



Deciphering the Electoral Genome in India

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«They are wearing heavy boots. All of them have black head-bands. Their INSAS (an abbreviation of Indian Small Arms System) rifles are held across their chest. The paramilitary forces are guarding now the iron gate of the school. A loud humming sound of (may be) motor can be heard from the other side of that Iron Gate. What is this sound all about?

The water pumps are raising the groundwater. Not one, but two submersible pumps have been installed overnight to arrange drinking water for about one hundred jawans. A bare-chested young man's eyes are fixed in that direction. He is in complete wonders in his copper-coloured trousers. After all, this is the first time that Subol Rana will cast his vote.

Everyone seems to be on their toes in Subol's village since the last Sunday. Armoured vehicles are every now and then moving around raising the dust storm. They are followed by heavy boots that are raising dust too. Subol can no more come close to his school that has been so dear to him since his childhood. So from a little distance he has been watching the jawans and their unfamiliar weapons from his world of curiosity...

Subol Ranas, however, do not have the access to such scarce drinking water that has been arranged for the jawans who have come a long way to provide security to their village. Be it summer or winter, come rain or shine, the villagers have to fetch drinking water throughout the year from a faraway place. The women of their village, young and old, have to travel at least one and half a kilometre to fetch drinking water everyday in earthen or other pots and pitchers. Yes, there are wells in the village. But, water from those wells is not potable. The primitive tube-wells are also out of order. Rabindra Palui, a villager, informs that no new tube-well could be installed in spite of repeated requests made to the panchayat and local administration.

Only a few affluent families in the village have been able to arrange fresh tube-wells by spending their own money... In this scenario, even some of the administrative officials felt embarrassed to arrange such submersible pumps for arranging drinking water for the soldiers. A police official exclaimed that, "If drinking water could be arranged for these soldiers within such a short notice, why could it not be arranged for the villagers? Had it been so, there would not have been any need for deploying these jawans here!"

Subol lives in a non-descript village of the Molom locality of Nayagram Block of Paschim Medinipur district (about 150 kilometres away from Calcutta). Year after year, the people here are assured of water and electricity. But, those promises are made to be broken. Yet, polls are held periodically. And, to ensure those polls, on each occasion, the able-bodied paramilitary forces are deployed from Delhi, Gujarat, Assam or Haryana. The pumps are arranged for smooth supply of drinking water to them. The villagers suddenly become optimistic. They start hoping that the pumps will be in the village even after the departure of the soldiers and they will be benefited.

But, it cannot be. There is no supply of electricity in the village that would run the pumps. Now, the generators are supplying electricity. Those generators will vanish with the soldiers. And, with that the dreams of Subol and others will nosedive at once.

They had to deploy at least 60,000 paramilitary forces for the fourteen State Assembly constituencies of Jangalmahal in Paschim Medinipur, Purulia and Bankura, in addition to 40,000 police personnel. That makes 100000 security personnel...

Huge amount of money have been sanctioned for these personnel... There would be an armed soldier for every 23 persons»¹.

Was it anything new? It is worth mentioning at the very outset that, not less than 6 million security and civil officials were responsible for helping to oversee the elections, and 1.3 million voting machines were used in the last Lok Sabha elections in India held in 2009². For that poll, the Government deployed hundreds of thousands of police and paramilitary forces to guard the polling stations, especially along thickly forested areas that security officials call India's «red corridor» because of the Maoist presence. In spite of that, at least eighteen persons died in different parts of central and eastern India on the very first day of the poll in 2009 in the Maoist attacks, although the attacks primarily targeted the security forces and polling officials, and not the voters³. The helicopters were also flown into some areas to evacuate soldiers who had come under the rebel fire. In some cases, the Maoists also destroyed electronic voting machines.

M.L. Kumawat, Director General of the Border Security Force (BSF) told the reporters, «Their political philosophy is such that they don't want to believe in democracy»⁴. Mahesh Rangarajan, one of the leading political analysts of the country, said that, «The extent of violence is unprecedented and shows it will be a significant political and security challenge for the next government»⁵.

From Nayagram to Calcutta

But, can we say that, the electoral governmentality only affects the life of the rebel-dominated Jangal Mahal of West Bengal or the Maoist-dominated parts of India? In fact, a glimpse of the urban socio-political space during the season of election in India may be sufficient to comprehend what the huge deployment of security personnel can unleash on the population living in that space. For instance, with the election logistics firmly in place in April-May 2011, Calcutta, the capital city of West Bengal, loosened its grip on emission from the automobiles that had become a sensitive issue in the city only a couple of years back. Many old commercial vehicles, including buses, taxis and three wheelers registered with the Motor Vehicles Department prior to 1993 had to go off the road immediately after the Calcutta High Court gave an order in 2008 that no commercial vehicle registered

¹ S. GHOSH, *Jawander Jonyo Uthchhe Jol, Obak Sotrishno Gram (Water is Being Arranged for the Soldiers, Perplexed Thirsty Village)*, in «Anandabazar Patrika», 10 May 2011, p. 1. [The author gratefully acknowledges his intellectual debt to Itty Abraham, Samir Kumar Das, Giorgio Grappi and Ranabir Samaddar and for their valuable comments on and inputs to the earlier versions of this essay. The usual disclaimer applies].

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/16/AR2009041602480.html> (accessed on 6 September 2011).

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.



before 1993 could travel around in the Calcutta Metropolitan Area⁶. Those older vehicles with archaic technologies used to emit more polluting substances in the air of the city and the issue of public health was at stake in this situation, in particular, during the winter. However, the auto rickshaws of vintage varieties, polluting the air more hazardously, continued to ply easily beyond the Calcutta Metropolitan Area, beyond the areas under the purview of Calcutta Traffic Police, as if the population living beyond the Calcutta Metropolitan Area is children of a lesser God. However, that is a different story.

In any case, the season of election brought all these vehicles back with a vengeance, semi-officially, if not officially. The concerned transporters argued that, such comeback was driven by the passenger demand as most of the public transport in the city had disappeared from the road because of the Election Commission's (EC) requisitions. The police and the concerned administrative officials also turned a blind eye to this development as a "state of exception". According to a newspaper report, the remote-sensing automobile emission checking unit recorded a huge volume of such old vehicles back on road in the season of polls. The vehicles included pre-1993 buses, taxis, two-stroke petrol autos and even diesel autos⁷.

The report also mentioned that, according to a senior city police officer, «There is hardly any force left for identifying the pre-'93 vehicles» (read in the poll season). A representative of the Joint Council of Bus Syndicates, an association of stage-carriage operators candidly said, «Even though we don't support any violation of the court order, some old vehicles have hit the road again as there is a growing demand from passengers after EC started requisitioning passenger vehicles». Although initially it was an apprehension of the environmentalists, it soon proved to be true after the remote-sensing automobile emission checking units started recording vehicles with old registration numbers. In fact, these units simply measured the emission of those vehicles without stopping them⁸.

But, these are all for "democracy". These are all for ensuring "free and fair" elections in the Maoist rebel-dominated areas. The security forces would strengthen the foundations of parliamentary democracy in those areas where a sizeable section of the population seems to be challenging the edifice of liberal democracy. After all, multi-party democracy is considered as *sine qua non* for engendering peace and stability in any country in the contemporary world.

But, democracy means different things to different people: a method, a process, a system, an ideology, a platform for contestation of power and not the least a class

⁶ *Polls Bring Polluting Buses Back* in <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/specials/assembly-elections-2011/west-bengal/Polls-bring-polluting-buses-back/articleshow/7870303.cms> (accessed on 6 September 2011).

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

struggle. The de-colonization of the erstwhile colonies of Europe in Asia and Africa, like India, after the World War II has privileged liberal democracy globally as the most credible basis of governmental legitimacy. But, the ecology of democracy in India is different from that existing in the nations of the West. After India's de-colonization, the State happened to be the main controller of national resources and their ultimate disperser, and politics slowly turned into a zero-sum game. This perhaps offered a new dimension to social exclusion based on caste, religious and ethnic identities. This also led to newer political marginalization, human rights violations, corruption and mismanagement. Sometimes, it may appear to caricature elections, promote irreconcilable conflicts and make peace unattainable in the long run.

Logistics of Indian Elections

The recognition of the basic principles of representative government by the Constitution of India created the potential for modern mass democracy in the country. The Indians henceforth started selecting their legislators to represent them in the government deliberations. The control of the citizens over their government could thus occur only through these periodic and competitive elections. In other words, elections began ensuring that the government officials are responsive and accountable to the people. By accepting this electoral process, the people tended to give their consent to be governed by their elected representatives. In this logic, the democratic process started depending on an effective and responsive relationship between the representative and the represented.

However, one may argue that, there is little point in holding elections, which are, expensive operations, and more so, if the outcome sometimes seems to be dubious. Therefore, it became the obligation of the electoral body to ensure the legitimacy of the processes for which it is responsible. It is believed that, this could only be ensured if the election management is founded on a few fundamental principles of independence, impartiality, integrity, transparency and efficiency. These principles are believed to shape the foundation of electoral administration and are supposedly essential to ensure both the appearance and the real integrity of the electoral process. These principles are usually considered as the ethical framework for conducting elections. In short, in a modern post-colonial democracy, every election's objective is a flawless election process with unquestioned results. Critical to ensuring accurate results and trusted processes is the efficiency and effectiveness of the logistics operations. The election observers, journalists and political analysts seem to be eager judging whether the elections in question were «free and fair». Sometimes it seems that, this is all people want to know. But what actually constitutes a «free and fair» election? Does the phrase mean only that the election was «acceptable», or



does it imply something more? Can the concept of «free» and «fair», election can be clearly defined and distinguished from other preconditions of democracy?

Be that as it may, the Election Commission of India has of late attached additional and renewed importance to logistics in order to improve the storage, distribution, tracking and retrieval of sensitive and non-sensitive election materials. One of the major challenges of the Election Commission of India nowadays is familiarizing the election officials and poll workers for the pressures of real-time operations.

For instance, in the 2004 Lok Sabha polls, there were 687402 polling stations across the country and the state exchequer had to spend at least Rs.13 billion for that election. And that was completely separate from the expenditure incurred by the political parties and poll contenders for campaigning. Even in the recently-concluded State Assembly polls in 2011, there were 54016 polling stations in Tamil Nadu, 20758 in Kerala, 23813 in Assam, 51919 in West Bengal and 851 in Puducherry.

Thousands of the Central Police Forces and State Armed Police were drawn from other States for deployment during the elections based on an assessment of the ground situation. These security forces were generally used for safeguarding the polling stations, the electors, poll-material and the polling personnel. These forces were also used for securing the strong rooms where the EVMs (Electronic Voting Machines) were stored till counting and for securing the counting centres.

Moreover, the Election Commission has been issuing instructions from time to time with regard to the pre-emptive measures to be taken by the District Magistrates and police authorities to maintain law and order to create an atmosphere conducive for conduct of “free and fair” elections. It is worth recalling that, the Election Commission of India nowadays constantly monitors the ground situation closely and takes appropriate measures to ensure “peaceful, free and fair” polls.

The Commission now also deploys thousands of General Observers to ensure smooth conduct of elections. The Observers are required to keep a close watch on every stage of the electoral process to ensure free and fair elections. In addition, the Election Commission appoints hundreds of Expenditure Observers and Assistant Expenditure Observers who exclusively monitor the election expenditure of the contesting candidates.

That is not all. The Election Commission, of late, has started deploying Micro-observers to observe the poll proceedings on the poll day in selected critical polling stations. These Micro-Observers observe the proceedings at the polling stations on the poll day right from the mock poll to the completion of poll, and the process of sealing of EVMs and other documents to ensure that all instructions of the Commission are complied with by the Polling Parties and the Polling Agents. These Micro-Observers work directly under the control and supervision of the General Observer. Now, all critical events are video-graphed. The District Election Officers

arrange video and digital cameras and camera teams for the purpose. The events for videography include filing of nomination, scrutiny thereof and allotment of symbols, First Level Checking, preparations and storage of Electronic Voting Machines, important public meetings, processions etc. during campaign, process of dispatching of postal ballot papers, polling process in identified vulnerable polling stations, storage of polled EVMs, counting of votes etc. Digital cameras are also deployed inside polling booths wherever needed and inside all counting centres. The Election Commission has also introduced a complaint redressal mechanism based on website and call centres. The number of call centre is a toll free number.

The Election Commission has also begun in engaging in the procedures of “vulnerability mapping”. But, is it talking about the vulnerability of the voters or the that of the polling stations? A recent letter, concerning such mapping, issued in 2011 by the Election Commission to the Chief Electoral Officers may be examined in this context. The instruction issued by the Election Commission through the following letter would indicate how the issue of “vulnerability” could soar to prominence in relation to the exercise of the “sacred” voting rights of the “voters” on the polling day. Their helplessness as citizens of the country in the face of scarcity of food, non-availability of safe drinking water, non-affordability of all-weather shelter or that of basic medical care, on the “normal” days would not have made them vulnerable, in any case. Does not the dominant discourse of security in most modern democracies work by deducing the “norm” from life processes via normality curves, sacrificing those lives that fall outside? Taking cue from Giorgio Agamben, the political, after all, is political because it is not bare life, or rather, the political defines itself at the same time as it defines what it is not, bare life.

ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA
NIRVACHAN SADAN, ASHOKA ROAD, NEW DELHI – 110 001.
No. 464/Instructions/ EPS/ 2011 Date 5th March, 2011.

To,
The Chief Electoral Officers,
West Bengal, Assam, Kerala.

Sub :- Vulnerability Mapping

Ref :- Letters nos. 464/INST/2008-EPS dated 24-10-2008 and 22-03-2009 of ECI.

In continuation of the instructions of the Commission conveyed vide letters nos. 464/INST/2008-EPS dated 24-10-2008 and 22-03-2009, as well as other instructions on the above mentioned and related subjects conveyed from time to time from ECI, the following instructions relating to Vulnerability Mapping are being issued for timely compliance in the context of the ongoing Assembly Elections, 2011.

“Vulnerability” – in the context of elections - may be defined as the *susceptibility of any voter or section of voters, whether or not living in a geographically identifiable area, to being wrongfully prevented from or influenced upon in relation to the exercise of his right to vote in a free and fair manner, through intimidation or use of undue influence or force of any kind on him* (italics mine).

The exercise of Vulnerability Mapping (VM) in the context of the Assembly Elections is to be undertaken with the point of view of *clearly identifying in advance, such voters or sections of voters who are likely to be “vulnerable”, the persons or other factors causing such vulnerability, and taking adequate corrective action well in advance on the basis of such identification* (italics mine).



The first step in the exercise of Vulnerability Mapping has to be undertaken with immediate effect by the Sector Officer or the Sector Magistrate (who have to be appointed as per ECI instructions and posted to commence their assigned task). The Sector Officer must necessarily visit every Locality/ Pocket in the area of every Polling Station in his Sector, hold widespread discussions with people there, collect intelligence, and list the vulnerable households and families, as well as the persons and factors causing such vulnerability there. He should, further carefully fill the Format “VM-SO” [Annexure I] for each such Locality/ Pocket, preferably while he is touring the locality itself. All help, including vehicular support if needed, should be extended to the Sector Officer for this purpose. The Sector Officer must retain a copy of the filled Formats VM-SO with himself and submit all filled in Formats VM-SO to the Retuning Officer within 14th March, 2011.

Each Returning Officer must collect all Formats VM-SO for his AC by 14th March, 2011, and prepare and make available to DEO, the Format “VM-RO” [Annexure II] by 16th March, 2011 after retaining a copy of the same.

The DEO, on the same lines must collect the Formats VM-RO by 16th March, 2011, and prepare and make available to the CEO, the Format “VM-DEO” [Annexure III] latest by 18th March, 2011.

The CEO must compile all the district formats VM-DEO of the state into a book and make this compilation available to the Commission latest by 20th March, 2011.

Sufficient copies of these instructions and formats must be made available immediately to all concerned officials for timely compliance and completion of the assigned tasks.

Yours sincerely,
Ashish Srivastava,
Director

Against this background, this entire logistics of elections in India has assumed an interesting and quite elaborate character over the years as the number of voters has gone up exponentially between 1952 and 2011. But, has it also been able to ensure a democratic space, inculcate a culture of representative democracy, bring an end to social exclusion, marginalization of the *dalits*, minorities, women and indigenous people and ensure peace and stability in the country? It is difficult to respond in the affirmative.

In this connection, one may recall how Foucault discussed about an apparatus (*dispositif*) of security that is not typical of the legal code or the disciplinary mechanism. Rather, this apparatus of security inserts the phenomenon in question, namely theft, within a series of probable events. The reactions of power to this phenomenon are inserted in a calculation of cost. Instead of a binary division between the permitted and the prohibited, one establishes an average considered as optimal on the one hand, and, on the other, a bandwidth of the acceptable that must not be exceeded. In this way a completely different distribution of things and mechanisms take shape⁹.

It also reminds one of the plague regulations formulated at the end of the Middle Ages, in the 16th and 17th century, involved literally imposing a partitioning grid on the regions and town struck by plague, with regulations indicating when people could go out, how, at what times, what they could do at home, what type of food

⁹ M. FOUCAULT, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at The College De France, 1977-78*, London 2007, p. 20.

they could have, prohibiting certain types of contact, requiring them to present themselves to inspectors, and to open their homes to inspectors¹⁰. A similar kind of disciplinary system seems to come into being during the Indian elections. A good sovereign, after all, is someone well placed within a territory, and a territory is supposed to be well policed in terms of its obedience to the sovereign in a territory that has a good spatial layout. Such a notion of sovereignty is likely to assume more significance during the elections that, in turn, are supposed to strengthen modern democracy¹¹. After all, disciplinary normalization consists of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm¹².

Foucault argued that, we live in an era of a governmentality discovered in the 18th century. The governmentalization of the state is a particularly crooked phenomenon, since if the problems of governmentality and the techniques of government have really become the only political stake and the only real space of political struggle and contestation, the governmentalization of the state has nonetheless been what has allowed the state to survive¹³, and, in this sense, the survival and limits of the contemporary Indian State and elections can perhaps be best understood on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality. The appearance of a governmental reason gives rise to a certain way of thinking, reasoning, and calculating. This is what is called politics at the time¹⁴. Governmentality is concerned most of all with «the conduct of conduct», that is, with the myriad ways in which human conduct is directed by calculated means¹⁵.

In a way, the capacity to adapt to the unforeseen challenges in the election times in India is prioritized over the capacity to develop a single, all-encompassing plan for the challenges in advance. These exercises seek to prepare emergency responders psychologically for real crises by simulating experiences that will build personal and team confidence, and give them experience in making real time decisions¹⁶. As the biopolitical governance of the «network society» is increasingly directed through the «living networks» comprising the modern society, the techniques of security during elections in India begin to resemble the immediate and continuous control

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 24.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹² Ibidem, p. 85.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 145.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 375.

¹⁵ M. DEAN, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, London 1999, p. 10.

¹⁶ CH. ZEBROWSKI, *Governing the Network Society: A Biopolitical Critique of Resilience*, in «Political Perspectives», 3/2009, p. 14.



characteristic of the Deleuze's «control society»¹⁷. Thus, *homo sacer* as a paradoxical juridical figure indicates exclusion from the law occurring through an inclusion within it. This paradox is mirrored in the role of the Election Commission of India, its evolving model code of conduct, and its more and more stringent security measures, whose positions are defined by the law, but also have the ability to suspend it. In this sense, the main power of the Election Commission of India introduces a state of exception, and on many occasions, it removes the people's legal status, leaving them in a space of distinction between law and bare life¹⁸. So, the costs of the election campaigns continue to grow immensely to fund the 24x7 televised media events, including “paid news” and political commercials, which are meant for the potential voters.

From this perspective, a re-colonization of the imagination of the post-colonial India seems to be slowly happening through the discourses of democracy and good governance along with neo-liberal economy. Consequently, does the notion of liberal peace, in times of contestation, turn into a war, to paraphrase Clausewitz, increasingly becoming «the continuation of economics by other means»? After all, the new surveillance systems used in the time of polls appear to become institutionalized, and taken for granted, in a fairly democratic India, and the “electoral panopticon” in the country tends to aim at a total and centralized surveillance of individuals who are constantly aware of being visible, and this visibility sometimes also replaces force as an instrument of control.

¹⁷ For details, please see G. DELEUZE, *Postscript on Control Societies*, in G. DELEUZE - CLAIRE PARNET (edd), *Negotiations*, New York 2005.

¹⁸ I. CLOUGH MARINARO, *Between Surveillance and Exile: Biopolitics and the Roma in Italy*, in «Bulletin of Italian Politics», 1/2009, p. 268.