A Review study on Concept of Democracy and Elections system in India

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The study of democracy in its similarities and differences has been among the most important agenda for comparative social theory in contemporary times. The endeavour of comparison has advanced a purely normative understanding of democracy, rooted in the idea of its being a form of rule legitimated by the people, to a greater understanding of its structures and processes—the variety of empirical conditions under which its facets play out. Since the arena of democracy has now expanded to include a majority of the countries of the world2—its ferment as Diamond (1990) notes, having spread to '…the world's most isolated, unlikely, and forgotten places', and also the challenge of understanding the plurality and differ- ences of contexts under which electoral institutions operate, consent and consensus obtained, and citizen rights secured. This piece advances a methodological proposition in favour of the use of an ethnographic approach for the comparative study of democracy and elections in India. The appeal of this approach is two-fold, it is argued: First, it helps us overcome the narrow rationality and exclusionary understanding of democracy as modernization—a guiding paradigm within comparative politics. Second, it advances our understanding of the substantive meanings associated with democracy as it flourishes in unexpected conditions of social traditionalism and economic poverty. In this case, democracy as it guides the thoughts and political actions of India's poor and marginalized, as part of a holistic culture within which individual rationality or group action can be meaningfully interpreted. This approach and the substantive considerations on democracy that follow are a contrast to the widely prevalent use of large-scale surveys in comparative politics. While the comparative ethnographies enhance our understanding of citizens acting within cultures of politics, the large-scale surveys have a thin yet aggregate understanding of individual action and cultural values. It also brings the unanticipated to the fore—ordinary people appear on the stage of politics with their agency, not simply as averages of numbers, playing out a force of history.

In India, Yadav (2000) notes that in the 1990s there has been a 'second democratic upsurge' with the increasing participation of the socially underprivileged citizens and the downward spread of democracy; and immense participation in elections specially at the lower levels of the federal system. What meanings do they find in the idea of democracy as they see it around their ordinary everyday life? Notwithstanding the adversities of circumstance, why do they invest in democratic politics? If subjectivities of marginaliza- tion and identity—of being a lower caste, dalit or adivasi—are so important for these new entrants, why should electoral participation, whose outcomes are numerical and cannot simply represent the experiential in any overt manner, be of interest? As they participate with intensity, how do they associate the act of voting for different levels of the political system? The resurrection of these subjects of democracy from their otherness, and of their cultures of democratic politics is therefore an important pursuit of scholarship and enquiry. Relatedly, it is also important to understand the meanings of democracy in their variation, in contrast to a definition of democracy in the aggregate. Comparative electoral ethnographies (CEE) are an aid to unravel the substantive dimension of this 'upsurge', and understand the meanings of electoral participation of the marginal.

The ethnographies that have been used to make the arguments in this article are drawn from elections for Indian states—state Assembly or Vidhan Sabha, and local Panchayats, between the years 2012 and 2016.3 The starting point for these are innovations drawn from Banerjee's Why India Votes (2014)—which initiated a new methodology for studying elections. In this work, the same phenomena, that is, the national elections of 2009 was studied simultaneously in 12 different field sites. This marked a departure from election studies that traditionally focused on the question 'who people voted for', to examining the question 'why people voted at all?' Two principal aims were achieved: first, the focus of the research was on the voter and the electorate, rather than on politicians and political parties; second, a methodological innovation was developed for taking the ethnographic method beyond the study of a single location to multiple locations tied together by a common set of research questions. These ambitions brought new challenges and new results. There was evidence now on how ordinary voters viewed elections, meanings they ascribed to the act of voting, their reflections on an election campaign and their attachments to the idea of democracy—a focus on the 'substance' rather than just the 'mechanics' of elections, as Lama- Rewal (2009) puts it. The data in some way provided an explanation for India's rising voter turnout rates. But it also raised further questions about how their motivations to vote were linked to who they voted

for, and how the use of unfair electoral practices such as money and muscle in elections affected their commitment to the electoral process. Methodologically, the innovations led to a national picture of voters' point of view of elections based on qualitative and ethnographic data. This was different from traditional ethnographic work as carried out by anthropologists in single locations, usually a village.4 The findings in this case did not just tell us the particular electoral story in a particular location but they also provided insight into how voters across India had similar attitudes and attachment to the idea of voting. For Why India Votes?, 12 researchers worked in settings, they were already engaged in research and knew the local language, and simultaneously investigated a common set of questions of voter attitudes. Not all the ethnographers had prior experience of studying electoral processes although they had research experience and insights about the studied community during non-electoral times. As a result, the project required training sessions for the team to identify and understand the rationale for posing the specific research questions and the methodology. Banerjee also travelled to many of the research sites and through a shared internet portal, the group was able to track the research findings as they emerged in other sites, and finally, collectively debrief the findings at the end of the project to explore similarities and divergences across sites, and also see how the local study fitted into a national picture. 'Comparison was therefore built into the research design of the project, rather than done post facto, and the national story emerged organically. As a result we have genuinely comparable data that has been simultaneously gathered on the same issues across the electorate of India.'5 This interpretive data could then also complement large-scale election surveys analyzed through statistical exercises. It should be added that for Why India Votes, the research questions had been generated from a hypothesis that evolved from Banerjee's own village level work in rural Bengal in previous years.6 The subsequent research (which is the object of methodological analysis in this piece) is an attempt at what Snyder (2001) calls 'scaling down' to observe variations in sub-national units in comparative studies. It has tested the same hypothesis in two lower levels of India's federal political system, that is, the Vidhan elections and local Panchayat elections held during 2012–2016. Unlike national elections, these are not held simultaneously; the questions investigated broadly remain the same. As noted earlier, quantitative data has shown a vigorous increase in participation at these lower levels, especially among the socially marginalized, not clearly understood why. Almost the same process has been followed even in this case—visiting the field sites with common research questions, training of researchers on the methodology, sharing of prior findings, immersion of each researcher in the site for close to a month prior to the elections, collaborative ethnographies by principal researchers, regular debriefing and finally sharing of findings in regular workshops of the EECURI network amongst scholars engaged in the study of Indian elections using different methods. The selection of field sites in this round has been carefully done to advance our understanding of electoral deliberations amongst the marginal citizens—lower social castes, urban poor, scheduled tribes and in constituencies reserved for scheduled castes and women. It may be added that this purposive selection has been done with the explicit intention of understanding the upsurge in democratic participation of the hitherto marginal citizens from backward and vulnerable parts of the world, which is now a major challenge to the scholarship of comparative democracy.

The arguments of this article are organized in three main sections: The first is a polemical engage- ment with the narrow tenets of early and dominant paradigms of comparative politics, using the political systems approach and its understanding of democracy as modernization7. The use of the ethnographic approach provides one possible way out from some of the shortcomings of this approach. The second section moves to a specific focus on the use of ethnography as a research practice for the study of Indian elections, and some of the substantive findings of the CEE. The concluding section brings together the methodological and substantive arguments, and attempts to stage a critical dialogue between the diverse pathways—disciplinary and methodological—to understand the politics of democracies comparatively. Together, these underscore the advantages of seeing politics in its ordinary, everyday locations, and not just as a set of institutions dominated by privileged actors of the political establishment.

A Critique of Political Systems Approach and Resurgence of Political Ethnography Structural–functional analysis and relatedly the political systems approach, mostly using quantitative techniques of large-scale survey dominated comparative work on democracy emerging in the early years following the Second World War. These provided a strong impetus to reifying the Anglo-American insti- tutional features of democracy, and their socio-economic conditions to the level of mandatory universals of the modern. These invariant conditions were to be aspired for by the developing world, understood as being on a lower stage of democratic evolution. This view is now rightly criticized for its ethnocentrism, and for viewing the democratic experience of new democracies—mostly erstwhile colonies with a definite 'otherness' of a third-world experience, and as an 'exceptional' category. This is also an apposite example of the problem of 'false universalism and false exceptionalism' that Tillin (2013) rightly warns against—a problem that can be rectified by spreading the net of comparisons wider.

Political anthropology, which has traditionally been engaged with the study of non-Western societies, should ideally have been able to explain these challenging empirical developments of why a modern system of democracy flourished in post-colonial societies. That it was unable to do so is in large part accounted for by the domination of systems level analysis, and a belief in evolutionism in political anthropology too. Vincent considers this (systems level analysis) to be the 'foundational metaphor' of the Enlightenment but this systemic approach discounts individual experience (2002, p. 9). Of the association with evolutionism, anthropologist Nader (2011) notes in a strong critique that there was unstated consensus with clear rules in ethnography: '…we were to work in non-Western societies, write about them as if they were bounded entities, ignore power politics, which included colonial and imperial presence, ignore similarities between "us and them", deplore 19th century unilineal evolutionism and exceptionalism but still practice it' (p. 212). There is now an explicit critique of these paradigmatic associations, and indeed a resurgence of political anthropology, as also an increased use of ethnography as a research method for the study of themes such as nationalism, citizenship and democratic cultures, within the formal province of political sociology or political science.8 The critique of democracy as modernization, and political anthropology's resurgence with a reflective critique of its past, has enabled the bringing together of some of the strengths of ethnog- raphy—strong empirical work, study of local power and a focus on the marginal underclass to develop a substantive understanding of democracies as they flourish. The current upsurge in the ethnographies of politics and political anthropology is the appropriate background in which Banerjee's study of elections in India using ethnographic approach is to be understood.

Big Phenomena of Indian Elections under the Lens of Ethnography For Banerjee (2014, pp. 26–28), three elements are key: First, in contrast to a survey or opinion poll, the ethnographic method involves observing actions, not just asking people questions. For what people say may be different from what they do. The second is putting the conception and vocabulary of the informant at the heart of the study and privileging their point of view rather than our own analytic preconceptions,pursuing this through open-ended conversations, observation and complete submersion in the life-world of the informant. And if there is seemingly a contradiction between these two—taking the language of the people seriously, while simultaneously not going only by what they say—Banerjee proposes a third which helps resolve this dilemma—cast the net of ethnography wide and observe things in a holistic manner—ritual, festival, kinship, inequality, work, labour and understand electoral politics within this wider ambit of local life. This approach of 'holism' helps to develop a 'thick description' of voting as a political act. An apposite example of the complexity, developed through the ethnographer's thick description of the political act, is Banerjee's understanding that voting (known as matdan in Hindi), akin to a religious ritual of dan (a ritual of giving of gifts or alms). Voting is not simply an official political activity, but an act of 'giving without expectation' (the literal meaning of dan)—it is understood by the voter as similar to other forms of dan such as shramdan (gift of free labour) and kanyadan (giving away of the daughter at the time of wedding (Banerjee, 2014, p. 29). Contrast this to the surveyor's one-time engagement with the field, and a categorical question only on the act of voting—this is a 'thin' description of the political act.

Four principle research questions have been asked in each field site:

1. What did an election campaign look like from the vantage of the voter?
2. How plastic was the language of politics—what local metaphors were used to describe the process of electoral democracy?
3. What happened on polling day? How did people experience the act of voting itself? What was the culture at the polling booth?
4. What were the reasons that people gave when asked 'Why do you vote?' (Banerjee, 2014, p. 12).
5. In addition, the voters were also asked whether they received 'freebies' or financial incentives for exchange of votes. And researchers were to observe election meetings, big rallies and smaller deliberations at tea stalls or other informal gatherings, and make a daily note. Besides these, the researchers did not go with a fixed template of questions or methodology, but observed and wrote about issues as they emerged in voter deliberations.

Although by no means a randomized research aiming at generalization, for the 2009 national elections, each site had been selected on the principle of fair representation of big cities, small towns and rural sites across the country. In the subsequent study of state and Panchayat elections (2012–2016), the sites were selected more for their atypicality—representation of remote rural areas with large presence of marginalized Scheduled Tribe population—as in Acchala, Gujarat; Reodar, Rajasthan; and Tau Panchayat, Jharkhand (see Mehta 2012, Kumar 2012, and Jha 2015a for detailed reports), sites of residence of the urban marginal in the unauthorized colony of Sangam Vihar (see Chaturvedi, 2015; Jha, 2015b; Priyam,2015 for detailed reports), Delhi; poor Muslims in Mewat Panchayat, Haryana; and finally in constituen- cies reserved for special representation of scheduled castes in Cooch Behar, West

Bengal (see Jha 2016 for a detailed report); and for women in Majgar Panchayat, Faridabad, Haryana (see Kumar 2016, for a detailed analysis). In this way, the comparisons purposively highlight the deep-seated social and economic inequalities inherent the lives of its ordinary poor people. Another notable inclusion has been a site of protest by villagers against the setting up of a cement plant in Dugheri, Mahuva in Bhavnagar district of Gujarat (see Kumar 2012 for details). This focus on social asymmetry, on the protests of ordinary poor, on the new issues of urban marginality allows the CEE to capture sub-national variations on important political processes. As will be shown in the next few paragraphs, especially in the varying assertions of the citizen's right to water, these comparisons bring to the fore how the electoral arena characterized by political liberty, is used to assert the rights to equality in specific ways. Although there are examples of control over the poor by patrons, lords and bosses, and of the use of money or other inducements, there are even more instances of the poor voting out the dominant, or at least strategizing to do so.

This assertion against inequality by the poor, using the power of their votes is an important reason why the poor consider democracy a legitimate system, and have their hopes pinned on it. Amongst the urban marginal of Sangam Vihar, Delhi's largest unauthorized colony, daily lives are led in an inhuman way with the poor having no access to piped water or disposal of excreta. Local mafia controls the irregular private supply of water from mobile tankers. Yet, citizens here utilize the opportunity for state Assembly elections in Delhi to assert demands for civic efficacy. They elected a new political party—the Aam Aadmi Party—which they hope will exterminate the control of the water mafia, and alter the iniquitous conditions of their lives in concrete ways (Priyam, 2014). In Redvakalan, Rajasthan, Bhera Ram Garasia (belonging to the Garasia tribe, and 70 years of age) remembers having first cast his vote in 1962—'It was a vote against the fiefdom of the village Thakur' (feudal lord belonging to the Rajput caste).

So Bhera rallied together his Garasia tribe and voted the Thakur out. 'That first election made me realize the power of my vote.' Since then, Bhera has voted religiously in every election (Kumar, 2012). The Panchayat and Vidhan Sabha CEE confirm some of the key findings from the 2009 national election, namely—the importance of elections as a 'special time', and of voting as an act of citizenship. In Acchala, Gujarat, Mehta (2012) notes that voting is understood to be a way of leaving an imprint or a mark—the phrases 'chaap padvi' (to leave an imprint), 'sikko maarvo' (to put a stamp) and now 'button dabaavu' affirm this mood. In Bihar, people who say that 'voting is a citizen's right (naagrik adhikaar hai)', say so with emphasis. For many the very question 'why do you vote?' was slightly absurd and their response was 'kahe nahi karenge vote? (why should we not vote?)' (Bagchi, 2016).

As we 'scale down', there are two notable new findings, reaffirming the importance of moving down vertically in comparisons9: first is the strong association between development (vikaas) and voting in Assembly elections, a theme that is widely being taken note of in the scholarship on Indian elections.

'Vikaas ke liye zaroori hai vote karna'—it is important to vote so that development will happen, notes Bagchi (2016) in Bihar. Kaushik (2013) notes that in Dalli Rajahara, Chhattisgarh, people linked develop- ment with elections and in the hope that the election of right candidate and government would get them better amenities and alleviate poverty, unemployment, poverty and insecurity. Second, voting is viewed as a vital instrument for political change. A Yadav caste voter in Sarairanjan, Bihar made this clear, when he said: 'Jis tarah roti ko pakane ke liye adal badal karna padta hai nahi to roti jal jaayega, usi tarah sarkar ka bhi adal badal karna jaroori hai' (When you cook a roti on fire, it is important to flip and change sides, and cook both sides evenly, else it will get burnt) (Bagchi, 2016). In Sangam Vihar, Priyam (2015) notes that the lower caste Valmiki voter consider their votes for the BJP in the 2014 national elections to be conditional—'if Modi's government does not fulfill its promises, they will be changed too' (kaam nahi karenge to unko bhi badal diya jaayega). Lowering inflation and providing employment are seen as the important electoral promises made by Narendra Modi in 2014. However, term vikaas varies in meaning, as also in the bundle of goods people consider important as we move down, or as we move spatially.

In Dugehri, Mehuva (Gujarat), in the context of land acquisition and destruction of their local water body—the bandharo—by the Nirma cement plant, the term development (vikas) elicited some derision.

The sarpanch of Dugheri, Bharati Shiyal, said, 'Vikas means nothing if the government cannot ensure that we get our rotla (roti, a daily bread).' Dugheri and Mahuva were strongly opposed to Narendra Modi and the BJP. Modi's erstwhile ally, Dr Kanubhai Kalsaria, had set up a Sadbhavna Manch as a political front (to oppose Modi), and fielded candidates from all five Assembly constituencies around Mahuva and exhorted his voters to use the mat as their 'shastra', that is, weapon in the fight against such 'develop- ment' projects (Kumar, 2012).

Within the broader gamut of vikaas, that is, development, some specific issues emerged especially in the Panchayats: the issue

of exclusion from the targeted poverty list of poor citizens known as the 'Below Poverty Line' or BPL list, was one of the more salient ones. People considered these exclusions to be deliberate, designed to deny poor people the benefits of development. Exclusion of the poor deserving to receive state protection and policy benefits from this official list (inclusion in the list would have entitled them to be recognised as 'poor' by the state) was seen as a weapon of power used by the patrons in conniv- ance with local officials, and elections especially state and Panchayat level, were seized on as a political moment to assert 'inclusion'. This could be heard loud and clear in the Jharkhand Panchayat elections. The other major issue was that of water. We have already noted how Dugheri in Gujarat protested against the Modi government for giving permission to the Nirma cement factory which would destroy their bandharo—a common water body and source of life. In Sangam Vihar, Delhi, the entire struggle in the last two Assembly elections in 2013 and 2015 was to challenge the mafia control over private water tankers. In the absence of piped water supply, lives have been difficult for the residents of this urban periphery. The crisis in the summer months often led to sar-futtawal (violent clashes); very often the police had to be called in (see Priyam, 2014, 2015). In a scenario of serious water insecurity and denial of water rights women took the lead in spelling out water woes. Jha (2015a) notes a response from Chandrakala Devi:The issue of water specially demonstrates the value of studying elections at different levels, and the understanding of variations. Water is now a very important matter of assertion by ordinary people in 'India as a whole'—a 'scaling up' demand that Sinha (2015) makes of comparative studies in India. However, the variations also show that the same 'national' issue has significant variations—spatially and also at different levels of the political system. People respond differently to national, regional and local messages by politicians on the water issue. In Jharkhand, in the national campaign of 2014, and the state Assembly elections later that year, BJP's Narendra Modi had proposed a grand scheme of linking rivers. During the state Assembly elections, the local Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader provided an alternative proposal of building up the Iccha Dam for water storage and conservation. The JMM candidate won, and Modi's grand proposals were neither understood nor taken seriously by the voters (Jha, 2014). In the local Panchayat elections in the same state (Jharkhand), the struggle for water was an issue—but mainly in terms of access to wells and for bathing rights for women in the local pond. Spatially different is the struggle for water in the urban periphery of Sangam Vihar, against the private and forced control of the water mafia on water tankers and access to borewells.

Overall, the studies reveal an increasing desire for better leadership specifically in the context of development or vikaas—bijali, sadak, paani (electricity, roads, water). The qualitative studies reveal the ramifications of popular assertions on rights to water and civic services against control by the mafia and dominant castes, the creation of new storage and conservation facilities, women's needs in particular and their role in protests for conservation of water as a common property likely to be destroyed by mindless development. As noted, people evaluate these issues in the context of the specific election in which they are about to vote. While the ethnographies do not explicitly engage with electoral outcomes, they are able to contribute to an understanding of the processes through which political change is affected.

Significance and Challenges for the Future

The CEE brings to the fore important information on the type of issues citizens consider significant, with a priority for the understanding of the socially disadvantaged or marginalized citizens. Further, political choice is seen from a wider information base, given the holism of ethnographies and not an aggregate sum ranking of political preferences as seen in electoral outcomes. Differences in the electoral process and nature of voting for different levels has something to tell us not simply about variations, but also that the citizens act differently in the same space, as actors for different levels. This reveals to us that they associate the act of voting with deliberation, and do so with intensity as elections move down the scale. Relatedly, there are issues on which they do not like to talk openly, especially before elections. People consider as inherently valuable the deliberations they are engaged in at the time of elections. There is ample evidence to believe that voters do not easily reveal their party political preferences, and if 'we' the researchers ask 'who' they will vote for, a straight answer may not be forthcoming, especially as the researcher is considered an outsider. Very often they fear political reprisals after the elections—when the special protection of the state is gone. In Harriya Panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh, Verma (2016) notes that the Kurmi voters were not willing to speak openly: 'khul ke bol kar apni hi biradari main apna bigadenge, jaroorat ke samay main biradari wale hi madad karte hai' (open admission will mean that you may not get help from your own caste-men in times of need). In Sangam Vihar, women did not speak openly in favour of any political party, but only signalled when they said: 'Didi is baar jhaadu ko bhi dekhiyega (sister please take note of the broom symbol of the AAP this time)' (Priyam, 2014). At times, people may speak out only after the results are out, as in the case of the Valmiki voters in Sangam Vihar. These are challenges and considerations that will likely

be of help for future researchers of elections— survey investigators as much as ethnographers.

CONCLUSION

People—illiterate, poor, rural ordinary and urban marginal—deliberate deeply on issues. And they do so in ways unanticipated to the classic schema of liberal politics. They make evaluations—thinking differently about appropriate issues for government for different levels. Amidst the diversity of Indian federalism, they compare outcomes of development and welfare policies across states, and for different levels of government. All these and many more are a confirmation of the greater need to compare from the 'bottom up', rather than consider comparison to be an orthodox tool of a rigid theorist. On a broader canvas, it helps us to put aside the dichotomies of the 'modern and traditional' that underlie the generalities of political systems approach and resurrects the ordinary subject of democracy as its agent. In its many similarities and variations, Indian democracy is valued by its ordinary voters as an arena of citizenship and political change.

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