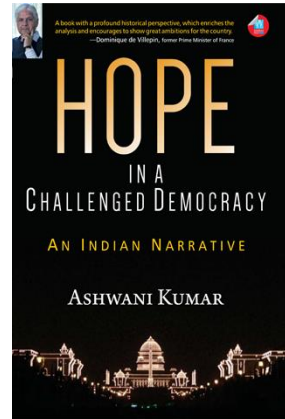


Book Review HT 15.07.2017



Dr Ashwani Kumar



Book : HOPE in a Challenged Democracy
Publisher : Wisdom Tree

When a politician writes a book, readers like me perk up. The logic is simple; in an impervious political system like ours, only an insider account can reveal what goes on inside political parties, how the nation's most consequential decisions are made, what is the pecking order and how the high-command culture plays out in real life. True that the accounts of politicians are one-sided, but they still give away a lot between the said and the unsaid. A case in point is BJP stalwart Jaswant Singh's account of the Pokharan nuclear tests, the Kargil war, or the moral dilemmas involved in the aftermath of the hijacking of IC 814 flight from Kathmandu to Kandahar. In his book, *A Call to Honour*, the Vajpayee confidant throws hints about the politics of the day while describing things like the failed Agra Summit and the post-Pokharan Indo-US engagements. Congress leader Natwar Singh's *One Life Is Not Enough* tells us a great deal about the mind and methods of the Congress President Sonia Gandhi. In *The Accidental Prime Minister* another insider, Dr Sanjay Baru, unravels Manmohan Singh's generous attitude to corruption of others while maintaining high standards of probity for himself .

Ashwani Kumar's book obviates all such clues. The former Union Minister ponders over matters of life and politics but ducks the realpolitik altogether. The book is **written in a different genre** and is unlike any other politician's book on politics. It is neither a revelation of an insider nor a commentary on India's peculiar polity.

As a result, the book stays clear of controversies, intra-party disputes and the juicy bits of political culture .

Kumar was in Parliament during Anna Hazare's movement, which marked the downward slide of the Congress party. Kumar manages a kind word for Anna but describes his activism as 'anarchist politics'. To him, the Constitution allows laws to be made only by Parliament and any attempt to do so on the street would be extra-legal. His speeches, however, omit the anxieties about the hijack of legislations and policies by the vested interests which was at the core of the anti-corruption movement...

Kumar's book is a record of his "views and works in the last fourteen years." It is essentially a compilation of his many speeches in the Rajya Sabha where he spent three terms as a Congress MP. The topics are varied and the speeches are well-researched. The author maintains that "...a persuasive speech leaves its mark in many ways." One may add that speeches can stir an audience but don't always make great bedside reading .

One consistent theme of his speeches is **the idea of, and access to, Justice**. Time and again, the author takes pains to connect the dots between Constitutional equilibrium and the institutions of a liberal democracy. He tries to anchor political discourse in reason, which is not always easy, and for common good. To him, the issues of communalism, poverty and development are intrinsically connected to the state of mutual tolerance and social cohesion, which are central to his idea of India .

This brings us to another common thread in the speeches, the social democratic agenda of the Congress, which nobody in the party seems eager to defend these days. On Jammu and Kashmir, he invokes healing of the wounds while on national security he tries to stay above partisan politics, which is a hallmark of a liberal mind .

Unlike many of his fellow Congress Ministers who secretly tried to dilute the RTI law, Kumar upholds it as an essential component of the citizens' freedom .

He maintains that the RTI Act and judicial accountability will enhance the quality of Democracy in India .

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[click : alumnus](#) Dr Ashwani Kumar's book "HOPE in a Challenged Democracy"
Launched 10 April 2017