

Addressing Issues of Poverty and Inequality through Democracy:



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Poverty, inequality, democracy – undeniably, fundamental issues of human rights that we are grappling with even in an age championing human development for all! Never has there been a global resurgence of democracy and democratisation as imperative for just societies; yet, poverty and inequality ironically remain faithful bedfellows ever dampening the struggle towards human development for all. This begs the question whether democracy – in principle, being government of the people, for the people and by the people – actually, is the panacea for poverty and inequality? Certainly, it is. But, not if democracy fails to acknowledge and deliver the very aspirations of peoples, which reflect in the bitter reality of our times today.

Today, South Asia in general boasts of democratic governments in place, however; is still shy of being home to half the world's poor with as much as 43 per cent of the total population of approximately 1.35 billion living in absolute poverty (CIVICUS). Out of the eight countries in the region, five fall in the category of Least Developed Countries (LDCs)² as defined by the United Nations (UN). The failure of democracy to address poverty and development has certainly fuelled further social unrest, political instability and violent conflicts that are commonalities not only across the region but also in all of the 49 LDCs; completing the equations of both, democracy with development as well as peace with development.

Despite tall claims of so-called economic growth in South Asia, the number of poorest of the poor and the marginalised also stands high. India, for instance, is the “largest democracy” and now, a global economic power on the rise. But, the most contradictory and unfortunate aspect of democracy in India is the increase in poverty including the widening rich-poor divide especially after the neo-liberal economic reforms of the 90s that only measures economic growth as an indicator of development. The toll of farmers' suicides alone stands close to 2 million since 1997 (BBC News, 2009). India is a paradox in itself, with the largest number of the poor on one hand and the largest number of billionaires on the other – a classic combination of poverty, inequality and democracy!

Similarly, a sequential glance over the almost two decades of democratic struggle in Nepal shows landmark achievements yet challenges abound. The ordinary mass in Nepal is not only deprived of the long overdue peace dividend of the decade-long Maoist conflict, but is also restlessly awaiting the democracy dividend of the second people's movement for democracy that overthrew the royal regime in April 2006. Both, peace and democracy is still an everyday struggle of securing the bare necessities for the Nepali people - the poor and the marginalised including women and children bearing the brunt of the mass frustration. The failure or inadequacy of the fledgling democracy to deliver is a constant risk in the current peace process, as social unrest and violence continues with above 108 armed outfits in existence, today. It is, therefore, validating when we say that the Nepal of today still differs only superficially from the elite regimes of the Ranas and Panchayat before 1990, in effectively addressing the deeply rooted poverty and injustice in the country (Karki, 2001).

The democratic exercise in other South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka is also a poor show. The proportion of people living in abject poverty is more than 33 per cent in Pakistan; about 50 per cent Bangladeshis are under the “poverty line” despite several macro and micro economic policies put in place by the democratic state and in Sri Lanka, despite the reported healthy growth rate of economy, it failed to benefit the poor, leaving around 23 per cent people under the national poverty line (World Bank, 2009). Afghanistan is still in a stage of transition to democracy and poverty is a major issue having economic, social, political and cultural dimensions. More than half of Afghanistan’s population lives in poverty and are food-insecure, which is about 18 million people from an estimated 30 million (SAAPE Poverty and Vulnerability Study, 2009).

Due to the diverse socio-cultural fabric of South Asia; poverty and inequality is rife along the lines of caste, class, gender, religion and ethnicity. The Dalits or the lowest caste groups, the working class, indigenous and tribal communities, religious and sexual minorities are the traditionally and systematically marginalised in the region. Needless to say, women who amount to at least half of the total population are the most vulnerable victims mainly due to still existing patriarchy and feudalism in Southasian societies. Primitive, it may sound, but even today, the birth of a girl child is not welcome in the region with modern technology being increasingly employed in female foeticide. Therefore, all such socio-cultural factors as well as the political economy needs to be borne in mind when we discuss, debate and strategise on poverty, inequality, democracy and development, especially in the South Asian context.

The traditional approach of defining and understanding poverty, in essence, overlooks its political dimension - that of equal opportunity. The poverty of equal opportunity to even basic necessities of life like food, water, housing, education, health, sanitation; to access productive resources; to planning and decision-making; makes poverty a human rights and democratic issue. Hence, merely an increase in income or in economic growth does not necessarily reflect a statistical reduction in poverty which is exactly the trend seen today in our economies. Politics, Power and Poverty are intrinsically linked and therefore, the problem of poverty can only be effectively tackled if we address the indispensable role of politics and power in creating and perpetuating poverty.

As mentioned previously, with democratic governments in place in all of the eight countries in the region, Southasia is a “democratic” region, in principle. However, the key question lies in analysing what sort of democracy is in practice that has miserably failed to uplift its people out of abject poverty and inequality. To start with, we witness democracy as basically “procedural democracy” in the region that is characterised by its sole focus on the electoral process. People are, thus, given the opportunity to elect their representatives every time period in the name of democracy. The transparency, accountability and autonomy of the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary are a far cry in the region. Corruption and criminalisation of politics are endemic, eroding the rule of law and thus, the very basis for good governance. Governance based on force and imposition of law and order without addressing the root causes of problems is bound to result in failure and will most likely continue to trigger social unrest and violent conflicts prevalent in the region. The alienation of the citizens from the state is on the increase resulting in democratic deficit, curtailment of freedom and the rise of populist politics (RRN, 2008).

The next key point of problem analysis is looking into the free market neo-liberal paradigm that our democratic governments are pursuing or in most cases, are forced to pursue in the name of development. Our national development plans are often dictated by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by way of the highly controversial Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) which further worsens the shrinking role of our states. The so-called development policies of these International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are absolutely market-oriented, solely measuring development by economic growth. The basic social sector in development plans like health, education, water, sanitation and even agriculture which is the mainstay of South Asian economies is ruthlessly undermined leading to major budget cuts in the social

sector.

Neo-liberal economic policies that have fuelled corporate globalisation have destroyed many traditional occupations and means of livelihood in the region. Through jobless growth, and paths of post-industrial development, they have also rendered many people unemployed. They have seriously eroded the possibility to get employment for any new entrants to the labour market. The very same policies have led to land-grabbing of peasants for Special Economic Zones or other such corporate projects. These peasant communities too have been displaced and rendered destitute. Subsistence and survival activities in the rural as well as the urban areas have been destroyed. Large numbers of people are now driven out of the rural areas and agricultural activities. They flock to the cities in search of livelihood opportunities. This is partly the reason behind rapidly increasing urbanisation including urban poverty in all the countries of South Asia. Needless to say, that at the global level, the current economic crisis is a proven failure of the neo-liberal development paradigm.

The current aid politics, therefore, is contrary to the essence of democracy and thus, poverty eradication. It has bisected the world into one of creditors and debtors, with the former dominating the latter with their designs, prescriptions and policies and forcing them to debt slavery. The total South Asian debt to the World Bank alone amounts to a whopping USD 60.5 billion (World Bank, 2009). Disguised in the package of aid is the old colonial mentality, institutionalising an unequal hierarchy of patrons and clients expressed in the language of conditionality. Aid is thus used as the means by which governments impose economic policies which weaken the capacity of the people to claim their human rights. Local and democratic ownership should be at the heart of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) as promoted by the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) which states “ownership” as one of the five pillars of democracy. Locally owned processes are sensitive to the core issues of poverty eradication, sustainable development, human rights, gender justice and conflict sensitivity and more importantly, they promote people’s participation and hold leadership accountable (RRN, 2008).

The other common trend in the region which is detrimental to democracy and poverty eradication is the rapid militarisation of states. The combined military expenditure of the region is estimated above USD 40 billion per annum, which is an increase by 41% compared to the military budget of 1999 (Stålenheim et al, 2009). Thus, the democratic states of South Asia are running high in the race of militarisation, which has forced vast majority of the people to live in poverty. With increased focus on narrow nationalism and national security, states are withdrawing the resources from the much required sectors of poverty reduction and humanitarian obligations.

To sum up, the existing democratic system of the region is largely deficient in responding to the issues of poverty. Therefore, the need of the hour is the promotion of a democracy that builds on the interest, choice and rights of people, especially of the poor, marginalised, oppressed and discriminated ones, and well founded at the grassroots. Democracy must be able to embrace the overarching principles of accountability transparency, rule of law and people’s sovereignty.

In fact in South Asia, first and foremost, democratizing the mindset of political party leaders is the prime challenge, for we witness a crisis of political leadership – a leadership that rises above party politics and envisions effective nation-building as a true statesman. Unless and until, the leaders who steer the nation internalize democratic values, the struggle towards poverty eradication and development through democracy will remain incomplete. Next comes, making democracy work for one and all; else the failure of democracy to address such rampant poverty and inequality will remain a constant threat to its very existence!

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