

Day 01: 27th August 2020.

 An exclusive two-day international webinar on ***Reading Democracy Global Perspectives, Contentions and Debates***, via zoom, was jointly initiated by the Department of Political Science, and IQAC, West Bengal State University, Department of Political Science, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai; Loreto College, Kolkata and Asia in Global Affairs, Kolkata, on 27th and 28th August 2020, to have a local and a global perspective on contentions and debates on democracy.

 On 27th August, Day 01 of the international webinar on contentions and debates on democracy was held by the Department of Political Science, and IQAC, West Bengal State University, Department of Political Science, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai; Loreto College, Kolkata, and Asia in Global Affairs, Kolkata, through an online platform – zoom, at 6 pm (IST). The webinar was a first of a series of joint academic and research endeavors that was contributed eminently by panelists of the first day: James Manor, who holds the position of Emeritus Professor of Commonwealth Studies at the School of Advanced Study, University of London; Professor Christopher Jaffrelot, who is associated with CERI - Sciences Po/CNRS, Paris and Kings India institute, London; Dr. Ajai Gudavarthy who is an Assistant Professor at the Centre of Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Prof. Sharmila Mitra Deb launched the webinar session by providing a glimpse of the topic that was to be touched upon and calling off Prof. Basab Chaudhari, Vice-chancellor of West Bengal State University, to give an inaugural address. Extending warm regard to the contributing speaker and the organizer, Prof. Chaudhari of West Bengal state University virtually introduced the panelists to the audience, and while acknowledging their presence he said "A king is worshipped in his own country, but a learned man is worshipped all over the world". He tabled his view on democracy as a 'win-win' situation and drew a parallel between the death of democracy during an emergency (1977) and the Modi era. Prof Shashikala Wanjari, representing SNDT Women's University Mumbai, in her inaugural speech linked democracy to Vedic norms and warmly, welcomed the speakers. Dr. Christine Coutinho, representing Loretto College, Kolkata, extended her wishes and blessings of the almighty for the smooth going of the session. Priya Singh of the AGA highlighted the session as being local and global in its approach. Srimanti Sarkar of West Bengal State University and the webinar organizing committee provided a glimpse of the speaker's bio-note. The moderator for the first day of the webinar was Dr. Samir Kumar Das, Professor of Political Science at the University of Calcutta, Kolkata, who set the rules of the game providing each speaker 20 mins and coordinating Q&A session that was followed at the end of the webinar. Following the Bio-note sequence, Prof. Christopher Jafferolt tabled his view on democracy first.

 Christopher Jaffrelot, whose area of interest includes Indian politics too, put forth a systemic approach to the webinar topic. He ruled out the party system approach in understanding Indian democracy and viewed it through the spectrum of the political system. Prof Jaffrelot mapped Indian democracy in terms of Lok Sabha election of 2019 and the inactiveness of the Supreme Court of India since then. In the opinion of the speaker, the 2019 Lok Sabha election was not fair for three such reasons: BJP purposely targeted oppositions to get them on the BJP's side, and in doing so it exploited CBI and Income tax department. Secondly, as per the panellist, money power was put in use. The panellist claimed the election to be the most expensive in the history of democracy, by estimating election campaign cost about 7.2 billion dollars. He revealed that the money was raised by 'blackmailing' corporate leaders, and also highlighted anonymous funding by these leaders to election campaigns, which led to the rise of the bond between corporate leaders and political leaders since 2016. Criticizing the bond, he quoted the Chief Election Commissioner of India, Justice S.Y. Quraishi, "electoral bonds are nothing but the legalization of chronic capitalism." Thirdly, he pointed out the weakening of the Election Commission of India and its unequal code of conduct. He compares how Mayavati's election campaign was suspended for a week or so, and how BJP leaders continued their 2019 election campaigns on communal themes, without being penalized. After having provided the election angle the speaker brought into light the role of chief check and balance institution – The Supreme Court of India. He torched light on two such completely unprecedented decision of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 – Firstly, blocking of elevation of Gopal Subramanium as a judge of the apex court, and secondly, advocating the replacement of collegium commission that snatched from them the power of their final word of appointing and transferring judges. Hence, he had brought the prominent question of paralysation of democratic institutions which were either based on 'ironological' affinities, or cause of era of 'all times of corrupt practices or threatening of judiciary independence and inevitability. This paralysation, he claimed, led to an increased risk of death of Indian democracy at the hands of blanket democracy-cum-authoritarianism.

 James Manor, who holds the position of Emeritus Professor of Commonwealth Studies at the School of Advanced Study, University of London, preceded Prof. Jaffrelot and put forth an institutional approach to the topic – Investigation agency and media being prime highlights. He began by rejecting the claim of scholars who are of the view that India is moving towards a new dominant party system. As per Prof. Manor, India is inclining towards 'comparative authoritarianism' that includes manipulating formal democracy's role and centralizing power. i.e. harping upon 'one-man rule' or in words of BJP (quoted by prof. Manor) developing an 'opposition mukt India'. He cited certain similarities with Prof. Jaffrelot, and critically remarked flagrant misuse of the investigation agency, civil society, independent voices in society and media. He also claimed the extravagant misuse of sedition laws against Nobel Prize-winning organizations like 'Doctors without borders' and 'Amnesty International. He claimed corporate leaders/ businessmen are raided and blackmailed to control them and extend their financial support to the party, which he claimed to rise under the Modi government. He was suspicious about how speedily the policies were passed, and cited the reference of TMC party member, Derek O'Brien, who tweeted 'Are we delivering pizzas or passing legislation?'. He reviewed Indian media under the Modi government by echoing Indian journalist, Krishna Prasad (Former editor-in-chief, Outlook and former member, Press Council of India), as 'undisguised, unthinking mouthpiece for government', that favors government to avoid 'stick' and attract 'carrots' (favors). In the words of Prof. Manor, "Indian media has paved in a timid and cordial manner in the face of the carrot and stick that this government offers". In conclusion, the professor highlighted the crumbling of governmental and non-governmental pillars of democracy and the non-existential of 'true democracy' in India.

 The final panellist of the first day of the international webinar, Dr. Ajai Gudavarthy, an Assistant Professor at the Centre of Political Studies, interestingly tabled a socialist policy angle to the topic. He highlighted the role of social policy in building authoritarian/majoritarian regimes, and compared the UPA government's right and need-based approach to social policy, on one hand, and the NDA government's empowerment approach to the same, on the other. As per the speaker, effective non-implementation of the social welfare policies by the UPA government acted like a vacuum that was filled in by the NDA government via a democracy blanket titled authoritarian policies. The speaker had analyzed Education policy, Skill India Mision, Swachhta Udyami Yojana, Ujwala Yojna, OBC reservation policy and touched upon triple talaq and demonetization of the Indian economy. In doing so, Prof Gudavarthy drew attention to the game of consensus and no opposition to the policies. He perceived these policies as disempowering, in opposition to the BJP, the majority of minority under an ideological 'rhetoric argument'. To cites an instance from the talk, the education policy that BJP claimed to empower students, had resulted in the large-scale closure of primary schools funded by the government. Similarly, in his analysis, Ujwala Yojna that BJP claimed to empower women through LPG connections, actually led to the gendered and traditional role of women, and the same was for Swachhta Udyami Yojna that promoted caste-based occupation rather than liberating Scheduled Castes from the grab of caste-based employment. However, Prof. Gudavarthy recognized the role of regional and congress party's consensus for such policy to breathe! Hence, in his view, greater privatization, the disempowerment of the majority of the minority, consent from both of the end of the spectrum, and most importantly, rhetoric ideological argument provided by the party, have jointly made India walk on the path of authoritarianism.

 Before the beginning of the Q&A session, moderator Professor Samir Das spoke a few words on how to read democracy. Prof. Das provided that democracy can be read through the performance of the democratic institution and referred to Samuel Huntington's concept of 'reversals', which he recognized as an element of democracy. He tabled Huntington's view of institutional collapse that leads to a political decay and cited that the reversals occurred in the 1920s & 1930s, 1960s to late 1970s, and in 1990s. However, he cited a certain silver lining existing beneath, the fact that the highest democratic protest occurred in 2019 that renewed hope of back to democracy. In his conclusion, he firmly stated, "alternative to democracy is democracy, more and better democracy." He then coordinated and set off the Q&A session. The chatbox was flooded with pertinent questions that added to the extra knowledge of the audience and served as a just cherry on the top. The main themes of the questionnaire revolved around a comparison of emergencies in 1977 and under the Modi era, their similarities and differences, the role of mandalization, civil society in the present government, strategies to combat authoritarianism, and exploring the possibility of democracy in the future. All the panelists did complete justice to the questions posed to them. Prof. Jaffrelot opining on the comparison and difference between the emergencies make a remarkable statement, and said: "emergency (initiated by Indira Gandhi) could be rolled back, but not 10-15 years of Modi". Additionally, Prof. Gudavarthy in his final words addressed the use of aspirational tactics by the Modi government to appeal to the sentiment of the people, the use of muscular power to centralize power, and of Hindutva ideology to disempower caste assertions. James Manor, attempting to answer the posed question during the session, claimed Fox Media as a destructive source of lies, recognized the existence of authoritarianism in America, however, predicted the defeat of Donal Trump in the 2020 U.S election. He believed Modi as a great asset of the party and reflected upon the centralization of power around Narendra Modi and Amit Shah.

 Around 8:30 pm, the first day of the informative and thought-provoking webinar was successfully summed up and concluded by calling it a day and providing a vote of thanks to the eminent speakers and organizer for their valuable efforts and contribution. Prof. Samir Kumar Das provided to vote of thanks speaker and applauded the organizing committee for their efforts that made the webinar smoothly possible, Srimanti Sarkar of the organizing committee also extended her vote of thanks to the participants, organizers, and audience, with a hope to receive a similar response on the second day of the webinar.

Report prepared by Bhagyeshree Pujari.

**Day 2 Report**

28th August 2020, Kolkata: Day 2 of the two-day international webinar “Reading Democracy: Global Perspectives, Contentions and Debates” was commenced by Priya Singh, Associate Director and Programme Coordinator at Asia in Global Affairs, welcoming and introducing the three esteemed discussants of the focused group discussion- Professor David Schulz, Professor Nivedita Menon, and Dr Rakhee Bhattacharjee. The moderator of this virtual event, Dr Manisha Madhava set the stage for the discussion by giving a brief recap of the discussions of the day prior. She also reiterated the programme schedule. The first speaker was prominent writer and scholar of American Politics, Prof. David Schulz.

Professor Schulz began his talk by evoking the brutal murder of George Floyd, one of the very recent acts of racism, which took place close to his home in Minnesota. He laid an exposition that racism- all the way from the start of American history to the 2020 killing of Floyd- is in many ways, fused with democracy. To further elucidate this idea, he mentioned epochs of American history from the 1860s civil war, to Jim Crow law of 1877, to Richard Nixon's 'law and order' campaign in 1968, and the manner in which they all contribute and relate to the ultimate blow of George Floyd murder. He made a noteworthy point that the visual of the police officer with his knee on Floyd's neck is the most obvious manifestation of the lingering racism in America. He opined that racism and the failure of the nation to address it, even after all these years, is because racism is deeply embedded in their history, institutions, political system, and legal machinery. He conveyed that it might be rather pessimistic nonetheless less true that institutional racism is built into the logic of American democracy. While concluding his thoughts, Dr Schulz called attention to the common pattern of democracies all over the world birthing from the foundation of deep-rooted inequality; an idea that might compel us to view democracy from a whole other perspective.

The next speaker was feminist writer Nivedita Menon; she is a professor of political thought at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. Prof Menon presented her paper "Imagining new futures in wake of the Pandemic" which aims to put forth means and thoughts of activism that go beyond the bounds of common sense or practicality. The professor compared these modes of activism with the tiny plants that grow from the cracks of concrete building of predatory capitalism. She spoke at length about one such idea called 're-wilding'. At its core, re-wilding is an ecological strategy that looks at all life forms with equal importance. According to Prof Menon, it may also be understood as the conscious political retreat from civilization. She referenced the works of filmmaker-turned-environmentalist Pradeep Kishan, who is putting this idea to practice by restoring several deserted ecosystems in India. She also stated the example of the Adivasi community, whose lifestyle of nature preservation aligns with this idea. The Adivasis, their lands, and their nature-based livelihoods have been under constant threat of predatory capitalist practices perpetrated by the Indian state. She then spoke about the concept of 'Green energy' promoted actively by the global North; which emphasises the need to conserve natural resources due to its usefulness in sustaining the capitalist system. She argues that this seemingly good cause is underpinned by selfish ambitions to keep capitalist production alive. Further, she also mentioned the concepts of 'de-growth,' food sovereignty, and 'commoning'- suggesting that if the three are practised together, it may be able to counterpoise capitalism. Reminiscing the event of migrant labours receiving support at the peak of the pandemic, not by state or market, but by people coming together or 'commoning' as a positive sign for the world subconsciously accepting alternative practices- Prof Menon ended her lecture.

The final speaker of the session was Dr Rakhee Bhattacharjee, Associate Professor of Economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She made a presentation on her paper 'State Economy and People- India’s shifting interaction during the Pandemic'. In this, she discusses the state's responsibility during and after the pandemic towards the marginalized labour forces. She began by pointing out the incoherence in the narrative of the substantial reduction of poverty in India post the liberalization of its economy. She argues that economic growth has been selective and the national capital distributed has only been polarized; the pandemic has accentuated this issue further. She addressed the plight of the migrant labourers, who have been further impoverished due to the sudden lockdown and the state's as well as markets failure in providing them considerable economic security. While most laws in this regard have been proved to be futile, according to Dr Bhatacharjee, in times such as these only one right based act MNERGA proved to be dependable. However, the post-pandemic future appears rather grim as the workers of the informal sector will find it difficult to rebuild their work amidst losses and uncertainty. She winded up her presentation by expressing concern about the possibility of the market revitalizing itself by exploiting the labourers even more. Hence, she encouraged political debates to formulate emancipatory right based laws for the informal sector in the post-pandemic world.

As the panellists spoke, several questions poured in from the audience. In the following session, these questions were read out by Dr Madhava and answered by whomever they were posed to. Dr Menon answered questions based on the distinction between populism and democracy, the continual of practice of caste discrimination in India despite reservation, 're-wilding' as a conscious political retreat, etc. Dr Schulz responded to questions on the changes in US society post-George Floyd incident. The possibility of the incident to serve as an impetus for America to move towards being non racialized democracy was pondered upon. Lastly, Dr Bhattacharjee addressed the question about economic policy recommendation for the ongoing Covid crisis. Dr Madhava took to the stage to add to the discourse and list the important takeaways from the disquisition of the speakers. The webinar was brought to an end by Priya Singh delivering a vote of thanks to everyone who contributed to making this webinar a success. The bottom line of this enlightening discussion was that democracy may be regarded as a better, more just form of government but it isn't infallible. Its hidden fallacies are unveiled when the established power structures fail to incorporate marginalized and disempowered sections of the society into mainstream, or worse, disregard and subjugate them. This illuminates the need for re-imagining other alternatives or modifications of the existing democratic system. It can be said with certainty, all the attendees were exposed to new ideas in the context of democracy which shall encourage them to reflect on the same and cultivate an informed perspective of national and international issues.

Report prepared by Anvesha Pandey.