

BOOK REVIEWS

Lancy Lobo and Jayesh Shah, eds., *Democracy in India: Current Debates and Emerging Challenges*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2017. pp. 197. ISBN: 978-93-84082-94-9

For over the past several decades, India, academically as well as popularly, has worked out and put together a rich and meaningful discourse on democracy, both in terms of the procedural aspects as well as substantive measures. Every reading of Indian politics, and sometimes of the economy and the social-cultural setups build on and work through the idea of democracy. Perhaps, it would not be entirely incorrect to suggest that almost every social scientist has implicated the analysis or study of democracy in their understanding of India. And this is not surprising, as democracy was and continues to be the bedrock upon which most, if not all, our institutions and constitutional guarantees have been established, legitimized and evaluated.

Contributing to the discourse on democracy in India are such works as Nirja Gopal Jayal's *Democracy in India*; Atul Kohli's *The Success of India's Democracy*, Thomas Blom Hansen's *The Saffron Wave*; Ramchandra Guh's *India After Gandhi*; Suhas Palshikar's *Indian Democracy*; Pratap Bhanu Mehta's, *The Burden of Democracy*; Ashutosh Varshney's *Battle Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy* and Bhikhu Parekh's, *Debating India. Democracy in India: Current Debates and Emerging Challenges*, edited by Lancy Lobo and Jayesh Shah, is indeed a valuable contribution to this ongoing discourse, filling in lacunae as well as introducing nuanced arguments. *Democracy in India* is conceptually and thematically divided into three distinct yet interrelated sections, which are, first, theory and practice, concerned with understanding and analyzing the idea and politics of democracy in India; second, the judiciary and Indian democracy, concerned with analyzing the at once contentious yet concurring relationship between the judiciary and the project and process of democracy; and third, new actors, issues and challenges, which focus on the politics and position of the civil and political society in the progress of democracy in India.

The first section, which focuses on the theory and practice of democracy, carries some rather interesting and academically provocative articles. Harihar Bhattacharya, while "debating democracy", underscores the manner in which democracy has evolved as the conceptual/political grid within which all other ideals and guarantees are debated. An important contribution is the link he draws between authoritarianism and democracy, whereby democratic welfare and repressive laws go hand in hand; or more importantly preventive detention and security claims are invoked simultaneously; and perhaps more acceptably, the claims of building a federation coincide with a centralized and centralizing state. Bhattacharya eloquently elaborates on the manner in which democracy's success has not only been conflated with, but has been presented as state's

success. For him, "the success of the state and democracy is not the same thing, and that each should be understood differently.... Otherwise, the discourse of democracy would never be able to emancipate itself from the discourse of the state." (p. 20) Arijit Bhattacharya's article on the ethnic and civic forces is an interesting read, suggesting that with the increasing space awarded to the ethnic for the purpose of winning elections, the space for the civic is severely constrained. In fact, Bhattacharya extrapolates from rich data on elections in India over the past few years, that the ethnic has come to appropriate the civic. The section ends with two rather well researched articles: the first by Amit Mitra focusing on the substantive ethos of democracy and the conception of collective empowerment read through a gender perspective; and the second, by Lancy Lobo and Jayesh Shah which involves a procedural reading of democracy through an empirical study in Vadodara district. Emphasizing the imperative of a grass root account of the idea and practice of democracy, Mitra argues that "democracy is actualized primarily by practicing equality at all levels ensuring that institutions and processes are owned by the constituency". (p.83) Lobo and Shah, from a statistical analysis of the data collected, demonstrate how voter turnout and electoral participation are determined by such factors as political awareness, education and class positions of the voter on the one hand, and effective booth management and election strategies by political parties on the other.

The section on judiciary and Indian democracy contains two extremely relevant contributions, which tease out their particularly belligerent yet compatible relationship. Sandeep Suresh and Ikron David Lukham as well as Sanjay Bang critically read the ideas of judicial review, judicial activism, judicial restraint and separation of powers, emphasizing their imminence and relevance for a democratic polity. The section brings out the particular relevance of the judiciary in protecting and promoting the idea and practice of democracy in India today, a task which is expected to be sustained by the legislature.

A rather interesting and thought-provoking section of the book is in the third section on civil society engagements and interventions in the process and project of democracy. Undeniably, civic space and civil society have increasingly become an important site for advocating the imperative of democracy and for measuring its health, and any credible work on democracy would be somewhat incomplete without a consideration of its contributions. Mahip Singh Sikarwar and Harsit Raj work through a critical reading of the interrelationship between media or freedom of the press and democracy or the right to privacy, and go on to suggest that criteria and activities such as Television Rating Points (TRP), oriental sensational journalism, trial by media and sting operation facilitate and are premised on an inherent conflict between two fundamental rights, namely freedom of expression and right to privacy. Rajeshari Deshpande points to a paradoxical consensus on the politics of democracy, whereby issues are debated out or demonstrated for in civil society and at the same time are depoliticized

or considered 'settled' on the agenda of state legislation. Substantiating her argument, Deshpande points to the post-Nirbhaya rape protests, the Lokpal campaign or even the claims of having a woman president when gender justice is grossly absent from India's democratic practice.

The book begins with an excellently written foreword by Fali Nariman, who points to the "messy business; unpredictable, occasionally tragic, often frustrating and sometimes simply ludicrous" nature of democracy. (p. xvii) Nariman's satirical celebration of democracy is obvious in his employment of two references: first, is by Will Durant, who describes democracy as the best of all forms of government, "because it requires the widest spread of intelligence... (but) deficient because we forgot to make ourselves intelligent when we made ourselves sovereign!." (p. xvii); and second, by E M Forster, who after a visit to India wrote, "I would say two cheers for Indian democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism.... But two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give it three." (p.xxi) Undoubtedly, three cheers to this work on democracy in India.

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