Democratic Backsliding in South Asia: Recent Anecdotes

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Abstract

Democracy is a political system of government that allows all groups, regardless of race, gender, class or sexual orientation, to participate in politics. Despite its limitations, most people have high hopes for democracy even today. However, the debate over whether democracy works in the contemporary but very complex global order is getting political space in academia and society. This paper explores the state of democracy in South Asia bringing some more ground reality, i.e. recent political upheavals in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal. While doing so, it extensively reviews the scholarly works of 'third wave of democracy' published during and around 1990s and 'third wave of dictatorship' published after 2019 and examines whether there is any linkage of scholarly publication and the democratisation process

*Keywords***:** authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, political unrest, Third wave, South Asia

Introduction

South Asia, a subregion of Asia, encompasses the Indo-Gangetic Plain and Peninsular India. This region includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan,

and the Maldives. The terms 'Indian Subcontinent' and 'South Asia' are often used interchangeably, though the latter phrase sometimes refers more specifically to Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

South Asia is home to one of the world's earliest civilizations–the Indus Valley Civilization–and is considered the most densely populated area in the world. Despite a history characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and political fragmentation, South Asians share a deep understanding of diverse, cultural and ethical perspectives. Over centuries, this region's music, dance, ritual customs, modes of worship, and literary traditions have served as unifying elements.

India is often referred to as the world's oldest[1] and largest democracy by its citizens. According to Jeffrey (1994), during a Commonwealth parliamentary seminar in 1994, a deputy chairman of India's Upper House remarked that the country's ancient institutions, the Sabhas and Samities, offered avenues for public participation in democratic processes. This implication debates over whether democracy first emerged in India or Athens. Nevertheless, some argue that the more relevant concern is not where democracy originated, but how it has endured in India since its reestablishment in 1950. Some argue that there is less material debate on where democracy first appeared.

Scholars in the late 1990s debated how resilient democracy spread in South Asia. During that time, democracy was not firmly rooted enough in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, or Nepal, and it was also facing serious challenges and obstacles in Sri Lanka. Through comparative analyses of these South Asian countries that share cultural attributes mostly because of the British rule influence until 1947-1948, scholars like Jeffrey (1994), Adhikari et.al (2010), etc. started examining and looking into the factors that contribute to the survival of democratic systems. By 'democracy' Jeffrey meant

[1] For details, https://www.historytoday.com/archive/democra-cy-south-asia , accessed on September 20, 2024.

regular, relatively free and fair, multi-candidate, usually multi-party elections. Even though such a system aligns perfectly with the dictionary definition of 'government by the people',[2] it does not quite guarantee prosperity, peace or equality among the masses.

Jeffrey (1994) could examine how colonialism and religious divisions have interacted with indigenous tradition to produce a mixed balance sheet for democracy in and around the Indian subcontinent. However, reports from three decades down the line show statements such as India being among the countries leading the 'third wave of autocratisation'.[3] The V-Dem report dedicates a chapter to India, titled 'Democracy Broken Down: India'. The chapter says that the 'world's largest democracy has turned into an electoral autocracy'. Over the years, India's autocratisation has followed quite a familiar pattern observed in other nations during the 'third wave' noted for its gradual erosion of freedoms, particularly in the sectors of media, academia, and civil society, according to reports. The report emphasises on the sharp rise in government censorship of the media, the suppression of civil society organisations, and the diminishing autonomy of the Election Commission of India. It also points to a high rise in media bias and signs of decline in academic and religious freedoms. Citing the same report, Lührmann et.al (2021) states, 'democracy has deteriorated since then, with EDI scores declining from 0.71 to 0.54 between the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections'.

A stark comparison has been observed between India and South Asian countries. According to V Dem records, India is, in this aspect, now as autocratic as Pakistan and worse than

2 For details, https://www.historytoday.com/archive/democracy-south-asia, accessed on September 20, 2024

3 A Sweden-based institute has said that India is no longer an 'electoral democracy', classifying the country as an 'electoral autocracy' instead, noting that much of the decline in democratic freedoms occurred after the BJP and Narendra Modi's victory in 2014

its neighbours Bangladesh and Nepal. In its democracy report,[4] India is enlisted under the six 'Major Autocratisers' category stating that anti-pluralist parties drive autocratisation in at least six of the top 10 autocratisers–Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland, Serbia, and Turkey. The report further states, 'The autocratising countries tend to be influential regional and global powers. The group includes major G20 countries such as Brazil, India, Turkey, and the United States of America, as well as countries such as Bangladesh, Tanzania, Thailand, and The Philippines. Except for South Korea, the countries improving on the LDI were typically less populous and not as influential internationally'. The report also emphasises the rising polarisation in autocratising countries like Brazil, India, and Serbia, stating that 'toxic polarisation and Autocratisation mutually reinforce each other', highlighting the 'toxic levels of polarisation that contribute to electoral victories of anti-pluralist leaders and the empowerment of their agendas' (p.31).

Before that, in March 2020, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) placed India alongside China, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia in a list of press freedom's 'worst digital predators'. The list compiled by the global media watchdog flags countries where companies and government agencies use 'digital technology to spy on and harass journalists'. The following month, the US government's Religious Freedom Monitor recommended that the country's state department should include India in the list of 'countries of special concern', in the company of China, Pakistan, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Russia. It noted that religious freedom had improved globally but singled out India for seeing a 'sharp downward turn'. The question arises as to whether democracy has lost its relevance or there is a greater search for democracy because of the stakes it is facing.

4 https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf, accessed on September 20, 2024.

Given such a background, this paper explores the state of democracy in South Asia, bringing some more ground reality, i.e. recent political upheavals in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and India. While doing so, reviewing scholarly works of 'third wave of democracy' published during and around 1990s and 'third wave of dictatorship' published after 2019 will be the focus of the paper to understand whether there is any linkage of scholarly publication and democratisation process.

Democratic Erosion: The Dynamics of Global Trends with South Asian Contexts

The first assumption could be whether South Asian society follows contemporary academic discourse and shifts accordingly. It is because while there was a web of democracy, many countries globally, including Nepal, converted to democracy. However, the mood in recent times seems to be trending in the opposite direction: Several books and numerous articles are nowadays raising the issues of the crisis of democracies. The literature draws attention to the phenomenon of 'democratic erosion': Democracies that no longer die in one fell swoop, but rather slowly, bit by bit. Instead of succumbing from one day to the next to massive riots or a military coup, democracies nowadays are dismantled piece by piece from within. Through small, outwardly legal moves, democracies are emptied of their representational legitimacies and turn into their opposites. According to Gargarella (2022), from the government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people', we find ourselves within a governmental rule 'of a few, managed by a minority, and for the privileged'. Also, having a benevolent dictator has been always a romantic idea of some of the elites in countries like India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. People refer to leaders like Lee Kaun Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, among others, as options to tempo infrastructural development of a country. However, Tavares and Wacziarg (2001) in their empirical study displayed a

negative relationship between democracy and economic growth. They found that as human capital investment rose, it was at the cost of physical capital accumulation which pushed down economic growth. Gerring et al. (2005), on the contrary, debunked this claim by establishing that democracies increase economic growth, especially in the long run through the development of human capital through declining fertility rates, education, affordable healthcare, etc. The government has no choice but to ensure that the policies work for the whole economy or else risk losing its authority. The longevity of human capital also ensures that the growth in democracies prevails for a longer run of time. Masaki & Van de Walle (2014) found that over a long period when democracy became more rooted in Sub-Saharan African nations, they enjoyed higher growth compared to when they were autocracies or monarchies. Acemoglu et al. (2019) also found a positive relationship between growth and democracy. Their panel data consisted of over 175 countries from 1960 to 2010. The long period gave an important perspective on the growth of countries that were initially autocracies before adopting a democratic system. They arrived at the conclusion that when a country transitions to democracy from an autocracy, its GDP increases by almost 20 percent in the long run. Higher taxation and increase in the production of public goods were provided as the main factors behind this behavior of GDP.

If the data is examined, it is clear that the global status of democracy is also weakening day by day as it is in South Asia. The Global State of Democracy Initiative (GSoD), which claims itself as an initiative with evidence-based, balanced analysis and data, states that the quality of democracy for around 173 countries across the world is going through rapid change within the trend of democracy after the global pandemic. Challenges created by climate change are another vital issue to affect the ongoing trend. The bulk of the literature leads us to the hypothesis that countries with weak

mostly Muslims, were killed—are still vivid in people's memories. Given the situation, a few members of the British Members of Parliament had demanded on January 12, 2021, that human rights provisions be made mandatory in all future trade deals with India, following a debate in the House of Commons on religious persecution experienced by minority groups. It spoke loudly and clearly about the situation of human rights in this country, particularly of those in the minority, the poor, and the helpless (Khangchian, 2021; Khangchain, 2023).

Some unreported incidents could have further defamed Indian democracy if they were given a space by the media. For example, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country witnessed a massive reverse migration, a crisis marked by several deaths, loss of jobs, starvation, neglect, and hunger-induced crimes. However, even amid such untold human tragedy and hardship, there were also certain labeling of communities such as 'Corona Jihadists' and even profiling of people with mongoloid features as 'Coronavirus' including those who were at the forefront of combating the unseen enemy (Khangchian, 2021). Thus, no matter how grave situations are, for mankind, there are people and groups with scant regard for the rights of others in the country. We also found that more often than not, people fighting for their rights or the rights of others, particularly the marginalised groups, are labeled as Khalistanis, Maoists, or even described as 'Terrorists': Actor and BJP party MP, Kangana Ranaut, faced an FIR, over her Instagram comments such as 'Khalistan' remarks on farmers' protest in Punjab (Hakkim, 2021) and later she was publicly slapped by a CISF constable whose mother was an activist in the protest, and the constable was suspended and shifted to Karnataka unit as a result (The Hindu, 2024).

Pakistan, on the other hand, in its 76-year history, has had 29 prime ministers, none of whom has completed a full five-year term. Interestingly governments have been ousted by military

or unstable economies are more prone to democratic collapse than those with stable economies. Przeworski et al. (1996; 2000) examine economic performance (that is, growth, absence of crises, and low inflation) and the stability of democracy. They conclude that affluence (continued positive economic performance) contributes to democratic stability; Powell (1982) examines the relationship between economic inequality and violence. These are only some of the studies that measure economic performance, not economic development, and its relationship to democratic stability. Lipset (1959), for example, measures indices of democratic development (wealth, industrialisation, urbanisation, and education) and claims that the more economically developed a nation is, the more likely it is to sustain a democratic regime. Lipset's claim has been confirmed by numerous scholars who have carried out multivariate analyses, such as Bollen (1979), Cutright (1963), Cutright & Wiley (1969), Lipset et al. (1993), and Olsen (1968) among others. The discussion among these scholars concerns the type of relationship, rather than the existence of such a relationship. Is the relationship linear or not (Bollen & Jackman, 1985)? Is the main variable economic development or income inequality (Hadenius, 1994; Muller, 1988, 1995)?

Global democracy is getting in the way of a big warning in the last few years, approaching the end of 2022 with multiple issues, a cost-of-living crisis, an economic crisis, and recent wars in places as diverse as Ukraine and Ethiopia. The world is fighting for balance in environments marked by instability and anxiety. Relatively democratic nations that are doing well are also going through difficult modules.

The dullness exists in parallel to democratic erosion elsewhere. The number of backsliding countries (seven) remains at its peak, and the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism is more than double the number moving towards democracy. As

of the end of 2021, nearly one-half of the 173 countries assessed by International IDEA were experiencing declines in at least one sub-attribute of democracy. The erosion in democratic rule is being charged by efforts to undermine credible election results, widespread dejection among youth over political parties, and their out-of-touch leaders, as well as the rise of right-wing that has polarised politics. In Europe, democratic rule in 17 countries has eroded over the last five years, affecting 46 percent of the high-performing democracies. The quality of democracy is declining in half of the democracies around the world while the number of countries with the most severe form of democratic erosion, known as backsliding, is at its peak. The rise of dictatorship has its background too. In 2012 liberal democracies peaked in 42 countries. In 2021, there were only 34 liberal democracies; the lowest number recorded since 1995—over 25 years ago. Only 13 percent of the world's population live in this least populous regime type. Dictatorships are the rise up from 25 to 30 closed autocracies between 2020 and 2021. This development adds to the picture of a change like autocratisation. Electoral autocracies are the most common regime type and harbor the largest share of the world population—44 percent, or 3.4 billion people.

The Brookings Institute, being based on six high-quality surveys, outlines that public support is good enough for fundamental change in their political system to make it work better and effectively. Around 6 out of every 10 Americans do not believe that the system can be changed; it has not changed despite growing disorder. Polarisation has led to a legislative halt resulting in rising support for unfettered executive action to carry out the people's will. Democracy means the rule of the people, but Americans do not fully agree on who belongs to the people. Although there are areas of agreement across partisan and ideological lines, some in our nation hold that to be 'truly' American. American democracy is under assault from the ground up. The most recent systematic attack on state and

local election machinery is much more dangerous than the chaotic statements of a disorganized former president. A movement that relied on Donald Trump's organisational skills would impose no threat to constitutional institutions. The chances are that this threat will remain over the next few years.

State of Democracy in South Asia

Democracy, often as a political system, meets at least three conditions: First, it features competition among organized groups and individuals over government power regularly and without the use of force; second, it allows for political participation through regular free elections that should not exclude defined social groups; and third, it offers a certain level of civil and political rights that ensures competition and participation (Diamond et al., 1990). Applying this definition to South Asia reveals several problems. The health of democracy has declined significantly in many nations over the past several years,[5] and it is the case in South Asia too. It is worth here to refer Christian Wagner (1999, p. 908-925) to understand the situation from his article 'Democracy and State in South Asia: Between Fragmentation and Consolidation?', through which the author uses a 'minimalist definition of democracy', as suitable to amply in South Asian context. According to him, even minimalist democracy faces several problems when applied to the South Asian environment. However, despite such problems as poll-related violence and restricted civil liberties, democracy is functioning in the sense that elections serve their first and foremost purpose to change governments through ballots. Such is even more remarkable in societies with high socioeconomic inequalities. For 21 consecutive years, from 1999 to 2021, the Freedom House Index—the most widely used measure of democratic

5   For detail, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/02/28/representative-democracy-remains-a-popular-ideal-but-people-around-the-world-are-critical-of-how-its-working/, accessed on September 20, 2024.

quality worldwide—has reported that South Asia is experiencing democratic backsliding. This is in line with global trends, where, democracies and civil liberties have deteriorated, and India saw the largest decline in the score among the 25 largest democracies in the world while Bangladesh and Pakistan also contributed to the region's democratic backsliding. India's decline (from 75 to 71) is the largest score decline among the 25 largest democracies in the world, and at least three decisions taken by the Indian government in 2019 are mentioned in the FH report as important for the sharp decline of the Indian score. The first is the decision to revoke the special status (and statehood) of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. The decision, which was accompanied by a communication shutdown (which is still partially in operation), the arrest (without charge) of Kashmiri political leaders, and a massive deployment of additional troops, also caused the Indian Kashmir score to drop dramatically to the category 'not free'. The second is the publication of the National Registry of Citizens in Assam in August 2019 which left out nearly two million residents from the list of citizens. The third is the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act in December 2019 which grants special rights to non-Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In 2023, people like Lydia Polgreen (February 2023) started comparing the changing situation with a short time slot and argued that it is difficult to believe that upon her arrival in India, more than a decade ago, Nehru's dream seemed alive—more than a billion people living in relative harmony, cheek by jowl atop a palimpsest of fallen empires. It is a tragedy that India's rise comes as that dream fades and is replaced by a new India that is less free, less tolerant, and more willing to jettison the furniture of democracy to build a temple of national greatness around a single faith. The whole of humanity will

be poorer for it.[6] Likewise, Lührmann (et al, 2022)[7] states that the Hindu-nationalist party, BJP became India's governing party in 2014 led by Narendra Modi. Democracy has deteriorated since then, with EDI scores declining from 0.71 to 0.54 between the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections. Several policies have diminished freedom of expression and academic freedom, and repression of civil society has increased. BJP's vision of India as a Hindu nation has also led to persistent discrimination against Muslims (Ganguly, 2020; Maerz, Lührmann, et al., 2020; Varshney, 2019; Pyakurel & Gurung, 2023; Pyakurel 2013). This is reflected in BJP's 0.84 score on the API in 2019.

Democratic backsliding is discussed within India itself. Guha (2020) hinted at worrying but unmistakable similarities between the Italy of the 1920s, namely the decade when Benito Mussolini conquered power, and the India of the 2020s. It is said that India in the 2020s resembles less Italy in the 1920s than Germany in the 1930s. Hitler came to power democratically; also, central to Nazi ideology was the contempt and hate for inferior races, starting with the Jews. Observing the Modi government's acts toward peaceful freedom of speech movements, such as the #ByeByeModi campaign, remarks such as 'There is freedom of speech, but we cannot guarantee freedom after speech' (The Wire, 2022) are also being made. Khangchian (2021) refers to cases such as the arrest of father Stan Swamy, a Catholic Priest, on October 8, 2020 by National Investigation Agency (NIA), considering this as against freedom of speech offered by Indian constitution. The farmer's agitation against the new agricultural laws, which began on November 26, 2020, protests the 'corporatisation' of Indian agriculture, and the arrests of anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protesters charged under the UAPA, along with the February 2020 Delhi riots—where 53 people,

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6 For detail, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/opinion/india-modi-bbc-de-mocracy.html, accessed on September 20, 2024.
7 For detail, https://v-dem.net/media/publications/working_paper_116_final. pdf, accessed on September 20, 2024

intervention in the past. A new election held on 8 February 2008 commenced while Pakistan's army had become increasingly visible in politics for at least the previous 20 months. The pre-election scenario was not very different than in Bangladesh as the political opposition had been marginalised, critics and the media muzzled, and space for civil society further shrunk. Opposition parties state that there had been hundreds of detentions—some on charges of violence. Under alleged duress or inducement, some senior PTI party leaders had abandoned the party. Journalists have described intimidation, harassment, and surveillance by the authorities for perceived criticism of the government. Some politicians and journalists had also been charged under Pakistan›s vague and overly broad sedition law, based on colonial-era legislation, and dozens had been tried in military courts in violation of international law.

In the case of Nepal, one can hypothesise that federal states are more prone to democratic collapse than unitary ones. The introduction of federalism can lead to centre-periphery struggles that could undermine democracy, as it was in the case of the American Civil War. This hypothesis runs counter to the small amount of literature (Giri et.al 2019; Pyakurel, 2015a; Pyakurel, 2015b; Pyakurel, 2022; Pyakurel & Adhikari 2013; Upreti & Pyakurel 2012a; Upreti & Pyakurel 2012b) that is available on the relationship between this variable and democratic collapse. For example, Lijphart (1984a, 1999) includes federalism as one of the majority-restraining elements that identifies his consensual model of democracy. Federalism is, therefore, conducive to democratic stability, and not damaging (Lijphart, 1990). Diamond (1990), Diamond et al. (1995), Horowitz (1994), and Pyakurel (2016) all focus on the usefulness of federalism in alleviating ethnic and other social conflicts to achieve a more stable democracy in pluralistic societies. Hadenius (1994), however, found no significant quantitative relationship between federalism and the durability of democracy in developing countries

(Adhikari, 2012; Pyakurel 2012). Another hypothesis could be that proportional electoral systems are more prone to democratic collapse than those with less proportionality. The influence of proportionality, however, can produce two offsetting results. On the one hand, high proportionality can expand fragmentation, thereby increasing the fragility of the party system. On the other hand, it can expand representation, thereby containing conflicts and reducing their spillover outside the system. Countries such as the Maldives, Bhutan and Afghanistan are undergoing political changes, with Bhutan being the only exception, potentially facing increasing democratic deficits within the region. The following section take Manipur (one of the north-eastern states of India), Sri Lanka and Bangladesh as the latest updates, and tries to understand the reasons for countries and societies being in such a situation. Is it due to the global scenario followed by South Asia or does it have some ingredients built within? The northeastern state of India is home to a diverse population that includes various ethnic groups such as Meitei, Kuki, Naga, and other smaller tribes. The majority representing the state and Imphal valley are the Meiteis, predominantly Hindus, while the Kukis, primarily Christian, live in the hilly regions surrounding the valley. Over the years these two communities have harboured conflicting interests, especially over land rights, political representation and cultural recognition. The ongoing struggle focuses on the three main ethnic groups–Naga (24 percent), Kuki-Chin (16 percent) and Meitei (53 percent), and this traces back over two centuries (IWGIA, 2023). Presently, the Nagas and Kukis are classified as 'Scheduled Tribes' under the Indian Constitution, a recognition acknowledging their socio-economic disadvantages. In contrast, the Meiteis are not designated as Schedule Tribes. Since India's independence, the Constitution has established principles of affirmative action for Scheduled Tribes, providing them with reserved political representation, government employment, quotas in universities, free

or subsidized education, and access to various government benefits. Several laws have been enacted to enforce such constitutional provisions, including the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989, the Panchayat Extention to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996, and the Forest Rights Act of 2006 (IWGIA, 2023).

The conflict between Kuki and Meitei communities started on May 3, 2023, following the solidarity march arranged by the All Tribal Student union Manipur (ATSUM) in various districts of Manipur. The purpose of the march was to protest against a recent order by the Manipur High Court that called for expedited consideration of granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei Community. This order directed the state government to respond to a letter from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, considering the inclusion of the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe list, expeditiously, preferably within a period of four weeks. As a result, it triggered clashes and sparked violence that had been building up over a decade of unresolved tension (IWGIA, 2023). The conflict has resulted in killings and displacements along with looting of around 5, 600 weapons and 650,000 rounds of ammunition from state armories. Both the Kuki and Meitei communities have been armed, including weapons sourced from various insurgent groups and from the neighbouring country Myanmar. Despite current efforts to contain the situation, the violence and killings continue (IWGIA, 2023).

The Manipur Conflict is the recent outbreak of ethnic violence in one of India's smaller states, clashing between the majority Meitei and the minority Kuki communities, battling over land and influence. Manipur, a hilly north-eastern Indian state, is situated to the east of Bangladesh and borders Myanmar with an estimated population of 3.3 million. The conflict started in May 2023 resulting in violence, with over 130 deaths and 400 injured. More than 60,000 people have been forced and displaced from their

homes as the army, paramilitary forces and police struggle to quell this violence. This unrest has also led to police armories being looted, having hundreds of churches and more than a dozen temples been ruined, along with villages being destroyed.

If we go through the history of North-east India, it is observed that this region has always been prone to ethnic conflict. There have been reports of abuses including gang rape, public humiliation, severe beatings resulting in deaths, and instances of burning victims alive or dead. Experts from the United Nations have emphasised severe such instances of gender-based violence, particularly targeting females from the Kuki ethnic minority. Similar such concerns have also been raised by the International Bar Association (IBA), which draws attention to a prolonged and brutal attack upon two women in Manipur. An associate professor at the Rutgers School of Social Work, Rupa Khetarpal, pointed out that such sexual violence has historically been weaponized in India during conflicts and political upheavals, that are particularly aimed at shaming, controlling and eradicating specific communities (Ochab, 2023). Nevertheless, in 1995, the Government of Manipur established a Social Policy Advisory Committee as part of its efforts to address the region's complex social issues. This committee was particularly designed to provide strategic guidance and recommendations on various social policies aimed at nurturing more effective governance and addressing the challenges faced by the state. This creation was committed to improving social welfare and to implement policies that could better address the needs of diverse communities within Manipur. By bringing all experts and stakeholders together, the committee set the goal of developing and taking initiatives that would enhance social cohesion, economic development, and the overall well-being of the state. The tribal communities in Manipur have traditionally managed their commons according to customary laws, that highlight equity and have resisted interference from Manipuri kings and

British authorities in the past. Today, however, these customary laws face challenges from the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act of 1960 (Kamei, 2018). This act was a significant piece of legislation that aimed at addressing issues related to land ownership and redistribution in the state. The judiciary has also played a significant role in the implementation of the Land Ceiling Act. Moreover, the government holds the rights to all the trees, brushwood, and other natural products on land designated as forest reserves, except where privately owned. The government also owns all roadside trees planted and maintained by or under its orders. The tribal people are engaged in gathering forest products and trapping wildlife for battering the same with agricultural and village industrial products. Referring to Harvey Feit's work, societies engaged in such activities should be supported with appropriate technologies and networking to specialise in their respective fields. However, it also notes its negative attributes providing a glimpse into the complexities of rural economies and the importance of sustainable development. The problem in Manipur stems from the community land system, where land is collectively owned by the village rather than by individuals. With boundaries being unmarked and villages being relatively large, conflicts have historically taken place among various ethnic groups and communities. This situation has deteriorated as government and corporate sectors have begun seizing land, leaving the villagers without compensation due to their lack of individual land ownership. In West Bengal, for example, the Totos were settled with individual property rights and were encouraged to take up agriculture. However, being traditionally pre-agricultural, they had to share farming practices with local Nepali farmers. Similarly, the people of Manipur, who have long relied on forest resources, are also largely pre-agricultural, further complicating their transition to more conventional land use. This as a result disrupts their traditional ways of life, exposing them to vulnerabilities, as they struggle to

integrate into an economic framework that was not quite designed according to their needs and historical practices in mind.

The Kuki-Meitei conflict in Manipur appears to be a multidimensional issue with roots in the in a complex interplay of ethnic identity, land rights, political power, and cultural economy. Resolving such a problem requires addressing these long-standing grievances through dialogue, inclusive policies, and efforts to promote mutual respect and understanding. A sustainable solution would involve political and administrative reforms and reconciliation efforts that recognise the aspirations and rights of all ethnic groups in the state.

Similarly, mass protests were carried out in March 2022 against the government of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government was heavily criticized for the mismanagement of its economy which led to a massive economic crisis including inflation, blackouts, shortages of fuel, domestic gas and other essential. Pattanaik (2023) writes that the pushback against authoritarian governments must originate from within the country, as demonstrated by Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement. This movement spread a significant message: While elected governments may have a majority mandate, they still cannot evade accountability after the election. Although the change in Sri Lanka has yet to yield significant democratic benefits, it stands as a testament to the power of the people to demand and enforce change. Sri Lanka witnessed massive, largely peaceful protests across its country with thousands of people from all walks of life demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brother Mahinda, the then prime minister who stepped down in May 2022. Thousands of protestors stormed the president's official residence, prompting Rajapaksa to flee to the Maldives and later to Singapore, where he sent in his resignation. His departure marked the end of a two-decade-long family dynasty in Sri Lankan politics. He was succeeded by veteran politician Ranil Wickremesinghe as

president of the country. The return of Rajapakse remains a sensitive issue for the new government, which seeks to avoid further unrest while ensuring his security (Ethirajan, 2022). 'People came to the streets because of the alleged corruption against his government. We don't have any personal enmity against him,' a prominent protest leader told the BBC.

Bangladesh has also witnessed such changes in the past, especially the anti-Ershad movement and the 1971 movement. Ali (2022) writes that Bangladesh has continually experienced prolonged periods of political instability, corruption, and violation of human rights. The country is facing a growing extremist threat, and its increasingly authoritarian government has exacerbated many of the problems that have stifled its potential to become an influential global actor.[8] The ruling Awami League has managed to remain in power with the support of a broad-based coalition of 14 political parties, known as the Grand Alliance. However, while the Awami League has kept this alliance intact, it continues to engage in evident political repression of its opponents, with ample evidence of ongoing political violence across Bangladesh. The International Crisis Group cited 14,000 incidents of political violence in Bangladesh from 2002 to 2013, which killed more than 2,400 people and injured 126,300. Widespread allegations of vote tampering and other irregularities followed general elections in 2014 and 2018. Analyzing the latest general elections that were held in December 2023, Kurlantzick (2024) terms it a significant election 'victory', taking a reported 222 seats out of a total of 298 available which gives the Awami League and its increasingly autocratic leader, Sheikh Hasina, her fourth straight term in office and fifth term overall as prime minister. However, leading democracies, i.e. the United Kingdom and the USA, condemned it as not free and fair. It is said

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8 For detail, https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/bangla-deshs-declining-democracy/ accessed on September 21, 2024

that during Sheikh Hasina's tenure, she increasingly cracked down on opposition parties, civil society, the press, and virtually any other form of opposition. The main opposition party, the BNP, declined to participate in this election with similar allegations. It was Sheikh Hasina who refused the previous practice of allowing a caretaker government to take over during the election period, saying that such governments ensure freer and fairer campaigning and helped prevent the ruling party from dominating the election machinery and process. While the country was conducting general elections, thousands, even tens of thousands of members of the BNP, were in detention, and several of them were killed. That is why, Bangladesh's exiled opposition leader Tarique Rahman and others describe the election as a 'sham' designed to cement Hasina's rule. It was Rahman whose party staged a months-long protest campaign in 2023 demanding the prime minister's resignation that saw at least eleven people killed and thousands of its supporters arrested.[9] Protests in Bangladesh erupted over long-standing resentment towards a quota system that reserved 56 percent of government jobs, including 30 percent for descendants of 1971 War of Independence fighters, creating barriers for the unemployed youths of the country. Although Prime Minister Hasina abolished the system in 2018, the high court declared this move illegal in June 2024, leading to new protests. Tensions escalated when she labeled students as 'rajakaar', a term used to identify pro-Pakistan collaborators during Bangladesh's War of Independence, leading to violent clashes with the Bangladesh Chhatra League and police. With over 266 people, mostly students, killed, the unrest intensified, resulting in a massive uprising and Hasina's eventual resignation as she fled the country (Sajjad, 2024).

These tragic incidents underscore the fragility of democratic

9   For detail, https://www.cfr.org/article/bangladeshs-sham-election-and-regression-democracy-south-and-southeast-asia, accessed on September 21, 2024.

institutions in these regions, emphasizing on how political dissent and grievances can lead to disastrous consequences. These circumstances reflect a bigger pattern observed in South Asia, where disregarding the advice of proponents of democracy often has catastrophic results. It is very important here to link these three latest incidents with the alerts that came up through various above-mentioned literature regarding strength and weakness of democracy in South Asia. A lesson for all nation-states, especially countries in South Asia, is that one must address concerns raised by democracy defenders on time. Results, otherwise, could more painful that may lead further chaos as in Sri Lanka in 2022 and Bangladesh in 2024.

Anti-politics, weak parties, normalization of lying, digital manipulation, foreign interference, and nationalism weaken the power of democracy. People seek a say in decisions that affect their lives and demand systems that work for everyone. Protests that express human rights and democratic values should be respected and addressed by their respective governments. Participation helps authorities understand public outrage and make informed decisions. Continued demands for human rights, equality, and action on climate change highlight the need for a new social contract and protection of freedom of expression to combat disinformation and polarisation.

Conclusion

The current South Asian state of democracy represents a complex and nuanced image, marked by both substantial declines and persistent challenges. The erosion of democracy through its backslides, weakened political parties, and growing authoritarian tendencies underscores a need for reevaluation of democratic practices and frameworks. This decline is not uniform but varies depending on the metrics used according to the specific contexts of different South Asian countries. While India is experiencing a decline in democratic practices, this trend is not necessarily permanent. Although hybrid regimes can be stable, elections continue to

provide genuine opportunities to the common mass of people for accountability, provided that ballots are confidential and elections are monitored fairly. A question may come here whether democracy itself is a problem?

Referring the U.S. political system, Thomas Carothers came up with an essay to highlight at least five significant design flaws of democracy itself[10]. Largely most of the Carothers's arguments are not very far away from South Asian realities too. Democracy requires active citizen engagements, responsible presses, universal education and political awareness, but interest group within political parties create an atmosphere to show that they are only stakeholders of democracy in many occasions. As a result, both citizen and press become reluctant to engage in political education and awareness. That is who, pessimism on democracy as a system is being further strengthened. Realizing these limitations of democracy, Pew Research Center survey in 2023 revealed diverse suggestions for improving democracy, with several common themes emerging from respondents. Improving political leadership, government reform, expecting more from citizens, and improving the economy are four major suggestions of the center (Silver et al, 2024).

Finally, restoring democracy is not just about going back to the way things were but it entails giving a modern makeover to better suit the demands 'of the people, for the people, by the people'. Reviving a democracy can bring stability and hope, ensuring that governance remains responsive and just for all. As rightly pointed out by Mahatma Gandhi, the spirit of democracy is not a mechanical thing to be adjusted by abolition of forms. It requires change of heart. In South Asia, 'democracy' as modern political system is very limited framework as the people of South Asia practiced more advanced system for centuries which goes beyond today's laws and

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10 For details, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2019/01/is-democracy-the-problem?lang=en, accessed on September 21, 2024.

structures of the government. As advanced model of democracy that 'comprehensive democracy' in today's formulation, is deeply rooted in the values, beliefs and attitudes of the people, elected leaders need to follow it rather than being confined to a new and narrow definition of 'democracy'.

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