

Whose Democracy? : Anthropological Perspectives from India

Ladies and Gentlemen - It's a great pleasure and honour for me to speak in memory of Barbara Ward today.

There are several elements of her work which have particular resonance with my own research, on the local, lived experience of Indian democracy.

First, her main fieldwork site of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s was a traditional society undergoing rapid change towards modernity – much like India today. And she thus worked in a capitalist enclave of a Communist nation; whilst my work is based in the Indian state of West Bengal - a Communist enclave of a capitalist nation!

Second, I admire Barbara's commitment to long-term participant-observation in the field, over many years. This is central to the best traditions of British (not to say Oxford) anthropology - and I have sought to return to my own two villages of study over the last 7 years as often as motherhood and university admin will allow. There are great dividends from such long term engagement, as Barbara's path breaking approach of letting women speak for themselves and tell their own stories, showed. It helps one generate trust and intimacy with one's informants; incorporate the continual social and cultural changes they face; and genuinely come to hear and grasp their voices and experience.

That said, I also very much endorse Barbara's openness to other types of data, notably the quantitative data collected by the United Nations, which she used effectively to complement her ethnographic material. In my work on Indian democracy, I have found that the (increasingly well designed) political and psephological surveys, and the snap shot and trend data they provide about the electorate's opinions, intentions, and behaviours, are a rich source of stimulation concerning what ethnographic questions one pursues, and a valuable discipline on the ethnographic generalisations one comes up with.

Lastly, an important part of Barbara's work concerned forms of self-help and circulating credit among poorer women. Whilst such institutions are not a main focus of my own work, they are a newly emerging sub-plot to it, as women's cooperatives are a striking recent addition to the West Bengal rural scene. As I shall argue today, the origins and practices of these cooperatives sheds further light on that cultural underpinning and popular experiencing of Indian democracy which is my own preoccupation.

A] I should perhaps begin my argument today by saying why Indian democracy is of such anthropological interest.

For one thing, an Indian general election is the largest single organised event in the world. It involves 700 million voters, 800,000 polling stations, one million electronic voting machines, and proceeds in phases (carefully choreographed to take into account local weather conditions and religious holidays) which allow electoral commission officials and the troops who guard the polling stations to be moved around the country. It is thus a 'campaign' in the most epic logistical sense. And remarkably, the state pulls it off each time with an efficiency and precision that it otherwise displays only in its arrangements for the similarly vast religious festival, the Kumb Mela.

Second, is the fact of democracy's survival in India at all. At Independence, democracies were the exception in the world, not the rule. Given its poverty, illiteracy, inequality, and divisions of religion and caste, many commentators, not least in Whitehall and Washington, saw Nehru's determination to establish mass democracy as rash in the extreme, a recipe for chaos. Certainly, one can say the prevailing material and social conditions in India were less propitious for democracy than in other, relatively more prosperous colonies such as Ghana (or indeed more recent 'transition' countries such as Russia), where democracy has fared far less well. And yet, India's has endured.

Indeed, electoral participation is positively buoyant, and unlike in the West, remains high. Although voting is not mandatory, and the journey to the nearest polling station can be long and effortful, general election turnout is over 60%, and state elections' for

around 70%. Moreover, and again quite unlike in the West, propensity to vote increases down the socio-economic ladder, with illiterate poor, low caste more folk likely to vote than the educated, high caste middle class. Rural dwellers vote more than urban, tribal areas have caught up with the rest, and female voting rates are now much closer to men's (Yadav 1999).

It's all quite counter-intuitive from the perspective of political science orthodoxies (Lipset 1981). And it's not just voting behaviour. For a robust level of belief in the efficacy of one's vote and the value of democracy is expressed in survey data, with the strongest and still growing commitment appearing among underprivileged groups (Linz, Stepan and Yadav 2007).

Such enthusiasm is conspicuous in the village, which on Election Dayⁱ woke earlier than usual and bustled around urgently with an air of barely contained festivity. Chores were limited to the bare necessities of fetching water and milking cattle, with all attention centred on the imminent mile long journey to the polling station. The constant enquiry was 'So, when are you planning to go to vote?' The men preferred to go in the early morning cool, to be present when the doors opened; the women necessarily later, after children and cooking pots had been seen to. Keen to look respectable, men swapped the customary draped *lungis* and *dhotis* for their best trousers, while women wore jewellery and make-up, and took out their handloom saris; I was chided for not having worn something new. The children were initially bemused, since unlike other special days when they were the centres of attention, today their preoccupied elders largely ignored them.

People travelled to the polling booth in groups of three or four, partly for moral support but also to help pass the time while trying to hitch a ride from passing trucks or queuing in the sun to vote. The polling station was the little school building in a neighbouring village, and adorned by bunting and banners it could be mistaken for a shrine or country fair. Outside were rows of chairs for the party agents who formed a seated guard of honour for any approaching voter, faintly intimidating in their eagerness to check names off their lists. The polling officials were keen to ensure that the day remained trouble free and armed guards stood around, languid but alert.

After voting, the hours passed in the conviviality of comparing notes on who had gone to the poll when, and in chivvying passers-by on their way. The villagers discreetly checked out each other's fingers and made their surprise and disapproval known to those who as yet bore no indelible mark of voting. Any excuse for not voting, other than perhaps severe illness, was met with a barely concealed scepticism, and the intense peer pressure led even natives who had migrated elsewhere to make expensive journeys back to their home constituency. ⁱⁱ

Thus, the excitement of the day, the presence of relatives, the peer pressure to participate, and the satisfied exhaustion of an important duty successfully discharged, all suggested a strong affinity between the elections and religious; democracy celebrated with the enthusiasm, colour and excitement common to all Indian festivals.

[**SLIDES** - Indian elections produce their own genres of ephemeral art, in elaborate murals, witty cartoons, and the huge cut out figures of politicians that appear on walls everywhere during the campaign but are removed after polling, and not to mention all the bunting and banners, pamphlets, mock ballot papers, flags and such like.]

And yet, we might reasonably ask - why this enthusiasm? For India's practical record on reducing poverty and achieving greater social equality has been rather dismal, even during the recent years of higher economic growth. More than 30% of low caste Hindus, scheduled tribes and Muslims live below the poverty line.

Moreover, such inequality, and the suffering it implies, seems to rest on an immovable ideological bedrock of hierarchy, namely caste, derived from interpretations of Hinduism and Islam. Though untouchability was officially abolished and outlawed at Independence, the caste system remains entrenched, modified and re-interpreted, but still important. The ostensible political challenge that has come from the lower caste parties, and their successful campaigns for some 30% of government jobs and higher education places to be reserved to their members, has reapportioned the fruits of the system, but reconfirmed its basic logic.

So unsurprisingly, a recent survey indicates 85% of 18 to 25 year olds believe in caste identity and endogamy. And the fact that a significant proportion of this cohort are

working with computers and in call centres, and relaxing watching MTV, highlights the apparent disjunct between tradition and modernity – a bafflement summed up in FT journalist Edward Luce’s recent book on contemporary India, ‘In Spite of the Gods’.

How then, do we reconcile India’s profound and metaphysical hierarchy, with its enthusiasm for the supposed equality of democracy? Why did Homo Hierarchicus embrace the Homo Aequalis of one-man one vote?

Put more bluntly, why do the great mass of people whose lives in fact 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’s interests to those of the minority urbanites?

These seem to me rather compelling anthropological questions. But they are also rather grand and diffuse. So before tackling them head on, I’d like to **ground the discussion more concretely in my fieldwork site, and look at the more manageable, but somewhat analogous matter, of participation in rural women’s cooperatives.**

B] The two villages of Madanpur and Chishti, sit on either side of a modern highway, two hours drive from the town of Bolpur and six from the capital of West Bengal, Kolkata. The villagers are mainly Muslims (a significant minority in West Bengal), but are divided into 4 caste groups. Three of them, the Shekhs, Mughals and Pathans, are lower ranking, as are the two Hindu caste groups in the village (Doms and Bagdis). The village elite was thus the fourth Muslim group, the Syeds, who trace their ancestry to a *pir*, holy man, from Iran. The Syeds are endogamous, considering themselves more pious than other Muslims in the village, and they evoke their foreign origins by speaking Urdu among themselves rather than the local Bengali.

In the late 1970s, rural Bengal remained semi-feudal in character, with the mass of the peasantry suffering insecurity and exploitation as sharecroppers or manual labourers in thrall to a more prosperous landowning, Congress Party voting, middle class. And

in many areas, class divisions correlated quite closely with caste. Thus in Madanpur and Chishti, it was the Syeds who owned land, and the various lower castes who laboured for them. And this is still reflected on the face of the villages, where aside from two mosques, there are just a few two-storied *pucca* structures, which are Syed houses, in contrast to the mass of mud and thatch huts.

However, in 1977, following Mrs Gandhi's Emergency, the Left Front (a coalition of thirteen Communist parties) won the state election, and embarked in the years that followed on far reaching land reforms.

Henceforth, any sharecropper, *bargadar*, who had worked an area of land for a landlord for more than three years, could register his interest in it, and be due fifty per cent of its produce in return for his labour, while the landlord remained responsible for the outlay of capital for seeds, fertilisers, bullocks and irrigation. The farming decisions now came to be made jointly, indeed were often dominated by the greater practical experience of the sharecroppers. Their new stake in the land also led them to work harder and invest themselves, and harvests flourished. Meanwhile, casual labourers were recruited into peasant trade unions and enjoyed a new government prescribed daily minimum wage of 60 Rs, which had to be paid to them the moment they showed up for work, ending the old humiliating wait at the end of the day.

While the implementation of these reforms has been extremely uneven across the state (as demonstrated by Barbara Harriss-White and others), in areas where they *did* take effect, as in my field site, the results were significant. Together with the introduction of high yielding varieties of rice, it meant the majority of even poorer families could now eat three meals a day; "no one went hungry anymore", as my informants put it.

But the **social effect** was even more dramatic, bringing a genuine transformation of the feudal character of labouring relations, with the lower castes becoming increasingly self-assured. In my villages, the Syeds were driven by the new labour costs into sweating in the fields themselves, a heavy symbolic blow given their traditional abhorrence of the plough and manual labour. The sharecroppers could now look them in the eye when talking, whereas previously, even riding a bicycle in

front of a Syed was considered taboo. The reforms created a mutual dependence, and the growing recognition of this gradually softened the older suspicions and separations. And the status of the lower castes also benefited from their participation in the farmers' unions and village councils (Panchayats) which the Left Front established.

Its unbroken electoral success since then has rested mainly on grateful support from the rural poor. But the reality of its dominance is in fact more subtle than this – for over time, the Left Front has succeeded, largely through the entrepreneurial activities of its local operatives, in becoming more of an 'all class' party.

SLIDES - LEFT FRONT

The main Communist Party representative in the villages has been a Party worker for over twenty-five years, and is now also president of the farmers' union (covering 20 villages). He is known to all as 'Comrade'¹. Well built and fit, he nonetheless carries a little more fat than the average farmer, and his complexion is a shade lighter than those who toil in the sun each day. He dresses like everyone else, but his lungi is always less faded and frayed, he is rarely barefeet and wears a gold chain. He is of the people, certainly, but unmistakably marked out as someone different and important.

The Comrade's primary responsibility is to deliver electoral victory to the Left Front. In the best traditions of a vanguard party, he considers that the mass of villagers, whom he calls 'the poor' (*gorib*), will naturally tend to vote for the Left Front *unless* they are 'led astray' by alien social elements. So, his perpetual anxiety is that the Syeds, brooding over their reduced status and wealth, will seek to exploit and coalesce the emerging grumbles among the peasantry that the government hasn't done much new for them in a while. The Comrade's main tactical challenge is thus to ensure that the Syeds – literate, articulate, landowning, and still with some influence over their sharecroppers – do not unite among themselves effectively to spread critiques of the government.

¹ For a comparative discussion on such 'big-men' see the work of Mines (1994) and Hansen (2005).

For example, in Madanpur, there were 3 Syed households who were widely known to vote for the Congress opposition. Over time, he used his position, and influence over grants and disbursements, to sap their position and significance by imposing additional share croppers on their land, denying them jobs they were qualified for, and by encouraging their business rivals. Of these 3 men – one is now mentally ill, the other obsesses about his farming and is tight-lipped about politics and the third has turned to religion and poetry.

More generally, he seeks to ‘divide and rule’, preventing kin groups in particular from coming together in common purpose, whether commercial or political. For a start, he keeps the politics of the two villages separate from each other, and in simmering mutual disregard. But he also carefully sowed discord among close male kin, especially brothers. My delving into these enmities typically revealed resentment of a material inequality that had been facilitated by a job or a loan or a marriage proposal arranged by the Comrade. By such treatment, the Comrade kept one brother forever in his debt, and the other in sullen hope of similar favour, and the two of them hopelessly estranged.

It was also striking that in the daily life of the village with all its accompanying gossip and envy, each conflict was resolved only after the personal mediation (*bichar*) of the Comrade. Employing considerable skills in magnifying ordinary village disputes to peace threatening proportions, the Comrade is then able to make himself an indispensable arbitrator in all disputes. This embeds him in the daily life of every household, with no matter too small to escape his attention. In each case, he restores order by issuing threats to the suspected mischief-makers or by mollifying the injured party. But these judgements usually bore no relation to the matter’s merits or proportions, and it was this arbitrariness which induced continual anxiety in villagers about the comrade’s disposition toward them.

For example, during one of my visits, he privately carried on an affair with a young girl while simultaneously sleeping with her mother. Publicly however, he was helping the parents arrange a suitable marriage for the girl, in return for the friendship of her father. While the goings on were the subject of hushed but outraged gossip, no

one directly actually accused the Comrade of having transgressed moral boundaries. For each and every one of them were involved in other disputes, which would inevitably required the Comrade's intervention, hopefully on their side.

Together with his own successful commercial ventures, which take full advantage of his privileged position concerning government intentions, regulations, permissions and grants to enrich himself, but the fruits of which he also shares selectively with others as part of his perpetual political work, these various manoeuvrings mark the Comrade out as very similar to an '*entrepratchiki*'- half entrepreneur and half apparatchik, the kind of East European 'wheeler-dealing rural politico-cum-businessman revelling in a socialist environment'.

A dense web of such men covers West Bengal, each taking the small amounts of social and financial capital that the Party provides and investing it energetically to build support. They have carried out an informal but thorough penetration of every aspect of 'civil society' in rural life, from village football clubs to Id festivity committees. As a result, for many villagers now, *any* figure of influence or achievement, whatever their actual political sympathies, is referred to as a 'comrade'.² They ask me what my Comarde is like!

SLIDES The villages

C] Despite these energetic local efforts to prevent the emergence of opposition, after two decades in power, the Left Front's lustre was undoubtedly beginning to wane, its ideas and agenda seemingly bankrupt. Though it won the 2001 election, data revealed rural women, hitherto its strongest support, had turned away in significant numbers.

After all, the statutory daily wage of 60 Rs established in the early 1980s no longer had the same purchasing power. And the continuing lack of long promised electrification and running water meant the burden of household jobs – making ends meet, cooking in the dark, fetching water, washing, looking after dependants - continued to be exhausting, shackling women to the village in its ancient tedium.

² Nor do they distinguish between the bureaucracy, the Left Front machinery, or the elected government - 'The Party' denotes all three.

Whilst they had shared in the initial material improvements that had accrued to their sharecropper or labouring husbands, they had not shared in the uplift of dignity and status. The intricate labour arrangements between elite households and low caste women remained stubbornly semi-feudal. The sharecropper's wife could still be summoned by Syed women at their convenience to prepare puffed rice, boil and dry unhusked rice, or join the harvest threshing. Though all such labour was now paid for in cash and grain, the social inferiority and subjugation it still implied increasingly grated with them.

And to this was added the more recent indignities of the Comrade's invincible lechery and opportunism, which preyed on them, their daughters and sisters, and bedevilled everyday family life by the disputes and enmities between their men folk, who as a result of their own emasculated influence, spent inordinate amounts of time in brooding, plotting and criticising.

So they women voted with their vote – either abstaining, or supporting the breakaway Congress faction Trinamul, whose feisty but matronly and incorruptible leader Mamata Banerjee seemed a world away from the macho amoralism of the Comrades.

The carefully considered response of the government was to seek to woo women back by encouraging the establishment of women's' self-help groups, and **in January 2005, one was formed in Madanpur and Chishti.**

As the women told it, the Comrade had invited them to form their own 10 woman *dols* [groups] for co-operative activities and regular meetings. There was plenty of curiosity and interest, and the Comrade was careful to ensure each dol had at least one member from each of the village's castes. The first *dol* was named 'Uttom Shoh Dol' (the Best Help Group), and after brainstorming discussions, its agreed focus was child welfare and income generation, including entrepreneurial activities. Members were also required to attend Block level meetings, with similar groups from 10 surrounding villages converged, where women were to be advised about best practice in child-rearing, including grooming and hygiene, and how to help with schooling – messages they would then take back to the village and disseminate.

The women held their own weekly meetings in each member's home by turn, late in the evening when children were asleep and pans at last put away.

One group received a small grant of 5k rupees from the Block office with which to start a small business of preparing, packaging and selling the ubiquitous Bengali snack, puffed rice, a skilled manufacture not all women can do. In time they made a modest profit that was shared among the membership, and the initial capital was repaid to the Block Office.

Along with discussing further ideas for income generation, they also discussed the need for more latrines in the village, reported on immunisation records of children, found ways to raise the two-rupee bus fare for their representative to visit the local bank to deposit their money, and so forth. In all this, they seemed to enjoy the full support of the Party, which at least lent an ear to their ideas, if not always resource. It had supported all *dols* with seed capital, and paid members travel expenses plus Rs25 for every meeting attended. The State government meanwhile promised to procure its stocks from rice that had been hand husked by women's cooperatives, not milled.

One especially beneficial and enduring scheme still in operation when I visited in advance of the 2006 elections, involved the Uttom Dol members preparing mid-day meals for pupils in a small thatch shelter built next to the school building. It was a beautifully simple idea, drawing on what they each did anyway for their own children, but benefiting from economies of scale and State recognition and aid, thereby ensuring improved quality from the rations store, and more varied and nutritious menus. And other women had confidence that the dol members, known to them or fellow mothers, would not defraud the shared ration in the way a commercial caterer might.

As all raw materials were supplied to them, the tenth of a rupee (10 paisa) they were paid per child amounted to pure if tiny profit of Rs 40 per month. The rules of the cooperative required them to re-invest three quarters of this in the cooperatives activities, but the women enthusiastically opened another bank account to jointly save the remaining Rs10 too.

Having already known the women involved for some years, I couldn't fail to notice the marked change in them after a year of *dol* membership and activity. Take, for example, the case of Mala Dom, a low caste Hindu woman who was the President of the Uttom Shoh Dol. One of 3 daughters of Tinkari and Charu Dom, she was married, with sons aged 6 and 4 and lived, unusually(?), with her husband and children in a complex of huts adjacent to her parents and siblings. The families were close, spending much time in the common courtyard, and the quiet but compelling dignity of the wizened matriarch Charu, had given the family a reputation for sobriety and honesty in the village. Meanwhile, the patriarch Tinkari was an articulate and politicized individual who had brought up a like-minded son to be the same. And though their poor mud huts lay quite literally in the shadow of the Comrade's sprawling compound, it was Tinkari who had long ago recruited the Comrade as a young man into politics, serving as his mentor before being out maneuvered and surpassed. Though Tinkari bore this fate with resignation and occasional bitterness, it had motivated his son to become an aspirant comrade himself.

Formerly, in all the hours I had sat in their courtyard discussing the days' events and political issues with father and son, I had never heard a peep from Mala. She was present and possibly listening, but always hunched over cutting hay for cattle, weaving a mat or oiling a child's hair. But by 2006, Mala had literally emerged from the shadows, and emboldened by her presidency of her *dol*, she joined forthrightly in the discussions, added details to her brother's account of what was going on in the village, and seemed generally more energized and alive. She still braided her niece's hair as she spoke, but now with confident eye contact, waves of the arm, and a broad smile as she recalled her nervousness during her first ever visit to the bank.

As the weeks went by and I met more and more women who had joined the self-help groups, this sort of transformation came to seem quite routine. They more often wore their saris in the formal 'city' style now, and sat straighter and taller. They seemed more able and determined to form and express friendships, finding more time to sit together, laugh and discuss matters beyond those of only hearth and home. In general, they exuded a new confidence which exposure to travel, business, and the company of strangers had engendered.

Such cooperative movements are of course not exclusive to West Bengal, and have a longer history and more established influence in other parts of South Asia (notably the famed micro credit circles of Bangladesh). And the economic incentives from the *dol* are trivial, with the monthly return to each member less than the daily minimum wage, and barely enough to buy a litre of milk.

But the symbolic impact of generating *any* earning through cooperation and initiative, rather than individualised and semi-feudal graft in brick kilns or field, was enormous - and in describing their new activities to me, the women emphasised above all the qualitative difference of these sums. For wage labour was seen as the mundane physical business of survival and an 'each to her own' ethic, where no one covered for you if you were sick. Whereas the ventures of the *dol* embodied cooperation among women, and exercised their planning and creativity in originating ideas, and overcoming the obstacles to realising them.

At the same time, interacting with each other in roles other than as mother or wife, on journeys in public buses, in 'alien' villages, in trips to the bank, generated new forms of sociality. The inter caste composition of the group and rotating meeting home was itself markedly novel egalitarian in a society where the poorer, lower caste members had always had to visit their superiors, since among other things, it was assumed lower caste women could eat and drink anything they were offered, in a way higher caste women would not.³ And since upper caste women only entertained and never visited, members of lower castes remained forever in social indebtedness to them. But the enforced circulation of weekly *dol* meetings now disrupted this.

The new sociality, and the newly collective goals it accompanied, also seem to have inspired the women to a larger and calmer perspective. For years I had listened to their vicious and vitriolic gossip, and witnessed countless slanging matches over the smallest matters. So when they told me proudly about their new initiatives, I had immediately feared the envy, scorn and backlash it might provoke. And they

³ And in traditional social gatherings, such as the *milad* prayer meetings, or threshing of the paddy crop, the spaciousness of the courtyards of the elite women, requisite seclusion [purdah?], and availability of sufficient spare crockery, all ensured entertaining was done only by elite women.

confirmed this was the case, as other women tried to subvert the groups with taunts, bullying, and charges of corruption. But the *dol* members related how, hard as it was, they had retained their dignity, refusing to rise to the bait or sink to the gutter, sticking together for support, and resolved to prove them wrong.

SLIDES Women

As a coda, I can't resist mentioning the vainglorious efforts of the women's menfolk to outdo them in 'even this', by establishing their own *dols*. In the best Bengali traditions, this involved thinking up elaborate literary names for their groups, and grandiose schemes for future action; notably re-planting an entire dried riverbed with fruit trees, to produce an ethanol based alternative to diesel. Sadly, the capital outlay required meant little progress, and it will be interesting to see whether male *esprit de corps* survives such disappointments....

Turning back to the women's group, their apparent success may at first glance seem surprising. How, given the traditional hierarchical divisions, did women of all castes and classes suddenly come together so harmoniously on an egalitarian basis? Especially given there were no real material incentives to paper over such divisions?

My suggestion is that it becomes less surprising if we take a more nuanced view of caste.

The kernel of truth in Louis Dumont's otherwise rather ahistorical and essentialist description of India's hierarchical metaphysics, is that caste is based simultaneously on a fundamental division - between the pure and the impure - and a fundamental holism - of ranking in relation to the whole.

Accordingly, much of the detailed symbolism and sociological practice of the caste system serves to apply, balance, and work out the tensions between, these two characteristics.

On the one hand, it ranks lower castes as perpetually impure, and separates them off from the pure, ostracising them socially, and justifying their exploitation economically and otherwise.

But the system also organises a division of labour, according to the degree of purity of different professions, so as to keep everyday material life viable and functioning.

And that in turn entails elements, and daily experience, of the complementarity, interdependence and cooperation of different castes - seen classically in the *jajmani* system of bartering labour and goods.

Thus for good or ill, as a member of a sub-caste, which is itself part of a caste, which is itself part of the entire system, all participants are perforce driven to experience and grasp their position in relational terms, as a part of successive larger wholes, which transcends their immediate social circle.

So whilst a Shekh labourer may deeply resent her patronage and exploitation by Syeds, her relationship with them also irremediably shapes her cosmology, such that her world would seem quite literally incomplete without them. Her part, however modest, becomes nothing without the whole which they complete.

Thus the ideals of cooperation, belonging, and the imagined common good are as much a legacy of the caste system as social discrimination.

My suggestion, therefore, and without condoning it in any way, is that the caste system is actually potentially 'good to think' with in respect of conceiving simultaneously of a small group's membership and interest, and of a much wider common good.

And these aspects remain part of the habitus of the modern Indian, and perhaps eased the women's transition to involvement in egalitarian self-help groups.

That is, the initiative of the *dol* perhaps provided an appealing arena, a symbolic space if you will, in which the more transcendent and collectivist aspect of the caste

system could be released from beneath the mundane rubble of division and exploitation.

It is from this perspective that I would now like to return to my earlier 'big question' : Why do 90% of Madanpur and Chishti's humble inhabitants turn out to vote at all?

There are two main kinds of explanation typically offered in the literature.

One argues the vote is a 'rational choice', deployed instrumentally to maximise self-interest. Thus, accounts of 'patronage democracy' in Uttar Pradesh argues that voters skilfully assess the chances of the party closest to their caste and ethnicity, when deciding whether to vote and for whom. Such democracy is all about the winning parties entering government and delivering tangible handouts to their supporters.

There is obviously something to this, but I doubt it can be the whole story. Few of the villagers I knew seemed at all hopeful of material benefit accruing from their vote casting. While water, electricity and employment were certainly key issues, they knew well enough the transience of politicians' promises; the hopeful candidates at campaign meetings who told them "Vote in our favour, we will look after you", but then vanished until next time.

Still, perhaps the vote can be a tool of morality and protest, at least giving the pleasure of 'throwing the rascals out'? Certainly, the Indian voter is a canny rejecter of incumbents; between 1989 and 1999, parties in state government lost two out of every three elections (Yadav 1999). Yet still I doubt this really explains Indians' voting enthusiasm - for they are well aware that it is usually the mere exchange of one set of rascals for another, equally likely to bully, take bribes, misappropriate funds or otherwise misbehave; indeed most villagers seemed to regard becoming a politician, of whatever stripe, as intrinsically corrupting. And in any case, anti-incumbency is an especially implausible motive in West Bengal, given the Left Front always wins anyway.

Nonetheless, if voting is seen as unlikely to change things for the better, the villagers do have faith in it helping to stop things getting worse. At the bus stop on the way to

the polling station, I fell in with Kubera, who ran a tiny paan shop with her husband. As we waited by the side of the melting highway on that blistering May afternoon, she remarked that the Party should feed the voters on election day, not just its own campaign workers. 'After all', she winked, 'we are doing the most important work of all, pressing the button. Without that, they are nothing!' She spoke in jest, but her point was a serious one. For whilst the Party had grown complacent about its mission and right to govern, election day always offered a reality check, and the campaign a certain humility and nervousness. Even a narrower win, or reduced overall vote could see them rebuked by Party headquarters, so activists and candidates took pains to be humble, with all the unfulfilled promises having at least to be explained, and new promises made, and more convincingly.

So even in West Bengal, voting did offer some check and balance on the behaviour and appetites of the rulers, as we saw, not voting helped the women of the village secure the modest but progressive gains of the dol initiative. For the villagers, this is like a small scale and everyday version of Amyrta Sen's famous argument that famine can't happen in a democracy.

Meanwhile, a second kind of view in the literature assesses voting as hopeless in any instrumental sense, seeing elections' value as entirely symbolic. From this perspective, democracy is an untrue but vitally important myth in support of social cohesion, with elections a ritual enactment that helps maintain and restore equilibrium. Here then, the vote is a necessary safety valve which allows for the airing of popular disaffection, but thereby merely bolsters the status quo. On this reading, which we may associate with John Dunn, an election requires the complicity of its participants in a deliberate mis-recognition of the emptiness of its procedures and practical futility.

I can see this view has some plausibility in the context of the contemporary UK and US, where the underlying consensus and lack of political distance between parties does mean that any sense of gravity and significance does seem something of a polite contrivance, fuelled by an anxious media - and where declining voter rates can be seen precisely as growing numbers of people failing to suspend their disbelief about the pointlessness of it all.

However, this just doesn't ring true for the case of India, or do justice to the passion and involvement of its voters. Are 700mn people really suffering the world's grandest delusion?!

This is not to deny of course, that there are profoundly ritualistic elements to India's voting – by which I mean not just the sense of repetition and charade that Dunn tends to reduce it to; but rather, the sense of symbolic value, and meaning rendered through the sheer act of performance.

The Indian voter is required to present himself bodily and in person at the polling station, and for these villagers, living in remote and semi-forgotten corners of the nation, well outside the India purportedly becoming a middle class superpower, this opportunity to prove one's membership of the nation and confirm one's status as a citizen was acutely felt, a rare moment of self assertion. As one man put it: 'If I don't even vote, no one will know I exist!'. Another said 'If we don't vote how can we prove that we are citizens (*nagorik*) of our country?'

The egalitarian mechanics of the poll afforded particular pleasure. People relished the fact that everyone, regardless of caste and class, had to stand cheek by jowl in the queue and wait their turn. And the marking of all voters' fingers, regardless of status, was a similarly satisfying displacement of the administrative thumbprints which had long stigmatised the illiterate. They also noted the fact that unlike religious rituals, which required the presence of an officiating imam or priest but not necessarily a congregation, an election could not be held without *them* – 'a festival for the people, not for Allah! It is little wonder the event has a carnival sense and explosive potential which requires cessation of normal activity and close monitoring by troops and officials.

Before someone could cast their vote, their left index finger had to be marked with black ink by the polling officer inside the polling station[i]. Something similar was tried in Bosnia, as Kimberly Coles discusses, albeit a more hi tech version of silver nitrate ink that showed up under ultra-violet light. But there it was resented as an intrusion into personal space and offensive indication that the people could not be

trusted (it was before long abandoned); whereas in India, the voter's marking seemed unobjectionably congruent with, and assimilated to, all the other body decorations which indicate ritual participation: such as henna on women's palms, bindis and tilaks on foreheads, rakhis tied on wrists, or the utter submersion in the rainbow of Holi. The black vote-mark on the finger is worn with pride as a testament to one's participation, like a sacred thread around the wrist after a Hindu ritual, or the discolouration on a pious Muslim's forehead caused by years of touching the ground in prayer.

But since the vote-mark goes away once its function is fulfilled, it can also be seen as belonging to that broad range of ephemeral ritual inscriptions seen throughout India, such as the intricate floor designs of rangoli, kolam or alpona, made with dry colours, rice flour and grains on the days of festival, involving hours of work, but soon washed away or allowed to fade, to make way for new ones later.

From this ritual perspective, it becomes apparent that to dwell mainly on the election's holiday aspect and collective effervescence in the village, as I did earlier, is still to risk missing what is actually most important and interesting : namely that so many people seem to share a genuine and thoughtful reverence for the democratic process as in some sense 'sacred' or 'sacrosanct' - a sacred election.

I wouldn't deny the religious connotations of this, but would note the aptness of Durkheim's qualification: 'We know today' (he said in 1898) that a religion does not necessarily imply symbols and rites in the full sense, or temples or priests. All this external apparatus is merely its superficial aspect. Essentially, it is nothing other than a system of collective beliefs and practices which have a special authority. And it has this special authority derived from a moral supremacy because it rises above private goals (Durkheim 1898: 23).

In India's case, the quasi-religious collective beliefs I suggest attach to elections have their origins in the fact that Independence, like for the USA before it, gave birth simultaneously to a new nation and a democracy. Though the colonial government had introduced legislatures elected on a highly partial system, based on limited franchise, and religiously divided vote banks; and notwithstanding the Fascistic

influence of right wing Hindu movements; when it came to formulating a political vision for the newly independent India, the Constituent Assembly had the imagination and courage to extend, at once, the franchise to all adults, and to hand this vast electorate in trust to an Election Commission immune from interference by the Legislature.

The Commission rose to the challenge, and helped the Assembly's democratic vision come to life through its perceptive and sensitive designs of the technology of democracy; initially, the simple details such as papers and pencils, symbols for political parties for easy recognition for the largely illiterate voters, and the finger marks to avoid fraud; and latterly, the plain circuit board based electronic voting machines that seem to work much more reliably than their elaborate British and American counterparts. Such simple tools helped emphasise the idea and optimism of political equality and mass democratic participation.

Thus ever since Independence, the Commission has seen itself as a key guardian not merely of elections but of the very nation itself, a sacred duty which it discharges with great seriousness and diligence. In practical terms, its reach and standardisation throughout every corner of the Motherland make it one of only a handful of institutions (the army, railways, cricket and movies) that are genuinely pan-Indian and that can serve to bind the vast and varied country together. The population greatly appreciates the work of the Commission, rating it as the most respected public institution (the police are the least), and surveys also reveal the people's belief that elections are largely free and fair – something that helps generate not only faith in the democratic system, but also patriotic faith in the idea of India itself.

Having characterised religion as authoritative collective beliefs about supra-private goals, Durkheim then characterises contemporary Individualism, as the 'religion of humanity', a glorification not of individual qualities, but the divine humanity which all men share, and which is sacred and inviolable.

Analogously then, I suggest that the ultimate appeal of voting to my villagers, is that it is their act of worship in India's religion of popular sovereignty – an act by which

they attest to, and celebrate, with due ritual and solemnity, their own inviolable share in that sacred idea of modern India and its ongoing 'tryst with destiny'.

As the tens of millions of subalterns assert en masse their citizenship, civic and metaphysical, and dwell for a day in a different and transcendent political imaginary, they cast a shadow, however brief, over the high and mighty, reminding them that their end could be nigh, wrought by an electorate which despite its marginality, has a festive and solemn moment of power that holds out hope and succour.

Equally, some of the hidden appeal of the dol cooperative groups is precisely that, for the first time, they allowed women to carry something of election day's holistic vision and participation over into daily life, as the dol too provided a small arena in which divisions of caste and class could be put to one side.

SLIDES 6 slides of voter ID card

To conclude –

Ethnography about most regions of the world now take for granted the mutability of cultures, and their continual creative responses to new 'predicament's. Yet the sociology of India is still prone to depiction as somehow eternal and unchanging. Perhaps its sheer antiquity is intimidating – and the shadow of Dumont looms long.

But as Andre Beteille notes: 'Whatever might have been the emphasis of traditional Indian culture, both equality and the individual are central concerns in the contemporary constitutional and legal systems; and it is impossible to understand what is happening in India today without taking into account Constitution, law and politics.' (Beteille 1986:122).

So, using two examples from my ethnographic research, I have tried to hint that in India too, traditional forms and values neither vanish, nor persist unchanged, but at a deep level are drawn on, and recycled, to make sense of a contemporary world.

Specifically, I have suggested how traditional notions of religion, ritual and caste, for all the oppression they have caused, also perhaps provide a 'deep structure' of

imagination concerning interdependence, shared belonging, common fate, and the transcendence of mundane reality – which is ‘good to think with’, and in turn facilitates the surprisingly ready and successful embrace, by otherwise divided women and voters, of the *dol* and the poll.

Thank you.
