

# Review of: "MODI 'Wave'-Leadership Legitimation and Institutionalization in Indian Politics"

Subrata K. Mitra<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

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India today is no longer 'the poster-boy of third world democracy' that it used to be during the halcyon days of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Characterized by the Economist Intelligence Unit as a 'flawed democracy' in 2021, Modi's India is ranked well below that of Botswana, Malaysia, and South Africa. Those who find this worrying will get some vital, and counteractive, insights from Dr Pravin Rai's important, and, in view of the forthcoming general elections in India, well-timed essay.

Redolent of the tradition of vigorous debate and sophisticated empirical analysis set by Rajni Kothari, the founder of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, where the author is based, the essay draws on the author's deep knowledge of India's ground reality and vast experience of electoral analysis, based on survey data. Unlike global ranking agencies which base their measurement on expert perception, Rai opens multiple windows to the functioning of Indian democracy at the ground level. A close grip over the everyday reality of Indian politics, the challenges to identity, welfare, and security that the average voter faces, and their impact on electoral choice is the forte of Pravin Rai. In this essay, he explains how political support in India today is contingent on meeting aspirations of upward mobility and global brand-recognition on the part of the Indian voter.

No longer isolated in their obscure, local corners, but, thanks to the connectivity that the new technology of communication at affordable prices offers, voters in India are now global citizens, aspiring to the best in the world, reaching out literally to the moon, and beyond. He who has the rhetorical flare and organizational network to link these aspirations with the electoral choice gets the vote. Rai explains how the "rapid turning of the wheels of economic and social transformation to achieve the goal of 'New India' by 2022," and "deepening democratic participation" have been instrumental in generating popular enthusiasm for electoral democracy, evident in the vast increase in electoral turnout. The allocation of subsidies to the underprivileged has been based on norms that are inclusive and are need-based, not communal criteria. In sum, the combination of nationalism, security, collective identity, and subsidization of daily needs has been instrumental in generating electoral support and legitimacy for the Modi regime.

Perhaps some of Rai's contentions could be fine-tuned a little more. The author's contention that "Modi succeeded in the charismatic routinizing of the BJP ... by taking recourse to the legal-rational path and minimized vote switching between elections by turning a large chunk of 'swing electorate' into justifiable saffron voters with high levels of party identification through value infusion" sounds a little garbled. But the assertion makes intuitive sense and would have been more persuasive if the author had supported the contention with appropriate statistical and survey data. In the same vein, the

claim that “He [Prime Minister Narendra Modi] has recast the monistic vision of popular sovereignty by pluralization of legitimacy of public policies and institutions and moved the goalpost of Indian politics from democratic stakeholders to welfare scheme beneficiaries” is vitally important for the essay, but to be fully credible, needs detailed empirical illustration.

Two further points deserve attention. In the first place, Rai’s contention that the bulk of contemporary writing on India’s ‘democracy backsliding’ is essentially advocacy masquerading as analysis is well taken. His argument that these are based on ‘expert’ opinion, with little empirical substantiation, indicating an “overlap of misinformation and propaganda” [with] “no research- based data collection ... to record and monitor structured diminution of civil liberties, systematic circumnavigation of constitutional organizations, and increased scale of religious sectarianism in the country” is indicative of the paucity of data-based analysis of politics in India. He would do well to support this contention by naming names and revealing the empirical vacuity of this particular genre of ‘scholarship.’

In the second place, the author’s repeated invocation of ‘wave’ as a determinant of electoral choice begs a theoretical and methodological question. To quote: “Wave’ is a political phenomenon that leads to a major electoral gain or loss for a political party, an expression of pro- or anti-incumbency public mood.” Is this concept merely a journalistic short-cut around phenomena that are not easily accessible in terms of conventional theory? Or is wave an analytical variable, capable of empirical specification and measurement? What is the relationship between issue-voting and wave-voting? How does one situate waves in the context of the model of Downsian issue-voting (Voters prefer candidates whose positions on issues are closest to their own; Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper & Row; 1957), which appears to underpin the main reasoning of this essay? For example, Rai gives a detailed empirical analysis of the achievements of the BJP government in Gujarat during the long stretch under the stewardship of Narendra Modi as Chief Minister. We are given to understand: Modi delivered on issues, and he was rewarded with multiple electoral wins. However, once the arena shifts to the national parliament, we get an abrupt jump from issues to waves. “The saffron party’s victories in national elections 2014 and 2019 are a reflection of ‘will of the majority’ that institutionalized and routinized *Modi wave* (emphasis added).” Might there be, lurking underneath the ‘wave theory,’ space for a deeper reflection that connects ‘politics within the system’ to ‘politics of the system’?

On the whole, the essay stands out in a crowded space where expert-opinionated texts, both foreign and home-grown, jostle for attention. The image of Indian democracy that Rai creates is kaleidoscopic, complex, and diverse. With its forward-backward movements, Indian democracy appears to be set on a non-linear trajectory. This raises a larger question: Is the triad of Hindutva, nationalism, and subsidies a stable and sustainable basis of electoral success in the Indian context? The answer to this question hangs critically on the emergence of what is euphemistically called a ‘majoritarian’ democracy. Majority rule, of course, is the basis of a parliamentary democracy, so that is not the issue. The key query is whether the ‘majority’ in question is a political majority – a short-term coalition of interests – or whether it is a solid phalanx of a dense, static, ethnic majority bent on using its political power to degrade the status of the (ethnic) minority. Should the former be the case, shifting political majorities would keep Indian democracy on course. The countervailing forces of Indian politics, the separation and division of powers, dominant regional parties and their leaders

who stand up to the centre, the professional and politically neutral army, bureaucracy, judiciary, and the Election Commission, and the unsynchronized national and regional elections that keep all politicians on electoral tenterhooks, will keep the democratic process running. This is the likely scenario. The Hindu ‘community’ itself is fragmented on the basis of castes, language, class, and multiple forms of divinity. However, if some superhuman political force manages to pulverize all these differences to pulp and make a solid, static, majority out of Hindus – constituting 80% of the Indian population – then, of course, the continuity of Indian democracy is in peril.

The survival of democracy *and* development over the past seven decades in India is a counterfactual when seen against the pessimistic prognoses of some of the major post-war theorists such as Gunnar Myrdal (the ‘soft state’), Barrington Moore (‘the poor must pay the price of progress’), and Samuel Huntington (‘political “disorder” in changing societies’). However, while India’s electoral democracy has coped effectively with ‘politics within the system,’ this success does not extend all the way to ‘politics of the system.’ Ironically, an empowered electorate and an alert citizenry work hand in hand to stymie structural reform of the economy, regulation of citizenship, and development of a national consensus on collective identity. As the message of entitlement, empowerment, and enfranchisement seeps through the layers of collective memory, old, unconsummated resentments and anxieties emerge as contentious issues of identity.

The Indian case – a transitional society caught in the ‘middle democracy trap’ (Subrata Mitra, Rekha Saxena, Pampa Mukherjee, eds. *The 2019 Parliamentary Elections in India: Democracy at the Crossroads?* (Routledge, 2022)) - thus raises a general question: Can electoral democracy replace violent revolution, which ultimately led to the creation of the Westphalian nation-state in Europe, and which still remains the cherished ideal of transitional societies? Rai’s essay belongs to the genre of writing that has a theoretical stretch and empirical depth, typical of his home institute, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, which has helped establish a serious and sustained tradition of empirical research on the functioning of electoral analysis and the functioning of democracy at the ground level. I urge the author to stay the course and, once the survey findings from the next general elections are available, to return to this critical field with a fresh offering!