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# A Primer for our Times

*Sardesai has provided material for academics to formulate a precise model to analyse indian voting behaviour.*

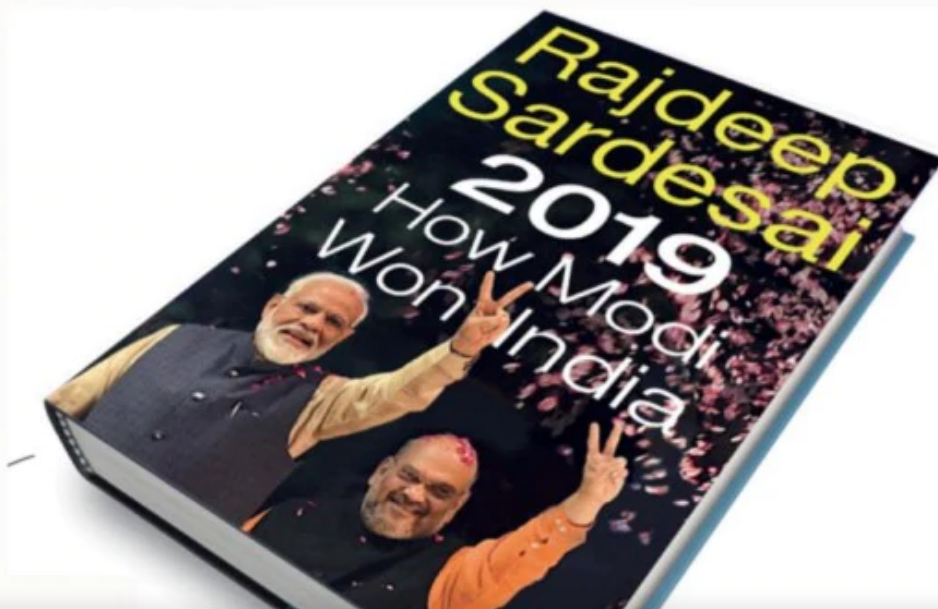Story in Audio

**Rahul Verma**
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2019: How Modi Won India By Rajdeep Sardesai, HarperCollins, Rs 699, 351 pages

Rajdeep Sardesai begins 2019: How Modi Won India, with an encounter with an old woman at a polling station in rural Uttar Pradesh who wanted to cast her vote directly for Narendra Modi (and not for the local BJP candidate or the party's lotus symbol). In some ways, this incident captures the impact Modi had on the 2019 verdict. The data, which Sardesai has provided as an appendix in the book, confirm the extent and scope of the BJP's success. However, for Sardesai, more than the statistics, it is the backstory-the key personalities, strategies and turning points-that provides deep insight into India's changing electoral landscape. In a detailed, exceptional account of the BJP's overwhelming victory, Sardesai describes various elements of its organisational machine, campaign build-up and important political events. Academic analysis often misses such microscopic details; in that sense, this book fills an important gap on Indian elections.

The book raises some interesting questions academics must pursue with greater rigour. Election studies in India suffer from a serious lacuna. The immediate, proximate factors take so much primacy that our analytical lens is rendered ahistorical. This approach a hinders contemplation of a counterfactual scenario, e.g. where the BJP hadn't won su thumping majority despite political events playing out the way Sardesai describes with great finesse.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the rise of the BJP is a result of a long historical battle that predates Independence. The BJP and its predecessors emerged as a counterforce to the Nehruvian consensus. In the aftermath, the BJP transformed both its social base and ideological positioning. Thus, while Narendra Modi's charisma and Amit Shah's organisational skills may have been the catalysts for the party's landslide victory, the BJP's success would have been rather mute without the emergence of social forces that India's rapidly changing political economy environment has produced.

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factors; especially in cases like the 2019 election. A multitude of factors must have interacted simultaneously to produce the final outcome. However, to claim that everything mattered is to sin in the world of political analysis. The task of a political analyst is to tease out the effect of the most important reasons. While I do not disagree with Sardesai's list of 16 factors-13 Ms [Modi, Machine, Media, Money, Marketing, Messaging, Mobile, Middle Class, Millennials, Majoritarianism, Muscular nationalism, Masood Azhar, Mahagathbandhan], two Ws [welfarism and WhatsApp], and one GK [Garib Kisan]-that shaped Verdict 2019, he should have been a bit more parsimonious. The author has provided raw material for academics like me to formulate a more precise analytical model of voting behaviour in India.

Sardesai's flavourful writing style, sprinkled with everyday analogies, makes reading politics fun. Much like in cricket, of which both Rajdeep and I are fans, a team does not have to necessarily excel in bowling, batting and fielding to win, and the losing side doesn't have to fail in all departments. Similarly, in politics, the winner doesn't have to do everything right to achieve victory. We must realise there are moments in politics when all moves by the opposition backfire and incumbents make windfall gains despite making blunders.

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This book is a must-read for all as an insightful documentation of political events between 2014 and 2019. Sardesai has yet again written a page-turner following his fabulous book on the 2014 election. He has woven five years' worth of electoral politics in a seamless story. A reader with interest in politics will find this book a delightful read, a journalist will learn a great deal from Sardesai's eye for detail and art of political storytelling and a future historian will find 2019 a useful record of this historic moment in Indian democracy.

*(Rahul Verma is Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, Delhi)*

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