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## Votes for Money in Maharashtra Gram Panchayat Elections

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*A survey on the use of money in gram panchayat elections in one Maharashtra taluka in 2017-18, found that at least half the voters had been offered cash. Yet, it is unclear how much did it influenced voting, compared with other factors such as anti-incumbency, caste, or language.*

With elections to be held in as many as nine states in India in 2023 (Karnataka is done but there is Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana and others to follow) and a parliamentary election in 2024, issues related to elections are very much in the news. One such issue is that of the use of money and muscle power in elections – or the “buying of votes through different means.

At a basic level, vote buying is a “simple economic exchange” (Schaffer and Schendler 2008: 17). The voter has the power to sell his vote for a price, which could be in cash or kind such as food, clothes, or gold. The buyer is the candidate who pays this price for the vote. Muscle power is the use of intimidation. The use of money and muscle power is linked in the sense that whoever has the money can buy muscle power. But, the reverse also happens. If a person has muscle power, he can accumulate money power.

That a humongous amount of money is spent during a general election and state-level elections is quite well accepted, along with the use of muscle power (Vaishnav 2017; Kapur and Vaishnav 2018).

However, Indian democracy exists beyond the central and the state levels, and in quite a vibrant manner too. There have been the elected gram panchayats (GPs) since 1993 in all Indian villages. While a reasonable body of work has been done on various aspects related to GPs, not much is known about the use of money and muscle power in GP elections. We try to explore this by focusing on GPs in Maharashtra.

We start by noting that in an election all parties and candidates try to win votes by mobilising the voters. This mobilisation can happen at various levels. There are the “overall” issues that are highly important to voters but do not affect them economically. For example, in the US elections, abortion and immigration have been important issues. In India, the building of the Ram temple at Ayodhya and Article 370 have been important issues.

In election campaigns, parties and candidates also take up issues that address the economic interests of voters. Some of these are called “programmatically” campaigns (Schaffer 2008: 5). These can be unemployment eradication schemes, or, say, subsidised education for all schemes, and they are expected to benefit all people irrespective of whom they voted for.

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However, there can be campaigns that can be called “clientelist,” where only a section of the voters are promised some material benefit (Kitschelt 2000). For example, only youth can be promised laptops, or people staying in a particular area can be promised a highway (Salem 1992).

Admittedly, the line between programmatic and clientelist campaigns can be, at times, thin. At what point an announcement by a party stops being programmatic and becomes clientelist is debatable. Schaffer (2008: 5) points to a way out by arguing that “it may be more fruitful to conceptualise the dichotomy as a continuum of distributional strategies that candidates may use to sway the voters”.

However, a line is definitely crossed when votes are bought or when violence is used for getting votes because the real preferences of the voters, especially the poor, are not revealed. If the whole idea of elections in a democracy is to find out what people want, that objective is manifestly lost.

Against this background, we focus on the use of money and muscle power in GP elections in some villages in Maharashtra.

### Turning towards voters

The State Election Commission of Maharashtra has fixed Rs 25,000 as the maximum amount a candidate can spend on a GP election. This has been done to provide all candidates with an equal opportunity and to ensure no one person attracts votes by having a lot of money.

Officially speaking, parties are not allowed to contest in GP elections, only individuals are. However, informally, the party affiliations of all the candidates are well known. Our field work showed that political parties do not, by and large, fund their “unofficial” candidates for the panchayats. The candidates usually raise the money on their own. That is, they put in some of their personal funds and are usually supported by their relatives or local businesses, and so on. Almost all the funding comes in cash.

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The use of money and muscle power in elections is, generally speaking, an under-researched area (even globally) because both are illegal activities. Going after them would mean finding more about corruption. It is also difficult to make respondents talk as they may not want to reveal they have accepted money or gifts. One cannot also be sure if what a respondent is saying is true or false as there is no way of verifying the information one gets.

If muscle power was used against a voter, he would be last one to admit to it for fear of reprisal. Further, if a candidate has used violence in elections, what will deter him from using it against a researcher or surveyor? So, asking questions on the use of money and muscle power can put researchers or reporters in a difficult situation.

In both central and state elections, we notice that the work done has focused on the candidates (Vaishnav 2017; Kapur and Vaishnav 2018). There is hardly any work that focuses on voters at any level. In this paper, we turn our gaze towards voters. We try to find out how they experienced elections in a context where money and muscle power were used. What were the kinds of pressure and intimidation they were subject to?

## Findings

There are 43,665 villages in Maharashtra (Census of India 2011) and the number of gram panchayats is 28,813. Here, we deal with the GP elections held from September 2017 to February 2018. This survey was carried out in July 2018 and we expected the people to have a good recollection of what had happened.

We selected a district in western Maharashtra for our field work and it shall remain unnamed. The district had a population of between three and four million and 75% of the people lived in rural areas. Being a progressive and agricultural district with a high degree of political patronage, agro-industries such as sugar and milk had done well there, especially in the cooperative sector. (See Appendix for more details on the sampling.)

The villages that we selected had a population between 812 and 48,000 (which was quite high), with the average size being 6,960 and the median population being 4,496. More than 60% of the families in this area had four to six members.

We found that the educational level of these villages was quite good. Only 1.4% of the respondents were uneducated and only 5 per cent of them lived in kachha houses, which meant that most of them were not too badly off.

Coming to their election experience, Table 1 (Q. 1.1) shows that a worryingly high proportion (95%) felt that there was a “lot of use of money and muscle power” in the last GP election. Whether this will lead to people losing faith in democracy is a question that only time can answer. It does not seem to have happened as yet because a high percentage of people still continue to vote.

**Table 1: Questions and Answers Related to Use of Money Power**

Q. no.	Question	Observations	
1.1	Do you think there was a lot of money and muscle power used in the last gram panchayat elections?	Yes	673 (95.2)
		No	34 (4.8)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>
1.2	Was cash given to you/your family members before elections?	Yes	365 (51.6)
		No	336 (47.5)
		No reply	6 (0.8)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>
1.3	If yes, then how much per person, in rupees?	Up to 500	101 (14)
		501-1000	90 (13)
		1001-2000	45 (6)
		2001 and above	7 (1)
		Can't tell	35 (5)
		Didn't answer	429 (61)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>
1.4	How much money do you think some candidates spent in the last elections, in rupees?	100 – 50,000	19 (2.69)
		50,001 – 5,00,000	130 (18.39)
		5,00,001 – 10,00,000	107 (15.13)
		10,00,001 – 25,00,000	41 (5.80)
		25,00,001 – 50,00,000	44 (6.22)
		50,00,001 – 1,00,00,000	9 (1.27)
		Can't tell	237 (33.52)
		No answer	120 (16.97)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>
1.5	Was a non-vegetarian party given to you/ your family members before elections?	Yes	553 (78.2)
		No	145 (20.5)
		No reply	9 (1.3)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>
1.6	Was alcohol given to you/your family members before elections?	Yes	487 (68.9)
		No	211 (29.8)
		No reply	9 (1.3)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>
1.7	Was a sari/s given to you/your family members before elections?	Yes	33 (4.7)
		No	665 (94.1)
		No reply	9 (1.3)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>
1.8	Was food like chivda, pulses etc. given to you/your family members before elections?	Yes	66 (9.3)
		No	629 (89)
		No reply	12 (1.7)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>707 (100)</b>

But then it can be asked: do people vote in such high percentages because of corruption, or due to the use of money and muscle power? In any case, one needs to take this issue very seriously because so many voters felt that there was the widespread use of money and muscle power in the GP elections.

From Q.1.2, we see that 51% reported that they were given cash before the elections. But 66% of them did not want to divulge the amount (Q.1.3). Of the total, 27% said that they had received less than Rs 1,000. This in itself does not seem to be a very high figure.

A worryingly high proportion (95%) felt that there was a “lot of use of money and muscle power” in the last GP election.

When asked how much the candidates may have spent, around 50% did not want to answer or said that they did not know. However, of the total, 18% said that the amount could be between Rs 50,000 and Rs 5 lakh while 15% felt that the amount could be between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 10 lakh. Only 1.27% said it could be as high as Rs 50 lakh to Rs 1 crore. So, on the whole, the amount perceived was on the higher side (Q1.4).

This was truly amazing spending for a GP election. With some disbelief, I discussed this with the field investigators (who were locals), members of non-governmental organisations, journalists, and local politicians who were there. Most of them believed that the information we had reflected reality.

The next question was: where was so much money spent? From Q.1.5 to 1.8, we find that 78% of the respondents were given non-vegetarian parties, and 69% said that they were also given alcohol. These are mainly male-centric things in Indian society. So the use of payments in the form of things “valued by men” seems to have been quite pervasive in the GP elections.

When it came to female-centric things such as sarees and food items such as chivda and pulses, quite a low number received them – 4.7% and 9.3% respectively. So, apparently, the influence on voters was exerted through the male members in families.

Was it possible that the male voters did not know what women in the family had been given? It was unlikely because candidates would make it a point to let male voters know what they had given the women. In certain cases, social events such as “haldi kumkum” ceremonies were organised for women, where they were given utensils.

Almost the same percentage of respondents felt that their situation had improved just before the elections as those who felt that there had been no improvement, implying that there was no long-term economic effect on voters (Q1.9).

By and large, money was not asked back if a candidate lost the election (81.5%, Q.1.10). An overwhelming part of the electorate – 91.2% – did not think that it was better to vote for a candidate who had more money (Q.1.11). But, then a high number of them – 60.7% – felt that voters were affected by money. While 82.7% felt that the use of money in elections had been increasing over the years, 94.8% felt that this was a bad development (Q1.12 to 1.14).

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We also asked questions related to the use of muscle power in the elections (data not given here). It seemed that the use of muscle power was not all that much in these elections. While more than 80% said that volunteers were stationed outside voting booths, only 20% reported that they exerted any kind of pressure. More than 90% said that they had not been threatened to cast their vote for any particular person. Almost everyone said that they had not seen any armed people and most had not heard of anyone being beaten up during the campaigning.

In view of this, it is surprising that 40% said that they had felt scared that violence could be used against them during the election. Almost 50% said that people were affected by the use of muscle power. Almost a similar number felt that the use of muscle power had been increasing over the years (48.4%). But, surprisingly, 33% felt that the use of muscle power had been decreasing.

As for emotional pressure (or blackmail, in a sense), we see that 75% of the voters felt that the candidates used the argument of “we have done so much for you, now you must vote for us.” In this, building a temple in a village played an important part.

However, more than 80% reported that they were not required to take an oath by putting their hand on the head of their children or any other relative. This was reassuring because in our discussions with the villagers we learnt that this had been a common practice earlier and the people resented it.

### Money and muscle

It is now well known that the budgets of villages have risen and become quite large over the last few decades, mainly because of state and central government allocations. So one could argue that candidates have a good idea of the possibilities of making money once they are elected.

It seems that the funds used for buying votes is taken to be an investment that has to made good after one is elected. It is also well known that money can be made by giving contracts at higher rates to businesses who are, most likely, the candidate's friends and family.

|| Candidates have much more money to spend on elections than what they had in the 1950s and 1960s

Another reason that was given for high expenditures was the need of candidates to maintain their own “status” in their villages. One could venture to say that this is very much a part of the rural psychology in India.

When we look at India from today's vantage point, the country has been growing at a high rate in the last two decades. Due to this, the money going around in the system has increased manifold. The first implication of this is that candidates have much more money to spend on elections than what they had in the 1950s and 1960s (be it white or black money). Second, the opportunity costs of losing an election have become very high.

### Conclusions

The use of money and muscle power has been a part of most democracies in the making. In this sense, India is no different. In the 1776 election in the US, George Washington is supposed to have given alcohol to buy votes (Sydnor 1984: 51). But there is also no need to think about this in terms of “stages” and accept it passively because it definitely vitiates the democratic process.

At the macro level, the nexus between big money and policy is well established in almost all democracies. At the village level, the opportunities for influencing policies are quite limited. They mainly consist of granting “benefits” (like ration cards, BPL cards, and so on) to people in return for money and giving various contracts to close ones.

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That money was used to buy votes in GP elections and that this use had been increasing did not come as a big surprise to us. But what was astonishing was the amount of money that was in use.

We found that most people did not approve of vote buying though 90% felt that there was lot of it in the last GP election. Almost half the respondents admitted that cash was offered to them or their family members. However, more than 60% were not willing to talk about how much they received.

Even so, we could gain some insight into the process, which was illegal. There seemed to be a “culture of silence” when asked about how much was offered, and how much do they thought the candidates spent. The high figures that were talked about were instructive and revealed a lot about the kind of elections that had taken place.

|| In all likelihood, most village women experienced the election time as a period when their men were drunk, and there was not much they could do about it.

From what the respondents who were willing to talk said, we can surmise that individuals were not paid very high amounts as such. But estimates about the money spent by the candidates were surprisingly high for a GP election (even up to Rs 1 crore). This contradiction is explained when we find that the candidates spent a lot of money on supplying liquor and non-vegetarian food to men

during the campaigning.

By and large, women were not given anything substantial. In this sense, they were not targets of vote buying. It seems unlikely that women were given something that the men did not know about. In all likelihood, most village women experienced the election time as a period when their men were drunk, and there was not much they could do about it.

At the village level, the election campaign provided immediate gratification to male voters. Since the figures cited were so high, we wondered if any assets had been created from the funds. For example, why were clothes, bicycles, mobile phones, or watches not given to voters?

This could probably be because non-perishable things can be traced back to the benefactor while food and alcohol cannot. A huge majority of 94% said that use of money or gifts in elections was “bad”. But then 60% also said that other people were affected by money power while they themselves were not.

There was the use of muscle power in these GP elections but it was not overt. The same could also be said about the use of emotional pressure.

Looking at the situation from the point of voters, most of whom were not well off, it is possible that people went to vote only because they got something in return. Without an incentive, why spend substantial time and effort in casting a vote and lose a day’s wages? This could be an interesting angle worth exploring in future work.

While the use of money did seem to affect voting, we do not know to what extent it affected choices in addition to the role of other factors such as anti-incumbency, caste, language, and so on. That is a much larger issue and not something we looked for in this survey.

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#### **Appendices:**

The villages were selected on the basis of probability proportional to population size of the taluka. The respondents were selected from all wards so that all castes were covered. We surveyed 707 voters (that is, two or three voters in four or five wards in 70 villages). Only male members between the ages of 18 and 60 years were selected as we felt that they would best know what was happening at election time.

The field investigators were given extensive training as this was a very sensitive matter. The information was to be collected from a person who was willing to talk, and the interview was to be conducted quickly before the respondent could “dress up” the information that he or she had or before anyone could threaten the investigator.