
Subrata K. Mitra and V.B. Singh, *When Rebels Become Stakeholders. Democracy, Agency and Social Change in India*

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/2968>

DOI: 10.4000/samaj.2968

ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

Joël Cabalion, "Subrata K. Mitra and V.B. Singh, *When Rebels Become Stakeholders. Democracy, Agency and Social Change in India*", *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], Book Reviews, Online since 22 January 2010, connection on 02 October 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/2968> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.2968>



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Mitra, Subrata K. & Singh, V.B. (2009) *When Rebels Become Stakeholders. Democracy, Agency and Social Change in India*, New Delhi: Sage, 320 pages

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[1] *When Rebels Become Stakeholders* undertakes the enormous enterprise of analysing the processes of democratisation and social change in India and in so doing engages with the wider debate on democracy and development. It raises several fundamental questions: Is it possible to conceptualize and measure such processes from a quantitative perspective? How can the perceptions of Indian voters be statistically apprehended to shape a body of coherent results that are instructive about the condition of democracy in India today?

[2] As a basis for their ambitious project, the authors have constructed a vast sample of 9000 interview respondents both cross-sectional (based on different social categories) and national as it covers all regions of India except Kashmir. Using statistical methods, the authors try to make the most out of electoral surveys, as they assert that public opinion data is the only way to reach a political understanding of voters. In order to cover all sections of society and to apprehend the national dimension of political perceptions of voters, individual electors have been traced according to a multistage, stratified and random sampling technique at different levels of electoral constituencies (Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha, polling booth).

[3] The analysis focuses on what is termed the 'political skills' of both the voters and their leaders in order to reconstitute the complexity of the inner dynamics of electoral politics. To illustrate and compare such skills, Mitra and Singh make use of vast attitudinal data drawn from three national surveys of the Indian electorate, conducted in 1971, 1996 and 2004, that aim at measuring the opinions, attitudes and values of 'ordinary people'. The 1996 Lok Sabha elections provided the statistical benchmark for the authors to construct a sample large enough to cover respondents from all over India and across social groups. However, the authors point out the impossibility of crafting a sampling technique that would be able to reconstitute the finer stratification

existing at the level of social groups. The methodological appendix provided by the authors illustrates the extent of their efforts but acknowledges the almost inherent bias faced by the study, as a result of the conditions of production of statistical data in India today (usually based on categories crafted for administrative reasons and little or not at all based on caste, class or community-oriented types of affiliation).

[4] The authors posit that India has achieved both democracy and social change concurrently. According to them, sixty years of independence has brought about a significant social revolution in the country: structural change has percolated down through society influencing gender relations, economic and traditional power relations and the political field, as illustrated by the upward mobility careers of elected representatives coming from marginal groups. The issue that puzzles observers, and that the authors raise in this book, concerns the orderly (i.e., non-violent and legal) social change India has been able to achieve in a way that defies the various pessimistic prognoses of scholars or even politicians with regard to the evolution of the nation. The combined phenomenon of entitlement, enfranchisement and empowerment within Indian society has brought forward an increasing number of new *stakeholders* and enabled a smooth transition to democracy despite numerous incidents of riots, uprisings and revolutions in the realms of ownership rights, contested cultural practices and social hierarchy. India's democracy indeed preceded structural change and the democratic political system has not only survived but also managed to deepen and broaden its reach, in spite of being often portrayed as a 'weak state locked into a battle with a strong society' (p.3). Opinions, attitudes and values of ordinary people form the basis of this book, as they are considered to constitute the only entry points into the popular perception of voters. They therefore represent the key empirical evidence to test conjectures about the relationship between social power and political change.

[5] The title of the book refers to 'rebels' and 'stakeholders'. By combining the variables of efficacy and legitimacy over two simple questions (the efficacy of vote and the legitimacy of the institutional arrangement), the authors conceptualize and measure two main attitudinal patterns towards the political system. According to them, a rebel thinks he/she has political influence but contests the legitimacy of the existing institutional arrangement. The expression is very useful but also very vague and would appear to cover a wide range of behaviours empirically stemming out of complex configurations. India harbours so many forms of rebellion, revolt or social forms of revolution, however small or localised they may be. The revolted or revolutionary agents, or

'rebels', involved in such struggles do not come into view in this book. The category of rebel is abstract and restricted to those who oppose the system. Stakeholders, on the other hand, are the people who combine both a sense of their own efficacy and a sense of legitimacy in democracy. They are the 'new social elites' and their figure has increased regularly in contrast with the declining number of rebels. These sentiments or convictions are expressed in perceptions and actions towards the political system in general, and reflected in their responses to the survey. Like 'rebel', the definition for 'stakeholder' could have been better explained or questioned in relation to the book's analytical framework, which revolves around the concept of agency. As suggested in the title, there seems to be a normative form of social philosophy in this book title. The term *rebel* is defined in a negative fashion, in opposition to stakeholder, as if democracy could only become viable and reinforced when the rebel becomes a stakeholder (and ceases to oppose?). Such an opposition raises two problems. On one hand, it does not base itself on clearly-defined notions empirically *constructed, conquered and verified*, as per the expression of Bachelard (Bachelard 1999). It is derived out of aggregate answers to a double question hinting at the trust one has in the political system and is therefore a weak qualitative definition. On the other hand, it seems to presuppose a rebel does not participate constructively in the democratic processes of his or her country unless he/she trusts the system, as if a rebel was a kind of external observer of changes he/she does not control, or that he/she would impede through violence and illegitimate means. A discussion of the theoretical frameworks of both Max Weber and Jurgen Habermas on different forms of legitimacy and interest or in relation to normativity would have been a welcome addition to this book. Although the authors do refer here and there to direct phenomena pertaining to social and economic forms of domination or power, they usually do not accommodate it in their thinking on the State. They rather follow ideas taken from institutional theory, where institutions are not only considered resilient but taken as independent variables to investigate the individuals' attributes and motives. Their conceptualization thereby passes lightly over the place of dissent in Indian society and the extent to which democratic processes are inevitably nourished through the accommodation of dissenting voices.

[6] The authors use survey data skilfully to link the evolution of democratic processes in India with the progress of social transformation. The survey results tend to show that stakeholders of democracy have increased across all social groups. And as the authors point out, it is remarkable that such a phenomenon continues to transpire despite the various events that have tragically rocked India in its recent history, such as the demolition of the Babri mosque or

the interval of the emergency; situations of crises that could have been seen as aggravating the polarization of Indian society or undermining the nation's democratic path.

[7] The extension of universal adult franchise, the foundational voice of Nehru and the ever-expanding political class precipitated the country in the need to map a dynamic political process into a set of stable institutions. These were required not only to make durable its democratic process but also to render social transformation sustainable and institutionally convertible into political capital capable of transcending differences.

[8] In reference to the works of Rudolph and Rudolph on political developments in India (1967), the authors identify three patterns of mobilization that encapsulate the way in which individuals get integrated into social relations: vertical (akin to the *jajmani* type of patron-client relationship of a pre-capitalist economy), horizontal (marshalling political support through class or community leaders) and differential (direct and indirect political support, often through the political party). It is remarked that politics at a micro level has moved from a *jajmani* (patron-client) and vote-bank based vertical mobilization to unstable, short-term coalitions, sustained by differential mobilisation enhancing the sense of power on the part of the small but well-organized groups. This evolution of local, regional and national type of political configurations has not undermined the political process but actually reinforced it by integrating progressively more groups in the institutional and democratic arena. This view is somewhat problematic as it may be numerically true but does little to inform as to why and how local and regional arenas in particular have evolved to such 'unstable' coalition configurations. Why are some unstable while others solidly reproduce patterns of caste mobilization or even caste feuds? Such a statement tends to minimize the intricacies of local politics.

[9] The results all point in the direction of a resilient, stable and vibrant political system capable of 'turning rebels into statesmen' through a two-track process combining institutional participation with 'rational protest'. As a result, the various indicators of electoral participation display, almost invariably, a high trust in institutions that is at the same time a cause and a consequence of democratic politics.

[10] In the third chapter, the authors raise the question of continuity and change in Indian politics by examining the intergenerational continuum in terms of political attitudes and values of the two main age cohorts of the electorate. The Indian political system is, according to them, a robust system on the whole as it is producing a consensus between generations. Despite the fact

that the social basis of power has considerably changed since independence, it appears nonetheless as if the commitment to the core values of the system remains intact, thereby enabling a stable reproduction and circulation of institutional and political capital. In asserting this finding, the authors seem to give a neat and clean impression of Indian politics, which somehow pushes to the margins the idea of a polity under pressure, potentially disrupted by social conflict

[11] The fourth chapter, however, examines the issue of the limits of consensus. It endorses the idea that conflict in Indian society is a crucial element to the functioning of 'orderly and democratic social change', an expression that could sum up the object of what they name the neo-institutional model. Survey results indicate a greater stability in the structure of electoral preferences and even a progressive reduction of floating (undecided) voters in the Indian electorate. Part of this has to do with the important role played by political campaigns, participation in election meetings and the influence of one's level of partisanship. The authors show that participation in campaigns correlates with income and level of education. It is therefore a differentiated element they bring forth in order to illustrate the variable propensity to participation in the political system. The sense of being satisfied with one's present financial condition reveals a similar logic of differentiation in relation with the sense of one's place: well-off people have a larger proportion of satisfied people among them. Seemingly their sense of being satisfied percolates in a way that tends to create an effect of legitimization for the system from below by overshadowing and even partially containing dissatisfaction germinating out of the material conditions of the toiling masses. Such differentiation is of course not surprising and could have formed a departure point for further investigation about the weight of more affluent, urbanised sections of society in the consolidation of a national sense of unity, including why these well-off groups actually vote less today in the Indian democracy as compared to rural or poorer groups. Although the authors do indeed talk of 'opinion-making classes', they do not really question the effect these groups might have on the spread of such a widely shared conception of democracy, efficacy and legitimacy. On the whole, most of the Indian population is said to display a sense of political consciousness, a degree of participation, albeit variable, in election campaigns and as a result do not question the legitimacy of the overarching principles of the Indian political system, evidence for what the authors call an 'inclusive political culture'. Without necessarily doubting the existence of such a culture, it would have been instructive to compare such results with a qualitative study of voters' perceptions at the local level, bringing out their motives for voting.

[12] In the context of Indian society, the authors underline the importance of the role played by political parties as the interface between society and the State. They distinguish two main periods that divide political life in India: the single-party dominated period (1952-1971) and the multi-party system period (1972-2004), which is assimilated with a system of coalition politics. In spite of all its cleavages, they assert that the Congress party remains a catch-all party occupying the ideological centre of Indian politics. It is noted that the OBC vote has partially deserted Congress, usually shifting to regional parties in a way that strengthens the mediation between the centre and the periphery, or between the elite groups and the new entrants in the political game. The survey results also tend to substantiate the fact that the propensity to be a BJP supporter corresponds to a class variable, i.e., being a person of high status. A majority of people think their votes count in the state of affairs, but it is remarked that this trust in one's own efficacy decreases in the lower social orders of society. Ultimately, in spite of stark inequalities and persisting power imbalance between social groups, the authors assert that these seem to bear little effect on the trust invested in institutions. The continuing strength and legitimacy of institutions would therefore indicate a successful progressive democratisation process concerning all people across social categories. The social differentiation among groups regarding the trust vested in institutions however shows that the democratic process is not to be taken for granted and that it is constantly being 'worked' by social groups striving for more inclusive policies.

[13] Mitra and Singh then venture into inspecting the link between the nation and the region in India. How does their overlay contribute to undermining or promoting national unity? Is there in India, as it was oft-heard and feared in the years that followed independence, a risk of Balkanisation? Is the regionalisation of Indian politics challenging the resilience of the Indian State? To the contrary, the authors find that the regional State appears to be culturally plural, tolerant, inclusive and committed to distributive justice in a way that integrates the region as an important level of the political system, which makes it complementary with the idea of the nation (or simply 'with the national political level'). Although this finding seems reasonable, it does encounter some practical problems. Can the Shiv Sena, for instance, be seen in such a perspective since it both propagates a regional chauvinistic ideology and a national communal identity? Is the communalization of regional identity politics a sign of better integration of the region in the nation? The question of intra-state disputes also tends to question this statement as in the case of Telangana, Vidarbha or Gorkhaland, to name just a few of the recent resurfacing claims.

[14] Chapter 7 investigates the link between political and economic citizenship by looking at the perception of poverty and prosperity by individuals, as compared to the usual objective measurement of deprivation. It is found for example that men tend to be more optimistic than women, that urban India is more optimistic than rural India and that the young are more optimistic than the elderly. If the sense of being satisfied with one's economic situation obviously varies across social categories, the pattern of opposition to economic liberalization tends to be more significant and polarized among social groups. It is clear that support for liberalization comes from vocal and articulate sections of the population, namely urban upper-class, college educated and 'high achievers'. The perception of liberalization thus highlights the fact that development has not benefited all sections of society equally. Furthermore, a sense of things worsening is shared by lower social orders.

[15] The cross-state comparison of certain reforms such as Panchayati Raj prompts the authors to speak of an incremental evolution of decentralisation in India. Whereas the region is noted as a crucial link between the nation and the locality, local forms of governance enjoy more trust and confidence from people as compared to either the regional or central governments. Interestingly, the analysis shows that the creation of local arenas of power, where political mobilisation has been progressively rendered possible for lower social classes, has positive repercussions on the general perception of the overall legitimacy of the state.

[16] What then are the reasons for the residual doubts about the stability of democracy in India? Why are there still so many prognoses of the deinstitutionalisation of Indian society? If one is to admit that there is indeed a high level of trust in institutions as the surveys indicate, there is nonetheless a high level of distrust of State actors, most notably politicians.

[17] The authors finally question the epistemological validity of their categories of analysis in relation to the larger postmodern approach in social sciences. What is at stake in mobilizing the indigenous pool of categories or the ones crafted in the field of social sciences? Raising such questions so late in the book led to some uneasiness on the part of this reviewer, since they challenge the legitimacy of their analytical framework and the use of certain categories such as democracy and secularism that they consider 'established'. Can academic discourse be 'mapped by political categories emerging out of the political practices of resistance and contestation of the actors?' (p.232). Can those be converted into categories of analysis? Are there any particular 'grounds of commensurability' (p.233) between the different approaches trying to grapple with Indian reality? These extremely relevant questions would have been compelling at the beginning

of the book, where they could have been explored in conjunction with the data. Finally, although expressed in a concluding way they do not appear to emerge out of the process of data construction and analysis.

[18] As a result of this methodological discussion, it is difficult to label or categorize properly the framework to which the authors adhere. On one hand, it apparently belongs to the rational choice theoretical background, quite common in electoral survey analysis. On the other hand, this framework is hardly put in relation to the literature they mobilize to contrast and deepen their own data analysis. Their use of the concept of agency, mainly used in anglo-saxon social sciences, helps them avoid the problematic opposition between the mechanical use of social categories and the tautological idea of an individual free of constraints and determinisms in his/her choices. However, the study sometimes gives the impression of not going beyond a primarily psychosocial approach of the electorate to validate a body of apparently coherent political behavioural patterns (trust, vote, participation, opposition, coalition). The statistical variations are sometimes too insignificant to provide relevant analytical matter to the reflection of the authors, who have to rely on the usage of broad and heavily loaded concepts such as democracy and social change to make sense out of situations for which one could expect finer observations.

[19] In some ways, this book resembles a vast and complex opinion poll where social actors are the ultimate units of analysis and where there is little reference to their real world contexts (place, living conditions, etc). One important question that emerges after the reading of this book concerns the conditions of validity of the use of vast opinion surveys based solely on statistical data, generated in sometimes doubtful contexts. Can we consider the collection of expressed opinions as a reliable way to measure the degree to which the Indian democracy is working, seen as efficient and represented as legitimate across all sections of society? Could it not be argued that electoral behaviour, preferences and perceptions, taken individually, are devoid of explanatory value due to their specificity and heterogeneity? The act of voting of two different individuals can cover a wide range of reasons that require qualitative forms of investigation to decipher its meanings. Is the use of the concept of agency enough to reconstitute the complexity of perceptions and to account for the genesis of such wide and differentiated political dispositions?

[20] Last but not least, however sincerely the authors draw an optimistic picture of Indian democracy, it may be questioned whether such a wide-angle macro statistical survey can

encompass so easily the different tensions, disillusionments and even violent situations in India, which are in some cases as resilient as the democratic processes they describe? Are the latter nothing but epiphenomena that one can sideline and accommodate in the theory of democracy as secondary effects of a to-be perfected democratic state? Although too vast to be taken up in the scope of this book, these phenomena deserve explanation as to why they persist (even increase in the context of Naxalism) and actually challenge democratic processes in a serious way.

One might also feel regretful that the issue of caste is not discussed in more depth inasmuch as this category of analysis could be interrogated from an epistemological point of view. Indeed, what could be today the relevance of the category of 'caste' for statistical analysis? The authors themselves mention the need to re-evaluate it (p.217) but do not decry the lack of data on caste, the non-existence of contemporary surveys and the need to develop such research to avoid large doubtful abstractions. The extent to which it still partly determines the reproduction of inequalities is a question that might have been posed.

[21] On the whole, the reader of *When Rebels Become Stakeholders* is being assured that the Indian democracy is not doing as badly as it is often portrayed, and the book provides a vast pool of representations and perceptions that can be referred to in order to secure this impression. It is a stimulating work, quantitatively ambitious, and at the same time attempting to accommodate space for the opinions and values of ordinary people. The statistical methodology deployed and the resulting data presented in this book however trigger mixed feelings in this qualitative researcher, not used to mobilising such large-scale survey results and sceptical about the feasibility of constructing a representative sample for a country like India. Is it that the authors are still seeking the 'lost paradise of totality'¹ or can we consider their study valid enough from a strictly quantitative point of view?

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¹ See Le Petit Bernard (1989) for a discussion of the history of quantitative methods of analysis.

Cabalion, Joel (2010) 'Subrata K. Mitra and V.B. Singh, *When Rebels Become Stakeholders: Democracy, Agency and Social Change in India*', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, URL: <http://samaj.revues.org/index2968.html>. To quote a passage, use paragraph (§).

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