In the first of our 20th Anniversary interview series, IDRF speaks with 2007 IDRF alum, Tariq Thachil.

Tariq Thachil is Associate Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

How did you become interested in political science and, more specifically, in your work on political parties, political behavior, social movements, and ethnic politics?

I was born into a political family, so I’ve always had an interest in politics. I became interested in political science mostly through the back door. I was an econ major in college, but I always was interested in political questions, and I was trying to hunt for the right field to ask those questions. I was drawn to [political science] because it seemed like the discipline that best allowed me to ask the questions I was interested in about Indian politics. I took classes in political science, economics, anthropology, all over the social sciences, and I liked elements of all of them, but I think political science was the one for which the questions I was asking were most central. Specifically, interest in political parties, how they organize, how they recruit supporters—these are really the bread and butter of political science.

I had a question about your book, *Elite Parties, Poor Voters*, in which you examine why poor voters often vote against their material interests in India. Can you talk to us a little bit about your findings from this research?

I think that in today’s political climate, it’s a question that has a lot of relevance for US politics and has been historically important in the study of Western democracy. We often have models of politics that assume that people vote in accordance with their material preferences; so poor people vote for left-of-center parties that favor redistribution and wealthier voters vote for right-wing conservative parties that are opposed to redistribution. And yet, we often see that that’s not the case. For example, many poor people in the US vote for the Republican Party even though we would think that that’s not a party whose core economic agenda is in favor of those voters. This has been a question, a poor voter paradox, that has been examined a lot in wealthy, Western democracies. There’s a famous book by Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, that made this question popular.

But we’ve never really examined if similar puzzles emerge in poor democracies like India. When we look at poor democracies like India, especially in the US academy, we problematically tend to focus on a well-worn set of
topics: violence and caste and religion. We rarely investigate whether these democracies have their own manifestations of phenomena similar to those within more advanced democracies. Yet during the time that I was in graduate school, I saw that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—a party that had been supported predominately by upper-caste Hindus and was really seen as a conservative, religious party that supported the interests of the upper caste, both economic and social—was all of a sudden getting a lot of support from people who were lower caste. Lower-caste and indigenous tribal voters were traditionally seen as people who would never vote for such a party, whose interests were not represented by this party. Yet they were voting for it, and so that’s what drew me to the question.

Why are lower-caste voters who’ve been marginalized by the upper caste for centuries all of a sudden going to an upper-caste party and voting for it? What I found was that this party had implemented a pretty ingenious division of labor. They had made sure that the party itself still represented the interests of the upper caste. It was still largely stocked with upper-caste candidates; its policy platforms largely supported the interests of the upper caste. But it had expanded and allied with a number of non-political, non-party organizations that were providing social services, basic social services in health and education, to a lot of these communities.

They were able to do this because the right-wing party in India that I was looking at, the Bharatiya Janata Party, emerged out of this broad, social movement: Hindu nationalism. It was the party face of Hindu nationalism, but Hindu nationalism also had a lot of other organizations in civil society. Many of these organizations were the kind of service organizations I was examining. What I found was that those service organizations were really at the forefront of recruiting support for the BJP among these lower-caste voters. Activists were going and spending their whole lives in these communities providing basic services and winning over these previously distrustful communities. The other thing that I found was it wasn’t a project of ideological conversion. It wasn’t that these lower-caste voters were all of a sudden dyed-in-the-wool Hindu nationalists, but rather they were pragmatic in saying, “Well, this is a group that is at least doing something for us.” In many ways, their support was won because the parties that were supposed to be looking out for their interests—left-wing parties or left-of-center parties, secular parties—had done very little for them historically, and so that facilitated this strategy.

**What do you find to be the most interesting or exciting part of your work?**

For me, fieldwork. Most of our lives as academics we’re at our desks, writing by ourselves, but for me, the most exciting part of work is trying to either test out ideas in the field or having everything that you previously thought overturned within 20 minutes of actually talking to people around the issue that you’re studying. For my first book, the most interesting part of the work was gaining the trust of people in these service organizations and within the Hindu Right more generally. They’re pretty cagey and not always open to divulging a lot of how they’re working. The most exciting part was gaining their trust and being able to figure out the puzzle pieces of what they were doing. [I had] some of what I previously thought confirmed, but a lot of it disconfirmed by seeing how things were actually working. In a place like India—such a complex political system—so little is knowable from a distance, even for experts. The most interesting part is starting to talk to people at different parts of the food chain that you’re analyzing and trying to piece together what’s going on and being humbled again and again about how wrong you were. I think that’s always what’s most exciting to me.

**And conversely, what would you say are the biggest challenges in your work?**

One of the bigger challenges is that my first and foremost interest is the study of Indian politics—what’s happening in India, what’s of importance to understand for Indian politics—but I work and live in the US. Many people assume the biggest challenge therefore is staying connected or spending time in India. For me that has been less difficult. The biggest problem has been ensuring that the questions I ask and answer are important in India and for Indians, and not just for the American academy. As I mentioned, India is often pigeonholed within US political science for the study of particular phenomena: the effects of randomized quotas, or the salience of
ethnicity in politics. Increasingly, it is popular as a site where one can field large-scale randomized interventions cheaply, but many of these studies have little interest in advancing specific knowledge about how politics in India works. So vital questions of local everyday politics—the kind routinely studied regarding US politics—are often difficult sells within the American academy. The result is that most Indians find the questions that US-based scholars ask about India to be frankly uninteresting. Doing work that is publishable in the US, but that is actually of interest to India—bridging that divide has been one of the biggest challenges I have faced. Most work within my discipline is only able to do one or the other. It’s a challenge, it’s exciting, but it’s also frustrating.

Can you tell us about your more recent work on the political consequences of urbanization?

I actually just came back from doing some of that work. This project was motivated by the simple fact that sometime during the latter half of this century, India is going to have an urban majority. But most of our models of Indian politics have been formulated thinking about the country as a village-based democracy. This is not just a trend that is particular to India. Across much of the developing world, urbanization is a huge feature, a massive social feature of life today. The question is, how are things going to change in these countries where urbanization has come after democratization? Democracies had been established when most people lived in villages and now they’re moving to the cities. How is that going to influence everything from the strategies political parties use to organize and mobilize voters, to the things that matter to voters. As the modal voter shifts from a poor villager to a poor urban voter, how will political behavior—and, consequently, political party strategies—shift? I’m interested in tracing that evolution.

One of things that I’m specifically examining with my coauthor is the rise of machine politics. If you think of Tammany Hall or the Democratic machine in Chicago, these are individuals and organizational structures that came up because of the sudden rise of immigrant populations settling within expanding cities. Party machines came about trying to mobilize those areas. Machines and migrants coproduced one another. We see something very similar happening in urban India—particularly in slum settlements. To win city politics in India, it is often crucial to win the slums. To do so, parties must extend their organizations deep into slums—very much like Tammany Hall—allying with local bosses who emerge in these slum areas. We’re studying that process of emergence and its effect on democratic politics: How do slum leaders emerge? How do they get recruited by party organizations? How do parties decide which slums and leaders to favor over others? We find the novel landscape of slums leads to novel challenges for politics. For example, most slums have people from hundreds of caste groups, diverse religions, and different linguistic regions. So local leaders and parties can’t appeal to just one caste group and win a slum. You have to find creative ways to mobilize multiple groups within a support base, and so we think it’s pretty exciting to trace that strategic learning in real time as it’s happening.

You were a member of the 2007 IDRF cohort. How did receiving an IDRF award impact your graduate education?

It sounds fake to say to you guys, but I still remember the day that I got the email saying that I got the IDRF award. I was in the basement computer lab and it changed my life. I was at a very good university, but we didn’t have funds to do fieldwork. We had to teach to get our graduate stipend. Especially for somebody like me, who wanted to work 10,000 miles away, there was no way to do that. I had friends who were not as fortunate and had to figure out how to do a project while living in upstate New York. The IDRF was such an amazing award, because
it had so few restrictions. I’m not a US citizen and that didn’t matter, but also there were so few restrictions on what you could spend the money on, what counted as a legitimate budget item. The flexibility that it afforded me was just amazing. I honestly think if I hadn’t got it, I don’t know that I would’ve had a career. That sounds really dramatic, but these are the kinds of small things that end up determining careers. Now I’m a professor, now I can get support for my work, but the problem was finding somebody to give me money when I had absolutely no track record. Just as an aside, I actually met my wife doing fieldwork, so we often joke that if I hadn’t got the IDRF, I wouldn’t have met my wife, which is a much bigger deal to me than not being an academic. I’m a total devotee of the award.

**What do you do outside of teaching and conducting research? What do you do for fun on your own?**

A couple of different things. I’m a sports junkie, so I love playing and watching sports. It’s probably the most American part of me. My wife and I also love to travel. Obviously, going back and forth to India, but also seeing other parts of the world. I feel like the best part of my job is how much autonomy we have in our schedules to go to other parts of the world, and to incorporate a diverse set of interests into my life. My wife is a fiction writer and a professor of creative writing, so she is always providing me with wonderful fiction and nonfiction to read—and it has been really important for me to read writing that is not social science!

**Speaking of reading, what is the last article/book/news you heard or read that is exciting or interesting to you?**

I recently read a book on urbanization in China that I think is fascinating. It’s a book by Jeremy Wallace called *Cities and Stability*. He talks about the fact that urbanization poses a massive political threat to China, because cities are typically the epicenters of unrest and of protest. At the same time, cities are engines of growth. There’s this difficult tradeoff the Chinese government faces in terms of encouraging the growth of cities, because they want to encourage growth, but also worrying about the political consequences of that. He writes really beautifully about that dilemma.

In terms of news, honestly, it’s been a hard time thinking about my role as an academic in the US. I am an immigrant from a low-income country. A lot of us are thinking about all of the freedoms we’ve enjoyed intellectually in the US and wondering about whether these same freedoms can be assumed going forward. And on a practical note, I go and come from India a lot, and those trips have become far more stressful now than they’ve ever been before. And I am such a privileged immigrant, in terms of documentation, economic stability, and connections. So if I feel nervous, I can only imagine how others less fortunate must feel. Even within my own profession, I worry about graduate students who are not citizens. I think about all of us who went on a year-long trip on IDRF. Coming back from a year abroad is going to be difficult in ways that I didn’t have to think about in 2007. I do think about that.

**We’re about to select the 2017 cohort. What advice would you give to incoming fellows?**

The real joy of IDRF—and I know that this is something that was at least quoted in the mission when I was selected—was that it really did seem to select projects that spoke beyond just a single discipline. I think that’s really hard for young scholars to do—when you’re in graduate school, it’s a time when you feel the weight of the discipline the most, because you have to make your name within a field. That often forces us to do—I see this in my own field—narrower and narrower projects, things that you can quickly get a publication [out of]. Pick that question that can be answered with data that’s already collected so that you can quickly move on. In some ways, I can’t fault that. There are incentives to do that.

But that is sad in that graduate school is often the best opportunity most scholars have to do uninterrupted work on a big question that will shape not just their project, but their career. One of the things that incoming IDRF fellows should remember is to really spend this time for the long game, for doing something that you can’t do if
you didn’t have this uninterrupted stretch of time to go and learn about a place. That’s going to set you up for the next decade. My IDRF year in India set me up for my whole career. It wasn’t just about getting quick data and getting out, but really thinking about what’s the big question of interest not just to three journals in my field but to people in other disciplines. I should say the conference you guys made us come to at the end of fieldwork was so helpful for that, because I got to hear how an anthropologist was writing up their fieldwork or a historian was writing up theirs. This forced me to think more broadly than if I had just been surrounded by political scientists upon my return. In fact, I’m still in touch with several other members of my cohort. Thinking big and seeing that this as an opportunity that really lets you do something beyond just convenience and expedience—that would be my advice.