A refreshing autonomy

Ashutosh Varshney exudes an intellectual self-confidence that enables him to escape a familiar failing of most professional political scientists, especially those who research and analyse the Indian political landscape, characterised by an inexplicable inability to remain unimpressed by the political correctness of the week, which is invariably defined by the politician, the polemicist and the pamphleteer. It is this refreshing autonomy that makes this collection of articles a sobering read.

The book also becomes a sobering read at a time when India seems to be in the grip of its periodic self-doubt about how to sort out the mess produced by its own democratic excesses, even though India enables make up its mind between the slogans for a “strong and decisive” leader and the romantic appeal of the anonymity of millions. This fiction – of Cicero’s caution against “the mad mohalla” and perhaps the romantic appeal of the anarchy of bolshevism, incomplete respect of Cicero’s caution against “the mad and irresponsible caprice of the mob”. These conditional world may benefit from Varshney’s equitable analysis.

The overarching theme holds together nine previously published (but updated) essays in Battles Half Won – India’s Improbable Democracy. A new introductory essay, clearly a homespun, sums up the arguments, elaborated in different shades in the rest of the book. Varshney exudes a kind of intellectual self-confidence that enables him to escape a familiar failing of most professional political scientists, especially those who research and analyse the Indian political landscape, characterised by an inexplicable inability to remain unimpressed by the political correctness of the week, which is invariably defined by the politician, the polemicist and the pamphleteer. It is this refreshing autonomy that makes this collection of essays a sobering read.

The very title of the collection suggests that there remain profound dissatisfactions with the way India conducts its collective affairs in a democratic idiom. But, then, all democracies – including the presumably super-perfect American democracy – produce their own share of absurdities, aberrations and anxieties. Varshney’s labours carry a resonating message, notwithstanding the greedy and hypocritical middle classes’ clamour for an Indian version of the Chinese authoritarian arrangement, it would be difficult to turn our back on the liberal Nehruvian legacy and on our democratic promises.

The battles raging in India today, the author cautions, are essentially about “inclusiveness”. It is this refreshing autonomy that makes this collection of essays a sobering read.

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