



Charani LCM Patabendige

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## The Importance of Political Literacy in South Asia

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*This year will see four democracies in South Asia — Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka — go to the polls. What is the importance of political literacy in a democracy? How can it be instilled amongst the citizenry? What are its benefits, individually and collectively? Charani Patabendige provides an overview.*

Political literacy is a weapon against discrimination, a call for reality and a whistleblower against bribery and corruption. But it is absent (or little or

no attention is given to it); therefore it is imperative to instil and enhance political literacy for varied reasons.

### *What is Political Literacy?*

As per **Exposure 2023**, political literacy refers to the set of skills needed to participate in democracy, including understanding elections and governmental processes, knowing how to engage in politics and critical thinking skills to evaluate different viewpoints. However, according to **McManus and Taylor 2009**, political literacy is 'not simply concerned with describing or even analyzing political institutions and government but is about being able to have an input and being able to exercise rights and responsibilities'. Together, these two definitions show the void of political literacy: how many of citizens possess the skills to participate in politics and engage constructively, and how many are genuinely interested in having an input and exercising rights and responsibilities diligently?

Before considering the importance and consequences of political literacy, it is useful to consider the different categories of civilians. Some are apathetic about politics, some have given up on politics, some are genuinely interested, some respond only if it concerns them directly, and some notice political shifts only if the media points them out and it becomes viral. The first category can be seen in contexts of certain youth in a society where they focus on their career or goals and politics does not matter to them. Conversely, the third category is also coloured by youth activists who are eager change-makers. The second have come to a point of giving up for many reasons, but mainly a lack of trust in leaders and institutions. The final category may in part be a victim of modern media where social manipulations and content falsification exist.

### *Why Political Literacy?*

Is political literacy a curse or a blessing? Political literacy is a subtle threat because the more knowledgeable the voter is, the more they are likely to question the legitimacy of illegitimate decisions, ask for accountability and demand rights. This is why at times even popular democracies undermine or censor certain news or opinions. While all governments have a right to restrict information for national security, and to preserve peace, if news or incidents are concealed to prevent education or notify the public of governmental decisions in which citizens have a stake, then the question of why is it done arises.

Regardless of personal stakes and benefits, many citizens remain politically illiterate causing them to be ignorant of their rights and duties in both individual and collective capacities. This has had many downsides, including inadequate representation of groups and issues. A politically illiterate individual may abstain from voting or demotivate peers from voting. Abstaining from voting has a direct impact, and can lead to lack of representation.

Of course, abstention from voting may also signal displeasure with a regime, and wanting change. Another consequence of political illiteracy is the escalation in misinformation, disinformation and hate speech — serious issues in all contemporary electoral democracies. This intensifies belief in falsified narratives or oversight of crucial issues. Another challenge is the inability to reap the benefits of public policy initiatives due to lack of knowledge and/or participation. For example, if the government introduces a law to curb falsehoods and monitor content, less educated individuals or individuals without interest will lack the knowledge or eagerness to seek the rationale of the policy.

Political illiteracy is now also linked closely to national security, whose purview now includes information and cyber security (along with the

political, economic and social). Political illiteracy undermines political security causing political instability. When citizens refrain from voting, it erodes democracy since citizen perception is not voiced. Lack of political literacy, against the flood of social media-induced propaganda is increasingly impacting voter choices, which may result in the election of a candidate who does not deserve the position. Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech have become so widespread that the resultant polarisation and division of opinions can create a pathway for anti-national forces (like terrorists) to exploit this distrust. In addition to political insecurity, such interference can also cause economic insecurity and financial instability. If the public is unaware of the gravity of economic decisions and its impact on them, they will turn a blind eye to its losses as well. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that citizens will oppose political decisions on the economy without understanding the benefits of it in the end: for example, misconceptions about trade agreements and taxation policies can lead to misguided preferences.

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Political illiteracy has various negative repercussions, which should worry all democracies. Fostering political literacy amongst the populace cannot be done single-handedly: the family, which is the basic unit of society, has an indispensable role. Parents and the elderly should openly and constructively discuss and debate about current events as one way of creating political awareness amongst family members. Schools and universities also have a role in integrating political knowledge and enhancing representations by allowing healthy debates, which will teach students to respect and empathise with one another. The media has a huge responsibility in abiding by media ethics and regulations (including community guidelines). The government, as the guardian of the people, should enable interest and welfare. To instil political literacy, it is crucial to

instil media literacy and information literacy. Finally, the Opposition (all other political parties) also have a role in engaging in constructive debate rather than mere objections and criticisms.

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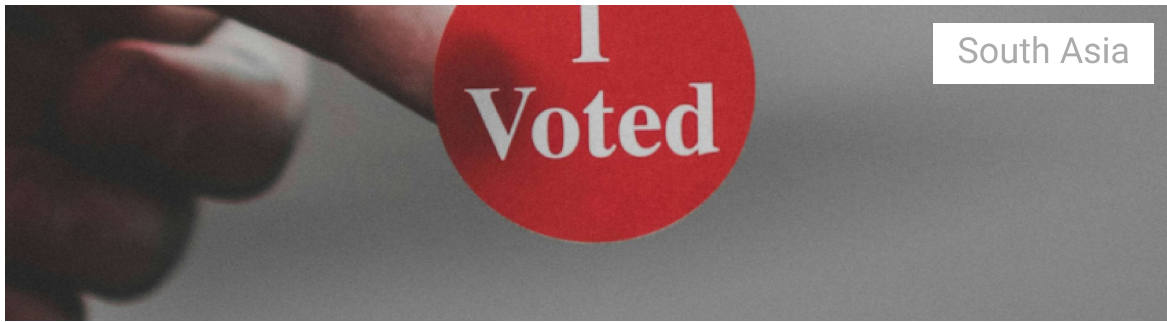
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