Working Democracy Amidst Continued Inequality: Does South Asia Represent a Paradox?[1]

Sandeep Shastri

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The workings of democracy and the fact of inequality has been a recurring theme of academic and popular debate over the second half of the 20th century and the first two decades of the present 21st century. The narratives on this important relationship have made an attempt to encompass multi-track perspectives reflecting on diverse socio-economic, historical and political contexts. South Asia represents an important site at which political systems have sought to deepen democratic processes even as they attempt to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor and to usher in greater socio-economic equity and justice. This paper attempts to explore the experience of South Asia in charting a course of ensuring that democratic practices take firm root even as efforts are made to usher in economic equality.

Even before commencing the analysis, a few caveats need to be added to contextualise the discussion. Firstly, this paper seeks to privilege the voice of the "common citizen" as against expert opinion. In doing so, one draws heavily from survey data. Survey research has brought to the dialogue table a fascinating and stirringly different dimension to the conversations on democracy and economic

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equality[2] both globally and in the specific South Asian context. The concepts of democracy and equality are increasingly being re-worked keeping in mind the "vision" of citizens who constitute the core of any experiment with democracy. This allows for a citizen's perspective on equality to be reflected rather than a mere theoretical analysis of the concept from a purely academic perspective. Much of the data discussed in this paper flows from the State of Democracy in South Asia Study (SDSA).[3]

Secondly, this analysis is consciously grounded in an appreciation of the socio-economic environment and political conditions that permeate South Asia. The paper compares the popular perceptions of democracy and the satisfaction with democracy on the one hand with the fact of the visible presence of poverty and inequality on the other.

Thirdly, the paper draws heavily on the SDSA data. This survey has been done in the five countries of South Asia – Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The analysis thus limits itself to these five countries of the South Asia region.

CONTEXTUALISING DEMOCRACY AND INEQUALITY

The fight against inequality in the context of democracy and democratisation has led, in recent years, to an increasing focus on the emergence of the "rest of the world" (as against the Global North) as an important site for the practice of democracy,

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[2] See for details Ronald Inglehart. 1997. *Modernization and post modernization: Cultural, economic and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Ronald Inglehart. 2003. *Human values and social change: Findings from the values survey*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan; Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel. 2005. *Modernization, cultural change and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Michael Bratton and Robert Mattes. 2007. "Learning About Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance and Experience". *American Journal of Political Science* 51:1: 192-217; Michael Bratton and Robert Mattes. 2001. "Support for Democracy in Africa: Intrinsic or Instrumental?". *British Journal of Political Science* 31:3: 447-74; Dieter Fuchs and Edeltrand Roller. 2006. "Learned Democracy? Support for Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe". *International Journal of Sociology* 36:3: 70-96; David Denemark, Robert Mattes and Richard G Niemi. eds. 2016. *Growing up democratic: Does it make a difference*. Boulder: Lynne Reinner; State of Democracy in South Asia. 2008. Delhi: Oxford University Press; Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar. 2017. State of Democracy in South Asia II. Bengaluru: Jain University Press.

[3] Hereinafter referred to as the SDSA study. Data drawn from the State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA) studies are an integral part of the Global Barometer Surveys (www.globalbarometer.net). SDSA is also known as the South Asia Barometer and the same is coordinated by Lokniti-CSDS (www.lokniti.org).

development and governance.[4] Many contemporary studies on democracy prefer to make a distinction (and search for the distinctive features or similarities) between "old" and "new" democracies. The onus often was on the "new" democracies to fall in line with the ways in which democracy is viewed, understood and practised in established democratic polities. Thus, for a long period of time, the conversations on democracy (and of course inequality) privileged the procedural dimensions of democracy as being the core of the "idea" of democracy. The newer studies of democracy allow one to look at possible ways in which the idea of democracy itself can be democratised and pluralised. This attempt consciously avoids the temptation of essentialising or overemphasising the differences in values as the main explanatory factor for understanding the different perceptions and conceptions of democracy. This attempt to "democratise the understanding of democracy"[5] implies that substance-based ideas of democracy and equality are now increasingly occupying the centre stage. The focus on "outcomes", as against (or alongside?) the "processes", has the potential of enriching the quality and content of contemporary debates on what constitutes democracy and the search for equality.

In the first SDSA Report it was highlighted that:

> ...democracy has come to stand for a substantive promise of rule by equal communities of citizens, and the well-being of all in terms of dignity and freedom from fear as well as want. This version pays less attention to some of the procedural aspects of democracy seen to be central to liberal, western democracies such as equal access to rule of law and to guard against the tyranny of the majority or a powerful minority.[6]

By seeking to go beyond the established "prism" of the Global North, the SDSA studies attempted to reflect on both the "idea" of democracy and development on the one hand and its "imagination" on the other and this has been a key focus of

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4 See for details State of Democracy in South Asia. 2008. Delhi: Oxford University Press; Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar. 2017. State of Democracy in South Asia II. Bengaluru: Jain University Press.

5 See Suhas Palshikar and Sandeep Shastri. 2010. *Democratizing the meaning of democracy: Voices from south asia*. Paper presented as the Global Barometer Surveys Conference on "How People View and Value Democracy" held at Taipei, 15-16 October; Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar. 2017. State of Democracy in South Asia II . Bengaluru: Jain University Press; Sandeep Shastri. "India's Development Path: Prospects, Challenges and Implications for the Emerging World Order" in *From the western-centric to a post-western world: In search of an emerging global order in the 21st century*. Routledge. Forthcoming.

6 SDSA. 2008. State of Democracy in South Asia. Delhi: Oxford University Press: 8.

analysis. The second SDSA report underscored the importance of the core concerns of countries in South Asia which are attempting to:

> ...achieve substantive outcomes (reduction of wealth inequality and provision of basic economic goods and services) while maintaining procedural institutions (regular elections based on universal adult suffrage, political participation and contestation) to produce an electorally legitimate government.[7]

The five countries of South Asia covered as part of this study do not fare very well in the global Human Development Index. In comparative terms, very limited improvement is recorded in the status and positions of these countries in global rankings. This is clear from the data outlined in Table 1.
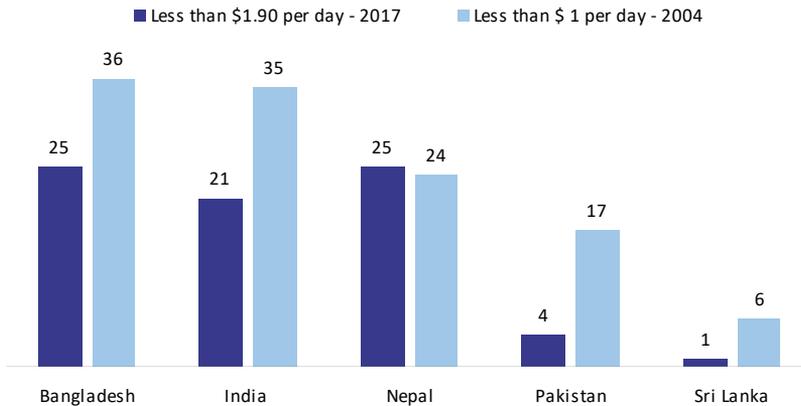
Table 1: Human Development Index – South Asia.

	2019	2017	2006
Bangladesh	135	135	137
India	129	130	126
Nepal	147	149	138
Pakistan	152	150	134
Sri Lanka	71	76	93

Source: http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/2019-human-development-index-ranking; http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI/.

Further, the data also indicates that in the countries of South Asia, the efforts in the first decade and a half of the 21st century have led to visible results in the fight against poverty. The percentage of the population living below the poverty line in Bangladesh and India has fallen from just over one-third of the population (2004), to less than one fourth of the population (2017). Similarly Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have seen a fall in the percentage of the population living below the poverty line (See Chart 1).

[7] Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar. 2017. State of Democracy in South Asia II. Bengaluru: Jain University Press: 16.

Chart 1 : Estimating Poverty

■ Less than $1.90 per day - 2017 ■ Less than $ 1 per day - 2004

Source: https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/overview.

The fact of economic inequality was clearly articulated by citizens of South Asia in the way they defined democracy.[8] In the second round of the SDSA study, close to four out of every ten respondents defined democracy in the language of justice and welfare (See Table 2). Another one in every five highlighted the procedural dimensions of democracy and just over three out of every ten defined democracy in the language of rights and freedom.[9] This finding was in line with what was reported in the first SDSA study.[10]

Table 2: Defining Democracy – South Asia (figures in percentage).

Welfare and Justice	38
Rights and Freedom	31
Procedural	22
Peace and Security	4
Other	5

Source: (SDSA 2017: 20).

In this sense, when over one-third of the respondents in South Asia privilege justice and welfare as representing the idea of democracy, this brings to the discourse

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[8] This analysis is based on the findings of an open-ended question asked in both rounds of SDSA: "According to you, what is democracy?".

[9] Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar. 2017. State of Democracy in South Asia II. Bengaluru: Jain University Press: 20.

[10]   SDSA. State of Democracy in South Asia. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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on equality a specific focus. It is clear that the appreciation of democracy is shaped by the context of poverty and asymmetries of well-being. Hence, democracy is seen as a harbinger of welfare and fair distribution of resources. This expectation derives not so much from the procedural and "rule of law" dimensions of democracy but rather originates from the idea that democracy mandates that those in power use the instrumentality of governmental power for a positive intervention in the socio-economic dimensions of life in a given society. This understanding posits an interventionist and transformatory character in democracy.

The privileging of the welfare and justice dimensions of democracy needs to be seen against the backdrop of the fact of economic backwardness and poverty, high rates of unemployment and relatively poor performance on key social indicators like education, healthcare and life expectancy in the South Asia region. The popular perceptions of democracy are intrinsically linked to the citizens' expectations of the state. The centrality of the process of democratic governance merits elaboration as it appears to be at the core of both the successes and challenges of the developmental process. The SDSA Report highlighted that:

> …a large segment of the society increasingly looks to the state as both a provider as well as a facilitator. For many, accessing the state for basic needs constitute the only choice and not one among a set of different options. In these circumstances, the responsiveness of the democratic state is critical to giving empirical meaning to the justice and welfare dimensions of democracy that citizens … uphold and cherish. South Asia's democracy would surely face greater challenges of governance as (one) … moves from mere welfare to expectations of well-being.[11]

Based on the analysis of survey data, this paper assesses the dynamics of democracy and inequality in South Asia. This region faces multiple challenges and striking the right balance between the multi-track expectations seems to be the biggest challenge to policy makers. The "principle" of democracy is often put to the test by the stark realities of the "fact" of inequality. Given the privileging of the welfare and justice dimensions of democracy, the corollary expectation of the state and its institutions is that they should ensure an element of sensitivity towards the aspirations of the people relating to their basic needs and well-being. The development strategies adopted by the state to give meaning to this popular aspiration lies at the core of the democracy-inequality debate in the South Asia region.

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11   Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar. 2017. State of Democracy in South Asia II. Bengaluru: Jain University Press: 10.

INSTITUTIONALISING DEMOCRACY EVEN AS THE FIGHT FOR INEQUALITY CONTINUES

The South Asia region is witness to a co-existence of the strengthening of "electoral democracy" and the "visible presence of inequality" in the social and economic spheres. While political freedoms are increasingly being asserted, the desire of sections of society to be given "freedom from want" continues to be unevenly met. South Asia has witnessed concerted efforts towards the institutionalising of democracy even as the "state inspired" and "society driven" fight against inequality continues. The question has often been raised as to whether the platform of democracy is perceived as the "ideal framework" for ensuring freedom from want and reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. Data from South Asia presents interesting insights on popular perceptions of democracy and support for democracy.

If one were to look at the support for democracy across the South Asia region, one notices significant variation in support for democracy across different socio-economic categories. The economic status of the respondent had a clear impact on the intensity of their support for democracy.[12] The lower a person's economic status was, the more intense their support to democracy was likely to be. Chart 2 indicates that more than half the respondents from the poorer sections of society endorsed democracy while a little less than one-third of the affluent segments from among the respondents took such a stand. As one moves from the poorer segments of society to the more affluent, the intensity of support for democracy witnesses a decline, as is evidenced in Chart 2.

Chart 2 : Support for Democracy
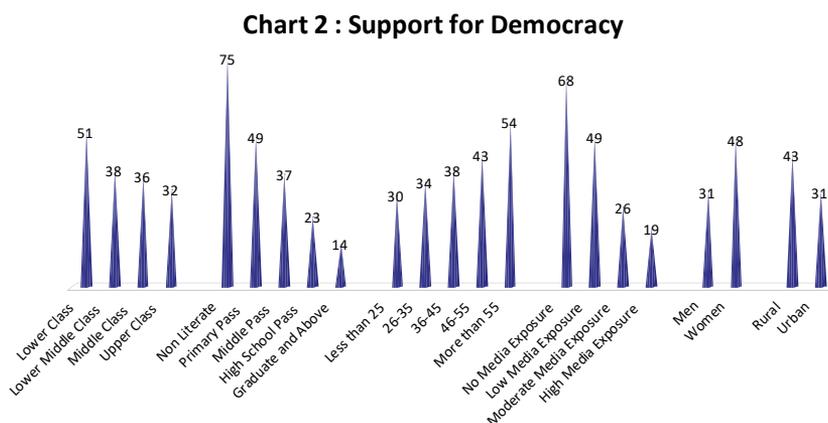
All figures in percentage.
Source: SDSA Data set, Lokniti-CSDS.

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12   The Class Index was prepared on the basis of the ownership of a combination of assets, self-declared economic status and education levels.

A similar trend is noticed when one assesses the response of people based on their access to education. Those who did not have access to formal education and did not know how to read and write were more likely to support democracy as compared to those who had secured a college degree. While three-quarters of the illiterate segments of the respondents supported democracy, the numbers plummeted to less than one-seventh of the respondents when those who had a college degree were taken into account. In Chart 2, it is evident that as one accessed higher levels of education, support for democracy becomes more lukewarm.

Media exposure[13] too appeared to play an important role in shaping common people's attitude towards democracy. As people accessed the media more, they were less likely to support democracy. Chart 2 indicates that close to seven out of every ten of those who had no access to media were more likely to supported democracy. Only two out of every ten of those who had high access to media were strong advocates of democracy.

The above narration is indicative of the fact that discontent with democracy is linked to greater access to information and higher levels of awareness. Those with limited opportunities for formal education and exposure to the media were also likely to be lower on the economic ladder. The response of the more educated, the economically better off and those with higher media exposure could well be a reflection of their higher levels of expectations of democracy. The greater cynicism with democracy appears to be more on account of their greater access to information. This is also evident from the higher levels of support for democracy among rural respondents as compared to their urban counterparts. Chart 2 also indicates that the younger generations were much more restrained in their support for democracy as compared to the older segments of the population. As the age of respondents increases, the intensity of support for democracy correspondingly increases. This too could be explained by the high levels of expectations and increasing access to information among the younger segments of society.

The data on support for democracy and the economic background of the respondents were analysed from yet another perspective. The SDSA study also asked respondents whether they preferred democracy in all circumstances or was dictatorship sometimes preferable and also whether it did not make a difference whether the system was a democracy or a dictatorship. The data was analysed keeping in mind the economic profile of the respondents. It was found that more

13   The Media Exposure Index was prepared on the basis of frequency of access to television, radio and newspapers.

than six out of every ten respondents across economic groups endorsed democracy unequivocally. Close to seven out of every ten endorsed it among the Lower Middle Class while close to two-thirds took the same stand among the Upper Class. Yet the cynicism with regard to democracy that it did not make a difference whether it was a democracy or a dictatorship was highest among the Lower Class and the Middle Class. One fourth of those in the Lower Class felt that it made no difference whether the country was a democracy or dictatorship and over two out of every ten from among the Middle Class took that stand. Data outlined in Chart 3 clearly indicates that besides awareness and media exposure, the cynicism with democracy could well also be linked to the common people's real-life experience with the workings of democracy.

Chart 3 : Support for Demcracy across Economic Class

Legend: Democracy is preferable | Dictatorship is preferable sometimes | Makes no difference
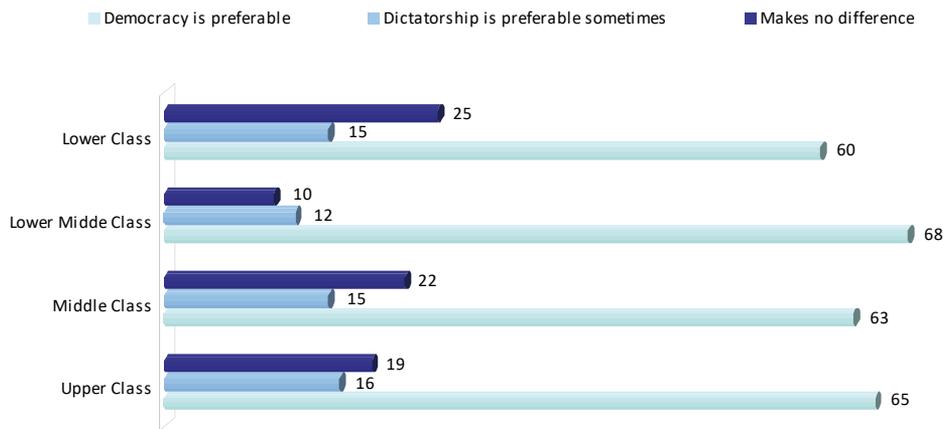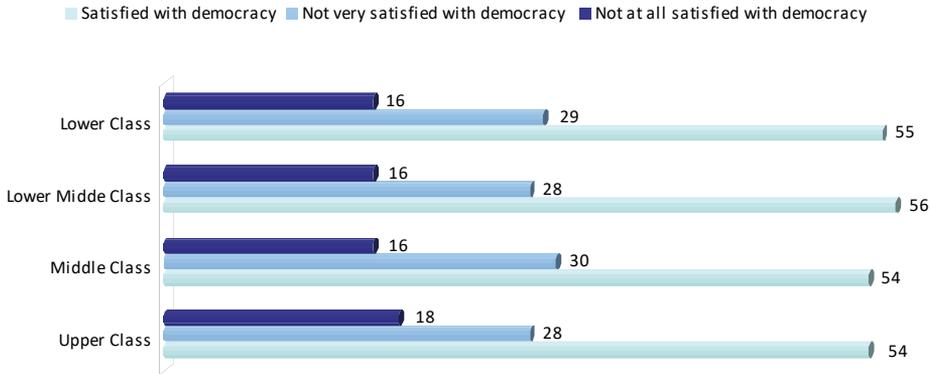

All figures in percentage.
Source: SDSA Data Set, Lokniti-CSDS.

A final analysis of support for democracy and its linkages to the economic status of respondents was attempted by comparing responses with regard to their intensity of satisfaction with the workings of democracy. Those satisfied with the workings of democracy, those not satisfied with the way democracy was functioning and those not at all satisfied with the way democracy was functioning were assessed from an economic class perspective. The analysis found that there was very little variation in the intensity of satisfaction with the workings of democracy across economic groups. Chart 4 indicates that there was a marginally higher level of extreme unhappiness with the functioning of democracy among the Upper Class, but the difference was to the tune of just two percentage points.

Chart 4 : Satisfaction with Democracy

■ Satisfied with democracy ■ Not very satisfied with democracy ■ Not at all satisfied with democracy

Lower Class: 16, 29, 55
Lower Middle Class: 16, 28, 56
Middle Class: 16, 30, 54
Upper Class: 18, 28, 54

All figures in percentage.

Source: SDSA Data Set, Lokniti-CSDS.

EMERGING ISSUES

In the first State of Democracy in South Asia study, it was reported:

> The experience of South Asia has shown that democracy can be built in societies that have not attained a high level of economic growth or well being; at the same time it also shows that democracies can continue to evade the issue of poverty and destitution even when the poor constitute a majority. A mismatch between the objective and subjective economic conditions creates space for democratic contestation as well as subterfuge.[14]

Less than a decade later, in its second study on State of Democracy in South Asia, the above stand was endorsed and expanded upon:

> ...democracy occupies a place of certainty in the affective map of citizens, but its position in the cognitive map is still hazy.... The idea to "contest", is... quite well established, but the imagination of institutionalizing democracy remains weak. This gap – between the idea and its imagination constitutes a key challenge for democracy in the region despite its endorsement by large numbers.[15]

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[14] SDSA. 2008. State of Democracy in South Asia. Delhi: Oxford University Press: 149.

[15] Sandeep Shastri, Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar. 2017. State of Democracy in South Asia II. Bengaluru: Jain University Press: 35-6.

The above narration highlights two important dimensions in the workings of democracy in South Asia. Firstly, there is visible and sustained proof of the continued faith of citizens in the region in the democratic process. The economic marginalisation of a large segment of society has not resulted in these segments choosing to opt out of the democratic political process. There continues to be robust endorsement and participation among the economically marginalised in the workings of democracy.

Secondly, the citizens' own economic status does not seem to have emerged as a vital category of political mobilisation. In a sense, the fact that economic inequality has not been articulated effectively in the public domain is clearly visible across South Asia. While the marginalised are disappointed with the inability of the democratic political system to improve their economic conditions, they continue to invest faith and hope in the democratic process. This is seen both in terms of their active participation as voters and in their continuing to nurture the hope that the state and its attendant institutions would help deal with their economic deprivation and alleviate their economic conditions.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that South Asia provides an example of how a working democracy within a framework of continued inequality does not necessarily represent a paradox. While there is visible discontent with the practice of democracy, this has not led to any abandonment of the faith in democracy. While there is a clear mismatch between expectations and experience, promise and performance, rhetoric and reality with regard to the workings of democracy in South Asia, the hope of a "democratic dividend" in the future, especially among the economically marginalised, is evident.

It is beyond the shadow of doubt that "context" often defines and decides people's approach to issues. While democratic political systems have a mandate to usher in socio-economic transformation, the political, social and economic context in which democracies operate often explain this hiatus between an "expectation overload" and a "performance deficit". This becomes even more relevant in South Asia, where the government is seen not merely as a facilitator but as a provider of economic benefits.

South Asia is witness to the support for the "principle" of democracy meeting a challenge when confronted by the realities of the practice of democracy and democratic governance. An abiding attribute of the democratic culture in South Asia is that citizens in this region are not willing to abandon their aspirations for

democracy in spite of the democratic process not living up to their expectations. This continued investment in the "future" of democracy appears to be its greatest strength in the South Asia region.

Dr. Sandeep Shastri is a Professor of Political Science and the Pro Vice Chancellor of Jain University, Bangalore, India. He is the National Coordinator of the Lokniti Network and the South Asia Coordinator of the Global Barometer (GBS) Survey.