

The Imperfect Best

By

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Dushyantha Mendis (ed). Electoral Processes and Governance in South Asia. Sage Publishers, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-7619-3577-3

The grand old sage Winston Churchill perhaps made the most definitive comment on democracy about it being the best of all imperfect systems for governing collective affairs. The book under review highlights the working of imperfect democracies in South Asia. Apart from Nepal, the rest of the countries in the South Asian Sub-continent were introduced to the concept and practice of parliamentary democracy by their colonial master – Britain- who also happens to be the oldest purveyor of the practice. In terms of learning the tricks of the trade, South Asians could not have hoped for a better guide and counsel.

Yet it goes without saying that any system of governance is as good as the society it governs is and the manner in which different protagonists use and abuse the system. The book delves into the vexed issue of a relatively healthy history of electoral democracy in the region accompanied with persistent failures in governance; primarily manifested in the use of muscle and money in politics as well as systematic discrimination against different groups in society.

The editor introduces the work in a lengthy and absorbing introductory chapter that provides the historical antecedents of state and social formations in South Asia and across individual countries in the post colonial period. The author's foray in social history from the Mughal times to the present is a concise and largely non-controversial lesson in south asian history, i.e. the Mughal and Colonial modes of governance were both based on arbitrary rule and the creation of elaborate patronage networks. State-society relations that emerge from such historical antecedents are thus not easily amenable to the creation of a democratic political culture. Hence the persistent gap between the existing practice of democratic governance in south asia and the ideal of a genuinely plural political culture premised on equality in citizenship of all its inhabitants.

While there is no cudgel with the author's conclusion that the weight of history bears upon South Asian societies in reducing the gap between democratic ideals and practice, readers would have been better informed if the proposition was further elaborated to see differentials in this gap between countries that have persistently practiced democracy within the sub-continent, such as India and Sri Lanka – and others that have had interrupted experiences with formal democracy like Pakistan and Bangladesh. Instead the author explains this phenomenon in terms of contest over the large chunk of resources that states control which has politicised resource allocation.

The rest of the book is divided in three parts. The first part consists of country papers with respect to the electoral history of each country. Interesting differences across South Asian states emerge. Data and information on India is the most extensive and the author – Partha Ghosh – has put it to good use. Some salient features reveal that the proportion of the poor voting in elections has increased from 38% in 1971 to 51% in 1996. In the same period, party membership of the upper castes has declined and that of lower castes has increased. There is also the trend of major national parties declining in strength, increasingly reflecting the diversity of the country. These simple statistics should suffice to convince the skeptics of the transformative role of democratic practice. Unless of course, the skeptics are afraid of precisely such an outcome!

We also learn that Sri Lanka was the only country in the sub-continent that has enjoyed adult franchise over the last 75 years, 16 years before independence and only two years after the first elections based on universal suffrage in Britain itself. Trouble in the process started initially in the wake of ambitious or greedy leaders that wished to hang on to power and later violence in the wake of the prevalent ethnic strife in the country has had an affect on electoral outcomes. In fact the theme of violence recurs across countries as one of the main spoilers of electoral process.

Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal on the other hand are characterized by weak political parties and the domination of the non-elected arms of the state. It is the military in the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh and until recently the monarchy in Nepal, that manipulated the electoral process in general and electoral outcomes in particular. As a result, election often lack legitimacy and the governments formed in their wake tend to be beholden to the non-elected arms of the state. The weight of the colonial state, it appears, bears more heavily on some countries than others.

The second part of the book delves on statutory electoral practices that exist in different countries. The institutional basis laid out by the British in the form of election commissions exist in all countries and apart from Pakistan, *de jure* discrimination does not exist in statute books anywhere in South Asia. Pakistan's statutory provisions are seen as most arbitrary. Until recently the voting age was higher than international norms and unlike any other democracy in the region and for that matter elsewhere in the world, separate electorates for religious minorities existed. Thankfully these provisions have been undone through the 17th Amendment. However, the qualification of candidates enshrined in Articles 62 and 63 of the constitution contain bizarre criteria based on so called Islamic injunctions that if applied stringently would disqualify MPs that would otherwise qualify under normal conditions. Moreover, delimitation of constituencies in Pakistan is much easier to manipulate by the executive than in other countries.

De facto concerns as a result of bureaucratic inefficiency and the use of muscle and money are, however, a common occurrence across all countries. Updating of electoral lists is usually fraught with problems in all countries, with the exception of India. While the use of money is an issue with electoral conduct perhaps everywhere in the world (reason why Marxists call this process 'bourgeois' democracy!), violence has become

endemic to South Asia perhaps more so than in other emerging democracies in East and Southeast Asia as well as in Latin America.

The third part of the book deals with group discrimination in countries. Discrimination against women, ethnic and religious minorities is again a recurrent theme across all countries. Thankfully, this is one area where Pakistan does not stand out as the worst offender, except for the fact that in some tribal and northern areas of the country even mainstream political parties are forced to concede discrimination against women as voters. Studies on discrimination on India and Bangladesh are the richest as they are outcomes of specific work done during elections on empirically discerning discriminatory forms and patterns of discrimination.

The disturbing conclusion that emerges from the last section of the book is the extent of gender, ethnic, religious, caste and class discrimination that is prevalent in South Asian societies. While we can go on blaming our colonial past for a lot of intolerance and prejudice in society, it is perhaps the most significant indictment of post colonial states in this region to have made scant progress on transforming society. To invoke a cliché, this can only happen with more democracy rather than subverting the process. Anti-democrats are still a long way away from proving Churchill wrong.