

# The Politics Of The Poor In A Democracy

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The poor, especially in rural areas, matter immensely in understanding democratic politics in India Getty Images

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*Politics of the Poor: Negotiating Democracy in Contemporary India*

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Democracy, claimed Aristotle, is a regime defined by the rule of the poor multitude. Modern representative democracy in North Atlantic societies has, however, departed from this ancient Greek ideal. Western democracies are

elitist at the top and bourgeois or middle class at the core. Aristotle would heartily approve to the extent that he loathed democracy. Yet the existence and persistence of democracy in postcolonial contexts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America seems remarkable, particularly because the majority of citizens are poor.

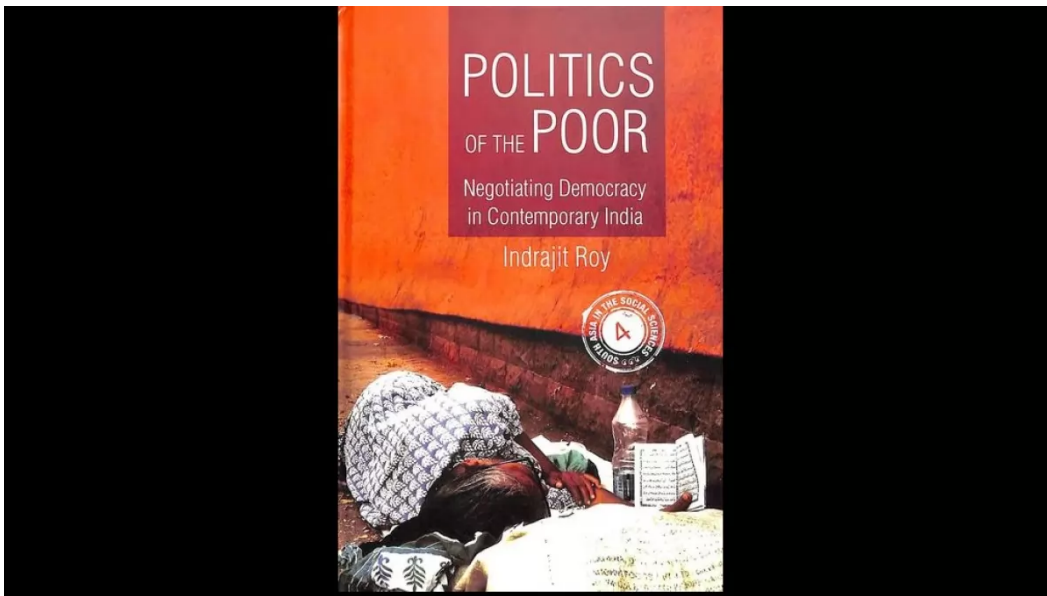
Much as in Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Kenya, Turkey, and Malaysia, democracy in India has been a key plank of political legitimacy for anti-colonial elites after independence. The vast majority of Indians, Kenyans or Malaysians were not asked for their consent, let alone opinions, in determining the post-independence future of these fledgling nations. Contrary to recent scholarship on popular constitutionalism by Rohit De, Madhav Khosla, and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, ordinary Indians have played no part in framing and defending the 1950 constitution. In fact, it is telling that the Congress party retained the emergency powers of the colonial state. It had limited trust in the populace it had enfranchised.

Indrajit Roy shows that, despite the elitist politics of the Congress, the poor majority in India has slowly but steadily emerged as key political actors in our democratic polity. The poor are, of course, notoriously hard to define with many competing definitions of the poverty line in the past quarter century. The poor, however, defined, is also far from a homogenous lot. Roy adopts a broad, multidimensional conception of poverty that accounts for socioeconomic factors beyond household income and consumption. He relies on official poverty headcounts but also conducts his own sample surveys, interviews, and ethnography in rural Bihar and West Bengal.

Roy's thesis is strikingly simple. The poor, especially in rural areas, matters immensely in understanding democratic politics in India and beyond. Whatever the original aims of the ruling elite to bestow democracy on citizens, the poor negotiate democracy and remake it from below. These negotiations are, in his terms, multifaceted, ranging from supplications and demands to overt confrontation with and opposition to elite politics. By focusing on politics between elections, he avoids a narrow electoral focus. Doing so opens up a vast area of inquiry in which group identities, affiliations, and allegiances based on politics of caste and class structure the everyday character of democratic life.

It goes without saying that the politics of the poor takes place under extreme constraints in a hierarchical caste society. Dominant caste elites own and control more land and village resources, including the labour of subordinated castes, particularly Dalits. Unless they migrate to cities or other rural locations, poor labourers in any village have little option but to labour for landowners or

“farmers” of varying sizes. Inclusion in BPL (below poverty line) lists or finding work under the MGNREGA required rural patrons to act on behalf of the poor. These are most certainly not the harmonious rural idylls that conservatives from Mayo and Maine to Gandhi and Hazare have championed. But, as Roy argues, the social relations of power in village India must, nonetheless, contend with the institutional opportunities created by democratic politics.



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On the basis of his extensive field research, Roy sketches out four political possibilities. First, where rural elites and the poor find common interests against the middle peasantry, this cross-class alliance leads to what Roy terms as ‘incorporative’ politics. Second, when middling and poor peasants make common causes with the landless poor, a ‘populist’ politics takes shape that pushes rural elites on the backfoot. Third, if middle peasants dominate the rural economy and enter into conflict with the labouring poor, a ‘differentiated’ politics emerges in which old elites side with the new ones. Fourth, when the labouring poor are countered by a coalition of elite and middle landowning interests, a ‘paternalistic’ politics develops in which the poor have exceedingly limited political opportunities.

From this brief sketch of Roy’s argument, we can infer that the poor can make themselves heard in village politics by allying with either rural elites or the middle and lower peasantry. By contrast, their voices and opportunities are throttled when dominant groups ally with each other to block radical politics from below. At the core of these alliances made by the rural poor, explains Roy,

are transient and varied negotiations with dominant groups over BPL cards, MGNREGA work, rural electrification, and the control of village temples. The poor, in other words, neither act alone nor in a political vacuum, but interact with other rural classes to pursue their political aims.

Drawing on the work of the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, Roy characterizes the politics of the poor in India as 'agonistic', literally combative, insofar as they oppose elite political agendas. Such politics also permits a more substantive form of democracy of group rights in India than the liberal democratic model based on individualism, property rights, and universalism. Democracy in India is not perfect, but without it, the poor would be crushed underfoot by elite coalitions. As Roy argues, democratic politics in India is, ultimately, the politics of the poor vis-à-vis dominant groups. Neither well-crafted laws nor public-spirited officials matter as much as the interests of the poor majority in postcolonial democracies.



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For Roy, the agonistic politics of the poor are driven, above all, by a sense of egalitarianism. Negotiations with dominant castes may be transactional but they are not devoid of political aims and ideas. When the poor seek to defend or advance their interests, they are, in Roy's terms, drawing on the egalitarian ideals of the bhakti movement. The Kabirpanthis, followers of Kabir, that he encounters in rural Bihar do not need to invoke modern constitutions or liberal theorists to claim that all human beings are equal. There is much to commend in this line of reasoning, drawing on the work of Gail Omvedt and R.S. Khare, but it is unclear to what extent egalitarian values are shared beyond one of

Roy's four case studies. Moreover, egalitarian values can coexist with hierarchical social codes as we see in intra-Dalit tensions between Musahars and Doms in one of Roy's fieldwork villages. The social facts of hierarchy may sit uneasily with the egalitarian aspirations of at least some of India's poor citizens. Lastly, scholars have shown that the political legacies of bhakti are ambiguous across India, and in some states such as West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, even conservative.

In the epilogue of his book, Roy says that, even in countries such as the US and UK, liberal democracies are under threat as growing concentrations of wealth gnaw away at the post-WWII settlement that amalgamated liberalism with representative democracy. When the Western middle classes experience downward socioeconomic mobility and widening inequalities of income and wealth, their politics may become more familiar to denizens of postcolonial democracies. What is termed 'populism' nowadays may, in my view, be better understood as democratic politics without liberalism. Contrary to the grandiose claims of modernization theorists, John and Jean Comaroff have argued recently, the Global North is moving in the direction of the South, not vice versa. Democracy in this century may still come to mean what it did in Aristotle's time: a regime dominated by the poor.

This is a sobering thought. But what is even more sobering is that a critical mass of poor citizens in India and elsewhere are increasingly willing to negotiate with right-wing populist nationalism. Roy does not consider what the growing support for the BJP among Dalits and Adivasis in states such as West Bengal might mean for the future of Indian democracy. Will these historically subordinated groups negotiate their claims effectively within the big tent of political Hinduism? Or will their claims be diluted in the service of the neo-Hindu nation? Ironically, it may be precisely the promise of equal citizenship, denied previously to them, that may make Hindutva irresistible for at least some of India's poor majority.

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