

Amid fun & frolic, India serious on ballot

Dr Anastasia Piliavsky

On December 1, Rajasthan did India's democracy proud with an unprecedented 75.2% voter turnout. A week earlier, Madhya Pradesh, too, set a state record with more than 71% of its electorate coming out to vote. While the EC may celebrate another triumph, skeptics will sneer. They will say that India's poor, illiterate masses sell their votes; that politicians trade in muscle and money; and that governance by and for the people here is but an empty charade.

Yes, some were certainly forced to vote, some were cajoled with freebies, and there were doubtlessly goons and cheats milling at many polling booths. But the bulk of Rajasthan's voters were neither bought nor forced to the booths. So, why did they vote?

The hackneyed boast that India is the world's largest democracy — not only the most populous but also one of the most engaged — seems less banal when you experience it first-hand. In the weeks leading up to election, Rajasthan's cities and villages were ablaze. In Jaipur, brass bands and drummers, dancers and gawkers filled the streets. It seemed that suddenly the whole of Jaipur was getting married and everyone was invited to celebrate. Slum dwellers and aristocrats walked side-by-side as they joined the candidates' march-

es. Heavily turbaned candidates made their way through the thronging crowds and the air pungent from thousands of marigold garlands.

Indian rituals of democracy are so garish and the force of euphoria they generate so intense that one can easily lose sight of their political content. Some say that in India, elections have become sacred rituals, even festivals, and that is why Indians, who like to party, vote with such verve. But don't be fooled by the fun and the colour. Just like a wedding, this is a solemn party whose implications are as serious as can be. Amidst the party carefully considered choices were being made.

Sunil, a factory worker in Jaipur said he will vote for his current MLA because

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"he does people's work". What kind of work? He explains: "I took my mother to hospital. Cancer," he adds emphatically, "Netaji gave her free medicine."

Zakir, an autorickshaw driver, enthuses: "In our colony, Netaji gives every old man and woman Rs 500 rupees (every month). He get us our plots of land."

The MLA himself does not distribute the pensions, land or medicine. What he does is help his constituents access the benefits of often-elusive government schemes. He guides them through the bureaucratic maze, helps them acquire legal rights to land on which many have been living for decades, and saves their children from harassment by the police. This work is as vital for rickshaw drivers as it is for the business elite. At a meeting of his women-followers, the daughter of a clothing exporter declares: "We don't need a politician. We want a man who will do our

work." A retired banker tells me: "Netaji has a social philosophy. People are his ideology and his work is for them." Different styles, same message: "We want men (and women) who will roll up their sleeves and do what we want and need them to do."

Cosmopolitan critics may say that citizens of mature democracies should vote with their eyes on policy and ideology, not on immediate material benefits. But why should they? Why should people abandon their own interests and prefer abstractions to the substance of real, everyday life? These questions acquire special force in a country where bureaucracy is torpid, the police ineffectual and the legal system hopelessly stuck. Here people choose representatives who can solve their problems and ultimately improve their lives.

Much of the 'Modi magic' is just that: The hope of a better life that the 'Gujarat model' seems to promise.

After all, democracy is government for and by, or at least via, the people. And in Rajasthan's middle-class enclaves, no less than in its remotest villages, voters know what they want. Political commentators may not be comfortable with their choices. They may think them myopic, crooked or selfish. They may say that they lead to dire political and economic consequences. They may deride this as 'mobocracy', the rule of a greedy and mindless mob. But if they want democracy, they will have to live with the people's choices — what the demos itself prefers, for better, if often for worse.

(Dr Piliavsky, a Cambridge-based anthropologist, is co-directing a study of democratic cultures in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The views expressed in the article are the author's own)

People voting for money, says Hemaram Choudhary