

## Book Review

Lisa Mitchell: *Hailing the State: Indian Democracy between Elections*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. Pp. xviii, 300.)

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*Hailing the State* arrives at a time when scholars are debating the meanings and practices of Indian democracy. From political scientists and economists discussing democratic backsliding and the rise of ethnic democracy in current times (Sabyasachi Das, “Democratic Backsliding in the World’s Largest Democracy,” <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4512936>; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* [Princeton University Press, 2021]), to historians delving into early postcolonial moments of the first elections in India (Ornit Shani, *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise* [Cambridge University Press, 2017]), the focus has largely been on understanding democracy primarily through the lens of elections. Lisa Mitchell takes a different approach, to examine democracy in India “between elections,” concentrating on “collective assembly” as a technique that citizens employ to petition state officials and elected representatives and to hold them to account. In redefining democratic practice to include collective assembly, Mitchell weaves an intricate picture of how people understand themselves as democratic citizens. Deftly combining approaches from anthropology, history, and political theory, she brings alive the mosaic of actions that they employ in what she terms “hailing the state.” She draws on very rich archival and ethnographic material to tell us the ways in which people have and continue to hail the state.

Mitchell defines acts of “hailing the state” as “a wide range of practices that can be grouped together around their common aims to actively seek, maintain, or expand state recognition and establish or enhance channels of connection to facilitate ongoing access to authorities and elected officials” (8). People’s political rallies, occupation of public spaces, hunger strikes, stopping trains, blocking roads, and sometimes even violent movements often are acts of catching the attention of authorities to seek inclusion, recognition, and attention and to demand resources. Mitchell presents empirical examples of such acts of collective assembly organized by members of groups which are marginalized, and shows us the importance of a democratic framework that enables them to speak to the state. In her emphasis on collective action in democratic contexts, she also makes the important move of going beyond Western political theory’s attention to individuals as the operative

political unit (97–98). She also challenges Althusser and Foucault, for whom the act of hailing can only be carried out by representatives of the state. Instead, the book argues that people in India undertake collective efforts in order to “actively and self-consciously seek to be seen, heard, and recognised by the state” (14–15). Acts of hailing are thus not limited to state officials; subjects of the state hail representatives of the state too, in order to be recognized. Drawing on her research in the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana where people believe that the state can transform lives and livelihoods, Mitchell challenges academic scholarship that views the state merely as a suspicious entity. She argues that people are not necessarily “keeping the state away” (James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* [Yale University Press, 2009]) but actively seeking it out.

Across the seven chapters, the book undertakes a journey through various acts of hailing the state. Each chapter focuses on one kind of modality of collective assembly and how it developed in colonial and postcolonial India, with empirical examples from the author’s field sites. For example, chapter 1 delves into sit-in demonstrations and hunger strikes and chapter 4 looks into the general strike as a mode of collective assembly that has been used across the world over centuries. I found historical and ethnographic accounts of alarm-chain pulling in trains (chapter 5) and rail and road blockades (chapter 6) to be particularly fascinating. Chapter 7 explores rallies and processions as larger acts of collective assembly. In these chapters, Mitchell engages with conceptual questions about civility, participation, publics and counterpublics, and sovereignty. Her empirical material is very well woven with theoretical ideas concerning democratic politics. Through detailed ethnographic accounts of the creative ways in which people hail the state, the book also makes a significant contribution to the anthropology of democracy.

Mitchell’s ethnography of democracy between elections brings it neatly in conversation with another recent work of political anthropology, Mukulika Banerjee’s *Cultivating Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2022). Banerjee has examined the sociocultural entanglements of democracy and posited that democratic practices imbibed by people in rural India go beyond election times. Banerjee’s research on eastern India and Mitchell’s research on southern India, when put together, alert us to how democracy for the marginalized in India is a way of life and hailing elected representatives and state officials is embedded in their everyday existence. By bringing her ethnography into conversation with historical accounts of collective assembly, Mitchell takes the next step of showing how democratic acts were also present in supposedly nondemocratic regimes such as the British colonial state in India.

While the historical details of the ways in which people hailed the state in colonial times are put together painstakingly and are crucial in showing the continuities and comparisons between then and now, the historical tends to dominate the narrative of the book a bit more than the ethnographic. The archival work undertaken by Mitchell is commendable, but as a reader I

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wished for more ethnographic descriptions of collective assembly to draw a more vivid picture of democratic politics between elections in her field sites. Despite this, the book is still remarkable in combining different sources to present a side of democratic politics that is not analyzed enough. The author urges us to see how many of the collective actions undertaken by people are not simply protests but appeals to the state “for recognition, for equal rights, for full implementation of existing legal structures, for economic equity, or for accountability to electoral promises” (22). Democracy, after all, is not simply about institutions. It is performed and lived by those who seek out the state to demand a better existence. In highlighting this, Mitchell makes an extremely important contribution to the debates on what democracy means in India and beyond. The book also provides a roadmap for understanding the state as emerging from “hailing”—both by the representatives of the state as well as its citizens.

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