Why Democracy Deepens

"Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic," warned Bhimrao Ambedkar, the principal architect of the country's constitution, a year into independence. The social order – the soil on which India's new democratic edifice was then being erected – was marked by social hierarchies and economic vulnerabilities. Decades of socio-economic changes since then would transform this old order, albeit unevenly across Indian states, to decisively shape the development of democracy in the country. *Why Democracy Deepens* relates how these socio-economic changes have deepened democracy in India beyond its topsoil. Drawing on his research in villages and states, Anoop Sadanandan explains how socio-economic changes have heightened the need for local voter information and promoted grassroots democracy in some Indian states. By exploring the pivotal political developments in the world's largest democracy, the book puts forward a theory of local democratization.

Anoop Sadanandan is a social scientist and an assistant professor at the Maxwell School of Public Affairs and Citizenship, Syracuse University, New York. He specializes in political economy and comparative politics and has an abiding interest in India.

Why Democracy Deepens

Political Information and Decentralization in India

ANOOP SADANANDAN

Syracuse University, New York

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

List of Tables and Figures

Author's Note

This book investigates why people in some Indian states have to travel long distances to urban bureaucratic centers to avail basic government services – such as tapped water or a road in their village – that their compatriots elsewhere get from their elected village councils; why unelected bureaucrats in distant towns are the most recognizable face of government in some parts of India when others have functioning elected councils in every village; why democratic governance remains remote to some Indians even as it reaches out to others.

"Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic," warned Bhimrao Ambedkar, chairman of the committee that drafted the country's constitution, a year into independence. The social order, the soil on which India's new democratic edifice was then being erected, was marked by age-old ethnic and gender prejudices and economic marginalization. Keenly aware of this reality, Ambedkar judged the villages that upheld this social order to be the ruination of India. Fortunately for India, decades of socio-economic changes since then have chipped away at this traditional order to socially and economically emancipate even those who had so little. In the process, many were freed from their vulnerable existence to give real meaning to the political ideal of one person, one vote. But, this transformation has been uneven across India, strapping some with greater vulnerabilities even as it bestowed greater freedoms on others. This book is about how these uneven socio-economic changes deepen democracy in India beyond its topsoil into its villages, its very substrata.

Author's Note ix

Big thanks are due to many people for their help in preparing this book. Foremost among them is Donald Horowitz, my mentor. Without his early and steadfast encouragement, the ideas presented in this book would not have evolved, and a term paper at Duke University would not have metamorphosed into a book. In ineffable ways, this book owes much to his boundless knowledge, intellectual energy, reliable generosity, easy cosmopolitanism, and commitment to good writing.

This book would also not be here without the kindness and hospitality of several people in India. B. S. Baviskar (Institute of Social Sciences), Debasis Biswas (Raiganj College), Dipankar Das (North Bengal University), Pramod Dev, Girish Kumar (Indian Institute of Public Administration), Sanjay Kumar (Center for the Study of Developing Societies), the librarians of the Institute of Social Sciences in New Delhi, Prasun Mukherjee and family, Nalini Netto, Jayalakshmi Ramakrishnan, and Prasad Ranjan Roy helped me at various stages of my travel and research in that country. Countless others – government officials, politicians, and ordinary people who welcomed me into their offices, homes, and lives, and breathed life into this book – shall remain unnamed due to research protocol and propriety. To all, I am utterly grateful. I hope that this book honors the trust they have placed in me.

Over the years, many colleagues waded through murky prose, stodgy presentations, and worse to offer critiques and insights that have made this book richer. I cherish their collegiality. In particular, I want to thank Ashok Chandran, Ronald Herring, Nobuhiro Hiwatari, Atul Kohli, Koichi Nakano, Karen Remmer, David Rohde, Guillermo Trejo, Erik Wibbels, Daniel Ziblatt, the participants of research workshops in Cornell, Duke, Harvard, Ohio State, and Syracuse universities, and the editors and reviewers of the Cambridge University Press.

As any writer could attest, developing a book from a germ of an idea, a series of travels, multitudinous facts, and endless drafts is a long and oftentimes solitary journey. I am grateful to my friends at Duke – Bruno Borges, Maiko Matsui, Anand Pai, Arturas Rozenas, and Yu Tanouchi – for making my journey lovely. I also thank my family very deeply: Narayanan, Serena, and Anand nurtured and bankrolled me to shun the familiar for the novel; and Maiko, my spirited companion and lodestar.