

Lokniti Newsletter

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IN THIS EDITION:

If you go to one demonstration and then go home, that's something, but the people in power can live with that. What they can't live with is sustained pressure that keeps building, organisations that keep doing things, people that keep learning lessons from the last time and doing it better the next time.

-Noam Chomsky

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EDITORIAL

Dear friends of Lokniti,

The entire Lokniti team in Delhi would like to wish each one of you a happy and, an intellectually and academically fulfilling year ahead.

As the year ended, the Indian political system found itself embroiled in much controversy, interesting among these were the two sting operations on the MPs. The sting operations invariably raised a hornets nest and brought to the fore discussion about the ethics of such under cover operations to the misuse of the Minister of Parliament Local Area Development (MPLAD) scheme and the cash for queries scam that indicated the new depths to which political corruption had sunk. Ironically, earlier this month, at a political dialogue held in Hyderabad, similar issues had come up for discussion. Former MLAs and civil society groups alike, agreed that the MPLAD scheme was a fraud and that since the MPs knew little about their vast constituency, the MPLAD scheme went to those who get a recommendation from those close to the MPs. The MPLAD scheme should therefore be scrapped, for it is a gross misuse of hundreds of crores of rupees from the public exchequer.

With best wishes,

Lillian D'Costa

'STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA'

The five country co-ordinators, the three principal investigators of the SDSA project, representative of International IDEA and others held a meeting in Oxford from 17th to 19th December '05. This meeting was held to review the chapters of the flagship report. The meeting was an opportunity to suggest clarifications and propose inclusions of hitherto excluded aspects of democratic functioning in the five South Asian countries.

Case Study

Below is a brief synopsis of the fourth case study done for the SDSA project.

'Local movements, political processes and transformation: a case study of Bhaktapur Municipality' has been written by Suresh Dhakal and Sanjeev Pokharel, both of whom take a critical look at the functioning of democracy in Nepal using the case of Bhaktapur.

At the very onset they write, 'if democracy is to be considered an environment which allows people to participate in the process of social and economic transformation and for achieving social progress and prosperity, it can be said that Nepalese people have not been able to experience democracy'. This is because no government has thus far spent time 'listening to the people about their desires, choices and priorities'. However the authors go on to cite the case of Bhaktapur Municipality, where the people 'have established social institutions through which they discuss

on and prioritize their choices, expectations and knowledge as part of their social planning'. 'By studying the transformation of the traditional city of Bhaktapur' the authors attempt 'to complicate and problematise the discourse on democracy'.

The people of Bhaktapur, were commonly believed to be dirty, with no knowledge on how to manage their waste; often dumping it in public places and creating an image of a city that is 'unchanging' and 'isolated'. Recently however, Bhaktapur has undergone a radical change from a *fohor sahar* (dirty city) to a *safa sahar* (clean city) and the authors attempt to carefully examine the political and economic reasons, which led to this change.

The *safa* movement in Bhaktapur was possible due to the presence of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN). The CPN popularized the *safa* movement for it offered an opportunity to spread the Communist ideology by locally organizing the people, during the autocratic Panchayat system when all political parties and their activities had been banned. The *safa* movement offered the CPN an opportunity to engage in political activity without fear of reprisal.

Besides the *safa* movement, Bhaktapur has also tasted success with the Land Reform Movement (Bhumisudhar Andolan). The implementation of land redistribution being spearheaded by the Bhaktapur Municipality; it led to the redistribution of land to the poor Jyapus and markedly improved their economic situation.

Another improvement to life in Bhaktapur was brought about by the Bhaktapur Development Project. This project worked for 20 years and besides heritage conservation, engaged in infrastructure development such as in the construction of roads and toilets, as well.

The last twenty years has also seen an increased participation of the local Jyapus in the Bhaktapur Municipality. However the movement that has won the highest acclaim is the *safai* movement, whose objectives have evolved into maintaining public health and attracting more tourists to Bhaktapur.

Another activity the Bhaktapur Municipality engaged in was education. The CPN initiated the Non-Formal Education Campaign with such positive results that the literacy rate was a comparative high of 74% in 2001. One of the main reasons for pushing for high literacy was for the implementation of the *safai* campaign itself. The *safai* of Bhaktapur in turn is much linked to attracting tourist as a sizable amount of the income of Bhaktapur comes from tourism.

Suresh Dhakal and Sanjeev Pokharel aptly conclude the case study by saying 'it is therefore important for a program of social transformation to be compatible with the constraints and opportunities faced by the people in their everyday lives. This is what motivates people to be both agents and beneficiaries of social changes. Hence, 'grass-root participatory democracy'- builds on indigenous political traditions, based on the tradition of voluntarism and self-help, and a spirit that extols the committed and total involvement of all the members of a community in the formulation and implementation of policies for the community's welfare'.

Events

A 'Dialogue on Political Parties in India' is a series of events, which are being held in different places of the country. The first of these Dialogues was held at Hyderabad on 2nd - 3rd December

'05. It was organized by IDEA, Lok Satta and Lokniti at the Administrative Staff College of Hyderabad. Present at the Dialogue were Lokniti State co-ordinators from the Southern States of India, politicians from prominent political parties and academicians involved in political study and research.

Besides the numerous inputs by well known personalities like Sri Pran Chopra and Justice Jeevan Reddy, the thrust of the two day Dialogue was on the broad issues of Party elections, Internal party processes, changing party systems and political and party reforms. In an effort to mull over these issues the participants were divided into focus groups where they spent time locating issues on their respective topics, current problems in the political system and offering possible solutions.

The plenary session threw up some interesting observations, such as, that political parties no longer represent the aspirations of the people, they lacked internal democracy and that their memberships were actually falling. On the other hand, it was observed that newer and once marginalized groups like the dalits were playing a greater role in the democratic processes of the country. Much debated was the role of the judiciary and the passing of numerous electoral legislations. Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan, director of Lok Satta was of the opinion that even though India had some of the best and most progressive electoral legislations in the world, they were little known and not being implemented. Both Dr. Narayan and Dr. Harsh Sethi argued that there is excessive judicial and legislative intervention, which is actually hindering rather than promoting a free democratic spirit. They argued that the solution lay in greater peoples participation, this would bring about transparency and accountability among political parties and democratize the political process in the country.

Lectures/ Talks and Seminars given

- Peter deSouza, lecture on 'Dalit discrimination and death: thinking about a case in Goa', at Daulat Ram College, 29th November 2005.
- Sanjay Kumar, paper presented on 'India Represents a case of Maturing Democracy', at a conference on Asian Political Cultures, organized by Shizuoka Asia- Pacific forum, Grandship, Shizuoka, Japan, 2nd to 4th December 2005.
- Sanjay Kumar, Panel discussion on 'How Bihar Voted', Saheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi, 8th December, 2005.
- Sanjay Kumar, Four lectures on Survey Research Techniques, Council for Social Development, (CSD), Lodhi Road, Delhi, 14th -15th December 2005.

Announcements

- Lokniti is abuzz and its co-ordinators in 29 states of the country are hard at work with the IBN-Lokniti survey 'state of the Nation', watch out for the results on the 24th - 25th January '06 on CNN-IBN.

Suggested Reading

Aditya Nigam, 2006, **The Insurrection of Little Selves**. The Crisis of Secular-Nationalism in India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi

Secular-nationalism, as the hitherto ruling ideology of the postcolonial Indian state and elite, represents a specific, historically constituted, ideological configuration. The 1980s witnessed the explosion of what is loosely called 'identity politics' and with it a crisis in the ideology. This book is the first to explicitly examine this.

With the emergence of new political assertions like feminism and Dalit politics on the one hand, and the rise of Hindu nationalism and other sectarian tendencies on the other, Nehruvian secular-nationalism revealed some of its deeply problematic features. Nigam argues that moments of crises have revealed that its latent assumptions are fundamentally Hindu. Further, its quest for a homogeneous national culture has led it, like other universalisms, to privilege the dominant and marginalize minority cultures.

The book takes a closer look at the phenomenon of the 'opportunism' of minority cultures – in the Indian context, the Dalit and the Muslim-and suggests that this might be the consequence of nationalism itself, especially of postcolonial nationalisms. For it is nationalism, which produces the 'minority problem' in the first place. Therefore, the book suggests that there is a need to think beyond the nation and conceive more modern political communities.

Blurb

Debates

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The topic for debate this month is, 'Are political parties representative of peoples aspirations or are they functioning like a law unto themselves'.

We request your opinions, which will be posted in the next newsletter.

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NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of the Lokniti newsletter will be in February 2006.



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