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Democratic Politics and Economic Reform in India

Successive Indian governments from a variety of political persuasions have remained committed to market-oriented reform since its introduction in 1991. In a well-argued, accessible and often controversial examination of the political dynamics which underlie that commitment, Rob Jenkins takes issue with existing theories of the relationship between democracy and economic liberalisation, while also engaging with key debates concerning the nature of civil society and the functionality of political institutions. He contends that while democracy and liberalisation are no longer considered incompatible, recent theorising over-emphasises democracy's more wholesome aspects while underestimating its practitioners' reliance on obfuscatory tactics to defuse political resistance to policy shifts. By focusing on formal institutions such as party and electoral systems, existing research ignores the value of informal political institutions. In India these institutions have driven economic elites towards adaptation, negotiation and compromise, while allowing governing elites to divide opponents of reform through a range of political machinations. These include shifting blame, surreptitiously compensating selected interests, betraying the trust of political allies, and cloaking policy change in the guise of continuity. Rather than simply denouncing democracy's dark underside, Jenkins argues that promoting change routinely requires governments to employ the underhanded tactics and impure motivations which all politics breed, but only democracy can tame.

ROB JENKINS teaches in the Department of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck College, University of London.

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For M.S.J.

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