



Research Foundation for Governance: in India

Insights into Indian Democracy

- Rosa van der Tas¹

“What is democracy?”

This was one of the questions constantly debated during the first year of my study of Political Science. Looking back, at that time, I only thought of democracy in the Western context, a presupposition that limits the scope, I must say. Luckily I had the chance to see a bit of what Indian democracy is about, when I volunteered with the Research Foundation for Governance: in India in Ahmedabad. My insight into the Indian democracy grew through our visits to different political party offices, the Deputy Collector’s Office (which conducts elections), the High Court and above all through a lecture that we gave at a local college. During these few weeks some things quite shocked me and others surprised me for the better.

My earlier visits had left me with the impression that issues such as politics do not get discussed very openly in India. I felt as if Indian people were often apathetic with the way politics of their country was conducted. However, this perception which I had built over time was completely changed when I visited a local college as a part of RFGI’s efforts to bring various debates on law and politics to students and youngsters of different ages. In this lecture, we put forward a few issues such as compulsory voting, dynastic politics and a youngster’s duty towards politics. I was pleasantly surprised to see that

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not only the students were very eager to share their opinions on these issues, but were also extremely passionate about what they felt and how they wanted to see more transparent governance at different levels. I was very happy to see this, because discussion and debate are needed to nurture democracy. Such debates should not only take place among politicians, but among ordinary citizens too. Democracy cannot be taken for granted and thus, it becomes a duty of the people to keep it vibrant through discussions and debates. I really hope that the activities of RFGI stimulate debates that strengthen the Indian democracy, but at least for the lecture I attended I think we accomplished it!

At RFGI, I was part of the project to understand the inner-party democracy of Indian political parties. This project gave me the opportunity to meet and interact with different politicians from different political parties in Gujarat. I visited the regional party bureaus of Congress, BJP and the Communist party. It was very interesting to see the differences between the parties and the people working there. The people working at these parties were extremely friendly to us. During our interviews I was very surprised to see how the decision-making of these parties was so centralized – decisions were taken in the top down fashion! The higher level always decided on the selection of board members and even for choosing candidates for elections for most levels. I saw that there was very little place left for the ordinary party member, who was left with almost no say on the people that rule the party or members who should contest elections. I asked myself, how come there is so little trust of the party leadership in the members? For me, this was completely different from the way political parties in my country are governed, where ordinary members have the say in choosing candidate for local, national and European level elections.

India is a democracy now for more than 60 years and a very special one as it is the largest democracy in the world. Experiencing the Indian democracy



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from such close quarters was a fascinating experience for me and I am really looking forward to seeing how it develops in the future! What way will Indian democracy go? India now has quite a large group of high educated young people that can give the country a bright future. I hope that as this group of youngsters becomes bigger, it will not only stimulate Indian economy, but also Indian democracy. We will see!