

State of Democracy in South Asia

DIALOGUE ON DEMOCRACY

South India, Bangalore

Dates: 6th and 7th December 2003

Venue: Indian Social Institute, Bangalore

INTRODUCTION

The Dialogue on Democracy was organised by Lokniti, a Programme on Comparative Democracy of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) on the 6th and 7th of December, 2003 at the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore. Activists and academicians from the South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry took part in this two-day dialogue. Apart from the participants from South India, there were three participants from Delhi as well. A total of 47 activists and academicians attended the two-day dialogue. Of the 47 participants, 8 were women. The participants who attended the dialogue came from different socio-economic and political backgrounds. There were activists who had worked with peasants, agricultural workers, unprotected workers, construction workers, slum dwellers, weavers, dalits, minorities and other backward classes. Participants also included civil, political and human rights activists. A substantial number of the participants were from the dalit and backward classes.

The topics suggested for the two day Dialogue by the coordinator were:

- (1) The Promise and Design of Democracy.
- (2) The Working of Democracy in India.
- (3) The Outcome and Future of Democracy in India.

THE DIALOGUE

Day One, 6th December 2003

Inaugural Session (9:45am to 10:45 am)

The proceedings of the Bangalore Dialogue began with Prof. Peter R deSouza welcoming the participants. Prof. Peter gave a brief introduction of the project on the State of Democracy in South Asia and spoke on the 'what' and 'why' of the Dialogue component in this study.

Prof. Peter R. deSouza (Professor and Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi): “This is a dialogue and not a seminar or workshop. There are different knowledge universes that come from the activists and the academicians. The purpose of this dialogue is to have a conversation between different knowledge universes. The idea of a dialogue was deliberately chosen because the academic class think that they are the sole producers of knowledge. The idea of the dialogue is to establish a two-way relationship with this community of activists, which is outside the world of academia. We would like to hold these dialogues in order to bring in insights, and to disseminate the findings of our research to activists and opinion makers who operate outside the world of the English language. The dialogue process would incorporate the insights of activists who may adopt a sharper focus and have a more in-depth knowledge and critical expectation of political processes. The dialogue process will take into account the views of the activists from political parties, non-party organisations those from social movements and those active in Non Governmental Organisation (NGOs). We have come here primarily to listen to what the activists have to say and the recorded discussion will become part of an oral archive. The purpose of having a dialogue at the beginning of the study is because we recognise that the knowledge of the activists is also to be taken into consideration while preparing the final report on the State of Democracy in South Asia. We are hoping to have a series of dialogue in South Asia. We

had one in Nepal and are going to have another in Sri Lanka after this dialogue (South India - Bangalore)”.

After the brief introduction about the proposed project all the participants briefly introduced themselves.

Session I (11:00am to 12:30am)

The theme of the first session was ‘The Promise and Design of Democracy in India’. The chair Prof. Ravivarma Kumar initiated the discussion with his presentation on the role of the Judiciary and Indian democracy.

Prof. Ravivarma Kumar (Leading advocate of the Karnataka High Court and Chairman of Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes from December, 1997 to December 2000. He is actively involved in Dalit and Backward Class movements and is a source of inspiration for the deprived sections in Karnataka):

“The Judiciary in India is not accountable to anyone and is becoming more and more powerful and has started deciding even those issues, which generally fall under the jurisdiction of the legislature or the executive. The balance of power between the legislature, Judiciary and executive is slowly turning in favour of the Judiciary this is becoming a law into itself. The legislature and the executive are accountable to the people of India and can be removed but in case of the Judiciary even if an innocent person is hanged and it is latter proved that he was innocent no harm can be done to the Judiciary. There is no scope for even constructive criticism of the Judiciary because of the contempt of court, weapon, which the Judiciary can use against anyone who tries to challenge its way of functioning. The social background of the higher Judiciary in India (High Courts and the Supreme Court) is also limited mainly to certain sections of the society and the representation of dalits, backward groups, minorities and women is insignificant. This lack of representation of different social groups in the higher Judiciary also act as barriers to achieve socio-economic and political justice in India. Most of the time of the higher

Judiciary is taken away by the cases that involve a tiny minority (the top 10 percent of India's population). Multinational companies and other big companies and businesses take up a major part of the judicial time of the higher Judiciary and questions pertaining to the right to life of the deprived sections hardly get any judicial time”.

The other participants who spoke in this session were; Dr. Shoba Devi, Mr. NP Samy, Dr. Lakshamanan, Mr. Raju Thomas, Mr. Paul Parackal and Mr Hemant Kumar Panchal. The following is a brief account of what these participants had to say in the session:

Dr. Ms. Shoba Devi (Senior Consultant on education and training from Karnataka. Working with different organisations on issues of education for all and the right to information): “Democracy is a way of exercising political power and there is no single authentic version of democracy. The right to information has been in existence in Karnataka for the past three years but very few people know that this act exists in Karnataka. What is the use of having an act, which cannot be utilised, and one that the people do not even know of? There is no use of an act, which is only in the books and not in reality. The Right to information is a key factor in the functioning of democracy. Lack of awareness or education inhibits the use of the law in promoting the right to live with human dignity. Even in Karnataka there are many restrictions to obtain any information from the state under the right to information act. Only enactment of a law is not sufficient it must also be put into practice”.

Mr. N.P. Samy (Secretary, Co-ordination, National Centre for Labour, an organisation of the unprotected workers in India who constitute more than three fourths of India's wage/salary workers. He is also involved in organising the slum dwellers in Karnataka): “We have all the pretensions of a democracy like the election commission, Judiciary, elected representatives etc. and we are said to be the world's largest democracy but all these things could not improve the living conditions of a majority of our people. We also have the world's largest number of illiterate, poor,

unemployed and disease-ridden people. Feudal values are still prevalent in rural areas and in urban areas money and muscle power dominate the election pattern. There is a need to understand what went wrong in Indian democracy and why a large proportion of India's population is still socially and economically deprived? Democracy in India has failed to achieve the right to live with human dignity for a majority of its citizens. The style of functioning of the political parties and elected leaders has no trace of democracy they are obsessed with power and the output is zero. There is no difference in this respect whether it is Communist Party of India CPI (M) or the (BJP), Bharatiya Janata Party. Their obsession with power overrides their political ideologies. What can be done to inculcate the values of democracy among our parties and political leaders?"

Dr. C. Lakshamanan (Dalit activist and Faculty member, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, Tamil Nadu): "There is something wrong with Indian society. During the British rule, our leaders, the freedom fighters, said that once we throw away the British imperial power and achieve freedom from British rule our socio-economic problems would get resolved very quickly in a free and democratic India. On the other hand socially and economically oppressed sections said that it is the brahminical culture that is the main problem in India. This culture also goes against the democratic values of equality, fraternity and liberty. How to counter this culture of brahminical values? Dr. Ambedkar had said that there are certain preconditions for the successful working of a democracy and without fulfilling these conditions democracy can be hijacked by vested interests. What is happening in India for the past 55 years with regard to the working of democracy is that economic power and wealth has become concentrated in a few hands and a vast majority of our people, especially the socially deprived, are living in sub human conditions".

Mr. Raju Thomas (Dalit activist from Tamil Nadu and presently running the Ambedkar Centre for Social Action): "Ambedkar had said that democracy is not a system to exercise only political power but also an attitude of fellow human beings. When a society is not democratic in its form and content, it can never have a democratic

government. Without fulfilling the preconditions of democracy as Dr. Ambedkar said, we cannot have real democracy. There is a brahmanical aggression on the Judiciary in India, it is a direct brahminical dominion over the Judiciary”.

Mr. Paul Parackal (Advocate from Kerala. Vice President of the National Federation of Construction Workers and National Centre for Labour): “If democracy is for the people by the people and of the people, than if things are not done for the people and the laws are not good for the people, it is not democracy. If there is a problem in democracy our parliament or legislature should resolve it even by amending the constitution and make democracy work for the people. But because we are represented by our agents in the legislature and if they have failed to rectify the problems in law or action, we have no remedy but to force our representatives to do it”.

Prof. Ravivarma Kumar (Leading advocate of the Karnataka High Court and Chairman of Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes from December, 1997 to December 2000. He is actively involved in Dalit and Backward Class movements and is a source of inspiration for the deprived sections in Karnataka): Spoke about the need to inculcate the values of democracy among our people, politicians and political parties. He also said, “We as citizens have no role in democracy except casting our votes whereas democracy should work in our day-to-day life. There is no accountability of the politicians or the elected representatives, for example the constitution of India speaks about free and compulsory education, to all children until they complete fourteen years of age, within ten years of the commencement of the constitution. But even after more than 50 years of the commencement of the constitution this has not been done and no prime minister or education minister has been held responsible for it although the Congress party led by Jawaharlal Nehru was ruling the country and the states during the first ten years of the existence of the constitution. As a nation we do not believe in the rule of law”.

Session II (1:40 pm to 2:45 pm)

The second session continued with the same topic 'The Promise and Design of democracy'. Prof. Arun Patnaik chaired the session. Mr. GKC Reddy, Fr. Claude de Souza, Mr. Lakshamanan, Prof. Valerian Rodrigues, Mr. Hemant Kumar Panchal, Mr Chandrashekar Bale, Mr. NP Samy, Mr. Raju Thomas, Ms BM Leela Kumari, Prof. K Srinivasulu and Prof. Peter R. deSouza spoke in this session.

Mr. G.K.C. Reddy (Socio-political activist from Karnataka, formerly Editor Bangalore Eveninger): “Dynastic values are prevailing in India and not democratic values. We should trace our democratic values in society for the past 5000 years like gram sabhas, community living and in Buddhism. But in the present, there is no democracy either in our political parties or the politicians. They are not interested in inner party democracy and democratic norms are totally violated in all the parties. They feel more secure under the dynastic rule. They do not even know what is there in our constitution. If the judiciary is asserting it, it is because our elected representatives lack the will to follow democratic norms. Even basic needs have not been fulfilled in the past 55 years of democracy. Without fulfilling the basic needs of the people there cannot be much use of democracy in India. A large number of candidates who are contesting elections have criminal records”.

Fr. Claude D' Souza (Director, Indian Social Institute, Bangalore, Karnataka):

“When any revolution takes place it does so in the background of certain values. But there were no values to be followed in a free and democratic India. Brahmanical values are totally against the democratic spirit of dignity, equality and fraternity. Lower castes are kept out of the society according to brahmanical values and it is worse than apartheid. Inequality is sanctioned divinely and humanity and society are being dehumanised. The result is that there is only a veneer of democracy and no content. Even fundamental rights are not taken care of in our democracy and there is no chance of any kind of justice for the poor and deprived”.

Dr. C. Lakshamanan (Dalit activist and Faculty member, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, Tamil Nadu):

“People are not only kept poor and illiterate but are also kept away from modern values. Democracy can exist only in a democratic society and if a society is not democratic there is no chance of real democracy. The role of intellectuals and political leaders is to bring democracy into society. When political democracy has failed to deliver even the basic needs of a majority of the people in India and all political parties are following, dynastic and hereditary rule in India how can we call it a democracy?”

Prof. Valerian Rodrigues (Professor of Political Science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi):

“In India all of us are whipping politicians and all our evils are said to be due to politicians. Every one is taking shelter by blaming politicians, whether it is the bureaucrat or businessman or common man. But I think the contribution of politicians in promoting democracy in India is much more than any other group. Even ignorant politicians are much better than the wise bureaucrats, and if some credit is given to any group for promoting political democracy in India it should go to the political class. They are very creative in promoting democracy. On the other hand bureaucrats still cherish brahmanical values and are against the value of equality and fraternity but political democracy in India does not challenge brahmanical values and culture. It is rather expanding and re-imposing brahmanical culture. Even dalit politicians start

believing and promoting brahmanical culture and values. Brahmanical ideology has never been challenged in Indian democracy although it is totally against the democratic values of equality, liberty and fraternity”.

Mr. Hemant Kumar (Socio-political activist who has worked for many years with Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha (KRRS)): “A large number of political activists in India have spent the best years of their lives ranging from 10 to 30 years in political activism and in the service of our people. The people used the political activists but did not place them politically even when they contested elections. The manipulators and political operators become the people who mattered in politics and not the political activists. Even today people think that '*pudaris*' (political operators) are the political persons and do not recognise the political activists and that is the reason why today there are more *pudaris* (political operators) than political activists”.

Mr. C.S. Bale (Advocate who has worked many years for the agriculture workers in Karnataka): “There is a contradiction between democracy and Indian politicians. Indian politicians are destroying democracy. There is no difference between *pudaris* and politicians”. All of us are talking about decentralisation of power in the villages but the reality is that only around a dozen people in every village claim that they are the defenders of democracy and it is they who are elected to the different bodies in the village and control democracy in the village. These are the people who are deciding the nature of democracy and politicians are using democracy for their personal gains. Even though women or dalits are elected representatives they serve as remote controls in the hands of these influential people. Political reservations are not promoting the communities from which these reserved categories of people are coming from but only the individuals and their families. Reservations are used for personal gains and not for the community. The rise of the Judiciary was possible because the other organs of the state failed to solve the problems of the majority of the people.

Mr. N.P. Samy (Secretary, Co-ordination, National Centre for Labour, an organisation of the unprotected workers in India who constitute more than three fourths of India's wage/salary workers. He is also involved in organising the slum dwellers in Karnataka): “Dissent is not tolerated in the political parties. Politicians are not helping in spreading democracy nor are they interested in democratic values. They always look towards their high command who in turn decides every thing right from who should be the candidates for election to who should be the chief minister or the leader of the legislative party. If someone challenges the party leadership he is thrown out of the party. Real democracy is never practiced either at the level of political parties or at the level of the people. The challenge is how to take democracy to the people and the political parties”.

Mr. Raju Thomas (Dalit activist from Tamil Nadu and presently running the Ambedkar Centre for Social Action): “There cannot be any political democracy without social democracy. When society itself is not democratic how can we have political democracy? Intellectuals in India have failed to identify the principle contradiction in Indian society, that is brahmanism, and never challenged the brahmanical hegemony. In the present circumstances when the killer, the prosecutor and the judge are the same people there is no hope for the deprived and the suppressed”.

Ms. B.M. Leela Kumari (Dalit activist and research scholar from Andhra Pradesh, and member of the Task Force National Federation of Dalit women): “As a dalit women when my rights are suppressed, I have two important weapons, dialogue and democracy to fight injustice. In my community of dalits there was more equality between men and women. In the villages we know that democracy is being scuttled by the vested interests but it is our duty to inform dalits and other deprived communities that they also have equal rights. Women are not being adequately represented in the executive, the legislative and the Judiciary and without women’s participation in these vital organs of the state there cannot be any democracy”.

Prof. K. Srinivasulu (Teaches Political Science at Nizam College, Osmania University, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh): Spoke about the reasons because of which the tribal communities, which earlier had the tradition of democracy, are going away from their traditions of democracy. Spoke about why and how modernity destroyed democracy in the tribal society.

Dr. C. Lakshamanan (Dalit activist and Faculty member, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, Tamil Nadu): “When the dalits started sanskritising themselves democracy within the dalit community started withering away, whereas earlier these communities were more democratic”.

Prof. Peter R. deSouza (Professor Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi): Concluding the discussion of this session Prof. deSouza spoke on the disquiet about the democracy and said, “The disquiet can be because of deficiencies of democracy which means that there is a need for improvement in democracy or it can be because it cannot solve the problems of our society”. He said, “It was possible only because of democracy that more than one fifths of the political seats in the Parliament and state legislature are filled with dalits whereas in our traditional society there was no place for dalits in political power. Similar is the case of reservation in bureaucracy and education. In all these places there was no scope for dalits in traditional society. With regard to citizenship the fact is that around 600 million people are on the voters list. But in spite of all these positive achievements of democracy in India, the worst kind of apartheid is also being practiced here”.

Session III (2:45 pm to 4:00 pm)

The theme for discussion in this session was the ‘The working of democracy in India’. Dr Shoba Devi chaired the session. A total of 7 participants spoke in the session: Dr. Shoba Devi, Prof. Hassan Mansur, Prof. Ravivarma Kumar, Ms B.M. Leela Kumari, Prof. K .Srinivasulu, Mr. Durgam Subba Rao, Mr. Hemant Kumar.

Dr. Ms. Shoba Devi (Senior Consultant on education and training from Karnataka. Working with different organisations on issues of education for all and the right to information): “The right to hold the rulers accountable for the use and misuse of power is one of the most important rights in a democracy. The link between democracy and the state of human development is not automatic. In case of countries, which have taken up democracy later or recently, their social and human development indicators have gone down”. She raised the questions, “How is democracy working and how it should work? Is it adequately working? If not shall we replace it with another system and what is that system that can work better than democracy?”

Prof. Hassan Mansur (President of Peoples Union of Civil Liberty, Karnataka): “The present system is in fact excluding the included and this has been happening systematically. The excluded are not among the citizens they are citizens without any citizenship rights. This can be seen from the plight of the dalits and the slum dwellers. If one sees the plight of the slum dwellers one can see that words like democracy and citizenship are a mockery and are self-deceptive. The countries mouthing words like democracy (USA and UK) are uttering these words to impose their hegemony on other countries”.

Prof. Ravivarma Kumar (Leading advocate of the Karnataka High Court and Chairman of Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes from December, 1997 to December 2000. He is actively involved in Dalit and Backward Classes movement and is a source of inspiration for the deprived sections in Karnataka): “In spite of the fact that more than one fifth of our legislatures are dalit they have not done anything for the dalit community. All the atrocities on dalits are committed on agricultural labourers and not on dalit MPs, dalit bureaucrats etc. but there is no legislation even to regulate the working conditions of the agriculture workers in India”. He recalled what Mr B.P. Mauria, a dalit MP and minister had to say about the dalit

legislature; 'Dalit legislature or ministers instead of becoming the dalit voice to the government have become the voice of the government to the dalits'.

Ms. B.M. Leela Kumari (Dalit activist and research scholar from Andhra Pradesh, and member of the Task Force National Federation of Dalit women): "Only the Hindu dalits are getting the benefits of reservation and not the Christian dalits".

Prof. K. Srinivasulu (Teaches Political Science at Nizam College, Osmania University, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh): "Any attempt to assess the working of democracy should be done at the state level and not at the national level as in some areas political regimes have become proactive for democracy. For example the Telugu Desam who have brought a large number of women and backward classes in the political system. Functioning of institutions should also be part of the assessment of democracy. Most of the political parties, which are the instruments of democracy, are functioning in a totally undemocratic way. Even dalit organisations behave in totally undemocratic ways and their style of functioning is the reason of frequent splits in these organisations. Judicial activism is because of the failure of other organs of the democratic state. The issues which are to be resolved politically are not taken care of by the politicians and are being handled by the Judiciary which affects the working of democracy".

Mr. Durgam Subba Rao (Research Scholar also working among weavers in Andhra Pradesh he has written a number of articles on the plight of the weavers of Andhra Pradesh): "There is no single notion of democracy. Even during the freedom struggle Nehru's concept of democracy was different from Ambedkar's concept of democracy, and Gandhi's concept of democracy was different from Nehru's and Ambedkar's. This should be kept in mind. Two types of constitutions are operating in India, one Ambedkar's constitution, which talks about liberty, equality and fraternity, and another Manu's constitution, which talks about hierarchy, subjugation, caste etc. The struggle between these two constitutions is still continuing. It is a general belief in India that only political democracy exists in India and there is a total absence of social and economic

democracy but the reality is that even political democracy is denied to the dalits. In Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, dalits from 52 villages have been denied even the right to vote and argued that a separate electorate for the dalits would have been better under the present circumstances. The Judiciary in India has different yardsticks for dalits and upper castes”.

Prof. Hassan Mansur (President of Peoples Union of Civil Liberty, Karnataka):

“When Bal Thackery or other leaders of the majority community spread hatred against Muslims or Christians or for that matter against non-Marathas, The Indian Judiciary ignore it but if the same thing is said by a Muslim they are arrested under Prevention Of Terrorist Act (POTA) or some other preventive law. Dalits and the minority community have lost faith in the Judiciary in India. The Judiciary is not interested in the issues of dalits and minorities who are denied the right to live with human dignity”.

Mr. Hemant Kumar (Socio-political activist who has worked for many years with

Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha (KRRS)): “Before independence only upper castes were enjoying all the privileges of power but in the past 55 years dalit and backward classes have also got some benefits due to reservations. We must oppose vested caste interests while promoting healthy caste competition. For example Dr. Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram were defeated from the reserved constituencies but won from the non-reserved constituencies”.

Dr. Ms. Shoba Devi (Senior Consultant on education and training from Karnataka.

Working with different organisations on issues of education for all and the right to

information): Dr. Shoba Devi concluded the session with her remarks on the discussion.

She said, “There is much needed to be done to achieve socio-economic and political democracy in India as only a select few are benefiting from our present democratic system. Civil society groups are also not behaving democratically”.

Session IV (4:30 pm to 6:00 pm)

This session continued the discussion on 'The working of democracy in India'. Prof. Valerian Rodrigues chaired the session. Those who spoke in this session were: Prof. Valerian Rodrigues, Mr. GKC Reddy, Mr. Y J Rajendran, Mr. Sri Ram, Prof. K Srinivasulu, Mr. Siddiah Naidu, Dr. Lakshamanan, Prof. Ravivarma Kumar, Mr. Durgam Subba Rao and Prof. Peter d' Souza. Prof. Valerian Rodrigues initiated the discussion.

Prof. Valerian Rodrigues (Professor of Political Science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi): Prof. Valerian spoke about the need to focus the discussion on the following issues, “How religion defines and takes to democracy? Is caste against democracy or it is an enabling factor in the context of democracy? Whether civil society is moving against democracy? Has it lost its capacity to build up democracy in India? Democracy is not only voting but the participation of citizens at all levels and this is not only political participation. What is the relationship between political parties and democracy? Are political parties carriers of or promoting democracy or are they against democracy?”

Mr. G.K.C. Reddy (Socio-political activist from Karnataka, formerly Editor Bangalore Eveninger): “Criminals are taking over politics in India and the result is that India has become one of the most corrupt countries in the world. These criminal elements are destroying the values of the freedom struggle and whatever was supposed to be good in politics. The so-called secular parties are only mouthing slogans of secularism but have no commitment to the principles of secularism. They are not building any institutions for secular activities whereas the so-called communal elements are building their institutions. For people corruption is a more serious issue than communalism and they want to get their problems solved. Neither only secularism nor only communalism will provide the basic requirements of life to the poor and the deprived sections of our society”.

Mr. Y.J. Rajendra (Working with the slum dwellers in Bangalore, Karnataka): “The Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF) is a civil society organisation in Bangalore and is

shrinking the democratic space for the deprived and the slum dwellers of Bangalore. BATF invites all the stakeholders to plan for the improvement of Bangalore city and for them the stakeholders are only big government organisations and other big organisations. They come together and decide the fate of the poor and the deprived without even taking their opinion. Organisations like BATF are not increasing the participation of the ordinary citizens and are hence shrinking the political space for the poor and the deprived”.

Sri Ram: In response to Rajendra’s comment that BATF like organisations are in no way expanding the democratic space for the citizens. He said, “After living in Bangalore for more than 15 years, I never knew who the corporator or other elected representatives were but with the help of a civil society organisation now I am taking part in the activities of my area. Many citizens like me have started taking part in their areas activities and even if they are from the elite background the fact is that the participation of citizens in democratic activities has increased and it is wrong to suggest that BATF type civil society organisation are shrinking the democratic space. In my view this increasing participation of citizens is a positive development for democracy”.

Prof. K. Srinivasulu (Teaches Political Science at Nizam College, Osmania University, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh): “The question of expanding or shrinking of the democratic space can also be seen from the fact of how tolerant is the political regime to protest and dissent. Around 30 years ago those who organised protests against the regime in Hyderabad were able to organise protests in the heart of Hyderabad city but today the protesting people are given a space at the margin of the city away from the public gaze. We should not limit ourselves to electoral participation but rather to what extent it is possible for the participation of people in the policy formulation process. Does the government involve people in its policy formulation? Dalit NGO organisations get massive international funds and under the shadow of these dalit NGOs the true people oriented dalit organisations are unable to stand”.

Mr. Y. Siddaiah (Farmers leader from Andhra Pradesh and President of Chittoor Zilla Rythu Samakhya): “Regarding the vote bank politics of political parties. These parties are interested only in counting votes even at the cost of merit. For example in the case of reservations for dalits this was originally meant only for 10 years. For democracy to survive we should work and think about all sections of our society. The poor from the so-called upper castes should not be ignored while distributing the share of development”.

Dr. C. Lakshamanan (Dalit activist and Faculty member, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, Tamil Nadu): “Before the 1990’s dalits were hiding their caste identity and were always trying to hide that they belonged to the scheduled castes but there was a sea of change in the 1990’s when dalits started revealing their caste in the public fora and started asserting their identity and rights as dalits. There is a threat to democracy from the culture of hypocrisy where we say one thing and do another. Prior to the 1990’s there was some amount of tolerance and scope for negotiation between different communities and ethnic groups. After the 1990’s caste, religion and ethnicity have become more important and the levels of tolerance within different groups and communities is going down’.

Prof. Ravivarma Kumar (Leading advocate of the Karnataka High Court and Chairman of Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes from December, 1997 to December 2000. He is actively involved in Dalit and Backward Class movements and is a source of inspiration for the deprived sections in Karnataka): “The so-called civil society groups like BATF are shrinking the democratic space and becoming extra constitutional power centres. People can remove the elected representative in the next elections if they find they are not up to the mark but who will remove these extra constitutional power centres like BATF”.

Mr. Y.J. Rajendra (Working with the slum dwellers in Bangalore, Karnataka): “BATF is controlling resources, elected people and information and is taking away the

democratic space from the deprived groups and converting it into a market led democracy where marginalized groups will be left to fend for themselves”.

Sri Ram: “If 24 percent slum dwellers need participation in the democratic process so does the 76 percent non-slum dwellers. If BATF or any other civil society organisation is creating space for people like me to participate in the democratic process it is expanding democracy and not shrinking it. There is scope for all types of citizen’s initiatives to improve the quality of life for the people and the quality of democracy. The organisations of slum dwellers should try to expand the democratic space for slum dwellers and the organisations of the posh colonies should expand the democratic space for their members. More citizen’s initiatives from whichever section it is coming means the expansion of democracy and not the shrinking of democracy”.

Mr. Durgam Subba Rao (Research Scholar also working among weavers in Andhra Pradesh he has written a number of articles on the plight of the weavers of Andhra Pradesh): “The people of Andhra Pradesh are suffering because of the policies of the government. When the policies are framed without the participation of the people these become problems rather than solutions. For example although Andhra Pradesh’s economy is agriculture oriented and more than 70 percent of its people are getting their livelihood from agricultural activities, the Vision 2020 statement of the state government which is a major policy document talks of the service sector being the biggest sector of the Andhra Pradesh economy by the year 2020. A large part of the agriculture workers of Andhra Pradesh are moving every year to Goa, Bombay and Gujarat in search of livelihoods. The Vision 2020 of the government of Andhra Pradesh has nothing much to offer to the 70 percent of those who are presently dependent on agriculture for their livelihood’.

Prof. Peter R. deSouza (Professor Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi): “With regard to the debate between YJ Rajendra and Sri Ram on whether certain civil society organisations are expanding or shrinking the democratic space and how and when these civil society groups become extra constitutional power

centres, the initiative of decentralised democracy under the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution are very important and cannot be replaced or bypassed by any civil society group. Take for example, in Andhra Pradesh when the Janambhumi programme tried to take away certain programmes of the Gram Sabha, people went on hunger strikes and there was a big protest. The government had to restore those programmes to the Gram Sabha. It is just not possible that the Bangalore Municipal Corporation's functions can easily be taken over by any civil society groups like BATF. According to me if more and more citizens are involved in the political process it is a sign of expansion of democracy”.

Prof. Valerian Rodrigues (Professor of Political Science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi): “Not mere negative things are happening due to citizen's initiatives but there are also positive outcomes and if citizen's initiatives are coming up, it is better. In what sense citizen's initiatives are justified and what role these public initiatives need to play is a matter of further discussion”.

With these concluding remarks Prof. Rodrigues ended the first day's dialogue.

Day Two, 7th December, 2004

Session I (9:30 am to 10:30 am)

On the second day of the dialogue Ms. BM Leela Kumari, a dalit activist from Guntur (Andhra Pradesh) chaired the first session in which Prof. Peter deSouza introduced the topic for the day.

Ms. Hasnat Mansur (Working among Muslim women in Karnataka): “I am not happy with democracy and have some reservations about democracy in India. We are only shouting slogans of democracy such as democracy for the people, by the people and of the people. These are only slogans and nothing more in India. Humanity has survived for thousands of years prior to the so-called advent of democracy in the world and will survive thousands of years more whether there is democracy or not. Democracy is fast becoming a tool in the hands of international oppressors and exploiters and their local stooges to keep the people deprived. The net result of democracy in India is that a majority of Indians are forced to live the life of sub-human beings without even the basic

requirements for a dignified human existence. We could build nuclear weapons in a short span of time but are unable to meet the basic requirements of life for our people in the last 55 years of democracy. I was also not happy with the observation of some people that 55 years is not a sufficient period to judge democracy. The average life span in India is only around 60 years and if democracy cannot change the lives of its people during their life span, what is the use of this democracy for the people who have only 60 years of life? If democracy cannot achieve the right to live with human dignity to a majority of its people it is of no use for them". She also spoke about the plight of Muslims and how they are being discriminated socially economically and politically.

Session II (11:00 am to 12:30)

This was the last session of the dialogue and was chaired by Prof. Hassan Mansur.

Mr. V.T. Rajshekar (Editor of Dalit Voice for the last 23 years): "Eternal vigilance is required to keep democracy on rail. Democracy can be a success in a nation state but in India where there are different nationalities democracy can be used by vested interests to their favour and against the socially and economically deprived sections. Democracy in a country like India can be of any use only if all nationalities are represented in the power structure as per their population. Although all citizens are equal according to the constitution, we know with our own experiences of the last 55 years regarding the working of democracy, how citizens are being discriminated in India because of their religion, caste and class. Dr. Ambedkar wanted to have separate electorates for dalits. Even during British rule there were separate electorates for Muslims, Christians, dalits and backwards etc. Separate electorate is a must for India because of the prevalence of the caste system. Although people in slums go to cast their votes in larger numbers compared to those living in posh areas, the condition of slums in Indian cities are such that these are like a living hell on earth. On the other hand elites from posh colonies do not cast their

votes but still have all the civic amenities. The poor peoples' votes are purchased by offering sarees, drinks and money. Poor people are kept poor and illiterate so that they can be used as vote banks by political operators”.

Mr. K. Rajendra Reddy (Farmers leader from Andhra Pradesh and Convenor of Rashtriya Raithu Seva Samithi): “On the whole Indian democracy is on the right track. People voted for a stable government at the centre for the first 30 years (till 1977). They voted out Indira Gandhi when she imposed the emergency and suspended the fundamental rights of the citizens. They crowned N.T. Ramarao in 1983 and when he was dismissed by the Governor of Andhra Pradesh, people came out openly against the removal of N.T. Ramarao and brought him back as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Only with a small majority of votes a party can form the government, which is not good for a healthy democracy. There is a need for proportional representation. The mafia is fast emerging in politics and is influencing the entire society. There is a need to get rid of mafia politics. There is a need also to impart such education that makes good and disciplined citizens. There is a need for compulsory military training to overcome the deficiencies in our society. Although two-thirds of India's population live in villages and get their livelihood from agriculture related activities they get less than one third of the nation's income, whereas those living in cities and get their livelihood from non agricultural activities make up around one third of the nation's population but they get almost two-thirds of the nation's income. No step has been taken in the past 55 years of democratic rule in India to remedy this inequality”.

Dr. M. Johnson Samuel (Faculty member of the Centre for Rural Management, Kottayam, Kerala): “Democratic rights are important but we should also know how to produce cake. Production in the economy is also as important as democratic rights. Is it possible to increase production of goods and services in a democratic decentralised way so that there is enough, at least for the basic requirement of life, for all citizens?”

Ms. B.M. Leela Kumari (Dalit activist and research scholar from Andhra Pradesh, and member of the Task Force National Federation of Dalit women): “We have seen one face of Andhra Pradesh when our friend from Andhra spoke on the plight of farmers, now I will show you the other face of Andhra. The dalits of 52 villages of Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh have never seen any democracy and were never allowed to vote till 1999. In 1999 we compiled a list of these people who were denied the right to vote in the first 52 years of Indian democracy and met different officials including the police. They could cast their votes for the first time in 1999. Similarly when around 200 women voters, basically dalit and from the minority community living on the national highway, went to cast their votes they were told that their votes have already been given and they need not bother. This is the condition of democracy in India where certain sections of our people are not allowed even the right to vote”.

Mr. Raju Thomas (Dalit activist from Tamil Nadu and presently running the Ambedkar Centre for Social Action): “The problem with the intellectuals and experts is that they do not use the right language and the most appropriate vocabulary, which leads to confusion. Without identifying the enemies of democracy that is those who are against equality, liberty and fraternity, a majority of the deprived citizens like dalits, OBC's, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs, will never have faith in this democracy”.

Dr. C. Lakshamanan (Dalit activist and Faculty member, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, Tamil Nadu): “The oppressed and depressed citizens of India have started asserting their rights and are fighting for them, this can be said to be a positive contribution of democracy in India. But equality before the law and the rule of law are the two basic ingredients of democracy that are lacking in India. Even the freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and other fundamental rights are selectively given to some and denied to a majority of the people. There is a law that minimum wages be given to agricultural labourers and other daily wage labour but this law is not being implemented. When a few years back, some people organised the workers of Mancholai Estate (Tamil Nadu) for increase in their wages because at the time the wages were Rs. 2

per day, 18 people were killed by the police in broad daylight. This happened in a state where political power is controlled by the non-brahmin movement for the past 60 years. A graphic detail about this struggle of the workers is given in a film called 'Death of a River'. Democracy also needs a scientific temper, which was correctly pointed out by Dr. Shoba. Scientific temper means rational behaviour or rationality, but our elected leaders are donating elephants to the temples and are opening Vedic colleges in the age of information technology. In this age of information technology a school teacher blinded a student when she drank a glass of water from the mud pot because she was an untouchable. Untouchability is practised in the villages every day and we are blind to that. Democracy and caste based discriminations cannot go together”.

Dr. Ms. Shoba Devi (Senior Consultant on education and training from Karnataka. Working with different organisations on issues of education for all and the right to information): “Some people spoke about ethics and democracy. Mr Reddy also spoke about the need for building a good society, which is also a democratic society. My response to that is that youngsters must have mandatory military service. But in our country the army service is completely voluntary whereas in Europe and in many other countries, if one is 18 years old then one has to be a part of the military service. Those who do not want to join the military can go for social service for a period of 3 years. This builds discipline. We must not necessarily denigrate what comes out of scientific knowledge. We have to keep in mind that whatever is positive about any technology must be utilised”.

Mr. V.T. Rajshekar (Editor Dalit Voice for the last 23 years): “We can pat our own backs saying that in other countries military service is compulsory but in our country it is voluntary. I have made a study of all the armed units in India and we should know that recruitment in Indian military is caste based. We have a Maratha Regiment, Rajput Regiment, Mahar Regiment and Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, etc (the later two for untouchables). There is no upper caste regiment because they are not a martial race and because they are vegetarian. The backward castes and dalits are non-vegetarian and are

considered martial races. There is no regiment for the upper caste and they give this as a reason to avoid compulsory recruitment”.

Mr. M. Venkataswamy (Dalit activist, Samata Sainik Dal (SSD) Karnataka): Spoke about the problems created by liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation for the dalits and backwards classes. He said, “Who are the people backing Information Technology and computers. It is the brahmins who are getting the most out of these things. If democracy really means something for the dalits, tribals, backward castes and the very poor, it should help them to come out of the age-old banishment and bring them to the socio-economic and political mainstream of the nation. Democracy in India has failed to provide social justice to the deprived sections of Indian society”.

Mr. Y.J. Rajendra (Working with the slum dwellers in Bangalore, Karnataka): “Democracy has failed to create enough opportunity for the poor and the deprived although on paper there are rights for them. For example the National Slum Policy created opportunities for slum dwellers and the State Housing Policy took away the opportunity created by the National Slum Policy. This is what is happening in Indian democracy. A set of people says they are providing lots of opportunities for the deprived and another set of people keep controlling the opportunity provided on paper. In the name of democratic decentralisation the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were passed to create Gram Sabhas in villages and Ward committees in cities to empower common people in villages and cities but these are just slogans either to catch some votes or get money from the World Bank or some such thing. There is no quantification of the contribution of the labouring class in the production of goods and services. The ministries are quantifying the contribution of the corporate sector in terms of the number of people employed etc. and their contribution is highlighted but not that of the labouring class. One more thing to be noted is that there are fundamental rights and directive principles of state policy which encourage the state to ensure proper distribution of wealth but these constitutional provisions are not being implemented and the nation’s resources are used not to sub serve the common good of the society but in reality the wealth of the nation

and the means of production is concentrated in a few hands. In the past fifty-five years of democracy no legislation has been passed to ensure distribution of wealth and national resources with which the deprived sections of Indian society can have the right to live with human dignity. Only around 34 percent of the capacity of total human labour of women is utilised. The concept of a welfare state is there in the constitution but it was never ever implemented. Almost 26 percent of the people in cities are living in slums who mainly belong to the dalit, backward class and minority categories but where is their share in the budget? We are now becoming a market-oriented democracy where technocrats and bureaucrats are managing the democracy. Under market democracy the poor and deprived will further get marginalized”.

Mr. G.L. Janardhana (Socio-political activist, living and working in a village situated around 70 km. from Bangalore. Involved in the activities of Samata Vidyalaya): “In the name of development and progress a lot of things are being done but nothing has changed for the deprived sections. Without drastic changes in the system it is difficult to bring about real democracy, development and progress to the doors of the poor and the deprived. We have to think of an alternative path of development and progress which will really result in the welfare of the people, especially those who are deprived, poor and weak”.

Mr. Paul Parackal (Advocate from Kerala. Vice President of the National Federation of Construction Workers and National Centre for Labour): “Bad legislation and bad administration can only be done away with when people are aware and have real power which they can express through their representative. But the political parties nominate our representatives and once they are in the legislative house they are at the dictates of the political parties. They have to follow the whips of their parties and have to vote and speak according to the whips of their party. So actually there is a party rule and not the people’s rule which is being implemented in the name of democracy. There is no democracy because there is no power we can exercise on our elected representatives and our elected representatives. Once elected they are more in the service

of their party high command or party bosses than the people, because they know if the party bosses are not happy they will be denied upward mobility in the power structure and if they are in the service of the voters they may not even get a party ticket to contest elections. So there is a need to replace the power of the party on the elected representative with the power of the electorate. I do not know whether it is viable or not but it has to be done in the present circumstances. So either the political parties should be honest and represent the people or the present system should be changed”.

Mr Basavaraj Kautal (Dalit activist): “Feudalism still prevails in our villages. Violence is galore in our countryside, in our villages and even in a nearby town Hoskote that is very near Bangalore city. The state and landowners are party to this violence and murder against the weaker sections. The jobs meant for dalits have been deliberately put away and are not filled at all. I have collected lakhs of signatures of dalits who have not got land and the government says that there is no land available but when it comes to giving land to the big industries and the Information Technology industry there is land for them. In the many years of democracy, dalits are still on the receiving end and have to fight their battle on their own and the state is always on the other side”.

Mr. G.K.C. Reddy (Socio-political activist from Karnataka, formerly Editor Bangalore Eveninger): “Although a lot of money is being spent in the name of villages there still are no proper roads, there is hardly any electricity. Bore wells for drinking water are not working for most of the time and there are no health centres. Hospitals are miles away from their villages and in case of emergencies there is no reliable public transport system. The people have to spend a lot of money to reach the hospitals. How much money is being taken away from the villages directly or indirectly through taxes etc. and how much money is being really spent for the development in the villages? Every government is city oriented and our development pattern is also city-oriented. When around 70 percent of the people in India live in villages why are our rulers not spending 70 percent of the government’s funds for the development of villages? City slums are there because villages are not getting their due share in the present development process.

In the absence of development and due to a lack of livelihood, poor people are migrating to the cities and creating slums. People are talking about connecting Ganga-Cauvery, which will involve hundreds of thousands of crores of rupees and create environmental problems. It will help politicians, contractors and bureaucrats to amass wealth whereas small irrigation projects can solve the drinking and irrigation water problems in India”.

Prof. Hassan Mansur (President of Peoples Union of Civil Liberty, Karnataka):

Prof. Hassan Mansur concluded the session, which was the last session of the dialogue and said that there was a need to discuss why democracy failed to promote the right to live with human dignity to a majority of Indian citizens. He said, “Maybe we can talk about the challenges before democracy or why it failed to provide dignified human existence to a majority of Indians in the panel discussion in the evening”.

After the session a film was screened on the struggle of a village in Kerala against the illegal sand mining from the riverbed by contractors working in connivance with the administration and police.

----- END OF DIALOGUE -----

List of dialogue participants arranged alphabetically by family name

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