

State of Democracy in South Asia

**NATIONAL DIALOGUE
ON
GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY**

Delhi

Date: 24 November 2006

Venue: Conference Hall, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

Delhi

The *State of Democracy in South Asia* National Dialogue was held on Friday, 24th November, 2006 in the Conference Hall of *Centre for the Study of Developing Societies* (CSDS), Delhi. This dialogue was jointly organized by *Lokniti: Programme for Comparative Democracy*, CSDS & *Lokayan*, Delhi. The dialogue aimed at discussing the changing attitudes towards democracy in South Asia. While the participants were free to express their opinions on various issues concerning democracy, the dialogue mainly focussed on the following issues in the South Asian region:

- What democracy means to common people?
- What is the level of support for democracy among the citizens?
- To what extent has democracy been able to deliver?
- The problems and challenges for democracy?

The meeting started with **Mr. Rajendra Ravi**, convenor of *Lokayan*, welcoming the participants to the dialogue. He encouraged them to speak about their experiences on grassroots democracy. Then Mr. Sanjay Kumar, of *Lokniti*, introduced CSDS and *Lokniti* to the participants. He said that the organization, through its projects, looks at democracy and politics from the lens of figures. All our research is empirically grounded. The project SDSA is an amalgamation of thoughts on democracy in South Asia. Some of the main points of SDSA are democracy, human security, economy etc. Quoting some of the basic findings of SDSA Sanjay Kumar said that the people of South Asia had a great level of trust in democracy and democratic institutions like judiciary, election commission etc. More than 70% of the people thought that their vote mattered. In terms of security, the South Asian population is not as worried about international security, as they may be worried about their personal security. On the economic front, most people are satisfied with their present economic condition. And when asked if they expected to have a better future, a majority of them gave a positive response.

Prof. D.L.Sheth, (Academic/Faculty CSDS), chaired the first session. He emphasised the importance of democracy and acknowledged that for countries like Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal, democracy is a question of life and death. Democracy cannot be understood by figures and aggregates, that is why we have dialogues. Though the phrase 'state of democracy' is not strong, there is a need to assess the health of democracy. We need to gauge the deepening of democracy, the expansion of democracy, and decipher how democracy will work better. After 60 years of independence, there is no alternative to democracy. The debate of either bread or liberty is very old. It is democracy itself with the above-mentioned features, which should be debated. We should talk about the weaknesses/ limitations of democracy and how we can improve it and make it productive.

Discussing democracy as a process, Prof. Sheth felt that democracy had in the recent times, become an ideology and in every state it was being exported and implemented forcefully. It has become an avengeric movement. Abhay Dubey (Academic/Faculty CSDS) endorsed that democracy was slowly turning into a revolutionary movement, a democracy v/s non-democracy movement. Prof. Sheth distinguished between direct democracy and the nation-state democracy. He said the indirect democracy is more

representative and liberal. However, the Indian democracy is not so democratic. 'We need to make it more representative. When elected the leaders should work according to the electors' decision. Reforms are needed in terms of proportional representation. Parties are based on caste and community these days. They are not of the people. The party system, electoral system, the community system needs change.'

One of the participants questioned the relationship between democracy and development. He was concerned about the extent to which displacement was justified in the name of development. Why people from the lower class, living in a place for many years, were thrown 40 kms. away, in an area with no electricity and water, in the name of development. Rajendra Ravi felt that in the era of decentralisation 'institutions are being made undemocratic. Decisions are taken on behalf of the democratically elected governments. There is no accountability.' Another person said that the agricultural land was being used for SEZ and the labourers, farmers and small businessmen were the worst affected by such policies.

Raju, a worker from *Yuva*, Mumbai, believed that development today was a 'people's vision v/s the corporate vision' phenomenon. 'The city is being planned for the next 10 years by private bodies and state government controlled authorities. There is no citizen involvement. The government and opposition take similar stands on so many positions. For example the cloth farmer movement was going fine till the time its leaders joined politics. Then the farmers lost out and committed suicide. The wealth and power always seem to win in elections. There should be empowerment of people.'

Another participant from Rajasthan believed that it was a joke to be sitting in a democratic country and discussing about democracy. 'Dhirubhai Ambani's sons make the education policies and the parliament is silent. IMF and WB are making our economic policies. It is a celebration for villagers to cast their vote, but policies are made against them. There is a high cost to maintain the parliament but there is no discussion on issues in parliament. Rivers have been sold and water has been privatized. We choose an MP during election and not a party. The main issues get lost in the parliament. There is booth capturing during elections. The upper middle class and the educated people don't even cast their votes. At the policy level, there is no participation of people in the main issues.'

As important conclusion, which came out of this debate, was that one of the main problems with democracy not having accountability towards the people was that the elites, corporate and the government class have cut the decision-making and the decision-making techniques from the people. Another *Lokayan* member, **Vandana** commented, 'If we say that we have 52 cards with us, we have exhausted all the ways in which these cards can be played. We have no alternative from these. We need to add a 53rd card to it for something new.'

One thing, which all the participants seemed to agree on, was that there was no scheme of government better than democracy. But that democracy constantly needs to alter and re-invent itself. Leadership and bureaucracy are the main concepts in a democracy.

Unfortunately the acts in parliament are made for the bureaucracy to rule and not to serve/ help the people.

Discussing about the role of India in the democratic process of South Asia, participants from Nepal, and Myanmar felt that India should support the democratic movement in these countries.

Concluding the session, Prof. D.L.Sheth said ‘an alternative to democracy is democracy itself. The more the power is at the local level and there is local democracy the better. We need to discuss and debate again, the essays of J.P and M.N.Roy, and the concept of Gandhi’s ‘*swaraj*’, in the local democracy context. This is because, after globalisation the nation-state’s power has become quite less. We cannot figure out where the strings are being pulled from. Since the state is not so central as in the 19th and 20th century, the values of democracy are different. We need to consider, how to improve democratic institutions like elections, political parties etc. because majoritarianism is not democracy. The poor people are now the new majority. The Dalits, Muslims, Adivasi, OBC etc. if we conduct a survey of all these, then probably only 10% poor will not belong to these categories. We also need to consider how can we join/ become a part of the neighbouring countries’ struggle for democracy, play an important part and still not be hegemonic.’

The list of participants for the dialogue-

1. Ms. Deepika D'souza
2. Sh. Ramsujan Amar
3. Sh. Lalit Batra
4. Sh. Tarun Bose
5. Sh. Radheshyam Mangolpuri
6. Sh. Arun Bhandari
7. Ms. Rajrani
8. Ms. Darshana
9. Sh. Nanu Prasad Gupta
10. Sh. Ramanand
11. Sh. Subhash Gatade
12. Ms. Anjali Sinha
13. Sh. Bhupender Singh Rawat
14. Sh. P.K. Sahi
15. Sh. Prashant Singh
16. Ms. Ninglun
17. Sh. C.M. Mehrat
18. Sh. Himanshu Upadhyaya
19. Sh. Harsh Dobhal
20. Ms. Vandana Bhartiya
21. Sh. Dhananjay Kumar
22. Ms. Smita Snehi
23. Sh. Jitendra Prasad

24. Ms. Anvita Anand
25. Ms. Anita Kapoor
26. Sh. Naresh Sharma
27. Sh. Arjun Singh
28. Sh. Lalremlien Neitham

Rajasthan

1. Sh. Ashok Mathur

Haryana

1. Sh. Dilip Singh Toofan

Mumbai

1. Sh. Raju Bhise

Himachal Pradesh

1. Sh. Lalchand Dhisa

Bihar

1. Sh. Vijay Kumar

Uttrakhand

1. Ms. Subhali Devi
2. Sh. Jabra Rana

Uttar Pradesh

1. Sh. Charan Singh Sisodia

Bhutan

1. Sh. Mohan Tamang
2. Sh. Ram C.Sigdel
3. Sh. P.L.Gurung (former National Assembly member, Bhutan)
4. Ms.Tara Makarung
5. Sh. N.K.koirala
6. Sh.Bhuwan Gautam