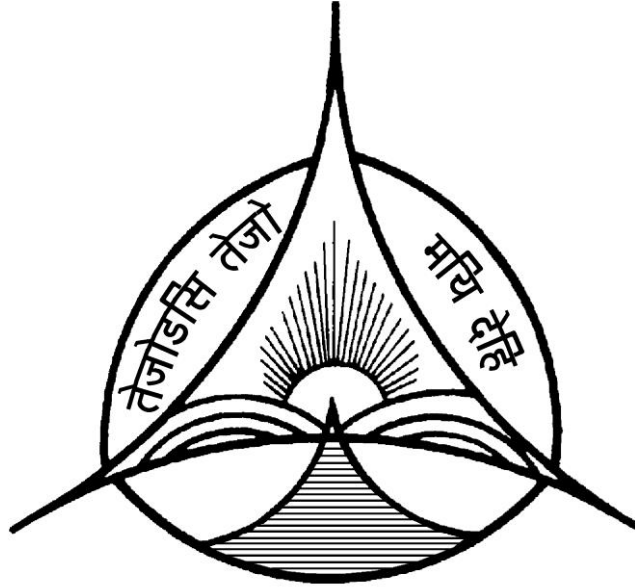


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Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Vote in India by Tariq Thachil
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014

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The vibrant multiparty system in India offers ample opportunity for research in the area of voter-party linkage. This area, of late, has been attracting the interest of scholars of Indian politics. While democratisation in postcolonial states has been rather difficult, in India it has sustainably consolidated. The success of Indian democracy has been generating interest in scholars of comparative politics to not only look at similarities and variations in a postcolonial democratic context with respect to the generalisations arrived at in the Western democracies, but also its implications for other democracies in the non-West.

Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Vote in India by Tariq Thachil is a unique amalgam of these two subfields of political science where an extensive case study of the electoral strategy of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), to win over non-elite voters outside its core support base is observed with reference to similar studies in Western democracies, as well as those of the global south. Through his study based on rigorous quantitative data and qualitative research around the rise of the BJP in India, Thachil attempts to contribute to critical enquiry in comparative politics regarding the nature and implications of electoral politics of elite parties in the non-West.

Thachil looks into the linkage between the vote support of poor Dalits and Adivasis (which he calls the subalterns: populations marginalised by Hinduism) to the BJP, an elite party with upper caste Hindus as its core constituencies and whose ideology and manifesto are clearly not in favour of progressive, redistributionist policies that tend to benefit the poor. Paradoxical linkages between elite parties and poor voters have been studied in Western democracies, but those causal relations based on moral value voting do not explain the subaltern support to the BJP. Neither do the 'patronage' and 'ethnic appeal' explanations qualify as adequate in this case. Also, Thachil negates any ideological shift to the 'prideful Hindu identity' in the face of communal politics.

Thachil builds his argument on a less studied trend associated with elite parties with religious roots, engaged in welfare efforts under the banner of religion in several countries of Asia and Africa. However, the political causes and electoral outcomes of such efforts remain wanting in systematic analyses and in the case of India the trend remains 'curiously unnoticed'. He explains this strange electoral choice as the result of a "politically motivated private service based electoral strategy" adopted by the BJP's non-organisational affiliate, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), over the past decades, consisting of "rudimentary health and educational services provided via one-teacher schools and village health workers" (p. 115).

Thachil's argument explores 'service' as an electoral strategy of elite parties to expand their support base beyond the numerically limited core constituency. This involves navigating through questions like: which parties are likely to use private service as an electoral strategy and why? How does such a strategy win votes? In what circumstances is it likely to succeed and when does it fail? His choice of the BJP in India is relevant for both theoretical and empirical reasons, he mentions, as it is the 'least likely' case that if such a linkage can take place here it stands the chance of replication in other set ups as well. Further, he notes, it opens up Hindu nationalism in comparative perspective which till now has been studied in isolation (p. 31).

The structure of the book is comprehensive, divided into six chapters apart from the introduction and conclusion. Each chapter consists of systematic analyses of the questions the author asks to explore the elite party-poor voter linkage. The introduction presents the layout of the study, including description of research questions, the methodologies employed and the outline of the book. Chapter Two tries to explain the struggles of the BJP to reach out to social groups on the margins in order to expand its social profile beyond its core constituency and the challenges to such endeavours.

The third chapter looks into the reasons for rich and poor voter support for the BJP and brings out evidence of the strategy of division of labour between the party (BJP) and its non-party affiliates (RSS), where the latter provides welfare service to win electoral support for the former. In Chapter Four, the author elaborates this point through the functioning of two such service organisations, the VKS in Chhatisgarh and Seva Bharti in Agra, where he conducted extensive fieldwork. The next two chapters describe how services win votes and when they fail. This involves organisation of the empirical findings and comparisons between cases to fine-tune the central argument. Chapter Seven places the study in a comparative perspective, thus relating the history of the BJP in India with Islah Party in Yemen and PKS in Indonesia. The concluding chapter reflects on the attractiveness of private welfare service as an operative electoral ploy for parties with an elite core constituency, as well as challenges to the success achieved through such a strategy.

The book also contains an Afterword that deals with the study's relevance in the wake of the results of the 2014 general elections in India, especially the overwhelming victory of the BJP.

The argument of the book goes like this: Welfare efforts in the form of private service under the banner of religion emerges as a novel strategy to win over votes of the poor by elite parties which cannot deploy redistributive programmatic appeals because of the fear of alienating their core support base of the privileged and the rich. Lack of a sustained period of incumbency denies them access to the strategy of patronage. The rich core constituency voluntarily provides the resources to finance private welfare efforts. This service is also different from vote-buying as it is not distributed under *quid pro quo* protocols. It helps the elite party to 'recruit the poor and retain the rich'. However, the strategy's chances of success are limited by the presence of pro-poor programmatic linkages by rival parties or the possibility of self-mobilisation of voters as a political constituency.

A vast amount of literature on electoral politics, party organisations, religion and welfare, patronage and clientalism is explored and emerges as an important contribution to the same. The book presents an insightful and compelling study supported by intense methodological rigour, including analyses of large-scale quantitative data and qualitative research.

However, a more intense engagement with certain significant debates in the existing scholarship in India over the Dalit/Adivasi–BJP linkage is something that the book lacks. According to the NES 2014, the BJP’s Dalit vote base in the 2014 general election was largely the upwardly mobile sections (urban, educated, middle classes, with high media exposure). Does that give any merit to the ‘prideful Hindu identity’ argument? As regards the relevance of the central dilemma that the author seeks to address through this book—how elite parties can craft strategies for electoral victory that appeal to the poor and yet retain the rich—it does not emerge as a progressive intervention for the cause of empowerment of the poor in the global south. Though the poor here might appear to “make active political decision” (p. 280), it however does not necessarily translate into a sustained ethic of empowerment. Because, as Thachil himself shows, “programmatically shifts to public welfare are not easy for elite parties to undertake as they run the risk of alienating the privileged core constituencies” (p. 285). The implication thus is quite alarming, and it calls for a more thorough critique of the preservation of the status quo in favour of the rich and privileged, as against the desirability of socio-economic change in favour of the poor and marginal in postcolonial democracies.