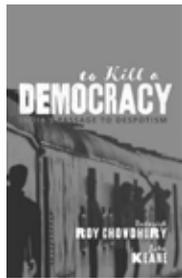


Important questions

Examining the evolution of democracy in India

Ian Hall



To Kill a Democracy: India's passage to despotism

by Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane

Oxford University Press

\$42.95 hb, 312 pp

In a recent interview, India's foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, was asked whether his country was heading in what his interlocutor, the Lowy Institute's Michael Fullilove, called 'an illiberal direction'. Bristling, Jaishankar denied the charge. India is undergoing something quite different, he argued. It is experiencing a 'very deep democratization'. This process might be hard for outsiders to understand, but it was positive, not problematic. After decades of rule by an English-speaking, Western-educated elite, the country was at last being governed by politicians who spoke and thought and behaved like ordinary Indians.

This exchange was brief but revealing. Fullilove's query reflected growing concerns about the condition of India's democracy, which Freedom House, an influential American think tank, earlier this year reclassified as only 'partially free'. For its part, Jaishankar's response betrayed both the acute sensitivity to international criticism of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, in power for the past seven years, and the deep-seated belief of Hindu nationalists that, in democratic politics, the will of the majority should prevail.

That latter view, as Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane insist in *To Kill a Democracy*, is politically toxic. It opens the door to arbitrary rule by demagogues who claim to govern for the people but who really serve the interests of the wealthy. It undermines public institutions, widens inequalities, and erodes the autonomy of ordinary citizens. It does not lead to deeper democracy, it kills it, putting despotism in its place, Chowdhury and Keane assert.

Democracy, they argue, involves more than periodic elections and majority rule. Inspired in part by the great Dalit thinker Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, they define it as a 'whole way of life' beyond the formal process of voting. Grounded in the mutual recognition of equality by all citizens, this concept of democracy re-

quires the treatment of others with respect and the setting aside of differences of belief, gender, status, and wealth. It requires that we strive to ensure 'freedom from hunger, humiliation, and violence' and the capacity to live with dignity are guaranteed for every citizen.

On this basis, Chowdhury and Keane find India wanting. In vivid and compelling terms, they detail its various 'social emergencies' – the inequitable, stratified healthcare system, the persistence of malnutrition, the rampant pollution of air and water, the creaking, danger-laden transport infrastructure, the inadequate schools, and the paucity of decent jobs. They sketch equally distressing pictures of its politics, not least the malign influence of money, the ubiquity of violence, the unravelling of law and order, and the near disappearance of accountability.

These failings, Chowdhury and Keane argue, have left India wide open to despotism. In such circumstances, all that is required to undermine democracy is a 'cunning and tightly disciplined political party', one equipped with a plausible demagogue and capable of presenting itself as the true representative of the people

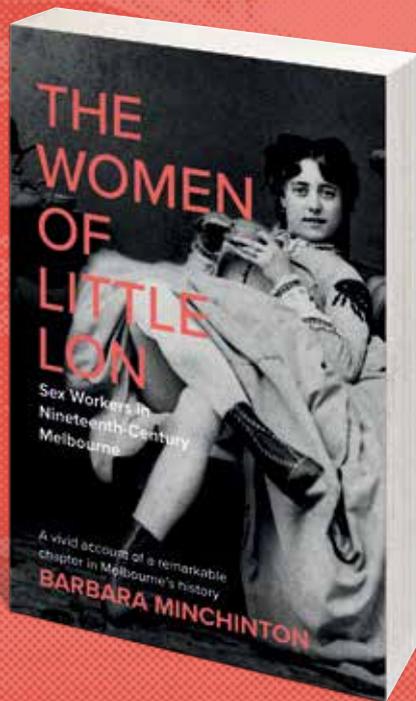


Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi about to address the nation at Red Fort, on the occasion of the 75th Independence Day, in Delhi, 2021. (Press Information Bureau, Government of India)

and their desires. Once in power, such a party can then exploit a weakened system to further advantage. It can set about rewarding friends and punishing enemies, directing judges and threatening journalists, demonising enemies, within and outside the country, and turning elections from meaningful and serious processes into 'carnivals of political seduction'.

This is precisely what Chowdhury and Keane think has happened in India, with the rise to power of the BJP – the aptly named Indian People's Party – with Narendra Modi at its head. The BJP's apparently unassailable dominance of contemporary India is a direct consequence, they argue, of the country's social ills and political weaknesses. The authors recognise that other factors

Enter the fascinating world of Little Lon



A vivid account of
a remarkable but
little-known chapter in
Melbourne's history

OUT NOW
in bookshops and online

 **LA TROBE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS
IN CONJUNCTION WITH BLACK INC.

– not least the clever manipulation of electoral politics and the backing of billionaires willing to bankroll extravagantly expensive campaigns – have played their part, but the underlying causes, they think, are much deeper and more pervasive.

This argument raises some important questions to which *To Kill a Democracy* provides only partial answers. The biggest is probably this: does the damage the BJP has undoubtedly done to India's social fabric and public institutions really spell the end of democratic politics?

As Chowdhury and Keane show so well, India has only ever been a partial democracy at best. Cronyism, corruption, and censorship are endemic to India's politics, as a succession of studies, some dating back to the 1950s, has laid bare. Its social and political frailties are chronic. Its politicians have exploited them for decades – not least Indira Gandhi during the so-called Emergency of 1975–77, when she contrived to suspend constitutional rights and to intimidate her critics. And many still do, including powerful demagogues like Uttar Pradesh's Yogi Adityanath and West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee.

**Cronyism, corruption, and censorship
are endemic to India's politics,
as a succession of studies, some dating
back to the 1950s, has laid bare**

Each one of these regimes has fallen when popular anger has risen and powerful interests – including the handful of billionaires who dominate India's business world – have shifted their support. Public distress at political graft and administrative ineptitude swept Modi and the BJP into government in 2014. After years of anaemic economic growth and the mishandling of Covid-19, this resentment could well sweep them back out again in 2024, as Chowdhury and Keane acknowledge. Despite the BJP's control over parliament and the media, the Modi government has failed time and time again to enact major reforms, such as those recently proposed in agriculture, now stalled after mass protests by farmers.

These tendencies suggest that India's fragile democracy could escape a slide into despotism, despite the successive polls, cited towards the end of this book, indicating growing public support for autocratic rule. To be sure, the postcolonial political settlement, predicated on elections, federalism, and government neutrality in matters of religion, continues to fray, as it has since the 1960s. The hold of India's English-speaking and left-leaning postcolonial elite over the country's political life also continues to weaken, though it is highly questionable whether that trend represents a deepening of democracy, as Jaishankar would have us believe. For all this, it is still hard to conclude that India will make a decisive turn to despotism. It is also telling that Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane stop well short of making that claim, despite their unhappiness at the Panglossian assessments of India's democracy that persist in the West. ■

Ian Hall is a Professor of International Relations at the Griffith Asia Institute at Griffith University. His most recent book is *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* (2019). ❖