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Democracy in South Asia: One Goal, Multiple Paths

While on the one hand, democracy in South Asia can be seen as emphasizing the welfare aspect more than the others, we have also noted that citizens from countries of the region also uphold various aspects of procedures, rights and governance when they think of democracy. If our conceptualization, therefore, does not insist on any one set of ideas as the authentic meaning of democracy, then we are in a position to study democracy in South Asia in a more nuanced fashion.

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It has been some time since theorizations of democracy have been aware of the need to encompass societies that practice democracy or are aspiring to be democratic but do not fulfill the classic conditions of educated citizenry or contained levels of poverty. From the middle of the twentieth century, not only did poor countries with large semi-literate or illiterate populations chose to adopt democracy, but many actually implemented democracy fairly successfully. By the end of the

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century, democracy had become an acceptable form of running public affairs in most parts of the world. So much so, that even ‘doubtful’ democracies and non-democracies took pains to claim that they were democratic. In the light of this increased acceptability and expansion of democracy, contemporary studies of democracy have evolved an important –and yet intriguing—component involving democracy assessment. This component aims at making an assessment of the empirical aspects of democracy by taking up the tricky issue of how much the practice of democracy in a given polity approximates the expectations and the idealized conception of democracy. This relatively new component of democracy study throws up new insights but also faces theoretical and methodological issues. Its main contribution lies in the field of comparative studies. With continuing expansion of democracy across newer terrains of the globe, the question of how to compare democracies assumes greater salience.

Therefore, exercises such as Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/>), International IDEA’s Democracy Assessment (<http://www.idea.int/sod-assessments/>), Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES; <http://www.cses.org/>), Electoral Integrity Project (<https://sites.google.com/site/electoralintegrityproject4/home>), and many ‘barometers’ of democracy (for instance, the Switzerland-based Democracy barometer: <http://www.democracybarometer.org/>; the Japan based Asia barometer: <https://www.asiabarometer.org/> and the Global Barometer: <http://www.globalbarometer.net/>, etc.) have emerged to undertake various tasks related to watching and assisting the functioning of democracy as also the critical task of generating systematic information on democratic processes. Some of these exercises have produced ‘ranking’ of political systems on a scale of their democratic nature. This results into issues of hierarchizing certain ways of organizing democracy. Yet others are based on expert assessments and as such do not involve citizen evaluations. The other overall theoretical problem is related to the western (North Atlantic) criteria and a blindness to society-specific experiments and innovations. However, criteria for evaluation cannot be country-specific either. Therefore, all these exercises converge on the need to evolve comparative criteria and perspective on democracy.

I

The study of democracy in South Asia² forms part of this growing interest in ‘new democracies’ and comparisons. Participating countries include Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This study commenced first in 2003-04 and currently second round of this study is under way. In its ambition to participate in the global debate on comparative democracy, this study is similar to most others mentioned above. However, there are marked differences:

- The South Asia study has carefully kept away from the ranking game. Ranking presupposes a complete agreement on criteria and a near commonality of the grounds—the socio-economic contexts and their effects on the political processes. In reality, every society goes through a unique trajectory of its own, evolves its own ‘democratic ambitions’ and above all, is impacted differentially by global and domestic political economies. As such, ranking can only be misleading because it assumes a ‘top’ and identifies a bottom. The South Asia study on the other hand sought to bring in sharp relief the country-specific dynamics of democracy while simultaneously remaining comparative.
- Two, while expert assessments are often rich in their theoretical critiques, the popular voice needs to be taken into account in any democracy assessment. Therefore, the South Asia study has mainly relied on citizen surveys. In the first round, two other assessment strategies were also used: qualitative assessments by experts and voice of the activists through dialogues. It was noticed that these strategies were valuable but their outcomes (findings) were at variance with citizen assessment.
- Three, for the first time, this study imagined a ‘region’ called South Asia, thus seeking to convert a geo-political entity into a socio-political category. Surprisingly, both in academia and in popular understanding, this regional identity is only hazy. Study of democracy in South Asia was the first ever self-conscious exercise that vested a regional dimension in the study of politics of the five countries of the geo-political region. Doing this of course begs a question: Do the five societies share common attributes as far as their perception of

² The first ever collaborative study of democracy in the region of South Asia and also the currently ongoing second round, on which this paper is based, were both coordinated by *Lokniti*, Programme on Comparative Democracy, CSDS, Delhi. This author, along with Peter R. deSouza and Yogendra Yadav consisted of the team of Principal Investigators for the first round while the second round is being coordinated by Sanjay Kumar, Sandeep Shastri and this author. Colleagues in the second round are: S. Tawfique M. Hque (Bangladesh), Krishna Hachcheta (Nepal), Bilal Mehboob Ahmed (Pakistan) and Pradeep Peiris (Sri Lanka).

democracy is concerned? The first study gave an equivocal answer to this. While there are cultural and historical intersections, political trajectories have mostly remained isolated from each other; in academic writings and analyses, the influence of the distant intellectual powers are more acceptable than the influence of the regional power; and yet, in some respects there were commonalities—mainly concerning the substantive conception of democracy.

Findings from the first study are available from ‘*State of Democracy in South Asia*’ (2007, New Delhi, OUP). A study of democracy in South Asia becomes interesting for a variety of reasons: this study draws attention to the muted sense of being a region along with some objective commonalities in the way citizens for the region look at democratic politics. Secondly, while the perceptions of democracy resemble many features of popular perceptions in global South, the study also indicates that popular perceptions here hold implications for democratic theorization more generally—in other words, there cannot be different theorizations for different regions of the globe and third, the so-called gap between older democracies and new democracies might be a topic of greater scrutiny.

Here, it is proposed to report some key findings from the second round of the South Asia study that commenced in 2013. While field work in all five countries has been completed and some country reports have also been published, the present findings seek to draw attention more to the possibilities of comparison of the five countries and the broader patterns that emerge from such comparison.

To begin with, it is useful to remember the political backdrop that provides the context to the findings: compared to the context of almost a decade ago, 2012-13 provided considerably different context for each country. Bangladesh was experiencing a heightened competitiveness reflected more in street conflicts and mutual distrust among the elite than in the form of parliamentary party competition. India was experiencing a new phase of citizen activism marked by civil society action and deep distrust of party politics. At the same time, India was also experiencing the dramatic slide down of its main political party, the Indian national Congress. Nepal was struggling with an absence of consensus over constitution making. Pakistan was going through a period of democratic consolidation and experienced transfer of power from one political party to another. Sri Lanka was reeling under a semi-authoritarian leadership and also was traumatized by the post-civil war issues

of reconstruction. These varying and diverse political trajectories make temporal comparisons very exciting.

Internationally, this was the period of considerable decline in the popularity of ‘socialist’ regimes in South America, a renewed interest in ultra nationalist and majoritarian regimes in many parts of the world and a wave of democratization in the Arab world. So, two theoretical issues were emerging: one was about the link between growing acceptance of the majoritarian political world view and the instabilities in-built in global political economy and the other was about the limits of citizen activism as a strategy to rejuvenate democracy. To put it cynically, the challenge was to make sense of the simultaneity of the ‘Arab spring’ and the decline of democracy in both Russia and Thailand at the same time! Democracy in South Asia too, experienced a similar cynical uncertainty—on its territorial margins, Maldives experienced troubled relationship between its major political players, Afghanistan continued to reel under pressures of armed non-democratic interventions, Myanmar trudged towards a semblance of democracy and Bhutan was pushed by its ruler into a democratic experience. So, the world over, one witnesses the simultaneous existence of uneven expansion of democracy and the uneven quality of democracy within the same country over time. These complex issues demand that the story of democracy be told with care and nuance; that there is no linearity to the story either within a country, within a region or globally too.

In the first study of democracy in South Asia (cited above), we had flagged a complex pattern of democracy’s journey. Many ‘new’ democracies had overcome the foundational challenge in that they had successfully acquired a positive attitude to democracy. There were and are country-specific differences: some countries may have translated this positive attitude into formalizing the wherewithal of democracy, some may still be struggling to do that. But the idea called democracy had arrived. The record of institutionalizing democracy was more mixed. Not just because some countries like Nepal took so long to bring in a new constitution; that was only one part of the story. The absence of consensus over the institutional framework was the other part of the story of institutionalizing democracy and the third story was inability to function with and through these institutions. The ability of more and more countries to conduct fairly smoothly their elections might constitute good news; the new-found assertiveness of the Courts may enthuse some; but the weakness of parties and the non-representative nature of the civil society arena might still be cause for worry. But most critically, the performance of democracy in terms of outcomes has been the

basis for concerns and criticisms. The formal democratic paraphernalia does not ensure democratic outcomes. This deficit of outcomes is threefold. In the political field, there is a deficit of democratic governance; in the field of distributive capacities there is deficit of fairness and in the field of social relations there is a deficit of equal citizenship. This is not to say that democracy has failed. But it means that the high levels of acceptance of democracy among citizens lead to a tension between expectations (aspirations) and performance (outcomes).

II

This broad canvas of temporal context and empirical limitations helps us understand the skewed nature of satisfaction that people express towards democracy in their respective countries.

As mentioned above, ‘democracy’ evokes considerable approval and acceptance—78 percent respondents from the region support the idea of democracy as ‘rule by elected representatives’. But as the previous study had found out, this approval is somewhat misleading since citizens may agree to deviate from the norm of ‘rule by elected representatives’ and prefer some exceptions from time to time (such as military rule, a strong and non-elected ruler, etc.). Just a little over half of the respondents (52 percent) said that they would ‘always’ prefer democracy to any other form of government. There is of course, a variation among the five countries. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the skeptics who might prefer non-democratic alternatives are much less and a large proportion ‘always prefers democracy (71 and 73 percent respectively) but India, Nepal and Pakistan have considerably limited numbers of staunch democrats who would always prefer democracy (46, 40 and 36 percent respectively). This finding alerts us to the challenge democracy has to overcome in the region: approval of democracy would still mean that democracy is on probation and citizens may be tempted to opt for alternatives either when democracy fails or when the alternatives present themselves as viable and attractive. It is for this reason that satisfaction about functioning of democracy and the nuanced understanding of the meaning of democracy become critical aspects of any analysis of democracy.

Taken as a whole, citizens in South Asia manifest only a modest level of satisfaction with functioning of democracy in their respective countries. Overall, 45 percent respondents say that they are ‘satisfied with the functioning of democracy’. What should be a matter of even more

concern is that the balance between those who are ‘satisfied’ and who are ‘not satisfied’ (what can be called *net satisfaction*) is rather delicate: only 7 percent. Table 1 shows the country-specific net satisfaction where Bangladesh and Nepal have more citizens dissatisfied than those who are satisfied. There is considerable divergence on this between Nepal and Sri Lanka on the one hand and also between Sri Lanka and India-Pakistan on the other hand. Perhaps, it might be better to say that Sri Lanka and Nepal are the ‘outliers’, with substantive approval and high disapproval of functioning of democracy as compared to more balanced approach adopted in rest of South Asia. It is only natural that more than a quarter of the respondents in Nepal chose not to answer this question given the halting and recent rise of democracy in the country. But overall too, much would depend on the direction taken by respondents who gave no response to this question because their proportion is greater than the net satisfaction figure.

Table 1

Net Satisfaction with Democracy in South Asia

	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Net Satisfaction	DK/No Response	N
Bangladesh	42	44	-2	14	2795
India	46	38	8	16	6043
Nepal	32	41	-9	27	3850
Pakistan	50	44	6	6	2487
Sri Lanka	55	28	27	17	3401
South Asia	45	38	7	17	18576

Source: CSDS Data Unit; unweighted data set.

How does one understand the divergence in citizens’ assessments in different countries? It is possible to situate these differences in the ‘context’—the experience of people from each country. While this is useful indeed, there is more pertinent factor at play here. It pertains to what people expect from their democracy—or more specifically, what meaning is attached to the magic ‘D’ word! Increasingly, the world over, and besides among experts and theorists, democracy has come to intimate different things to the people. Broadly, we can postulate four different conceptions of democracy. One would be procedural conception where the term is understood mainly as adoption of certain procedures. Two, democracy also means a rights regime where citizens expect that various rights would be respected and implemented. Three, and perhaps in more recent times,

democracy has come to be associated with governance—that it produces effective and responsible governance. Four, citizens may associate democracy with welfare rather than other dimensions. This of course, is a heuristic exercise and in reality citizens may hold mixed ideas, but if we are able to isolate these four and investigate as to what is the predominant conception in each country, that might provide us with a handle to analyze democracy in operation more effectively. Such an exercise indicates that within the consensus over supporting and aspiring for democracy, each country has its own emphasis on what democracy means to its citizens. Thus, the goal is the same but the purpose and path are different.

Democracy as procedure: This included free and fair elections, legislative control over executive, competitive party system and judicial protection against abuse of government power. Expectedly, free and fair elections are seen as essential to democracy by a large proportion of the respondents while more technical procedures are viewed as essential by less number of persons (Table 2). It is interesting to note that there are some major differences among the five countries—Nepalis being less interested in elections and Pakistanis being more interested in ‘controls’ over government. It may also be surmised that citizens from South Asia are less attracted to procedure-driven idea of democracy when it comes to legal and institutional mechanisms to control the government. A more direct and populist dimension of procedures in terms of elections is, however, quite popular. The simplicity and directness of this procedure as symbolic of popular control attracts the people to this idea, though otherwise, they may not be much interested in the procedural aspects as essential characteristic of democracy. Thus, ‘election’ as a procedure subsumes other procedural aspects of democracy such as competition and control.

Democracy as Rights: Historically, the idea that democracy entails citizens’ rights is indeed a crucial one. In societies of South Asia too, the idea of rights is not new. Yet, when asked to prioritize, citizens tend to underemphasize the rights component as an essential part of democracy. One way to understand this would be to realize that the rights discourse is, at one level, more pedantic than political and hence, in the cognitive map of ordinary citizens, it gets merged with procedures and outcomes. As a result, as we see in Table 3, not many identify rights as an essential component of democracy. At the same time, it is worth noting that compared to other rights, the right to protest does evoke greater support from citizens. In a sense, this is consistent with the nature of democracy in many parts of South Asia where citizens have earned their ‘rights’ through

protests and have also kept governments under leash mainly through the instrument of popular protests. Citizens in India and Bangladesh are more interested in this dimension of democracy, whereas, Nepalis and Pakistanis are more interested in freedom of expression and freedom of media respectively.

Table 2

Democracy as Procedures

	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	South Asia
Free Elections	43	24	11	37	35	31
Legislative control of executive	7	10	3	21	6	11
Party competition	14	13	10	9	16	12
Judicial protection from abuse of power	5	13	8	20	14	13

Table 3

Democracy as Rights

	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	South Asia
Expression	14	18	25	9	19	16
Organization	7	17	13	16	18	15
Media	11	16	9	28	17	18
Protest	25	32	16	17	17	20

Democracy as Governance: From the nineties, the discourse of democracy internationally shifted its focus to the governance outcomes. This discourse penetrated the countries of global South mainly because of the implicit criticisms that democracies in poor countries had not been able to produce governance. But as Table 4 suggests, in popular imagination, this shift has not yet changed the essential meaning of democracy beyond a certain limited impact. Prudent modes of public spending constitute the backbone of the idea of governance. The structural adjustment programmes undertaken in most of South Asia (as indeed elsewhere in the global South) draw attention to the futility of superfluous public spending on ‘populist’ programs and wastefulness of fat public administrations. However, this thinking does not resonate much in opinions of the citizens—at

least yet. Therefore, avoidance of waste of public money and provision of effective public services are not seen by many as essential to democracy. The exception is Sri Lanka. Citizens of Sri Lanka chose public service provisioning as an important component of democracy in large numbers. Otherwise, in contrast to these aspects of governance, the basic concern with routine law & order is certainly shared by larger numbers across all five countries—something which also alerts us to the challenge of governance in the region as a whole. Equally, people are concerned with the broader governance issue compared to wasteful expenditure--corruption. This too suggests that rather than the technicality of ‘wastefulness’ of expenditure, the more direct experience and perception of corruption concerns citizens more and therefore, they tend to believe that a government not engaging in corruption is the essence of democracy.

Democracy as Welfare: Compared to the other three thematic rubrics, welfare –related items evoke more positive response from respondents. This is in tune with the finding from previous round of South Asia study too. People in the region identify democracy with welfare more than they identify it with the other three meanings. Thus, overall, the positive response to all four welfare related items is higher than what the items on procedure, rights and governance received. Here too, the broader idea of welfare as ‘fulfilling basic needs’ is closer to the minds of the respondents. In contrast, the specific principle of unemployment assistance is not seen as very essential to democracy. Similarly, the idea of minimizing the gap between the rich and the poor seems essential to only a limited segment in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. This should not be understood as opposition to or disinterest in the idea; it is only that respondents did not think of this as essential to democracy.

Table 4

Democracy as Governance

	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	South Asia
No waste of public money	5	8	5	16	11	10
Provisions of Public Services	17	14	15	16	34	19
Law & Order	34	23	26	28	27	27
No Corruption	26	11	10	38	35	26

Table 5

Democracy as Welfare

	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	South Asia
Narrowing gap bet. rich & poor	17	23	16	36	18	24
Provision of basic needs	48	31	24	44	21	35
Job opportunities	20	21	13	30	21	23
Aid to unemployed	13	14	22	18	17	17

Note to Tables 2-5: Source: CSDS Data Unit. Tables based on items A16 to A19 from the Questionnaire of the Second Round of South Asia study. For exact wording of the items, see http://www.lokniti.org/pdf_ques/sdsa-set-a-english-final-january-31-2013.pdf

Overall, the discursive shape that the idea of democracy assumes in the region as a whole is not focused on any single thematic rubric. The idea consists of a mix of various elements. Elections dominate the idea of procedures, protests emerge the main focus of rights, law & order is the top concern pertaining to governance and fulfillment of basic needs occupies central position regarding welfare. But behind this larger picture, one comes across the many different paths to democracy that each society seems to adopt. All societies look upon elections as essential; but Nepal is less emphatic about this than others. As for rights, there is a clear division—India and Bangladesh privileging protests over other rights while the other three countries privileging freedom of expression and media. In the case of governance, Pakistan focuses more on absence of corruption and Sri Lanka on public services while the other three countries prefer law & order as an important element of democracy. On the question of basic needs, we come across complete unanimity, but here too, Sri Lanka throws up a slightly different pattern: provision of job opportunities is almost as important as provision of basic needs and the other two welfare items—economic leveling and unemployment allowance carry equal weight with the citizens of Sri Lanka.

Concluding Observations

Instead of claiming that democracy has only one particular meaning, if the idea of democracy is treated as having diverse connotations, then it helps us to appreciate the different discursive routes the goal called democracy may take in different societies and at different times. This approach is

also useful to enrich the theorizations of democracy while at the same time being useful to understand the diverse paths taken by democracy in various parts of the globe. Further, such a diversity-based conceptualization of democracy helps us understand the more complex terrain of democratic practice. While on the one hand, democracy in South Asia can be seen as emphasizing the welfare aspect more than the others, we have also noted that citizens from countries of the region also uphold various aspects of procedures, rights and governance when they think of democracy. If our conceptualization, therefore, does not insist on any one set of ideas as the authentic meaning of democracy, then we are in a position to study democracy in South Asia in a more nuanced fashion.

Thus, avoiding ‘standardization’ of democracy allows us to meaningfully contribute to robust comparisons and empirically grounded theorizations. The study reported here, the second round of ‘Democracy in South Asia’, as also similar other studies elsewhere which adopt this multi-layered and open-ended conception of democracy have an advantage in that they permit the student of democracy to combine society-specific emphases with more generalized ideas. The initial glimpse into some limited findings of the study of democracy in South Asia, thus, argues that while the goal called democracy may be understood in the singular, but the spread of democracy as an idea leads to pluralization of its meaning and diversification of its practice. The argument thus seeks to overcome both particularisms of country-specificity and implicit hegemonies of abstractions.

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