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India Votes

A Grass-Roots Drive for Clean Elections in Karnataka

By ANKITA RAO

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DHARWAD, India — Buying votes in Karnataka, like much of India, is ubiquitous during the election season, especially the one that just ended Monday, which may turn out to be the most expensive in Indian history. The Election Commission said it had seized a record amount of cash, as well as alcohol and drugs, earmarked to buy votes.

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But in B. Godihal, a village of 4,000 on the outskirts of the city of Dharwad, perched on the cultivated foothills of northern Karnataka, residents are proud to say that none of the dirty money or contraband made its way to their constituency this year, which voted April 17.

The village is one of the thousands of communities in Karnataka that have worked to hold clean elections, stirred by a confluence of awareness campaigns by nongovernmental organizations and rising public frustration with candidates' broken promises.

The effort stems from a campaign called Me and My Vote Are Not For Sale, which began in 2007 in Karnataka through a joint effort by the Grama Panchayat Hakkottaya Andolana, a network of village councils, and the Concerned for Working Children, a nonprofit organization in Bangalore. The campaign was intended to establish the idea of peaceful democracy void of transactions between candidates and voters — however subtle their form.

“We wanted to start to rekindle that belief in the Constitution, building a new India — a belief in democracy itself,” said Nandana Reddy, director of the Concerned for Working Children.

Through training, the media and rallies, the founders have focused on a two-pronged approach: Voters can pledge not to receive handouts from political parties, and candidates can pledge not to distribute them. The founders also created lists of candidates without criminal backgrounds or a history of corruption.

This movement, Ms. Reddy said, has rallied young people in the cities to speak out across campuses and in the public arena. And it has spawned local manifestations in thousands of villages, she said, although the organization did not have exact figures on the reach of its campaign. Panchayat leaders urged their communities to avoid bribes, and women's groups held rallies and handed out stickers to raise awareness.

The campaign has worked especially well with lower-income women and youth, and for local council elections. This reflects the general tendency for citizens to engage more with the political bodies they think have a greater impact on their lives, said James Manor, a Karnataka

politics expert and professor at the University of London.

In B. Godihal, Shamala Jinnamanavar, a member of the gram panchayat, or local council, attended the campaign training when it came to the rural areas surrounding Dharwad in 2009. Since then, the training sessions have been held one month before every election, both local and national.

As part of a women's group that works with Mahila Samakhya, a government program focused on educating women, Ms. Jinnamanavar, 38, and others in the group said what they learned from the clean-election campaign built on their own experience with local corruption. They noticed that after the politicians got their votes and the elections ended, many of them would disappear until the next election.

“People felt insulted — they made us into fools and didn't do the work,” she said, sitting cross-legged on the floor of her home with peers from the women's group.

Two weeks after the polls closed, the women said no candidates tried to dole out money this year as they had in the past season, knowing that the villagers had started to avoid these bribes. Ms. Jinnamanavar and her group said that few families would have accepted anything — food or money — this year.

“This time we won't stand for it,” she said.

The anticorruption movement in India has gained steam in recent years, especially with the rise of the Aam Aadmi, or Common Man, party, which has campaigned on a platform calling for clean, transparent politics.

But Mr. Manor said the real, if slow-moving, strength of the anticorruption movement was at the very local level through gram

panchayats. Karnataka has significantly invested in these councils and given them relatively broad power and funding since 1987. For example, the government has given the panchayats control over 90 percent of the funds for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, created to support rural livelihoods. The national requirement is 50 percent.

“The greater engagement with panchayats, which brings with it greater transparency in local government, has reduced corruption there,” he said. “I recall a rural leader in Mandya District telling me that before the panchayats were strengthened, he could make big money behind closed doors, but that afterward, he could only make chicken feed.”

Despite the possibilities of a progressive political state culture, both Mr. Manor and Ms. Reddy said much work remained for the democratic process to remain free of incentives.

This year, some liquor stores, bars and restaurants in Karnataka offered discounts to people who could prove that they had voted. While many view these discounts, commonly offered in big cities, as merely a business promotion, the campaign founders deem even the smallest incentive as a means of compromising and commodifying democracy.

Despite the progress the clean-election campaign was making in Karnataka, Ms. Reddy said the culture of greed remained entrenched in politics. “He’s going to make his money back somehow,” she said, referring to the average politician. And, Ms. Reddy said, when that time comes, the money will be siphoned from the public funds meant for the public. “It’s a vicious cycle,” she said.

She said that people in both rural and urban areas would need to shift from a jaded, hands-off attitude toward politics to address the corruption that Karnataka was encountering. So far, the campaign has had moderate success in cities like Bangalore, where mostly young people and women

have been handing out bangles and pamphlets urging citizens to hold candidates accountable.

Me and My Vote Are Not For Sale will continue to push citizens to get their voter ID cards and examine politicians' backgrounds and records. The founders have also helped to start the campaign in other states, like Maharashtra.

Back in B. Godihal, though Ms. Jinnamanavar hoped to continue improving the quality of life in her rural village, she said the temporary money and gifts from politicians were not worth giving up the dignity of having a voice.

“We’re helpless against corruption if we don’t believe in this,” she said.

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