



Democracy lies at the very core of every Indian's DNA

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BOOK REVIEW: *The Verdict: Decoding India's Elections; Prannoy Roy, Dorab R. Sopariwala, Penguin Random House, ₹599. 2019. 304 PAGES. ISBN-13: 978-0670092260*

While delivering the 17th Justice P.D. Desai Memorial Lecture, Chief Justice of India, Justice Ramana contended, 'elections are not a guarantee against tyranny'¹. He justified his argument with the historical data of Indian general elections: 'In the 17th general elections to the Parliament held so far, the people have changed the ruling party or its combinations eight times, which accounts for nearly 50% of the number of general elections. Despite large-scale inequalities, illiteracy, backwardness, poverty, and alleged ignorance, the Indian citizens have proved themselves to be intelligent and up to the task. The masses have performed their duties reasonably well. Now, it is the turn of those who are manning the key organs of the State to ponder if they are living up to the Constitutional mandate'.

Understanding the Indian electoral system would be a colossal task, owing to the intricacies involved in the electoral process. Being the largest electoral democracy in the world, India's elections are watched by intellectuals, diplomats, academicians, journalists, heads of governments, and many others. Right from the first general elections, till the recent one to the Parliament of India held in 2019, there were a surfeit of analytical writings on the electoral process and its outcomes, including the one by journalists (Sardesai, 2014; Kare, 2014, for instance), former election commissioners (Quraishi, 2014; Chawla, 2019, for instance) academics and independent researchers.

One such significant work of research on India's elections is Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala's seminal book, "The Verdict: Decoding India's Elections", published by Penguin Random House, on the eve of 2019 Parliamentary elections. Team Prannoy Roy introduced Indians to the exhilaration of India's general elections when the team led by him entered into the analysis of election results in the early '80s. Being a psephologist, Prannoy Roy, with the help of a database of 833 polls, found out that opinion polls have got the winner right 97% of the time.

The book, a significant contribution to the understanding of Indian elections, unwraps many a fascinating story behind the conduct of elections in India over seven decades. Name any phenomenon related to understanding the Indian electoral system, you will have an illuminating note on it in the book, such as landslide victories in the state assembly elections, the dwindling representation of minorities in the Parliament, anti-incumbency, the success rate of opinion and exit polls, or bellwether constituencies.

1. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/elections-no-guarantee-against-tyranny-cji/article35067783.ece>

The book begins with a catchy argument: “Democracy lies at the very core of every Indian’s DNA. It is intrinsic to our consciousness. It animates our conversations, energises our minds, and brings out the best and occasionally the worst to us” (p.3). It starts with a brief history of Indian elections and the Indian political state, and seeks to disentangle the Indian voter’s mind. The book filled with arguments based on datasets is divided into four parts. The first part describes how India has matured as a democracy over the past seven decades. The second and third parts, based on the rich experiences of the authors in psephology, discuss opinion polls, and their trustworthiness. The final part explains how Indian elections are won or lost in First Past the Post (FPTP) system.

Dividing the entire election history of India into 25-year periods, Prannoy Roy and Sopariwala have arrived at an interesting pattern: The era from 1952 to 1977 has been termed the pro-incumbency period, also termed the period of optimism, when 80% of successive incumbent governments were voted back to power invariably due to lack of information about politics and politicians. During the

next era, i.e. from 1977 to 2002, termed birth and growth of angry voters, most governments were voted out of power. When the ’80s started, voters began to understand the power in their hands, as they became better informed about what was happening. All this also helped in making the Indian voter more discerning. Whereas during the final phase of this history, i.e., from 2002 to date, it is 50-50 chance – wherein a government comes back to power only when it impresses voters. So, now we have the wise voter who thinks for his/her benefits and weighs leaders based on who has done what for their particular constituency.

The book is optimistic about the future of India’s democracy and election forecasts. The method of election forecasting looks complicated, but it is charming, especially so in a politically unstable and emotional society like India. Opinion polls are reliable in the sense that they could rightly forecast the overall winner. But, all polls undervalue the winning margin. Conducting an opinion poll is much more problematic in India than in the western democracies, due to the diversity of identities of the Indian society, argue the authors. It is much more challenging, because extracting information from the Indian voter is challenging, due to fear of getting targeted by political parties.

Generally, minorities and Dalits are underrepresented in opinion polls conducted in India, because they are very difficult to approach and very reluctant to divulge their opinions due to hesitations of being targeted. Similarly, unless women field-workers are employed, it is very difficult to get rural women to open out, say the authors.

Index of opposition unity

One of the significant arguments the book places before the academia is Index of Opposition Unity (IOU). In India, dividing the opposition is the best method to ensure a win, as the FPTP system allows parties with even less than one-third of polled votes to score victories as their opponents take away votes. In the first 50 years of our elections, more than two-thirds of seats were won or lost depending upon popularity, and only one-third of the outcome depended on a divided or united Opposition. But in 2019, the relationship between popularity and the IOU has become almost 50-50. In other words, the Index of Opposition Unity has become crucial in winning or losing elections. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, if the two primary parties, the SP

2. A detailed interview of Prannoy Roy and Dorab R Sopariwala was published by Scroll. in, related to the book and its narratives can be accessed at: <https://scroll.in/article/918245/in-many-states-the-index-of-opposition-unity-is-more-crucial-than-the-popularity-of-a-party>

and the BSP, had come together last time, the BJP would have won half the number of seats that it did, explains Prannoy Roy in an interview².

“The IOU in Kerala is always high. With an average IOU of 83, Kerala functions as though it is almost two party system despite having among the largest number of parties. Alliances are regularly formed in some other states as well, like Tamil Nadu, but many states still have elections with fragmented opposition such as UP ... The BJP for example has much better record than the Congress of forming pre-election alliances. Perhaps it has better understanding of the importance of IOU in Indian elections” (p.209-210).

Missing women voters

In the second chapter, the authors go into the consequence of women as voters and the difference they make to the outcome of an election. While discussing the status of women voters in India, the authors found that there was a huge amount of women voters missing in the final electoral roll released by the election commission. Their argument was based on comparing the census data with the electoral roll published by the Election Commission of India.

The 2011 census suggests that by 2019 the total population of women (aged 18 and above) in India would be 97.2 percent of the total men’s population. Therefore, the total electorate of women voters should be the same percentage as the total male electorate—or very close to these figures. But, the Election Commission data for 2019 states that women voters are only 92.7 percent of male voters.

The difference between what it should be - 97.2% and what it is - 92.7%, indicates a 4.5 percent shortfall of women voters. The 4.5 percent of missing women translates into as many as 21 million women who are denied their constitutional right to vote, as their names are not registered in the voter lists around the country. When we translate this into per constituency rate, a whopping 38,000 missing women voters in every constituency in India on average are deprived of their voting rights. The authors argue that there are many Lok Sabha constituencies where winning and losing occurred by a margin of fewer than 38,000 votes.

If you apply the same principles to Uttar Pradesh, 85,000 women voters on average will be deprived of the right to vote in every single constituency. This complete chapter from the book dealing with missing women voters has been published by Down to Earth online³.

Facts

- Apart from highlighting the appalling institutional gender bias, the book has many interesting trivial facts. Just a glimpse of the facts:
- PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in Mexico, which held power in an uninterrupted period of seventy years (p.8).
- After 392 elections (376 State Assembly Elections, and sixteen Lok Sabha elections) spanning 67 years, from 1952 to January 2019, the Election Commission of India is still one of India’s most credible institutions retaining a high level of public confidence (p. 4).
- Dorab here was the first to coin the word “anti-incumbency” (p.15).
- In the first phase of our elections, 1952-1977, the largest party would on average win

3. This excerpt appeared in the Down to Earth print edition (1-15 May 2019) can be accessed at: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/general-elections-2019/missing-women-voters-21-mln-can-t-exercise-franchise-this-lok-sabha-polls-64245>

47 percent of the votes in the seats it contested. In the second phase, 1977-2002, the winning margin of the largest party dropped to 43 percent. Now, in the latest phase, 2002-2019, the average vote that the largest ruling alliance (both the NDA and UPA) won in the seats they contested is down to only 37 percent, a huge drop of 10 percent (p.275).

- The turnout data indicates that when there is a low turnout in any constituency, the BJP does well. And in constituencies where the turnout is high, the Congress does well (272).
- The number of seats won by the regional parties has risen from an average of thirty five Lok Sabha seats in the early phase after independence, to over 160 seats now, almost a third of the seats in the Lok Sabha, and the trend is decidedly upwards (p.268).
- Between the 1952 and 2014 Lok Sabha elections there has been nearly 20% increase in the women's turnout, versus only a 5% increase in men's turnout. In a revolutionary change, women's turnout in State Assembly elections has now overtaken men's turnout. Women voters had a 71% turnout versus, 70% turnout for men (p.204).
- It is clear that Rajasthan, Maharastra, Kerala and Haryana have historically been the easiest states for opinion polls with the lowest error in opinion poll of forecasts. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Uttarpradesh have been te most difficult states for pollsters to get opinion poll forecasts accurate (p.121).

Conclusion

Towards the end of the book, the authors look at the problems in the Indian election process, the biggest of which is under-representation. Muslims are badly hit, declining in numbers in legislative assemblies and the worst served in the BJP Lok Sabha landslide victory of year 2014. Women and the youth are also under-represented. And the most badly served as far as voting rights are concerned are migrants.

The book ends with a positive note, which summarises the essence of elections in a vibrant democracy like India: “ The book Verdict is an open-ended story. There was a beginning, but there will be no end. Indian elections will continue to evolve, the electorate will become more sophisticated, more assertive, more demanding, more aware of the power of the vote..... It is not the VIP, not the individuals who temporarily occupy the high office, not the careerists who man the administration, not the eloquent or high profile leaders who dominate the media today and perhaps the history books tomorrow but the anonymous voter from the four corners of our country who is the true guardian of our democratic state (p.277).”

Notes on the Contributor

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