

Title: Why Indians vote: reflections on rights, citizenship and democracy from a Tamil Nadu village.

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**Why Indians vote: Reflections on rights, citizenship and democracy
from a Tamil Nadu village**

Grace Carswell

Department of Geography, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK;
g.carswell@sussex.ac.uk

Geert De Neve

Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK;
g.r.de-neve@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper contributes to an empirical and theoretical understanding of democracy and political participation in India through an ethnographic study of the meanings attached to voting in rural Tamil Nadu. Based on a study of voting in a rural constituency during the 2009 national elections, the paper explores the variety of motivations that compel people to vote. It explores how voting is informed by popular understandings of rights and duties as citizens, programmatic policies and their local implementation, commitment to caste and party loyalties, and authority of charismatic leaders. The paper explores the roots of the political consciousness and rights awareness that underpin high levels of electoral participation. It suggests that elections form unique moments that allow ordinary people to experience an individual sense of citizenship and of democracy itself while at the same time allowing them to pursue projects of recognition, respect and assertion as members of communities. It is precisely this dual feature that makes voting so enduringly attractive to India's contemporary electorate.

Keywords: voting, democracy, citizenship, rights, Tamil Nadu, India

1. Introduction¹

¹ This research was carried out while undertaking 12 months of fieldwork in Tamil Nadu in 2008-9 and was funded by an ESRC-DFID Research Award (RES 167 25 0296). The researchers also participated in Mukulika Banerjee's ESRC-funded 'Comparative Electoral Ethnographies' project (RES 000-22-3376). The research would not have been possible without the support of our research assistants – most especially Gayathri, Adele Fash, Arul and Muthu. The paper has benefitted from comments by Chris Fuller, John Harriss, the editor and four anonymous reviewers.

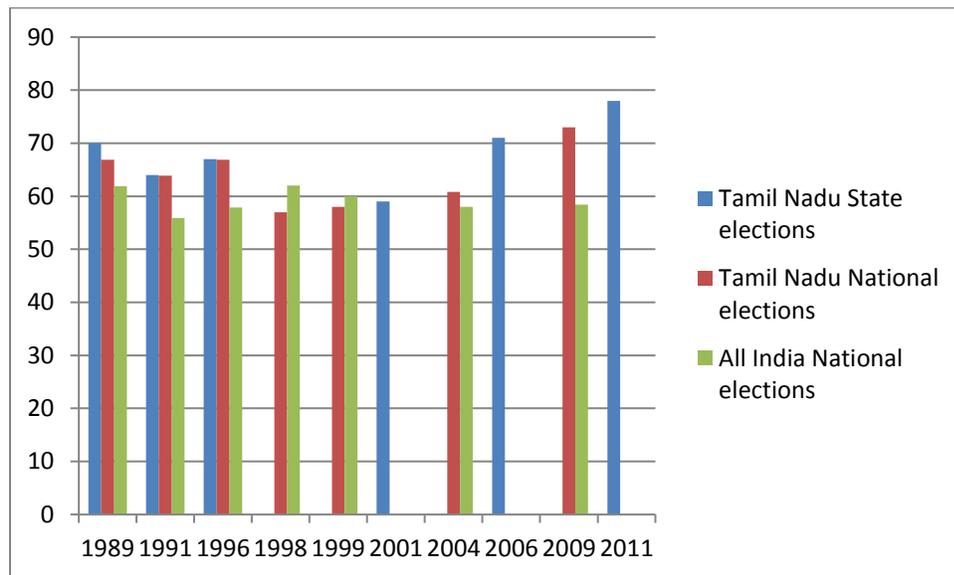
This article seeks to contribute to an empirical and theoretical understanding of democracy and political participation through an ethnography of the meanings attached to voting in rural Tamil Nadu, South India. Despite the substantial insights they offer, election studies have been critiqued for what Lama-Rewal calls their focus ‘on the “mechanics” more than on the “substance” of representative democracy’ (2009: 2). Studies of elections and voting tend to explore the processes, trends and patterns of the electoral process rather than taking voting as an entry into understanding democracy and citizenship itself (Diwakar 2008; Kumar 2009; Chandra 2009). Ethnographic approaches, by contrast, are well suited to the study of the meanings people attach to voting as a key aspect of democracy as well as to an exploration of voting as a window onto culturally specific understandings of rights, duties and citizenship (Lama-Rewal 2009: 4; Banerjee 2007: 1556). Yet, remarkably little ethnographic research has focused on elections or on the ideas and meanings the electorate attach to voting. Struck by India’s persistently high levels of voter turnout, Banerjee raised the question: ‘why do 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?’ (2007: 1556). In what follows, we seek to contribute to this research through an analysis of why people vote in India, based on an ethnographic study of a rural constituency in Tamil Nadu at the time of the 2009 national elections.²

There are many reasons why India is an ideal place to explore the above questions. Not only does it form the world’s largest democracy, but democracy and citizenship are almost continually discussed and debated in the media, in scholarship and in everyday life. Moreover, in contrast to many other established democracies (Blais et al 2004; Franklin 2004; Gray and Caul 2000) electoral participation in India has been consistently high, and turnout at national elections has not fallen below 58% since 1984 (Jaffrelot 2008: 37; Kumar 2009). If anything, turnout rates have increased since 1951, with the 1990s being particularly marked by rising levels of participation – the so-called ‘second democratic upsurge’ - which reflected an increased interest in elections among disadvantaged sections of society (Yadav 1996; 2000). By 2009, participation in elections had stabilised, with a turnout rate of 58.8%, in line with rates

² The 2009 election constituted a national-level election in which a new central government was elected. The 2006 and 2011 elections were state-level elections in which a state government was elected. While it is said that people tend to be more enthusiastic about state elections than national elections, participation rates have steadily increased for both elections in Tamil Nadu since 2004.

from any of the elections over the previous 20 years (Kumar 2009: 48; Palshikar and Kumar 2004: 5412). In the state of Tamil Nadu, however, where this study is located, rates are even higher, with a mean voter turnout of 64.4% for 1951-2004 (Diwakar 2008: 83). Furthermore, as Figure 1 shows Tamil Nadu has seen significant increases in electoral participation, which in recent years have exceeded all-India levels (Kumar 2009: 48, Special Statistics 2011: 138, Figure 1). It is therefore a perfect place to ask why people are so committed to voting and to explore their understanding of political participation, citizenship and democracy.

Figure 1 – Voter turnout for national and state elections, 1989-2011



(Source: Compiled from Palshikar and Kumar 2004, Kumar 2009, Special Statistics 2011)

One further voting trend identified across India is also worth mentioning. In India marginalised groups have higher participation rates than more privileged groups, with Palshikar and Kumar noting higher participation amongst poor, lower caste and poorly educated people (2004: 5142, Yadav 1996), the inverse of what has been observed in several other democracies (Franklin 2004). In Tamil Nadu too the turnout of 78% among Dalits in 2009 exceeded the average of 73% (Kumar 2009: 48), albeit not excessively. This seems to corroborate Jaffrelot’s conclusion that in India ‘the poorer one is, the more one votes, and the richer one is, the less one votes’ (2008: 38; see also Krishna 2008).³

³ Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007), however, warns us that the evidence on the poor turning out in larger numbers is in fact highly incomplete and inconclusive. What can be concluded, according to Kitschelt and Wilkinson, is that the poor in India vote at proportions not too far off those of the better off.

Field-based research on voting has offered various explanations for Indians' commitment to electoral participation. Some have described the figure of the rational or instrumental voter who participates in the hope of obtaining material benefit or livelihood improvement. Chandra, for example, argues that poorer people in India use their vote as their 'primary channel of influence' (2004: 3), and thus interprets the high turnout as for instrumental reasons:

The best form of political participation is to obtain political office, which provides the most secure guarantee of access to [survival] goods. ... A second-best form of political participation is voting. Voters do not themselves have control over the distribution of goods. But by voting strategically and voting often, they can increase their chances of obtaining these goods (ibid: 4).

This is echoed in Witsoe's study of democracy in Bihar where for many lower-caste villagers voting was about getting access to resources. Witsoe mentions the 'feeling of entitlement that a voter has to make concrete demands of the politicians that he or she helped to elect ...' (2011: 626). Similarly, Ruud's research on popular understandings of democracy in rural Bangladesh revealed that villagers were keen to elect efficient and experienced leaders who protect the poor, deliver services and 'supply "development" in its many facets' (2011: 57). The vote was considered crucial as a tool to do away with representatives 'that do not "supply"' (ibid: 67).

Others have emphasised the ritualised and celebratory dimensions of voting that turn elections in India into major ceremonial events. Banerjee's description of the excitement and celebratory nature of election events in two West Bengali villages indicates 'that elections are clearly regarded and treated as being in substantially the same space as religious festivals and rites of passage celebrations' (2007: 1558). Elections, Banerjee argues, have a 'sacred' or 'sacrosanct' dimension to them which imbue them with an importance far beyond the mere act of voting itself: they 'offer an opportunity for the expression of citizenship, and for an understanding of the duties and rights involved in living in a democracy (ibid.: 1561).

Others again recognise that not everyone votes for the same reason or attaches the same values and meanings to electoral participation. In a recent multi-state study, Ahuja and Chhibber (2012) explore variations in motivations for voting in India between the poor and the non-poor. They argue that while the poor see voting as a right, the non-poor vote either to gain some benefit or because they see it as a duty. They relate these different explanations to these groups' different relationship with the state. The poor and marginalised, who 'face a capricious state that mostly ignores or mistreats them except on Election Day' (ibid.: 391), see elections as the one time that the state recognises them and treats them as 'equals'. They vote because

they consider it their right. The non-poor by contrast are networked within the state and look for mobility through working with it (ibid.: 400). The non-poor therefore vote to access opportunities, but also because of a sense of civic duty: voting is something that all good citizens should do. Ahuja and Chhibber's analysis (2012) differs from previous work in that it moves away from a singular explanation and presents different motivations for different social groups.

This article similarly explores why voting is so enthusiastically embraced in India. Our ethnographic study from a village in western Tamil Nadu illustrates a variety of motivations that compel people to take part in elections and indicates that any single factor falls short of explaining high turnout rates. Importantly, however, in a final section we also consider those who do not vote and provide an explanation for non-voting both in terms of people's electoral commitment and the bureaucratic processes that affect voting behaviour. As such, we argue for a holistic sociological approach to voting that explores the range of individual and social motivations that enthruse people to participate in elections, and we propose two broad conclusions. First, the much debated rational choice model of voter participation (Downs 1957) is simply inadequate to grasp the diversity of motivations that lead people to vote in India. Secondly, we suggest that elections form unique moments that allow ordinary people to experience an individual sense of citizenship and of democracy itself while at the same time allowing them to seek recognition, respect and assertion. It is precisely this dual feature of voting, as an act that gives recognition to both poor and rich as individual citizens and as members of communities, that makes electoral participation so attractive to India's electorate.

2. The study village: changing state-level politics and patronage relations

Before turning to our study village, some features of the recent history of politics in Tamil Nadu need mentioning. We briefly introduce four key elements of Tamil politics that not only shape the current political formation in the state but that also help make sense of our village observations. First, Tamil politics have been dominated by two regional parties, aka Dravidian parties: the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), which first came to power in 1967, and the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, aka ADMK), which was launched following a split from the DMK in 1972. These rival Dravidian parties have alternately ruled the state since 1967, and their continued domination of politics is evident at the village level. Despite Dravidian parties' initial strong egalitarian and secular ideology, Dalits were gradually marginalised within these parties which came to be dominated by intermediate castes (Harris

2002, Gorringe 2007, Wyatt 2010). Second, since at least the 1980s the Dravidian hegemony has been challenged by a rapid fragmentation of the political party landscape. Smaller parties emerged, many of them being the product of caste-based political mobilisations including by Dalits (Karthikeyan et al 2012: 31, Gorringe 2007). Examples include the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK or Dalit Panthers) started by the Dalit Paraiyars, the Puthiya Tamilagam (PT) of the Dalit Pallars, and the influential Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), formed by the lower-caste Vanniyars. Moreover, this political fragmentation has not only intensified competition for votes in Tamil Nadu but also encouraged people to vote (De Neve and Carswell 2011, Karthikeyan et al 2012, Wyatt 2010). Importantly, Gorringe comments, Dalit mobilisation and political organisation 'have raised consciousness, challenged residual forms of untouchability and forced Dalit issues into the political limelight. Whilst Dalit organisations are still peripheral to the corridors of power, they have gained political recognition and placed their concerns onto the agenda' (2010: 119). Indeed, as we will discuss below, they have played a key role in raising electoral awareness and pulling villagers to the polling booth.

Third, there has long existed 'a symbiotic relationship between the medium of cinema and that of politics' in Tamil Nadu (Pandian 1992: 33, Wyatt 2013a). Both DMK and ADMK have nurtured close alliances with the popular world of cinema as a means to gain political influence and woo voters. Many leading politicians of the last half-century first rose to fame through the cinema, either as film actors (e.g. MG Ramachandran, popularly known as MGR, founder of the ADMK, and J. Jayalalitha, current ADMK leader and chief minister) or as screenwriters (e.g. M. Karunanidhi, the party's current leader)⁴. Most emblematic of the way in which stardom has been mobilised for political purposes is the 'MGR phenomenon', which continues to attract voters and influence voting patterns in Tamil Nadu today. Pandian described how the DMK from the 1950s, and later the ADMK, 'skilfully transferred MGR's cinematic image to the domain of politics' (1992: 11), turning MGR into the state's most popular politician ever and three-times elected chief minister. MGR, and others after him, successfully projected their on-screen image as protector of the poor and downtrodden onto their real selves so as to attain electoral success (ibid.: 39-43, Rogers 2009). The strategy paid off. Even today it shapes the public image of actors-turned-politicians and fuels the consciousness of many poor and low-caste people whose eagerness to vote is informed by images and memories of legendary film actors like MGR. Even though Tamil Nadu is certainly not unique, politics and cinema are nevertheless closely tied up

⁴ There are many others such as screenwriter C.N. Annadurai, founder of the DMK, and filmstar Vijaykanth who started the DMDK in 2005.

in this southern state and the cinematic image of many politicians continues to appeal to the electorate (Dickey 1993).

Finally, although Dravidian politics has long been steeped in patronage politics and in a populist rhetoric that sought to reach out to the 'common people' (Subramanian 1999, Harriss 2000, Wyatt 2013b), more recently a significant shift has taken place away from clientelist politics towards an increased use of programmatic policies to attract votes (Wyatt 2013a). While clientelism - in which appeals to voters are based on selective hand-outs of benefits and patronage - has certainly not disappeared, its relatively 'poor record has encouraged political leaders to explore post-clientelist approaches to governing' (Wyatt 2013a: 30). These include a trend towards a programmatic approach, in which voters' attention is drawn to a party's policies and its implementation, and in which contingent benefits are replaced by more universal schemes that benefit everyone. Wyatt emphasises that this shift is not new in Tamil Nadu. It had its roots in the early universal welfare schemes launched under ADMK rule in the 1980s, such as the 1982 MGR Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme that provided free meals to all school children (2013a: 33). However, ahead of the 2006 state elections the DMK turned to a more explicitly programmatic manifesto targeting the poor: its promises included using the Public Distribution System (PDS) to provide 20 kg of rice at Rs 2 per kilo, free colour televisions and gas stoves for the poor (ibid.: 38). Having won the 2006 state elections, it was the implementation of the DMK's welfare programmes that the people of Tamil Nadu, including those in our study village, were scrutinising and debating in the run-up to the 2009 elections. The further introduction of 'one rupee rice' in 2008 was probably the most discussed policy in the village in 2009. Politicians' enhanced commitment to implementing policies with a universal reach - such as the PDS and more recently the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) - not only confirms the shift to a 'programmatic style of governing' (Wyatt 2013a: 43) but also encourages electoral participation.

Turning to our study site, research was carried out in the run-up to the 2009 national elections. The fieldwork was conducted in a village, which we call Allapuram, in rural Tamil Nadu where we also conducted research on changing agrarian relations and the effects of the garment industry on rural livelihoods (Carswell 2013; Carswell and De Neve 2014a). As the election approached we spent our days with different resident groups of the village. Using a combination of participant observation, case-studies, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews we talked with villagers about the election and the campaign, about voting, its meaning and effects,

and about democracy and politics more generally.

[INSERT MAP ABOUT HERE]

Allapuram is located 19km south of the booming garment manufacturing and export town of Tiruppur, and is at the heart of the highly industrialised western region of Tamil Nadu (see Map 1).⁵ The village is known for its successful and viable agriculture, but is also a village which sends significant numbers of commuters (across castes) to work in the Tiruppur industry. In Allapuram Gounders are the dominant caste in terms of economic wealth and political power, owning most of the land in the village (Carswell and De Neve 2014a). At the other end of the social spectrum are two Dalit groups: Matharis (aka Arunthathiyars) who are the lowest ranking of all the Dalit groups and Adi Dravidas (aka Paraiyars) many of whom have converted to Christianity.⁶ Between these two extremes there are a number of other castes, such as dhobi and barber, who are considered lower to middle-ranking within the village.

In the past the livelihoods of land-owning Gounders and landless Dalits were closely connected, with the latter working for Gounders as agricultural labourers (often as bonded farm labourers or pannaiyaal, see Carswell and De Neve 2013). Wider market-led and state-led transformations, however, have changed these local social relations. Jobs in Tiruppur's garment industry are available to people from across castes and offer attractive and rewarding opportunities for people to leave agricultural work (Carswell 2013). Getting jobs outside the village has not only given lower castes unprecedented economic opportunities, but also enhanced their confidence and self-esteem. Gounders too shifted their attention to the garment industry, and the result has been that today – in this village at least – Gounders and Dalits are increasingly disinterested in each other, living largely independent economic lives. Caste has therefore begun to lose much of its previous socio-economic significance in Allapuram, and the importance of patronage has dwindled considerably (Carswell and De Neve 2014a).⁷ At the same time a range of government schemes has made an impact on social relations in the village. Social welfare policies introduced from the 1960s include universal schooling, PDS,

⁵ All names of people and places have been anonymised.

⁶ Some have Christian on their community certificates, while others have Adi Dravida. Some people said that they referred to themselves in different ways depending on context. Whilst known as Christians in the village, they are treated largely as Dalits.

⁷ It is worth noting that there is a huge diversity of transformations within this region. Elsewhere we have stressed the importance of being sensitive to the spatial variations in the ways in which caste relations are being transformed (Carswell and De Neve 2013; 2014a).

school midday meals, housing schemes and, more recently, MGNREGA (Heyer 2012; Carswell and De Neve 2014b; Still 2011). These policies, which aim to alleviate poverty, have without doubt contributed to improvements in the material conditions of Dalits' lives, and this has gone hand in hand with their increased ability to pursue livelihoods independent from local landlords. Our own village-level material as well as village studies by Heyer (2012) reveal the particular importance for the rural electorate of emerging programmatic policies, discussed by Wyatt (2013a) at the state level.

Finally, some established voting patterns in the village need to be mentioned. Matharis have a long history of voting for ADMK and revere MGR for his role in supporting Dalits, giving them respect as a low-caste community, and improving their livelihoods, not in the least through his famous free school meals scheme. Adi Dravida Christians have tended to vote for DMK as they are wary of the ADMK's historical association with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Gounders in the region do not have a single political allegiance and their vote tends to be split between the main Dravidian parties. However, in 2009 the Gounders launched a new caste-based party, the Kongu Nadu Munnetra Kazhagam (KNMK, or Kongu Region Development Party), in an attempt to unite the Gounder vote against the established parties (see De Neve and Carswell 2011, De Neve and Carswell, in prep.)

3. Why do people vote?

We now turn to our key question 'why do people vote' and present some of the main issues that were brought up by villagers. Frequently, answers to the question 'why do you vote' focus on why people vote for a particular party (even if that was not the question asked), but these answers do reveal much about why people vote per se, which is the focus of this article.

Instrumental voting: material benefits and state schemes

In line with what other studies have suggested, voting in our village is at least in part motivated by the material gains that people envisage deriving from it (Chandra 2004, Ruud 2011). One widowed woman, who never missed a vote but who admits not always voting for the same party, said that she decides who to vote for by looking at who will 'help people'. More particularly, she would look at who is likely to increase the old age pension, provide water facilities and ensure that the prices of commodities go down. She explained to us that she would

vote for whoever she felt most likely to provide such things, and emphasized that she always votes.

Periyasamy, a Dalit Adi Dravida Christian, who commutes daily to Tiruppur where he works as a skilled ironing master in a garment company, is very pragmatic in his approach: 'there is no change, but we still vote. I have always voted ... I look at the candidate and at what they are likely to do, and I'll change from DMK to ADMK to other parties. Last time, they gave us a government loan to build this extension [to our house]. That was under the ADMK, so I voted for them. Now the DMK has given us roads and street lights. Whoever is giving something at the time of election, that's whom I will vote for.' But, again, he made it very clear that he always votes. Material gains, usually expressed as benefits from particular state schemes, are an undisputable drive for less well-off and vulnerable villagers to vote, and villagers were well aware of the promises made by the DMK at the time of the 2006 state-level elections regarding the distribution of cheap rice, and free TVs and gas stoves (Wyatt 2013a). The lower-caste and poorer people of the village were clearly assessing the ruling DMK on the basis of electoral promises and ongoing policy delivery. However, it is not only the poor who are motivated to vote by the prospects of personal gain from state programmes. A wealthy Gounder landowner made similar considerations. He was explicit about favouring Congress in national elections as they wavered many agricultural loans, while supporting DMK at the state level because they gave free electricity to farmers.

Not only past but also anticipated benefits shape people's voting behaviour. Anthony and his uncle Ponnarasu, both Christian Adi Dravidas employed in Tiruppur, explained how their expectations inform their voting behaviour: 'In places where there is a thottam [Gounder farm] they build a bus stop, but for us [Dalits] they are not providing one. But I will still vote, because we expect that perhaps the next government will lay a good road or provide that bus stop. People are always expecting something, so they vote!' Indeed, the expectation, or perhaps distant hope, that votes will yield concrete resources drives people to vote. Villagers proved themselves to be astute observers of government policies and made careful judgements on which promised welfare schemes were most likely to be implemented and how they would benefit from them. But different social groups make different assessments. For example, while some approve of 'one rupee rice', others – especially Gounder landlords – criticise it for making workers lazy and reducing the supply of labour. Assessments of policies thus vary and depend on one's class position (Ahuja and Chibber 2012), but it is the delivery of specific party

programmes – and especially universal welfare schemes – that is central to how people across classes judge government performance and gauge future impacts of party manifestoes.

Mr Kulandaisamy, a former panchayat president and member of the Mathari community in the village, clarifies that for some the desire to vote is less a matter of rational choice than the only tool of political participation available to them. He was particularly referring to his own Mathari community, the state's lowest ranking Dalit caste. 'There is no other way for us. Paraiyars have Thirumavalavan [as their leader] and the Pallars have John Pandian to look after them and even to use violence on their behalf, but we Matharis have nobody to stand up for us and we have no money to organise. We are not even able to use violence to attract people's attention. So, we have to vote. If you put your vote, change will come'. Kulandaisamy makes a crucial point here. Voting is not just a way of gaining material benefits, but for some like the Matharis it is the only way to be heard by the state in the absence of any other form of mobilisation or political organisation. Lacking the resources to organise themselves as a civil society movement or political party, the only option left is to vote. This supports Chandra's argument that where one is unable to directly obtain political office, the 'second-best form of political participation is voting' (2004: 4).

An important distinction needs to be made between higher level party policies and local policy delivery. Villagers are patently aware of high level policies – such as PDS and MGNREGA – and most can clearly identify policies and programmes with specific parties. What parties promise and implement is closely observed in the run-up to elections. Villagers have a remarkable awareness of parties' welfare schemes, and it is clear that their programmatic policies encourage villagers to vote and to vote for particular parties (Wyatt 2013a, Koteswara Prasad 2009). What voters are most directly affected by, however, is the way policies are implemented locally, and indeed the way they are transformed by local political actors and relationships (Jeffrey 2000; Ruud 2011; Witsoe 2011). Following a visit to the village by a DMKD candidate on the campaign trail, an older Christian Adi Dravida woman told us what she perceived to be the failure of politicians: 'Karunanidhi [DMK leader] promised us a television, and hasn't given it. ... The whole area around here hasn't got a TV, no drinking water, no bus stop. All the neighbouring villages have ... it is because of local politics ... conflicts between people of two different parties within the village'. Local politics and how they affect delivery by

the local state hugely influence why people vote and indeed how they vote⁸ (see also Ruud 2011 for similar observations in rural Bangladesh).

Local politics and the behaviour of local party representatives may also produce radical shifts in people's voting behaviour, but not their decision to vote per se. This is well illustrated by the case of Gayathri, a woman who had always voted ADMK. Following a dispute with the local ADMK politician over obtaining a signature for a water connection, she turned to the DMK, promising she would never again support the ADMK. Crucially to our argument, however, the dispute never made her reconsider whether to vote at all, something she was fully committed to. What Gayathri is exemplary of is the increasingly independent voter who is not tied by clientelist bonds to vote (or to vote in a particular way) but is able to assess party programmes and local government representatives, and change her vote accordingly. While acts of patronage may continue to compel party activists to vote, as Markussen has recently shown (2011), a sharp decline in economic patron-client relationships in the village goes hand in hand with increasing political independence, in which the electorate make up their own minds on who to vote for. While we repeatedly asked about vote buying, everyone in the village confirmed that no money changes hands in this region and that it would not make any difference anyway.

Urimai and Kadamai: between right and duty

Less tangible considerations too shape the intense interest in voting among our informants. These considerations evolve around strongly-held notions of voting as a 'right' and a 'duty', adhered to by villagers across the class spectrum. Moreover, notions of rights and duties appear as closely interconnected concepts in commentaries on elections, and their popular usage reveals a great deal about villagers' understandings of citizenship and democracy. In this section we explore popular understandings of civic rights and duties, and contextualise them within the political history of Tamil Nadu.

When asked 'why do you vote?' or 'why do people vote?', people often reply that they vote 'because it is our right (urimai)' or 'because it is our duty (kadamai)' as citizens of India. Voting is often simultaneously perceived as a right, given by the state to its citizens, and as a duty, a task people feel they have to fulfil as citizens. The meaning of these terms is to be derived from

⁸ There is a significant gender dimension to this too, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

the context in which they are used, as some examples illustrate. Take the case of Anthony and his mother, Sangeetha. Anthony is a 25-year old Christian Adi Dravidar who works as a cutting master in the Tiruppur garment industry where he earns a good salary. His brother works as a skilled tailor in the same industry. Both are unmarried and live with their widowed mother who works as a casual agricultural labourer. Their house was recently renovated and extended. While Sangeetha talks about the hardships they faced in the past, they readily assert that their lives have substantially improved thanks to 'Tiruppur jobs'. Turning to the topic of elections, we ask whether she will vote.

Sangeetha answers: I can't be without voting; we both have not missed any vote ... we always think: whoever might come next, will they do something good for us? Parties are changing all the time, but there is no change for us ...

Anthony adds: I will look at the policy of a party. Here ADMK is very strong, and only the last time the DMK won here. ...

Sangeetha: We will ask: what will they do for the people? Many people got free loans, but we had to ... get a commercial loan, which we are still repaying today. I didn't get a free loan, so I am fed up with all the parties.

GDN: So why do you vote then?

Sangeetha: There is no meaning to life in this world if I do not vote, it is meaningless not to vote!

GDN: What do you mean with this?

Anthony explains: If we don't vote, we are giving up our right, it is our right (urimai)!

In talking about voting Sangeetha and Anthony move back and forth between two levels. At one level, they dwell on pragmatic gains from government schemes, while at another level, they refer to something much more fundamental, something 'they cannot be without'. This fundamental issue is ultimately expressed as a right, but not just any right. It is a much valued right that should not be given up under any circumstance and, more importantly, a right that gives 'meaning to life in this world'.

Karpagam, a first time voter studying at a local teacher training college, asks me in reply to the voting question: 'It's our right (urimai), so why should we give it up? The only right of Tamil people is the vote, so why should we give it up?' On another occasion she said: 'I'm very happy [to be voting]. This is the first time I've been given this responsibility (kadamai). This is my right and no-one can interfere with that.' Several informants identified the right to vote as 'the only right of Tamil people', which reflects a sense of an 'absolute' or 'guaranteed' right that - unlike social and economic rights which are much more ill-defined and elusive - cannot be taken away from them. Karpagam's statement also reveals how this right is simultaneously conceived of as a duty or responsibility, that is, as a right that they feel strongly obliged to use. Implied in informants' reflections is a distinct sense of moral duty or responsibility rather than any sort of contractual obligation. While certainly not everyone is passionate about politics, almost everyone is passionate about voting itself, considering it morally wrong 'to waste a vote' or 'to give up this right' (Banerjee 2007: 1560). Other informants expressed this in comparable ways. Rajan, a tailor in Allapuram, told us 'I have never wasted [in English] a vote, that is the only right (urimai) we have No one can interfere with that.' One Mathari woman said she always votes despite the many failed promises. When questioned why she votes if it made no difference, she replied: 'the thing is written on our forehead', implying that it is simply something they have to do.

A young Christian Adi Dravida, from a staunchly DMK family, said this about voting: 'It is our only right in our country. We are nothing if we are not voting, we are not worth anything if we do not vote.' His father added: 'Only dead people will not vote. If you don't vote, it means you are not living.' A non-Dalit woman in the main village similarly stated: 'It is our right to vote; if you are not voting then you are not living. Only those who have died will be removed from the list. There is no meaning to living if you are not voting.' Gurusamy, a Gounder farmer with no particular party loyalties or interest in politics, and who claims to decide only in the last minute who to vote for, had this to say: 'There is no respect for us if we don't vote. There is no meaning in life if you don't put a vote. If I don't vote, it's like I am dead. It isn't that we vote for a good person or a bad person, but it is our duty to put a vote. They earn millions of rupees and we don't benefit but still we vote.' Clearly, the very act of voting is prioritised over voting for the 'right' candidate.

On election day a group of five women from the Christian area discussed why they always vote.

One said: 'It is a sign that I belong to this nation; if I don't vote then I don't have an identity. ... It is our right (urimai), it is our duty (kadamai).' We asked: 'What do you mean by duty?' And she replied: 'It is our duty to elect our leaders. I feel empowered to choose them.' The right to vote is indeed seen by many as one of the ways in which the state recognises the very existence of people, or as one Mathari woman puts it: 'it [voting] is the only evidence that I am here'.

Passionate statements like those above reflect two important points. Firstly, they reveal the immense weight ordinary villagers attach to voting. Voting is not only seen as a valued right but is it recognised as the very act that turns people into citizens. It is the act through which they gain formal recognition by the state as members of the nation. By stating that if they do not vote they do not have an identity, villagers reflect on their civic identity as citizens of the Indian nation. Or, as Ahuja and Chhibber put it, 'the act of voting recognizes the poor as citizens in the eyes of the state and those who run it' (2012: 4). This transpires most emphatically from emotive outbursts that if one does not vote, one does not exist - in a political sense at least - as a citizen of India. For Periyasamy, a Christian Adi Dravida employed in Tiruppur, voting and being an Indian citizen is indeed one and the same thing: 'As an Indian citizen (kudimagan) I have to vote; I have to select a representative for parliament.' Secondly, such statements also illustrate an awareness that voting can make a difference. By voting one can elect particular leaders and parties while rejecting others. At no other time can this be done. This is borne out by the fact that due to the 'first past the post' rule, a minor swing in votes can often produce substantial shifts in results, and indeed oust politicians and parties. This clearly points to a popular understanding of voting as a unique means of political action, and as an act that is particularly significant in the absence of other forms of political participation.

Mr Murthy, a Gounder and District Treasurer for the DMDK, answered the question 'why do people vote?' as follows: 'Adu taan jananayakam! (That is what democracy is!) Adu taan makkalatchi! (That is what people's rule is!) Adu kadamai illaea? (That is our duty, isn't it?)'. Here, Murthy uses the words duty or responsibility (kadamai) and people's rule (makkalatchi), which move us onto the terrain of democracy: voting is seen as the materialisation of democracy (for which usually the vernacular jananayakam is used) itself. It is presented as the very act through which democracy, conceived of as people's rule, is realised in a direct and tangible manner. Hence, voting is considered of primary importance to the perpetuation of this much valued political system. Here, voting appears as a basic civic duty adhered to by villagers across caste and class.

Clearly, the concepts of right and duty evoke closely related meanings. In search of first time voters, we approached a class of 50 female students at a local teacher training college, who were very explicit about the differences and the connections between the two terms: 'The right to vote is an individual right (urimai), it's a right given to us by the state. But it is our duty (kadamai) to use it, it is our duty to select a good leader.' While urimai is understood as a formal right conveyed by the state onto its citizens, the way in which that right is made use of is perceived as a matter of personal (moral) duty or kadamai. Either way voting is seen to be, in their words 'a must', and the young women we talked to further expanded on their love for their country, the importance of selecting good leaders and their determination to vote for the first time in the 2009 elections.

Two broader insights can be drawn from the above ethnography. First, a strong language of rights is used across the social spectrum. This language reveals an understanding of voting as key to being recognised by the state as a citizen of India, to participating in the political affairs of the state, and to the realisation of democracy itself. These are matters that are valued by all villagers, and not solely the poor. Second, the language of rights and the language of duty are closely interconnected and mobilised by the same informants. So rather than the poor drawing on a language of rights and the non-poor mobilising a language of duty (Ahuja and Chhibber 2012), we found ample evidence of people using both terms together, often in the same sentence, to reflect on their rights and duties as voters. This reveals urimai and kadamai as two sides of the same coin⁹.

Where, then, does such strong political awareness and civic sense of rights and duties come from? While standard school text books no doubt inculcate a sense of citizenship and make youngsters aware of their voting rights, we need to look beyond this to understand the particular commitment to voting in rural Tamil Nadu today. Answers can be found in the specific history of political mobilisation in Tamil Nadu that, as we set out in the introduction, has been characterised by a long legacy of populist mobilisation by the Dravidian parties that raised political awareness among the population, based on popular imagery and rhetoric of Tamil identity and Dravidian self-rule (Harriss 2000, Wyatt 2013b). Later, as more and more social groups began to feel disenfranchised within the dominant parties, new caste-based parties,

⁹ See also Ruud for a discussion of how vernacular terms for right, duty and citizenship are drawn upon by Bangladeshi villagers, and how they express their understanding of voting 'as a fundamental right, one that one is under obligation to exercise' (2011: 54).

including Dalit parties, further raised awareness, especially among Dalits and low castes. They emphasised the importance of civic rights and political participation to challenging higher-caste economic and political dominance (Gorringer 2007, 2010, Karthikeyan et al 2012). In addition, Tamil Nadu's charismatic leaders – from MGR in the 1960 to Vijaykanth today - continue to use their cinematic appeal to raise cognizance of rights and entitlements, and to present political organisation and electoral participation as solutions to social injustices and economic oppression (Pandian 1992). Finally, programmatic policies and their associated universal welfare schemes – themselves cast in a strong rights-based language – have further enhanced people's consciousness of rights and entitlements. Together with rising levels of literacy and education among the state's rural population, these political dynamics go a long way to account for this remarkable awareness of electoral rights and duties among Tamil Nadu's rural population (Krishnan 2008).

Loyalties, histories and caste identification: voting for respect

But for many informants much more is at stake in casting a vote; voting is associated with receiving not just recognition but respect from the state. Priya, a Christian woman who commutes daily for work in Tiruppur, was asked what she would do if she didn't get leave to vote. She exclaimed: 'I will just go [to vote]! I have to vote! It is our right (urimai) to vote.' What do you mean by right? 'The government gives us no other benefits, it only respects us in that regard, this is the only place where they respect us!' Respect from the state is frequently mentioned by informants, and it is the fact of being on an equal footing in the eyes of the state that is particularly valued by the villagers of Allapuram. Let us explore this further with reference to narratives not only of why people vote but also who they vote for. Often, people's electoral participation is strongly driven by a wish to vote for a particular party or person. Here various loyalties – to family, party or charismatic leader – appear significant, and caste identities are central to the search for respect.

To start with, many voters have strong family or caste traditions of supporting a particular party and would not dream of swapping allegiances, even though they may not always be pleased with the party's particular policies or candidates. Party loyalty is particularly strong among activists, but also runs through ordinary families, many of whom have voted for the same party for generations. We find that answers about why people vote for a particular party shed light on why people vote at all. Mohan, a leading Gounder ADMK activist in the village, has been an

ADMK councillor for the last 5 years, following his mother in that role. They have been ADMK supporters for a long time, and their support has become unconditional: 'Whatever Amma [ADMK leader] says, we will do. The way Amma goes, is our way!'

While sons and daughters may follow the voting of their parents, and wives that of their husbands, there are certainly limits to family loyalty too, and we came across many women who admitted voting differently from their husbands or youngsters voting differently from their parents. Karpagam, a young first time voter had decided, in a change to family party loyalties, that she would vote DMDK, a new regional party started in 2005 by the hugely popular film actor Vijaykanth. She was trying hard to convince her parents to vote for him too. The charisma of Vijaykanth attracted the interest of many younger voters in the village and, while not gaining any seats, generated over 3 million votes in the state as a whole (or 10% of the votes) (Koteswara Prasad 2009: 122). Poornima, a woman of the barber caste, confided to us that she voted Congress even though most of her relatives vote ADMK. Smiling, she told us 'I am not telling anyone, but I have always voted Congress, my father voted Congress and I have always liked the party.' Secrecy, or not revealing who one votes for, is particularly adhered to by women who feel passionate about their personal right to vote and to make their own choice.

Some people's loyalties are based on a powerful historical identification with a party or a party leader, often a charismatic founding person. This identification often extends beyond the individual or the household and can apply to entire communities. This is the case of the low-ranking Matharis, who have a longstanding caste-wide loyalty towards the ADMK. One woman from the Mathari community said she had always voted for ADMK: 'when I get to the booth and see irettalai [two-leaves, the ADMK party symbol], I will always vote for it!' Another Mathari woman who initially said that she just votes for whoever helps her, then went on to explain that she felt that there was no real decision to take: 'we always vote for one party, so there is no decision to take. It comes generation after generation; all our forefathers voted for that party. The person who gave us this land, built this house, gave us free electricity – they are all of this party.'

Several Matharis explained how they closely associate irettalai [two-leaves symbol] with 'MGR' [M G Ramachandran]. MGR continues to be spoken of with great reverence and fondness, and pictures of him appear on all ADMK campaigning posters and leaflets. It is not unusual for voters to talk about him in the present tense – although he died over 20 years ago – and to

mention their love for MGR as the main reason why they vote ADMK today. A Mathari mother and agricultural labourer explained her love for MGR with much emotion:

Here, our children could not sit in the same chair as them [Gounder children] and they could not sit inside [the school building]. Now all that is possible thanks to him. We used to have to stand up when they [Gounders] passed our house and show them respect. ... Because of him we haven't got that fear (atcham) anymore. He said all our children should go to school, and he started free school meals and introduced eggs for the children ... What MGR did, Amma is now following too ... Whether I die tomorrow or live another 50 years, I won't change the party I vote for!

These feelings not only explain why she votes ADMK but also why she is so strongly committed to the act of voting itself. MGR – the most influential actor and politician in Tamil Nadu's recent history – remains remarkably alive in the minds of Allapuram's Matharis today. More than the party's current policies, what is at stake at the time of elections is the perceived respect given by the ADMK to the Matharis. The party and its leaders – MGR in the past and Jayalalitha today – are seen as key to the enhancement of Matharis' sense of dignity and self-respect, to the promotion of equality and 'upliftment', and to the transformation of social relations in the village and beyond. It is their identity – as low caste and poor people – and its transformation over time that the Matharis talk about when reflecting on 'their party', 'their leader', and their overwhelming desire to vote. Here, voting transpires as a means through which one's very identity as a community is reproduced. Voting itself acts as a means by which villagers come to express and reproduce group identities, and assert their self-respect as Dalits.

A similar pattern is to be found among the other Dalit caste in the village, the Adi Dravidas, who closely identify with the DMK and its long-term leader Karunanidhi. They consider the DMK a party that takes care of them in several ways. Many of them have government jobs, or as Ayyadurai, a strong DMK supporter, put it 'in each family there is a government employee and the DMK is known for giving good support to government staff, so that's why many vote DMK in our area'. Moreover, as Christians and a minority group, they feel that voting ADMK would be too risky given the party's earlier alliance with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Security is without a doubt an issue for them. Priya explains 'I am a Christian and I will look after my safety. I will choose a party under whose rule there have been no communal clashes.' Her parents joined in the conversation and further elaborated:

When Advani [BJP] was in rule we had communal problems and when Jayalalitha was

chief minister in Tamil Nadu there were problems. ... So we don't want them to come to power. Because of that most Christians vote DMK.

Minority identity, security and particular government schemes are all related factors that Christian Adi Dravidas consider when voting, and that have consolidated their allegiance to the DMK. Among the village Adi Dravidas voting constitutes a key tool in the protection and reproduction of their identity as both Christians and upwardly mobile Dalits, who benefited from education and government employment over the last decades. Patently, caste identity plays a key role here and propels the poor and low caste to vote, and to vote for a particular party. However, while not discussed in detail here, higher castes, such as the Gounders, in the village also tend to support particular parties (such as the newly launched Gounder-led KNMK), so that caste-based political loyalties can certainly not be identified as merely a low-caste phenomenon (De Neve and Carswell 2011, Wyatt 2010). What can be concluded from the above is that for the village Dalits, voting is also about respect and dignity (see also Ruud 2011: 68).

As this material illustrates, charismatic leaders continue to play a key role in mobilising voters in Allapuram. Matharis dwell on the legacy of MGR, Adi Dravidas consider Karunanidhi's alliances and his schemes for government employees, and youngsters from across castes are being wooed to the polling booth by the charm and promises of the latest actor-turned-politician, Vijaykanth (Koteswara Prasad 2012, Rogers 2009). In the meanwhile, being dissatisfied with the popular policies of both DMK and ADMK, increasing numbers of disgruntled Gounders turn to their own leaders of the newly-established KNMK in the hope that shifting their votes might make a difference.

4. Who does not vote, and why?

Having looked at why people tell us they vote, we now turn the question why people do not vote. Voter turnout in the 2009 national elections reached an all-time high of 73% in Tamil Nadu, while voter turnout was even higher in Allapuram: 78% of those on the voters' list cast their vote. So, why did the other 22% not vote on election day and how can non-voting be explained? We obtained a copy of the voters' list after the election, which had marked on it who had voted and who had not. We then managed to follow up 76 of the 105 people marked as non-voters to find out the reasons behind their non-vote. About a third of these people should not have been on the voters' list at all, either because they now lived elsewhere (21%) or had died (11%). A

significant group (18%) appeared on the list and told us they had wanted to vote, but did not have a valid voter's ID. Another group (18%) were either too ill or elderly to get to the polling booth, while a further 9% said they were looking after ill people or at the hospital. 7% said they couldn't vote for work related reasons, while 9% of those marked as not voting, told us that they had in fact voted.

Perhaps the most interesting group was the 18% who did not have a voter's card and so were unable to vote. Many of those, being on the voters' list and having voted many times in the past, assumed that they would be able to vote with, for example, a ration card or another form of ID. Before polling day there was a widespread belief that the ration card would be acceptable for those without a voter's card. But on voting day, people on the voter's list but who did not have a voter ID card, were not allowed to vote with the result that a sizeable number of individuals could not cast their vote.

A second major reason why people didn't vote is that they are on a voters' list, but not where they are currently resident: this particularly affects women (who often move on marriage) and labour migrants. The Tiruppur region of Tamil Nadu has high rates of labour migration, both to and from the area. Many migrants, however, do not transfer their vote because they are unsure how long they will live away from the area, while others mean to transfer their vote but never get around to it. Many migrants reported that transferring one's voter's card is not straightforward and that problems routinely occur when they try to transfer their voter's card to a new place of residence. Indeed, 21% of the non-voters in Allapuram who we managed to trace were people who had moved elsewhere but were still on the voter's list in Allapuram. Similarly, in-migrants into the village may not yet have registered in Allapuram appearing on the voters' list in their previous place of residence. For many the cost, in terms of bus fares and time off work, makes returning to vote prohibitively expensive so they end up not voting at all. All this reveals that bureaucratic hurdles to registering in a new place of residence form real obstacles for many migrants and married women, and that as a result many who are keen to vote end up being unable to do so.

Another group of non-voters are those who are too ill or elderly, who are caring for others, or have work commitments that prevent them from taking time off. They add up to about one third of the non-voters. While many of them were genuinely unable to make it to the booth, we also need to recognise that others offer such explanations as mere excuses where in fact they

simply have little interest in voting. Yet, under the weight of social pressure to vote and the hegemonic discourse that presents elections as key to democracy, many feel they cannot just say that they have no interest in this form of political participation, and thus offer excuses that are easily accepted by kin and neighbours, let alone inquiring fieldworkers.

A small minority of villagers, however, are rather apathetic and disinterested particularly among the young and the very old. One young Adi Dravida man, Ravi, showed no interest in voting at all: he told us that as he had been given a day off for the election, he and a group of friends had decided to visit a nearby theme park for the day. Other first-time voters hadn't even registered: a group of young Mathari women said they hadn't registered to vote as they were unclear how to, and thought that someone else would do it for them. Some older voters too showed little interest in politics, often because they have become so disheartened with past governments that they see no point in voting, convinced that it is not going to make any difference anyway.

A last significant group of non-voters are those who did not even appear on the voters' list yet were keen to vote. Many of them are young, first-time-voters who hadn't managed to get registered on time. Some had tried to get registered, such as Karpagam, who had applied for a voter's card well ahead of the election and assumed she was on the list. But the card never arrived and on polling day she discovered she was not on the voters' list. In fact, many first-time voters found themselves in a similar position and were unable to vote. Rather than revealing apathy, this group's eagerness to vote suggests that official voter turnout results may even underestimate the actual commitment to voting among the young. Clearly, bureaucratic delays in the registration process prevented some villagers from participating in this much-anticipated democratic event.

Our post-election follow-up thus revealed a number of issues. First, non-voting was caused by a variety of reasons, with bureaucratic obstacles to registering and obtaining a voter's card as well as migration being major factors preventing many from voting. Second, political apathy and disinterest explain the behaviour of only a very small portion of an already small percentage of non-voters. As reported by other observers (Palshikar 2011), these non-voters constitute only a very small section of the population and cannot easily be identified with a particular social group. Instead, many villagers' distress over the inability to vote only reaffirms the huge commitment to voting found among the people of Allapuram.

5. Conclusion

In India voting remains probably the most important form of political participation today (Harriss 2005). Voter turnout rates in Tamil Nadu have been remarkably high since the 1950s, and have been rising steadily over the last 10 years. Our ethnographic study of Allapuram, a village in western Tamil Nadu, sheds light on this issue and suggests some explanations with a wider relevance.

People's passionate insistence that voting is the most fundamental right they have and their assertion that it is their personal duty to make use of it indicates an high awareness of voting as a medium of democratic assertion – best captured in the oft-repeated statement 'it is the only right we've got!' Here, voting appears as the very essence of democracy and of what it means to be a citizen of India. In addition, our ethnography reveals that an emotional attachment to voting also emerges from a search for recognition and respect from the state. While this applies to all communities, poor and non-poor alike, for Dalits in particular this is a significant driver to vote. It is only on election day that they feel the state treats them as equal to other citizens, and it is on this day that their identity as citizens is realized (Ahuja and Chibber 2012, Banerjee 2007, Ruud 2011). Furthermore, Dalits' wish for recognition and respect as low caste communities is also connected to long-term caste loyalties to particular parties and party figureheads that are seen as patrons of the marginalized and that continue to shape the political imagination of many communities today. Hence, we argue, elections form unique moments that allow ordinary people to experience an individual sense of rights and duties as citizens and as producers of democracy itself, while at the same time allowing them to pursue recognition, respect and assertion as members of particular communities. It is precisely this dual feature that makes voting and electoral participation so enduringly attractive to Tamil Nadu's contemporary electorate.

Much of this, we argue, is the outcome of a long legacy of populist mobilisation by the Dravidian parties that raised political consciousness among the population, drawing on popular imagery and rhetoric of Tamil identity, self-respect and nationalism (Harriss 2000, Wyatt 2013b). The cinema too played a central role in the circulation of this political awareness, and charismatic leaders, many of whom hailed from the popular world of film, fuelled the political interest of the Tamil people (Dickey 1993, Rogers 2009). Over the last couple of decades, this awareness was further kindled by new caste-based parties, including Dalit parties, which emphasised the

importance of civic rights and political participation to challenging higher-caste economic and political dominance. Indeed, Dalit parties' 'role in spreading a legal awareness and rights consciousness amongst the oppressed cannot be overstated' (Karthikeyan et al 2012: 33), and they too have encouraged villagers' electoral participation.

Moreover, villagers remain hopeful that elections will produce better governance with social and economic justice for all. This hope is not entirely unfounded. Indeed, over the last three elections it has been invigorated by a renewed interest among the two main Dravidian parties in programmatic party politics, which focuses increasingly on the delivery of universal welfare schemes and good governance (Wyatt 2013a and 2013b). Such a programmatic approach does not mean that clientelist politics have completely disappeared, but rather that good governance and welfare provision have become routine expectations among the electorate that parties can no longer ignore. Moreover, villagers' extensive discussions of a range of government policies indicate that state welfare provision, good governance and sound economic management are important matters on which parties are critically assessed (Wyatt 2013b: 9-12). While sound programme delivery might not in itself guarantee electoral success (as indicated by the DMK defeat in the 2011 state elections), the programmatic turn in Tamil politics has certainly consolidated electoral interest among the rural population, as reflected in rising voter turnout rates post-2004.

We have suggested that no single factor can account for why people vote in our village and by extension in Tamil Nadu as a whole. In this southern state a combination of the above factors underpin high levels of political awareness and electoral participation, including among the less educated members of rural constituencies. While not all of these factors may be prevalent across India, several of them have certainly been identified in other states too and we contend that each of them should be considered in explanations of particular electoral participation rates. There are, for example, clear indications that a renewed focus on development, good governance and welfare provision have become crucial in appealing to voters across India. Ashutosh Kumar, for instance, attributes some of Bihar's chief minister Nitish Kumar's recent popularity to his focus on economic development and on channelling 'resources to provide quality governance in an erstwhile "failed state"' (2013: 101). Yadav similarly notes that at least part of the 2009 electoral success at the national level can be ascribed to the fact that 'the Congress leadership skilfully used the opportunities offered by economic growth and revenue buoyancy by deploying the symbolism of the aam aadmi [common man] and by designing some

potentially far reaching welfare policies' (2009: 42). In rural Bangladesh, Ruud found that people vote in order to elect 'efficient' and 'experienced' leaders who are likely to deliver 'development' (2011: 58-64). Whatever reason they vote for, our study from Tamil Nadu has shown that high levels of electoral participation indicate substantive amounts of political awareness and rights consciousness, and it is this underlying awareness that turns voting into a meaningful act of democracy.

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