

and sense of identity that are “powerfully resilient”. Armstrong reviews four decades of North-South interaction and concludes that while engagement has not achieved nearly as much as its proponents had hoped, coercion has not worked either. Engaging North Korea is never easy, but it remains the least bad option for addressing the nuclear standoff.

Keio University, Tokyo, Japan

PETER M. BECK

RISE OF THE PLEBEIANS?: The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies. *Exploring the Political in South Asia, vol. 2. Editors: Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar.* London, New York and New Delhi: Routledge, 2009. xxxvi, 494 pp. (Tables, figures, maps.) US\$100.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-46092-7.

Conceptualizing the effects of salient ethnic identities on the workings of electoral institutions has long been of central concern for scholars of democratic politics. In the wider comparative literature, the presence of politicized ethnic identities has been viewed as deleterious for outcomes ranging from levels of social trust to the provision of public goods in multiethnic democracies. Scholars have thus been apprehensive about the heightened salience of caste as the explicit basis for political mobilization and party formation in Indian states following the decline of the Indian National Congress' dominance. Such entrenchment of caste, observers fear, necessarily undermines the liberal potential of the country's democratic institutions.

It is to this interpretation of the role of caste in Indian democracy that the contributors to this volume offer a hefty challenge. At its core, *The Rise of the Plebians* seeks to build on an insight made by one of its editors in a previous work, where he provocatively posited that it was precisely the elevated salience of caste which “was responsible for the democratization of Indian democracy” (Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Silent Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 10). This present volume argues that caste in many parts of India has been transformed from the basis of a vertical socio-religious hierarchy between communities to the foundation for horizontal political mobilization within them. Further, it is populations that have previously been excluded from the corridors of political power that have spearheaded this reconfiguration. In doing so, they have reshaped the ethnic identities that served as the basis for their historical marginalization into “vehicles for socio-political change” (1).

It is the rise of these “plebians” (particularly groups classified as Other Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes in the lexicon of the Indian government), mobilized explicitly on the basis of their caste, that has fundamentally deepened the representativeness of the Indian political system. The most compelling evidence the volume presents in favour of this

argument is the perceptible, often dramatic shifts in the social composition of India's legislators. This central empirical thread structures both the individual chapters on 16 major Indian states, and their ordering within the collection. Since the shifts in social profile have not occurred uniformly, a major contribution of the collection is to carefully outline the considerable variation in plebian assertiveness across India. Accordingly chapters have been grouped into regional sections that also serve to illustrate certain underlying commonalities.

A plebian rise has been most pronounced in the northern Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where lower-caste formations have effectively pushed upper-caste politicians into positions of relative marginality. A similar transition occurred much earlier in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where lower castes were aggregated under a broad regional "Dravidian" identity. Yet in states in the Deccan plateau, and India's northwest, elite dominance persists, with struggles largely circumscribed between dominant caste groups. The studies of West Bengal and Kerala highlight a paradox offered by these strongholds for Indian communism, which despite their commitment to pro-poor policies (particularly in the latter case) and substantial support from subaltern voters, continue to be dominated by upper-caste leaders.

The data on the caste composition of Indian legislatures is the major contribution of this volume, an impressive testament to the patience and dedication of its researchers. Given that this data has never been systematically collected and made available, it offers fertile terrain for future analyses to explore the connections between state-level trends in representation and other socio-political phenomena, ranging from party fragmentation, to public spending, to patterns of social conflict. At the same time, the individual chapters can serve as useful references for students looking for brief accounts of contemporary political developments in major Indian states.

Yet the major shortcoming of many individual chapters, and the collection as a whole, is that they offer far less theoretically than they do empirically. Variation in analytic quality is perhaps to be expected in a volume of this size, with the chapters on Uttar Pradesh (Zerinini) and Bihar (Robin) providing the most compelling examples of a "plebian rise." However, many other chapters are unable to move beyond dense descriptions of the political trajectory of an individual state. Few attempt to use their empirical findings as the basis for more abstract theoretical insights. For example, there is little discussion of the advantages or limitations of an exclusive focus on the social composition of legislators as an indicator of democratization. Nor are there many attempts to explain whether increasing representation has been accompanied by policy shifts, how these new political actors forge support among their caste constituencies, or the impact of these assertive plebians on coalition politics.

More broadly, the volume misses an opportunity to frame the collective

findings of its authors as a contribution to the broader work examining the relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and democracy. Even within a purely India-specific discussion, the volume does not clearly differentiate its analytic contribution from previous arguments about the “silent revolution” of India’s lower castes (Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Silent Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003)). Despite these theoretical limitations, *The Rise of the Plebians* is an invaluable addition to studies of the evolution of Indian democracy, and will remain an influential reference on the important shifts that its authors have uncovered with such care.

Yale University, New Haven, USA

TARIQ THACHIL

MINORITY GOVERNMENTS IN INDIA: The Puzzle of Elusive Majorities.
Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series, vol. 19. By Csaba Nikolényi. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. xvi, 175 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$125.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-77826-8.

For the majority of its post-independent history, the Indian National Congress has largely governed New Delhi. Since 1989, however, no single party has been able to capture a parliamentary majority. A series of minority national governments, mostly ruled by enormous multiparty coalitions, have emerged in their place. This is a real puzzle given that India has a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral regime which, following Duverger’s Law, regularly produces single-party majority governments and two-party systems in other Westminster-style democracies. What explains this puzzling transformation in the world’s largest democracy? *Minority Governments in India* presents a parsimonious original explanation, employing social choice theories and sophisticated regression analyses, to answer this important question. It makes several valuable contributions to our understanding of modern Indian politics, coalition governments and comparative electoral systems. Yet the argument leaves several questions unanswered that warrant greater attention.

The merits of the book are threefold. First, it presents an original explanation that integrates the Indian case within the wider, theoretically driven comparative literature, its principal goal. Nikolényi argues that the rise of minority national governments in India since 1989 is due to the increase in the number of parties contesting for office that, in turn, is the unintended consequence of a previously understudied constitutional amendment. The passage of the Anti-Defection Law in 1985, designed by the Congress Party to control its factions, ironically encouraged the latter to form their own parties. Second, the author gathers and analyzes an enormous wealth of electoral data to defend his arguments. In particular, chapter 5 presents several intriguing observations that will stimulate further research, concerning the varying propensities of different Indian states to