

Top Dressing or Deep Roots?

EPW epw.in/journal/2023/11/book-reviews/top-dressing-or-deep-roots.html

March 17, 2023

Cultivating Democracy: Politics and Citizenship in Agrarian India by Mukulika Banerjee, *New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021; pp 237, ₹995 (hardbound).*

Several recent works have taken on the challenging task of understanding the Indian democracy from the grassroots. Works like *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* by Christophe Jaffrelot (2003), *The Vernacularisation of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in India* by Lucia Michelutti (2008), *The - Enchantment of Democracy and India* by Sudipta Kaviraj (2011), *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* by Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya (2016) and *Making Sense of Indian Democracy: Theory as Practice* by Yogendra Yadav (2020), among others, have helped us understand how the dynamism of the largest democracy in the world is shaped, sustained and reinvigorated

at all levels from the bottom to the top. Most importantly, they provide a granular picture of why ordinary people participate in democratic processes at all. *Cultivating Democracy: Politics and Citizenship in Agrarian India* by Mukulika Banerjee takes this scholarship further ahead.

The book seeks to capture the moments and processes that guide rural Indians' decision-making during elections. It achieves this through an ethnographic study of the social life of Indians in two villages of Birbhum district, West Bengal, conducted between 1998 and 2013. The ousting of the left from power in the state legislative assembly election in 2011 forms the background of the book. The results of the National Elections Study conducted by Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies provide an apt backdrop against which the author sets her research questions. While this study showed that the poor voted more often than the rich and the marginalised rural woman voted more often than the urban upper-caste male, the study did not explain why she voted. This prompts Banerjee to look at the interlude between elections and explore how people form their political opinions by drawing on values cultivated through their engagements in the social and cultural spheres. "Cultivation" is used in a dual sense—to denote the activity of farming that brings together the various castes in the fieldwork villages as well as the cultivation of the virtues of fraternity, cooperation and egalitarian faith. The book argues that the "social imaginaries" generated during the interactions in the agrarian milieu produce values that are transferred on to the engagement with the Indian democracy.

Banerjee strings together a nuanced theoretical framework for the book in Chapter 1, drawing on disparate strands of literature. B R Ambedkar's social democracy provides the book with a useful theoretical starting point. Banerjee (p 5) notes that the idea emphasises the importance of genuine "fraternity within citizenry" that could transform villages that Ambedkar saw as "essentially undemocratic." The concept further informs the author's exploration of the idea of the republic. The author points out

that for Ambedkar, it involved equality and cooperation governing the relationship between citizens and not just the vesting of sovereign powers in the people. Banerjee explores how this is actualised in the villages that she calls Madanpur and Chishti. Drawing on the Manchester School's treatment of "events," certain key events are picked up by the author as windows into the villagers' interactions. These events and the stories surrounding them help the author describe how India becomes a substantive democracy and not just a procedural one. Drawing on Victor Turner (1980), the events and eventualities are treated as social dramas that throw open relationships of cooperation as well as ruptures within a society.

The strength of the book presents itself early on in Chapter 2, where the author takes up the caste relations that exist among the residents of these predominantly Muslim villages and outlines how the practice of Islam has changed over the years, marked especially by the growing influence of the Deobandi school. The upper-caste Syeds have had to take up agricultural work over the years, indicating the rising influence of the Muslim lower castes of Sheikhs, Mughals, and Pathans and the Hindu lower castes of Doms and Bagdis, especially after Operation Barga, the land reform. The communist party's towering presence in the life of the people is symbolised through the character of the Comrade, who is a Syed. Through the Comrade, we see how elaborate patron–client relationships are embedded in kinship relations stretching across the villages.

Chapter 3 looks at a scandal and the social drama that unfold in the two villages. The Comrade crosses "an ethical red line" when he decides to marry off two lovers of similar ages who happen to be blood relatives (p 64). The event unleashes gossip and discussions that generate public opinion against him. It would later have its impact in the ballot box. The Comrade's influence is best expressed by a villager in these terms—"Comrade *daaley achey, bhattey achey, machey achey*"—the Comrade is in the dal, the rice, the fish (p 71). From the imposition of his own *niti* (rules), the people were desperate to move towards *lokniti* (the people's will).

In Chapter 4, Banerjee takes up the event of the harvest for closer examination. The harvest brings out the economic as well as the social dimensions of how redistribution of agricultural produce and markets work, the author argues. The grain heap has also been witness to social upheavals over time. It has seen how the sharecropping and labourer castes received land and gained voice as well as how the achievements of the reform came undone as the sharecroppers sold back their tenancies to landowners. Chapter 5 shifts focus to cattle sacrifice done during an Eid al-Adha day. By highlighting the spirit of sacrifice, redistribution of meat among those who cannot afford it and the spirit of giving gifts without expecting returns, Banerjee constructs the argument that these "examples of ethical behaviour" guided how to be a community "later, in ordinary times" (p 118).

Chapter 6 links the previous three chapters with the event of an election day. Chapter 7 concludes the book by asking if those who castigated the Indian village underestimated its potential to cultivate values that could usher in a new politics, as exemplified by the fall of the left and the rise of the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal.

Transfer of Values

The book reiterates the familiar point that people draw on their everyday interactions and the moral standards that are made and remade along the way while formulating their opinions about leaders, political parties and the overall democracy. To this end, the book explains how the people unseated the Comrade who had been reigning in the villages for decades, just as the left parties at the state level. Banerjee lets us into the minutiae of the everyday interactions of the people that congeal into these big decision-making moments. This naturally raises the need for more clarity on how the Singur–Nandigram incidents impacted people’s attitudes in the fieldwork villages towards the left. Further, the book opens with scenes marking the rising popularity of Hanuman and chants of Jai Shri Ram in these villages, which brings up the question: How do we understand the rise of Hindutva in agrarian Bengal? Can the conclusions that Banerjee draws about the transfer of values from the cultural and social spaces to the political arena be applied here as well? These questions could generate some uneasy discussion.

The observation regarding cultivation of values is a significant one, especially given Ambedkar’s own observation that there is a need to cultivate constitutional morality in an otherwise deeply unequal country. However, Ambedkar’s total admonition of the Indian village as the site of extreme caste oppression seems to be at odds with Banerjee’s more optimistic take on the agrarian milieu’s potential to produce democratic values from within. While the author points out that the “changes brought by technology, state interventions and the blurring of boundaries between the village and its surroundings and between the rural and the urban” (p 37) may warrant a re-evaluation of the older, more critical takes on the Indian village, this could have been taken up further through a more critical conversation with Ambedkar, given the book draws on several of his ideas.

In all of these discussions, the idea of moral economy looms large. It could be argued that the term *lokniti* that the author uses consistently comes close to moral economy. The limited exploration of this popular concept thus stands out. Could the Comrade’s unseating and subsequent change of allegiances in the elections be read as the response to the threat felt by the people to what they considered as a fair and just way of life? The transformation of this moral economy along with the agrarian changes underway in the villages can be amply read between the lines in the book. This allows room for further research into the aspirations—economic and political—of the younger generation that wants to move away from agriculture and away from traditional party allegiances.

Caste Hierarchies

A less emphasised, but significant, contribution of the book is on the status of caste in contemporary rural India. While it brings caste to the centre of analysis, the book displays an overall optimism about the withering away of caste relations, an argument that has certainly been corroborated by several other authors (see, for instance, Gupta 2000; Chandra et al 2016). However, the jury is still out on whether caste inequalities are becoming less graded. This could be seen especially with respect to how notions of purity and pollution persist, access to educational and employment resources works, new forms

of unfree working conditions come up in the farm and other sectors, and old patron–client relationships sustain themselves despite changes brought in by liberalisation (see, for instance, Thorat 2012; Jodhka 2015; Pitcheritt 2017; Benbabaali 2018; Mosse 2020).

Banerjee presents several examples of the weakening of the old caste hierarchies. The Syeds have been forced to do agricultural work. The Shekhs and Doms now dominate decision-making as they have better know-how of farming compared to the Syeds. Banerjee provocatively adds that, by definition, “rural living requires a certain reciprocity and a sense of community that discourages extreme individual self-interest” (p 19). This could raise several questions regarding the extent to which village life cultivates cooperation. In the book, cooperation is treated not only as a division of labour, but also as a desirable value/virtue that is later transferred onto the political sphere while engaging with democratic processes. The author argues that the harvest presented “a new egalitarianism, greater dignity of labour, class solidarity, the power of collective action—par excellence” (p 112). While the author emphasises the “solidarity created through cooperative labour” as a “key social imaginary created during the harvest” (p 113), there seems to be less emphasis on the fact that as capitalist relations become more entrenched, people are forced to sell their labour power in a competitive labour market, find less work in their traditional sources of livelihood or face the threat of becoming replaced by cheaper sources of labour. The levelling of hierarchies is then transferred to the polling booth, Banerjee argues, by adding that “conceptually, the paddy dust that covered everyone during harvest was not dissimilar to the identical black ink mark on every voter’s finger” (p 115). Given the absence of an exploration of the political violence that rural Bengal is known for, it becomes difficult to assess the extent to which this optimism about the village is generalisable and the extent to which it falls prey to romanticisation.

Precisely because of the discomfiting debates that the book may spark, the book will be of great interest to students and scholars of Indian democracy. The long-duration ethnography on which the book is based will provide a useful resource to students who want to employ this research method to understand Indian elections and the intervals in between.

References

Benbabaali, Dalel (2018): “Caste Dominance and Territory in South India: Understanding Kammas’ Socio-Spatial Mobility,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 52, No 6, pp 1938–76.

Bhattacharyya, Dwaipayan (2016): *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chandra, Uday, Geir Heierstand and Kenneth Bo Nielsen (2016): *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, New Delhi: Routledge.

Gupta, Dipankar (2000): *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Penguin India.

Jaffrelot, Christophe (2003): *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Jodhka, Surinder (2015): *Caste in Contemporary India*, New Delhi: Routledge.

Kaviraj, Sudipta (2011): *The Enchantment of Democracy and India*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan.

Michelutti, Lucia (2008): *The Vernacularisation of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in India*, New Delhi: Routledge.

Mosse, David (2020): "The Modern of Caste and the Market Economy," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 54, No 4, pp 1227–71.

Pitcheritt, David (2017): "Dalit Mobilisation and Faction Politics in Rural Andhra Pradesh," *Contested Hierarchies, Persisting Influence: Caste and Power in Twenty-first Century India*, Surinder S Jodhka and James Manor (eds), Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, pp 349–72.

Thorat, Sukhdeo (2012): *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Turner, Victor (1980): "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 7, No 1, pp 141–68.

Yadav, Yogendra (2020): *Making Sense of Indian Democracy*, New Delhi: Permanent Black.