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# Hijacking G-20's civil society forum

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A forum that is meant to provide an independent voice against the abuse of power has been hijacked

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ASHISH KOTHARI

COMMENTS

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Imagine a global civil society event in which the first several rows of the audience are occupied by saffron-clad members of a single religion, and whose coordination is in the hands of institutions from the same religion. Well, you do not have to imagine too hard, because this is the reality of C-20, the official civil society process of G-20, since India has taken over the latter's presidentship. The C-20 process has been co-opted by the party in power in a not-so-subtle attempt at furthering its own politico-religious vision, giving it a very thin veneer of civil society respectability. This dangerous deception is combined with another one where G-20's focus on neoliberal economics is attempted to be covered by a green fig leaf called the 'green economy', and pliable NGOs are being called in to legitimise it.

I learnt this the hard way when I recently agreed to be on a panel to discuss the role of civil society in biodiversity conservation, being organised by a prominent university, as part of the C-20 process. I told the organisers upfront that I will be critical of G-20 and C-20 in my remarks as I think they are being used as platforms to push for

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policies and actions that are anti-biodiversity and against the interests of communities most dependent on nature. I was told that they had no problems with me raising issues about economic policies, etc., as long as I did not make 'political' statements about G-20 and C-20, and remained objective. I politely refused to accept such censorship and we agreed that I should drop out of the panel.

As a forum providing space for civil society to discuss issues relevant to the economic, social, cultural issues that the G-20 forum takes up, C-20 has been around since 2008. It has a statement of principles, finalised in 2019, which includes its mandate to 'hold governments accountable' and be a counter-balance to undue business influence.

Unfortunately, the various 'engagement' forums of G-20 such as C-20 have hardly been allowed to play the independent role they were envisaged to. G-20 has been a powerful platform for pursuing exploitative neoliberal policies built into economic globalisation, and the entry of countries such as India has been more a way of appearing to create a balance of power between the north and south than actually enabling it. In such a situation, hardly any country in the G-20 would encourage truly independent civil society processes.

It is, therefore, unlikely that C-20 was ever considered to be independent enough to be a critical mirror to G-20 or enabled the involvement of radical people's movements, including those that dissent from the government of their host countries. But the way it has been set up in India, it seems to have hit a new low of kowtowing to the government. Digging a bit further into the C-20 architecture, I found out that its Secretariat is housed in the Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini, a 40-year-old civil society organisation (CSO) focused on leadership development. Rambhau Mhalgi was a Rashtriya



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Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) publicist. The Steering Committee of C-20 has six Indians (out of nine members), of which four are from religious organisations and they all belong to the same religion — no prizes for guessing which.

No one can have objections to there being religious membership of the C-20 coordination, but why such an overpowering presence, and why of only one religion? The C-20's official tagline is '#YouAreTheLight' — is light to be found only in religion, and that too in only one of the many that find their home in India? This is in violation of one of the core elements of C-20 principles: "inclusiveness: C-20 is a space for meaningful exchange and cross-country collaboration, which does not tolerate any form of discrimination."

In a statement put out in early March, over 100 CSOs and independent scholars, activists, journalists, and others pointed to the way in which India could have used its G-20 presidency to promote a global world order that furthers justice and sustainability. But instead, the statement said that the Indian government was using it "as an opportunity to seek political and electoral gains before the upcoming national elections. The scale at which the G-20 meetings are being organised to portray a picture-perfect narrative of shining India reeks of a vulgar display of wealth at a time when India's performance on every social barometer is abysmal... In the run-up to scheduled G-20 meetings in different cities of India, government authorities are displacing the homeless people to far-flung areas, removing street vendors, and small shops from the roadsides to 'beautify' the cities".

The gross distortion of the C-20 forum is part of the same abuse of power. This goes hand-in-glove with the ruling party's spin doctors churning out G-20 slogans that hide the reality in India. For instance, taking pride

in India being the 'mother of democracy', while its government is rapidly cracking down on dissent and freedom of speech; or talking of the country's traditions of harmony with nature's five elements, while systematically dismantling laws protecting its ecological integrity; or 'promoting our cultural and religious diversity', while encouraging extreme right-wing Hindutva forces to carry out heinous actions against religious minorities. Double-speak is the order of the day, and a forum that is meant to provide an independent voice against the abuse of power has been hijacked.

The CSOs who are participating in C-20, and there are many well-meaning and committed ones, need to introspect on whether they will legitimise this highway robbery, or challenge it.

*(Ashish Kothari is an environmental activist based in Pune. Views expressed are personal)*



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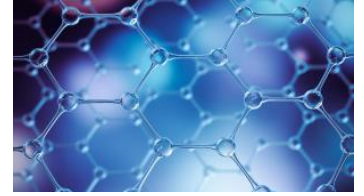
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