

**Michael COLLINS**

**Elections for 'Dummies'? *Democracy, Chicanery, and Electoral Practice in  
Modern India***

Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Date: **Januray 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

Time: **11 – 12:30**

Place: Social Sciences Department room



In popular imagination elections are centered on the act and outcome of suffrage. Votes are tallied and trends are analyzed as political pundits distill election results, *post facto*, into plausible narratives said to reveal 'the pulse of the nation', often littered with clichés about 'popular mandates' and 'the people's verdict'. But, such accounts convey a narrow perspective on elections, which are equally a game of skill, finesse, charisma, and outright skulduggery. An election campaign is replete with shrewd party operatives and wily booth agents angling to gain any advantage, circumventing

election law or, just as often, capitalizing upon its lapses. Election campaigns require constant innovation and present a steep learning-curve for new aspirants vying to enter the 'corridors of power'. For India's Dalits (ex-untouchables), contesting elections requires more than simply mastering the 'rules-of-the-game' due to how existing inequalities are brought to bear on the democratic process. One of India's most prominent Dalit parties, the Liberation Panthers Party (VCK) of Tamil Nadu, is a case in point. This paper draws together ethnography from the campaign trail and interviews with VCK party leaders, candidates, and activists to explore how these first-generation Dalit politicians navigate electoral competition, assessing its challenges and implications for the future of Dalit politics.

**Michael Collins** received his doctorate from University of Pennsylvania and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies at the University of Göttingen, Germany. His research intersects the disciplines of anthropology and political science to analyze (ethnographically) the practices of democracy, elections, and political representation in modern India. His prior doctoral research examined the formation of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK; Liberation Panthers Party) of Tamil Nadu, the largest Dalit political party in southern India. Previously, he has published articles and book chapters on election finance and the history of Dalit legal-activism in Tamil Nadu.