Violent conjunctures in democratic India; Elite parties, poor voters: how social services win votes in India

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BOOK REVIEW


The decisive victory of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in India’s 2014 national elections has once again brought the question of the political strength of the Hindu nationalist movement to center stage for analysts and scholars of contemporary democratic politics in India. Amrita Basu’s Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India and Tariq Thachil’s Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India provide timely and important explanations of the electoral successes and weaknesses of the BJP. The books draw on in-depth original field research and address both comprehensive national political trends and complex regional and local variations in the electoral and political fortunes of the Hindu nationalist movement.

Amrita Basu’s Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India is an impressive and substantial study that analyses both the local and national electoral dynamics of the BJP and the broader political dynamics of the Hindu nationalist movement. While there is a substantial literature that has sought to explain the rise of Hindu nationalism, Basu’s work provides a distinctive analysis of the ways in which particular conjunctural relationships between institutions, organizations and movements can actively and purposefully promote violence. On one level, she argues that in places where the BJP has been a strong and cohesive force, the party has tended to engage in more violent agendas. In other locales, factional divisions within the party have blunted the impetus towards violence. On another level, Basu argues that the nature of the relationship between the BJP, the state and Hindu nationalist movement organizations also explains variations in violence against religious minorities. She shows that the greater the cohesion of this relationship, the greater the likelihood that such violence will be enacted. At its broadest level, she challenges the reader to engage in a sustained rethinking of the nature of democratic politics. Rather than viewing religious violence as an aberration from an idealized model of democracy, Basu argues for and provides a sustained analysis and explanation of patterns of “conjunctural violence in multi-ethnic democracies” (23). Such an approach unsettles easy typologies that seek to classify the outbreak of anti-minority violence through oppositions between weak and strong democracies or between democratic and authoritarian states.

Basu builds her argument through an in-depth comparative analysis of four states (Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan). She delves into the local patterns of movement, party, and state relationships, and the complex social configurations of caste and class that explain when and why Hindu nationalist organizations engage in violence. The cases contain a depth of analysis that is difficult to summarize within the limited space of a review. Each case provides a historically contextualized analysis of the institutional structures and political processes that explain when BJP-led governments engaged in or refrained from pursuing ideologically driven Hindu nationalist agendas and illustrate why and how Hindu nationalist
organizations have engaged in violence. The book is based on rich and textured fieldwork and includes interviews with victims of religious violence, BJP party members, Hindu nationalist activists, and government representatives. In the process, Basu provides a window into the micropolitics of power and interests that run through anti-minority violence. For instance, in a striking analysis of local politics in Uttar Pradesh, Basu demonstrates the ways in which local municipal politics and the desire for control over both material and symbolic resources led Hindu activists to target Zafar Khan, a Muslim municipal council chair who was in fact elected with majority Dalit support. The analysis presents a devastatingly vivid picture of the ways in which Khan was targeted by political rivals and vilified through gossip, rumor and extremist political discourses as an “anti-Hindu” leader. This is just one example of the many nuances of the book’s analysis that addresses the role of women in the Hindu nationalist movement, political competition over Dalit support, the culpability of state officials and the complicity of local newspapers in outbreaks of violence. In the process, Basu provides a multilayered analysis of both the state and civil society and the complex interconnections between state and civil society that shape such outbreaks. Thus, the nature of local connections between the police and Hindu nationalist activists are an important factor in determining the role of the local police in preventing or allowing outbreaks of violence to occur.

In summary, Basu’s work makes a significant contribution to the understanding of violent religious nationalism in contemporary India and to broader comparative understandings of the explanations of anti-minority violence in democratic societies.

If Basu’s work tackles the violence that has unfolded with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, Thachil’s book foregrounds the service-based dimensions of the BJP’s electoral strategies. Thachil seeks to explain why poor voters would choose to vote for elite parties that do not represent their economic interests. Drawing on both quantitative methods and original fieldwork in India, he asks why subordinated social groups such as Dalits and Adivasis would vote for the BJP. He argues that elite parties such as the BJP are able to win over such socio-economically marginalized groups through affiliated organizations that gain their support through the “private provision of local public goods – mostly basic health and educational services” (5). He argues that this strategy allows elite parties to deploy an “organizational division of labor” (5) where the party can continue to represent elite interests while the affiliated service organizations can act as representatives of the interests of subaltern social groups.

Similar to Basu, Thachil illustrates the complex relationship between political parties and civil society organizations that has shaped the political and electoral strategies of the BJP. Drawing on a comparative analysis of three states (Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh), he argues that such service provisions do not automatically produce political or ideological loyalties to the BJP. Rather the BJP has achieved success in cases where rival parties (and local states) have not effectively provided public services and where poor voters have not been effectively integrated as a political constituency by rival parties.

Thachil’s fieldwork provides useful insights into the micropractices that Hindu nationalist organizations have used to try and draw political support from Dalit and Adivasi groups. The book is an analysis of the BJP’s attempts at broadening its electoral base beyond its original core support from the urban upper caste middle classes. He provides in-depth discussions of organizational mechanisms that shape service provision. However, as he argues, the provision of services does not build a simple form of clientalistic politics. For example, the process of building political support depends on a more complex process of developing community leaders through service provisions who can then embed themselves in communities in order to build support for Hindu nationalist party organizations and political agendas. He thus provides a systematic analysis of the ways in which the provision of such services does or do not translate into actual electoral and political support for the party. Readers will find valuable research and
analysis of both the micro-level dynamics of the Hindu nationalist movement in various states and broader explanations of patterns of the BJP’s electoral successes and failures.

A key dimension of the BJP’s service-related work, as Thachil notes, is the fact that it has specifically developed organizations in “states with large subaltern populations and in states with higher proportions of religious minorities (particularly Christians)” (105). Thachil notes at various points that this is related to the BJP’s ideological opposition to Christian missionary work. However, he stops short of analyzing the ways in which this agenda is directly linked to increasingly coercive and often violent attacks on India’s Christian minority (analyzed in Basu, 190). This has been part of an organized political strategy that has used the language of “religious freedom” and anti-conversion legislation in various states as a strategy of intimidation, one that often slides into violence against Christian Dalits and Adivasis. Thachil notes that “service work did not engage in the fracturing language of caste and simultaneously energized activists by offering a means to counter similar efforts made by predatory activists of foreign faiths” (113). At no point does Thachil critically examine the construction of Christianity as a “foreign” faith or address in depth the Hindu nationalist political and discursive investment in focusing on Christian conversion as forced or “predatory” as opposed to the “reconversion” missionary activities of Hindu nationalist activists. At one level, such an assumption both reproduces Hindu nationalist assumptions and presumes that Dalit and Adivasi Christians and Muslims have a religious passivity that prevents them from having authentic relationships with their Christian or Muslim faith. At another level, the book’s focus on the secular nature of service provision risks seriously underestimating the links between “non-violent” service work, violent attacks on Dalit and Adivasi religious minorities, and the broader patterns of coordination between the various elements of the Hindu nationalist movement. Such limits do not reduce the significance of Tachil’s analysis of how service organizations do political work but call for a deeper analysis of the links between this strategy and the violent dimensions of Hindu nationalist politics.

Both Thachil and Basu have produced invaluable books on the Hindu nationalist movement and its effects on democratic politics. They are must-reads for both social scientists and specialists focused on contemporary India.

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