

Book Name: Sharma, Ruchir, Democracy On the Road: A 25-Year Journey through India Publisher, Penguin Random House, 345 pp., ₹ 699.

Democracy On the Road- A 25 Year Journey Through India is a masterpiece produced by Ruchir Sharma. Sharma is no ordinary soul. He is the Chief Global Strategist and head of the Emerging Markets Equity at Morgan Stanley based out of New York. He is regular columnist, a sought after commentator, a thought leader and a best selling author.

This book is Ruchir's take on Indian democracy spanning over a quarter century. For the uninitiated Ruchir is a firm believer that politics of a country plays a major role of how a country's economy shapes up. He is intrigued by interplay of society at large, politics and economy.

The book consists of forty chapters in total. The story began in mid-1970s when author started spending his summer vacations in a small town of western part of Uttar Pradesh called Bijnor. This was his first tryst with small town India, the so called mofussil. Through the eyes of the author the reader can see the changing political and social landscape in Bijnor, and in fact the entire north India through the mid-1970s to mid-1990s.

English speaking urban elite and Indian diaspora lost touch with the rural and semi urban India. As a result their understanding and prediction of elections were not in line with actual outcome. The first election covered by the author, was the national election of 1998. It came from a conviction that to call an election they needed to be on ground, understanding the pulse of the people. He sought the company of some seasoned journalists for these trips. People like

Swami Nathan Aiyer of Times of India group, Rajiv Shukla etc. agreed to join him in these trips. The composition of the team saw gradual change over the years with new people coming in and few people leaving. Starting with the 1998 election, the motley team of writers and journalists covered all national elections and all the major state elections.

Some of the observations are stark and very on the face; for example, Ruchir tells that, the Indian 'state is broken'. The best example of this phenomena he says that central government has close to one thousand schemes, yet announcing new schemes every now or then. There is hardly any study on whether this schemes achieved its stated goal or not. It is also dangerous to announce any scheme targeted towards a constituency or a segment of the population, as others will think that they are short-changed. He also tells that the term, 'anti-incumbency' is mostly used in the Indian context, he cites some google search result to corroborate his observation. He found arrogance of power leads to downfall for most of the leaders in India.

The book at the same time talks about how safe the country is, as it is not possible to travel the length and the breadth of many other emerging market economies, as the hinterlands are way too lawless.

The interviews with political bigwigs post their public meetings brings some fresh perspectives in this book. It showed how these politicians are quite different personalities in public and in private interactions. The group was also called for lunch or dinner to home of leading

1 (1), 69-70, 2020

politicians. The author applauds the warmth of these hosts and states that it is quite an Indian way of interaction.

Another key takeaway from the book is the author's observation that growth in India is primarily dependent on quality of leadership at the state level than at the central level, as a result it is argued that the states are always changing their pecking order in terms of development graph, and development leader in one decade is fallen way behind in the next decade.

In most of western countries government's ability to handle economic parameters like GDP growth, unemployment, inflation etc. determines their fate in the electoral hustings. However, India is a different ball game, economy is just one of the factors, other factors like caste arithmetic, spending power of the candidate, religion, freebies given to the electorate etc. also plays a huge role in the actual outcome. At the same time, sops given at the last moment leads to cynicism in the

electorate's mind, and they seldom change their choice.

It is noteworthy that Ruchir doesn't believe that political dynasty is a baggage in India, because the concept of dynasty is so ingrained in the Indian psyche. However, he found a palpable acceptance of leaders who are single, as they perceived to have nobody to benefit through corruption. For example, in late 1980s all Chief Ministers of India were married, however by 2018 one-third of all incumbent Chief Ministers were single. This is quite a significant change, as these single leaders are also perceived to be more committed. This is remarkable in a country where society puts huge premium on marriage.

All in all, this a good book to read and it helps to understand the quite complex political landscape of India. The style of writing is quite engaging and it gives a first-hand glimpse of the country over a period of close to forty years.

Dr.Souvik Banerjee,
Assistant Professor,
Management Development Institute Murshidabad