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TRANSCRIPT

"EXAMINING BINARIES: THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND THE STATE IN DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES"

A conversation with Chitrangada Choudhury and Prashant Sharma

Moderator: Bipasha Ray

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* * *TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: CHOUDHURY AND SHARMA'S ACCENT DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.* * *

ANNOUNCER:

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BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you all for joining us today-- to have this conversation with two of our Open Society fellows who have been working on-- issues related to the private sector and development over the course of the past year and a half or so, two years. And both are at the end of their fellowships and we thought we would take this opportunity to bring them together at a time that-- we could talk about some of these questions that are also increasingly becoming relevant at OSF and-- in the context of certainly the Soros economic development fund-- and economic advancement program.

But also more broadly we're-- we're-- more interested in matters related to-- development, economics-- more broadly. And so I will introduce-- two of our colleagues-- fellows-- momentarily-- and they will talk a little bit about their projects and what they've been doing for the past year.

And then we'll try to unpack some of these broad concepts that we laid out in the-- in the invitation, some things that often fall into various buckets and-- and come with a

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lot of ideological and other kinds of-- veneers. And I think this might be a chance to sort of dig a little bit deeper.

And-- and so with that I'll get started. So Prashant-- (NOISE) Sharma is-- working on a research project that looks at the accountability question around public-private partnerships in education. His focus is-- primarily India with-- (NOISE) alternative-- with initial focuses (NOISE) on-- South Africa, various countries in Latin America. And there had been-- an emerging conversation on BRICs countries-- but that, I think, is evolving.

He's currently based at the UN res-- UN Research Institute for Social Development in Geneva. And also affiliated with the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration at the University of Lausanne where he's carrying out comparative research on the interface between transparency and democratization.

He did his Ph.D.-- at the LSC where-- where he investigated and examined the political and social processes that led to the enactment of the Right to Information Act in India. Previously he's worked with the International Center for Integrated Mountain and Development-- the World Bank-- the BBC World Service Trust, the London School of Economics and the University of Delhi.

Chitrangada Choudhury on my right is an award-winning journalist and researcher. Over her fellowship period she's been chronicling the effect of resources conflicts on the lives of indigenous and marginalized communities in central India's forest-- forest-- mineral belt. And we've had a map of India up on the screen. That won't be the-- the-- it's just an image for you to refer to as-- as they speak. She's currently based in the Indian state of Orissa in the east-- home to over 60 indigenous communities, rich forest and large deposits of minerals, including coal, bauxite (NOISE) and iron ore.

She has worked at two leading Indian national dailies, *The Indian Express* and the *Hindustan Times*, as well as the *Guardian U.S.* and has written for publications like *Outlook Mint* (PH), *Caravan*-- and the *Colombian Journalism Review*. She has been n-- named for national-- international reporting awards including the Sunscrithy (PH) award and the Lorenzo Natali Journalism Prize.

She has been a Fulbright-Nehru-- scholar at the Colombia Journalism's-- oh sorry, (LAUGH) Colombia University Journalism School and the School of International and Public Affairs. So with that maybe I could just turn to Prashant and ask him to of-- c-- for us an overview. I know his fellowship work has evolved and changed quite a bit since our initial conversations. And so tell us a little bit about how your project has evolved and also how it relates to our question for today.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Well thanks. It's been a pretty interesting and very enriching, very intense year and ride. So it-- the-- the project started with the idea of looking-- trying to understand the accountability question when it came to public-private partnerships, because

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(NOISE) most accountability frameworks as we've understood them and known them, studied them and read about them-- seem to have been focused mostly on state accountability, governmental accountability.

In other forms, of course, there's been discussions and-- a lot of debate around private sector accountability, particularly post the financial crisis, and so on and so forth. But-- when we came to PPPs there seemed to be this sort of gray area, (NOISE) which was, you know, neither private nor-- nor state n-- not completely.

So it was this sort of in-between world, if you will. And there a lot of the-- the user accountability framework seemed to be-- unexamined. How are they working out? I mean, are they working out well or-- are there completely different challenges? How exactly are we going to-- (NOISE) approach some of these questions?

So initially we started with public-private partnership. I consciously didn't want to focus-- most PPPs are-- are-- as at least-- we-- we seem to come across (UNINTEL) physical infrastructure space, so roads, sports, you know, the usual-- the usual suspects. But-- in this case I thought it would-- it-- I was more attracted towards exploring the social sectors, PPPs of the social sector, which seem to be also on the rise and particularly-- education has the (UNINTEL) as the weeks progressed, a long-term way just in conversation there so it's-- in-- in the-- in the initial part.

But somehow it's sort of getting-- started getting more of a focus on the education part. And-- so that's been-- very interesting. So in the end, I think, for the last-- the-- the-- the-- the majority of the work has been focused mostly around public-private partnerships in education across a wide range of geographies. So it's been quite-- quite enriching. And-- and-- I mean, there are many things, of course-- which one could talk about.

And I think-- it's-- it's difficult to try and distill all of that right now. S-- partly because I'm still-- absorbing much of the-- (NOISE) the-- the-- the-- the work that has gone the last year. But-- the one thing which-- which-- which one-- I found interesting, and perhaps-- that's something which we could dwell upon and link to this whole idea of the binaries, that, I think, m-- m-- most of the times we find that-- we are s-- generally in the social-- in the debate in the so-- in debates-- across the social sciences and in various processes of social and political evolution, we tend to start seeing things in these binaries-- very often.

And that's the only-- usually the typical entry point. So whether it's a public-private (COUGH) industries, or it could be even, you know, s-- larger-- larger-- theoretical sense left and right and, you know-- the market in the state. And a lot of the times you essentially working with binaries. Now that's useful. But is that necessarily-- sophisticated enough?

And I think that's something as a larger (NOISE) question, (COUGH) which-- which I ended up beginning to question-- through the process of this year. Initially it was-- it was-- I was, myself, sort of, you know, stuck in the same ways of, okay, yes, there are systems for private-sector accountability, there are systems for public-sector accountability and this thing lies in the middle. And therefore (UNINTEL PHRASE)

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needs to be a different kind of a framework for things which are sort of lying in the middle.

But then you start discovering that it's actually not just PPPs which lie in the middle. There's a lot of stuff which lies in the middle. In fact, (LAUGH) a vast majority of social, economic, political processes lie somewhere in the middle. So how does one really negotiate this space? Because one enters it by saying, "Yes, you know, this is how we can try and make sense of it."

But when we come to this large, diffused middle, it-- a lot of these-- these-- these (COUGH) categories start falling by the wayside. So-- so, for example, whether it's-- let's-- let's take the example of-- of-- of a school in-- South Africa and-- which is-- so-- a private person takes up-- as a sort of matter of concern, social concern who's-- had experience in the-- in the education system, starts working with private companies and starts setting up some schools on the-- on the-- on the outskirts of areas-- townships, just outside of Johannesburg.

The resources are brought in from the-- from the-- from the private sector. A lot of money, now-- part of it, is also rooted through this corporate social responsibility frameworks and monies-- which-- of course, going to be, shall we say, try to make the most of that as well. At the same time you start, as-- as the school and its results starts getting recognized a bit, the state starts coming with some-- some resources to support that effort.

And-- next thing you know, it's a network of schools or a s-- I mean, of course, it spreads over a period of year-- separate years. And in the end there are (NOISE) many results to show for it. There are-- there is obviously an audience which is quite-- s-- it's focused only on the-- the populations in the-- in the townships. (THROAT CLEARING)

There c-- there is-- there is clearly-- what's also encouraging in this case is that many (UNINTEL) of sort of graduates from these schools also start coming back after certain years and becoming teachers themselves in these schools. So there's-- there's-- there's this kind of loop also which gets established.

Now this is all very interesting and positive broadly. Of course, there are other problems as well, because how-- what's the selection process? How are these students selected? On what basis? So there are all kinds of questions and critiques which are going around of-- of-- of that model as well. What happens, though, which is-- which I find particularly interesting, is that when a group of people who are, whether education specialists, or including the government, or some people who are working in this kind of a project, are bringing in some of this, or the corporate, when the conversation starts happening about some of these things, the battle lines (?) suddenly become very polarized.

And that's pretty awkward. Because, yes, it's a project which is doing some interesting stuff without-- with-- with its flaws and with many limitations, (COUGH) but with-- a fair amount of-- shall we say-- the desire to actually make it work-- (NOISE) and improve the project, improve how it's done.

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But when-- the moment we start getting-- into-- into-- a table or s-- start having conversations (COUGH) about this, it's essentially the-- the line is a very straight one, that there's-- there's a group of people who will essentially say, "There should be no private sector involvement in the delivery of-- of public education."

There should be none because it goes against the very idea of rights-based approach, against (UNINTEL) idea of social justice, it creates more problems, and so on and so forth, with a set of-- shall we say, evidence to support that argument. The other side, so to speak, is-- is-- is-- is also coming up with his own set of evidence which says, (THROAT CLEARING) "Yes, there might be some of these things, but at the same time this is how it's actually improved learning outcomes, and so on and so forth, and some of the output has been-- positively interesting for these very reasons."

"Also, here are the limitations of the public sector, publicly funded, publicly financed state's-- education system, which is the reasons why some of this thing is-- has had to take place, it had to-- had to be-- is-- is delivering some of these services." Now on the ground it's a gray area, which is where, I think, what we're most concerned about in terms of the students and the learning, and so on and so forth.

But it-- (COUGH) in the conversations it's-- it's no longer gray. It's black or white. That is something which I-- and there is n-- not a great deal of willingness to actually have a (COUGH) conversation about this. Because everybody's coming at it from their p-- so you can have-- one set of people who are-- perhaps proposing-- certain ideas, bring a set of evidence which supports their perspective.

The other side would bring in their evid-- then the-- the d-- then the argument on this, I think, is true for most social-science research where a lot of the argument then starts getting into your-- "My research is better than yours. My numbers are better than yours because your methodology is problematic on these X, Y, Z." "No. But your-- when you did your research and when you did (LAUGH) this study, there's a problem there because this thing is limited in this, X, Y, (UNINTEL)."

So in the end-- the-- the-- it becomes a bit sort of, you know-- a battle to-- which is essentially an ideological battle between the pretense of fighting it out on an evidence-based policy (UNINTEL PHRASE) research platform, which it isn't that-- if you think about it. Because that's the problem with the large, gray area. It's messy, it's complex. And social science cannot-- cannot necessarily say, "This is conclusive evidence." It will always the evidence and always be conclusive because society is very complex, societies are complex. And it will always be in defense.

So is this n-- idea of this notion of, you know, whether PPPs therefore are good or bad when it comes to delivering school education, it becomes-- it's-- the actual answer is, it depends. But we're not comfortable with that, "It depends." We are-- we are always trying to say, "No. We have to take a position on this." And then we-- it's sort of a retro-engineering thing.

So how does one get out of this kind of a thing? One perhaps, I mean, one way-- some of the ideas w-- in a place we've been experimenting with, with some of my colleagues in-- in this during of-- course of this project is, actually to-- to-- to separate

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principles from-- from-- from ideology.

So if the principle is-- if-- if the thing which-- what do we all agree on? If-- all of us agree on that, regardless of what system there is, accountability is-- is a key element of it. And how do we then realize that accountability that becomes-- a principle? But if we say no, this-- it does not-- (NOISE) yes i-- is-- has to be only the responsibility of the state to deliver-- school education, then that becomes-- and but-- and-- and-- we only-- that's our entry point, we only start talking about s-- the accountability of state-led education systems afterwards, then-- then we are running into a problem.

Because we are-- we are not recognizing the complexity of the real world. So I think-- essentially the biggest question for me really is that, how does one start rethinking many of these things without getting stuck in some of these bi-- binaries, without already assuming that the moment there's private sector involvement in any large (COUGH) development process it is axiomatically bad, it's axiomatically negative.

And how d-- does one really start-- talking and having-- getting conversations going across the board, which more realistically and more honestly reflect the actual complexity of the reality in most social, economic and political processes. So that's really it. Thank you.

BIPASHA RAY:

We will... explore a bunch of that. (APPLAUSE) Chitrangada?

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

Yeah. So-- Milap thought that both of us are in town and we should speak together. And we're trying hard to find how both (NOISE) of us can speak together. And he's used the word public-private partnership in the invite note. But I think what is a better characterization of the things I have been looking at over the last-- year and a half is-- state-corporate collusion.

The refrain I hear a lot of the ground from people I meet as I've traveled across this landscape, Milap will show the map, is, you know, the state is in the company's pocket. It's-- it's a very-- it's a colloquial phrase which I'm translating. But it means that-- you know, the company has the power to influence the state. But also the state is in the company's pocket and it's eating some money there. So it's-- it's very evocative phrase which they use on the ground.

So the landscape essentially I'm speaking about is-- (COUGH) the east where you see a lot of the green concentrated in the center of-- so this is central and eastern India. These are all very resourch-- resource-rich states-- very dense forest cover. And like I said, lots of indigenous communities. So for reasons of both history and geography, th-- all these communities have been marginalized from, you know, s-- key development indices like education or health or access to government, public services.

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And that then plays a very important role in, you know, creating an arena of (COUGH) violence where the state and the company can come together and influence people's lives in a way which they probably cannot do if, you know, you're an urban Indian or you a middle-class Indian. So you're much more vulnerable to-- this nexus or to this violence if you are an Indian living in these areas.

So I'm going to speak again on 17th when I think Milap is putting together another event. But right now I just want to draw (COUGH) two or three-- sort of just-- draw the context with two, three, broad themes. Development is a very contested term in India, as I'm sure it is in many other countries-- outside the western region. We don't really have-- a word in our own language for it, a word which is used a lot is (FOREIGN LANGUAGE), which more accurately translates as progress, which is not really development. So development has been contested a lot.

And this current government which we have now-- it's been about 18 months, it came into power in May or June 2014. So the prime minister came, or at least that's how he marketed himself as a man of development. And if you didn't start unpacking that term, a key definition of development is the ease of doing business. That's how they define it.

And that would mean basically that industry feels, like the state is listening to it-- pr-- decisions take place much more sooner. If industry wants resources the time period of transferring those resources to them is not too long. Our finance minister was one of the most powerful figures in government. He was giving an interview last month to a newspaper listing (COUGH) all the government's achievements.

And one achievement is said that-- environment clearances are just now given as a rule. So that it seen as, you know-- an achievement. Obviously there's a lot of violence which then goes behind that on the ground. (NOISE) But that's-- that's sort of the-- the power balance right now. And this is not new. The previous governments also, especially in the '90s when India started opening up its economy and we said, you know, there has to be a larger role for the private sector, of course, (NOISE) --example in mining. (COUGH) It was only public sector companies.

And again, I think this is what Prashant is also saying, are these binaries useful? Because if you look at-- look at on the ground, both public and private sectors companies are equally bad, mining companies. But there was a lot of nationalization. So now the private sector has a larger role to play. For example, coal, earlier, only our public-sector companies could mine, now even private companies can mine.

So this has been going on since (COUGH) the '90s. And-- to give you a sense, I think some of you were in Indian on that contested-spaces trip. So if you were picking up the newspapers or just speaking to people-- a national goal right now seems to be growth. Again, you know, this is a word for which we have no-- similar word in our local language.

But growth, and this is the focus of the business players, it's the focus of the national elite, we're constantly looking at figures. And so a lot of these policies get judged. Are they contributing to growth? Or, another key word is reforms. So when this

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government tried to sort of alter-- a land acquisition law to take away power of consent, a lot of the business pr-- press framed this as, you know, a reform-friendly government.

So these are how the policies are spoken about at the national stage. Once you start (NOISE) traveling down and speaking to communities on the ground, obviously the picture changes drastically. So this is sort of the (NOISE) broad, economic picture. And another parallel of what has been happening is there has been a deepening of democracy. There have been formal sites opening up where people can participate, where, you know, earlier hierarchies are getting questioned.

So there has been a lot of-- I mean, there have been long-- long-led social movements and protests going on. But over the last 15 years there have been laws recognizing some of these. So now people actually have a formal space to put up their hand say, you know, "I don't agree to this." Or, like Prashant's work is around the Right to Information Act, that just turned ten years old.

So for the first you can get documents out of a government office, which earlier we just could not. A lot of the legal-- infrastructure was sort of a hand-me-down from the colonial era. There was an official secrets act, which is still there, but that could be used by the bureaucracy to not share any information.

Now, even as a journalist, I use the RTI a lot. I can file an RTI, I can take out documents for (UNINTEL) mining proposal. I can travel with those documents back to the village and, you know, question them and (COUGH) then bring out all kinds of discrepancies.

So that's a really powerful tool, which-- people have access to. It doesn't cost money. If you're below the poverty line you can even get the information for free. The Land Acquisition (NOISE) Act, which again, came in two years ago. (COUGH) Before that we had a Land Acquisition Act 450 (NOISE) years, which again, the British brought in, which basically said, you know, the state, in national interest, can take over-- a farmer's land. And, I mean, no questions asked. You can't challenge that process.

So we had that 450 years. It's just changed two years ago. There's a Forest Rights Act again, which came in ten years ago. Earlier the colonial state had sort of just cordoned off large areas of forest and said, you know, "No. The colonial state (THROAT CLEARING) is the owner of those resource," because they needed timber for empire building (UNINTEL PHRASE) are the kinds of (THROAT CLEARING) processes.

So again, that has just changed. So all these are creating a lot of churning and flux on the ground. They're creating contestation. They're creating, I mean, protest movements. A lot of state violence when the state is responding to this. And we have several society groups also, maybe some of you have been following the state's action against Greenpeace. (NOISE)

Just, I think, two or three months ago the state asked Greenpeace to-- fold up its operations in India. This is part of like a year-long campaign that they have been doing against Greenpeace. Again, Greenpeace went to court and successfully

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challenged it. So we have like an independent judiciary to some extent, an independent media.

So all these challenge the power of the state and the-- the company-- company's a word which people on the ground use a lot. So I also (LAUGH) use that word, company, to, you know, implement (COUGH) the kind of decisions that they warrant and the power that they warrant and sort of be able to implement those decisions, which they all justify in the name of development. For example, Greenpeace was accused of being, you know, holding back in years economic development. That was actually the phrase used in the intelligence bureau report.

So that's how a lot of these groups are tarnished or painted on the ground. And that is the view of the state. Because the leg-- they feel that, you know, "We need coal. So why is this group coming in the way (COUGH) and trying to stop us from mining coal?" But that's-- that's sort of the-- the landscape right now. It's really interesting. I'm not s-- it's clear that one side is more powerful.

But there are all these p-- unpredictable outcomes because of these legislations created because of, like, long tradition of protest so-- and this overlap between public and private. So this is the stage right now and it-- it-- it leads to all kinds of fascinating questions about, you know, how do you frame and understand all this.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you. So I will soon (COUGH) open it up for questions. And I'm sure, I can see it on your faces, there's already questions. But maybe let-- s-- kick off the discussion with one point that you referred to a little bit and that came up a little bit in yours thinking about this.

What you're presenting are-- are two different sides of the broader conversation around-- the private sector and development. You brought up this whole notion of corporate social responsibility. Of course, in India recently there's been a bill-- bill passed-- a law-- passed that-- asks certain corporations-- beyond a certain-- level to-- commit two percent of their revenues to CSR.

In the context of corporate social responsibility, where some of these worlds collide, I think both the worlds that you're-- to the collusion that you're talking about, as well as the partnership that you're talking about. So how-- how is this playing out on the ground?

What-- what are the future prospects and how the CSR law can or cannot have an impact in either-- ex-- you know, refine-- making those binaries even more firm or reducing or, you know, promoting much more of the gray area that is-- that you're seeing out on the ground? So I guess it's a question to both of you, but from your vantage points.

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CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

I think what has happened with this new-- I mean, it's not a legislation, it was an amendment. A lot of that money actually has not yet started being spent. So again, you know, the state has capacities. It's not like you throw a lot of money at a problem (LAUGH) and then that gets solved.

So I think what we-- a lot of this money still hasn't been spent. One of the public-sector mining companies, which is in iron ore mining, they have spent a lot of money to build an education complex in one of the Maoist-held areas of central India, which is traditionally sort of-- not even had primary education. So they're building colleges. They've sort of tried to hold that as a model of, you know, good PPP-- collaboration. So that--

BIPASHA RAY:

Through the-- through the monies of the (UNINTEL)--

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

Through the-- through the CSR--

BIPASHA RAY:

CSR.

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

--money, which the iron ore mining company gave.

BIPASHA RAY:

Yeah.

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

Because it actually is a lot of money.

BIPASHA RAY:

Uh-huh (AFFIRM).

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CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

So, you know, again, I would say they're two-- two things here. A lot of the demands, which people are making on the ground, is about, you know, their resource rights. So you can sort of give them money and take care of that because they say, "We need this land," or, "we need this forest," and the money will get over into (UNINTEL), what will we do then.

And-- the second thing is about justice. They say, "We need a say in the process." Again, CSR doesn't really address that. CSR is the state's way of saying, you know, "We're compensating you in some way and we're making the company (COUGH) share some of their profits." But often that's not the complete answer to, what is the problem on the ground.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

I mean, it's-- it's interesting but think it's also-- s-- it's-- it's-- it's a deeper question. All of these things, I think, we need to keep digging a bit deeper, particularly at the conception level in the sense, what is-- how i-- are these things-- how have these things been-- been thought about in our society and-- down to the relationship between, let's say-- the private sector and people at large or societies and communities and the state. And also, how-- what are the expectations which are now also-- which have changed as well.

I think it finally looks to the pre-- pre-colonial period and I-- I-- a lot of the philanthropic work, or a lot of work around whether it was health or education or-- or a lot of the stuff or-- was-- was essentially financed by rich individuals in that particular social community. And there was a certain social expectation that this is what would-- be-- what is i-- what's that sort of-- (THROAT CLEARING) that's-- that's in-- that's a important social role which ought to be played.

Somewhere along the line I think there is a lot of reasons that I think that's something which we need to also discuss a lot, particularly when we talk about development, progress and all the rest of it. But very sophisticated, nuanced and-- extremely decentralized social, economic and political systems are fundamentally destroyed when the Brits came in.

And very quickly, and very, very efficiently destroyed, which effectively meant that there was-- with no system because they-- the destruction was, of course, not just for the-- the colonial perspective to extract, but also because they were replicating their own systems of their societies into a society which they were going to rule over.

So these separations, these binaries, I think-- th-- th-- when-- when-- I appreciated

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the fact that-- Chitrangada mentioned that there are many words which don't exist in our vocabularies, in our-- in our-- in our languages. Development is one. Many other words are there.

But one particularly interesting thing which I discovered, that in Sanskrit there is no word for bad. There is no word for bad. (COUGH) It is always considered to be the absence of good, or the absence of. The negatives are not necessarily monolithic and present in-- in so-- social systems. It's the absence of something which is considered.

So it's a very different s-- and many of these things are so d-- they're deeply imbedded, deeply thought-- they-- they-- they're diffused. So when we then suddenly come up with-- system which is not germane or organic to the way society and interactions with we-- what we now happily call the state and-- and the private sector and-- and-- and then citizenry at large, these are not necessarily dichotomies or, these are not necessarily-- the-- the-- sort of-- binaries which-- which are-- have been completely internalized by people, all the social systems, which are essentially broken systems now.

So how does one therefore-- so then when we translate m-- much of this into the whole corporate social responsibility, or some of these laws and legislations and the structure that-- even the legal structure which we essentially-- f-- for the largest part inherited from a colonial government, which was there for-- existed for a certain purpose, which was to extract-- it-- it's always going to be a very complex and very contested and extremely painful process, which may not necessarily had ever-- reach a point where, you know, all of those things are internalized completely because it's always going to be tensions.

So the idea of the tensions between what is the role of the private sector and how's philanthropy seen and for what things, what purposes it's there, these are all very, very-- they're culturally, in some ways, defined as well. And we cannot forget that.

So-- (COUGH) so now with the CSR law, coming back to that, sorry it gets-- but it is a very knotty thing so I'm just trying to see if I can get a flavor across of that. But the id-- the-- the thing of the-- the CSR law, it's sort of an obligation by the state for people to put aside. Does this mean that before this private companies were not performing s-- philanthropic activities? It's interesting.

But IDC, which is-- which is apart from many other things, it's also the largest tobacco company in India, in (UNINTEL) where it basically grows a lot of tobacco leaves, it's also called, speaking of which, the mother company, it's literally-- in the vernacular it's called the mother company (UNINTEL).

Partly also the reason because it's in those areas. It's just employs practically everybody. But-- on another level it's always also consistently-- putting schools in place or healthcare facilities, and so on and so forth, as a part of its own responsibility, much before the CSR thing came into the picture, even the idea of CSR come-- into the picture. The (UNINTEL) is-- was some of the biggest conglomerates.

I mean, in eastern India you would-- you would be able to sort of, you know, they run some of the biggest schools, hospitals and so on and so forth. So there's also data

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(UNINTEL) social sciences which is another thing which some of you may have (NOISE) come across-- is work in Mumbai. So just to say that it-- there are-- I think if you talk to many people, different people about-- it's one thing to start framing the discussion, you know, this is a CSR responsibility, what are you going to do it and-- where is the money going.

And it-- th-- and, you know, these are all very real, practical, nitty-gritty, granular things. And, yes, there's also critiques that the CSR money is going to take away people from the-- NGO sector because then our people are qualified, they're going to pay-- better. There's all kinds of criticisms around. Sure.

But how are these-- what is the role? I think eventually we have to develop a better understanding of how-- what is the role of-- how are these relationships imagined, the relationship between a big company, the state, citizen groups, societies, communities.

And what is the general, social expectation from this and how are these panning out? I think till we start getting to those-- those deeply philosophical questions, we will always be-- focusing on all the-- the lived-out tension, which are important, but we're not going deeper. We're not going deep enough.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you. With that I'm gonna open it up. Els (PH)? No?

(PRASHANT SHARMA: UNINTEL)

ELS:

Yeah. Thank you so much (BACKGROUND VOICE) for a very thought-provoking-- comment. And-- at public health program we have engaged over the past couple of months in-- n-- strategy around governance for health and many of these issues. Because, as you were saying earlier, health is an-- is a sector where there's whole debate about public and private and public-private partnerships, et cetera, is very-- you know, prominent.

And what-- what was interesting in our discussions about, like-- how, I mean, what is wrong and what-- what-- what do we wanna do around that, is that we felt that, like, the-- the whole dichotomy (COUGH) between public and private-- doesn't make sense. (THROAT CLEARING) And both of you have spoken to that from different angles.

And I'm wondering whether we-- we-- I mean, the state, like, is d-- we-- we would expect the state to s-- defend the public interest. I think we all have many examples where that is not at all the case. And the private sector, I mean, the Gates Foundation is the private sector. They are-- we are the pri-- no, no, of course. (BACKGROUND VOICE) I mean, but I'm talking about health-- the Soros foundation

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is not, like, s-- so active in-- in funding health.

But the Gates Foundation is one of the biggest funders of the World Health Organization. They give-- Bill Gates gives the keynote to the World Health Assembly where all ministers of health assemble every year. Like, what does that tell us about the role of public and private?

And so I'm wondering-- can-- shouldn't we come up with a much better-- terminology and semantics? Because I think it's a sterile discussion-- as far as I'm concerned, whether public or private sector. Because it doesn't mean anything. The public sector d-- which is, I mean, me as an individual, am I the public sector or my government?

I mean, think about the troika in Europe, how they impose austerity on-- on Greece on behalf of which public interest was that again? I mean, so I think-- but-- but we were stuck into this semantics and I think it's stops us from having a real conversation about what we need to have, which about-- is about power, representation, accountability and relationships.

But I think people need to come up with new terminology because now it's kind of like-- it doesn't-- it doesn't allow us to-- to talk about what is really going on, let alone (COUGH) where we wanna-- where we wanna be. And so I'm trying to challenge-- certainly the scholars but also the journalists. It's kind of like-- (NOISE) I think we really need to evolve our thinking because we get stuck in our old s-- paradigm that is no longer applicable.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

How do you w--

BIPASHA RAY:

Do you-- do you wanna-- have any responses to that? Or?

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Yeah. Sure. Or we want to take questions first—how do you want to--

BIPASHA RAY:

Sure. I can-- why don't we fold that in too. But, I mean, there's a question of semantics that, I think, both of you should return to at some point. (LAUGH) Maria.

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MARIA:

I-- I-- I'm following a little bit along those lines because when I was hearing all of this the bottom line for me was accountability-- and how-- at the end of day, whichever actor is acting, whether it's public or private, are they held up to some sort of accountability and do they care if actually something is presented to them as something that they might be doing that is negatively impacting the-- the public?

And so even when you're talking, and you're talking specifically about India, but I-- I-- you can say the same thing in the United States. And-- and so i-- i-- it's-- it's inherent in the system that has both state and the private sector-- as actors-- but at the end of the day, whether it's a public-private partnership or that it's just the private the sector doing something, whether it's just the government doing something-- the-- what influences them to act in a more-- egalitarian-- just manner?

(MALE VOICE: UNINTEL)

BIPASHA RAY:

Please.

MALE VOICE:

Thank you, Prashant, for that presentation. And-- actually I have one question and one comment. So the thing is, when you say it about this binaries-- I think often, as a civil society, I thought that an entry point for us is-- the stewardship role of the state in terms of regulating the private sector.

So-- I mean, unless we emphasize on that stewardship role-- I do not think private sector will-- they will be accountable to the public concern. So even when considering that binaries are too acute occasionally, what is your opinion on actually seeing state as a primary, you know, driver for regulation of the private sector (UNINTEL)?

And the second is-- you know-- now this might be a bit provocative comment, but-- I think somewhere the weakening of public oversight on public services is largely a manifestation of aspiration and middle class moving away from social agenda. That is the context that you can clearly read in the co-- in-- in India at least. I mean, (NOISE) I'm coming from Punam, Mumbai and we used to have such a strong trade unions And none of those trade unions now are existing. (RUSTLING)

And-- this might be bit insenting (PH) but I feel-- middle class has actually emerged as the strongest cheerleader of privatization. And-- you know, once that woken mass has moved away from the otherwise domains of activism and influencing public decisions and other thing.

Largely it has remained restricted to-- (UNINTEL) NGOs-- with little bit of influence

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of occasionally people's organizations like (UNINTEL PHRASE) (COUGH) of organizations in Orissa. But, you know, mobilizing marginalized community (COUGH) action, actually emphasizing their agency, has always been difficult in Indian context. So how you are going to negotiate? That is the key question.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

MALE VOICE:

I was just going to say, in terms of-- in thinking about public and private, might be worthwhile to think about in terms of the mechanisms that they ideally operate (NOISE) with. Right? So we think of the private sector as operating with exit, voting with our feet. Right?

And so there's always a question of-- under what conditions is that a meaningful-- is that (COUGH) a meaningful form of power, the ability to exit and that the private-- and the public sector operates with voice. Right? So people who are subject to private sector have a meaningful voice. Now, of course, in the real world, both of these are kind of intertwined in many ways, both in the public and private sphere.

So the-- the binaries are less about the demarcations between the spheres as it is the mechanisms through which-- those who are subject to the decisions can operate, or can respond. Right? And so-- and I'm-- I'm raising this because I was-- I was thinking about it in the context of-- when you said roles. The roles for different partners require political imagination and-- before there's-- to settle them.

I don't think they're ever actually settled in-- in any society. I mean, I think these-- these boundaries are always contested. I mean, in well-institutionalized societies you have contests over the role of company, the private sector and the public sector. You know, say healthcare in Sweden, for example, right, which would seem like a settled question.

And I think, like, the-- the idea that o-- we can reach some equilibrium point might not be a useful, orienting, you know, orienting position. Rather, one which just empowers people-- who are subject, who are affected by these decisions to be part of the conversation about-- the actions. And so I guess it's a question of accountability but-- but thinking about what those mechanisms would actually be.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

(UNINTEL) (LAUGH) loads of things. (BACKGROUND VOICE) I'll-- I'll try to touch upon s-- these are interrelated. So if-- if-- if-- I'm not able to respond specifically to-- your particular question, maybe we can continue our conversation outside-- after the event. (THROAT CLEARING)

I think the language issue is really key. I really-- completely agree with you there. And sometimes, I mean, and this may be possibly, I think-- and these are interrelated,

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the accountability question and then the-- the-- the osh-- notion of the stewardship in a role of this-- (UNINTEL) civil society.

We have to go back, I think, and again, try to see how did we even w-- is there not a certain-- part of the reason why we're finding this vocabulary difficult to-- to come up with is because it is monochromatic. This is the-- I think, fundamentally. And (NOISE) part of the reason it's monocr--chromatic is because there are certain things on even the progressive side, which have become very dogmatic.

And-- for example, even the-- the-- and this is probably heretical in many context to say something like that, but the whole no-- the notion of the rights-based approach. I think it leads-- the moment the entry point is that, we are setting ourselves for conflict because rights at the individual level are always going to be in conflict with another person's right.

And then we need an external arbiter to actually decide whose right is more-- is-- is strong than any particular. So then we are in some way outsourcing conflict resolution to a third party. Because if you internalize the idea that-- so, for example, wh-- my freedom of speech versus somebody else's freedom of religion, which is a classic thing which is going on right now.

And it's at the individual level. It's at the same-- you know, I am-- I should be able to say whatever I want to (COUGH) say while the other party (COUGH) saying, "Yes. But this," you know, "against my-- the-- the idea of my practicing my religion." Whatever it is.

We n-- we s-- we are-- we're seeing this every day, playing itself out. And it's-- so in some ways the moment our entry point into thinking of society and social systems, and therefore political and legal systems, the entry point becomes individual rights, which is, of course, something which we cannot-- in this current context ever say-- ever question, we're also setting up ourselves for some-- a different kind o-- o-- o-- of conflict of a certain kind, which is playing itself out.

So therefore-- is it even possible to imagine a different way of understanding social s-- structures and processes and therefore these relationships of the public and private, and so on and so forth? So, for example, if I-- I can imagine, I don't-- expressly spoke about the idea of rights, but if one was to think about the Gandhian way of looking at things, it would not-- the entry point would not necessarily be the-- the individual being the-- the-- the-- the sort of, you know, the holder of-- of individual rights b-- as being the only way of looking at society and understanding society, but more in terms of the idea of-- trusteeship, perhaps.

Or, responsibility and-- and-- and social and com-- and-- but that's-- look-- from a community perspective, not necessarily at the individual level. But we are-- but we are working now with-- w-- (COUGH) s-- it's bound to be that their vocabulary's going to be limited because that also-- that vocabulary comes from a particular-- particular cultural and social history, which is not the only single culture and social history of the world. It is not.

So on the one hand we want plurality, because that's what we advocate for, plurality

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of perspectives, but when it comes to ideas which we think are the only ideas, then we don't really appreciate plurality if somebody is coming at it from a different perspective. So if somebody's-- is plurality as far as is circumscribed by the rights-based frameworks, where the individual is the entry point-- then it's great. Then plurality is wonderful.

But the moment-- the entry is point is-- no, we-- need to look at social process and systems. And we need to see the community as an entry point. (COUGH) And let's say, all legal systems have to be-- have to be thought through or rethought by looking at the community as the entry point rather than the individual, we suddenly run to problems because that's not progressive and that's not-- so this dog-- this-- I think is that rethinking.

That's why this whole notion, I think, these are-- in real life that's how it works in many, many most parts of the world. So-- so how does one sort of, you know, these-- this-- this-- this-- this-- the fluidity, how can that be captured? And I think that's the biggest challenge. And indeed, I mean civil society has to be careful.

But I think you look at it, again, we come back to the vocabulary that civil society (COUGH) is in many ways, what we consider to be civil society, is again, trapped in that same vocabulary. The moment it sticks, or tries to step outside the vocabulary, is no longer even considered civil society. So--

(MALE VOICE: UNINTEL)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Sorry?

MALE VOICE:

It's no more civil.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

It's no more civil. It's no more civil. Even this terminology, I mean, really if you-- I think what I find very useful these days, particularly as an exercise, is whenever we talk about any conceptual ideas, or any processes, or social processes, I try to find-- a word for it in-- in my own mother tongue. And where I don't find it, or whether I find it a different way, suddenly tells me that there are very different ways of looking at the world and have been.

And so let's-- so-- so how-- so I think that's sort of-- and which is, at least my thinking-- (UNINTEL) if anybody's looking for solutions --Els?. (LAUGHTER) But I think what-- but, I think, thinking through these things is important, even in our daily work. And also for an organization like perhaps-- OSF, which is making grants,

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also widening the-- the-- perhaps the-- the-- the typology of organizations and ideas and individuals and whatever else that it funds, which is not necessarily coming at it, you know, it's not a template. It means more work.

But what-- what basically the template, the broader template has to be really made the-- the-- it-- it-- that-- those lines have to be-- have to be-- softened tremendously for, I think, processes to be more ac-- I think the w-- it's not as if the w-- the-- these things exist and it's happening. It's just that, I think, most of the times we're unaware of it. And-- it's easy for us to be able to bring it meaningfully and (UNINTEL) provide that space and that-- setting that's important. (BACKGROUND VOICE)

BIPASHA RAY:

No. No. No. This is-- this is very--

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Chitrangada.

BIPASHA RAY:

Chitrangada?

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

He-- there's really nothing for me to say. (LAUGHTER)

BIPASHA RAY:

You have an different perspective, I'm sure, on some of these.

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

No. I-- I mean, of course, I agree with what you're saying. And there's so much overlap and the lines have blurred. And where does (NOISE) public end and private begin? But I still think, especially like in-- elected democracies, I mean, people are completely within their, sorry to use the word right, to have expectations-- from the government, like you said, of regulating, of-- you know, mediating and accountability.

I mean, just to give a very concrete example, like this Right to Information Act. I can't go to a private mining company and tell them, "Show me your plans." But they

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have given those plans to the government. They want the government to facilitate that.

I mean, the government should be sharing those plans with-- people, especially who live in those areas. So to that extent, I do think, I mean, the-- the notion of the public is a valuable notion and we shouldn't completely throw it out by saying, you know, "It overlaps with the private in so many ways and we don't-- and we don't find that space."

And very interesting, this point you made-- between the individual and community. This Forest Rights Act in India, which came in-- about ten years ago-- that also came, I mean, just on the back of, like, 20, 25 years of, like, social movements and, like, protests-- basically saying that, you know, we need to give-- recognize customary tenure to the forest communities of India and they literally been painted as encroachers in their own land.

So one of the provisions is the (COUGH) village which has common property resources like pastoral lands or, you know, like a religious site of a forest or a mountain, so that can be recognized through community title. And that is one of the most under-implemented provisions of that law.

The state is still sort of-- you can drag it, reluctantly, to award a few individual titles. But community is-- there may be like a real handful of examples where it's been done. So I think even the-- probably the state prefers to not, you know, get into that arena. Tomorrow if the whole village-- like-- a community title has been awarded, over say 1,000 hectare patch of forest and then the company wants that, the state would rather not, you know, (LAUGH) have--

BIPASHA RAY:

Deal with the community.

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

--the company have to pay a huge amount of compensation or have the whole village have a say in-- of what happens to-- so that's-- that's also there. But, I mean, broadly, I-- I think the notion of the public is valuable. And-- not being naive about the way power operates, like you said, the-- the real-- I mean, the important thing is power and the important thing is looking at accountability. That's-- that's-- we still have to interrogate this.

ELS:

Would you have a public sector that has increasingly embraced (BACKGROUND VOICE) the interests of the private sector? And this-- and this is exactly what you

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were saying. And-- and where then the-- for me, the question is not how we-- I mean, how we name, like, whether an actor is public or private, but what are the drivers and the interests that are at stake.

And then there may be multiple public interests. I mean, me from a health and rights perspective, that is what I think is the more important public interest. But the states often argue, "No. No. Economic growth is the more important-- and it's good for us all."

Now what we, I think, have gotten to learn is that basically states and the private sector, especially the kind of the big, private sector, the big conglomerates and-- multinationals, they have colleeded (PH) completely into what's, I think, we call now the one percent and all of us are the 99 other percent.

But that-- I cannot-- it-- that's where I-- it becomes difficult to kind of talk about the public and the private because wh-- the drivers of the-- those are the same. They-- the-- i-- it's a power and money and economic growth. And we are all grappling and trying to build social movements to say, "Well that does not really represent our interests because inequality has been growing ever since. The economic growth s-- it-- is there. But inequality has been growing even more."

So that's where I'm grappling. Like, we can't even have a conversation if we talk about public and the privates. And I'm happy to kind of preserve the idea of a public. But can we think about a public that's really represents the public interest of-- and I'm not going to say the majority because we work on minorities and vulnerable, I mean, it's not about the majority, but now it has all been captured under the same that does not seem to be representing the broader public interests. Yeah. But (COUGH) I don't know how we can even talk about that. And that's-- make this very-- challenging.

(QUESTION: UNINTEL)

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

MALE VOICE:

I'm-- I'm very sympathetic to-- to what Prashant has said about the problem and what all of you have also-- (UNINTEL) the problem of inadequate vocabulary, so to speak. At the same time, you know, I think it may-- it-- it does-- we run the risk of overstating this problem in the sense that, yes, you know, the colonial regime-- and let's not forget that the colonial regime was not the first, within quotes, "foreign regime" in India.

The colonial regime caused some amount of whatever cognitive epistemic-- whichever-- philosophical disruption. But that disruption opened up emancipatory potentials for the untouchables. You know? I mean, the-- the biggest, strongest champion of the rights-based approach was (UNINTEL) in India.

And-- and no points of guessing the people's arch critique of-- Gandhi and this-- idea

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of community. And in this country too, you know, I mean, W.E.B. Dubois, Martin Luther King, Jr. So let's not trivialize, I would say, the-- the emancipatory potential that an alien framework of rights has provided in to-- indigenously oppressed communities of any society.

Now having said that-- I-- I don't look at the g-- I-- I-- I watch what Gates Foundation is doing very closely, not in the health sector but in the agriculture sector, you know, the-- the alliance for the green revolution in Africa. And-- and-- in-- in my own work what I've found somewhat helpful, and I'm just sharing this, is not so much to think in terms of, "Well what does the public or the private, the state, the market, the growth, the environment, what are these things doing?"

But rather, to --you know --work with the somewhat --with an idea which, you know, one can say comes from John Rawls, which is simply to ask, you know, "Are spaces for participation shrinking or enlarging?" And that shrinking and enlarging, you know, that shrinking-- there's no monopoly on who can shrink or enlarge the spaces.

In certain junctures it might be a private company who's opening up spaces for certain kind of, you know, vital reflection, democratic participation. And in certain cases it could be the state which is actually shrinking, which is, I think, what Chitrangada that was trying-- describing in her case.

And perhaps, you know, if we, like, (COUGH) try and examine that-- I mean, I would imagine that, you know, if-- if-- if-- if growth is such a deeply popular sentiment that, you know, that the Indians want-- I mean-- that-- prime-- our current prime minister thinks, or would like us believe that it is, you know, then I would imagine that you open the space for democratic reflection and deliberation and people will themselves come and say, you know, "Hey, take away our forests. We really want just 10,000 rupees in our pockets. And that's that."

So anyway, so my (NOISE) simple-- you know-- that's perhaps one way out of this conundrum of inadequate vocabulary is to keep our nose to the ground and see what are really the mechanisms which are being opened up for vital participation and whether particular-- specific mechanism enlarges that or shrinks that.

BIPASHA RAY:

(UNINTEL) any comment on that? (UNINTEL)--

(PRASHANT SHARMA: UNINTEL)

(OVERTALK)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

No it's-- it's-- I agree. But--

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CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

Just very quickly. You m-- this one (UNINTEL) that you mention, I think now we have figures for (UNINTEL). So I don't remember. But, I mean, the-- the disparity is really grown. I think in India now the-- I mean, the richest one person to owns--

(QUESTION: UNINTEL)

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

--like 50-- 50 percent of the wealth or--

PRASHANT SHARMA:

(UNINTEL) (BACKGROUND VOICE) 62 people-- 62 people in the world own more than 3.5 billion people--

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

Yeah. So-- so all this is-- yeah. It's-- it's happening globally. (BACKGROUND VOICE) But again, you know, there are all these challenges and we are questioning what governments are doing, what states are doing. I don't think in India we are questioning enough what corporations are doing. That is a problem. They're still pretty much, you know, the holy cow, they're seen as the people who are delivering growth to the economy. So the way, I think, in America there's much more criticism and you know--

(OVERTALK)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

I mean, here, in fact, the-- the-- the lobby, I mean-- come on--

(OVERTALK)

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

I mean, in-- in terms of public discourse, it's not like you can (BACKGROUND VOICE) blank out news on one or two industrial houses the way you can do in India. You just can't print something about, (NOISE) you know, the three top business companies.

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PRASHANT SHARMA:

The same thing, I think, pretty much anywhere.

(OVERTALK)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

No. I mean-- just one m-- minor --or something specifically about the accountability question, which is, of course, I think, key to not only the larger, I mean, --it's definitely key to my work-- so you're absolutely right. But I think that's where perhaps even expanding that notion of accountability also, because currently most of our thinking around accountability is legislation and regulation. (BACKGROUND VOICE)

I think that is-- a major limitation. It's major limitation because-- that's what I'm saying-- I think it's important to look at historically and in other societies, in different societies and in large parts of the world, how is accountability exercised and realized. Because every society it is in a certain-- in a certain fashion.

It may not (NOISE) necessarily be-- in a manner which is formalized in a sense what we consider to be formalized, which is perhaps through legislation, regulation and, you know, however s-- holds-- rule of law bro-- broadly. But there are many, many, many different forms in which that is realized, whether it's through the idea of social expectation, what somebody's supposed to be doing or not doing, what is the right thing.

And many of these things also, again, related to what are the administrative structures, how decentralized a particular-- sort of, you know, even the administrative rules are, in what forms in s-- there are some many thing which are deeply integrated. And that's where, again, particularly I find-- when I think about in many post-colonial societies is the destruction of forms and systems of social accountability, which were brought in by essentially a colonial power and they're-- (UNINTEL) I disagree with you.

I think there's-- a huge difference between the British as-- as-- as a colonial thing and previous whatever. Massive difference. And we can discuss that. (LAUGH) We don't have to bore everybody. It's not quite along the same, you know, happy continuum.

(OVERTALK)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

But that's the destruction, I think, is-- is-- I think that's key. And not to say, you know, when one's just sort of, you know, start looking at some great, golden period in the-- ancient past and all the rest of it. Not to say that. But I think recognizing that a lot of the-- the-- the-- the problems we are running into now, or the tensions and the

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conflicts and the-- and the-- and the-- s-- seemingly sort of, you know-- the-- the-- i-- lies-- it's there because-- because of this-- because of very specific historical reasons. (COUGH)

FEMALE VOICE:

Well-- just to follow up points, I mean-- you know-- when I think of accountability and-- and why perhaps the United States is a little bit better, is because there's a lot of public opinion and public opinion seems to count. And so that on-- on some level, whether you're a corporate or (NOISE) NGO or-- the government, if you have bad press or i-- if you've-- if you've done something that's the subject of criticism, you know, it's either gonna be in-- you're not gonna get a vote, you're not gonna get funding as an NGO or you're not gonna get customers as-- as a company.

So I-- I don't know i-- i-- you know, if there's-- an equivalent strength of public opinion, let's say, in the place-- like India. Just-- (BACKGROUND VOICE) w-- that one thing. And then-- the other point was, you know, on accountability as well.

And I think, again, the-- the United States is maybe a little bit better in this as well is-- is the notion that-- you know, if you're gonna be the government and you're gonna be holding-- non-governmental actors accountable, you better be accountable yourself-- to your-- to your-- to your public.

So to the extent that you either show that through some sort of transparency or recording or whatever the case might be, then there's some-- th-- y-- there's some level of either hope or trust, whatever you wanna call it, that your government is actually taking that responsibility seriously. And-- and if you're not showing that as-- as a government otherwise, then I-- I would think that there'd be a lot of distrust there, that you're doing it vis-à-vis any other sector in the-- in the country.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Just-- just to quickly respond. I'm not so sure, first of all, (UNINTEL) a moment we can do that-- we can (UNINTEL) it's better here and worse there. That's a problematic. That's a problematic is that does not recognize that things are different in different places. And that's all there is to it. I don't think it's better or worse.

Because, for example, I could say I'm in-- things are so public-- public opinion sensitive to the United States, I mean, Walmart. So, you know, I mean, (LAUGH) don't (UNINTEL) labor and all the rest of it, you know, they would be-- over the last 15 years with all the bad press they've received and so on and so forth, but actually their profits would be falling or they'd be, you know, going bankrupt by now. But it's not happened. (BACKGROUND VOICE)

So-- so it's not-- so-- and I can-- also, we can all take examples because we are-- s-- but I think it's-- it's a false-- it's-- it's-- it's-- it's pointless to actually think in terms of better or worse. I think it's just systems are different. Processes are different. And I

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think sensitivities are different. It's just that the forms it takes what-- what-- the forms-- and how it works is different.

And what we, I think, consider to believe-- to-- what we believe-- we want to strengthen those (COUGH) (UNINTEL) mostly there. And I think in many cases-- that's why I'm saying, I think, when-- we limit our imagination only to, let's, say, things naming and shaming, on-- which is what a lot of rights-- discourse is all about, you know, naming and shaming, putting in new legislation in place, putting that legislation, put-- this regulation in place, great. Nobody saying one shouldn't do it.

But I think an inordinate amount of energy and resources are-- orientated only to where such strategic, or such strategies and such-- such activities, rather than recognizing that there are many other ways in many different contexts which are, if not equally but even more importantly-- effective.

I think that recognition-- and that's again, it comes back to the same thing that how are we receiving our information or our understanding about other parts, it's usually through the same lenses, through the same vocabularies, through the same dichotomies, through the same binaries, where we continue to hold one particular system better than another one.

And that's where, again, we come back into the same problematics. And unless we in-- in effect, essentially think out of our own selves-- we are not going to recognize that there are many, many different ways of doing things. And each has its own validity. And that is true plurality, not the dogmatic ones which we are thinking. We get stuck in one (UNINTEL)

MALE VOICE:

So yeah. I mean, I'm just, you know, listening to this conversation and I think one thing I struggle with is this-- this-- idea of accountability because, you know, I-- talking about in the abstract is so difficult where I think a lot of the question comes around, like, who-- who are people accountable to. You know? And I think part of the problem that we are grappling with is that government is often accountable to business but not accountable to the people. And that's the problem.

So there's certain kind-- type of accountability that is there but it's actually accountable for delivering growth rather than delivering something else, for example. And I think another one is the, you know, what are-- what are they accountable for and what-- what did we, like, you know, what do we hold valuable that we hold people to account for. You know?

And I think-- you know, the idea of, like, well we ho-- you know-- holding business accountable what, increased profits? Or, is this something else? And in our s-- and I think-- our problem is that, certainly in-- this country-- like that is the main-- the standard. Right? So and I think there's some debate now with this whole medicine s-- scandal about, well, how far do we go-- towards that. But I think that's a question that I grapple with as well. You know?

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ELS:

Yeah. And actually if I can just-- as an illustration--

MALE VOICE:

Yeah.

ELS:

--a fantastic example. Many of you may have heard about this-- Martin Shkreli guy who-- a-- had this company and hiked the prices from-- an old drug from 13 t-- $13 to $550 per pill out of the blue. Now he actually defends that because, and he's actually today in-- in congress in some-- in some hearing, and he actually says, "I am accountable to my shareholders and they want me to maximize profits. So I can maximize (BACKGROUND VOICE) pro-- I am maximizing profit. And actually if I would have known I would have done it-- I would have hiked it even more."

This is really interesting. And so the whole pharmaceutical industry is up in arms. It's like, "No. No. No. We don't do that." Now they do that all the time they just (BACKGROUND VOICE) don't say it like that. And-- and this is--

MALE VOICE:

He's—he's at least being honest.

ELS:

--exactly the question. No. Because what-- whose interest are you defending? And the pharmaceutical industry has always pretended that they are interested in our health. But they're not. They're actually-- accountable to their shareholders and they wanna maximize-- profit and value in the market.

Now we are being confused. But-- but I think this such an interesting debate. And then the question is, like, w-- where is the public interests, interests being defended and by whom? And-- and where-- which kind of accountability loop is there to-- to make that happen, which I don't have any answers for.

MALE VOICE:

I-- you know-- y-- use the World Bank example. So-- you know--

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ELS:

Oh yeah.

MALE VOICE:

--if-- if Bill Gates is providing how much budget-- of the World s-- Health Organization, they're accountable to him. And then when we talk about, like, you know, corporate influence. But there's a private funder--

ELS:

Yeah.

MALE VOICE:

--to the-- to World Health Organization and less and less accountable to citizens of countries who are, you know, less and less, of course, you know, contributing--

ELS:

Yeah.

MALE VOICE:

--to the world. So it's all those questions that-- make-- create that kind of confusion. Yeah.

BIPASHA RAY:

It also raises a whole host of bigger questions I hope to explore more at some point. One last question from Sanjay (PH).

SANJAY:

Yeah. I mean, it's just sort of--

BIPASHA RAY:

Or comment.

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SANJAY:

--two minutes left. I don't know if it'll be answered. It's a pretty big question. (LAUGH) But-- I mean, is it the sort of short coming, of even of work, is that we're focused so much on accountability? But accountability sort of looks at decisions that have already been made, sort of, you know, it's-- it's retrospective. It's not reflective in the moment.

So we never really, as an organization, you know, Prashant and I just talked about this the other day-- unpack why people behave in the way they behave in the first instance. So the motivations for why people act in the first place, why do they seek power, why do they seek-- you know, to be-- you know, to be greedy or whatever.

Like, I mean, there's all s-- and, I mean, greed is linked to power, but that-- that desire to do X or Y in the world, the motivation for why people do that-- to my mind is a better way to sort of get at these questions than the accountability frame. Because accountability it's-- it's done. Right?

And the decision has been made and actions have taken place. And so you can sort of look at somebody and hold them to account for those decisions. But that thing which you wanted to interrogate is already been completed and finished. And you may-- you may hope that doing that will then influence how people behave moving forward.

But we don't really see that in our work. Do we? Like, I'm just thinking of the work that I've done with policing. I mean, how much do police change their behavior because they've seen the one or two cops that are held accountable for their malfeasance. (BACKGROUND VOICE) It's not really, like, that doesn't really get to the heart of how and why people feel like, you know, knocking heads on the street is the way that the police will assert their power and therefore do their job effectively. Like, that is never really unpacked with an accountability frame. So just my one thought for today. (LAUGHTER)

BIPASHA RAY:

That's a big bucket of thoughts. Any final comment to that or to all of the other things that were brought up today? Chitrangada do you have--

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Very good samosas. (LAUGHTER)

BIPASHA RAY:

Who c-- be accountable to-- for that. (BACKGROUND VOICE)

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CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

--always be after the decision was made. Right--

BIPASHA RAY:

Uh-huh (AFFIRM). Uh-huh (AFFIRM).

SANJAY:

Usually it is, though--

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY:

It often is. Yeah.

SANJAY:

Or-- or, like I said, like, for the purposes of influencing the next--

(OVERTALK)

MALE VOICE:

E-- even if the process is a hundred percent transparent the problem is, if you don't get to motivation or something in that direction, you have to-- you have to know what's-- what's about to happen. And there's an infinite-- it's-- it's like trying to micromanage employees. You need them to want to do the right thing because otherwise you-- you don't have enough (BACKGROUND VOICE) bandwidth to-- to make them do it. And institutions are way more powerful relative to us than employees.

BIPASHA RAY:

Lots of food for thought.

(OVERTALK)

BIPASHA RAY:

This was a great discussion. Thank you to Prashant and Chitrangada-- for joining (APPLAUSE) us today. (BACKGROUND VOICE) And I hope the conversation

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continues.

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *

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