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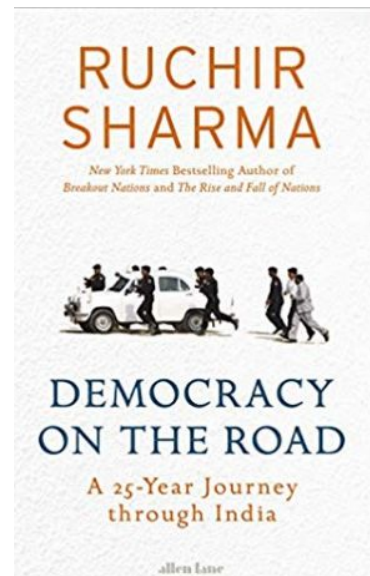
## Democracy on the Road - Ruchir Sharma

### What the book is about?

In his latest book, Ruchir Sharma provides a part-travelogue of his trips along with his election caravan from 1998 to 2018. He maintains that there is no consistent formula to winning elections in India and more often than not, political parties have to pass a test of ‘community, family, inflation, welfare, development, corruption and money’.

At the outset, Sharma gives a vivid account of local politics in Bijnor and then takes the reader through the journey of elections in India - gauging the public mood in

political rallies and interviewing the leaders and the electorate.



Though elections in a country as diverse as India are complicated, the book gives a lucid account of how “Indian elections are lost by the incumbent more often than

they are won by the challenger” and how a mixed bag of development and economic growth doesn’t guarantee electoral success.

### Major themes

The author points, “From Indira Gandhi’s loss in 1977 through 2003, nearly 75% of all state and national governments had failed to get re elected”, attributing the reason largely to ‘Many Indias’, which according to the author comprise of different communities, separated by caste, religion, tribe and language.

In his coverage of national and state polls, the author succinctly presents the electoral realities.

First he cites the the broken state and unresponsive bureaucracy as the reason why the average voter looks up to local legislators; also evident from the fact that economic growth as high as 8% would improve conditions in the mofussil only incrementally. Thus, leaving space for welfarism and freebies.

Second, even the developmental plank adopted by few of the leaders hasn’t guaranteed them success. For instance, delivery on development and economic front might have brought back Chandrababu Naidu to power in 1999, but did not guarantee him a second term five years later. Similarly, visible improvements in the home state haven't managed to win the electorate over in the long term as seen in the routing of governments in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh.

Similarly, welfarism is also not a sure shot way to success. The author notes for example, how Gehlot lost in 2003, campaigning as a development hero, and lost again in 2013 as a prodigiously generous champion of welfarism.

In his analysis of the electoral outcomes, the author drives home two points. One, caste-based politics in India is easier to sell than development-based politics. This is evident from the fact that

Bihar under Nitish Kumar made remarkable progress but wouldn't allow the leader to get even a 20% vote share, compelling him to forge an alliance on caste lines to win. Second, community ties are so powerful in India that parties have to get the equation right and choose the candidates who can appeal to a complex mix of sub-caste, religion and language in a constituency and state.

### **What's in it for the reader?**

Anecdotal references to interviews with top leaders are particularly significant and add a layer of nuance to our understanding of the context of Indian politics. The group's interaction with Chandrababu Naidu reveals that a development star like him, though hi-tech inside, is "populist from the roof". Another interaction with the Gandhis reaffirms the point that free market economy in India is realised by compulsion and not conviction, when Sonia Gandhi defended the strong role of government in the economy -

particularly in creating jobs. The group's meeting with Narendra Modi on two instances is confrontational, leading to an abrupt end of the conversation.

Although the author didn't shed much light on the possible outcome of 2019 general election, he goes back to Modi's campaign of 2014 general elections when the perception was that he would be the Ronald Reagan of India; but proved otherwise. The author is cautious of the party's changed narrative but is also optimistic when he says, "with its multiple languages, cultures, religions and castes, India gives special meaning to the notion that all politics is local".

It seems that the author fails to acknowledge the larger picture - that voters are more concerned with tangible change in standards of healthcare, education, service delivery, and the like. His preoccupation with the failure of development to propel parties to electoral victory is thus divorced

from the reality of the voters' pulse. This to some limited extent is addressed by the argument that “local issues often trump national issues”.

Given the incredibly complex electoral architecture of India, the book provides a ready reckoner of how these complexities have played out in the last twenty-five years. ▪

- Vriti Bansal