

BOOK REVIEW

THE VERDICT: DECODING INDIA'S ELECTIONS, DR. PRANNOY ROY & DORAB B. SOPARIWALA, PENGUIN BOOKS, 2019. Pages 304. Price ₹ 599.

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Dr. Prannoy Roy and Dorab B. Sopariwala are doyens of field of psephology. Together with other legendary names like Sir David Butler and the economist-turned-politician Ashok Lahiri, they have been consistently carrying out in-depth analyses of Indian Elections, both at the national and regional levels, from the early 1980s. Before Roy set up and nurtured the NDTV, which was a pioneering beacon of independent journalism (until very recently), he was already a familiar face in the Indian households of the 80s owing to his dexterous electoral number-crunching in the Doordarshan Election shows. Breathing life into dry numbers, they had already familiarised the Indian populace with terminologies and concepts like “anti-incumbency” and “index of opposition unity”. This book, quite appropriately titled “The Verdict: Decoding India’s Elections”, is a phenomenally useful guide to unravel the different layers of Indian elections.

After a riveting foreword by Sir David Butler, in which he primarily discusses his association with the rigmaroles of Indian election processes, the book is divided into five parts. The first part is titled “Turning Points in India’s Election: A Maturing Democracy”. In this part, the authors focus on three issues, namely, anti-incumbency, the woman voter and the signs of greater or deepening democracy. They develop their analytical framework by dividing Indian elections into three broad phases of classification — the pro-incumbency era (1952–77), the anti-incumbency era (1977–2002) and the fifty-fifty era (2002–19). The first phase, spanning almost twenty-five years, christened as “a honeymoon period between voters and politicians”, was marked by a one-party dominance by the monolithic Congress party. The authors very cleverly point out the changing patterns within the Congress party — from the ideologically inclusive Nehru Cabinet, the Congress’ widening cracks resulting in the formation of newer parties and the gradual emergence of strong and credible opposition is very succinctly documented. This part also deals with the elements of behavioural complacency associated with an almost certainty of re-election, and the authors correlate this element of complacency coupled with ideological obstacles to the painfully slow economic growth of India, where the GDP was growing at the “Hindu Rate of Growth” of 3.5 percent. This phase was also marked by the institutionalisation of corruption and the phenomenon of “State Capture”, where institution after institution was being nationalised, and their functioning was being turned into being less economically efficient and corruptible. This State Capture system has been commented upon by Prannoy Roy as “India’s version of one-country-two-systems: Socialism for the rich, Capitalism for the poor”.¹

Adding to the accountability deficit and the resultant pro-incumbency was the fact that there was hardly any media scrutiny of the kind that can be observed in today’s days and times, owing to the limited coverage of Doordarshan, and also attributable to the state ownership of the All India Radio. The presence of active print media did not help things much — the literacy rates were abysmally low to be of any credible significance towards shaping public opinion — 18 percent in 1951, 28 percent in 1961 and 34 percent in 1971, as per the

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¹ Prannoy Roy & Dorab B. Sopariwala, *THE VERDICT: DECODING INDIA’S ELECTIONS*, 26 (Penguin Books, 2019).

Census data. A voter's knowledge of his representative's performance was thus only being assessed at a personal level — through their lived experiences. The quite obvious repercussion of this growing bubble of disillusionment with the pro-incumbency democratic process was that by the post-emergency election of 1977, the Indian electorate was ready to move over to the second phase — quantitatively observed by the authors as the anti-incumbency phase, or the phase marked by the “birth and growth of the angry voter”.

The frequency with which any government was re-elected fell from over 80 per cent to only 29 per cent during this period. The authors cite the instance of the dramatic and revolutionary 1977 elections as a pivotal threshold towards the dramatic transformation of the average voter behaviour. The authors chronicle the reasons behind the voters' anger and how such anger started finding a reflection in the eventual electoral outcomes during this phase. Equally interesting is the authors' debunking of the myth that corruption can be one of the crucial factors determining electoral choices. To quote the authors,

“for an issue to affect voting behaviour, it is not enough for it to be just an important issue for voters, it must fulfil one other condition. One side—one party—must be seen to be better at solving the issue than the other side. No matter how important an issue is for voters, if they feel that all parties are equally useless at fixing it, the issue does not affect voting choices”.²

The authors also carefully articulate the other socio-economic factors behind the growing anger of the voters. One of the key factors highlighted was the fact that there was a demographic shift in the composition of the voters in terms of the average voting population becoming younger, and this aspirational Indian would be more enthused by the call of the future than the laurels of the past.

The third phase, titled the fifty-fifty era, highlights the rise of the “wiser voter” and the political class, which has also become reflexively sensitive to the demands of the electorate in a “perform or perish” paradigm. One of the key elements of this reflexive sensitiveness would mark the complete transformation of the politician from his erstwhile indifferent and self-centric image to that of a “thinker, fixer or communicator” — the sufficient presence of at least one of these three attributes being absolutely integral to a politician's political survival. Another factor that is highlighted is the rapid proliferation of the media in this phase, including the anonymity of social media, which is very often used to propagate “fake hate news” that has the potential to impact electoral outcomes. Although the authors have, in their considered views, deemed the 24x7 news channels as an overrated factor in the ultimate determination of electoral outcomes, they also highlight the transformation of politicians to their more 20-second soundbite-friendly avatar, yet another indicator of the fact that the voter of today is a more discerning lot, expecting performances from out of their leaders, even if such performance may eventually lead to a “dumbing down” of the political space.

The authors then move to another crucial issue that determines and often becomes a key verdict determinant: the woman factor. Appropriately titled “Women Ahead”, this part deals with the significant rise of women's participation in the democratic process. Statistically speaking, the increase in women's turnout in Lok Sabha Elections from 47 percent in 1952 to 66 percent in 2014 (as opposed to only a 5 percent rise in turnout for men during the same period) is significant enough. In fact, even more significantly observable is the rise in turnout of women during the State Assembly Elections. Between 1962 and 2018, the

² *Id.*, 32.

participation of women has increased by 27 percent, in comparison to a 7 percent increase of the men voter, to the extent that the participation of women voters has surpassed their male counterparts in quite a few states.

This surge in women's participation would naturally explain the reasons why women-centric political and socio-economic issues are becoming more and more fundamental to the campaign strategies of the political parties. Apart from the obvious policy and strategy shifts, the authors also get deeper into the sociology of gender and family dynamics in India when they reveal that in the course of their pilot studies when they asked the women whether their husbands determined their voting behaviour, their reply was one of disdain and ridicule.

This rise of the "independent-minded woman" voter is a crucial point that the book empirically articulates.³ The authors evaluate the efficacy of women-centric governance decisions taken both at the Central and State levels, like providing free gas cylinders, bicycles (and in the case of Bihar, the money to procure bicycles) or free rice, and in the context, point out the sharper percentage rise in the number of rural women voters as compared to urban women voters. However, the authors note with concern that this upward trend is not quite visible in the Hindi-speaking states and, in the process, allude to the mechanisms of 'voter suppression' and 'turnout management' that are used to regulate and restrict the participation of targeted voter groups not just in India but in advanced western nations as well.

To highlight this point on the missing women voters, the authors refer to the 2011 Census and the 2019 electoral figures from the Election Commission data. While the 2011 Census suggests that by 2019, the total population of women (18 and above) would be 97.2 percent of the male population, the Election Commission data of 2019 suggests that women voters are only 92.7 percent of the male voters. This deficit of 4.5 percent, ostensibly owing to under-registration, is staggering because it amounts to almost 21 million missing women voters, with Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra topping the list.

Another important point that this book seeks to highlight is that to a voter, the local elections — Panchayat and Municipal polls, as well as the Vidhan Sabha elections, hold greater importance than the Lok Sabha polls. They buttress this point citing turnout percentage data of 14 local body elections, 11 state assembly elections and the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections in the states where the local body elections took place between 2014 and 2018. The participation figures are 65 percent and 70 percent for Municipal and Panchayat elections, respectively, and 66 and 74 percent in urban and rural centres in the Vidhan Sabha, as compared to only a meagre 64 and 68 percent in the urban and rural centres during the Lok Sabha polls.

The immediate observation from this data is that the average rural Indian voter is more interested in his immediately identifiable fate in his constituency closer home than the larger national questions like who becomes the Prime Minister of India. The authors also venture into a discussion on how the voters are increasingly becoming more averse to wasting their votes on independent candidates. They also discuss how the imposition of the President's Rule has become almost obsolete in current times. Another key issue on which the authors take an unequivocally clear position is the infallibility of the EVMs. They establish how the advent of EVMs is a lesson that Indian elections have taught the world and argue that EVMs have resulted in drastically curtailing electoral malpractices like booth capturing.

Parts 2 and 3 deal with the actual business of election forecasting. Speaking through anecdotal references as well as statistical nuances, the authors take the readers through

³ *Id.*, 61.

different aspects of poll predicting — methodological specificities in opinion and exit polls and the real problems and challenges faced by pollsters when it comes to Indian election forecasting. In doing so, they discuss interesting concepts like the Index of Opposition Unity (‘IOU’), “bumps” in election results and so on, which make these two parts extremely informative to an interested reader.

Part 4 of the book, titled “Divide and Rule”, deals with election-winning strategies and statistics. In the process, it ends up debunking a number of election myths. For example, it conclusively establishes the fact that with an ever-burgeoning number of parties contesting elections, the winning candidate can actually win a seat with less than 30 percent of the total votes polled. All that is required to be done is to divide the already divided opposition.

In fact, referring to the conceptual basis of the IOU in the context of contemporary elections, the authors argue that securing a greater number of popular votes is less important to an election victory than fragmenting the opposition unity. The authors cite the case of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections in Uttar Pradesh, where despite avowedly opposing the BJP as their main enemy, the sheer reluctance of the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party to come to a common ground resulted in a landslide victory for the BJP.

Another important aspect that the book touches upon is the underrepresentation and marginalisation of different groups in the democratic polity. The authors empirically observe the perceptible decline in the representation of Muslims, the underrepresentation of women and the gradual increase in the average age of popular representatives signifying the side-lining of the youth from the political space.

Finally, the authors discuss the unique facets of the “Jugaad-First past the post system” followed in India that has, in their opinion, converted the elections into a more equal, quasi-proportional representation system. They conclude the book by reminding the reader of the core concepts covered in the course of the book using the prism of which they would forecast the outcome of the 2019 General Elections.

This book was obviously written with the 2019 elections in mind. Then why is it that we are reviewing this book almost five years from that date? The reason is simple — we are trying to put the ideas propounded in the book to the test and assess whether they continue to hold true across all elections to come. If we take into consideration the 2014 General Elections, a lot of the ideas discussed in the book can be seen to be in complete action. We continue to find “State Capture” operating in a more pervasive, nuanced form where the Enforcement Directorate and the CBI have been used as the Central Government’s strong arms to thwart the opposition parties. We have also seen how the media, especially social media, played a significant role in determining the outcome of the elections. Another key election factor that has only become more pronounced is the voice of the women voter. We have witnessed how women-centric welfare schemes such as “*Lokkhir Bhandaar*” in West Bengal, “*Ladli Behna*” in Madhya Pradesh or “*Mukhyamantri Ladki Bahin*” in Maharashtra have been decisive game-changers in the respective elections.

The recent rounds of elections have also proved the fallibility of election forecasting. Pollsters have gone horribly wrong in successive rounds of opinion and exit polls, both at the recent Assembly and Parliamentary elections. While all such polls have been vouched for by their impeccable methodologies, including large sampling sizes and extensive use of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, the outcomes clearly suggest that these forecasts are proving to be inaccurate and often misleading if one looks at them from the perspective of a voter. Perhaps this is one singularly important reason why Dr Roy and Mr

Sopariwala should actively consider bringing out an updated edition of the book to articulate more nuanced psephological tools and categorically underline to today's forecasters where they are going wrong.