

Rogue Elephant: Harnessing the Power of India's Unruly Democracy

**by Simon Denyer, Bloomsbury Great Britain, 2014,
440pp including endnotes and index, RRP \$39.99**

June R Verrier

June R Verrier is former head of the Parliamentary Information and Research Service

Democracy is a messy business and perhaps it is most messy in this largest and least likely of democracies. Would Narendra Modi have taken it on if he had read this quite shocking book? If he is an optimist, he will see much to encourage him beyond the model of his own success in Gujarat in this account, not least the mobilising of a new middle class replacing caste, empowered by new technologies. If he is a pessimist, he will be overwhelmed by what it reveals about how much has to be done in so many spheres. The book begins and ends with the huge issue of the position of women in India as illustrated by the recent rape scandal (chapter 1) and the totally unregulated trade in women and girls (chapter 16). In between we are taken through India's economic, infrastructure, educational, population, land management, border, regional, dynastic and parliamentary problems – and the failures of leadership, not least on the huge overarching issue of corruption. In between there are chapters on those things that give the author hope – aspects of modern technology which compel transparency, from shock jocks to Facebook, mobilising an emerging middle class increasingly willing and able to stand up and be counted.

Simon Denyer is the Washington Post's Beijing Bureau Chief who spent much of the last ten years in India. *Rogue Elephant* reveals that he became deeply engrossed in the huge canvas of India and the multiple challenges it faces as it seeks to make its way to economic powerhouse and great power status in the world of international politics. He tells some grim stories in what, really, comes across as a series of insightful essays, or snapshots, on some deeply disturbing aspects of Indian life, the thread through them being the need for dramatic improvement in the way the country is governed (p390). Denyer's approach is to highlight some dramatic aspects and episodes of Indian life to make his points. He does so colourfully and compellingly, writing with passion and clarity, with a mixture of hope and despair at the huge problems, but also the prospects he sees in the vibrancy of much of this huge country and the commitment of so many ordinary people to make it better.

One example of this is the success of the Right to Information campaign. The Right to Information Act is a huge achievement. It started at the grass roots in a remote village by exposing corruption in payments for local buildings which were never built (p128), taking years, but finally taken up at the national level resulting in one of the world's strongest Right to Information laws (p134):

In a country where the poor are routinely denied access to public services unless they pay bribes, a country where most of the money earmarked for the poor gets stolen, the Right to Information Act has won countless battles... (it) played a major role too in uncovering and exposing the huge corruption scandals that erupted in 2010 and formed the backdrop to Manmohan Singh's fall from grace' (p135).

The Act has, in other words, been at the heart of India's democratic reawakening, by unleashing the power of information to make the nation's politics more transparent and its politicians much more accountable...' p136. ... The RTI is one of the few pieces of legislation that actually empower the citizen outside of election day, and that is its extraordinary impact (p150-51).

Then there was the anti-corruption campaign which brought thousands out onto the streets from 2011. In Chapter 8: *Get up, Stand Up: India Against Corruption galvanizes the middle class*, Denyer tells us that people took to the streets in their millions to 'overthrow a system based on corruption, nepotism, to expose a cosy conspiracy between the nation's political and business elite, and to excise the rotten heart of its bureaucracy' (p199). 'India Against Corruption represented an important moment in the deepening of Indian democracy by engaging an entirely new set of people in a mass movement, and fusing the anger of the middle class with the impatience of youth...'

Assisted very significantly by technology. In chapter 6 *Headline Hustler: the twenty-four-hour news television helps awaken the nation*, Denyer examines the enormous success of shock jock, Arnab Goswami. Shrill and extreme though he be, he represents the new media and the role it can play in the new culture of transparency and political accountability (p156). Together with the Right to Information Act, this has 'shifted the pendulum of power from the politicians to the citizen, the common man, the activist' (p161). So we have accounts of individuals taking on the system: the whistle blower (in chapter 11), the woman raped by the army on hunger strike for years (in chapter 12), those land owners who won a landmark case in West Bengal helped by the new media (in chapter 7). Denyer concludes that the power of the media in modern India to set the agenda is partly a reflection of the weakness of the government, especially under Manmohan Singh and his bumbling administration. Though he notes that it, too, is corrupt; there are no scruples about payment for news and there is often little attention to the facts/the truth (p176).

Denyer portrays India's politics as crippled by a stagnant dynastic system, a manipulated federal structure and an impotent parliament. His second chapter is on the failures of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, this world renowned economist who led the economy close to ruin, this ascetic moral man who turned a blind eye to corruption and was deferential in the face of the Gandhi dynasty. Chapter 4 is on that dynasty and its impact, and on the weakness of the Gandhi heir apparent, Rahul Gandhi, his failure as a campaigner, his contempt for the parliament, his miscalls on corruption and the anti-rape legislation – he didn't even bother to show up for the debate(p97). He records, as well, the total lack of democracy within parties where the leader directs members' votes, the breakdown of the two major parties, the emergence of more minor parties, and so more coalitions, more compromise with no consensus on the critical issues of the day. He is excoriating about a parliament which sits for fewer and fewer days, dealing with fewer and fewer bills and spending less and less time in debate on them. He identifies the problems – and the solutions – but sees no will to change.

Denyer reminds us of the high ideals that informed this unique parliamentary democracy at its outset, records its descent into chaos in the nine years he lived in the country, and provides his analysis of the reasons why. He concludes that 'in the end money is the root of much of the evil in Indian politics' (p83). Indira Gandhi closed off the only legal way to fund campaigns after a near Congress loss in the 1967 elections, meaning in practice that 'bribes, patronage and trading favours have become the only way that politicians can survive in modern India' (p83). So in a parliament in which there is a very high proportion of hereditary seats, we have an astonishing story of vote buying and a similarly astonishing story about the campaign for candidates to disclose criminal records in a situation in which convicted murderers and rapists continue to sit in Parliament. Some changes were made in 2013-14 to

remove convicted criminals from Parliament, but what he calls the farce of the failure of the anti-corruption legislation in the Upper House, the Rajya Sabha, in December 2011, illustrates that:

India's parliament often seems more interested in protecting the vested interests of its members than in cleaning up its act. Neither of the two big parties has been quick to grasp the idea of good governance as good politics, at least not at the national level. ...the only politician who is offering that kind of national vision today with any real conviction, and with any track record behind him, is Narendra Modi... (p336).

Writing probably close to a year out from Narendra Modi's victory in the 2014 election, his chapter 15, 'I'm the Man', will be much read. Half of it tells of Modi's divisiveness – a Hindu nationalist guilty in the eyes of many for whipping up anti-Muslim prejudice (or worse) – and half of the economic success of Gujarat where he was Chief Minister from 2001. Denyer describes him as 'one of India's most charismatic but divisive of politicians (p338)...a demagogue who mixes humour with vitriol...but engenders more hate and fear than anyone else in politics today...' (p339). Gujarat on his watch was a very polarised state. There were riots between Hindus and Muslims in 1969, 1985, 1992 and 2002. But he also records that he is celebrated as India's most effective administrator, strong and decisive, who has curbed corruption and ushered in a prolonged economic boom in his state.

Effective campaigner, charismatic, connecting with the crowds, using social media – but a control freak (everything has to go through him), trusts no one, can't tolerate dissent, and is a bully. Can he rule for all of India like that? Can he move to the middle ground (as Morsi failed to do in Egypt)? Not if Denyer's comparison with Margaret Thatcher is accurate: 'He reminds me a little of Margaret Thatcher on steroids, a man who is definitely not for turning, or compromise, and certainly not for taking criticism on board...' (p361).

Modi will be most judged for his performance in getting India's economy moving again and the early signs are good. Interestingly, too, and uniquely for an Indian leader, in his first Independence Day Address on 15 August this year, he condemned rape and urged parents to take responsibility for the behaviour of their sons. (He also urged an end to communal violence, vowed to improve the lives of the poor – and to provide toilets: Denyer tells us, p3, that Indians own more mobile phones than have access to toilets). Still not an issue taken seriously by so many, whether Modi will move beyond words to show leadership on this most contentious and emblematic of issues, remains to be seen.

Denyer arrived in India in its golden age. In 2004 growth was 8%, there was a growing middle class with access to luxury goods and foreign investors were flocking in. But by 2009 with the re-election of Singh, it had begun to fall apart. He concludes: 'Since I arrived in India nine years ago, I have grown immensely frustrated with its chaotic style of government, the inability to take decisions, the rampant corruption and the denial of economic opportunity to so many people'. Nonetheless, after drawing comparisons throughout the book with China whose command economy has ensured much greater economic success but at the high price of freedoms, he tells us he has also 'come to love its freedom of speech, its secular DNA, and the checks and balances inherent in its democracy... it is the glue that keeps India together...' (p360). That said, Denyer ends his chapter on Modi by asking: 'is his assault on secularism and the rights of minorities, in his autocratic style, does Narendra Modi threaten the very essence of what makes India great?'

Like India, then, this book is not without its contradictions. The new media has been a boon for the protestors and a bane for the Parliament, for example. And Modi is the only leader

showing any sign of national vision and at the same time is seen to be the most divisive of politicians.

We are used to looking at India from the top down, in particular lauding its remarkable democratic achievement (the largest democracy in the world) and, increasingly until recently, its equally remarkable economic resurgence. *Rogue Elephant's* significant contribution is to look at India from the inside, from the bottom up, and in the process highlighting the disequilibrium of development, the inequities of uneven development, and the complexities consequently arising for India's decision makers and those who would do business there. It highlights the increasing frustrations of a people with rising expectations stymied in very large part by a political system characterised at every turn by rampant corruption. Though he is optimistic overall about India's future, Denyer's conclusions about Modi are not. Hence whether this 'messiah for the middle class and for the young' (p362) can rise above his roots, pull this feral federation together and pull off the kind of transformational reform he was put there to produce – and retain the essential essence of democratic India remains to be seen.