

INDIA'S HUMAN DEMOCRACY

The air is cool and it smells of roses. Outside, the temperature is nearly 50°C and a crowd of several thousand is jostling for a glimpse of a rare sight. But I am inside, on a sofa, next to the sight that they seek – then candidate for the post of Rajasthan's chief minister and now incumbent, Vasundhara Raje. We are inside her minibus at a midpoint on her grand 2013 pre-electoral tour. The bus, known as the *rath*, or the 'Chariot', is one of India's earliest innovations in democratic technology, built originally in 1990 for L.K. Advani, then president of the nascent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Twenty-five years ago, Advani's 'Chariot of Fire', as it was known, carried him from the state of Gujarat to the city of Ayodhya, charring the country with the flames of Hindutva (Hindu nationalist ideology) it left in its wake.

Today, the BJP Chariot is less a symbol of Hindu supremacy and few party followers smear their foreheads with the dust from its wheels as they did two decades ago. It stands instead for development and techno-boom, the party's two new political flags flown high by Narendra Modi, India's newly elected prime minister. The Chariot is like any other coach, decked in plastic and plywood with faux brass trimmings, but it has one remarkable feature: a lift that propels candidates onto the roof, from where they address the crowds. Miss Raje's contraption is more modest than Modi's armchair-lift, shaped like a lotus. But the effect is nonetheless dramatic. As she floats up to the roof, awe moves audibly through the crowd. Two or three times a day during her tour, Raje leaves the bus and ascends a stage where party bosses and laymen wrangle over a chance to present her with swords, garlands and crowns, and to touch her feet. When she finally slips

away, Raje sheds the garlands, but a few petals, caught in the folds of her sari, fall to the floor and fill the air with sweetness.

Raje is one of Rajasthan's most popular politicians. The villagers may not understand her newspaper Hindi, but at the end of her speeches, when she shouts 'victory to Rajasthan!', punching the air with both fists, thousands rise up as one. Raje is a great conversationalist. Shrewd, urbane and up for a laugh, she steers conversation in her smooth, throaty Bombay accent and guffaws when I say I am writing about 'the logic of Indian democracy'. Raje hates buses, where as a child she spent long hours travelling with her politician mother; she tells me she was 'pushed' into politics by her in-laws, who 'tricked' her into fighting her first election. She confides that she hopes that her son, already a member of parliament, will not follow suit: 'One politician in the family is enough'. Suddenly, as if



Fig. 1. An election rally for Vasundhara Raje near Bundi, Rajasthan.



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Fig. 2. Election rally in Jaipur.

remembering something, Raje catches herself in mid-sentence and fixes me with a hard, steady gaze: ‘You know’, she says, ‘this is a feudal democracy. There is no other word for it. Look at these people outside: swords and garlands and all’. She pauses and stares absently at the heavy curtains. But the earnest moment is gone in a flash: ‘There’, she laughs, ‘now you have got your answer – so you can go home!’

In the parlance of Indian cosmopolitans like Miss Raje, a royal heir to a dynasty rich in Oxford alumni, ‘feudalism’ is a slur. It refers to all that is wrong with Indian politics: casteism, nepotism, and clientelism. The term strikes at ‘corruption’, the target of India’s urban middle classes who recently propelled Anna Hazare, an ex-soldier militating for teetotalism in a village, into a political icon akin to Gandhi. While Western political theorists applaud India’s political triumphs – and above all its democratic spirit – local elites snigger at democracy’s very mention. ‘A sham’, spits out one would-be raja, ‘this democracy of ours has been kidnapped by goons, hijacked by money and muscle. It is no more’. Wistfully swizzling his gin and tonic, he adds: ‘Perhaps this never really was a democracy’.

But there is also another story. Whereas in the indexes of the global civil society organization Transparency International, Indian corruption hovers at sub-Saharan levels alongside

Djibouti and Senegal, voter turnouts across the country are some of the world’s highest. While in Europe and the US, electoral participation has flagged since the 1950s, in India it has been steadily on the rise. Parliamentary elections regularly engage over 60 per cent of voters and local elections often rise to 100 per cent. The sheer scale of Indian general elections is mind-boggling: almost a billion active voters make this the world’s single largest social event. Every electoral seat is teeming with dozens of candidates, and in the weeks before the elections, thousands of aspirants besiege party headquarters in a bid for tickets. Those who lack resources and energy to stand for elections, join politicians’ entourages, campaign for friends and family, and spend long, hot hours queuing at polling booths on Election Day. If, as urbanite Indians like to say, three decades ago every middle class family had a civil servant, today they each have a politician of this or that stripe.

So why do Indian citizens in cities and villages, the rich and the poor, engage in politics with such verve? Political scientists tell us that the answer lies, paradoxically, in India’s underdevelopment and mass poverty. They tell us that the Indian masses, desperate for food, shelter, and elementary infrastructure, sell their votes to those who provide – or promise to provide – all these. Elections, they tell us, are no more than auctions where votes are

sold to those who bid the most. The poorer the voters, the cheaper are their votes, which can be bought with a clutch of cash, a bottle of alcohol or a plateful of rice. Those who demur at the deals offered by politicians can be easily enough swayed by brute force. Money-power and muscle-power, goes the analysts’ refrain, are the oil and gas of India’s democratic machinery. Electoral politics is little more than a spectacle of desperation and greed. No morals, no forward planning, just one vast bazaar.

But is it really like that?

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Mrs Shiksha teaches in a government school in Jaipur. She has a good salary (more than \$400 a month) and a guaranteed pension, and the school is only a few blocks away from her house. Mrs Shiksha paid to get her position, and this is how: at the end of her teacher training, she was posted to a school on the edge of the Thar Desert, 300 miles away from her Jaipur home. Soon enough her in-laws began to protest: ‘Return at once to Jaipur or we will find another wife for our son. If you keep going like this, you will never have children’. She was desperate. Without connections in Jaipur she was sunk. This was when her sister’s husband, himself a schoolteacher, introduced her to Mr Chamcha, a man who helped people like her, for a fee. Mr Chamcha is one

of the many brokers (some full-time, some part-time, some paid, some unpaid) who get India's bureaucrats and politicians, as people say, 'to do the citizens' work'. Mr Chamcha was expensive – he charged an equivalent of \$1,000 – but he operated on a 'no win, no fee' basis and did not charge Mrs Shiksha until she was served her transfer notice.

Mr Chamcha has expert knowledge of government departments and bureaucratic procedures, but his real capital is in the thousands of 'contacts' among civil servants, in political circles and with the police, which he has nurtured over decades. He tells me that he uses at least half of the fee to grease the politicians' and the bureaucrats' palms. Yet he can only do what he does at all because he knows the relevant people: ministers, members of the municipal board, members of parliament and members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), and their many assistants. He says: 'You can't just walk up to a minister and say: "Hey, dada [brother], give me a job! Here is 2 lakh [200,000] rupees"'. In India things like that need *approaches*. You need relations, you see'.

Reports on corruption, which cause routine sensations in the press, are usually about embezzlement, crooked deals or bribery in high office. Money of course lubricates politics and bureaucracy on all levels, but aside from the few rupees bribe you may pay on the side of the road to traffic police, cash does not swap hands between strangers. Every transaction proceeds through a relationship – through a 'known person', as locals say.

Meet Bally, a wholesome young man in his early twenties. He has just landed a job as a constable in the police and he is pleased. Competition for these posts is often fierce, with several thousand applicants, so I asked how he arrived at such luck. His face rounded into an awkward, dimply smile as he explained: 'My father is a policeman too, you know'. True, government posts are often inherited, or it is at least assumed that the children of officers have stronger claims to their parents' posts. This was not enough in Bally's case. He needed 'political connections', so his father approached a cousin who owns a small car tyre factory and maintains many 'friendships' with politicians, as most businessmen do. By a stroke of luck, the standing MLA from their constituency happened to be his school friend and all it took was a phone call. Within minutes the MLA was delivering instructions to a handful of 'his' senior officers, one of whom was on the exam board. Bally passed the test and was soon employed in the much-coveted station in central Jaipur. 'It is not like that only', he added shyly: 'I am good at running too'.

Webs of relations with family members and caste mates, neighbours and people from one's native village, and the all-important college and school mates, stretch right across the sub-continent, connecting cities and villages, castes and classes, the illiterate and the literati elites. Visitors from more solitary cultures are often amazed, even exhausted, by the local people's capacity to make and maintain innumerable relations, and by the number of people eve-

ryone seems to know and be able to introduce one to. But in India, getting anything done – from buying a car or a plot of land to arranging a marriage, securing a job, placing a child in a school, or attracting the favour of voters – requires 'approaches', as people say. A great deal of cash does pass hands, but there are few quick and easy sales. Each arrangement works through bonds of mutual sympathy, favour and trust, so that the connected, the resourceful and the ambitious may arrange their entire lives beyond the law without ever paying a bribe. Many people, of course, lack the requisite social skills and connections, and this is where brokers like Mr Chamcha thrive.

Bapu-ji (Respected Father) is another such broker, nick-named by the working classes in Jaipur after Mahatma Gandhi, India's greatest political saint. Bapu-ji has a permanent twitch and his eyes do not settle on any one thing for a moment. He was born in a tiny village and has barely any schooling, but he possesses an extraordinary social gift. Carrying three mobile phones, two of them in nearly uninterrupted use, Bapu-ji has a remarkable ability to create and maintain relations right up and down the political ladder, from the cabinet to the slum. His phones hold thousands of numbers, whose owners he claims to know by face and name – a talent widely considered essential for success in politics.

Officially, Bapu-ji is the head of a phantom NGO (non-governmental organization) called Incredible India. But his real work, as he puts it, is 'social'. All day long Bapu-ji builds links between people, connecting voters to politicians and vice versa. He ensures that politicians provide slum dwellers with 'development' – roads, sanitation, water, schools – performing the 'social service' which earned him esteem. He knows how to procure a fake birth certificate, whom to petition for an electrical connection, how to apply for a government job, and which politician to contact to ensure success. In return, he helps politicians secure beneficiaries' loyalties and for that they call him their 'vote agent'. Bapu-ji himself lives in a slum, where he moved to from his remote village, climbing upwards through his elder brother's connections in the NGO world and through the sheer force of his nous.

He lives with his wife and two sons in a concrete, one-story compound and drives a battered motorcycle around town. He invested instead in his sons' private education at a school full of politicians' children. He gets cuts from each deal he effects and from the money politicians give him to run their campaigns. But altogether this brings in relatively little cash. What it provides instead is administrative favour for him, his family and his friends. He can buy a plot of land without waiting for years, he can get electricity at a discount, and his fictive NGO occasionally attracts foreign funding. When German donors pay a visit, plenty of slum dwellers come forward and testify as to how much Incredible India does for them.

Bapu-ji is one of millions of India's political leaders, many of whom are much poorer than their counterparts in Africa, Italy, Russia,

or the US. Campaigns often cost billions of rupees (usually exceeding the legal limit by more than a hundredfold) and electoral feasts alone, a tradition dating back to India's independence, can cost millions. Unless politicians are independently wealthy – and they increasingly are – much of this money will necessarily be black or grey: syphoned away from businesses, public works funding, or even police chiefs who exact dues from subordinates to 'oblige' political bosses. But this money does not all end up in politicians' pockets; much of it is redistributed, even if not blindly or equitably, among their followers. Few who wish to stay in politics can manage to avoid spending large sums of 'private funds' on their constituencies: for latrines, water pumps, schools, and sometimes more focused help like medical treatments or wedding gifts.

Millions of entrepreneurs like Bapu-ji are the links in the long chains of relations which connect voters to politicians, through which politicians gather votes and voters in turn press demands on their representatives, holding them accountable for delivering what they need. In Rajasthan, each of the 200 MLAs has between 1,500 and 3,000 brokers working for him or her nearly full-time. Some of these are formally elected village councillors or ward presidents, but many are informal political entrepreneurs. Every MLA also has a smaller platoon of close associates, 'friends', party workers, youth leaders, municipal and union elected representatives, and the innumerable businessmen who cultivate political ties. These platoons may be as large as 200-strong. A much larger army of supporters is raised at times of election. The sheer scale and density of political participation is astounding. According to the matching estimates of senior party leaders in the Congress and the BJP national headquarters, approximately one in a hundred adults in rural India is involved regularly in formal politics and one in five joins in periodically. The country is positively hyper-political, and not just during elections.

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At the end of her electoral tour, Miss Raje mounts the dais holding a piece of crumpled paper, which someone had just thrust into her hand. She greets the crowds and spreads the sheet on the lectern, peering quizzically at its contents. The text before her is written in local dialect in a semi-literate hand and all she can really make out is the signature, which she reads out loud: Chhoti Bai (Little Sister). Little Sister was petitioning Miss Raje for electricity, which she wrote reached her village for only three hours on alternate days. Miss Raje's team did not miss this opportunity for a display of largesse, pulling the petitioner out of the crowd and onto the stage. Tiny, black as the earth and wrapped in a sari the colour of pink candy floss, Little Sister rushed to Raje's feet. After a brief embarrassed pause, Raje composed herself and said firmly: 'It shall be done' – something temple priests often say to devotees on behalf of deities.

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Fig. 3. Rajasthan's chief minister Vasundhara Raje distributing 'Bhamashah' women's welfare cards.

If in conversation with a Cambridge academic, Raje may demur at the title of Maharani, as she is known without irony across Rajasthan, on stage and among her followers she wears her crown well. Modernists may cringe at the royal insignia, genuflections and the intimacy of India's political bonds. But in Indian popular politics, right up and down the social scale, all of this is a matter of course. In India, politics is about relations and hierarchies; it is about obligations and loyalties to people one calls one's own. We may call this irruption of human intimacies into bureaucratic process and the abstractions of law, 'corruption'. Yet it is precisely this 'corruption' – the sprawling, tangled webs of human relations – that animates India's democratic process and drives its citizens in droves to the polling booths.

This picture strikes hard at the collective Euro-American psyche, for which 'democracy' is by now nothing short of a religion: the source of all political good, a salvation in its own right. We may criticize democracy's church and clergy, but the ideal of governance by – or at least through – the governed, remains unassailable in our eyes. This religion has a theology and a set of basic tenets: equality and personal freedom, enshrined

in the ritual of one vote cast by each adult citizen in the isolation of a polling booth. But democracy has not always and everywhere been imagined this way. The Founding Fathers who drafted the American Constitution were not egalitarians, and neither were the citizens of ancient Athens, the only state of any scale where democracy ever existed in its ideal, direct form. Both were slave-owning societies and both comfortably excluded women from the franchise.

Democracy in ancient Athens, like democracy in the early United States, was a mirror of its own society, which reflected the values espoused by its *demos* and the ways in which this *demos* conceived itself. This is equally true of modern-day India. The difference is that unlike ancient Athens, India is now part of the global ecumene with its single standard of political virtue. If we judge India's politics against this standard, it will indeed appear a garbled or an inchoate version of democracies further north. But in 2015 we cannot sustain this view. Today we see a full-blooded political world with a life and character of its own. We may think it appalling, astonishing, bizarre or simply ridiculous, but we can no longer afford to ignore it – intellectually every bit as much as politically. Indian politics poses a fierce

challenge to our political intuitions. But if we pause in our judgement and listen to India's own account of itself, we may begin to hear some answers. We may also start to see gaps in our own fragmented picture of democracy; the gulf between what we think democracy ought to be and what it necessarily is – indelibly and very fallibly human. ●

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1. Some names of organizations and persons have been anonymized.