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# Indigenising Election Studies in India

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Elections are fundamental for the functioning of a successful representative democracy. People exercise their sovereignty, and the governments draw their legitimacy through the operationalisation of elections (Singh 2021: 4). Elections remain integral to the survival and resilience of any democratic system. The Constitution of India under Article 324 provides for an independent election commission to conduct free and fair elections in India. The Election Commission of India has conducted some of the largest and longest drawn elections in the world (Ahuja and Ostermann 2021). It has conducted 17 national elections along with more than 370 state assembly elections which have contributed immensely to the deepening of electoral democracy in India.

Despite glaring social and economic inequality, successive moments of elections witnessed enthusiasm among the electorate coupled with an increase in voter turnout. The 1st Lok Sabha elections witnessed a voter turnout of 46% and it increased to 65% during the 17th Lok Sabha elections held in 2019. The rise and consolidation of political democracy in India categorically chides viewpoints which remained critical about the adoption of democracy in a deeply divided and hierarchical society in 1947.

The trajectory of electoral politics from the Congress system (1950s and 1960s) to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dominant party system (2014 onwards) needs a deeper academic engagement not only to earmark the possibilities and limitations characterising working of democracy but also to reflect on the more substantive questions of how contextual peculiarities of electoral politics in a country like India can be studied to build new theoretical models offering an explanation

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Electoral Dynamism of Indian Politics: Deciphering the Enigma** by Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajendra K Pandey, *SAGE Publishing India, 2021; pp 348, ₹1,395.*

of distinctive nature of democracy in a non-Western context.

### Indigenising Elections

Divided into 10 chapters and including an introduction and a conclusion, the volume under consideration seeks to interrogate the limitation of conventional conceptual framework in explaining the voting behaviour in India. The authors use historical-analytical approach to make sense of an ever-changing texture and nature of democracy in India and with this objective focus specifically on the national elections held till 2019. Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajendra K Pandey assert that deepening of electoral politics in India also resulted in its indigenisation as “it has developed organic roots in India” (p 33). According to the authors,

Despite having deviated from the derivative conceptual parameters, the Indian example provides newer ideas and viewpoints which are useful to grasp the nature of democracy and election in general. (p 24)

Underlining the significance of elections in holding together a democracy like India, the authors emphasise the limitations of blind imitation and contends that “Indian election cannot be meaningfully understood within the derivative framework of analysis” (p 18). In their words,

Elections in India can never be conceptualised in derivative format, it is incumbent on those seeking to grasp the distinctive character of Indian polls to take into account the contextual peculiarities to arrive at a persuasive conclusion. (p 25)

Based on their thorough assessment of national elections since 1952, they present a case for deeply engaging the electoral context of any election in addition to studying conventional factors shaping voting behaviour to offer explanations on electoral change and stability marking different moments of political history of India since 1952. Every election presents a moment which is unique and thus researchers need to interrogate more deeply the contextual peculiarities of any election.

### Situating Elections

Through an analysis of the national elections, the authors have discussed how the various conventional factors like leadership, ideology, caste, culture, regional divergence, identity politics, and anti-incumbency influenced the voting behaviour. Nonetheless, voting behaviour is a context-dependent factor and cannot be understood merely through an analysis of above-mentioned factors in a theoretical format. It can be argued that to explicitly establish the centrality of contextual peculiarities in deciding elections, the authors posit two basic questions.

First, how does the conventional factors like ideology, leadership, caste, identity politics shape voting behaviour and why do each of these factors individually fall short in adequately explaining the voting behaviour? Second, why and how does the immediate context of any election remain crucial in shaping the electoral milieu? A multidimensional approach is proposed to explain the dynamic nature of elections and how it has contributed to the deepening of democracy in India.

Thus, for instance, leadership has been a vital factor in deciding elections, yet it must be studied in conjunction with the ideological context to make sense of any election. The leaders tend to personalise elections but the importance of context in which certain ideological beliefs trump ought to be taken into serious consideration (p 59). Likewise, anti-incumbency passions gain momentum during the election campaign

since it had been a critical factor in determining the election results in India. However, there are a combination of factors like failure or success of opposition parties in polarising the political space of opposition apart from any immediate triggering factor that largely shapes pro-incumbency or anti-incumbency sentiment in a massive manner among the electorate. Thus, the Balakot incident and fragmentation of opposition contributed to allaying the anti-incumbency sentiments in 2019. In their words, “here the Balakot strike along with the pro-incumbency stance of the voters appears to have made NDA invincible in 2019 national poll” (p 249).

### Analysing Elections

The first three general elections were dominated by the strong influence and legacy of the national movement. While the Congress emphasised upon its legacy of freedom struggle, other parties projected their ideological standpoint. Successive victories of the Congress were not a comment on its vision, ideology or programmes, rather “it was a voters’ gift for its altruistic sacrifice for India’s freedom from the British yoke. Jawaharlal Nehru’s emergence as the face of Congress party as well as government may have gradually contributed to personalisation of elections immediately

after independence. Nevertheless, it gained greater prominence with the weakening of Congress party as well as the assiduous efforts of certain regional leaders to carve out a space for themselves at the state level. Personalisation of politics has become integral to electoral politics and its salience in deciding elections at the national and state level is notable.

However, as contrary to the Western experience it has not proved to be an anathema to democracy, rather it has just been a means to gain victory in elections in India. Since the return of Indira Gandhi in 1971, the relevance of national leaders became phenomenal and India witnessed the rise and consolidation of plebiscitary politics with elections getting transformed into a plebiscite or referendum on leadership. Though the successive United Progressive Alliance governments largely bucked the trend, the rise of Narendra Modi and the formation of successive National Democratic Alliance governments in 2014 and 2019 respectively, “represent a continuity of the trend that seems to have struck roots in the Indian politic” (p 82). Notwithstanding the remarkable role of leadership and ideological preferences too remained crucial in shaping voting behaviour. Hence, conceptualising India as a plebiscitary democracy, in the true sense of

the term, has certain inherent limitations. Ideology has played a vital role in elections, but exceptional elections (1984) defied its key position in deciding elections. As the authors write,

Elections in India, unlike what happens in western democracies, are an occasion when voters and the parties act to cement a bond between them (*Voters and parties*) or cause a separation, which is reflected in the poll outcome. (p 122)

Further, the authors discuss the critical role of caste as a perpetual determinant of the electoral behaviour in India. Caste has been both a divisive and integrating factor in Indian politics—divisive in terms of classifying the caste groups based on their caste identity and integrating in the sense of bringing people together since they have identical caste identities.

Electoral politics in India is characterised by strong regional divergences. The decline of the one-party dominant system and the emergence of coalition politics at the centre led to a twin phenomenon of “regionalisation of national politics” and “nationalisation of regional politics” by dialectically establishing interlinkage between regions and the nation (p 107). Corollary to this, parties returning to power attempted to draw a convergence between national and local issues. This process earmarks the essential

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centrality of “context” in deciding any election, notwithstanding the leadership waves that characterised different national elections. The voting behaviour is shaped by diverse issues and, during elections, the national and the local get dialectically intertwined. In this regard, the authors analyse how by spearheading the agenda of cultural nationalism anchored in Hindutva ideology, the BJP secured votes both at the national and regional levels. The consolidation of the Hindutva has ascertained “culture” as the central marker of mobilisation with the dissipation of the previous narrow vision of identity. The authors assert that Hindutva has endeavoured to articulate an “Indian Identity” that includes the socio-cultural influences which previously remained at the margins (p 229).

### Context and Contest

The authors have been critical of the dominant trend of election studies which they consider to be relying upon the derivative framework of analysis. They argue for a contextual understanding of voting behaviour eventually to theorise a non-Western view of Indian democracy. Such a study, in their view, must move beyond monochromatic explanation and put forward a multidimensional approach to the study of voting behaviour in India. This assertion is based on the reasoning that the dominant studies of voting behaviour is context blind as well as

lacks rigour for offering a more nuanced understating of the complex interplay among different factors like ideology, leadership, and identity.

However, the volume suffers from a major limitation in this regard. The authors pay inadequate attention to theorise what constitutes a Western explanation and their engagement with theoretical literature in the volume is scant and sketchy. Consequently, the volume remains quite self-limiting in offering any concrete explanation of the process of indegenisation of elections and electoral processes in India. Election studies in India have gained considerable academic engagement and most studies whether relying on questionnaire or qualitative research strategy have sought to establish interlinkage between the national and the local or between the context and the metanarratives in national elections. The authors have primarily used instances from national elections and presented analysis but have not gone deep enough to interrogate the constitutive basis of what they refer to as monochromatic explanations.

Studies in Indian politics are occupied with many writings which position itself as representing exceptionalism, uniqueness, or paradoxes in regard to their understanding of the emergence and consolidation of democracy in India. All such writings invariably engage the contextual peculiarities characterising

Indian politics and hence the claim in defence of a multidimensional approach need not only be context sensitive but also be more pertinent and rigorous in its engagement with theoretical attributes and its application in understanding the instances from history to explain voting behaviour in India.

Nonetheless, the volume remains a significant contribution in the field of election studies and has given an insightful analysis of the complex interplay among ideology, identity, leadership, and context during different moments in the political history of democracy in India. The volume may be of immense help to scholars, political commentators, journalists, and researchers interested in the aspect of democracy and elections in India.

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