

India's Experiment with Democracy: The Life of a Nation Through Its Election, S.Y. Quraishi, HarperCollins India, ISBN: 9789356993648, Rs. 699, pp. 600, 2023

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S.Y. Quraishi, in his book *India's Experiment With Democracy: The Life of a Nation Through Its Election* (2023), takes upon himself to provide exposure to the electoral wonder of democratic politics in India. A former officer of the Indian Administrative Services and 17th Chief Election Commissioner of India has collected varied anecdotes from his life while he was serving in the office, and even after his tenure came to an end, he took great interest in electoral politics. Thus, he puts forth his set of reform suggestions for the lacunae he identified in the system after close observation. The book is home to his experiences, electoral incidents, and related laws, as well as their detailed analysis. Through the course of this, he discusses both sides of India—one filled with glory and the other with gore—thus presenting a balanced view. The book addresses immediate concerns such as the criminalization of politics, the politicization of caste, and corruption in the country. The Election Commission of India (ECI) finds itself at the center of the academic exploration. Quraishi not only highlights the role of conducting free and fair elections but also discusses the constraints it faces. The vices of India's electoral system, such as horse-trading of politicians, inadequacy of the Anti-Defection Law, the money-muscle nexus, and malpractices in media. The state elections in Bihar, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh are taken into account as case studies to highlight these vices and propose solutions. Out of all the reforms suggested, reforms related to simultaneous elections and the financing of elections stand out the most, as the former is a newly opened yet old topic of debate and the latter has been an omnipresent topic of discussion. Religion, gender, and caste—the holy trinity of Indian politics—have been discussed at length. Religion and caste turn voters into mere vote banks on the one hand, and women and transgender people face marginalization and low visibility in the mainstream. These problems continue to persist despite India's early experiment with universal adult franchise. The book not only enshrines discussions and debates of Indian democracy but also sheds light on electoral democracy in various countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, the

United Kingdom (UK), Myanmar, the United States of America (USA), Nigeria, Kenya, and Mozambique and highlights lessons that India can apply in its own democratic landscape. Apart from this, the book encompasses the role of the Supreme Court and governor in elections, violations of the model code of conduct, and disqualification of members of parliament. Finally, the book evaluates democracy in India and, through various surveys and data, states that India remains a flawed democracy despite being an electoral wonder. However, solutions to overcome these flaws have also been provided in the book.

The title of the book suggests that it aims to trace the life of a nation through its “election”; however, instead of elections, Quraishi traces the life of the nation through its Election Commission. The debates and discussions center around the achievements of ECI and justification of its failure to act as expected. The author writes that he finds himself in a dilemma when he is asked to comment on the evident failures of the commission. The section titled “Critiquing the Election Commission of India” acknowledges the failures of ECI but isn’t quite critical of them. Rather, he shifts the focus to reforms and then on the unethical conduct of political parties: ‘It is unfortunate that the topic of debate is now the ECI rather than the political leaders and their appalling and unconstitutional conduct.’ (Quraishi, 2023, p. 72) After much reluctance, when the ECI finally decided to act on the complaints against Prime Minister Modi and BJP President, however, it didn't mention the impact of the social media campaign on voters and didn't delve deeper into the question of whether it alienated a chunk of the population that was unable to access the internet or integrated a far larger population, especially youth active on social media platforms, and what its impact was on the political discourse of India in relation to the country's experiment with democracy. Shah, the verdict was in favor of Modi and Shah; only one election commissioner found them to be guilty of invoking armed forces in an election campaign. ‘His minority vote may not have changed the ECI verdict, but dissent is a healthy sign of objective deliberation and thus presents a ray of hope.’ (Quraishi, 2023, p. 71) Rather than proactively criticizing the commission, the book celebrates a minority vote that had no impact on the verdict. Throughout the course of this literature, the ECI is presented as a ‘victim’ who is toothless due to a lack of reforms; the politicians are the ‘villains’ whose conduct is the root cause of the vices in electoral democracy; and amidst these victims and villains, the voters fail to make their presence known in the book.

Further, elections of Covid times are discussed in lengths and breadths. The unique features of these elections were virtual campaigns and the use of social media. Here too, ECI played an important role in conducting the election by implementing strict COVID norms in and around the booths as well as throughout the model code of conduct days and did an exceptional job in monitoring the activities on social media. However, the impact of the social media campaign on voters and the question of whether it alienated a chunk of the population that was unable to access the internet or whether it integrated a far larger population, especially youth active on social media platforms, as well as its impact on the political discourse of India in relation to the country's experiment with democracy, was left unexplored. The addition of these accounts would have further expanded the scope of the book. The case of Maharashtra highlights a grim picture of loopholes in the anti-defection law, which makes it defunct in cases of mass defection. Regarding the role of governor, Quraishi states, 'Their role has extended from the impromptu dissolution of elected governments to assenting to the arbitrary formation of government.' (Quraishi, 2023, p. 160) Thus he suggests reforms in case defecting legislators by banning them from being appointed as ministers/ chairman of boards and being reelected for a period of six years. For governor, he suggests that discretionary powers must be scrapped and recommendations of the Sarkaria Commission must be implemented. These suggestions come at a time when both topics are at the epicenter of all political debates, and their implementation will be a valuable addition to democratic politics.

The book turns out to be a plethora of recommendations to strengthen India's electoral democracy. In case of debates surrounding simultaneous elections, both drawbacks and advantages are thoroughly examined, and it is concluded that 'One nation, one poll: one good idea, some hurdles.' (Quraishi, 2023, p. 183) Thus, simultaneous elections are deemed to be beneficial for the nation. Further, only proven convictions of heinous crimes lead to the debarring of politicians. The provision of innocence until proven guilty has become a roadblock. The duality in treatment of alleged convicts who aren't allowed to cast votes and alleged convict politicians who face no hurdles in contesting elections. Thus, he suggests both convicted and alleged criminals in confinement must get the right to vote, as their isolation from democratic politics leads to them being reduced to second-class citizens. Additionally, the issue of migrant workers not being able to cast their votes is against the essence of democracy. To tackle this problem, he suggests the use of multi-constituency remote voting machines. Among various recommendations, the

book also highlights the demerits of the First-Past-The-Post System (FPTP) and Proportional Representation System and suggests that ‘India could invent its own mixed model to fit its political and cultural specificities.’ (Quraishi, 2023, p. 277) For this, the case of Nepal’s experiment with the ‘Parallel System’ is taken into account as an example. The suggestion of strengthening ECI by amending the appointment procedure and limiting the role of politicians in the appointment of election commissioners as well as the procedure to remove other election commissioners needs to be changed, and removals should only take place through impeachment to provide security to the ECs.

Quraishi identifies three curses of democracy: casteism, communalism, and corruption. To curb corruption he suggests state funding of parties rather than elections and monitoring of political parties instead of the entire election expenditure. Further, he takes into account the politics of hatred along caste and religious lines and suggests, ‘In order to protect the moral fabric of our republic and to exorcise the demons against democracy, we must redeem ourselves of these elements of hate and fear, both in speech and action, by powerfully reasserting the great values of non-violence, equality, and communal solidarity of our founding fathers. Moreover, we must remember that the book by which we rule our nation should not be any religious epic or revelation, but our extraordinary Constitution, which is secular and indispensable.’ (Quraishi, 2023, p. 559)

The book, despite being a treasury of information on electoral and democratic politics, has overlooked important aspects necessary to trace the life of a nation through its elections. Quraishi focuses majorly on the elections of 1952 and 2019; the rest of the elections find their mention in fleeting moments and are nitpicked to only discuss a few incidents. In order to trace the journey of a nation and secure a better future, it is important to have an insight into the past. The detailed study of the said past elections was missing. Moreover, Quraishi writes that he finds himself to be a spokesperson of the ECI, which is also visible in the book. Throughout the course of the book, justifications of the failures of the ECI are evident, along with shifting of blame on the lack of reforms. In the chapter about T.N. Seshan, Quraishi states, ‘The passing on of Mr. T.N. Seshan marks the end of a glorious era of resurgence of democracy about three decades ago.’ (Quraishi, 2023, p. 544). This sorry state of affairs should not have been India’s reality; instead, post-Seshan ECI should have learned from his experience and carried forward

the legacy. Quraishi writes about a lack of political will, but this statement made by him unravels the lack of the ECI's will, which he fails to mention. Democracy without 'demos' isn't possible; however, in the book about India's experiment with democracy, the demos find a restricted place. The exploration of the evolution of India's political culture would have enriched the literature. Nonetheless, The discussion about the rights of convicts and transgender is a refreshing addition to the corpus of electoral literature. The detailed discussion of articles and amendments, as well as their loopholes, makes the book an informative wonder about democratic and electoral politics.

Subarna Banerjee