The Indian Commonsense of Democracy

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THREE reports published at the end of 2006 have some bearing on the theme of this paper. The first, the State of Democracy in South Asia put together by the CSDS-Lokniti team, recognizes that most commentaries on democracy in South Asia are expert-centric and mostly one-dimensional. It seeks to develop an understanding of democracy in the region by adopting four research pathways – the attitudinal survey, case study, qualitative analysis and dialogues. [1] The SDSA report shows that not only is democracy contributing to the transformation of South Asia but equally that South Asia is problematizing the dominant discourse of democracy by drawing attention to certain puzzles that emerge in the working of democracy and that need to be addressed. [2] In addition, it suggests that looking at 'people's aspiration' for democracy is as important for an assessment of democracy in a country as examining 'system attributes'. This aspiration needs to be examined in terms of the meaning that people give to democracy.

The second report, in contrast, prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit presents a single index of democracy where 167 countries are ranked on the basis of an overall score. [3] This is arrived at by scoring answers given to 60 questions (indicators) which are clustered into five attributes of democracy: (*i*) electoral processes and pluralism, (*ii*) functioning of government, (*iii*) political participation, (*iv*) democratic political culture, and (*v*) civil liberties. An aggregate score is then calculated. On the basis of this aggregated score countries are classified as full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.

As a result little Luxembourg, boisterous Brazil, and troubled Turkey, all find a place on the index ranked at 7, 42 and 88 respectively. France is placed behind Malta and the US as a full democracy. India is sandwiched between Italy and Botswana as a flawed democracy. In addition to the nagging question of who answers the questions and gives the score for each question (perhaps professors of political science) is the issue of the classification labels naming countries as 'full' and 'flawed', as if one was describing Himachal apples.

The third report was not about democracy. Prepared by the United Nations University and the World Institute for Development Economic Research (UNU-WIDER), the study of household wealth reported that 'the richest 1% of adults alone owned 40% of global assets in the year 2000, and that the richest 10% of adults accounted for 85% of the world total. In contrast, the bottom half of the world adult population owned barely 1% of global wealth.' [4] This wealth is heavily concentrated in North America, Europe and high income Asia-Pacific countries. The full democracies seem to be at peace with such a skewed distribution of the world's wealth. Is democracy good for wealth production or is it merely a cover for wealth accumulation, is a question that needs to be continually asked and answered.

But before doing so let me comment on the challenges of doing a report card on democracy in India. This is a task which is near impossible because the working of democracy in India is replete with conundrums which do not admit to easy judgment. There are both spectacular gains, and dismal failures, significant achievements in advancing 'political equality', and equally significant drawbacks in establishing 'political accountability'. Indian democracy has a mixed record not because it is 'flawed' but because it is 'in process', implying that the route the polity has taken by which it sets up the institutions, develops the cultural practices and grows the social mindsets required to achieve 'popular control' of power, is a route governed by its cultural and political history.

No polity is a completely 'consolidated' democracy since reverses do occur, and since the struggle between the market forces and the political process is always in a situation of an uneasy truce. Let me develop this reading, of the challenges of doing a report card, by discussing, through brief analytical sketches, four significant aspects of the polity on which it is difficult to arrive at an unambiguous judgment.

Let us first begin with the issue of 'economic well-being'. The recent reports of the Government of India show that the Indian economy has registered an impressive growth from 7.5% in 2004-05 to 9% in 2005-06 and that the percentage of persons below the poverty line has dropped from 36% in 1993-4 (URP based poverty estimate) to 27.8% in 2004-5.[5] While such accounts of 'India shining' have become the toast of the financial markets, and of successive governments, they are unable to accommodate the grim statistic that in the same period about 100,000 farmers committed suicide because of rural indebtedness and its multiplier effects. [6]

On the basis of the first statistic, on the reduction of those below the poverty line, one could reasonably argue that the success of Indian democracy in promoting economic well-being has been quite commendable. Yet the second statistic requires us to hold such a judgment in abeyance. No polity can be deemed to embody the values of democracy if it permits such a large number of its citizens to take the extreme step without undertaking an emergency, I repeat, emergency institutional response to meet the crises. Some piecemeal responses have been made but no such emergency institutional response has been attempted. Perhaps this is the 'collateral effects' of liberalization with which we have to live.

As a second example take the issue of 'representation'. Over the last 15 years the representative density of the Indian polity has grown from approximately 5000 elected representatives, at the first and second tier of the government of the union and the states, to approximately three million elected representatives as a result of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. Of these one-third are women and about 22% are Dalits and Adivasis who have entered the representative system because of the reservation route. This is a revolutionary makeover for any polity and yet the plight of women, Dalits and Advasis continues to remain dismal. Dalits and Advasis constitute the largest number of

displaced people and are the first victims of mega projects such as dams, mining projects, steel plants, and SEZs. In the states of Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, which were formed in November 2000 to give Advasis a state of their own, there is a raging insurgency where great hardship has been visited on the people and where there have been severe violations of human rights.

While one can argue that the increase in representative density has given marginal groups more 'voice', one could also argue that it has produced a new class of political elites who use their presence in, and access to, the state for 'rent taking'. The global discourse on democracy does not discuss the role of political elites in rent taking. How much representative density then must a democracy of the magnitude of India work towards, and what forms should it take, for rent taking not to emerge as the underside of the expansion of the political system? How does one ensure that one is not just expanding the elite segment of the polity, which pursues its own self-interest and not the interest of its represented publics?

The third aspect that we could consider is the rule of law. In the last few decades India has introduced several innovations in the legal edifice of democracy at the different levels that are quite remarkable. Not only has the concept of 'locus standi' been expanded to allow those not affected by state action to be heard by the court in a public interest litigation (PIL), but we have also modified the principle of 'innocent until guilty', in the perverse cases of death of young brides in questionable circumstances where the burden of proof of their innocence with respect to dowry death is placed on their in-laws. At the level of laws we have now some radical laws such as the Right to Information Act 2005, which gives citizens access to the internal processes by which the bureaucracy arrives at its decisions on an issue in a file, a big step forward in making government more transparent. We also have the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 that assures employment for 100 days per year to poor families.

Within the legal system the higher judiciary has scaled new heights in its activism that has taken the polity some distance towards establishing the rule of law. But in contrast to these advances there are also laws which are of a draconian nature, such as the Armed Forces Special Power's Act that was ostensibly introduced for the extraordinary purpose of dealing with insurgency in the states of the North East and Kashmir, but has now been in place for over four decades. [8] With respect to the legal system in India we see both great innovation and empowerment of the citizen as also great tyranny by the custodians of the law.

The fourth feature that I could flag is that of trust in political institutions. I have chosen to shift from the more general level to the more specific to illustrate that such conundrums exist at many levels. In the SDSA survey we found that the two institutions that are quite central to democracy, political parties and the election commission, differ significantly in

their levels of trust. While the election commission has a trust score of 78%, political parties lag behind at 46%, the lowest among the ten public institutions for which we sought trust ratings.

While we know from the literature that there is a correlation between trust and performance,[9] we also know that there is a link between institutional trust and interpersonal trust.[10] Both links raise interesting issues of interpretation. The first suggests that the levels of trust are a measure of the comparative performances of the two institutions. But it also suggests that perhaps institutions that people have an intense relationship with produce levels of familiarity which breed contempt since there are higher expectations and also higher disappointments, whereas institutions that do not have such an intense relationship are more often admired. Hence it may be proximity rather than performance that is the explanatory variable.

The second link also raises difficult issues of interpretation. If high background trust is a necessary condition for high political trust, the culturalist argument, and the fact that such high trust is to be found in societies that are largely culturally homogeneous such as the Scandinavian countries, is it then possible for a plural country like India to achieve such high background trust? Democracy in a country must hence be assessed with different analytical tools.

If the argument that democracy is to be seen as 'in process' is acceptable then we must go to the next stage in the assessment debate and engage with the issue of whether we should use a 'graded' or a 'dichotomous' approach. The former argument, advocated by Bollen and his collaborators, is based on the perception of the 'inherently continuous nature of political democracy'. [11] It suggests that democracy should be seen as a property that regimes exhibit in varying degrees. The task of the analyst is to identify these varying degrees and to see whether they are moving the polity in the direction of more democracy or of less. The issue here is to identify the drivers of political change and to evaluate them in terms of their democracy quotient.

In contrast, the latter argument, forwarded by Sartori, holds that it is first necessary to distinguish between democracy and non-democracy. For him 'what is completely missed by this degreeism, or continuism, is that political systems are systems, that is, bounded wholes characterized by constitutive mechanisms, and principles that are either present (albeit imperfectly) or absent (albeit imperfectly)'.[12] While this is a very valuable debate about concepts and conceptualization which any assessment of democracy in India must engage with, it is something that I can only flag here and indicate, in the light of the preceding discussion on the difficulty of doing a report card, that I see myself belonging to the graded rather than the dichotomous camp.

If one prefers the graded approach then one must be prepared to take a position on another conceptual issue that is allied to this debate and that has an immediate bearing on the next section of this paper, the issue of conceptual overload. If one is to distinguish between regimes by using a graded approach, in terms of more or less democracy, then one would have to use several qualifiers to differentiate between the many democratic

regimes, to adopt a language of what Collier in another context calls 'democracy with adjectives'.[13] In addition to adjectives such as participatory and representative, or parliamentary and presidential, we would also need to engage with adjectives of democracy such as decentralized, socialist, Gandhian, or pluralist.

These adjectives link democracy to other concepts that are also used in the naming of systems, and that place, as a result of this use, because of the moral load they carry, an additional moral burden on it. Theorists of democracy, such as Munck and Verkuilen, warn against such conceptual overburdening since it makes the task of analytical differentiation more difficult.

'The tendency to specify the meaning of a concept in a way that includes too many attributes – the problem of maximalist definitions – has two potential drawbacks. On the one hand, the sheer overburdening of a concept may decrease its usefulness by making it a concept that has no empirical referents. The inclusion of social justice as an attribute of democracy is an example. On the other hand, even if a concept is defined in such a way that empirical instances can be found, maximalist definitions tend to be so overburdened as to be of little analytical use.'

Munck and Verkuilen feel that the concept of democracy, for example, must not carry the additional burden of social justice. Whether the people feel the same way is an issue we shall explore in our analysis of the attitudinal data. While this discussion on conceptual overburdening is from the perspective of the expert analyst, it does not quite engage with the issue of conceptual overburdening from the perspective of the citizen. In countries such as India where a huge societal transformation and churning is under way citizens have expectations of democracy that range from the opportunities for personal advancement that democracy makes available, or should make available, to the benefits that it produces, or should produce, for individuals and communities.

Democracy as an idea and a promise has become a part of the people's commonsense. If these expectations of the citizen result in an overburdening of the concept, as seen from the expert point of view, then we have to take a position on which view should prevail, that of the citizen or of the expert. To complicate the discussion further let me now make a detour into the SDSA study, especially the quantitative attitudinal data on people's responses to questions of satisfaction, support and the meaning of democracy in India.

I shall begin this quantitative exploration by looking at data on (*i*) support for democracy and (*ii*) satisfaction with democracy in India. [15] Based on an index prepared by aggregating several responses (see footnote for the method and the meaning of the categories strong believers, weak believers and skeptics) the data reveals that the strong believers in democracy in India were about 42%, weak believers 42% and skeptics 16%. Democracy is hence preferred to non-democracy even though the number of weak believers is as large as strong believers.

If this is read in terms of demographic characteristics of education, we see that the lower the levels of education the larger the number of weak believers and the higher the level of

education the larger the number of strong believers. The same trend can be seen with levels of income with support for democracy growing with income among strong believers and declining among weak believers. When to this issue of support is added the responses for satisfaction with the performance of democracy in the country, we find that in India those who were very satisfied or satisfied were about 55% of the population, with 15% totally dissatisfied and 30% having no opinion.

Satisfaction and dissatisfaction both grow as one moves up the education and income scale. Similarly those with no opinion also drop as one moves up the income and education ladder. *It is embarrassing to admit what we knew all along that social class seems to be in operation here* . This suggests that the experience of democracy that people of different classes have varies with the opportunities they enjoy and their perceptions about what is possible. This becomes clearer when we examine the meaning that people ascribe to democracy by class.

In the survey people were asked an open-ended question: What is democracy is understood differently by different people. According to you what is democracy? There were approximately 5205 respondents or about 10410 responses since each was allowed two responses. These were in many languages. Coding and clustering them with respect to the attributes of democracy involved two stages, both of which involved a hermeneutic intervention. The first involved converting the thousands of responses into 99 groups, the last two of which were 'negative response' and 'no response'.

Responses such as 'democracy means Laloo Prasad Yadav' in Bihar, and 'before election democracy prevails, after it gets over dictatorship starts' in Maharashtra, to 'government has to provide facilities to the public' in Tamil Nadu and ' *azadi*' in Haryana, to 'rule by the police ' in Manipur and 'enjoyment of economic rights' in Assam, to 'an opportunity to provide the right to equal work' in Andhra Pradesh and 'those who are poor will remain poor and those who are rich will always be rich' in West Bengal, are responses that are rich in normative content. These will have to be sanitized and clustered into neat sounding categories such as 'rule of majority', 'fundamental rights', 'solidarity' or 'employment'. This clustering runs the risk of ironing out the many interesting hidden meanings that are contained in the responses but since we are doing a quantitative exercise, and not a discourse analysis, i.e., we are searching for aggregates that give us a sense of the views of the whole population, we have to run this risk.

The second hermeneutic intervention involved further categorization of the 99 groups of responses into 10 sets. The following Table I gives a sense of the clustering of attributes that people have given to democracy. Here too there is a risk of the analyst imposing his/her way of seeing on the responses. Fortunately we did this clustering through a collegial process and thereby hope that we have kept the hermeneutic discretion to the very minimum.

The clusters represent the opinions of the respondents on what democracy means to them. The global discourse on democracy seems to be getting through and is received by the different classes through lenses fashioned by their own class expectations. The data

shows that there is a broad spread. It tells us several things about the appropriation of the discourse of democracy by different classes, about different expectations from democracy, and about the strong normative load of the discourse of democracy in India. In the light of the preceding debate, on not overloading concepts, this data poses a challenge. I have disaggregated the responses in terms of social class.

The first observation from Table I relates to the high number of 'no opinion' responses. Possibly asking an open-ended question, on the meaning of democracy, to people from all social classes, places too much of a psychological burden on them to construct an answer and then to articulate it. The correlation between social class and ability to articulate becomes clear when we see that 28% of the upper class has 'no opinion' in contrast with 77.5% of the lower class. From this we should not arrive at the conclusion that the lower class has 'no opinion' but only that they are perhaps unable to articulate it. This high number of those with 'no opinion' drops when we give the respondent a menu of attributes of democracy to choose from.

TABLE I

Meaning of Democracy

(in percentages)

Attributes	Upper class	Upper middle class	Lower middle class	Lower class	Total	N
People's rule	21.6	10.0	9.7	4.1	7.9	819
Parties & elections	3.8	3.5	2.3	1.7	2.3	242
Law & institutions	4.4	3.5	2.5	1.2	2.2	233
Rights & freedom	15.5	9.4	8.6	3.6	6.9	720
Social justice & equality	9.5	5.5	5.5	2.9	4.4	461
Development & welfare	12.3	8.2	9.7	6.9	8.1	838
Peace & security	0.8	1.7	1.8	0.9	1.3	135
Negative attitude	4.0	2.1	2.5	1.2	1.9	197
Others	-	-	0.1	-	-	4
No opinion	28.0	56.2	57.3	77.5	65.0	6761
Total	6.1	21.7	30.4	41.8	100.0	10410

However, of the 35% who gave an opinion it is interesting to note that these opinions show a fair distribution in terms of the different attributes of democracy. The largest number of responses saw democracy in terms of 'development and welfare' although democracy, seen as 'people's rule' and 'rights and freedom', have also many adherents. This data tells us that the meanings that people invest in the idea of democracy are quite

varied. The global political discourse on democracy thus seems to be getting through. India is not building its own theory of democracy; it just gives a different emphasis to the attributes. The emerging Indian commonsense of democracy covers the entire spectrum.

The data also tells us that the procedural aspects of democracy score lower than the substantive aspects. Hence 'development and welfare' scores high as an attribute among all classes although it is ranked third for the upper and upper middle classes whereas it is ranked first for the lower and the lower middle classes. The data also shows that people rank 'rights and freedom' high, second for the top three classes and third for the lower class, *implying that while people want democracy to give them material goods they also want to enjoy the political goods that democracy provides*. The rhetorical definition of democracy as 'people's rule', while being somewhat difficult to analytically describe, enjoys the highest rating for the upper three classes and the second for the lower class. The centrality of 'the people' in ruling seems to have entered the citizen's commonsense. One may be stretching the argument a bit but it seems that democracy is being owned by the people. Interestingly the negative attitude to democracy is low and, as is to be expected, is the highest among the upper classes.

To probe further these leads emerging from the open ended question I shall now shift to the structured question where people were given a menu of five options about the most essential attribute of democracy. They were asked: 'People often differ in their views on the characteristic that is essential to democracy. If you have to choose only one of the things I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential to a democracy.' From placing the burden on them to find the language to articulate their meaning of democracy we have now made it easy for them and have only asked them to choose from among a set of options.

TABLE II

Essential Attributes of Democracy

(in percentages)

Attributes	Upper class	Upper middle class	Lower middle class	Lower class	Total	N
Opportunity to change the government through election	34	26	24	14	21	1031
Freedom to criticize those in power	10	6	4	3	4	210
Equal rights to everyone	28	22	25	15	20	1001
Basic necessities for everyone	26	33	34	40	35	1743
No opinion	2	13	14	29	20	959

| Total | 6 | 22 | 30 | 42 | 100 | 4944 |

When options are given, the 'no opinion' response drops to 20% as compared to 65% in the previous open-ended question. People have a view. To articulate it they need a menu. As was indicated by the previous data the attribute that all classes rank high is 'basic necessities' (or 'development and welfare') which is 35% of all respondents and the highest among the choices among the lower class. For the upper class it is the 'opportunity to change government through elections' which is the most important rather than issues of *roti, kapda, makaan* and *bijli, sadak, pani*, which I suppose are goods to be assumed for the upper classes.

Interestingly the 'freedom to criticize' gets the lowest ranking of the five attributes for all classes. Perhaps this is the story of democracy in the global South and hence for Munck and Verkuilen to say that the concept should not be overloaded, by adding to it the attribute of social justice, is for them to overlook the ethnocentricity of their framework. People want democracy to be more not less. Let political philosophers sort out the analytical problem. Economic well-being is the first value for citizens in the global South, a commonsense here that it has now taken a survey to establish! Among the trilateral countries, I suspect, the ranking of attributes may be the other way around. [17]

On the issue of most disliked characteristic of democracy, it is the 'increase in corruption' that is considered the most ugly with about 43% of respondents, almost equally among all classes, ranking it as the highest. Parties seen as dividing the people is ranked next with 19% as an attribute to be disliked. Here again we get a sense of the appropriation of the idea of democracy by democracies from the global South. Not too many surveys in the global North will place this on a menu of choices; yet it an important concern in societies that are in the process of nation-state formation through democracy. The new political community of democracy is being forged and in the process there is a democracies of communities emerging. If these are flawed understandings of democracy from flawed democracies then so be it. We can struggle with the conundrum that democracy may, after all, be a concept the contours of which the elite and not the demos will decide upon. If we were to take a global vote on what is to be included and excluded in the idea of democracy the results, I suspect, would be very startling.

Footnotes:

1. SDSA report, released on the 4 December 2006. The report is being published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi in 2007.

2. Philippe C. Schmitter and Carsten Q. Schneider, 'Conceptualizing and Measuring the Liberalization of Autocracy and the Consolidation of Democracy Across Regions of the World and from Different points of Departure', at www.iue.it/SPS/People/Faculty/current professors

3. The EIUs index of democracy.

4. UNU-WIDER press release, 5 December 2006, p. 1.

5. http//indiabudget.nic.in

6. Based on a discussion I had with farmer leader Hemant Kumar at CSDS who has toured the states where these suicides have occured. This estimate is supported by P. Sainath who while discussing farmers suicides in his article, 'Suicides are about the living, not the dead' in *The Hindu* of 21 May 2007, mentioned a figure of one lakh widows.

7. *Economic and Political Weekly*, special issue of seven articles by K.C. Suri, Surinder S. Jodhka, V. Sridhar, S. Mohanakumar, R.K. Sharma, P. Narasimha, Srijit Mishra, on Suicides by farmers, 22 April 2006, pp. 1523- 1569.

8. Details of AFSPA can be read at www.hrdc. net/sahrdc/resources/armed_forces.htm

9. William Mishler and Richard Rose, 'What Are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post Communist Societies', *Comparative Political Studies* 34(1), 2001, pp. 30-62; Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker, 'Political Trust and Trustworthiness', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3, 2000, 475-507.

10. Bo Rothstein and Dietlind Stolle, 'How Political Insititutions Create and Destroy Social Capital: An Institutional Theory of Generalized Trust', paper prepared for the 98th APSA meeting, September 2002; Eric Uslaner, 'Varieties of Trust', *European Political Science* 2(3), 2003.

11. Quoted in David Collier and Robert Adcock, 'Democracy and Dichotomies: A Pragmatic Approach to Choices about Concepts', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2, 1999, p. 546.

12. Sartori quoted in Collier et al., p. 548.

13. David Collier and Steven Levitsky, 'Democracy With Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', *World Politics* (49.3), 1997, pp. 430-451.

14. Gerardo L. Munck and Jay Verkuilen, 'Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indices', *Comparative Political Studies* 35(1), 2002, p. 9.

15. A composite response was prepared by assessing responses to four questions. There are different ways in which a country may be governed. I will read out some suggestions. For each of these would you say that you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree? (*a*) the country should be governed by the army, (*b*) the country should be governed by a king, (*c*) the country should be governed by those chosen by the people in a fair election and (*d*) which one of the following three statements do you agree with most: democracy is preferable to any kind of government, in certain situations a dictatorship government is preferable to a democratic one, it doesn't matter to people like me whether we have democratic or non-democratic governance. The composite responses were then grouped into four groups (*i*) strong believers of democracy, (*ii*) skeptics, (*iii*) weak believers in democracy and (*iv*) not sure/can't say. This was according to the following principle of selection.

Strong believers

are those who prefer democracy and strongly disagree or disagree with army rule *and* with monarchy *and* who strongly agree or agree with electoral democracy. *Skeptics* are those who prefer dictatorship *or* those for whom democracy or dictatorship does not matter, *and* strongly agree or agree with army rule *or* Monarchy *or* who strongly disagree or disagree with electoral democracy. *Not sure/can't say* comprises those who have no opinion (including those who could not understand the question) on whether they prefer democracy or dictatorship *or* democracy and dictatorship does not matter to them *and* have no opinion (including those who could not understand the questions.) *Weak believers* are those who do not fit any of the above categories.

16. The characteristics of class are as follows. The total population is divided into five income quintiles and five education groups, i.e. non-literate, below primary, middle school, secondary and higher secondary, and graduate and above. The grouping as per these sections is *upper class* (only graduate and above who are in the fourth and fifth income quintile), *upper middle class* (upto secondary and higher secondary of those in the fourth and fifth income quintile), *lower middle class* (third income quintile all levels of education plus those in the lowest and second income quintile who have done secondary and higher education as well as those who are graduates and above, and finally *lower class* (the first two income quintiles who have studied upto middle school.

17. Susan J. Pharr and Eobert. D. Putnam, *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000.