

Communications to the Editor

TO THE EDITOR:

Reviewers for the *JAS* are routinely admonished to generate “heat not light.” However, this simple and eminently sensible injunction appears to have escaped Mr. Yogendra Yadav of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in his review of our book, *India Votes* (*JAS* 55.2:501–2). His review is little more than a vicious, personal diatribe that violates every canon of professional decency and propriety. It defies our imagination as to why the *JAS* saw it fit to publish such a patently *ad hominem* review in light of its own stated standards of fairness and intellectual responsibility.

It is not our intention to rebut every remark and criticism that Mr. Yadav levels against our work. Instead, we will confine our rejoinder to some broad themes and concerns. First, despite Mr. Yadav’s belief that our work represents “the decline of American scholarship on Indian elections” he makes little or no effort to locate our book in a larger corpus of literature beyond his cursory and snide reference to Myron Weiner’s M.I.T. studies. Would not concerns of fairness and responsibility demand this?

Second, he betrays his personal animus toward particular authors by focusing his criticisms on essentially trivial statistical and stylistic issues, quoting sentence fragments out of their larger context. Nowhere in the review does he even attempt to seriously address the substantive data analyses undertaken by any of the authors.

Third and finally, he asserts that the book lacks “a general argument.” Interestingly enough, despite his strident and sweeping criticisms of our work, he offers little by way of an alternative argument. Furthermore, he characterizes our work as “journalistic” and consisting of “freewheeling” accounts. It is a pity indeed that Mr. Yadav apart from slinging polemical pot-shots could provide us with no alternative conceptual framework or even testable hypotheses that we intellectually challenged Americans could benefit from.

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TO THE EDITOR:

I welcome the comment by the editors, for it opens up the possibility of taking forward the debate I had tried to initiate in my very short review of their work. I do hope that this exchange would provoke at least some of the readers of the *JAS* into going back to that little piece and joining this discussion.

Let me look at the editors’ response on the two major aspects on which I had questioned their work, namely its empirical deficiencies and its theoretical weaknesses. On the empirical aspect they think that I had picked on “essentially trivial statistical

and stylistic issues.” In the review I had pointed out instances of an inference inconsistent with the data presented in the same article, nonuse of a directly relevant and standard statistical measure, a gross factual inaccuracy crucial to the argument being put forward, and to the use of unprofessional and unreliable data source. If all this is trivial, I wonder what constitutes substantive or methodological criticism of an empirical work? I doubt if any American student of Indian elections in the 1970s would have offered such a casual defense to these types of criticisms. To that extent, the editors’ response again illustrates the point I was trying to make in my review.

As for the theoretical aspects, I suppose it is not unreasonable to expect even from an edited volume that the larger generalizations be made with some care. I still maintain that the characterization of the two elections as “binary elections” in the preface, the text as well as on the jacket of this volume violates this elementary expectation. Let alone relate to the complex intellectual ancestry of the concept of binary opposition, the editors nowhere spell out the specific usage, theoretical intention and the benefits of invoking this concept.

I am not sure if the editors are very serious in their expectation that I should have offered an alternative argument or a conceptual framework or a review of literature in my 800-word review. Any such review, or for that matter any piece of writing, must draw upon a lot which cannot be explicated within it. I can see, for instance, that my formulation regarding the decline of American scholarship on Indian elections requires an elaborate justification for which that little review or this short response may not be the right place. But I would welcome an opportunity to do so, should any reader of *JAS* wish to join the issue by offering substantive points of disagreement.

Finally, the question of professional ethics. I leave it to the readers to decide if my review was “little more than a vicious, personal diatribe.” But I must respond to the charge of harboring “personal animus towards particular authors,” for it is indeed a grave matter involving professional ethics. It so happens that barring a casual acquaintance with two or three, I have never met most of the authors and the editors of this volume. I have read and, in some cases, admired their earlier work, but have never had any serious relationship, professional or personal, let alone animosity, with either of the editors or any of the authors. What I wrote was nothing but my honest professional appraisal, whatever its worth. I wish the editors’ comment had not engaged in unnecessary speculation on this point. After all, there is a difference between being forthright and being personal.

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