

# Politics Matters: A Contextual Reading Of Indian Democracy

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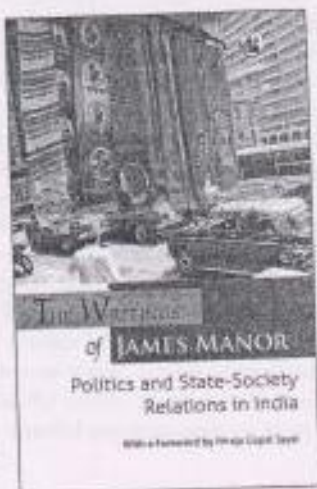
THE WRITINGS OF JAMES MANOR: POLITICS AND STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS IN INDIA

With a Foreword by Nirja Gopal Jayal  
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Professor Manor's scholarship on India extends to nearly half a century now and his distinctive commentaries on various aspects of development of politics and society have benefited generations of students of Indian politics so far. The set of writings under review revisits some of the key themes in Indian politics that Professor Manor has addressed from time to time and helps reconstruct an important part of contemporary political history in India. This work, therefore, becomes one of the most important additions to the literature on contemporary Indian politics as politics enters a new phase after the elections in 2014.

With a significant exception of his work on Karnataka, the author's extensive writings on Indian politics so far have been mainly strewn over a number of publications in the form of book chapters, journal articles and introductions. A number of chapters included in the present collection were published outside India or have not been published at all. The collection not only brings them together but also situates them within the author's larger theoretical/conceptual perspectives concerning politics and society in India. The chapters in the collection also benefit from Professor Manor's studies of socio-political realities from different countries of the developed and the developing world and introduce a unique comparative dimension to the understanding of Indian politics.

There are at least three important takeaways for the students of Indian politics offered in Manor's writings. One is about the linkages of local, regional and national levels of democratic exercise and the need to understand and highlight them in our understandings of the working of Indian democracy. The other insight is about the significance of comparative exercises—not only those contextualizing the Indian experience vis-à-vis other countries but Manor also underlines the need to take up comparative exercises across Indian States to understand both the specificities of regional politics and also to generalize on the basis of these comparative understandings. But perhaps the most significant aspect of the discussion in this collection is about recognizing and respecting the 'autonomy of the political'. To quote the author from the introduction: 'this book argues that politics matters'. On the one hand, it avoids a reductionist understanding of democratic politics where politics is often reduced to social variables. On the other hand the book also rejects the anti-politics tendency to categorize democratic politics as essentially 'irrational' and as an impediment to the processes of governance. Instead the collection asserts how democratic politics in India encompasses the larger socio-economic processes, how it influences them,



how the issues of governance remain embedded in the political arena and thus how politics and society in India and elsewhere enter into an interplay in which each set of forces influence the others. At the same time, Manor's reading of democracy underlines the role of political agency—a recurring theme in his narratives on leadership. This contextual understanding of the autonomy of the political has been a hallmark of Manor's work so far.

The vast canvass of the book covers two main phases of post-Independence Indian politics and the author characterizes them as that of prime ministerial dominance and the post-1989 phase of hung parliaments. The Indian polity is currently at a threshold of a new structural and ideological transition after the elections in 2014. The book connects to this transition in the author's introduction and also in the small introductory comments preceding each chapter. The larger question for the author is whether this new phase in Indian politics will resemble the era before 1989 or not. The book's detailed enquiries into the two earlier phases provide important pointers in order to help address this question. These enquiries, on the one hand, examine the various aspects of the democratic process in India. At the same time, they also centre on the changing state-society relationships during this period and thus develop a more contextual understanding of democratic politics.

Manor's lifelong work in India and on India is deeply rooted in a sympathetic yet critical reading of the Indian situation (the first essay in the collection, mainly addressed to the western observers of Indian democracy, unfolds it). This reading is enriched by his extensive fieldwork in different parts of the country as well as his distinctive reading of the democratic theory. The chapters in the book bring together these two kinds of insights in their chronicles of the rise of liberal democracy and its institutions, party politics, the role of leadership and the political and social churning of the new millennium. Manor weaves the simultaneously unfolding themes of awakening and decay in Indian democracy in the detailed narratives of these chapters. But more importantly, he also brings in the issues of governance under what he terms as the difficult realm of managing the democratic affairs. It becomes a core theme for the author's understanding and explanation as the book develops the contextual journey of Indian democracy.

In the first part, it is a commentary on the emergent democracy and its tenacity to regenerate in spite of the symptoms of decay. It explains how the parallel trends of awakening and decay posed grave danger to the democratic order and how a corrective was developed in terms of regeneration of key institutions especially during the decade of the 1990s. If one side of the story of management of democratic affairs is linked to the wise Indian voters and their shifting political choices, Manor is equally interested in the other part of the story where political leaders step in. The author's deep respect for politicians and political actors operating in Indian democracy is a very unique aspect of his framework of explanation of politics. He devotes three core sections of the collection to the discussion of this aspect where he comments on the nature of political parties, the trends of regional politics and how at all these levels political actors manage the challenges of governance.

Manor addresses the regional dynamics of politics through the lens of political leadership in the fourth section of the collection that he has titled as 'Chief Ministers' Struggle at the State Level'. The discussion of leadership and of management of the democracy continues in his much celebrated chapter on political 'fixers' who act as the agents of democracy at the grassroots level. Manor discusses how the tasks of management are both complicated and eased by the contemporary social universe in India. He explains the complexities of this social universe in his discussion of the idea of ethnicity and its

inadequacy in dealing with the intricate and fluid nature of identity politics in India. The chapter on caste hierarchies furthers the argument and relates it to implications of challenges to caste for local level political dynamics. With the last two chapters on uses of comparative politics, the collection concludes Manor's reading of post-Independence Indian politics and society.

It is a robust reading and yet, one gets an impression that the collection leaves out many significant pages of Manor's writings so far. As the author himself confesses, his earlier detailed commentaries on democratic decentralization and participatory politics are not included and so are his extensive commentaries on Karnataka politics. In his early work on Karnataka, included in the celebrated volumes of Frankel and Rao (1990) Manor develops a nuanced reading of the caste class dynamics in the context of regional political economy of the state. These readings provide the underpinnings for a larger argument on the current nature of regional and national political economy in India, more particularly about the post-liberalization phase of Indian politics. On the other hand, they also open up a space for a detailed interpretation of contemporary caste realities within the framework of political economy of caste. A related issue is about the character of the Indian state and how the dynamics of democracy and domination unfolds in the state arena. The present collection of writings by Manor no doubt touches upon these themes however, only in glimpses and the readers of the volume would definitely look forward to more detailed commentaries on these themes from the author.

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## Theorizing Interactions

Anushree

DEMOCRATIC DYNASTIES: STATE, PARTY AND FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POLITICS

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'Dynastic politics is a termite that eats away the foundation of democracy,' asserted the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, addressing an election rally in Sangaid Mandli area of Billawar constituency, in December 2014, in the run-up to the State assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir. This was not the first time that the issue of dynastic politics found mention during the electoral battle in India. In fact, the BJP leadership had made it one of the core issues during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections to target its principal opponent, the Congress. While the Congress led by the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is one of the most prominent political dynasties in India, there are several others at the national and regional level, spread across parties with an increasing number in the Indian legislature.

It is in this context that there has been a growing interest in academic circles in the last few years over the issue and some serious research has been taken up to investigate the phenomenon of dynasticism in democracy and the interactions between these two. *Democratic Dynasties, State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics* edited by Kanchan Chandra is one such work that makes an attempt to create 'a foundation for theorizing about, and testing for,

<sup>1</sup> *The Hindu*, 16 December 2014.