

Comments on the ADI Project from the Indian Perspective

BONOJIT HUSSAIN

It has long been proposed by proponents of democracy from a certain ideological vantage point that political democracy becomes meaningful only when its frontiers are ever expanding in the realm of social and economic citizenship (good living standards, life with dignity free of discrimination and fear, universal access to education, health, housing, etc.). This means that democracy is not only an “end in itself” that needs to be pursued but also a process that is not devoid of conflicts and contestations under the global system it necessarily operates within. And, I believe, the Consortium of Asian Democracy Index (CADI) is yet another noble effort towards reaffirming the same.

I have been asked to comment on the CADI project from the point of view of someone who is considering the possibility of conducting the survey in India. Let me start by saying that while going through the CADI theoretical framework, I was struck by the absence of any discussion on social diversity vis-à-vis democracy. To put in the terminology of CADI, the theoretical exposition as far as social de-monopolization is concerned is rather weak.

The relationship between democracy and diversity has proven to be particularly difficult in South Asia, for both ends of this relationship pose a challenge in this region. The nature of diversity itself is a challenge to political imagination. Probably more than any other region in the world, South Asia represents a bewildering mosaic of different collective identity—religious, linguistic, ethnic, sub-regional—which overlap and cut across one another in innumerable ways. This difficulty in the relationship between democracy and diversity has essentially to do with the idea of Westphalian notion of modern nation-state whose “boundaries must also correspond and coincide with homogenous cultural boundaries.”

Bonojit Hussain is an independent researcher and political analyst from Assam, India. He is affiliated with New Socialist Initiative-Delhi Chapter.

Hence, it is of utmost importance to realize the fact that in India (like in numerous non-homogenous countries in the Third World), formal equal political citizenship exists in a very unequal society marred by issues of castes, indigenes, oppressed nationalities, gender, etc. which perpetuates exclusion and oppression in the everyday lives of millions. From the Indian experience, it can safely be noted that a well functioning multi-party democracy does not ensure everyday democracy at the local level. A political democracy at the national level does not realize itself in a meaningful sense without social and economic justice at the local level.

“Really existing democracy” in Asia has failed to address the issues of the “downtrodden,” oppressed and marginalized on many accounts. The issues of exclusionary structures, which violate socioeconomic and cultural rights, have become a part of official State discourse but more often than not just as lip service. A good illustration on this point would be again India, where out of approximately three million (in both tiers of State and central government) elected representatives, two million are women and twenty-two percent represents dalits and indigenes (adivasis), and yet women, dalits and indigenes remain more oppressed and vulnerable than ever before. It can be argued that within the present “really existing democratic” framework, representation often becomes a mechanism of producing new “rent-taking” political elites who might still bear the name of the marginalized.

Like I hinted above, even though India has a formal political democratic setup, democracy is visualized, and it operates within the larger paradigm of nation building/nation, without recognizing or evading the homogenizing tendencies of the notion of modern nation itself which renders minority nationalities and linguistic, religious and other minority as the “other.” This has led to conflict with the State, often militarizing the society; examples are innumerable starting from India’s Northeast and Kashmir.

Another aspect in the CADI framework that struck me was the unsubstantiated use of concepts (both in theoretical and descriptive sense) like civil society and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). If CADI is using “civil society” in a Gramscian sense, then it needs to spell it out, as it is a much used and abused concept in contemporary political theory. For the past two decades the most popular concept in the analysis of the social basis and agent of “democratic” struggles among the Western academia and activists as well as external support for democratic political reform (notably from western donors) have undoubtedly been “civil society.” Civil society has been said to be the powerhouse which sustains democracy through associational engagement and democratic deliberation. Many Western proponents of the so-called third wave democracies point out that civil society

promotes democratic consolidation by “inculcating not only the participatory habits, interests, and skills of democratic citizenship but also the deeper values of a democratic political culture, such as tolerance, moderation, willingness to compromise, and a respect for opposing views.” Of course civil society as a category and as a concept has a very rich history and no doubt that deliberation in public sphere is crucial to sustain an inclusive democracy that be. But if we were to consider the fact that civil society in the “third wave sense” in a largely rural Asian context is confined to urban centres and the middle classes, there arises serious doubts on fairness and equality in deliberations. The public sphere of “Asian civil society” essentially excludes certain voices and marginalizes others by glossing over intersection of class/gender/race/caste/nationality. The language that so-called civil society operates through and deliberates is the language of legality and civic morality derived from the notion of modern state, whereas in a Third World country like India, majority of the population doesn’t have access to knowledge (or even basic literacy) that produces expertise over that language. In other words, the deliberative language of Indian civil society is monopolized by few in the larger society.

On the other hand, a careful look at Indian or rather Asian society (excluding perhaps the first world countries in Asia) can be telling of the fact that civil society as it is constituted today is not autonomous of the State. The realm of collective action and deliberation of civil society functions within the parameters laid down by the State. Within that permissible parameters civil society can do whatever they want, but once it puts forth redistributive demands which might destabilize the very socioeconomic structures generating inequalities, the “civil actor” might be relegated beyond the dark realm of civic rights and law.

Now, again, CADI should be careful in using NGO as a conceptual term; it is understood differently by political masses in different countries, depending on where the countries (the nation, the people) stand in the global division of labor. Across the Third World countries, for politically conscious masses the concept of NGO immediately gets connected with multilateral lending agencies like World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) who have been funding scores of NGOs to promote the ideology of “self-help.” These NGOs are often hailed as agents of democratic deepening, but a closer critical look might reveal something else. Not much attention has been paid to analyze or critically engage whether NGOs promoted by World Bank and ADB help deepen democracy or undermine it at a structural level. Most of these NGOs are service providers or promoter of self help groups operating in local level, and in the process they provide an opportunity for the “democratic” State to roll back from providing basic services and amenities

to its citizen. And since these NGOs, unlike the State, are not accountable to the people in a real sense, in the process it transforms historically hard earned basic rights into services.

The era of neoliberal globalization of capital and “free market” ideology has seriously weakened the “social” character of democracy. While neoliberalism promotes a form of market utopia of prosperity and at the same time it has also been destroying people’s lives in form of extreme commoditization. The fate of people is being constantly “thrown into the floating global market away from the will of the voters.” It has been happening because neoliberalism requires the State to constantly withdraw from its welfarist role, which was obtained through struggle, and to become more interventionist in favor of capital. Recent glaring examples again come from India, the largest functioning democracy in Asia, where the “democratic” State is increasingly putting its weight behind big capital against its own denizens (whereas traditionally it played a mediating role, biased though, between capital and people/labor).

And, I believe, this is what the CADI survey had to measure. It is complex but it is a workable and desirable initiative which could possibly enable processes of understanding “Asian” democracy in all its complexities, yet not be colored by Western unilateralism.