

**Sethi, Harsh (ed.): State of Democracy in South Asia.
A Report by the CDSA Team. New Delhi: Oxford
University Press, 2008, 302 pages, ISBN: 0195689372.**

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Presented book has the format of an academic report and is a research outcome of Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), located in Delhi. It is the first-ever political study of electorate political attitudes and opinions on democracy functioning, institutional outcomes and acting of other mixed social forces in the area of South Asia. Such homogenous and complex project of examining democratic experience of five South Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal) was missing in academic field for a long time. Empirical data were obtained by the combination of the public opinion data, case studies, dialogues and expert assessment. A three years long research program was held in collaboration with network of various institutions and scholars by utilizing the State of Democracy Assessment framework, which has been piloted by the Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance in Stockholm. The outcome of the research is published under the name “State of Democracy in South Asia” and is written in a non-technical language. The text is accompanied by interesting graphic pictures, which serve as the proofs of the conclusions. Such style of published version was chosen to attract political scientists, students, activists, NGO’s, policy planners. The report offers very actual analysis of South Asian society and its attitudes and behavior (which were examined). The analyses are connected also to the historical context, in which was found the source or motive of electorate behavior in political arena.

The main focus of this report is to describe shift of the idea of democracy in mentioned countries. The theoretical ground is based on thinking about South Asia as of the “third wave” democracy, and further in its procedural conditions which shapes democratic institutional framework. The empirical research provides qualitative data as the arguments for the purpose of the project which is lying in two general interacted questions posed by the researchers:

- a) what democracy has done to South Asia,
- b) what South Asia has done to democracy (p.3).

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In connection to these questions, there is important to suggest, that the survey persist on the assumption that democracy was not introduced in South Asia and established as a separated phenomenon. There were three historically determined and for South Asian democracy conducive factors which we can describe in its full extent as long lasting processes: nationalism – state building – modernization, with their own particularity and contribution to democracy building and functioning.

In the research, one view became clear: democracy is more than just political freedom and includes the concepts of social justice and equity. With this consciousness the survey was realized.

The survey connected South Asia with model of democracy, by defining two dimensions which were serving as a description of unique Asian conditions for adoption of western type of democratic governance:

- a.) Regional dimension, where region complexities were examined as negative impact of adoption process: large scale rate of multiple diversities which overlap social structure, poverty and inequality, high levels of illiteracy.
- b.) Dimension of uniqueness, in sense of regional multi-culturalism.

Upon specified methodology, text serves an expert analysis of 7 ideas solved by the project purpose:

- 1.) The idea of democracy in South Asia is a result of mixture of western vision of democracy and South Asian cultures of democracy.
- 2.) South Asian exceptionality, which is lying in its ability to “disprove the notions that democracy cannot be instituted in conditions of mass poverty and illiteracy”.
- 3.) Power of politics, in meaning of political parties and organizations which are able to cover all kinds of social, economic and ideological cleavages.
- 4.) Political experiences with democracy have essential meaning for people’s support of democracy as such.
- 5.) South Asian type of democracy in sense of its practice is deviation from the received model of democracy.
- 6.) Institutions and organizations are regarded as “...key to the successful working of democracy”.
- 7.) There is a strong interconnection between “...subjective and objective marks”.

These seven key ideas and empirically based answers on them, can be generally described as examination of *political experience* with orientation to democracy of selected countries in context

of their identities as religion, ethnicity etc. (item no. 1, 4, 3), *transformation of received model of democracy* (item no. 5, 2, 6), *political interest* on both sides: politics and electorate (item no. 7).

The methodological framework in this study is indexing democracy in specified region, while „index works as a tool of measuring ‘how much’ in comparison to the other, providing ordinal ranking“ (p. 3). The data were concretely gathered by:

Cross-section survey: This method was a „principal instrument of data collection “on the ground of ethnography and discourse analysis” (p. 196). A number of total sampled respondents was 19 409, which were answering in the period of August 2004 to February 2005. For this phase the method of interviews with respondents in their residences was selected. The main aim was oriented on certain questions in general: a) what democracy meant for them, b) confidence in institutions of governance, c) levels of political activity, d) people’s view on the status of minorities, e) personal safety and perceptions of the material condition of their family and country, so researchers generalized it as an opinion, attitudes and behavior oriented data collection. For the sample selection, it was used circular random technique from Parliamentary Constituencies, to Assembly segments and latest electoral roll from each country, with the purpose to retain the respondent participation from all particular segments of societies.

In the concrete, for BANGLADESH, it was used 3-staged stratified sampling technique: 1) sample selection from Parliamentary Constituencies by using Probability Proportionate to Size method (PPS); 2) selection of polling booths in villages; 3) selection of respondents upon the gender and a booster samples which covered separation of three Bangladesh communities – Bihari people, Garos and Hill people.

In the case of INDIA, it was used 4-staged stratified random sampling: 1) sampling of Parliamentary Constituencies, which was already done by National Election Study 2004; 2) random selection from Assembly constituencies; 3) sample from polling stations of beforehand chosen Assembly constituencies; 4) sampling of respondents from electoral rolls which were used for interviewing. For the interviews, a quota for the States in sense of interviews quantity was used (see Appendix for the detailed categorization of interviews, p. 198-199).

For NEPAL, it was used 3-stage sampling: 1) Parliamentary Constituencies’ sampling; 2) polling booths’ sampling, while in this case, it was introduced the armed conflict in Nepal, which disabled the investigators to carry out the survey in some of the polling stations; 3) sampling of respondents. Also, a booster sample referred to this survey – it was organized upon clusters of 10 marginalized groups: displaced, liberated bonded labor, squatters, Thakali, Chepang, Rajbanshi, commercial sex workers, restaurant waiters, migrant labor, Tibetan refugees.

In PAKISTAN, it was used 3-stage sampling random technique, but in case that electoral rolls were not reliable, it was used Census instead of regularly used research technique: 1) sampling of Primary Sampling Units (district within a province) with using the latest available Census Data form 1999;. 2) selection of household for interviews based on the enumerating under certain criteria, while manually choosing the household; 3) selection of respondents by random selection from the personally, beforehand collected list of eventual respondents. A booster sample was added for the sake of Christian and Hindu representation.

SRI LANKA was examined by 3-stage random sampling technique: 1) random selection of Parliamentary Constituencies; 2) selection of polling booths; 3) respondent selection with introduction of over-sampling method because of non-contact and frequent refusal. Exclusion was also applied because of security question in Northern and Eastern areas, which were excluded.

Dialogues: They were used as a method for the purpose of specification and recognition of a pluralism of knowledge, interests and diversity of voices generally (p. 179, p. 204-211). The problem may be seen in the setting of the selection limits of concrete political active respondents. There are no mentioned criteria according to which they were personally sorted and which should provide the explanation of respondent selection process.

Case studies: Influences and sources that caused a change and produced the new political realities were prioritized by the case studies. In the sense of Weberian dictum “social reality is both intensively and extensively infinite and hence seeks to explore the web of interconnections that constitute the slice of reality being studied”, the issues were connected to the political process by their intensity and impact. Case studies were used as an instrument which covered dynamics of a working democracy. They were worked out by many experts, which are mentioned in the list (p. 178).

Qualitative assessment: This part of research involved scholars who did some theoretical and ideological survey in various studies. They designed a categorization upon sorted body of literature, which was consequently revised with concrete levels and domains. Answering the Qualitative Assessment framework questions, the idea of democracy assessment and specified aspect of country's democracy could be located. This step provided general commitment to the norms and its practical realization (p. 186).

A detailed Schedule and technical part is added in the Appendix for survey methodology (p. 177-214).

It is not surprising that democracy brought an institutional and procedural framework to South Asia. To prove such an argument, the study used also descriptive and historical approach as a complementary source of events description. But the contribution of the survey in this respect is the evidence justified by the empirical research that a) democracy expresses public legitimacy of shared values and their perception of the validity of democratic procedures; b) democratic orientation of the countries, gaining confidence in dealing with authority and negotiating their own identities; c) democratic imagination has perlocated to the non-political dimensions of life (p. 135). This set of values authors named as “culture” of democracy in South Asia. Second principal contribution of democracy is that it has transformed people from subjects to citizens, with their valuation as voters, which according to the research also effects high trust in democracy, especially in elections (very high rate of those, who think that their vote makes any difference). Both elements citizenship and value of the vote (from the point of view of electorate as well as politics) are reaffirming each other. On the contrary, institutions as parties or elected representatives suffer by the lack of trust. On the basis of such interconnected results authors argue that “democracy becomes an ever-expanding ideal, a beacon and a normative horizon” (p.145). The research also proves that democracy is not able to protect minority rights (for detailed notion see chapter 5). Another conclusion is coherent with this affirmation: there are overlapping attachments to the region and nation where we can note few tensions: national and provincial identities, religion and linguistic tensions and juridical identity of the citizens and significance of culturally-imagined group of (citizenship) identities.

It is still not answered to the question what South Asia did to democracy. We could not find in the book exact enumeration of certain facts which would respond this question. Personally, I see the answer in three challenges provided by the survey, which are not strictly isolated from the first issue “what democracy did to South Asia”. But it does not mean automatically that South Asia had not contributed to the model of democracy. It is just not defined by the survey in a positive/negative verdict, as it is in the answer to the first question. A foundational challenge is considered to be “instituting a democratic government in a manner such is not constantly vulnerable to authoritarian and other challenges” (p. 150). The argument lies in four inability of examined states: to control organized private violence, to translate popular will into effective policies, to reduce capacity of most state institutions to make decisions autonomous (because of permanent pressure of local interests), to liberate elections from fraud and violence.

The second challenge of expansion consists in application of democratic principles of government in every particular region, social group, sector and state institution.

The third challenge is seen in deepening of democracy which grants consolidation of democracy in South Asia. This issue is understood as the improvement of balance in sharing of power. It is the question of establishing institutional routine. In this meaning, the survey is talking about revitalization: in democratic governments, which rarely involve people in policy making; in breaking the hegemonic power over social and caste groups; in presenting democracy not only in majoritarian sense, which does not cover various dimensions of minorities; in fighting the mechanism of corruption, which defeats the purpose of democracy; in waylaying that people are crucial for functioning institutionalized democracy.

The book directly answers the question of South Asian contribution to democracy in (more negative) sense of “rise to a new language of democracy” in the meaning of democratic reforms which reflects “vision of an elite integrated more with global discourse than with local imagination” (p.156).

In conclusion of this review, I should recommend this book to all students, researchers and people interested in South Asian democracy who try to expand their knowledge of how the society in South Asia behave, what are its attitudes to the procedural democracy and why it is so. This book is very helpful for those who are seeking for empirical data on concrete questions connected with the relation between South Asian society and democracy. I see the limitation of this book in the fact that for such a type of survey is typical impossibility to fix the attitudes, i.e. the conclusions are heuristic in the modern age. It means that a research reflecting an actual respondent's opinion is terminable up to the period of research procedure. Other limitation lies in the territorial conditions of studying South Asia, temporary local exclusions from the survey, trench conclusive description and, furthermore, after termination of such situations, also doubts about actual validity of the survey should be brought. But, personally, I see the real limitation of the survey in general interpretation of the research outcome: if reader tries to select one concrete country from the survey, such an interpretation from this book would be very vague. So, generally, we can assume, that this survey is not considering the uniqueness of states, but uniqueness of examined area. We should apply this study to the South Asia as a complex of specified countries.