

Lokniti Newsletter

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EDITORIAL

Hello once again!

Besides updates on the *State of Democracy in South Asia* (SDSA) project, and events organised by Lokniti, you will find, in this issue of the Lokniti newsletter, some summaries of the case studies that have been commissioned and dialogues that have been organised as a part of the SDSA project.

Do visit our website www.lokniti.org for further information.

With best wishes,
Edzia Carvalho

‘STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA’

Cross-national Survey

The findings of the attitudinal survey component of the ‘State of Democracy in South Asia’ that was conducted in Nepal have been published in *State of Democracy in Nepal: Survey Report*. The Report has sought to provide an understanding of the perceptions of the respondents of the working of democracy in Nepal, levels of awareness of and participation in the functioning of democracy, perceptions of the role of ethnicity and minority in the lives of the respondents, and the like.

The fieldwork for the survey in Sri Lanka has been completed and is in progress in Pakistan.

In India the survey has just begun and is likely to be completed in all the states by 25th December. Three training workshops were conducted to train investigators for the attitudinal survey in India. Two workshops were held from the 5th to the 7th of November, one in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala by Prof. Sandeep Shastri for field investigators in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and the other in Guwahati, Assam by Prof. V. B. Singh for field investigators in Orissa and the Northeast. The training workshop for investigators in northern India and in Maharashtra and Gujarat was held in Delhi from the 8th to the 10th of November 2004 and was conducted by Mr. Sanjay Kumar.

The workshop for the training of the field investigators for the survey in Bangladesh was conducted in Dhaka on the 23rd and the 24th of November 2004. Prof Yogendra Yadav and Dr. Dwaipan Bhattacharya joined the SDSA country co-ordinator Prof Imtiaz Ahmad and his team in conducting this workshop. The survey in Bangladesh will commence in the first week of December.

Qualitative Assessment

The following papers on the *Qualitative Assessment of Democracy in Nepal* have been received:

- ‘Design of Democracy in Nepal’ by Mihir Thakur,
- ‘Working of Democracy in Nepal’ by Mukta Lama Singh,
- ‘Future of Democracy in Nepal’ by Krishna Khanal

Case Studies

A brief summary of three case studies that have been commissioned under the SDSA project follows:

- Prof. Errol D’Souza, India: *Collusion in Government and Corruption*
The case study looks at the impact of corruption on political institutions. The conventional thinking has been that political institutions are sets of rules that regulate behaviour in certain ways. These ways are governed by the principles of fairness, impartiality, universality, etc. Corruption as a phenomenon, it is held, undermines

such principles since it seeks to give unfair advantage to the corrupt. Institutions that are infected by corruption are regarded as malfunctioning, the deviation rather than the norm and hence repair and restoration is possible if the infection is addressed. However the magnitude, spread, and frequency of corruption in our polity have made corruption appear more like the norm than the deviant. This raises a whole set of issues about trust and political institutions. The study hopes to address the question of whether the institution, which is already in the public realm, remains true to its design objectives in circumstances that bring about rampant corruption.

➤ Mr. Kanak Mani Dixit, Nepal: *The Monarchy in a Democracy: The Case of Nepal*

The case study looks at the centrality of the Monarchy in Nepal. It examines the debates around monarchy and democracy --- figurehead, nominal, constitutional, executive --- and their relevance for South Asia today especially with the return of monarchies in many of the newly emerging democracies in Europe. It seeks to revisit some of these issues, which range from the symbolic to the institutional in a case study of the changing and contested character of the monarchy in Nepal. It also examines the role of the institution and whether it is exacerbating or assuaging the current political uncertainty in Nepal.

Announcements

Two new case studies have been commissioned:

- Mr. Hari Prasad Bhattarai, Nepal: *Citizen Without Citizenship*
- Dr. A. Bimol Akoijam, India: *Extraordinary Powers in a Democracy: The Armed Forces Special Powers Act*

➤ Dr. Kumari Jayawardena, Sri Lanka: *Dynasties and Democracy: The Family in Politics in Sri Lanka and South Asia*

The case study looks at the issue of ‘families and dynastic politics’ in a South Asian democracy. The conventional response is to see it as an aberration, things that ‘grown up’ democracies do not do. This we know to be untrue. In South Asia, the dynastic family in politics is an increasing tendency with sons, daughters, wives, sisters, etc., all achieving power through the democratic process. If the role of the family in politics has grown then perhaps we need to look at the family differently not as nepotism but as ‘social capital’ for both the representative and the represented, where the latter sees the family as an asset that s/he can turn to in a situation of uncertainty. This, while it gives certain benefits to members of prominent families, also places obligations on them to meet the expectations of the family supporters. So unpacking and evaluating what are the components of this ‘social capital’ is an important exercise. The power of the family in politics in South Asia does not allow us to treat it as an aberration. If it does not fit in well with democratic theory then perhaps we may need to change the theory.

Dialogues

The following dialogues were held in the month of November under the SDSA project:

- A dialogue on *Democracy and Human Security* was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 24th November 2004.
- A dialogue on *Democracy and Human Security* was held in Pokhara, Nepal on the 27th and the 28th of November 2004.

A brief summary of the report of the national dialogue on *Democracy in India* held on 15-16 April 2004 in Delhi, India follows:

The Dialogue was divided in three broad themes to facilitate a focussed discussion. These three themes or topics were: (1) Promise and Design of Democracy (2) Working of Democracy in India and (3) Outcomes and Futures of Democracy in India.

Many speakers felt that the promise of democracy in India lay in its promise of equality before the law. Democracy could not work in a society that believed in graded inequality and treated one section as subhuman. Others equated democracy with people's power. Another fundamental feature of democracy that was enumerated was the freedom of expression and religious faith given to its adherents. Democracy also provided for the accountability of the rulers to the people. It was widely felt that although the Indian democratic system could not achieve what was expected from it, yet democracy was better than any other system of governance.

The working of democracy was viewed as having had some positive impact as well as having been largely ineffective in improving the existential conditions of the large majority of India's citizens. Most speakers presented quite a cynical view of the working of democracy. They alluded to corruption, caste and communalism that had entered Indian politics. One speaker pointed out that democracy in India had failed to take root because of brahminism, which was the ideology of the ruling class and which was against equality and fraternity. Another presenter spoke on the situation of the dalits in Punjab who were being denied their rights by the manipulation of the democratic system that was supposed to protect and uphold their rights. Subsidies meant to benefit farmers were being misused by big farmers. Dalit sarpanches of the panchayats were being harrassed and humiliated. Dalits and other vulnerable groups did not take recourse to the justice system when serious crimes committed against them for fear of reprisals from the powerful upper castes and dominant groups. The graded inequality of the caste system had also resulted in discriminatory practices among dalit groups.

Although the unorganized sector comprised a majority of India's workforce, they had been denied the basic benefits due to a worker. Further, only a handful of workers belonging to the organised sector had been given these benefits.

The speakers also spelt out the realities of the functioning of the institutions of democracy in India. Most of these democratic institutions helped and promoted the interests of the rich and the powerful. It was pointed out that the Indian constitution was the result of the class character of the members of the Constituent Assembly. This was the reason that primary rights like the right to live, the rights to food and employment, etc., were not guaranteed as fundamental rights. Thus even after more than five decades of the existence of constitution and democratic rule, people in India were still dying of starvation and easily preventable diseases etc. People's power had been subverted by the representative democracy that we have adopted. Citizens were only as important as their potential for voting for a candidate whom they had no voice in nominating every five

years. The logistics and resources involved in campaigning for election entailed that only a small fraction of Indian citizens had the capacity to contest an election.

Attention was also directed towards the functioning of panchayats in the country. Democracy could not be strengthened if panchayats, which were considered to be the basic unit of our democracy, remained weak. It was suggested that village panchayats should be given the right to make decisions on the infrastructure they need as well as the financial resources to implement these decisions.

It was pointed out that there was a total lack of democracy in the structure of political parties in India. Parties were being run like a private enterprise and the lack of accountability of the top leaders of the parties was a common feature of almost all political parties.

The practice of democracy has destroyed our common resources and natural resources. Chemical fertilizers, pesticides and fungicides use to promote the Green Revolution in Punjab has had an adverse impact on the water, soil and other natural resources of the state.

Democratic institutions were being misused to deny the poor and downtrodden their right to live with human dignity. The solution proposed was direct democracy, where people can directly represent themselves, and the role of political parties should be minimised.

On the other hand, some speakers enumerated the spaces provided by democracy for protest and alternative solutions. It was felt that although democracy in India was not perfect, still dalits and poor enjoyed the right to receive education, shelter and property and were in a better position today under democratic system. Although Indian democracy had many weaknesses, it was through democracy that Indians were able to change rulers frequently in the past three decades. Many movements in the past such as the dalit movement, peasants' movement, working class movement, women's movement, etc. had been used by the political parties for their own ends and agenda. There was a need to evolve a cosmopolitan agenda that cuts across regions, religions and castes, etc. to give teeth to these movements.

Some speakers felt that the wrongs in India's democratic system were not because of the system of democracy but because of the people who were running this system. Therefore there was a need for political activists to work among the deprived sections of our society and to fight for their rights which they were entitled to under a democratic system. It was also felt that the relationship between the cultural understanding of democracy and religious notions of democracy needed to be understood.

A few speakers pointed out the importance to hold on to spiritual faith and trust in democracy and to try to find solutions to the problems and the way to improve the content of Indian democracy. The future of democracy can be safeguarded by converting representative democracy to people's democracy, by abolishing the special position of

political parties, by curbing the role of money in our democracy and by state funding for the elections.

EVENTS AT LOKNITI

Projects Undertaken

A **cross sectional survey** for the state of Jharkhand was designed, co-ordinated and analysed by Mr. Sanjay Kumar and conducted by *Prabhat Khabar*. This survey was conducted on the lines of the Delhi survey that had been conducted by Lokniti in 2003. The findings of the survey were published in *Prabhat Khabar*.

Announcements

A special issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* dated 18th December 2004 will be published containing articles based on the data generated by the *National Election Survey 2004* conducted by Lokniti in May 2004.

Events Organised

A National **Seminar on ‘Democracy’s Marginal Citizens’** was organised by Lokniti on 19th and 20th of November 2004 at CSDS, Delhi. The purpose of the seminar was to foreground the existential conditions of sections within the citizenry who are living at the margins and who, because of their marginality, are unable to enjoy the promise of 'equal citizenship'. While the source of their marginality is the social structure it is assumed that democracy promises to diminish it, to make it a concern of political authority. In India this does not seem to have adequately happened. Democracy, it can be argued, has once again been co-opted by the visible and the able, attending more to the needs of the powerful and successful than to the marginal. The seminar had papers on the following groups of marginal citizens: slum dwellers, undertrials, the displaced, riot victims, rickshaw pullers, migrant workers, the elderly, the urban homeless, street children, the differently abled, vulnerable Muslim women, domestic workers, commercial sex workers, sanitary workers, citizens without place: the nowhere people of the north east, and widows. The seminar sought to remind democracy of the moral obligations that flow from the promise of equal citizenship and thereby to bring the marginal citizens more emphatically into the democratic discourse.

A **dialogue** on *Democracy: Dialogue Between Activists and Academicians on Questions of Regional Imbalance, Ethnicity and Language in the North Bengal Region of the Indian State of West Bengal* was held on the 26th and 27th November 2004 at Jaipaguri, West Bengal. The dialogue was organised by Lokniti in collaboration with Samata Kendra.

Recent Publications

- DeSouza, Peter R. ‘Democracy’s Inconvenient Fact’, *Seminar – Amchem Goem*, No. 543, November 2004.
- Kumar, Sanjay, ‘Jharkhand Election Survey: Special of Its Kind’ (in Hindi), and ‘How MLAs Have Been Graded’, (in Hindi), *Prabhat Khabar*, October 30, 2004

For Further Information

On our publications please visit our website at <http://www.lokniti.org/publications.htm>



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NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of the Lokniti newsletter will be issued in January 2005.

Suggested Reading

Bourdieu, Pierre et al. *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

Under the direction of Bourdieu, a team of sociologists spent three years analysing the new forms of social suffering that characterize contemporary societies – the suffering of those who are denied the means of acquiring a socially dignified existence, as well as the suffering of those who are poorly adjusted to the rapidly changing condition of their lives.

-- (The blurb)

In this study, Bourdieu has adopted a research method that goes beyond the established forms of empirical research, from ethnography to sociology and from the so-called questionnaire to the most open-ended interview. It is an interesting research strategy that runs counter to the established conventional wisdoms.

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