

## BOOK REVIEWS

Ashutosh Kumar and Yatindra Singh Sisodia (Eds), *How India Votes: A State-by-State Look* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2019), xxv + 443 pp.

While UK and US electoral processes presently suffer visible deficits of democratic credibility, exhibit worrying lack of focus on responsible governance and have become acrid contests manipulated by elite claimants for power, who put their egos above commitment to public service, it is deeply instructive to study how India votes. This book about India, not Hindu India, written just before India's Parliamentary Elections of 2019, confirms convincingly that there is much more to the recent surge in electoral support for Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) than a shift to the Right or growing support for Hindu nationalist rhetoric or symbolisms. This set of studies also helps to explain why the 'sense of amazement' (p. 1) about how India votes and stays credibly democratic could then be reflected in the widely unexpected results of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, providing an even larger majority for PM Modi and the BJP.

The study brings out much semi-hidden evidence that Indians have slowly, and often painfully, been learning to become experts in understanding their own place and role as voters in a highly pluralistic democracy. Most notably, throughout this book, especially at pp. 61–8, there is evidence from different parts of India that many Muslims remain negative about Modi and the BJP (p. 70), but more Muslims are now voting for regional parties rather than Congress (p. 71) and even for the BJP in national elections. Such evidence includes 38 per cent Muslim support for the BJP in Rajasthan (p. 238) and even 17 per cent of Muslims voting in 2014 for the BJP in Gujarat (p. 294). Kashmir (pp. 125–43), where 'the mainstream electoral politics exists parallel with the autonomist/separatist politics' (p. 11), shows intriguing conflicting trends. More detailed studies are needed on such developments. Clearly, as vote holders, flocking to polling booths in record numbers on any count, diverse Indians seem to be much more conscious and well-informed than outsiders assume about how they assess and relate to those that seek to represent and govern them. Indians, too, use their votes to engage in protest, but more often they focus constructively on electing leaders that offer hope for making their huge, extremely diverse nation work together to develop a sustainable future, rather than serving some leader's ego or chasing some

ultimately divisive and romantic dreams of a purely ‘religious’ nature. While for 2014, it still made sense to identify a ‘saffron wave’ (p. 37) in which the BJP assumed the leading position of Congress, after the 2019 elections, a much more complex picture emerged and such notions and images require careful revision. The BJP has certainly not won everywhere, but increased its support base beyond elite groups, while the left parties, which already declined in the 2014 elections (p. 41), suffered further losses in 2019 and many regional parties remain important democratic actors.

For Indians, the forward-looking scenario of electing a national government for the next five years does not exclude being mesmerised by charismatic visionary leadership. It seems short-sighted to bracket such charisma as merely religious politics. Today, remarkably, this assumes again Gandhian characteristics, brought out by reference to advice offered by the Mahatma to the Congress ministries in 1937, when Indians began to self-rule and Gandhi stressed the triple task to generate funds for disposal by the state, selfless public service and, most pertinently here, the need ‘to bridge the communal divide’ (Guha, 2018: 506). Clearly, India’s leaders need to be competent and focused on the multiple competing realities at all levels of day-to-day life and handling the resulting challenges. This book confirms abundantly that deficient, ill-prepared leaders will often be quickly punished by voters for cheating them to fill their own pockets or stroke their own egos, making unrealistic promises, or just engaging in petty politicking, including religious demagoguery. Indians evidently need not just ‘*roti-kapra-makan*’ today, but electricity (*bijli*) and good water (*pani*). Most of all they seem to want order (whatever that means to different Indians), peace and aspire for sustainable development now (p. 87). While the latter is not the same as everyone being rich, even before the results of the 2019 elections were known, it was increasingly evident that more and more Indians have become averse to divisive politicking over culture and religion and realise the democratic credibility deficit of Islamists and the RSS.

Kumar and Sisodia’s highly informative collection of studies largely keeps out of such big political questions and focuses diligently on analysing mainly the 2014 elections. The articles benefit from the rigid methodologies of a long-established body of National Election Studies (NES), here the NES 2014 data, as explained in the excellent introduction by Kumar (pp. 1–34) and the final ‘Method Note’ (pp. 423–8). Focused mainly on the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, this book involves a large team of scholars from all over India, under expert coordination by Lokniti and Delhi’s Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. Producing and discussing a rich collection of empirical material on the basis of multistage random sampling, the claim is that ‘[t]his procedure ensures that the selected sample is fully representative of the cross-section of voters in the country’ (p. 426). An impressive list of Tables and Figures (pp. ix–xvi) whets the reader’s appetite for the rich menu of 24 chapters, including the introduction and a brief final section on method. Six parts present first the national perspective (four chapters), then Northern states (Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan), central or bridge states (Madhya

Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Gujarat), Eastern states (Bihar and West Bengal), and Southern states (Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh/Telangana). Part VI on Northeastern states contains a chapter on 'Diversity in Voting Patterns in Northeast India' (pp. 383–405) and on 'Shifting Social Base. Explaining the Rise of BJP in Assam' (pp. 406–19). It would be unfair to assert a North Indian bias, as this collection's coverage is rather comprehensive. Notably, the states that remain uncovered in separate chapters (Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Jharkhand and Goa) and the Union Territories are all included in the discussions of the broader chapters and are listed in the detailed Index (pp. 431–43).

The book as a whole charts various multi-level changes in the Indian polity today and examines their reflections in voting patterns. Not only does one witness the widespread decline of Congress and the rise of the BJP, in all sorts of manifestations of the 'Modi wave' of 2014, but the ongoing process of India's federalisation (p. 7) and the multiple challenges of keeping the nation and the various states in a proper balance are prominent themes. In states where bipolar politics are dominant, the battle is often between Congress and the BJP, but in many states the picture is much more complex. Further, the present one-party dominance of the BJP in Gujarat (p. 15) may not last forever. Even if it were replicated in Rajasthan (pp. 13–4) and elsewhere, it is unlikely, in view of the rich evidence of this study, that India would ever become a one-party state. The 2019 election results, too, suggest that fears of complete BJP domination seem exaggerated, and Modi seems to know this. Recent debates about arranging simultaneous national and state elections and concerns about undemocratic manipulations (p. 89) will need to be balanced with arguments about saving costs for running such massive elections. There is already evidence that Indian voters have been perfectly capable of voting differently on the same date, de-linking national and state elections (p. 375 for Telangana), which indicates deepening democracy and a changing federalisation (p. 91). There is also evidence that the BJP strategy of denying Muslims even symbolic representation (p. 223) may be revised in a maturing BJP dispensation.

It is impossible to discuss the rich detail from the various chapters here. I found very little to critique, but remain puzzled about the mythologies concerning the reverberations of the Shah Bano case (pp. 85, 209). The chapter on messy Bihar (pp. 301–15) remains mired in cumbersome descriptions rather than analysis, and the 2019 results confirmed this state's complexities. Overall, this book is a must-read for anyone trying to understand how India(ns) vote.

## Reference

Guha, R. (2018) *Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World. 1914–1948*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

**Werner Menski**

*SOAS, University of London, London, UK*