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This book is an assessment of the evolution of India's political parties since independence

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1



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Ideology and Identity:

The Changing Party Systems of India

Pradeep K Chibber and Rahul Verma

OUP, Rs 895, 336 pages

This book is an assessment of the evolution of India's political parties since [independence](#). Though there have been many ideological contestations, the authors have narrowed their focus to the ideas they believe have influenced the arc of party politics: "The [politics](#) of statism and the [politics](#) of recognition". As the authors explain, "the states' role in transforming social traditions and its role as accommodator of various social groups constitute the dimensions of ideological spheres... in Indian party [politics](#) today."

Their approach is a data-intensive study based on a survey. On this basis, they say voters with higher exposure to media, and voters who were educated, young and upper class were more likely to have voted for the [Bharatiya Janata Party \(BJP\)](#). The overall message is that politics is not only an activity for "who gets what and how" but a fundamental social and ideological struggle for shaping modern [India](#).

chapters are devoted to discussing the issues political parties faced over the past 70 years in their attempts to transform India's inherited hierarchical social order. The sequence of the chapters, however, is a little odd, creating a degree of repetition throughout the book. For instance, Chapter 2 on the 2014 national elections should have come later because the winning party, which exists by, for and of conservative Brahmanical Hindutva, is an ideological opposite of the essentially liberal and secular character of other major all-India and regional parties thus far.

Over different chapters, the authors refer to the ideological conflicts between Hindu traditionalists and modern pluralists. But the polarising impact of the party of Hindutva, the BJP and its institutional mentor, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has been presented in a somewhat diffuse narrative. It is difficult to accept the author's contention when they ask, "Is there truly an ideological divide in India, or is it merely an artefact of the BJP's electoral politics?"

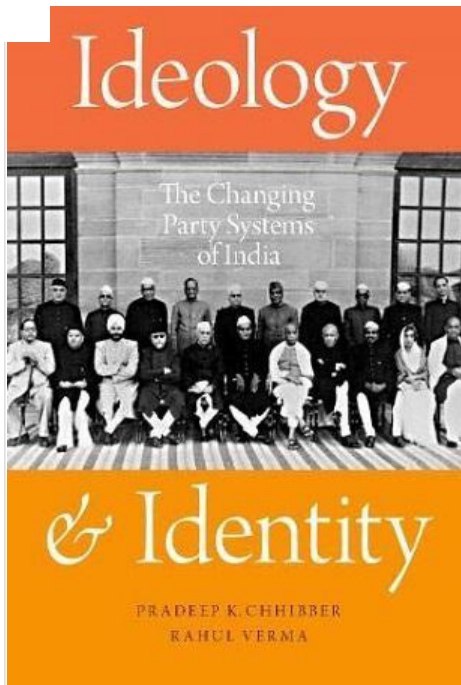
No less untenable is their observation that "...it is virtually impossible to determine whether the BJP created the social divisions or whether those social divisions are what enabled the BJP to win votes". The historical record unambiguously shows how the British Raj divided Indian society on the basis of religion to maintain its power. The Jan Sangh, BJP's predecessor, built on this policy to consolidate the notion of Hindu identity as a political platform. Indeed, the authors point out that Hindu social conservatives abandoned the Congress and joined the Hindu traditionalist parties to safeguard the hierarchical traditional social order. In spite of this evidence, the authors are unable to draw the clear conclusion that BJP is a polariser and promoter of Hindus exclusively, and that this has been a major marker of modern-day political contestations.

To be sure, affirmative action also caused a cleavage between traditionalists and progressives. On the basis of their survey findings the authors suggest that the upper castes were not major opponents of reservations. "If prejudice were the only explanations for the upper caste respondent's higher level of opposition to reservations, then we should have seen even greater support for abolishing reservations among the upper-caste respondents," they write. This is a questionable conclusion because there were other factors at work in supporting reservation.

One significant finding, however, concerns the nuances of upper caste prejudice. Upper caste prejudice against Dalits was relatively more common than it was among OBC and Muslim respondents. However, "upper-caste, OBC and Dalit respondents all showed prejudice against Muslims". The issue of reservation for Muslims generates so much hostility that even secular parties hesitate to respond to the genuine predicament of this community for fear of being labelled "appeasers". Electoral logic, thus, determines political decisions on many basic issues of historical significance.

The faulty chapter scheme also interrupts the authors' discussion on ideological conflicts. Chapter 5, for instance, abruptly discusses the myth of vote-buying based on the 2017 UP Assembly elections. Without contextualising the election, which was held soon after demonetisation virtually eliminated campaign resources for opposition parties, the authors conclude that "ideology, not clientalism, is what ties voters to parties in India". They reach this conclusion despite their statement that voters "look to the state for the provision of material benefits", and "notwithstanding the weak evidence in favour of clientalism, voters can indeed still be swayed by policy benefits directed toward them".

The authors have identified four phases in the evolution of the party system — 1952-67, 1967-1984, 1984-2014 and 2014—to trace the shifting position of parties and the role of state in reordering inherited traditional social relations.



They have rightly concluded that the divisions in the politics of recognition are deep and wide especially on the issue of reservations for the other backward castes.

The theme of this book —that Indian party politics is deeply ideological — opens many new windows to understanding a complex story. But because the authors have limited the scope of their enquiry, they have missed the opportunity for a deeper analysis of the other fundamental ideological disputes that are taking place in [India](#).

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