

## “The alternative to democracy is democracy”

Interview with  
Professor Samir Kumar Das

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**Professor Das, where does the surge for independence within democracies come from?**

**“It is certainly not an economic demand.”**

In my point of view, I think that the critique in India comes from the political question, which is essentially the question of being a part of the body politic – in the way the constitution wants them to be a part of it. The constitution guarantees the rights and other arrangements for autonomy. So people striving for autonomy want to be true participants in the constitutional dispensation. I see it that way. But let me also explain what it is not. It is certainly not an economic demand. It is not a demand for improving the economic conditions of a region. Some of the regions where aspirations for independence are raised are certainly not backward regions in terms of public outlay. The per capita public outlay is the highest in the Northeast where you also have a high concentration of these demands. Some of these states where these movements for independence are being organised certainly are very well rated in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) performance. So you cannot say that economic underdevelopment is the cause which actually pushes people for these independence movements. It is not true.

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**In what way do separatist movements put democracies to a test?**

I think that the crucial test of democracy is the fact that the alternative to democracy is democracy. You can always think in terms of better democracies. That is the reason why democracy always promises

constant experimentation with different institutional arrangements. In other words, you cannot really associate a set of political institutions with democracy. Because democracy is always an endless experimentation. If one takes for example the 500 year long history of democracy, you can see some experimentation going on. We are probably on the doorstep of another transition. I would describe it as a democratic transition where democracies also have to learn how to better themselves. These independence aspirations are taking place not just in India but all across the globe. India has been responding in its own way with the kind of success which cannot be underestimated. But like I say, democracy always pushes you to experiment further from one stage to the next stage, there is no way you can stop somewhere.

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**What can democracies do to address political grievances before a situation escalates?**

I think all these movements that we are talking about have to be explained in terms of less of democracy rather than democracy per se. In other words what I mean to say is that these aspirations are certainly democratic aspirations. And they need to be accommodated democratically. That these

**“There is always room for improving democracy.”**

aspirations are being articulated at any particular time means that democracies have been inadequate. I am not saying that there was absence of democ-

**“So there is no scope for being satisfied with a particular state of democracy. One always has to stay critical. The sooner we understand this, the better for democracy.”**

racy. What I am saying is that there is always room for improving democracy. So if you do not read the writing on the wall and if you do ignore for instance the early warning signals, then obviously democracies will be jeopardised. But one has to understand that articulation of these aspirations per se is not a threat to democracy. If it is allowed beyond a threshold it might take a while in time. And it is at those crucial junctures that democracies face a threat. You see democracies collapsing back into authoritarian regimes, so there have been reversals of democracy as well. Prolonged civil war, for example, is a condition pushing certain democracies back into authoritarian regimes. So there is no scope for being satisfied with a particular state of democracy. One always has to stay critical. The sooner we understand this, the better for democracy.

### Professor Samir Kumar Das



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