ELECTIONS AND REPRESENTATION
IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
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In my talk I address two simple, related and rather obvious questions about the state of democracy in my country. What is wrong with representative democracy in today's India? And, what can be done about it? Questions of this kind are considered too simple, too general or perhaps too large for academic students of politics to answer. I suspect that in its search for *clever* questions and *novel* answers, academia often loses sight of *significant* questions and *good* answers. Or so I hope to persuade you.

Let me first clarify the questions. The first question contains two questions within it. Does the system of competitive elections succeed in representing the people in terms of what they demand, what they desire or what they need? If it does not – at this stage let me not get distracted into the fascinating distinction between these three terms and how these set up three different ways of measuring the gap between the actual and the ideal – then the natural question is – why not? There are many obvious candidates for an answer here: the quality of political leadership, the nature of political parties and party competition, the institutional rules of electoral competition and popular beliefs, attitudes and values. How much weight do we assign to these possible explanations? An understanding of what and why should give us some clues about how we can go about correcting the democratic deficit. Where should the thrust of the attempts at political reforms be directed? Does it call for constitutional and legal redesigning? Or should we look at institutional modifications? Or does the answer lie in the domain of political action?

I cannot hope to answer all these questions in my talk even if I were to pretend to know the answers. But I do wish to suggest a general way of thinking about and answering these questions in the Indian context. In this sense my argument is specific to India. What I say may not be unique to India; I do hope that something in my argument may apply to other

contexts as well. At the same time I make no attempt here at law-like generalizations, and the validity of the argument does not depend on its applicability outside India.

A brief comment on the state of academic wisdom on this question and its relationship to political common sense is in order here. The questions that I raise here are not altogether unattended by academia. On the contrary, academic political science houses many resources to forge an answer to these questions. But these resources are scattered across academic sub-disciplines. The established division of academic labour discourages any attempt to piece together the big picture.

Western Political Theory has a rich tradition of thinking about the foundational questions of representation. What do we mean by representation? What kind of representation can we reasonably expect from democracies? The task of specifying the real-life conditions under which democratic elections may or may not yield responsive and accountable government has been left to the sub-discipline of Comparative Politics. There is now a growing academic literature that studies the impact of the quality of governance on electoral mandates and whether the nature of mandate makes a difference in what the governments do. Increasingly colonized by the economists and couched in a language of "scientific" models, this literature draws much of its material and assumptions from North America and Europe. Thinking about how all this relates to the opinions, attitudes and behaviour of ordinary voters is a task left to another semi-technical sub-discipline of "Election Studies". Scholars in this sub-discipline, focused or modelled on North America, tend to draw their evidence from sophisticated statistical analyses of survey data to draw precise but limited conclusions about why voters vote the way they do. And then there is the scholarly literature on electoral systems and their reforms that looks at the political consequences of electoral laws in western democracies.

Most of these fields do not speak to one another. Besides, as noted above, most of the general propositions have a built-in reference to western democracy, for they draw their material and assumptions from the working of democracies in Europe and North America. Interestingly, the only literature that focuses specifically on the working of elections in the global South is the non-academic "manuals" on election monitoring prepared by international NGOs and human rights organizations. This highlights the difficulty of answering the kind of questions that I have asked with the help of the existing academic scholarship.

Perhaps this is also why the established academic wisdom plays little role in shaping political common sense on this issue in contemporary India. Scholars would of course put it down to the illiteracy of the politicians and public intellectuals. But it could also be read,

equally plausibly, as a sign of disconnect between political science and political sense. India has rich, almost obsessive, public debates on what is wrong with representative democracy and what can be done about it. Political common sense on this question is forged by political debates in legislatures and committees, jurisprudence and the legal discourse, "civil society" recipes for political reforms and media debates around specific instances of lack of accountability and responsiveness in politics. Yet this debate has virtually no point of contact with the professional knowledge of politics listed earlier.

<p align="center">Three Objections Met</p>

Let me begin by responding to three possible objections to the line of inquiry that I undertake. It could be argued that the questions I ask are not worth pursuing because a) India is not quite a democracy, or b) there is nothing really wrong with the outcomes of democracy in India, or c) one should not expect democracy to address issues like mass poverty.

In defining democracy I follow the "minimalist" tradition of defining democracy as a form of government in which those who rule are elected by the people in competitive elections and run the risk of losing power in regular elections. In this definition the election of rulers by the people is subject to some qualifications:

The election should be competitive in that there should be more than one serious contender;

The opposition should have a fair chance of winning, should they have popular support;

The electoral mandate cannot be revoked by the loser and the winner should get to exercise highest political power; and

The elections should be held at regular intervals irrespective of the wishes of the incumbent.

Examined closely, this definition is actually not so minimal, for these conditions cannot exist without there being a certain regime of freedom, rights and rule of law. But I do not wish to pursue that line of argument here. A minimalist definition of democracy is particularly suited to the task at hand, for it reminds us that democracy is only one of the things we value, and that it cannot be presumed to usher in all other good things (at least not by definitional fiat). We cannot assume that democracy has benign social consequences. Obversely, we must not insist that a regime that does not bring about social well-being cannot be called

democracy. It reminds us that the conceptual trick of equating democracy with social democracy may have its rhetorical value, but it comes with huge analytical costs.

Following this definition, it seems fair to categorise India since independence as a "democracy". To be sure, there has been more than one instance where these minimum rules have been violated. The illegitimate, though strictly speaking not unconstitutional, extension of the term of the Lok Sabha during the state of national "emergency" imposed by Indira Gandhi (June 1975 to March 1977) was one instance at the national level. There are several instances of gross violation of the minimum requirements of a democratic rule at the state level, where the overall verdict of the elections could not be described as a fair reflection of popular choice. I would put all elections except the one held in 1977 that took place in the state of Jammu and Kashmir before 2002, all elections in Nagaland before 2003 and in Mizoram before 1987, the state assembly election in West Bengal in 1972, Assam in 1983 and Punjab in 1992 in that category. This is an embarrassing but finite list of exceptions that otherwise serves to prove the rule that India since independence must be characterised as a democracy in the minimalist sense of the term.

The second objection can be met by pointing to one gross failure in India since independence, namely the continued existence of a vast population well below a floor of minimum goods and services required for dignified living. Now, talking about poverty is the professional turf of the economists. I do not wish to enter into a discussion on the very rich literature on competing approaches to defining poverty: absolute or relative measures, objective or subjective approaches, material or non-material dimensions. For the purpose of the present argument it is necessary to reiterate what would be acceptable by nearly all the participants in the debate, namely that a substantial population in India is poor. The exact count does not quite matter to my argument here except in a minimal way: the poor are not a tiny fraction of the Indian population which may be explained away as a minor malfunctioning of the otherwise well-functioning system, nor are the numbers diminishing in a way as to make poverty a phenomenon of passing interest. Although the official count of the Government of India puts the proportion of persons "below the poverty line" somewhere around a quarter of the country's population, all reasonable estimates point to a much higher figure. As has been persuasively argued, the official "poverty line" is really a "starvation line". Once floor level requirement of material needs other than food intake (clothing, housing, energy, medical care, education) are factored in, nearly two-thirds of our population lives below the floor of minimum goods and services required for dignified living.

Finally, the third objection: why are we surprised at the co-existence of democracy and mass poverty? Simply put, majority rules in democracies and we should be surprised if those who (can) rule do not use this power to improve their conditions of life. This is not to say that the desire or demands of every kind of majority are routinely fulfilled in any democracy. Clearly, the strong desire of an overwhelming majority of the electorate in all the democracies to have clean, accountable and efficient government is routinely frustrated. The point here is that the non-fulfilment of this expectation calls for an explanation. There is nothing new in this expectation: democracy was always seen as the rule of the poor. Before the recent spread of the democratic form of government all over the globe, democracy was the dread of the propertied classes and the hope of those who believed in radical redistribution.

The expectation is based on the following chain of argument: In conditions of mass poverty, it is reasonable to expect that those who live below the floor of dignified existence would desire to move out of it. It is also likely that the existence of mass poverty will generate a moral unease among a section of those who are not poor, unless this form of deprivation is culturally sanctified. Both of these, or at least the first one, will generate a reservoir of latent or revealed preferences for floor-securing social policies. Given a free media, it is reasonable to expect these preferences to be articulated in the public domain and translated into definite signals. This issue is expected to become at least one of the main issues of public life that is reflected in social and ideological divisions and is likely to attract the average voter ("median voter" in the language of election studies) who is likely to be poor. In conditions of open and free competitive politics, the contending parties are expected to respond to these signals by changing their political agenda to reflect the priorities of the median voter. Since the issue has some salience in public life and the poor are a very large part of the electorate, the party that is seen as presenting a credible floor-securing social policy should stand a better chance of winning the elections. The prospect of winning elections and holding on to power in the next one is expected to provide the political will to design and carry out floor-securing social policy.

This logic is summarized in Figure 1. The purpose of this simplified model is to spell out the logic behind an intuitive expectation and to identify the various stages in which the real life experience of democracy can be compared with this expectation. The model does not predict that its expectation shall be fulfilled. The point instead is to identify the mechanisms that account for the non-fulfilment of this expectation.

Responsiveness

| Conditions | Preferences | Signals | Mandates | Political will for floor securing social policy | Outcome |

Cultural values

Free Media

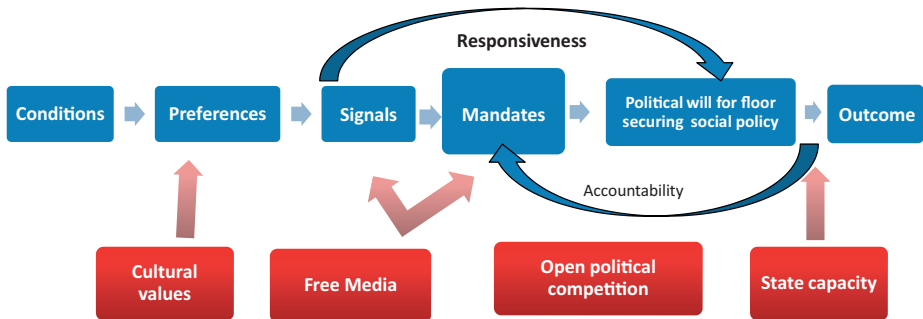Open political competition

State capacity

Accountability

Fig. 1:   Why do we expect democratically elected governments to carry out floor securing social policies. Modified version of Przeworski, Stokes and Manin 1999 and Yadav 2008

In fact, the paradox of the co-existence of democracy and mass poverty is deeper in India than in many other societies. Some of the common reasons why democracies do not care for their poor do not hold true for India. First of all, the institutional design of Indian democracy (parliamentary system, asymmetrical federalism, flexible constitution amendment) is not "demos-constraining" in that it does not put significant obstacles to the democratic popular will. There are not too many veto points that might account for the failure of floor-securing social policies to be legislated and implemented. Second, the party system is intensely competitive with very high electoral volatility. The first-past-the-post system accentuates the effect of voters' volatility into dramatic change in seats and government formation. Though the level of volatility has come down in this decade compared to the previous one, a ruling party in an Indian state has just about a 50 per cent chance of coming back to power (Figure 2). Parties cannot afford to be complacent and overlook issues that might concern a significant proportion of population. Third, the state capacity in India is higher than most of the comparable poor countries; it still commands the force to impose its will and is not crippled by absence of resources to meet some of its key projects. All this makes it even more intriguing that the ruling parties/coalitions should not (be able to) muster adequate political will to carry out anti-poverty policies.
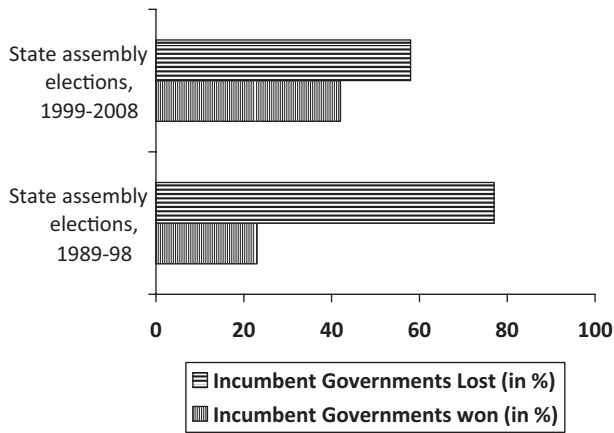
Fig. 2: Success rate of incumbent state governments, 1989–2009. Source: Yadav & Palshikar (2009: 415). Note: There were 57 elections in total in each round from 1989 to 1998 and 1999 to 2008. The figures reported are in percentages.

Finally, what makes it truly intriguing is that the poor have not opted out of democratic politics in India, at least not from the routine participation in electoral politics. The evidence put forward by the National Election Studies in India show that the participation level and the sense of the efficacy and legitimacy of the system are still fairly impressive in the case of the poor. While electoral participation rates are declining in older democracies, turnout at the state assembly level has risen in India (Figure 3).
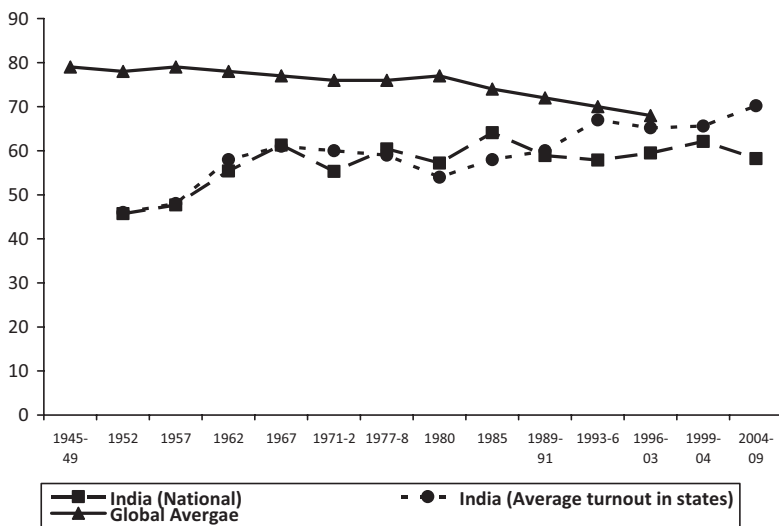
Fig. 3:   Turnout trends in India compared to global trends since 1945. Source: For India (National) and India (Average turnout in States) – CSDS Data Unit. For Global Average – Voter turnout Database, IDEA international website. Note: The turnout figures are in percentages.

Turnout in Indian elections goes up as one goes down the multiple tiers of democracy; the highest turnout is recorded in local level elections. Unlike Europe and North America, the participation rates do not decline in India as one travels down the social hierarchy. Citizens at the lowest rung of caste, class and educational hierarchy turn out to vote in numbers as great, if not greater, than those at the top (Figure 4 and 5). Villagers vote more than city dwellers and women's participation level is catching up with men's.
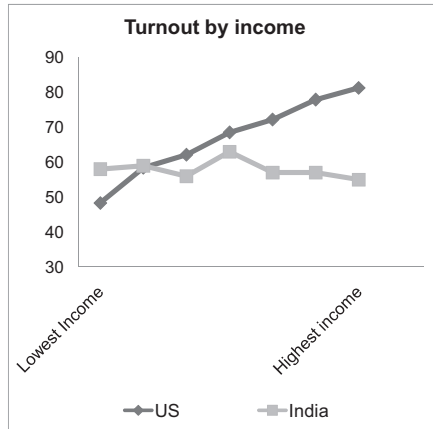
Turnout by income

Fig. 4 A: Turnout by income groups in 2004 elections: India and US compared. Source: For India – NES 2004, CSDS; For USA – http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf [accessed on 2 Feb 2011]. Note: ANES 2004 in US uses annual household income variable where as NES 2004 in India uses monthly household income variable.
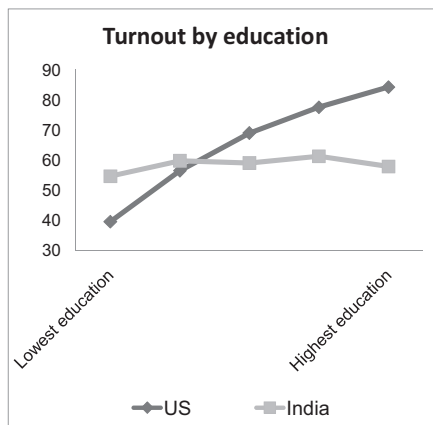

Turnout by education

Fig. 4 B: Turnout by educational attainment in 2004 elections: India and US compared. Source: For India – NES 2004, CSDS; For USA – http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf [accessed on 2 Feb 2011]. Note: The turnout figures are in percentages.

Fig. 5A: Turnout by race/ethnicity in US, 2004. Source: http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf [accessed on 2 Feb 2011]. Note: The turnout figures are in percentages.
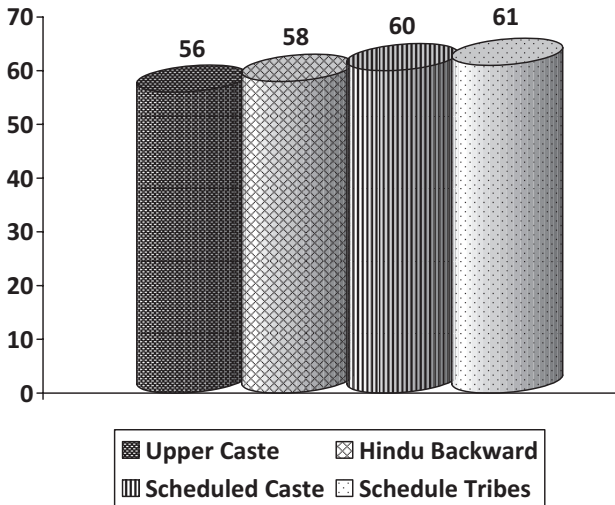

Fig. 5 B: Turnout by caste/community in India, 2004. Source: Kumar, Sanjay (2009:49). Note: The turnout figures are in percentages.

To sum up: the co-existence of a functioning democracy and mass poverty does constitute a paradox that we need to think about, especially in the case of India. A meticulous way to respond to this paradox would be to take up each link in the chain of argument summarized above and specify at each level the mechanisms that do not let this expectation be realized. Many of these mechanisms would turn out to be nearly universal and are fairly well understood. Grossly unequal distribution of private wealth and the constraints it imposes on the nature of democratic politics are good examples of such universal factors. I take these into account while proposing the way forward, but let me focus here on some of the mechanisms that are distinctively Indian.

Specificity of Indian Elections

Sudipta Kaviraj recognizes this specificity when he says "Modern politics in post-colonial societies involves strange objects masquerading under familiar names." Indian elections are a good case in point. As the system of competitive elections expands to most parts of the world, there is a tendency to interpret and evaluate electoral politics as if it were the same and familiar object all over the globe. This tendency often goes unnoticed, since the end product of this game is recorded in a format that is universally recognized and lends itself to easy surface comparison. It's all about seats and votes, the chemistry of popular mood or the arithmetic of alliances, advantage or otherwise for the incumbent government or representative and of course the charisma or otherwise of the political leadership. We do recognise the differences across countries in terms of the impact of the electoral system, the structure of political choices offered by the party system, the social basis of political preferences, agenda setting and public opinion formation, the invisible role of issues and ideologies, interests and identities. Yet we simply assume that elections perform the same role everywhere. The end result of this similarity is that the experience of electoral politics in societies like India is interpreted in the light of the narrow historical experience of Western Europe and North America. Hence the need to understand the distinctiveness of the Indian experience of elections.

One of the first things that strikes any observer of Indian elections is the centrality of elections in India's political life. Banners, posters and crowds fill the streets; massive processions and rallies are a norm; the media are full of election news and every street corner is buzzing with political gossip. Though on a steady decline of late, this kind of visibility in Indian elections symbolizes the pivotal role elections have come to occupy in Indian politics.

If a tension between the pre-existing social form and the borrowed legal-political structure provides the basic frame for understanding Indian democracy, the story of Indian politics is a story of the attempt by millions of ordinary people to write their own political agenda in an alien script. An encounter such as this, if it is to lead to meaningful outcomes, requires bridges or hinges that connect the two different worlds. The institution of elections came to perform this crucial role in India. It became the hinge that connected the existing social dynamics to the new political structures of liberal democracy allowing for reciprocal influence. Election is often the site for a fusion of popular beliefs and political practices with high institutions of governance.

Thus election is an occasion for the transfer of energy and resources from the "unorganised" to the "organised" sector of democracy. This is the moment when the legal-constitutional order of liberal democracy makes contact with the messy social and political reality of India. The "formal" sector is highly visible, it leads a legal-constitutional existence, it involves "civil society" groups and NGOs or a certain segment of political parties, it speaks a familiar modern language, mobilises secular identities and is easy to incorporate into a global register of democracy, even if it draws modest energy and participation. Every political actor is aware of another, "informal" sector, often seen as a source of embarrassment. Political organizations and movements that inhibit this sector speak a homespun hybrid language and fall back upon identity-based mobilisation. Though political practices in this sector lead an invisible, often para-legal existence below the radar, this sector remains the most happening political site in terms of popular mobilisation and energy. The chasm that separates the two worlds and the absence or non-functioning of the other possible bridges have resulted in the unusual salience of the institution of elections. This unique role is what accounts for the continued dynamism of the electoral process in India, while a number of other imported institutions and processes are floundering.

This hinge-like role has meant that Indian elections simply do too many things. All over the world, elections perform the foundational function of legitimising the rulers in the eyes of the ruled and of ensuring transfer of power without violence. They are also expected to ensure responsive and accountable government. This in itself would have been complicated enough. Modern democracies, especially those with a first-past-the-post electoral system as in India, expect their voters to use a singular instrument of vote to elect a representative, select a ruling party, choose from various policy packages and name a leader.

As if this were not enough, elections in India perform many more functions. For a post-colonial country like India, successful elections are still a symbol of a national political com-

munity, something of a festival of collective identity. For the poor and the marginalised, who are excluded from the normal functioning of the state, elections are an affirmation of their citizenship and are seen as a sacred ritual of political equality. Notwithstanding a robust media that routinely uses public opinion polls, elections are still the principal site for the dissemination of political ideas and information and also the only reliable method to gauge public opinion on the big issues facing the country. Elections force political parties to take into account ideas, interests and entities that do not lend themselves to easy aggregation through instrumentalities of the "organised" sector. Thus, elections often appear as the only bridge between the people and power, as the only reality check in the political system.

Elections are also an occasion for settling, unsettling or resettling local equations of social dominance and the arena of struggles for social identity and dignity. Elections are a site for contestation for social dominance in a locality, leading to assertion by dominant social groups and protests by subaltern groups. Attempts by clever political entrepreneurs to manufacture a social majority often involve building a local coalition of castes and communities. This often leads to an invention of community boundaries and sometimes the gerrymandering of settled boundaries. In a micro as well as macro setting, elections are an occasion for distribution and redistribution of resources. This is the time for patronage distribution as well as the occasion for the ordinary citizens to collect their "dues" from the political class. All this accounts for the festival-like character of the Indian elections and the fierceness with which elections are contested here. At the same time, this compression of multiple decisions into a single act also results in an under-emphasis on the representational functions of elections.

Two other structural features of Indian elections have accentuated this difficulty. One of these has to do with the problem of scale in politics. The design of representative democracy in India simply lifted a system meant for much smaller communities and applied it to a polity of continental scale. This resulted in a manifold increase in the scale of representation and led to a qualitative difference in the nature of the relationship between the representative and the represented. An Indian member of Lok Sabha, the popular chamber of the parliament, typically represents a population exceeding two million and a member of the state legislature in one of major states represents anything between 200 and 500 thousand persons. A comparison with the scale in Britain (less than a hundred thousand for each member in the House of Commons), which served as the model, brings out the sharp contrast. Figure 6 compares the scale of political representation in India with some of the other large democracies. The mega-scale of the system of representation had many consequences
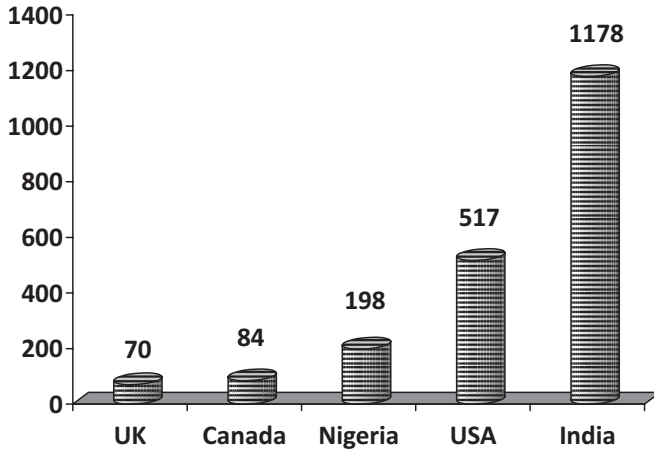
Fig. 6: Average electorate per parliamentary constituency: India compared to other large democracies. Note: Average electorates per constituency (in thousands).

for the nature of political representation. The minimum requirements of resources and information needed for this kind of election result is a very high entry barrier for a new entrant to the system. The impossibility of face-to-face interaction between the representative and the represented has necessitated an army of rent-seeking intermediaries and is beginning to lead to the mediatisation of constituency-level politics.

Finally, a system with multiple levels of governments and its corollary of multiple non-corresponding electoral cycles in a parliamentary system have introduced a peculiar disjunction between different levels of government and elections. Over the years, state-level politics has become the principal arena of political contestation. But the design of Indian federalism allocates principal power and resources to the central government. And most of the principal or at least immediate problems faced by citizens require a solution at the level of local self-government. In the absence of well-functioning local bodies with matching resources or accountable local officials, elections to parliament and state assemblies also perform a routine municipal function of attending to local grievances and connecting the people to the administration. Parliamentary elections often reflect the verdict for or against state government. This conflation in levels has meant that the central government is simultaneously under-accountable and over-accountable. It is over-accountable, for every round

of state-assembly elections is politically sensitive for the national government. At the same time the central government can be under-accountable, for its fate is largely determined by what some other governments do.

Political Lessons for our Times

These distinctive Indian features can now be placed in a wider context to arrive at some general propositions about the relationship between democracy and poverty. We need to guard against two simple-minded ways of thinking about this question. On the one hand, there are good reasons to question the idea that the needs, desires and demands of the over-whelming majority of the underprivileged would prevail in a free and open political competition in a democratic setting. This dominant and celebratory account of democracy turns out to be rather naïve understanding of how the logic of political competition works. As in the open market, free competition with a level playing field is an ideal that is rarely approximated in real life. On the other hand, there is a need to resist the rather gloomy conclusion that this democracy is but a sham, that the final outcomes are predetermined to favour the interests of the economically and socially dominant classes. Open political competition in a democratic setting does offer many openings, some of which can lead to radical social policies. The probability of enacting pro-poor social policies is higher when it depends on the survival instinct of the politician and their hunger for power than when it depends upon the goodwill of political guardians or the vanguard. At any rate, any rejection of the democratic system must be tempered by a realization that this may be the only game in town, that the citizens, including the poor, may have invested more in this system than is often acknowledged.

A rejection of these two extremes opens the way for a tentative and contingent answer that appears to hold some water in the Indian context. Political competition can and does lead to political will on the part of the ruling party to use state power to carry out pro-poor social policies, but the prevalence of many factors ensures that it happens rarely. Some of these are structural and cannot be wished away. Gross economic and social inequalities, especially the system of private property and its skewed distribution, set limits to how level-playing the political field can be. In the absence of conscious efforts to neutralize the effect of private money on politics, the role of dominant economic classes has grown over the years and finds articulation in multiple ways, from the control of political workers, leaders and parties to the buying of media and setting limits of state policy. This is accentuated by some

political institutions: the scale of political competition introduces remote control, multiple-level governance leads to conflation of choices and the pivotal role of elections as a hinge results in a congestion of decisions, while the short political cycle reduces the time horizon of political actors. The institution of the mass media introduces a specific distortion in the process of political agenda setting: it accentuates the pre-existing uneven access to information, foregrounds the voice of a privileged minority and masks the opinions, concerns and issues of the underprivileged majority. The systemic "drag" introduced by these economic structures and political institutions puts the onus of correction on political organizations, political leadership and political practices. A rapid decline in party organization across the political spectrum, the atrophy of political judgment among the leaders and the non-political character of dynamic social movements have meant that the resistance to systemic drag has weakened, especially in the last two decades.

Is there a hope, then, for pro-poor social policies in a democracy where the overwhelming majority is poor? If there is, notwithstanding the structural, institutional and processual odds stacked against it, the driving force is the overwhelming number and proportion of those who need such social policies. An overwhelming majority of India's population still lives below the acceptable minimum level of access to goods, services and dignity. They use every available opportunity offered by universal adult franchise and open political competition to secure better conditions of life. Very often they don't succeed, for the political menu on offer is very narrow and hard to alter, especially at a time when mainstream political parties are more insular and party organization is very fragile.

What, then, needs to be done? If the argument offered above has any force, it points in two directions. The first and a pressing need is a package of political reform that reduces some of the institutional constrains that prevent the needs of the majority from being translated into political signals leading to political will for social policies. Let me provide here a checklist of the changes required. The basic idea is not to bring India in conformity with the global practices, for "deviance" has been the strength of the Indian system. Nor do we need to change India's electoral system or de-crowd the electoral arena of contestants, as many enthusiastic reformers have suggested in recent times. What we need is, first of all, decentralisation of political power by creating smaller states, greater assured resources to state government, autonomous district-level governments, greater funds, functions and functionaries to local bodies. Second, we need measures to strengthen other mechanisms of accountability and responsiveness by instituting independent regulatory institutions and reforming the bureaucracy and the police to bring them closer to people. Three, we need

measures to reduce the asymmetry of information, such as a genuine public service broadcaster, regulation of cross-media ownership, checks against private treaties and stronger disclosure norms for public functionaries. Four, we need measures to reduce the inequality of resources in politics, such as public funding of elections by vote-linked cash reimbursement on a non-discriminatory basis and tax support for political contributions. These reforms are urgent, for their absence would hurt not just the prospects of social democracy but also the existence of democracy itself.

Constitutional and legal reforms may be a significant part of, perhaps ever a prerequisite for, improving the prospects of a politics of social democracy, but principally the challenge of creating a politics of social democracy is a political challenge. Specifically, the challenge is to create a firm and institutionalised bond between the constituency for social policies (which is large and expanding) and its political instrumentalities. It could mean forging a new political bloc that mobilizes the energy released by social movements and identity politics and could take the space once occupied by the various shades of the political left: the Communists, the Socialists or the Congress-Left. Or it could involve overhauling the existing political parties so as to forge a bond with the newly empowered sectors and their organizations. Both these routes involve reinvesting in party organizations and reviving some elementary organizational protocols of internal democracy. This is also an intellectual challenge that involves rescuing political judgment and marrying the moral ideal of social and economic equality to energetic politics and intelligent economics.

Conclusion

A fairly common way to think about representational deficits in India is that representative democracy in India has not yet evolved to the level of the "advanced" democracies. There are too many parties, too much caste-based identity politics and too little ideology, which allows political entrepreneurs to take advantage of ill-informed citizens. The view invites us to be patient with the maturing of Indian democracy and encourages legal interventions to nudge it in the right direction.

I have explored a different response that recognizes the distinctiveness of Indian elections in their own terms. Elections in India have come to be the hinge that connects the "formal" sector of high politics with its underbelly, the "informal" sector of politics. That is why elections have acquired an exaggerated visibility in India's political life. Emphasis on the "bridge function" and citizenship-affirming role of elections has ensured robust partici-

pation, better descriptive representation and summary trial of governments. At the same time it has meant a relative neglect of the representational role of elections as an instrument of responsive and accountable government.

This reading gives us a different perspective on what's wrong with representative democracy in India. The problem is not that the people are uneducated and lack ideological orientation; the problem is that popular preferences do not get translated into politically relevant signals by the media. The problem is not that caste mobilization subdues other cleavages, but that the multiplicity of cleavages fractures the majority. The problem is not that the proliferation of parties leads to fragmentation, but that an increase in parties is compatible with a shrinking of political choices and the capture of parties by special interest groups. Finally, the problem is not with the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, but with the massive scale and multiple levels of representation.

This reading recognizes the need for some corrective measures: lowering the scales, reducing the asymmetry of information, monitoring media and levelling the playing field in terms of resources. At the same time it also reminds us that democracy cannot be made responsive and accountable by tinkering with institutional design alone, that the quality of democracy is in the last instance a function of the intensity and nature of politics.