

“Chatterjee flags the underlying tectonic tensions that have spurred the massive disruptions that we are witnessing in our times.”

be told in China and its neighbourhood, where many manufacturing jobs that had once existed in the industrial heartlands of western societies, had now migrated. This has created one of the biggest grounds for populist resentment in Trump’s America and Brexit Britain. Levels of prosperity were maintained and enhanced in privileged enclaves of western capitalist societies especially, when those privileged enclaves tapped into the massive flows created by the financialization of the economy. The rise of London as the world’s largest financial centre is an example of such a privileged enclave that has kept increasing the gap as it pulled away from the laggardly de-industrialized heartlands of the North and the Midlands of Britain. This is where the populism of Brexit found the most resonance, and in the December 2019 elections, the British Labour Party discovered the ground being pulled away from under its feet as these bastions fell to the populist promise of Boris Johnson that they could leave it to him to ‘Get Brexit Done’. In the US, Trump’s approval ratings continue to remain disturbingly high even as the Democratic Party seems to be on its way to handing over the nomination to Joe Biden, in a manner that many fear could be a repeat of the 2016 presidential election.

Populism is clearly the flavour of the season across vast stretches of the world. Election after election in most countries seems to be almost gamed to yield the most shocking of electoral verdicts. Chatterjee mentions the sudden proliferation of writings that suggests the end or death of democracy. However, he does not seem to be interested in making the connection between the continuing prevalence of populism through the instrumentality of the loaded dice of democracy. In case one is wondering who loaded the dice, it may be a good idea to begin with the social media Mughal, Mark Zuckerberg and his ownership of platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

What Chatterjee tries to do is to analyse the rise of the ambiguous conception of the people that is the stuff of much of populism, and upon which its particular notion of popular sovereignty seems to rest. Chatterjee shows how populism tends to ride roughshod over the heads of the intelligentsia, the snooty upturned noses of

the elite, trampling heavily over institutions and finally coming to rest on the broad shoulders of the populist leader who claims to speak in the unvarnished, unaffected and genuine tenor of the people. Here Chatterjee relies heavily on the theoretical formulations of Ernesto Laclau and in doing so emphasizes the empty signifier of the people very much that can be filled in whichever way the populist leader wills (p. 83).

Despite the self-admittedly pessimist tenor of the book, Chatterjee does not really seem to hint strongly enough at the fact that this populist trajectory could really be the path down the road of totalitarianism. In other words, his pessimism may be far less than that of many of his readers who he wants to forewarn. Chatterjee’s emphasizing the empty signifier of the people is a point well taken but remains just that, a point that is never charted for the path that it is plotting. The empty signifier of the people is being transformed in the sense that the populist leader has now become a metonym of the people. The populist nostrum of ‘the people’ is itself a caricature. Not every part of the populace falls into the populists’ conception. Think of all the people who in India have been reading out the Preamble of the Constitution in various public fora. When they read out the lines ‘We the people of India’, they are certainly not the people from the populist’s playbook. For in the populist’s playbook, the ‘people’ is just a small excitably aggressive section that has been blown out of all proportion, as is the wont of any caricature, to be blown out of proportion. When that happens, the people are decisively transformed into a mob.

Chatterjee touches, tangentially and almost tantalizingly upon this point when he quotes American poet Carl Sandburg, ‘I am the people—the mob—the crowd—the mass’ (p. 122).

Why this review suggests that Chatterjee’s pessimism is partial is because he does not seem to dwell enough on the dangers of popular sovereignty becoming unhinged from representative democracy. Once that happens, the people caricatured easily become the mob and the mob will, as Hannah Arendt points out in her bleak, almost Orwellian 1951 work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, make alliance with the elite and then cry out for the strong leader. Let us begin from this darker sort of pessimism and from here onwards fashion the audacity of an optimism that dares to re-envision the 21st century far away from its opening two decades.

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## A Pillar of Democracy Under the Scanner

Chanchal Kumar Sharma

**ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA: INSTITUTIONALISING DEMOCRATIC UNCERTAINTIES**

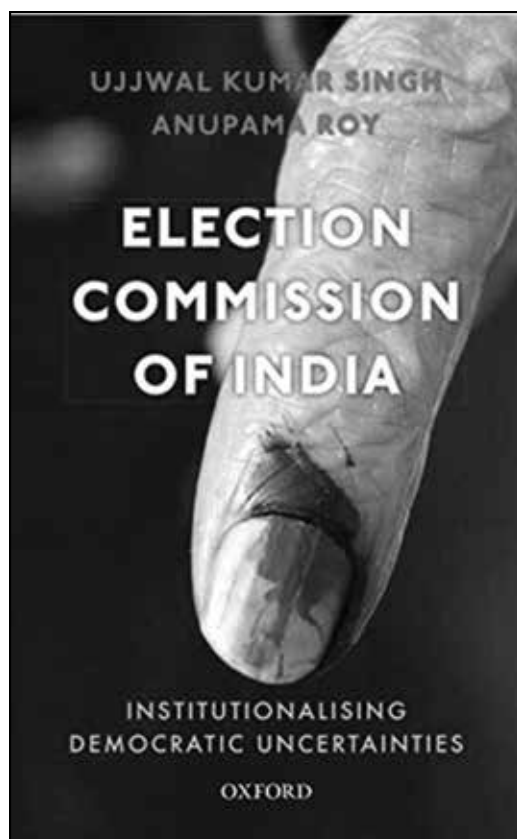
By Ujjwal Kumar Singh and Anupama Roy  
Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 400, ₹1100.00

*Election Commission of India: Institutionalising Democratic Uncertainties* has hit the shelves—physical as well as digital, at a time when the Election Commission of India (ECI) has come under unprecedented scrutiny over its alleged failure to enforce election norms in a way that maintains a level playing field. The ECI’s coming under the scanner during such extraordinary times, when the opposition is in disarray and institutions are beholden to uphold the dominant party’s agendas and ideology, is but natural. Indeed, the bounden duty of the ECI is—to quote the authors—‘efficient “rule-implementation” so that the certainties of procedures generate democratic uncertainties of electoral outcomes’ (p. 184).

The monograph by Ujjwal Kumar Singh and Anupama Roy, is a fascinating study of the Election Commission and a nuanced contribution to election institutions and electoral management studies. The four chapters, amply illustrated with tables, figures, and graphics, are prefaced by a stimulating introduction, and a conclusion that sums up the core ideas.

The focus of the study is clearly defined in the introduction of the book. Here the authors highlight the paradoxical location of the ECI in the institutional space of democracy in India, whereby it is located within the bureaucratic apparatus of the state but is driven by the logic of democracy (pp. 6-8). This location of the ECI in an uneven and asymmetrical institutional matrix makes it a challenging topic for research. However, the authors engage masterfully with this complex topic—while making abundant use of case law—and offer an extremely rich perspective on a wide range of issues which lie at the heart of the democratic process.

The first chapter, ‘The First General Elections: The Political and the Bureaucratic’, pieces together an interesting account of the process by which universal franchise, considered impracticable by the British, was implemented in India. Indian leaders and bureaucrats were well aware that electoral democracy is an essential but not



sufficient condition for securing democracy. Thus, the ECI addressed the procedural as well as substantive aspects of elections to secure the edifice of electoral democracy in India. Through a study of measures adopted by the ECI, this chapter explores how certainty of procedures was ensured in order to maintain the democratic uncertainty of electoral outcomes.

In 'Electoral Roll, the "Vote", and Democracy' the authors expertly set the scene by introducing the Bollywood film *Newton* where a presiding officer is on a mission to conduct free and fair elections in a conflict-ridden tribal area. Having contextualized the issues and challenges of preserving electoral integrity, the chapter deals with the quest for 'procedural certainty' and 'democratic outcomes' through richly structured discussions on the right to vote, the preparation of electoral rolls, the contest over citizenship and innovations in 'voter education and awareness'. The well-researched chapter covers a whole gamut of themes, touching upon the key aspects of the question of citizenship and the problem of exclusion. This discussion can certainly inform and guide more recent debates on the Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Indian Citizens, and the National Population Register which are closely related to the larger issue of the position of the Muslim minority and other disadvantaged groups within India's body politic.

'Election Time and the Model Code of Conduct' argues that the ECI is not simply a referee institution or a regulatory body but has over the years wrested from the political

executive the power to determine the rules of fair play in the electoral game (p. 186 and p. 257). For this reason, the ECI has emerged as a site of contestation between the political parties and the ECI, specifically over the Model Code of Conduct (MCC)—a relatively autonomous instrumentality—that equips the ECI with 'direct disciplinary control' over political parties during the electoral process. Cases can be booked against violators of the MCC, after the elections are over, under specific sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Representation of the People Act, and the various state laws.

In 'Creating Spaces for Democracy', the authors find room for optimism in an otherwise gloomy political scenario where the constitutional institutions, vital for keeping the nation's growing aspirations for a better life alive, have increasingly been perceived under threat by government interference. Engaging with the compelling topic of power tussle between the ECI and political regimes within the shared political space of democracy—whereby the former seek extraordinary powers during election time and the latter seek to limit the former's powers—the authors show unambiguously that the tussle has settled in the favour of the Commission, cementing its exclusive domain to 'superintend, direct and control' the conduct of elections.

Overall, the book offers a convincing portrayal of the ECI as a trusted institution whose credibility, according to the authors, is not only confined to people but also includes political parties (pp. 36–8; pp. 335–7). Undoubtedly, the ECI, especially since the breakdown of the dominant party system, has been instrumental in restoring faith in the Indian electoral system that had otherwise gained notoriety in the previous decade for booth capturing and misuse of government machinery. However, the overall credibility of this otherwise robust and resilient institution has taken a hit under the Modi government that has acquired a reputation for firming up the ideological-partisan grip over the media and the constitutional institutions. Nevertheless, as the authors maintain, while there have been controversies and criticisms, yet optimism lies in the fact that political parties and ruling regimes have always submitted to electoral outcomes (p. 38). Even so, one can say that the question is of 'degree' to which the integrity of the electoral process is maintained. In those terms a decline is certainly perceptible, so much so that a former Chief Election Commissioner, TS Krishnamurthy, was prompted to raise doubts over the ECI's functioning and an

incumbent Election Commissioner, Ashok Lavasa, felt compelled to express dissent on decisions taken by the ECI. Furthermore, politicians cutting across the party lines accused it of bias, partisanship and sinking to its lowest to promote the interests of the ruling Hindu nationalist party. All this does not bode well for the credibility of the Commission, which is supposed to play a neutral role, thereby ensuring the democratic principle of uncertainty of electoral outcome. However, we observe the ECI making very little attempt to clear up the concerns and maintain its credibility.

Since the capacity of constitutional institutions to function autonomously depends to a large extent on the political operating environment (specifically the nature of the existing political regime), and conversely, the effectiveness of a regime rests on the operations of institutions, the question that begs to be asked is, whether there has been a fundamental refiguration of this relationship under the current ruling dispensation? Has there been a shift in the very nature, quality and content of negotiations between the institutions and the ruling party in recent years?

While the project remains open to further critical inquiry, this comprehensive monograph is undoubtedly a springboard for students and scholars engaging with election institutions and electoral management. On the whole, Ujjwal Kumar Singh and Anupama Roy, Professors at the University of Delhi and Jawaharlal University respectively, have presented their arguments very elegantly and convincingly. The monograph represents the excellent scholarship of the authors.

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*The RSS: Roadmaps for the 21st Century* by Sunil Ambekar presents a blend of past milestones, present achievements and future ideas. What is the RSS's imagination for India? If India becomes a Hindu Rashtra, what will be the place of Muslims and other faiths in it? How big is the RSS project of history writing? Will Hindutva override caste politics? And what is the RSS view of social issues pertaining to the changing nature of family, the rights of people with different sexual orientations and the third gender? A high-ranking pracharak analyses these contentious questions in his book.

Rupa, 2019, pp. 223, ₹495.00