While there is overwhelming support for democracy in India and voter turnout is higher than in many Western democracies, there are low levels of trust in political parties and elected representatives. House of the People is an attempt to look beyond Indian elections, which have increasingly occupied analysts and commentators. The focus is the Lok Sabha (the House of the People or the Lower House), currently comprising 543 members directly elected for five years by potentially 800-million-plus voters in 2019.

There are two questions that the book seeks to answer: Is the Indian parliament, which has the unenviable task of representing an incredibly diverse nation of a billion-plus people, working, if not in an exemplary manner, then at least reasonably well, to articulate the diverse demands of the electorate and translate them into legislation and policy? And to what extent has the practice of Indian democracy transformed the institution of parliament, which was adopted from the British, and its functioning?

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House of the People
Parliament and the Making of Indian Democracy

Ronojoy Sen
For Asutosh Law and Sumitro Sen, both of whom are no more
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This book, as with my earlier publications, took longer to finish than anticipated. This was partly because I wrote another book even as I had begun research for this one in 2010. While the subject of my last book – a social history of sport in India – might seem somewhat distant from parliament and its goings-on, there is in fact a connection between the two. Parliament, like sport, represents a taming and domestication, admittedly incomplete, of competitive behaviour and violence. It is not surprising then that sporting, especially cricket, metaphors crop up periodically in this book, especially in the chapter on disruptions.

Authors usually run up a mountain of debts when writing a book, especially ones that are a long time in the making. This one is no exception. There have been several people who have contributed to the writing and conceptualizing of this book. Although both my PhD advisers and mentors, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, died within a month of each other in 2015–16, their spirit has hovered over this book. I was fortunate to have met them for the last time in Oakland, California, in 2015. I have taken their advice to engage in a study of politics that does not blindly rely on quantitative tools and the latest academic fashions, and continually interrogate the ‘science’ in political analysis.

Most of the book was written during my time at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore. I’m thankful to successive directors at the institute and my wonderful colleagues for creating a conducive environment for research and writing. Several colleagues and friends have read chapters and contributed to the crafting of this book. I must mention in particular Robin Jeffrey, John Harriss, M. R. Madhavan, Diego Maiorano, Erik Mobrand, Karthik Nachiappan, Dinyar Patel, Vinod Rai, Iqbal Singh Sevea, Aditya Singh and Arun Thiruvengadam who have kindly read and commented on different chapters. Robin, in fact, read multiple chapters and has always been a source of wise counsel. I have benefitted from the advice of Partha Chatterjee, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Ashis Nandy, Yogendra Yadav and C. R. Raja Mohan (who was the director of ISAS from
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My father-in-law, Asutosh Law, a former MP and chair of the Estimates Committee, was a storehouse of anecdotes about and insights into politics and parliament. My father, Sumitro Sen, a lay observer of contemporary events, closely followed the ins and outs of Indian politics. Both passed away while the book was being written. I wish they were here to see it in print. The book is dedicated to both of them.