# 4. The Subaltern as a Political ‘Voyeur’?

But it also explained that the place in which they found themselves prevented from understanding this law of domination: they were dominated because they did not understand, and they did not understand because they were dominated. Which meant that all the efforts they made to struggle against domination were themselves blind, trapped by the dominant ideology, and that only scientist able to perceive the logic of this circle could put them out of their subjection.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## The Rally: Politics at the Crossroads

It is a fine February evening, in more than one ways. I am at the intersection, yet again. But not a researcher, not awaiting someone to come and accompany me into the slums. There is no scheduled interview. I am not a researcher in and at the moment. I am wading along with the jubilant, intense, some inebriated crowds to celebrate the sweeping, historic[[2]](#footnote-2) victory for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for the 6th Delhi legislative assembly elections. I share the chorus and chants for the party's victory, and rejoice in the announcements by the residents of the slums of Govindpuri that ‘this is ***our*** victory’, ‘it is **our** *sarkar* [government]’, and ‘now it **our** responsibility to ensure that the government functions properly’.

The intersection cuts across the Navjeevan and Bhumhiheen camps, on either side, and meets with the road leading into its posher-distant-cousins of settlements, Alaknanda, Chittranjan Park and further into the Greater Kailash territory. Alongside the road, on whose either side’s slumming spreads out on to it, also are a few middle-class apartment blocks, Kohinoor and Konark. This road encircles the Navjeevan and Nehru camps. A trip down this road is for many – uninitiated, apprehensive and vicariously inclined – the most intimate they get with the slums. Lacking open spaces within the slums, the encircling road becomes the arena for the residents of these slums: here, the children come out to play, wares are sold, people hang about, and markets spread out. This blatant, unapologetic slumming evokes diverse reactions from the middle-class neighbours.

A lady, residents of Kohinoor apartment and a professor of political science in a women’s college in Delhi, articulated it thus:

I moved into these apartments 20 years back, the price was affordable because of there were these slums. But we were assured that they will be soon relocated. I am all for the dignity of the poor, and they should get proper houses, but does it have to be here? Never in my entire stay here have I walked this road [leading to the intersection, passing along the slums]. And in the last few years what with the air-conditioning in the car, I don’t even have to roll down the windows. That such a relief.

When further asked had she ever been into slums and how did she reckon the residents their lived like, ‘hell no, I have never been inside. And I bet they live packed sardines’. Another residents of the Konark apartments, also a petitioner in the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) which sought to remove the slums, whilst maintaining that the presence of the slums accounted for the nuisance levels (including the embarrassment it caused to the middle-class residents) admitted that, ‘the presence of the slums, and its people on the roads, lends to the vibrancy in this area and also makes it cheaper for us to live here’.

The intersection then is an important landmark for both the residents of the slums and its visitors. During my initial research days, when I still was not acquainted with the geography of the inner-lanes in the camps and moved into these spaces with certain apprehension, it was here at the intersection – *maachi market waali red light [*red light outside the fish market] *–* that I was met with by the residents. In that, the intersection and the road leading into the slums are the main arterial link with the world of slums and slumming for those variously interested: research, activism and politics.

During the time of the elections – Municipal, State, Centre – the road assumes a renewed importance. The politicians keen to seek the voter support base of the slums without really slumming it out – venturing into the lanes of slums – to reach out to the residents. The park, adjoining the communal toilets on the Bhumhiheen camp side of the road and Konark apartment block, becomes the congregation grounds during the times of election. And thus it was not a surprise the victory rally for Avaatar Singh rode along this road.

I begin with this event to enliven the vibrant, dense and contested political landscapes the urban poor inhabit. Here, to celebrate AAP’s historic victory or undertaking a catharsis of this event as a metaphor is not the intent. The centre-stage is the marginalized space of the slums in the city, and the attention steadfastly remains on the urban poor – here, resident of the Govindpuri slums as representative of that constituency. The poor as an electoral constituency remain an enigma for most political parties, commentators and pundits during elections at any jurisdictional level – national, state, municipal: why do the poor cast their vote? And what determines their allegiance? Patronage? The ‘freebies’? The communal evocations? The caste rhetoric?

The literature, as well as non-poor commonsensical reckoning, abound with interjections, inquisitions and ‘explanations’ towards this end: why do the poor vote? However poignant and penetrating these analyses there is not an absolute answer to this question, and each election result compels a new set of questions and interjections. And thus how could not I, as an ethnographer and interlocutor of the lives on the margins for more than a decade, not feel arrogant enough to undertake the task, to once and for, answer the overwhelming question, why do the poor vote?

## The Ethnographer at the Crossroads: Interrogating the Politics of the Subaltern

Politics is omnipresent, and as an atheist, it is in the realm of the political, first and foremost and fundamentally, that I locate the consolidation of one's position within the broader, intersecting matrices of social, cultural, religious, amongst others. However as an ethnographer in/of marginalised spaces, in the initial years of my forays in GP, I found myself hesitant to openly discuss the politics. Indeed: the focus of the research being undertaken then did not foreground the political lives of the poor. However, I saw politics of caste, communal, regional and gendered strategically negotiated and performed within material realities of the slums, and in turn also lending to give its particular characteristic. But also, that these very lens informed the negotiations (and relationships) of the slum-dwellers with the middle-class residents and spaces which are, more often than not, predicated on the former being allowed to occupy only a subservient position. And thus in encounters as such, complex and complicated trajectories were revealed through which the political self – manifest in one’s caste, communal, gender, regional identities – were calibrated, emphasized, negotiated and/or subverted.

Baby has been working in an upper-caste, Tamilian household for the last twenty years as a domestic worker. When she first went to seek the job, she was mistakenfor a Hindu widow, given the fact that her body was not marked by the symbolisms which establish the marital status within the Hindu cosmos; namely, absence of a *mangalsutra, bindi* and bangles. Her employer, a chaste, upper-caste woman, not only felt kindly towards Baby, but also hired her at a rate higher than the going one at that time. During the last twenty years, the family has looked after Baby and her extended family with some consideration, often paying when health and education needs in the family demanded investment.

Baby has immense respect for the family. In recounting the chastity of the household, she talks with certain reverence about their highly meticulous abstemious practices, especially, in regards to food. They don’t eat garlic, onions, definitely no meat of any kind. Considering Baby cooks for them as well, they are convinced she shares their food-beliefs. Often at this moment of telling, she cannot help being naughty to wonder aloud, ‘how the hell did these people with so much money, intelligence and education, just could not figure it out all these years’. Baby’s real name is Chandbibi, who in the neighbourhood is known for her delicious buffalo-meat kebabs.

Saroj, of whom I shall speak at length later, was a formidable politician in Navjeevan camp. She hailed from a lower-caste village in Uttar Pradesh, but since her early teens had been a resident of Delhi. One hot, summer afternoon I was visiting her house. We sat on the *charpoy* in the lane, outside her *jhuggi.[[3]](#footnote-3)* Through the open door I could see a house sparsely and cleanly organised, the shades were drawn and from where I was in the heat, the coolness of it was very enticing. But no such invitation was extended, and thus we sat outside, smoking (she, *beedi* and I, rollies; and often sharing each other’s).*[[4]](#footnote-4)*An hour or so into the conversation I asked for water, the throat was parched, the heat overwhelming, I was losing focus. Saroj sent out orders, and I expected a cool tumbler of water to appear in matters of seconds, after all the open door and the fridge I could see were only a few meters away. But the wait continued, and so did my desperation. About 15 minutes later, one of her young sons hurried back with the 2-litre bottle of Coke and a couple of plastic glasses. They were filled, and I was offered one. I refused, ‘I don’t drink Coke, and I really, really do want water, can I please just have some?’. In my breaking voice, the desperation was evident.

Another nod from Saroj, and this time the water did materialise in matter of seconds. As I was guzzling the cool water, Saroj remarked, with a slight amusement in her voice, ‘but people like you, even in the slums, don’t drink water or eat at our place’. The upper-caste inscription which my body carries and hard as I try, I cannot scrub it off, and surely never announce, had led to the anxiousness which it was reckoned the ultimate metonym of capitalist-consumerist celebration, a Coke, could resolve. There are more than many such encounters and instances wherein gender, caste, communal, regional distances and differences are maintained: people of different caste will not drink or eat in other’s houses; sometimes they will not enter into each other's houses, having the entire social interactions at the doorsteps for years, and certain lanes are avoided on account of certain kinds of people living in those camps in the slums.

The practices in the immediate, intimate realm, whether be of culinary preferences and prejudices; the nostalgic continuation of regional traditions, even if the region (the village) had not been visited in their living histories; the peculiar sense of fashion, which both determines the shades of decency but also ‘daring’ (as it is articulated especially by the youth to challenge the traditional norms); the shifts in notion of leisure and utilization of time, and the anxieties about it among other sections in GP, are not merely a manifestation of the interiority of cultural identities being produced and performed in public. But, I insist, that in these everyday, ‘banal’, *apolitical* activities, the political selves of the residents of GP is foregrounded – inadvertently, unwittingly, and also not without a certain deliberation – and is at once a response to the material realities of being a slum-dweller, but also the broader dialectical relationships within which these are produced.

And thus to return to my own position as an ethnographer, even though aware of these complexities, I found myself unable to take the bull by its horns, so to say, to ask the residents of GP, what is your political position? What informs it? Who do you vote for? What does casting a vote mean? What sense of entitlements, rights do you expect from the government you voted in? How do you respond when the candidates, parties you voted in do not respond to your needs? And in setting these specific questions as the only ones resolving the overwhelming question (oh, why do the poor vote?) I was committing a double whammy of a research (and by extension intellectual and political) faux pas in absenting from the banal, apolitical, everyday practices of the residents of GP their political selves.

Whilst it is tempting to attribute naiveté, lack of experience to this blind spot in discussing with the residents of GP their political selves and ecologies during the initial research period, the personal hesitation and unease to discuss these concerns with the slum-dwellers (as a middle-class, educated, upper-caste individual) is in fact representative of the broader and fundamental anxiety to engage with the marginalised, the identified others. In this essay, it is the othersin their political presences and performances that hold the centre-stage.

## But, Why Should We *Not* Vote?

Between late 2012 and early 2013, following up to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) elections, I focused on the manner in which residents of GP were mobilized by different parties and the role of local leaders within the slums. As a researcher, I was more confident and confrontational in my research agendas and questions than my initial forays into GP.

Amidst the intricate, incestuous and maze-like lanes of GP, the summer afternoons are like an older relative having a nap, around whom the children uncontainable enthusiasm have to tip-toe, lest they wake them and invite their wrath. The winter afternoons, on the contrary, are like a never-ending blanket that is being woven by the old and young alike, spread out on the terraces, squat in precious corners where the sun has not died, collectively adding to its warmth. The winter of 2012 was no different, except along with the tales and talks of the everyday, the know-how about the neighbours, and what was happening in another’s house, the afternoons were enlivened by the announcements by representatives of different political parties contesting the MCD elections; meetings to ‘get-to-know’ the candidate; and the speculative conversations about each candidate’s politics and their proposed agendas.

As researcher, with a very precise focus to resolve the identified question, the matter of the different political parties, their histories, the profile of the respective candidates, the presence in the slums and their past achievements and interventions in the slums was not a concern. But the conversations in GP were replete with these discussions, more specifically targeted towards a character appraisal of the candidates from different parties. The matter of their personal fortune; their businesses; love affairs; benevolence; corruption; the arm-strength each candidate could yield via the *goons* in each of the camps, among many other facets, were discussed to threadbare repetitions. From my *then* naive position of reckoning that the political of the poor is a distinct, separate entity – almost as an astral form floating over and above - from the *banality* of the everyday, I found these conversations tiring. But I persisted, perhaps awaiting a fate like Ali Baba’s to chance upon the magic words, *open sesame,* to enter into this astral political realm, where ideologies, revolutions, utopia would be discussed, aspired and designed towards. I started to suspect everyone of Morgiana’s deftness and cunning to keep me out.

One of the most common refrains, after a candidate had been reproached for an action or other, or indeed praised for a redeeming act, was that after the reverie of the elections, the meetings, the rallies, the fascination of freebies and the grand promises into the future were over, and one or the other candidate had won, the jhuggi-walahswill be left to their fate, to fend for themselves and nothing was going to change. This sentiment was particularly exaggerated one afternoon in Baby’s lane.

When the candidate for whom Baby had been appointed to organise a ‘meet and greet’ gathering did not turn up, instead sending his deputy laden with samosas and ladoosfor the attending women, the disappointment and resentment was particularly severe.[[5]](#footnote-5) Baby’s sister-in-law, and her neighbour, have a fraught relationship. Their loud recriminations of every aspect and each member of other’s lives are commonplace, followed with much interest by the neighbours for its abusive, obscene and often simply jocular affects. Since the campaigning for the elections had started, and Baby had agreed to be an agent for the candidate in question, Baby and her sister-in-law’s relationship had taken a turn for the worse. Baby did not leave any opportunity to exhibit and perform her newly acquired importance as an agent, proximity to the candidate and lending a suggestive air about herself that she indeed was in the know-how of what ensues in the inner circles. And thus when the much deliberated event was a no-show, and Baby publicly shamed, how could the sister-in-law miss the opportunity to rub salt into the wounds?

The sister-in-law is a garrulous woman of bulbous proportions. When she is present, she does not only defiantly occupy the space, she indeed becomes the space. Considering not only Baby, personally, but the jhuggi-walllahs*,* collectively, had been humiliated by the candidate’s no-show, the sister-in-law could not hurl a direct assault at Baby, instead in the manner of the ‘voice, the great deep cry of [the] Fog Horn shuddering through the rags of mist’, pronounced, her heaving, heavy breasts sans the *dupatta* punctuating her performance, ‘we have to cast our vote, irrespective of the fact that nothing ever happens. Our fate is worse than that of the whores. We will have to fuck someone, someone will fuck us, whether we get anything or not. Well, let’s vote for Baby’s candidate this time, after all she is one of ours’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

An otherwise unapologetic woman, Baby had shrunk becoming the corner she was leaning against. Baby was my introduction to this lane in Navjeevan camp, and I had shared her enthusiasm in getting things in order for the now no-show ‘meet and greet’ (if only to understand the intricate workings of political mobilization in the slums). I realised that in such a pronouncement irrespective of whether the said candidate won or lost, it would be reckoned Baby’s responsibility for ‘nothing happening’ for the next five years and for its residents to have been yet again *fucked over.*

I intervened, and with a certain sense of permission that I could. The strict researcher-researched, self-other boundaries were already blurring. I put out the overwhelming question*,* in almost a manner of reproach to those present for *ganging up* on baby, which I had been yet been waiting to ask at the opportune moment (perhaps when I had in fact chanced upon the *political* of the poor), ‘so, why do you vote then?’.

The question drew exclusively attention to me, and a momentary stern silence was followed by a collective question (Baby had immediately shifted sides as well) in the manner spoken to the child who had missed the basics of multiplication: ‘But, why should we *not* vote?’

‘Well’, I continued, sensing that I finally have to tell the others what they don’t know*, ‘*all of you keep on insisting that nothing happens, that the politicians just use you for the vote, they treat you nicely only during the elections, and after that no development takes places, and things don’t change, then why do you vote?’. The conversation, now almost combative continued, ‘but still what has nothing happening, no improvement, corrupt politicians have to do with why we should not vote?’.

## The Theatre of the Political and the Subaltern as Unrealised Characters

Both Baby’s sister-in-law’s pronouncement, and the following assertion about casting the vote among the residents of GP, set in motion an intellectual paralysis and stasis. As if all this time, my engagement with the poor had been the Rorschach test being read upside down. Of course, why ought not the poor vote? And when they in fact do, why ought their choices be put under threadbare examination in regards to their motivations, awareness and engagement with not only the democratic ideas but also the working of the systems and processes? In the analyses to address the overwhelming question – why do the poor vote - the underlying sentiment is that the unique vibrancy of the Indian democratic system (though what makes it unique in fundamental, foundational ways is never really spelled out) and the society’s inherent pluralistic and accommodative character extends *hope* to the poor, even though their predicament remains more or less unchanged.

The rationale for the poor’s presence, unrelenting participation and performance identifies and emotional core responding to the hope candidate, the party’s rhetoric and theatrical rallies can evoke. On the other hand, the tendency of the non-poor not to vote, especially at the most local jurisdictional level of Municipal elections, is accorded to an informeddecision premised on disconnect, apathy and dismay with the democratic and political systems, processes and their functioning. Of course, I am presenting a rather simplistic condensation of these analyses, poignant and pertinent in their significant ways. And the intent is not to either critique or contribute to these discussions.

The seemingly straightforward question, ‘So, why do you vote then?’*,* were the magic words to open and enter the astral realm of political of the poor I had been desperately seeking for. The question of why, how, whom and towards what end the poor vote for were all at once rendered inconsequential if they were not teased out, approached and explored within the ‘particular conception of the world[[7]](#footnote-7)’ the slum-dwellers, the poor, those on the margins, inhabit.

The ‘particular conception of world’ the poor, subaltern, marginalised have, lending them their peculiarity, is not a symptom of their poverty, marginalisation and subalternity. Instead, poverty itself is the conditionof concrete historical, geographical social, political processes, grounded in the broader material realities and dialectical relationships. In order to engage with the political (here, with the intent to understand why and how the poor vote)of the poor, or for that matter any facet of their lives which cannot simply be viewed in isolation, these processes, their historicity – however contemporary – must be foregrounded to insist on the vulnerability, precarity and unliviability as these are the axis along with which the bodies of the poor in their corporeality and their presences in dispersed abstractions (political, cultural, social) exist.

Without such an undertaking, the subaltern, the poor, the marginalised (of each and every order, category and constant calibration) shall be stuck sharing the fate of Pirandello’s unrealised characters.[[8]](#footnote-8) And thus I abandoned the project of once and for all neatly resolving the overwhelming question*,* but I also did not assume the role of the elusive author who would finally allow the subaltern as *characters* to realise themselves. In short, I became one of the unrealised characters, whose predicament and politics was not determined by the *condition* of poverty, but was nevertheless in search of a narrative (and author) which could allow for an ethical cohabitation with the subalterns, the poor, and those on the margins.

## Enter the Booth: Politics without the Politics

By late December, 2012, I extensively and intimately started following the everyday of two women leaders, both affiliated with the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Saroj and Saiddya. The two of them made an unlikely pair. Saroj, who passed away in 2014, was a wiry, *beedi*-smoking, lower-caste woman. Saiddya hails from a middle-caste, Muslim family. As flamboyant as Saroj was, uninhibited in making her presence felt and claiming the space, Saiddya presents herself with a demure but definite sense of self. The pair of them piqued my interest as both of them representatives of their constituencies – lower-caste Hindu and Middle-caste Muslim, respectively – are traditionally reckoned to face the wrath (the intent of a discipling agenda) of the right-wing Rashtriya Swamay Sevak (RSS) backed, BJP rhetoric.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the task assigned to mobilise women to vote for BJP in the upcoming elections, and as I followed them, there were no speeches, pamphlets to be distributed, either an excited celebration of BJP’s candidate for councilour from the area or a hectic criticism of the opposing candidates. The matters that dealt with were everyday and commonplace. The difficulties, roadblocks, the families – either visiting or who were paid a visit - were encountering whilst dealing with the different state agencies, hospitals, police, legal matters, as also domestic disputes and the manner in which Saroj and Saiddya’s interventions (owing to their proximity to the candidate) mitigated these issues.

Of the two Saiddya was the more restraint and demure one; as Saroj would jocularly comment, ‘of the two us she is the respectable one, that is why she goes to the schools and hospitals, I am the bloody loudmouth that is why I have to deal with the goons, sister-fucker of men who beat up their wives and the cops’.

And indeed Saroj, weighing less 50 Kgs, held her might with aplomb. It was spending afternoons with her that I had my lessons which refined and sophisticated my engagement with the politics of the subaltern. She would command – everything she did, even a smile, gravitas of a command – space, respect and attention, and indeed got it. And I felt highly privileged to be taken under her patronage. After wandering about the lanes, a *charpoy* would be summoned, almost blocking the passage (but who could dare to complain), Saroj would spread her meagre self on it and I would be the only one allowed to sit on it next to her. The first time two glasses, filled to the brim with undiluted, dark rum, were served to Saroj and I in the afternoon, I was slightly taken aback and my hesitation was very evident. After the initial performance of chastity, I used to smoke openly, and share drinks with friends in GP, but before this had never done publicly.

In her classic style, Saroj slapped her thighs, and laughed, ‘listen, I know you are like me, we are just the same, I realised this the moment I saw you. You are very courageous, and you are not a cheat, but you are definitely not one those ‘nice, virtuous’ ones, so drink up’.

In re-listening to the conversations, recorded during those few months, whilst drinking rum, smoking, sharing the most intimate aspects of our lives, deliberating politics, I am at once overwhelmed with gratitude for the wealth of wisdom, lived experience and insights Saroj shared with me, and taken by a child-like fancy to click my heels and dance for her approval of me. In that, this essay is a tribute to Saroj's memory, the organic intellectual and philosopher par excellence. I learned my first practical lesson in the possibilities of ethical cohabitation, as a praxis and practice.

The conversations, long and winding, often without a specific beginning and usually with an abrupt end, were uninhibited, often confusing and combative. Whilst my debt to Saroj in my engagement with the political of the poor is surmount, the voices which guided me through were many and abounded in their multiplicities. Saroj, here, is evoked as a medium, a channel, and a mouthpiece of these voices, which all did not sing in unison, there were conflicts and tensions.

On one of these afternoons, I finally raised Saroj the question which had been bothering me since I was first introduced to Saiddya and her, ‘we know how BJP talks about the lower-castes, the Muslims (the demolition of Babri Masjid had been a topic of discussion between us), then how do the two of you reconcile to being associated with a party which is so openly anti-Muslims and so upper-caste?’

Of course, we are aware of that, but is it only BJP who is anti-Muslim and lower-caste? You tell me? Everyone is, consciously, subconsciously, if not anti-Muslim definitely thinking through jati (caste), even the Muslims. I won't even blame the upper-caste of being jaati-waadi (caste-biased), even I, the bloody bhangi (lower-caste) I am, I won't let my children marry someone lower than us in jaati. When it comes to the roj-maara ki baat (everyday practices), it does not matter, but when there are long-term consequences – like, marriages – I am not going to take the chance. I know it is wrong, I suffer it. People will sit at my feet, ask me for my help, let me sort out their lives, but they will not drink water from my house. Of course I know it is wrong, but do I have the strength, courage and will to affect change, no. Perhaps if I were rich enough, I would be more khule-dimaag ki (open-minded, liberal).

What do you mean? Should you of all the people not be standing up, fighting against everything that is wrong? What they say, about the lower-castes, the jhuggi-wallahs?

Beta (My child; even though Saroi and I were spared of only a few years in age, she commanded the space of a wizened person, and always referred to me as Beta, a term of endearment I was only glad to be showered with), what makes you think I have not been fighting my life? I had to sort out my husband, he was bloody abusive, older to me by almost 15 years and got married to me when I was about 15. Now he is hurled up in that little room, bastard scared to come out, but he beat me up. I worked in people's houses, at construction sites, I was here in the jhuggi's when it was a big, bloody swamp. What makes you think I have not been fighting my whole life?.

‘Yes, I get it, the life in the jhuggi's was difficult and you have managed so much, you command so much respect, and do much for the people, but you still are associated with the BJP. They are anti- lower-caste, women, Muslims. Why?’.

Garibi se badi koi sachai nahi hoti (There is no bigger truth than poverty). You think I will stand for anyone hurting Saiddya or any Muslim family here, of course no. That time has not come here, and I will not stand for that kind of injustice and violence against anyone. But then I also do not shy from thrashing the men (and their mothers) who harass their wives, daughter-in-laws, is that OK then? BJP is in charge of the municipality, and their people at the local level listen to me, give me izzat (respect), get my work done, get me the izzat I get here. That will do for me until the time for a decision comes. If I had the monies, if I did not have to sit at the feet of the BJP people for years like the people you see here sitting, I would have had the luxury of taking sides more clearly. Garibi bhi ek dharam hota hai, beta [Poverty becomes a religion of sorts, my child].

But what about the State elections, the general elections, what is your role in those elections? Do you still remain unaffected by what each party candidate is saying?

Dekho bhai, aisa hai, [See, this is how it is], when there are the “big” elections, then we have to go, then we do take women for rallies, they get blankets, shawls, it is a bit like a picnic. That is a different game, we [as party workers] don't have much to do with it. But when the MCD elections happen, they have to come here, when the matter of concern is “here”, where else will they hold the rally. Now bloody hell tell me, how many candidates want to roam the lanes of the slums, so we get their work done’.

During these winter afternoons in late 2012- early 2013, I found myself intensely engaged in the density of the everyday life of the slum-dwellers, especially the political. In these discussions I had anticipated an animated discussion about the recently concluded India Against Corruption[[10]](#footnote-10) (IAC) movement (April 2011-November 2012) which had led to the emergence of a new political party, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) from within the section of protesting leaders.[[11]](#footnote-11)

‘Did you organise people, especially the women, to go to Jantar Mantar[[12]](#footnote-12)*,* to take part in the protests against the whole corruption prevalent in the country?’.In asking this question, I retrospectively realise my folly to reckon that the *poor* had naturally allied to the cause; even though in my distant analyses of the movement (from Singapore) I had presented a highly critical evaluation of it in regards to the participation of the middle-classes and the framing of corruption within a cleanliness discourse.

Of course, it was everywhere, on the TV, news, and we did follow it closely. The Gandhi-jaisa aadmi (reference to Anna Hazare) was admirable, to sit there, not eating, fighting for the cause of corruption. But, firstly, none of the political parties came here to “round us” up in the buses, with promises of blankets or lunches, as is usually the case. How the hell are we supposed to go all the way, paying for the fare, missing out on the work on our own, except when we are taken? But also, samaaj mein nahin aaya ki matlab kya tha [but we did not quite understand the meaning of the whole protest]. Bilkul, ghuskori kharab hai, galat cheez hai [yes, giving bribes is a wrong thing], but you tell me, how do we survive without giving guss [bribe]? Matlab, the thula [colloquial term to refer to the cops] who asks for a 100 here and there, is he wrong? Do you know what he earns? He is one of us, we don't think of it as ghus.

Then Saroj went to explain and implicate herself in the *danda of gusskori* [the business of bribing, and thus by that extension being corrupt].

Beta, let me tell you this. There was this woman in the lane, newly married and had altercations with her husband and in-laws. She was a very feisty woman, I liked her for that, but she was also very quick of temper. I tried to talk her through, I even said, if she wants to leave the husband and her marital home, I will sort it out. But one day, god knows on what whim, she left her child out in the lane, closed the door and set herself to fire, leaving a message on her phone that her in-laws were setting her to fire. I knowthat wasn't true. I was here. The husband and the mother-in-law were away. I had to palm the investigating thulas with money to not regard phone messages, and other negotiations. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that the husband and his mother were saintly, but they did not kill the girl. At best they could be accused of harassment, but murder. That wasn't fair. And yes for the running along, pulling the strings, negotiating with the cops and lawyers and finally letting them off with a case of harassment but not murder, I charged 10,000. Of this I paid the amounts to the cops, etc., but also kept almost half as my fee. I do not see this as corruption, it is a service I am providing. The poor thulas they know everything, but have such little powers, and do you know what they earn for the work they do? I am supporting them too. What is wrong with that? How else would they got justice?

In the framing of the corruption as a social malice, the IAC movement specifically insisted on the role of the people who *give* bribes in perpetuating corruption, highlighting their immorality in this complicity. Here, then the voices intervened questioning their own participation? Is it corrupt to give money to get the child into school? To get an identity card made? What do they mean by black money*,* for us money is like magic, it disappears as soon we lay eyes on it, one of the congregating woman jocularly remarked. Of course, everyone agreed.

With the Municipal Corporation of Delhi elections only a few weeks away, I raised questions not about why they vote in abstraction, but the grounded practices of it: who they will vote for? Whose campaign seemed effective? Which candidate? In raising these questions, I was hoping to arrive at the epistemological, reflexive processes through which 'decisions' are made, and the manner in agency and structure were negotiated in a Bourdieuian sense.

The responses at the most fundamental level seemed frivolous to me: ‘we vote because we can’. That was the most common refrain, the much touted celebration of the practice of the poor voting as exercising their right was not asserted as vehemently as I had read/expected. Of course, in my naïveté then I failed to identify the capacity to act (in the action of casting a vote) in itself an event of assertion of agency. One man, a first-time voter in the coming elections, announced, ‘I will be voting for Congress’. *Who is the candidate? ‘*I don't know the candidate, the family has been voting for Congress ever since, and how can we betray the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi!’. *I don't understand,* I said. ‘Well, they are descendants of Mahatma Gandhi, Indira was his daughter’. *Well,* I interjected, *that wasn't the case. Indira Gandhi was Nehru's daughter, she was married to a man whose last name was the same as Gandhi. ‘*She was a Gandhi, right, and of Congress, *hum tho haat ko denge* [we will vote for the 'hand', the Congress party's symbol]’.

‘*Aap kisko vote dete ho?’ (w*hom do vote for?), I was under the inquisition and scrutiny of those, including Saroj, whose political motivations I had until then putting under microscopic examination. I fumbled, I was embarrassed until then (2012) I had not cast my vote in *any* of the elections in the country – General, State and Municipal. In fact, I didn't even have a voter's identification to be eligible to cast the vote. I told them as much. ‘So, you cannot vote. *Yeh tho bahut chutiyapa hai* [this is such a bummer]. Saroj mausi (an aunt – mother's sister, and as she was referred to by one and all) can get you made one, you know’. Saroj nodded, and added, ‘no charge for you’. The *act* of not casting the vote in fact cast a shadow of doubt on my politics as event, ‘*tho koi party koh support kaise karte ho?’ (*so, how do you show your support to any party?)’.

Political being the onlyterrain in and through which I negotiated my own identity, I feel ambushed. I took on to give a brief history of my political engagement with the left*,* my involvement with All India Students Association (student wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) Liberation) as student at Jawaharlal Nehru University, the commitment to the agenda of the left*,* workers revolutions, instilling revolutionary consciousness, the concerns with class struggles, against caste and communal tendencies, etc. They gave me a patient hearing, until Saroj interrupted rather irritably, ‘*Beta,* this party, whichever it is, seems the one we should be aligning with, right? They work for us, but pray tell me one thing, why haven't we heard of them before this? Why haven't any of their representatives come to us? Where are they?’.

I was silenced in humility. The ‘organic intellectual’ had made a pronouncement resounding the anxieties of Ranciere's cited earlier. And thus we returned to the act of voting – not as a metaphor, or the burdens of its memory – but as an event in an asserting agency.

Yet again, evoking Saroj as the mouthpiece, the loudspeaker, the channel, the medium, for the multitudinous and multiplicities of the *voices*,

Hum vote karte hain, koi ki kar saakte hai [We vote because we can]. A while back you were asking about people selling their votes, and even if they have committed to voting for someone, got the money, why don't they vote for someone else? Yahan pe kutch maslee hain [there are a few issues here], how many things do you think we have we can sell and ask the price we want, negotiate? Vote is a thing, which can be sold, and better still we don't lose the thing, it comes to us in another five years, at least thrice. Unlike house, jewelry we have to sell. But that does not mean, everyone sells their vote, or can simply be incited by daru [alcohol]. There is something called ethical practice of transaction, here most transactions are based on trust, and so when we do say, we will take the money and vote for you, we are honouring that trust and transaction. When we enter the booth, even though we go together in groups and usually if the party is taking us, there will be festivities, everyone is on their own. They are thinking for themselves, it could be the money they have taken, the kindness a candidate had shown, or some work they had done, or perhaps not done. You ask repeatedly, why support BJP as a Muslim? Why vote for that candidate when he has a case pending? Why not vote for the party which has said they will do something about the slum-dwellers? But, beta, when we enter the booth, anyone of us, we are not only just jhuggi-walahs, or woman, or Muslim, or bhangi (lower-caste), or garib (poor), yes, we are all of that, but in the booth, we are also absolutely alone, who is to say, eh?

A young, pretty lady, a domestic-worker by profession, an attentive audience to these conversations, one of the afternoons, amused by the fervour of the discussions, breaking the decorum of interrupting Saroj (an act which otherwise invited severe reprimand from her, had it not been for the pretty lady's youthful exuberance and infectious excitement), ‘When the voter registration comes which also has a photo, it feels really nice. Taking that slip to the booth is so much fun, and when I go in I press whichever button fancies me’.

Saroj smiled at her indulgently, and said to her, ‘*Beta*, this time, when we are going to the booth, you come with us, we will have even more fun’.

## The Subaltern as Political Voyeur

The discussions about the politics of the poor in Govindpuri in 2012-2013 highlighted the resonances of the India Against Corruption movement (IAC) of 2011 and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) 201s amongst its residents. In 2015, I also closely followed the involvement of the residents with the Delhi Legislative Assembly elections. Each of these events as they unfolded within the ecology of Govindpuri are deserving undertakings on their own, and a reading of these three political moments in conjunctions only lends to further nuanced reading (and thus revealing) of the ‘organic, political’ selves of its residents.

The imagined, projected call of a clean, corruption free India did not hold much resonance here. It was, as discussed through the narratives, not on account of the idea of corruption, and thus its absences, as incomprehensible, but the linear and collapsible identification of the corrupt with immorality, greed and to a far-fetched extent being anti-national. The fact of everyday lives of living on the margins compels negotiating with the state, its authorities and the mainstream through a network of tacit arrangements and exchanges, more often than not, humiliating and disenfranchising for the poor. Do they want to continually experience it? If they had a choice, would they still do it, were the rhetorical questions raised to be answered in the negative. Of course not. Would they not want services, goods and their rightful demands to be fulfilled without succumbing to these tactics? Of course yes. But what to do? Without these corrupt practices, left to their own devices by the State, they would perish.

In their rejection of the so-reckoned ‘second struggle for freedom’, the slum-dwellers reveal with an astute sensibility a sociological-political reality, which a lot of commentators and enthusiast of the movement sustained an amnesia about in its celebration, that corruption is a structural and systemic concern, its practices unfolding in the social realm (caste being its pivotal and obscenest manifestation) is far more detrimental than the financial exchanges. In fact, the latter relies on the former to exact and exaggerate its benefits.

In the immediate political ecology of the MCD 2013, elections, epitomised in the two women, Saidyya and Saroj, the arbiters of political agendas of the parties within the slums, reveal political sensibilities, vocabularies and capacities to negotiate the concerns of caste, gender, amongst others categories, towards a census and/or conflict. These negotiations are poignantly revealing in more ways than one: they highlight that the slums, and its residents, are not a homogenised whole, and that to achieve the desired political end an *insider* is indeed needed as the ploy of ‘empty’ promises and incentives is just not enough.

During the celebrations of the Delhi Assembly Elections results on 10 February 2015, the repeated insistence of the party's victory being theirs and the responsibility to ensure good governance shared by them with the elected members, the residents of GP at once emphasized the importance of their participation in AAP's success and claimed ongoing partnership with the state. Along with these insistences the residents reiterated that they had exercised this political mandate out of their own will, and that they had not succumbed to either incentives, coercions or considerations of identity politics (all implicated in other political rallies that I have observed) to bring to fruition the '*andolan',* movement, which AAP as a party had set out to accomplish by ensuring their sweeping victory in the Delhi elections 2015. In this political performance, the residents' revealed a highly matured and assured political self.

And here, I return to the thought with which I started the essay. And to the misplaced reckoning of the ‘scientist’, the lot of which I am often associated with and the association I vehemently oppose, that the dominated do not in fact understand the laws and logic of domination. It is a matter of deliberation to not allow the task of meaning-making of the ‘self’ to the subaltern as it then allows to obliterate the ‘self’ of the subaltern in its corporeality, only to be engaged in its abstractions. As evidenced through the narratives here, the subaltern is not only aware of the rules of the games of domination but also knows how to subvert and disrupt it, even though only slightly and, more often than not without, any substantial impact.

In fact, through the performance of political ‘naivety’ – *what do we know? What can we do? -* expected of them, the slum-dwellers demonstrate an astute awareness of the experience of poverty they are expected to perform, especially when encountering State agents, civil society workers and politicians, to accrue financial assistance, subsidies and other benefits. The performance to accrue immediate and extended ‘benefits’ is often confused with their compromised and absent political core, a reckoning which the grounded experiences of the political of the poor puncture.

In each of these three events, India Against Corruption 2011, as *rejection* to the movement's premise*;* the engagement with the MCD elections 2012, *claiming stakes*; and in the celebration towards the victory of AAP in Delhi Assembly elections as an event of *political participation and collaboration,* the slum-dwellers exhibit a highly mature engagement with the political landscape of the present in its imagined, immediate and extended ecologies.

Even though these three events highlight the ‘organic, political’ self of the slum-dwellers, as a representative constituency of the subaltern, the tapestry of being and becoming it unfolds within is revealing of a finer, intricately woven, sometimes fragile, designs. The slum-dweller, she, is at once astute and street-smart; she knows what she wants, but sometimes is lead ashtray; she gives in to her desires with a reckless ferocity, but she also holds on to her grounds, when she wants, putting at stake her most intense desires and immediate needs. If she knows the lanes of the slums, reckoned dreaded and dark by those who have never ventured into, like a sorcerer, she is not lacking in the knowledge, desire and imagination of the highways and super-highways out there. In short, she is an argumentative, intuitive, emotional, not without the intent of self-interest, inquisitive, imaginative, deliberative whole.

Poverty is a compelling and difficult text to read, and its committed readers few and far between. In engaging with the politics of the poor, it is easier to reckon, identify the political as existing in isolation, a seductive temptation so as not to concern oneself with the messiness of the processes, structures, systems which produce and systematically sustain poverty. Moreover, in engaging with the political of the poor, detached from their diverse sensibilities and sentimentalities, it becomes convenient and commonplace to expect the commitment of the poor to the predicament of poverty to violent, loyalties; such that, the poor then can be (and are allowed) only to be poor, devoid of emotions, aspirations and desires. However: Poverty does not happen in isolation, and nor does politics and poetics. The subaltern knows, lives and experiences it well.

The State and the hegemonic narratives, deliberately deny the poor the capacity to imagine, inquire and emote. And if it is in fact extended to them, it is only within the terms of excesses, threatening to tear the seams of the social fabric. And in this identification, as definite structural and systemic tactics, the poor, the marginalised, the disenfranchised, the subaltern, is recognised as an ‘imbecile’, lacking a core, logic and sense of ‘self’. The plans and policies that are thus envisaged for this constituency not only absent their presences – as they do not know they are present – but are always predicated on the project of disciplining them towards an evolutionary agenda of incorporating them into the normative social, cultural, political order.

And it is within this schematic that I evoke the imagery of the subaltern as a 'voyeur', seeking intellectual, theoretical and real permissions for the subaltern to be voyeuristic. The State engages with the subaltern as *voyeur* in its aimless and senseless wanderings, which it then translates as necessitating the agenda of containing, silencing and disciplining the subaltern. However, the subaltern as a *voyeur* in its second avatar is possessed of imaginations, inquisitions and emotions to draw out its own maps, where its coordinates are steadfastly located (and thus allowing it capacities to shift back, forth and sideways), and these mappings are populated with many of its selves, spaces, and histories.

Thus, in celebrating the voyeurism *of the subaltern*, the intent is to recognise and engage with the ‘organic, political’ self of the subaltern, with all the misconceptions, misgivings and multiplicities she possesses. This is not merely an ambitious, well-intentioned, romantic agenda; without allowing for the imaginations, inquisitions and emotions of the subaltern, the project of the realisation of a truly democratic, ethical, equitable and just social, cultural and political order remains and shall so, a distant dream.

1. Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian nights: the workers' dream in nineteenth-century France,* trans. John Durry, New York: Verso Trade, 2012, pp 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. # Sanjay Kumar, ‘Interpreting the AAP win’, *The Hindu,* 11 February 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/interpreting-the-aap-win/article6879316.ece>.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A bedstead of woven webbing or hemp stretched on a wooden frame on four legs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Beedi is a thin South Asian cigarette made of 0.2-0.3 grams of tobacco flake wrapped in a tendu (Diospyrox melanoxylon) leaf and secured with coloured thread at both ends. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indian savoury and sweet snacks commonly served at communal gatherings. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ray Bradbury, ‘The Fog Horn’, https://archive.org/stream/TheFogHorn/TheFogHorn.txt. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Antonio Gramsci, ‘The Intellectuals’, in Selections from the Prison Notebooks, trans. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (eds.), New York: International Publishers, 1971, pp 3-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luigi Pirandello, ‘*Six Characters in Search of an Author’,* trans. John Linstrum, London, Methuen Drama, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I wrote journalistically about the MCD elections covering the profile of Saroj and Saiddya, Tripta Chandola, ‘Slum in the time of politics’, *Business Standard,* 21 January 2013, https://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/slum-in-the-time-of-politics-112030400055\_1.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. # Wikipedia Contributors, ‘India Against Corruption’, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India\_Against\_Corruption, accessed 4 April 2020.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In these journalistic articles I reported on the last day of the IAC's protest at Jantar Mantar: https://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/getting-a-rise-112080500044\_1.html. and, here: https://countercurrents.org/chandola090812.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jantar Mantar is an astronomical historical momument in Delhi. It was a prominent site for holding protests on which following National Green Tribunal ordinance was shut down in 2018. Now prior permissions are required to hold protests here, Aniruddha Ghosal, ‘End of a protest: The story of Jantar Mantar as a protest site began in 1993’, *Indian Express,* 26 June 26 2018, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jantar-mantar-protests-ngt-end-of-a-protest-2011-lokpal-agitation-anna-hazare-4922867/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)