

India's democracies

ARILD ENGELSEN RUUD AND GEIR HEIERSTAD (EDS.)

India's democracies

Diversity, Co-optation, Resistance

Universitetsforlaget

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Preface

ARILD ENGELSEN RUUD AND GEIR HEIERSTAD

India is everywhere, not least in the Nordic region. She is in the news, at the table in many boardrooms, a regular guest in ministry discussions. India's history, society and political culture are taught at universities. In a progressively multipolar world, no one can miss that India is a force not to forget. A force that we need to know. This international volume is an indirect result of the urge for knowledge about India in Scandinavia. But it's a delayed result, as this volume should already have been published in India. As such, the book tells an increasingly familiar story of India. And the story goes like this:

We had a signed contract, typeset files and an attractive jacket cover. We hoped the volume would engage debates about Indian experiences with democracy because these are both enchanting and captivating, and India is important to a more general debate about what democracy is and how it works. With this volume we looked forward to continue our numerous and rewarding dialogues with Indian colleagues and students, intellectuals and activists, South Asian scholars and the engaged public, friends and foes.

But the prevailing political climate in India made our publisher jumpy. There were formulations in the text that could be construed as critical of the current government. To quote from what he wrote us:

There is no academic freedom in India today. And that's why Amartya Sen has decided to pack his bag and quit the VCship of Nalanda University. If a Nobel Laureate cannot withstand the pressures being brought on him by the BJP-RSS combine, do you think I have chance? Look what they have done to the judiciary in Gujarat. Practically every Police Officer who was implicated in 2002 riot cases or in cases involving Amit Shah and Modi has been granted bail by the Gujarat High Court and is strutting on the streets of Gujarat as though he was a free man. [...] Look what they did to Wendy Doniger and her Indian publishers. And what they have done only recently with the author Murugan. I am not one bit in favour of censorship, nor do I want to impose it. But prudence advises us to be cautious and keep a low profile so long as Modi is in power.

In the end, our publisher would not risk publishing the book. The completion of our story, to publish it as an Open Access book, is our way of showing respect to academic publishers in today's India.

India is the foremost expression of democracy in the post-colonial world and an academic encounter with it carries the possibility of deepening our general understanding of what democracy is and can and should be. At a basic level, democracy is, of course, a form of government based on elections. At a more advanced level it is about respect for variety, certain kinds of freedom, the rule of law, freedom of speech and other such ideals. In practice, democracy finds its form in constant negotiations and innovative adaptations to a range of political forces in more or less conservative or more or less radical societies, more or less divided or conflict-ridden or united societies. And in practice, democratic practice is also influenced by sets of vague and undefined ideals about what democracy should be – about just society, for instance, or equality. It is entangled in all these ideals and practices and tensions that democracy evolves. India is one of the great laboratories of this creative process – a laboratory that we, the contributors of this volume, involuntarily became part of.

In the last two decades, the image of India in the West has changed. India has a decent growth rate, geopolitical ambitions, and plans to export cars to Europe. Governmental and commercial sectors in developed economies have increased their efforts to enter Indian markets and to collaborate with government institutions, private enterprises and NGOs on topics ranging from business collaboration and global climate change to UN peacekeeping operations.

At the same time, India hits the news abroad as a country of religious chauvinism, violent gang rapes and increasingly limited freedom of expression, for youths on social media, academics, artists, and writers.

As our small Nordic countries started to engage officially and commercially with Indian counterparts, there was a need for better understanding of the Subcontinent's history and political life. Not only did this result in a greater number of students with a South Asia interest, there is also a market for academic books on India written in the Nordic language. One such book was *Demokrati på indisk* ('Democracy, Indian flavour'), written in Norwegian and published in Oslo in 2010. The volume brought together a number of scholars with an interest in India's political culture and her democracy. The present book, *India's Democracies*, evolved from this endeavour although the contributions are new or substantially rewritten with an international and Indian academic audience in mind.

We do not suggest that there is a given Nordic perspective that unites the various contributions in this volume. Neither is there any attempt to make a comparison between the Nordic countries and India.

This volume is about India's deep and complex relationship with its chosen form of government. It is an interdisciplinary book with approaches drawn from history, anthropology, sociology, political science and social geography. We believe this volume provides new perspectives on how to approach and analyse the complexity of India's democracy. The book's unfortunate publishing history also tells a tale of India.

While democracy is highly valued by most people, whether in the West or in India, there is no consensual understanding of what democracy can and should be. This becomes particularly acute in the light of the increased multicultural nature of societies in the West, for instance, and in some places increased conflict over the basic aspects of democracy.

The multivocality, fluidity and heterogeneity found within the frames of Indian democracy provide the world with a diversity that contains the potential to help societies elsewhere – in the developed world, in emerging economies, or in poor countries – to remain vital and growth-oriented. At the same time, Indian politics at large ensures that we do not forget that democracy and its most common attributes such as rule of law and freedom of speech never can be taken for granted.

This volume would not have been possible without the existence of an engaged and energetic, but small Nordic community of South Asia scholars, who are still large enough to produce a volume like this, and the intellectually stimulating environment created as a joint effort is duly acknowledged with gratitude. As editors we would also like to express our particular thanks to Professor Harihar Bhattacharyya, to our former Indian publisher, and to Per Robstad at Universitetsforlaget. This book would not have materialized without their generous intervention and support. We would also like to thank the University of Oslo for generous financial support in the final stages of preparing this volume for publication as Open Access.

1

On the Diversity of India's Democracies

ARILD ENGELSEN RUUD AND GEIR HEIERSTAD

When Selig Harrison wrote his book on India in 1960, he feared that Indian nationalists would experience democracy as a barrier to the country's development.¹ Any nationalist, he wrote, would wish for the rapid development of the country. But such a 'nationalist in a hurry', as Harrison calls him, would be faced with a difficult choice, and he might be tempted to drop the messy decision-making processes of democracy in favour of the rapid and clean decision-making processes, and clear priorities of a more autocratic government. Harrison's fear was shared by many, and pessimism on behalf of democracy in this poor, mostly illiterate, and ethnically heterogeneous giant was widespread.²

Yet, fifty-odd years after Harrison's book was published, democracy in India is still with us. And it seems to be flourishing. Atul Kohli writes that democracy 'has taken root', and Sumit Ganguly characterizes it as 'the only game in town'.³ These characterizations are supported by the *State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA)* report.⁴ The extensive surveys behind the report show that popular opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of democracy. This historically alien system of governance enjoys a very healthy 95 per cent support among those questioned. Although there are methodological issues to be raised with surveys covering this huge and complex country, it is safe to assert that almost all Indians today believe that the country should be governed by elected leaders. And these sentiments are translated into practice during elections. The voter turnout in the general elections in

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1. Selig S. Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960.
 2. Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, New York: Ecco, 2007.
 3. Atul Kohli, ed., *The Success of India's Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Sumit Ganguly, 'Introduction', in *The State of India's Democracy*, ed. Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
 4. The report hails from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in collaboration with International IDEA and the Department of Sociology, Oxford University. *SDSA Team. State of Democracy in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

India over the last 30 years compares favourably with those of the presidential elections in USA. Despite the complexities of Indian society, there is a high degree of positive identification with the state and pride in being its citizen.⁵

Of course, Harrison's expectations and those of most observers were predicated on an idea of what an ideal democracy was like; and that ideal was very much built on an understanding, however flawed, of how democracy worked in the West. With those ideas in mind, democracy in India and its survival, and to some extent its way of working, has appeared difficult to categorize and understand. Democracy in India has been characterized as 'a riddle' and 'a paradox', and Atul Kohli writes that it 'defies theories'.⁶ Perhaps he is right. But then perhaps it is the theories that need to be re-examined. As N.G. Jayal points out in her introduction to *Democracy in India*,⁷ democracy in India must be understood on its own terms, and not on theories built on the experiences elsewhere, masquerading as universal scientific theories.⁸ The point is pertinent. The Indian experience of democracy is rarely found in standard textbooks on democracy,⁹ in spite of the fact that more people live under democratic rule in India than in Europe and North America put together; and despite the fact that India's experience with democracy is as old as that of much of Europe. True, some European democracies are old and can trace their ancestry back to the nineteenth century or even earlier. Others, however, are more recent additions or have at most a very chequered history of engagement with democracy – like Spain, Italy and Germany and most of Eastern Europe. Against this backdrop, the Indian experience with democracy can be of no less interest than that of the West. This is acknowledged by the *Journal of Democracy* editors M.F. Plattner and Larry Diamond, and constitutes a motivating force behind the *SDSA* report.¹⁰

What India does to our understanding of democracy remains under-researched and there is, in particular, a need for in-depth and sociologically sensitive investigations into the meaning and practice of democracy in India.

5. Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

6. Arend Lijphart, 'The Puzzle of Indian Democracy', *Democracy in India*, ed. N.G. Jayal, 2001; Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics*, ed. Ashutosh Varshney, New Delhi: Sage; Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

7. N.G. Jayal, ed., *Democracy in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

8. Adam Kuper, ed., *Conceptualizing Society*, London: Routledge, 1992.

9. Linz Stepan and Yadav, op. cit.

10. Marc F. Plattner and Larry Diamond, 'Acknowledgements', *State of India's Democracy*, p. viii; *SDSA* Team, *State of Democracy in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Equally interesting is the reverse question: what has democracy done to India? How has this alien and elite-imposed, and for long elite-controlled system of government altered India?

The contributions in this volume attempt to shed light on these questions, and address the meaning and practice of democracy at different levels in India, to help us understand democracy and democratic practice. Our main proposition is that there is no single Indian democracy, but several Indian democracies, that this originally foreign system of government and representation has adapted to and been adapted into a great variety of cultural, political and historical experiences, in which different practices have emerged.

A HETEROGENEOUS DEMOCRACY ...

Let us investigate the relationship of democracy to Indian society. First, it is important not to underestimate the role of democracy in India today. In the same way that colonial India to some extent was ruled and shaped by 'the steel frame' of the Indian Civil Service, India today is ruled and shaped by the steel frame of democracy. At least in the narrow sense of democracy as an electoral system, democracy is everywhere, most of the time. The polity is shaped by democracy's insistence on regular elections, by its rhetoric of voter supremacy and elected leaders as servants, by imperfections and chaotic processes, and of decision making by protest and compromise. Today, most parts of India experience at least three elections in the course of five years: local level panchayat or municipality elections, state assembly elections, and national elections. It is argued, with good reason, that people today are well accustomed to the 'rituals' of elections, to the cut-outs, the loudspeakers, the election meetings, the wall-paintings, slogans, flags and posters, and the line up to vote.¹¹

The force of the democratic setup is such that society itself changes under the persistent presence of electoral logic. People of the same castes are rallied together to form not just electoral alliances, but super-castes with new names and innovative marital patterns. Much of India's northern heartland is engulfed in what has been termed as 'a silent revolution', where those who were at the bottom of the social ladder are now asserting their presence.¹² It is also argued that voters

11. Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, London: Hurst, 2003.

12. Jonathan Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Stuart Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

increasingly think of themselves as citizens and not subjects, with new forms of rights thinking and issue-based activism continuously emerging.¹³

Yet, in spite of the familiarity with the ritual of elections, its popularity can equally be seen as hollow and support for democracy as fundamentally flawed and brittle. In a wider sense of what democracy is about, including respect for institutions, equal opportunity and tolerance, the situation is not so easily defined. One of the main riddles in the workings of contemporary Indian democracy is the high voter turnout coupled with the low esteem in which most voters seem to hold politicians as a class. The *SDSA* report suggests that close to half the Indian population (45 per cent) has little or no trust in political parties. Among all state institutions, political parties fare the worst – worse even than the police.¹⁴ Only 36 per cent express some or high trust in political parties. And yet, 60 per cent vote.

The same report suggests that a large majority of Indian voters are in fact ‘weak democrats’, inclined to accept strong leaders and autocrats. The authors of the report acknowledge that in South Asia, autocratic forms of government can be understood as democratic by a majority of the population. They also observe that among South Asians, the ‘sanctity of the institution is underplayed’ (government institutions and procedures of the state are undermined by ‘populist contempt’), and that South Asians are ‘inadequately attentive to the rule of law’. The authors of the report use the term ‘blind spots’ to denote these qualities of the Indian voter, suggesting that the citizens tend to ignore the sanctity of formal institutions and of the rule of law.¹⁵

Another paradox is that the very high voter turnout and high support for democracy is not reflected in what may be considered to be democracy’s twin brother, namely, equity. Even after more than 60 years of democracy, Indian society is still grossly unequal, with mass poverty that strengthens deeply entrenched social hierarchies. People are equal as citizens and as voters, but in terms of social standing, ownership, entitlements and even before the law, they are unequal. Why does this situation persist, and why does this lack of progressive change not translate into a different voting pattern? Why do poor voters not vote for more effective pro-poor politics?

There are certain partial explanations for this state of affairs. The middle classes and the rich have other ways of influencing the state and bureaucrats. And for the poor, voting is often a question of pride, of being able to vote in the first place. Voting can also be a matter of group identity, ethnic belonging or caste (whichever

13. *SDSA*, op. cit., pp. 92, 57.

14. *SDSA*, op. cit., pp. 92, 57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

term one prefers), by which electoral success carries its own reward.¹⁶ But these partial explanations still leave us with important questions. Why have the poor embraced a political system that after six or seven decades of operation has still not given them all that much?

India's democracy presents us with one last cause of wonder: the absence of a common cultural identity to support the system, that feeling of cultural 'we-ness', commonality and belonging that comes with shared symbols, shared narratives and shared sentiments. A common cultural identity, an imagined idea of a common history and a fate, is thought to be necessary for sustaining popular support for a political system that at its heart encourages the expression of conflict. A common cultural identity will help create bonds of loyalty that allows different interests to be expressed, and maintain respect for the losing party, for the minority. Yet, India's cultural variation is so enormous as to be mindboggling. True, there are symbols, institutions and events that are shared by many, and in contrast to Europe, India is one country, one state. Ramachandra Guha makes the point that even if there are many axes of conflict in India, there are nonetheless some elements that tie it together. Democracy with its practices and focus is one of these elements. Other elements include the formal government institutions, a history of wars with its neighbours, the personality of certain leaders, and cricket and Bollywood.¹⁷ He is of course right, and his list could possibly have been longer. Nevertheless, India is still closer to the heterogeneous salad bowl of Europe than the melting pot of multi-ethnic USA. In fact, it may well be argued that continent-sized India's cultural diversity exceeds that of Europe. India has twelve languages spoken by ten million native speakers or more, sometimes many more, a situation which is quite comparable to Europe. Each state again is divided into castes, clans or religious denominations, plus 'tribal' populations, which add to a diversity that is not found in Europe. Also, religious differences are often accentuated, violent, even exploited.¹⁸ Added to this are class and socio-cultural distinctions. The cultural outlook of the urban middle class of India is very different from that of the rural poor of Bharat just a few miles away, or even from that of their servants. In this sense, the cultural spectrum of the Indian society is probably much wider than that of most European countries.

Yet, for all its diversity, at a fundamental level India remains one state and a democracy. This situation does indeed un hinge the supposition that democracy

16. Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

17. Guha, op. cit.

18. Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

can thrive only in ethnically homogeneous nation states. India is democratic and heterogeneous and proves the supposition wrong. This observation also leaves us with other questions: is there something special about this democracy, something unique that links its democracy with heterogeneity?

... OR LOCAL DEMOCRACIES

A comparison with Euro-America will help shed some light. We know that the manner in which democracy is understood and practised in Scandinavia is very different from how democracy is understood and practised in Italy, just as French democracy is different from German democracy and Swiss democracy is different from British democracy. For example, the French Gaullist tradition of a distant and powerful president would be unsavoury to most people in the Nordic countries, whose preference is for down-to-earth politicians, while the strict moral standard Americans apply to their elected leaders does not appeal to most Europeans. The question then poses itself: if democracy has many acknowledged differences in Euro-America, does it not follow that it would be even more diverse in the more heterogeneous India?

Let us keep this last point at the back of our minds for a little while, and return briefly to the two other riddles – that of a high voter turnout versus lack of trust in political parties, and the high level of support from the poor for seemingly low rewards. The problem with these two riddles is that they appear as riddles mainly in the aggregate. Certainly, in some states, the poor have not received much in terms of material benefits from the state in spite of a high level of electoral support. It is equally true that in some other states the picture is not so bleak. If social indicators are an indication, as they should be, then Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh are states, according to Jean Drèze¹⁹ and Amartya Sen's reading, which have fared quite well. In general, states in the south and parts of the west have done much better than some of the northern states. It is observed in several of the southern states, that a high voter turnout among the substantial mid-level sections of the population has indeed changed the political scene. The Brahmins are no longer in control and it is the populous middle-ranking castes that dominate the scene by using their numerical weight in a political system where numbers count. In these places, democracy seems to work, at least no less effectively than in some countries in Euro-America. In other Indian states, voting patterns and

19. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, 2011, 'Putting Growth in Its Place', *Outlook*, November 2011.

preferences based on group identity and identity politics, for instance, throw light on the functioning of democracy.

There is probably some regional variation behind the *SDSA* figures as well, regarding trust in political parties or the degree to which citizens are 'inadequately attentive to the rule of law'. Is this also a riddle in the aggregate? There is certainly a great extent of regional variation in cultural and political identity between the different regions of India, as well as variation among the social strata. The fact that there are only two national political parties of mass following in the country, and that they together accounted for only half of the votes cast in the 2014 election, and much less in earlier elections, means that at least one in two voters votes for a party that is not national. This is a crucial pointer to the political importance of regional variations, even given the federal setup of India. Then there is the difference in the educational level between states, or in the prevalence of civil society organizations. One would be surprised if these regional variations do not entail differences in popular understanding of the rule of law and democratic practices.

The relationship between the national framework and regional political cultures is a complicated one and it can be argued that the regional has been given much less prominence than what is its due. In his book *Democracy and Discontent*, Atul Kohli points to democracy as the primary cause behind the weakening of India's governance capacity, what he terms as 'deinstitutionalization'.²⁰ Kohli's focus was on Bihar, Gujarat and West Bengal, underlining the differences in the political choices made by the different political parties.

An interesting set of studies that predates Kohli is Rajni Kothari's edited volume of essays investigating the relationship of caste to democracy.²¹ What Kothari's collection shows us is that each case of mobilization was built dynamically on specific local constellations. Thus, the efforts to build broad electoral alliances based on a reformed Rajput identity in Rajasthan was fundamentally different from the mobilization of service castes in the Kamma and Reddy rivalry in Andhra Pradesh. Although the mutual adaptation of caste and democracy was a common theme, the concrete expression differed from one region to the other, and gave rise to different constellations and different agendas. Kothari's cases alert us to the need for understanding political culture in its local setting. As such, India accommodates diverse and separated democratic practices or, to put it bluntly, democracies.

20. Kohli, *op. cit.*

21. Rajni Kothari, ed., *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970.

VERNACULARIZATIONS, THE MAKING OF DEMOCRACIES

Nandini Sundar's anthropological history of Bastar further underlines this point.²² Her study shows how the dynamics of migration and establishment of a rudimentary state in the nineteenth century and earlier, among other ways through rituals, created the particular circumstances in which several twentieth century uprisings were brought about and must be understood. The singular incident of a revolt under the leadership of a mad king against an uncaring state in the early 1960s, is not a strange freak incident, nor is a 'traditional tribal' protest against the modernizing state. These were events that developed from the dynamics of local history and society, coupled with the demands and intrusions of the modern state and immigrant populations.

Other studies underline the same need for understanding democratic practice in the context of local dynamics. The growth of rural communism in West Bengal and its local entrenchment in rural parts of Burdwan district can best be understood in the context of modern Bengali literature and the compulsions of the rural middle class. Popular participation in political processes was not a role appropriated by the rural poor, but rather facilitated by a village elite seeking to recast itself, in a very Bengali mould.²³

Lucia Michelutti's study on the 'muscular politics' of the Mathura Yadavs shows that India's federal democracy not only allows articulation of difference, but also allows this diversity to affect the workings of its democracy. 'We are born politicians', the Yadavs claim; 'Politics is in our blood.' These ideas, Michelutti shows, go hand in hand with bodybuilding, wrestling, leather jackets and certain Bollywood-inspired mannerisms. Their form of politics is tied to physical pressure, violence if necessary. Mathura Yadavs claim that their dominance in local politics is a natural state of affairs in a democracy and yet their style is very different from how politics is conducted, say, in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala or the North East. Similarly, Jeffrey Witsoe's study of crime and politics in Bihar points out that state formation in the era of Lalu Prasad Yadav consisted of structures of power and of identity in which caste-based politics made sense to most people.²⁴ The importance of caste to the individual, to group identity, to the distribution of state assets, would have surprised people in neighbouring West Ben-

22. Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar 1854–2006*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

23. Arild E. Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal's Rural Communism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

24. Jeffrey Witsoe, *Democracy against Development: Lower-Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, page 10.

gal. And even if the elements of caste, politics and crime are in evidence in some mixture in almost all parts of India, there clearly are big differences in the extent to which it has been allowed to flourish under the protection of a chief minister. Yet, when the Yadavs of Michelutti's study insist that their form of doing politics is democracy, she is forced to acknowledge this insistence by coming to terms with the slow and yet popular appropriation of a once alien system to local political structures. She introduces the term 'vernacularization' to denote the process by which political structures are adapted to existing cultural practices and social patterns. Vernacularization is a process wherein new alien practices become rooted, popularized, but are changed in the process.²⁵

A potential new turn in the vernacularization of democratic practices, albeit on a different level, is seen in the recent urban mass mobilizations. Prominent in this respect is the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as an offspring of the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption bill campaign. It has been argued that the campaign for the first time united large sections of a new middle class, from legal activists via a rightist corporate middle class to neo-Gandhians.²⁶ Despite the heterogeneity of this class in terms of income and values, the campaigners were able to appeal to the differing interests by a rhetoric that catered to the desires of diverse sections of the Indian middle class. As Ravinder Kaur shows, not only were ordinary citizens 'mobilized around the "plight" of the common man [. . . but also] a different kind of rationale had spurred corporate actors into activism to eradicate corruption and "governance deficit" in public life'. The united forces of heterogeneous middle class groups supported by corporate actors were initially seen as representing an opposition to electoral politics. However, with the foundation of the AAP, individuals connected to the campaign sought to make the endorsement a political force within electoral politics. This particular case of mass movements uniting new groups and subsequently venturing into party politics might be an urban twist to the vernacularization of democracy in India. To what extent the mobilization around gender issues spurred by the tragic Delhi gang rape case in December 2012, and the anti-corruption movement that led to the AAP's election victory in Delhi in late 2013 and again in 2015 might influence the future political landscape of India remains to be seen.

The point to note is that these very different democratic realities are the outcomes of very different histories. They are not stories about a system of govern-

25. Vinay Sitapati, 'What Anna Hazare's Movement and India's New Middle Classes Say about Each Other', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. xlvi, no. 30, 2011, pp. 39–44.

26. Ravinder Kaur, 'Nation's Two Bodies: Rethinking the idea of "new" India and its other', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2012, p. 617.

ment being implemented equally in different localities, nor are they stories of the government being appropriated by a particular all-India class. These are stories about the asymmetric political system being adapted and appropriated in different ways in different parts of the country.

The study by Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*,²⁷ gives much support to this line of thinking. The authors argue that Indian federal democracy's ability to foreground the regional and accommodate diversity is the main reason for its survival as a trusted and supported political entity. By not attempting to create a symmetric federation in which each state has identical rights and obligations, the Constitution opened up spaces for negotiations between the centre and various (political) communities, creating what they call an asymmetrical federal state. Harihar Bhattacharyya suggests further that in practice India's states system and fragmented society has created what we may call fragmented citizenship, where access to the state and its provisions is dependent on ethnic identity rather than a national citizenship.²⁸ A state consisting of several 'nations', with differing rights and obligations based on bargains and compromises, allowed Indians to retain multiple and complimentary identities. True, areas of alienation do exist, as well as outright failures. The cases of Jammu & Kashmir and the Maoist unrest are but the most striking examples of how India's federal democracy has not been able to accommodate radical differences. The argument by Stepan et al., nonetheless, foregrounds the need to be sensitive to India's ability to accommodate diversity within the formal structures of the state. Our point here is to add that this diversity also stems from regional political histories and cultures, from an accommodation not only of static constellations, but also of a variety of forces, local and national, in constant interaction.

The deepening of democracy in India is an uneven process, made possible by what at least initially was a conscious attempt to accommodate the country's diversity. What takes place in different localities varies greatly and renders the concept 'vernacularization' meaningful. It needs to be broadened, though, to include its embeddedness in local histories and the many vernacularizations. Such embeddedness should not be taken to mean that political practices emerge from the straitjacket of some pre-colonial cultural logic, but that political practices are shaped in local tensions and dynamics. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that all societies have their own particular history of engaging with the state and

27. Stepan, Linz and Yadav, op. cit.

28. Harihar Bhattacharyya, "'A Nation of Citizens' in a Fragmented Society?", in *The Politics of Citizenship, Identity and the State in South Asia*, Harihar Bhattacharyya et al., eds., New Delhi: Sanskriti, 2012.

the outside – in the form of different types of actors, for instance state actors such as kings and administrators, or non-state actors such as moneylenders and businessmen, or sadhus and migrants, or semi-state actors such as missionaries and NGO-activists.

This is not to ignore pan-Indian trends, but to emphasize the need for investigating and being sensitive to deep local histories and trajectories that form the perceptions and practices of democracy. The pan-Indian sensibilities are also important. The democratic setup itself – with its regular elections, the election commission and the tiers of constituencies, the news, scams and scandals, the Delhi focus, and the all-Indian judicial system – informs and influences the local one.

The spectacular victory of the BJP and Narendra Modi in May 2014 appears, at least on the surface, to suggest that the national has become so crucial in Indian politics that it overrides the regional and the local. Modi's victory was comprehensive in the sense that he (or his party) won in a very large number of states. It was also comprehensive in the sense that he secured support from a wide section of Indian society. The scale of the victory was one thing; the other was that it was very much Modi's victory. As Chhibber and Verma and other commentators have pointed out,²⁹ Modi himself was a major attraction for voters across the country; or rather it was the vision of a future that he represented that made such an impact on the electorate. This suggests that the BJP's win was not the agglomeration of a wide variety of different interests, motivations and voting patterns. If voters in state X had voted for the BJP because of its Hindutva agenda, and voters in state Y voted because of its economic agenda, the thesis of a heterogeneous India would have been easy to sustain. But when a fair proportion across the states votes for one vision rather than several, that thesis is somewhat more challenged.

So, does the victory of May 2014 and Modi's position suggest that India is moving away again from the post-Congress phase that Palshikar et al. identified,³⁰ that of a relatively modest-sized main party and a host of smaller regional parties? Are we witnessing a jump from the post-Congress phase to an entirely new phase?

There are good reasons to be cautious about such a hypothesis, though. First, in an ahistorical perspective, Modi's victory is certainly impressive, but not unprecedented. In the entire post-independence period, including the 1996 election, the Congress consistently won a larger share of the votes than what Modi and the BJP

29. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma. 'The BJP's 2014 "Modi Wave": An Ideological Consolidation of the Right.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIX, 39, 2014.

30. Suhas Palshikar, K.C. Suri and Yogendra Yadav, eds., *Party Competition in Indian States: Electoral Politics in Post-Congress Polity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014.

secured in 2014. Even in the dramatic election of 1977, that forced the Congress party out of office for the first time, the Congress still secured close to 35 per cent of the vote against BJP's 31 per cent in 2014.

Moreover, for a significant period of time, the Congress was a truly national party that was represented in every nook and cranny of the country, and that secured members of parliament from almost every state. In this perspective, it would seem that the national has always been a significant part of Indian voting behaviour. These decades were followed by a period in which regional issues could no longer be contained within one organization, and increasingly the Congress lost votes to parties that fed on these regional issues. It was this development that brought to light the great variety of political cultures that, we have argued, is a hallmark of Indian political life. However, it did not create it.

Second, as Chhibber and Verma point out,³¹ the support for the BJP is not pan-Indian. It was at its strongest in the north and the west of the country; for the rest the BJP's support remains circumscribed, both socially and geographically. This does cast doubt over the proposition that we have witnessed the return of a one-party dominant system. The regional parties are still there, very much in the fray, waiting for the opportunity to come back, and they continue to represent the variety of sentiments, interests, and social divisions that they have fed on for the last few decades. The Bihar results in November 2015 suggest surprising constellations, and local dynamics still matter. A majority of the Bihar population never voted for the BJP, even in 2014; they were just split. Alliance building is the art of politics in India, and a vital art. Social variation is not likely to lose its political significance in the future. The run-up to the formation of the Telangana state is another example of the conflict of interests that cannot easily be sorted out within the framework of a single party such as the BJP. In fact, the party did not represent an alternative during the entire duration of the Telangana controversy.

The different political, economic and other ways in which the individual states are challenged will also remain. One may be more exposed to climate change and drought, while the other to the demands of its citizens for industrial jobs. A third may struggle with lawlessness and corruption. Even so, Modi may well be able to win the next election as well, if he can retain his grip on approximately 30–35 per cent of the electorate. We must also remember that politics is the art of the possible and, as Lars Tore Flåten points out in his essay in this collection, the BJP has a previous record of not only trying to appeal nationally but also, and at the same

31. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma. 'The BJP's 2014 "Modi Wave"', *op.cit.*

time, has the ability to project an image of being regionally grounded and being able to speak in the local idiom.

However, the pan-Indian trends are by necessity interpreted and appropriated locally, so that democracy appears and works in different ways in different states and localities. While processes of vernacularization have resulted in support for state autonomy and democracy, the mutual pull between the unifying and the particular is evidently a painful and never-ending process.

THIS BOOK

A very good expression of the varieties of democratic practice that exist in contemporary India is found in the contrast between the cases described in the two chapters by Guro Aandahl and Alf Gunvald Nilsen in the present volume. The situation that Nilsen describes from Madhya Pradesh is one of an oppressive state, characterized by what he calls 'everyday tyranny'. This is a nominally democratic political system that has been appropriated by local elites and used to their advantage. At the same time, as he very interestingly shows, individuals among the oppressed, together with activists from outside of the immediate community, work to reform the local state, and use the rhetoric and legal system of the state to the benefit of local peasants. There is a certain 'plasticity' in the workings of the state power, as he points out, meaning that at least parts of the state machinery can be moulded and manipulated into something less oppressive. Some of these efforts are successful, some are not, and Nilsen advocates an 'instrumental' engagement with the state for subaltern groups, thus acknowledging that the state is not *The State* – singular and impenetrable.

The diversity of the Indian state and its polity is further exemplified in the contrast of Nilsen's case with that described by Aandahl in her chapter. Her ethnography derives from the Gujarati villages supposed to be grateful receivers of costly irrigation water harvested from Madhya Pradesh and the Narmada River. Aandahl's argument is with the understanding of massive dams and irrigation projects as the instruments of an almost despotic modernizing and technocratic state machinery overruling local societies. However, her evidence suggests that a much more nuanced understanding is necessary, she admits. The political clout of villagers is considerable in a democratic state, albeit disorganized, and the engineers who represent state power are easily disempowered by local villagers who have 'cards to play' – pressuring their elected representatives or simply refusing to play along. The state and the way it works, she shows, are influenced to a very consid-

erable extent by peasants' groups, who mould it to fit their interests. True, these are not the poor subalterns of Nilsen's study; these are middle-caste landowning peasants' groups who with confidence call upon the MLA, the MP or even the minister and demand the transfer of a local bureaucrat. The political weight is placed much more broadly and much closer to the ground than in Nilsen's study, underlining the huge difference in how the state engages with the citizens in Gujarat on the one hand and in Madhya Pradesh on the other.

Pamela Price and Dusi Srinivas' chapter adds considerable nuances to our overall argument when showing that villagers in Andhra Pradesh are informed not by a single stratagem as they approach the ballot, but by different sets of values or compulsions. Price and Srinivas group these values into two sets termed 'the patrimonial' and 'the programmatic'. The first is informed by the world view in which the rich and powerful provide sustenance and protection, and the second is informed by a fair understanding of the possibilities and rights enshrined in the democratic setup of the state. As Price and Srinivas conclude, there seems to be a significantly greater expression of a self-conscious independence on the part of the ordinary voter than was indicated by another study carried out in the same region fifteen years earlier. At the very least, this indicates substantial dynamism in local society, adding energy at the village or local level, even at individual and household level, to the diversity of political understanding.

The importance of the distinction becomes clear when we consider how ideas of legitimacy and popular understandings of the role of the elected representative influence situations at more aggregate levels. This is brought out in Kenneth Bo Nielsen's study of the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. Nielsen's interest is in how she, as a woman, could carve out a position for herself in the male-dominated sphere of Indian politics, a story worth telling in itself. In doing so, he also shows that the political figure she has become or is portrayed as, is very much a Bengali construct. She is *didi* and in some ways also Durga. She is a product of a specific Bengali culture and society. Comparing her to two other female chief ministers brings out the point even more clearly. Jayalalithaa from the south, Mayawati from the north, and Mamata Banerjee in Bengal make for excellent comparison, and he finds that their styles are surprisingly different. Mamata's simple lifestyle contrasts strikingly with those of both Jayalalithaa and Mayawati. In this context, it may also be recalled that the public lifestyle of both the two previous chief ministers of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, was also simple and unassuming. None of the three – Basu, Bhattacharya, and Banerjee – style themselves in the same mould of largesse, opulence and riches as do

both Jayalalithaa and Mayawati (who are nonetheless very different from each other).

It is almost surprising how little attention has been given in literature to the implications of such differences, to what may be called 'vernacularizations' – in the plural. And one rather unexpected implication concerns the nation's security policy. In his chapter, Geir Heierstad points out that although the increased influence of the local (in the sense of state-level) has been widely recognized as important in the shape of coalition politics, less attention has been devoted to what he calls 'the emergence of a process of democratization of foreign policy'. The more sensitive attention to at least the nearest of neighbouring states is a natural collateral of increased state influence over the central government. Heierstad shows this to be particularly acute in places such as Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. In West Bengal, the chief minister gained much popular kudos for her refusal to take part in the ceremony to sign the water sharing agreement and thus 'jeopardize' West Bengal's interests.

If local tastes matter this much, how then do national parties garner support? Lars Tore Flåten's very interesting reading of one of Lal Krishna Advani's yatras shows how this national level leader sought to establish linkages between the national and the regional. This was an informed politician's recognition of both the cultural diversity of the nation, and of the appeal of regional and local symbols. What Flåten shows is that Advani made conscious efforts to merge sets of symbols and icons that had emerged out of one particular region with the symbols and icons of not just another region, but several. Flåten coins the term 'symbolic engineering' to denote these efforts, a term that points to how creative and innovative processes are used to link regional and non-regional identities.

Several of the chapters so far underline the diversity of the country, in particular the inter-state diversity. These are counterpoised by the contributions by Kathinka Frøystad and Sten Widmalm, who add nuance and understanding to how this diversity both challenges and is managed by the nation-state. Widmalm's concern is with tolerance and relationships between groups. He investigates the complex history of mass mobilization in India and questions the democratic credentials of these mobilizations. Populist leaders, communal riots and lack of development efforts are among the ill consequences he identifies. He enquires into the effects of the democratic setup itself on society, and in a closely argued case, suggests that the diversity of India's society itself is no guarantee for plurality or democracy. With its emphasis on the workings of institutions, forms of tolerance and trust, the nature of elite-non-elite relations, and the possibilities inherent in the unevenly implemented process of decentralization, Widmalm's chapter underlines the chal-

lenges inherent in the variety of political practice in India. A heterogeneous society creates different outcomes, through politicized groups forming alliances and bonds of loyalty, only to see these fall apart and new alliances form.

The potential for mass mobilization, good or bad, is a major factor behind cries for censorship, which have been increasingly heard in recent years. Kathinka Frøystad's chapter reminds us of what the diversity of Indian society, with warts and all, requires of political acumen and care. Her focus is on the balancing of freedom of expression against prevention of expressions that may cause riots and destruction. This is a difficult exercise. It is also clear, as she shows with several examples, that the reaction is often an unreflected and kneejerk response to cries from reactionary quarters. Yet it is the difficulty of this balancing that she finally points to, as it is not only a question of 'how' democratic or 'which' kind of democracy, but also a question of whose right it is to allow expressions that might lead to mayhem and death. It is to the credit of the Indian state that it is able to consider the complexity of the situation and local dynamics in its responses.

Thus, it is not only a spatial or geographical complexity that emerges, but also the complexity of a state that works at different levels. When using the turn of phrase 'India's democracies' we have sought to highlight the very diverse workings of the state, geographically and socially, and at different institutional levels of the state. It is a testimony to this complexity when Frøystad shows how decisions by courts at one level are contradicted by courts at a higher level, or when Nilsen shows that the state apparatus is oppressive at local level, but amenable to reason and even compassion at another. Villagers shot at by the police or by local goondas later receive promises of compensation from higher institutions of the state. In Aandahl's chapter, 'the state' wants engineers to implement the grand plans, and at the same time allows voters to influence politicians in a way that is contrary to the design of the same plan. As she rightly points out, it is difficult to identify 'the state'. So is 'India's democracy'.

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2

Democratic Struggles in the Adivasi Heartland¹

Towards a Relational Conception of Subaltern Political Cultures and State-Society Relations in India

ALF GUNVALD NILSEN

TOWARDS A RELATIONAL CONCEPTION OF SUBALTERNITY²

For some time now, important new ground has been broken in the study of Indian state-society relations. Challenging an established body of work that tended to portray the Indian state as alien and irrelevant to the vernacular political cultures of the country's subaltern groups,³ recent ethnographic explorations of 'subaltern politics'⁴ and 'the everyday state'⁵ have brought to the fore a far less Manichean

1. This chapter draws extensively on empirical material that has been presented previously in Nilsen, 2012 and 2013.
2. In this chapter, I use the terms 'subaltern' and 'subalternity' as they were intended by Gramsci – not as a 'code word' for 'working class', but as designations of 'an intersectionality of the variations of race, class, gender, culture, religion, nationalism, and colonialism functioning within an ensemble of socio-political and economic relations', Green, 2011: 400.
3. I have in mind here the kind of conceptualizations found in Ranajit Guha, 'Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography', in *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on Indian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha, Delhi: Oxford University Press; Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010; Ronald Inden, 'Embodying God: From Imperial Progresses to National Progresses in India', *Economy and Society*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1995, pp. 245–78; Ashis Nandy, 'The Political Culture of the Indian State', *Daedalus* 118, no. 4, pp. 1–26, and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
4. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
5. J. Fuller and John Harriss, 'For an Anthropology of the Modern Indian State', in *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, ed. C.J. Fuller and V. Bénéï, London: Hurst and Company, 2001.

conception of political life in India. The work of scholars such as Heller (1999),⁶ Jaffrelot (2003),⁷ Fuller and Harriss (2001),⁸ Corbridge et al. (2005),⁹ Sharma (2008),¹⁰ Gupta (2013),¹¹ Shah (2010),¹² Michelutti (2007),¹³ Chatterjee (2004),¹⁴ and Corbridge and Harriss (2000)¹⁵ has shown how exploited and oppressed groups utilize the state in a myriad of ways, ranging from quotidian manipulations of the local state to the seizure of state power through participation in electoral politics, to challenge their adverse incorporation in the structures of power that undergird the political economy of contemporary India.

In a recent contribution to this body of scholarship, Williams, Vira and Chopra (2011) have argued that the current conjuncture is one in which the spaces for interaction between the Indian state and the most marginalized sections of its citizenry are proliferating and expanding.¹⁶ They argue that the Indian polity is currently witnessing the proliferation of interstitial spaces in which ‘the fluid and contingent boundary between the state and society gets creatively renegotiated’.¹⁷ And this in turn calls for analytical attention to be paid to ‘the ways in which marginality is reworked through active subaltern agency, in some cases through processes of everyday resistance, but also by exploiting spaces of opportunity which utilize state structures to further social ends’.¹⁸ According to

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6. Patrick Heller, *The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala, India*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
 7. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2003.
 8. C.J. Fuller and J. Harriss, op. cit.
 9. Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava, and Rene Véron, *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
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 13. Lucia Michelutti, ‘The Vernacularization of Democracy: Political Participation and Popular Politics in North India’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2007, pp. 639–56.
 14. Partha Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
 15. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India*, op. cit.
 16. Philippa Williams, Bhaskar Vira and Deepta Chopra, ‘Marginality, Agency and Power: Experiencing the State in Contemporary India’, in *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2011, pp. 7–24.
 17. Vira, Williams and Chopra, ‘Marginality, Agency and Power’, p. 14.
 18. Ibid.

Williams, Vira and Chopra, this is a task best undertaken through the utilization of a Foucauldian conception of state power, in which the state is not conceived as 'a unitary centre of power', but in terms of 'multiple and contradictory articulations of power that emanate from no fixed axis'.¹⁹ These 'power geometries'²⁰ are analytically virtuous in that they bring us far closer to a grounded understanding of the complex vicissitudes of a subaltern agency as it actually exists – that is, within what Moore has called 'relational spaces of connection and articulation'.²¹

However, as I have argued at length elsewhere,²² this theoretical optic suffers from a tendency to elide the fact that the 'conjunctural opportunities' for subaltern empowerment to be advanced through the institutions, discourses and technologies of rule of the state, what Williams, Vira and Chopra refer to as 'spaces of opportunity' for the exercise of subaltern agency,²³ are part and parcel of a composite dialectical equation that also encompasses 'structural constraints' on the extent to which the state can serve as a conduit for collective oppositional projects from below.²⁴ An exclusive focus on the decentred nature of power in general, and state power in particular, is analytically detrimental in the sense that it cannot account for how and why, at specific and contingent conjunctures, the exercise of state power achieves a certain unity across dispersed sites, and the limits that this may impose upon the prospects for advancing subaltern agency in relation to the state.²⁵ The conceptual challenge before us, then, is that of developing a relational conception of subalternity that allows us to grasp the complex ways in which state power at some points comes to function in such a way as to conjoin dispersed sites of power and thus bring a certain degree of uniformity to the workings of the multiplicity of institutions that make up the 'state system'.²⁶

19. Ibid., p. 17. In addition to Foucault, common theoretical denominators in this body of work are Philip Abrams and Timothy Mitchell; for an extended discussion, see Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "Not Suspended in Mid-Air": Critical Reflections on Subaltern Encounters with the Indian State', in *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance*, ed. Sara M. Motta and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

20. Vira Williams and Chopra, op. cit., p. 17.

21. Donald S. Moore, 'Subaltern Struggles and the Politics of Place: Remapping Resistance in Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands', in *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1998, pp. 1–38.

22. Nilsen, 'Not Suspended in Mid-Air', op. cit.

23. Vira, Williams and Chopra, op. cit., p. 16.

24. Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods*, Oxford: Martin Robertson, op. cit., p. 253.

If we are to address the challenge of developing an adequate relational conception of subalternity, our starting point should be the constitution and contested reproduction of historical relationships. Subalternity, that is, should thus be understood as being constituted in and through relations that emerge between social groups that are differentially positioned and endowed in terms of ‘the extent of their control of social relations and . . . the scope of their transformative powers’.²⁷ These historical relations are in turn dynamic: they transform as a consequence of contestation between dominant and subaltern groups in ‘a societal field-of-force’²⁸ and there are two aspects of this dynamic relation are of particular importance here.

First of all, the exercise of hegemony by a dominant social group is not something that is simply accomplished, once and for all. Rather, constituting, reproducing and extending hegemony entails contentious negotiations in and through which ‘the dominant group is coordinated with the general interests of the subordinate groups . . . [in] a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria . . . between the fundamental group and those of their subordinate groups . . .’.²⁹ Dominant groups, in short, are dependent on gaining the consent of subaltern groups. Achieving this will entail the making of concessions by the for-

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25. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 94 and *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–7*, London: Pantheon, p. 142. See Bob Jessop, *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in its Place*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, pp. 234–5 and *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, pp. 151–3 for some very insightful comments on how Foucault struggled to resolve this issue in his later writings. In the recent ethnographic work on the Indian state, there is a tendency to acknowledge that there may be limits to the extent to which subaltern groups can appropriate the state to advance their interests, needs and aspirations, often with reference to empirical cases that suggest that this is so (see for example the references to state violence against organized protest against displacement, the military offensive in the ‘Red Corridor’, inaction in relation to the Bhopal gas tragedy and so on in Vira, Williams and Chopra, ‘Marginality, Agency and Power’, p. 13, and the reference to Kashmir, the Punjab and the Narmada Valley in Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State*, p. 18). However, what is missing is a substantial interrogation of why exactly such limits exist and the political ramifications they carry for subaltern agency.
26. Philip Abrams, ‘Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State’, in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1988, pp. 58–89, see p. 82.
27. William H. Sewell, ‘A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 98, no. 1, 1992, p. 20.
28. E.P. Thompson, ‘Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class’, *Social History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1978, p. 50.
29. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998, pp. 181–2.

mer to the latter, albeit without undermining the structural foundations that ultimately buttress hegemony.³⁰

Second, it is crucial that we recognize that the 'local rationalities'³¹ that subaltern groups develop in order to ameliorate or oppose their adverse incorporation into unequal power relations, and in extension of this, oppositional projects in the form of social movements, should not be thought of or construed as wholly 'autonomous expressions of a subaltern politics and culture'.³² To the contrary, the local rationalities of subaltern groups have been moulded in and through learning processes that advance as and when these groups encounter and contest the hegemonic projects of dominant groups and the institutional complexes and discursive formations in which this hegemony is entrenched.³³

Now, Gramsci of course thought of the state as an institutional modality that was crucial in terms of enabling dominant groups to achieve 'the fundamental historical unity'³⁴ that makes it possible for these groups to articulate and gain consent for hegemonic projects. It is therefore necessary to make two basic points that relate the above argument about subalternity to a specific understanding of 'the political power that is pre-eminently ascribed to the state'.³⁵

First, state power should be conceived of as 'a complex social relation that reflects the changing balance of social forces in a determinate conjuncture',³⁶ manifest, of course, in an ensemble of institutions that these social forces act in and through. The key analytical virtue of such a reading is that the state and the power vested in it cannot be reduced to 'a fixed sum of resources which can be appropriated by one social force to the exclusion of others',³⁷ the state, in other words, cannot be construed simply as a monolithic vehicle for the execution of the designs of dominant groups.

Second, and as a counterpoint, an appreciation of the fact that there is a degree of plasticity in the constitution and workings of state power should not lead us to neglect the fact that the state 'can never be equally accessible to all forces and

30. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; Alf Gungvald Nilsen, 'The Authors and the Actors of Their Own Drama: Towards a Marxist Theory of Social Movements', *Capital and Class*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2009, pp. 109–39.

31. Laurence Cox, *Building Counter Culture: The Radical Praxis of Social Movement Milieux*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dublin: Trinity College; Nilsen, 'The Authors and the Actors'.

32. Roseberry, 'Hegemony and the Languages of Contention', p. 360.

33. Nilsen, 'Autonome Domener'; 'The Authors and the Actors'.

34. Gramsci, op. cit., p. 52.

35. Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, London: Verso Books, p. 147.

36. Jessop, *The Capitalist State*, p. 221.

37. Jessop, op.cit., p. 225.

equally available for all purposes'.³⁸ A given state emerges from and is entwined in a historically determinate latticework of social processes and power relations. Its working will also buttress the reproduction of this social formation as a structured whole. Following Bob Jessop's work, the structural constraints that flow from this can be conceptualized in terms of a 'strategic selectivity' that renders the state 'more accessible to some forces than others according to the strategies they adopt to gain power', and 'because of the modes of intervention and resources which characterize the system'.³⁹

In this chapter, I am primarily concerned with how subaltern groups encounter both enablements and constraints as they engage with and appropriate the 'universalizing vocabularies' of democratic rights, citizenship, and constitutional entitlements espoused by the modern Indian state.⁴⁰ Such vocabularies are of course central to the hegemonic projects that animate state formation, but they also tend to become 'sites of protracted social struggle as to what they mean and for whom' as subaltern groups initiate and pursue emancipatory struggles.⁴¹

In what follows, I shall discuss these questions in relation to grassroots resistance by Adivasis to the 'everyday tyranny' of the local state in western Madhya Pradesh.⁴² As Ramachandra Guha has noted, Adivasis are, as a whole and broadly speaking, the people that 'have gained least and lost most from six decades of democracy and development in India'.⁴³ This is also true of the Bhil, Bhilala, and Barela communities of western Madhya Pradesh. The districts in which they constitute the dominant part of the population – Jhabua, Alirajpur, Khargone, and Badwani – figure in the lowest rungs of the Madhya Pradesh Human Development Index, with Jhabua and Badwani as the two bottom-most districts.⁴⁴

38. Jessop, *State Theory*, p. 250.

39. Jessop, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

40. P. Corrigan and D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 7.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Alf Gunvald Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage*, London: Routledge, 2010.

42. Ramachandra Guha, 'Adivasis: Unacknowledged Victims', *Outlook*, 14 April 2010, p. 1.

43. Madhya Pradesh Human Development Report, Bhopal: Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2007. In 2007, when this report was published, Alirajpur was still a tehsil in Jhabua district.

44. I base this account on a series of interviews with AMS activists carried out in 2009 and 2010. In order to reconstruct the detail and sequence of events in the repression of the AMS, I have also drawn extensively on Amita Baviskar's (2001) rich and dense account, which in turn is based on her intervention as a human rights activist during the events of 1997–8. In addition, I also draw on AMS (1998) and Amnesty International (2000), as well as Baviskar's (1995) analysis of the KMCS. See Nilsen (2010) for an extended account of everyday tyranny.

The impact of rampant poverty and exploitation on Adivasi communities has been compounded by political disenfranchisement. Until recently, making a rights-based claim on the state was unthinkable for most Adivasis in this region; the state and its officials were dangerous figures that one avoided or appeased, and under no circumstance challenged. In the following sections, I will show how Adivasis have sought to challenge this aspect of their subordination through collective oppositional projects centred on the making of rights-based claims. Furthermore, I will also delineate how these democratic struggles have encountered their limits when their momentum has become such as to threaten regional elites and their hold on the state. In the concluding remarks, I briefly discuss the strategic implications of these experiences.

DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLES IN THE ADIVASI HEARTLAND

THE ANATOMY OF EVERYDAY TYRANNY⁴⁵

‘We learned how to speak’ – this is how activists of the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS), an independent trade union working in Bhil and Bhilala communities in the southern part of what is now Alirajpur district in western Madhya Pradesh, would often explain how the process of mobilization that they had participated in had affected their lives. As will become clear, they had learned how to speak a democratic vernacular that asserted basic constitutional rights and entitlements against the workings of a profoundly oppressive local state.

When Adivasis in western Madhya Pradesh encountered ‘the everyday state’,⁴⁶ they did not come into touch with an agency or with officials who provided services to citizens, and were accountable and attuned to their rights and demands.⁴⁷ Rather, what they encountered was an ‘everyday tyranny’⁴⁸ in the form of state officials – forest guards, police constables, revenue officials – whose regime was cruel and coercive: they would levy extortionate exactions on people who were in effect rightless subjects.

45. C.J. Fuller and J. Harriss, *op. cit.*

46. The experience of encountering the state would be different for a small elite among the Adivasis, namely the Patels (the village headmen) and the Patwaris (the revenue officers). These men were normally the nodes that linked the local state to the villages, and they often partook in the coercion and extortion that state officials imposed on the village communities (field notes and interviews, 2009–10; see also Baviskar, 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 11).

47. Alf Gunvald Nilsen, *op. cit.*, 2010.

48. Ratan, interview, March 2003.

One KMCS activist recounted how officials of the state were a persistent source of fear for the villagers. The officials working for the forest department and the revenue department, as well as the local police, harassed and extorted the villagers very badly. The fear of the officials was such that, if two brothers were caught working on a field in the forest, one of them would do the ploughing, and the other would stand guard to look out for the forest rangers. If they were caught ploughing their field, they risked being beaten up, or having their hand nailed to the trunk of a tree. Invariably, villagers who were caught cultivating their plots in the forest would be taken to the local police station. A savage beating would follow, and a case would be filed against them for encroaching on reserved forests. This would in turn be used as a means to extort money from the villagers: a handsome bribe would make the charges disappear. If officials ran into a villager on the road, they would often demand that he or she carry their bags for them. If this was refused – and even if people failed to greet the officials politely – they would be given a heavy bashing.⁴⁹

This is only one of many accounts of the violence, coercion and extortion meted out by state officials that I came across during the course of my research among activists from the Bhil communities in Alirajpur district. In another case, villagers told me how, if they were caught walking along the road carrying a sickle, they would be accused of going to collect fodder from the forest and beaten up; the officials would invariably demand money from them if they wanted to avoid criminal charges. Similarly, if people were caught with an axe, or if they were carrying firewood, they would risk beatings and extortion. If someone needed to cut down trees to get building materials for a house, the forest guards demanded a bribe of up to Rs. 2,500, chickens and homemade liquor.

Forest and forest resources were so central to the working of everyday tyranny because of the fact that Adivasi livelihoods contravened the formal laws of the land.⁵⁰ Among the Bhils and Bhilalas in western Madhya Pradesh, the practice of clearing and cultivating plots of land in the forest, a practice known as *nevad*, is an essential part of their lifestyle. The yields from these plots complement that from the revenue land that borders the village huts. The forest also provides livestock fodder, firewood and building materials, and various forms of minor forest produce that can be sold in the *haat* (market) in nearby towns. However, these

49. This is not to say that breach of forest law was the only source of state tyranny in the region. See Nilsen (2010) for a more detailed account of the manifold ways in which the local state imposed its regime of extortion on the Alirajpur communities.

50. M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993.

livelihood practices are illegal: As M. Gadgil and R. Guha point out, Indian forest legislation has entrenched 'the right of the state to exclusive control over forest protection, production and management'. This legislation originated in the commodification of India's forests during the British colonial rule. In order to secure the supply of timber for shipbuilding and railway expansion, the colonial state passed a series of laws, culminating in the Indian Forest Acts of 1878 and 1927, which established 'the absolute proprietary right of the state' to India's forests, and thus, abrogated 'by one stroke of the executive pen ... centuries of customary use by rural populations all over India'.⁵¹

State ownership of forests, a phenomenon that carried over into the postcolonial era, was a key moment in the historical process through which Adivasi communities in western India came to be subordinated by centralized state power: the political economy of shared sovereignty in which Bhil forest polities had claimed a stake in the Maratha period disintegrated, and in the process 'the kings of the forest and their subjects alike became the largely acquiescent serfs of the Forest Department'.⁵² The everyday ramifications of this was that clearing and cultivating fields in the forest, as well as other customary uses of forest resources were defined as 'encroachments' on state property.⁵³ Adivasi livelihoods were thus criminalized, and this in turn undergirds everyday tyranny as a state-society relation in western Madhya Pradesh, as it provided a pretext for forest guards and other officials to extort bribes from the Bhil communities.

In Alirajpur, the giving and taking of bribes had become so central to the workings of everyday life in Bhil communities that it was in fact a guiding principle of how relations and interactions between Adivasis and the state were supposed to be structured. Indeed, the local rationality bred by everyday tyranny was one in which the fear of violent reprisal ruled out defiance and opposition to the state and its officials. Whatever kind of resentment may have bubbled beneath the surface, a 'public transcript'⁵⁴ of deference and appeasement was adopted as a survival strategy in the hills of Alirajpur.⁵⁵

51. Ibid., p. 134.

52. S. Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India (1200–1991)*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 167; A. Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

53. A. Prasad, *Environmentalism and the Left: Contemporary Debates and Future Agendas in Tribal Areas*, New Delhi: Leftword, 2004.

54. J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

CHALLENGING EVERYDAY TYRANNY⁵⁶

In the early 1980s, everyday tyranny and the relations of power upon which it rested came in for a challenge when two ‘middle class activists’,⁵⁷ Khemraj and Amit, who were intent on mobilizing the Bhils, arrived in Alirajpur. Khemraj, a first-generation literate from a family of poor Jat farmers in southern Rajasthan and a former student activist, was the first of the two to reach Alirajpur. There he established a friendship with Khemla, a young Bhil Adivasi who had been educated at a residential school in the market village Umrli. Khemla was the son of an activist of a socialist movement that had been active in the region during the 1960s,⁵⁸ and had acquired a reputation for being rebellious and ready to take effective action against misbehaving state officials. Khemla was a natural ally for Khemraj, who settled with him and his family in the village of Badi Vaigalgaon.

Khemla and Khemraj first confronted the everyday tyranny of the state when they came to know that close to Khemla’s village, the irrigation department was having a pond constructed. They signed on to work on the project, and soon discovered that the contractor – a non-Adivasi *sahukar* (moneylender) from Alirajpur town – was not paying the workers the government-stipulated minimum wage. Khemla and Khemraj explained to their fellow workers that this was the case and calculated for them what they would be earning if the contractor paid them the minimum wage. If they made a collective demand to the contractor, they said, he would have no choice but to pay the minimum wage. Under the leadership of Khemla and Khemraj, the workers went on strike and demanded that they be paid the wages that were due to them. The contractor responded by having his goons

55. This should not be read as an argument to the effect that a lack of capacity for and propensity towards resistance has been a constant feature of Adivasi relations to external social groups and forces. Rather, the history of Bhil and Bhilala Adivasis in western India ‘has been a chronicle of incorporation and resistance’. (Baviskar 1995: 85) from the nineteenth century onwards (see Hardiman 1987 and Skaria 1999). Immediately after Independence in 1947, the region witnessed the rise of the Lal Topi Andolan under socialist leadership. The Lal Topi Andolan made substantial headway in challenging the oppression of Adivasis by users and championing the rights of Adivasis to forest resources. However, the movement was brutally repressed in the 1960s, and the living memory of this repression seems to have acted as a barrier for open defiance and resistance to the state (Nilsen 2010).

56. This section is based on interviews with KMCS activists carried out in 2003 and 2009–10. I have also drawn on Baviskar (1995) and Banerjee (n.d.).

57. This is the common term used to describe activists who come from an urban background, who tend to be highly educated and who have grown up in families engaged in white-collar work. The following account of the KMCS is based on interviews carried out in 2003 and 2009–10, as well as Baviskar (1995, chap. 8) and Banerjee (n.d., chaps. 3 and 4).

58. This was the Lal Topi Andolan. See footnote xlviii.

beat up Khemla, but this did not deter the strikers. Ultimately, the Subdivisional Magistrate intervened and settled the matter in favour of the striking workers.

The news of the successful confrontation spread like wildfire in the area, and served the 'dual function of informing and mobilizing at the same time'.⁵⁹ Calls came from nearby villages, who asked the activists to come and stay, and help them with their problems. At this point, Khemla and Khemraj had been joined by Amit, a middle class activist who had left his studies at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi. The three travelled from village to village, where people would share with them their experiences of the everyday tyranny of the local state and its officials. And through this process, a foundation was established for collective mobilization.

When news reached Khemraj that several people from the village of Gondwani had been picked up by forest guards and taken to the Range Office in the neighbouring village of Attha, a crucial chain of events was set in motion. Along with some of the villagers, Khemraj went to the Forest Department bungalow to intervene. When he approached the forest guards, Khemraj was invited inside the bungalow. But as soon as they had shut the doors behind him, they proceeded to beat him to pulp; using lit *bidis* (country-made cigarettes) they burned his arms. Feeling satisfied that they had taught the haughty activist a lesson, they released Khemraj to his companions outside the bungalow. While Khemraj was taken to hospital, Amit and Khemla organized a march to Alirajpur in order to stage a dharna in front of the *tehsil* office. A complaint was submitted to the police, press notes were circulated, and the incident soon became news. The Chief Minister (CM) – Arjun Singh of the Congress party – felt compelled to intervene, and as a result, several of the forest guards involved in beating up Khemraj were suspended. Digvijay Singh, who at this point was state president of the Congress party and the CM ordered the highest-ranking official of the Forest Department to Mathvad, a small town not far from Alirajpur, to consult with people from the communities. In the meeting, the villagers detailed the misbehaviour of the forest guard. In response, the Conservator implored the villagers to file complaints if such incidents took place again.

In the wake of these confrontations and the concessions exacted from the state, mobilization expanded throughout the southern part of Alirajpur; at its height, it extended to approximately 100 villages. Ultimately, a formal organization was established and registered as an independent trade union under the name Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS). Based in the village of Attha, the KMCS

59. R. Guha, 2002, 'Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 32, 11–17 August 2007, pp. 3305–12.

developed its activities from challenging the brutality and exactions of petty state officials to implementing anti-corruption campaigns, constructive work in health, education and agriculture, participation in local politics and, perhaps most significantly, a protracted struggle for the recognition of Adivasi forest rights.

It was quite natural for the activists to focus their mobilization on the issue of forest rights. Of all the state agencies that preyed on the Adivasi communities, it was the Forest Department that was responsible for the worst depredations,

People were under this impression that their whole lives were bound by the forest guards: ‘if we do anything, we are breaking the law’. . . . And the forest issue was not just asking for land, *hain na*, or complaining against the beating by forest guard. It was a whole idea, instilling an idea in the minds of the people that ‘whose forest is this; did we come here first or did the Forest Department come here first?’ . . . So basically we were trying to say that this is our forest and we have to look after it, and we have to decide the rules and laws for its use.⁶⁰

Following persistent pressure from the Sangath, the Forest Department conducted a survey of *nevad* cultivation in the block of Mathvad in 1988. The survey revealed that all cultivators in the surveyed area had several small plots of *nevad* in addition to their legal holdings. However, the survey did not lead to any concerted measures by the authorities to recognize *nevad* lands as the lawful property of the Bhil cultivators. Thus, the struggle for forest rights carried on, at times escalating into violent confrontations. In the early 1990s, for example, protests against the digging of Cattle Proof Trenches (CPTs) that would block access to the forests for several villages actively involved with the Sangath, was met with police firing.

Ultimately, in 1994, the Government of Madhya Pradesh announced that land that had been encroached prior to 1980 would be recognized. This was announced in response to stipulations from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and was in large part a move geared towards appeasing the KMCS. The measure was met with enthusiasm in the Sondwa block of Alirajpur *tehsil*.⁶¹ However, the results were actually not very substantial. Considerable odds were stacked against the claimants from the start as the Ministry of Environment and Forests laid down stringent conditions for recognizing encroachments in state-owned forests. Furthermore, evidence had to be submitted that the lands in question had actually

60. Amit Bhatnagar, interview, August 2009.

61. A. Baviskar, ‘Fate of the Forest: Conservation and Tribal Rights’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 29, no. 38, 1994, pp. 2493–501.

been tilled before 1980. More often than not, this evidence consisted of receipts given by forest guards for fines paid for the so-called 'forest-crimes'. But such receipts often did not exist: 'Most people . . . were never given receipts because the fines that they paid went directly into the pockets of the forest guards, *nakedars* and deputy rangers. When receipts were given in exceptional cases, very often they were small bits of paper that were easily lost or destroyed.'⁶²

Eventually, a kind of *modus vivendi* was reached between the KMCS and the villages mobilized by it on the one hand, and the state authorities and the Forest Department on the other: the Forest Department allowed *nevad* to proceed in villages that were recognized as Sangath strongholds. Thus, despite the fact that the state did not formally recognize *nevad*, the KMCS nevertheless succeeded in carving out a space for this livelihood practice.

What these processes of contention ultimately achieved was to fundamentally alter the way in which subaltern groups in Alirajpur conceived of and related to the state. The state officials who at one time had been perceived as all-powerful figures by the Bhil and Bhilala Adivasis of the region were now seen as public servants whose powers were legally circumscribed and who were accountable to the local citizenry; a state apparatus that had previously been known only for its forceful exaction of bribes, came to be understood as an institution that was meant to provide services and safeguard rights, an institution upon which rightful claims and demands could be made, and an institution which local people could participate in the running of. It was, then, a process through which formerly subjugated communities emerged as agents who could and would 'seek to engage with the state as citizens, or as members of populations with legally defined or politically inspired expectations' in a competent and assertive way.⁶³

Through this process, local rationalities were transformed. In activist accounts of what lessons had been learned from participating in the KMCS, three themes were particularly important: first, that of losing their fear of the officials; second, that of learning that officials were not entitled to extort them; and third, that of acquiring the skills that allowed them to challenge everyday tyranny. In sum, the transformation of local rationalities revolved around effecting changes in emotional dispositions, cognitive resources and practical skills. A central aspect of this transformation was the fact that the Sangath created a democratic vernacular where before there was none. It was precisely through an appropriation of the 'universalizing vocabularies' of the Indian state, notably, vocabularies of democracy and development, that the KMCS was able to orchestrate this change. Crucially, this vocabulary was infused

62. Ibid., p. 2493.

63. Corbridge et al., op. cit., p. 13.

with forms of meaning, above all centred on the legitimacy of customary use rights, that reflect subaltern experiences of oppression and hopes for change. By deploying such vocabulary to reveal the ‘radical disjuncture between ritual language and social action’⁶⁴ in the workings of the state in Alirajpur, the KMCS democratized local state-society relationships in Alirajpur to a significant extent.

Whereas this is an example of how processes of collective action can alter the balance of power between dominant and subaltern groups in a historically determinate field of force, it is also necessary to take cognizance of the limits to such processes of empowerment.

QUELLING SUBALTERN RESISTANCE⁶⁵

The politics of the KMCS set out to democratize the local state, which is an entity that is suffused with local power relations, and which in turn plays a major part in sustaining and reproducing these power relations.⁶⁶ As C. Jeffrey and J. Lerche have shown, regional elites in India have colonized the local state apparatus through extensive networks of contact and influence. Combined with their substantial purchasing power in the informal market for government jobs, the state system serves as an important modality in the reproduction of class advantage. And crucially, challenges to elite hegemony tend to provoke ‘reactionary upper caste violence and intimidation’.⁶⁷ It is this latter aspect of local state-society relations – the repressive response of dominant groups to democratic challenges from below – that constitutes the focus of attention in the remainder of the chapter.⁶⁸

Khargone district is located just to the south of Alirajpur, and like Alirajpur, it is an Adivasi-dominated district.⁶⁹ Here, during the early 1990s, two middle-class activists, with a background from the Communist Party of India, propelled the for-

64. D. Nugent, *Modernity at the Edge of Empire: State, Individual and Nation in the Northern Peruvian Andes 1885–1935*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 20.

65. I base this account of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan on interviews with AMS activists carried out in 2009–10, Baviskar (2001), Amnesty International (n.d.), and Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (1997).

66. See B. Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, C. Jeffrey and J. Lerche, ‘Stating the Difference: State, Discourse and Class Reproduction in Uttar Pradesh, India’, *Development and Change*, no. 31, 2000, pp. 857–78.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 873.

68. N. Sundar, ‘Vigilantism, Culpability and Moral Dilemmas’, *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010, pp. 113–21.

69. Khargone was divided into Badwani and Khargone districts in 1998.

mation of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS) through a process that shared many similarities with the emergence of the KMCS.

Bijoy Panda, a founding member of the AMS, described the situation of Adivasis in Sendwaha *tehsil* as follows: 'they were exploited, suppressed, brutally killed. And even if they were cheated, and all these things . . . they were not able to open their voice. They were really voiceless. So our initial strategy was to create a situation where people can have their own voice before anything'.⁷⁰

A leading Adivasi activist from Warla block elucidated the relationship between the Adivasi communities and the Forest Department as follows:

The jungle and the Adivasi cannot exist without the other. Without the jungles, the Adivasi cannot survive. We have to pay money if we want to take our cattle for grazing. They would beat up women who go to get wood from the jungles to cook food. One had to give money for the wood also. And if any of our farming tools broke, like a plough, etc., then also we had to give money. If because of the rain or the wind, our houses get damaged and we need to repair them, we still needed to give money. One log of wood would cost Rs. 1,000. So if you use two or three logs to repair your house, you generally have to pay at least Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 5,000. If a person refused to pay, the forest guards would beat him up and make false cases in his name. They had many ways.

'The forest guards', he added, 'treated the people's property – their hens and their goats and so on – as their own'. In the villages, he argued, people knew very little of their rights in relation to the state,

Nobody knew anything. They didn't know a thing about rights. The people thought it was all right to get robbed. If the forest guards beat us up, the people said they had a right to do so. If the policemen would forcefully enter someone's house and catch them with 2–5 litres of alcohol, the people still said it's their right to do so. Nobody knew anything about rights.⁷¹

The same forms of everyday tyranny that were so prominent in Alirajpur, defined state-society relations in Khargone.

The AMS made a great deal of headway in challenging the local elites and their hold on the state in its first years of activity. In the process, a sense of self-confidence and a capacity for assertion was generated in the local Adivasi communi-

70. Bijoy Panda, personal interview, November 2009.

71. Mukesh, personal interview, November 2009.

ties. The mid-1990s, however, would witness the convergence of two developments that set in train a process of violent repression against the organization.

During the first five years of its existence, the AMS rapidly extended its reach across Khargone district: by 1996, it had a presence in more than 500 villages in three blocks of the district, and had linked its activities to several other Adivasi organizations in the area. Consequently, the AMS was also capable of challenging the illegal trade in timber and liquor that was going on in the Adivasi villages. In Bhagwanpura block, some 250 liquor outlets were closed as a result of campaigning by the AMS, which dealt a significant blow to the incomes of a powerful group of vendors, as well as to local police and Adivasi *dalals*. One person whose interests were particularly hurt was Jhagdia Patel, the president of the Bhagwanpura Congress Committee and the hereditary headman of Kabri village, who had profited from illegal trading for a long time. In much the same way, the timber mafia found itself challenged when the AMS stopped a truck that was ferrying illegally felled timber, and reported the case to the police and the media. Local politicians were naturally in a rage, as their coffers had until then been filled with bribes from the timber mafia.

Adding to the concerns of the local elites was the fact that the oppositional project of the AMS was radicalized during the mid-1990s, as the organization took up village self-rule as a key demand. This development, in turn, was a response to what was perceived to be the limitations of the previous gains that the organization had made:

We liberated them, the communities, from the oppression of the local officials, traders, and dominant classes there, but we were not successful to challenge the government policies, in order to control the natural resources. . . . It started in the nineties, in the early nineties, when people . . . thought we should take control over this forest, land, water because even though we are free from this local exploitative system, but we still get these eviction notices.⁷²

The AMS thus linked its activities to the Bharat Jan Andolan, a national network of social movements that was led by the one-time Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Dr B.D. Sharma, which at this point in time was campaigning for the implementation of the Bhuriya Committee Report. The report, which had been submitted to the Government of India in 1995, had recommended that tribal self-rule should be implemented in Scheduled Areas. In

72. Nikunj Bhatia, personal interview, April 2010.

response, the central government enacted the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996.

This Act put a potentially effective weapon in the hands of the activists of the AMS, who by this time had managed to gather more than 100,000 people for a national rally championing Adivasi self-rule in the district headquarters of Khargone. The gains that the organization had made at local level, gains that undermined the power base of local Adivasi *netas* (leaders) with Congress affiliations, such as Jhagdia Patel, could therefore be extended, and this made the regional political elites sit up and take notice.

One person who was particularly concerned was Subhash Yadav, the Deputy Chief Minister of Digvijay Singh's Congress government, and MLA from the constituency of Kasarwad in Khargone district. Aiming to quell the advance of the AMS, he entered into an alliance with Jhagdia Patel. Together, they orchestrated the formation of the Adivasi Samaj Sudhar Shanti Sena (ASSSS) in 1996 in order to counter the further rise of the AMS by instigating a series of violent conflicts. An unprecedented campaign of terror and repression would soon follow.

The conflict kicked off in 1996, when the AMS declared that during the Indal festival, the most important annual festival of the Adivasis in the region, liquor would not be sold in Kabri village. As retaliation, Jhagdia Patel and his men abducted one of the anti-liquor activists and tortured him: they broke one of his legs and one of his arms, and then proceeded to urinate in his mouth when he asked for a drink of water.

A few days later, Rem Singh, sarpanch (elected head) of Kabri and the leader of the anti-liquor campaign in the village, was called to the local police station to negotiate the dispute with Jhagdia Patel. This, however, turned out to be a trap: while on their way to the thana (police station), Rem Singh and his men were ambushed by Jhagdia Patel's followers. While they made their escape, one of Rem Singh's companions shot and killed one of Jhagdia's men with his bow and arrow. When the police arrived in Kabri for investigations the next day, they beat up the women who had stayed behind in the village after the men had sought refuge in the forest. Following this, Jhagdia Patel's men went on the rampage: the houses of Rem Singh and other anti-liquor activists affiliated with the AMS were looted, vandalized and burnt.

The conflict escalated the next year. In his capacity as Deputy CM, Subhash Yadav made a speech in June 1997 in which he accused the AMS of being a Naxalite organization involved in sabotaging the government's development projects. If he were Home Minister, he proclaimed, the AMS would have been driven out not

just of Madhya Pradesh, but of India. The next month witnessed a spate of attacks on AMS activists.

Repression started with full force, however, after Kaliabhai, an activist with the AMS, made an intervention in the negotiation of a property dispute in the village of Julwania. A panchayat consisting of the *patels* of several villages had been called to adjudicate on a case where two brothers were locked in a conflict over land: one man, Bhimsingh, was accused of having dispossessed his brother Dongarsingh. The panchayat fined Bhimsingh Rs. 35,000 for his offence. Bhimsingh then turned to Kaliabhai for help, who in turn negotiated a reduction of the fine to Rs. 13,000. Bhimsingh was not happy with this result, and directed his anger at Kaliabhai. Encouraged by the local police, he filed charges of extortion against him and 29 other activists belonging to the AMS, none of whom had been involved in the settlement of the dispute in the first place.

This conflict in turn provided Jhagdia Patel with an opening for launching an attack on the AMS. On 25 August, one day after the police had granted him protection, he and a gang of 25 men and a police escort made their way to Kaliabhai's house in Julwania. When they discovered that Kaliabhai was not there, they stripped his wife naked and raped her. Five other women from neighbouring houses were subjected to the same treatment; two young women had their infants snatched from them at gunpoint. The Shanti Sena posse threw the babies in a nearby stream, and their bodies were never recovered. Unsurprisingly, the police failed to register a case against the perpetrators.

Kaliabhai exacted revenge the following day: along with a group of 150 men, he caught up with Jhagdia Patel, his men, and their police escort as they were trying to cross over a small river. The Shanti Sena outfit found itself surrounded, and, along with the police, they barricaded themselves in the house. Kaliabhai and his man demanded that they hand over Jhagdia Patel, and the police pushed him out the door of the house. He was then killed with an arrow, and the party of angry men stoned his corpse.

Cases were registered with the police against more than 80 people for the murder of Jhagdia Patel on 27 August, and a reward of Rs. 10,000 was offered for information about Kaliabhai's whereabouts. In a high-level meeting of the state government, ministers discussed possible ways in which to outlaw the AMS, and on 31 August, SubhashYadav arrived in Kabri and announced that the state government would give Rs. 100,000 to Jhagdia Patel's family as compensation for his death. In a public speech given the following day, Yadav encouraged the Shanti Sena to recruit more activists, and also instructed the police to station five armed people in every village to provide protection against the AMS.

The police established a camp in Kabri, and the Shanti Sena began to tour the area. Villagers were forced to pay a membership fee of Rs. 25, as well as an additional Rs. 11 for a receipt that confirmed that they had paid the membership fee!

In the village of Mandav, in Nepangar block of Khandwa district, some 400 forest guards accompanied by a team of twenty men from the Special Action Force, and led by the Divisional Forest Officer, descended upon villagers who had refused to pay bribes in order for the guards to ignore their *nevad* fields, and started to uproot standing crops. The villagers hurled stones in response, but were met with gunfire from the forest guards and the Special Action Force troops. Two Adivasis were shot dead, and six were injured. Crops were razed to the ground, thus jeopardizing the village's food supply.

A string of arrests followed in September, and leading activists of the AMS eventually convinced Kaliabhai and sixteen other activists to give themselves up to the Deputy Inspector General of Police in Indore. The group was remanded to police custody for two days on 15 September. Two days after this, an armed escort of 15 policemen took Kaliabhai with them on an expedition to locate the firearms that had allegedly been used in killing Jhagdia Patel. As they were travelling back through Kabri, Jhagdia Patel's village, they were surrounded by several hundred people who demanded that the police hand over Kaliabhai. Kaliabhai, who was handcuffed and whose legs were chained, was released to the angry crowd. He was killed with an axe; his corpse was then hacked into small pieces.

Amita Baviskar has rightly pointed out that there was no good reason for taking Kaliabhai on this expedition in the first place: first, Jhagdia Patel had been murdered with a bow and arrow, not a firearm; second, there was no need to return via Kabri village.⁷³ In a report issued by the PUCL in the wake of the killing, it was therefore dryly stated that 'there [was] complicity of the police in the custodial death of Kalia'.⁷⁴

The murder of Kaliabhai, however, was not the end of the repression of the AMS. Attacks continued into 1998, forcing the leaders of the Sangathan to flee the state due to rumours that police authorities were planning to have them killed in fake encounters. The repression proved to be a dramatic setback for the AMS. Bijoybhai summed it up as follows: 'In the heydays, we were having more than sixty full-timers; and after that repression, after two years of that repression we slid down to six'.⁷⁵

73. A. Baviskar, 'Written on the Body, Written on the Land: Violence and Environmental Struggles in Central India', Working Paper, vol. 2, no. 10, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 2001, p. 16.

74. Ibid., p. 16.

75. Bijoybhai, personal interview, November 2009.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS IN ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LOCAL STATE

The contrasting trajectories of the KMCS and the AMS constitute a useful point of departure for problematizing the dialectics of conjunctural opportunity and structural constraints that characterize the encounter between subaltern social movements and the local state.

Much like the KMCS, the AMS emerged through a series of catalytic show-downs that ultimately managed to curb the violent excesses and corrupt exactions of low-ranking state officials. In both movements, this process generated a spirit of assertiveness in relation to non-Adivasis, and moneylenders, traders, and liquor-dealers were compelled to loosen their grip on the Adivasi communities of Alirajpur and Khargone. And as a result, the activists created an awareness of and a working knowledge about the state and the formal democratic principles upon which it was founded. These skills were in turn put to good use in the further mobilizing process.

There is a crucial difference between the two movements, however, in that the AMS took this process further than the KMCS. Not only did they mobilize five times as many villages as the KMCS, thus making itself a force to be reckoned with on the basis of organizational reach alone, but the AMS also emerged at a conjuncture in which campaigns for Adivasi self-rule had been decisively advanced through the extension of panchayati raj to scheduled areas. PESA is in many ways a good example of how social movements from below can modify the form of the state and its modes of intervention, and, crucially, it provided the AMS with something the KMCS never had, namely a means of institutionalizing Adivasi empowerment that was sanctified by the legislative powers of the highest authority in the land.

The KMCS was by no means whatsoever insignificant in its impact on local state-society relations, but its victories were, in comparison with those of the AMS, of a more moderate nature. In terms of advancing Adivasi empowerment, the Sangath could not proceed beyond an informal *modus vivendi* with the state, which allowed *nevad* cultivation to proceed within certain limits. Correspondingly, the repression that was faced by the KMCS was more moderate than the systematic subjugation that eventually broke the back of the AMS.

In the case of the KMCS, there were two cases of police firing, one of which left a young boy injured, numerous beatings at the hands of police and forest guards, some of which have impaired activists' health for good, and countless false cases, which it has taken years to settle for the people involved. Nevertheless, when the KMCS dissolved in the mid-1990s, it was not a consequence of

repression so much as a result of the fact that middle class activists, for various reasons, left Alirajpur, and the movement had not succeeded in replacing the skills and leadership that these people had provided. In the case of the AMS, a coordinated campaign of violence and terror was orchestrated by, in, and through the state with the active support and approval of its upper political and bureaucratic echelons.

The campaign of repression in turn reveals how dominant groups are able to access the power of the state, and use it efficiently to constrain the advance of the movements of subaltern groups. Whereas the AMS still maintains a presence, the repression that it was subjected to has tamed activist ambitions quite considerably: mobilization is now kept within the bounds of what is acceptable for elite groups, at least for the foreseeable future.⁷⁶ And this in turn relates back to the relational conception of subalternity from which this chapter started: the ability of dominant groups to deploy the coercive apparatus of the state with such devastating efficiency is expressive precisely of how 'the structures of political representation and state intervention involve differential access to the state apparatuses and differential opportunities to realize specific effects in the course of state intervention'.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

What the empirical material presented in this chapter shows is that, on the one hand, democratic struggles from below do have the potential to challenge the ways in which subaltern groups are adversely incorporated into a specific set of power relations. This in turn compels us to recognize 'the possibilities for empowerment that might exist within India's polity'.⁷⁸ On the other hand, the chapter has also demonstrated the considerable ability of dominant groups to deploy the power of the state in such a way as to curb the advance of subaltern mobilization. This scenario throws up both conceptual and political challenges.

Conceptually, my main conclusion is as follows. It is of key importance, when we explore subaltern engagements with the state, that we recognize the ways in which social movements from below can and do make use of state institutions, discourses and technologies of rule as they pursue their oppositional projects. The recent wave of Foucauldian approaches to the study of state-society relations in India has made a significant contribution in this respect, but in giving analytical

76. Personal interviews, 2009–10. 78.

77. B. Jessop, *op. cit.*, 1982, p. 224.

78. Corbridge and Harriss, *op. cit.*, p. 238. Jessop, *State Theory*.

primacy to a decentred notion of state power, these approaches leave us ill-equipped to understand the ways in which the state works in such a way as to reproduce a certain configuration of relations between dominant and subaltern social groups. As J. Harriss and C. Jeffrey (2013: 515, 517) have argued about one of the most recent additions to this body of scholarship – Gupta’s (2012) *Red Tape* – the Foucauldians lose sight of ‘the ways in which “the state” is an organization . . . and operates in ways that are patterned over time’, and this is in turn politically disempowering as it ‘diverts attention from its class character’. Remedying this shortcoming entails the deciphering, first, of the way in which the ‘strategic selectivity of the state’⁷⁹ is patterned in a specific context, and, second, analysing the genesis of this patterning across spatial scale and historical time with a view to understanding how it has crystallized through confluences between the political projects of opposing social forces. As I suggested above, Gramscian conceptions of subalternity, hegemony, and state formation may be genuinely helpful in such an endeavour.

The political conclusion that flows from this argument, however, is not one in which the state and its institutions, discourses, and technologies of rule are abandoned as a terrain of mobilization.⁸⁰ It is quite evident that in a context of everyday tyranny, for example, the claiming of citizenship is not only highly likely to be a necessary first step in a longer process of mobilization; it is also a fundamentally radical demand with potentially radical consequences for local state-society relations. As an alternative to the Scylla of seeing negotiations with the state as the *only* terrain for subaltern mobilization and the Charybdis of *rejecting* the state *tout court* I would argue that there is much to be gained from translating the analysis of conjunctural opportunities and structural constraints into multi-pronged strategic repertoires which at some levels seek to make the greatest possible gains within the parameters given by a particular, actually-existing state, and at other levels seek to develop counterhegemonic projects that can challenge the fundamental power equations upon which a given state is founded, and thus decisively shift the parameters of mobilization as such.

Such a multi-pronged strategic repertoire would be grounded in what might be called an *instrumental*, as opposed to a *committed*, engagement with the state: that is, an approach based on limited expectations of what can be gained, and clear understandings of what is at risk when appropriating the institutions, discourses, and technologies of rule that make up the state system. Moving simultaneously

79. Jessop, *State Theory*.

80. See S. Kamat (2002) for an example of such an argument.

within and against the state may prove to be crucial if Adivasis and other subaltern groups in contemporary India are to further their own emancipation.

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3

Canal Irrigation and the Limits to State Authority

The Sardar Sarovar Project in Gujarat

GURO AANDAHL

Big dams are government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where)', asserts Arundhati Roy in 'The Greater Common Good', her widely read and irate essay against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) in Gujarat.¹ They are 'a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom away from him'.² However, the experiences from the command area of the SSP do not confirm this widespread narrative of centralized state control.

The SSP of Gujarat is the massive dam and canal irrigation project that has turned the Narmada River into a large lake and displaced between 250,000 and 320,000 people in the Narmada Valley.³ Arundhati Roy's claim is part of a simple narrative of destruction that for long has held the hegemonic position in critical development studies' approaches to big dams, in general, and the Narmada issue, in particular. Roy's essay may have popularized the argument, but she stands on the shoulders of an impressive range of writers and scholars who have developed this critique over the last 50 years.

The work spans from Karl Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* (1957), via Elisabeth Whitcombe's *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India* (1972) and Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire* (1985), to James C. Scott's *Seeing like a State* (1998) and Patrick McCully's *Silenced Rivers* (2001).⁴ Through these and other analyses, the dominant argument is that government bureaucracies rule hydraulic societies at the expense of local communities and local self-reliance. Large-scale canal irrigation concentrates power and expertise in the state bureaucracy, making cultivators

1. Arundhati Roy, 'The Greater Common Good', in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, New Delhi: Penguin India, 2002, p. 57.

2. Ibid.

3. The estimates of displaced persons vary between a government estimate of around 250,000 people (www.nca.gov.in, accessed in January 2010) and the estimate of Narmada Bachao Andolan of more than 320,000 displaced persons and more than one million affected persons when we include the canal system and allied projects (www.narmada.org, accessed in January 2010).

and local communities (often collapsed into one category), the helpless followers and victims of a process, which is beyond their control and agency.

In this chapter, I follow the Narmada water to the villages of Central Gujarat.⁵ Along the way, I explore the views and actions of actors that have their hands on the management of the water and the canals. We will encounter the farmers of command area villages, the contractors constructing the smallest canals of the network, the field engineers of the government's implementing agency Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd. (SSNNL), and the high-level irrigation bureaucrats in charge of the SSP, working from the capital's head office. This investigative tour of one of the world's most condemned large-scale canal projects, will make it hard to conclude that 'the state' is expanding its control over its rural citizens. On the contrary, the farmers form an important, albeit disorganized, power, and this study of the SSP sheds light on important dynamics of the Indian democracy.

COLLAPSING CANALS AND ANGRY FARMERS

The first irrigation season in Phase 1 of the SSP was originally planned for 1995, and the full project was supposed to be completed and operational by 2004. However, the project was met with opposition of an unexpected force from the 1980s – opposition that was strengthened by the changing zeitgeist and increased awareness of environmental and indigenous rights during the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ The canal-network construction was delayed because of this opposition and because of financial problems in the early 1990s.⁷ Construction was already severely delayed when the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) brought their protests to the Supreme Court of India in 1995, claiming that the project violated basic human rights. Dur-

4. Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957; Elisabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: The United Provinces under British Rule, 1860–1900*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1972; Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: Why Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1998; Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*, enlarged and updated edn., London/New York: Zed Books, 2001.

5. The chapter is based on my Ph.D. dissertation 'Technocratic Dreams and Troublesome Beneficiaries. The Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) Project in Gujarat', 388 pages, Oslo: Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, 2010. Field research for the dissertation was carried out during a total of nine months in 2004–5 and 2006.

6. Ibid.

7. S. Mehta, *Financing: Sardar Sarovar Project*, Gandhinagar: Government of Gujarat, 1994.

ing the five-year court case, until the Supreme Court decided that the project could continue, there was no construction on the dam and minimal work on the canals.

In August 2002, the dam and canal network was finally ready for the release of Narmada water into Phase 1 in Central Gujarat. For Gujaratis, the Sardar Sarovar was a highly prestigious and much-awaited project. 'Ahmedabad's residents still haven't stopped celebrating',⁸ reported *The Indian Express* in late August 2002, and 'The water flowing in the canals has brought the smiles back on farmers' faces in Central Gujarat and parts of Saurashtra'.⁹ Two years into its operation, however, large and important parts of the distributory network remained unfinished with the smallest canals (the subminors) still not being built in most parts of the command area.

The situation in Krushigam¹⁰ village of Jambusar taluka (subdistrict) in late 2004 was typical. Well-off farmers and farmers with fields in good locations were illegally siphoning or pumping water from the branch canal through pipes powered by tractors, diesel pumps or gravity flow. The distributory canal connected to the Baroda Branch Canal had collapsed shortly after the release of water in the canals in 2002 and was still awaiting repair despite repeated complaints from the farmers. The Baroda Branch Canal was partly overgrown with bushes and grass, the roots of which were further weakening the canal walls. Parts of the Branch Canal had collapsed several times, causing damaging floods to the fields nearby.

In Krushigam, the farmers denied the contractor the permission to build sub-minor canals. The explanations for this were various and confusing. Many, including the contractor, said the deputy sarpanch was corrupt and wanted money for himself, or even worse, that the whole panchayat wanted bribes for allowing construction. Some said that the contractor used mud that was needed for house building; others said that the sub-minors would block access roads to the fields. The sarpanch told me that he had to stop the work because the contractor had not followed procedures and asked for permission, and paid a commission for the soil.¹¹

8. Shefali Nautiyal, 'Narmada Makes Sabarmati Come Alive', front page main story in *The Indian Express*, Ahmedabad edn., Friday, 30 August 2002.

9. Express News Service, 'Water in Parched Saurashtra at Last', *The Indian Express*, Ahmedabad edn., Saturday, 31 August 2002.

10. Pseudonym for the village.

11. It is SSNNL policy that the contractor must get the panchayat's permission to take the soil needed for construction, and a fee shall be deducted from the contractor's bill by the SSNNL officials and deposited in the Collector's office, and repaid in whole to the panchayat (Deputy Executive Engineer for Subminor construction, SSNNL Baroda, personal interview, 11 January 2005). It is apparently also customary law in India that the state has to pay the Panchayat for the use of Panchayat land (personal communication with Dr Loes Schenk- Sandbergen, May 2009).

The contractor gave up, and started construction in the neighbouring village. His company lost money every idle day.

The farmers of Krushigam were angry with a state that could neither build waterproof canals nor maintain and repair them. The leading farmers of the village had written several letters of complaint to all levels of the government, including Chief Minister Narendra Modi. In these letters, they demanded the transfer of ‘rude’ and ‘abusive’ SSNNL officials. They made it clear to me that they would not allow any further canal construction before the existing canals were repaired. These farmers were well-off and had invested in pumps, therefore lack of sub-minor canals was not a problem for them. Another two years into operation, in 2006, the sub-minor canals were still not finished. There were still bushes growing in the Branch Canal, but the Distributory was repaired. Farmers were still irrigating through pumps, which meant that only the relatively well-to-do had water access. One sub-minor canal was half-ready, but one of the farmers showed me how we could break pieces off it with our bare hands.

How can we explain this sorry situation of Gujarat’s most prestigious development project to date?

Most farmers explained the dilapidated canal network in terms of corruption. Canals broke because of the poor quality of building materials used, facilitated by a corrupt nexus between SSNNL officials and the contractors. ‘They are all percentage-wallahs,’ was a frequently repeated claim from the leading farmers in the village. This is also what the Krushigam farmers argue in the three letters of complaint described earlier, and what I was told by farmers in other villages. Similar to the systematic corruption in south Indian canal irrigation described by Wade (1982, 1985),¹² the SSP farmers say that the irrigation engineers in the SSNNL expect a kick-back from the contracting firm that gets the tender – a fixed percentage of the contract sum is paid to the engineers, hence the term ‘percentage-wallah’. The contractor will not pay this percentage from his own pocket and thereby reduce his profit, said the farmers, but he will save the money by diluting the quality of building material. For example, he will reduce the amount of cement and replace it with sand. Alternatively, if the government agency provides the material, the contractor will sell some of the cement sacks.¹³

The contractors confirmed the existence of a percentage system, but refined my conception of corruption. When I asked the leader of Contractors Ltd.¹⁴ whether

12. R. Wade, ‘The System of Administrative and Political Corruption: Canal Irrigation in South India’, *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 18, 1982, pp. 287–328; R. Wade, ‘The Market for Public Office: Why the Indian State is Not Better at Development’, *World Development*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1985, pp. 467–97.

they had to 'bribe' the SSNNL officials in order to get a contract, he laughed and shook his head. 'Single officials never ask for bribes,' he said, 'but of course there is a commission to be paid when a contract is signed'.¹⁵ I did not realize it at the time, but the contractor here confirmed Jonathan Parry's finding that there are different types of corruption associated with different degrees of moral condemnation.¹⁶ There is a moral distinction between 'gifts', 'commissions' and 'bribes', of which bribes are regarded to be the most immoral.¹⁷

Another contractor explained that a total of 5 per cent of the contract sum is paid directly to the different staff at the SSNNL office: 1 per cent each for the section officer, the deputy engineer, the executive engineer and the quality controller, 0.2 per cent each for the accountant, the secretary and some of the other staff.¹⁸ Such a percentage system seems to have been informally institutionalized for a relatively long time in India. According to the Santhanam Commission report of 1963, a regular percentage of the contract sum on public works was often demanded by government offices and shared among various government officials for the allocation of construction contracts.¹⁹ However, the question still remains whether this illegal, but institutionalized, percentage system is the cause of the broken canals in the SSP command area. In other words, are the command area problems mainly caused by the corrupt Indian state?

Here, the contractors' explanations depart from that of the farmers. Although the contractors also confirmed that the standard of construction was not always up to the mark, they disagreed strongly that they did poor quality work *because of the commission*. According to them, the main reason for the poor quality construction

13. I visited one command area village in Ahmedabad District where farmers laughingly told me that they had all bought cheap cement from the contractor who built Narmada canals in their village. The NGO working on Participatory Irrigation Management in that village also told me that the contractor had sold cement from the site.

14. Pseudonym for company name, 'Contractors Ltd.' had the subcontract for construction of sub-minors in Krushigam and neighbouring villages.

15. Contractor, personal interview, 16 December 2004.

16. J.P. Parry, 'The "Crisis of Corruption" and "The Idea of India": A Worm's Eye View', in *Morals of Legitimacy: Between Agency and System*, ed. Italo Pardo, New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000, p. 45.

17. 'The "commission" is a fixed rate percentage on the value of all contracts – so much to the clerk, so much to his immediate superior, so much to the manager in charge of the section . . . [w]hile the "gift" is for having invitations to tender placed your way; the "commission" is for getting the order, and the "bribe" – a negotiable amount – is paid for passing substandard goods or sanctioning payments for phantom supplies.' Parry, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

18. Small SSP contractor, personal interview, 31 March 2006.

19. R.Wade, *op. cit.*

was the many obstacles in the construction process, to a large extent caused by the actions of command area farmers, i.e. the project beneficiaries. Interfering farmers demand changes in the network design, they block construction, delay the work, and production costs escalate. 'We are forced to do bad quality work because of this,' said the small contractor.²⁰ As we have seen, this was common behaviour among farmers in my field research area.

The engineers in the SSNNL's regional head office in Baroda argue that an important reason for the many breakages in the canals is farmers' illicit pumping from, and frequently also deliberate breaking of, the canals. First, they say, the canals have been unused for six to ten years since their completion, and the wear and tear of time has affected them. Second, the unauthorized pumping of water destroys the canal lining. Pipes make indents into the lining, and weaken the structures. And when farmers pump water during daytime, the water level in the canal is lowered. The canals have to run at full level for the water to reach the tail ends. The canal operators, therefore, adjust the water level by opening gates to increase the flow to the prescribed level. When, at night, the farmers shut down their pumps, the water level increases and the pressure exceeds what the canal is designed to tolerate.²¹ The SSNNL lacked funds on the budget of 2003 for the repair and maintenance of the canal network.²² Without funds released from the central office, the regional SSNNL office cannot hire contractors and initiate repair work. This resource situation was clearly frustrating for the SSNNL field engineers, who had to face the demands and ire of angry farmers. As we shall see more elaborately later, the explanations provided by the government engineers are in line with the arguments of Barbara Harriss-White (2004), that shortage of government funds and resources is a more crucial reason for poor government performance than corruption.²³

The question remains: why were the beneficiaries of this project, which when completed could more than double their annual income, obstructing canal construction and even breaking canals?

20. Personal interview, 31 March 2006.

21. Executive Engineer, Jambusar division of SSNNL, personal interview, 14 December 2004.

22. Superintendent Engineer, Canal Wing SSNNL Baroda, personal interview, 15 October 2004.

23. Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press/Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd., 2004.

THE CORRUPTION DISCOURSE AND ITS EFFECTS

The farmers would often trail directly from the percentage-*wallah*-story into a broader account of the problems of corruption in other sectors of the society. People would tell me that rather than paying ten rupees for a bus ticket for Jambusar, the conductor would charge seven rupees and pocket the money. People would point at the heaps of rocks lying along the village connection roads, and say that due to a 'corrupt nexus' between the contractors and the road department officials, the work was abandoned. Where the roads had been improved, the rocks used were too big and sharp, and destroyed the bullock carts, due to the same corrupt practices. The Government Labour Office (GLO) in each district is supposed to monitor the Minimum Wage Act for agricultural labourers, but in Krushigam, the office had appointed a farmer in charge of collecting an annual bribe from the farmers. After receiving this, the office did not check the adherence to the Act in the village.²⁴ On a couple of occasions, I asked why neighbours did not call the police about repeated instances of severe wife beating, and I was told that there was no point in calling the police as they would not do anything but demand a bribe from the perpetrator and nothing would change. Not only were the government employees accused of corrupt practices, but so were fellow villagers. During interviews and evening chats, I was told that the committee of farmers in charge of the government-financed Watershed Programme in the village pocketed money meant to pay for labourers to dig field bunds and field ponds. And as mentioned earlier, the contractor in Krushigam blamed the Panchayat members for extorting bribes from him before he could start work.

Parry (2000) observed similar widespread popular perceptions of pathological corruption in Indian society – the prevalent belief that corruption has been continuously escalating to unprecedented levels in India since Independence.²⁵ 'A content analysis of *chay*-shop conversation would probably reveal that corruption

24. The practice of the Government Labour Officer (GLO) in Gujarat was described by Jan Breman in 1985: "I am the Government Labour Officer. . . ." 'State Protection for Rural Proletariat of South Gujarat', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 20, no. 24, pp. 1043–55. At this time, according to Breman's article, the Government Labour Office would actually tour the villages and ask labourers and employers about wages paid, although the sanctions against violations of the Minimum Wage were few and far between because the GLO staff sympathized with the farmers and the labourers feared sanctions if they reported about their employers. Twenty years later, it seems the GLO limits his check on the wage level to the collection of bribes, as I was told was the practice in Krushigam and Motugam. This is also confirmed by Breman, in his *The Poverty Regime in Village India: Half a Century of Work and Life at the Bottom of the Rural Economy in South Gujarat*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.

25. Parry, *op. cit.*

beats even the state of the crops', he says.²⁶ But Parry questions whether this talk is an accurate description of the real state of affairs. The incidence of corruption seems to be inflated by popular discourse, and Parry suggests that the reason may be the ever-expanding presence of the government since Independence and is present (in the forms of schools, electricity, clinics, etc.) in areas where it was not before. It may, thus, not be that the government is more corrupt, only that it is larger, and the possibilities of experiencing corruption, or practices which may be interpreted as corruption, are also correspondingly larger.

The widespread belief in a crisis of corruption is not a new phenomenon in India. Corruption has been a recognized problem since the early independent years. In fact, Gunnar Myrdal²⁷ wrote in 1968 that the belief in widespread corruption in India amounts to a 'corruption folklore', which may or may not exaggerate the level of corruption in the Indian state, but which 'embodies important social facts on its own'.²⁸

Myrdal and Parry suggest that the *perceptions* of corruption have effects in themselves. This folklore, says Myrdal, has a bearing on the way 'people conduct their private lives and how they view their government's efforts to consolidate the nation and to direct and spur development'.²⁹ Parry argues that belief may turn into reality when people think that, for instance, access to a government job is unavailable without the costly services of a middleman (*a dala*). For example, those without the means to pay a middleman, may not even try for the job, whereas those who do, will seek out the 'services' of a middleman before they are even asked for a bribe. Other studies on bureaucratic performance suggest other negative effects of a discourse of corruption.³⁰ For example, Banik (2001) shows that unfounded accusations of corrupt practices are used to justify punitive or politically-motivated transfers of government officials, and that such transfers demoralize government staff,³¹ while Mollinga and Bolding (2004) argue that widespread and unfounded accusations of systemic corruption put irrigation bureaucrats on the defensive and make them unreceptive of necessary reforms.³²

26. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

27. Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, London: Allen Lane and the Penguin Press, 1968

28. *Ibid.*, p. 940.

29. *Ibid.*

30. This is not to argue that we should stop talking about or investigating possible corrupt practices. However, we should not take the corruption discourse at its face value and present it as a truth without firm evidence, which is far too common, even in research.

31. Dan Banik, 'The Transfer Raj: Indian Civil Servants on the Move', *The European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2001, pp. 106–34.

Like for Parry, most of the stories of corruption relayed to me were second- or third-hand, and the sources of many were the print media. When the stories and complaints about corruption popped up during conversations and interviews, I asked whether my informant himself or herself had actually had to pay a bribe for a public service, and most frequently I would get a negative answer, but invariably they knew of someone who had been forced to do so. Out of hundreds of brief and long conversations I have had about the issue, I can count on one hand the instances when my informant had been forced to pay a bribe.

Gradually, I started suspecting that the discourse of corruption may also influence the interpretation of government policies and regulations. Take the example of the opposition to sub-minor construction in Krushigam. The policy of SSNNL is that the contractor should get the panchayat's permission to take the soil needed for construction. The company should further pay a 'royalty' for the soil, a royalty, to be deducted from the contractor's bill by the SSNNL and then deposited in the Collector's office, and repaid in whole to the panchayat.³³ The explanations for the obstruction of sub-minor construction in Krushigam were varied and confusing. In hindsight, it now seems plausible that there was some confusion about the correct procedure for the payment of royalty for the use of panchayat soil, and that the contractor interpreted the demands of the panchayat members for a commission/royalty through the filter of the corruption discourse in which all holders of public office are immediately suspected of siphoning off public resources for private gain.

It was beyond the scope of my study to determine whether the commission or the farmer's interference was the main reason for the poor quality and frequent breaches in the Sardar Sarovar canal network.³⁴ However, it is safe to suggest that the prevalent corruption discourse has an effect on its own, regardless of the degree to which it is the correct diagnosis of the problems of governance and policy implementation. It contributes to the very same governance problems by providing justification for policy violation and private acquisition of public goods. In Jambusar, the result is a vicious circle in which delays lead to construction short-cuts and weak canals that break more easily under water pressure, which the farm-

32. P.P. Mollinga and A. Bolding, 'The Politics of Irrigation Reform: Research for Strategic Action', in *The Politics of Irrigation Reform: Contested Policy Formulations and Implementation in Asia, Africa and Latin America*, ed. P.P. Mollinga and A. Bolding, Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004, pp. 291–318.

33. Deputy Executive Engineer for Subminor construction, SSNNL Baroda, personal interview, 11 January 2005.

34. And it is most likely also impossible.

ers perceive as confirmation of their ‘percentage-*wallah*-thesis’, and then use to legitimize their illegal pumping from the canals and obstruction of the construction work. The illegal pumping, in turn, further damages the canals, and the obstruction of canal building leads to delays which, again, lead to poor quality construction.

‘WE ARE NOT SOCIAL WORKERS’

The canal water of the SSP is to be managed through village level water cooperatives (Water Users’ Associations or WUAs), organized around the minor canals. This so-called Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) model was introduced in the late 1980s, and adopted as SSP management policy in 1994. Each WUA will be run by a committee of eleven members representing both the head and tail ends of the village canal system. These have the responsibility for reporting larger damages to the SSNNL, for repair and maintenance of the sub-minor canals, for ensuring that irrigation water is shared on rotation, for collection of water fees, and for sanctioning violation of rules.

At the time of research, most WUAs in the command area villages were largely non-functioning paper organizations. The situation in Krushigam was typical. There were two WUAs in the village, each led by a committee of eleven registered members. Of these, only the leaders knew the rules and regulations for canal water management. There were board members who did not know that they were on the board of a WUA, and the household survey revealed that most of the landowners in the village had at best a vague idea of being members of such an association, although a majority of the landowners were registered as members of one or both of these WUAs. Only 11 per cent of the landowners reported that they had participated in an information meeting organized by the SSNNL, and 80 per cent of the landowners did *not* know that a water users’ association was responsible for distributing Narmada water in the village.³⁵

The SSNNL office in the taluka capital has a staff of around thirty engineers and one computer. The leader of the office, Executive Engineer V. Amin, had held the position for six months when I first met him in December 2004. Since the establishment of the office in April 2001, there had been fourteen other men in his position, an example of the rapid rate of transfers in Indian bureaucracy. Their responsibilities are many: (1) to construct the sub-minor canals, (2) prepare and motivate farmers for WUA membership and participation, (3) motivate farmers to build

35. Aandahl, *op. cit.*

field channels, and (4) monitor water delivery and irrigation. Each field assistant has to cover the work in 2,000 hectares of land,³⁶ 'a huge task,' complained the Executive Engineer. With only one computer in the office, the amount of paperwork to be done also took much time. In particular, the Executive Engineer complained about the task of motivating farmers to enrol and participate in WUAs, 'This is a very difficult task. We are breaking our heads on this task. Illiteracy is much more. At present, we cannot do as much progress as we want. Progress is zero'.³⁷

He said that only 'strong people' come to the meetings they hold to inform farmers: 'We inform the *Talati*, the leader of the WUA, and the sarpanch about the meetings, but the weaker never come. They are prevented from coming.' According to him, there is little the SSNNL can do about this, since, 'We are not social workers'. Amin admitted the problems of keeping the schedule of sub-minor construction. In Krushigam, he said, 'this Motu fellow is trying,³⁸ but he is harassed like anything'. Only one village in his region had completed the sub-minor network. There were many reasons for the success in this area, he said, but the main reason he could find was that the sarpanch and the leader of the WUA in this village were both members of the Swaminarayan sect, and so was his field assistant, 'so somehow we could manage'.

The field-level officers complained about the amount of work they were supposed to do, as illustrated by a casual talk with field engineers during ethnographic fieldwork in Krushigam in March 2006. One evening, a team of three field engineers from the SSNNL led by the Additional Assistant Engineer Madrasi,³⁹ stopped by the veranda of the heads of the leading family of the village when I was there. Rajendrasinh and Sanjaysinh Sindha⁴⁰ were brothers, now in their sixties, and the largest landowners and *de facto* leaders of the village. This team of engineers were not responsible for the SSP work in Krushigam, but knew the Sindha brothers from earlier, and used to stop by for tea whenever they passed the village. Now, they were on their way back from inspecting sub-minor canal construction and minor-canal restoration in their area. We talked about the problem of poor-quality construction, and the lack of cooperation between the villagers and the contractors. The SSNNL field officers said that the farmers refused to let their land be cut in two by the canal network, and some people harassed the contractor and

36. 2,000 hectares is equivalent to around 2,700 football fields.

37. Executive Engineer, SSNNL Jambusar Division, personal interview, 13 December 2004.

38. Contractors Ltd. had the subcontract for Krushigam from Motu Construction.

39. Pseudonym

40. Pseudonyms

demanded money. The farmers knew the amount of money the contractor loses if the work is delayed and used this as leverage for pressing him for money, they said, to which the Sindha brothers agreed. So is the case in Krushigam, they said, mentioning names but asking me to write 'some people' only.

I asked about the WUAs and whether they had started collecting water charges now in Krushigam and elsewhere. Both the Sindha brothers and the SSNNL officers answered in the affirmative and told me the current rates. To my question if this was really happening, they jointly replied that 'Well no, there is no public support for paying water charges. Some people refuse to pay'. After some back and forth on the issue, they agreed that most frequently, people are *not* paying. Rajendrasinh said that this is wrong and that the government cannot pay everything on its own if people are taking water all the time. 'The project is done with the aim of making people happy and raising their standard of living,' he said, 'but how can this happen if no one is paying?' Madrasi nodded in agreement and said that 100 hectares were being irrigated in the neighbouring village of Tingam, although no one was paying. His assistant looked in the files, a big book with records of hectares irrigated and charges collected, and gave the precise figure – in Tingam 125 hectares are irrigated and no one has paid anything. The engineers finally admitted that nobody in *any* village in their subdivision was paying anything. People give lots of excuses, and they say that 'the other villages are not paying so why should we?'

The problem described by Mr Madrasi was the following. The field officers responsible for collecting the fees do not have the power to stop water if farmers do not pay. Farmers are angry and uncooperative because broken canals are not repaired in time. But the SSNNL office in Jambusar lacks funds, as advance funding has not been given from the main office, and they cannot hire contractors. In some villages, people are 'good' and cooperative, and help with the repair of broken canals, said Madrasi, but he was unable to explain why. 'It depends on caste also,' he said, 'but it is hard to guess'.

Madrasi argued that it would be much better if the WUAs built the sub-minors themselves, but Rajendrasinh and Sanjaysinh protested: 'We don't have machinery, and payment from the government is never done in time. So how much time and money can we spend on our own?' This was the widely held view of the leading farmers of Krushigam. Madrasi suggested that the farmers should hire a man to keep an eye on the contractor and make sure he did good work. The wage for the watchman would be an expense for the WUA, but the work would be done in time, and the investment would be recovered when the canals started yielding more profitable farming. 'I can't work in five places in one time,' Madrasi com-

plained, reminding the farmers why it is impossible for the field engineers to supervise all the work done by the contractors. Sanjaysinh agreed that this procedure would be a good way of overriding the corrupt nexus between government officials and the contractor. 'But,' he suggested, 'it is possible that the hired guy will also be corrupt!' 'So the committee must keep an eye on the guy!' Madrasi exclaimed, 'How can I do so much work!' Sanjaysinh laughingly commented: 'If you do too much work, the contractor will get you transferred.' This exchange is an example of the many and frequent remarks about corruption in village talk, the corruption discourse discussed earlier. It also gives us a hint at another factor influencing bureaucratic performance, the looming threat of punitive transfers.

The main problem for repair and maintenance, according to Madrasi, was that the Irrigation Department used to have labourers working under the engineers, who would be tasked with regular maintenance. But they changed the system and introduced the contract system. 'This is the problem,' he said, 'the previous system was more expensive, but it worked, the repair and maintenance was done in time.' He was frustrated that farmers could get away with taking water without paying for it, and asked what advice I would give. I said I am only an amateur, but it seemed a good idea to stop the water if people don't pay. They all nodded, and Madrasi opened his notebook and wrote in English: 'Stop water if people don't pay'. Unfortunately, he said, it is impossible to suggest such things further up the system. The system works the other way,

I get a phone call from Gandhinagar saying 'I want all information about committees and irrigation in your area before evening'. But how is it possible to give information that fast, when there is no organization? They want information about irrigated area, released water, charges collected, such information. We don't have an organization to collect all that information that quickly. They keep reducing our staff, there is too little staff.⁴¹

'So what do you tell them', I asked and Madrasi's response was quick: '*Gappa* (lies). We give false information. Everybody does that. If it is not possible, how can we do anything else? And it is not possible to tell them that it is impossible to give such information. They don't accept that.'⁴² His colleagues joined in, and everybody agreed. They said that maybe you can send such a message two or three times, but if you keep saying it, they kick you out, or transfer you, 'like Amin'.

41. Additional Assistant Engineer, SSNNL Jambusar Division, village conversation personal interview, 6 March 2006.

42. Ibid.

They all laughed at the mention of the transfer of their superior. The general feeling among farmers and these engineers was that this was a punitive transfer due to slow progress. ‘They will order an inquiry into your work and remove all your powers or harass you’, they said, ‘so we just add to the previous information: if we said 100 last time, we say 105 now.’⁴³ This information is then passed upwards in the system and aggregated, from Section Officer (Madras), to Deputy Engineer, to Superintendent Engineer, to Chief Engineer, to the Director and finally to the Chairman of the SSNNL. Aggregated, it becomes the official statistics of progress in the project, the numbers quoted to researchers like me, published on the project website, given to journalists, and from there on to the general public.

A common bureaucratic phenomenon is the tendency to displace the original project goals of social transformation, progress and improved well being with quantitative and measurable indicators of performance.⁴⁴ There are clear signs of the same process happening in the SSP.

Almost all the government officials I talked to about the SSP knew the numbers of the project by heart. Quite early on in our conversations, whether the occasions were an interview or a request for a map or a list of command area villages, they would spontaneously tell me the status of the project through its numbers. One fact was repeated by all, that in Phase 1 of the SSP, from the dam at Kevadia to the Mahi Aqueduct, 1,192 WUAs were registered. This number did not change from March 2004 to March 2006, when I did the last interview. This would be supplemented with other quantitative facts. One official would say that there were 443,587 farmers in Phase 1 of the command area, another would say 3.16 lakh landowners, one would add that of the 1,192 WUAs, 1,179 had been registered under the Cooperative Act, yet another would tell me that they had held 3,000 village-level farmers’ meetings, 200 *taluka*-level meetings, and 50–70 district-level meetings, or that 85 Village Service Areas had completed the canal network down to the sub-minor level, and that in the current season 1–1.5 lakh hectares of the 4.46 lakh hectares in Phase 1 were irrigated. None of the officials ever had to look these numbers up in a file or report.

Quantification and enumeration has replaced quality and function in the evaluation of success. These numbers were the measures of the progress of the SSP, and proof of the immense efforts the government had invested in the project. A new bureaucratic management model adopted by the SSNNL in 2003 may have strengthened this quantitative focus. The organization introduced the Management By Objectives model. At the beginning of every year, each officer sets tar-

43. Field Engineer, SSNNL Jambusar Division, village conversation, 6 March 2006.

44. Scott, *op. cit.*

gets for himself. Then, the required activities for reaching the target are identified 'stage and component wise' and responsibility for tasks are allocated. The progress is monitored and targets revised every six months.⁴⁵ The pressure to meet these targets does not encourage field engineers to report more truthfully about the state of project implementation in their subdivisions.

THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING

In the head office of SSNNL in Gandhinagar, the problems of implementing the PIM and getting farmers to cooperate with each other and with the government were acknowledged. Executive Engineer of the Command Area Development Wing of the SSNNL said that PIM is a new concept for farmers as well as engineers,

The engineers will naturally focus more on the construction process, and the farmers expect the government to deliver at the doorstep. But the Narmada project is of such dimensions that it is not possible to deliver at the doorstep. Gujarat has a long history of successful cooperatives, as seen in the Amul story.⁴⁶ So we thought that farmers should be involved. The farmers will have to invest something, therefore they are not responding initially. But over the last ten months the picture has been quite good, the membership drive is finally working, enrolment has increased, even cooperative societies have started registering.⁴⁷

But this is a difficult job for the engineers, he said, as 'they have never done this sort of social engineering before'.⁴⁸ A year later, he repeated that the main challenge of the project was PIM, and that 'Making people participate in the way we want is hard'.⁴⁹ The challenge of social engineering, of making the farmers behave in the manner necessary for the functioning of the scheme, was recognized and echoed by most engineers. One Deputy Executive Engineer in the Baroda

45. Executive Engineer, CAD Wing SSNNL, Gandhinagar, personal interview, 3 March 2005.

46. Amul is a cooperative dairy, one of the most widely acclaimed success stories of rural development in Gujarat, and a model which has spread to other states. Through village-level marketing cooperatives, even the smallest farmer can deliver as little as half a litre of milk to the local dairy cooperative and get a fair price for it.

47. Executive Engineer, CAD Wing SSNNL, Gandhinagar, personal interview, 3 March 2005.

48. Ibid.

49. Executive Engineer, CAD Wing SSNNL, personal interview, 27 March 2006.

office of the SSNNL complained about the problems of formation of WUAs, saying that ‘In certain areas farmers are saying “first you show us the water, then we will become members”. The farmers don’t visualize the actual beauty of the water users’ association, so they don’t come forward’.⁵⁰

One experienced irrigation engineer who had worked six years in the SSNNL and before that several years as Executive Engineer in the Irrigation Department’s Central Design Organization, complained about the lack of training for such tasks. He averred that ‘Engineers are taught how to acquire land, survey it, prepare the tendering, etc. He is not taught the socioeconomic aspects which are needed after the engineering work is done’.⁵¹

The reluctance to participate in WUAs in the SSP has been explained partly with the recent breakdown in the cooperative movement in Gujarat.⁵² In the villages of one study, the researchers found that cooperative credit banks for agriculture had gone bankrupt, and the Amul cooperatives were not established.

J. Talati, D. Pandya and T. Shah, therefore, suggest that people in these areas have lost trust in the cooperative movement. However, in Krushigam and surrounding villages, the cooperative credit bank and Amul dairy cooperative were operating successfully, with low levels of conflict and high levels of participation and loan recovery. The answer may then lie not in the viability of ‘cooperatives’ as a general model, but what kind of cooperatives. The Amul cooperatives are *marketing* cooperatives, and require little cooperation and negotiation between farmers beyond organizing a board and a milk collection centre in each village. An irrigation cooperative is a *management* cooperative, where farmers have to organize and negotiate the fair sharing of a limited resource. This has proved to be much more difficult.

The daily work of SSNNL engineers is characterized by adaptability and negotiations in their efforts to implement the project as smoothly as possible. One example is the collaboration with NGOs for the motivation task for establishing WUAs. Since the adoption of PIM as the preferred management model for the project in 1994, the SSNNL had involved NGOs in this job in some parts of the command area. This was an ongoing pilot scheme based on the idea that NGOs are closer to the people and better able to communicate with farmers.⁵³ But the

50. Deputy Executive Engineer, SSNNL Baroda, personal interview, 11 January 2005.

51. SSNNL Engineer, personal interview, 3 March 2005.

52. T. Shah, ‘Framing the Rules of the Game: Preparing for the First Irrigation Season in The Sardar Sarovar Project’, *IWMI-Tata Comment*, vol. 11, 2004; J. Talati and D. Pandya, ‘Issues in Canal Infrastructure Development and Canal Irrigation Management’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. xlii, no. 33, 2007, pp. 3422–9.

NGOs and the SSNNL did not agree on the best organization of PIM. One NGO had in 2005 recommended that the formal minor-canal administration rights be handed over to the WUA even with only 51 per cent of the farmers enrolled, which the SSNNL refused. If the administration rights were given to these 51 per cent farmers, the Executive Engineer of Command Area Development feared that they would monopolize the water, not make sure the sub-minor canals were built, and sell the water to other farmers. The SSNNL wanted there to be at least 80 per cent enrolment and also that 25 per cent of the members of the WUA should be 'tail enders', i.e. have land in the tail end of the canals. 'One would believe that these concerns would be held by the NGOs, who are supposed to be pro-poor, and not the government', said the Executive Engineer.⁵⁴ A year later, the SSNNL had accepted that 51 per cent enrolment had to be sufficient before the formal management rights were handed over to the WUA. At this time, the same Executive Engineer told me that the policy was that 51 per cent of the farmers should be members and that 25 per cent should be 'tail enders'. The SSNNL had realized that 80 per cent enrolment was unrealistic in many of the VSAs, and adapted their policy to reality.

SANCTIONS, POWER, AND THE ROLE OF POLITICS

The complaints aired earlier by field engineer Madrasi over the lack of sanctions against water theft and other violations during the chat at the Sindha brothers' veranda is relevant here. In the head office of the SSNNL, the engineers regard sanctions for violation of irrigation policy as a dilemma. Irrigation is important for productivity and to limit the damage and government expenses in drought years. Therefore, the government wants the farmers to use water.

'Water is an essential commodity. If we stop the water, the crop will fail and you will lose the production. We *want* the farmers to use irrigation water. They know this, and play this card', said Vyas.⁵⁵ I believe Vyas here provided an important clue to understand the implementation problems of the SSP. As was also documented in the study by Talati and Shah, there is a widespread perception among project beneficiaries that the need of the state to deliver water is greater than the need of the farmers to use canal water.⁵⁶ The state provides irrigation water with

53. SSNNL, 'An Action Plan for Forming Farmers Water Cooperative in SSP Command', Gandhinagar, 2004.

54. Executive Engineer, CAD Wing SSNNL, personal interview, 15 March 2005.

55. Ibid., 27 March 2006.

the aim of increasing agricultural production, which is necessary to achieve the projected returns on the huge investment made in the SSP. In addition, with the long history of intense conflict, it is important for the government to prove that the controversial SSP is a ‘success’, and success depends on agricultural productivity. There are two types of sanction that is available to the government – to stop water or to fine individual farmers. The first would be a collective punishment of an entire Village Service Area, and thus, would seriously undermine the need of the SSP to demonstrate that the project increases agricultural productivity. The second sanction of imposing fines seems equally unlikely to work, as the government is already not able to collect the water fee.⁵⁷

The field officers furthermore do not have the authority to go against the powerful local elites, especially in politically important areas. Vyas and other engineers blamed the ‘lack of political will’ for the irrational water use. Vyas explained that politicians are part of the reason for the lack of efficient sanctions against policy violations. First, politicians will too easily accommodate the farmers’ demand for water. ‘If we stop the water, the farmers will make a delegation to the Chief Minister and the politicians. They will claim that they will pay later if the water starts running again, and they will get this agreement with the politicians.’⁵⁸

Second, it has been politically difficult to remove distorting agricultural subsidies and charge appropriate water fees. Cheap electricity for farm pumps has been an efficient ‘vote-getter’ in Gujarat since 1988,⁵⁹ and so is the promise of water. Many engineers complained to me about the political clout of the farmers and the irrational water use resulting from it, as exemplified by the following quote from an engineer who concluded that ‘our only problem is democracy’,

Agriculture is subsidised at all levels. Farmers are not paying the actual costs. We are providing water at negligible cost to the farmer. If water is available so cheap, then will he be inclined to invest lots in drip irrigation? At the least we could have charged more for the electricity used to pump

56. J. Talati and T. Shah, ‘Institutional Vacuum in Sardar Sarovar Project: Framing “Rules of the Game”’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. xxxix, no. 31, 2004, pp. 3504–8.

57. A third option was never even mentioned to me by the SSNNL engineers: confiscation of pumps that were pumping water illegally. This would likely have been a very efficient threat against illicit irrigators, but seems to have been a too politically controversial punishment to even consider.

58. Executive Engineer CAD Wing SSNNL, Gandhinagar, personal interview, 27 March 2006.

59. N.K. Dubash, *Tubewell Capitalism: Groundwater Development and Agrarian Change in Gujarat*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

water. Groundwater is now pumped with subsidized electricity. So will the farmer be inclined to save that water? Nobody will understand the scarcity of water unless it is costly.⁶⁰

The political use of the Narmada water was evident in the weeks leading up to the elections in Gujarat in March 2004, when the ruling BJP government released Narmada water into the unfinished canals in north Gujarat.

CONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES DUE TO SCALE

A well-known problem of large canal-irrigation projects is the synchronization of the construction process – the dam and the main canal are completed early, while the distribution network of smaller canals is delayed. The planners of the SSP attempted to avoid this situation by constructing the project in phases and completing the full network in Phase 1 in Central Gujarat first. Among other things, they did not anticipate that sub-minor construction would meet such opposition. The situation of 2002 presented the government with another dilemma. In the absence of a complete canal network, there were large volumes of water available from the Sardar Sarovar Dam and the larger canals. What should one do with this water? In the interim phase, the SSNNL decided for interim allocation of water. The interim policy allows for controlled pumping from the canals, but the government ignored the lack of compliance with the interim policy rules. In addition, the government decided to fill the Narmada water in existing village ponds, lakes, and rivers, even outside the command area. This served to recharge severely depleted groundwater and improved irrigation availability in many areas. A question is what will happen when the canal system is finished, and the government tries to impose austerity on the water users with stricter rules? One irrigation department official commented on the dilemma, 'If you give water for ten years and then stop, there will be riots. Some will say we should, therefore, not give outside the command area. But the other school says: Should we waste water for ten years?'⁶¹

60. SSNNL Engineer, personal interview, 3 March 2005.

61. Dr. M.B. Joshi, Executive Engineer, Kalpasar Project, personal interview, 17 March 2004. Formerly with the SSNNL over many years, now Executive Engineer for the new Kalpasar project in the Department of Narmada, Water Resources, Water Supply and Kalpasar (name of Department of Irrigation in Gujarat Government in 2004).

The BJP politician and former Irrigation Minister Jaynarayan Vyas⁶² was known to have voiced strong words about the creation of ‘rivers of blood’ because of the lack of control of water use in the interim phase after the release of the Narmada water into the unfinished network.⁶³ Although he did not admit to making such a strong comment to me, he said he had worried in public about the lack of volumetric pricing, which ‘should be implemented at the earliest’.⁶⁴ Giving Narmada water to areas that will not get water in the future is creating water rights, he said, ‘and nowhere in the world can any politician take away water rights once they are established’. However, it is ‘not possible to withhold water from people when it is flowing in front of their eyes’, he said. His strong advice, therefore, was to complete the canal network and enforce volumetric control and pricing at the earliest, and in the meantime, ‘educate the farmers that the water will be rationed in the future’.⁶⁵

BUREAUCRATIC BALANCING

Canal irrigation is said to transfer power from autonomous peasants and local communities to central bureaucrats and the state. Seen together with the corruption discourse these highly critical explanations paint a very negative picture of the state, blaming the failure of government programmes on the state, and presenting the farmers and local communities as the victims. My research of the SSP tells a different story. Rather than being disempowered and deskilled by a centralized high-modernist canal irrigation scheme, we see that the farmers have ‘cards to play’, and that the relationship between the government and farmer is less a question of state dominance than has been suggested.

Government engineers, in my experience, engage more in negotiating between competing claims on and aims of the state, balancing difficult dilemmas and scarce resources, rather than simple dominance and rent-seeking. It is often claimed that the reason for the implementation problems of participatory management models at the field level is that the process is thwarted by field engineers who

62. Former Minister for Narmada and Major Irrigation Projects of the Government of Gujarat (1995–7, and 1998–2000), and former chairman of the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd. (1995–7) during the BJP Government.

63. Y.K. Alagh told me this and suggested I interview Vyas for a critical perspective on project implementation.

64. Presumably because he perceived me as likely to be a supporter of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and also because he was planning a comeback in the next Gujarat Assembly elections.

65. Jaynarayan Vyas, personal interview, 7 December 2004.

recognize that the transfer of powers to farmers will deprive them of an additional source of income through bribes.⁶⁶ My field research does not support such a claim. It may well be that the SSNNL field engineers occasionally also demand bribes for their services from command area farmers, as popular belief would have it, but I did not come across any direct accusations of this kind. A percentage system for contracts, however, seems well documented, but this works more indirectly to upset the implementation of plans, by depleting the government of financial resources, and through a possible lack of control with the quality of the work of contractors. The contractors are likely to cut corners in construction and blow up their costs in the tender process, and farmers use the percentage-*wallah* argument to legitimize illegal pumping and obstruction of canal building.

The centralization argument against canal irrigation has a tendency to collapse all levels and parts of government into one monolithic category of 'the state', with a common interest in increasing the power of this 'state'. But the case of the Sardar Sarovar shows that different parts of the state operate in different spheres, within different constellations of social and political interests and technical challenges. The field engineer in direct contact with the farmers faces very different challenges in his daily work from his superiors in the head office, who needs to balance the different and sometimes contradicting goals of government policies. Common to all parts of the irrigation department is the need to function within a democracy that gives large groups of voters the real power to overthrow politicians at the next election if they cannot give the impression of having delivered on demands for water and (cheap) electricity. And these politicians have the power to transfer officials in the bureaucracy. As Corbridge et al. remind us, officials at all levels in the bureaucracy must maintain relations with key actors in the political sphere of society.⁶⁷ This brings us to a recurring issue in literature on Indian political economy – the government's degree of independence from strong special interests and classes in society.

A classic study in this field is Suzanne Rudolph and Lloyd Rudolph's *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*.⁶⁸ They argue that small and medium peasants have considerable

66. A claim found in for example S. Singh, *Taming the Waters: The Political Economy of Large Dams in India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; D. Mosse, *The Rule of Water: Statecraft, Ecology and Collective Action in South India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003; Wood, *The Politics of Water Resource Development in India*, Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore: Sage Publications, 2007.

67. Stuart Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

68. Suzanne Rudolph and Lloyd Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman Ltd., 1998.

influence as voters because of sheer numerical strength. As a group, they overlap to a large extent with another numerically strong group: the Backward Castes. This is one of the largest interest groups in India, argue the Rudolphs, comprising more potential voters than any other rural group. In a more recent analysis of the class relations in the Indian political economy, Barbara Harriss-White similarly emphasizes the role of the intermediate classes, i.e. the small landowners, rich and medium peasants, merchants of rural and semi-rural townships, small-scale manufacturers and retailers.⁶⁹ These, and not the urban middle class and the rich elite, are the masters of the India where most people live in villages and small towns. If we are to understand how Indian democracy is working, and why so much is not working, we must understand the interplay, interests, conflicts, and strategies that arise when these economic interests meet different parts of the government.

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69. Harriss-White, op. cit.

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4

Patrimonial and Programmatic Talking about Democracy in a South Indian Village

PAMELA PRICE AND DUSI SRINIVAS

How do people in India participate politically, as citizens, clients and/or subjects?¹ This query appears in various forms in ongoing debates concerning the extent and nature of civil society, the pitfalls of patronage democracy, and the role of illegality in political practice, to name a few of the several concerns about political spheres in India. A focus for discussion has been the relationship of civil society institutions (with associated principles of equality and fairness) to political spheres driven mainly by political parties and to what Partha Chatterjee designated as ‘political society’.² Since 2005, with the publication of the monograph, *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India* (Corbridge et al.), there is growing support for the argument that political cultures and practices in India, from place to place and time to time, to greater and lesser degrees, include

1. Thanks to those who commented on earlier drafts of this piece when it was presented at the Department of Political Science at the University of Hyderabad, the South Asia Symposium in Oslo, and at the workshop ‘Practices and Experiences of Democracy in Post-colonial Localities’, part of the conference, ‘Democracy as Idea and Practice’ organized by the University of Oslo. We are grateful to K.C. Suri for suggesting the term ‘programmatic’ in our discussions of the findings here. Thanks to the editors of this volume, David Gilmartin and Sten Widmalm for reading and commenting on this piece. Please note that the interviews in this essay took place in undivided Andhra Pradesh. The village lies in the new state of Telangana.
2. See, for example, Partha Chatterjee, ‘Community in the East’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 6, 1998, pp. 277–82; Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; John Harriss, ‘Middle Class Activism and Poor People’s Politics: An Exploration of Civil Society in Chennai’, *Working Paper Series*, vol. 72, no. 5, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economic and Political Science, 2005; Ajay Gudavarthy and G. Vijay, ‘Antinomies of Political Society: Implications of Uncivil Development’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 29, 2007, pp. 3051–9; Nissim Mannathukkaren, ‘The “Poverty” of Political Society: Partha Chatterjee and the People’s Plan Campaign in Kerala, India’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2010, pp. 295–314.

notions of citizens' rights and absolute principles of fairness.³ Corbridge et al. summarized the issue as follows, 'The distinction . . . between political society, on the one hand, and civil society on the other, can more reasonably be thought of as a set of interlocking political practices that are arranged along a continuum.'⁴

Seeing the State contains wide-ranging discussions where the authors base their research on the encounters of villagers with state agencies in five localities in northeastern India. With their framing of issues and approaches and their emphasis on field research, Corbridge et al. set high standards for scholarship on politics and the political in India. Missing from the study, however, are villagers' sightings of politicians and their understandings of the role of elected leaders in the achievement of welfare and development. The personal discretion of village, state, and nationally elected officials plays a major role in the distribution of state resources in India. All the more significant in the study of the political is the knowledge of voters' views of those with discretionary power. This chapter explores the aforementioned through the presentation and analysis of interviews in a village in western Andhra Pradesh. Informants' comments include rich composites of ideas and values that illustrate the existence of citizenship amidst clientage and subjecthood in this part of rural India. We find two models for understanding leadership, articulated in the responses given by the 26 informants to the questions developed by Pamela Price and posed in the field by Dusi Srinivas.⁵ One model, we call patrimonial-democratic and the other, programmatic-democratic.

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3. Neera Chandhoke, Review of Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays*, and Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas, H-Asia, H-Net Reviews*, August 2010.
 4. Stuart Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 214; Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Headcounts in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; John Harriss, 'Is Government in India Becoming More Responsive? Has Democratic Decentralization Made a Difference?', in *Simons Papers in Security and Development*, no. 8, November 2010, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 2010; Sanjib Baruah, 'Regionalism and Secessionism', in *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, ed. Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 181–91.
 5. Some of the 26 informants were selected from a list of randomly selected farmers of different size holdings provided by an agricultural research team, which had earlier studied agricultural processes in the village. However, others were the result of chance meetings by Price while conducting interviews in the village over a period of six months in 2003–4 or by Dusi Srinivas in 2007. Still others were interviewed because of their current engagement in politics in the village and the district or their special role in the village economy or in earlier village governance. The population of the village and the adjoining hamlet was about 4,000. The village lies 80 km. away from Hyderabad, the capital city of Andhra Pradesh.

PATRIMONIAL WIELDINGS OF POWER

Discussions about patrimonialism usually refer to styles of governance and the structure of state administration, whether the author is talking about pre-modern or modern state formation. Weber used the term *patrimonialism* in his analysis of pre-modern kingdoms in Europe. Anthropologists of sub-Saharan Africa have applied the model in discussing the nature of post-colonial African states.⁶ Steven Blake greatly expanded historians' understanding of the structure of the Mughal Empire in pre-colonial India by pointing to both patrimonial and bureaucratic elements in the state.⁷

In patrimonial governance, generally, the person of the ruler, not his office, is the focus of the attention of his officers and other subjects. His relationship with them is personalized and not subject to abstract issues of universal regulation and merit. Separation between public and private domains does not exist, and the authority of the ruler is described in terms of paternal benevolence. The ruler is the chief distributor, and he maintains his authority in part through the socially appropriate distribution of largesse and surpluses in production. He is the lord who protects his subjects by his generosity, as well as by the use of force.

In 1989, Price outlined features of a patrimonial style of leadership in the Indian politics.⁸ She argued that populist distribution, with a focus on the person of the political leader instead of policies, and the association of authority with persons and not institutions were among the characteristics of kingly models in Indian politics.⁹ The article contained observations from Price's research, as well as references to anthropological and historical studies of political behaviour and political relations in modern India. Price found the reproduction of kingly patterns of behaviour to lie in relations of clientage in agrarian production and in monarchical traditions of rule that had survived British imperial conquest. Popular worship in temples and shrines assisted in reproducing conceptualizations of lordly and personalized authority. In popular Hinduism, a god or goddess appears as the ruler of

6. See, for example, works by Jean-Francois Médard, including 'Corruption in the Neo-Patrimonial States of Sub-Saharan Africa', in *Political Corruption: Concepts and Contexts*, ed. Michael Johnston and Arnold J. Heidenheimer, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002, pp. 379–401.

7. Steven Blake, 'The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals', in *The State in India: 1000–1700*, ed. Hermann Kulke, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 278–303.

8. Pamela Price, 'Kingly Models in Indian Political Behaviour: Culture as a Medium of History', *Asian Survey*, vol. 29, no. 6, 1989, pp. 559–72.

9. The career of the charismatic film actor, M.G. Ramachandran (1917–87), the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu epitomized this model. See Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, chap. VI.

the cosmos who is honoured and worshipped. Divine discretion decides one's fate as a subject worshipper.

Later, Price found that ideologies of authority and duty in traditional kinship systems can also nurture patrimonial values and models.¹⁰ The reproduction of families and wider kin group as micro-political domains finds strength in ideologies of the personalized authority of the head of the family to whom honour should be shown.¹¹ Patrimonial conceptions, even as they change, have persisted in part because of the relatively slow rate of change in rural societies. They have also been supported by the nature of the distribution of resources of the state, a point which is discussed later in the essay.

More than 25 years have passed since Price's article on kingly models appeared and much has changed in Indian politics, including the deepening of democracy and a focus on development in the rhetoric of political parties. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, to greater or lesser degrees, constituents are demanding more from the state. With an intensity that varies from state to state, politicians and bureaucrats are under pressure to supply both welfare and development.¹² Nevertheless, as we will illustrate, some patrimonial attitudes, which formed the basis of the kingly model, continue to exist. Thus, we use the term patrimonial-democratic when discussing the nature of patrimonial conceptions among the major portion of our informants. The programmatic model suggests the existence of alternative, general conceptions of the nature of political transactions among some of the informants.

GENERAL MOTIVATIONS FOR VOTING

Most of our informants, representing a wide range in terms of caste identity, political engagement and economic condition, voted with two main motivations.¹³ One, was the notion that if one did not vote, one would be struck off the voters'

10. Pamela Price, 'Ideological Integration in Post-Colonial (South) India: Aspects of a Political Language', in *Re-imagining Indian Political Institutions*, ed. Crispin Bates and Subho Basu, London: Anthem, 2005, pp. 39–62.

11. Satish Saberwal uses a similar method of interpretation in discussing institutions of caste in the reproduction of mentalities in his book *Roots of Crisis: Interpreting Contemporary Indian Society*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996.

12. In the north Indian state of Bihar, a two-party coalition achieved resounding success in the Assembly elections of 2010 with electoral appeals based on its performance in governance with a focus on development. This presaged the success of the Bharatiya Janata Party with its focus on 'development' in the General Election of 2014.

list as deceased. For many of our informants this conviction appeared to have morphed into two related conceptions, namely, (i) one's vote was one's civic identity, and (ii) if one did not vote, one was 'dead' to the village. Being on the voters' list established one's general rights to benefits that the state offered, affecting the terms of one's existence.¹⁴ Even villagers who held strong patrimonial views, as we show in this chapter, had a conception of rights to state resources, associating the appearance of their names on the voters' list with these rights.

Concerning the second motivation, most informants said they voted with the hope that their vote would help bring to office a leader who would do something for them and/or the village. We do not mean to imply by this observation that informants *expected* change for the better. An elderly Muslim man indicated the limitations of that hope for him. He said, 'I vote with the hope that at least the other man would do something good—only with hope.' Then he went on to observe that in elections farmers were like insects that get attracted to a street lamp, '[they] get attracted for its redness, thinking that it's edible, come near and die'.

Several stated that electoral politics had brought change to the village, namely that parties would promise to do better than the previous regime and might carry out some campaign promises for fear of not being re-elected. A prosperous young Forward Caste (FC) farmer observed, 'People are more conscious now, so the leaders have to do something for people these days. They just can't go away without doing anything as they were doing earlier. They can't survive for long if they do like that.' Still, most informants did not trust politicians to be reliable. There was not widespread confidence that politicians would or could carry out their campaign promises.

13. Among the 26 informants, Forward Caste persons included five Reddy caste men, one Reddy woman, and two Velama men; the Backward Castes included five Toddy Tapper men, one Toddy Tapper woman, and one Katika man; the Scheduled Caste people included four Mala men and a Madiga man and woman. There were two Muslim male informants. The villagers did not use the term Dalit in referring to ex-untouchables, but talked about Scheduled Caste status, referring to the schedule for positive discrimination in the nation's Constitution. Forward Caste refers to those with high caste and economic status. Backward Caste designates those of medium and low status.

14. Pamela Price and Dusi Srinivas, 'Hvorfor stemmer folk, og i håp om hva? Intervjuer fra en sørindisk landsby' [Why do People Vote and For What: Thinking in a South Indian Village] in *Demokrati på indisk* [Democracy in India], ed. Arild Engelsen Ruud and Geir Heierstad, Oslo: UniPub, 2010, pp. 89–110. Expanded in English as Pamela Price (with Dusi Srinivas), "'Vernacularisation": Voter Autonomy, and Tensions in Political Conceptions', in *State, Politics, and Cultures in Modern South India: Honour, Authority, and Morality*, Pamela Price, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2013, pp. 290–307.

We were inquiring in 2007 mainly about the Assembly elections of 2004, which the Congress party won under the leadership of Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy (1949–2009), in alliance with three other parties.¹⁵ The Congress-led alliance ran against a two-party alliance led by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which had been in power for two consecutive electoral periods.¹⁶ Some informants said that they had believed in the promises that Congress politicians made during the 2004 campaign. This belief may have been a factor in the hope that they experienced. A larger number of informants, however, said that they did not believe campaign promises, but they still voted with the hope that a good and honest leader would be elected.¹⁷

PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP FAILURE

Why should voter ‘hopes’ be salient? These hopes are in strong contrast to the low *expectations* of betterment that the informants articulated, their conviction that few, if not almost none, of the leaders were willing to ‘work’ for them. The conception that leaders were ‘selfish’ and corrupt was often expressed, and the two characteristics were commonly associated in the minds of informants. They said that because most leaders were selfish, they ‘ate’ funds instead of distributing them further to the villagers. The literate wife of a FC medium landholder observed, ‘Only one among hundred is honest nowadays. Even if there is an honest leader, once he gets an office, he’ll change’. A particularly sharp critic, a college-educated Scheduled Caste (SC) smallholder, was more graphic. Change, he said, ‘will come only after the ruling class has its stomach full. Until then [politicians and government officials] will work for their own welfare’.

This is not to say that there were no informants with nuanced statements about the perceived limitations in government assistance and lack of cooperation from

15. The Congress party emerged out of the Indian nationalist movement and dominated national and state governments in India until the late 1960s. A Congress alliance was in power at the national level at the time of Srinivas’ interviews.

16. The Telugu Desam Party is a regional party based in Andhra Pradesh. It was founded as a Telugu self-respect party in 1982 by the famous film actor, N.T. Rama Rao.

17. Preoccupation with the moral ‘character’ of politicians, and the broadly articulated hope for positive outcomes from the election of a person of good character certainly is not particular to rural India. For observers of the US politics, the successful campaign in 2008 to elect Barack Obama gives good evidence of how personal traits of candidates influenced electoral victory. Reasons for preoccupation with the character of a politician vary among communities and persons, and are subject to contingencies of time.

elected representatives. An elderly SC smallholder was sardonic about the attitudes among villagers in his comments on Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs).

After winning, a leader may do something if he is good. Suppose for example an MLA would have around 200 or 300 villages under his constituency. Can he give benefits to all these villages equally? Who'll do it? At the most, he'll do something for ten people in one village and ten people in another village. So these people call him 'good', whereas the rest call him as 'bad'.

Some informants said that village presidents and MLAs could be hindered in doing good work for villagers because of the limitations of funds from the state government. And a small minority said that the chief ministers had to face the challenges of securing funds for the state from the central government. However, even those informants who commented that MLAs might be hampered by lack of funds also added that MLAs in general, besides being corrupt, were not interested in exerting themselves to help villagers. These elected representatives did not 'bother'. A prosperous young FC landholder, the village president in 2007, gave an unusually comprehensive response when asked why an MLA may choose not to assist a constituent or a village:

There may be a funds problem. Sometimes he may have funds. Some MLAs are active and can manage funds and resources and do some work. But all MLAs may not be equally active. Some may be dull. So he can't get more funds. So he may be incompetent or he may think that [he] wanted to serve one term as MLA and that 'I'm not bothered about the next term, so let me make as much money as possible these five years'.

In the following sections, we explore meanings of the hope of voters in casting their ballots, and thereby come to some understanding of the vibrancy in electoral democracy in parts of rural India.

PATRIMONIAL-DEMOCRATIC CONCEPTIONS

The responses of informants revealed particular lifeworlds, the most common of which were infused with patrimonial elements to variant degrees. The frequency of patrimonial views, values or sentiments differed from being highly involved in

an interview to being non-existent. We chose to designate responses as patrimonial-*democratic*, because of the role of elections in enabling a shift of patrons, enabling voters' hopes for better persons as patrons.

Beginning in the 1980s, the nature of clientage altered radically in Balapalle. The expansion of education and opportunities for landholding, changes in agricultural technology, and developments in electoral politics in the state resulted in a greater sense of personal autonomy among the villagers.¹⁸ Village leadership was relatively fluid, subject to elections, and relations of subordination were less personal than they were under the previous regime of village lords, major landholders from FC families.

Under the previous regime, one's relationship with one's patron tended to be lifelong. Informants used the term *bhayam-bhakti* (fear-and-devotion) to describe the general nature of the attachment.¹⁹ One feared displeasing a person with superior power and influence, a Big Man, because one's dependency was acute. However, mutual loyalty and personal assistance could exist between a Big Person and a subordinate, which accounted for the informants' use of the term *bhakti* in characterizing these ties.²⁰ An old SC man, a smallholder who had experienced hardship when he was landless under the old regime, expressed enthusiasm for the possibilities that existed in 2007, in these words:

Earlier we didn't have a role in government because of kings' rule, *zamindars*, etc. But now you can determine which government do you want. You have the power of the vote. [Democracy] means power is with everybody. It's not with you, not with me.

If there is a house, all the four people living in the house would have power. Democracy means [a government] that takes care of everybody.

Under conditions of greater personal autonomy in Balapalle, what does our use of the term patrimonial-democratic convey? It suggests an informant's relationship with an elected representative which was personal and not subject to governmental regulation. Transactions in this political universe were subject to personal discretion on the part of the leader. The elected representative did a *favour* in responding to a request, and the system of personalized transactions extended

18. Pamela Price, 'Changing Notions of Authority in Contemporary Rural India', *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2006, pp. 301–16; Price (with Srinivas), 2013, op. cit.

19. Price, op. cit., 2006.

20. *Bhakti* is the loving devotion a worshipper feels toward his or her goddess.

even to the office of Chief Minister. One SC small landowner said, in response to a question about qualities a CM should have, ‘All MLAs come together and elect a CM. So they elect only that person who can do favours for them as CM’.

Even if one was no longer subject to lifelong domination by a village lord, in these lifeworlds, sustaining existence or experiencing positive change was very much dependent on the personal willingness of those with power and authority to help a person or a village. Powerful and influential persons, not institutions and rules, made the difference in one’s welfare. An elderly Backward Caste (BC) farmer was of the opinion that, ‘If [a leader] has the will to develop the village, he will do it.’

A ‘good’ leader in this model was one who was not selfish, but one who bothered to stretch himself to help others, distributing resources when material needs were at issue. All was dependent on the leader’s personal character. Leaders did not do the *correct* thing; they did ‘good’ things or were ‘bad’ and chose not to help. This statement from a Muslim smallholder represents a common patrimonial-democratic view of a good leader:

[A leader] should not be selfish. Even if you [a leader] are selfish, use one or two per cent for your sake and do the rest for people. He should come forward and help people. He should be able to donate, even without taking for himself. . . . [He] should tell what is good and bad. If there is a crisis, he should be near you/support you . . .

This man gave a similar response when asked the meaning of democracy:

All of us come together and elect a person. If he takes care of us, then it is a democracy. If he listens to us and solves our problems, then he is regarded as a leader in a democracy and we will be his people. If he does not listen to us, then we can re-elect somebody. We have that power.

A BC farmer came with a similar statement. A leader first and foremost ‘. . . should think, “all are my people”. He shouldn’t have any bias. He should have a helping nature. He should feed his people first, even if he is hungry’. An elderly Muslim echoed the same sentiment: A leader ‘. . . should have love for people, concern for the country. He should feed people even though he himself is hungry. You should help the people around you.’

One of the persons whose notions were the most patrimonial-democratic, the former SC caste leader, said the following about deciding for whom to vote:

I'll see a person with good character, virtues and vote for him. I'll see whether he'll be able to do our work, whether he is a good man. . . . If I'm in a crisis, or if I have a problem, and I go and tell him, then he should immediately respond to it. He should go and speak to the parties concerned with the crisis and solve it. I would see whether he stood by his word and solved the crisis or not. He should stand by his word, when I'm ready to give my life for his sake, he should also be ready to give up his life for my cause.

While some of the patrimonial elements in informants' responses were understated, others were clearly articulated. There was some reference to rulers as kings, suggesting informants' experience of being subjects under the patronage of personal rulers. An SC smallholder gave the following characterization of the electoral system:

It is no more kings' rule. It is rule of the vote. But in reality they won't work for people. Though they should serve people, they go and live somewhere after winning. They are like kings. In every five years, they change places between themselves. They earn for themselves.

When asked what a people's government should be, this informant added that, 'It is a government which functions for the welfare of the people. But such a government is neither there nor will it come in the future. If a leader spends Rs. 10 for people, he says he spent Rs. 100'. Several informants talked about the constituents of the leader as being his 'children'. However, the former BC woman village president did so in a nuanced fashion:

A mother cannot look after both her kids equally, cannot treat them equally. Though one says that all children are equally pampered in a family of four children, someone will get neglected. There will be 150 villages to look after and how can an MLA look after all of them in all these villages equally? The difference in treatment is bound to happen.

The preferred character of a chief minister was dramatically outlined in patrimonial terms by the former SC caste leader:

First [a Chief Minister] should love the people of the state after his victory, after making his party win the elections. He should take care of his party members, he should have extreme patience, because somebody would be abusing

him, somebody praises, the other comes up and falls on his feet for help, and so forth. He should bear all these and yet treat all of them equally, with great patience, only then he'll be a big man. Otherwise, he can't be, even if he distributes gold the size of the hillock, he cannot be [a big man]. . . . Anybody, be it a CM or MLA or whatever, if you want to be a *pedda manishi* [a big person], then you need to be like that.

Out of the 26 informants, the responses of seven men lacked patrimonial elements. These we call programmatic, as discussed later. The other 19 ranged in attitudes from *highly* patrimonial-democratic to *somewhat* patrimonial-democratic. The latter also expressed programmatic views to a greater or lesser extent.

PROGRAMMATIC-DEMOCRATIC CONCEPTIONS

The seven programmatic-democratic informants put emphasis on systems and impersonal patterns in the way they talked about politics, voting and development. Four were FCs, one was a BC, and two were SCs. One of the FCs and the two SCs had graduated from college with Bachelor degrees, while the BC had a Master degree in history. The remaining three FCs were literate. As discussed later, literacy is one of the variables to consider in deciding why these informants' life-worlds differed substantially from that of the others. The SCs were in their thirties and married, while the BC was in his twenties and unmarried. The FCs ranged from middle-aged to elderly.

These men tended to talk about processes and policies, without focusing on politicians' personal character, which tended to dominate the other 19 informants' statements. The comments of these seven suggest that they blamed *systems* to have succeeded or failed, rather than impugn the weight of change and welfare on particular persons. The seven talked about wider economic conditions and developmental concerns, going beyond their own particular situations. Even though they were preoccupied with development in Balapalle, they easily talked about the needs of the district and beyond.

An example of the type of thinking of this group comes from one of the SCs, who was commenting on what he saw as the overall failure of the policy of so-called 'free electricity', which had helped bring the Congress party to power in 2004.²¹

21. The 'free electricity' promise in 2004 appealed to farmers who needed electricity to pump water for the irrigation of their fields. Later there were complaints that some fees were charged and the supply of water was irregular.

If we pay more, then we will have the right to question the authorities, we will have accountability. Now if I ask an official as to why electricity is frequently going off, he says, 'I don't know. Anyhow, you are not paying for it. You are getting it for free'. They are selling it to some industries by not supplying to farmers. But we can't make demands on these officials now. Anything that is free is wrong. . . . [The government] should charge money so that we will have a right to ask.

A smallholder farmer himself, he argued that if the government increased the Minimum Support Price of paddy, the price of rice would go up for ordinary people. The government, instead, could support farmers by subsidizing input costs for cultivation. The informant argued with reference to process and policy, not persons.

To greater or lesser degrees, five of the programmatic-democratic informants said that elections had brought change to the village. The clearest statement of this view came from an SC who had been a TDP activist. He said:

Change will surely come through elections, because through elections the governments would be changing. The government that comes to power by defeating the earlier government, its leaders would, after coming to power think that they have to do more good to people than the previous government and hence, strive more for their development. So people will also benefit, so change comes. . . . Congress has brought out some populist measures, as they had to take power back from the TDP.

The other SC did not see much change in the village, in that he found that poor villagers were still very poor. He argued that change could come from elections only when the mass of voters were educated and their consciousness accordingly raised. Otherwise, he argued, some villagers were undermining the value of their vote by accepting bribes from candidates and their party workers. He avers that 'First the voter should get awareness; only then will some benefits come out of elections. If you take money [for] voting, what would the leader do after winning? He recovers the money back from you. So corruption begins from the voter. So the leader follows the same way.' An elderly FC, who had been part of the pre-1980s old regime in the village, shared a similar view, although phrased differently:

Change is very difficult through the process of elections. Change will come only when the people change—[when] their thinking, consciousness, grows. The people should think that, 'I will not be attracted to [candidates'] evil prac-

tices,' and they should be firmly resolved not to accept any bribes from politicians. They should be honest and think that the vote that they are exercising is for the sake of the country. . . . Only then will some change come through elections.

All of the programmatic-democratic informants responded when they were asked about the problems a chief minister faces. This was in contrast to the patrimonial-democratic informants, most of whom had some difficulty in thinking beyond the MLA level to the responsibilities of chief ministers. A prosperous, programmatic FC gave a response that echoed a common observation about chief ministers:

He should get more funds from the central government, and he should be able to distribute them equally to all people as far as possible. This is the biggest challenge. If you ask Rs. 1,000 for the Minimum Support Price for rice and the Prime Minister . . . does not agree, what can the Chief Minister do? If he gives more promises, he will have a tough time in getting funds from the centre for all of them. . . . So he should be able to manage things with the money available. The public would be asking. MLAs would be asking him.

The response from the young BC man stood out on the topic of problems facing a chief minister. He chose not to focus on the office of chief minister when talking about governance and change. He adds:

The fundamental problem before him is how to make the state more developed. In reality the state is ruled by the administrators. They will have more knowledge and only with their support can political leaders function. A good CM is a person who can make the officials work well. Although they make promises in the elections, the leaders have to listen to what officials say, whether a policy is feasible or not.

Some of the seven expressed frustration with what they perceived as low morality in politics. Earlier, we quoted the former old regime FC's reference to candidates' 'evil practices'. It was not only the distribution of alcohol, money, and food during election time that perturbed him, but what he characterized as the lack of a sense of duty among both politicians and their constituents. According to him, 'Everybody has only one motive, to eat the government's money. . . . Everybody is trying to exploit as much as he can of the other. Probably very few people have [a] sense of duty.' One of the programmatic SCs phrased his disillusionment thus, 'It is all self-

ishness. Nothing else. There is no gain for people. . . . There are no true elections, actually. It is all corruption. A person who has money would be a politician'. As we wrote earlier, this informant argued that change would come when the masses were educated. When Srinivas asked, however, if he voted, he said, 'Yes, but out of compulsion. Even if you refrain from voting, the process would not stop. It goes on. Whether it is good or bad. Two fools would be fighting, and we need to vote for a person who is less of a fool than the other. That is [the] compulsion.'

SOME SOURCES OF PROGRAMMATIC THINKING

What characteristic or characteristics do the programmatic seven share, which can explain their difference from other informants in their approach to thinking about elections and governance? These men were not among the group that was selected through formal random procedures. Of the seven, three are included because of their present or past importance in village governance and politics, and the others are the result of chance encounters in the village.

Regarding the seven, we have noted that they came from different castes and that they belong to different age groups. They also represent a wide socio-economic stratum in terms of the size of landholdings and wealth, with the four FCs being prosperous, the SCs being smallholders and the BC coming from a family with a small business. In terms of party preferences, two of the FCs were Congress partisans with an important engagement in local and mandal Congress party politics, while the other FCs were not active in their attachment to Congress. The BC identified himself as having voted for the Congress in the Assembly elections of 2004. One SC, as quoted earlier, said that he voted but did not give evidence of a preference among parties, expressing bitterness about the failure of electoral politics to bring substantial change. The other SC supported the TDP and was a faction follower of the TDP leader in the village. Party preference, then, does not offer any insights into their choice of approach. It is striking that four of the seven, the very prosperous FC, the two SCs, and the BC had Bachelor degrees, with the BC also having a Master's degree in history. In contrast, none of the patrimonially oriented group had gone beyond high school; some had only a few years of schooling, and some were illiterate.

What about the financial security of the seven? We can surmise that the four FCs, all of whom were prosperous in village terms, experienced less dependence for their welfare on the services of the village president and the MLA because of their superior financial resources, their wider knowledge of the world beyond the

village, and perhaps, their networks of connection. Thus, their comments reflected their greater effectiveness in reaching their objectives and lesser vulnerability to the vagaries of politicians' commitments. Furthermore, because of these FCs' superior resources, elected representatives may have been relatively accommodating to their wishes. The BC, on the other hand, was unemployed at the time of the interview. One of the SCs was working irregularly as a local reporter for a Telugu newspaper, hoping for more substantial employment, while the other SC was supporting five members of his family (including two children) with some difficulty.

The relative prosperity of the four FCs could have played a role in the forming of an approach to governance that looked beyond the personal character of elected representatives; however, there were two prosperous farmers in the patrimonial-democratic group who did not engage in the same type of analysis. It is reasonable to assume, however, that freedom from marked scarcity can play a role in expanding the range of models from which a person chooses to explain his or her world.

In the case of the other three much poorer informants, their experience of higher education must be considered as a major influence in providing wider knowledge of society and styles of argumentation. There was no college in the village, though it contained one of the largest high schools in the district. So these informants, as well as the college-educated FC, had spent several years of their youth away from their families and the village, gaining a broader outlook and experience.

PATRIMONIAL CONCEPTIONS AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

About the presence of patrimonial elements, to greater and lesser degrees, among the nineteen other informants, except for the prosperous farmers from this group (mentioned in the previous section), responses from informants suggested some desperation in reaching their goals of well-being. No one spoke of scarcity of food, but in various ways, they expressed financial insecurity. The village is in a semi-arid zone, with agriculture dependent on rainfall and borewells, amidst falling groundwater levels. The failure of successive governments, after years of promises, to supply water for irrigation was bitterly criticized. In recent years, drinking water from groundwater supplies had become polluted with fluoride, and villagers eagerly awaited water supply through pipes from the Krishna River. The Congress Chief Minister visited the area shortly after the election of 2004 and promised the supply of good drinking water in six months. Now, three years later, some informants thought that in another six months the project would be finished, while others were not so confident.

In thinking about the reproduction of patrimonial concepts among informants, we need to consider the dynamics of politician-constituent relations in the state of Andhra Pradesh, as elsewhere in India. At the beginning of this essay, we referred to 'patronage democracy'. In a study of Indian state politics published in 2004, Kanchan Chandra used this term to illustrate the importance of welfare projects and specific acts of assistance on the part of politicians in securing support for political parties.²² Sanjib Baruah's comments on the implications of Chandra's study are pertinent:

Individual politicians are more important in patronage politics than the political party or party ideology, because groups of supporters are beholden to them. A collective allocation of resources through policy might be credited to a party or its leadership, but credit for goods delivered through patronage goes to individual politicians.²³

We can also take into consideration the fact that a common way for a man to acquire influence as he builds a career in politics is to take on the role of a 'fixer', one who assists ordinary people in their dealings with state administration or with other problems requiring the mediation of a person with authority.²⁴

The personalized distribution of state resources and services was accepted as legitimate by those rural folk whose notions of authority were informed by patrimonial models. The main complaint was that politicians were not better persons due to their moral character. As noted earlier, this is not to say that among the nineteen whose statements were predominantly patrimonial, there were no programmatic exceptions. Patrimonial notions dominated the comments of one young BC farmer, but he also noted that MLAs were faced with pressure from local leaders in villages and mandals for 'funds, works to their village. They may be asking for houses, roads, etc. So he should deal with them carefully'. He added that a chief minister had to distribute resources among the MLAs and appease the rival factions within his party. There was a sense among some informants that the palpable scarcity of resources for distribution played a role in supporting imbalances and

22. Chandra, *op. cit.* 20

23. Baruah, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

24. G. Ram and G. Haragopal, 'The Pyraveekar: "The Fixer" in Rural India', *Asian Survey*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1985, pp. 1148–62; James Manor, 'Small-Time Political Fixers in India's States: "Towel over Armpit"', *Asian Survey*, vol. 40, no. 5, 2000, pp. 816–35. A recent ethnographic account of 'fixing' activity is discussed in Björn Alm, 'Creating Followers, Gaining Patrons: Leadership Strategies in a Tamil Nadu Village', in *Power and Influence in India: Bosses, Lords and Captains*, ed. Pamela Price and Arild Engelsen Ruud, Delhi: Routledge, 2010, pp. 1–19.

inequities in distribution, and that structural features affected failures of governance. The nature of political economy, as well as political culture, informed the reproduction of patrimonial models.

INTENSITIES OF PATRIMONIAL EMPHASIS IN POLITICAL CONCEPTIONS

At the risk of being speciously precise, we point out that there were eleven persons among the informants whom we found to be ‘somewhat’ patrimonial-democratic. Two informants were ‘highly’ patrimonial-democratic and six articulated attitudes that we found to be in the middle ground, between that of the other two groups. An example of an informant in the ‘somewhat’ group is a former village president, an illiterate BC woman, Yamma.²⁵ She argued for the importance of elections in bringing political change in Balapalle. Through elections, the founder of the TDP (her affiliated party) came to power as the chief minister and he, in turn, gave the backward classes new opportunities in village politics through reservations for low caste men and women. Twice, SC men became village presidents under the TDP system of reservations in village government elections.

When the SC candidates won and became *sarpanch* (president), all the low castes got political consciousness. Till then, the lower castes or SCs were afraid to talk to a *sarpanch*, meet him or go to his house. But now they came to think that ‘one of us has become *sarpanch*’ and hence, gained confidence, strength, and consciousness. They came to know the power of voting and elections. From then, there is [a] rise of consciousness.

Yamma did not speak in terms of moral indignation when talking about the opposing party and its politicians. She had a pragmatic attitude and spoke well of the Congress MLA from that constituency.²⁶ In speaking of him, however, she showed conviction of the overwhelming significance of a politician’s moral character in the achievement of effective governance. She said that, ‘Even in the present Congress government, our MLA X is a good man, but still not much is going on on the lift irrigation front. Even if one person is good out of a gang of ten members, what can he do alone?’ From her point of view, elections were important because they could give good people a chance to come into politics to help others.

25. A pseudonym.

26. Her husband had earlier cooperated with the MLA when the latter was an Independent.

Her husband, Gowni, gave evidence of stronger patrimonial sentiments.²⁷ Gowni and Yadamma had shared the duties of village president. She had been elected through a reservation provision for BC women. Her husband, however, was the undisputed TDP leader in Balapalle and spoke throughout the interview of the time when *he* was sarpanch (without reference to his wife). Those informants who chose to talk about Gowni's (and Yadamma's) period as village president said that they had been responsible in carrying out their duties. The general opinion was that they had kept their embezzlement within reasonable boundaries. Gowni was more clearly partisan than his wife in his views of the past and present governments of the state. The TDP had good policies and programmes, and the good leaders were TDP men,

Srinivas: What are villagers and officers in Balapalle doing in the [Congress-initiated] National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme?²⁸

Gowni: No idea. I have no idea. Nothing is happening. It is because of lack of good, able leadership. If the leader is not good, then officers won't work. If officers are good, then scheme will be good. In the [state] Congress government, government officers are not working well. There is a lot of corruption in houses, pensions, etc.

For Gowni, however, effective leadership required more than moral intent. On the village level, 'If a leader [is] to grow, then he should participate in all social activities. He should be always available to the people. . . . He should try to solve if there are any quarrels in the village. He should be with people and also he should have some money.' To the question: What qualities should a chief minister have? He answered:

He should have the capacity to run the party. He should have good leadership skills. For example, [TDP leader and former Chief Minister, 1995–2004] Chandrababu came as the son-in-law of [TDP founder] NTR into the party, [and] he is running the party and has proven to be a good administrator. Then [a Chief Minister] should have money, leaders to support him, etc.

27. A pseudonym.

28. *The Act* establishing the scheme calls for a hundred days of work a year in rural settlements, to be administered by both the village leadership and state officers.

Gowni's view of how change in political relations had come to the village was similar to that of his wife, except that he was more enthusiastic in stating the role of his political party: 'From the time that NTR formed the TDP government, the small and lower caste groups could know their power and gained some political consciousness. They could know what politics is. All this happened because of NTR and the coming of the TDP government to power in the 1983 elections.'

Yadamma and Gowni had experience in politics in and beyond Balapalle and contacts with the district administration and in the state TDP. Even though they had sold some acres of land to fund their political activities, it appears that at the time of the 2007 interviews, they still retained some land for farming. Their expressions of political understanding are in marked contrast to those of the two informants we rank as being highly patrimonial. One was the former SC head, quoted several times earlier in this chapter. The other person was an SC woman who was married to one of the former SC village presidents. She said that the family was landless, and her two sons and daughter were working as labourers, even though they had completed, respectively, twelve and ten years of schooling. She said that her house was in poor condition and added that the 'The government should give some loans or some employment for my children or some agricultural land. Then we'll be happy.' Srinivas asked her about the qualities she looked for in a leader, she replied that, 'He should be a good person; he should be able to help us in time of need, when we are in trouble'. A while later she said further, '... he should do good work in the village. He should have a zeal to develop the village and like that.' On the topic of elections and change in the village, the informant said that every government 'tried to do something', except that now, the Congress village leadership was distributing village benefits only to its supporters.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Sudipta Kaviraj has written about the ways in which 'existing understandings and compartments of power' can affect the functioning of institutions.³⁰ He wrote with reference to concepts of Hans Georg Gadamer, in particular, the notion of the 'effective historical', describing how initial conditions in a society can affect the evolution of institutions. While initial cultural conditions affect directions in 'path dependency', contemporary and contingent conditions influence the rate of

29. This point is taken up in Price and Srinivas, op. cit. and Price (with Srinivas), op. cit.

30. Sudipta Kaviraj, 'An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity', *Journal of European Sociology/Arch. Europ. Sociol.*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2005, p. 516.

change. In the decades following Independence, the 'Hindu rate of economic growth' in much of agrarian India contributed to slow changes in relationships of power.³¹ Anthropological studies of rural society in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s portrayed attitudes of subjecthood on the part of low caste people toward higher caste patrons and village leaders.³² However, as Marguerite Robinson illustrated in her study of village politics in semi-arid Andhra Pradesh, by the mid-1980s, the results of, *inter alia*, new agricultural technologies, improved transportation, access to media and expanded opportunities for education found political expression in a new daring and sense of agency among some BC and SC people.³³ Our research in Balapalle in the 2000s, in the same part of the state where Robinson carried out her study, gives evidence of a much greater and self-conscious expression of independence than what existed in Robinson's Mallannapalle.³⁴ The responses of, especially, the programmatic-democratic and slightly patrimonial-democratic informants suggest a desire to understand the functioning of the government and state administration that extended beyond the focus on good moral character and personal generosity. Remaining patrimonial conceptions contributed to nurturing the hope that good persons might be elected to produce better governance.

Balapalle informants mixed notions of rights protected by the state with conceptions of leadership which, for some, implied their status as subjects of elected leaders. Others, who articulated programmatic ideas but who were poor, were citizen-clients. Citizenship, clientage and subjecthood prove here to be fluid identities, with one not necessarily excluding experience of the other.

31. Brass reports that the overall rate of growth between 1950 and 1980, when adjusted for population growth rates, was approximately 1.3 per cent a year. The World Bank estimates 1.8 per cent growth between 1965 and 1988. See Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence*, 2nd edn., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 281.

32. See, for Andhra Pradesh, S.C. Dube, *Indian Village*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967; Paul G. Heibert, *Konduru: Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971; Marguerite Robinson, *Local Politics: The Law of the Fishes. Development through Political Change in Medak District, Andhra Pradesh (South India)*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988; Bruce Elliot Tapper, *Rivalry and Tribute: Society and Ritual in a Telugu Village*, Delhi: Hindustan Pub. Corp., 1987.

33. Robinson, *op. cit.*

34. Price, *op. cit.*, 2006.

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5

Mamata Banerjee

Redefining Female Leadership

KENNETH BO NIELSEN

On Friday May 20 2011 thirty-four years of Left Front (LF) rule in West Bengal came to an end when Mamata Banerjee was sworn in as the state's first woman chief minister. Having visited the Kalighat temple in south Kolkata on her way, Mamata Banerjee arrived at the Raj Bhawan (Governor's residence) shortly before 1 p.m. Dressed in a simple white cotton sari with a blue border and wearing a tricolour *uttariya* (long scarf), she took the oath in the name of *Ishwar* (God) in Bengali on the Raj Bhawan lawns at 1:01 p.m., a time selected as auspicious by her family priest. According to *The Hindu*, Mamata Banerjee later,

In an unprecedented move . . . walked the distance of about half-a-km to the Writers' Buildings, the State Secretariat, even as her security staff had a trying time controlling the thousands of admirers surging towards her. By the time she reached the Secretariat, the road in front of it had turned into a sea of humanity, with people breaking through the police cordons in a massive display of outpouring of emotions.¹

This chapter portrays and analyses Mamata Banerjee as a political leader, and simultaneously seeks to provide a broader insight into the phenomenon of female political leadership in India's democracy.² Through a detailed empirical portrait of Mamata Banerjee, this chapter examines how Indian women with political ambitions carve out a career for themselves: How has Mamata Banerjee emerged as a political leader? To what extent is her political career and style of leadership comparable to that of other important female politicians? And how is female leadership popularly construed and understood in the context of West Bengal? In addressing these questions, relatively limited attention is paid to her party's

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1. *The Hindu*, 'Mamata: 37 Ministers Sworn In', 20 May 2011.
 2. This article builds on an article in Norwegian (Nielsen 2010) published in Ruud and Heierstad (2010). I am grateful to the editors for encouraging me in transforming the Norwegian original into a publishable English version.

stated ideology, and her record of governance to date, but focus is instead on the significance of personal style and image, kinship terminology and popular religion in the production of Mamata Banerjee as a political leader. In the conclusion I reflect, in line with the editors' introduction, on the extent to which the notion of vernacularization helps to make sense of Mamata Banerjee's rise as a popular leader.³

If scholarly work on political leadership in the context of democratic India has until recently been in short supply,⁴ the absence of studies on *women* political leaders has been even more conspicuous.⁵ This is surprising given how the presence of powerful women political leaders like Mamata Banerjee often appears as something of a riddle or a paradox. Given the prevalence of patriarchal forms of social organization, discrimination against and the exclusion of women is widespread in several spheres of life. Indian women are on average less educated,⁶ earn lower salaries, and have very limited control over means of production and capital compared to their male counterparts.⁷ In some states, new forms of female foeticide have led to alarmingly skewed child sex ratios,⁸ a tendency which now asserts itself across India.⁹ Moreover, women's access to public spaces is often restricted, and many formal political spaces tend to be predominantly male or masculine.¹⁰ Indeed, the practice of politics is itself often construed as a male

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3. Lucia Michelutti, *The Vernacularization of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in India*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2008.
 4. Pamela Price, 'Relating to Leadership in the Tamil Nationalist Movement: C.N. Annadurai in Person-Centred Propaganda', *South Asia*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, p. 149; Mukulika Banerjee, 'Foreword', in *Power and Influence in India: Bosses, Lords and Captains*, ed. Pamela Price and Arild Engelsen Ruud, New Delhi: Routledge, 2010, p. xv.
 5. A recent anthology by Price and Ruud (2010) has sought to fill this knowledge gap through ten detailed case studies of individual leaders at various levels. Perhaps tellingly no female leaders are portrayed.
 6. Annemie Maertens, 'Does Education Pay Off? Subjective Expectations on Education in Rural India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 9, 2011, p. 58.
 7. Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
 8. Prabhat Jha et al., 'Low Male-to-Female Sex Ratio of Children Born in India: National Survey of 1.1 Million Households', *The Lancet*, vol. 367, no. 9506, 2006, pp. 211–18; Sabu M. George, 'Millions of Missing Girls: From Fetal Sexing to High Technology Sex Selection in India', *Pre-natal Diagnosis*, vol. 26, 2006, pp. 604–9.
 9. Mary E. John, 'Census 2011: Governing Populations and the Girl Child', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 16, 2011, p. 10.
 10. Cf. Thomas Blom Hansen, 'Politics as Permanent Performance: The Production of Political Authority in the Locality', in *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*, ed. John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt and Vernon Hewitt, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 19–36.

activity,¹¹ frequently characterized by distinctly gendered forms of ‘muscular politics’ that exclude women.¹² Overall, as Corbridge et al. have recently argued, India’s gender democratic deficit remains very wide.¹³

Yet, Indian democracy cannot be characterized as a ‘government of the people, by men’. Certain states, such as Mamata Banerjee’s home state of West Bengal boast of a long history of women’s participation in a broad range of political or social movements,¹⁴ and the reservation of one-third of all seats at local levels of government, introduced in 1993, has meant that more than one million Indian women – ostensibly more than the rest of the world combined¹⁵ – are presently involved in making Indian democracy work at the grassroots.¹⁶ And at the higher echelons of the government, a group of high-profile female political leaders have made their mark on both Indian and international politics. In addition to Mamata Banerjee, this includes, of course, Indira and Sonia Gandhi, the Dalit leader Mayawati, Tamil actress-turned-politician Jayalalitha and the present Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj.¹⁷

The aim of this chapter is not to offer an all-encompassing explanation for the phenomenon of female political leadership, but rather to examine some of the more localized and contextual dynamics that go into the production of particular forms of female leadership, while seeking to retain a comparative perspective. The

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11. Cf. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 116–34.
 12. Lucia Michelutti, ‘Wrestling with (Body) Politics: Understanding “Goonda” Political Styles in North India’, in *Power and Influence in India: Bosses, Lords and Captains*, ed. Pamela Price and Arild Engelsen Ruud, New Delhi: Routledge, 2010, pp. 44–69.
 13. Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss and Craig Jeffrey, *India Today: Economy, Politics and Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, pp. 276–83.
 14. Sirpa Tenhunen, ‘Culture and Political Agency: Gender, Kinship and Village Politics in West Bengal’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., vol. 37, no. 3, 2003, p. 509; Sirpa Tenhunen, *Means of Awakening: Gender, Politics and Practice in Rural India*, Kolkata: Stree, 2009; Sunil Sen, *The Working Women and Popular Movements in Bengal*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1985.
 15. Aksel Sundström, ‘Leaving the “Proxy Woman or Politician” Dichotomy’, paper presented at the Seminar, ‘Democratic Values and Political Practices in South Asia’, 13–15 March in Copenhagen, Denmark, 2009.
 16. Gail Omvedt, ‘Women in governance in South Asia’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, nos. 44 and 45, 2005, p. 4748.
 17. It is important to keep in mind that while these leaders have a high political and public profile, women do in fact remain relatively few and far between at the very top of the political ladder. The number of female representatives in the legislative bodies in most of India’s states remains well below the global average of 20 per cent (Praveen Rai, ‘Electoral Participation of Women in India: Key Determinants and Barriers’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2011, pp. 47–55), and the proportion of female MPs has historically hovered between 4 and 8 per cent. The 10 per cent barrier was only broken in 2009.

first section of the chapter locates Mamata Banerjee in a broader context of power, gender and political leadership in democratic India by way of concrete examples that include, e.g. Mayawati, Jayalalithaa, Rabri Devi and Sonia Gandhi. The second section focuses in greater detail on Mamata Banerjee.

While often the target of detailed journalistic accounts,¹⁸ not much academic literature, barring a few exceptions,¹⁹ has been produced on Mamata Banerjee's political style and tactics. It is likely that her reputation as an unsophisticated and unpolished political maverick has made her something of a pariah among academics. Scholars working on West Bengal politics often tend to dismiss her as an unprincipled populist undeserving of academic attention, and explain her rise to power as a consequence of the political vacuum created through the decline and failure of the Left in West Bengal. While not necessarily incorrect, this 'vacuum theory' of Mamata Banerjee's popularity fails to engage with the substance of her political message and style of leadership. This is unfortunate since, as this chapter demonstrates, Mamata Banerjee has not only redefined the contours of West Bengal politics for better or worse, she has also in some ways redefined and expanded the boundaries of female political leadership. Born into a lower middle class and not particularly political Bengali family in Kolkata, Mamata Banerjee has managed almost single-handedly to build a political career for herself. She has done so by adopting a fiercely independent, confrontational, uncompromising and activist political style, driven by personal will and force. She, thereby, challenges the assumption, as do to a certain extent the likes of Jayalalithaa and Mayawati, that Indian female political leaders primarily build their careers based on family or kin relations with powerful and influential men.

Yet, while Mamata Banerjee's *personality* has undoubtedly been important, one can only fully comprehend the nature of her political leadership if one takes into

18. Monobina Gupta, 'The Paradoxical Figure of Mamata', *Kafila*, 21 April 2011.

19. Mukulika Banerjee, 'Democracy: An Indian Variant', paper presented at the Visions and Voices, conference, 27–31 October in Manchester, UK, 1999a; Mukulika Banerjee, 'Mamata's Khomota', *Seminar*, vol. 480, 1999b; Mukulika Banerjee, 'Populist Leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu: Mamata Banerjee and Jayalalithaa Compared', in *Regional Reflections: Comparing Politics across India's States*, ed. Rob Jenkins, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 285–308; Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and Unmaking of Trinamool Congress', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, nos. 14 and 15, 2004, pp. 1529–37; Kenneth Bo Nielsen, 'Kvinnelige ledere i indisk politikk' [Female Leaders in Indian Politics], in *Demokrati på indisk* [Democracy Indian Style], ed. Arild Engelsen Ruud and Geir Heierstad, Oslo: Oslo University Press, 2010, pp. 63–88; Kenneth Bo Nielsen, 'Congress Factionalism Revisited: West Bengal', in *Trusts with Democracy: Political Practice in South Asia*, ed. Stig Toft Madsen, Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Uwe Skoda, London: Anthem, 2011a, pp. 157–92.

account the broader *cultural* and symbolic context in which it is formed, exercised and recognized. Elsewhere in this volume, Lars Tore Flåten draws our attention to how political leaders may ‘engineer’ or manipulate symbolic worlds to refashion themselves and their message to broaden their mass support base. While gender appears as relatively unimportant in Flåten’s study of L.K. Advani, in contrast, the symbolic or cultural world within which Mamata Banerjee has had to navigate is a distinctly gendered one. This gendered cultural world may simultaneously provide both sustenance for and impose barriers on female leaders.

SITUATING FEMALE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: POWER, KINSHIP, DYNASTIES

Much of the classical village politics literature, rooted in the rural sociology and anthropology of the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized how power and influence in agrarian societies were intimately linked to the control of and access to the primary means of production in the rural economy, i.e. land. Village landlords would act as patrons by granting access to land, and by extending credits and other favours, to their clients, who would in turn lend their political support to the patron in times of political conflict, which typically played out *within* a locally dominant and numerically strong group of high caste land owners.²⁰ In a patriarchal social system, where land ownership tends to be the prerogative of men, women had few available avenues for wielding political influence.

These power structures have since then increasingly crumbled. With the gradual deepening of democracy in India over the past several decades, more and more groups, including the formerly untouchable castes and Other Backward Castes (OBC), have been drawn into the ambit of institutionalized democratic politics. In the wake of this democratic upsurge, new forms and styles of political leadership have emerged at the local, state and national levels. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar use the label ‘the rise of the plebeians’ in Indian politics to summarize the considerable changes that are happening in the social composition of political leaders in terms of caste, class and occupational background.²¹ Yet, the *gendered* structure of political leadership at the state and national levels has proven less amenable to change. Here, female representation has increased only marginally, and within most political parties

20. M.N. Srinivas, ‘The Dominant Caste in Rampura’, *American Anthropologist*, n.s., vol. 61, no. 1, 1959, pp. 1–16.

21. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar, eds., *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2009.

women continue to be marginalized by the party hierarchy and structure,²² often because the parties assume that female candidates lack 'winnability'.²³

How then, do female political leaders reach the higher levels of political power and influence? Among the routes to political power available to women, the dynastic route figures prominently in both academic literature and media reports. While family members of deceased political leaders do not always emerge as leaders, the tendency towards dynastic succession is much more common. Both India and its South Asian neighbours boast several political dynasties that have included a number of high-profile female leaders, who have stepped in to shoulder the responsibility of carrying forth the dynasty's political interests.²⁴ Some two decades ago *India Today* reported during the run-up to the 1989 Lok Sabha elections that,

The list of candidates for the coming Lok Sabha and Assembly elections would make any geneticist conclude that human chromosomes have an as-yet unidentified political gene. The roster of fathers and sons, sons and mothers, sisters and brothers and sisters and sisters contesting simply goes on and on.²⁵

This tendency has not diminished since, and the practice of nominating the sons and daughters of powerful political leaders is well established and endorsed by the electorate.²⁶ Political dynasties are collective repositories of considerable political exper-

22. Rai, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

23. Tinaz Pavri, 'What Determines Women's Entry into National Politics in India? Lessons from the 2004 Elections, 2005', Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Georgia Political Science Association, Savannah, GA p. 4; Corbridge et al., *op. cit.*, p. 278.

24. Inder Malhotra, *Dynasties of India and Beyond: Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003.

25. Cited in Linda K. Richter, 'Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and South-East Asia', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 63 no. 4, 1990, p. 529.

26. Cf. Prafulla Marpakwar, 'Sonia Puts List of Ticket-seeking Kin on Hold', *The Times of India*, 22 September 2009. See Patrick French, *India: A Portrait*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2011, for an illuminating analysis of the presence of dynasties in the 15th Lok Sabha. At the time of writing, the Lok Sabha included for instance Ajit Singh and Jayant Chaudhary, respectively son and grandson of Charan Singh; Dharmanendra Yadav, nephew of Mulayam Singh Yadav; Neeraj Shekhar, son of former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar; Dushyant Singh, son of present Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia; Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury and Mausam Noor, both relatives of former Railway Minister. A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury; and Abhijit Mukherjee, son of President Pranab Mukherjee. Lalu Prasad Yadav also appears to be grooming one of his sons for a career in politics (Raj Kumar, 'Rahul and me? Helluva difference, he's twice as old', *The Times of India*, 24 October 2010), while in Maharashtra, the Thackeray family has recently inducted Aditya Thackeray, grandson of the late Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray, into politics. See Anupama Katakamand and Lyla Bavadam, 'Initiation Rites', *Frontline*, vol. 27, no. 23, 2010, pp. 33–6.

tise, knowledge and influence, and are often embedded in wider regional or national political networks and alliances. They facilitate the intergenerational transmission of political knowledge and skills through socialization so that both sons and daughters learn the formal and notso-formal rules of the political game at an early age. In addition, having a well known surname like Bhutto or Gandhi facilitates almost instant recognition among large electorates and can provide candidates with dynastic connections with a competitive advantage vis-à-vis their rivals.²⁷ Political dynasties, in addition, often have significant resources at their disposal, either in the form of personal wealth or qua links to the state. This allows them to carefully nurture their constituency/constituencies, and campaign extensively at the time of elections.²⁸ Some of India's most well-known female political leaders have belonged to such dynasties, most prominently Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. Interestingly, both of them, for a time, displayed a distinct disinterest in politics and have insisted that they only assumed positions of leadership out of respect for the family and in response to the demand of the people at large. For instance, just months before she was made prime minister Indira Gandhi wrote that, 'It may seem strange that a person in politics should be wholly without political ambition but I am afraid that I am that sort of freak ... I did not want to come either to Parliament or to be in Government.'²⁹

Yet, while Indira Gandhi, without much ado, moved in to occupy the post of prime minister when it was offered to her, Sonia Gandhi declined for many years to lead the Congress party after Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in 1991. She only relented in 1998 after years of sustained pressure from party influentials who looked to her to salvage the party. Later, she turned down the offer to become prime minister of India after an intense campaign by the BJP that portrayed the Roman-Catholic Sonia as a foreign daughter-in-law (*videshi bahu*) unfit to govern Bharat. At the same time both Indira and Sonia have invoked their connection to the Nehru-Gandhi family during election campaigns and rallies, and their dynastic connections have clearly facilitated their entry into politics.³⁰

27. Pamela Price, 'Da Sonia Gandhi ble politiker' [When Sonia Gandhi became a Politician], in *Nærbilder av India* [Close-ups of India], ed. Kathinka Frøystad, Eldrid Mageli and Arild Engelsen Ruud, Oslo: Cappelen, 2000, p. 176.

28. Cf. Stig Toft Madsen, 'Ajit Singh s/o Charan Singh', in *Trysts with Democracy: Political Practice in South Asia*, ed. Stig Toft Madsen, Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Uwe Skoda, London: Anthem, 2011, pp. 73–102.

29. Cited in Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001, p. 283.

30. *Ibid.*; Price, 2000, op. cit.; Uwe Skoda, 'The Politics-kinship Nexus in India: Sonia Gandhi versus Sushma Swaraj in the 1999 General Elections', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2004, pp. 273–85.

Yet, while dynastic belonging has been important in elevating both of them to some of the highest political offices in India – Indira as prime minister and Sonia as the chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance and the National Advisory Council – few dispute the fact that they both went on to become established, skilled and ambitious leaders in their own right. Indira Gandhi was, for instance, widely praised for her determined and independent leadership of the nation during India's involvement in the war in East Pakistan. And Sonia Gandhi is now increasingly recognized as a competent puller of political strings from behind the scenes. She is, in addition, presently engaged in securing the continuity of her political dynasty by grooming Rahul Gandhi for the role of prime minister at some point in the future.³¹

Thus, dynastic affiliation can function as a springboard from which women with political ambitions can gain entry into the world of democratic politics, and from there they can go on to use their own accrued political skills, talent and savvy to further their careers. But dynastic or kinship affiliation may also reduce female politicians to mere proxies, whose primary function is to keep the chair warm for a relative (most often the husband), who for one reason or the other has been temporarily sidelined. The job of the female proxy is to act as the formal decision maker on behalf of her husband and in accordance with his interests and instructions.³² Independent political action and initiative is discouraged, and in the event that her services are rendered redundant, for instance because her husband is able to return to politics and resume office, she is expected to cordially step aside and vacate the seat.³³ In local level politics, it is not uncommon that influential families will field female candidates whenever the seat(s) they wish to contest are reserved for women. But proxy women may be found at the highest political levels as well. A case in point is Rabri Devi, who served as the Chief Minister of Bihar several times between 1997 and 2005. Her husband Lalu Prasad Yadav was first elected to the Lok Sabha in 1977 on a Janata Party ticket. Lalu belongs to the numerically strong Yadav caste, which over the past decades has increasingly come to see itself as a natural caste of politicians, and the support of his fellow caste members was a decisive factor in making Lalu Chief Minister of Bihar for

31. Other members of the Nehru-Gandhi family, who have pursued careers in national politics, albeit on BJP tickets, include Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law Maneka Gandhi and grandson Varun Gandhi.

32. Carole Spary, 'Female Political Leadership in India', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2007, p. 256.

33. Medha Nanivadekar, 'Reservation for Women: Challenge of Tackling Counterproductive Trends', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 28, 1998, p. 1816.

the first time in 1990.³⁴ While Lalu would use his characteristic rustic charisma, keen political wit, and a colourful ‘politics of the spectacle’³⁵ to build a political career for himself both in Bihar and Delhi, Rabri Devi kept out of the public glare. Yet, when corruption charges against Lalu emerged in 1997, he was forced to step down and subsequently jailed, and Rabri Devi was, to the surprise of many, installed as the new chief minister in his place. Prior to assuming the office of Chief Minister, Rabri Devi had never publicly expressed any interest whatsoever in politics. She had instead loyally performed her duties as housewife and the mother of the couple’s nine children. She was also poorly educated, seldom spoke in public, and could neither read nor sign official documents.³⁶ Interestingly, Rabri Devi denied that her husband had had anything to do with her being elevated to the post of chief minister. In an interview she gave in 2000, the interviewer asked her if she had discussed the issue with Lalu before being sworn in. She answered,

No. Never. The party men made me the C[hief] M[inister]. They told me, ‘*Chaliye* (let’s go).’ I asked them, ‘where am I supposed to go?’ They said I have to reach Raj Bhavan for the swearing-in ceremony. I clung to my chair and I refused to go. I asked them ‘Why should I go?’ My party men said they now consider me their *neta*. I argued that I am only a housewife. I work within my home. I can only look after my children, I can’t manage the state. But they dragged me to Raj Bhavan. We are not greedy. The first time I came out of the confines of my home, it was to become the C[hief] M[inister]!³⁷

While Rabri Devi clearly takes care to emphasize her desire to live up to the ideal of the caring, self-sacrificing mother and wife, who is dedicated first and foremost to her home and kin, few believe that her swearing-in was solely the result of intense grass roots pressure from party supporters. Tellingly, Rabri Devi explained that ‘the wife has a duty to sit in her husband’s chair to keep it warm. It is an old Indian tradition’.³⁸ And while Lalu was jailed he frequently received visits from leading politicians, state ministers, bureaucrats and senior police officers.³⁹ It was, thus, apparent that the state was being run from Lalu’s cell rather than from 1

34. Michelutti, op. cit., 2008.

35. Cf. Hansen, op. cit., p. 21.

36. Manoj Chaurasia, *Rabri Devi: Lalu’s Masterstroke*, New Delhi: Vitasta, 2008, p. 88.

37. The Rediff Interview, ‘My name will be there on the pages of history’, 23 February 2000.

38. Chaurasia, op. cit., p. 77.

39. Kalyan Chaudhuri, ‘Another Round for Laloo Prasad’, *Frontline*, vol. 17, no. 8, 2000, pp. 26–7.

Anney Marg in Patna. While Rabri Devi's loyalty has won her praise from some quarters, where she is seen as the ideal *pativrata*, the loyal and devoted wife, others ridicule her as a *gungi gudiya* or *kathputali*, a stupid doll or puppet.⁴⁰

Dynastic affiliation and kinship relations, hence, can be a double-edged sword. They provide women with a measure of political capital and knowledge that is otherwise not easily accessible. At the same time, the support and encouragement of family and kinship networks can be indispensable in overcoming traditional patriarchal barriers to female participation. Kinship and dynastic belonging can then function as the foundation from which women can access, shape and give direction to democratic processes. But kinship may also work to reduce women to mere political proxies or 'token presences' with little or no independent political agency.⁴¹

FEMALE LEADERS BEYOND DYNASTIES

While kinship relations often play a significant part in the making of female political leadership, India's democracy is also home to a number of female politicians who have established themselves as leaders without the benefit of kinship. This category of women, who may be viewed as more or less politically self-made, includes the likes of Mamata Banerjee, Jayalalithaa and Mayawati. A brief comparison of these three women, current or former chief ministers is insightful to foreground both the similarities and differences between them in terms of political career and leadership styles.

Jayalalithaa had a long relationship both on and off screen with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) founder and leader, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) who first rose, with the help and votes from his millions of fans, to become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1977.⁴² Jayalalithaa was the last in a long series of lead actresses starring in MGR's film, and they acted together in more than twenty-five films, often with Jayalalithaa dressed in what many saw as outrageously modern and revealing clothes. Rumours were ripe that she was MGR's mistress off screen, and among AIADMK supporters Jayalalithaa was simply known as *anni*, the elder brother's wife. Upon MGR's demise in 1987, a

40. Spary, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

41. Cornelia Lenneberg, 'Women and Political Leadership in India: Able Politicians or Token Presences?', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1994, pp. 6–14.

42. Sara Dickey, 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1993, pp. 340–72.

battle for succession ensued between Jayalalithaa and MGR's wife Janaki Ramachandran. In accordance with the principle of political succession rooted in kinship, Janaki took over as chief minister, but after an extended power struggle within the AIADMK, Jayalalithaa managed to out manoeuvre and sideline Janaki. Jayalalithaa became Chief Minister in 1991 and is now the undisputed leader of the AIADMK. She held the position of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 2011 till 2014.

Publicly, Jayalalithaa often makes a point out of demonstrating her fiercely independent and supreme political power. Many of her followers liken her to a *veerangana*, a warrior queen. According to anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee, beguiled by her charm and command, men have been said to stand awed in her presence. Self-consciously enigmatic and sparing in her utterances, Jayalalithaa projects the stillness of royalty, and her meetings and negotiations are discreetly arranged. . . . Her private life is closely guarded and her supporters are raised to great excitement by the prospect of an occasional glimpse. Haughty and imperious, surrounded by her coterie, Jayalalithaa demands exaggerated gestures of total loyalty, with ministers and bureaucrats known to prostrate themselves before her in greeting.⁴³ She is also known to let visitors wait for hours, often in vain.

Mayawati's rise to political prominence to a certain extent mirrors that of Jayalalithaa's. Mayawati began as a Dalit activist and found her political mentor in Dalit leader Kanshi Ram. When Kanshi Ram founded the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984, he included Mayawati in the party's core group, and the two went on to work closely for well over two decades. It was with Kanshi Ram's blessing that Mayawati assumed office as chief minister in Uttar Pradesh in 1995, and shortly before his death, he officially anointed Mayawati his successor. Mayawati too has cultivated an image of being a supremely powerful leader, for instance by throwing outrageously lavish birthday parties paid for at least partly by using state funds;⁴⁴ but she has also retained some of her Dalit activist politics, for example by claiming and 'filling' public space with Dalit symbolism, viz., statues of herself, Kanshi Ram and Ambedkar, as well as of the BSP's symbol, the elephant.

As the careers of Jayalalithaa and Mayawati illustrate, women may embark on an independent political career even in the absence of powerful kinship-based political networks, although both relied on the assistance of an influential male leader in the early stages of their careers. To an even greater extent, Mamata Banerjee is an example of a woman who has made a career for herself in politics

43. Mukulika Banerjee, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 290.

44. Sharat Pradhan, 'Mayawati spends crores to fulfil her b'day dream', *Rediff News*, 15 January 2003; Purnima S. Tripathi, 'A Birthday Message', *Frontline*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2003.

almost single-handedly. She *did* receive both political training and advice from influential male politicians (which is more or less inevitable in a male-dominated domain as politics) like Subrata Mukherjee, Siddhartha Shankar Ray and Rajiv Gandhi in the earlier stages of her career,⁴⁵ but unlike Jayalalitha and Mayawati she was not elevated into high office, nor did she inherit control of an already established political party or a clearly defined constituency.

The sections that follow examine how Mamata Banerjee has carved out a political career for herself at the highest levels of both state and national politics. Towards this purpose, certain aspects of her *personal* style of political leadership that were instrumental in securing for her a large political following are analysed. In some respects this style resembles what has been called 'the activist style of leadership' based on an anti-establishment, 'pro-people' and grass roots-based approach.⁴⁶ The link between this style and the more general inscription of Mamata Banerjee into local cultural or symbolic universes is also scrutinized. This account begins with a personal description, reproduced from field notes, based on a face-to-face encounter with Mamata Banerjee in Singur in rural West Bengal in 2007.

MAMATA BANERJEE'S POLITICAL STYLE AND CAREER

The first time I saw Mamata Banerjee live was in December 2007 during the movement in Singur against the setting up of a Tata Motors car production unit. In order to establish the factory some 1,000 acres of farmland needed to be acquired at the behest of the LF government, but as local farmers proved unwilling to relinquish their land in lieu of cash, a local movement to resist the land acquisition soon emerged. Farmers formed the Singur Krishi Jami Raksha Committee (SKJRC), the committee to save the farmland of Singur in 2006, which Mamata Banerjee's party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) both supported and increasingly also led due to its strong political and organizational presence in Singur.⁴⁷ On this December day Mamata Banerjee had come to Singur to commemorate the first death anniversary of Tapasi Malik, a young girl and supporter of the SKJRC who had been raped and burned to death, ostensibly at the behest of local leaders of the

45. Nielsen 2010, op.cit.

46. Kenneth Bo Nielsen, "An Activist Can't Become a Politician": Social Activism, Leadership and the (Un)making of a Political Career in an Indian State', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2012a, pp. 435–53.

47. As a fallout of the protest, Tata Motors decided to abandon Singur for greener Gujarati pastures in Sanand in late 2008. At the time of writing, the acquired land in Singur lay vacant and had not been returned to its erstwhile owners.

ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. Tapasi Malik was now remembered as one of the movement's martyrs. The stage was adorned with her photo and a *shahid bedi* (martyr's column/memorial) was erected next to the stage.

I was conducting fieldwork in one of Singur's villages at the time and had decided to attend the meeting. When I arrived at the field where the meeting was held, Mamata Banerjee had not yet arrived. However, several lesser political VIPs were already seated on plastic chairs on the dais. Some of them gave speeches, while others sang songs or read poetry in praise of the Singur movement. Gradually, more villagers started arriving, and when TMC supporters from other parts of the district began pouring in by bus, the crowd soon swelled to several thousand. But few paid any attention to what was happening on stage. Instead they drank tea, ate sweets and snacks, or gossiped in the shade. Suddenly, however, a cloud of brown dust rose in the distance, and a whisper of 'Mamata is coming' rapidly spread through the crowd. On stage, a leader of the Janata Dal (United) had just stepped up to the microphone, but as a large convoy of eight to ten cars, some with blue flashing lights, suddenly burst forth from the dust cloud, it was evident to everyone that this had to be Mamata Banerjee and her entourage. The Janata Dal (United) leader soon realized that all eyes were now turned towards Mamata Banerjee's convoy, and he wisely chose to cut his speech short and simply return to his seat. He merely said: 'Brothers and sisters. I have been given the chance to speak at the time of Mamata's arrival. Therefore I will say just one sentence: I support your movement! Thank you.'

Mamata Banerjee emerged from one of the cars, and as a visiting anthropologist I at first had a hard time identifying her as one of the most influential political leaders in India. Short and stocky, without any make-up or visible jewellery, and dressed in a simple cotton sari with cheap *chappals* on her feet, she exuded none of the glamour or awe that characterizes for instance Jayalalithaa.⁴⁸ And yet, the almost electric excitement in the crowd amply demonstrated that a leader of unusual stature and influence had just arrived. Accompanied by shouts of 'Mamata Banerjee *zindabad!*' she made her way towards the stage, palms pressed together and slightly raised in a gesture of greeting the crowd. Her security guards stayed near their cars, so the crowd could easily get close enough to get a glimpse of her as she approached the stage accompanied by Tapasi Malik's mother. Once on stage, she took her time to personally greet all the political leaders assembled there, and almost like an attentive hostess she sent for more chairs when she dis-

48. In outward appearance, Jayalalithaa has gradually and considerably 'deglamourized' herself after making the transition from acting to politics.

covered that there were not enough seats for everyone. She then sat down and encouraged two other leaders to continue with their scheduled speeches. When they were done she asked Tapasi Malik's mother to speak, but the only words she managed to speak before she broke into a sob were 'Tapasi Malik was my girl . . .'. Mamata rose from her seat and put her arm around Tapasi Malik's mother and escorted her back to her chair before asking Tapasi Malik's father to speak. He was more adept at the art of addressing a crowd and spoke for some minutes before sitting down with tears in his eyes. Only then did Mamata herself approach the microphone. She began at length by thanking the organizers for hosting this meeting, and the political VIPs for sharing the dais with her. Lastly, she thanked the villagers for spending their Sunday commemorating Tapasi Malik and listening to her. So far she had been speaking in a low and subdued voice, but it soon escalated to a much higher pitch as she began lambasting the CPI(M), the dominant constituent of the LF, whom she loudly and repeatedly accused of everything from corruption to murder, rape, arrogance, and fascism,

When a democratic movement like ours rises the government must accept its demands. But in West Bengal the CPI(M) has grown only more and more aggressive. On my way here I passed an area all covered in red flags. There was a CPI(M) conference, very lavish. It must have cost crores of Rupees, all financed with money collected from the people. There was a time when the CPI(M) activists would go hungry and never have food to eat. Eight of them would share one bread. Earlier they would all starve, but now they have everything, big cars, big houses, everything. Crores of Rupees! They say they are best in everything: math, science, history. But they stand first in murdering Tapasi Malik; they stand first in corruption, in rape, in theft! The CPI(M) wants to control everything, but in reality it is they who are out of control.⁴⁹

Mamata Banerjee continued in a similar vein for just short of half an hour, and while she sprinkled her speech with short excerpts from well-known Bengali poetry and songs, and made passing references to a range of local or regional political events, both historical and contemporary, the single unifying theme of her speech was how the CPI(M) terrorized and ruined West Bengal. She finished her speech by encouraging all those present to unite to oust the CPI(M) from power. After that, she handed over a bundle of blankets to local SKJRC leaders for them

49. I attended the meeting with my field assistant. We both took notes during Mamata Banerjee's speech and transcribed them later the same evening. The excerpt here is a narratively structured synthesis of points she made during her speech.

to distribute among the needy, and announced that they would now honour Tapasi Malik with one minute of silence. She then left the stage to visit the home of the Malik family, after which she proceeded to visit the widow of a Mr Patra who had recently committed suicide because the land acquisition in Singur had hurled his family into poverty. It was very late in the evening when I caught a glimpse of her white Ambassador driving through a small hamlet on its way back to Kolkata.

Mamata Banerjee's performance in Singur was in many respects representative of her political style. She is at once a gentle, caring and attentive leader, and a fiery, shrill and confrontational orator. This has made her a controversial political figure in the Indian political landscape. She often divides public opinion, and people tend to either love her or hate her. Consider for instance the following two descriptions of her, offered by two different journalists,

Ms Banerjee is a street fighting, rabble rousing, plain living populist politician living in a slummy red-tiled one storey home on the banks of a stinking canal in a run-down Calcutta neighbourhood. She turns out in cheap, pale, sometimes-tattered saris.⁵⁰

If there is one honest political leader in India who has lived like a common person and the Indian oligarchs could never bribe her with money and other things, she is Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal.⁵¹

These two mini-portraits are quite representative of the way most Indians judge Mamata Banerjee: for some she is a shabby populist demagogue; for others she is the only honest and hard-working politician in an otherwise dirty and corrupt game of politics. Judging by the atmosphere that day in Singur, it was evident even to an outsider that the villagers assembled in front of her dais belonged to the latter group.

Mamata Banerjee's political career began during her college days in the 1970s, but only really gathered momentum when she, as a candidate for the Congress party, defeated CPI(M) stalwart Somnath Chatterjee at the 1984 Lok Sabha elections. Her political standing and reputation continued to grow during the 1980s and 1990s when she, by her own admission, formed a special bond with Rajiv Gandhi.⁵² She was elected to the Lok Sabha several times, served as a minister for

50. Soutik Biswas, 'Cheap Saris and Beauty Queens', *BBC News Online*, 9 May 2004

51. Sudhir Chadda, 'Witch-hunt on Mamata Banerjee – communists blame her for instigating people against Sikhs in 1984 riot – shame on communists', *India Daily*, 19 August 2005.

52. Mamata Banerjee, *op. cit.*, 1998a, pp. 20–2.

a short while, and was elevated to the post of national leader of the Youth Congress. At this stage of her career Mamata Banerjee exemplified the type of female political leader who furthers her career and capacity for leadership by gathering experience and expertise within an organized party structure over a period of time.⁵³ This enabled her to climb the institutional ladder towards ever more influential political positions. Yet, women who tread this institutional career path often hit a glass ceiling that prevents them from reaching the very pinnacles of the party hierarchy.⁵⁴ Mamata Banerjee learned this the hard way when she, in 1992 and again in 1997, unsuccessfully sought to be elected as the leader of the Congress in West Bengal. By 1997, she had ostensibly grown so frustrated with life in the West Bengal unit of the Congress that she wanted to almost revolutionize it. Most state leaders, she believed, were corrupt and bribed by the CPI(M) to the extent that they had been reduced to a compliant 'B-team' of the communists. But when she failed to get elected as state party president, she soon announced that she would leave the Congress and form her own party, the TMC, as a radical and dynamic alternative to the 'old' Congress.⁵⁵ Yet, ideologically the TMC is virtually indistinguishable from the Congress, and Mamata Banerjee frequently and with pride invokes the legacy of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

As is evident from her speech in Singur, Mamata's principal political adversary is the CPI(M). In her eyes the CPI(M) established an authoritarian rule based on violence and terror, and killed democracy in the state.⁵⁶ TMC's political agenda is, therefore, founded on a single-minded, one-point anti-CPI(M) programme, which has allowed her to bring together the simmering discontent, which escalated during the more than thirty years of LF rule, and which culminated with the ouster of the LF in 2011.⁵⁷ This conspicuously inclusionary programme has allowed her to enter into and break alliances with a range of political parties from the Hindu nationalist BJP on the right, through the centrist Congress, and all the way to the Socialist Unity Centre and various Naxal groups on the far left. While her critics see this kind of political manoeuvring as shamelessly unprincipled, her supporters most often take it as evidence of her superior skills as a political strategist.

53. Spary, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

54. The same 'glass ceiling' is at work when ministries are allotted. Women are mostly allotted 'feminine' ministries like women and child welfare, information and culture, or social welfare, while heavy-weight ministries like finance, defence, or home are all considered 'masculine' ministries (Rai, 2011, p. 54).

55. Mukulika Banerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

56. Cf. Mamata Banerjee, *Slaughter of Democracy*, Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2006.

57. Mukulika Banerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

THE GRASSROOTS ACTIVIST

In terms of political style and oration Mamata Banerjee departs significantly from certain culturally informed ideas about how political leaders should comport themselves. Political leaders in Bengal have historically been recruited from the Bengali *bhadralok*, the respectable and educated middle class, and to this day the state assembly has a disproportionately high representation of legislators with a *bhadralok* background.⁵⁸ A *bhadralok* is the embodiment of a particular combination of cultural capital, manners and dress code. A quintessential *bhadralok* is educated, refined, eloquent and with a good knowledge of English. He is a high caste Hindu, often a Brahmin, and has style, manners and dignity, although he will usually display a measure of modesty and moderation in public life. His uniform is the crisp white *dhoti* and *kurta*, and a genuine *bhadralok* will be well versed in the world of arts, literature and poetry. Virtually all of West Bengal's chief ministers from B.C. Roy to Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya have conformed to this model of a *bhadralok* politician. Jyoti Basu, for instance, who served as chief minister from 1977 to 2000, was the son of a doctor and studied at some of the most prestigious colleges in Kolkata, namely Loreto, St. Xavier's and Presidency. Having earned his honours in English he went on to study law in England, only to return and join the Communist movement in India in the 1940s. His successor Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who is the nephew of a well-known revolutionary poet, cultivated the *bhadralok* image to an even greater extent. He studied Bengali and Bengali literature, and also served as his state's Minister of Culture. He is also known as an admirer of, and a contributor to, the world of theatre and poetry. He is a film buff and visits the culture and film complex *Nandan* often, and has translated the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Bengali.

While Monobina Gupta has rightly argued that Mamata Banerjee's 'lower middle class origins, her abrasive forthright style and jarring and unpolished language squarely place her outside the club of the genteel *bhadramohila*',⁵⁹ she is, in fact, not entirely without *bhadramohila* credentials. She has a Brahmin family background and holds a degree in law; she speaks decent English and has authored numerous books, both poetry and literature, and is also a painter. During the movements in Singur and Nandigram, she even managed to win over a good deal of the charmed circle of Kolkata's urban artists and intellectuals long known for

58. Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, 'The Resilient Bhadrakok: A Profile of the West Bengal MLAs', in *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar, New Delhi: Routledge, 2009, pp. 361–92.

59. Monobina Gupta, 'The Paradoxical Figure of Mamata', *Kafila*, 21 April 2011.

their sympathy with the Left (although she presently seems well on her way to losing their support again).

But in general, Mamata Banerjee compares unfavourably to the ideal of the *bhadralok* politician. Her educational credentials were irreparably damaged when she claimed to have what eventually turned out to be a non-existent doctorate from the non-existent but ostensibly US-based East Georgia University.⁶⁰ Although she speaks and writes in English, she lacks the ease and fluency of the bonafide *bhadramohila*; and the quality of her English poetry is quite mediocre.⁶¹ As Dwai-payan Bhattacharyya has noted, most of her books are written in a style that fits a school essay, with occasional bursts of ornamental expressions.⁶²

Mamata Banerjee is also found wanting in terms of a *bhadramohila*'s manners and moderation in public life. As her speech in Singur testifies, the tenor of her political rhetoric is often characterized by angry and sweeping accusations against her political adversaries, and she is known for losing her temper at the most inappropriate moments. Yet, rather than trying to live up to the elevated *bhadralok* ideal, Mamata Banerjee has turned her lack of proper cultural capital to her own advantage, seeking to establish an alternative model for political leadership in which her simplicity and emotionality become assets rather than liabilities. In a very revealing foreword to one of her collections of poetry Mamata Banerjee writes, 'I am afraid the collection may not find readers' attention as far as the quality of verses is concerned, but I may expect appreciation for their simplicity and emotional content.'⁶³ Similarly, as a painter she presents herself as 'just a vagabond dabbling with colours'.⁶⁴ Her paintings are (sometimes) appreciated by other artists sympathetic to her political agenda not for their inherent artistic quality, but for the 'honesty and vibrant emotions',⁶⁵ or for the 'passion, zeal and grit'⁶⁶ that shine through her canvases. In much the same way, she seems to attract the voters' attention not because of the quality of her ideology and political eloquence, but for her simplicity, passion and emotional content. In accordance with her party's name *trinamul* (Bengali for grassroots), she portrays herself as a woman of the people with scant regard for power, middle class comforts and intel-

60. Contrary to what is commonly accepted, Gupta suggests that the East Georgia University does in fact exist, but that it was not empowered to grant Ph.D.s (Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography*, Noida: HarperCollins, 2012, p. 29).

61. For example Mamata Banerjee, *Motherland*, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1998b.

62. Bhattacharyya, op. cit., p. 1536.

63. Mamata Banerjee, op. cit., 1998b, p. 6.

64. Swagata Sen, 'The Angst of Painter Didi', *India Today*, 18 January 2008.

65. Nandini Guha, 'Mamata's Paintings Rake in Rs. 92 Lakh', *Hindustan Times*, 5 April 2011.

66. *Hindustan Times*, 'The Dadaist in Didi', 4 April 2011.

lectual pursuits. In her private life, she takes care to cultivate an image of being distinctly disinterested in urban middle class lifestyle. She continues to live in a house of modest size near one of Kolkata's largest red light areas, and the adjacent party office is merely a small room with some basic furniture and without air-conditioning. By dressing in cheap and wrinkled cotton saris, wearing *chappals* and a simple *jhola* draped over the shoulder, she marks a clear contrast to the refined but also elitist *bhadralok*. Her staple diet is similarly simple and not unlike that of 'ordinary' Bengalis: rice and fish curry for dinner, and tea, biscuits, puffed rice and cucumbers as snacks during the day. This strategic simplicity of living has additional layers of political meaning. Her frugality sets her apart from the lavish and extravagant lifestyle enjoyed by certain politicians in other parts of India, including other mainstream women politicians. Mayawati, for instance, during her latest stint in office, was India's richest chief minister with declared assets officially worth Rs. 86 crore. Mamata Banerjee, on the other hand, was known to be one of the 'poorest' MPs in the 15th Lok Sabha before she returned to West Bengal to serve as chief minister, and her personal assets are worth only a couple of lakhs of rupees. Her persistent 'poverty', even after several decades in politics, sends the message to the electorate that she is not driven by a desire to maximize personal gain. Most Bengalis see politics as a dirty and immoral game, where corruption, deceit, and greed remains the order of the day.⁶⁷ Seen in this light, Mamata Banerjee appears to possess a special kind of moral superiority, which has made her one of the few honest and incorruptible political leaders of the state in the minds of many.

At the same time, her simplicity breaks down the social barriers that might potentially otherwise exist between an urban, educated Brahmin politician and West Bengal's electorate. During her speech in Singur, Mamata Banerjee spoke at length about how CPI(M) politicians who claim to stand by the poor, often seem more interested in personal wealth, urban comfort and cabinet berths. She, on the other hand, has no interest in fame and fortune. She claims to share people's suffering and strives to meet people eye to eye; she listens sincerely to people's concerns; and she conveys the dissatisfaction of 'the people' to the powers that be. This political style has also been described as a form of assertive populism. As Mukulika Banerjee has argued, Mamata Banerjee embodies a fearless willpower, which allows her to take up the grievances of the oppressed and in turn, challenge the *bhadralok* establishment. Through her powerful speeches and the force of per-

67. Arild Engelsen Ruud, 'Talking Dirty about Politics: A View from a Bengali Village', in *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, ed. Chris Fuller and Véronique Bénéti, London: Hurst & Company, 2001, pp. 115–36.

sonal example, she seeks to mobilize people to assert their own will and opinion in the face of intimidation by the CPI(M) cadre and assert their dignity in the face of middle class reproach.⁶⁸

Another important factor that contributes to reducing the social distance between Mamata Banerjee and her supporters is that she, unlike the leaders of the secular left, very actively uses and appeals to popular religion. As seen, she visited the Kalighat Temple on the day of her swearing-in ceremony; took the oath in the name of *Ishwar*; and relied on her family priest to suggest the most auspicious time for the ceremony. Her speeches and writings are generally 'laced with quotations from religious scriptures', refer to personal supernatural experiences, or draw heavily on the work of religious leaders such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.⁶⁹ She also actively makes use of religious symbolism and appeals to religious identity, appearing in a hijab, offering *namaz*, celebrating Eid,⁷⁰ or joining the Christmas prayer in church as part of her campaign.

An important corollary of Mamata Banerjee's simple and spartan lifestyle is her very physical kind of politics that profiles her as a fearless activist. If her preferred setting is not the parlour but the street or the village hamlet, her preferred form is definitely the activist's confrontational style, and not the polished ideological debate. In her younger days, she was known to jump on the bonnet of cars if she wanted to have a word with the passenger, often a minister or an important politician. She has on several occasions been injured after clashes with CPI(M) cadre or the police. At the height of the Singur movement she even undertook a fast unto death in Kolkata, which she eventually called off after 26 days. To her supporters, this willingness to stand firm in the face of political opposition reinforces the impression that she is a dedicated leader who will remain true to her conviction, whatever the personal cost.

As an activist Mamata Banerjee's emotionality becomes an asset. In the Lok Sabha she has on several occasions thrown her papers in the air in a fit of rage; she was once in a physical confrontation with a fellow MP, and she has on more than one occasion delivered spontaneous or impromptu resignations from one or the other ministry. In the eyes of her critics, this makes her an unpredictable and untrustworthy leader, but in the eyes of her supporters it once again demonstrates that she has an activist's approach to politics: she is capable of genuine and deeply felt indignation, and is driven by sheer personal dedication and conviction. It also

68. Mukulika Banerjee, op. cit., 2004, pp. 302–06.

69. Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography*, Noida: HarperCollins, 2012.

70. See, e.g. Nielsen, 'In Search of Development' for an analysis of Mamata Banerjee's campaign to attract Muslim voters and the role of religious symbolism in it.

demonstrates that she is willing to fight for those who support her, even if it means risking personal injury or giving up influential ministerial berths.

Being an activist entails being ‘active’, and in order to sustain her image Mamata Banerjee engages in significant travel activities. Even when she served for decades as an elected MP she spent most of her time in her home state. This was the case during her two stints as Railway Minister, one of the most important ministries in the central government.⁷¹ She tours West Bengal frequently and intensively, and makes a point of visiting places of public grievance, particularly where the state or the administration could or should have intervened to alleviate local suffering.⁷² During my on-and-off stays in Singur from 2007 to 2009 I must have ‘encountered’ Mamata Banerjee on more than a handful of occasions. She often came to speak at local political rallies, and took great care to comfort local villagers like Tapasi Malik’s parents, who had suffered personal tragedies as a consequence of their support for the Singur movement. Mamata Banerjee, thus, ‘stands by’ her supporters in a very literal sense: she is physically present when her assistance is needed; she shares in their sorrow and is there personally to inspire and motivate. But sustaining such a personalized activist image over long periods of time is a challenge. Mamata Banerjee is the TMC’s only star campaigner, and she is constantly in demand.⁷³ During the 2011 state elections campaign she kept up a gruelling campaign schedule and participated in upwards of seven rallies per day for several weeks in a row. She also undertook a number of political *padayatras* (march/journey by foot) in Kolkata, anywhere between five and ten kilometres in length, in the hot months of April and May to campaign for TMC’s candidates.⁷⁴ Incidentally, this style of campaigning also sets her apart from the ideal *bhadralok* politician. About Mamata Banerjee’s many *padayatras* in 2011, which attracted massive numbers of people, Gupta writes,

71. Such ‘ministerial absenteeism’ may, however, not be all that unusual. Madsen quotes former Minister of Agriculture, another large ministry, Ajit Singh as saying: ‘I only went to office two hours a day when I was in Delhi’. See Madsen, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

72. Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, ‘West Bengal: Enduring Status Quo’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 36, no. 21, 2001, p. 1785.

73. To reach voters across the state she has begun distributing audio and video CDs featuring herself throughout West Bengal, and has sometimes addressed political rallies in some of the remote districts via mobile phone (Banerjee 2011).

74. On the political use and significance of the *padayatra* in a south Indian context, see Pamela Price, ‘A Political Breakthrough for Irrigation Development: The Congress Assembly Campaign in Andhra Pradesh in 2003–2004’, in *Trysts with Democracy: Political Practice in South Asia*, ed. Stig Toft Madsen, Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Uwe Skoda, London: Anthem, 2011, pp. 135–56.

Images of her energetic campaign on foot made for a stark contrast with Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's jeep *yatra*, waving at people from the confines of his vehicle. The dramatic contrast between the two images seemed to function as a revealing metaphor for the widespread acceptance of Mamata Banerjee as a popular leader of the state, and Buddhadeb as representing a party thoroughly disconnected from the masses.⁷⁵

Mamata Banerjee is not the only female political leader who has cultivated an activist image. Mayawati, during the early stages of her career, emerged as an energetic and dedicated Dalit activist, and within the Hindutva camp, Uma Bharti is well known for her loud and confrontational anti-Muslim rhetoric through which she seeks to mobilize Hindus to join the fight for 'endangered' Hindu values and ways of life. To facilitate the spread of the message, recordings of Uma Bharti's speeches are distributed and played to rouse supporters and public opinion alike. She also manages to curiously combine her adherence to an essentially conservative Hindutva agenda with a style of progressive feminist activism, condemning the oppressive regime of Muslim personal laws, burqa, and patriarchy from both the point of view of cultural nationalism and feminism.⁷⁶ It is also noteworthy that the activist model of leadership that Mamata embodies is in itself essentially not gendered. If anything, it could be construed as a distinctly male style of politics that is based on prolonged and public physical activity that requires stamina, strength and the willingness to endure pain and hardships. Yet, a closer examination of 'activist' female leaders reveals that there tends to be additional and very gender specific aspects to their leadership. Uma Bharti, for example, lives a solitary and simple life as a *sanyasin* or *sadhavi*, while Jayalalithaa is sometimes seen as a *veerangana*. Similarly, Mamata often talks about her emotional attachment to her family and home, and of how she, as a responsible elder sister, was entrusted with bringing up and caring for her many younger siblings after her father passed away at an early age. She also lived with her ageing mother until she passed away in late 2011. Evidently, even the fearless activist needs to possess distinct feminine qualities. The gendered dimensions of Mamata's leadership become even more obvious if we look at popular perceptions and media portrayals of her. Here the image of Mamata as *didi*, the Bengali term for elder sister, or Durga figures prominently. The next section closely examines how these two culturally informed notions of gender and

75. Monobina Gupta, op. cit., 2012, p. 145.

76. Amrita Basu, 'Hindu Women's Activism in India and the Questions it Raises', in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 171.

femininity, rooted in kinship and religious cosmology, work to define Mamata Banerjee as a figure of political authority among her supporters.

MAMATA AS DURGA AND DIDI

Dipankar Gupta has recently warned against ‘raising the cultural banner’ when explaining female political leadership in India. According to Gupta, there is a tendency to explain not only Indian female political leadership, but in fact most things Indian in culturalist terms. This, Gupta argues, only further mystifies and obscures the object under investigation, and therefore, one should do away with such ‘mystical symbols’ as Durga and *shakti* when examining female leadership.⁷⁷ While Gupta’s critique is not without merit, it is certainly exaggerated. Ideas about power, authority and influence are everywhere shaped by the cultural context in which leadership is played out and exercised. In the case of Mamata Banerjee both her supporters and the media rely on religious cosmology and kinship terminology to describe her – she is likened to the Hindu goddess Durga – or simply referred to as *didi*.⁷⁸

‘Mamata’ in Bengali means motherly love, a kind of love that is both protective and selfless. But among most Bengalis, Mamata Banerjee is not spoken of as a mother but rather, as a *didi*. In the villages in Singur where I stayed, Mamata Banerjee was almost universally referred to as *didi* in everyday parlance – only rarely would villagers refer to her by her full name – and everybody knew who *didi* was. In Bengali kinship terminology certain specific expectations are attached to the role of *didi*. According to Ronald Inden and Ralph Nicholas, the egalitarian love that siblings have for each other is supposed to be subordinated to a hierarchical love based on the differences in their age.⁷⁹ The parental love that unites elder siblings with their younger counterparts, and the filial love that unites younger siblings with their elders, are both modelled after the hierarchical love that parents and children have for each other. Hence, an elder sister or *didi* is expected to show parental love towards her younger siblings, and should act

77. Dipankar Gupta, *The Caged Phoenix: Can India Fly?*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2009, p. 23.

78. Kinship terminology is widely used to refer to female leaders. Jayalalithaa is for instance described as both *amma* (mother) and *anni* (elder brother’s wife) because of her relation with MGR. Indira Gandhi was of course known simply as *Bharat mata* (mother India), while Sonia Gandhi has been portrayed as both a ‘genuine’ *swadeshi beti* (Indian daughter) or a *videshi bahu* (foreign daughter-in-law), depending on one’s political standpoint. Mayawati is usually spoken of as *behenji* (respected elder sister).

79. Ronald Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, new edn., New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2005, p. 27.

almost as a proxy mother. A proper *didi* will dress her younger siblings, feed them and wash their hands and faces, set up their toys and play with them. She will look after their well-being, support them, protect them and nourish them. It is not too far-fetched to argue that many of Mamata's supporters direct similar expectations towards her, and that their consistent use of the term *didi* denotes a special kind of intimacy. They too expect her to stand by them in their hour of need and help them deal with the challenges they face. In Singur, I asked one elderly villager to explain the role that Mamata Banerjee had played in their movement. He replied,

Didi many times came and saved us from police beatings. She has also sent us rice and money because the poor here had nothing to eat. She also arranged money to bail us out of prison, and made sure we got medical treatment if we had been injured. She has helped us in every way so that we did not have to bear any expense ourselves. She has come to this very village four or five times, and has come to mass meetings here maybe fifteen to sixteen times. Here, three movement supporters have died, and every time, *didi* came to their house with comfort and money. She has come here more often than anybody else, and although many organizations are in this movement, it is always from her party that the maximum support comes.

This point of view was widely shared in Singur, and Mamata Banerjee is well aware that people generally look to her for support, assistance and help. She herself says, 'They love me because they know I will protect them if they have a problem. They come to me directly when they have a problem and I do as much as I can to help them sort it out.'⁸⁰

Mamata Banerjee *is* generally very approachable. In Singur, Sukumar, a landless labourer, told me of how, to get her attention, he had one day jumped onto the bonnet of Mamata Banerjee's car as it passed through Singur. Mamata Banerjee had rushed out to see if Sukumar was OK, but once she emerged from the car, Sukumar hastened to ask her why she had never visited his village where there was much suffering and hardship. In his village, Sukumar explained, there lived mostly landless labourers, who were now chronically under-employed because the acquisition of agricultural land had rendered their labour redundant. 'We need your help!' he had pleaded. Mamata Banerjee immediately ordered her driver to head to Sukumar's village and even scolded some of the local TMC leaders in public because they had failed to tell her about the problems faced by Sukumar

80. Banerjee, *op. cit.*, 1998a.

and his fellow villagers. In the other villages of Singur, people often casually talked about the time when they had spoken to Mamata Banerjee. Initially, I expected that having had a conversation with such a political VIP would be a source of some pride and status, but gradually I realized that because it is Mamata Banerjee's style to engage directly and personally with villagers wherever she goes, a good many villagers had in fact had such conversations, however short.⁸¹ Some who had met her described these meetings as having happened 'face-to-face', while others would speak of how she 'always met you at your level.' Many of them expected that when Mamata Banerjee came to the village she came as a proper *didi*, not just to talk, but also to listen and help. Kinship terminology, in other words, not only *describes* the character and nature of female leaders, it also carries with it certain expectations of how female leaders should behave and act. Yet, while kinship terminology defines and circumscribes the political space available to female politicians, conformity to and the successful manipulation or 'engineering' of such gendered kinship stereotypes can add to the stature of a female leader. Mamata Banerjee evidently seeks, both in manners, dress, and behaviour, to appear as a supportive and helpful *didi*. And for this she is rewarded by her supporters with respect, gratitude and votes.

At the same time, Mamata Banerjee's supporters and the media often draw a parallel between her and the goddess Durga, the most popular of all incarnations of the militant mother-goddess. Such use of religious symbolism to describe female leaders is not uncommon. During the Independence movement, Subhas Chandra Bose explicitly incited women to emulate Durga and come to the rescue of the struggling nation, while Mahatma Gandhi, in contrast, invoked another female deity Sita, the epitome of wifely virtue.⁸² Later, Indira Gandhi was likened to Durga by the media, and renowned painter M.F. Husain painted a portrait of her, astride a tiger, slaying demons.⁸³ The VHP-affiliated women's organization, Durga Bahini explicitly draws on the imagery and symbolism of Durga, and calls its members, who undergo both religious, ideological and martial arts training, as Durgas. Here, Durga is upheld as a role model for female activism, and Durga Bahini's members are expected to be strong and capable defenders of the Hindu nation.⁸⁴ A more extreme

81. In contrast, having Mamata Banerjee's personal cell phone number was a source of some prestige and status.

82. Stephanie Tawa Lama, 'The Hindu Goddess and Women's Political Representation in South Asia: Symbolic Resource or Feminine Mystique?', *International Review of Sociology*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2001, p. 7.

83. Dipankar Gupta, op. cit., 2009, p. 23.

84. Anja Kovacs, 'You Don't Understand, We are at War! Refashioning Durga in the Service of Hindu Nationalism', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2004, p. 377.

case would be Jayalalithaa. Jayalalithaa started representing herself as a goddess during an election campaign in 1991. Alleging that she had been assaulted by members of a rival party, she referred to the incident presenting herself as Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata. Years later, during Christmas, she appeared as the Virgin Mary on huge cut-outs all over Chennai, and in 1998 she was portrayed as Kali, wearing a garland of skulls depicting M. Karunanidhi, the leader of the rival party.⁸⁵ In her home state of Tamil Nadu there are temples where she is installed as the central deity.⁸⁶

To understand why Mamata Banerjee is sometimes compared to Durga, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the goddess' characteristics. Durga is one of the most famous avatars of Hinduism's unmarried goddess and the embodiment of uncontrolled *shakti*, dangerous, ferocious and hot-tempered.⁸⁷ The legend of Durga tells of how the clever demon Mahishashura after prolonged meditation had tricked the gods into granting him immortality so that neither gods nor men could kill him. The immortalized Mahishashura then turned against the gods and banished them from heaven. He conquered both the heaven and the earth, and terrorized mankind. To overcome the demon, the Gods united their divine powers and created the invincible goddess of war, Durga, who astride a lion and armed with the gods' most powerful weapons rode into battle against Mahishashura, whose immortality was of little use since Durga was neither god nor man. Durga defeated Mahishashura's armies, vanquished the demon and restored order in the world.

Throughout her political career Mamata Banerjee has, due to her physical and activist political style, displayed a comparable fearlessness and persistence in her 'battle' against her political opponents. Many of Mamata's followers make a very explicit and straightforward comparison between Mamata and Durga, and as per Mukulika Banerjee, 'For them, she is Durga, the warrior queen, fearless and tireless in her defence of the underdog.'⁸⁸ In Singur, the comparison between Mamata Banerjee and Durga was not always made in such straightforward terms, but the comparison definitely made cultural sense. Thus, when I asked a villager in Singur if one could compare Mamata to Durga he immediately agreed: 'You are right', he said, 'like Durga she fights alone and with ten arms!' Seen from this villager's perspective Mamata Banerjee is willing to fight important battles on her own if need

85. Lama, *op. cit.*, 2001, pp. 10–11.

86. Madhu Kishwar, 'Indian Politics Encourages Durgas, Snubs Women', *Manushi*, vol. 111, 1999, p. 6.

87. Chris J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 44–5.

88. Mamata Banerjee, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 303.

be, and she fights hard. During street corner meetings and election rallies in Singur in 2011, Mamata Banerjee was often talked of as Bengal's Durga.⁸⁹ In metaphorical terms, it is usually the CPI(M) which occupies the position of the demon in the political universe. Thus, Tapasi Malik's father in Singur is known to have kept an altar with a photograph of Durga, whose face he has replaced with Mamata Banerjee's. The demon's face has also been replaced by that of the former Chief Minister, CPI(M)'s Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.⁹⁰

Mamata Banerjee's political mission clearly mirrors that of Durga's, for she wants to banish the CPI(M) from West Bengal, and restore order and democracy out of chaos. As Stephanie Tawa Lama has noted, the invocation of the Goddess translates a political endeavour into an almost religious mission, and the ongoing struggle is simplified as one of good against evil.⁹¹ Perhaps, unsurprisingly, among the results of this 'mission' or 'struggle' so far has been a considerable increase in political violence in the state after her assumption of office.

While Durga is powerful she is also potentially dangerous and unpredictable, and a figure of fury and destruction. Critics maintain that Mamata Banerjee's temper and emotionality make her equally dangerous and unpredictable. Even fellow party members are known, from time to time, to be targets of her fury since she is known to have absolutely no tolerance for internal dissent in her party, where she rules supreme, and where her authority is hardly ever challenged.

In spite of her visible ferocious traits, Durga is a multidimensional character. As Tanika Sarkar has observed,

There is . . . a curious mismatch between how she looks and what she does. Durga is supposedly a warrior Goddess who has killed a dreaded *asura*. Yet the icons depict a smiling, matronly beauty, a married woman visiting her natal home with her children at her side – the archetypical mother and daughter, fundamentally at odds with the dying demon at her feet and the weapons in her hands.⁹²

Durga is, in other words, not just a fearless warrior but also an obedient married daughter, who during the annual festival of Durga Puja in Bengal, where it is the most important of all Hindu festivals, returns to her parents' house, where she is

89. I am grateful to Aparna Das for this information.

90. Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey and Falguni Banerjee, 'With Left's Downfall, Singur has the Last Laugh', *The Times of India*, 15 May 2011.

91. Lama, 2001, op. cit., p. 8.

92. Tanika Sarkar, 1987.

received with joy and celebration and treated as a beloved and dear relative. According to the iconography of Durga Puja, Durga is accompanied by her four children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesh and Kartik, and so Durga is transformed from a vengeful goddess to a dutiful and loving mother, whose 'anger and rage' is no longer vindictive but protective. Therefore, to worship Durga is to seek compassionate motherly love, and here the images of Mamata as Durga and *didi* merge. Both as Durga and *didi*, Mamata is expected to be the caring, compassionate protector and provider.

As with kinship terminology, the use of religious symbolism to conceptualize female leadership simultaneously restricts and enables female political agency. Hindu symbolism and cosmology is the main source of social norms concerning women, and is in many respects distinctly patriarchal.⁹³ The application of religious language on women politicians, therefore, subordinates them and restricts their agency, while also mystifying their authority and power.⁹⁴ On the other hand, the strategic use of Hindu cosmology may also serve to enable women's participation in politics. Urban middle class families, for instance, may be more willing to let their women engage in politics if the political agenda they espouse is founded on traditional religious values. Moreover, the instrumentalization of Durga in a political context can empower women as it legitimizes them as leaders in their own right. As the case of Mamata Banerjee shows, she may be held up as an ideal for emulation, and be used to legitimize a very confrontational, physical, fiercely uncompromising and even vindictive style of politics.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have identified several aspects of Mamata Banerjee's style of leadership in order to shed light on her emergence as a popular political leader. Important among these are her personal grassroots activist style, and her success in gaining popular recognition and cultural legitimacy as a *didi* and Durga. When viewed in isolation, none of the elements can be considered unique to her – several other female leaders have relied on comparable styles, registers and cultural imagery. Yet, while the elements may not be unique, the combination of styles that she embodies, coupled with the fact that she has managed to carve out a political career for herself at the highest levels of Indian democracy, without any significant proximity to important male leaders, justify the claim that Mamata Banerjee

93. Lama, op. cit., 2001, p. 17.

94. Spary, op. cit., p. 267.

has in important ways redefined the boundaries of female leadership. In fact, this combination and the socio-political context that facilitated its emergence, may be so unique as to render Mamata Banerjee a statistical outlier, casting considerable doubt whether ‘the Mamata model’ can be made more widely available for emulation by women with ambitions for political leadership. Indeed, to my knowledge Mamata Banerjee does not see herself as a role model for other female politicians, nor does she have any explicit feminist agenda. Yet she does, to borrow a phrase from Stephanie Tawa Lama, point to a bridge between femininity and power, a bridge whose use might be restricted to few individuals and specific circumstances, but a bridge nonetheless.⁹⁵

Can the rise of Mamata Banerjee, then, be seen as part and parcel of the gradual vernacularization, *pace* Michelutti, of democracy in the context of West Bengal? The answer would be both a yes and a no. The central tenets of Michelutti’s argument concerning vernacularization hold that when the values and practices of democracy become embedded in particular cultural and social life domains, tied to particular times, people and locations, interesting and unpredictable things can happen.⁹⁶ The very meaning of democracy is likely to change, as indeed are the local conceptual worlds and practices in which it is embedded. Therefore, what we should expect to see, as Ruud and Heierstad point out in the introduction to this volume, is a plurality of ‘vernacularizations’ inflected by the particularities of place, identity and history.⁹⁷ In a very visible sense, Mamata Banerjee has ‘pluralized’ political leadership in West Bengal by bringing ‘the vernacular’ into the halls of power, in terms of dress, manners, language, as well as the imagery, symbolism and idioms of kinship and popular religion that surrounds her persona. She has dented regional *bhadralok* elite hegemony and, as a self-declared populist standing neither on the left nor on the right, but on ‘the side of the people’,⁹⁸ has carved out a space for new forms of populist leadership and politics in a state that has long been considered a bastion of the democratic centralism of the organized parliamentary left. What might complicate such a reading, however, may be the fact that the dominant *bhadralok* leftist political culture she has now dented, may of course be seen as no less ‘vernacular’. If anything, it can be considered the product of precisely the kind of process that Michelutti describes, in this case, the prolonged encounter between colonial modernity (and its discontents) and particular segments of Bengali society.

95. Lama, *op. cit.*, 2001, p. 18.

96. Michelutti, *op. cit.*, 2008.

97. See also Ruud, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

98. Kenneth Bo Nielsen, ‘Didi and Her Sonar Bangla’, *Governance Now*, vol. 3, no. 11, 2012b, p. 25.

Yet while democracy *within* West Bengal does appear to have become more differentiated and ‘vernacular’ in new ways, it also appears to have become more like what we often find (or found not too long ago) in other large states in north India. Appeals to caste and community are now made more explicitly in political arenas; the honour and reputation of the supreme party leader appears as closely tied to the honour and reputation of her constituency, and is fiercely defended; a fairly high level of political violence and *goondaism* is the order of the day; and awarding one’s own through patronage while punishing one’s adversaries is the *modus operandi* of governance. In this sense, vernacularization may produce plurality in the particular, but conformity in the aggregate.

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6

Foreign Affairs and Federal Actors in the Indian Democracy

GEIR HEIERSTAD

India is an emerging power. Its economic clout has increased substantially and on a more or less even pace since the late 1990s, partly as the consequence of this economic growth and partly as a prerequisite for it, India is an ‘emerging power’. Its economic clout has increased substantially and on a more or less even pace since the late 1990s. Partly as a the country has acquired a higher international profile and ambition. The claim to a permanent seat at the UN Security Council and the increased military capability, both in air and at sea are but two expressions of this new thinking. However, in spite of these expressions and the advantages of a concerted effort, India lacks a clear international agenda and strategy for her international ambitions.¹ For instance, in certain areas New Delhi pursues a policy of support for the furtherance of democracy in the world. In other areas, New Delhi pursues a policy that effectively undermines these endeavours, as in its close collaboration with the undemocratic regimes of Sudan and Iran. Another example is the contradiction between India’s interest in close collaboration with its neighbours on the one hand, and its inability to pursue this in practice. Bangladesh is a case in point, which will be discussed later.

This chapter will argue that the lack of a coherent agenda and strategy is caused by processes of change in the practice of two interlocked yet separate constitutional provisions, namely, the division of power between the central government and the states, i.e. India’s federal structure, and its democratic setup. Thus, it counters and adds to explanations emphasizing causes such as the Hindu view of life, a lack of ‘instinct to power’, and continued support of non-alignment in international affairs.² The chapter will further argue that this political dynamic renders

1. George Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay*, RAND Corp.: Santa Monica, California, 1992; Sunil Khilnani, ‘India as a Bridging Power’, in *India as a New Global Leader*, ed. Sunil Khilnani et al., London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2006, pp. 1–15; Harsh V. Pant, ‘A Rising India’s Search for a Foreign Policy’, *Orbis*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2009a, pp. 250–64.
2. Harsh V. Pant, ‘Indian Foreign Policy Challenges: Substantive Uncertainties and Institutional Infirmities’, *Asian Affairs*, vol. XL, no. I, 2009b, pp. 90–101.

the prospects of a coherent agenda even less likely in the future as Indian states increasingly engage in foreign policy and, consequently, would actively contribute to the differentiation of India's external affairs.

THE CENTRE–STATE RELATIONSHIP AND FOREIGN POLICY

That the workings of Indian democracy are complex and paradoxical is an uncontroversial statement even within the passionate realm of writings on the politics of India. It is complex in terms of the number of voters, political parties and politicians. It is multifarious when it comes to vernacular approaches to democracy and tiers of administration. Added to this are divides of classes, castes, languages, religions, and the buying powers of the different communities. Complexity is also an inherent factor in India's constitutional framework. One aspect of the Constitution that is meant to counter the complexity is Article 3, which provides for the establishment of states, and the Seventh Schedule, which provides the distribution of powers between the Centre and the states.

The federal arrangement of the Indian union is in answer to the country's territorial size and the diversity of its population. It provides the various states with different rights and obligations, vis-à-vis, the Centre. As such, the asymmetric federalism is meant to accommodate each state's deep diversity.³ To what extent the arrangement simplifies, rather than complicates, is an open question. However, recent writings on the federal nature of the Indian union increasingly stress the growing independence of Indian states.⁴

This independence seemingly counters the constitutional power distribution, as Indian states engage in foreign policy issues on their own. This is particularly so within the sphere of the economy. Leading politicians of Indian states, competitive as they are on behalf of their constituencies, vastly benefit from working directly across the nation's borders in order to attract foreign investment and financial support of various sorts. Thus, the statement that most Indian states engage in activi-

3. Alfred Stephan, Juan J. Linz and YogendraYadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

4. Kripa Sridharan, 'Federalism and Foreign Relations: The Nascent Role of the Indian States', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2003, pp. 463–89; Rafiq Dossani and Srinidhi Vijaykumar, *Indian Federalism and the Conduct of Foreign Policy in Border States: State Participation and Central Accommodation since 1990*, APARC, Stanford: Stanford University, 2005; Rob Jenkins, 'India's States and the Making of Foreign Economic Policy: The Limits of the Constituent Diplomacy Paradigm', *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2003.

ties that are not unambiguously sanctioned by the Constitution is also uncontroversial, if not as widely accepted as the first statement.

If we turn our gaze away from economic activities to other areas, it is less easy to find uncontroversial agreement. It is particularly so on issues of foreign affairs and security politics. However, provided the right focus, it seems palpable that the actual making of policies, to minimize threats to the nation-state's interests, and to further its interests in relation to its neighbours and internationally, is influenced by increasingly larger sections of the population through the workings of its democracy.

This chapter follows such a line of thought by arguing that the 'new' federalism seen evolving through the 1990s has given subnational actors like the Indian states an increasingly important role in India's international affairs. This statement is also valid for certain issues involving external national security concerns. There are certain limits here, however, and it seems that it is mainly states bordering other countries that can influence the national security policy towards those other countries, e.g. West Bengal can influence India's Bangladesh policy and Tamil Nadu can influence the Sri Lanka policy. To what extent the importance of the states that share a co-ethnic population with other countries will grow beyond the present day limitations is hard to predict. However, I will argue that the dynamics of the twin processes of decentralization and democratization make it likely that we will see more subnational actors influencing the country's foreign policy, including its national security policy, in the future. As such, this is *the emergence of a process of democratization of foreign policy in India*.

Empirically, the argument will be put forward through the analysis of two Indian states or 'subnational actors', Jammu & Kashmir and West Bengal. The analysis will also deal with a foreign policy sector often thought shielded from the dangers of democratic populism and left in the hands of professionals, namely security policy.

But first we need to contextualize the current affairs of federal actors and security politics.

SECURITY POLITICS AFTER COLONIALISM

The retired diplomat and writer Kishan S. Rana sums up India's external affairs after Independence as follows:

As the British Empire's jewel and hub, colonial India had a proto-organization for the external policy management of *its neighbourhood*. At Independence

that provided a nucleus, but in concepts and methods, India forged its own path. That mind set of operating *autonomously*, disregarding other models, has persisted. [emphasis mine]⁵

The civil servants engaged in external affairs before Independence belonged to the Political Department and the Foreign Department. The Political Department worked on neighbourhood affairs, especially the turbulent Afghan region and Tibet.⁶ The department's elite belonged to what was called the Political Service, a cousin branch of the famous Indian Civil Service (ICS). Officers in the Political Service came mainly from ICS and the Army. It was this institution that formed the core of the new Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), along with ad hoc appointments supervised by independent India's first Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.⁷ Thus, the MEA was to a considerable extent built on British India's 'steel frame', even though the Indian National Congress and Jawaharlal Nehru had started to formulate an independent foreign policy as far back as the late 1920s.⁸ After the British had handed over external affairs and defence authority with India's Independence, Nehru changed the motivations and objectives of the service to suit his own thinking. An overarching objective in Independent India's external relations was to secure the country's autonomy (like most other countries) through non-alignment (unlike the majority of countries). Still, to argue that the mindset as such changed overnight, as Rana suggests, is wrong. Nehru was not altogether free from the legacy of the British rulers.

The new Indian federation run by Nehru had a highly centralized government, with a relatively autonomous federal bureaucracy rarely challenged by the Parliament (dominated by Congress), by the media or by individual politicians.⁹ In effect, Nehru would run the country's external affairs largely in accordance with his own visions.¹⁰ In the early days of Independent India the British legacy was still clearly visible in that Nehru continued what had been the British efforts of

5. Kishan Rana, *Asian Diplomacy*, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007, p. 47.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

7. *Ibid.*

8. The Indian National Congress established a small foreign policy department in 1925 to make contacts overseas and seek support for its freedom struggle (Balakrishnan 2010). Nehru himself formulated most of the Congress party's positions on international issues from the late 1920s onwards.

9. Walter Andersen, 'Domestic Roots of Indian Foreign Policy', in *Trysts with Democracy*, ed. Stig Toft Madsen, Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Uwe Skoda, Anthem Press, 2011.

10. S.D. Muni, *India's Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimensions*, New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2009; Andersen, *op. cit.*

‘fortifying India’s defence and promoting, as well as protecting India’s security in the Himalayan region’.¹¹ The neighbourhood policy focus of British India was more important than what Nehru’s speeches suggested, to the extent that he was characterized as a ‘Democratic Curzon’ as he kept a Curzonian mindset on security issues.¹² Consequently, not only was the highly centralized and semi-autonomous MEA a British legacy, but the reading of the major security issues in the early phase of Independence was a continuation of the foreign policy outlook of the colonial government.

However, Nehru developed a larger framework for India’s foreign policy during his tenure. According to Walter Andersen, the key elements of Nehru’s foreign policy vision were:

- ▶ Strategic autonomy or no military alliances with other nations to ensure an independent foreign policy;
- ▶ A policy of non-alignment, with the major objective to end colonialism in Asia and elsewhere and guarantee no outside influence;
- ▶ A close relationship with China, as a means to develop Asia and fight neo-colonialism.¹³

Strategic autonomy and the policy of non-alignment were important elements in India’s ambitious international self-image. According to J.N. Dixit, the Nehru government felt ‘India had an ideological as well as an operational role to play in world affairs in order to eradicate imperialism, colonialism and all forms of discrimination’.¹⁴ To a certain extent this culminated in the leading role India had in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1960 and its key presence in NAM for the first few years.

The close relationship with China remained mainly a vision and not a practical reality, even if India supported China internationally on several occasions.¹⁵ And even if relatively friendly, the relationship with China was at the same time also somewhat ambiguous. While Nehru held that the colonial borders drawn during the 1914 Simla Convention were valid, China disagreed.¹⁶ In January 1959, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai wrote to Nehru explaining that China did not accept the

11. Ibid., p. 29.

12. A.G. Noorani, ‘Nehru: A Democratic Curzon?’, *Frontline*, vol. 17, no. 26, 2000.

13. Andersen, op. cit.

14. Jyotindra Nath Dixit, *Indian Foreign Service: History and Challenge*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2005, p. 11.

15. India partially supported China’s rights to Tibet in order to avoid antagonizing China (Balakrishnan 2010).

16. T.K. Balakrishnan, op. cit., p. 154.

McMahon line of 1914 as legal. This did not immediately make Nehru change the course of his China policy, probably much to the chagrin of some of his advisors. However, the short period of optimism, encapsulated in the phrase ‘Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai’, came to a final end on 20 October 1962, when Chinese forces attacked India. Another victim of this war was the *Panch Shila* – principles of peaceful coexistence, which had been a basis for India’s non-aligned policy. After this brief war India, led by a disillusioned Nehru, turned to a more inward-looking foreign policy that focused on the immediate neighbourhood of South Asia.¹⁷

The inward-looking period lasted almost three full decades. In this period India saw two wars with Pakistan, the establishment of Bangladesh, and an increasing dependence on its relations with the Soviet Union. New Delhi continued to stress security concerns in the neighbourhood as its main focus. The impression of the ‘India which says no’ in international relations was born out of a conceited country that lacked economical, political and military capital or prospects of such. It was a period of defensive diplomacy.¹⁸

DEEPENING OF DEMOCRACY AND A NEW FEDERALISM

On the larger geopolitical scene, India continued to be a poor giant of little importance. Economically she developed at a rate more akin to countries in Africa than the tigers of the East and South-East Asia. However, three different processes took place in what was a more dynamic society than would appear from the outside, processes that would first become clearly visible in the second half of the 1980s, but which would, then, have significant consequences for the country’s foreign policy: a deepening of democracy, a liberalization of the economy, and mainly as a consequence of the above two, a ‘new federalism’.

On the political scene the ‘catch-all’ function of the Congress disappeared and it lost its national monopoly. Instead, regional, state-based parties received increased support in the elections. In addition, the number of political parties grew, and with them new groups of voters achieved some influence at the central level. Except for a brief period in the late 1970s, the Congress party formed all central governments until 1989. After this time all governments have been coalition or minority governments, consisting partly of national parties such as the Congress or its rival, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a host of regional or state-based parties. It was a change in the political landscape ‘from one dominated

17. Andersen, op. cit.

18. Rana, op. cit.

by a single party, Congress, to a federalized multiparty system'.¹⁹ The term 'federalized' points to the rise of state parties that began with the coming to power of parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh. This new pattern of federalized political representation is a result of two trends. First, an increased proportion of poor and socially marginalized actually cast their vote, thus creating room for new parties and forcing existing parties to reconsider their appeal. The increasing proportion of poor and socially marginalized groups seemed to prefer parties that specifically claimed to represent them, thus eroding support for large 'catch all' parties.

A second development was the weakening of India's financial situation which forced a major rethink, and liberalization of the economy starting from the late 1980s. Throughout this decade, the Indian economy had been heading towards a crisis situation and action had to be taken to ward off a threat of bankruptcy.²⁰ At this point, the incoming Congress Government of Narasimha Rao appointed the economist and former Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Manmohan Singh as Finance Minister. He opened up India's economy, and within a short period of time, the move showed results. The increased role of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)²¹ and the boosted Indian self-confidence created an environment in which international relations became more important to the country's well being and to individual states and leaders.²²

The change in fiscal policy also entailed a transition from 'a federalism associated with Nehruvian planned development and Congress party domination . . . to a federalism associated with a multiparty system and a market-oriented economy'.²³ There was, in short, a shift in the balance of power from the Centre to the states, and increased power for the states and the state governments. The interesting aspect for our purposes is that this had consequences not only for the state government's ability to have a deciding voice at home, in their states, or at the national level, but also paved way for the states' increasing interest and willingness to engage in international arenas. It is mainly in the field of economy and investment

19. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'The Old and New Federalism in Independent India', in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics*, ed. Paul Brass, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 151.

20. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy*, Malden: Polity Press, 2000.

21. Ramkishan S. Rajan et al., *New Dimensions of Economic Globalization: Surge of Outward Foreign Direct Investment from Asia*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2008.

22. Rana, op. cit.

23. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, op. cit., p. 149.

that this shift was visible. State governments competed in order to attract foreign investment and convince international companies to establish production units or buy services. John Kincaid has argued that the label 'constituent diplomacy' may be used for situations in which subnational political units, like the Indian states, to a large extent engage in national policy formulation.²⁴ This implies that the states function as 'co-sovereign constitutional polities with the federal government [. . . and that states are not] below or inferior to national governments'²⁵ in terms of engaging in international relations.²⁶ The ability of the states, or constituencies, to work on their own in the field of foreign affairs is again based on their new prominence that came into being with the end of the Congress' monopoly in governance.

Given this apparently new role of the Indian states in external affairs, one also needs to ask to what extent this affects India's larger foreign policy, including its security policy, a field that traditionally is extremely centralized in most countries. This topic will be investigated by looking at, first, the political contestations surrounding India's nuclear programme, and, second, confrontations between the central government and state governments in two different states: Jammu & Kashmir in the north-west, bordering both China and Pakistan, and West Bengal in the east, bordering Bangladesh.

A NUCLEAR DEMOCRACY

India has succeeded in becoming an international partner in the nuclear trade, and as such an internationally accepted nuclearized nation, without signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It succeeded in circumventing the Treaty by using its democracy as an argument, but the road was long and arduous, and democracy turned out to be a double-edged sword.

While it can be argued that the 1998 Pokhran II test explosions were targeted at a domestic audience, they received negative responses internationally.²⁷ The demand was for India to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty and in effect, give up

24. John Kincaid, 'Constituent Diplomacy in Federal Politics and the Nation State: Conflict and Cooperation', in *Federalism and International Relations: The Role of Subnational Units*, ed. Hans J. Michelmann and Panayotis Soldatos, London: Clarendon Press, 1990.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *op. cit.*; Jenkins, *op. cit.*; Andersen, *op. cit.*

27. Kalpana Sharma, 'The Hindu Bomb', *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, vol. 54, no. 4, July/August 1998; Harsh V. Pant, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy: India Negotiates its Rise in the International System*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

its desire to be a nuclear power. India, under the leadership of the Hindu nationalist-dominated government, declined. While the domestic majority hailed the (Hindu) bomb, threats of trade embargo loomed internationally. The nuclearization threatened to create an obstacle to India's economic growth.

In this context, the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States gave India new room for manoeuvre. The Indian support to the United States after this attack was both moral and material. Morally, India expressed strong sympathy with the United States, having been a regular targets of terrorist attacks. Materially, India supported the US with access to airports and air space over India for launching attacks against Afghanistan. India was clearly 'with us'.

Alongside this development, and probably as a consequence of new income-generating trade relations with the West, India once again took on the role of a champion of democracy. The difference between the situation in the 1950s and now is in the close relationship with a number of primarily Western countries. India and the Hindu nationalist-dominated government coalition depended on good relations with rich countries to continue the economic growth curve, and had to demonstrate to the world that their nation was a responsible international player.²⁸

In 2000, India became a Member of the Community of Democracies, a newly formed group initiated by the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright.²⁹ By extension India also became a member of the United Nations Democracy Fund when it was founded in July 2005.³⁰ With this engagement India showed its willingness to contribute financially to promote democracy in the world. The UN Democracy Fund officially 'supports democratization efforts around the world'.³¹ India is the fund's second-largest donor, and contributed in 2011 the same amount as the largest donor, the United States, and almost three times more than the third-largest donor, Germany.

The UN Democracy Fund membership, in the context of the thaw that followed 11 September 2001, suggested to many, and perhaps especially to the United States, that India could become something more than an important trading partner. The country could also become an important partner in general on the international scene and in Asia in particular, not least in order to balance China's growing

28. Ibid.

29. S.D. Muni, *India's Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimensions*, New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2009, p. 5.

30. Ibid., p. 168.

31. *UN Democracy Fund, About UNDF*, 2010. 32.

importance.³² It seemed that India, during both the BJP-led and the Congress-led governments, had managed to raise the country's international standing.

An important result of the thaw was the agreement on civilian nuclear trade. India became an accepted customer at the international market for civil nuclear technology and fuel through a 'clean waiver' in 2008 from the Nuclear Suppliers Group's existing rules.³³ The agreement meant that India was to reclassify 14 of its 22 nuclear reactors from military to civilian and open them up for international control. By opening up the reactors, India, in return, received access to trade in nuclear fuel supply to its civil reactors from the United States.³⁴ It was India's participation in international forums like the UN Democracy Fund that worked as preconditions for the West's ability to ignore the fact that India resisted signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty.³⁵ The close relationship with the US created, however, problems, even as the new line of foreign policy introduced by the BJP was continued by the Congress after they and the UPA coalition came into power in 2004.

For the UPA, the support from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI(M) was crucial for its parliamentary majority. However, the CPI(M) strongly disliked close relations with the United States.³⁶ They saw the future nuclear agreement with the US as forming an alliance that would give the world's biggest imperialist power too much influence over India. Not only did the CPI(M) threaten to leave the government coalition, they followed through with their threat and left the government. This was the most serious threat to the UPA coalition government before the 2009 elections. The Government survived, by a slimmer majority and some hefty cajoling, but the case was the first in which a foreign policy issue had almost brought a government down in India. It was a special case of a more general trend. State-level parties appeared increasingly as key political actors nationally.³⁷ It is

32. Pant, *op. cit.*, 2008, pp. 19–37.

33. During a plenary meeting of the Nuclear Suppliers Group in June 2011, the group 'agreed to strengthen its guidelines on the transfer of sensitive enrichment and reprocessing technologies [and] continued to consider all aspects of the implementation of the 2008 Statement on Civil Nuclear Cooperation with India and discussed the NSG relationship with India' (NSG 2011). While media and opposition politicians in India, in general, understood this as a rollback of the clean waiver, the Indian government held that the US, France and Russia in the aftermath of the NSG's plenary had assured India that the 2008 exemption would not be affected by the new rules (*The Hindu* 2011).

34. Pant, *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 29.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

36. Baldev Raj Nayar, 'India in 2005: India Rising, but Uphill Road Ahead', *Asian Survey*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2006, pp. 95–106.

37. Yogendra Yadav, 'Electoral politics in the time of change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989–99', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, nos. 34/35, pp. 21–8.

clear that the foreign and security policy is no longer something that only interests a small elite in Delhi.

One can argue with some strength that India's foreign policy since the 1990s is to a lesser extent ruled by a small elite group of ministers in Delhi. 'Internal diversity' has sometimes led to 'external diversity', even when this seems to threaten national unity.³⁸ Indeed, some would even argue that regionalization of the national political arena has taken place, in the sense that various state governments are increasingly involved in setting the framework for the national foreign policy.³⁹

We now turn to the role of the Indian states in relation to the Centre's day-to-day enactment of the nation's foreign and security policy. State governments, as subnational actors, it is argued, can both work with and against the incumbent government at the Centre to enforce their priorities, even when it is about foreign affairs and national security concerns.

JAMMU & KASHMIR: UNCONSTITUTIONAL AND DEMOCRATIC

Jammu & Kashmir epitomizes the secular ideals of the Indian constitution, being a Muslim majority state in a Hindu majority nation. But it is also a state of religious conflict and ethnic diversity. Internationally, the state is contested territory, not least testified to by the overwhelming literature that deals with the state. As a conflict zone since Independence, Jammu & Kashmir probably is among the most discussed, described and debated conflict zones in recent South Asian history. There are several significant points of contention. Pakistan claims the entire state of Jammu & Kashmir. Insurgent groups function in support of this claim. There is probably not a very widespread popular support for this claim, although vote on the matter has never been held, of course. But there is probably a widespread support for independence or at least a large measure of autonomy from the Indian state. A last point of contention is Aksai Chin, the huge, largely empty mountain region now occupied by the Chinese, but claimed by India.

Subnational units' involvement in security politics is not entirely new. Jammu & Kashmir is an obvious example of how a state government's policy intentions and ambitions, as well as non-government groups (in this case insurgents) become of consequence for national security concerns over many years. Another example

38. Sridharan, op. cit.

39. Subrata K. Mitra and V.B. Singh, *Democracy and Social Change in India: A Cross-sectional Analysis of the National Electorate*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999, p. 156.

with reference to the same state is Nehru's policy towards China before the Sino-Indian War of 1962. It has been suggested that Nehru could not accept the offer proposed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, whereby China would 'relinquish its claim to most of India's north-east in exchange for India's abandonment of its claim to Aksai Chin [in Jammu & Kashmir]'.⁴⁰ Nehru's refusal was mainly due to domestic public opinion.⁴¹

Public opinion is something that should and does matter in democracies, even in foreign and security-related matters. In these early cases from Jammu & Kashmir, however, the Centre easily overcame or accommodated these concerns. The ambitions of the state government were dealt with by direct interference and *inter alia*, the arrest of the political leader, Sheikh Abdullah. More recent events, however, suggest that the state government's scope for independent manoeuvre has increased, suggesting a reorientation in the relationship between the state and the central government.

Due to circumstances around Jammu & Kashmir's inclusion into the Indian Union, constitutional provisions ensured a special status for the state. Introduced in October 1947 and affirmed by the Constitutional Order of 1950, Article 370 gave Jammu & Kashmir powers that were denied to other states.⁴² The state government has wider powers to legislate on matters of land settlement rights pertaining to, for instance, property, immigration and political titles than other states, while only defence, foreign affairs and communications policy, and legislation were retained by the central government.⁴³ However, by the mid-1950s and increasingly in the years to follow, the national Parliament extended its jurisdictional powers. Between 1953 and 1986 forty-two constitutional amendments were passed which increased the power of the Centre.⁴⁴ For many in Kashmir, *azadi* (freedom, independence) implies a return to the pre-1954 agreements between the Centre and the state. The amount of autonomy, thus, forms a major part of the dispute between the Centre and the state, and the issue of the autonomy of the state government is a central one in the political life of Jammu & Kashmir.

The stunning 62 per cent turnout in the 2008 assembly elections paved the way for the pro-India political party, National Conference, to gain prominence. Some interpreted this 'as a sign that the people of Kashmir have endorsed Indian rule in

40. T. K. Balakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Vernon Hewitt, *Towards the Future? Jammu and Kashmir in the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge: Granta Editions, 2001, pp. 142–3; Dossani and Vijaykumar, *op. cit.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the state'.⁴⁵ Others point out that *azadi* is still desired by a majority, and that years of emergency legislation and paramilitary presence have created anti-Indian sentiments that run deep in the region.⁴⁶ This is the background against which contention between the state government and the central government must be read. The state government at the time was a coalition government, and the nationally dominant party, the Congress, was a partner in that coalition. The main partner was a state party, the Jammu & Kashmir People's Democratic Party (PDP).

The coalition exercised autonomy in a number of cases. One case, the year after taking office, concerned the release of militants and the disbanding of the Special Operations Group (SOG). The Centre sought to prevent this, because both the release and the disbandment involved national security. But the state government did not budge under the pressure. The state government ordered the release of the militants, both home-grown terrorists and cross-border infiltrators. This was contrary to the aim and ambition of the centrally administered Prevention of Terrorism Act.

A little later the SOG was dissolved. While the SOG was a Jammu & Kashmir state creation and thus, under its control, it was an organization that worked against terrorism and, as such, the Centre had strong grounds for opposing the move. The Centre sought to do so before the actual disbanding in 2003, but to no effect. As pointed out by Rafiq Dossani and Srinidhi Vijaykumar, '[here] again is an example in which the Centre was justified in intervening, but instead allowed the state to have autonomy'.⁴⁷

The status of Jammu & Kashmir within the federal arrangement of India is both special and highly disputed. Still, it is evident that the various actors at state level, both governmental and non-governmental, have strongly influenced the Centre on issues concerning foreign affairs and security in ways that go against the constitutional arrangement of the federation. West Bengal, even without any secessionist ambitions, whatsoever, is another example of how subnational governmental actors working within the frameworks of constitutional democracy are able to exercise powers in areas where the Centre seemingly should be in full control.

45. Sheikh Saaliq Fayaz, 'Kashmir Conflict', *The Daily Rising Kashmir*, 2011; Reeta Chowdari Tremblay, 'Kashmir's Secessionist Movement Resurfaces: Ethnic Identity, Community Competition, and the State', *Asian Survey*, vol. 49, no. 6, pp. 924–50.

46. Voice of America, 'Regional Party Enters Talks for Coalition Government in Jammu & Kashmir', 2009; Arpita Anant, 'The 2009 National Elections: Signals from the Kashmir Valley', *IDS Comment*, 2009; Tremblay, op. cit.

47. Dossani and Vijaykumar, op. cit., p. 17.

WEST BENGAL: VILLAINS, VOTERS AND WATER

India's relation with Bangladesh is influenced by West Bengal is but obvious. Issues involving illegal immigration, border patrol, deportation and the national identity card system, and trade policy are also areas where West Bengal has been able to influence the Centre's policy.⁴⁸ These are all important issues of national security at the federal level. The West Bengali influence on these concerns has ranged from invited involvement where the Centre sees a benefit from representatives of the state mediating contact, to instances where the state government has worked against the outspoken policy of the Centre.

In terms of security politics, India's national policy towards Bangladesh is informed by concerns 'typified by the broader fear of Bangladesh's potential to produce destabilizing conditions in the subcontinent which, in the long term, could invite external meddling and perhaps, ultimately, the disintegration of the Indian Union'.⁴⁹ Padmaja Murthy mentions four other areas of Indian concerns, vis-à-vis, Bangladesh:

- ▶ The porous Indo-Bangladeshi border, insurgents take refuge in Bangladesh; illegal immigration and its implications for West Bengal politics as immigrants tend to support the CPI(M) – the former state ruling party;
- ▶ Pro-Pakistani elements holding influential positions in Bangladesh;
- ▶ Bangladesh's strong political and defence links with China and Pakistan.⁵⁰

In several of these issues West Bengal's Left Front government led by CPI(M) for more than three decades until 2011 had influenced national policy, and when the Centre has disapproved the state's actions, West Bengal has successfully pursued its own policy. Three such cases of independent policy concerning border issues will be discussed here, namely, illegal immigration, border patrol and deportation.

The massive migration of people from Bangladesh to West Bengal has many consequences.⁵¹ While the states have an uncertain constitutional role to play to control illegal immigration, the Centre has wanted to hand the matter entirely over to the states. At the same time, during the time of the BJP-led NDA government, there were fierce allegations from the Centre that there was an increase of Paki-

48. Ibid.

49. Kathryn Jacques, *Bangladesh, India and Pakistan: International Relations and Regional Tensions in South Asia*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2000.

50. Padmaja Murthy, 'India and Its Neighbours: The 1990s and Beyond', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 24, no. 8.

51. Anand Kumar, 'Illegal Bengladeshi Migration to India: Impact on Internal Security', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2011, pp. 106–19.

stani-inspired terrorist infiltration into West Bengal from Bangladesh. (Further, insurgency in India's north-eastern states has shown a use of Bangladesh as sanctuary.) There have also been tensions between the Centre and West Bengal concerning 'regular' illegal immigration. The Centre has suspected the Left Front government of West Bengal of turning a blind eye to illegal immigration to increase its voter bank. Thus, illegal immigration, often connected to terrorist infiltration, was a subject of contention between the Centre and the state concerning both means and ends.

Given this tension, it is even more surprising that the national government has allowed the state government the scope to pursue its own border politics. In India it is the paramilitary Border Security Forces (BSF), run by the Centre, which plays the main role in border patrol. This is especially so in West Bengal, Kashmir and the north-eastern states. The BSF is responsible for 'protecting India's land border during peace time and for preventing transborder crimes and it has an extensive intelligence network'.⁵² The West Bengal government has in theory little control over the BSF, even as the BSF monitors and works with anti-insurgency and counterterrorism units within West Bengal. In practice, however, the state has been able to successfully control the BSF. In 2004, the West Bengal High Court was able to force the BSF to hand over members in a criminal proceeding, even as the Centre protested and argued that the state had nothing to do with BSF investigations. After the High Court granted jurisdiction to the state government, the Centre did not pursue the case.

Another area where West Bengal has been successful is in influencing the deportation policy. The shared ethnic background of people in West Bengal and Bangladesh has made deportation a tricky area for the Centre. If the state opposes a deportation, it is easy for it to argue that it is an Indian Bengali who has been wrongfully accused. Further, West Bengal has been largely successful in regulating deportations of alleged illegal immigrants to Bangladesh from other states, since the actual deportation happens on their soil.

In all these three interrelated West Bengali cases, we see an ability of the state through state-level ruling parties, such as the CPI(M), to influence policy that forms an important part of the security portfolio of the central government. They include influence on the use and control of armed forces to protect the nation's autonomy. Thus, we see that when tension between the Centre and the periphery arises over external issues, it is not certain that the Centre will be given the upper hand, despite Constitutional stipulation to the effect.

52. Dossani and Vijaykumar, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

It may be mentioned here that West Bengal is to some extent a special case. The situation is quite different in other large border states, such as Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh (all bordering on Nepal) or Rajasthan and Punjab (bordering on Pakistan). One difference between these last states and West Bengal is that Bangladesh is peopled by co-ethnics – Bengali speakers.

THE WATER DISAGREEMENT

On the evening of Sunday, 6 September 2011 the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh attempted in vain to call West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. She plainly refused to entertain the call.⁵³ The reason for PM Singh's attempt was to convince the chief minister that she should not withdraw from joining the prime minister's official visit to Bangladesh. The chief minister had refused to be part of the delegation since the Trinamool, a party in alliance with the Congress both in West Bengal and at the Centre, and she was unhappy with the draft of the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement with Bangladesh. The draft crafted by the Centre and the Bangladesh government envisaged an equal split (50/50) of the water between the two countries. West Bengal and Banerjee had been kept out of much of the process and would not settle for more than a 25 per cent share to Bangladesh. They felt that the 'draft would mean that the rain-starved areas of West Bengal would be parched to keep up with the obligation to Bangladesh'.⁵⁴

Not only had West Bengal's chief minister been kept out of the process, but also the Railways Minister Dinesh Trivedi from Trinamool, who was part of the then Government at the Centre, was told at a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs 'that a bilateral water-sharing agreement was a "constitutional prerogative" of the Centre, when he raised his party's concerns'.⁵⁵ Further, the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool was shown the prospective water deal only two hours before it was intended to be discussed in the Cabinet on 2 September 2011.⁵⁶ At that point, a Trinamool leader requested Manmohan Singh to amend the draft in keeping with the party demand that the water share for Bangladesh should be 25 per cent, but 'all he got in return was a lecture and a scolding on the state's

53. *The Economic Times*, 'PM's Visit to Dhaka for Key Water-Sharing Agreement Cancels, Shows Political Mismanagement', 6 September 2011.

54. *OneIndia News*, 'Mamata Stands Ground, Opts out of Bangladesh Trip with PM', 5 September 2011.

55. *The Economic Times*, op. cit.

56. Jyoti Malhotra, 'Where Did India-Bangladesh Talks Go Wrong?', *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 2011.

duties and the Centre's responsibilities by finance minister and Congress stalwart Pranab Mukherjee'.⁵⁷ Mukherjee is supposed to have said 'that foreign policy was the preserve of the Centre, not the state'.⁵⁸ To journalists the anonymous Trinamool leader explained:

I had to tell him, you have no right to rebuke me. I am duty-bound to represent my state's interests. . . . The federal government may have the right to run the country's foreign policy, but the state has the right to protect its assets. . . . If Delhi could show us the draft treaty on the land boundary ahead of time, which we had no problem with, why didn't they do the same with the water treaty? I think Delhi was trying to hoodwink us.⁵⁹

But the hoodwinking was not a success, and without Banerjee as part of Singh's delegation and the consent of the Trinamool, the Prime Minister's visit to Bangladesh partly failed. Despite the National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon being sent to Kolkata to negotiate with Banerjee, a new Teesta Water Sharing Agreement could not be ratified. Thus, the breakdown in the river water talks happened not because of differences between Delhi and Dhaka, but between the federal government in Delhi and the West Bengal state government in Kolkata.

Even as the Indian Constitution gives only the Centre the power to engage in foreign affairs and amend treaties with other countries on sensitive security issues such as water sharing, the role of states is increasingly important.⁶⁰ This should not have surprised the Prime Minister the way it did in the autumn of 2011. In the case of India-Bangladesh relations the use and the influence of prominent people within the West Bengal government have been important for a long time. The role of the West Bengal former Chief Minister Jyoti Basu in earlier water sharing agreements is not only well known, but is also hailed as a good example of how leaders from border states that share an ethnic and/or cultural relation with neighbouring countries can be instrumental in facilitating foreign affairs. In negotiations resulting in the 1996 Bangladesh-India treaty on the sharing of Ganga water, Jyoti Basu became involved because of a request from the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

60. Chandran, 2010; Punam Pandey, 'India-Bangladesh Water Relationship: A Renewal of Trust', Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Article no. 3342, 12 March 2010.

There is an interesting difference between the three cases represented by the Communist-dominated Government of West Bengal and the case of the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement, opposed by the new government of the state. When the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee publicly explained her decision not to join the Prime Minister's delegation to Bangladesh, she did so with reference to the interests of the people of West Bengal. She spectacularly embarrassed her coalition partner and the Prime Minister of the country, and rationalized this with reference to the interests of the people of her state, ignoring the more general interest of the people of the nation.

More importantly, perhaps, the CPI(M)-led governments in West Bengal always had a more or less tenuous relationship with the central governments, whether dominated by the Congress or by other parties. Mamata Banerjee, on the other hand, was closely tied to the dominant party in the government. She had recently stepped down as a minister of that government, and the party she led was still a member of the coalition. The fact that she was able to undermine the Prime Minister and a coalition partner, and get away with it, points strongly to the new vulnerability of the central government.

Interestingly, the communists in the CPI(M), who had recently lost power to her, could only agree on her opposition to the water sharing agreement and support her decision. A little earlier they had supported Mamata Banerjee when she proposed to change the name of the state from West Bengal to Paschimbanga, which basically means West Bengal in Bengali. This ethnically conscious decision is another example of a populist bend in the state. It is difficult to imagine that once the populist *djinn* is out of the bottle, it shall be possible to put it back in. Decisions will increasingly be legitimized with reference to the 'interests of the people', meaning the people of the state, and less with reference to the interests of the nation.

State-level ruling parties, both influencing foreign and security policy and undertaking foreign policy-related actions, seems to be quite common, at least in border states.⁶¹ The cases of Jammu & Kashmir and West Bengal prove that the states can be both integrated into the Centre's policy and act independently in what constitutionally are fuzzy borders. In short, domestic issues do matter in security and foreign affairs in India, even as the constitution seemingly gives the Centre full powers in such matters. Federal arrangements are never easy. On the contrary, it is perhaps as James Manor states 'the virtues of accommodation [that work] as both the oil and the glue of federalism' in India.⁶² But 'the politics of bargain-

61. Dossani and Vijaykumar, *op. cit.*

ing⁶³ is not an easy one, and during the last decade even domestic views on foreign affairs have surfaced as a potential threat to incumbent governments.

DEMOCRATIZATION OF SECURITY POLICY

In conclusion, the reconfiguration of Indian politics has affected both the country's foreign policy and security policy. The main reason why the reconfiguration of Indian politics and economy in the 1990s spilled over into security policy was coalition politics. Coalition governments create a space for smaller state-based parties to play a role in national politics at the centre, which are still moved by compulsions that are state-based.

The lack of a coherent agenda and strategy in India is described as a result of various variables, such as a specific Hindu life-world, lack of 'instinct to power' and/or continued support to Nehru's non-alignment and the third way.⁶⁴ George Tanham, in his widely cited study of Indian strategic thinking, refers to how the life and world of the Hindus to a great extent is unknowable, and exists in external time to explain the lack of a coherent and systematic strategic thinking.⁶⁵ Another more recent approach stresses the lack of a sophisticated understanding of power in the international arena of strategic competition, and the absence of 'an instinct for acquiring it' among India's elites.⁶⁶

Harsh Pant builds upon both George Tanham and Sunil Khilnani, and further emphasizes the continued heritage of the elite's choice to opt for a non-aligned foreign policy during the Cold War. Despite the end of the Cold War it is still debated and, according to Pant:

The reiteration of the alleged relevance of NAM by India's foreign policy elite is merely the clearest sign of the intellectual sloth that has infected the foreign policy discourse in the country, an attitude that refuses to see non-alignment as a strategy that does not apply now that the Cold War bipolar international system has collapsed.⁶⁷

62. James Manor, 'Parties and the Party System', in *State and Politics in India*, ed. Partha Chatterjee, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 33, 92–124.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Pant, 2009b, *op. cit.*

65. Tanham, *op. cit.*

66. Khilnani, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

67. Pant, 2009a, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

To a large extent there is agreement concerning India's lack of a coherent foreign policy agenda, wherein, it faces a 'fundamental crisis'.⁶⁸ There has never been any 'general consensus across political parties on major foreign policy issues', except that of 'intellectual laziness and apathy'.⁶⁹

However, the lack of coherence and census is also caused, as argued earlier, by processes of change in the practice of two interlocked constitutional provisions: India's federal polity and its democratic setup. Overlooking the changing practices of federal relations and the workings of democracy will render efforts to contribute to India's claim for superpower status through grand strategies and power-oriented strategic thinking, if not worthless, then at least partial.

Such maps correspond poorly to the territory and prove navigation difficult.

The cases presented here suggest that India's foreign and security policy has been conditioned by economic liberalization and the new realignments in federal-state status quo. In certain areas powerful and/or influential states have been able to play a part as engaged constituents with the ability to inform, and in some cases challenge and directly oppose the Centre's security policy. India's apparent lack of a coherent foreign policy agenda and strategy stems in large part from this dissonance. Sunil Khilnani seems to agree with this reading, even though he does not provide a substantial discussion of subnational actors like the Indian states, when he states that India's place in the world will depend on more than economic growth, namely 'its ability to nurture internal diversity and pluralism through the structures of liberal constitutional democracy'.⁷⁰ It is no longer the case that India's foreign and security policy is formulated by a small elite. On the contrary, we may today talk about 'constituent diplomacy' and the presence of several more or less equal subnational actors. This can best be described as the emergence of a process of democratization of foreign policy in India.

Two last questions to be posed are: is this an emerging trend, meaning that in the future will the states have a more important role to play? And to what extent will India benefit from such a development, or is it rather a threat to India as an autonomous nation?

Even if the federal arrangement of India and powerful state-level parties may frustrate initiatives at the Centre, as was evident in the efforts to amend the Teesta treaty, the politics of bargaining and accommodation might still be the glue and oil of India as a nation state, even after the BJP won the right to form a majority government in 2014. A return to the more centralized federal practices is probably

68. Pant, 2009b, op. cit.

69. Ibid., p. 100.

70. Khilnani, op. cit., p. 12.

impossible. The deepening of democracy and the connected fracturing of the political landscape force governments to be sensitive to state interests and politics in the foreseeable future.

The combination of a new federalism and economic growth, on the one hand, and the deepening of democracy in a way that may open up for more populist decision-making (ignoring for now whether this is good or bad) on the other has fractured India's ability to pursue a coherent foreign policy. Still, accommodating the multitude of voices and views in the largest democracy in the world through political bargaining may in the long run benefit the unity of the country and in fact, strengthen the basis on which decisions are taken, even if on occasion the Prime Minister is embarrassed, and even if on occasion the nation's external voice is less coherent than what one could expect.

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7

Symbolic Engineering

Advani's Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra

LARS TORE FLÅTEN

Hindu nationalism, as represented in politics by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been influential since the late 1980s. The party advocates cultural nationalism, aiming to redefine India according to its Hindu cultural legacy. Many approaches to the BJP have analysed its role during the Ayodhya movement, which reached its culmination between 1989 to 1992, and its six-year tenure as governing party at the national level, from 1998 to 2004.¹ In this chapter, I will focus on the years falling in between these two periods. This was a period in which the BJP underwent several important changes and was transformed into a national party, which eventually assumed power. This transformation was in many ways a result of the BJP's abilities to take lessons from its involvement in the Ayodhya movement and also respond adequately to important structural changes taking place in Indian politics. These changes are mainly connected to the increasing regionalization of Indian politics as well as the introduction of alliance politics. These tendencies seen together have made the relationship between the central level and the state levels more complex, and in order to fully grasp the workings of India's democracy, one needs to take into account the plurality of regional political cultures without losing sight of the aggregate level at the centre. For a national party such as the BJP, which also has a clear national vision, this development implied that it had to regionalize its own strategies without undermining its key message of Hindu cultural unity.²

Furthermore, I approach the BJP through the prism of identity politics, by paying attention to the party's employment of various strategies in order to mobilize India's Hindus – by virtue of being Hindus. This also involves how the BJP defined

1. With regard to the Ayodhya controversy, see for example David Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, Oxford University Press, 2006. For a good introduction to the legacy of BJP rule at the centre, see K. Adeney and L. Saez, eds., *Coalition Politics and Hindu Nationalism*, London: Routledge, 2005.

2. See the introductory essay in this Volume for an elaborate discussion on the different levels characterizing Indian democracy.

and promoted the very content of Hindu identity through its political activities. And most certainly, the BJP has promoted its version of Hindu identity within a great number of arenas, such as the educational system, religious festivals, and different welfare programmes. I have chosen to focus on one particular political campaign, Lal Krishna Advani's Swarna Jayanti RathYatra in 1997. Advani has, since the foundation of the BJP in 1980, been one of its main leaders, and he is particularly known for his large-scale political campaigns. The yatra can best be described as a political pilgrimage, and characteristic of these yatras is the way in which Advani tends to fuse certain conceptions of Hindu culture and Indian history with more traditional political appeals. As such, this chapter seeks to address the relationship between identity politics and political entrepreneurship.

The main challenge to the Hindu nationalists has always been to define and advocate Hindu identity in heterogeneous India, divided along the lines of caste, language, region and to some extent religion. In other words, the party has had to find the right balance between the core Hindu identity, on the one hand and the existence of sub-identities, on the other. I propose that the concept of 'symbolic engineering' might shed light on how the BJP has sought to respond to this challenge, and that it also illuminates some key features of Advani's yatra. This concept is inspired by Christophe Jaffrelot's usage of the term 'social engineering', which denotes the BJP's conscious attempt to incorporate low-castes into its party apparatus in order to widen its social base.³ The concept of symbolic engineering seeks to explain a similar and parallel development, insofar as the efforts to widen its social and geographical base also implied that the BJP had to promote Hindu identity according to local contexts.⁴ As I will show, Advani's yatra in 1997 represents a fine example of symbolic engineering. Advani employed a wide range of local symbols in his political agitation, and it was through these local characters that his national vision emerged.

The challenge facing the BJP takes as its point of departure that national identity is a singular category. However, this does not necessarily imply that a national Hindu identity needs to be invoked in the same manner throughout India. The anthology *Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva* (2011) underlines the need to ana-

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3. Christophe Jaffrelot, 'The Sangh Parivar between Sanskritization and Social Engineering', in *The BJP and the Compulsion of Politics in India*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and T.B. Hansen, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
 4. Thomas Blom Hansen has referred to this process as the vernacularization of Hindutva. Hansen uses this concept to show how Hindu nationalists have used local interpreters to promote pan-Indian themes. Hansen, 'The Vernacularization of Hindutva: The BJP and Shiv Sena in Rural Maharashtra', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 2. 1996, pp. 177–214.

lyse Hindu nationalism in its multi-faceted versions, as it is constantly influenced by and adaptive to different local contexts.⁵ Similarly, Peggy Froerer has examined the expansion of various (RSS) activities, such as educational schemes and welfare programmes among Adivasis in Chhattisgarh.⁶ Although there are good reasons to assume that the BJP benefits politically from such grass roots activities, I am more concerned with the level of party politics and election campaigns. As such, Badri Narayan's detailed study of the BJP's appeals to Dalit identity in Uttar Pradesh is worth noting. Narayan focuses on the way in which the BJP has appropriated Dalit icons and reinterpreted them within a Hindu nationalist framework. Furthermore, these reinterpreted icons are the ones utilized by the party when it seeks to attract Dalit voters.⁷

For the most part, my approach follows and partly incorporates Michael Gillan's arguments concerning the ways in which the BJP has responded to regional diversity.⁸ With regard to West Bengal, Gillan delineates how the party has appropriated regional icons and histories. Through this attempt, the BJP has sought to inscribe important aspects of the Bengali cultural legacy into its Hindu nationalist universe.⁹ Although Gillan notes that this appropriation has been going on for several decades, he also pays specific attention to the challenges facing the BJP in the 1990s. Before turning to the Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra (SJRY), I wish to briefly outline the one issue that brought the BJP into the centre stage of Indian politics: the Ayodhya issue. I will mainly focus on Lal Krishna Advani's contributions to this campaign, namely, his Ram Rath Yatra in 1990.

RAM RATH YATRA

In 1990, Advani launched his Ram Rath Yatra, with the aim of mobilizing support for the Ayodhya movement. At the core of this controversial yatra was the Babri

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5. D. Berti, N. Jaoul and P. Kanungo, eds., *Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva: Local Mediations and Forms of Convergence*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2011.
 6. P. Froerer, *Religious Division and Social Conflict: The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in Rural India*, New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2007.
 7. B. Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009.
 8. M. Gillan, 'Assessing the "National" Expansion of Hindu Nationalism: The BJP in Southern and Eastern India, 1996–2001', in *Hindu Nationalism and Governance*, ed. J. McGuire and I. Copland, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 30–57. See also M. Gillan, 'Bengal's Past and Present: Hindu Nationalist Contestations of History and Regional Identity', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2003, pp. 381–98.
 9. Gillan, op. cit. 2003.

Mosque in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Hindu nationalists claimed that the Mughal emperor Babur had ordered the destruction of a Hindu temple – dedicated to the god Ram – and raised a mosque on its ruins. Against this background, Hindu nationalists demanded that a Ram temple ought to be raised on the disputed spot. They also asserted that this particular temple being razed was only one of many examples of Muslims destroying Hindu temples.¹⁰ Hence, the symbolic aspects of this issue were significant, insofar as Hindu nationalists argued that Muslims had to make amends in order to end the collective suffering of India's Hindus.¹¹ The BJP was not involved in the controversy when it began to gain ground in the early 1980s. However, when the party eventually joined the temple movement in 1989, it threw in its full support and has since then been associated with this issue.

Advani's yatra set off from Somnath in September 1990 and planned to reach Ayodhya one month later. However, Advani was arrested upon his entry into Bihar, accused for escalating communal violence. There are several aspects worth noting with regard to how Advani and the BJP propagated Hindu identity during this campaign. Advani projected himself as representing a victimized and homogeneous Hindu community, denied the opportunity to worship Ram by the so-called divide and rule policy of the government.¹² To a large degree, Hindu identity was defined with reference to the alleged importance of Ram to most Hindus. Advani stated that 'Maryada Purushottam Chakravarti Raja Ram is a National Hero, representing the spirit of the nation.'¹³ In a similar manner, Advani argued that 'Ram is connected with the tradition, history, culture, geography and sociology of this "Hindu" nation'.¹⁴ In other words, Ram encapsulated the very essence of Hindu India. According to Richard Davis, who has examined the iconography of this yatra, the BJP also utilized images from the immensely popular TV serial *Ramayana*. The physical design of Advani's vehicle closely resembled Arjun's chariot from the TV serial.¹⁵ The Hindu concept *dharma* or the universal law was also often invoked as a unitary symbol during the Ayodhya campaign, and Ram was presented as its protector.¹⁶ The utilization of Ram during Advani's Ram Rath

10. Lars Tore Flåten, 'Hindu Nationalist Conceptions of History: Constructing a Hindu-Muslim Dichotomy', in *South Asia*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2012, p. 625.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Organizer*, 'Government Should Respect People's Wishes to End Vandalism of History', *Deepawali Special*, 1990, p. 19.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. R.H. Davis [1996], 'The Iconography of Rama's Chariot', in *Making India Hindu*, ed. D. Ludden, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 28.

16. Flåten, *op. cit.*

Yatra confirms what Thomas Hylland Eriksen holds to be one of the general features of identity politics. He argues that 'at the level of ideology, cultural similarity overrules social equality'.¹⁷ Eriksen also relates the emphasis on cultural similarity to an under-communication of internal differences.¹⁸ This cultural similarity was, as noted previously, structured around the importance of Ram to all Hindus. Moreover, the notion of Hindu homogeneity also has to be understood with reference to the social and political context at the time of the yatra. This context was characterized by social tensions, many of them relating to caste divisions.¹⁹

Hence, Advani's yatra defined what might be termed the similarity aspects of identity with reference to Ram. However, identity is also a relational concept and as such brings to the fore notions of difference. Identity, as constituted of both similarity and difference, is reflected in what Eriksen refers to as the distinction between 'we-hood' and 'us-hood'. Eriksen writes that 'Being *us*, people are loyal and socially integrated in relation to the other; through competition, enmity, symbiosis or the contrastive use of stereotypes and boundary symbols. Being *we* on the other hand, entails being integrated because of shared activities within the collectivity'.²⁰ Most certainly, the BJP's Ayodhya campaign was also characterized by its preoccupation with the 'us' aspects of Hindu identity. Calls for Hindu solidarity were to a large degree promoted in contrast to Muslims. Advani asserted that 'Sri Ram is our Rashtrapurusha. He is connected with our tradition, history and culture and not Babur who was an invader'.²¹ Another contrast was framed within notions of Hindu tolerance as opposed to Muslim intolerance.²² The Hindu-Muslim dichotomy also took more radical and violent forms, perhaps most evident in the many riots following in the wake of Advani's yatra.²³

Returning to the similarity aspects, Michael Gillan notes that the Ram Rath Yatra did not receive substantial support outside the north Indian Hindi-belt. Moreover, he described the Ayodhya campaign in terms of 'carefully packaged appeals to upper caste voters in northern India'.²⁴ Richard Davis remarked that the

17. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, p. 159.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Advani decided to launch his yatra after the V.P. Singh government decided to implement the proposals presented by the Mandal Commission, concerning reservations for the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBC).

20. Eriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

21. Organizer, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

22. Flåten, *op. cit.*, pp. 624–47.

23. A. Basu, 'When Local Riots are Not Merely Local: Bringing the State Back in, Bijnor 1988–92', in *State and Politics in India*, ed. Partha Chatterjee, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

24. Gillan, *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 383.

BJP's campaign did not take the complexities associated with Ram into account, and it did not reflect that there are many different versions of the *Ramayana*.²⁵ These arguments suggest that although the BJP utilized an image of Ram that was rather vague and abstract, it still defined Hindu identity according to the preferences of upper-castes in northern India.²⁶ Furthermore, this identity also had a rather singular character, since Ram was its sole defining feature.

According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the most important aspect of identity politics is that political symbols and rhetoric manage to evoke personal experiences.²⁷ There are, of course, many reasons why the Ayodhya issue did not become popular in eastern and southern India. One reason might be that it appeared unfamiliar and distant to too many people.²⁸ In the remainder of this chapter I will show that in order to mobilize new groups the BJP seemed to adapt a strategy of conveying its messages through the active use of local idioms and notions of regional pride.

TRANSITIONS

Advani's yatra did generate a lot of enthusiasm in northern and western India, however, the communal violence that followed in the wake of Advani's yatra and after the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992, seemed to backfire on the BJP. The historian K.N. Panikkar suggested that the anti-Muslim rhetoric could not generate support over time, and that the image of the Muslim enemy 'had run out of steam'.²⁹ In the assembly elections of 1993, the BJP experienced electoral set-

25. Davis, op. cit., pp. 35–6.

26. Gillan, op. cit., 2003, p. 383. The argument concerning the Ayodhya campaign as being designed according to the preferences of upper castes might be contested. The campaign was mainly concerned with devotional aspects of Hinduism, which are popular among a majority of Hindus. According to Arvind Rajagopal, people belonging to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) constituted the majority of the so-called *kar sevaks*, or religious volunteers. See *Frontline*, 'Hindutva at play', interview with Arvind Rajagopal, vol. 17, no. 2, 2000. In addition, Richard Davis remarks that upon the yatra's visit in Delhi and later in Madras, he spoke to several upper castes who dismissed the yatra as 'Toyota Hinduism'. Davis, op. cit., p. 29.

27. Eriksen, op. cit., p. 59.

28. Jayant Lele's argument appears relevant in this regard. He asserted (in 1996) that 'Hindu identity was a consciously cultivated, oppositional identity, and hence external to the everyday life of the people.' Jayant Lele, 'Hindutva as Pedagogical Violence', in *The Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia: Essays on Education, Religion, History, and Politics*, ed. N. Cook, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996.

29. K.N. Panikkar, 'Towards a Hindu Nation', in *Frontline*, 30 January–12 February 1999, p. 4.

backs in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, all states prioritized by the BJP.³⁰ It was evident that the BJP's appeal had both geographical and social limitations, and it was in this context that the party adopted the strategy of social engineering as mentioned above.

The increasing regionalization of Indian politics, which was intensified throughout the 1990s, had created an overly complex political climate.³¹ For the BJP, advocating a national Hindu identity, the growth of regional parties represented an obvious challenge. Furthermore, the regionalization of Indian politics also introduced the logic of alliance politics, which still characterizes the political scene of India today. The importance of the latter aspect was a decisive factor for the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections in 1996. Although the BJP emerged as the largest party in the Lok Sabha, it garnered support only from its ideological affiliates in the Shiv Sena. In order to attract alliance partners, the BJP was more or less forced to tone down its Hindutva agenda and its anti-Muslim rhetoric.

All these factors coalesced in Advani's SJRY in 1997. This yatra was a nationwide campaign, celebrating India's fiftieth anniversary as an independent state. The SJRY was not directly part of any election campaign, as the eleventh Lok Sabha was elected the previous year. However, this election resulted in a hung parliament, and the political situation was clearly unstable. The so-called National Front, supported from outside by the Congress party, assumed power and was initially led by Deve Gowda. After a year, he was replaced by his party colleague, I.K. Gujral. Advani, reflecting on the political instability on the occasion of launching his yatra, asserted that he expected mid-term polls in the near future.³² Thus, the SJRY may be construed as part of an election campaign.

Michael Gillan has described the BJP's main challenge in this period in terms of constructing 'a coherent ideology and nationalist narrative in the face of regional diversity'.³³ This challenge became apparent since Advani chose to spend much time and energy in the southern and eastern states of India, areas in which the BJP had experienced limited electoral success. There are several factors

30. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 515.

31. Y. Yadav, 'Reconfiguration in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections 1993–1995', Chatterjee, op. cit., pp. 177–208.

32. *Indian Express*, 'Curious Crowds and Fiery Speeches', 6 June 1997; *The Observer*, 'Advani's Rath Catches Public Pulse', 11 June 1997b.

33. Gillan, op. cit., 2003, p. 382. John McGuire has put forth an almost identical argument. He states that throughout the 1990s the BJP 'repackaged core elements of its national ideology according to regional characteristics'. John McGuire, 'The BJP and Governance in India: An Overview', in J. McGuire and I. Copland, op. cit., p. 3.

worth noting in the party's attempt to overcome this challenge. Gillan refers to the important role of the Sangh Parivar in terms of normalizing Hindutva through its many grassroots activities.³⁴ In addition, he emphasizes that the BJP utilized several sub-themes in order to expand its electoral success, 'such as "political violence" (Kerala and West Bengal), developmental "neglect" (the states of the north-east), and "farmers' concerns" (Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka).'³⁵

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the ways in which Advani's yatra may be construed as an effort to accommodate regional diversity. This effort also implied that the very content of Hindu identity had to be redefined and applied according to regional variations. I propose that the concept 'symbolic engineering' illuminates the ways in which Advani sought to mediate between the regional and the national, in order to reduce the symbolic distance between them. Although the yatra had a national message, this was conveyed to the audiences in different ways, tailored to suit each context, and as such, Advani seemed to utilize the existence of local historical and political imaginations. In this regards, I approach *nation* as a symbolic entity on the imaginative level. By doing so, I also take into account the multi-vocality of symbols, in the sense that they might stand for many things. Symbols, Anthony Cohen argues, 'are effective because they are imprecise'.³⁶ As a consequence, Cohen states, the symbol 'allows its adherents to attach their own meanings to it'.³⁷

In the context of the yatra, I will show that Advani invoked the nation as a symbol and that he encouraged his audiences to invest it with meaning according to their local contexts. As such, Advani sought to convey that there were high degrees of congruence between the local and the national. Next, I will outline the common national framework of the yatra, before discussing how it was applied in different localities.

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The SJRY shared one important aspect with Advani's earlier Ram Rath Yatra, insofar as it conflated cultural and national unity mainly through the promotion of certain conceptualizations of the past. The way in which Advani made sense of his yatra within the framework of the freedom struggle revolved around the relation-

34. Gillan, op. cit., 2007, p. 48.

35. Ibid., p. 47.

36. A.P. Cohen, 1985, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 15.

37. Cohen, ibid., p. 15.

ship between unity and diversity. The BJP released a booklet called 'BJP's Comment on Fiftieth Anniversary', which was distributed along the yatra's route throughout India. This booklet contained two statements, which at first sight appear inconsistent.³⁸ The BJP here asserted that 'India is one country, one people and one culture'. However, the booklet also reproduced a statement put forth by its leader Atal Behari Vajpayee: 'My party and I not only recognize but celebrate the plural, multi-religious, multi-regional, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic character of India.'³⁹ This unity seemed to be defined deliberately vague, in order to appear relevant throughout India.

According to Advani, 'no nation in the world has either attained freedom or realized its full developmental potential as a free country without first discovering its true national identity.'⁴⁰ He added that 'The identity of India was, is and forever will be her integrative cultural principle that nurtures her diversities and yet unifies them in a common community.'⁴¹ Moreover, Advani asserted that this national identity, or the cultural ethos of India, was understood by all the great leaders during the freedom struggle, and was the key to its success.

Compared to the extensive emphasis on Ram during the Ayodhya controversy, concepts such as 'integrative cultural principle' would barely alienate anyone. Furthermore, Advani also referred to concepts such as 'Hindutva', 'Hindu ethos', 'Bharatiya' and 'Indianness', without defining their content.⁴²

Similar conceptions were also reflected in the visual imagery of the yatra. The panels of the truck carrying Advani around India were decorated with paintings of heroic freedom fighters, together making up a pantheon. The list included: Lokmanya Tilak, Sardar Patel, Dr Ambedkar, Rani Laxmibai, Veerpandyan Kattaboman, Subhas Chandra Bose, Veer Savarkar, Ashfaqulla Khan, Chandrasekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh and Dr Hedgewar.⁴³ This pantheon represented a very diverse list of figures, belonging to different religions and castes. It also included people of different political persuasions, as well as some important regional heroes. By using such a list of figures, Advani invoked a glorified picture of the national past, where people from all sorts of backgrounds joined a unified move-

38. As Heierstad and Ruud note in the introductory essay to this Volume, this may perhaps only be a riddle in the aggregate.

39. *The Observer*, op. cit., 1997a.

40. Lal Krishna Advani, 'Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra: To Commemorate the Fiftieth Year of India's Independence', Press Release by President Lal Krishna Advani, New Delhi, 16 July 1997, p. 2

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *The Rediff Special*, 'Swarna Jyanti Rath Yatra: "It is the People who have to Bring the Change, and not Individuals"', Advani, 11 June 1997.

ment. Furthermore, Advani seemed to project the freedom struggle in symbolic and abstract terms, as a singular event. The yatra had no room for the complexities of the freedom struggle, its various ups and downs, or the fact that the different leaders of the movement had contradictory opinions on how to attain independence. The freedom struggle denoted a unified Indian society, expressing its common national identity.

This message of cultural nationalism was intimately connected to what Advani referred to as *Samajik Samarasata*, or social harmony. Advani stated in a press release that the promotion of social harmony was one of the main aims of his yatra.⁴⁴ Advani remarked that ‘The BJP believes that the people of India voluntarily dissolve divisive tendencies and identities in society when a higher unifying identity and a nobler national cause is placed before them. India’s national liberation was one such cause’.⁴⁵ Advani continued by asserting that India’s national reconstruction would arouse a common identity.⁴⁶ Moreover, he also framed his yatra as a ‘national renaissance’.⁴⁷ The term renaissance, as well as Advani’s extensive emphasis on unity and social harmony, suggested that these virtues were now absent, and that India had left the path established by the proud and glorious freedom movement. Advani blamed the Congress for this development, saying that ‘Unfortunately, after Independence the Congress leadership began to negate this truth [that cultural nationalism represented the glue of the freedom struggle] as much under the influence of a false view of secularism as due to considerations of vote-bank politics’.⁴⁸

Hence, the mission of Advani’s yatra was to remind Indians of the profound and fundamental unity that existed between them. This unity had existed during the freedom struggle, and the BJP was the main vehicle in its re-establishment. Thus, Advani did not ignore the diversity of India, but he opposed the politicians, who in his words, deliberately tried to benefit politically from these differences and thereby, destroy the unifying bonds. Advani’s yatra, therefore, may be construed as an attempt to reverse these tendencies.

I have limited my discussion to Advani’s campaigns in West Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In these states, the BJP had received minimal political support. Common to the two former states is that communist ideology had become deeply entrenched, whereas the latter two are characterized by the

44. Advani, *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 3–4.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

influence of regional movements, which to a certain extent are defined in opposition to Hindu nationalism.

DEALING WITH COMMUNISM: WEST BENGAL AND KERALA

Michael Gillan has examined the Hindu nationalist appropriation of Bengali icons, both prior to and during the SJRY. According to Gillan, already during the Ayodhya controversy, the BJP had decided to arrange several theatre performances of the *Ramayana* in Bengal. In these performances CPI(M) played the part of Ravana, who had abducted Sita or Bengal, whereas the BJP represented the dharmic liberator, Ram.⁴⁹ During the SJRY in 1997, however, Advani and the BJP seemed to pursue new strategies. Since the yatra celebrated the freedom struggle, Advani paid most attention to patriotic characters from this period, and during his five days in the state, Advani hailed the contributions of several Bengali icons. In his autobiography, Advani recalls his campaign in West Bengal, thus, 'On June 23, I participated in a special meeting in Calcutta to mark the martyrdom of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh.' Advani also emphasized that Mookerjee had been the youngest Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University.⁵⁰ Mookerjee's alleged martyrdom was here incorporated into the larger framework of the freedom struggle, and as such this reference also emphasized the contributions of Hindu nationalists in this regard. Advani's comment may also be construed in terms of underlining the Bengali roots of Hindu nationalism. Drawing attention to the Bengali background of one of the main Hindu nationalist ideologues represented one way of emphasizing this congruence. The other was to incorporate more traditional regional icons within a Hindu nationalist framework. In his autobiography, Advani noted,

In all my speeches, I invoked Bengal's incomparable contribution to India's freedom movement – the enduring message of social reformers and philosophers like Ramakrishna Parahansa, Swami Vivekananda and Maharshi Aurobindo, the eternal appeal of *Vande Mataram* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the soaring patriotism of Netaji Subas Chandra Bose, and the inspiring martyrdom of Khudiram Bose.⁵¹

49. Gillan, op. cit., 2003, p. 385.

50. Lal Krishna Advani, *My Country, My Life*, Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2008, p. 511.

51. Ibid.

Similarly, Michael Gillan argues that ‘the campaign honoured and associated itself with a plethora of Bengali nationalist icons. Included among them were Rabindranath Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, the Anushilan Samiti, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Syama Prasad Mookerjee.’⁵² Michael Gillan pays particular attention to how this appropriation of Bengali icons tended to converge Hindu nationalism with Bengali cultural legacy.⁵³ Moreover, Gillan notes that this appropriation represents a rather selective reading of these icons, perhaps most visible with regard to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda.⁵⁴ One such example, offered by Gillan, is telling, ‘national leaders such as Advani claimed an affinity between the outlook of the BJP and Vivekananda on the subject of religion and society’.⁵⁵ The characters listed by Advani were all subject to a great deal of regional pride. This is a fine example of what I refer to as symbolic engineering. Advani’s utilization of such figures, therefore, may be understood as an attempt to mediate between his version of Hindu identity and the regional Bengali identity. Advani did not push the unitary symbol of Ram from above, as was characteristic of the Ayodhya campaign. Instead he seemed to take advantage of a strong regional identity, which was then redefined and incorporated into his national framework. It was these redefined regional icons that Advani invoked in his speeches. Such a strategy appears strikingly similar to how Badri Narayan has conceptualized the way in which the BJP utilized Dalit icons in Uttar Pradesh.⁵⁶

Michael Gillan also emphasizes that such an appropriation was subject to much political controversy.⁵⁷ Particularly so, since the Bengali cultural legacy has often been associated with the so-called *bhadraloks*, a group of well educated, ‘respectable people’. This group has promoted a modern and secular outlook, and has tended to support the left parties in the state.⁵⁸ At the time of the yatra, West Bengal had been governed by the so-called Left Front, dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), for 20 years. Hence, the Hindu nationalist appropriation of this cultural legacy obviously collided with the way in which it was conceptualized by the *bhadraloks*. This discursive struggle was also visible in Advani’s rhetoric. The yatra, devoted as it was to nationalist themes, seemed to

52. Gillan, op. cit., p. 387.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., pp. 387–90.

55. Ibid., p. 386.

56. B. Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009.

57. Gillan, op. cit., 2003.

58. Arild E. Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal’s Rural Communism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

represent an excellent opportunity for Advani to reframe the freedom struggle into an expression of cultural nationalism. Advani asserted that,

No other ideological-political stream, barring the Muslim League, has caused so much harm to the cause of Indian nationalism as communism. Influenced by false and foreign-inspired notions of secularism and nationhood, Marxists have sought to erase India's very identity of Cultural Nationalism. Their contempt for religion and spirituality, their opposition to *Vande Mataram*, scrapping of Article 370 of the Constitution, Ram Janmabhoomi movement, and their cheerleader's support to the failed ploy to delegitimize the BJP under the pretext of separating politics from religion – all these are proof of Indian communists' un-Indian, divisive and disruptive character.⁵⁹

This list of severe accusations brought up one of the main aspects of the yatra, i.e. Advani's preoccupation with the so-called divisive politics of his opponents. According to Advani, the communists were guilty of undermining the very soul of India, its cultural unity. It is noteworthy that Advani referred to how the communists opposed the hymn *Vande Mataram*, which was authored by the Bengali poet Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Thus, Advani turned this Bengali icon against the governing party of West Bengal. Such an image was even more explicitly invoked in another of Advani's speeches in the state.

The communists have now invented a new demon: the BJP. Indeed, both the communists and the Congress have become allies in the politics of anti-BJPism. I am confident that the people of Bengal will see through this game. India's march to becoming a great nation will not gain momentum unless Bengal returns to its nationalistic roots.⁶⁰

In this statement, Advani clearly asserts that the communists had led Bengal away from its roots. In this way, Advani once more conveyed that there was no difference between the BJP's national visions and the cultural legacy of Bengal. Advani obviously considered the BJP's role in terms of reminding the people of Bengal their own proud legacy within a national framework.

As I will show later, this aspect of symbolic engineering was also visible in other states visited by Advani. He seemed to consciously inscribe symbols of local

59. Advani cited in Gillan, op. cit., 2003, pp. 391–2.

60. Advani, op. cit., 2008, p. 512.

cultural and political legacies into his own national visions, and turned them against his political adversaries in the respective states.

Kerala is another state where the CPI(M) has been influential for several decades. Advani claimed that Kerala and West Bengal were the two states in which his yatra received the most enthusiastic response.⁶¹ In terms of rhetoric, Advani's campaign in Kerala shared several features with the one in West Bengal. In his autobiography Advani recalls his visits to Kerala in 1997, thus,

In my speeches, I sought to emphasize Kerala's contribution to Indian nationalism as the land of Adi Shankaracharya, who travelled on foot all over India and spread the message of spiritual unity more than a thousand years ago; and Narayan Guru, the great social reformer who campaigned against caste discrimination by invoking the basic Vedic principle of oneness of all creation. I also referred to the patriotic warrior-king, Palasi Raja, who organized tribals for a guerrilla battle against British rule well before 1857. I said that both the communist and the Muslim League, another important force in the state's politics, were playing a divisive role since they neither accepted nor respected the cultural basis of India's nationalism.⁶²

There are several aspects of this excerpt that need to be scrutinized. First, the reference to the local patriot fighting the British well before 1857 is interesting to note. 1857 was the year of the uprisings in northern India, which is often referred to as the First War of Independence. Advani here seemed to take the north-south dimension into account. By acknowledging that this local king fought the British prior to the uprisings in the north, Advani also invoked a great deal of pride in these contributions. The references to Adi Shankaracharya and Narayan Guru illuminate Advani's strategy of conveying his political messages by appropriating local characters. In the cases of both Narayan Guru and Adi Shankaracharya, Advani's message was one of cultural unity, which was also the underlying theme of his yatra. The references to these two reformers also highlighted an important aspect of symbolic engineering, insofar as Advani underlined that the visions propagated by the BJP were not external to the political culture of Kerala. To the contrary, they had allegedly been promoted by locals for centuries. Moreover, the symbolic entrepreneurship of Advani may be understood in terms of emphasizing social harmony within a particular state, as well as high degrees of congruence between the regional and the national. Indeed, this example resonates with

61. *Ibid.*, p. 498.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 498–9.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen's argument that identity political movements tend to under-communicate internal differences and emphasize cultural similarity.

Furthermore, parallel to the previous example from West Bengal, these images of social harmony and cultural unity were contrasted to the main political parties in the state, namely, the communists and the Muslim League. Apparently, culturally defined nationalism represented the very antithesis of divisive politics, and Advani seemed to suggest that these parties were responsible for breaking up the unity that previously had existed in Kerala. Thus, Advani construed these parties as alien to the very cultural ethos of Kerala. Hence, in both West Bengal and Kerala, Advani highlighted that the values promoted by these local characters were in perfect accordance with the visions of the BJP, and this image was further strengthened through the externalization of the dominant parties in these states.⁶³

REACHING OUT TO THE SOUTH

Advani spent much time in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, both with strong and deep-rooted regional identities. In Andhra Pradesh, Advani's yatra had received a bomb threat from Naxalites. However, Advani refused to yield and completed the yatra according to plan.⁶⁴ Advani recalls his speech in the city of Vijayawada,

Here I paid tribute to Alluri Sitarama Raju (1897–1924), a legendary freedom fighter who mobilized tribals in the struggle against the British. Baba Prithvisingh Azad, the great Ghadar revolutionary from Punjab, had been imprisoned by the British in a jail in distant Rajahmundry town in eastern Andhra Pradesh. When Raju learnt of this, he vowed to free Azad. In the process he was caught by a British officer, tied to a tree and shot dead. The youth wing of the BJP presented me a torch, called Alluri Sitarama Raju Jyothi, which they had brought from Rajahmundry.⁶⁵

This statement suggests that patriotism transcended social and regional differences. First, Advani highlighted the contributions of tribals to the freedom struggle, and also the willingness of Raju to lay down his life for a person from the distant region

63. This particular aspect seems to echo Michael Gillan's argument concerning how the BJP engaged in opposition politics 'against various entrenched political regimes'. See Gillan, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 47.

64. Advani, *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 503.

65. *Ibid.*

of Punjab. As such, Advani's speech resonated with the general framework of the yatra, which highlighted a unified national movement. In terms of symbolic engineering, it is important to note this congruence between a local hero and the national visions of the BJP. In this case, the role of the BJP – paying respect to the heroic acts of this local character and promoting the values of the freedom struggle in a contemporary context – was firmly established through the involvement of its youth wing.

Advani's other speeches invoked similar images. In Nellore, Advani hailed the contributions of several freedom fighters from the district.⁶⁶ Moreover, he stated,

Why have their dreams of a New India remained unfulfilled even after fifty years of freedom? What would all the patriots and martyrs of the freedom struggle think if they were to see India of today, her polity steeped in corruption and her society reeling under poverty and social disharmony? The freedom fighters discharged their duty in their time. Now we have to do our duty.⁶⁷

This statement again highlighted the key message of the yatra. Its intention was to celebrate the freedom struggle, and through that remind contemporary Indians of the need to re-establish the unity that existed fifty years earlier. In Andhra Pradesh, Advani celebrated the freedom struggle by highlighting the contributions of several Congress leaders, 'At Ponnooru, I garlanded the statue of N.G. Ranga, yet another illustrious Congress leader who was a dedicated peasant leader, able parliamentarian (he was indeed the longest-serving MP) and crusader against untouchability'.⁶⁸ Analysed together, these two excerpts seemed to promote certain views concerning the legacy of the Congress. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress party has for long been one of the two main parties, the other being the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). Why then, did Advani so often refer to Congress leaders from Andhra Pradesh?⁶⁹ As I noted above, Advani accused the Congress leadership in the years after Independence of pursuing false secularism and vote-bank politics. He invoked a similar image in Andhra Pradesh, and by doing so, he turned the proud legacy of the Congress against its modern version. Without saying so explicitly, Advani seemed to promote the BJP as the true heir to this legacy. Following my argument concerning symbolic engineering, it was significant that Advani conveyed such a message through the appropriation of local Congressmen.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid., p. 504.

69. Advani also paid tribute to Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu, the first chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, *ibid.*, p. 503.

Advani also brought up another issue that has been the subject of much controversy in recent years – the demand to carve out of Andhra Pradesh a separate state of Telangana. This issue has been advocated by the TDP, and Advani made it clear that the BJP supported this demand.⁷⁰ Such a statement may be understood as a conscious move in order to forge an alliance with the TDP. With the benefit of hindsight, the TDP also joined the NDA in 1998. However, it may also be viewed in light of the BJP's approach to regional identities in general. During his visit to Andhra Pradesh, Advani also paid tribute to the local leader, Potti Shriramulu. Advani noted that Shriramulu, 'whose fifty-two-day fast, culminating in his self-immolation in December 1952, forced Pandit Nehru to accede to the demand for the reorganization of states on linguistic lines in 1956'.⁷¹ By paying tribute to Shriramulu, Advani also embraced the existence of regional identities, and through that reassured the audiences that the BJP posed no threat to such loyalties. As I will turn to in my discussion of Advani's visit to Tamil Nadu, the significance of such statements relates to the traditional image of the BJP as defining national identity according to the preferences of north Indians.

Tamil Nadu has for decades been dominated by parties originating from the cultural nationalist Dravidian movement, namely, the DMK and AIADMK. This regional nationalism has been expressed through Tamil language, *bhakti* poetry, and in recent decades, through Tamil cinema. The larger movement, from which these parties emerged, was also characterized by a large degree of scepticism towards north Indian dominance, Hindi language, Sanskrit culture and caste hierarchies.⁷² This legacy has made it extremely difficult for the BJP to establish a foothold in Tamil Nadu, since the BJP has traditionally been understood as a north Indian party representing the views of the upper castes.⁷³

Advani was of course conscious of this historical legacy, and while campaigning in the state, he paid particular attention to regional pride and social harmony between different castes. And he clearly sought to overcome the north-south division. In his autobiography, Advani notes that in Ettayapuram, he referred to the Tamil poet Rashtravaki Subramania Bharati, who according to Advani was also a nationalist.⁷⁴ In the words of Advani,

70. Ibid., p. 504.

71. Ibid., p. 503.

72. Pamela Price, 'Revolution and Rank in Tamil Nationalism', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2, May 1996, pp. 359–83.

73. Jaffrelot, op. cit., p. 439.

74. Advani, op. cit., p. 500.

In a popular poem *En Thai* (My Mother), Bharati wrote: ‘My Mother has thirty crore faces, but their body and soul is one. She speaks in eighteen languages, but the thought she expresses is one.’ I reminded the audience in my speech that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had recited this poem – in Tamil first and then in Hindi translation – during his celebrated confidence-motion speech in Parliament in May 1996.⁷⁵

This poem goes right to the core of the message promoted by Advani during this yatra, and also illustrates my argument concerning symbolic engineering. Advani here emphasized that India’s diversity did not undermine its fundamental cultural unity. Instead of constantly invoking Ram as a symbol of Hindu unity, as the BJP had done during the Ayodhya controversy – Advani here promoted the notion of unity from below by paying more attention to the many local manifestations of this unity. By referring to Vajpayee’s speech, Advani also conveyed that the BJP respected Tamil identity.

With regard to the freedom struggle, Advani apologized for the way people from the north often ignored Tamil Nadu’s contributions. In a speech Advani asserted that, ‘The tendency is to refer to the 1857 Battle as the First War of Independence. But long before the North woke up to British imperialism and fought the foreign rulers, here in this land, you had Veer Pandiya Kattabomman’.⁷⁶ Advani also added that his yatra vehicle had a picture of Kattabomman.⁷⁷ This was not the only occasion Advani emphasized the role of the legendary Kattabomman. The following excerpt is from *The Hindu’s* coverage of Advani’s visit to Tamil Nadu,

Recalling his visit to the Panchalankurichi fort earlier in the day, the BJP leader said he saw there the statue of Veerpandia Kattabomman flanked on either side by the statues of Veeran Sundaralingam and Vellaiya Thevan. While one was a Dalit the other belonged to a higher caste but they never had such feelings and fought together to free the country from colonial yoke.⁷⁸

In yet another speech, Advani apologized for not having intimate knowledge about Tamil films. Advani continued, ‘But a long time back I saw a Tamil film by

75. Ibid.

76. *Rediff on the Net*, ‘Advani’s Rath Yatra is a Grand Success in Tamil Nadu’, 27 May 1997.

77. Ibid.

78. Advani’s Appeal to Shed Casteist Feelings’, *The Hindu*, 27 May 1997.

the name *Kattabomman*. Sivaji Ganesan's portrayal of the local folk hero was superb'.⁷⁹

By referring to the regional hero Kattabomman, Advani incorporated his heroic acts in the larger, national framework of the freedom struggle. Advani clearly utilized the existence of a regional, Tamil identity, perhaps most visible in his references to Tamil films, in order to communicate with his audience. While referring to Kattabomman, Advani also commented on the existence of caste tensions in the state. As briefly suggested above, Advani seemed to convey that such tensions did not exist during the freedom struggle. Thus, he reminded the audience that caste cleavages could be overcome by rediscovering the underlying sense of unity. Social harmony was, as noted above, a key message of Advani's yatra, and in a press release, Advani asserted that his calls for Dalit-Thevar solidarity had only received positive response.⁸⁰ This again brings to the fore Advani's conviction that the Indian population did not approve of social tensions, and that they were created by divisive politics. This aspect was elaborated by a local BJP activist in an interesting manner, 'Mind you, the Meenakshipuram conversions took place only miles from here, and yet he did not make any reference to the same'.⁸¹ This incident was a regular feature of the BJP repertoire in the 1980s. During the SJRY however, there was no need for Advani to refer to this contentious issue. It related to both Hindu-Muslim enmity, as well as caste discrimination. Attention to such topics would only undermine the key messages of the yatra. Advani's lack of reference to these conversions rather seemed to suggest that he was sensitive to the local political context.

Kattabomman was not the only regional character emphasized by Advani. He referred to the local political hero Kumarasari Kamaraj, who also took part in the freedom struggle, and stated that Kamaraj's image was to be found on his truck, alongside pictures of other important leaders such as Gandhi, Patel, Ambedkar and Savarkar.⁸² It is interesting to note that Savarkar also belonged to this pantheon of leaders. As it turned out, in a speech in the town of Tuticorin, Advani highlighted that Savarkar had mentioned the contributions of Vanchi, a local martyr of the freedom struggle, in his book, *Kaala Paani*.⁸³ One should perhaps not read too much into this small comment. However, Advani's comment was probably not accidental, and may be understood in terms of familiarizing the local audi-

79. *Rediff on the Net*, op. cit.

80. Advani, op. cit., 1997, p. 4.

81. *Rediff on the Net*, op. cit.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*

ence with one of the founding fathers of the Hindu nationalist movement. At least, Advani suggested that Savarkar was well aware of the patriotic contributions of Tamils during the freedom struggle.

Advani's rhetoric, which to a large extent revolved around local heroes, seemed to represent a conscious strategy with the aims of communicating with the local population through the employment of well known idioms. Hence, this strategy resonates with my argument concerning symbolic engineering, as well as what Thomas Hylland Eriksen regards to be an important feature of identity politics – the ability to make the political message appear familiar.

These local characters functioned as mediators, through which Advani emphasized the congruence between a regional, Tamil identity, and the core Hindu identity. Advani's rhetoric also sought to invoke pride. The pride in these local heroes was converted into a national framework, through the promotion of common cultural bonds and a unified freedom struggle. Advani also tried to convey that Hindu nationalism as it was promoted by the BJP did not represent a threat to Tamil identity. To the contrary, the BJP was aware of the contributions Tamils had made to the nation. Moreover, Advani promoted the BJP as the vehicle in re-establishing the ethos of the freedom struggle. The existence of caste cleavages in Tamil Nadu were only due to divisive politics, and would disappear as soon as this ethos was re-established.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ADVANI'S YATRA

In this chapter, I have taken as a point of departure, the challenges facing the BJP in the aftermath of its Ayodhya campaign. This challenge was one of widening its social and geographical base, a matter which became all the more urgent due to the regionalization of Indian politics, and the need to forge alliances in order to assume power at the national level. During the Ayodhya campaign the BJP invoked Hindu identity by focusing on both similarity and difference. With regard to the notion of similarity, Hindu identity was promoted as a singular category, which was defined according to Ram. The notion of difference came to the fore insofar as Hindu identity was construed through its contrast to the Muslim other. Both aspects had obvious limitations. BJP's anti-Muslim image alienated potential alliance partners, whereas the strict focus on Ram proved largely ineffective outside the Hindi-belt of northern India.

It is important to underline that there were several similarities between the Ram Rath Yatra and the SJRY. Both had explicit intentions of promoting a national and

culturally defined unity. Common to both yatras was also Advani's promotion of the BJP as the main vehicle in establishing this unity in order to counter so-called divisive tendencies. The main difference between the two yatras was the way in which Advani disseminated these messages. One apparent advantage of the SJRY was its main theme. By emphasizing the independence struggle, Advani could incorporate a wide range of local heroes and histories within a national framework, and this framework was also rather vague in comparison to the Ram-centred Ayodhya campaign. One of the main limitations of the Ayodhya movement, at least in northern and eastern India, might be explained with reference to the distance between the Hindu identity, on the one hand and the variety of local contexts on the other.

The concept of symbolic engineering sheds light on what appears to be a conscious strategy on part of the BJP. With regard to Advani's yatra, it seeks to explain how Advani tried to mediate between a national Hindu identity and the various regional identities. Through this attempt, Advani tried to open up a symbolic space at the local level for his own political visions. One might argue that Advani actually utilized the diversity of Indian society as it enabled him to reach down and communicate with different local audiences. Advani employed a great number of local characters and presented them as local manifestations of Hindu unity. On other occasions, he referred to these local characters as representatives of the same values as those promoted by the BJP. As a consequence, Advani's message appeared more familiar to the local audiences, and in several speeches he conveyed that the visions of the BJP were not new. They had been promoted by local leaders and heroes during the freedom struggle and sometimes long before that. Employing this kind of appropriation, Advani invoked regional pride and attempted to convert it into a sense of pride in belonging to a national Hindu community. And this particular aspect brings out the differences between the two yatras clearly. The Ayodhya campaign sought to promote a singular and monolithic Hindu identity from above. The SJRY, on the other hand, was mainly concerned with conveying Hindu unity in different ways – by showing a greater deal of contextual sensitivity and by invoking national identity through political imaginations at the local level. Hence, the nation as a symbolic entity was invested with meaning in multiple ways.

The different characters referred to by Advani during his yatra mainly belonged to two categories. Advani highlighted well-known Hindu nationalists, such as Savarkar and Mookerjee, for their contributions to the Independence movement, both in speeches and through the visual imagery in his vehicle. These Hindu nationalists were also regionalized as Advani emphasized their significance in a

local context. For the most part, however, Advani's speeches represented a selective appropriation of important regional icons. Advani consciously emphasized those aspects concurring with the views of the BJP, in particular, that of cultural unity. Both categories more or less conveyed the same message – the congruence between the core Hindu identity and regional identities.

A second aspect of this symbolic engineering was visible in Kerala, West Bengal and to some extent in Andhra Pradesh. Here, Advani incorporated local characters, and local, cultural and political legacies into his national framework, and turned them against the dominant parties in the respective states. This aspect also related to the relationship between unity and diversity, which was a key theme of the yatra. Advani acknowledged the existence of diversity, but he severely opposed those, who in his mind, deliberately tried to destroy the fundamental, underlying unity. These opponents were guilty of promoting difference, and by so doing, they opposed the legacy of the Independence movement, which Advani claimed to represent. Hence, Advani sought to accommodate diversity by appropriating its various manifestations, in this case within a framework of national patriotism.

Finally, the yatra needs to be viewed in light of the BJP's attempts to attract alliance partners.⁸⁴ This concern might explain why anti-Muslim rhetoric was not a prominent feature of this yatra. Demonization of Muslims during the Ayodhya movement had alienated many potential allies. This lack might also be explained in terms of a higher degree of local sensitivity on the part of the BJP. Appeals to Hindu solidarity through the depiction of a common Muslim enemy had not generated much support in the states under study.

Advani was probably well aware that the BJP would not stand much of a chance in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu in the forthcoming elections. Advani's choice to spend so much time in these states may have been with the intention of establishing the presence of the BJP in order to underscore its national ambitions. With the benefit of hindsight, such a strategy might have proven successful. In West Bengal, the regional party Trinamool Congress joined the BJP's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1998 and again in 1999. Advani's utilization of regional heroes in Tamil Nadu may be understood in a similar manner, as a means to promote itself as a reliable alliance partner to the regional parties in the state. In 1998, the AIADMK joined the NDA, and the year after, when the AIADMK left the NDA, the other main Tamil party, the DMK, became the BJP's ally. I am not suggesting that this was due to Advani's yatra. Nonetheless, his yatra

84. For an elaborate discussion of BJP's performance in several of these states, see Gillan, *op. cit.*, 2007, pp. 47–54.

seemed to reflect a conscious strategy with the aim of gaining the support of one of the two main Tamil parties.⁸⁵ As briefly noted earlier, the TDP in Andhra Pradesh also joined BJP's alliance. Advani's motives for campaigning in Kerala are perhaps more difficult to grasp. His activities in the state never succeeded, neither in terms of increased support nor with regard to gaining influential alliance partners. One possible motif could perhaps be related to the party structure in this state, which has been dominated by the CPI(M), the Congress, and the Muslim League. The BJP had always framed its political visions in contrast to these parties, so its presence in Kerala may be due to ideological considerations.

It is difficult to assess whether Advani's yatra contributed to the electoral successes of the BJP in 1998 and 1999. Nevertheless, both the yatra and the elections indicate that the party placed a great deal of emphasis on its regional presence throughout India.⁸⁶ The BJP was able to assume power at the centre mainly due to its ability to forge a majority alliance with a wide range of regional parties. Thus, Advani's yatra also illustrates that regionalization of Indian politics does not only involve the introduction of a wide range of state-based parties. Due to the impact of coalition politics, the BJP, as a national party, needed to regionalize its own strategies, and find new ways of mediating between the national, the regional and the local. The symbolic engineering characterizing Advani's yatra has to be understood in this particular context.

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85. These two parties are bitter enemies and have never been in the same coalition.

86. In retrospect, Advani's campaign in Orissa is also a case in point, since the BJP managed to forge an alliance with Biju Janata Dal. Advani's message in this state, which has a considerable adivasi population, was social harmony. In the words of Advani, 'One of the recurring messages in my speech was that of social harmony (*samajik samarasata*) between tribals and non-tribals of different castes, for which I invoked a popular aphorism: *Na jaat na paat/Jagannath ka bhaat/jag pasare haath* (The blessings of Lord Jagannath are available to the entire humanity, irrespective of caste or creed distinctions).' Lord Jagannath is a popular deity in Orissa.

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8

A Fine Balance

Censoring for Respect and Social Harmony

KATHINKA FRØYSTAD

‘I am afraid you will have to rephrase some sections of your analysis. Certain sentences could seem offensive, and we do not want to risk that.’ This was the message I received from my reader at the New Delhi division of Oxford University Press just before my book *Blended Boundaries* went to press.¹ One of the themes was caste discrimination, and I had not always found generic referents such as ‘dalit’ adequate for discussing how such attitudes were expressed in everyday life. For reasons of precision, I had distinguished between the specific communities that make up the dalit category, in spite of the fact that certain of these designations are perceived as stigmatizing. I had also exemplified the way in which upper-caste Hindus referred to dalits in a condescending way and associated them with a host of negative characteristics. Was it going to be impossible for me to document how upper-caste prejudices were expressed? Would the publishers censor my research? The background to the publishers’ request was India’s strict legal restrictions on offensive remarks made in the public domain. As it turned out, the publishers had just been involved in a stormy controversy over another book, which ended with the state authorities in Maharashtra not just banning it, but also taking legal action against both the publisher and author.² Understandably, the publishers were anxious to avoid a repetition of such an experience. Fortunately, we soon came up with a compromise – I rewrote the phrases that could be misunderstood, but retained concrete caste designations and quotations where I considered them essential for the analysis, and the publication has so far provoked neither legal nor political reactions.³

1. Kathinka Frøystad, *Blended Boundaries: Caste, Class, and Shifting Faces of ‘Hinduness’ in a North Indian City*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

2. More on this later.

3. For this reason I follow the same practice in the present chapter.

This experience is my own little window onto a question that is of immense significance for the way in which the world's largest democracy manages its public sphere. How does India balance its commitment to freedom of expression with its aspiration to promote amiable relations and mutual respect between its many religious and social communities, and what does the balance point say about India's democratic status? On the one hand, the connection between democratic governance and a public sphere that allows free and critical dispute can hardly be exaggerated. One of the most renowned social science dictionaries, for instance, maintains that for units of the size of modern states, freedom of expression is as fundamental a requirement for representative government as elected representatives, free and frequent elections, access to alternative information, autonomous organizations and equal civil rights.⁴ But on the other hand, the ability to enjoy one's democratic rights requires a certain dignity and worth of the human person,⁵ and if these traits are to hold meaning beyond 'bare life' in the sense used by Giorgio Agamben⁶, certain restrictions to freedom of expression may be necessary. Thus, one could also ask whether India becomes more or less democratic by restricting its public sphere for the sake of respect and social harmony. Since this question would necessitate a lengthy engagement with the many competing definitions and theories of 'democracy' that have appeared over the years, this chapter will rather stay closer to the empirical ground.

Indian freedom of expression is limited in several ways. Explicit sex scenes are still unacceptable in feature films and TV series, there is strict protection from libel, and considerations of national security weigh heavily in a state with several unresolved border conflicts and past instances of terrorism. In this chapter, however, I emphasize the restrictions on freedom of expression that are justified by concepts such as 'social harmony', 'respect' and 'religious sentiments'. More specifically, I want to compare how the Indian balancing act has been performed in relation to caste discrimination and religious relations in the recent decades. I also examine the extent to which India's balancing act is explicitly challenged or defended in public, thus, generating a political debate on the desirability and also of the dangers of a more extensive freedom of speech in a country such as India.

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4. Robert Alan Dahl, 'Democracy', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004, pp. 3407–8.
 5. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A), 1976; see also Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 128.
 6. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

My argument is that in issues of caste we see a growing trend towards judicial censorship on the grounds of respect; that the judicial restrictions on expression in the religious field are stable, but under growing influence from religious and political pressure groups; that the chief public critique of regulation within these fields arises from instances that affect art, academic writing, and what I term the proliferation of *laissez faire* zones; and that, though censorship for the sake of respect and harmony certainly has had some rather disconcerting outcomes, it does not restrict the public sphere sufficiently to threaten India's reputation as the world's largest democracy. Perhaps the case is rather to the contrary.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE SEARCH FOR AN UNBIASED STARTING POINT

The concept of the 'public sphere' that recurs in such discussions derives from the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas' classic treatise on how the growth of discursive spaces in Europe – from British coffee houses and Parisian *salons* to newspapers and journals – enabled the transition from a feudal representative government to a form of governance in which the authority of the state could be subjected to critical discussion.⁷ Though the Indian public sphere grew forth in a different way, it is this conceptualization I invoke in the present discussion, and since I limit my case material to the recent past, I will primarily be concerned with newspapers, books and political meetings, with occasional side-glances to television and the Internet.

India's public sphere is exceptionally lively. Not only does it encompass newspapers, periodicals, TV channels, radio stations and more, in at least twenty-two languages, it also involves an impressive range of participants, including countless non-profit and religious organizations, political parties, social activists, and public intellectuals who by no means refrain from speaking out. The liveliness of India's public sphere is protected by the Constitution of India, which gives all citizens the right to freedom of speech and expression. India has also ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that 'Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice'.⁸ This being said, the Constitution of India also specifies that its

7. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

commitment to freedom of expression does not prevent the state from enforcing 'reasonable restrictions' in the interest of sovereignty, security, international relations, public order, decency or morality.⁹ How do we approach these exceptions and the controversies that surround them without relying too heavily on normative concepts, which give virtually any discussion along these lines a considerable bias against such restrictions?

My solution is to take inspiration from the title of Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* from 1995. Here we meet a young middle class widow, her friend's student son and two low-caste rural tailors who end up in the same apartment during the Emergency in the 1970s, and who try to find a balance between hope and despair, corruption and courage, dignity and heroism. On the front cover of the Vintage paperback edition, the balance metaphor is underscored by a photograph of a tiny girl who balances on the top of a long pole, which in turn balances on the thumb of an adult hand.¹⁰ True, the balance metaphor has been subject to considerable simplistic use given its easy applicability to all kinds of situations in which values come into conflict with one another. In this case, I nevertheless find it productive given its neutrality compared to concepts such as 'censorship' and 'freedom of expression'. The problem is not the inherent value-ladenness of these concepts but what their value-ladenness makes us emphasize and overlook. Grounding our studies in the concept of censorship can all too easily steer us toward an analysis that gives virtually all its attention to state regulation of the public sphere while ignoring the motivation for this regulation, as Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella correctly point out.¹¹ Grounding our studies in the concept of freedom of expression can make it difficult to maintain sufficient analytical distance from the increasingly vocal Western discourse on freedom that emphasizes individual autonomy while ignoring power relations, as Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Arne Johan Vetlesen argue.¹² Although it is impossible to avoid

8. OHCHR, op. cit.

9. Government of India, *The Constitution of India*, 2007, p. 9.

10. The photo was taken by Dario Mitidieri and depicts a two-and-a half year old girl named Savita performing for Arab tourists near the Taj Mahal Hotel. The photograph is part of a series titled 'Children of Bombay', dated 1992.

11. Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella, eds., *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2009. Despite making this important observation it can be questioned whether their own volume steers entirely clear of this bias, as I suggest in Frøystad, 2013.

12. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Arne Johan Vetlesen, 'Innledning', in *Frihet*, ed. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Arne Johan Vetlesen, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2007.

these concepts, 'balance' and 'regulation' constitute more neutral starting points. But what is it that is actually being balanced here?

Neither India nor other states restrict their freedom of expression because they 'hate our freedoms', as George W. Bush used to claim during his presidency in the United States. The reason is, rather, that they regard other values as even more fundamental. The value with which freedom of expression is balanced in India is neither hatred of freedom nor censorship, I suggest, but an equivalent of what political philosophers, social anthropologists and other scholars refer to with terms such as cosmopolitanism and recognition. Cosmopolitanism covers the concern for other social communities than one's own,¹³ as well as the mutual habituation that arises through everyday communication across social fault lines.¹⁴ According to the political philosopher Axel Honneth,¹⁵ recognition also includes legislative fairness and the acknowledgement that a child receives from its family, where especially the former is of relevance here. In Indian political parlance such values are normally discussed in terms of 'respect' and 'social harmony', which are seen as necessary to limit violent group conflicts, caste discrimination and religious tension, thereby also protecting 'public order', which is another common term in Indian political discussions about the regulation of the public sphere. The necessity to promote a cosmopolitan attitude arises from India's remarkable religious, linguistic, ethnic and social diversity. Beneath the mind-boggling heterogeneity documented by the Census of India each decade, there is a mosaic of villages, towns and cities in which people of different social affinities share social space. Most people relate to this plurality in an impeccable manner, treating each other with a tact whereby differences are acknowledged but downplayed, controversial topics circumvented and cultural restrictions respected. Indeed, Indians seem to be more skilled at this than many others,¹⁶ but in order to prevent hotheads and provocateurs from overstepping this unspoken social contract, endangering the social fabric and worsening inequalities, cosmopolitan behaviour and recognition of difference are also reinforced by India's legislation.

Most of the Indian studies that have looked into the regulation of the public sphere make their point of departure in the 'censorship' term and emphasize its

13. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism', in *For Love of Country?*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

14. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006.

15. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

16. Cf. Jonathan Parry, 'Cosmopolitan Values in an Indian Steel Town', in *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Pnina Werbner, Oxford: Berg, 2008, p. 328.

negative implications. Examining the proscription of books since the nineteenth century, for instance, Girja Kumar argues that the book is under a 'state of siege', held hostage by religious fundamentalists.¹⁷ Examining the regulation of films, which also pertains to questions of decency, Someswar Bhowmik argues that the Indian State has 'kept the cinematic medium in chains' and generated a 'long list of serious abuses'.¹⁸ Examining the court cases that have emanated from the effort to keep offensive expressions away from the public sphere over the years, Rajeev Dhavan argues that the authorities overstate their concerns for 'public order',¹⁹ that the censorship legislation is too inclusive and that ruling is inconsistent even at the apex level.²⁰ Additional critique will be exemplified later. In contrast, Western scholars' writing for a Western readership also accentuate the cosmopolitan side of the equation. At present, this is especially appealing in my home region Scandinavia, which is where the infamous cartoon crisis began,²¹ where the threshold for what one can write in public about Islam and European Muslims currently is lower than most other places in the world, where the blasphemy legislation is either abolished (Sweden, Norway) or dormant (Denmark),²² and where successful prosecution under the hate speech legislation is rare.²³ Against this background, the Norwegian social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen pre-

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17. Girja Kumar, *The Book on Trial: Fundamentalism and Censorship in India*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997, p. 16.
 18. Someswar Bhowmik, *Cinema and Censorship: The Politics of Control in India*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009, p. 342.
 19. Rajeev Dhavan, 'Moral Consensus in a Law and Order Society: Indian Responses', in *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History*, ed. Arvind Rajagopal, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.
 20. Rajeev Dhavan, *Publish and Be Damned: Censorship and Intolerance in India*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008, pp. 25, 141, 143.
 21. I am thinking here of the cartoons that were first published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in 2005 and which triggered an international clash of values, where Muslim organizations in a number of countries protested against what they perceived as unnecessary offence, while an increasing number of European newspapers reprinted the cartoons either in solidarity with Jyllands-Posten or due to their lasting news value.
 22. There are some crucial differences between these countries. The Norwegian hate speech legislation is considerably narrower than the Swedish one, with the Danish legislation occupying a middle position. The infamous cartoons were not published in Sweden (Eide 2011). Swedish newspapers, nevertheless, published a Swedish artist's offensive drawing of Prophet Muhammad as a dog.
 23. Marianne Gullestad, *Det norske nett med nye øyne*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2002; Mattias Gardell, *Islamofobi*, Stockholm: Leopard Förlag, 2010; Peter Hervik, *The Annoying Difference: The Emergence of Danish Neonationalism, Neoracism, and Populism in the Post-1989 World*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2011; Sindre Bangstad, 'Fighting Words That Are Not Fought', *The Immanent Frame*, 14 June 2011.

sents the Indian ban on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (discussed later) as 'a clear victory for a cosmopolitan attitude that transcends mere liberalism and acknowledges that difference necessitates respect'.²⁴ Likewise, the Canadian philosopher Ashwani Kumar Peetush, warning against the social marginalization and radicalization that an unfettered freedom of expression may engender in plural societies, mentions India as an example of a state that recognizes the harm of hate speech and other kinds of hurtful expressions.²⁵ The question I address in the following pages is neither which of these positions are most accurate, nor whether they can represent different perspectives on reality like in the story of the blind men and the elephant (as I suggest in Frøystad, 2013), but rather what the regulation of the public sphere 'does', for better or for worse. This, in turn, raises the question of what kind of empirical material one should look for.

While the Indian critique of censorship methodologically privileges the most controversial instances of censorship over those that have been met with consensus, Eriksen's and Peetush's praise of India's regulative measures privileges the authorities' intentions over actual outcomes. To balance these methodological extremes, I find it useful to juxtapose the ban on expressions that offend religious sentiments, which has given rise to most of the critique, with the ban on caste abuse, which helps bring out some of the cosmopolitan aspects of regulation. In both cases, I follow Michel-Rolph Trouillot's call for approaching the state (and by extension, democratic governance) not through its institutions but rather through its wider 'state effects',²⁶ beginning with the legislative sections that limit freedom of expression and continuing with their chains of implications, whatever these may be. When doing so, I find it useful to look for what Victor Turner termed 'social dramas',²⁷ which reveal the existence of some very real conflicts, not merely about the subject matter of the expressions, but also about whether these expressions should be allowed to circulate freely or not. The advantages of this approach are that it prevents romanticism of the kind found in comparative discussions that

24. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'The Globalization of the Insult: Freedom of Expression Meets Cosmopolitan Thinking', in *From Transnational Relations to Transnational Laws: Northern European Laws at the Crossroads*, ed. Anne Hellum, Shaheen Sardar Ali and Anne Griffiths, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011, p. 315.

25. Ashwani K. Peetush, 'Caricaturizing Freedom: Islam, Offence, and the Danish Cartoon Controversy', *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 173–88.

26. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization: Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2001, pp. 125–38.

27. Victor W. Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957; Victor W. Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

depict India as the ‘cosmopolitan other’ of an increasingly Islamophobic Europe, and the methodological accessibility of ‘censorship dramas’ given their broad coverage in Indian news media, books and studies. But this accessibility can easily boomerang. Since news journalists are known to pay far more attention to conflicts and irruptions than to the uneventful flow of everyday life, there exist far more media records of controversial proscriptions than of regulative measures to which the population at large agrees. Relying too heavily on media accounts and commentaries would then inevitably result in a study that exaggerates the extent to which the regulation of the public sphere generates problems on its own.²⁸ To steer clear of this methodological pitfall, I will also draw on my former research on social inequality, interreligious relations and violence dynamics,²⁹ besides including some largely uncontroversial instances of censorship. Indeed, the regulation of the public sphere entails a fine balance also for scholars who study it. Let me now step carefully onto the balance rope, beginning with the legal measures that India has taken to reduce the amount of derogatory public remarks against dalits.

CASTE ABUSE AND RESPECT

Sadly, the formal abolishment of untouchability in the Constitution of India in 1950 did not put an end to the many forms of caste discrimination that still occurs across the country. Over the years, the Indian state has adopted several successive legal acts that precisely detail the kinds of caste discrimination deemed unlawful. The kinds of discrimination targeted by these legislations typically concern behaviour that is far graver than making derogatory remarks. The Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, later revised as the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976, made it punishable to deny someone access to temples, village wells, schools, eating establishments and other gathering places on the basis of untouchability.³⁰ The

28. See Frøystad, 2013.

29. My former research includes an article on the caste dimension of master-servant relationships (Frøystad 2003), a book chapter on how people position each other according to class in public places (Frøystad 2006), an ethnographic account of the ways in which everyday enactment of caste and class articulated with the anti-Muslim tenets of the Hindu nationalist movement before, during and after the 1992 riots (Frøystad 2005), as well as an article discussing the temporality of riot dynamics (Frøystad 2009).

30. For further details, see Marc Galanter, ‘Temple Entry and the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955’, *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, vol. 6, nos. 2–3, 1964, pp. 185–95; Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, which came into being to promote social inclusion of dalits further, also makes it punishable to force any member of a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) to eat ‘inedible or obnoxious substances’, chase them from their property, compel them into forced labour, or report them to the police on false charges, to name a few of the atrocities specified in the text. Against this background, derogatory caste remarks may appear to be quite insignificant, but they nevertheless represent a form of discrimination that is now prohibited throughout the country. The SC/ST Act, as it is known, states that any person not belonging to the SC/ST category who ‘intentionally insults or intimidates with intent to humiliate a member of a scheduled caste or a scheduled tribe in any place within public view’ will be punished with imprisonment or a fine. This clause clearly includes verbal utterances, though it neither specifies what *kind* of utterances, nor how publicly an insult has to be made to qualify for punishment. Energetic legal activism among India’s politically engaged dalits has ensured that a growing number of derogatory remarks have been tried in court in the recent years, which is one of the most immediate state effects of the SC/ST Act.

To exemplify such processes, I open with the immediate reactions of Mayawati, chairperson of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and four-time chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, when Mahendra Singh Tikait, leader of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) used a caste slur against her during a public meeting in Mayawati’s home town Bijnor in 2008. Mayawati belongs to the jatav community (also known by the more condescending caste term of *chamar*) which is traditionally associated with leather work and treated as untouchables throughout the Hindi-belt. The jatav community is administratively recognized as a scheduled caste, which gives its members legal protection under the SC/ST Act. Tikait, on the other hand, hails from the jat community of medium-status farmers and landowners who are not included in the Schedule, and was thus liable to be taken to court for a caste slur. That Tikait’s remark was public was beyond any doubt. So was evidently the condescending tone of his remark, although Indian news media refrained from repeating exactly what he said for reasons I will come back to later. At first Tikait attempted to excuse himself by claiming that he had merely been using ordinary village expressions. But when a 4,000 strong police force surrounded his home village of Sisauli, where he was surrounded by fellow villagers and BKU activists, he softened sufficiently to ask for forgiveness and offered to withdraw his remarks, now referring to Mayawati as his *beti* (daughter). Although he was arrested anyway, in order to set an example, he was soon released on bail. The Bijnor court eventually concluded that his remarks were ‘not derogatory’, a con-

clusion Mayawati refrained from challenging given her dependence on jat support to remain in power in Uttar Pradesh.³¹ Even so, the SC/ST Act had enabled Mayawati to demonstrate successfully to her fellow dalits that no one should have to tolerate caste-related insults any longer, even if they were 'only' verbal.

Another instance concerns an article written by the media personality, playwright and former investment banker Anish Trivedi for the Mumbai based newspaper *Mid-Day* in 2006. Trivedi is of brahmin background, and in an article titled 'Children of a lesser God' he argued that government offices and government-owned companies suffered due to India's reservation policy, which sets aside a state-specific quota of the posts in all state institutions and enterprises for people of SC, ST and Other Backward Class (OBC) origin. In an attempt to establish the link between reservation and inefficiency, Trivedi made some rather distasteful remarks about reserved-category employees.³² Such remarks are not unusual. When I lived in Kanpur in the 1990s, for instance, I often heard upper-caste Hindus blame bureaucratic inefficiency on reservation, not only by criticizing the practice of hiring people on grounds other than merit (which was inconsistent given their own tendency of seeking employment and college admissions through personal contacts and bribes) but also by maintaining that reserved-category people had less favourable capabilities as a direct result of their caste background.³³ Trivedi's mistake was to put forth such remarks in public. Seeing them as a clear violation of the SC/ST Act, dalit activists registered a case under the special Prevention of Atrocities Act court in Mumbai. Seeing this coming, Trivedi made a public apology in *Mid-Day*, but the activists decided to let the matter take its course, and in January 2011 he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 25,000. This conviction was a clear victory for dalit activists across the country, though Trivedi was released on bail when he appealed the decision.

31. Sharma, Ashish and Malata Nyak 2008: 'Tikait episode exposes fault lines in UP coalition', LiveMint.com, 6 April 2008.

32. The contentious part of Trivedi's argument was not quoted in the mainstream news media that reported on the case, but it is freely available on the Internet, including in various blogs and the electronic edition of *Dalit Voice*. See V. T. Rajshekar, 'Editorial', *Dalit Voice*, vol. 25, no. 15, 2006.

33. Despite being grounded in an entirely different cultural logic, this mode of reasoning has much in common with classic racist arguments in the West, which occasionally resurface in academic studies that 'prove' people of African descent to be less intelligent than whites. The controversial book *The Bell Curve* is a case in point. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles A. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, New York: Free Press, 1994.

My third example concerns the question of whether stigmatizing caste names are illegal in themselves. According to Susan Bayly, the use of caste terms was already banned in certain state-specific legislations.³⁴ Among them was Gujarat, which prohibited the use of caste terms such as *dhed* in the 1950s.³⁵ But whether the SC/ST Act made such caste terms illegal throughout the country remained an open question until 2008. True, my upper-caste acquaintances in Kanpur generally believed such caste terms to be illegal. In fact, their resentment at the silent dalit revolution³⁶ under Mayawati's reign in the state was frequently expressed in terms of muffled remarks such as 'Abhi it has even become illegal to call out *he bhangi, idhar ao!* (Hey *bhangi*, come here!) to the *safai karamcharis* (municipal sanitation workers) who sweep the streets outside here!' The term *bhangi* is a stigmatizing designation used to address the community of scavengers and sweepers who now prefer to call themselves *balmiki*, which has positive connotations, since it is named after the person credited for having authored the Ramayana. All the same, dalits who attempted to report the use of derogatory caste terms to the police were usually turned away.

In the mid 2000s, the Supreme Court was faced with an interesting question. A case was filed in 2005 by a man named Vinod Nagar, who hailed from the khatik community, who used to make their living as pig herders. They are classified as SC and are protected by the SC/ST Act. Nagar worked as a driver in one of the upper middle class neighbourhoods in south Delhi, and his work included keeping the car clean and being available whenever his employer needed to go anywhere. As a result, Nagar spent most of his time just outside his employer's house, waiting to be called. This was not to the liking of the Sikh family who lived on the second floor of the building. On repeated occasions, the wife and daughter of that family are supposed to have called out to him that he ought to keep away when they went by as he was a *chuda-chamar*. Etymologically, *chuda* (also transcribed *chura*) is yet another term for the stigmatized balmiki/bhangi community, while *chamar* refers to the aforementioned leather workers and tanners. When these designations occur together and are directed at a person who is neither *chuda* nor *chamar* but a third low caste, the semantic effect is that of a profound derogation. That the offenders in this case were Sikhs, whose religion does not officially

34. Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

35. Shalini Randeria, 'Carrion and Corpses: Conflict in Categorizing Untouchability in Gujarat', *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1989, p. 174, n.7.

36. Cf. Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, London: Hurst & Company, 2003.

acknowledge caste, shows how entrenched caste thinking is in day-to-day life, despite all the legal measures that have been taken to reduce it.

Vinod Nagar's appeals to the women to speak to him more politely were unsuccessful. So were his employer's attempts to get the woman's husband to persuade them to behave more politely. Vinod Nagar, therefore, decided to report the women, who responded by submitting a counter charge against Nagar for misusing the legal system. The Delhi High Court was in doubt as to what to do about the case and requested a clarification from the Supreme Court. The issues the Supreme Court was asked to decide upon was whether expressions of the kind the women were alleged to have used were covered by the SC/ST Act or not and whether they were made sufficiently publicly to be illegal. The two-judge bench who assessed this issue produced a detailed statement – cited in all the major newspapers across the country – which argued that the use of such terms was indeed punishable by law. Their argument was that although the designations *chuda* and *chamar* may originally have been neutral, such terms are nowadays mainly used by upper- and middle-caste Hindus as insults for people of (assumed) low-caste background, which makes them illegal. In this way, the Supreme Court based its argument on the social context and assumed intention of the expression rather than on its etymological origin. Its statement also contained a broader justification for why the SC/ST Act should be interpreted rather strictly in order to do away with caste discrimination. In its verdict, the Court elaborated that,

This is the age of democracy and equality. No people or community should be today insulted or looked down upon, and nobody's feelings should be hurt. This is also the spirit of our Constitution and is part of its basic features. Hence, in our opinion, the so-called upper castes and OBCs should not use the word *Chamar* when addressing a member of the scheduled caste, even if that person in fact belongs to the *Chamar* caste, because use of such a word will hurt his feelings. In such a country like ours with so much diversity – so many religions, castes, ethnic and lingual groups, etc., all communities and groups must be treated with respect, and no one should be looked down upon as an inferior. That is the only way we can keep our country united.³⁷

Despite the unequivocal conclusion about the illegality of derogatory caste terms, the Supreme Court judges had serious doubts about the publicness of the women's

37. Supreme Court of India, *Criminal Appeal No. 1287 of 2008*: Swaran Singh & Ors Vs State, 2008.

remarks. In principle, they argued that caste-related insults by no means need to be exposed to large audiences to be punishable, as the SC/ST Act prohibits insults made ‘within public view’, which according to the judges also includes private places where others than family members and immediate friends are present. But whether this condition was met in Vinod Nagar’s case was doubtful, they stated. On this note, they returned the matter to the Delhi High Court, which is yet to take a decision when this chapter goes to press. Regardless of what the final judgement will say, it is certain that the Indian judiciary has now made an unambiguous statement in favour of interpreting derogatory caste terms as a punishable insult, and that the Supreme Court justified its statement with cosmopolitan arguments that are strongly reminiscent of those made by Nussbaum and Appiah, two of the most prominent scholars of cosmopolitanism.

My fourth and final example concerns the circulation of caste insults on the Internet, which comprises the ‘opposite’ pole of the public sphere, so to speak. This will enable me to return to Mayawati, who for long has been a prime target for caste insults given her influential political position. During the general elections of 2009, when certain newspapers speculated whether Mayawati could attract enough votes and alliance partners to become India’s first dalit prime minister, an anti-Mayawati group was set up on Facebook sporting images and text that clearly were against the law, whichever way it was interpreted. Its profile picture had a portrait photograph of Mayawati with the word *chamar* written underneath in uneven, almost dripping handwritten letters. Not only did this involve a derogatory caste term, the shape of the letters also alluded to the false rumours that Mayawati is illiterate, and gave – at least to me – uncanny associations of horror films with long takes showing writings on a wall written in blood, following a murder scene.³⁸ While this particular group eventually was removed after repeated complaints to Facebook, anti-Mayawati groups continued to be established years later, many of which contain remarks that not only violate the SC/ST Act, but also argue that Mayawati deserves to be killed. In all fairness, the anger that was poured out in these pages was primarily directed at Mayawati’s extravagant use of public money rather than at her effort to alter deeply entrenched caste relations. Nevertheless, the caste dimension was salient in the way in which the resentment was expressed. In an attempt to reduce the amount of objectionable expressions on the Internet, the Indian Department of Technology tightened its

38. Personally I was also reminded of the way in which Nazi sympathizers painted the word ‘Jude’ across the windows of Jewish-owned shops in Germany and several other European countries in the beginning of the Second World War, though I doubt that the group administrators were sufficiently familiar with European history to have been inspired by this kind of acts.

regulation of the Internet in April 2011.³⁹ From then on, all officials and private citizens were entitled to demand that Internet sites, service providers and foreign 'intermediaries' remove illegal or objectionable content within 36 hours.⁴⁰ Several sites had already been blocked before these regulations were issued, including a Facebook group named 'I hate Ambedkar', which had motivated clashes in the outskirts of Mumbai.⁴¹ Even so, the 'I hate Mayawati' pages were still in place when this book went to press and it remains to be seen how effectively Indian authorities will be able to clamp down on caste abuse and other unlawful expressions forwarded in cyberspace while more and more people gain access to the Internet.⁴²

To summarize the way in which freedom of expression has been balanced against caste abuse in the recent decades, I note the following trends. First, the enforcement of the SC/ST Act in 1989 made it illegal to forward caste insults in public. Second, in 2008 the Supreme Court confirmed that derogatory caste terms count as insults. Third, the effort that dalit activists and politicians have made to transform the SC/ST Act from a paper tiger to an actively implemented legislation has raised the number of court cases pertaining to verbal and written caste abuse. Fourth, to prevent the Internet from becoming a burgeoning *laissez-faire* zone of the public sphere, the Government of India has since 2011 regulated the Internet more strictly. Fifth, all these changes have clearly given dalits better protection and self-esteem. Sixth, these developments have also contributed to generate a growing public critique of censorship, which I return to later. As far as caste issues are concerned, the balance point has clearly shifted towards a stricter regulation of the public sphere, especially since 1989. Compared to the United States or my home country Norway, India's balance point is located at an entirely different spot. In these two countries, stigmatizing terms such as *nigger* and *svartskalle* (black skull) are fully legal despite being politically incorrect in the extreme. Unless

39. The term 'objectionable' includes information that 'is grossly harmful, harassing, blasphemous, defamatory, obscene, pornographic, pedophilic, libelous, invasive of another's privacy, hateful, or racially, ethnically objectionable, disparaging, relating or encouraging money laundering or gambling, or otherwise unlawful in any manner'. See *Information Technology (Electronic Service Delivery) Rules, Department of Information Technology*, Government of India, 2011, p. 12.

40. Rajini Vaidyanathan, 'Freedom Fears of India's Web Users', *BBC World News*, 23 May 2011.

41. Mateen Hafeez, "'I Hate Ambedkar' Page Deleted from the Internet', *The Times of India*, 21 March 2011.

42. I have personally reported these and other groups to Facebook on several occasions, but Facebook is either slow or reluctant to block pages with content that violates other legislations than that of the USA, which may be why the Government of India now attempts to regulate such pages by itself.

these terms are used in ways that violate the respective hate speech legislations by explicitly inciting violence, their use is left to people's own sense of appropriateness. India, on the other hand, appears to apply its legislation in order to *promote* self-justice of this kind.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES AND SOCIAL HARMONY

While the SC/ST Act only protects people from the most stigmatized castes and tribal communities, Indian law also gives a more general protection against expressions that may provoke violence along its various fault lines, especially those that are ethno-religious in nature.⁴³ Of particular relevance are four of the sections in the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Section 153A of Chapter 8 states that anyone who by words, signs or visible representations promotes disharmony or enmity between different religious, racial, language groups or castes, shall be punished with up to three years' imprisonment and/or a fine. Section 153B further details that anyone who insinuates that people of particular religious, racial, linguistic or regional backgrounds cannot be loyal to the Constitution or be legitimate citizens, shall be similarly punished.⁴⁴ In Chapter 15 of the IPC, section 295A states that anyone who, through words, signs or visible representations, insults with malicious intent another group's religion or religious beliefs, shall be punished with up to three years' imprisonment and/or a fine. Section 298 details that this also applies at the individual level by declaring that anyone who through speech or sound deliberately attempts to wound the religious feelings of any person, shall be punished with up to one year's imprisonment and/or a fine.⁴⁵ In other words, India has exceptionally strong protection against infringements and prov-

43. I prefer to speak of ethno-religious rather than religious boundaries when thematizing the pronounced 'us' and 'them'-ness that gives room for politicization. Following this line of thinking, the boundaries between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians – all large-scale imagined religious communities, some of which did not crystallize until the late nineteenth century – are primarily ethno-religious whereas the boundary between, say, Arya Samajis and devotees of Krishna merely constitutes a religious boundary.

44. Despite the general phrasing of this section, readers familiar with the scholarship on Hindu nationalism are likely to be reminded of the 1930s ideologist M.S. Golwalkar's much quoted statement that 'foreign races' deserve 'no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen's rights' unless they respect and stay subordinated to the Hindu nation. M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan, 1947, pp. 55–6; Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2008, p. 33.

45. For details, see *Government of India, Indian Penal Code*, 2010.

ocations linked to community memberships with pronounced ascriptive characteristics.

The background to this legislation lies, as mentioned, in India's remarkable diversity. Despite the ease with which this heterogeneity is usually dealt with in everyday life, India has experienced some horrendous instances of collective violence, particularly along religious boundaries. Since 1980 there have been several major instances of ethno-religious violence. In 1984 Sikhs were attacked following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, who had been killed by her Sikh bodyguards. They had acted in revenge for Operation Blue Star, which was a rough-handed attempt by Indira Gandhi to defeat Sikh separatists in Punjab. She ordered the Indian Army to storm the Golden Temple in Amritsar, where at least 400 armed separatists had barricaded themselves. As counter-revenge to Indira Gandhi's murder, Sikh families were attacked in several Indian cities, especially in Delhi. In the course of three days at least 3,000 people – almost all Sikhs – were killed or had their homes destroyed. Later, in 1992, there were widespread riots between Hindus and Muslims following the destruction of the Babri Masjid, which Hindu nationalists claimed was built upon the ruins of an ancient Ram temple. Muslim protests were met with violent attacks. In town after town in north India, local troublemakers went on the rampage against Muslim residents, often acting on orders from leaders of Hindu nationalist organizations. Before the central government's paramilitary forces regained control, at least 1,200 people had lost their lives and almost a thousand more if we include the riot in Mumbai, one month later. In 2002, there were anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat, where the state authorities are said to have been so complicit that several scholars treat the riots as pogroms⁴⁶ or even genocide.⁴⁷ The violence was triggered by a passenger train full of Hindu pilgrims on their way home from Ayodhya allegedly being stopped and set on fire by a local Muslim mob. In revenge, Muslims were attacked in large areas of Gujarat in a series of riots that cost between 1,000 and 2,000 lives. This is the kind of ethno-religious violence that the Indian lawmakers attempt to limit by banning expressions that wound a person's religious sensibilities or promote disharmony in other ways. Granted, all the riots above occurred in spite of these legal restrictions, which begs the question of whether they really have the intended 'state effect'. Before commenting on this question, I want to exemplify certain instances where freedom of expression has been targeted, starting with Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*.

46. Paul Brass, *The Gujarat Pogrom of 2002*, *Contemporary Conflicts* blog, 2004.

47. Nussbaum, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 17.

Rushdie's fourth novel was anticipated with great excitement. The remarkable success of his two previous novels *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983) had made Rushdie an international celebrity and introduced a number of Western readers to South Asia's complex history for the very first time.⁴⁸ *The Satanic Verses* was initially released in Great Britain in September 1988. Weaving together the migration histories of two radically different Indian-born men with a rather unflattering fable on the origin of Islam, the novel alienated several Muslim readers, who complained that it was historically inaccurate, denigrated Prophet Mohammed, and contained passages that resembled hate speech. Penguin Books India, who had planned to publish the book in India, asked the renowned writer and intellectual Khushwant Singh for advice. Singh concluded that the book was so hurtful and tasteless that it could motivate massive riots, and advised the publisher to drop its plans.⁴⁹ Penguin initially decided to ignore his warning,⁵⁰ but changed its stance when the matter came to the attention of the Jamaat-e-Islami. This organization already bore a grudge against Rushdie following his malicious portrait of it in *Shame*, which made it launch a campaign against *The Satanic Verses*. The turning point came when the MP Syed Shahabuddin forwarded Jamaat-e-Islami's objections to the novel in *The Times of India*, and demanded that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi ban it. Rajiv Gandhi complied with this demand on 5 October 1988,⁵¹ mainly because he acknowledged the offensive nature of the book, but also because he did not want to lose Muslim votes barely a month before the elections. Thus, *The Satanic Verses* was never published in India, but the controversy had nevertheless taken root. Following Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie in February 1989, Muslim youth organizations arranged a strike and demonstration in Mumbai. Since India's ban was already in place, most leading Muslim politicians and organizations declined to take part. I happened to be in the city myself at that time, and I still recall the deserted streets with their closed metal shutters that Friday. The next morning the newspaper front pages sported pixillated photographs of white-clad

48. Kenan Malik, op. cit., p. xvi.

49. Cf. Anne Waldrop, 'Gud, Og Jeg Vet Ikke Hva', *Samtiden*, vols. 5–6, 1999, pp. 112–22; Sutherland, Janice, *The Satanic Verses Affair*, Documentary film, Great Britain: BBC, 2009.

50. According to Malik in *From Fatwa to Jihad*, Penguin reckoned on low readership figures in India, an assessment I believe to have been class-based. In India, the small proportion of the population that read serious English-language literature was dominated by Hindus. Though there were Muslims among them, there were hardly any from the Muslim working class who would take to the streets in protest.

51. The book was formally banned under the Customs Act, which regulates what goods can be imported into the country. The important thing in this case was to stop the import of British editions.

men with banners in Urdu and English denouncing Rushdie and supporting the fatwa. The caption said that ten people had been killed when the police attempted to disperse the crowd, a figure that was later adjusted upwards to twelve, and which included several onlookers.⁵² This incident and the discourse that surrounded it, reveal a tripartite disagreement between the critics of the ban, its supporters, and those who wanted Rushdie to be punished according to Islamic law for insulting the Prophet. In the years that followed, the public opinion in India mainly crystallized around two positions: the first supporting the ban on the same grounds as Khushwant Singh; the other interpreting it as a token of 'Muslim appeasement', which became a catch phrase in the Hindu nationalist discourse that began to grow forth.⁵³ Even if it could be established that the proscription of Rushdie's novel succeeded in averting large-scale riots, which I am inclined to believe, the proscription nevertheless caused considerable ripples on its own.

A more recent instance in which the IPC came into play occurred during the general elections of 2009, following Varun Gandhi's unofficial election speech in the Pilibhit district of Uttar Pradesh. In contrast to the other members of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, Varun and his mother Maneka represent the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Varun was already rumoured to have made some rather harsh statements against the Muslim minority, including that the Muslim population ought to be sterilized.⁵⁴ During the election meeting in Pilibhit, he also proclaimed that Muslims should have their hands cut off if they raised their hands against Hindus, that Pilibhit must be saved from becoming a new Pakistan, that his Muslim opponent was an Osama bin Laden and that his own lotus-shaped hand would cut the throat of 'the circumcised' after the election.⁵⁵ What Varun Gandhi did not know was that he was being filmed, and in the following days the recordings were broadcast on news channels across the country. This made the matter so highly publicized that the authorities stepped in. The Election Commission of

52. Asghar Ali Engineer, 'Anti-Rushdie Disturbances in Bombay', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 24, no. 10, 1989, pp. 492–4; Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, 'Bombay Talkies, the Word and the World: Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1990, pp. 107–59.

53. Mishva, Vijay, 'Postcolonial Differend: Diasporic Narratives of Salman Rushdie', in Harold Bloom (ed.): *Salman Rushdie*, Broomall, PA, Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, p. 88.

54. Praful Bidwai, 'Wayward Trends', *Frontline*, vol. 26, no. 8, 11–24 April 2009.

55. Maseeh Rahman, 'Gandhi Relative's Hate Video Shocks India', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2009; Santwana Bhattacharya, 'Varun Gandhi: A Pox on Both His Houses', *Asia Times Online*, 27 March 2009; *India Latest News*, 'Varun Gandhi Speech Video', 17 March 2009. The lotus flower is the political symbol of the BJP, and the slang expression he used for those who have been circumcised is itself derogatory. His statements were reproduced in greater detail in foreign news media than in India.

India accused him of having breached the ethical principles to which political parties and candidates are subject, and recommended that the BJP find another candidate from Pilibhit – a request the party opted to ignore.⁵⁶ As Varun Gandhi was a politician in the middle of an election campaign, his provocative speeches could not be stopped by reporting him for breach of the IPC.⁵⁷ The Mayawati-led state government in Uttar Pradesh, therefore, reported him in accordance with the National Security Act (NSA), which allows preventive arrests of people who threaten state security or public order.⁵⁸ Despite Varun Gandhi's protestations that the video was a fake, he was arrested. Even so, he was released eighteen days later, once he had signed a declaration that he would make no more speeches that could precipitate violence. At the same time, the Supreme Court rejected the state authorities' use of the NSA, which it argued should be reserved for more serious cases. Now Varun Gandhi was free to return to the election campaign, and at the time of writing he represents the BJP as a Member of Parliament. Nonetheless, his encounter with the long arm of the law demonstrates some of the sanctions that can be set in motion if the IPC is violated. I also highlight the complex legal terrain one may move into when trying to regulate the public sphere, whether in regard to exceptions (here politicians in election campaigns), alternative legislations (here the NSA and in Rushdie's case The Customs Act) or the disagreement between the state authorities and the higher courts, which I will discuss later.

While both the Varun Gandhi and the Rushdie case illustrate how freedom of expression is restricted on behalf of the Muslim minority, the blasphemy legislation gives equal protection to Hindus and Christians. In 1998, the Indian authorities banned the Christian pamphlet 'Satya Darshini', which describes Hindu deities in such negative terms that it soured the relationship between Hindus and Christians in southern India. Christian missionizing is widespread in certain parts of the country, and the inclination of people from low-status communities to convert has caused considerable alarm in Hindu nationalist circles, whose ideology prescribes a numerically powerful Hindu majority with all its caste communities

56. The Election Commission referred here to the so-called Model Code of Conduct (MMC), which specifies in its opening paragraph that no party or candidate may act in such a way that they reinforce the tension between various castes or religious/linguistic communities. However, the MMC has no official status or powers of sanction. Election Commission of India, Model Code of Conduct for the Guidance of Political Parties and Candidates, 2007.

57. While most Indian citizens can be arrested while awaiting judgement, politicians are exempt from this rule. As the election campaign was about to begin, Varun Gandhi could not be arrested until after a potential judgement.

58. The National Security Act has been criticized for being so wide-ranging that it is often used unnecessarily, something that was also claimed following the arrest of Varun Gandhi.

interacting in harmonious complementarity.⁵⁹ In 2008, the book appeared again in Karnataka, this time allegedly distributed by an American charismatic church. It triggered angry attacks on a convent and fourteen Christian places of worship.⁶⁰ As the pamphlet had already been banned, the author and distributors were reported to the police, but the government commission who looked into the matter advised a withdrawal of all the cases in the name of forgiveness.⁶¹ While I was writing the first draft of this chapter, a ‘converse’ situation occurred in the north-eastern state of Meghalaya, where Christian parents and church members, supported by the National Council of Churches in India, protested vehemently against a textbook in which Jesus was depicted with a cigarette in one hand and what was interpreted as a beer can in the other, under ‘I for idol’ next to ‘J for jeep’.⁶² The textbooks were promptly confiscated and legal action against the publisher contemplated,⁶³ but since then there has been no news about the matter. As Torkel Brekke suggests, this controversy shows how Christian organizations are not just protesting against a particular offensive depiction, but implicitly also against what they see as long time harassment by Hindu nationalist forces.⁶⁴ As I was revising this chapter for the present volume, newspapers reported about a controversy over bathing suits that depicted the Hindu goddess Lakshmi on the lower front. The bathing suits had been designed in Australia and shown at a fashion show there, and though there was little the defenders of Lakshmi could do to influence freedom of expression outside India, they arranged loud protests against the Indian newspapers that published photographs of the event. The protesters were supported by the Allahabad High Court, which issued notices to the newspapers, and the designer promptly issued a public apology in which she added that the production of these bathing suits has been stopped.⁶⁵ Cases such as this do not only con-

59. The Hindu nationalist conceptualization of harmony, which from the perspective of its critics glosses over glaring social inequality and structural violence, must not be confused with the cosmopolitan conceptualization of social harmony on which the Indian authorities base their restrictions on freedom of expression. The only feature these conceptualizations have in common, apart from the term itself, is the absence of open conflict.

60. Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed, ‘Now, Karnataka’, *Frontline*, vol. 25, no. 20, 27 September–10 October 2008; Sugata Srinivasaraju, ‘Preying Hard’, *Outlook*, 29 November 2008.

61. CRIB, ‘Karnataka Church Violence: Probe Names No One’, *Conference of Religious India Bulletin*, 3 February 2010.

62. PTI, ‘Probe Depiction of Jesus in Objectionable Manner’, *Outlook*, 22 February 2010.

63. Subir Bhaumik, ‘Indian State Confiscates “Blasphemous” Jesus Textbooks’, *BBC World News*, 19 February 2011.

64. Torkel Brekke, ‘Ytringsfriheten Begrenses’, *Aftenposten*, 26 February 2010.

65. BBC, ‘Indian Fury over Australia Swimwear Images of Laxmi’, *BBC World News*, 10 June 2011.

firm that the regulation of the public sphere for the sake of harmony benefits the Hindu majority as much as religious minorities, but also that what counts as offensive is heavily influenced by the social and political context.

Let me now return to the difficult question of whether the prohibition of public expressions that are offensive on religious grounds really does promote public order, social harmony and respect, as intended by Indian lawmakers. This is a notoriously tricky question given the impossibility of describing the course of events that would have unfolded if, say, *The Satanic Verses* really had been published in India after all, or Lakshmi bathing suits had been displayed in shopping malls across the country. We simply do not know. Nonetheless, we have two strong indications that these legal sections do indeed protect public order. The first indication arises from the contrast between the riots that followed the demolition of Babri Masjid and the train fire in Godhra on the one hand, and the absence of riots following the largely successful effort to keep the Danish Muhammed cartoons away from the Indian public sphere. These cartoons acquired an explosive symbolic potential that may well match the demolition of a discarded mosque or the charring of a train carriage full of passengers. After all, the ‘victim’ was the Prophet himself. In 2006, a minister in the state government of Uttar Pradesh, Haji Yaqoob Qureishi, offered Rs. 51 crore to anyone who would behead the cartoonists.⁶⁶ In addition, he demanded an apology from *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish authorities. In Europe, planned and actual attacks on the cartoonist who had made the provocative drawing contributed to keep the cartoon controversy a hot news topic for several years. But in India the matter blew over fairly quickly. The main reason, I suggest, is that very few publications actually printed the cartoons, and that those who did so – *Dinamalar*, *Senior India* and the Patna edition of *The Times of India* are those I know of – had their remaining copies immediately confiscated and their editors arrested.⁶⁷ Protests were staged and additional bounties declared, but there was hardly any political violence to speak of, which suggests that Muslims felt that, this time around, the Indian government had stood up for them. An additional element is that the Indian authorities successfully advised the then Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh-Rasmussen, from carrying out his

66. Aman Sharma, ‘Cartoons: Spontaneous Rage? Look at Drama, Well Scripted’, *Indian Express*, 21 February 2006; Malik, op. cit., p. 145. Qureishi’s reward was highly controversial. He was reported to the police (though the charge was rejected by the courts), criticized for being both un-Islamic and inhumane. Several Muslim intellectuals in Delhi demanded his resignation.

67. Rajeev Dhavan and Aparna Ray, ‘Hate Speech Revisited: The “Toon” Controversy’, *Socio-Legal Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2006, p. 17; *Televisionpoint*, ‘Sun TV and Dinamalar Media War Rages on Badly’, 9 September 2008.

planned state visit to India in 2006. But as Haji Qureishi's reward indicates, there was hardly a lack of activists willing to organize mass action if these cartoons had been allowed to circulate freely, action that could well have triggered ethno-religious violence once again.

The second indication arises from the vast scholarship on how ethno-religious riots are initiated, developed and spread from place to place. Most riots are rooted in local quarrels – for example, regarding a cow grazing on a neighbour's property⁶⁸ or young boys being denied cold drinks from a corner shop on the grounds that they plan to mix it with rum – that escalate when bystanders take a stand aligning with their religious denomination. If local *goondas* or politicians also get involved, such riots can become relatively fierce, although they almost always remain local. The most grave riots, in contrast, tend to begin with a symbolic shock event, such as the destruction of a sacred building, the assassination of a politician, or a fatal accident which comes across as pre-planned, and this is the kind of riots that can spread from place to place.⁶⁹ If the shock event is interpreted according to a general discourse that is then reproduced as various local variants across the country, it may legitimate violence in those places too.⁷⁰ This form of riots is often so carefully organized that they resemble pogroms.⁷¹ In such cases, the motivation varies from political gain and settling old scores to liberating land from settlers. Biased press coverage and political rhetoric that is hostile to minorities tend to give considerable local legitimacy to such actions, which is why the law attempts to restrict such forms of expression.

68. Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with a Cow: Making Sense of Social Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

69. Interestingly, bomb blasts and terrorist attacks have not had the same precipitating effect so far. Somehow these kinds of events are neither sufficiently symbolic nor as easily interpreted according to a wider ethno-religious discourse. See Philippa Williams, 'Hindu-Muslim Brotherhood: Exploring the Dynamics of Communal Relations in Varanasi, North-India', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2007, pp. 153–76.

70. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, 'Presidential Address: Reflections on Communal Violence in South Asia', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1990, pp. 741–60; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; Kathinka Frøystad, 'Communal Riots in India as a Transitory Form of Political Violence: Three Approaches', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2009, pp. 442–59.

71. Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997; Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003; Paul Brass, *Forms of Collective Violence: Riots, Pogroms, and Genocide in Modern India*, Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2006.

Let me exemplify this process with one of the riots that took place in Kanpur a few years before I arrived to do my first fieldwork in the city. In 1990, there had been an attempt to destroy the Babri Masjid which was stopped by Mayawati's predecessor, Mulayam Singh Yadav. Between twelve and twenty people were killed when the police took action against the mosque vandals,⁷² but although many people in Kanpur were furious about the rough defence of the mosque, Kanpur remained calm. Rioting only spread to Kanpur when, several months later, a local newspaper reported a murder incident on a train, in which several passengers and a railway employee from Kanpur were killed by Hindu troublemakers who boarded the train in Aligarh. On one level, this happened through a banal chain of events: a Muslim street vendor in an inner-city Muslim-dominated *muhalla* was attacked and his stock burnt; sympathizers set fire to a few Hindu-owned shops; Hindus retaliated by burning down a few Muslim-owned shoe shops and destroying a mosque; paramilitary forces attempted to enforce peace by cutting power and water supplies to the *muhalla*, whereupon Muslim residents attacked the paramilitaries and between twenty and fifty people died.⁷³ On another level, this chain of events was fed by newspaper reports that inflated the death toll in Ayodhya,⁷⁴ topped with the train murders on the way between Aligarh and Kanpur. Certain Hindi newspapers were also said to have published unconfirmed rumours that poisoned cows had been found in the courtyard of a temple, rumours that spread like wildfire and sharpened communal hostility even without the help of the press.⁷⁵ Just as such reports can fuel ethno-religious violence, it is likely that the suppression of such reports and expressions that offend religious sentiments contribute to limit the level of ethno-religious violence. But it certainly does not prevent violence entirely, and has undoubtedly struck down a number of expressions that are unlikely to have caused harm or hurt. In some cases, censorship may even have generated political ripples that exceed the turbulence it was put in place

72. Radhika Ramasehan, 'The Press on Ayodhya', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, no. 50, 1990, pp. 2701–4.

73. Anubha Rathaur, *Communalism in Kanpur; Postgraduate Journalism Thesis*, Christ Church College, Kanpur, 1992; Frøystad, 2005, op. cit., p. 47; Asghar Ali Engineer, 'The Bloody Trail: Ram Janmabhoomi and Communal Violence in U.P.', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1991, pp. 155, 157–9.

74. Sevanti Ninan, *Headlines from the Heartland: Reinventing the Hindi Public Sphere*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007, pp. 224.

75. For a more detailed examination of the Hindi press and its politicized local sensationalism, see Peter G. Friedlander, Robin Jeffrey and Sanjay Seth, "'Subliminal Charge': How Hindi-Language Newspaper Expansion Affects India', in *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History*, ed. Arvind Rajagopal, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

to prevent, at least in the long run.⁷⁶ Thus, the regulation of offensive remarks for the sake of public order is something of a double-edged sword. Yet, in terms of respect and recognition it nevertheless has the same merits as the prohibition of caste abuse. After all, it ensures that each and every child from the minority religions grows up without being surrounded by TV broadcasts, magazines and books that mock the religious practices of their parents or denounce their families as second-class citizens, which over the years would have generated a profound feeling of alienation.

An additional 'state effect' I want to consider, concerns the way in which prescription generates circumvention. To be on the safe side from violating the IPC, the mainstream news media stay well within its boundary. Some even impose on themselves a restraint so high that their articles come close to losing their news value, as quoting an offence may be interpreted as an offence in itself. This is why mainstream newspapers refrained from quoting the offensive statements of Tikait and Varun Gandhi. In newspaper reports on ethno-religious conflicts restraint is usually shown by concealing which communities the conflicting parties belong to, as well as the ethno-religious identity of the main culprits. Consider this excerpt from *The Times of India*,

Lucknow: The murder of a youth in Pratapgarh sparked off large scale violence when his supporters torched 100 houses spreading over three villages, belonging to the community to which the murder-accused belonged to. . . . Complaints by a particular community about biased police action against them also added fuel to the fire.⁷⁷

Interestingly, such media restraint has created an interpretive dynamics of its own, and most newspaper readers know that 'members of a particular community' or 'a minority community' typically mean Muslims, and that 'the majority community' means Hindus. To some extent this enables newspapers to write between the lines,

76. Christopher Pinney for instance, makes the intriguing point that the colonial censorship of eighteenth century political posters with religious images made politics spill over to the religious domain to a greater extent than before, which in turn aggravated ethno-religious tensions. Christopher Pinney, 'Iatrogenic Religion and Politics', in *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction*, ed. Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009.

77. 'Youth's Murder Leads to Violence in Pratapgarh', *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 19 June 2006, <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2006-06-19/lucknow/27801915_1_minor-girls-villages-police-action>, accessed on 13 September 2013.

though doing so entails a fine balance indeed. More explicit content usually circulates in alternative media, which brings me to the point of secondary adjustments.

In his sociological classic *Asylums*, Erving Goffman analysed how patients in total institutions such as mental hospitals in the United States eventually managed to circumvent the rigid rules they were subject to by developing routine methods for achieving unauthorized goals.⁷⁸ In Goffman's terminology, these routine methods were analysed as secondary adjustments. In the case of censorship, the secondary adjustments to the IPC's restrictions on freedom of expression implies that people or organizations who want to transmit overly explicit or illegal messages do so in a way that is difficult for the authorities to trace. Pamphlets and leaflets disseminated through religiously homogeneous networks of friends, for example, were a common channel for Hindu nationalist anti-Muslim propaganda in the 1990s. Cassettes were also used, and especially popular were recordings of the fiery speeches of Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati.⁷⁹ Video cassettes of banned documentaries also circulated, and I recall quite well a video recording from the attempt to destroy the Babri Masjid in 1990 – close-ups dwelling on the swollen corpses from police bullets, with flies buzzing around.⁸⁰ Publishing outside India is also a possible strategy. For instance, when I wanted to familiarize myself with the ideological founders of Hindu nationalism, M.S. Golwalkar and V.D. Savarkar in the 1990s, I had to order their books from the Hindu Swayamsewak Sangh in Great Britain.⁸¹ Smuggling is another strategy – around 3,000 copies of *The Satanic Verses* are believed to be smuggled into India every year.⁸² Publishing on the Internet offers yet another avenue for secondary adjustment, which is demonstrated with the Facebook group on Mayawati. Even though all these outlets are, in principle, subject to regulation in the sense that the controversial expressions they circulate are occasionally discovered, confiscated/removed and punished, Indian authorities would have had to impose censorship of a far more authoritarian nature to monitor them completely. Fortunately, this has never been an option.

78. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, New York: Doubleday, 1961. Such practices were also among the themes in Miloš Forman's famous film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 1975.

79. For a translation of one of these speeches see Peter L. Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in India*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

80. Cf. Christiane Brosius, *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism*, London: Anthem Press, 2005, pp. 261–2.

81. I have been told that these books are now available from Indian distributors again.

82. Nirmala Ravindran, '1988– The Satanic Verses Is Banned: In the Twilight Zone', *India Today*, 24 December 2009.

Let me summarize the ways in which freedom of expression has been balanced against the protection of public order since the ban on the *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 by noting the following trends. First, the IPC sections on censorship and the way they are interpreted remain unchanged, in stark contrast to the legislation on caste abuse. Thus, the balancing act primarily concerns their implementation, that is, questions as to which expressions should or should not be stopped, and what sanctions should be imposed in the event of infringement. Second, the number of charges according to these IPC sections appears to have risen. It is perhaps inevitable that some religious organizations exaggerate their feelings of hurt to express pent-up collective resentment or mobilize support for a broader political cause. The latter seems particularly true for Hindu nationalist organizations, some of which appear to have 'invented' feelings of insult to make up for what they interpret as Muslim appeasement. Third and consequently, many charges, state government proscriptions, and lower-court verdicts rooted in these IPC sections are overturned later on. This reflects India's judicial hierarchy, and more examples follow in the final section. But even if the end result is acquittal, years of court cases and hearings involve considerable mental and economic strain, which Rajeev Dhavan rightly encapsulates with the words that 'the process becomes the punishment'.⁸³ Seen from the United States or Norway, where neither blasphemy nor negative generalizations about religious minorities are likely to be punished, unless they involve threats of physical violence, India's balance point tilts heavily towards public order, respect and recognition. The strictness of India's legislation does not only lie in the preventive ban on expressions that may legitimate ethno-religious violence, but also in the protection from expressions that cause religious offence, regardless of the perpetrator's intention.

DEBATING THE BALANCE

What kind of public debates have emanated from the restrictions on freedom of expression of the kind I have examined in the preceding pages? The answer depends on whether one looks at the restrictions on caste abuse or religious insults, and I begin with the former. Interestingly, virtually all the comments I have come across so far open with a general appreciation of the SC/ST Act, and its overall aim of promoting respect for dalits. Still, there is some disagreement about whether the SC/ST Act ought to criminalize verbal and written caste insults along-

83. Dhavan, op. cit., p. 175. Dhavan borrows his expression from the title of a book by Malcolm Feeley. Malcolm Feeley, *The Process Is the Punishment: Handling Cases in a Lower Criminal Court*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 1992.

side graver atrocities. The loudest outcries against regulation typically concern the *particular* instances in which the SC/ST Act has come into use. The following statement by the managing director of *Mid-Day* Multimedia in defence of Anish Trivedi's rant against reservation exemplifies such arguments exceptionally well,

While I am deeply aware that the lower castes have suffered great indignity and discrimination at the hands of the majority and I have no intention whatsoever to cast aspersion on the judiciary or the judgement of the learned court, let me make two simple points: (1) Anish Trivedi has been my friend for forty-five years now. Very rarely have I agreed with him, on anything, least of all politics. . . . The learned Court has thrown the rule book at Anish for stating an opinion. I certainly do not agree with that opinion, but that's all it is. . . . Are we going to start stifling opinion and free speech on the basis that it is 'offensive' to some people? . . . (2) Anish Trivedi may hold unpopular opinions. And he may not even be a very pleasant person. But the last time I looked, this was still a free country. I don't agree with his views but we lose the right to hold independent opinions at our peril, and to the great detriment of a free India.⁸⁴

Ansari's advocacy for a public sphere with fewer restrictions echoes the views of not only the French enlightenment thinker Voltaire, but also the classic liberalism of the American democracy, and Ansari may well have been influenced by US-style liberalism when he studied in USA in the early 1980s.⁸⁵ Interestingly, a growing (though still modest) proportion of India's urban middle class now has personal experience from USA or other Western countries. Yet most of them have a rather limited contact with people hailing from the communities that risk caste abuse – at least beyond servitude and other asymmetrical relations of employment and exchange.⁸⁶ This may explain why there appears to be considerable yet unspoken resonance for Ansari's view among the elite.

84. Tariq Ansari, 'My Friend, Anish', *Mid-Day*, 30 January 2011.

85. Voltaire's view was famously paraphrased as 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to death your right to say it' by his biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall in 1906, writing under the pseudonym Stephen G. Tallentyre. See Evelyn Beatrice Hall, *The Friends of Voltaire*, London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1906. Given Ansari's Muslim background, it would have been interesting to know how strongly he would have defended insults against religious minorities of the kind I discussed in the previous section.

86. Anne Waldrop, *A Room of One's Own: Educated Elite People in Delhi and Relations of Class*, Dr Polit thesis, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, 2002; Mario Rutten, 'Middle Class Interests and Labour Relations in India and Indonesia with Some Notes on East-West Parallels', in *The Easternization of the West: Europe Meets Asia*, ed. Nordin Hussin, Bangi: University of Malaya Press, 2006.; Frøystad, 2005, op. cit., chap. 5.

But the proscription of caste abuse also has vocal defenders. Alongside dalit activists, the political establishment, and the judges manning the courts, we find several respected scholars. Commenting on Tikait's casteist remarks about Mayawati shortly after they became a media event, the historian Ramachandra Guha stated that 'If a male leader from a landed community in Uttar Pradesh calls a female dalit leader an offensive name, and if action is taken against him, it should be seen only as a case of adherence to the Constitution, which abolishes untouchability, including verbal abuse'.⁸⁷ His fellow historian Mushirul Hasan, former Vice-Chancellor of the Jamia Millia Islamia, further reflects that 'Mayawati could act and enforce the law because of the resources at her command. But think of the vast majority of dalits who have little recourse to justice. This is the huge challenge that India faces'.⁸⁸ The abyss between Ansari's viewpoint and those of Guha and Hasan suggests the emergence of an increasingly explicit disagreement about the regulation of the public sphere, where media representatives and the traditionally privileged social segments are pitted against the government, the courts, the marginalized and the academic elite. This disagreement constitutes a second-order state effect of India's caste-related legislation, though it must be carefully balanced against the intentional but more slowly evolving recognition (in the sense of Honneth) for India's around 300 million dalits.

As for the prohibition of expressions that unsettle ethno-religious relations, my impression is that there is high acceptance for the effort to keep intentional religious insults away from the public sphere. Many people have experienced riots and interreligious tussles in the vicinity of their homes at some point during their lives, and know painfully well how fragile local ethno-religious ties may be in times of serious political turbulence. There is certainly not much general defence for the right to threaten Muslims, missionize by making critical remarks about Hindu deities, or circulate offensive images of Jesus or Muhammed. But this does not preclude censorship from being questioned, which typically occurs in three contexts. The first is when the disputed expression belongs to the artistic realm, as in Rushdie's case. Here, the primary question is not whether a particular ban represents 'Muslim appeasement', but what implications such a ban may have for artistic freedom. One of the first to make such an argument was the renowned historian Romila Thapar,

87. Ashish Sharma and Malathi Nayak, 'Tikait Episode Exposes Fault Lines in UP Coalition', Live Mint.com, 6 April 2008. <<http://www.livemint.com/2008/04/06230507/Tikait-episode-exposes-fault-l.html?d=1>>, accessed on 1 June 2011.

88. Ibid.

If the state has taken on the role of the main patron of culture and if it should then withdraw from innovations in creativity on the grounds that it will hurt the sentiments of a 'religious community', culture will tend to be reduced to the lowest common denominator. . . . [T]he Shiv Sena can once again object to the government of Maharashtra reprinting a chapter of Dr Ambedkar's book because it questions the authenticity of the brahmanical version of the *Ramayana* among other things, and the government bends. It may not even be a question of objecting to the suppression of the views of Ambedkar per se, but of allowing various readings of a cultural tradition. Or a Shahabuddin can demand the banning of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, and again the government accedes to this demand. Predictably the next step is that the government anticipates a demand from some Christian groups to ban *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and yet once more the government bans the film. Are we going to be left then with laundered strips of culture because the patron, the state, cannot distinguish between religious sensibilities and cultural articulation?⁸⁹

Seven years later similar arguments were made in defence of M.F. Husain, whose paintings of Hindu goddesses in the nude earned him death threats and a series of charges that eventually made him leave the country for good.⁹⁰ Seen from the world of art, India's censorship for the sake of public order and religious respect does indeed look overzealous.

The second context in which censorship is explicitly challenged is when it affects academics. One such case is James Laine's book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, which triggered the request I received from the Oxford University Press to rewrite the most controversial quotations in my book.⁹¹ By examining the shifting narratives that had been told about Shivaji during the three and a half centuries that

89. Romila Thapar, 'The Ramayana Syndrome', *Seminar*, vol. 31, no. 353, 1989b, pp. 71–5. The Ramayana epic exists in a number of different versions (cf. Paula Richman, *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991; Romila Thapar, 'Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent and Politics in India', *Past and Present*, vol. 125, 1989a, pp. 3–26; Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Thapar's article was written following a political push for making the brahmin version hegemonic by telecasting the Ramayana serial on Doordarshan (1987–8) while suppressing its alternative versions, a push that was repeated in the 'Three Hundred Ramayanas' controversy at The University of Delhi in 2011. Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was indeed banned.

90. For the details, see Dhavan, op. cit.

91. James W. Laine, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

had passed since he established the Maratha Empire, Laine's book triggered sharp reactions from Maratha patriots and Hindu nationalists. Especially unpalatable was Laine's reference to a humorous story that questioned Shivaji's paternal descent. What followed were withdrawal requests to the publisher, attacks on one of Laine's collaborators and the research institute that had hosted him and, not the least, a series of legal charges.⁹² Laine's book was banned in Maharashtra in 2004, and became a legal and political shuttlecock for six full years until it eventually was irreversibly cleared by the Supreme Court in 2010. Laine is not the only academic to have had such experiences. Dwijendra Narayan Jha, professor of history at Delhi University, was reported and threatened for his book *Holy Cow: Beef in Indian Dietary Conditions* (2001), which was banned in Hyderabad and Uttar Pradesh for some years, and the political psychologist Ashis Nandy was reported to the Gujarat Police for having written in *The Times of India* that the urban middle classes in the state bore much of the responsibility for the 2002 riots by virtue of controlling the 'hate factories' of the media and education system.⁹³ In 2014, the academic community witnessed yet a new turn of events when Penguin India decided to pulp all the remaining copies of Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, following a lawsuit against its alleged hurtful expressions and factual inaccuracies. The publisher's decision to opt out of a long-drawn court battle that could have cleared the book was a bitter realization of the extent to which academic freedom in India has become affected by 'lawsuit fatigue'. With the exception of those who sympathize with the pressure groups that attempt to block academic writing that is at loggerheads with their political ideology, the public response to such censorship dramas is uniformly critical, which the following statement demonstrates,

The attack on a Ramanujan text, an Ashis Nandy article, a Husain painting, a James Laine book . . . has something in common with the Gujarat genocide and the Nandigram operation. It is for us to realize this. It is for the larger academic community . . . to ask if they are going to remain prisoners of their self-styled guardians or assert and secure for themselves the rights . . . enshrined in the Constitution, to think for themselves, decide for themselves.⁹⁴

92. Christian Lee Novetzke, 'The Laine Controversy and the Study of Hinduism', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 8, 1 March 2004, pp. 183–201; James W. Laine, 'Resisting My Attackers; Resisting My Defenders', *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*, ed. Mathew N. Peter Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010.

93. Dhananjay Mahapatra, 'We Don't Find Nandy's Article Objectionable: SC', *The Times of India*, 2 July 2008.

94. Apoorvanand, 'Lessons from a Kerala Textbook', *Rediff India Abroad*, 16 July 2011.

must be measured against the context in which the regulations were issued. By 2011, Indian Internet users had benefited from extensive cyber freedom for a number of years. By coincidence, the regulations were also enforced almost at the same time as the United Nations declared access to the Internet a fundamental right,⁹⁸ having witnessed its vital role during the democratic revolution attempts in the Arab world. Besides, the definition of 'objectionable content' came across as overly inclusive and vague, though this could also be said about the censorship legislation these regulations reflect. Seen from the blogosphere, these regulations felt like a sudden attempt at straitjacketing.

Such discussions will continue to ebb and flow for every new proscription controversy and regulation enforcement. But during times of ethno-religious tension of the kind that marred Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra in 1992–3 and Gujarat in 2002, one also encounters critiques of the Indian media for being 'irresponsible' and 'insensitive', which perhaps reflect an expectation that they ought to maintain a cosmopolitan self-restraint after all.

CONCLUSION

As I drafted the first version of this chapter, an American acquaintance asked me an insistent question: 'Yes, but what do you *think*? Shouldn't India have complete freedom of expression like us?' All my attempts to make her understand why, in certain situations, freedom of expression can be legitimately balanced against other considerations were, however, interrupted by loud, high-principled statements about how essential freedom of expression is for any democracy worthy of its name. What I tried in vain to say but write here instead, was as follows: Freedom of expression is not completely unrestricted in the United States or other Western countries either, as the draconian reactions against Bradley Manning's and Edward Snowden's information leakages suggest. It yields to considerations of national security, privacy and the safety of minorities, among other things. In the same way as Americans and Europeans attribute these exceptions to inalienable values that are given precedence over freedom of expression, any analysis of the way in which the Indian democracy handles freedom of expression must take

98. United Nations, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue', Human Rights Council, Report no. A/HRC/17/27, 2011, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf>, accessed on 15 June 2011, Adam Clark Estes, 'The U.N. Declares Internet Access a Human Right', *National Journal*, 6 June 2011.

into account that India too may have values that are regarded as so essential that they are given precedence. The Indian values that hold such a status may be summed up in four key concepts: national security, moral decency, public order and respect for vulnerable groups. In this chapter, I have concentrated on the latter two, which I have analysed as being rooted in a cosmopolitan orientation in which respect for social communities other than one's own is not merely desirable, but also necessary for curtailing ethno-religious tension, fighting discrimination and promoting equal citizenship.

The question of freedom of expression in India cannot be answered with a simple 'for or against' conclusion. If I were pushed into stating an opinion, I would probably express agreement with Indian lawmakers in that India's unique heterogeneity, political inflammability and history of oppression require more restrictions on the freedom of expression than in the United States or Europe. At the same time, I share many of the concerns outlined in the previous pages, and welcome all informed discussion about the desirability of legal procedures which make it so easy for pressure groups to implicate artists, academics and others in decade-long judicial imbroglios. Yet, my main concern has been to contrast and compare the regulation of caste abuse with the regulation of religious insults, and to trace their respective state effects without falling into either of the contrasting traps of exaggerated criticism or cosmopolitan romanticism.

This focus has left several questions unanswered. For instance, does the commercialization of the media encourage sensationalism that borders on offences, or does it rather promote self-regulation? Do the legal sections I have examined encourage proscription demands and transgressions that worsen rather than safeguard ethno-religious relationships in the long run, as Christopher Pinney suggests?⁹⁹ Will a higher level of education and material security help people respond to insults by 'talking back' rather than resorting to judicial activism or violence, and thus, reduce the need for such an inclusive regulation? Is it possible to protect public order and promote respect for one and all without affecting art and scholarship? These are some of the questions that will require attention in future studies of democracy and the public sphere in India, all deserving scrutiny informed by broader material than the most questionable instances of proscription.

Whether India's regulation of the public sphere makes the country more or less democratic depends on which understanding of democracy one subscribes to. It also depends on which democratic right one would give precedence to if they come into conflict with one another. Thus, a die-hard liberalist would probably

99. Pinney, *op. cit.*

argue that regulation of the kind discussed in this chapter makes India less democratic, while political philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum probably would argue that it makes India more democratic. Put starkly, democratic rights are of little value for people who are too harassed to dare exercise them, whereas cosmopolitan restrictions on public expressions would entail an indisputable threat to democratic rights if the authorities use them as a pretext to silence political critique. Proponents of a freer public sphere frequently invoke the 'slippery slope' metaphor to suggest that any censorship of the kind discussed in the foregoing pages entails a risk of political repression.¹⁰⁰ Judging from the liveliness and fervour with which political issues are debated in the Indian public sphere despite more than a century of state-enforced religious respect, such arguments are dubious. That even censorship can be discussed with such fervour is certainly a democratic feat.

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100. Malik, op. cit.; Rose, op. cit.

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9

India and the Two Faces of Political Mobilization

STEN WIDMALM¹

The reflections in this book on trends, tendencies and various features of the Indian political landscape do not lend themselves easily to delivering a coherent rating of Indian democracy. The contributions provide differing illustrations, examples and specimens of what Indian democracy stands for, what it has achieved and what it still has to live up to. What is common to all the contributions is that the phenomena that are analysed affect Indian democracy in one way or the other. In this chapter, therefore, I wish to hold up a kind of mirror to India's democracy. What challenges do we see if we discuss the influence of Indian democracy on itself?

A question that is often asked is whether India has the 'right' qualities for a democratic regime to function effectively. After brief reflection on the way the question is posed, one detects an unexpressed suspicion that India ought not to survive at all, either as a nation or as a democracy.² Against the background of some of the challenges described in this book, the following questions are reasonable: Is Indian democracy sustainable? Does the country have enough middle class, literate, female and low-caste people in politics, a high enough average income and so on, to give liberal values buoyancy? Sometimes researchers and debaters turn the question around and wonder whether India's democracy creates the 'right' conditions in the country for long-term development. When can India create some kind of basic welfare for all its citizens? Can democracy bring justice, economic growth *and* political stability at the same time? In discussing these questions, the issue automatically arises: Is Indian democracy itself creating the

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1. A big 'thank you' to Sven Oskarsson, Frida Widmalm, and Bernard Vowles for creative suggestions and comments on this text. Also to the members of the working group 'Dysfunktioner i statsapparaten' [Dysfunctions in the apparatus of state], which met at the annual conference of the Swedish Political Science Association, 2010. I am also grateful for the financial support from the Swedish Research Council and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Finally, this author is also very grateful for the impressive efforts made by the editors of this book to publish this manuscript.
 2. Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy – Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

preconditions for its own long-term survival?

On the one hand, India is a country that has disproved many common conceptions of what constitutes good conditions for a democratic form of government. Despite innumerable administrative failings, low literacy and poverty, the country has succeeded unusually well in mobilizing its voters. There is in India today a strong popular adherence to the view that the citizens have the right to choose their own leaders. One manifestation of this is the high electoral turnout of around 60 per cent since the 1960s. Only for a period of twenty-one months in the 1970s did a political elite³ succeed in totally blocking the democratic process at the national level (discussed in greater detail later). From this point of view, democracy has succeeded extremely well, if India is compared to other countries that were colonized and have long been burdened by poverty.

On the other hand, a high electoral turnout, implying a high degree of political mobilization, in a country still struggling with widespread poverty and a weak or corrupt bureaucracy, is far from unproblematic. Therefore, the aim here is to note some of the specific challenges facing the country, given that we, from a normative standpoint, favour democracy as a form of government. For even if the most pessimistic predictions have not yet been fulfilled, it is impossible to disregard the problems that arise, as Atul Kohli pointed out so well twenty-five years ago, when the masses are mobilized while at the same time the institutions of government are weak.⁴ If one considers that many of those who have become more politically active during the last two decades are motivated by issues relating to ethnicity and religious belonging, it becomes even more urgent to re-examine the problems. There is a risk of erosion and disappearance of political tolerance in strongly polarized societies. Issues relating to tolerance have been intensely debated in 2015, but here we will have a slightly more narrow approach to this topic. By political tolerance is meant here the will and inclination to put up with groups and opinions that we ourselves do not like.⁵ If we agree

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3. By political elite, in this chapter and in this context, I mainly refer to leaders of political parties that win elections, bureaucrats and military officers positioned at high levels of authority within their own organizations, and representatives of large commercial interests and businesses. For an intriguing discussion on the theoretical aspects of the concept, see Alan Zuckerman, 'The Concept "Political Elite" – Lessons from Mosca and Pareto' *The Journal of Politics* 39, no. 2 (1977).
 4. Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
 5. Sten Widmalm, *Political Tolerance in the Global South – Images from India, Pakistan and Uganda* (London: Ashgate, 2016 [in press]); Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties – a Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, [1955] 1963); John L. Sullivan, James Piereson, and George E. Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); James Gibson and Amanda Gouws, *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa: Experiments in Democratic Persuasion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

that this aspect is essential to a functioning democracy then we can see the danger manifested in the political climate of India today.

The question to be asked is under what circumstances the mobilization of Indian electorates will have a negative effect on democracy. But as mobilization alone can hardly be said to constitute a problem, we have to see the phenomenon in relation to other factors.

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

The relationship between democracy and desirable societal development is one of the most intensely discussed issues in the social sciences. When India crops up in this discussion, it is often because examples are found here that turn common perceptions upside down. For example, the school of modernization may be mentioned, which is based largely on the idea that economic growth is a necessary prerequisite for democracy.⁶ Barrington Moore developed this view and was quick to make a pessimistic forecast of India's prospects after Independence.⁷ It is true that from Independence onwards until the 1980s, the Indian economy did not do well. Economists spoke in deprecating terms of what they called the 'Hindu rate of growth'. As long as economic growth was only two or three per cent, the broad-based middle class that social scientists asserted was a necessary prerequisite for a democracy was unable to emerge. A weak economy and low literacy levels and the extremely uneven distribution of the few resources that existed, handicapped Indian democracy.

Experts have also argued a reverse chain of causality.⁸ How has India's democratic form of government been able to promote a kind of development that is desirable in other ways? On the plus side, it is most frequently mentioned that it is democracy which has given the country stability and ethnic peace. The reform of the 1950s, involving the reorganization of the states of India to coincide to a considerable extent with linguistic divisions, was particularly conducive to the relatively good outcome. When the size of the population and the degree of poverty are borne in mind, it is possible to claim that India has experienced *relatively* few ethnic conflicts. To understand how India has managed to stay united,

6. Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy – Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,' *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959).

7. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy – Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*.

8. Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*.

Paul Brass has contradicted the assumption we often make, that heterogeneous societies have more conflict than homogeneous ones. He does not regard the threat to India as arising from the heterogeneous nature of the country. On the contrary, he says, this is one of the country's stabilizing factors.⁹ When a country contains so many ethnic groups, languages, religions, social groupings, etc., it is in theory impossible for one group to entirely dominate another. But even if the observation deserves consideration, one wonders whether it really can be so simple. Is it a misreading to assume that contradictions in India will solve themselves since no one group, in the long term, can dominate the country alone? We will return to this idea at the end of this chapter and compare it with other conclusions about the patterns of mobilization in India. For there are many factors here that confuse the picture.

It is necessary to raise the question of why during certain periods there has been widespread violence in India where factions have formed on ethnic lines. Atul Kohli in *Democracy and Discontent*, for example, has convincingly shown how the demand for government services in India tends to outstrip the supply.¹⁰ When the gap between supply and demand becomes too wide, there is no longer any room for political tolerance, and the result is often politically motivated violence, insurrection and sometimes pure ethnic persecution. Soon after Kohli published his book, the occurrence of serious conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the country increased. To some extent, the conflict was fuelled largely by the Hindutva movement. But it also arose from the fact that the state apparatus was weak, politicized and corrupt, entirely in accordance with Kohli's analysis.

Three factors that can explain this effect on democracy need to be highlighted in this context. The first is that the supply of government services is not always something measurable in such coarse terms as levels of expenditure. If we want to understand the role of the government and of different institutions in how conflicts arise or can be avoided, we have to take note of *the way in which* services are provided.¹¹ Are government services and provisions fair, clientelistic, efficient, complicated, etc.? A weak state apparatus increases the risk of conflict. The important role that the *character* of the government plays in development was stressed by Gunnar Myrdal in *Asian Drama* and subsequently, by a number of experts in development and admin-

9. Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Delhi: Sage, 1991), pp. 342–3.

10. Kohli, op. cit.

11. For support of this argument see Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).

istration.¹² Here, dysfunctional apparatuses of the state in the developing world are designated ‘soft’ when weighed down by corruption and clientelism. Going further back in time, the idea that institutions play a role in how a society is shaped, in general, and in determining the degree of political tolerance between the citizens, in particular, was first clearly expressed by the writers of the American Constitution – especially James Madison, who played a key role in formulating the American Declaration of Rights and who made sure that the US Constitution incorporated the principles of ‘checks and balances’.

The second factor is the role of the political leadership, who play an important part in determining whether people are mobilized under populist and intolerant banners. Political leaders are not only ‘structural dopes’ – actors whose actions are determined solely by socioeconomic and cultural conditions, institutions, norms and rules – but also actors who can function autonomously.¹³ They can choose to mobilize for short-term economic gain and employ confrontational strategies. Or they may choose to plan for economic development that is sustainable in the long term and bank on political strategies that pour oil on the troubled waters of pluralistic and infected societies.

The third factor is the people themselves. They may be educated, prosperous, well-travelled and well-informed about political processes. Such citizens will probably have a greater chance of acting more tolerantly towards members of society who act differently, and express differing views in comparison with poorly educated and impoverished individuals who have never had direct contact with other political groupings or cultures.

The three factors stated above are important to understand why political mobilization of the population sometimes favours democracy and why it can also turn against democracy. This article is not meant to whip up fear of what in the past –

12. Gunnar Myrdal, *Asiatiskt drama – En undersökning om nationernas fattigdom – Arbetskraftens utnyttjande*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Stockholm: Utrikespolitiska Institutet, Rabén & Sjögren, 1968); *Asiatiskt drama – En undersökning om nationernas fattigdom – Ekonomiska och sociala problem i Sydostasien*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Stockholm: Utrikespolitiska Institutet, Rabén & Sjögren, 1968); *Asiatiskt drama – En undersökning om nationernas fattigdom – Politiska problem i Sydostasien*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Stockholm: Utrikespolitiska Institutet, Rabén & Sjögren, 1968).

13. This widely used term is more clearly defined in Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory – Actions, Structure and Contradictions in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 52. Also see Torben Bech Dyring, *The Circular Structure of Power – Politics, Identity, Community* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 137; David Rubinstein, *Culture, Structure and Agency – toward a Truly Multidimensional Sociology* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), p. 14.

even during the democracy debate of Mill's time in the mid-nineteenth century – was called mob rule. It aims to discuss the real problems that arise when political actors mobilize the masses with a message of intolerance, and democratic institutions cannot protect the rights of the individual.

The subject of mass mobilization has been dealt with in many critical studies and it is worthwhile here to recollect some of them. John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville were concerned about the unbridled mobilization of the citizenry – what they called 'political mass participation'. To prevent it from getting out of hand – from mobilization of the masses to the mob, so to speak, it was necessary for the people's level of education to be raised, and for them to be socialized in the democratic rules of the game by participating in politics.¹⁴ James Madison averred that the constitution and government institutions should be so designed as to avoid *the tyranny of the majority*.¹⁵ By enshrining rights in the Constitution and dividing power between different institutions – the parliament, the executive and the courts – it was possible to safeguard the rights of the weak and also channel interests so that they could not easily gang up against just one group in society. Nevertheless, the possibility remains of a political elite exploiting groups in society that may have found themselves outside the establishment. They can be utilized in populist movements and be moulded into the core of an entirely authoritarian movement. It is the *masses* that Hannah Arendt describes as particularly difficult to handle or even dangerous to the life of a democracy.

About the *masses* and those who were mobilized in the authoritarian regimes of the 1930s and 1940s in Europe, Arendt writes:

It was characteristic of the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany and of the Communist movement in Europe after 1930 that they recruited their members from this mass of apparently indifferent people whom all other parties had given up as too apathetic or too stupid for their attention. The result was that the majority of their membership consisted of people who never before had appeared on the political scene. This permitted the introduction of entirely new methods into political propaganda, *and indifference to the argument of political opponents*; these movements not only placed themselves outside and against the party system as a whole, they found a membership that had never before been reached, never been 'spoiled' by the party system. Therefore they

14. Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*, pp. 13–14, 15.

15. James Madison, 'The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances between the Different Departments,' *The Federalist* no. No. 51 (1788), <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa51.htm>. Access date 2013-10-02.

did not need to refute opposing arguments and consistently preferred methods which ended in death rather than persuasion, which spelled terror rather than conviction. They presented disagreements as invariably originating in deep natural, social, or psychological sources beyond the control of the individual and therefore beyond the power of reason. This would have been a shortcoming only if they had sincerely entered into competition with other parties; it was not if they were sure of dealing with people who had reason to be equally hostile to all parties.¹⁶

Notwithstanding Arendt's well-formulated ideas on who represented the driving force in the tyrannical Nazi and Communist regimes, *the masses* have almost disappeared as an analytical category in recent times. William Kornhauser tried to develop the concept into a theory, but in the 1970s, the term began to be regarded as basically unusable or politically incorrect.¹⁷ It was felt to express disdain for the common people. But is this criticism fair to Arendt? Is it of use to us ourselves if we care about the democratic form of government? Let us see whether there are nevertheless, characteristics that Arendt describes in the amorphous political entity of *the masses* that are pertinent to our analysis. Latter day events in Europe bear witness to the continued relevance of her viewpoint. In Ian Buruma's *Murder in Amsterdam*, Theo van Gogh's murderer Mohammed Bouyeri is described as a 'radical loser'. The term is borrowed from an essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger and refers to individuals in modern society who have found themselves outside the labour market and normal social networks, and who have finally found support in intolerant radical ideologies.¹⁸ The profile described can fit Bouyeri as well as those who are today attracted to the xenophobic ultra nationalist Sweden Democrats, Jobbik in Hungary, or Golden Dawn in Greece. And from here perhaps we can draw a parallel to Arendt and then onwards to those actors who take part in conflicts in India. The sum total of this is that radical losers crop up in all sorts of places and that they are always easy prey for populist leaders. They can in certain circumstances have a big effect on politics by being brought together under a populist message and acting in a manner contrary to all that the deliberative democratic model stands for.

16. H. Arendt, *Totalitarianism* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), pp. 9–10 (my italics).

17. W. Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

18. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'The Terrorist Mindset – the Radical Loser,' *Spiegel Online*, 20 December, 2006.

To sum up, in the very brief exposition of political mobilization in India that follows we shall bear in mind the following actors, which together seem to be having a decisive effect on the outcome for democracy when the population is mobilized.¹⁹

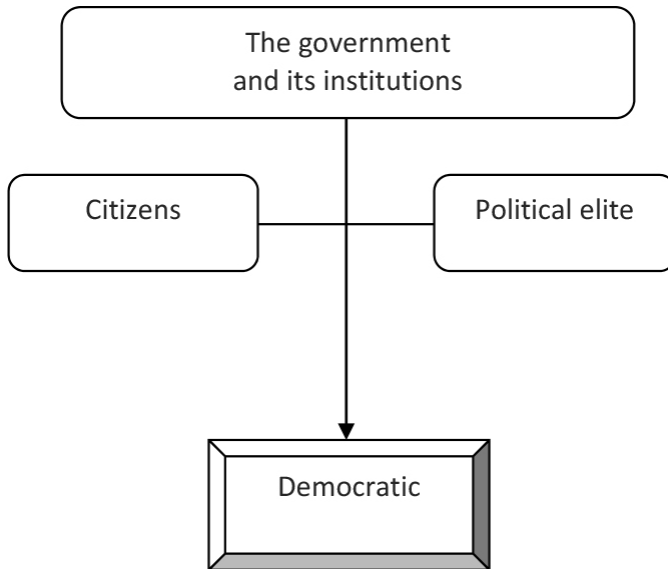


Figure 9.1: Players interacting for and against democracy

The division of actors and structures is accepted in many analyses of political processes, but here it is particularly relevant because a consistent theme is the degree of tolerance in society. In *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*, Sullivan et al. observe that different ideologies have had differing views about which actors contribute to intolerant movements, and how actors can help to counter intolerance.²⁰ Conservative democratic theoreticians pin their hopes on the enlightened elites in society. Liberal democratic theoreticians also rely on the enlightened elites but they add that well-educated citizens are also key to a tolerant society, where equal democratic rights are respected. Mill and de Tocqueville were par-

19. One does not have to be a Marxist to ask where capital and the companies are placed in this model. Obviously, economic development plays a big part in the development of tolerance or conflict. But in this model, it is implicitly present as an underlying factor that influences and directs individuals, political elites, and the actions of the state, even if they can act autonomously. Other such underlying factors are historical context, cultural values, position in the greater international political context, etc.

20. Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*.

ticularly concerned about ‘mass political involvement’. But education and socialization by participation would bring order to this. Federalist democratic theoreticians, such as James Madison, rely neither on elites nor on citizens. It is the state and its institutions and how they channel interests that determine whether a society is tolerant or not. Just as these actors may represent solutions, so also can they be the cause of problems that arise with political mobilization. A brief account of India’s complex history with regard to different kinds of political mobilization, focusing on the roles played by the political elites, the state and its institutions, and the citizenry, is useful to highlight some of the major challenges faced by Indian democracy. The idea is to provide a few examples to illustrate the different and dynamic aspects of the mobilization processes that lead to diverging outcomes, where the factor or factors mentioned have played a central role. Such an account can also point out some of today’s greatest challenges to Indian democracy.

MOBILIZATION FOR INDIAN DEMOCRACY

The obvious objections to the assumptions underlying the design of this chapter would perhaps be: how can anyone not approve of mass mobilization in India? Mass mobilization has surely been the basis for India’s liberation and has, after all, formed the basis for the many popular movements that have questioned the authoritarian tendencies of the state. Let us consider this perspective first.

MOBILIZATION FOR INDIAN DEMOCRACY

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Indian soldiers, both Hindu and Muslim, took part in a revolt against the British East India Company, which came to be known as the Sepoy Uprising.²¹ The incident resulted in the British Crown taking over the administration of the British Empire in India. The revolt, which was enormous in extent, included not only the soldiers recruited by the East India Company but also the civilian population.²² It is not surprising that the revolt is regarded in India as ‘India’s first war of liberation’ against the British. And this mass mobilization paved the way for continued resistance to outside oppression.

Early in the twentieth century there followed one of the most spectacular displays of mass mobilization that the world had ever seen when India once again

21. David Saul, *The Indian Mutiny* (Viking, 2002).

22. Stephen Howe, ‘“The Indian Mutiny” by Saul David – Forgotten Horrors of the British Raj,’ *The Independent*, 16 October 2002.

rose up against the British Empire. Obviously, some nationalist leaders, such as Subhash Chandra Bose from Bengal, advocated militant opposition to the colonial rulers.²³ But it was a movement based on non-violence and civil disobedience that made the great breakthrough. This movement was led by the Congress Party, with Jawaharlal Nehru as its political leader, but most of the spiritual and ideological inspiration came from Mohandas Karamchand, or 'Mahatma' (great soul) Gandhi. He recommended 'Satyagraha' – a kind of passive resistance that proved hugely effective in winning both a strategic and moral advantage over the British. It began with boycotts of British goods and British education and a refusal to pay tax. The latter acquired enormous symbolic significance when the Indians were urged to produce their own salt to avoid taxation by the British. In 1930, Gandhi walked four hundred kilometres, from Ahmedabad to the coastal town of Dandi, joined by thousands of Indians protesting the British rule by making their own salt from seawater. The protesters soon included millions of Indians from all strata of society and eventually Independence became a reality.

However, the tradition of large-scale protests and mass mobilization did not disappear with liberation. Indira Gandhi gave an impressive demonstration of mass mobilization forty years after the salt march. As Indira Gandhi had lost a significant part of her institutional capital after the Indian National Congress had split in the end of the 1960s, she was obliged to adopt a new political strategy. She decided to mobilize the masses by appealing to them directly. Before the election of 1971, she promised that poverty would be eradicated. '*Garibi hatao*' became a slogan that had enormous impact, particularly on the poorer voters. The underlying strategy came to involve an important change for the Congress Party. Previously the party had been a 'catch-all' party – an organization that picked up support from virtually all groups in society, or as Rajni Kothari has described it, a kind of microcosm of the whole of India.²⁴ But now, Indira Gandhi was compelled to bypass both the old caste elites in the countryside and the middle class in the cities. Within ten years, the Congress Party lost its 'catch-all' character.²⁵ But to win the 1971 election it proved to be the right move. Indira Gandhi's Congress won 44 per cent of the votes, while the Congress (O) gained 10 per cent before receding into

23. L. A. Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876–1940* (Delhi: Manohar, 1979).

24. Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (Himayatnagar: Orient Longman, 1970). Arend Lijphart builds on this description when he describes India as a 'consociational democracy'. See Arend Lijphart, 'The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation,' *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (1996).

25. Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution – the Rise of the Lower Castes of India* (London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 1988).

the background. The electoral victory was a political and cultural upset without parallel. Partly because Indira, a woman, succeeded in beating the old elites at their own game and also because '*garibi hatao*' came to stand as a symbolic victory of the poorest, who previously had difficulty in making their voices heard.

We can find a final example of meaningful democratic mass mobilization in India in recent times in the protests against the building of dams in India. Since the 1980s, the Sardar Sarovar dam was the focus of protest, since it may have displaced between three hundred thousand and a million people from their homes.²⁶ The large scale protests against the dams helmed by the organization, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada) was a significant movement in many respects. Regardless of the consequences of the dam project, the protests show that Indian democracy is far from being a space that engages only the elites. Tribal peoples, the largest demography affected by dams in India, are among the most economically and politically disadvantaged groups in Indian society. Even if the dam projects continue, the size of the protests still shows that Indian democracy lives in the hearts of a population who despite severe socio-economic disadvantages assert their rights against political elites and outstandingly strong economic forces.

From these examples, it is apparent that the mobilization of citizens on a large scale, or 'mass mobilization' is central to Indian democracy. Such mobilization can, undoubtedly, encompass the most economically disadvantaged and can be of a populist nature. The '*garibi hatao*' campaign is an example of this. Given these circumstances, it is not entirely obvious how one can convincingly argue that mass mobilization can also pose a threat to democracy. But unfortunately one can. As is shown by history and by what Arendt witnessed before and during the Second World War, mass mobilization is not inevitably beneficial to democratic development. It can also work in an anti-democratic direction if those who are mobilized have no intention of letting their political opponents be heard, and if violence is the means of achieving their goals. India, like so many other states around the world, also offers many experiences of the kind.

MASS MOBILIZATION AND TRAGEDY IN INDIA

India's Independence in 1947 also came with the displacement of millions of Hindus and Muslims from their homes. More than seven million Muslims fled to

26. The Narmada project is actually a number of projects that include dams to be built along the River Narmada in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. More about popular protests in India can be found in Katrin Uba, 'Do Protests Make a Difference? – the Impact of Anti-Privatisation Mobilisation in India and Peru' (Uppsala University, 2007).

Pakistan and equally many Hindus and Sikhs made their way to India. This gigantic process of migration gave rise to conflicts that led to the deaths of around a million people. 'Liberation', therefore, is remembered alongside 'Partition' and forms one of the most painful moments in the history of southern Asia. India and Pakistan have still not recovered from it, and the events around 1947 remain a volatile ground of conflict between Pakistan and India and have also fuelled intolerance between, in particular, Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus.²⁷ In these conflicts, mass mobilization is an important component, where the state and the political elites exercised a crucial effect on the outcome. The following four examples illustrate this point.

The *garibi hatao* campaign had a downside, even if the purpose was a good one. When Indira Gandhi broke with the old elites in the Congress Party, she was obliged, as described previously, to pursue her political struggle without a strong organization. She appealed directly to the people. This enabled her to circumvent elite groupings in the states and rule by direct means. For example, it quickly became customary to use and indeed abuse, the protective mechanisms in the Indian Constitution that were intended to create order in the states when there were disturbances. Vaguely expressed passages in the Constitution were often used to depose regimes at the state level that were not to her liking. Generally, power was centralized in New Delhi in a very tangible and authoritarian manner. With strong electoral results behind her and a closely integrated political elite surrounding her, there was for a long time nobody to whom she was answerable. In 1975 Indira Gandhi, locked in a very tight political corner, introduced a state of emergency that radically circumscribed the freedom of the press and civil rights. Politicians who expressed dissatisfaction with the regime were thrown into prison. Even less did anyone dare to criticize her right-hand man, her son Sanjay Gandhi, who became increasingly known for implementing Indira's will, and his own, with a growing brutality. Here mention may be made of compulsory sterilizations in the seventies and Sanjay's order to clear the slums of the poor in New Delhi using ruthless methods; these are but two instances.²⁸ It looked for a while as if India was going to suffer the same fate as Pakistan. Nonetheless, after 21 months, Indira Gandhi suspended the state of emergency. She and the Congress (I) lost the following election. However, the opposition was fragmented and weak, and after another election in 1980, Congress (I) and Gandhi managed to regain power.

27. Admittedly, it would be possible and relevant in this context also to discuss caste conflict and intolerance based on gender.

28. See for example Katherine Frank, *Indira – the Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* (London: Harper-Collins, 2001).

Before the election, Gandhi and her party entered into alliances and collaborations with other political forces who were prepared to resort to harsh methods against opponents of Congress (I).

One example is Sanjay Gandhi's support over a period for the religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in Punjab. Bhindranwale's career was rising as a Sikh missionary preaching strict abstinence to young, disillusioned and often unemployed men of rural Punjab. Collaboration with the Congress (I) did not work out well, since it was soon realized that Bhindranwale had a political agenda in the direction towards separatism. Soon Bhindranwale led a widespread populist movement that targeted the Indian government and Congress (I). They demanded that Punjab be allowed to form its own state, Khalistan. Soon Bhindranwale and his supporters achieved wide support in Punjab. He mobilized a kind of mass movement and many of the displaced farmers and poor young men who joined it were not very different from some of those described by Arendt.²⁹ Those who opposed him and his political movement became targets of the death patrols sent out from the movement's headquarters, which were in the sacred Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar. The conflict escalated and Indira Gandhi's attempt to 'solve' it was Operation Blue Star, which involved surrounding the temple with a full military force and then attacking it. The siege ended in great bloodshed. Bhindranwale was killed, and his supporters avenged his death less than six months later by assassinating Indira Gandhi. Congress Party supporters then took immediate revenge on the Sikhs as a group, especially in New Delhi. For three or four days there was a frenzied hunt for Sikhs and more than three, possibly four, thousand Sikhs were killed in organized pogroms. The conflict in Punjab continued throughout the 1980s, where democratic institutions were damaged or stopped functioning entirely. In due course it subsided, only to give way to a growing conflict in Kashmir, which, too, contained elements of mass mobilization.

Kashmir was disputed at Partition and before the 1980s, India and Pakistan had already fought three wars specifically about, or strongly affecting, the area. Kashmir, or 'Jammu & Kashmir', as the Indian-controlled part was called, is special in a number of ways, including the fact that it is a state with a Muslim majority. Over the years, Pakistan has often supported separatists in Kashmir in the hope of gaining control of the Indian-controlled part. But in the late seventies and early eighties there was hardly any local support for separatism in Kashmir. Democratic institutions were functioning relatively well and integration of the area with the rest of India was proceeding along the right lines from an Indian perspective. Dur-

29. M. Tully and S. Jacob, *Amritsar* (London: Pan Books, 1985). Also see Gurharpal Singh, *Ethnic Conflicts in India – a Case-Study of Punjab* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000).

ing the 1980s, however, corruption in Kashmir increased, politicians tried to manipulate elections and control the judicial system for their own purposes.³⁰ When the population lost faith in democratic institutions, protests increased, as did support for separatists in the region. The Indian central government chose to meet the discontent with more restrictions of rights and by imprisoning dissenting political leaders. Towards the end of the 1980s, mass protests were very common and the response was sterner military reaction. Before long, almost all the democratic institutions in Kashmir collapsed and this was followed by a conflict that has not yet come to an end. It is important to note that by the end of the 1980s, the young men who had been mobilized in the conflict were completely disillusioned about democracy and opportunities for rational and constructive discussion. Years of corruption and electoral fraud shaped, quite naturally, their view that it was only with violence that a political struggle could be continued.³¹ What else could they lose? They had, in a sense, been transformed into radical losers, to revert to the terminology of Enzensberger. In this case, we can clearly see how the masses were mobilized and took up rational positions on account of the actions of the political elites and of weak, politicized and corrupt institutions.

As the conflict in Kashmir escalated, the Hindu nationalists in India found more support. It is true that their movement had begun to grow appreciably during the 1980s, but in the 1990s, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the largest party espousing the Hindutva movement, came to enjoy almost as much support from the electorate as Congress (I). In its political rhetoric, Muslims were portrayed as disloyal to India – Kashmir was just one example – and its most radical representatives were not opposed to the idea of suspending Muslims' Indian citizenship. The BJP was remarkably skilful in mobilizing the masses. One way of doing this was by marches through the country, for example the BJP's *Ekta Yatra* in 1992. This was led by BJP president Murlī Manohar Joshi, and ended in Kashmir with Joshi hoisting the Indian tricolour in Srinagar to show that Kashmir was a part of India and would never be relinquished. Given the conditions in Kashmir at that time, it is understandable that a symbolic deed of this kind merely exacerbated the conflict at the local level. Another type of mass mobilization that turned out well for the BJP was its actions in what is known as the Ayodhya question. The background to this conflict is described in Chapter Seven. There, too, we observe a well-organized mobilization of the masses. Many of these joined the movement as *kar sevaks*, or voluntary assistants, who in 1992 demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

30. Sten Widmalm, *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective – Democracy and Violent Separatism in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

31. *Ibid.*

The Ayodhya conflict continues today and still has repercussions on the political climate of India. This leads us on to the last example of mass mobilization associated with conflict. In 2002, a train stopped at a station in the state of Gujarat. The train contained many Hindu passengers, including several Hindu nationalist activists returning from Ayodhya after demonstrating for the building of a temple on the remains of the Ayodhya mosque. One of the carriages in the train caught fire. The first media reports stated that the carriage was set on fire by angry Muslims. Later enquiries suggested that it caught fire after an accident. Fifty-eight Hindus died and the event set off an extensive pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat, not unlike the pogrom against Sikhs in New Delhi in 1984. Within the span of a few days, around one thousand Muslims were killed in the state, although the exact numbers remain inconclusive. The violence was extremely brutal and often sexual. According to many reports, it was led by Hindu nationalists and sanctioned by political elites in the state, including the Chief Minister Narendra Modi. In the subsequent election in the state, Modi and the BJP won a decisive victory.³² Later, in 2014, Modi became the Prime Minister of India.

DEMOCRATIC AND ANTI-DEMOCRATIC MOBILIZATION IN INDIA

From these examples, it is easy to confirm that the kinds of contexts in which mobilization with democratic or anti-democratic overtones has arisen are specific to India. However, this does not mean that the dynamics and the patterns we can observe are unique or of an unusual kind. Let us return to the discussion at the start of this chapter and take a closer look at the population, the political leadership and the institutions to examine the role they play in the varied outcomes.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE POLITICAL ELITE

Political leaders around the world are seldom averse to taking personal credit when their own political campaigns are successful from a democratic perspective. This view is reflected in the depiction of political leaders as the founders of the nation in portraits and statues, and in the writing of biographies of the ‘great leaders’. When things go wrong, the responsibility of the individual leaders seldom receives the same proclamation – at least not from themselves. Suddenly it

32. Pankaj Mishra, ‘The Gujarat Massacre – New India’s Blood Rite,’ in *The Guardian* (14 March, 2012).

becomes necessary to understand 'structures' – such as the laws, the constitution, the economic situation, etc.

It is obvious that institutions, conventions, unwritten and written systems of rules and so on, can lead, and even force, political leaders to adopt positions and strategies that polarize groups in an anti-democratic direction. It is difficult to blame a party which resorts to arms after being harassed and suffering drastic restrictions of freedom over a long period. We can see elements of this process in Kashmir and Punjab. At the same time, it is wrong to exonerate political leaders in every situation that leads to conflict. Perhaps the leaders could have acted differently. Perhaps they could have implemented conciliatory strategies in critical situations. As well as cases that are difficult to assess from a perspective of responsibility, there are many examples of conflict stirred up by politicians whose main concern has been to maximize their personal power and influence. Conflict may then arise as an unforeseen consequence. Sometimes polarization is an expression of a desire for revenge, or of an intention to drive out or wipe out another group in the community. The Kashmir conflict, as it developed in the 1980s and the early 1990s, is an example of a conflict that was not created deliberately. The Congress Party, and also the strong local party, the National Conference under the leadership of Farooq Abdullah, pursued a policy focused solely on maximizing their own influence.³³ This then led to the politicizing and/or dismantling of democratic institutions, which resulted in greater polarization and conflict. So even if armed conflict was never intended, the major parties and their leaders were to blame. In the wake of the Ayodhya conflict, we find examples of direct provocation of Muslims led by a Hindu nationalist elite. The most blatant example is Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who is alleged to have sanctioned the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. The fact that instead of resigning as Chief Minister, he used the attacks as a platform for re-election, bears witness to dominant views of Muslims as well as his and the political elite's cynical exploitation of opportunities – which continues to constitute a problem for Indian democracy.

It is clear that the political elites have a definite influence on the patterns of mobilization that may arise among the population. As mentioned earlier, Paul

33. S. Bose, *The Challenge in Kashmir* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997); Sumit Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1997); S. Ganguly, 'The Crisis of Indian Secularism,' *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 4 (2003); Ashutosh Varshney, 'India, Pakistan, and Kashmir – Antinomies of Nationalism,' *Asian Survey* 31, no. 11 (1991); Widmalm, *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective – Democracy and Violent Separatism in India*; R. G. Wirsing, *India, Pakistan and the Kashmir Dispute* (Allahabad: Rupa & Co., 1994).

Brass has pointed out that pluralism in India strengthens its democracy.³⁴ This is true to some extent. If society contains many different politicians and groupings who are all making political demands of different kinds all the time, a pattern of countervailing pressures arises that prevents any groups from taking over completely. In cases like the Sepoy Uprising and the Dandi March we saw how large-scale protests mobilized several groups at the same time against a tyrannical regime. The explicit joint objective here lay in a democratic direction. But it is equally possible for political elites to mobilize a larger group, or several groups together, against *one* single group.

A kind of tyranny of the majority can then arise. This may mean that, for example, different caste groupings, which have previously had differing interests, unite against another group in society, such as the Muslims. This creates a new identity, a new 'us and them' dimension, and when a minority group finds itself at such a disadvantage, the consequences may be serious. Government institutions and the State in general are supposed to resist such a course of events. But sometimes government institutions fail to act in accordance with the democratic principles of the state to treat and protect all its citizens equally. On the contrary, the institutions may often be a powerful causal factor in the polarizing process.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN THE MOBILIZATION OF CITIZENS AND INTERESTS

The pioneering work of Sullivan et al. on political tolerance draws attention to James Madison's perceptive observation that a state contains a large number of political groups and differing interests. As long as the structure of the state incorporates well-developed principles of separation of powers and a decentralized administrative structure, interests are divided between different levels and are always to some extent opposed by other interests. This means that no group can easily achieve *total* political dominance, and no group ends up entirely outside the system as a loser.³⁵ Nor does the federalist model anticipate that any political group or leader will, to any great degree, stand up heroically to defend another political group that is subjected to threats, violence or other activities that curtail its freedom. This function is the task of the executive power, the legislative assembly and the judicial system as prescribed in the Constitution and in its declaration of rights.

34. Brass, *op. cit.*, pp. 342–3.

35. Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*, pp. 19–23.

These observations are particularly interesting in an Indian context, because the Indian Constitution envisages a kind of federation based on rights that finds parallels in the American Constitution and elsewhere. There are many cases where the Indian Constitution and the institutions of the Indian state have worked together in uniting the nation and upholding democracy. The Indian state has never been as soft-centred as many have imagined after reading Gunnar Myrdal's *Asian Drama*. The language question that we mentioned initially is an example. It was solved by amending the Constitution and by the court's upholding of government directives. What might have become a prolonged conflict on borders and the status of the different languages was turned, instead in the 1950s, into one of the strongest foundations currently supporting the Indian nation. Furthermore, it was the Constitutional reforms in the early 1990s along with administrative reforms, such as the *panchayati raj* reforms, that led to India becoming more decentralized and gaining a better-functioning democracy with a considerably higher number of women in politics.³⁶

My own research on the panchayat system in India shows how the democratic deficit – citizens' experience of lack of effective democratic processes – was reduced by decentralizing reforms.³⁷ The study was carried out in Madhya Pradesh and Kerala during the period 2000–2004. It contains in-depth interviews and questionnaires addressed to political elites and citizens chosen at random. The study clearly shows that people believe that democracy functions better since the decentralizing reforms were carried out. In this respect, the aforementioned federalist democracy theory receives support. Further support from the theory emerges from the fact that the study shows the different effects of the degree of decentralization on the level of political tolerance among citizens.³⁸

There is no doubt that we can see good results for democracy when government institutions function as intended. Conversely, there is also considerable criticism of Indian government institutions, which are often deemed weak and corrupt. It is very easy to show that many cases of conflict have arisen because of, or have been inflamed by, India's dysfunctional institutions. In Kashmir, Gujarat and Punjab, as we mentioned earlier, corruption in the police force, the judicial system and the electoral commission, and among politicians, can be the most important factor

36. Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, 'Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a India-Wide Randomized Policy Experiment', *Econometrica* 72, no. 5 (2004); Sten Widmalm, *Decentralisation, Corruption and Social Capital – from India to the West* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2008).

37. *Decentralisation, Corruption and Social Capital – from India to the West*.

38. Also see Sullivan et al., op. cit., p. 22, for discussion of decentralization and tolerance.

contributing to the flare-up and escalation of conflict. The political elites who wish to exercise total political domination cannot do this by military force alone. They have to draw up a *hegemony* – to use (Gramsci, 2007³⁹). They have to exercise an appreciable influence on cultural values and norms in society, and ensure that their own value system is accepted by the rest of society. This can be done if the elite or elites can control government institutions for their own interests. There is still far too much scope for this in India. In democracies where the state is ‘soft’, there is potential for a dictatorship of the majority. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest challenges facing democracy in India is to build a more just and functioning state apparatus and to avoid a dictatorship of the majority.

TOLERANCE OF THE CITIZENS AND THE RADICAL LOSERS

Finally, it is necessary to put in perspective the role of the citizens in the mobilization processes. As we have seen, elites and institutions have a big influence on the direction of democracy. They can influence citizens and structure their preferences, their feeling of solidarity, their interpretation of reality, etc. However, first, not all citizens are affected in the same way by the same information or incentive structures. Second, the reverse order of causation is relevant – elites and institutions are often shaped by the pressure from beneath in the form of the will and methods of expression of the people. When these take an anti-democratic course, terms such as ‘mob’ and ‘rabble’ are heard. When they take a democratic or other more sympathetic course, they are usually called grassroots movements. But even if the citizens are motivated by widely differing aims, it is possible to ask whether the underlying dynamics in political processes are not basically similar. This question is well beyond the scope of this chapter. But it is worthwhile to provide some illustrations of how the characteristics of individuals shape political movements and what may constitute differences that are very important to democratic development.

There is no shortage of studies supporting the liberal democracy theory we mentioned at the beginning – stating that not only enlightened elites but also educated and socially oriented citizens are necessary for a functioning democracy. A generally high level of education and high levels of social capital among the population are seen as either essential or at least conducive to a functioning democracy.⁴⁰ Tolerance research, in particular, has focused on the importance of educa-

39. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, vols. I–III, *European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

40. More modern research which shows the effect of education on the degree of democracy dates back to John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916).

tion in the development of democratic norms.⁴¹ Ideas on the importance of social capital made, in their early form, their breakthrough with the modernization theory of the 1950s,⁴² which also stressed the great significance of education; they have more recently been revived in the work of Robert Putnam in the field.⁴³

Modern theories in this area of research have proved particularly relevant to India.⁴⁴ We know from these that economic activity that involves individuals across ethnic lines creates trust across boundaries and reduces the risk of conflict. We also know that literacy breaks down old social hierarchies and creates new social entrepreneurs in a more equal and therefore, more democratic social structure. These observations are particularly interesting, because enthusiasm is often expressed for social capital *between* groups in today's discussion of democratic theory. In such cases, the mafia, the Ku Klux Klan and criminal motorcycle gangs are cited as examples of what can happen when groups only nurture trust, networks and norms *within* their own group.

At the same time, mobilization within groups need not necessarily be a bad thing. Trust within groups and internal solidarity are preconditions for the mobilization of resistance to forces of oppression. This has been observed in the villages of Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, and in my opinion, it is also demonstrated in work done by the Narmada Bachao Andolan.⁴⁵ They depend on trust within the group, and it is probable that they have no great faith in their political opponents. The Narmada Bachao Andolan is undoubtedly important to democracy. Democracies have developed on the same lines in the West. High levels of social capital within groups have been the key to the mobilization of workers, blacks and women.⁴⁶ For instance, extensive research on intolerance in South Africa shows that strong identities based on ethnic divisions need not have a negative effect on democratic values.⁴⁷ The conclusion we can draw from this is that social capital is an important precondition for the occurrence of political mobilization in what-

41. At least from the time of Stouffer onwards. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties – A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind*.

42. S. M. Lipset, op. cit..

43. Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work – Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

44. Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Anirudh Krishna, *Active Social Capital* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Widmalm, *Decentralisation, Corruption and Social Capital – from India to the West*.

45. *Decentralisation, Corruption and Social Capital – from India to the West*.

46. 'The Utility of Bonding Social Capital,' *Journal of Civil Society* 1, no. 1 (2005).

47. J. L. Gibson, 'Do Strong Group Identities Fuel Intolerance? Evidence from the South African Case,' *Political Psychology* 27, no. 5 (2006).

ever form. But social capital *itself* does not determine the course that a democracy will take. This is decided by interaction with factors we have already mentioned, such as the institutions and the elites. However, that does not mean there are no differences between citizens who want to mobilize within a democratic framework and those who resort to non-parliamentary methods to achieve political influence. I conclude this section by making a few observations concerning those individuals who seem to have ended up ‘outside’ the democratic system.

Hannah Arendt’s initial description of intolerant citizens who are mobilized in populist movements is of special interest. She says that those who were mobilized by the Nazis and the communists were individuals whom other parties regarded as too crazy or apathetic to be interesting. They were individuals who had not been mobilized before and who, more importantly, were *indifferent* to the arguments of political opponents. Differences of opinion were regarded by these citizens as a result of divisions that were so deep, and also ‘natural’, that it was quite simply not possible to enter into a rational dialogue. For this reason, these individuals were more inclined to turn to violence to attain political success. They were people who had been placed, or had placed themselves, outside the existing political system. So the question then becomes how this picture fits in with our picture of, for example, radical Hindu extremists or extreme Islamists in India.

Epithets such as extremists with a religious prefix lead to thoughts of individuals who practice their religion very ardently, and the idea that it is the religious belief itself that gives inspiration, force and motivation to their intolerant or violent behaviour. But the order of cause and effect is often quite different. It is rather the case that the most intolerant individuals are people who first find themselves outside society in some way and that they are then picked up by a politically radical movement.

In studies that I have been involved in after the above mentioned research project on decentralization, deeper insights about the causes behind tolerance have been revealed in India – or more specifically in the context of Madhya Pradesh. Gender, education, party affiliation and age seem to have no relationship to political tolerance. The politicized curriculum seems to block the positive effects of education on political tolerance, which is commonly observed elsewhere. Those who do engage in party activities, or membership in NGO-activities and unions, are however significantly more tolerant than those who do not.⁴⁸ Perhaps this is

48. Widmalm, *Political Tolerance in the Global South – Images from India, Pakistan and Uganda*; Sven Oskarsson and Sten Widmalm, ‘Personality and Political Tolerance – Evidence from India and Pakistan,’ *Political Studies*, accepted (2014); Sten Widmalm and Sven Oskarsson, ‘Political Tolerance in India – Descriptions and Explanations from the Heartland,’ *Asian Survey* 53, no. 3 (2013).

expected but what was surprising was that those showing strong trust in their own group were no more intolerant than those showing trust across group boundaries.⁴⁹ It is quite common in the discourse on social capital to emphasize the positive effects that trust extends across group identities. Trust mainly within groups is often regarded as detrimental to democracy. Also it is assumed that trust and political tolerance is almost the same thing. People are assumed to be politically tolerant towards those they trust. But the study on decentralization shows that trust and tolerance are evidently different qualities.

It was perhaps even more surprising to find in the studies mentioned here that the degree of tolerance, or intolerance, was not correlated with the inclination to visit temples or, if the person went to the temple regularly, the frequency of the visits. If various statistical methods were applied to the survey data it was possible to detect that in some cases the extremely intolerant respondents went to the temple more seldom than those who showed themselves to be tolerant. Apparently, intolerance and religious activism cannot be automatically equated. What appears, on the other hand, is the picture of men who are not doing particularly well in life and who are outside the more established social contexts. They are bitter for various reasons and do not think 'other people', especially those they regard as different from themselves, should have the same rights as they believe they themselves should have. They are very close to the personality type described by Arendt, and this is not, in other words, unique to the Europe of the 1930s and 1940s. Nor to India today.

This kind of *outsider* has been described by Ian Buruma in his portrait of Mohammed Bouyeri.⁵⁰ a young man who ended up entirely outside the usual social groupings and systems of norms in one of the world's most developed welfare systems. The only recognition and the only moral rehabilitation that Bouyeri seemed able to find was from radical Islamist ideologues whom he met primarily on the Internet and in Amsterdam. He easily fell into the role described by Hans Magnus Enzensberger as a 'radical loser'⁵¹ – an individual who has found himself outside 'the collective' and has nothing to lose, however, extreme the actions he or she takes. On the contrary, radical, non-democratic action may be all that can afford the individual some redress and self-esteem. Here Arendt, Buruma and Enzensberger take the same line, and it becomes relevant in the South Asian context as well. We find radical losers among the *kar sevaks* who tore down the

49. This result is in line with finding by Gouws and Gibson in South Africa. Gibson and Gouws, *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa: Experiments in Democratic Persuasion*.

50. Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

51. Enzensberger, 'The Terrorist Mindset – the Radical Loser'; *ibid*.

mosque at Ayodhya and those who carried out the pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. In 2010, the 22 year-old Ajmal Kasab was convicted of the assassinations in Mumbai in 2008. His background is in several respects like Bouyeri's.⁵² But as stated, the personal characteristics of certain individuals who may become radical losers are not enough to rock a whole democracy. There has to be an interaction of more factors. The effect of the actions of radical losers is naturally also decided by institutional, economic and cultural factors. For example, political tolerance remains a characteristic cultural trait in Spain even after the Madrid bombings in 2004.

CONCLUSIONS

The diversity of India is not an adequate safeguard against oppression in India, despite the observation by Paul Brass that India cannot become a fully-fledged dictatorship because the country is *too* heterogeneous. In saying this, Brass challenged Muhammed Ali Jinnah's theory of two nations, which propounded the view that the British Empire in India comprised two great cultures and thus, two nations, the Hindu and the Muslim. They were destined to go their separate ways. Otherwise, Muslims would be condemned to live forever under a kind of oppression of the majority under the Hindu regime. So Brass succeeded to some extent in undermining Jinnah's argument by pointing out the great heterogeneity that is hidden under the lid of the Hindu cauldron. But I do not believe that Brass wants us to be excessively optimistic on the strength of his thesis. The argument may very well hold good as long as many different individuals and groups direct their intolerance at many different targets at the same time. This creates countervailing pressures and a kind of equilibrium with everybody keeping each other in check and therefore, preventing anyone from achieving complete domination. However, research shows that group identities, alliances and loyalties are constantly changing and that heterogeneity is not in itself any guarantee against a tyrannical majority, as James Madison, and later Jinnah, feared, taking hold of power.

52. 'Ajmal Kasab – School Drop-out to Gunman', *Dawn*, 30 April, 2010.

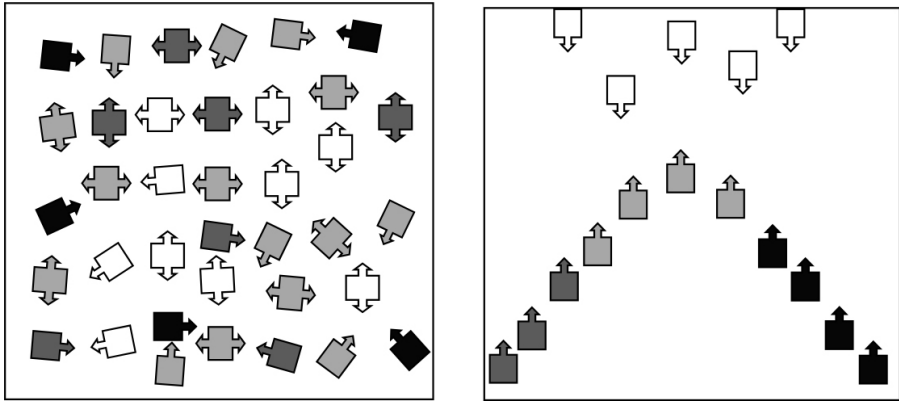


Figure 9.2: Pluralist countervailing pressures vs. tyrannical majority

Figure 9.2 may serve to illustrate the two extreme positions discussed. It is not particularly strange that groups can from within themselves establish the pluralistic countervailing pressure we see in the left-hand part of the figure. Groups react, first and foremost, to the group that is close to them, and if they are competing for important resources, it is not unusual for this to result in intolerance. Also sheer fear of strangers may lead different groups to oppose each other. In certain situations, the intolerance begins to focus principally on one group in the population. If that process is allowed to continue, it results eventually in a tyrannical majority as illustrated by the situation in the right hand part of the Figure. From this, it is clear that a tyrannical majority can be formed even though it is not homogeneous in itself. Figure 9.2 also shows that the tyrannical majority is hardly likely to emerge simply because individuals and certain groups bear ill feeling towards each other. Effective oppression of a minority by a majority requires a capacity for coordination, which is something that many of the radical losers we mentioned are not particularly good at. In all important respects, they lack the resources they need in order to coordinate their frustration, e.g. education and social capital. On the other hand, they constitute a category of individuals who can be easily mobilized by others, i.e. by the political elites. In contexts where institutions are weak or corrupt, there is room for such politicization, and the institutions may even, as we discussed earlier, accelerate the process.

So if we return to the three actors that we had at the start in Fig. 1 and simplify everything by imagining two possible positions for each of the factors, we can illustrate as follows the eight possible outcomes that may ensue.

TABLE 9.1: OUTCOME OF COMBINATIONS OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF ELITES, INSTITUTIONS AND CITIZENS IN PLURALIST SOCIETIES⁵³

	Well-educated, tolerant citizens feeling included in the community		Poorly educated, intolerant citizens feeling excluded from the community	
	Coalescent political elite	Populist and adversarial elite	Coalescent political elite	Populist and adversarial elite
Just and efficient institutions	Very good conditions for democracy	Good conditions for democracy	Good conditions for democracy	Moderate risk of tyrannical majority
Clientelistic or weak institutions	Good conditions for democracy	Moderate risk of tyrannical majority	Moderate risk of tyrannical majority	Substantial risk of tyrannical majority

Table 9.1 shows that all three factors have to reinforce each other before a worst-case scenario can occur. With one deviant factor, the tendencies are alleviated and with two, the potential for democracy soon becomes good in a pluralist setting. For example, even if political elites aim for a populist message with an adversarial content, the effects of this are countered by an educated and enlightened population and strong institutions that oppose injustice. But the picture also demonstrates that we cannot pin excessive hope on isolated factors in order to obtain a functioning democracy. For example, literacy and a higher level of education alone are no panacea. Nor can high levels of education alone be expected to lead to democracy.⁵⁴ Nor can we expect that building a large and stronger state *by itself* will be enough to strengthen democracy. We must bear in mind the warning we have had to remind us since Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto – big bureaucracies in the West tend to first and foremost serve the prosperous elites.⁵⁵ They make ‘true’ democracy impossible.⁵⁶

So the answer to the question of whether there can be too much popular participation in India depends in particular on how elites, institutions and the citizens

53. The terms in Table 9.1 that describe the behaviour of the elites (coalescent and adversarial) have been taken directly from Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

54. Daron Acemoglu et al., ‘From Education to Democracy’, *American Economic Review* 95, no. 2 (2005).

55. See Sullivan et al., op. cit., pp. 17–18.

56. Ibid.

and their characteristics interact in the political process. We have the most important analytical tools to show us the direction in which a country like India is moving. However, we do not have enough information to give a clear picture of the whole country. India's size, social and institutional complexity make it difficult to draw conclusions. It is easy to find depressing examples and tendencies, mainly because we receive most information about violent events and negative trends. We create our understanding from the material that has been filtered by the mass media, the politicians and the debaters. As Stein Rokkan pointed out in the 1970s, there was a great shortage of reliable data on countries like India.⁵⁷ Even if this is to some extent true today, certain positive trends can be detected with the information that is available now. We can see how administrative reforms in India have strengthened at least parts of the country's administration. The *panchayati raj* reforms are an important example. It is no exaggeration to claim that in the modernization process that India is going through, with increasing numbers of workers leaving the land and more and more people becoming unemployed, functioning institutions are becoming ever more important in order to stabilize the country. The panchayat system appears to offer a valuable basis for this. As the human capital of India is growing, it is also becoming increasingly literate, and more people than before can now influence their own lives. Infant mortality is falling and life expectancy is rising. The country contains a huge and poverty-stricken population but the poor are becoming relatively fewer in relation to other citizens who enjoy reasonable living conditions. But what about the political elites? Are they becoming better democrats? The Congress Party needs to become a substantially more responsive and democratic political institution – there is no doubt about that. It simply needs to abandon the undemocratic and dynastic principles it relies on today. Not only to provide a better chance to win future elections, but also to strengthen India's democracy in general. The BJP is the strongest force in Indian politics at national level and will remain so for a long time. It needs a real and democratic opposition party, or parties, in order for the democratic system to evolve in the right direction. As long as the Congress (I), or strong regional parties, do not find a way to cooperate and present the electorate with viable and credible strategies against corruption and pollution, and with economic reforms that create jobs, then it is mainly the BJP that decides if India's democracy will continue a path towards the upper left, or lower right corner, in Table 9.1.

57. S. Rokkan, *Stat, Nasjon, Klasse* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1987).

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