an additional normative burden.

A closer look at the functioning of democracy in Bangladesh brings out the fact that democracy here has been manipulated through hierarchichal setups and Western-oriented privileged classes. A host of factors including disorder and manipulation in the electoral processes, weak legislations, democratically non-literate voters, bureaucratic hurdles and structural disorders were the key elements hampering the smooth functioning of democracy in Bangladesh. Moreover, military intervention, politically driven judiciary and dependent election commissions, etc. together weakened democracy and people's rights.

Though a vital change in the process of empowerment of the people was required in the discourse of democracy and ensuring the rights of the people, unfortunately that has not happened. Also structural continuity of democracy, keeping civil-military relations within limits, choice of honest and competent representatives through a standard process, continuity of leadership, strong political parties and drafting of social rights for the people could have led to a sustainable practice of democracy in Bangladesh. But the latter got handicapped because of the absence of one, or many, of the variables.

Against this background, the understanding of democracy from the viewpoint of values and intellectual convictions may significantly differ from the understanding of democracy by different segments of people. Their support for democracy does not tell us much about what is this "democracy" they support. There are various competing and overlapping conceptions that inform popular usage of democracy. The survey on the State of Democracy, as part of a South Asian survey carried out in December 2004 - January 2005 by the Centre for Alternatives in collaboration with other regional centers, brings out the differences in perception of democracy and other related topics from the standpoint of locality, religion, gender, age, and education.

According to the survey, democracy is understood as "equality, liberty, and freedom" by the largest section of the respondents (11.9 percent), followed by the recognition of its fundamentals like "free and fair elections, rule of law, human rights" (9.5 percent). Many of the respondents (9.0 percent) understood it in popular terms, that is, democracy is "people's power, rule of people, care for people and public opinion," and so on. While attempting to identify the core element of democracy, the survey found that about 6 percent of the respondents thought it meant "free and fair elections." Interestingly, only 1.2 percent saw democracy in terms of "good governance." But more surprisingly, if not shockingly, the bulk of the respondents (43.6 percent) had no idea about the meaning of democracy.

Democracy as part of political commonsense in South Asia, or what Amartya Sen refers to as "public reasoning," is now much beyond formal literacy. But then, when it comes to defining democracy the non-literate people have a higher preference for procedural democracy, like "periodic elections," while school or college level educated people prefer "equality, liberty, and freedom" as the preferred meaning of democracy.

Do men and women think differently on the meaning of democracy? No concrete evidence could be gathered from the results of the survey on this account, either in favour of or against such a question. Compared to female respondents, however, a larger section of the male respondents understand democracy as equality, liberty, and freedom (2.2 percent and 17.5 percent respectively). The female respondents, on the other hand, found the popular meaning of democracy (that is, "people's power, rule of people, care for people and public opinion") more fitting (although percentage-wise only 6.5 percent). A vast majority of them (56.6 percent) did not know the meaning of democracy. The male figure on this issue, however, is only relatively better (29.7 percent had no knowledge of democracy).

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Of the 980 non-literate respondents out of the total of 2,252, fully 61 percent could not come out with any meaning of democracy, while 6.1 percent understood democracy in terms of its fundamentals (that is, "free and fair elections, rule of law, human rights"), 4.2 percent meant democracy in popular terms (that is, "people's power, rule of people, care for people and public opinion") and 3.6 percent meant "liberty, equality, and freedom." Among the literate respondents, out of 1,272 about 19 percent meant democracy as "equality, liberty, and freedom," 12.7 percent identified democracy in popular terms while 12 percent understood democracy in terms of its fundamentals. Interestingly, the meaning of democracy gets a higher negative appraisal among the literates than their non-literate brothers and sisters. Probably the higher exposure of the literates to the political process has made them more pessimistic about the system.

An age-wise distribution was made to see whether there are any fundamental differences in understanding democracy