

Democracy in Peril: The India Story

An important new book analyzes the deep-seated forces behind the long decline of the 'world's largest democracy'

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Its title notwithstanding, a new book by Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane, To Kill a Democracy, starts out with hopeful words:

“Like other national stories, India’s rests on a belief in a beginning that ranks as the beginning of beginnings: that magical moment of the birth of Indian democracy, just before sunset on 14 August 1947, when the Indian tricolor was raised over the old imperial Parliament to flutter in the late-monsoon Delhi sky, blessed by a distant rainbow.”

It’s all downhill from there.

But don’t jump to the conclusion that the authors contend Indians have lost interest in participating in the “world’s largest democracy”; to the contrary, they note, “Voter turnout is high, and unusually by global standards, the most marginal parts of society show up at the polls more often than the wealthier middle and upper classes. Votes count. Votes are dignity.”

And yet almost from the first days of the “India Story,” things started to go wrong. That much, everyone already knows; after seven decades of independence from the British Empire, this country of vast population, vast resources, a wealth of ethnic diversity, a long and vibrant history, and – most important in the modern context – an admirable and envied constitution, India remains racked with poverty, underachievement, and corruption.

What the casual observer does not know is why. And that is why this book is important. Not only in the Indian context; on nearly every page, non-Indian readers will be reminded of ills in their own societies.

That is not accidental. India’s great size and unrivaled diversity make it a microcosm – actually, a macrocosm – of the world itself.

Commendable research

Debasish Roy Chowdhury is an award-winning Indian journalist now based in Hong Kong (and, incidentally, a onetime business editor for this website, when it was known as Asia Times Online). John Keane is research professor at Wissenschaftszentrum (Social Science Center) Berlin and professor of politics at the University of Sydney.

Clearly, the meticulous research that powers this book was begun before the Covid-19 outbreak that now dominates news about India, to the unfortunate exclusion of nearly everything else. Mercifully, the timing of their task helped spare the authors from that obsession.

That is not to say what they rather quaintly refer to as “the pestilence” is ignored, but it is given its proper place, more so than in much of the so-called reporting on Covid that consists largely of click-bait horror stories that almost never put statistics in their proper context by noting India’s huge population. (Brazil is a victim of similar sloppy journalism, while countries like Belgium and Hungary are let off the hook because they are too small to generate dazzling death tolls.)

In most of the developing world, and indeed to a large degree in the rich world, ham-fisted efforts to “contain” the virus have done more severe, and longer-lasting, damage than the illness itself. There can hardly be any stronger example of this phenomenon than the “great lockdown” imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government with almost no notice:

“The apocalyptic scenes of reverse migration, the panic over food within just days of the lockdown, the failure to arrange for suitable transport to systematically transfer migrant workers to their place of origin in order to minimize contagion risks, and the calamity confronting Indian hospitals from the earliest days of the pestilence: all of this pointed to a deeper social malaise caused by government inaction, mismanagement, and dereliction of duty.”

The book also steers clear of the error many writers make when documenting recent Indian history, namely to blame it all on Narendra Modi.

Chowdhury and Keane don’t let Modi off the hook; far from it. But they observe that he is the product of a long decline in Indian democracy and, hence, Indian society, much as some (too few and too late) recognized that Donald Trump was the result and not the cause of a remarkably similar decline in the so-called paragon of democracy itself, the United States of America.

The book’s subtitle is *India’s Passage to Despotism*. A theme of the book is something called “elective despotism,” or what Sweden’s V-DEM Institute in its *Democracy Report 2020* termed “electoral autocracy” when analyzing India’s “path of steep decline.”

These seemingly oxymoronic terms speak to the “slow-death” theory of democide, as opposed to the “sudden-death” sledgehammer coups d’état seen most recently in places like Thailand and Myanmar.

In this way, not only *despite* vibrant elections participated in by enthusiastic masses, but actually *by means of* the nominally democratic franchise, the path to despotism becomes ever steeper.

No stone unturned

Few will find nothing new to learn from this book. Practically every aspect of life in India, and not just elections or the other bare bones of democracy, is covered in detail. For example, the authors note that the simple phenomenon of human movement, and the development of transportation, has been a driver of civilization from ancient times. And the book devotes an entire chapter to transport, titled – no surprise – “Motion Sickness.”

The Indian rail network, launched with fanfare and hope long ago, has not only been yet another disappointment, it has become downright deadly. “A ride on a Mumbai train in rush hour,” we read, “is more the stuff of nightmare than dream.”

“Traveling like animals, risking their lives for livelihood, has been the lot of Mumbai daily commuters for as long as they can remember. So deadly are its trains, and so low the safety bar, that zero fatalities on one day (26 June 2019) was marked as a milestone. The very next day it was back to business, with nine deaths.”

But it’s not just the trains; buses (in Bihar, there is one bus per 50,000 people), private vehicles (in Mumbai, “residents on average waste 11 days a year stuck in traffic”), bicycles and even sidewalks and potholes get a close (and un-glamorized) look.

Democide

Though smartly written, and peppered with anecdotes of ordinary people interviewed by the authors, this book is not light reading. Page after page documents tragedy after tragedy, of how the Indian demos has not only been systematically robbed of the hope symbolized by that distant rainbow of August 1947, but how the demos has actually been redefined by the robbers. Readers will be tempted to peek at the closing pages in search of a happy ending.

There is one, of sorts, but it’s more philosophical than the hard-edged, fact-based tone of the bulk of the book. To many, apparently including the authors, belief in democracy has become more of a cult of hope, of paradise in the sweet by and by, than a pragmatic ideology.

That may also explain why there is relatively little analysis here of the successes of systems the writers disparage as “tyrannies,” such as the late Hugo Chavez’ Venezuela or, more obviously and much more importantly, India’s great neighbor and rival, communist China.

Despite this book’s fretting title, and the unrelenting evidence within to back it up, its purpose is to deliver a paradoxical message: For all its many failings, government of, by and for the people has been and will continue to be a worthy experiment. How true that message rings is up to the reader – and, more important, to the people of a great nation – to decide.

[To Kill a Democracy: India’s Passage to Despotism](#) (June 2021) by Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane is published by Oxford University Press.

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