

# The govt by the people, decoded

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EARLY in school we are taught that we live in a democratic country but even before we finish higher studies, many of us begin to doubt it. However, a pessimistic view on Indian democracy is definitely not what Peter Ronald deSouza is presenting in his book, *In the Hall of Mirrors: Reflections on Indian Democracy*.



**In the Hall of Mirrors: Reflections on Indian Democracy**

by Peter Ronald deSouza.  
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ing it is justified convincingly.

The first section treads the pathways towards engagement with democracy, be it the interventions of a public intellectual while telling the truth to the powers that be, contemporising the epics, re-reading of *Hind Swaraj* or evoking the metaphor of *Ardhanarishvara*. The second section draws out people's imaginations of the nation, sketching ideological and intellectual approaches. When "*democracy in India appears to have become people's commonsense*", it calls for astute playfulness to put it to test. The anxieties, accommodations and ambivalences that deSouza puts forth in the remaining sections does not just whet the appetite of an argumentative Indian, but it also captures the nuances of the daily existence, with all its expressions and impressions that form the contours for mapping the Indian democracy.

It is, in fact, refreshing to find a political scientist indulging in storytelling, and even better so to discover, that in the process, the political polemics are not pushed to the margins. While sparing the reader the trouble of carrying the burden of heavy footnotes and academic jargon, the narrative has its dramatic moments. "India has become a *matlabi* society," deSouza declares, but only after having traced the journey of the word *matlabi* in Indian languages. Every word has a meaning behind it, but it is not the same as its definition in dictionary. Thus, the construction and the deconstruction of democracy's meaning is what deSouza attempts at while walking through the muddle that democracy is with all its appropriations, compromises and conundrums. Besides being of interest to scholars of not just any one discipline, the book holds value for ordinary but curious readers keen on being acquainted with public affairs.

Rather, he offers kaleidoscopic patterns of engagement with the idea of democracy as it takes shape in India and, in turn, shapes the country. The title categorically states the purpose: *The hall of mirrors is an epistemic location. It serves as both critique and recommendation... offers diverse images of Indian democracy.* The idea behind it is to place more than one mirror, each edged differently and at a varied angle, to have several reflections, assorted frames of perception and interpretations of democracy.

Averting direct commentary in terms of the good and the evil, the writer unwraps democracy as a discourse, underscoring that a contrapuntal reading of its several layers is essential. Suggesting a heteroglossic approach, deSouza writes: *Eclecticism as an approach, tempered by the demands of providing a coherent narrative when reporting the findings is...the most productive way to talk about Indian democracy.*

The book is a collection of 53 essays, some small and crisp, a few empirical in nature, while others elaborate and theorise an observation. A candid question — how Indian democracy is doing? — forms the central thread of all essays, which have been grouped in five clusters, each pointing at an analytical concern, the five 'A's: analytical frames, aspirations, anxieties, accommodations and ambivalences. Each section is briefly introduced and the need of hav-



**OF RULERS AND SELF-RULE:** The book tries to explain the idea of democracy as it takes shape in India and, in turn, shapes the country PHOTO: PTI