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Violent Layers: Rethinking Electoral Violence in India

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Abstract

This article examines the multi-layered nature of electoral violence in India. At one level, the violence behaves like a barrier by excluding certain actors from political participation. At another level the violence functions like a filter - recognising, accentuating, or by creating social meanings that have electoral implications. Hence, instead of looking exclusively at its strategic, structural, or cultural dimensions, this paper looks at the simultaneous performance of electoral violence as a social process, a political strategy, and an institutional behaviour. To demonstrate the non-autonomous character of each of these levels, this article explores the limitations of using communal violence as an electoral strategy, highlights the unintended effects of securitization on voter turnout and political competition, and probes into the various unequal social structures that reproduce violent elections in India. It also offers an alternative perspective to studying electoral violence by looking at its historical development vis-à-vis the radicalisation of a society's political culture. On the basis of this multidimensional analysis, the paper concludes that electoral violence can be structurally induced by even well-consolidated electoral institutions and thus, cannot be regarded as simply a breakdown of democratic institutions.

Keywords: communal violence, democratic institutions, electoral violence, India, political culture, securitization

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Introduction:

The political right of voters to vote freely without being subjected to any form of coercion is probably the lowest threshold of a democracy. The deliberate use of violence or its threat on voters, competitors, and other electoral participants fails this basic requisite of any democratic election. Despite the repeated failure of this basic criterion, the literature on democratisation has declared India to have fairly consolidated itself as the world's largest electoral democracy. Despite so many threats to the baseline of electoral integrity, India has regularly conducted highly competitive elections with large-scale civic participation at the national and sub-national levels. The answer to this confusing record of democratic performance is that – violence, instead of eliminating the competition for acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating political power, has made Indian elections into a theatre of violent competition. As Hansen (2019, p. 35) writes, "Violence (in India) is no longer politics by other means but the heart of political life itself."

This article aims to explore the multi-layered nature of violent electoral behaviour in India. Instead of looking exclusively at its strategic, structural, or cultural dimensions, we are looking at its simultaneous performance at all these levels of analysis. Each of these levels are interacting with one another, negotiating with, and manoeuvring across the spaces opened up by the other. At one level, the violence might perform the function of "political exclusion" by eliminating candidates, campaigners, voters, media outlets, or poll-workers from electoral participation (Birch et al., 2020, p. 5) and thus, appear like a barrier. However, at another level the violence might function like a filter - recognising, accentuating, or creating those social meanings that have electoral implications. For example, in a cult there's usually a process of initiation or a rite of passage that potential candidates must perform to become cult members. The role of violence is like that initiation - it rejects or excludes just as much as it recognises and creates. When judges, local police or election officials are intimidated by criminals, new

ways of administering justice and managing elections develop that are compatible with the local conditions e.g., the introduction in 1998 of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) to reduce booth capturing and rigging (Rao, 2004) and that of vulnerability mapping of districts in 2007 for taking necessary preventive actions (Election Commission of India, 2016). Conversely, when a certain region undergoes excessive securitisation, local people as well as political participants in the region devise new informal strategies to negotiate with the agents of the State and evade the sanctions of State-sponsored pre-emptive violence e.g., collusive networks, parallel economies of gifts and obligations, and so on. This implies that instead of one dimension, say the social, unilaterally shaping another, say the political, the relation works both ways i.e., violent social actors modify existing political structures; and violence exerted or enabled by political structures produce new social norms and practices. The true nature of violence used during elections can thus be understood only if we acknowledge its value as a psychosocial fact, a political strategy, and an institutional behaviour, interacting and co-existing with each other.

The argument here is not the same as Birch et al. (2020) that certain violent actions that are done for electoral objectives may have non-electoral outcomes e.g., the act of grabbing the estate of an opponent to benefit an ally (p. 5). The point here is to say that there are violent actions, done with no intent of excluding or hurting a political opponent or not emerging out of any conscious consideration for elections, that end up having significant electoral implications e.g., inter-ethnic violence around issues of indigeneity, ethno-religious violence based on land and resource distribution, gendered acts of violence, etc. This is also to say that there's a certain "fallacy of misplaced scale" (Rubin, 2002, p. 199) in the existing literature on 'election violence' which prioritises the word 'election' over 'violence'. The subjective pleasure of the individual from violence, its intersubjective (social) value, and the mundane, everyday reality of violent activities that may not embody the level of political salience or spectacular character that scandalous riots, insurgencies or declared protests usually have -

these are issues not deeply engaged within the present literature on election violence. This apart from being an incomplete and naively secular understanding of violence, also fails to engage with the immersion of social meanings like masculinity, pride, or enmity in the competition for formal, legal authority; meanings that find popular expression and mobilise (electoral) support only through violence.

Although the uniqueness of caste-based violence and faction crimes are directly related to electoral violence in India, this article focuses primarily on communal violence. The section 'A Violent Society' does however acknowledge certain forms of electoral violence that utilise unequal social structures to deliberately disenfranchise marginalised sections from democratic politics and representation.

Moving Beyond Criminalisation:

The deployment of criminal force to navigate elections is a common practice in transitional and conflict societies. It takes the form of booth capturing, sabotaging public and oppositional property, personation, armed clashes and riots, arson, attacks on demonstrations, blocking of roads to prevent voting, murder, stabbing, instances of assault and kidnapping of individuals (Dhanagre, 1968; Sharma, 2018; Reif, 2014). Incidents like these involving spectacular forms of physical coercion have shifted the focus of scholars who're studying electoral violence in India towards the process of criminalisation of elections i.e., the nomination of criminal candidates and the use of criminal methods to contest elections. While the use of an unlawful degree of physical force for electoral objectives is invariably a criminal offence, the uniqueness of the violent character of Indian elections lies not so much in the proliferation of criminals in elections as in how this 'crime' has become at once a strategy used by political parties, a political culture with embedded social meanings, and an unintended consequence of the electoral system. This violent character therefore has less to do with ethno-religious differences or the deficit of what western

theorists call a 'civic culture' (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1988) than a well-built network of political actors and institutions that produce and interpret socially meaningful violent episodes to divide political constituencies. The criminalisation of Indian elections in this regard is merely the manifestation of a more complex problem, and not its cause.

The Efficacy of Communal Idioms:

Political parties which are dominant in the status quo can use the narratives of electoral violence to resist voters from joining their opposite blocs by convincing them that electoral participation is invariably corrupt and dangerous. While get-out-the-vote (GOTV) strategies like canvassing are used by parties to increase turnout among their potential supporters, electoral violence and its narratives are used as negative GOTV efforts aimed at swaying voters away from the opposition. However, the risk of using pre-poll violence as a GOTV strategy is that supporters of the aggressor may also get disenfranchised when subjected to an environment of violent conflicts. There are two means of reducing this risk of using pre-poll violence strategically. First, through having a greater share of 'steady voters' than the opposition, whose incentives and willingness to vote are relatively unaffected by contingent violent incidents. Second, through amplifying the importance of voting in situations of violent conflicts. In this context, going beyond the conventionally understood role of communal riots in polarising the electorate, communalization of voters can be observed as performing both the aforementioned functions i.e., enlarging the aggressor's bloc of steady voters and increasing their importance of voting during or after the episodes of communal conflicts hence generated. Iyer and Shrivastava (2017) find that "riots occurring in the year preceding an election increases the vote share of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party by at least 5 percentage points" (p. 1). Parallel to this argument, Wilkinson (2004) showed that State level incumbents that do not depend on minority Muslim votes, have lesser incentive to prevent Hindu-Muslim riots, especially if such riots attract lower caste Hindu votes. Both

these findings suggest that communal riots are neither conflicts emerging spontaneously from inter-community differences, nor the result of how community life is geographically structured, instead there is a distinct process of 'riot-production' in India that impacts electoral outcomes and then some (Brass, 2005).

This argument suggests that mono-ethnic parties that represent narrowly defined religious or ethnic identities (Sridharan & deSouza, 2006) may have lesser risks of losing their supporters to pre-poll violence than other types of parties like personalistic, catch-all, programmatic, elite, multi-ethnic or movement-based parties (Gunther and Diamond, 2001). These mono-ethnic parties are "embedded in a social group" (Jensenius & Chhibber, 2022, p. 6), and most of their supporters are part of pre-existing social or religious networks, mobilised by party activists to support a particular ethno-religious identity. Their voters don't have interpersonal relations of exchange with a patron leader unlike what's commonly observed in top-down clientelistic parties like the Congress. Whether these mono-ethnic parties understand and consciously utilise this knowledge to become (more) typical users of pre-poll violence than the other types of parties is, however, up to clarification by statistical studies in the future. Another important scope of future research is whether or not mass parties based on certain radical ideologies other than communalism e.g., revolutionary communism or Leninism, ultra-nationalism, or religious fundamentalism, can rationalise the risks of using pre-poll violence by means of having ideologically steady voters, their demands for radical socio-economic changes and for radical means to achieve the same.

However, the efficacy of violent narratives as a deliberate strategy of reducing turn-out can be quite low in terms of its impact on opposition voters with strong partisan identities and ideological coherence (Daxecker & Fjelde, 2022); ideologically engaged voters are anyway more likely to participate in political activities during elections than passive or "peripheral" voters (Chhibber & Verma, 2018, p. 4; Campbell, 1960). Young (2020) uses a psychological

approach to demonstrate that opposition supporters with a greater sense of self-efficacy respond to State-sponsored violence with anger rather than fear. If most of the voters in the opposite bloc of the perpetrator demonstrate such sturdiness through partisan allegiance, ideological fortitude, or high sense of self-efficacy, the violence incurs unintended costs for the perpetrator in the form of voter backlash and a more aggressively mobilised opposition (Rosenzweig, S. C., 2021).

Furthermore, communal violence impacts Indian voters only during phases of temporal and conditional salience of the religious issue within the political discourse, rather than throughout India's electoral history or polity. One persuasive explanation of this phenomenon is given by Sircar (2022) in that, "religion-as-ethnicity voting" emerges only when a religious group has a certain degree of "density" or spatial concentration in a region, and "pivotality" or the likelihood of forming government; both of which are conditions usually satisfied by ethnic or linguistic groups. While density is a pretty stable variable (although the effects of migration can be important in the long run), the condition of pivotality depends on there being some ruling party that can use State power to aggregate religious identity over caste or linguistic cleavages. The electoral failure of most religious parties in India, either due to being supermajorities that are broken by internal ethno-linguistic differentiations or due to being concentrated minorities dependent on ideological mismatches to form pivotal alliances, has meant a greater stimulus ascribed to ethnic and linguistic voter blocs and their representative parties. Thus, communalisation of voters may be a dominant cause of electoral violence in periods of political salience of religion (like the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, Pulwama and Balakot attacks and NRC-CAA in 2019), but we can't conclusively say that it's a consistent electoral strategy unless some specific conditions are reproduced to consolidate a religious vote that performs as well as ethnicity. Perhaps, we can call it a misperceived strategy that most often costs more than how much it benefits; something that the perpetrator doesn't realise and hence keeps repeating.

The paradox of Electoral Security:

Too much securitisation of the electoral cycle based on a "probable" threat of violence can have the same impact as violence itself. This is because greater the security deployments, more assured are the voters that violence will occur and as a result they may abstain from voting on poll-day. This assumes that the choice to vote (or not) depends less on the frequency of violent occurrences in the past than the voter's interpretation of her socio-political environment based on her subjective experiences and judgements, and limited quantity of available information. Another theoretical reasoning behind this argument is the assumption that people are ambiguity averse. This assumption is an experimental result of the Ellsberg Paradox that says that individual decision-makers often violate the rules of probabilistic sophistication. They prefer choices which have objective (calculable) risks over those that have subjective (unknown) risks, even if the former has a lower expected utility than the latter. Hence, the background of political unrest and the presence of greater security deployments present the voters with some incalculable risks of voting i.e., whether they would be given sufficient security or be just stuck in a messy battle between the State forces and the armed groups. At least theoretically this might reduce the voter turnout, although that may not be to the same extent as caused by pre-poll violence.

Following the same argument, we can infer that greater military and police deployment is not always a response to violence (or its threat) but can also become its cause. Political contestants can view this securitization as an effort of the incumbent to demonstrate its power of State resources. Indeed, data from ACLED (2019) shows how the Indian State forces were the most frequent participants in organised violence during the 2018 local body elections of Jammu and Kashmir, as well as in Meghalaya, and Assam during the elections between 2016 and 2018 - more so than other actors like rebels, armed groups, and political militias. In border regions, the issue of security deployment becomes even more sensitive than the interior. Demands of political autonomy, fuzziness of

citizenship, fatal border disputes and overlapping trans-border identities add to the antagonism between the local electorate and the security forces. The involvement of enemy States, insurgents and separatist groups has been another common factor for the greater deployment of Indian security forces in J&K and the North-East, especially Assam. Ordinary citizens on the other hand interpret this excessive securitization as a limit on their civic and political rights and engage in activities of armed dissent like stone-pelting. Using State-sponsored repression to prevent election violence can be counterproductive. This is because it strengthens the clandestine avenues of support for the insurgent groups and terror outfits that succeed in exposing the injustices of the State and weaken its legitimacy – something that explains the greater presence of Maoist-rebels that challenge the Indian State in the predominantly tribal states of India (the "Red Corridor" states) whereby generations of indigenous tribes have been displaced by agrarian reforms and State-sponsored industrialization.

A Violent Society:

Election violence is not just a strategy but also a socialised political behaviour. The deliberate acts of violence during elections have causes and impacts outside the realm of electoral outcomes and motivations. Hence, the assumption that election violence, similar to terrorism, is simply the use of violence or its threat as a means to achieve political goals is grossly wrong. For example, the reported cases of sexual violence against women, especially from the lower-income and marginalized sections are not mere electoral strategies. They reflect the patriarchal nature of elections in postcolonial societies, and a general effort at creating a climate of apprehension and uncertainty for the minorities and marginalised groups. Violence, be it during or between elections, is a coercive performance of one actor using unequal social structures to exert a certain degree of physical, psychological, or economic power beyond the legally permissible levels of persuasion on the opposite actor in any form of social interaction or transactions. Political outfits identifying with the Upper caste Varnas like the

Jats in Haryana (Chowdhry, 1994, p. 35), Bhumihars in Bihar (Nandan and Santhosh, 2019) or the *Gau Raksha Dal* (GRD) or 'cow protection corps' have routinely used political violence to express the martial traits traditionally attributed to their castes. Similarly, the symbolic objectification of women as a "property" of a social group has led to their commodification as a 'gift' exchanged for illicit services (Sarkar, 2016) and has also made sexual violence on them a means to hurt the *izzat* or "honour" of the group to which they belong - these are strategies with socially constructed meanings. The enabling conditions of such violence are not just specific to the motives of a few parties or the contingent levels of contestation in a district. These are offset by traditions that transcend electoral cycles but find a heightened expression during episodes of socio-political transition or unrest.

Violence is used to exclude not just political opponents but entire social groups from democratic politics and representation, thus creating deeply divided political constituencies. When an incumbent has a supermajority voter bloc, its opponents try to reify the social cleavages within that bloc through various means of polarisation (Sircar, 2022). When vote bank politics like social engineering or distributive benefits fail to serve this goal, violence is used as an alternative. The arbitrariness in this approach lies in that it neglects the differentiation of political preferences within a community as well as the co-partisan ties shared by socio-culturally different groups. Hence, without any empirical consideration of partisan allegiance or ideological orientations, citizens holding certain social identities are prejudicially assumed to support specific political groups e.g., Hindi-speaking people in West Bengal are BJP supporters, lower castes in U.P are BSP supporters, and so on. In this way, these social groups become easy targets of various means of political exclusion, including violence, since such exclusion is perceived as benefiting the perpetrator, if not vote-wise (because the excluded groups could have been its supporters), but at least in performing its party ideology or breaking up the incumbent's bloc.

In the context of rural Indian politics, the separation of electoral strategies from informal social institutions becomes unyielding. This is because loyalties based on ties of caste, religion, ethnicity, or kinship are a very important determinant of rural politics. Local political institutions are captured by elites which in the postcolonial (especially post-Congress) era have been associated with greater social capital rather than only ownership of estates. An example of this dynamic can be seen in Dwaipayan Bhattacharya's (2010) concept of party society of rural West Bengal under the Left-Front, whereby partisan affiliation to the incumbent became the source of higher social status which was not enjoyed by the landed groups opposed to the incumbent. Almost always the campaigning strategies are based more on arousing conflictual sentiments that reify social boundaries between communities, than on aspects of law-making, distribution of public goods, or any Foucauldian idea of governmentality. Governmentality is seen as limited to the centralised and technocratic bureaucrats located outside the realm of electoral politics while elections are dominated by charismatic and customary leaders who have no hesitation to use extra-legal means to win power (Hansen, 2021).

Violence as a Political Subculture:

There are phases in history, wherein social unrests arising out of economic crises, rising corruption or security threats lead to the radicalization of the political culture of a society. In other words, the pattern of political orientations of the electorate shifts towards more radical policies, practices, and ideologies. This was experienced during the Great Depression of the interwar years whereby fascism and other radical right-wing ideologies mobilised political power in countries like Spain, Italy, Japan, and Germany. Similarly, in the Middle East during the 1960s and 70s, the rapid growth of population, the protracted Arab Israeli war, and the failure of pro-western leaders to increase socio economic development led to the masses losing their faith in Arab nationalism and their political orientations shifting towards Islamism, the creation of political Islam, and religious fundamentalism (the

creation of theocratic Iran in 1979), with the latter finding militant expressions in transnational terrorism (Heywood, 2011, p. 290). In India too there has been an increased radicalization of politics since 2014 when the Hindu-nationalist party BJP formed an absolute majority at the Centre and has been in power ever since. Many can argue against such a chronological distinction by means of proving that electoral violence has been invariably present in India since its inception, it being part and parcel of the Indian way of *doing politics*. However, there's a certain difference between the discrete occurrences of violent confrontations between political parties and their supporters during elections and that of violence becoming the grammar of a society's politics; a political culture. While the former represents the inefficiency of democratic institutions in removing the incentives to use violence in the competition for political authority, the latter represents the gradual retreat of democracy from a society. This retreat of democratic political culture can be reflected against the Pew Research Centre (PRC) data (2017) – a measurement of the political orientations of Indians towards democratic and non-democratic forms of rule. Of the 2464 respondents surveyed, 65% supported rule by experts, 55% supported rule by a single, autocratic leader (the highest among the 38 countries surveyed) and 53% supported rule by military (one in only 4 countries where half or more of the people supported military rule). The report also found BJP supporters as more likely to support military, autocratic, or technocratic rule than Congress supporters, with the latter more likely to offer no opinion on the matter. The PRC national survey (2021) of nearly 30,000 Indians found a complex perception of "religious tolerance" in India, whereby most respondents held positive views about religious diversity and respecting other religions but also supported various forms of religious segregation e.g., oppose inter-religious marriages, prefer having co-religious friends or neighbours, enforce dietary strictures, and so on. Among the Hindu respondents, 59 % and 64 % considered speaking Hindi and being Hindu, respectively, as requisites for being "truly Indian". While the BJP's strike rate in the 2019 General Elections was 60% among those Hindu voters

who considered these two requisites as very important, it was only a third among those who felt less strongly about these aspects. As previously noted, the findings of Iyer and Shrivastava (2017) show how "riots occurring in the year preceding an election increases the vote share of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party by at least 5 percentage points" (p. 1).

Even if we assume that the probability of observing electoral violence largely depends on the nature of the politics, the elections, and the electoral institutions of a regime (Höglund, 2009), we cannot entirely negate the possibility of electoral violence increasing with the shift in the preferences of the median voter towards more radical ideologies during specific phases in history.

Violence in a State of Exception:

Our conception of electoral violence so far has been that its victims are citizens fully entitled to political rights but are *de facto* disenfranchised from those rights by force or intimidation. However, election violence doesn't just lead to political exclusion but is also built upon it i.e., exclusive political constituencies are at the heart of a violent election. Hence, a reconceptualised idea would say that electoral violence is not just destructive in nature, but also constructive. It doesn't just limit participation of a particular section, but it also generates or enlarges a separate ideological camp by creating or intensifying certain divisive agendas during elections. The distinctive facet of this form of electoral violence is not just its constructive nature, but also the nature of its victims. The use of violence for agenda-building confronts groups that are already excluded from the political sphere by the State and its agents and constitute the peripheries of legal protection and social mainstream; their habitats thus become the arenas of authorised and coercive ideology-building which consolidates one's ideological position in the elections and constructs a public opinion favourable to such a position, despite not breaking the law of the land. This is the *Agambenian* experience of the 'state of exception'. The Jews, gipsies and homosexuals faced it in

Nazi Germany. And the same experience of violence for agenda building is faced by the politically excluded in India i.e., the slum dwellers, transgenders, tribals, lower castes, borderland citizens, and immigrants. You might say that such a violence doesn't fit the definitional brackets of electoral violence primarily because of its timing i.e., it may not occur during the phases of an electoral cycle. However, there are reasons why Indian political scientists need to radically rethink election violence and include ideological violence within its brackets even if the latter doesn't occur within the electoral cycle. Firstly, ideology is the prime determinant of voter choice in India - the lengthy and credible proof of which has been given by Chhibber and Verma (2018). Secondly, they have also proven how ideology is transmitted to the voters through multiple agents of political socialisation including parties, education, media, religious practices, and heuristic devices like transformational leaders. Thirdly, parties with ideological coherence perform better and voters with a firm ideological position participate more in elections. Finally, if we join all these points the result is clear in front of us – violent occurrences, albeit occurring outside the electoral cycle, frame ideological choices of voters and consolidate the ideological position of parties that ultimately drive the election, from campaigning to polling to its results. Such violence, its manner of execution and its targets reflect the [planned] levels of State intervention and recognition given to social groups.

Only the Failed Systems?

One of the received wisdoms commonly present in the literature on election violence is that – violence during election is not a product of the electoral process but its breakdown. This view is based on the *apriori* purpose with which elections were introduced in the liberal democratic west - that being to avoid the use of coercion and violence in the process of achieving political authority. According to this logic, electoral violence has a trade-off with the success of electoral processes because the former represents the latter's breakdown. This however is a flawed argument because of two reasons. The first one is evident in the works of Acemoglu and

Robinson (2000) who classify democratisation as a negotiation that incentivizes peaceful resolutions in the form of limited concessions or fullest enfranchisement instead of repression used by the elites or revolution by the masses. As opposed to that, democracy is a political system created through democratisation that doesn't just have the potential of generating conflicts but is also a reversible outcome.

Secondly, the system of elections – its superintendence, participation, and organisation have several avenues capable of causing violence even when they are working at their fullest efficiency. For example, as much as preventing violent confrontations is quintessential to electoral superintendence, so is it to ensure highest participation of eligible voters, civic groups, and minorities. The pivotality-voter model suggests that voter participation increases with the closeness (or competitiveness) of electoral contests since such a circumstance increases the probability of individual votes affecting final outcomes, subject to the size of a constituency. But in a highly polarised polity, this does not come without its share of proactive intensity. For example, Wilkinson (2004) showed how the Hindu-Muslim violence during the 2002 Gujarat pogrom peaked in the most competitive constituencies i.e., in the seats where the Bharatiya Janata Party faced the stiffest competition. In fact, in highly polarised districts the most successful efforts of 'getting out the vote' (GOTV) are partisan in nature, not independent. Several theories on voter turnout support this argument by showing that voter participation increases with polarisation and decreases with the convergence of policies in the electoral menu (Lefkofridi, Z., Giger, N., & Gallego, A., 2014). It's speculated that when policies converge many voters don't identify with the limited and similar political options and as a result, abstain from voting. The polarisation of politics in this case refers to the policy-preferences of each candidate and/or each voter diverging away from instead of converging to the median of the distribution of all preferences. There is also sophisticated proof that in a two-party competition, policy divergence or polarisation increases with the uncertainty of parties about voter preferences (Hindriks & Myles,

2013, p. 375). This is a strong case for India's robust secret ballot which has rendered distributive politics to be largely inefficient as an electoral strategy because parties or their brokers are unable to monitor voter behaviour (Auerbach et al., 2021, p. 4). However, by increasing voter uncertainty it has also increased the chances of ideological polarisation.

Looking at the same paradox of competitiveness having a positive correlation with polarisation and violence, not from the angle of voter participation but Parliamentary contest, Hanne Fjelde and Kristine Höglund (2014) rightly observes the success of the single-member plurality voting system or the FPTP system in its ability to create a strong Parliamentary opposition that can challenge the incumbent due to the close margin of votes separating the two. This, however, raises the electoral stakes and the ruling party's fear of defeat, in the process incentivizing violent confrontations that can break the deadlock. Thus, to say that electoral violence is always a result of the failure of electoral or democratic mechanisms, that it's not a feature but a breakdown of the system fails to explain the system itself and how it operates in a postcolonial environment.

This however is not an apology for electoral violence, nor is it to say that violence is a staple in the elections to any postcolonial State. This is to highlight that there are elements in the institution of elections that generate conflicts and violence instead of solving them.

Voter Interpretation of Violence:

The correlation between electoral violence and a lower turnout is not always consistent in the Indian context. Even if we do observe the turnout to be lower under the treatment of violence and higher in its absence, the confounding variable that begs recognition is the strength of the partisan allegiance of the voter. The expression of one's partisan allegiance doesn't end with voting; it continues beyond the polling phase with a series of personal and collective efforts to justify the fairness and efficacy of one's preferred candidate

or party. As a result, information about co-partisan violence need not result in a voter's evaluation of the electoral quality to worsen (Daxecker and Fjelde, 2022). This argument can be understood with a closer look at how partisan relations influence the voter's perception of electoral integrity. If a voter perceives an election to be fair despite the occurrence of electoral violence, it could be due to informational constraints, distance from the violent occurrences or due to the party affiliations of the respondent.

For example, an interesting paradox can be found in the post poll survey of the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections, disputed to be one of the more violent elections in recent years. Therein, 84.3 % of the total 4223 respondents considered the elections to be totally fair. 89.3% didn't see any act of voters being threatened or prevented from voting, 90.4% didn't see any booth capturing, rigging, etc. 85.9 % didn't see any clash between party workers. The percentage of those who didn't see but heard of each of these cases was also quite low. Thus, it can be statistically inferred that the perception of an overwhelming majority of electors in Bengal was that the elections were fair primarily because they didn't see or hear of any corruption during campaigning or polling day. However, a substantial number of people do believe that the incumbent AITC government is corrupt (probably, in between elections), a number greater than those who believe otherwise.

We see the occurrence of electoral violence, the simultaneous belief that the incumbent is corrupt and yet the overall belief among the respondents that the electoral process was free and fair. This ambiguity in the findings prove that we can't always explain electoral violence with a focus on corruption, criminality, and communal tensions. What is required is a deep-rooted analysis of how violence is read in society. Biggers and Bowler (2022) conducted a study along the lines of voter perceptions regarding the fairness of electoral reforms. The findings suggest that the respondents' perceptions of the fairness of the reform improve if the enactment of the reform benefits the electoral position of their preferred party. Following this finding, we can say that the

voters perceive an election to be free and fair if its outcome is closer to their most preferred policy. The more they depend on a particular policy-preference, even the most violent elections that achieve the same can therefore be read and reported as free and fair. What is important here is not the violence itself, but the nature of its perpetrator and its outcomes. Violence during elections is something that no voter wishes to be subject to i.e., it's a fairly unacceptable practice. But they tend to not object, if not directly endorse, such violence if the results are in their favour or they perceive political violence as beneficial to their electoral prospects.

Conclusion:

The success of Indian elections in repeatedly securing large-scale turnouts and multi-party competition raises a moral and logical quandary about the otherwise violent heart of Indian politics - is electoral violence an illegal activity which threatens Indian democracy or is it a behavioural feature of democratic institutions in a postcolonial society?

The legal-illegal binary of formal legislative and judicial vocabulary looks at electoral violence as the mere proliferation of criminality in elections. However, as this article demonstrates, election violence is a multi-layered phenomenon. It's at once a social process, a political strategy, and an institutional behaviour.

The purpose of this paper was to make plain that violence during elections is not just a repressive apparatus of the State and its agents nor is it the state of conflict solely between powerholders and their opponents - it's a form of social interaction between groups differently located in the social hierarchy and the ideological spectrum. When used within the forbearance of dominant social structures and norms, violence is considered as no more coercive or illegitimate than the strategies deployed in a "fair" game of socio-political survival, a fight between dominant traditions trying to survive as electorally pivotal meanings in a postcolonial society. And the liberal democratic model of elections has but only provided

this social Darwinism with a formal, legitimate, and authoritative character. With in-built trade-offs between participation and consensus, competition and stability, security and securitization, democratic elections are far from being peaceful institutions meant to resolve a violent world.

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