



A refreshing autonomy

Battles Half Won – India's Improbable Democracy

By Ashutosh Varshney

Viking/Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2013, 415 pp.,

Rs 599 (HB)

ISBN 978-0-470-08426-7

HARISH KHARE

Ashutosh Varshney is one of the brighter sparks to come out of the “Political development” stable of American Political Science. The Political Development School assigned to itself the onerous task of initiating the post-colonial academic elites into the “modernisation” project, educating them on how to make a distinction between right and wrong constitutional principles, and, between desirable and undesirable institutional choices as emerging nations undertook the task of organising their collective affairs. This academic discourse ran a close parallel to the American foreign policy templates at the height of an all-consuming Cold War. As it happened, Ashutosh Varshney earned his academic spurs just at a time when the Cold War was petering out and indeed was presumed to have been concluded. And not unsurprisingly, since then the American Social Sciences’ love affair with the emerging world, too, turned somewhat tepid. Under these circumstances, it was easy for him to saunter off the reservation.

Also, the battle Varshney chose to fight – on behalf of democracy, with a capital D, in India – was an easy fight; but, he was willing to see before others could see “the exceptionalism of India’s democracy with stunning clarity”. Though from an Indian point of view it is rather difficult to understand what all the fuss is about; evidently his quarrel is with his condescending North American colleagues who had to be necessarily sceptical about India’s experiments with democratic practices and arrangements. Varshney proceeds competently to dissect “in a highly counter-theoretical way”, why Indian democracy has survived and, while he is at it, draws up a dhobi list of failures and successes. He rejoices in the fact that Indian democracy has “defied” the “standard democratic theory”.

This overarching theme holds together nine previously published (but updated) essays in *Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy*. A new introductory essay, clearly a bonus, sums up the argument, 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 unintimidated 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.

Ashutosh 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 unintimidated 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-doubts about how to sort out the mess produced by its own democratic excesses; even the liberals seem unable to make up their mind between the clamour for a “strong and decisive” leader and the romantic appeal of the anarchy of *mohalla* republics, in complete rejection of Cicero’s caution against “the mad and irresponsible caprice of the mob”. These confused souls may benefit from Varshney’s equitable analysis.

Given the fact that a systematic effort is on to delegitimise Jawaharlal Nehru’s democratic and liberal legacy, Varshney’s analysis on the Indian democracy’s longevity does well to highlight the historical significance of that leadership. Asserting that “Nehru’s emergence as the topmost leader was a monumental fortuity”, Varshney invites speculation as to what would have happened if Nehru had had to contend with Subhash Bose or Sardar Patel: “Bose dies in 1945, Patel in 1950.

Given their political trajectories, one shudders to think what kind of political system India would have evolved into if they had dominated the 1940s and 1950s.”

Varshney’s essays are remarkable on another count. It is understood that after all, scholarship is obliged to see larger themes which may necessarily be at work beyond the daily grind of professional noise-makers in television studios and newspapers and even in Parliament. Scattered through these essays is an important theme – a theme for which there seems to be not many takers in the present cynical days – of the centrality of the Indian National Congress in the consolidation of the democratic arrangements, in particular as one of the “institutions that have played a key role in generating all-India loyalties, historically and currently”.

All said and done, the Congress accent on the middle path and moderation remains the key to the overwhelming task of governing a vast, continental polity. This accent is

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 reassuring 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

ideologically premised on a cultivated rejection of extreme partisanship and allurements of exclusion; on the other hand, the pronounced emphasis on “inclusiveness” may be a clever electoral strategy but it is a ploy that nevertheless is democratic and is anchored in vague – almost John Rawls-type – notions and premises of fairness. And, that is why, as Varshney notes perceptively, the Bharatiya Janata Party will not be able to do things vastly differently:

It should be noted that the BJP – should it return to power in an alliance – cannot entirely escape these inclusionary pressures. In search of votes, the BJP also has to move downward for support. That is where the biggest numbers of votes exist. Unsurprisingly, the BJP did not oppose the NREGA, nor did it resist the 2006 affirmative action plan, nor the right to education and food security bill. All parties are subject to the rise of inclusionary pressures.

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, all democracies – including the presumably super-perfect American democracy – produce their own share of absurdities, aberrations and anxieties. Varshney’s labours carry a reassuring 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. “India is hyper-mobilised, much of it by political parties. Hyper-mobilisation might make Indian democracy very noisy, even chaotic, but in many ways, it also keeps democracy going.”

All this is very flattering to the argumentative Indian. However, Indian democracy has yet to confront the problem identified by James Madison in *The Federalist*: “The inference to which we are brought is, that the causes of faction cannot be removed.” Our national discourse, for understandably historical reasons, had sought to paper over differences inherent in existence of “faction” and its inevitable demands on attention, resources and policy. Instead, somehow, we had sought solace in the presumed curative power of this or that “leader” to harmonise varying and often conflicting interests and outlooks of different factions. This fiction – of a painless reconciliation – is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain; or, at least, it requires a sophistication in political dexterity that is not so easily available. Varshney alludes to this dilemma in his concluding essay. Making an eminently sound proposition that “a nation’s politics decides what is acceptable”, he identifies the nature of new challenge:

Under such circumstances, a universal-franchise democracy, where the deprived – defying standard democratic theory – have come to vote at least as much as, if not more than, the privileged, is bound to feel inclusionary pressures. Many more would like the fruits of the economic boom to come to them. The greatest challenge for India’s policymakers today is to balance the new growth momentum with inclusionary policies.

That elusive “balance” again. But so be it. ■