CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI "CESARE BONACOSSA" - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
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The life and death of indian democracy*

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Yogendra Yadav, *Making Sense of Indian Democracy*, Ranikhet (Uttarakhand, India): Permanent Black, 2020, 422 pp. (ISBN108178245469).

The political theorist Sunil Khilnani once remarked that every general election in India sets a new record, as the largest exercise of the popular will in the history of humankind. More people voted in the 1952 elections than in any previous poll in the UK, the US, and other (and older) democracies of the world. And more Indians voted in 1957 than in 1952, in 1967 than in 1962, and so on.

Yogendra Yadav's new book *Making Sense of Indian Democracy* begins by suggesting that the great experiment of fostering democracy in a desperately poor, deeply divided, and educationally backward country may have finally run its course. His introduction presents the book itself, and the essays it contains, as an epitaph, an archive, of the electoral history of what the author calls India's «first Republic», the implication being that the second successive electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2019 has inaugurated a new epoch in our political history, where the old constitutional values of pluralism, dialogue, institutional autonomy, and harmonious centre-state relations are sought to be replaced by Hindu majoritarianism, coercive forms of governance, the submission of institutions to the will of the ruling party, and the subordination of states to the centre. Yadav states that Indian democracy is currently facing «its worst crisis» – a verdict I endorse – before outlining some ways in which a pushback against the majoritarian and authoritarian character of the current regime can begin to take shape.

Political scientists have a reputation for writing clunky prose suffused with jargon. However, this particular representative of the species writes

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fluently, presenting complex ideas in accessible language. Political scientists also have a reputation (again, largely deserved) for being trapped in their disciplinary silos. Yadav, on the other hand, is alert to the insights that history and sociology (less so economics) have to offer in understanding how voters and parties operate. Most Indian political scientists look at democratic competition either from the perspective of the particular state they live in or from the lofty perch of the national capital – again, Yadav is unusual in being deeply knowledgeable about the dynamics of general elections as well as of assembly elections in different states of the Union.

Yadav's strengths as a scholar and political analyst are richly illustrated in the first and framing essay, entitled «The Creolisation of Indian Democracy». This identifies three distinct phases in the political history of our Republic. In its origins, he writes, democracy in India was very much a top-down affair, «an invitation by the Indian elite to ordinary Indians to join them in playing a new game».

Yadav continues:

The Nehruvian phase of Indian democracy is widely seen, and rightly so, as a period of consolidation. The achievements of this phase, and of Nehru in giving a long-term institutional base to democracy in a fragile moment, must not be undervalued. But it must be remembered that these achievements were made possible by a discursive chasm between the elite and the masses.

The second phase of Indian democracy, what Yadav calls its «coming of age», began in 1967, in which year the Congress began to lose its hold in many states that it previously had a firm grip of. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam came to power in Tamil Nadu, the Communists in Kerala on their own and in West Bengal as part of a coalition, while in large states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, an alliance of Congress rebels, Jan Sanghis, and Socialists got together to run state governments.

This political weakening of the once hegemonic Congress was in part a consequence of the peeling off from them of the support of peasant groups dominant in their own locality. These were the so-called Other Backward Castes (OBC), who had come to exercise an increasing role in shaping electoral politics across a large swathe of the Republic. Democracy was being deepened through a greater assertion of non-elite groups, and «as more and more participants came to see the game as their own, they brought their own expectations, demands, and beliefs». Further, «as political competition grew more intense, political actors were forced to pay attention to the tastes and preferences of ordinary voters».

The third phase of Indian democracy began in the late 1980s, with the emergence of the «three Ms» – Mandal, Mandir, and Market. The movement to demolish the Babri Masjid and replace it with a Ram temple, the extension at the central level of affirmative action to OBCs and the controversy this unleashed, the dismantling of the license-permit-quota Raj and

the onset of economic liberalisation – all reshaped Indian politics and society in profound and often unsettling ways. One consequence of Mandal and Mandir was to further reduce the electoral footprint of the Congress in northern and western India, with a section of Muslims leaving them for the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal, a section of Dalits for the Bahujan Samaj Party, and a section of Hindus from all castes for the BJP. It now appeared that «at the national level, India seemed to be moving towards a multiparty system».

This third phase saw a further deepening of the democratic process through the vigorous participation of subaltern groups. As Yadav himself demonstrated in his celebrated essay «Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge» (not included in the present volume[1]), by the 1990s, electoral democracy different in one striking respect from electoral democracy in the West. There, the poor were more apathetic than the rich when it came to casting their vote; whereas here it was the reverse, with Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims in villages and small towns more likely to exercise their franchise than wealthy upper-caste Hindus in the cities.

The book contains individual chapters on theories of the Indian state (liberal, Marxist, culturalist), on particular works of scholarship (such as Rajni Kothari's *Politics in India*)[2], and on different research methods used in the social sciences (such as sample surveys and ethnographic studies). However, the core of the book consists of essays on electoral democracy, these analysing the rise and fall of different parties, the competition for votes during assembly and general elections, and the role of caste, gender, class and region in determining voter behaviour.

Yogendra Yadav is the best kind of political scientist, but he remains a political scientist, whose work is not immune to the weaknesses of his discipline as a whole. By focusing so relentlessly on parties and elections, this book seriously underplays the role that *ideology* and *organisation* play in the making (and unmaking) of Indian democracy. Notably, the book has only five index entries to Hindutva, as well as merely five to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS).

Again, like others of his disciplinary tribe, Yadav underplays the role of influential *individuals*. There is scarcely any discussion of the personalities and political styles of those long-serving prime ministers, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, no attempt to explain why they were so popular across India and for so long, not just embodying their party, but somehow standing above it. Nehru and Indira both played critical roles in their parties winning general elections, as, at the state level, did M.G. Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu, Jyoti Basu in West Bengal and Narendra Modi in Gujarat. Yet

1. Published in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava & Balveer Arora (eds.), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.146-175.

2. Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*, Telangana: Orient BlackSwan, 2012.

these leaders, acting with such authority in states as populous as large European countries, likewise escape the analytical gaze of the political scientist.

The emphatic triumph of the BJP in the general elections of 2014 and 2019 owes itself to ideology, organisation, and money, and to the projection of a particular individual as the person most capable of being prime minister. In late 2018, the Congress won assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Yet it was more or less wiped out in those states in the Lok Sabha elections that followed a few months later. This was in good part because of the perceived contrast in voters' minds between Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi – the first seen as strong and decisive, the second as weak, effete, and incompetent. For good and for ill, individuals matter far more in politics than political scientists or political science are prepared to allow.

This lack of attention to ideology and to leadership, as well to their interplay, is manifest in the volume as a whole, and perhaps especially in what is pitched as its most theoretically ambitious essay, which distinguishes between two kinds of political systems, the «nation state» and the «state nation». The distinction, first used by the Western political scientists Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, is here invoked by Yadav to distinguish the India of his conception from the India that seeks to replace it. Thus, as he puts it:

> […] the idea of the nation associated with the "nation state" approach implies creating one common culture within the state, while the idea of the nation associated with the "state nation" approach can contain more than one politically salient culture, but nonetheless encourages and requires respect for the common institutions of the state, as well as respecting existing socio-cultural diversities.

The distinction is useful, although it can perhaps be stated in simpler and more straightforward terms. The nation-state model seeks to unite citizens on the basis of their allegiance to a common religion, a common language, and often a common enemy too. Identities matter more than values. To be truly Indian means to be a Hindu, speak Hindi, and hate Pakistan. On the other hand, in the state-nation model, citizens can practice a variety of faiths and speak a variety of languages; rather, what they must all affirm is a commitment to individual rights, and non-discrimination on grounds of (among other things) caste, race, gender, religion, language, and sexual orientation. Here, values matter more than identities, and to be truly Indian means merely to uphold the ideals of the constitution.

In outlining this contrast in the context of India, Yadav does not choose to tell us that each model was, at it were, the handiwork of certain individuals and organisations. Without the moral inspiration of Tagore and Gandhi, without the work of Ambedkar and others in drafting the consti-

tution and the efforts of Nehru, Patel, Kamaraj and the Congress party in promoting an inclusive form of politics, the «state-nation» model would not have existed in India. On the other side, without the ideological opposition of Savarkar and Golwalkar, and its organisational embodiment first in the Hindu Mahasabha and later in the RSS, the «nation-state» model could never have emerged as a popular alternative either. An abstract, analytical contrast could be given real flesh-and-blood, made to look more plausible and convincing, if representative individuals, their arguments and their organisations, were brought into the narrative.

Despite its broad title, this book essentially seeks to make sense of *electoral* democracy in India from 1952 to 2014. The book has disappointingly little to say about the intermediate institutions of democracy – such as the courts, the civil service, the universities and the media. There is, or at any rate should be, more to democracy than the periodic holding of elections. One senses that winning and losing elections is all that matters to Indian politicians today, but surely a scholar should have a more capacious understanding of democracy. Yadav displays this broader approach in his popular writings, but in these, his more formal academic papers, he is constrained by the traditions and frameworks of his discipline.

That said, it is a mark of Yogendra Yadav's intellectual integrity that he has allowed the essays in this book to be published as they were first written, without changes or emendations to take account of later events. It is thus that the reader can see how he underestimated the social base of the Bharatiya Janata Party, as well as overestimated the resilience of Indian democracy. I offer below some quotes from *Making Sense of Indian Democracy* that constitute, as it were, hostages to history.

In an essay published in 1999, Yadav writes of the limits to the BJP's expansion thus:

The most important barrier that it still needs to cross is the social barrier – its inability to change its profile as a party of the socially privileged. The findings of the National Election Study in 1998 show that although support for the BJP has become broader than before it is far from acquiring the kind of widespread support the Congress enjoyed in the past. The BJP continues to be the darling of upper-caste Hindus and the urban «middle classes», although it has also succeeded in getting a substantial vote from the OBCs. It still lags behind among the Dalits and the Adivasis.

An essay of 2006, after speaking of the consolidation of majoritarian sentiments in Gujarat after the anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002, remarks:

Clearly, if the Gujarat model ever became a dominant model in India, it would bring about the socio-political destruction of India's state nation. We hope that this will not occur, and we do not believe it is inevitable that it will. Much of what we have discussed about India's institutions as well as the data we have presented here about the attitudes of citizens would support a more optimistic view.

A numeral superscript in this paragraph directs the reader to a long endnote, where the author explains why – back in 2006 – he believed (and hoped) that the Gujarat model could not be replicated nationwide. In this note, Yadav spoke of how the non-BJP parties in the (National Democratic Alliance) NDA government then in power at the centre immediately distanced themselves from what had happened under Narendra Modi's watch in Gujarat. Yadav also believed that the BJP as a whole was embarrassed by the naked display of majoritarian might by one of their state units. Thus, he commented:

More generally, we can say that the leaders of the BJP as a political party (who were in a governing coalition with twenty-three partners) for reasons of parliamentary, coalitional, electoral, and even very important national and international investment imperatives, might well want to distance themselves from full association or complicity with, the projects of such groups as the RSS, VHP, and the Bajrang Dal.

Consider finally, these remarks from an essay published in 2011:

The 2009 [general] election showed that the BJP's «new social bloc», the strategy of overdrawing from a smaller social pool comprising the upper end of the caste-class continuum, has hit a dead end. It failed to realise that this strategy was always vulnerable to small shifts of some key and historically fickle or unattached social groups – upper caste, middle class, and lower OBCs.

These quotes are representative of an entire class of Indian scholars, not just a particular individual. I must here acknowledge that in my own writings from a decade or a decade-and-a-half ago, there was a similar complacency at work, the same underestimation of the potential of Hindu majoritarianism to grow and expand (and display its darkest sides as it did so), the same inflated faith in the potential of Indian democracy and its institutions to survive relatively unscathed.

Oddly enough, after ignoring the role of ideology and of individuals in the bulk of the book, Yadav concedes their importance in his last chapter. Entitled «An Agenda for Political Agenda in Our Times», this was originally published in *Seminar* magazine in November 2017.[3] Here, he writes that «the BJP has successfully shifted the entire spectrum of political opinion towards its ideology. It has more or less captured key symbols of nationalism, Hinduism, and our cultural heritage». And further: «A Modi cult has been carefully built up with the help of communication, media amplification, spin doctoring, and social media management». And finally: «[A] ragtag coalition of all non-BJP parties cannot be an alternative to Modi; an electoral alliance cannot substitute for a coherent vision, a credible leadership, and a clear road map».

3. Yogendra Yadav, 'What is to be done?', *Seminar*, No. 699, November 2017 (*A New India, a symposium on the current political dominance of the BJP*).

The political activist thus belatedly acknowledges what the political scientist does not or cannot – namely, that ideology and individuals are important, even vital, in shaping the contours of democratic politics in India. The fact is that in the construction of the first Republic, the charisma and character of Gandhi and Nehru, their sway over and appeal to hundreds of millions of Indians, played a crucial role, as did the mobilising work of the organisations they embodied and led, and the ideology of social inclusion and religious tolerance they advocated.

Likewise, whether a second Republic based on exclusion and majoritarianism can indeed be successfully established in India will depend in good part on the charisma of the individuals who seek to lead it, and on how enduring is the appeal of their ideological beliefs beyond the traditional core constituencies which have historically sustained the RSS and the BJP. Can Modi's charisma be transferred to Adityanath as effectively as Gandhi's was to Nehru? Can majoritarian pride forever satiate voters deprived of decent education and dignified employment? On the answers to such questions may depend how enduring the second Republic will be, how long-lasting its damage to the social and moral fabric of the country.

In his introduction, while warning readers of the insidious undermining by the Modi regime of the constitutional ideals on which our Republic was founded, Yadav writes:

India may never formally be declared a Hindu Rashtra. It would be unnecessary, for the second republic is likely to be a non-theocratic majoritarian state with a de facto hierarchy of religious communities. … We are unlikely – or so I hope despite the Delhi riots of February 2020 – to witness large scale anti-minority pogroms, in part because the regime would like to avoid the international outcry that is bound to follow such violence. In any case, since the need of the day in our second republic would be to reduce the minorities, mainly Muslims and Christians, to the status of second-rung citizens, quotidian put-downs and symbolic violence would suffice. Dalits and Adivasis may not face the same kind of onslaught, because the ruling regime in the second republic would be cognizant of the political benefits of accommodating them, at least symbolically. To grind their noses in the dust would in any case seem unnecessary, given a de facto hegemony of upper-caste Hindus. In our New India the politics of social justice would effectively have taken a back seat, with any expression of Dalit or Adivasi upsurge being nipped in the bud or tamed. While the imposition of Hindi on non-Hindi states would be deemed an unnecessary upsetting of the apple cart, cultural homogenisation in all other respects would be the state's agenda. Our second republic may not be quite the Hindu Rashtra of Savarkar's dreams, but as close to its 21st-century version as required and feasible.

This is an excellent summary description of what Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, and the RSS wish to do.

How long will this second Republic last? Yogendra Yadav does not wisely ask or answer the question (scholars are not astrologers) but – as a scholar who has now become a full-time activist – he outlines some ways in which it might be challenged, perhaps in time even leading to «a reversal of hegemony and a reclamation of the [first] republic by the public». Here, Yadav places less hope on opposition parties like the Congress and greater trust in what his intellectual mentor, Rajni Kothari, once called the «non-party political process». He focuses in particular on the hope and possibility of farmers' and youth movements. And so he writes that «the electoral arena may not be central to the historic mission of reclaiming the republic. We are unlikely to witness a repeat of 1977 when an authoritarian ruler quietly stepped down after an electoral defeat. Mass mobilisation and popular resistance outside the electoral arena are going to be prerequisites for any effective reversal of the hegemonic power».

In this, the final and exhortative chapter of his book, Yadav writes that «counter-hegemonic politics need a new political instrument. Clearly none of the established political parties are fit for this purpose. But the need is not merely to create a new party or a new alliance. What we need is a new kind of political formation that subsumes a party, which is a party but not just a party».

I do not dispute the need for and importance of popular movements, always non-violent, taking place outside the formal electoral or party political process. Like Yadav, I too was moved and inspired by the protests across the country against the Citizenship Amendment Act. But in the end, this regime will have to be defeated at the ballot box. And here, the opacity of electoral funding places enormous barriers to the successful emergence of brand-new parties, as Yadav knows so well from his own experience. It is possible that the «established political parties», revitalised and repurposed (and under a new and less nepotistic leadership), may yet have a role to play in taming the Modi regime. So, to be sure, might other factors, such as the abandonment of the BJP by those «historically fickle social groups», or the emergence of a saintly figure outside party politics (on the model of Jayaprakash Narayan in 1974 and even of the faux JP, Anna Hazare, in 2011) who is seen as a credible moral challenger to political authoritarianism. Finally, the sheer economic incompetence of the Modi government might also contribute to its undoing.

Let me end, however, with a personal hope rather than a political one. In the introduction to *Making Sense of Indian Democracy*, Yogendra Yadav says that academic political science in India has been «disconnected» from «ordinary people, their language and culture». Later, in an essay entitled *What is Distinctive about Indian Elections?*, Yadav writes that «the history of Indian politics is a story of the attempt by millions of ordinary people to write their own political agenda in an alien script».

This line deserves a book-length elaboration. To this formal, analytical, academic, monograph that he has just published, Yogendra Yadav should write a complementary work, a personalised account of his own engagements with political, social and intellectual life in India. Unlike the book that he has just published, the book I hope Yadav will next write will be richly peopled with incidents, individuals, and ideological debates. For his experience of studying Indian democracy is unmatched, both in its depth and its range. For 40 years and counting, Yadav has explored politics from above and from below, from the perspective of the centre and from that of every state of the Republic (and from a few Union Territories too). He has lived and struggled with farmers, argued with teachers and students (and quite a few MPs and ministers too), helped found a political party and left it to found another. Surely, he owes it to his fellow citizens to one day (hopefully soon) put all that knowledge and understanding between hardcovers.