
The Impediments of Democracy in South Asia & South East Asia

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Abstract

What we call democracy has a celebrated history over centuries or to be more precise, ever since the era of ancient Greece. Flaws of various forms and degrees notwithstanding, democracy has spread almost every nook and corner of our globe barring some exceptions. The countries of the South Asia and the South East Asia too, have been covered with this polity. Even Pakistan, every now and then, having been under military regime for last few decades, appears to have a certain degree of stability with its democratic inclination.

But democracy in South Asia and South East Asia, owing to obvious historical and socio-cultural factors, can hardly be juxtaposed with its counterparts in western Europe. The democracy prevalent in Europe particularly in Western Europe has a glorious history of uncompromising and relentless battle against feudalism and religious orientation. The democracy in South Asian and south East Asia, on the other hand, is premature. The inner essences of modern democracy in those regions remain elusive. The French revolution of 1789, relentless fight against the feudal forces, had established the values of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity. The democracy of Western Europe has its sound foundation upon these values. But owing to the compromising nature, the democracy in South Asia and south East Asia trudges on with political violence and gender inequality. Vibrant politics based on essential values of democracy is remaining a far cry. Political violence is a rampant phenomenon in most of these countries. Electors at large often are not sure whether they would be allowed to exercise their opinion. And the mass media, the so-called fourth pillar of democracy, often, stands impeded by commercial motivation. Media often dance to the tune of the political dispensation. Women's political rights across these countries often remain only nominal. All these taken together must be properly accounted for in evaluating the democratic polity of South Asia and South East Asia.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Political violence, Media, Polity, Political dispensation

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- a) To have an analysis of the history of development of democracy in western Europe.
- b) To get an idea of the democracy prevalent in South and South -East Asia vis - a - vis democracy in western Europe.
- c) To know the obstacles faced by democracy in south and South-East Asia.
- d) To find possible way out of these obstacles and impediments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The nature of the subject presently dealt with is thematic. The methodology followed, therefore, has been based on study and analysis of secondary documents relevant to the subject. The specific viewpoint pertinent to the subject concerned has been pivotal in elaborating the theme the present work is dealing with. The number of secondary works, duly referred as and when required, have been gone through with a view to collecting material and interpreting them in terms of the theme in question. Apart from these, a number of articles published in journals or elsewhere, too, have been studied to have smooth headway leading to establish the proposed research work. The entire process has purportedly been aimed at finding a sound logical basis for the thesis to stand on firmly.

MAN IS NOT INDEPENDENT OF POLITICS

Aristotle had said that Man is a social animal. The necessary implication of what Aristotle had said is that man is a political animal too. An objective analysis of the history of mankind will definitely corroborate that human beings are, in no way, independent of politics. We as the integral part of society have little option to keep off politics. Economics, Politics, Culture etc. are no airtight, watertight compartments to be dealt with independently. These are rather manifestations of the societal process of which each and every human being, politically conscious or not, is a part. The fact of the matter, in course of the entire history of mankind, is that unless and until the political aspect is properly dealt with, we can do little in the process of understanding the significance of human civilization.

NATION STATE IS GUIDED BY A COMMON ECONOMY

The contemporary world that we belong to is necessarily an era of what is called Nation - State which, in terms of connotation, is quite different from what is conventionally known as country. In this sense India is no more a country. It is, in the contemporary context, precisely referred to as a Nation-State. From the historical perspective too, India had never been a country as a whole unit. India like any other Nation-State, is referred to as a political unit brought under a common economy where what is called a state is in congruence with what we call a Nation. This applies to every country across south and south-east Asia like the rest of the world.

The polity of the south and South East Asian states, therefore, is to be interpreted in terms of the concept and structure of Nation State. The system of governance in this area, by and large, can be termed as democratic. But democracy prevailing in this area, owing to the very premature nature, can hardly be juxtaposed with the democratic polity is Western Europe.

ORIGIN AND UNFOLDMENT OF WESTERN DEMOCRACY: A RELENTLESS FIGHT AGAINST FEUDALISM

It scarcely needs mentioning that the democracy of the Western Europe has a glorious history of relentless and uncompromising battle against feudalism. What deserves to be emphatically mentioned in this context is the role of Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century England. Cromwell had shaken the edifice of monarchy based on feudal economy and culture. Prior to this in the 13th century, the event i.e. charter of right what is commonly called Magna Carta was signed by the then king of England. These events corroborate the glorious battle against feudalism.

The French revolution in the year of 1789 too was the culmination of series of relentless and uncompromising battle against the feudal monarchy. This event was based on the democratic principles of equality fraternity and liberty.

The history of relentless battle in England and France had a huge impact to eliminate the feudal regime in other states of Europe. So, democracies in the West European states do have a sound foundation. The polity is run in terms of the basic principles of democracy. But in sharp contrast to this reality, the South Asian and South East Asian States a polity in the name of democracy, of course in half-baked form, trudges on. Most of these States, erstwhile colonies of the European States, still are burdened with colonial hangover. While “liberal democracy”, which has deep roots in Western Europe and North America, has progressed spectacularly in these two regions, this “Constitutional democracy” has not been consolidated in other parts of the world. (James & Ramcharan, 2014) Unlike the west European States, democracy in Asian States has been a compromised one falling short of the required criteria and standard to achieve a polity to be called democratic. Neither in the field of economy nor in culture, Asian countries are nowhere around to have shaken off the traits of feudalism.

THE AGRARIAN ECONOMY: ITS IMPACT ON THE INDIA AS A NATION STATE

To have clarity in this respect, we may, for example, refer to the economy and culture prevailing in our contemporary India which, much astonishingly, is referred to as the largest democracy in the world. But with a closer view of the economic history, one can hardly ignore the ground reality that Indian economy is yet to achieve the merits of industrial revolution. Indian economy still, to a great extent, is dependent upon agriculture. And the agriculture sector too, instead of bringing about land reform is dominated by the “big fishes”, the likes of the kulaks in Tsarist Russia. Unlike the states of western Europe, where in the wake of industrial revolution there emerged everywhere an organized labour force, the inevitable outcome of the force of democratic movement. Indian economy still hanging around with unorganized work force in the agriculture sector. The big farmers in India still do enjoy some economic

privileges which they do not deserve. The focal point of this story is that, agriculture, though a big part of economy, is not at par with the industrial sector in terms of attaining post feudal nature.

HEREDITARY POLITICS IN SOUTH & SOUTH EAST ASIA

The flip side of this story is that feudal culture is still casting its dark shadow in the democracy of Asia. Hereditary privileges are just the normal phenomenon in Indian democracy. The leadership a Congress party is still under the absolute control of a particular family. This practice is not at all in congruence with democratic norms. Even almost all the regional parties too are not free from this feudal and dynastic vice. This practice cannot uphold democratic norms. This practice is quite common in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and some other countries. Without resorting to eliminating the feudal vices including the least elements of feudal culture left, the principles of equality, fraternity and liberty can have no place in a polity. This is exactly what has been occurring in the Asian democracy. Democracy without its basic principles is something having no feasibility. And on account of this hard reality, the democracy in these region trudges on with the impediments like political violence, biased media, gender discrimination and such other menace uncalled for democracy to sustain and prosper in the true sense of the term.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE POLITY OF SOUTH & SOUTH EAST ASIA

Gender politics is one of the worst elements to impede democracy in Asia. The fact that mass Mrs. Indira Gandhi in India, Sheikh Hasina or Begum Khaleda in Bangladesh, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan or Mrs. Shrimavo Bandarnayake in Sri Lanka who, sometimes or others had been at the helm of affairs in their respective countries, cannot cover of the ugly picture of gender discrimination in these regions. Women population at large are always at the receiving end and in terms of social security, economic liberty and above all, dignity as women. Women in the greater society seldom receive due honour. The heinous crimes like molestation and rape are quite common in society, that too in terms of the recorded events only. The crimes unheeded and unrecorded must depict a worse picture. Even capital punishments to the perpetrators of crime against women have not been sufficient to deter such crimes. In the field of politics, we find the bill reserved to reserve one third of parliamentary constituencies for women is yet to be passed in Indian parliament. This is the gloomy picture expressive of the perspective of male chauvinism in the third world society at large. Strong feudal and traditional values and patriarchal cultural practices, which are common characteristics across the region, have hindered capacity building and the improvement and take-up of opportunities for women. (Nepali, 2009) Women, in general perspective, is often dealt with something "less than human

being". This is the reason why out of context obscenity and vulgar are exhibited in the films. Women body are used for endorsement of products for commercial purpose. The average approach to women is based on the false perspective that woman is only liability. Birth of male child is an occasion to celebrate in common households. A girl child, on the other hand, in average cases are distastefully unwelcomed. The discriminatory gender politics in South & Southeast Asia is an inevitable outcome of this outlook prevailing in the society at large. In recent past, the episode of Malala Yousafzai in glaring example of the degree of atrocities women have to suffer in the area of our discussion. She had to sustain multiple bullet injuries just because she politely spoke out in favour of women education. The Malala episode itself is more than enough for the statement that women folk at large have a long way to struggle to get rid of the gender discrimination.

MEDIA THE 4TH PILLAR OF DEMOCRACY: A MOCKERY IN SOUTH & SOUTH EAST ASIA

The role of mass media, the so called fourth pillar of democracy as is much trumpeted is also another impediment. Mass media both print and electronic often stand impeded by commercial motivation. They often have the obligation to dance at the tune of the political dispensation. Any random survey in this regard will reveal the sorry state of affair across the entire region of south and South East Asia. The most alarming part of the story is that media sector has developed a trend of political inclination. A sector, instead of adhering to their professional norms, often are found to be advocating for the political party in power. The role of mass media on the other hand, is to stand critical with regard to the policies and programmes of the government to keep them alert. This role of media plays a balancing factor to keep the on-going political dispensation on the right track. This also plays a vital role in building public opinion on the basis of objective facts and data. But unfortunately, the picture, by and large, is just the reverse where the mass media often turn out to be mere sycophants of those who are at the helm of affairs. An inevitable outcome of this sort of deviation of mass media is that the government go unabated with its anti-people stance. The worst sufferer in nothing but democracy itself. The mass media is supposed to expose the malfunctioning of a government and set it on the right track. But instead, in many cases across south and South Asia it stands deviated to cover up the misdeed of the government. These partisan characters of mass media are uncalled for. Besides it also needs to be mentioned that mass media is not meant to oppose the government. Any pro-people program undertaken by government should be solicited for. But the fact stands that often media fails to act up to that mark. This also is due to the partisan character of media. Media has to be independent of any political inclination to justify its status of being the fourth pillar of democracy. But there are

examples galore to substantiate that most of the media house across south and South Asia are advocating the prominent political parties which rotating occupy the corridor of power. So, mas' media should have an anti-establishment status only to stand by the common people and their aspirations.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE, ANOTHER MENACE

Political violence contrary to standard norms of democracy wreaks havoc in this region. Democratic process is often marred by the vice of political violence. Universal adult franchise often sounds a mockery when political goons are often seen to run amok on the days of public election. people are either barred to reach the polling station or are threatened to stay away from this polling station. Goons brandishing fire arms in public is often a common picture. Booth capturing, intimidation of the electors is rampant. Pre-poll and post -poll violence have become the household vocabulary now-a-days. Physical violence is a menace. But the threat of violence which keeps the common people too scared to cast their votes is worse state of affairs. Democracy which is supposed to be based on interaction between different views has become a war of weapons. Political violence in many cases has become a phenomenon occurring round the year. Politicians indulge in violence and take refuge in other unhealthy, undemocratic methods to win elections. Undoubtedly, this is not a healthy trend in politics and there is an urgent need to apply serious check on such tendencies. It is the very negation of democratic values and has no place in a democratic set up. (Rana & Meena, 2017) The most unfortunate part of the story is reflected in the reports where the law makers themselves indulge in violence and that too in the very legislative offices. Legislators or parliamentarians with their oratory skill and rational argumentation have become rarest of rare species in the present-day political platform. That the candidates with criminal records getting party tickets to contest election have become quite common in recent past.

CONCLUSION

Politicization of crime and criminalization of politics are the flip side of a same coin which, in other words is known as political violence. Politics is supposed to be a war of words rather than war of weapons. The impediments dealt with here are the necessary outcome of the immature nature of democracy prevailing in most part of Asia. Democracy should be a full package consisting of requisite political norms coupled with befitting culture, which comes into existence by virtue of uncompromising struggle against feudal system. To be precise democracy in Asia still has a long way to go to assimilate the democratic culture in itself. Till then south and South Asia will continue to have their half -baked and premature form of democracy. Given that democratic discontent is clearly evident both in terms of perception, as well

as reality, it is important to explore what its underlying sources are. While there are no doubt a range of factors that can be listed to explain this, five principles drivers are at play with respect to Southeast Asia and the wider regional and global environment: the erosion of traditional institutions, the suppression of opposition and civil society, the rise of intolerance, growing regional normative scrutiny and increasing global ideological competition. (Parameswaran, 2020)

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