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The Cultural Politics of Proxy-Voting in Nagaland

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Nagaland's voter turnouts are often the highest in the country, and it may be so this time around as well. But why was the citizenry of Nagaland so keen to vote for their lone, largely ineffectual representative in the Lok Sabha?

Of all truisms about democracy, one that is held to be particularly true is that any democracy's vitality and verve depends on its voter turnouts during elections. As the acclaimed political and social theorist Steven Lukes (1975: 304) concluded long ago: "Participation in elections can plausibly be interpreted as the symbolic affirmation of the voters' acceptance of the political system and of their role within it." Indian democracy thence draws special attention; not just for its trope of being the world's largest democracy (Indian voters make up roughly one-sixth of the world's electorate) but for the democratic and electoral effervescence reported all across the country.

While a disenchantment with democratic institutions and politics is now clearly discernible in large swathes of the so-called "West" and finds its reflection in declining voter turnouts, to the point almost where a minority of citizens elect majority governments, India experiences no such democratic fatigue. Here voter turnouts are not just consistently high, but continue to increase and now habitually outdo those of much older democracies elsewhere. And if India's official voter turnouts are already high, they might well be a low estimate still. Says Yogendra Yadav (2009): "if we assume spurious names of those dead, migrated or simply non-existent make up 10% of our electoral rolls, the real turnout figures would be at five per cent higher." Within India, the state that regularly tops the charts of voter turnouts might well seem a surprise: it is the small, tribal upland state of Nagaland, perched against the Indo-Myanmar border.

> Why...do Naga men and women cast their votes in such large numbers? Why are they so enthusiastic about Lok Sabha elections? The answers: they don't and they really aren't.

Focusing here on Lok Sabha elections, Nagaland outperforms all other Indian states in terms of voter turnouts. It certainly did so during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when a massive 87.91% voter turnout was reported from the state. The figure is astounding. The turnout for the recent Lok Sabha election, conducted on 11 April in the state, was again characteristically high. A first estimation, drawn up immediately after the closing of the polls, pitched the voter turnout at 78%. The Nagaland Chief Election Officer, however, quickly added: "We expect the percentage to increase" (cited in *Nagaland Post* 2019). And rise it did. A few days later, the Election Commission finalised the voter turnout at 83.09%. Compare this, for instance, to the current sub-totals (sub-totals as the multi-phased election is still in progress at the time of writing) reported from Telangana, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh which are 62.53%, 58.65%, and 62.84% respectively. The gap is yawning. Nagaland's consistently high voter turnouts have not gone unnoticed and over the past years national newspapers and political analysts have heaped lavish praise on Naga's electoral fervour, or interpreted the voter turnout as definite evidence that Nagas have finally foregone their long lingering demand for self-determination and have now fully committed themselves to the idea of India and its democratic process. Such readings of Nagaland voter turnouts are deceptive, however. Why, then, do Naga men and women cast their votes in such large numbers? Why are they so enthusiastic about Lok Sabha elections? The answers: they don't and they really aren't.

In what follows, we first explain why Lok Sabha elections matter little to most in Nagaland (as opposed to state elections, but that's a story for another day). We then offer a few explanations for Nagaland's nevertheless high voter turnout.

A Seat of Little Consequence

To begin with, Nagaland possesses a lone seat in the Lok Sabha, an arrangement which is perhaps justified in view of the state's comparatively small size and population but simultaneously one that feeds a widespread local conviction that any Nagaland member of Parliament has little power and influence in Delhi. "There are 545 members in Parliament, what can one member from Nagaland possibly accomplish?" is a sentiment voiced widely across the state. Relatedly, most Naga citizens are sceptical about the ability of a single Naga MP, and correspondingly a single Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS), to bring development and progress to the state, except perhaps-in the good old fashion of patronage and partiality-to the MP's own tribe, village and clan. The perception that the Nagaland MP takes little initiative in Delhi, or perhaps is discouraged and disempowered from

making his mark in Parliament, is substantiated by data provided by PRS Legislative Research. The last three MPs from Nagaland, about whom we could obtain data, moved a sum total of zero private bills, asked less than 10% of questions compared to the national average, and participated in an equally low number of debates. Clearly, the "Nagaland voice" becomes muffled inside of Parliament.

Perhaps one reason explaining the apparent low political intensity of the Nagaland MP, at least so formally and on the floor of Parliament, is that any Nagaland MP must surrender his party identity and ideology as soon as he arrives in Delhi. At the level of national politics, the party that represents Nagaland's Lok Sabha seat often (though not always) feels hard-pressed to align itself with the national ruling party or alliance, even if, within Nagaland that party may be their prime political opponent. If this would seem a perversion of party principle and ideology, it is nevertheless part of a longstanding and pervasive trend in which the ruling party in Nagaland almost routinely offers its support to the national ruling party. That party ideology in any case does not appear to be a decisive consideration in Naga inhabited areas also reveals itself in the Naga People's Front being in the opposition against the ruling coalition, which includes the BJP in Nagaland, but is part of the BJP-led ruling coalition in Manipur.

The reason for the apparent absence of a clear party ideology and line during Lok Sabha elections can, in important parts, be located in the makeup and workings of Indian federalism in North East India, and the routine politicisation of state-centre relations. As a small state with limited revenues of its own, Nagaland depends heavily on central funds, as well as on the occasional special financial package. Enacted in 1963 as an envisaged (but failed) political compromise to the Naga struggle for the right to self-determination, Nagaland was created out of political necessity, and this political imperative surpassed economic and fiscal considerations. Right from the beginning, Nagaland was "not economically viable" (Jamir 2002: 4). Consequently, the relationship between Nagaland and the central government is one of extreme dependency, and there exists a clear local conviction that fiscal and economic support from the centre, so essential to the survival and functioning of Nagaland, may well diminish were the Nagaland MP to take up a role in the opposition within Parliament. Dolly Kikon (2005: 2835), therefore, sees the position of Nagaland within the pan-Indian dispensation as exposing "cleavages and strains within state-centre relations." She observes thus: "even solemn affairs as electoral alliances and political ideologies are undermined or determined by an omnipresent need to continue with the economic packages extended from the centre to the states."

If the seemingly negligible influence of the Nagaland MP and the institutional and political quelling of party-ideology are two factors that disillusion most in Nagaland about the relevance of the Lok Sabha election, another contributing factor is Nagas' complicated relationship with the Indian democratic process. From the 1950s onward, the Naga National Council (NNC) and later the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), in its now different factions, resisted and rebelled their enclosure into postcolonial India. As part of their struggle, independent India's first two general elections (1952 and 1957) were boycotted locally. While after the enactment of Nagaland state elections became regular, Naga underground groups continued to boycott them formally-even if not always in practice (Wouters 2018a: 243-248)-as "Indian elections imposed on Naga soil."

What, in short, sets democratic institutions and elections in Nagaland apart from those in most of India is that the democratic process always coexisted with the politics and violence of insurgency and counterinsurgency, including the enactment of draconian laws such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) that are deemed deeply undemocratic (Kikon 2009) and turned Nagas from citizens into subjects, and later, from 1997 onward, with a volatile ceasefire.

While we will not be able to detail the intricacies and complexities of the Naga struggle, and the Indian state's response to it, here, it needs pointing out that Nagas long experienced the coercive, repressive arms of the Indian state, its prerogative to arbitrate over life and death, and that this resulted in experiences of state violence and of widespread misery, suffering and loss. While much has changed in recent years, these experiences-at once embodied and emplaced-continue to nourish a sense of alienation and ambivalence towards the centre, as well as suspicion of its self-proclaimed role as a benevolent provider and protector of all its citizens. Among other corollaries of the conflict, such past experiences reveal themselves in a distinct sense, among not a few Nagas that central politics, or "Delhi politics" as it is often called locally, is not meant "for them."

Jointly, the above factors culminate in a marked disinterest in Lok Sabha elections locally. In this the recent Lok Sabha election was no different and enthused very few. Let us presently return to what now appears as a paradox, one that was succinctly summed up by *The Nagaland Post* (2019): "Despite low physical voter turnout, the overall percentage was reportedly high."

The Cultural and Material Politics of Proxy-Voting

The obvious answer to Nagaland's astoundingly high voter turnout is the widespread casting of proxy-votes, or a general perversion of the elevated democratic principle of "one person, one vote" with non-voters, the dead, migrated, and non-existent being "voted for." This observation, however, begs more questions than it offers a clear-cut answer. For one, why would voting patterns and behaviour in Nagaland be more susceptible to proxy-voting compared to other states? Put differently, why has the principle of autonomous political deliberation and individual balloting apparently not made significant inroads in Nagaland's democratic process? To be sure, this cannot be understood as a "small state phenomena." Compare Nagaland, for instance, with Mizoram where the voting turnout for the recent Lok Sabha election was 63.06% or to the equally small state of Meghalaya with 71.32% voter turnout.

> [V]illage (or clan) councils often advertise their collective voting decisions in Nagaland dailies well prior to election day

The Nagaland voter turnout, interestingly, does compare with the neighbouring Outer Manipur seat, whose electorate, hardly coincidentally, is preponderated numerically by Nagas (although several other communities also reside there in significant numbers, and where 84.21% of votes were polled. Is proxy-voting then a distinctively Naga adaptation of the electoral process? While this would seem an overtly strong assertion to pursue, we nevertheless pose that there are a number of particularistic factors that are explanatory, or at least enabling, of widespread proxy-voting amongst Nagas.

It has been widely observed, to start with, that the unit of voting among Nagas is seldom the autonomous individual but variously the family, clan or village, and that the roots of this particularistic voting pattern must be sought in the complex intermingling of contemporary electoral politics and the logic and workings of traditional Naga village polities (Wouters 2014). Such patterns of voting, importantly, are not considered aberrations locally, but are mediated and endorsed by locally powerful village councils (emboldened in their strength and jurisdiction by a special Constitutional amendment), which regularly and through decrees substitute individual voting for the casting of "collective votes," and often intimate presiding polling officers (who are usually fellow-Nagas) of this decision on the eve of polling day. Despite their training in "free and fair elections," and in view of the authority of village councils, these officers have little option but to accept the particular modality of casting votes endorsed by these councils, even if this upturns core modern democratic and electoral practices and values. There is no secrecy about this as village (or clan) councils often advertise their collective voting decisions in Nagaland dailies well prior to election day (especially during state elections). On polling day, consequently, even a cursory observation at polling booths reveals that most voters carry not one but several voting slips s with them; hence the short queues everywhere but the nevertheless high voter turnout reported during the recent Lok Sabha election.

In this casting of "collective votes" women are often conspicuously absent, especially in rural Nagaland. This can be read as a lingering remnant, and forceful remapping, of the traditional and undoubtedly patriarchal set-up in which Naga women were generally side lined in the political and public domains, which were and remain strongly masculinist in their form and functioning. Naga women's continued marginal position in contemporary democratic politics is there for everyone to see and analyse: while one Naga female politician was elected as MP in the 1970s, Nagaland otherwise has the dubious distinction of being the only Indian state that has never elected a women to its legislative assembly. To be sure: the votes of Naga women do not go wasted. They are cast in large numbers, just often not by Naga women themselves but as proxies by their husbands, fathers, clan elders or council-members.

Community over the Individual

However, rather than seeing this procedural adaptation of elections by substituting individual voting for collective balloting as evidence of perverse and dissolute politics plain and simple, Nagas' voting behaviour must also be evaluated in the light of a profound culturalist critique of party-based and competitive elections, especially in its contemporary liberal sense that idealises individual autonomy and choice, equal voting rights, and rightful self-expression. These values, often mistaken to be culturally neutral, run counter to the form and substance of Naga home-grown political theory and praxis. This argument has been worked out with ethnographic and historical detail elsewhere (Wouters 2018b); here we present it only in the briefest of summations. Both then and now, Naga society is structured strongly around the prototypical Naga "village republic," and which, in its political ethos and workings, privileges the protection and welfare of the clan and village community over more idiosyncratic, individual interests and desires. Besides this culturalist emphasis on the communitarian and political commensality of village life, the Naga village polity was also averse to seeing all villagers in a socially sanitised frame of sameness and equality, the way liberal democracy promotes. It was instead cognizant of kinship hierarchies and differential levels of merit and wisdom villages accumulated over their lifetime (note: not ascribed, but achieved), and which made some villagers, elders in particular, appear better placed, more mature and wiser, to adjudicate political matters. To be sure, everyone in

the village was allowed to speak and contribute to political deliberations. However, the voices of the village elders and meritorious generally preponderated over those of the village young and immature, whose naiveties had to be kept in check, and, alas, women.

While Naga village polities were vastly heterogeneous in their political structures and sentiments, public deliberation and consensus-making was a widely followed practice and principle. The family, lineage, clan and ultimately the village community aimed, and was expected, to speak in a single voice, ever based on the conviction that the village was, in its final evaluation, a reciprocal community with shared ends and concerns. Among the Chakhesang Naga, and in the Chokri language, this principle is referred to as *müthidzü* or *müthikülü*, which translates as "the community's voice" or "the community's thought." Or as a former Nagaland Chief Minister elucidated: "The collective life took precedence over the individual" (Sema 1986: 10). Such kinship and social hierarchies, and a preference of consensus-making over individual and autonomous deliberation, even if increasingly challenged today, have far from disappeared, but remapped themselves unto the modern political arena, including the contentious field of elections.

> [T]he practice of "proxy-voting," in which many more votes are cast than individuals queuing up before polling booths, is not just an electoral malpractice, but also indicative of the cultural agency and creativity of Naga villagers to adjust the modern democratic process to their own lifeworlds

One way of interpreting the widespread substitution of individual voting with "collective voting," or indeed "proxy-voting," then, is to read this as a partial remapping of the values and workings of traditional village polities in which the village "thought" or "voice" took precedence over the whims and wishes of purportedly autonomous individuals. Put otherwise, the practice of "proxy-voting," in which many more votes are cast than individuals queuing up before polling booths, is not just an electoral malpractice, but also indicative of the cultural agency and creativity of Naga villagers to adjust the modern democratic process to their own lifeworlds and uses.

But even as there are clear cultural antecedents for present-day proxy-voting, among Nagas the "cultural" and the "material" are everywhere closely entangled. Akin to many of their counterparts in the so-called "mainland," Nagaland politicians are known-and expected locally-to privilege "their own" in the allocation of government jobs and state resources, and have acquired themselves a long track-record of privileging their supporters, especially if they belong to the same clan, village and tribe (usually in that order of priority) in the dispensing of state resources. On part of Naga electors, this makes it beneficial for a village to act as a single "voting unit," as this would give them the leverage to articulate material claims on their democratic representative, and particularly to see one among their own to capture the constituency. This political logic is particularly pervasive during state elections. During Lok Sabha elections this political logic takes on a somewhat different dynamic. In very many cases, it is the local MLA who "advises" village councils to secure votes for his party's candidate in large numbers, and there is a clear *perception* that a village council failing to accomplish this may fall out of favour with the MLA, and so at the cost of development funds and other state benefits that are channelled to the village. Village Councils, thence, often feel obliged to secure a high voter-turnout and may readily resort to proxy-voting to achieve this.

Yet another-and crucial-factor that contributes to Nagaland's high voter turnout is the existence of vastly inflated village electoral lists, despite recent efforts by the Nagaland Government to verify thesm. To understand why this should be so, we also need to first take a step back. In the past, the strength and sway of a Naga village was derived from the might and bravery of its warriors, and inter-village conflicts and raids were a marked feature of the political landscape. In the modern era, a village's political status and sway is no longer measured by the strength of its warriors, but by the numerical strength of its electoral list with those villages preponderating numerically on the electoral list within their constituency assuming central stage during election seasons. In this competition over electoral lists, the adding of "extra votes" has long been a prime method (Wouters 2015).

> More than a contest over party ideologies and principles, or over well-defined political issues, the Lok Sabha election in Nagaland, then, is a politics of proxy-votes

Relatedly, and at the level not of village but tribe, Ankush Agrawal and Vikas Kumar (2013) have convincingly linked the locally inflated electoral rolls to the pervasive inter-tribal competition that exists in Nagaland. Among other things, this inter-tribal competition resulted in Nagaland's notoriously skewed population censuses. Especially the 2001 census, which showed a superficial increase of the population by 64%, they argue, resulted from Naga tribes deliberately exaggerating their population numbers in view of an impending (but later postponed) delimitation of electoral seats, which are demarcated based on demographic figures. As different Naga tribes sought to protect and enlarge the numbers of electoral seats in their "possession" numbers were manufactured and made-up, resulting

not only in a superficial increase of Nagaland's population but also in large numbers of "extra" votes during elections, votes which do not have an owner by whose casting becomes the prerogative of clan and village councils. Here again, Nagaland's vastly inflated electoral rolls are not just evidence of straightforward electoral malpractice, but must *also* be understood in the particularistic historical and sociopolitical set-up of Naga society.

More than a contest over party ideologies and principles, or over well-defined political issues, the Lok Sabha election in Nagaland, then, is a politics of proxy-votes, the practice of which, we have argued, cannot be easily reduced to a dissolute politics but takes on a logic of its own, one that has historical, cultural and material imperatives. What is nevertheless hardly surprising in this system is that Nagaland's Lok Sabha seat is habitually won by the state's ruling party, which because of its privileged access to state resources has a clear edge in the competition over proxy-votes.

Winds of Change?

Traditions and political cultures are of course ever in flux rather than static or bounded entities, and the politics of proxy-voting that presently determines the form and outcome of the Lok Sabha election in Nagaland may not necessarily be the politics of the future. Signs of change are perceptible, especially amongst younger generations and in the urban centres of Kohima and Dimapur, where there is increasing talk about political and economic issues that involve Nagaland's relationship with the centre. Among such issues, during the recent election, was the contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Bill that many Nagas fear will confer citizenship on illegal migrants, thus threatening the protection and status of those who are indigenous to the state.

> [T]he new generation of voters...increasingly insist on casting their individual ballots

Gradually-and not without setbacks-the longstanding campaign of the influential Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) for clean elections, including the adage of "one person, one vote" is also finding its way into the interstices of Nagaland politics, again mostly amongst the new generation of voters who increasingly insist on casting their individual ballots and react with anger and frustration when they turn up at polling booths only to find that they have already been "voted for."

Technological advances such as CCTV cameras being installed inside selected polling booths, and decisive action taken by the Election Commission against proxy-voting may further lead to an alteration in current voting patterns and behaviour. During the recent Lok Sabha election, for instance, re-polling was ordered in a particular polling booth after unambiguous and video-recorded evidence of proxy-voting.

If the above winds of change unfold further, one thing seems quite certain: Nagaland voter turnouts during Lok Sabha elections will drop drastically as Nagas' marked disinterest in the general election, and for which they have good reason, will then correspond to a voter turnout that might well see Nagaland drop from the top of the voter turnout chart to a position towards the very bottom.

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