar* a voluntary sort of labor available for implementing projects in Tajikistan and their work is guided both by local cultural traditions and national ones.⁹ *Ashar* is a pre-Soviet form of collective voluntary work, in which groups of people were mobilised to provide assistance for family and neighbours.

Although it is a pre-Soviet tradition, the form *ashar* seems to have undergone considerable change since independence. The origin of *ashar* is not clear, but one source suggests that it was practised by nomadic peoples.¹⁰ It survived during the Soviet period, when it was generally organised to help build or repair housing.¹¹ Up to 50 people would help build a simple house (for a newly married son, for example) that could be completed within a day. Traditionally, men who were fit enough would provide manual labour, *aksakals*¹² would give advice and women would prepare food for the workers. Their role as adjudicator in domestic and community disputes and the respect they command locally suggests an ability to take an objective stance and to draw on years of experience when deciding what is best for their community. In the pre-Soviet era *mahallas* developed in urban areas as relatively independent associations of citizens. *Mahallas* were self governing and members gathered regularly to exchange information, decide community problems, provide support for life-cycle rituals and define public opinion in neighbourhood mosques and teahouses (*Chaihana*).¹³ They were meant to regulate personal and family problems, inhabitants used to turn to these councils of elders (*shura aksakal*) for family problems. They helped organize traditional feasts and gatherings (*maraka*) to celebrate births, marriages and funerals. Members of these communal societies felt it was their social obligation to assist one another whenever possible. The bonds created in such circles were often so powerful that they would be 'inherited' by the children of members who would regard each other as kin and rely on each other for help

⁸ M. Glasius, *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*, Routledge, 2004, p, 131.

⁹ S. Frederick, Baktybek Beshimov, *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, M.E. Sharpe, 2011, New York, p, 288.

¹⁰ Christine Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation in Central Asia Irrigation disputes in the Ferghana Valley*, Routledge, London, 2009, p, 143.

¹¹ Despite the imposition of identical Communist Party and state institutions across all republics, enforcement was neither equally strong nor equally successful, The *mahalla* was the traditional form of urban communal organization; its form has persisted into the post-Soviet era. The *mahalla* is a neighborhood unit that typically includes an informal network of families, relatives and extended kin, and neighbors who consider themselves members of a local community. Kathleen Collins, *Clan politics in Central Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 67-70.

¹² White beard people. Often based on elderly and wisdom keeping people

¹³ Sabine Freizer, Neo-liberal and communal civil society in Tajikistan: merging or dividing in the post war period, *Central Asian Survey* (September 2005) 24(3), p, 3.

Traditional Communal Societies under Soviets

However, In the Soviet era, there existed a wide array of political, professional, social, cultural institutions that were managed and controlled by the Communist Party-State apparatus, which rarely nurtured environment for them to survive.¹⁴ Soviets often check their actions to make them state oriented and socialize them in a way which suite their temper and test. From the 1930s these associations were increasingly guided by the Communist Party and operated within official ideology.¹⁵ Some public organisations were direct subsidiaries of government structures, financed by the State, and established at the suggestion of either the State or the Party.¹⁶ The repressive regime does not necessarily wipe out all forms of civil society. Thus, the Soviet regime, often assumed to have eliminated all traces of traditional or religious associational life, was not able to take control over the whole societal sphere. The Soviet authorities, however hostile they were towards traditionalism, did not succeed in uprooting their influence over the informal part of society, but rather reinforced them through their emphasis on voluntary work as part of the Soviet citizen's consciousness.¹⁷ Invisible forms of civil society existed alongside the more standard Soviet forms of associations which were linked to the state - such as parent associations, pioneer organizations, Red Cross societies or *sovety* (council bodies) in kolkhoz. Apart from young people, other bodies existed to respond to the needs of particular sections of society, such as pensioners, veterans and women. In Soviet Tajikistan, the traditions of community based voluntary action (*hashar*) were giving help to those who were in need (*sadaqa*) and were largely maintained in rural areas. *Mahallas* were reincarnated in the kolkhoz where they organized some service provisions, local infrastructure maintenance and resolve community disputes.¹⁸ At times communal civil society worked with or behind the state, but rarely in Tajikistan's history openly opposed it.

Role of Communal Societies in Post-independent Tajikistan

The emergence of NGOs in Tajikistan,¹⁹ if argued plainly, is deeply embedded in the past layers that brought up local agencies and communities, which with the passage of time became bedrock

¹⁴ Adrain Karatnycky, Alexander J Motyl and Amand Schenetzler, *Nations in Transit, 2002: Civil Society, Democracy and Markets in East Central Europe and the newly independent states*; Aryn B Sajoo, *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary perspectives*, USA, 2002, p. 172

¹⁵ Under Soviets, of course, there were a number of associations or groups which in democratic countries would qualify as constituting a civil society, but remained largely under the close control of Communist party, despite a typical word, '*dobrovolnyi*' (voluntary) was accorded to them. Whatever was running parallel to Govt. was the unofficial ideas that were either hoarded in unofficial Islam, or in any other element; Sally N Cummings, *Oil Transition and Security in Central Asia*, London, 2003, p. 87.

¹⁶ Janice Giffen and Lucy Earle, Charles Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia*, INTRAC, p. 70,

¹⁷ Ina Zharkevich, *The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Political Accountability in Fragile States: the case of Tajikistan*, INTRAC, 2010, p. 7.
<http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/682/The-Role-of-Civil-Society-in-Promoting-Political-Accountability-in-Fragile-States.pdf>

¹⁸ Sabine Freizer, Neo-liberal and communal civil society in Tajikistan: merging or dividing in the post war period, *Central Asian Survey* (September 2005) 24(3), p. 5.

¹⁹ Here it means social capital as understood by Robert Putnam is networks of civic engagements amongst individuals which generates trust and facilitate collective action. De Tocqueville has suggested that active associational forms and the consequent development of civic engagement contribute to the deepening of democracy as well as to economic development. Similarly in Tajikistan the traditional Communal societies are bedrocks for present day NGOs. It indicates that these Communal civil societies could be located in 'families, communities, friendship networks, solidaristic workplace ties,

for the development of Civil Society. Traditions, and social practices and even at times history have played an important role in determining the behaviour of individuals and organizations in the present day Central Asia.²⁰ These local communal associations of various kinds worked relatively unnoticed in these societies for generations in the form of religious organizations, community groups and organized self-help ventures. These informal groups have served a mobilizing factor through which individuals have expressed their common interests. Except in few cases these diverse associations can be taken as prototype of present age NGOs. Secondly, the development of civil society does not occur on a blank slate but rather draws on the unique historical experiences of local context. Informal social institutions have demonstrated tremendous endurance in Tajikistan through changing history and the drama of development during the Soviet period. The most important of these institutions was the community *mahalla* that acted as an intermediary between government and citizens. Comprised of four to five respected community leaders, the *mahalla* advised the government on local issues. But during Soviet times they have been regulated by the communist party but still they continued to regulate important social events.

Independence has brought many changes in these communal societies and made them as channels of community development in Tajikistan. One of the keys for international donor engagement at the grassroots is the involvement of elders or *aksakals*. Donors have realized the importance of dialogue with these community members before projects are initiated, and an *aksakal* is very often included in the community initiative groups that are then established. Their inclusion is seen both to help legitimise the project in the eyes of the villagers and to ensure that they will be mobilised to participate in it. Often, the authority of the *aksakals* is needed to persuade community members to contribute their labour and/or money to a particular project. These individuals are perhaps also seen as representatives of rural populations, because they are in theory chosen by the communities themselves.²¹ In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan trust and solidarity groups have been mobilized by the NGOs as the primarily ground around which the civil society is being created as there was little alternative²² given the collapse of so many professional and institutional frameworks.²³ These range from traditional communal associations based on self-help groups to more recent ones established with the aid and help of international organizations. Whereas communal forms of civil society are often more concentrated on the issues of social service, generating trust and resolving conflicts, further study is needed into their capacity to improve political accountability at anything above the self-government and district levels. Secondly, for analyzing the concept of civil society in non-Western contexts we should take into account the idea of traditional or 'communal' civil society. Its involvement means enriching the already established web of social relations based on clan or personal relationships. It could

voluntarism, spontaneous groups and movements. What International development NGOs did they made use of their knowledge and local experiences to channelize their work.¹⁹

²⁰ In Kazakhstan it is observed that during the pre-Soviet period, traditional norms and values based on clan and tribal loyalties were passed from one generation to another over centuries; Janice Giffen, Lucy Earle, and Charles Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia*, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/PDF/Outputs/Urbanisation/R7649-report.pdf>, pp. 22-23.

²¹ Lucy Earle, Community development, tradition and the civil society strengthening agenda in Central Asia, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, no. 3, Routledge, p. 7.

²² Charles Buxton, NGO networks in Central Asia and global civil society: potentials and limitations, *Central Asian Survey*, 28, No. 1, Routledge, 2009, p. 45.

²³ Ina Zharkevich, *The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Political Accountability in Fragile States: the case of Tajikistan*, INTRAC, 2010, p. 18., <http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/682/The-Role-of-Civil-Society-in-Promoting-Political-Accountability-in-Fragile-States.pdf>

develop their skills, self-confidence so that the community (the people) can begin to make significant improvements to their neighbourhoods and its material environment.²⁴

Initially the NGOs ran their own development projects, which were mainly concerned with rehabilitation and humanitarian aid to the war victims. These NGOs began by doing purely humanitarian work during the civil war period, with scant involvement in politics. At that time, civil society's emergence was linked to the empowerment of dissident opposition movements that sought to terminate the region's socialist/communist experiment. Civil society was equated with enemies of the Communist State.²⁵ But later on, they began to move to work with local partners on long term basis. From 1997 onwards NGOs and international donor community in Tajikistan began to take a more and systematic role²⁶ in addressing the development related problems of state. To renew the traditional communal societies, the Khujand Civil Society Support Center has developed a three month program on "Development of Volunteers movement in Soghd Region". Twenty-five volunteers were trained and received skills at Counterpart's International support center. Its purpose was to develop civic sense promotion among the people.²⁷ This was all possible owing to the presence of communal societies in Tajikistan. These communal societies made possible for international donor community to work and understand the local culture of people. It has a rich culture of associations based on kinship, neighborhood and these Communal Societies in the form of self-help groups are treated as associational assets by these INGOs and donor bodies. NGOs are encouraged to develop ways of partnerships with mahalla committees and community groups, who then make a joint application for grants to Counterpart International. It has developed its Community Outreach programme for the whole of Central Asia, delivered through the network of local civil society centers.²⁸ Independence brought new roles for *Avlods* in the Tajik peace building process. For example, in 1992-1994 in a number of regions mostly destroyed as a result of civil war, the *avlod* were compelled to carry out the functions of the major social institutes. The flexibility and adaptability of *Avlod* as a social tool allows us to hope that it can become a basis for positive social development.²⁹ In searching for CBOs, one institution in particular has attracted the interest of international donors—the mahalla. One of the earliest and most significant attempts at incorporating the mahalla into donor programming was Counterpart Consortium's Mahalla Initiative Program (MIP) in which grant money was made available for NGOs partnering with the mahalla in local

²⁴ Lucy Earle, Community development, tradition and the civil society strengthening agenda in Central Asia, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, no. 3, Routledge, p. 11.

²⁵ Baken Babajanian, Sabine Freizer, and Daniel Stevens, Introduction: Civil society in Central Asia and the Caucasus, *Central Asian Survey*, 2005, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 211.

²⁶ The government of Tajikistan now encourages the formation of NGOs. The law has evolved over time. Since 1996, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law has been carrying out programs in Central Asia and the Caucasus, helping governments to formulate law dealing with NGOs. Law of 1998 on Public Associations is the principal act. It was adopted in 1990 and amended in 1992 and 1998. This provides a legal space for a public organization as a self-governed, not-for-profit association, including political parties, trade unions, and other social organizations, but not commercial organizations. For a long time after Tajikistan gained its independence in 1991, NGOs functioned on the basis of the 1990 Law on Public Associations in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* vol. 15, no. 1, April 2013.

²⁷ Program of Civil Society and NGO Development for Central Asian Region, www.counterpart.org, p, 80

²⁸ Janice Giffen and Lucy Earle, *the Development of Civil Society in Central Asia*, p. 104.

²⁹ Yusufbekov Yusuff, Babajanov Rustam and Kuntuvdiy Natalya, Civil Society Development in Tajikistan, Dushanbe 2007, p. 5.
http://www.akdn.org/publications/civil_society_tajikistan_development.pdf

social development projects. Within the framework of this programme, direction, training, technical assistance and small grants were given to NGOs for specific projects upon the condition that the mahalla would participate. The rationale behind the project was to encourage NGOs to engage with the grassroots in a process of ‘community mobilisation and while the terms were not used, the intention was for neo-liberal civil society to partner with communal civil society.’³⁰ After independence the importance of *Mahallas* has increased on account of their contribution in distributing humanitarian work of NGOs. NGO community has sought their help while facing inaccessible rural society of Tajikistan. Second, they are being very close and easy accessible to local people. Third, because the mahalla tradition pre-dates the Soviet era, it can be viewed as a form of ‘communal civil society’ that has in the past been able to represent the interests of its residents in interactions with state authorities. International Donor community and International NGOs have strengthened their advocacy skills, train them and build their capacities. The United Nations (UN), World Bank USAID and Aga Khan Foundation began to look for new ways to collaborate with Tajikistan’s often isolated, poor and desperately need rural communities through them.

The two most widespread community-based organizations in Tajikistan are Village Organizations (VOs) at the village level and *Jamoat* Resource Centers (JRCs) at the *Jamoat* level, established by Aga Khan Foundation and UNDP respectively after 1997. Significantly the leaders of these organizations were not only technical managers implemented MSDSP (Mountain Societies Development Support programme funded projects³¹; they also played a broader role in the community similar to that of traditional *aksakal* and *mahalla* leaders. VO Presidents helped maintain community cohesion and resolve local conflicts. The VO leadership was often called upon to mediate in family crises and disputes between neighbours. The UNDP’s Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Development Program (RRDP) became actively involved in supporting the latter through *jamoat* development committees (JDC). Its purpose is good governance and participatory development at local and for this it works closely with *Mahallas* Committees. However, there are also certain risks associated with this approach of international community. Here the influence of some elite groups has been observed and misunderstanding between international community and local groups. In 2001 Counterpart Consortium undertook a ‘Community Outreach Program’ to increase the capacities of grass-roots initiatives; while Mercy Corps International began implementing the “Peaceful Communities Initiative” in the Ferghana Valley. USAID initiated a three year US \$22 million Central Asia Community Action Investment Project to fund community groups to carry out infrastructure development and maintenance activities in 2002.³²

In Tajikistan, the Aga Khan Foundation’s Mountain Societies Development and Support Programme has established Village Organisations along the lines of traditional village groups.

³⁰ Daniel Stevens, NGO–Mahalla partnerships: exploring the potential for state–society synergy in Uzbekistan, *Central Asian Survey*, 24:3, 281-296, Rutledge, 2005, p, 5.

³¹ In Tajikistan, the Aga Khan Foundation’s ‘Mountain Societies Development Support Programme’ has established Village Organizations along with the lines of traditional village groups. The approach is being considered an effective way of promoting community mobilization. The donors have sought the help of *aksakal*, for organizing community voluntary labor. The practice is known as ‘*ashar*’ in Kyrgyzstan and ‘*assar*’ in Kazakhstan. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan it is known as ‘*hasher*’; Sabine Freizer, “Neo-liberal and communal civil society in Tajikistan: merging or dividing in the post war period”, *Central Asian Survey*, 2005, Vol. 24 no.3, pp. 233, 235.

³² www.akdn.org/publications/civil_society_tajikistan_development.pdf, p, 27. Civil Society and Human Development in Tajikistan

Their approach is considered an effective way of promoting community mobilisation. The Aga Khan Foundation's Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP) is committed to supporting the Republic of Tajikistan in developing an effective and transparent institutional system, for the implementation of participatory development in the country. In 2004, the AKF's MSDSP with funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) initiated the Tajikistan governance and livelihood programme (TGLP) as a pilot project in GBAO region. Its objective was to promote good local governance by supporting the active participation of local people and strengthening collaboration between³³ CSOS and local government authorities.

Critical Analysis

Pre-soviet traditions and institutions have gained new significance and relevance in post-independent Tajikistan. The existence of these social practices served as a platform for the donor community to move ahead with ease and confidence. A national NGO with foreign support had helped to form a Community Based Organization and then partnered with it in order to implement its projects. This is how they become active in post-independent era with new roles and expertise. For instance the *aksakals*³⁴ brought representatives from a Civil Society Support Centre³⁵ (CSSC) to the village where they carried out need based assessments through PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) and undertook participatory planning for a project that had provided an improved irrigation system for the village. Roy neatly argues that taking civil society in the context of liberal perspective based on Western ideas of political and economic freedom (free elections, free markets), then it has been created from scratch in Tajikistan. This is also either because there is nothing of value today upon which to build (the entire Soviet legacy being cast as negative)—or because there is no such thing as a traditional society in Central Asia, owing to the onslaught of the Soviet system on previous social structures.³⁶ But this is not case; Roy goes on to counter this assumption by noting that the Central Asian states are endowed with an 'immense social fabric'³⁷ made up of strong networks of support groups, within families, villages and across lines of kin, as well as traditional forms of community interaction, management and positions of responsibility. These institutions, traditions and practices may not fit precisely the definitions of civil society given above, but they cannot be ignored altogether. Actually scholars are using communal societies to substantiate the presence of civil societies in non-western context. The Kolkhoz has acquired in central Asia a far greater social and political role than was devoted to it by the soviet system; it does represent collective identities that are a basis for civil society. Central Asia with its culture, traditions, social solidarity groups, patronage, etc., and this is not just a product of Soviet system but has a long historical background. These include even

³³ Carmen Malena, *CIVICUS (Association), From Political Won't to Political Will: Building Support for Participatory Governance*, Kumarian Press, USA, 2009, p, 52.

³⁴ White beard people,

³⁵ In Tajikistan Counterpart established six local Civil Society Support Centers and a Hub Center located in Dushanbe. The Hub Center provides training, finance and technical assistance to these five Centers. [www.counterpart.org. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDABY950.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDABY950.pdf) p, 11.

³⁶ Janice Giffen, Lucy Earle, Charles Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia*, INTRAC, From the 1930s public associations were increasingly guided by the Communist Party and operated within official ideology. Some public organisations were direct subsidiaries of government structures, financed by the State, and established at the suggestion of either the State or the Party, Thus it was impossible for a private individual to establish an organisation, p, 70.

³⁷ Lucy Earle, *Community Development in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan*, INTRAC, p, 24.

loosely established, based on kinships, extended families, clans, and the mahalla and Kolkhozes.³⁸ As Freizer has noted,

Globalization has propelled the civil society argument to the far flung parts of the world— [which] previously may have remained entirely excluded from the debate—and incited a re-consideration of the term to fit new contexts.³⁹

The weakness of liberal civil society and NGO sector in Tajikistan has been contrasted with a rich associational life of communal civil societies. Scholars working on Central Asia have pointed out that kinship and clan served as a basis for organising civil society in Tajikistan, which contradicts the classical definition of civil society as a realm outside the domain of the family and the state. Kin ties augment patronage networks through which access to resources, political posts and economic assets is largely determined in Tajikistan. These and other forms of traditional civil society in Tajikistan have a potential for social mobilisation, generating trust and promoting development.⁴⁰ What western donors have done after independence have shifted their attention towards these community based organization for rendering services and have used traditional aspects of Central Asian society, such as *ashar* and the authority vested in them to help facilitate their programming, aims to enrich the web of personal relationships, group networks, traditions and patterns of behaviour and make its threads stronger, to develop self-confidence and skills, so that the community (the people) can begin to make significant improvements to their neighbourhoods (the place) and its material environment.⁴¹

Witnessing their relevance in Tajik society, these traditional societies based on kinship and patronage that allowing people to resist the encroachment of the state can be used as a tool for the conceptualisation of Central Asian civil society proving helpful for creating political space as a prerequisite for building democracy and the rule of law. The latter, he asserts is pursued by external aid agencies and their 'indigenous subsidiaries' that is externally-funded NGOs in the region and is regarded by local people as Roy argues that the efforts of external donors to promote civil society will ultimately fail in Central Asia, if they continue to work only with a small cadre of educated NGO workers who are isolated from the rest of their compatriots. Freizer, also takes up the discussion of traditional networks and kinship groups, and argues for a reconceptualisation of civil society that will encompass these types of institutions and practices. This leads her to put forward the idea of a 'communal' civil society that reflects patterns of social relations in the region better than neo-liberal, Freizer also argues that 'in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan kinship served as an important mobilizing factor through which individuals were able to express and defend their common interests'. She goes on to explain the importance of institutions such as the mahalla and *avlod* in providing social protection to members and resolving community problems. Akiner and Roy argued that while the appearance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has often been equalled with the emergence of an indigenous civil society, NGOs from liberal perspective are of peripheral importance in the country. Both authors call for more attention to be paid to 'local partners who matter' who are active in a civil society that 'is predicated on the

³⁸ M. Holt Ruffin, Daniel Clarke Waugh, *Civil Society in Central Asia*, University of Washington Press, USA, 1999, p, 114.

³⁹ S. Freizer, 'The role of civil society in development in Central Asia (with a focus on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan)', Draft paper given at the Ecumenical Consultation on Central Asia: Future Opportunities and Challenges, Geneva, 1–2 May 2003, p 3.

⁴⁰ Ina Zharkevich, *The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Political Accountability in Fragile States: the case of Tajikistan*, 2010, p 23.

⁴¹ Lucy Earle, Community development, 'tradition' and the civil society strengthening agenda in Central Asia, *Central Asian Survey*, 2005 vol.24 (3), 245–260 p, 248.

social fabric as it exists and is evolving.⁴² It can be argued that communal civil society existed in Tajikistan for centuries, resisting full state capture during the Soviet era. In the theoretical discourse, more recently an alternative approach was adopted by scholars for having proper understanding of civil society in Tajikistan. The alternative approach which can be termed as 'communal', has gained currency. In the late 1980s and early 1990s political entrepreneurs like regional post-communist leaders and traditional Sufi leaders of popular Islam have successfully mobilized these rural communities based on religion and regional identity (localism) through traditional solidarity structures of communal societies. During the periods of mounting political and economic instability, the communal societies have made every attempt to channelize the 'local grievances of people. Thus as of 1990 many Islamists linked to the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), successfully mobilized traditional groups using kin and territory based networks especially in the *Vaksh* and *Karategin* Valleys. They acted through the large number of informal mosques, *chaihana* and *medressas*, which had been constructed in rural areas in the 1980s through *hashar* and the tacit or open support of kolkhoz leaders.

Olivier Roy has argued that, in rural areas, little has changed in the way of power dynamics since independence, as privatisation has maintained powerful sectors of rural society under these dominant positions and there was no 'neo-liberal' style civil Society in evidence. This can be understood as a synonym for the non-profit sector, and NGOs in particular, that are independent from the state, but able to take over its role in the provision of certain services.⁴³ The villagers were electing a community initiative groups and then contributed their labour through *ashar*. After independence, these local bodies have started to do favor to their own relatives while distributing daily needs of life. The Soviet time elites have got an upper hand in these local communal societies.

Conclusion

To conclude, these communal social associations have gained tremendous significance in the post-independent Tajikistan forming an important part of and are serving a road map for the contemporary formation of civil society. These traditional societies based on kinship and patronage while allowing people to resist the encroachment of the state can be used as a tool for the conceptualisation of Tajikistan's civil society domain generating a political space which is very much prerequisite for strengthening democracy and rule of law. These traditional communal societies have persisted even during the Soviet onslaught and have taken different roles to sustain its existence. With independence of Tajikistan both donor community and INGOs cooperated with them to penetrate down the levers of the society. Their role as adjudicator in domestic and community disputes and the respect they command locally suggests an ability to take an objective stance and to draw on years of experience when deciding what is best for their community. The use of *ashar* seems to be a successful way of ensuring participation of local people in project implementation in a way that is familiar to them. It does also show that donors have become more aware of indigenous forms of community or social organisation. These needs to be strengthened requires some sort of reorientation in their role and approach based on some new parameters undertaken well established civil society groups.

⁴² Olivier Roy, 'Soviet legacies and Western aid imperatives in the new Central Asia', p 144.

⁴³ O. Roy, 'Soviet legacies and Western aid imperatives in the new Central Asia', in A. Sajoo, ed, Civil Society in the Muslim World (London: Tauris, 2002), p 125.