

How to make democracy truly participatory

AVIJIT PATHAK

I AM reflecting on these two volumes edited by Aruna Roy and Suchi Pande at a time when, to use Antonio Gramsci's prophetic phrase, "the pessimism of the intellect" haunts me. I witness the degeneration of democracy into some sort of electoral autocracy. And despite the ritualisation of periodic elections, I see the growing disempowerment of people. Under these circumstances, these two volumes, which emerged out of two conferences held in Canada and India, make me think. I too ask: Is it possible to save democracy, make it truly participatory, and create a world where the voices of the subaltern matter?

Indeed, the 26 insightful essays these two volumes contain activate my critical thinking. Take, for instance, the question Moyukh Chatterjee has raised in his essay: Why is the "politics of exposure" not working anymore? Even though we are aware of the violence implicit in the Hindu supremacist doctrine of hyper-nationalism, what ought to perplex us is that such a non-democratic doctrine continues to look "so pervasive to large numbers of people across the social divisions of caste, language, class, religion and gender". As Chatterjee aptly explains, "The current

Hindu nationalist regime is actually revealing the dark side of democracy, its potential to become... the tyranny of the majority."

Likewise, as Sohini Sengupta has analysed, a "new politics of voice" seems to have emerged in the age of digital media. For instance, as her research indicates, a 140-character negative post about Muslim refugees on Twitter (now X) can become 'viral' instantly, and evoke strong emotions. In fact, as Vipul Mudgal's rigorous essay suggests, fake news or organised disinformation looks "more believable than real news"! It is, therefore, not surprising that, as he writes, "some of our media organisations were paid heavily for promoting the right-wing Hindu agenda during the 2019 national elections, denying the opponents their rightful coverage".

Under these circumstances, can democracy be truly vibrant and participatory? As Patrick Heller cautions us, in this age of "reactive democracies", there is chronic fear among the minorities whether they can prove their citizenship. Moreover, what counts as 'public affairs' — say, welfare policies — has been "sharply compromised by a sway of market forces". Even amid this darkness, there is a domain of possibilities. As TM Thomas Issac's essay suggests, People's



UNPACKING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE VOL I & VOL II

Edited by Aruna Roy and Suchi Pande.

Orient BlackSwan.

Pages 352 | Pages 280

₹725 | ₹610

Plan Campaign (PPC) — the decentralisation programme in Kerala — has done reasonably well to enable "greater participation and deliberation in the local decision-making process". Yes, a project of participatory democracy, argues Mamta Jaitly, needs to include the excluded.

However, as Nikhil Dey and Rakshita Swamy remind us, unless political democracy is nurtured by social democracy, there will always be a danger. This reminds me of what Prabhat Patnaik has written in the Preface to one of these volumes. While recalling Ambedkar, he cautions us that without social democracy, the local self-government institutions cannot be free from "the influence of the ruthlessly hierarchical caste-centric old village community". Moreover, what Teesta Setalvad characterises as "institutional amnesia" is an obstacle to the growth of participatory democracy. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the "absence of institutional memory". This absence, Teesta argues convincingly, "plagues Indian institutions of governance, especially when it comes to addressing the systemic failures caused by cycles of targeted violence".

The range of issues that these two volumes have covered — from the fiscal distribution

of justice to the wisdom of pastoral peoples; or, from Shaheen Annam's essay on Bangladesh to Rajesh Veeraraghavan's reflection on whether information can make the subaltern speak — is truly amazing.

In this context, let me refer to two refreshingly creative essays written by TM Krishna and Shiv Visvanathan. What distinguishes Krishna's essay on 'Culture and Democracy' is that, despite his privileged location in the traditions of classical music, he has not forgotten to remind us that "culture has to introspect about its own contradictions, and about exclusion and discrimination". Hence, writes Krishna, it is important to "construct a nuanced cultural conversation between these graded cultural sections of society". Likewise, as opposed to the prevalent politics of knowledge that privileges techno-science and devalues people's experiential knowledge/folk wisdom, Visvanathan pleads for some kind of "knowledge panchayat" as "democracy's antidote to technocracy and majoritarianism".

Thank you, Aruna Roy and Suchi Pande for offering us these two volumes at a time when we need to move from the "pessimism of the intellect" to what Gramsci would have categorised as the "optimism of the will".

— *The reviewer taught sociology at JNU*