

Assertion Of Citizenship through the Vocabulary of Rights: Who Votes and Why?

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ABSTRACT

As the title of the paper evocates "Assertion of Citizenship through the vocabulary of Rights: Who votes and Why?" the prerogative is to analyze the election process in India by outlining the causes that make elections and voting in India sacred and what is it that makes Indian elections significantly different from those that take place across the globe? In context of this, the attempt of this paper is to map out the reasons that explain the participation of the poor in the electoral process. My paper having established the pattern of high voter turnout, seeks to establish a causal relationship between the poor and their dependence on the state. Bringing in arguments forwarded by Neera Chandoke and Yogendra Yadav, this section attempts to delineate the reasons that make the state central. The penultimate section shall focus on the determinants of voting: how does one decide whom to vote. This section will closely borrow from the debates of Tariq Tehchil, Suhas Palshikar, Yogendra Yadav and Mritunjoy Mohanty. The article shall conclude with arguments that appear pertinent if one has to holistically gauge the functioning of the electoral process in India.

1. Introduction

While a democratic set up is marked by things other than elections, such as a free press and civil rights, elections continue to remain the most fundamental and defining feature of a democracy. Elections have not just outcomes and causes, they also have meanings.¹ With its large electorate, the General Elections to the Lok Sabha undoubtedly remain the single largest organized event in the world. It involves thousands of polling stations, over one million voting machines and proceeds in many phases to facilitate the movement around the country of electoral commission officials and the security forces who guard the polling stations.

If election is central to the democracy, voter turnout is so for a vibrant and participatory electoral system. Although a democracy cannot be defined solely in regard to voter participation in open, free, and fair elections, the lack of such involvement by specific groups within a country can have serious implications for the maintenance and functioning of a democratic government. Lower voter turnout contributes to a diminished sense of governmental legitimacy, which then has negative implications for the officials elected by small proportions of the population. It is this centrality of voter turnout that this paper seeks to study.

2. The sanctity of elections and the fervor to vote

The widespread lack of participation in the democratic process is of particular concern to those who value pluralism, because the interests of different income groups can be very

¹ 'Seeing' the State in India: Neera Chandoke: Economic and Political Weekly 2005:40, Pg 1033-40

Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99: Yogendra Yadav Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 34, No. 34/35 (Aug. 21 - Sep. 3, 1999), pp. 2393- 2399

Do Policies Matter in Indian Elections?: Tariq Thachil,; Does the aam admi care about economic policy?: Tariq Thachil,; The 2009 Lok Sabha Elections: a Storm in the Teacup: Mritunjoy Mohanty, May 18, 2009

¹ The Elusive Mandate of 2004: Yogendra Yadav, Economic and Political Weekly, Dec 18, 2004. Pg 5383-98

different. *A pattern of disproportionate turnouts can skew the legislative, executive, and judicial balance toward the participating groups, which in turn can result in even more disillusionment and disempowerment among the unrepresented group.* Participation in the political arena by groups with specific interests has been shown to make a difference, particularly in leader responsiveness.¹ Elected leadership is more apt to listen to the representatives of groups that participate in politics and that vote in significant numbers, particularly if that participation is coupled with financial contributions.² *Therefore while the social profile of voters is a large category, my attempt has been to look at it through the binary of class.* The central question that runs through this paper is what makes the poor such staunch supporters of democracy despite the fact that they have been oppressed and marginalized since decades and infact development pe se has only perpetuated their poverty.

Interestingly, voting in India does not take place merely as a mundane routinized activity. It is infact surrounded by unparalleled enthusiasm, zeal and celebration. Although voting is not mandatory, and the journey to the nearest polling station can be a difficult one, voter turnout is fairly impressive. General elections to Lok Sabha have recorded turnout of around 60 per cent while it is about 70 per cent or above for the state assembly elections and significantly higher for panchayat elections.³ Further the officially reported turnout is often an underestimate, because the electoral rolls are usually inflated and often contain many names of those who are dead or have moved away on a temporary or permanent basis. More than the level of turnout, what is most striking about the Indian elections is the pattern of political participation that defies

² Mobilizing the Unrepresented: Indian Voting Patterns and the Implications for Tribal Sovereignty: Eileen M. Luna. Wicazo Sa Review, Vol. 15, No. 1, The Secular Past, the Mythic Past, and the Impending Future (Spring, 2000), pp. 91-115

³ 'Participatory Norm: How Broad Based Is It?'- Palshikar, Suhas and Sanjay Kumar (2004), Economic and Political Weekly, December 18, pp 5412-17

commonsensical expectations and academic theories alike in at least three respects.

- First, turnout in the Indian elections defies the general trend, especially in older democracies, of decline over time. In the last five decades the overall pattern is that of stable and even increasing turnout in elections.
- Second, the turnout tends to go up as one goes down the tiers of democracy. As noted above, the turnout in the local and state elections tends to be substantially higher than that in the national elections.
- Finally, the turnout is not lower among citizens at the lower end of the social and economic hierarchy; the present scenario is quite the reverse, since a poor, low caste person is more likely to vote here than an upper caste, upper class person. *Yogendra Yadav suggests that the rural electorate votes more than their urban counterparts; voting in the tribal areas has caught up with the rest of the country; and the gap between the turnout of men and women has reduced substantially in the recent years.*⁴ Evidently then, voting in India has sought to transcend the conventional barriers of caste, class, region and gender. *Lipset* would see this as much of a deviation from the standard image of the "political man" presented by political science research.⁵ It is pertinent to note herein that this pattern reflects a robust level of belief in the efficacy of one's vote and a strong support for democracy. *In this respect the underprivileged groups have turned stronger supporters of the democratic system than before.*⁶

3. Political representation and the vocabulary of rights: Case of the underprivileged

It is these facts that perturbs our rationality leading us to question why this enthusiasm? Why do people whose lives improve very little from election to election, nonetheless continue to think of them as important events which "demand" their participation? Why does their faith in their votes continue despite the continued subjection of the vast rural poor interests to those of the minority urbanites? Why is it that the disadvantaged and socially exploited turn out to be the staunchest and most vociferous supporters of elections? More crudely why on earth do India's poor bother to vote at all? *These questions become all the more puzzling on account of the following two reasons:*

- The state that organizes the elections and the government created by these elections are known to neglect the interests of the poor. It is inherently prejudiced in its treatment to them with regard to higher income groups.

- There is absence of systematically evaluated literature on what motivates the poor to go to the polling booth.
- We do not know the difference in motivations for voting of the poor compared with those who are endowed with more economic resources.

Mukulika Banerjee suggests that there are two broad explanations that are rendered to explain this phenomenon⁷:

The rational choice theory forwards the argument that the vote is a rational and instrumental tool to maximize self-interest and the voters use it for an improvement in the material condition of their lives. *Kanchan Chandra's* discussion of what she calls "patronage democracy" is a case to the point.⁸ In Uttar Pradesh for instance, she argues, voters routinely assess the chances of "their" party, defined by caste and ethnicity, in deciding whether to vote for a particular party or alliance. Here, democracy is all about "patronage", with the government in power delivering even the most basic of entitlements as handouts to its clients. In this assessment, voting strategically and often therefore increases one's chances of accruing these benefits. According to this **instrumentalist view**, *elections are arenas for transactional behavior and the skilful deployment of one's vote as an instrument can lead to tangible benefits.*

A second kind of explanation is the **symbolic view of elections**. From this perspective, *democracy is really an untrue but vitally important myth in support of social cohesion, with elections as its central and regular ritual enactment that helps maintain and restore equilibrium.* The ability to vote is thus seen as a necessary safety valve which allows for the airing of popular disaffection and opinion, but which nevertheless ultimately restores status quo. In such a reading, elections require the complicity of all participants in a deliberate misrecognition of the emptiness of its procedures and of the lack of any significant changes which this ritual brings about, but are yet a necessary charade to mollify a restless electorate.

Steven Lukes argues that *elections are a way in which "a particular political system reproduces itself" and elections "express the symbolic affirmation of the voters' acceptance of the political system and their role within it".* Alternatively, an election is really just an elaborate way to embrace the status quo.⁹ John Dunn describes elections as *"events which confuse in a very intimate and purposeful way, the largely symbolic identifications of large numbers of people with their effects upon the politically effective conduct of rather small numbers of people".* Accordingly, this confusion is beneficial because it makes the electorate feel empowered, albeit briefly, and merely symbolically. This is a conception of elections as "ritual" - though the conception of ritual it assumes is rather denuded, being equated with the absence of intentionality or instrumentality, and thus with something essentially repetitive and automative.

⁴ Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99: Yogendra Yadav *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 34/35 (Aug. 21 - Sep. 3, 1999), pp. 2393- 2399

⁵ Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics: Lipset, Seymour Martin (1981) Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

⁶ 'Nation State' or 'State Nation'? India in Comparative Perspective': Linz, Juan J, Alfred Stepan and Yogendra Yadav (2007 in K Shankar Bajpai (ed), *Democracy and Diversity: India and the American Experience*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

⁷ Sacred Elections: Mukulika Banerjee: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 17 (Apr. 28 - May 4, 2007), pp. 1556-1562

⁸ Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Chandra, Kanchan (2004): Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

⁹ Steven Lukes (1975): 'Political Ritual and Social Integration', *Sociology* 1975, 9:289-308.

Mukulika Bannerjee based on her rich ethnography in the Indian state of West Bengal, seeks to refute these conventional arguments.

- First, from the narrow viewpoint of marginal utility, voting is hardly ever a rational activity, since as studies of American elections have shown, single votes almost never affect the outcomes of elections and this must be still more true of India's vast constituencies.
- Second, in the context of states with history of one-party dominance like West Bengal, the choice of who to vote for is in fact rather secondary, since the Left Front has ruled for nearly 30 years and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. So you either vote against it, wasting your vote and hardly improving your material circumstances; or you vote for it, knowing that while it has brought some significant improvements to the lives of the poor (e.g., land reform), these lie well in the past, with little obvious promise for the future
- The Indian voter is no more sanguine about politicians and manifestos. Very few during Bannerjee's ethnographic study expressed any hope of material benefit from casting their vote and complained that the hopeful candidates during campaign meetings would say "Vote in our favour. We will look after you", but were then never seen again until the next elections. While basic necessities such as water, electricity and employment were key issues, the voters knew full well of the funds that were misappropriated or otherwise diverted by local politicians and officials. So the vote is not really a very plausible tool of material improvement.

Based on her field work, she suggests that while the poor lack political sophistication and hence do not know why governments break up, what results elections produce, they *consider voting to be their job, their duty and anyone who fails to fulfill these duties was looked down upon with disapproval.*¹⁰

For others, voting is an expression of citizenship. *Voters in the countryside, live with the perception that, 'if they don't vote, no one will know about their existence.'* For the multitude living in the semi forgotten corners of the nation, well outside the shining India, this opportunity to prove one's membership to the nation and confirm one's status as a citizen was actually felt. *The ability to register one's existence through such a physical presentation of one's body and vote at the ballot box was the ultimate validation of one's identity as a citizen.* The legal requirement to be present in person to cast a vote is interpreted by them as "a rare flowering of their individual liberty in an arid reality of constant subjection." *Exercising one's right to vote, thus provided one of the very few ways to express one's citizenship- this was much more dignified a claim than claiming citizenship through the claim of one's entitled ration.*

The high voter turnout particularly amongst the poor also substantially suggests that elections bring with themselves the crucial element of equality which otherwise is largely conspicuous by its very absence. The conduct of elections is underlined by a sense of egalitarianism whereby equal treatment is meted out to all irrespective of caste, class, religious, community based ties. Standing in the same queue, waiting for one's turn, polling at the same machines establishes a sense of equal treatment that the poor find extremely satisfying.

Further, it is evident that in the wake of politics in chaos and politicians in vain, it is only the voting rights of the people and the free procedure through which they are conducted that makes political parties and governments to display the bare minimum of concern for the hitherto marginalized and give them some assistance at least.

According to interviews conducted by Lokniti, the disadvantaged in India are those most committed to the idea of democracy and participate in elections with such enthusiasm for they believe that while their vote might not lead to radical transformation; it still asserts that India is a Lokshahi and not Rajshahi.¹¹

Clearly then, the vote is felt to possess both symbolic power, in expressing people's self-respect and self-worth, and instrumental power, in helping to ward off potential attacks by the state upon that self-worth. 'The vital importance of such power for dignity and survival, along with the appealing formal equality of the vote's operation and the sense of dutiful participation as citizen-subjects which it affords, together generate that deep felt sense of "something sacred" which gives a moral and emotional core to the ritual elements of the election and draws India's voters irresistibly towards it.'¹²

4. Differing dynamics of participation

Poor and the non poor are driven by different motivations for voting. In his treatment of Indian democracy, **Javed Alam** observes that the poor turn out to vote in large numbers and that they value democracy.¹³ The turnout rate among the poor is almost as high as for those who are either middle class or rich. A detailed study of voter participation reported for the 2009 national elections shows that voter participation rates do not seem to vary by income status at all. According to income-based breakdown, turnout for the 2009 national election as spelt out by Kumar, there was no difference in the turnout among the poor, the middle classes, and the wealthy.¹⁴ *The poor voters at large are seen holding on to the belief that their political existence is directly related to their act of voting. They are driven by the logic that "I am because I vote on Election Day. Otherwise, what is my stature in this society?"* Many said that Election Day is the one day when they matter. Only during election campaigns, they said, do party workers and politicians come to them, seeking them out. Kumar tells us that for many

¹¹ National Election Studies by Lokniti: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

¹² Sacred Elections: Mukulika Banerjee, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 42, No. 17 (Apr. 28 - May 4, 2007), pp. 1556-1562

¹³ Who Wants Democracy: Javed Alam

¹⁴ Patterns of political participation: trends and perspective: Kumar S. Econ Political Weekly. 2009; 44:47-51.

¹⁰ Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, Christopher. Larimer

of his respondents, "An election is the one event which ties us to the government. Politicians, people like you, journalists—everyone comes looking for us. If we did not vote, there would be no elections, and no one would know of our existence."

Chibber and Ahuja argue that the poor and the non poor are driven by differing motivations.¹⁵ *While for the poor, voting is an assertion of their right, for the non-poor, voting brings to them material benefits from the state, it gives them access to the state or because it is their civic duty.* This differing attitude, according to the writers can be attributed to their differing relationships with the state. *Unlike the non poor, the poor always bear the brunt of ignorance and maltreatment. Yet on the election days, they make every attempt to be treated equally. The recognition that the state grants to them on the election day makes them to view voting as a valued right, one that gives them a rare chance to associate with those who govern as equals.*

Based on extensive field research in UP, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, **Ahuja and Chibber** argue that the poor use the language of rights to explain their participation, while the comparatively well to do explained their own participation in terms of personal benefits or civic duty. It is the state's capricious, disregardful treatment of the poor that leads them to link the language of rights to the decision to turn out to vote. Ahuja and Chibber substantiate their arguments with empirical data. They suggest that for 67% of their focus groups in rural localities, voting was seen as a right. As against this, for 83% of focus groups in middle and upper income localities, civic duty or exchange for benefits was the determining force. It further gives them a stake in decision making. Clearly then, it was not a claim to equal citizenship or the exercising of a valued right because their civil rights are not dependent on the goodwill of the politicians and bureaucrats and they are far less likely to stress their rights.

It is crucial at this stage to also make a distinction between the two segments of the non-poor class. These two segments are dependent on state support differently. Some of these better connected citizens do not possess the resources to opt out of the state support to maintain their current socio-economic status and therefore look for prospects to establish direct relationships with the state. The other section amongst the non-poor strata networked with upper echelons of the state have independent resources to access the varied resources of the state. Therefore if this group expresses dissatisfaction with the quality or quantum of public goods and services, it has the avenues to exit the system and purchase these goods and services in the open market. Therefore their dependence on the state is not direct, they turn to it only when they need to but otherwise they can do without the state.

5. Unpacking State Centrality

Chandoke argues that the preeminence of the state in the public imagination is an outcome of state's practice and

¹⁵ Why the Poor Vote in India: "If I Don't Vote, I Am Dead to the State": Amit Ahuja & Pradeep Chibber

rhetoric.¹⁶ The Indian state controls a substantial portion of the national resources and public service delivery system. Even while the Indian state has failed miserably to stand up to its commitments, it has become implanted in the public imagination as the arbiter of common good. Moreover the state's programs, its administrative structure, and its politicization through parties and movements have all contributed to this process.

It is evident that since the early 1990's, civil society organizations have gained strength and have been involved with governments in an effort to 'mobilize and organize the poor with a view to empowering them, converting them from passive recipients of doles to active participation in development. Chandoke in her article 'Seeing the State in India' suggest that this however has not meant that the state institutions have weakened? Or that it has liberated itself from the obligations to the people. Based on a survey conducted in Delhi, she argues that citizens have high expectations from the state. Such political preferences are outcome of a historical process.

Yogendra Yadav, in his essay 'Electoral Politics in the Time of Change' juxtaposes two situations. *While the last decade stands out for the outburst of various maladies, inherent in our system- multiplication in number of parties, factionalism, rise of regional ethnic parties, end of ideology based politics and decline in political morality, political corruption, non-governance, disorder and instability. These have simultaneously led to a paradigmatic shift in the voting pattern.* The voters choose differently- the size, composition and self determination of those who vote have changed. People from the lower rungs choose as groups and not as individuals. They therefore bring their own tastes and worldview. *Voting gives them a right to choose and reject thereby exert their authority.*¹⁷

6. Determinants of electoral outcomes

It has for long been debated as to what determines an individual's vote? Have policies begun to matter? Or is ethnicity still the determining factor. Traditionally, ethnicity has been seen as the key parameter of electoral mobilization. Scholars like Yadav and Palshikar, defined 'identity politics as politics of empowerment'.¹⁸ While dominant, this view has begun to erode as manifested in the 2004 and 2009 elections which significantly underlined the significance of development. It brought policies to the center stage so much so that politicians and bureaucrats alike saw a causal relationship between the success or failure of a policy implementation and the electoral choices of voters. *It began to be acknowledged that policies can no longer operate at a rhetorical level they are demand driven and need to be constitutionally mandated.* This

¹⁶ 'Seeing' the State in India: Neera Chandoke, Economic and Political Weekly 2005:40, Pg 1033-40

¹⁷ Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99: Yogendra Yadav Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 34, No. 34/35 (Aug. 21 - Sep. 3, 1999), pp. 2393- 2399

¹⁸ Participatory Norm: How broad based is it? Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar, Economic and Political Weekly, Dec 18, 2004. Pg 5412-5417; The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same in India, The Bahujan and the Paradox of the "Democratic Upsurge": K.K. Kailash; A radical agenda for political reforms: Yogendra Yadav

politics of policy became explicit during elections, when incumbent governments were replaced if they failed to provide for efficient implementation of policies.¹⁹

This view is contradicted by Tariq Tehchil. *He suggests that it is difficult to say that people in India 'vote on issues' primarily because most people are not even aware of policies in question.*²⁰ Citing evidences, he would like us to believe that 40% of rural poor are not even aware of their entitlements under MGNREGA, while 50% lack awareness about the BSP's cash handout scheme. He further goes on to argue that the perception about policies, amongst voters is often mixed. Much to the detriment of the pro-policy view, Tehchil believes that voters more often than not do not even know whom to blame or credit for well known policies. This clarity is further muddled by India's federal structure and complicated coalitions. Whether it is the local politicians who politicize it, the state government's necessary that implement and the central government that provides the necessary funding remains a puzzle in the popular perception. For Tehchil 2009 Elections, demonstrated the inadequacy of a dichotomy between identity and issue based politics itself. Economic interests are not always at odds with caste divisions. Where the two converge, the heightened importance of issue based voting might actually overlap and fuse with identity based politics.²¹

Election results in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal however point a contradictory picture. They suggest that the suppressed groups vote for parties which atleast in perception put forth the role of a good implementer. It is clearly evident that identity politics has reached a saturation point- people realized that while it gave them a voice, it did not guarantee human development. Voters thus look for and eventually choose parties that combine the twin agenda successfully. In crux, policies do matter. If they did not, there would be no reason for the framing and implementation of policies like MGNREGA and RTE.

7. Concluding remarks

From the above account certain conclusions become apparent. *To begin with a citizen's relationship to the state is essential to why an individual goes to vote.* Therefore fundamental to political participation is the relationship between the citizen and the state. Clearly then, *participation by the disadvantaged is related to political institutions and how political processes might exclude them.*

Significant is the fact that *the act of voting recognizes the poor as a citizen in the eyes of the state and those who run it.* It grants them the much desired parity, even though momentary with the rulers by empowering the poor, to make independent choices irrespective of their plight and status and to accordingly choose or reject their political matters. *Franchising thus grants to the poor membership in a political community.*

Elections and voting help citizens conceive their citizenship 'as a means to establish a common ground and creates the sense that their status as citizens has an unconditional, equal worth in rights, not one based on individual market value or any other status' thereby making rights more egalitarian. Further, elections invert the transformation of rights into privileges that characterize everyday life by making the right to vote independent of the discretion of those in power.

To conclude, *voting for the poor satiates their quest for equal access to citizenship. They have translated this into the vocabulary of rights.* How this vocabulary of rights has been internalized by the poor remains subject of further analysis.

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¹⁹ What Determines Electoral Outcomes in India? Caste, Class, or Voters' Satisfaction with Government Performance? Rahul Verma. Asian Survey, Vol. 52, No. 2 (March/April 2012), pp. 270-297

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