The mark that makes us equal

A stunning study of the process that turned Indians into voters even as the founding fathers were writing the Constitution

In her 2014 ethnographic inquiry Why India Votes?, Mukulika Banerjee reported a young man telling her: “I vote to establish my identity and let the government know that there is someone with so-and-so name living in so-and-so village.” Another voter said: “After this mark (the indelible ink), we are all similar, and have become equal after voting. Each vote has the same value, no matter whose it is. That makes us all equal today.” Conversations such as these highlight a particular assertion of citizenship that obtains on voting days and goes to the heart of the unique quality of Indian democracy. Banerjee’s focus on “ordinary Indians’ experience of elections” and on what they “think they are doing when they vote” yielded a nuanced picture of the fairness, equality, administrative efficiency and camaraderie that voters sense on voting day — an ideal that on other days, and perhaps even outside of the polling booth, remains a distant dream.

Voter before citizen

Now, in a book that cannot be recommended enough, Ornit Shani deepens the scholarship of that vitally Indian connect between exercising one’s franchise and being a citizen. In a volume thick with footnotes, Shani, an academic at the University of Haifa, tells the story of the preparation of the draft electoral roll after Independence but before the enactment of the Constitution, and makes the grand claim that “Indians became voters before they were citizens.” She chronicles this process of making every Indian a voter at a time when the founding fathers were still working out the changes and continuities from the colonial regime into free India, when the integration of princely states was still going on, when the violence and migrations of Partition were altering demographics, when there was no template on how to enrol the last voter by name and residence.

Shani details the entire process sufficiently to allow us to grasp the importance of that moment of rupture right after Independence when the administrative task of preparing the electoral roll was taken up by the Constituent Assembly Secretariat — and also to appreciate the imagination and quick-footedness of its bureaucrats in drawing it up. It was this gigantic exercise undertaken by the CAS, and the integrity of the process that they worked out on the go, that ensured that “while the details of India’s constitution were formulated by the Constituent Assembly, democracy was made on the ground not from a formal abstract consultation, but from wrestling with the practical problems of implementing the registration of all adults would-be citizens as voters.” And it’s not just that citizenship was already assumed by this process of enlisting voters along universal franchise, as opposed to the severely limited franchise pre-Independence — the process of
preparing the draft electoral roll involved individual Indians in an interaction with the administration that transformed their ideas about their stake in a free country. All this was done through responsive communication by the CAS as well as local administrations — and later through a series of press notes put out by the CAS to inform the public of what was going on and storify the undertaking. There were instances of practical problem-solving whose import went beyond just the process of enrolment and to the larger question of what it meant for a free population to engage with a bureaucracy that till just the other day implemented imperial rule.

Shunning instincts
The process, crucially, was not top-down, and problem-solving emphasised the federal structure. In November 1947, for instance, the CAS wrote to the provinces and States asking them to “start examining the administrative problems involved”, to do this “in consultation” and “let us know how you propose to prepare the rolls, what difficulties you anticipate and how you propose to meet them.” On the ground, it meant shunning ingrained instincts to limit franchise, as under the Government of India Act of 1935, and enable an egalitarian capaciousness. So the Government of the United Provinces told District Magistrates: “There will be no need to refer to... income tax, or revenue records, to judge a person’s eligibility for being a voter nor will the roll for an area be prepared according to communities.”
It was a finely detailed exercise. Governments deliberated on, say, a possible shortfall of paper, and the modalities of how to list house numbers, even arrange names and figure out the age of a voter. In Assam, it was decided that it be left to district officers to decide whether to “frame” a questionnaire on important events, such as “the floods of 1927, the freedom movement of 1930” to put an age to a voter.

It is especially interesting to note the difference between colonial and free India on the question of women being enrolled under their own names. For the limited franchise under the 1935 Act, women were allowed, variously, “to nominate some person to exercise the vote”, or “to be entered in the roll as ‘the wife of A.B. (the husband’s name)’ or, if she is unmarried, as ‘the daughter of A.B. (father’s name)’.” Now, post-1947, it was made clear that a woman voter could not be listed as someone’s “wife”, she had to be listed under her own name. A letter from the U.P. government to the District Officer in Agra, for example, suggested propaganda work to convince women to do so, including press publicity, “beat of drums” and inclusion of “women workers for the purpose.” In other words, a progressive way was being forged for every Indian to “let the government know that there is someone with so-and-so name living in so-and-so village.”
And it is Shani’s especial contribution to show how this administrative task and people’s involvement anticipated and even informed Constitution-writing. A few good persons helmed the process, but they made sure that it took an entire country to swing it.