

The Threat of Consent

What is the biggest concern facing South Asia over the next decade? Ritika Arora-Kukreja — winner of the [LSE South Asia Centre Vera Anstey Essay Competition 2021](#) — argues that macroeconomic indicators, unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, and the alarming challenges surfacing across the region are no longer the only challenges we should be cognisant of; rather, the unspoken consent citizens ascribe every time they justify the contentious incidents unfolding in their nations is perhaps the novel, fundamental challenge we ought to further scrutinise.

South Asia is an intricately designed mosaic: each piece is unique and distinct from one another, yet when orchestrated, is illustrative of a masterwork of diversity symbolic of the region. A symphony of cultural similarities and celebrated differences, South Asia has been touted an economic, political and sociological marvel. However, whilst each nation was formerly on a path to secure its niche in a rapidly globalising world, we are increasingly witnessing a region besieged with various obstacles. Many of these challenges are persistently reviewed by renowned academics and practitioners, including high levels of unemployment and illiteracy, economies structurally locked into low-value supply chains, endemic gender inequality, a palpable disdain of climate catastrophes, and more recently, an ominous escalation of internal conflict. And whilst these challenges have been incorporated into critical agendas for decades, there is one thing that is particularly striking today: the reluctance to question.

In recognising the alarming implications of challenges mentioned afore, I contend that whilst such obstacles must be overcome, the most instrumental impediment in confronting them is us — *citizens*.

To illustrate, consider the Indian state. Recently, a disturbing pattern of *justification* is being observed. When we hear of the dwindling economy, the rampant inequality, callous attacks on a religious minority group, or abrupt, undebated decisions that erode India's democracy, we see a surge of the population rushing to defend or de-intensify such episodes with statements like:

'But, they had it coming.'

'But, it's not as bad!'

'But, people are making a big deal out of this.'

'But, things are getting better.'

'But, surely it's for our best.'

Our ability to question our environment, to reflect on the direction our societies are rustling towards and be conscious of imperceptible dominance, is rapidly diminishing. We are reluctant to accept that change, in any form, is necessary in apprehension that it would be uncivil of us to *want* to seek betterment. Why should we question the status quo, of course?

'Theek Hai, Chalta Hai — It's fine, it is what it is.'

To explicate, the reluctance to question could be illustrative of [Foucault's paradox of power](#) which illuminates the idea of masked power: a mystical control over society that ideologically paralyses the populace from questioning 'the state', and their social world. This, Foucault argues, is the most potent manifestation of power and supremacy through which citizens may consciously accept realities, yet are oblivious to *why* or *how* their consent was crafted. In doing so, the populace incontestably complies and consents to a social world as orchestrated by a higher authority: the transcendent 'state', we confer our power to.

Consequently, the greatest challenge facing South Asia over the next decade is not the threat of coercion, rather, it is now the threat of consent.

The Role of Education

Various lenses elucidate the avenues through which education intersects with the shaping of socio-political ideas, institutions, and identities, and accordingly serves as an essential ideological state apparatus for nation-building. The socio-cultural construction of the education landscape in South Asia reflects a neo-conservative pedagogical culture which discredits critical thought and the questioning of authority — elements instrumental to a [democratic fabric](#). In the context of Pakistan, for instance, [Khan et al.](#) find that the prevalent pedagogical process based on *narrative* teaching makes learners incapable of thinking critically, which ultimately produces ‘robots’. As such, memorising textbooks to regurgitate information for standardised examinations are historically characteristic of schools across the region, and with more statist approaches dominating the education arena, we are also consuming a curriculum designed to socialise people into customary cultural norms and values. Young people are seldom encouraged to ponder outside the curriculum, and questioning it is simply absurd. In homes, classrooms and a multitude of social spaces, questioning what is imparted by a higher authority is often considered disrespectful and a ‘threat’, with the pedagogical relationships between teachers and students in particular reflecting conformity, discipline and hierarchy. Accordingly, citizens have solidified their role as passive consumers of information — assenting to a social doctrine which, in turn, has effectively impeded their role in civic republicanism.

If citizens are inherently reluctant to question authority, how will they ever hold accountable,

those who they have granted their collective power? If citizens uncritically consent to a society rife with economic, political, sociological and ecological challenges, how will the state ever strive for betterment?

The Centrality of Citizens

Though it is uncontested that education is a pivotal pillar for citizenship and the imagining of the civic, the fundamental narrative in South Asia is such that the ‘system’ crafts citizens who subscribe to a social world that they continually seek to justify, discounting their *transformative* power as a collective community. With this, I argue that the challenges unfolding are not the sole responsibility of the mystical ‘state’ to which citizenries have granted authority, or of the governments comprising the region: the responsibility of the republic rests within citizens themselves. If citizens continue to consent to the existing imagination of society, how will a ‘reimagination’ ever be incited? How will existing challenges truly be eliminated, if citizens refuse to even see them as such?

The foundations of this argument are built on an anthropological perspective of the state. Whilst the ‘state’ is traditionally viewed as a group of [authoritative actors](#) with decision-making powers who seek to govern social life through institutional mechanisms and tactics, I draw on [Abrams \(1988\)](#), [Mitchell \(2006\)](#) and [Nugent \(1994\)](#) to disentangle what is traditionally considered to be the ‘state’, to propose two distinct entities: The state-‘system’, and state-‘idea’. On this, Abrams explicates that whilst the state-system is a tangible cluster of institutions of political authority, the state-idea is a fantasy as imagined by members of the state, an ‘ideological project’ which, through agency, is then projected by the system. Thus, rather than viewing the state as a definite product defined by governments or hierarchical actors of the alleged state, it is vital to identify the instrumental role of citizens in producing and maintaining both conceptualisations of the state. Further reflecting on [Arendt’s \(2004\)](#) understanding of ‘power’ and [Spencer’s \(1997\)](#) analysis of ‘the political’, I believe that the power held by the state lies with its citizens who, contextual upon their imaginations, effectively produce and shape an ever-changing ‘state-idea’ — the ideological project they manifest and see unfold in their daily practices.

The traditional state, therefore, remains a canvas upon which the dynamic variations of the state idea are transcribed and re-transcribed. What a state should, or should not, represent, practice or reinforce, is then a reflection of citizens’ imagined accreditations ([Anderson, 1991](#)) — thus proposing that the power of, and presence of, the state is in reality limited or shaped by, and a product of, the populace’s (subliminal) consent. Moreover, viewing citizens as a static group which can effectively be subordinated by the state and its ideologies, practices and physical manifestations inaccurately reduces their agency and presumes that they have been (subconsciously or consciously) *coerced* to approve of the state and its dominant ideologies. As a result, we often seem to abandon the notion that citizens and their responses are responsible for producing and reproducing state and society, its legitimacy and its survival ([Arendt, 2004](#)).

With this, I bring the discussion back to South Asia, and in particular the challenges associated with escalating internal conflict, majoritarianism, intolerance, poverty, and the deeply entrenched multidimensional inequalities plaguing the most diverse region in the world. As citizens, we are responsible for sustaining the challenges currently afflicting our nations, and if we aspire to overcome any of these, we must reflect on not only what we consent to, but why and how our consent is shaped over time. In addition to this, we must reconsider what we regard as power, or whom we deem to be 'powerful'. In suggesting that the capacity to act in concert for a public-political purpose is *true power*, *M P d'Entrèves*, quoting *Arendt* in [On Violence](#) says:

Power... is never the property of an individual, but of a plurality of actors joining together for some common political purpose. (It) is a human creation, the outcome of collective engagement. And unlike violence, it is based not on coercion but on consent and rational persuasion.

Ergo, the power to incite transformation and address such challenges may not lie with the decision-makers we turn to in demanding times. Rather, citizens as a collective hold the power to truly address these challenges, and our analysis needs to turn towards understanding the broader crafting of consent. We need to unpack why citizens are apprehensive of questioning the very authority they, themselves, grant power. We must explore why citizens justify and consent to the ominous events evolving in their own nations today. Together with holding decision-makers accountable, we need to be able to hold our own fraternities accountable.

Macroeconomic indicators, unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, and the alarming challenges surfacing across the region are no longer the only challenges we need to recognise. Rather, the unspoken consent citizens ascribe every time they justify the contentious incidents unfolding in their nations is perhaps the novel, fundamental challenge we ought to further scrutinise. In directing our attention towards exploring the threat of consent, we must also re-evaluate the dialogue surrounding South Asia's education landscape to incorporate critical pedagogies for generations to come, in order to deconstruct the reluctance to question the world around us.

Ultimately, the power to overcome the challenges afflicting our societies, has always been, and will always be rested with us — the citizens.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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