

# *Money and Meaning in Elections: Towards a theory of the vote\**

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## **Abstract**

This article offers a comprehensive set of explanations for why people vote. Based on evidence from Indian elections, where voter turnouts remain consistently high—and rising—despite voting not being compulsory, the article shows that two broad sets of reasons exist. First, a set of transactional factors, labelled ‘money’ here, encompass within it the instrumental and coercive reasons that propel people to vote. Secondly, evidence shows that people also attribute ‘meaning’ to the act of voting itself so they vote for the sake of performing the act itself. Drawing from the wider literature and the author’s own ethnographic work, including comparative ethnographic research conducted by a team across India, this article brings together these diverse set of reasons to propose a holistic explanation for why people vote.

## **Introduction**

In democracies across the world, people’s decision to vote or not vote in elections is the result of a combination of several predictable and unpredictable factors. There is a wide variety of democratic societies in the twenty-first century world, and each creates a context-specific version of a commonly held set of ideas of what constitutes democracy. In its current resurgent phase over the last 200 years or so, democracy has come to stand for both a common set of aspirations as well as an

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enormous variety in how these are embedded in particular social contexts. It is worth noting that in the very title of his classic work, *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville draws our attention to how the ideas of modern democracy born in the context of post-revolutionary France took root and flowered in the very different context of the New World. He noted with admiration the successful establishment of a democratic ethic in America that far outstripped its French roots, where post-revolutionary disorder continued to reign. Despite his aristocratic birth and intellectual genealogy, which no doubt influenced his ambivalence towards the virtues of democracy as a political form, the French philosopher displays little chauvinism at how America adopted and adapted democratic ideas for its purpose. Instead, he focused his attention on the specific context and the particular combination of factors that made American democracy what it was.<sup>1</sup> It is in this sort of Tocquevillian vein that anthropologists and ethnographers of politics have lately been at the forefront of articulating the context-specific nature of democratic practice in the contemporary world. While the study of democracy and its institutions has been of relatively recent interest in political anthropology, a proliferation of current studies have nevertheless shown, both with the weight of evidence as well as theoretical innovation, that it is precisely this variation that lies at the heart of democratic ideas and its continued popularity as the least bad system of government.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of elections in installing democratic governments has also been widely studied and there is near-universal agreement among scholars of all disciplines that although elections are not a sufficient indicator of modern democracy, they are nevertheless an essential element.<sup>3</sup> A country cannot be classified a democracy unless it holds regular elections. There is also general agreement that participation in elections is a useful indicator of the health of democratic arrangements,

<sup>1</sup> See A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002 [1835].

<sup>2</sup> In 2007 when the volume *Anthropology of Democracy* was published, there were only a handful of political anthropologists explicitly working on democracy. See J. Paley (ed.), 'Toward an Anthropology of Democracy', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 31, 2007, pp. 469–496.

<sup>3</sup> This is not, however, to advocate a minimalist view of democracy. I appreciate Lisa Wedeen's spirited critique of such a view in L. Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power and Performance in Yemen*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, especially in Chapter 3, pp. 103–147.

especially in those countries where it is not compulsory to vote.<sup>4</sup> A decline in voter turnouts therefore causes concern, as it is a clear indication of a disengaged or disenchanting electorate. For a democratically elected government to be genuinely for, of, and by the people, a greater aggregate of people involved in selecting the government is of crucial importance. Thus, it is reasonable to surmise that the probity of electoral procedure and the rates of voter turnouts are immensely important features of any modern democracy, regardless of social context. Given this, the case of Indian democracy—with the largest electorate in the world of over 815 million voters—is an interesting one. India's record on non-electoral indicators of a democracy, namely, human rights, accountability of the elected, and transparency of institutions is mixed; there is a considerable 'liberal deficit'; and the legitimacy of the state and its actors, including the political establishment, is low.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, Indians are keen voters and vote in ever-increasing numbers at all levels of elections. The challenge for observers of Indian democracy is therefore to explain this seeming contradiction: that is, why do people continue to vote enthusiastically, despite the failure of governments to perform in their interests?<sup>6</sup> This article is a response to that challenge.

Elections in India have two seemingly contradictory impulses: on the one hand, they are conducted to a high degree of efficiency, with elections held on time and in a largely 'free and fair' manner that, given the impoverished state of infrastructure in the country and general record of non-performance by public officials, is extraordinary.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See the recent attempt at classifying democracies according to several criteria in R. Youngs, *The Puzzle of Non-Western Democracy*, Carnegie, Washington, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Varshney, 'India's Democratic Challenge', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 2, March 2007, pp. 93–106.

<sup>6</sup> In a recent paper Laura Zimmerman indicates that voter turnout increases in areas with a higher quality of implementation of government-led welfare programmes such as NREGA, a rural employment guarantee scheme. Such analyses that link voter turnout with government performance or other factors are, however, rare. See L. Zimmerman, 'May there be Victory: Government Election Performance and the World's Largest Public-Works Program', IZA Discussion Papers, No. 9161, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> For an examination of the 'free and fair' nature of Indian elections, see D. Gilmartin, 'Voting and Party Symbols in India: The Visual and the Law in Constituting the Sovereign People', Triangle Legal History Seminar, National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, NC, 9 September 2016, pp. 1–3. It should also be noted that India has among the highest numbers of 'election petitions' in the world and the conduct of elections is not uniformly efficient everywhere. However, given the scale of the exercise (one million

Yet elections are also dominated by enormous amounts of unaccounted-for cash, violence, and intimidation by political actors who attempt to influence the outcome through these means. Thus, there is widespread use of coercion alongside a high degree of electoral participation. The task of explaining increasing voter turnouts within such a contradictory scenario is thus tricky because it is hard to determine whether the use of money and its accompanying practices of violence, incentives, vote-buying, intimidation, and criminality drive people to the polling stations. Do people vote because they are compelled to? The contradiction raises further questions. Do indirect transactional processes such as patronage and public services also affect turnout? Is there any voluntary engagement by voters or is their motivation to vote solely driven by incentives and intimidation? Does the choice of who to vote for determine whether they will vote at all? Does anyone vote because they think it is important to vote? Does the act of voting in itself hold any meaning for voters?

The scholarship on Indian elections often links transactional motivations to electoral outcomes, thereby highlighting the role that identity, money, and muscle play in determining popular choice in elections. This literature is diverse and rich, and goes a long way towards explaining voter motivations.<sup>8</sup> To these, in this article, I will add additional meanings that voters attach to the act of voting, based on my own long-term, village-level anthropological research as well as data from a comparative ethnographic project conducted by a team during the 2009 national elections.<sup>9</sup> Research has revealed that, while it

electronic voting machines, 12 million election officials, over 900,000 polling booths) elections in India are considered to be within acceptable levels of procedural efficiency.

<sup>8</sup> The existing rich literature on Indian elections focuses largely on whom—that is, which party and candidate—people vote for. See Mary Breeding, ‘The Micro-Politics of Vote Banks in Karnataka’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 14, 2011; L. Michelutti, ‘“We (Yadavs) are a Caste of Politicians”’: Caste and Modern Politics in a North Indian Town’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 38, no. 1–2, February 2004, pp. 43–71; and L. Michelutti, ‘The Vernacularization of Democracy: Political Participation and Popular Politics in North India’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13, no. 3, September 2007, pp. 639–656; and S. Singh, ‘Candidate Caste Effects in Uttar Pradesh Elections’, *Studies in Indian Politics*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 179–197; and J. Ruet and S. T. Lama-Rewal, *Governing India’s Metropolises*, Routledge, London, 2009, for comprehensive reviews.

<sup>9</sup> The field research for the comparative electoral ethnographies project focused on four questions which I framed for the larger project. It was conducted over one month before and during the 2009 general elections in 12 sites. The project researchers submitted reports

was evident that elections were indeed dominated by money, violence, and patronage, voters were nevertheless able to preserve a sense of citizenship in their individual act of casting a vote. When asked directly what the vote meant to them, voters focused on the actual experience of voting and explained that they considered the act of voting a rare and precious performance of a highly personal civic duty which allowed them to experience political equality and democratic values that were otherwise invisible in everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Performed citizenship of this sort was as much an interior state as it was a public duty, and signified individual dignity and selfhood that was prior and foundational to any future claim-making as citizens. It was for this reason that they considered elections to be precious and sacrosanct events, despite their association with the venality of politicians, money, and its practices. While they acknowledged that they usually had to vote *for* someone, their decision to vote *at all* was because the act of voting itself held meaning.

In this article I propose that any theory of the vote in India needs to accommodate both of these instrumental and expressive aspects of the vote as they coexist, despite their seeming contradiction. I shall examine each of these aspects in turn: in the first half of the article, I will examine the more transactional aspects of elections, which include a diverse set of practices, from vote-buying to patronage. These various practices work in different temporal cycles of immediate transaction versus long-term relationships of clientelism which, when taken together, explain the instrumental factors that determine electoral choice and, in turn, voter participation. I will then present the second set of explanations that people themselves offered when asked directly ‘Why do you vote?’ It is revealing that although all of the factors described in the first part of the article, namely the more instrumental ones, continued to affect voters during the 2009 elections, when researchers directly asked voters why they voted, people used the opportunity to explain what the vote meant to them and offered additional reasons. Thus, by placing these various motivations within the same explanatory frame, I hope to offer a comprehensive theory of the vote in India.

from their respective field sites and the material from the original reports was integrated with my own fieldwork. See M. Banerjee, *Why India Votes? Exploring the Political in South Asia*, Routledge, New Delhi and London, 2014. In both the latter and in this article, information taken from the field reports submitted by the researchers is indicated with the following reference: FR: original page number.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to analytically fetishize ‘the electoral moment’, but to take seriously the explanations that voters themselves offered as their reasons for voting.

### **'Money' and elections**

It is evident to anyone studying elections in India that they involve considerable sums of money. Full page advertisements on the front pages of major newspapers, gigantic hoardings along highways and in cities, cameras that amplify the size of crowds at public meetings and feed footage directly to TV stations, holograms of candidates that magically appear on a stage while they are physically elsewhere, and so on—all expensive devices of political campaigning. Less visible, but just as effective, are 'paid news' or 'advertorials' reporting on the virtues of certain candidates or the scandals of another, depending on who is paying. Elections also cause a sudden spate of 'weddings' and 'birthday parties' that call for mass feasting hosted by political parties for their workers, fixers, and constituents. Money is also spent on 'rent-a-crowds' mobilized for political rallies. Less visibly, candidates and political parties hand out cash and incentives directly to individuals to use as they see fit to entice constituents. Political parties all use these money-rich tactics to create shock and awe, to change people's opinions by bombarding them with messages, or simply to cultivate support among people to be harvested in the form of votes. There is little regulation of 'money' in Indian elections and the only cap on expenditure is for individual candidates and not political parties. The money that is spent during elections is often from unaccounted-for funds, making it impossible to find hard evidence of actual figures of expenditure or their sources. This causes wild variations across parties and candidates in their campaign strategies and makes for an extremely uneven playing field. The Election Commission of India (ECI), despite its vigilance and desire to do so, spectacularly fails to control expenditure in elections.

The practice of such widespread unaccounted-for election expenditure by political parties can be traced back to 1969 when India's prime minister Indira Gandhi banned corporate donations to political parties. Before then, such donations were recorded and they were available for scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> Though the lion's share of donations went to the Congress, Mrs Gandhi's party, which was the dominant one at the time, her action was designed to starve the opposition parties of funds to silence

<sup>11</sup> See D. Maiorano, *Autumn of the Matriarch: Indira Gandhi's Final Term in Office*, Hurst and Co., Oxford University Press, London and New York, 2015, especially pp. 17–18, for a fuller account.

criticism. Businesses that were critical of Mrs Gandhi's increasingly 'socialist' politics were willing to fund rival political parties. The ban and simultaneous growing government control of business had two major effects: it choked off funds to the opposition and it simultaneously allowed the Congress administration to extract extortionate amounts of unaccounted-for money from corporations in exchange for licences to trade. From this point on, the relationship between money and political influence in Indian politics has remained unaccounted-for, opaque, and part of the black economy. To assess the linkages between money and elections is thus a tough challenge for any scholar. And to demonstrate the linkages between money spent and electoral outcomes is an even greater challenge. But some excellent research exists on both issues.

The issue of political finance has been tackled by Vaishnav and Sridharan who report that during the last Indian national elections in 2014, an estimated US\$ 5 billion was spent by political parties on their campaigns.<sup>12</sup> That this occurs in a country that is 130th on the global Human Development Index is a travesty. They show how a combination of factors has severely stymied political finance regulation, among which the state's strong involvement in access to assets such as land, minerals, and real estate had led to a 'system of trading policy and regulatory favours for payments and anonymous campaign donations'.<sup>13</sup> To address the issue of irregularities in campaign expenditure, they point out that some progressive measures have been introduced. These include tax breaks for party contributions and the 2005 Right to Information Act, which led to a ruling in 2008 'compelling parties to publicly release their income and expenditure records' and for candidates to file affidavits disclosing 'their criminal, educational and financial details'.<sup>14</sup> Yet despite these, political financial regulation remains weak. This is in large measure the result of the weak enforcement powers of the ECI which is otherwise immune to political interference through its constitutional sovereignty. In March 2017, the Government of India did pass a new bill on political finance, but as a finance bill in order to bypass the scrutiny of the upper house of

<sup>12</sup> M. Vaishnav and E. Sridharan, 'Checkbook Elections?: Political Finance in Comparative Perspective', 16 July 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/07/16/checkbook-elections-political-finance-in-comparative-perspective-pub-60754>, [accessed 15 March 2019]. See also M. Vaishnav, *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

parliament (where it does not have a voting majority). This effectively undid the good work of the 2008 ruling. The new bill has made political finance issues even more opaque and vulnerable to manipulation—the cash limit of each contribution was lowered from Rs 20,000 to Rs 2,000 but the disclosure threshold was left untouched, the previous cap on corporate contributions was eliminated, and avenues for scrutiny of the source of funding of political parties were effectively shut down. This has further weakened the ECI whose outstanding performance in conducting the elections notwithstanding, effectively now has little or no leverage over electoral expenditure by political parties. The net result is that the nexus between criminality, money, and politics continues to be deep and calls into question the credibility of elections.<sup>15</sup>

In an earlier paper, Kapur and Vaishnav, through an imaginative use of quantitative data, demonstrated one way of tracing the precise linkages between money, politics, and sources of cash during elections by tracking figures of cement sales.<sup>16</sup> They showed that there was a discernible drop in the demand for cement during elections, which indicated a relationship between builders and politicians. The reason: the cash that fuelled the building industry is rerouted to politicians to fund their election campaigns, causing a temporary contraction in cement sales. They argue that the nexus between these two sets of actors—builders and politicians—was largely to do with the symbiotic relationship between them: builders need politicians to acquire building permission and politicians need somewhere to park their ill-gotten wealth. The ideal location for their black money required a ‘financial mechanism that has the features of a bank without the traceability of a physical account’.<sup>17</sup> Real estate—a large and dynamic sector in India—had the required characteristics of such a financial mechanism. It had an absorptive capacity for large sums of cash owing to the lack of bank loans available to this sector (and because cement could only be paid for in cash), it could make the assets easily available (by simply pausing construction during elections), and it had the mechanism for enforcing

<sup>15</sup> I do not wish to suggest, obviously, that the influence of money and muscle is in any way unique to Indian elections: it is unfortunately a feature of many democracies.

<sup>16</sup> D. Kapur and M. Vaishnav, ‘Quid Pro Quo: Builders, Politicians, and Election Finance in India’, Centre for Global Development, Working Paper 276, 12 July 2011, <http://www.cgdev.org/publication/quid-pro-quo-builders-politicians-and-election-finance-india-working-paper-276-updated>, [accessed 15 March 2019].

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



the contract because of the mutually dependent relationship with politicians. The value of this piece of research is that it made black money visible—by showing the dynamics of its flow (measured by cement sale figures) in relation to electoral rhythms.

But what, we may ask, do these vast sums of money actually achieve in an election? As noted, it clearly buys both a party and candidates visibility. In India's vast parliamentary constituencies, reaching every voter is an enormous challenge.<sup>18</sup> With the increasing professionalization of election management, it is evident that a vast amount of money is utilized in strategic ways to create visibility and to compensate the intermediaries who campaign door-to-door on behalf of candidates. But are the campaign coffers also used to buy votes? Comparative research across several democracies has found that vote-buying is perhaps the most unreliable way to win an election. At the end of a volume presenting several national case studies, Frederic Schaffer presents the following conclusion, 'Vote buying is far from a sure-fire strategy—even when accompanied by a panoply of instrumental, coercive, and normative strategies to boost the rate of compliance among voters. Where balloting is at least intermittently secret, many people defect.'<sup>19</sup> The correlation between expenditure and electoral outcome, it can be concluded, is a weak one and the candidate or party that spends the most does not always win elections. And yet it is impossible to deny that money *is* spent, so what does it actually achieve? Lisa Björkman addresses precisely this issue and shows that 'multiple logics [are] operative in election-time cash flows; actors involved with moving money have divergent and sometimes conflicting aspirations, motivations and agendas, within which cash itself plays various roles simultaneously'.<sup>20</sup> Thus money works in multiple ways rather than merely to 'buy votes'. Björkman explains further in another piece co-authored with Jeff Witsoe, a scholar of Bihar politics. They examine the key role that money from the trade in sand—a key ingredient for cement and therefore the real estate industry—plays in political connections. Because of the materiality of sand, its value for an industry

<sup>18</sup> The average Indian parliamentary constituency is 20 times the size of a UK one; a single Indian MP can represent over two million voters compared to about 70,000 in the UK.

<sup>19</sup> F. C. Schaffer, *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, Lynne Rienner Publications, Boulder, CO, 2007, p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> L. Björkman, "'You can't Buy a Vote': Meanings of Money in a Mumbai Election', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 41, no. 4, November 2014, pp. 617–634, p. 617.

that largely relies on cash (as we have seen above), and the need for it to be transported from its source in riverbeds to construction sites across the country, the sand mafia that controls its trade have become the gateway into village and regional politics, and have emerged as key political players connecting the local with a wider stage and providing access to the local. The authors propose that ‘just spending money is not how elections are won. Cash generates relationships and it is these relationships that ultimately win elections.’<sup>21</sup> Their work demonstrates that it is not the fact of money being spent nor even the amount that is important, but the *manner* in which it is spent that is key as well as the channels through which money flows. This reveals the strength of a candidate’s networks, which has real political valence. The ‘multiple logics’ of money reveal the candidate’s ability to make the right judgements about how money is spent and it is this ability that voters evaluate.

At this stage in the argument, we can come to some important conclusions. First, money does not simply buy votes, as there is no straightforward correlation between monetary investment and electoral results (the richest parties do not always win elections), although everyone recognizes that more and more money is spent during elections. Second, as Björkman and Witsoe’s argument demonstrates, a discussion of money in elections clearly has to go beyond the mere discussion of ‘vote-buying’ as some sort of contractual exchange and rather recognize how money is used for long-term investments in networks, reputation, and social capital generally. They show that ‘the mechanism of cash gifting helps and hopes to produce these relations of obligation and mutual benefit’ rather than merely reinforce or buy loyalty.<sup>22</sup> Thirdly, the role of money in Indian elections has to be delinked from the phenomenon of a ‘vote bank’, as M. N. Srinivas described Indian politics in the 1950s—as a captive electorate whose votes can be controlled by a traditional patron.<sup>23</sup> Instead, as the examples above have demonstrated, in contemporary India, it is the control of mobile and cash rich resources such as sand and cement, and the possession of hard cash that can be shifted easily, rather than land, that provides both financial and social capital. The control of mobile

<sup>21</sup> L. Björkman and J. Witsoe, ‘Money and Votes: Following Flows through Mumbai and Bihar’, in D. Kapur and M. Vaishnav (eds), *Costs of Democracy: Political Finance in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2018, p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, M. N. Srinivas, ‘The Social Structure of a Mysore Village’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 3, no. 42–43, 30 October 1951, pp. 1051–1056.

assets allows political actors to demonstrate the complexity and spread of their networks and their 'reach', as it is popularly described in India. These new networks create new economies and new identities that lead to new political and electoral capital—and often financial capital is used to gain access to these forms of capital. Finally, as Schaffer indicates in the quote cited above, the secrecy of the ballot is a key feature of a genuinely 'free' vote.

This was confirmed in *Why India Votes*, the comparative research project undertaken across India, where it was evident that although people freely accepted bribes/gifts of colour televisions and saris, accepting them did not correlate in any way to who they voted for. As voters explained, more than one party handed out material incentives, so while voters coolly accepted gifts from all of them, they ultimately voted for the party they wanted to. When the question of reciprocity was put to them, one woman retorted 'Do you think my vote can be bought with one sari or a TV?!' Witsoe pithily captures this sentiment by stating, 'vote buying is acknowledged but rarely vote selling'. Voters saw elections as a moment of redistribution when politicians were forced to share some of their ill-gotten gains. Thus, voters made the most of the bounty of the election season, but money did not play a straightforward transactional role by buying votes. It worked in far subtler and non-material ways, as Björkman and Witsoe show.

In another recent study, Tariq Thachil's data further deepen our understanding of reciprocity in transactional mechanisms.<sup>24</sup> In the three large Indian states where he conducted his research he examined the perplexing phenomenon of poor voters voting for elite parties who were unlikely to articulate their identity and interests. He looked at the role of incentives in influencing poor voters, often assumed by lay observers of politics to occur.<sup>25</sup> The corollary of such an assumption would indicate that incumbent governments with the easiest access to patronage goods are in the strongest position to win elections. However, evidence shows that exactly the opposite is true, which is to say that incumbent governments are frequently voted out of power, and neither does an appeal to identity and ethnic interests sway very poor voters. Why then, Thachil asks, do poor voters vote for elite parties? He reports that the provision of services, rather than material handouts,

<sup>24</sup> T. Thachil, *Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> This is, of course, a classic issue in the study of politics in democracies the world over.

was likely to have a greater influence on determining voter choice. For poor voters, the provision of basic services of health and education, rather than material goods, is key and any political party that worked towards delivering those was most likely to win votes during elections. In his study, voters emerged not merely as clients who voted for the party that offered the highest bribe/gift during an election campaign, but as discerning citizens who rewarded those parties who worked directly or indirectly to make the most essential services available to them in the short to medium term. In a creative move, Thachil also probed the question of reciprocity and obligation to ask if voters felt in any way bound to vote for the party whose affiliated organization did excellent and non-partisan work in providing education and health care. The answers to his questions were startling and showed that, while people felt it was good to reward them with their votes, they did not feel any obligation to do so. To the survey question that asked if they 'felt they had to' vote for such a party (*dena padta hai*), an overwhelming 87 per cent replied that they did not. But when they were asked whether they felt they should give something back (*dena chahiye*), nearly half of them said they did.<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to note that, despite good governance being a more important factor than incentives in determining choice, it still did not exert a coercive power.

These conclusions are similar to research done in Latin American democracies.<sup>27</sup> In Lazar's study of a municipal election in the Bolivian town of El Alto, she shows how clientelism not only has instrumental and pragmatic aspects, but that the relationship that voters establish with their political clients has an affective dimension too.<sup>28</sup> The issues of reciprocity and promised benefits that come up during an election campaign are the result of the immediacy and affective nature of election expenditure, gifts, bribes, and patronage, in contrast to a disinterested and distant bureaucracy that they faced the rest of the time. The election therefore presents an opportunity to voters to exercise their judgement and make their claims on candidates and parties who are most likely to deliver much-needed services. Both Björkman's work<sup>29</sup> and Piliavsky's edited collection of

<sup>26</sup> Thachil, *Elite Parties, Poor Voters*, p. 475.

<sup>27</sup> See J. Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> S. Lazar, 'Personalist Politics, Clientelism and Citizenship: Local Elections in El Alto, Bolivia', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2004, pp. 228–243.

<sup>29</sup> See Björkman, "You can't Buy a Vote".

essays<sup>30</sup> show that, through their multiple-level engagement with political actors during a campaign, voters can be seen to be deepening the processes of political participation and making the political process more, rather than less, representative.<sup>31</sup>

We have seen thus far that, while there is a transactional quality to the relationship between political patrons and their clients through the provision of money or services, it is nothing like a straightforward exchange. This is confirmed by anthropologists writing about patronage elsewhere, who have shown that it is not a simple transaction of material favours in exchange for votes; instead, different sorts of transactions have moral meanings associated with them.<sup>32</sup> In the Indian context, Anastasia Piliavsky has explored some of these moral meanings, making a case for a distinction to be drawn between ‘bribes’ and ‘gifts’ in the Indian state of Rajasthan.<sup>33</sup> She draws our attention to people’s moral categories regarding different sorts of giving and points to a distinction that is made between incentives such as bribes, which are considered immoral, versus incentives that are offered as gifts, and are therefore considered to be virtuous. Thus, for example, a feast offered to a community, she argues, would be seen as virtuous and legitimate, whereas stuffing money into someone’s pocket would not. The former, she argues, was not only considered to be virtuous but the very dharma (moral duty) of politicians, whereas the latter was considered corruption. Politicians therefore played on this nuance by offering their incentives,

<sup>30</sup> A. Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Ethnographic work has provided excellent analysis of ‘muscle’ or brute force in Indian politics, that is, the social, political, and financial capital that political actors accrue through their criminal pasts. A five-year, multi-sited study ‘An Anthropological Investigation of Muscular Politics’ (AISMA) (ERC 284080) is a collaborative project directed by Lucia Michelutti and others. It examines the modus operandi of systems of muscular political and economic governance in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In a recent article, Piliavsky and Sbriccoli show that people choose muscle men (or goondas) as their leaders, not because of their lack of virtue but because they are able to get things done. They call this ‘the ethics of efficacy’, a key feature of political man. See A. Piliavsky, and T. Sbriccoli, ‘The Ethics of Efficacy in North India’s Goonda Raj (Rule of Toughs)’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2016, pp. 373–391. See also Kanchan Chandra’s recent volume which demonstrates how dynastic politics in contemporary democracies emerge out of particular institutional arrangements: K. Chandra (ed.), *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Lazar, ‘Personalist Politics’.

<sup>33</sup> Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as Politics*.

by making a public show of this, and by making an offering to a collective body of people. But rather than reject such material incentivization during the electoral process, which could seriously influence a voter's choice, Piliavsky suggests the very opposite, arguing that such public, collective, and virtuous giving created bonds between politicians and voters that generated political loyalty which, in turn, translated into greater political engagement of the electorate during elections. According to such a reading, if delivered in morally acceptable terms, patronage was ultimately good for democracy because it fostered political participation. This last conclusion is arguable, but here a clear case is made for the important role that patronage plays in determining high turnouts among voters keen to support their patrons. Steve Wilkinson's article in the same volume reinforces this conclusion; he states that people vote 'in part because they value democracy, but it is also likely that their vote promises more immediate, tangible and relatively valuable returns from patrons or parties. Were it not for the large amount of patronage, Indian voter statistics would probably look much more like the other countries where the poor vote notably less than the rich.'<sup>34</sup> So while he recognizes that part of the explanation for voter enthusiasm may be an attachment to the idea of democracy, Wilkinson ultimately cites patronage as the deciding factor for high turnouts in India.

To conclude this section on the role of 'money' in elections, we can draw some important conclusions on the basis of the studies discussed here. First, to draw a causal link between incentives and who people vote for would be hasty. While it is true that millions of voters accepted inducements during a campaign, it seems impossible to surmise that these inducements were enough to buy their vote. Voters clearly did not feel much obligation to vote for anyone unless they judged them to be worthy. Second, the reason voters felt they could defy any coercive pressure exercised by political parties during the campaign was mainly because they had recourse to a secret ballot. Third, even when parties performed well during their time in power, and used this as a measure to persuade voters to vote for them again, voters felt they were not obliged to reward them. These are valuable and persuasive insights, and go a long way towards demonstrating that elections are complex sites of popular claim-making and that transactional behaviour (if not patronage per se)—albeit of a longer, more complex nature than

<sup>34</sup> S. Wilkinson, 'Patronage politics in post-independence India', in Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as Politics*, p. 276.

immediate reciprocity—among voters remains a strong determinant in their decision to vote or not.

But is this a sufficient explanation for the high and rising voter turnouts in Indian elections? If the desire for rewards, material or immaterial, is not the main reason why people vote, and instead it is the performance of a political party on delivering basic health and education, how then do we explain why voter turnouts continue to remain high in areas where there is an absence of basic services? Why do rich people who do not rely on the state's health and education services vote? Why do immigrants living in faraway cities make expensive journeys home to vote? How can we explain why someone who possesses nothing is left bereft when they are unable to vote? In India there is an intensity to people's commitment to voting that leads us to question whether the act of voting itself held some valuable meaning, regardless of whether it led to any benefits in the future. Does simply having the right to vote hold significance for socially disenfranchised citizens? Are there behavioural pathways alongside the transactional that could throw some light on the question of why voting is considered such an important act to perform? I turn to these questions in the next section of the article.

### **'Meaning' in elections**

While all of the 'money' factors were in evidence in the *Why India Votes* study during the 2009 nation elections, when the research question 'Why do you vote?' was posed directly to voters, people offered a variety of additional explanations. A frequent immediate riposte was the counter question 'Why would you *not* vote?!', after which an often-cited reason for voting was the assertion that it was the most accessible way of being recognized by the state. As people put it, the very presence of their name on an official voters' list confirmed that they existed in the official landscape—a sort of bureaucratic existentialism. As one person explained, 'Once we vote our name gets recorded in the government's register and because of this we are accepted as the citizens of this village by the Government. And only then will everyone in the wider society (*samaq*) know that we are the citizens of this village.'<sup>35</sup> While

<sup>35</sup> See Banerjee for the ubiquity of the English word 'vote' used as part of the lexicon in languages across India: S. Banerjee, 'Vote', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2017, pp. 410–412.

people knew in theory they were Indian citizens, it was the procedure of voting—involving identity cards, lists, and indelible ink—that made concrete the immaterial nature of this citizenship.<sup>36</sup> This desire to be recorded on paper as confirmation of existence is also reported by Jonathan Anjaria in his work on illegal street hawkers in Mumbai. He shows how even punitive paper fines were seen to legitimize their presence and were used by the hawkers as a means of making future claims. Some kept the receipts for years after the original fine as proof of their right to access the streets; ‘the possession of paper proving continuous physical presence, even if illegal, confers considerable legal and symbolic power’.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the hawkers’ desire for visibility and formal acknowledgement was highlighted by their cooperation with the teams conducting the surveys, who claimed that the hawkers were ‘generally quite cooperative and were keen to fill up the forms as they felt it might give them some legitimacy for carrying on their activity’.<sup>38</sup> In this landscape of ‘paper truths’ in the context of elections,<sup>39</sup> by presenting themselves in front of the polling officers with their Electoral Photo Identity Cards (EPICs), voters who otherwise felt forgotten by the state project were able to make themselves visible to it and stake the most fundamental claim of citizenship.<sup>40</sup> As one voter explained, ‘I realize that to vote is my fundamental right but having done it I will now get a new identity as an equal citizen of my village.’ So simply put, voting made the idea of citizenship material. People acknowledged that although this recognition in itself did not guarantee good governance, it at least confirmed that the state and the political system had not forgotten about them altogether. This anxiety of socially

<sup>36</sup> In her forthcoming book Ornit Shani painstakingly charts the story of India’s first election, demonstrating how radical it was to introduce universal suffrage in a largely illiterate and poor country and the challenges it posed to both the bureaucratic and popular imagination. See O. Shani, ‘Making India’s Democracy. Rewriting the Bureaucratic Colonial Imagination in the Preparation of the First Elections’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 36, no. 1, May 2016, pp. 83–101.

<sup>37</sup> J. S. Anjaria, ‘Ordinary States: Everyday Corruption and the Politics of Space in Mumbai’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2011, pp. 58–72, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS)–YUVA 1998, p. 6, in *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> See E. Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> See also Bear and Mathur for an account of boatmen on the Hooghly who use ‘receipts’ as a way to legitimize their precarious and informal existence: L. Bear and N. Mathur, ‘Remaking the Public Good: A New Anthropology of Bureaucracy’, *Cambridge Anthropology*, Special Issue, vol. 33, no. 1, 2015.



disadvantaged individuals to register their presence has to be put in perspective: they live in an electorate of more than 815 million people and the size of each Indian parliamentary constituency is vast, 20 times larger than, say, the average UK constituency. However, many remarked that voting was largely possible because of the smooth conduct of elections by an efficient electoral machinery, in stark contrast to the Indian bureaucracy which tends to be more of an impediment than an enabler. As Priya, a young woman in Tamil Nadu, put it: ‘The government gives us no other benefits, it only respects us in that regard!’<sup>41</sup>

Polling officials themselves could not stress enough the importance of accuracy and probity in the conduct of elections so as to retain the trust of voters in the sanctity of the electoral process. They reported that, unlike their everyday jobs, they approached election duty with a mixture of excitement and dread—a wedding and examination rolled into one (*yeh pariksha bhi hai aur shaadi bhi*). In all accounts of Indian bureaucracy, such a sense of commitment and sincerity on the part of bureaucrats and appreciation by members of the public is unheard of.<sup>42,43</sup> In fact, Akhil Gupta’s work argues precisely the opposite—that Indian bureaucracy and its crippling procedures are a form of structural violence against poverty and people. But the constitutional autonomy of the ECI and the ephemeral nature of electoral bureaucracy which is assembled only for elections made it a remarkably different beast to the ‘steel frame’ of the Indian administration.<sup>44</sup>

The structural violence of the Indian state and its repeated technologies of exploitation and extraction have led to a deep suspicion of any official activity, including elections. In some areas people have chosen to ‘keep the state away’ by committing to alternative political imaginations and models.<sup>45,46</sup> In these instances, turnouts at elections can be low. However, in northeastern India, where Naga communities also reject the logic of electoral competition in favour of local understandings of

<sup>41</sup> De Neve and Carswell FR: 17–18 in Banerjee, *Why India Votes?*, p. 162.

<sup>42</sup> A. Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> N. Mathur, *Paper Tiger: Law, Bureaucracy and the Developmental State in Himalayan India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> See Banerjee, *Why India Votes?*, Chapter 4, especially pp. 119–122, for a fuller discussion of the electoral machinery of the ECI.

<sup>45</sup> A. Shah, *In The Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> N. Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar 1854–2006*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008.

strategic political alliances, voter turnout rates are much higher than the national average.<sup>47</sup> In some fascinating recent work, Wouters offers a way of understanding this. He shows that while Nagas vote enthusiastically, they do not do so according to the rules of multi-party competition, but as a way to express local values of cohesion and consensus based on different models of social allegiances. Thus, because individual votes for particular parties exacerbated difference and threatened social cohesion, peer pressure forced groups to come to a consensual choice of a single candidate that everyone would vote for so that the local social order was not disturbed. The Naga example, in contrast to Shah's work, shows that even when there is a culturalist critique of one of the central tenets of the democratic system—that is, multi-party competition—it does not always translate to rejection. In fact, here it leads to extremely high voter turnout rates. If anything, it could be argued that elections provide the opportunity to create social cohesion through the process of deliberation and the consensual choice of a single candidate.

The evidence increasingly points out that perhaps people often vote not just to support a particular party or candidate but for other reasons. Some very interesting data available from the 2014 national elections and a few regional elections prior to that, when the ECI introduced a new option, NOTA (None of the Above), in all electronic voting machines (EVMs) allows us to probe this suggestion further. NOTA enabled voters to 'spoil the ballot paper' which was not otherwise technically possible on an EVM. The uptake for this option was immediate: in 2014, 1.1 per cent of all votes cast across India were registered for NOTA and an average of 10,000 votes were cast for it in every constituency. In every subsequent election NOTA has registered more and more votes, and while 1.1 per cent is not a large figure in absolute terms, in at least 19 constituencies NOTA votes may have affected the final result, as its vote share was higher than the winning margin between the first and second candidates. In the Bihar state elections in 2015, NOTA polled more than the winning margin in the significantly high number of 23 seats. In Chhattisgarh's state elections held in 2013, NOTA polled more than the winning margin in 15 seats. In the state of Odisha during the 2014

<sup>47</sup> See J. P. Wouters, 'Performing Democracy in Nagaland: Past Politics and Present Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 49, no. 16, 2014, pp. 59–66; and J. P. Wouters, 'Feasts of Merit, Election Feasts, or No Feasts? On the Politics of Wining and Dining in Nagaland', *The South Asianist*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 5–23.

national elections, NOTA polled more than 4 per cent of the votes.<sup>48</sup> There may be several explanations for this evidence, but we may conclude that whatever the motivation, those voting NOTA view the act of voting *as an end in itself*. By bothering to turn up, with the correct ID and willingness to queue, only to press a button that does not support any individual or political party, significant numbers of voters appear to be sending the message that they believe there is some intrinsic merit in the act of voting, without necessarily using it to support anyone in particular. The figures for NOTA votes thus draw attention to the act of voting itself and raise the possibility that the vote is not only used instrumentally to garner a particular result, but perhaps also to achieve a symbolic meaning.

The following vignette from a scene on polling day during the 2009 national elections provides a glimpse into the potency of this symbolism:

One morning in May, when the agricultural grain market was winding down from a busy season of wheat sales, we found Rukmini Bai, an elderly woman who worked in the trading yard, wiping away tears with the end of her sari. She was inconsolable, and explained that the day before she had been unable to vote at the elections because she did not have the correct identification. She had produced other pieces of paper with no success, so in the end, she had to wait outside the polling booth and watch everyone else emerge with newly-inked fingers proving they had cast their vote, while her own remained bare. When we asked why this upset her so much she explained that every vote was important and she did not want to waste hers. When we tried to console her saying that it was after all, only one vote, and that her missing vote in unlikely to affect the outcome, she paused amidst her tears and said, 'You know what my job is! My work is to sweep up all the grain that falls from the sacks and the weighing scales on the floor. At the end of the day, I sell what I have collected and I am allowed to keep half the money. That is my income. So you see, I spend all day chasing every last grain because I understand their value. On the floor they look insignificant, just one isolated grain of wheat, but each grain that is added to the heap determines what I earn. My vote is like those grains of wheat.'<sup>49</sup>

Rukmini Bai's description of her vote and its significance presents an altogether different understanding of the meaning of the vote to those we have considered so far. By stating that her single vote is valuable, she rejects the logic of the aggregate that renders an individual vote irrelevant. She draws our attention to the fact that it is thousands,

<sup>48</sup> The NOTA option is not available in panchayat elections, the most local tier of elections.

<sup>49</sup> Krishnamurthy FR: 1 in Banerjee, *Why India Votes?*, p. 2.

indeed millions, of people like her, with their single votes, who make up a collective. She also rejects the reasoning of the free rider who hides within this collective by relying on the conscientiousness of others and abstaining from doing their bit. In fact, as the vignette demonstrates, she was distraught precisely because she had been unable to add her own opinion to the collective, fully knowing, as her analogy indicates, that it will be indistinguishable from the others, as wheat grains are in a sack. Her tears were for her failure to add her vote to the others, to make her presence felt, and to belong to a collective. We knew that over a period of several years Rukmini Bai had managed to vote on some occasions and not on others, and that this had not affected the material reality of her life either way. Despite this, her sense of loss at not being able to vote and the accompanying desire to participate indicated that elections and the ability to vote carried a set of meanings that went beyond money or instrumentalism. I would argue that any theory of why people vote needs to accommodate this kind of affective attachment to the act of voting. To fully understand this expressive aspect of the vote, elections need to be seen within a wider social context.

Elections in India bring with them a distinct political temporality and are clearly demarcated from everyday time and events. Election Day is a public holiday in India, which immediately disrupts the normal rhythm of daily life and turns the day into a special one. People tend to rise early to arrange their day around the trip to the polling station. In rural India, women accelerate their household tasks to complete them before a quick bath and dressing in their 'best' saris for the outing. Village men tend to make their trip to the polling station early so that they can free up the rest of the day to get on with other things or to simply exchange news and gossip of the election with others as events unfold. The rhythm of the day is much like it is for other festival days when the normality of 'everydayness' is suspended to create a feeling of specialness through a different domestic routine, nice clothes, special foods, and the luxuries of extended play and television-watching for families. Election Day in India is as a culmination of a long period of campaigning that attains a carnival-like atmosphere, similar to what Auyero describes as the 'time of elections' in Brazil.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See J. Auyero, 'The Logic of Clientelism in Argentina: An Ethnographic Account', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2000, pp. 55–81; and J. Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2001.

De Tocqueville provides an account of an American election, where, despite only 11 elections having taken place before his visit, the pattern seemed to have been set for perpetuity and resonates with the Indian scenario. 'As the election draws near, intrigues intensify, and agitation increases and spreads. The citizens divide into several camps, each behind his candidate. A fever grips the entire nation. The election becomes the daily grist of the public papers, the subject of private conversation, the aim of all activity, the object of all thought, the sole interest of the moment.' And then, as it ends 'ardor dissipates, calm is restored, and the river, having briefly overflowed its banks, returns peacefully to its bed'.<sup>51</sup> This change in rhythm is what all rituals do: replace the banality of the everyday by rearranging daily life's little jobs so that the day is unlike all others.

The polling station itself is physically marked off from the rest of the neighbourhood by security guards and officials.<sup>52</sup> Political party workers are permitted to set up desks on the perimeter to hand people their voting slips, check off names, and provide information to anyone who needs it. For the voters, therefore, once they have passed this point, there is a noticeable lessening of the din. Any external influences of political parties, their workers, and opinion-givers are shut out and the focus shifts to the job at hand. As they enter the voting space, conversation, even among voters who come with others, tends to fade. At the booth itself queues are mostly orderly and formed strictly on a first-come, first-served basis, which in itself is a relatively rare occurrence in public spaces in India. Further, the composition of a queue at a polling station is unlike any other in India, for while there might in theory be democratic access to public spaces, only particular groups of people, either through self-selection or social exclusion, occupy them at any time.<sup>53</sup> In a polling queue, however, there is evidence of a genuine social mix. In cities, it is common for the very wealthy to live alongside those whose income is significantly lower (and

<sup>51</sup> Quote from de Tocqueville taken from J. Epstein, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy's Guide*, HarperCollins, New York, 2006, p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> The following account is based on the findings of the dozen researchers from different parts of the country involved in the *Why India Votes* project who were present on election day in polling booths across the country as well as my own personal experience of observing elections for over 15 years in different parts of India. I recognize, however, that this description may not match the reality equally in all parts of India.

<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that violence continues to be used in twenty-first century India to refuse entry rights to lower castes and women to places of worship.

who often provide domestic services for the wealthy who live nearby); in villages, a polling station often serves more than one village and so strangers and men and women are forced to mingle, though in separate queues. As a result, a queue at a polling station in India is a fairly unique artefact of public culture. It is perhaps the only occasion when Indian citizens experience the social diversity that exists in the country but is never actually experienced because of segregated public interactions. Thus, for instance, in 2009 in Tamil Nadu we witnessed ‘the wealthier Gounders to the middle-ranking Nadars and Barbers to Adi Dravida Christians and SC Matharis all milling about together’.<sup>54</sup> In another part of the country, an upper-caste Rajput woman commented that in her natal village, dominated by the upper caste Rajputs, it would have been impossible to imagine them rubbing shoulders with a low-caste Chamar woman in any other context but the voting queue. The orderliness is also an uncommon occurrence. To be able to wait peacefully in line with enough room, alongside a mixed bag of strangers without fear, under the watchful eye of officials, creates a sense of civility that is in marked contrast to the world outside. In this sense, the polling station is an example of what Neyazi, Tanabe, and Ishizaka call a ‘vernacular public arena’ that is created as the result of the encounter between a diverse society and political institutions. Such a space, they argue, stands apart from state and society, and problematizes ‘the connection between the languages and lifeworlds of the vernacular and discourses and activities in the public arena and the resulting vitalization of the public arena in which diverse vernacular social groups participate’.<sup>55</sup> In the case of the polling station, the official conduct of elections by the state, the solemnity of the polling process, and the unusually diverse composition of the voting queue created such a vernacular public arena in which citizens participated in an altogether new register.

Inside the booth itself, the atmosphere is one of quiet efficiency. Polling agents from the contesting political parties are allowed to be present, but election officials outnumber them and dominate the proceedings. For some, the simple fact of having their name called out in full by an official with no ascriptions of kinship or community was in itself meaningful. As Tiratdas Mahant, a young Kabirpanthi, whose

<sup>54</sup> De Neve and Carswell FR: 48 in Banerjee, *Why India Votes*, p. 133.

<sup>55</sup> See T. A. Neyazi, A. Tanabe and S. Ishizaka (eds), *Democratic Transformation and the Vernacular Public Arena in India*, Routledge, London, 2014.

community faces the constant stigma of Untouchability said, 'voting also gives me a feeling of being identified as a citizen with equal rights to anyone else'. By being identified as a citizen rather than by his caste, Tiratdas could instantly tap into a new identity that was provided by the Indian constitution rather than society. The accessibility of the technology of voting on a simple machine (which the EVM is designed to be), rather than ballot paper which has the potential to stigmatize the illiterate, took this process of inclusion further.<sup>56</sup> And, most of all, it was the secrecy of the ballot that made voting an unusual and desirable activity. Young women reported that the moment of casting their vote was perhaps the only time when they felt their thoughts and emotions were not being controlled by their mother-in-law, husband, or elders; others welcomed the quiet of the ballot box which gave them space to think clearly by silencing the cacophony of social opinion and weeks of election campaigning trying to persuade them to vote for this or that party. It is no wonder that the introduction of the secret ballot as an integral element of democratic voting practice was so hotly contested, with strong arguments on both sides.<sup>57</sup> In the end, the secret ballot was adopted and created the space for a voter who, in that moment at the ballot box, could stand apart from the context in which she was otherwise embedded to act as an autonomous individual exercising her choice. As the young women indicated, the voting booth gave them the opportunity to think as a citizen and voter, rather than as a woman encumbered by the structures of patriarchy outside it.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Akhil Gupta notes how the routine insistence on paperwork by bureaucracy 'bestowed a degree of arbitrariness to the biopolitical project...[even though] the product of such arbitrariness was not in any critical way mediated by literacy, by whether the poor person in question knew how to read and write...[and so] literacy is complexly articulated with structural violence...it mediates and structures such violence': Gupta, *Red Tape*, pp. 232–233. According to the most recently available census data of 2011, India's literacy rate is 74.04 per cent.

<sup>57</sup> For an overview of the history of voting worldwide, see D. Gilmartin, 'Towards a Global History of Voting: Sovereignty, the Diffusion of Ideas, and the Enchanted Individual', *Religions*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2012, pp. 407–423, especially pp. 407–409.

<sup>58</sup> An extremely worrying development since the adoption of the EVMs is how it has compromised the secrecy of the ballot. Before, ballot papers used to be shuffled in a barrel before being counted, so booth-wise polling patterns could not be identified. However, EVM votes are counted by machine, thereby revealing accurate data of voting patterns for every polling booth, which covers 1,000–1,200 voters. To correct this, the ECI developed a machine called the 'Totaliser' that electronically 'mixes' the votes, but this has been opposed by the BJP and other parties, no doubt because this data are very useful in 'managing' the supporters and detractors with carrots and sticks

Voters emerging from a polling station were asked how they felt, having voted. They often remarked that ‘it was unlike any other experience in their lives’ and many said they felt they were ‘king for a day’ (*ek din ka sultan*) and the vote felt like a weapon. This sense of empowerment and transcending the social contexts of their lives is what Gilmartin describes as ‘sovereignty’s enchanted essence’,<sup>59</sup> and it is entirely apt that voters compared the atmosphere to the *garbhgrha* of a temple, the sanctum sanctorum where the deity is located and is the high point of a devotee’s visit to the temple. One voter drew out the metaphor, saying, ‘The EVM is like a god who is sitting inside and no one except the devout can enter. Even the priest (i.e. polling officer) has to sit outside this area.’ It was no surprise that people used the word *darsan* to describe this moment to signify a personal and intimate communion between the divine and deity in a temple.<sup>60</sup> People like Hiral, a first-time voter, drew our attention to how this felt. ‘I wanted to feel that experience, I wanted to press the button on EVM and I wanted to see how it functions. And now I am very happy because I will now be considered a citizen of this country.’ The importance of the secret ballot was therefore manifold. At the most important level, it allowed voters complete privacy, as a sovereign citizen, to make their political choice. And Hiral’s assertion above ‘I wanted to press the button on EVM...’ indicates that the sheer materiality of the machine, the feel of the button he could touch with his finger, reminds us of what Chris Pinney calls ‘corporetics’ (sensory, corporeal aesthetics) which, he argues, is part of ‘a whole range of culturally diverse popular practices that stress mutuality and corporeality in spaces as varied as those of religious devotion and cinematic pleasure’.<sup>61</sup> We could argue that the act of voting is another example of such a popular practice which, when performed, creates a whole new experience.

Voters carried some of the ‘enchanted essence’ of the polling booth back into the reality outside. Nineteen-year-old Gayatri Banjare, a young Dalit woman voting for the first time, felt as if she was being

respectively. While controversies about whether EVMs can be ‘hacked’ are ongoing, to my mind, it is the absolute necessity of the Totaliser that is the real issue. Without it, the secret ballot, which lies at the heart of the ‘meaning’ of the vote, is severely compromised.

<sup>59</sup> See Gilmartin, ‘Towards a Global History of Voting’, p. 412.

<sup>60</sup> See D. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998 [1981], p. 5; and C. Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: the Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004, on *darsan*.

<sup>61</sup> Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, p. 193.



noticed and taken seriously for the first time in the village where she grew up. This recognition was obviously desirable: ‘When I walk to the booth and cast my vote, people notice me and I feel great about it’ is how she described it. And the fleeting but potent awareness of equality inside the polling booth lingered into an unequal society. As a man in Bihar put it, ‘It is because I have a right to vote that I feel I am valued in society’ (*samaj main hamari bhi value hai*). The equivalence of universal suffrage and the principle of ‘one man one vote’ held enormous significance in a society of pernicious inequality, as it did for a young Dalit law student whose community faces some of the worst atrocities: ‘I enjoy the identity of being equal with everyone, at least for one day.’ Another woman who belonged to a low-caste Chamar community said: ‘I realized the value of casting my vote through the experience of standing in the same line and in the same room alongside people of other castes.’ The identical mark made with indelible black ink on each voter’s left index finger (to avoid fraud) served as an unintended material proof of social equivalence. As she emerged from the polling station, one young woman in Tamil Nadu said proudly, drawing attention to her left hand: ‘After this mark we are all the same.’<sup>62</sup>

Given the widespread intimidation and coercion that exists during Indian elections, people recognized that being able to vote was a privilege and they did not take it for granted. One woman told us that in her elite Jat-dominated natal village, her caste members had been forcibly prevented from voting and so her own first-time experience of visiting the polling station after marriage (in a different village) felt momentous. One person even went so far as to say that the act of voting made them human: ‘If we don’t vote then what is the difference between human beings and the animals? ... Have you heard of animals going to vote?’<sup>63</sup> In turn, the right to vote, and the freedom to exercise that right, generated a sense of duty among voters. People called it their *dharmā* (moral duty) and they argued that it was a duty, even a ‘sacred duty’, to exercise their right to vote. Fulfilling this duty was seen as a selfless act that had to be done without necessarily expecting a material return. The idea of ‘giving’ your vote was frequently explained by disaggregating the Hindi word for vote: *matdan*, which is composed of two words *mat* (opinion) and *dan* (giving).<sup>64</sup> The essential

<sup>62</sup> De Neve and Carswell FR: 20 in Banerjee, *Why India Votes?*, p. 159.

<sup>63</sup> Jani FR: 9 in *ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>64</sup> See Banerjee, *Why India Votes?*, pp. 98–100, for a longer discussion of a vote as *dan*.

characteristic of the nature of *dan*—of ‘giving without material expectation’ as one would to the priest or to the poor as a way of gaining virtue—was emphasized. Thus the duty or *dharma* of voting was the *dan* of one’s vote, which was performed as an important act in itself and the action of giving it accrued virtue to the giver. We recall from our earlier discussion of transactional factors that receiving anything in return for voting was never guaranteed and so people had to ‘give’ their vote without expectation or in vain hope, simply because it was the right thing to do.

It was no surprise, then, that as the evening of Election Day drew to a close, the atmosphere in the village was tinged with wistful satisfaction, as at the close of an important event. Even the polling officers for whom elections meant extra work were not immune to this mood. They remarked on the extraordinary camaraderie created among the officials who met as strangers, but worked together as a team to achieve the common goal of conducting another good election. As a poetic bank teller from Bihar put it, reminding us of de Tocqueville’s riverine metaphor for elections: ‘Here we flow together like a single river, but when we leave this booth, we will all revert to becoming separate tributaries’ (*yahan par toh hum sab pani ke jaise hain, bahar ja kar saab apne apne rang mein dhal jayenge*).<sup>65</sup> It was as if, with the conclusion of voting, officials and voters alike were left bereft of the transient glimpse of something extraordinary that was quite unlike everyday life.

## Conclusion

Yogendra Yadav has argued that elections are a sort of ‘hinge’ that connects the messy vernacular social life with the formal institutions of democracy.<sup>66</sup> The discussion above has shown the surprises thrown up by this temporary coming together of two very different social worlds. In this article, these two worlds are roughly characterized as ‘money’ and ‘meaning’. As we have seen, on Election Day, the messy and iniquitous world of ‘society’, marked by a series of transactional gestures involving money and muscle, is temporarily dislodged to create an alternative social order that goes some way towards realizing the

<sup>65</sup> Reported by Priyadarshini Singh from the *Why India Votes* team.

<sup>66</sup> Y. Yadav, ‘Political Representation’, in P. B. Mehta and N. Jayal (eds), *Handbook of Indian Politics*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010.

‘meaning’ of the democratic potential of the values of citizenship and fairness. Unsurprisingly, it is the poor and socially disadvantaged voters who valued this dislodgement most acutely and continue to vote in large numbers. There have been recent claims that seem to suggest that liberal citizenship is for the elites and the poor have an imperfect version of a more clientelistic citizenship. The first is based on a juridical concept of citizenship and constitutes ‘civil society’ as it is understood in liberal democratic theory, and the rest constitutes something less so, namely ‘political society’. This formulation, proposed by Partha Chatterjee,<sup>67</sup> has since been contested by many who have found that it is not supported by empirical evidence.<sup>68,69</sup> The evidence presented here has shown that the distinction between these two categories may be overdrawn because even members of Chatterjee’s ‘political’ society who are entangled in clientelistic pressures are able to retain a sense of liberal citizenship—embodied through the values of autonomy, judgement, and duty that find expression in the act of voting. Elections thus play a significant role in creating and sustaining that sense of citizenship.

As is evident, multiple motivations are at play when people cast their vote in an election. By examining elections and the electorate in the large and tumultuous democracy of India, we find that voters, especially members of Chatterjee’s ‘political society’, respond to material factors such as cash, incentives, patronage, and the threat of violence through transactional behaviour. But when the same voters were asked why they voted, they also outlined non-transactional factors that created meaning in the voting process and the act of voting itself. A number of factors contributed to this—the efficiency of the bureaucratic machinery that made a genuine attempt to create free and fair elections, the secret ballot, and the social mixing and solemnity at polling stations where everybody was treated the same. Voters went so far as to compare the experience of casting their vote to a *darsan* of the divine and, as Diana Eck reminds us, a crucial element of *darsan* is not simply to be able to see the deity, but also to be seen by it and be blessed by the divine.<sup>70</sup> Thus, just as standing face-to-face in front of the deity is a vital element

<sup>67</sup> P. Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006.

<sup>68</sup> A. Baviskar and N. Sundar, ‘Democracy versus Economic Transformation?’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 43, no. 46, 2008, pp. 87–89.

<sup>69</sup> I. Roy, *The Politics of the Poor: Agonistic Negotiations with Democracy*, forthcoming.

<sup>70</sup> Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image*.

of worship, so voters drew attention to the opportunity that an election provided in both seeing the state and being seen by it.

It is vital for any democracy to create such spaces for the expression of individual choice and the sovereign individual. Of course, the portrayal of an Indian voter as ‘an autonomous moral agent, transcending the bonds of society’<sup>71</sup> will be rightfully challenged by many because of the role of patronage and money in Indian elections. It would nevertheless be hasty to ignore the subjective experience of voters themselves who, despite the coercive and corrupt practices of politicians, saw the act of voting as a meaningful act of citizenship. It is for this reason that the universal right to vote creates a sense of duty that drives up voter turnout figures in every election, reflecting the constitutional ambition to create a ‘sacred individuality as a property of the self ... as it was linked to the notion of human equality, dignity and reciprocal recognition’.<sup>72</sup> The meaning of the vote is thus as much a part of the story of Indian elections as money and coercion.

<sup>71</sup> Gilmartin, ‘Towards a Global History of Voting’, p. 411.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*