

## BOOK REVIEW

***2014: The Election that Changed India.* Rajdeep Sardesai.  
Penguin Books. India. 2014. Pp 372.**

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*2014: The Election that Changed India* is based on Rajdeep Sardesai's observations as a columnist, editor and an award winning anchor. The skills of both interrogative journalism and writer's dexterity are demonstrated with riveting coherence. The story-like writing style makes the reading popular. The chronology of events building up the eventual shape of the 2014 verdict and the key players in big stories is ably expressed. Sardesai has maintained a balanced and critical approach while talking about the gaps in the democratic system.

The sixteenth Lok Sabha general elections of 2014 in India were held to elect the members of all 543 parliamentary constituencies. These were to run in nine phases, with 814.5 million people participating as eligible voters. These were the largest ever elections held in the world. The election turnout, according to the Election Commission of India, was 66.38% and was the highest ever in the history of India. The National Democratic Alliance won 336 seats, out of which Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alone had won 282, enabling it, for the first time since 1984 Indian general elections, to govern without a coalition. Indian National Congress, leading the United Progressive Alliance, won 58 seats only and conceded its worst ever defeat in any general election.

Every election has its own distinct features and significantly contributes to the evolution of the democratic system. While tracing back the history of elections in India, the author has classified the elections of 1952, 1977 and 2013 as game changers and has underlined the reasons for change. Sardesai regards the 1952 election as an experimental leap towards democracy in an era of post-imperialism and an "article of faith" (p.9). They helped determine the system through the constitution. The

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social structure of that time reaffirmed secular democracy while disregarding both the communal differences and caste-based trajectories. Similarly, the 1977 general elections, the first held after imposition of emergency by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, were a firm rejection of dictatorship. Gandhi was “defeated by the people” (p. 11).

However, the 2014 elections saw a major shift in Indian politics. Its outcome discarded the rigid beliefs and orthodoxies about the voting patterns. For example, the rural-urban divide appeared to have ended. The BJP won two-thirds of the urban seats and more than half of the rural seats. The BJP got an overwhelming vote of the non-Muslims.

Though the writer maintains that the post-liberalisation political beliefs of Modi are more popular in the caste-based society, the results of November 2015 legislative elections in Bihar contradict his argument. The BJP is commonly known as “Brahmin Bania Party.” It has been able to bag 36% votes as against 3.1% votes in 1952. In 1977, BJP could make only a coalition government. The unwavering support from the corporate sector is the primary reason behind BJP’s success in 2014. The 2014 elections were strategised like a business venture. This denied a level playing field to all political parties. The promise of Modi to give India a neo-middle class society gave space also to a large number of aspiring youth. It consequently eclipsed the sub-plots in the election, such as the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party. The corporate sound of the election period also led to Congress fall to 20% votes. The sustained media hype for the BJP is also condemned by the writer for not being able to seriously interrogate the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate’s leadership credentials. Perhaps the most significant element of change in the Indian politics was the “right man at the right time with a right rhetoric” (p. 140). Modi was able to use his instinctive ability to raise his profile when politics in India was riddled with corruption and disorderly economy. He very aptly contextualised his Gujrat Model governance to his candidature for the prime ministership.

Sardesai describes two significant dates in the saga of Modi’s triumph. One is the February 27, 2002, when the Godhra train burning incident took place. Modi’s anti-Muslim attitude helped him win the hearts of the

traditional BJP constituency. His stance on pseudo-secularists helped him gain popularity. The second date is that of October 7, 2008 when the Tata announced the setting up of Tata Nano plant at Sanand in Gujrat. This earned Modi the “legitimacy he secretly craved for amongst the middle class and elite well beyond Gujrat” (p.35). Tata's acquaintance had introduced Modi to the international audience. He seized the opportunity and travelled to Japan and China to have himself acceptable by the economic giants *en route* to economic prosperity.

The author incisively narrates the successes of Modi's oration and public speaking. Both Manmohan Singh and Rahul were reluctant and unimpressive speakers. Modi filled the vacuum in public discourse and came out as an urban hero.

Modi also emerged as an instrument of change. It was “Modi vs Rahul, the outsider vs the insider, the meritocrat vs the dynast” (p. 282). Unenamoured of politics, Rahul Brand of *Aam Aadmi* and Nehruvian approach was considered as old-style. He often talked about two Indias ‘one travelling on bullet trains and the other on bullock carts’ (p. 49-50). Rahul's desire for “quasi-royal status for himself” hindered even organisational changes within the Congress. The four time resignation of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh further plunged the Congress into complications. That was the time when Modi had evolved from a “demagogue to statesman” (p.114), and shared with youth his strong sense of looking forward: “We have got *swaraj* but after sixty years, we are still looking for *swaraj*” (p. 112). He made sure both technology and economy became the most saleable products in his campaign.

Modi's first state elections in Gujrat were on Hindu Hriday Samrat (Emperor of Hindu Hearts). His ambitions for premiership appeared more explicitly during *Sudbhavana Yatra* (Peace Mission). It was primarily aimed at reaching out to the Muslims in 2011 after the 2002 massacre. Although, he was groomed in the tutelage of M.K.Advani, Modi upheld his *Hindutva* belief and In the chapter *I want to Be Prime Minister*, Sardesai avers that Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and BJP are umbilically tied by their shared notion of Cultural Nationalism (p.129). The RSS had thrown full weight behind Modi's elections. The current

wave of communal violence in India endorses both Modi's personal belief and popular desire for a theocratic state. Earlier, Advani himself had told BJP leaders that if "Modi became the face of the BJP campaign, it would lead to Hindu-Muslim polarization" (p.123).

The anecdotes of the self-aggrandisement of the politicians and the vacuums in the politics of India are quite repetitive in the book but the inquisitive analysis of the reporter's diary from the familiar political history of immediate past, keeps readers' interest alive.