Power and Influence in India

BOSSES, LORDS AND CAPTAINS

PAMELA PRICE & ARILD ENGELSEN RUUD
Power and Influence in India
Exploring the Political in South Asia

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Bosses, Lords and Captains

Editors

Pamela Price
Arild Engelsen Ruud
To Birgit and Hans-Olaf Ruud
in memoriam

and

to Leila Gillette
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Pamela Price

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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACD</td>
<td>Anti-Corruption Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADMK</td>
<td>also known as AIADMK, Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam</td>
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<td>AIYM</td>
<td>All India Yadav Mahasabha</td>
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<td>BDO</td>
<td>Block Development Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party</td>
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<td>BNP</td>
<td>Bangladesh Nationalist Party</td>
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<td>BSP</td>
<td>Bahujan Samaj Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSU</td>
<td>Chaudhry Charan Singh University</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPB</td>
<td>Communist Party of Bangladesh</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>Communist Party of India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPM</td>
<td>Communist Party of India (Marxist)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSDS</td>
<td>Centre for the Study of Developing Societies</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIG</td>
<td>Deputy Inspector-General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLM</td>
<td>Dalit Liberation Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMDK</td>
<td>Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMK</td>
<td>Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPI</td>
<td>the Liberation Panthers Iyyakam, the largest Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DU</td>
<td>Dhaka University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DWCRA</td>
<td>Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGS</td>
<td>Education Guarantee Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCD</td>
<td>Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, student wing of BNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LF</td>
<td>Left Front, the ruling coalition in West Bengal</td>
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<tr>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Meerut College</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLA</td>
<td>Member of Legislative Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLC</td>
<td>Member of Legislative Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<tr>
<td>NBS</td>
<td>Naujawan Bharat Sabha</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>Other Backward Classes</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMK</td>
<td>Pattali Makkal Katchi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Paraiyar Peravai</td>
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</table>
PT  Puthiya Tamilagam, also spelt Puthiya Tamizhagam
PWG  Peoples’ War Group, a militant revolutionary group
SC  Scheduled Caste
SDO  Subdivisional Officer
SFI  Student Federation of India, student organisation affiliated to the CPM
SP  Samajwadi Party
TN  the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, also spelt Tamilnadu
TDP  Telugu Desam Party
UP  the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh
VAO  Village Administrative Officer
VC  Vice-Chancellor
Glossary

Ahir: a landowning caste, also known as Yadav  
akhara: local wrestling gymnasium  
Ambedkar: Dalit lawyer, founder of Dalit activism  
Andolan: refers to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the movement resisting the Narmada dam project  
Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK): also known as All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, one of the two most powerful political parties in Tamil Nadu  
amman: Tamil word meaning elder brother  
Arya Samaj: a movement of reformed Hinduism  
Backward Caste: a caste of intermediate social status between elite castes and lower castes  
Bagdi: a scheduled caste  
Bahujan Samaj Party: the most successful Dalit-led party in India  
bal: brute and raw strength  
Bargadar: sharecropper  
Bhadralok: ‘gentleman’, educated Bengali  
bhrashtachar: corruption  
Brahmin: the ritually highest caste (varna)  
Chamar: a large scheduled caste  
Cheri: Dalit residential area  
dada: lit. elder brother, also used for local strong man  
Dalit: a Marathi term meaning downtrodden, adopted by politically active ex-Untouchables  
darshan: the act of seeking the blessing of a divinity or a superior  
Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK): Dravidian Association for the Progress of the Country  
dol or dal: group, political ‘faction’  
Dom: a scheduled caste  
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK): Association for the Progress of Dravidians, one of the two most powerful political parties in Tamil Nadu  
Dravidianism: a movement of cultural nationalism to support the interests of people speaking languages belonging to the Dravidian language family
Ekta Parishad: a Gandhian organisation which worked among disadvantaged groups

_ghus_: bribe

_goonda_: bully

_Gujar_ or _Gujjar_: a scheduled tribe

_guru_: a teacher who brings his disciples into self-realisation

_Hindutva_: Hindu-ness, a concept in Hindu nationalist ideology

_Janata Party_: formed in opposition to the ruling Congress party when Indira Gandhi was prime minister; formed the first non-Congress central government in post-Independence India

_Jat_: intermediate status caste group, dominant peasant caste in north India

_Kallar_: a fairly low-ranking caste by orthodox Tamil standards, once labelled a ‘criminal caste’

_Kshatriya_: the ritually second-highest varna

_Lok Sabha_: the lower house of the Indian Parliament

_Madras_: the former name for Chennai, capital of Tamil Nadu

_Marutham Network_: a coalition of charitable and social institutions

_mastan_: bully

_mukhtar_: attorney or solicitor

_Naxalite_: militant revolutionary group

_neta_: leader, career politician

_Pallar_: Dalit caste in Tamil Nadu

_Panchayat_: statutory local government body

_Paraiyar Peravai_: an organisation to forward Paraiyar caste interests

_Paraiyars_: the most populous Tamil Dalit caste

_Pargana_: the next lowest administrative level in a district

_Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK)_: party supporting the interests of the Vanniar caste in Tamil Nadu

_Patwari_: the village record-keeper

_Puthiya Tamilagam_: an organisation to forward Pallar caste interests

_rajinji_: politics

_Rajput_: an elite caste in north India

_Republican Party of India (RPI)_: a Dalit political party

_sadhu_: a holy man

_samaj seva_: serving society

_Scheduled Caste (SC)_: bureaucratic term for those castes entitled to positive discrimination
Scheduled Tribe (ST): bureaucratic term for those tribes that are entitled to positive discrimination

shakti: power and energy

shishya: the disciple of a teacher, a guru

Shiv Sena: a party of cultural nationalism in western India

Syed: a Muslim ‘caste’

tadbir kora: ‘supervising’ or ‘looking after’; ‘doing deals’

Tahsil: a revenue division, also know as taluk

Taluk: also spelt taluka, a revenue division

Talukdar: holds the title to a talukdari, an estate paying taxes to the government under British imperial rule

Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS): a party dedicated to the formation of a separate for the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh

Telugu Desam Party (TDP): a regional party in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh

Thakur: a caste name

Vanniar: a backward caste in Tamil Nadu

Venkateswara: popular form of the god Vishnu in Andhra Pradesh

Yadav: a landowning caste, also known as Ahir

zamindar: holds the title to a zamindari, an estate paying taxes to the government under British imperial rule
The fifth book in this series is the result of a very enjoyable conference held in the depths of a Scandinavian winter, in a Norwegian wood in December 2006. Participants from various disciplines had been invited to think about leadership styles in the politics of South Asia, and while not everyone present had published specifically on the theme of leadership they nevertheless had a thorough familiarity with politics in South Asia. The papers presented therefore had a freshness of perspective as this territory was traversed again, this time for a novel purpose, and the discussions were lively, argumentative and creative, moderated skillfully by the organisers of the conference who have also edited this volume. The settings of the papers were diverse: from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh, from prime ministerial offices to local fixers at tea stalls. While comparative studies of different regions across South Asia are thin on the ground due to the huge variations in the different political settings, the common strand here was provided by the theme of leadership. Our shared agenda of this most basic feature of politics helped in uniting diverse political contexts analytically.

This book therefore presents an examination of the nature of leadership in contemporary India. While leadership should have been a well-rehearsed topic in the context of democratic India with its myriad political parties and electoral contests — all of which require the representation of the many by a few — literature on it has been remarkably lacking. Instead, discussions of the ‘group’, defined variously by caste, class and status, have dominated discussions of Indian politics. Several explanations may be offered for this. First, the initial decades of post-Independence India saw the publication of biographies of prominent nationalist leaders and, even here, only a handful of individuals considered at the head of the pantheon were profiled, those who were seen to have shaped India’s post-colonial future. Second, the dominance of the nationalist narrative also undervalued the importance of ‘regional’ (and by implication somehow less important) leaders, despite the fact that their spheres of influence were often large, and comparable in size to a country in Europe. As a result of the above factors attention has been largely focused on the
top levels of leadership, rather than studying and taking leadership as it occurs ubiquitously, with varying scope, at every level of the political system. Third, the strident assertion of identity politics in the electoral arena since the early 1990s has provoked scholars to examine its emergence, thereby encompassing any discussions of individual leaders as part of this wider group phenomenon. Further, in the social sciences at least, Louis Dumont’s image of *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966) had cast a shadow over alternative formulations of any other kind of Indian. This essentialist portrayal has been thoroughly challenged by some scholars, and the influence of these debates has been manifest in explorations of the concept of the individual in India. In the context of leadership specifically, notable exceptions exist, and among these Mattison Mines’s *Public Faces, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India* (1996) made an early contribution and remains remarkably relevant for newly emerging forms of leadership in contemporary India.

Mines’s discussion of the ‘institutional big-man’ is a conscious examination of the virtues of personal uniqueness, volition and achievement in the formation of individuality and leadership in the Indian context, qualities that had largely remained overlooked or understated in extant accounts till the early 1990s. Though Mines noted that authors in general believed in the importance of the role of these qualities in the formation of leaders, they were often left unsubstantiated in their publications. While his ethnographic context is a temple in South India, he puts forward a model of the ‘big-man’ that has national relevance. Shaktival, the protagonist of Mines’s account, personifies the institution he heads and his eminence is dependent on the institution. Thus, his fortunes and that of his institution are interdependent. Yet Mines also shows how the institutional position is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the viability of the Indian big-man; instead, his personal charisma and individual qualities are crucial qualities that define his pre-eminence. His list of five essential characteristics that define a ‘big-man’ can indeed serve as an ideal type for leaders in such settings. Thus, big men are (1) simultaneously hierarchical and unique persons; (2) dependent on their personal style and ingenuity in maintaining their following; (3) not just pre-eminent, but central to their constituency; (4) defined by a public recognition of individuality and instrumentality that is circumscribed by values that subordinate their liberty to the common good; and (5) undertake to set up institutions that establish their social credit as
unique, generous and honourable individuals. As Mines shows, these characteristics are important not only for a model of leadership but also to develop a notion of Indian individuality as one not merely lacking the characteristics of equality and liberty, as argued by Dumont, but one that takes into account the combined importance of institutions, charisma and skill.

Mines’s account drew attention to the importance of individual achievement and agency in the creation of leaders, and various scholars of Indian politics have taken up this insight for discussion. A recent addition is E. Raghavan and James Manor’s Broadening and Deepening Democracy (2009), an earlier title in this series, where they analysed the politics of the state of Karnataka through an examination of three men who became its chief minister. This volume furthers the discussion of political leadership in India in several ways. First, it takes seriously the symbiotic nature of institutions and leaders and explores how institutions of diverse kinds — political parties, student unions, official posts and so on — bolster and limit the creation of a leader. Second, the articles do not lose sight of the political culture created by more than 50 years of democratic practice. Thus, even the articles that are based on research in villages or particular institutional settings show how these are linked to larger political structures and processes that impact on and are influenced by a multitude of local political processes. Third, the volume takes the analysis of leadership in India to a different level by bringing together a common framework of discussion for leadership for all levels across the political spectrum. It is able to do this by paying serious attention to the importance of cultural models and political style, now taken more seriously by scholars of Indian politics not least because of the renewed interest by sociologists and anthropologists in Indian politics.

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May 2010

Mukulika Banerjee
Introduction*

In an early evaluation of the results of the Indian Parliamentary elections held in the spring of 2009, a political commentator voiced his sense of the importance of leadership for the future direction of Indian politics:

Inherent in the 2009 mandate is a yearning for stability and coherence at the very core of the Indian state…. The new vote means that the voters do not want the Centre to become an all-India version of Jharkhand [fragmented polity, with high levels of violence]. In other words, the 2009 mandate has mandated Dr Manmohan Singh to restore the moral elements in governing processes and practices. (Khare 2009)

One does not need to agree with Harish Khare’s prescription in order to realise that in the subcontinent it is generally in newspapers and news magazines that one finds the conviction that knowing about leadership is important, that knowledge of leadership assists in understanding and explaining political change and development. In newspapers and magazines one finds information and analysis *inter alia* of the actions, values, rhetoric, policies, and styles of those who govern. In contrast, scholarly writing on post-colonial South Asian politics has indicated

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* The Introduction has been written by Price with assistance from Ruud. Earlier versions of it were presented by Ruud at the workshop, ‘Politics of Environmental Challenges in South Asia in the 21st Century’ (Oslo, 2008) and the panel, ‘Political Creativity in South Asia’, at the conference, NORASIA IV (Trondheim, 2008). Price presented a version to members of the Oslo South Asia Symposium. Thanks to participants in these events and the anonymous reviewer for comments. Gratitude goes to David Gilmartin and Ronald Herring on reading and critiquing this, and to Harald Baldersheim for suggestions on reading. The usual disclaimers apply.

1 The word ‘India’ appears in the title of the volume because only one of the articles is based on fieldwork outside that country (in Bangladesh). However, we use the terms ‘South Asia’ and ‘subcontinental’ through the Introduction because the term ‘India’ presupposes a reification which is misleading, in that patterns of political action and thought illustrated here are spread variously in the South Asian region.
much less interest in these issues. For instance, Lokniti, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), recently produced a discussion on democracy in South Asia in which a wide range of subjects were analysed, leaving aside the topic of political leadership (CSDS 2007).

There are, of course, significant studies on the wielding of power and influence by persons in post-colonial South Asian polities. Paul Brass (1965, 1974) and James Manor (1980, 1989, 1990) are among scholars who, in the course of their careers, have examined actions, ideas and values at various levels of political leadership. M. S. S. Pandian (1992), Arun Swamy (1998) and Narendra Subramanian (1999) have analysed populist styles in Dravidian party politics in Tamil Nadu. Early on in the genre of scholarly biographies, with regard to post-colonial leaders, was Manor’s 1989 study of the career of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the fourth prime minister of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. Judith Brown’s political biography of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, appeared in 2003. Increasing interest in elite political actors is indicated by Ramachandra Guha’s call for more biographical studies (Guha 2007: xxiv–xxv) and Sunil Khilnani’s engagement in a major study on Nehru.

It has been other aspects of political or sociopolitical life, such as nationalist ideologies, ethnic conflict, voting behaviour, and quotidian transactions, that have garnered the major part of scholarly attention in the last four decades. The editors of this volume value these contributions, but at the same time, as the essays here illustrate, other related topics in the field of political activity also require our attention — specifically, the actions, ideas and values of persons who wield power and influence in the various types of political spheres that are to be found in the subcontinent.

Earlier versions of the articles comprising this volume were presented in 2006 at a conference titled ‘Creating a Constituency/Producing a Leader in South Asia’. Participants were asked to consider formal and informal ways in which politically ambitious persons go about

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2 The Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS) and the Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH) at the University of Oslo provided the funding for the conference. Ruud took the initiative for much of the financing and organisation of the event. Lars Tore Flåten coordinated the original conference.
garnering support for themselves and for their policies or goals. Also encouraged was a discussion on leadership from the point of view of those whom political actors would want to mobilise, including, conceptions of the appropriate use of authority, the appropriate behaviour of leaders and the correct goals of political action.

The articles illustrate certain common patterns in action and meaning that recur in subcontinental politics. For the editors, more important than an even geographical spread has been the range of political actors represented in the articles. Methods of study include interviews, participant observation and printed and handwritten sources. The work is the product of research methods in anthropology, political science and history.

In presenting the varieties of leadership to be found in the subcontinent, the articles respond to calls made in recent years for increased attention in political studies to ‘local meanings’ (Spencer 2007: 184), ‘complex imaginings at the individual level’ (Herring 2000: 957), and ‘embedded understandings’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2005: 5). At the same time as we appreciate insights into political behaviour found in structural studies based in the main on quantitative methods of analysis,3 we hope this collection speaks in various ways to those who ponder ‘the difficulty of reading interests, identifications and political dynamics from structure’ (Herring 2000: 957).

Together the articles cover a wide range of political spheres. Most of the contributions deal with domains of various degrees of institutionalisation. Represented here are i) the micro-polities of student unions, villages and an urban neighbourhood, ii) more or less amorphously bounded political parties, and iii) legally defined and regulated governments of states.

In terms of politics, ‘domain’ commonly denotes dominion or rule over a territorially bound polity: ‘A district or region under rule, control, or influence, or contained within certain limits…’.4 When analysing political structures that have experienced high levels of social

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and political segmentation, ‘domain’ also usefully denotes polities, along a wide scale of size and complexity, which are not characterised by formal boundaries or formal regulation. These can include, for example, clans, castes, social movements, and villages, in pre-modern states, while contemporary nation states like India can maintain high degrees of segmentation amidst vast expanses of porous central and state bureaucracies.

Why is segmentation relevant? Long periods of relatively slow state-formation in early South Asian history produced social and political communities with high degrees of self-rule and regulation (see Thapar 1984; Heitzman 1997; Peabody 2003). Castes, villages, chieftaincies, and little kingdoms produced and reproduced ideologies which aimed to legitimise personal rule and authority in small-scale polities. In contemporary South Asia, therefore, elements of personalised rule and/or lordship continue to operate to affect the nature and functioning of leadership in many types of polities.

The volume also contains writing on ‘fields’, both as a principal focus and as one of several political spheres being considered in an article. Domains encompass fields, and fields exist between domains. Here we consider fields to be fluid and unregulated, sociopolitical spheres of competition. Fields consist mainly of informal networks, with various degrees of institutionalisation. The networks consist of connections maintained by practices, the games one plays to achieve practical ends, such as getting a place in a college, a loan or a government job. A socially and politically ambitious person commonly needs to achieve prominence in fields as a ‘fixer’, successfully promoting his (more rarely her) own interests and/or those of others (Jeffrey 2009).

Activities in both domains and fields revolve around competition for material and symbolic resources. However, one important difference between the two is that headship in a domain customarily requires activities of sociopolitical inclusion (as well as, sometimes, exclusion). Domain leadership often requires, as well, some articulation of normative values and visions of the domain community(s). For many domain heads, particularly for those who come from modest beginnings, being a successful fixer has been a necessary first step in constructing a political career, and maintaining leadership may entail continuing activities of playing field games.

The articles offer illustrations of ideas and symbols, in confluence with material resources, in the construction and maintenance of political authority and control. The volume thus enters into debates
about the nature of political domination in the subcontinent. As indicated above, the emergence of steeply hierarchical and segmented sociopolities by the early modern period in South Asia produced a vast array of formal and informal domains. As Robert Travers recently observed, in state polities ‘sovereignty was dispersed, uneven and plural rather than singular and neatly bounded’ (2007).

Research by anthropologists and historians since the 1960s has illustrated the ideological aspects of domain formation in subcontinental contexts of segmentation. An important, partial summary of this work is found in Mattison Mines’ study of ‘big-men’ in 20th century Tamil Nadu (1996). Mines explored the ideological and material mixes at play in the construction of urban domains and domain leadership. The focus of his work is (mostly) the network domains of personal authority.

Most of the contributors to this volume are concerned with leadership over more complex domains than those of Mines’ interest. Persons who sought domain control in these cases were commonly related to relatively large-scale institutions, mostly with members and/or institutions of political parties. Sociopolitical visions that expanded beyond those of purely personal authority followed from association with these complex institutions, from the point of view of the leaders as well as the constituents. In this volume, it was partly within this larger context that personal desires for control, authority and/or expressions of identity found political expression.

The contributors to this volume are indebted to Morris-Jones’ interest in political styles, languages and values, formulated in his much-cited article from 1963. The three political idioms which he outlined — the modern, the traditional and the saintly — reflected the discourses of modernisation which engaged scholars of post-colonial societies in the 1960s. Morris-Jones’s choices also reflected the ongoing debates in independent India, with discursive contrasts being drawn between idyllic/backward/traditional villages and industrial/progressive/modern India. Scholarly conviction that the political elite of India spoke a language of purpose and process which

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5 Post-colonial period research includes: Bremen (1974); Wadley (1977); Davis (1983); Raheja (1988) and Ruud (2003). Early modern and colonial period research includes: Appadurai and Breckenridge (1976); Roghair (1982); Dirks (1987); Price (1996) and Peabody (2003).
was alien to the values and visions of the ordinary people continued into the 1990s. In this volume, however, customary, conventional and unconventional ideas and symbols mix according to the aims, personalities and contexts — structural and historical — of political actors. These actors chose eclectically, in terms of style, language and resource ‘management’, as they sought leadership over different types of political domains that often transcended divisions between the global/modern and indigenous/traditional.

While the domains represented here vary widely in nature and scale, the leadership styles of those who wield (or would wield) influence are less heterogeneous. The terms ‘boss’, ‘lord’ and ‘captain’ best describe the styles illustrated in this volume. A leadership style may have elements of more than one of these alternatives and included activities of fixing.

Usage of the term boss in scholarship appears to derive from studies of urban politics in late 19th and early 20th century United States. Boss refers to the redistribution of resources in relatively small-scale domains according to machine politics, i.e., with a first (amoral) imperative of maintaining the dominance of the leader and his/her establishment. While the boss may espouse an ideology, his actions appear focussed around the goal of sustained personal dominance. A boss may be affiliated to a political party (and is hence different from the local unattached fixer or the village patron with no political ambition beyond the village). He incorporates elements of the fixer, practicing the role of the local middleman between individual supporters or groups of supporters and powers higher up. In cases in which the political base of a boss is maintained with threats of violence, he associates with goondas, thugs or strongmen.

A lord denotes a type of leadership with more pronounced normative elements than the boss. Illustrations of lordly authority are found inter alia in debates about tribal leadership in Afghanistan (Ahmed 1976), a ruling lineage in Cameroon (Hansen 2000), and in notions of patronage and patriarchy among working-class women in Nicaragua (Hagene 2008). Constituents’ perceptions of their head as a benevolent person of expansive agency form a major element of

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6 Brass (2002) provides a discussion of this and related issues.
7 Since none of these papers focuses on female heads, henceforth we refer to male actors.
allegiance to lordly leadership in the South Asian context (Burghart [1996] 2008: 16, 343–45). The capacity to use force may play a role in the construction of lordly leadership; however, violence has not been a constant feature of this political style. Post-colonial lordly styles in the subcontinent incorporate the broadly defined protection which the ideal/moral patron offers his clients (Wadley 1977; Greenough 1983). The special qualities of morality attached to this type of patronage, however, enable a lordly style leader to appear substantially superior to and protective of members of broad, heterogeneous constituencies. A traditional model for lordship among Hindus is a god/goddess, a prime agent, ruling the cosmos as a monarch, imbued with the endless possibilities of cosmic energy. A divinity protects creatures in a multitude of ways, according to his/her desire and will. The human lord of this model may offer protection in the glamorous and generous mode of monarchs (Price 1989) or in the spiritual efficacy and knowledge of gurus (Brass 1965: 55). A more secular form of lordship appearing in post-colonial political discourses is the ‘social worker’ (or ‘social reformer’ in Jeffrey’s study in this volume). This actor asserts or acts his disillusionment with and desire to be separated from conventional political strategies. Thus he poses his involvement in political mobilisation as markedly disinterested. In contemporary India, sometimes when a political actor is described as, for example, angling for nomination to stand for election, he will protest that he is ‘only a social worker’, i.e., seeking only to serve others.

Captaincy has long been in use cross-culturally as a metaphor for political leadership. We take ‘captain’ here to denote dominance of large-scale polities, typically states/provinces, requiring relatively wide ranges of strategic skills. In post-colonial India effective captaincy requires knowledge and/or skills of bureaucratic management, with the office encompassing legal authority and attention to formal codes. The social and institutional complexity of such political domains constrains those who would take and retain control to articulate statements of purpose addressing general as well as particular interests. Captaincy, then, commonly requires articulating ideological stances and general policy, as well as moderating among other domain heads in the state polity and managing powerful instruments, bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic, of domination and distribution.

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8 Vasavi (2008) provided the suggestion of the term ‘captain’ in this context.
The articles illustrate variously these three styles of leadership. Mostly, individual leaders do not expound one style only but mix and blend eclectically, according to need, context, personal skills and opportunity. The articles of Gorringe (Tamil Nadu) and Ruud (Bangladesh) provide, respectively, fairly straightforward examples of lord and boss leadership. Gorringe’s Dalit caste leaders are guru-like teachers to their devoted followers, while Ruud’s actors in university student politics build their careers importantly around threats of force. Jeffrey includes among the various styles of the student political ‘animators’ of his focus the moral authority of ‘social reformers’. A more complicated leadership is Banerjee’s CPM village boss (West Bengal). He is a machine politics operator with a minimalist style who, at the same time, is constrained to give teaching in party ideology and carry through party programmes of rural development. Boss and lord also overlap in the leadership model which attracts Michelutti’s low-caste urban dwellers (Uttar Pradesh). Their ideal is the god Krishna, protecting his honour and that of his followers — in their rendition — with a powerful body and quick recourse to force. In reference to our distinction between boss and lord, David Gilmartin noted that the latter case relates ‘to a dense frame of cultural legitimation (drawn in part from religious ideas)’, while there is ‘the relative lack of such a frame in the former’ and, he added, ‘...of course, there is no real leader who operates without cultural legitimation, and none, however lordly, who can operate entirely without “bossism”’ (Gilmartin, personal communication).

Wyatt discusses the activities of a film actor who, in establishing a new political party, mimicked the lordly style of former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, M. G. Ramachandran (MGR). A wealthy mega-film star, MGR practiced benevolent populism on a grand scale (Swamy 1998; Subramanian 1999). A very different lordly style comes from Brass’s (Uttar Pradesh) exploration of a little known aspect of the career of Charan Singh, famous for his captaincy in state and national-level politics of the interests of agriculturalists. Here Singh is guru-like in his honesty and austerity, demonstrating the power that self-denial can have in Indian politics.

Self-effacement is an important aspect of the persona of Digvijay Singh in Manor’s study of the former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh. His strategies as captain included projecting inclusive development and establishing programmes to attend to the needs of rural society and Dalits. Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh
is another development chief minister in this collection, one with a markedly different, person-centred political style. Price finds him shifting strategies in a (failed) re-election campaign, replacing his image as an icon of neo-liberalism with one of pro-poor, welfare statism. Along the way, Naidu also tried out lordship.

The choice of style for the individual leader is constrained by circumstances, such as access to resources, size and nature of domain, available ideologies and known leadership models. Alm (Tamil Nadu) portrays a rural would-be leader — a young man with scanty resources practicing the skills of negotiation and manipulation, using materials at hand as he seeks to build influence. Alm’s article illustrates well a theme which appears also in the articles of Ruud, Jeffrey and Banerjee: the construction of local dominance through control over and the skilful use of scarce material resources. A hard felt lack of abundance supported the reproduction of machine politics in both urban and rural localities.

Gorringe’s case of Dalit leaders explores dominance over a different kind of domain — a large, amorphous one of caste fellows — and illustrates the significance in this context of symbolic action in coincidence with ideology. The leader provides a vision of the moral character of the group and its goals. The leaders whom Gorringe observed were similar in their sober style to actors in Dalit mobilisation in Uttar Pradesh, studied by Ciotti (2006), while the urban followers of Yadav caste politicians described by Michelutti encouraged ideas and actions of robust expansiveness.

The chief ministers in the collection constructed ideologies and policies appropriate to their political constraints. In Madhya Pradesh, Digvijay Singh’s self-effacement encompassed subordination to the Gandhi dynasty ruling the Congress Party. He would avoid being perceived as a threat to the Congress ‘High Command’. However, Singh also needed to serve his own career needs by mobilising new sources of political support in his state. As the leader of a regional party in Andhra Pradesh, on the other hand, Chandrababu Naidu did not shy away from hagiographic profiling. However, he shifted his development focus from neo-liberal policies, deciding that any chance he had of beating the curse of incumbency in 2004 lay in showing enhanced interest in the agricultural sector and the effects of drought.

In outlining types of leadership in the context of discussions of combinations of styles, a question arises: are boss, lord and captain ideal types, or do they provide a heuristic frame for exploring the
components that go into leadership. We suggest that there exist structural elements in the typology with a primary identification between a leadership type and the scale and nature of domains over which a person in these cases has gained or attempted to gain dominance and authority. However, at this point of investigation we make the typology an interpretive device.

It is necessary to put the emergence and reproduction of these types in historical contexts. Post-colonial South Asia has witnessed uneven growth in rural and urban economies and widespread and severe scarcity of economic resources. Institutions of state governance have lacked the capacity to secure social welfare for large sections of rural and urban populations. Widespread economic vulnerability has existed without ‘safety nets’ being sustained by a state bureaucracy. The experience of marked resource scarcity for the majority of political constituents influenced the strategies and tactics of the leaders and would-be leaders of the cases discussed in this volume. In rural communities, widespread vulnerability fuels the reproduction of boss leadership, as well as notions of generosity informing monarchical models of lordship. One result of continuing conditions of scarcity is a focus in communities on the person or persons who have the capacity to do things for others (as opposed to bureaucratic functionaries — who are ‘just doing their job’).

Against this background we can understand the common complaint in political commentary on ‘person-centred’ politics and the relative lack of policy in political formulations in the subcontinent. However, a focus on the person of the politician has an element which has been under-reported and analysed: the leader and/or his followers generally seek to portray his character as moral (in culturally specific terms). The leader, whatever his domain, seeks to ‘help’ others or at least give the impression of doing so, thereby responding to the common convictions of ordinary people that it is ‘good’ people who can do good (Price 2006). There are different ways of being ‘moral’, different strings for politicians and would-be politicians to play on, and the size and nature of a leader’s domain affects the kinds and range of choices he can make. The collection includes both a poor village man who attempts

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to construct influence by doing things for others and chief ministers with wide resource access who aim for resonating moral notes.

The special regard that ordinary people have for those who help others, in subcontinental conditions of marked scarcity, explains the prominence of the terms ‘social worker’ or ‘social reformer’ in political discourses. In Jeffrey’s study of student politics (Uttar Pradesh), one finds economic hardship and institutional failure to be productive elements in the emergence of various styles of student activities, including the ‘social reformers’ of middle caste, lower caste and Muslim backgrounds; netas who were clearly ambitious and could employ violence; and elite caste visionaries and facilitators.

The studies implicitly support the challenge of Stuart Corbridge and his colleagues (Corbridge et al. 2005) to Partha Chatterjee’s despondent vision of a divide between civil society and political society in India (Chatterjee 2004). The rules of the games in Chatterjee’s political society contain sharp differences with those of civil society, including high recourse to violence. The studies in this volume confirm Corbridge and his colleagues’ assertion that local political society ‘is often constructively engaged in providing links between “government” and “the public”, as well as brokering deals and forming patterns of authority that hold these deals in place’ (Corbridge et al. 2005: 191). Such linkages aid in understanding elements of political stability amidst high segmentation and processes of fragmentation in subcontinental states and provinces.

The collection also implicitly challenges the argument of Hansen and Stepputat that domain formation occurs primarily ‘through the exercise of violence over bodies and populations’ (2005: 2). As a whole, the articles counter the notion that ideas and values which legitimate activities of domain rule constitute the ‘sublime’ aspect of a general mystification of inherent violence (Hansen 2005: 171). The emic concept of male authority of Hansen’s focus, mardangi, associates successful displays of masculinity with ready willingness to resort to violence (ibid.: 190–91). In this volume, on the other hand, the construction of leadership over domains, macro and micro, draws on heterogeneous arrays of ideas and symbols of authority. And the actors in this volume are found to make their careers choosing from a wide range of practical and ideological strategies, appropriate to domain scale and nature. In the material presented here one finds various political rationalities and responses to exercises of political legitimation.
The studies suggest the importance of domain types and access to resources in the construction of styles of political leadership, contributing to debates involving those who are preoccupied with the material bases for and/or institutional constraints on political action — sometimes opposed to those who focus commonly on actors’ ideas, concepts, and values. Here issues of structure and meaning in politics appear with reference to each other. The types of actors are closely associated with the nature of ‘their’ domains of control and/or governance. However, the articles also illustrate ‘culturally-specific operations of power’ in different parts of the subcontinent (Mosse 2003: 22). Implicitly, the pieces meet ‘the need to overcome the distinction between rational action and custom and to re-conceptualize … resources as part of … a material and symbolic domain’ (ibid.).

The articles taken as a whole find kinship with Max Weber’s interest in styles of leadership and historical contexts (Weber 1978). Weber isolated three ‘“pure” types’: the traditional/patriarchal; the charismatic/confrontational; and the bureaucratic/’rationally’ ordered (ibid.: 954). (These resonate with Morris-Jones’ traditional, saintly and modern.) In his Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, Weber’s styles appeared in coincidence with particular polities or movements (chiefdoms, early Christianity, western European kingdoms, modern bureaucracies, etc.). However, he added, ‘The forms of domination occurring in historical reality constitute combinations, mixtures, adaptation, or modifications of these “pure” types’ (ibid.: 954). Thus Weber becomes a forerunner of situational and contingency schools of leadership theory. These focus on leaders’ assumption of specific styles in negotiating a wide and varying range of factors in their environment as they take decisions. The evidence in the volume here supports arguments that contexts and contingency tend to mould political styles and decision-making, and that leaders take elements from different models for action as they make their careers and solve problems of rule and control.

Our elaboration on the domain context of persons wielding power and influence constitutes a contribution to the field of comparative study of political leadership (cf. Daloz 2003a, 2003b). The cases illustrate to greater and lesser degrees classic problems of dominance, finding political persons acting in domains of matter and symbolism.

The arrangement of articles is such that one moves from figures of power and influence active in domains which are relatively less in geographical range and institutional complexity toward those of larger extent and institutional scale.

References


searchFulltext.do?id=R03925081&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft (accessed 28 April 2009).
Creating Followers, Gaining Patrons: Leadership Strategies in a Tamil Nadu Village

Björn Alm

In this article I discuss how politically ambitious people in the village of Ekkaraiyur went about building support for themselves. 1 The temporal context of the discussion is 1988–90, when I did anthropological fieldwork in the village.

My research focused on the emergence of a new type of leader, associated with the erosion of earlier village loyalties, and the censure of these leaders as corrupt. This article builds on this general theme, enriching it through a focus on the strategies politically ambitious people have used. In particular, I shall discuss how Karuppuvan, an informal leader of DMK youth in the village, built a support base for himself. 2

I have chosen to focus on Karuppuvan because he lacked any formalised political position. That is, he did not hold any elected positions within the parliamentary and panchayat systems, and, although he was a member of DMK, he did not hold any officially recognised position within the party. In this sense, Karuppuvan was on his own. Whatever political clout he could assert, he had to create for himself. The realisation of his ambitions depended on his abilities to successfully put such strategies in motion that created networks of followers and patrons.

I intend my discussion of Karuppuvan to provide some material on what can be termed ‘the grass-roots level’. However, the activities,

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1 Ekkaraiyur is a fictitious name. The names of villages in Ekkaraiyur’s surroundings and the names of people likewise have been changed.

2 DMK is the abbreviation for Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, which translates as the Dravidian Progress Party. It was one of the three major political parties in Tamil Nadu at the end of the 1980s. The other two were the Congress (I) and ADMK (see n. 5).
aims and ambitions, as well as the means of Karuppuvan were not merely set within a larger political context. I think that they were also mirrored at successive levels of Tamil Nadu politics.

The Setting

The village of Ekkaraiyur is centrally located in the Dindigul valley, which has been an important route of communication between the central and southern parts of Tamil Nadu since early times. Transport and communications are easy as several main roads and one railway track traverse the valley, linking a handful of small towns that serve as centres of trade and communication for the surrounding countryside with the bigger cities to the north and the south. The town of Dindigul, located at the northern end of the valley, was an important regional centre in the late 1980s, with markets, schools, small industries, and a fairly handsome population of about 200,000.

The large irrigation works of Ekkaraiyur water a wide expanse of wetland paddy fields in the otherwise predominantly dry Dindigul valley. With its 5,000 or so inhabitants, Ekkaraiyur accounted for a sizeable portion of the 20–25,000 people who lived in this part of the valley in 1989. Only the nearby small town of Yarkottai was more populous. Until the end of the 19th century, Yarkottai was little more than a collection of small villages. At that time, the construction of a road from the Palni Hills amalgamated the villages into a small town, which became a local centre for commerce. A new road was similarly the maker of the village of Velpatti, located near Ekkaraiyur. Velpatti consisted of little more than wasteland until the middle of the 20th century, when a new road from Coimbatore and Palni turned Velpatti into a local centre of communications and commerce. Ekkaraiyur, Yarkottai and Velpatti were all favourably located with respect to irrigation works. The latter two, however, had the added advantage of being located along busy roads. Even if the growth of these two did not depopulate Ekkaraiyur, it was pushed towards a local periphery. However, Ekkaraiyur was no ‘backwater village’.

The fertility of Ekkaraiyur’s wetland supported a relatively large population and a more complex social structure than other villages in the valley. Some traits, notably the presence of a relatively large group of Brahmin landowners, gave Ekkaraiyur something of the character
more typical of the Brahmin-dominated villages of the Kaveri river delta (Béteille 1971, 1974; Gough 1981, 1989). However, Ekkaraiyur was not a Brahmin-dominated village. There were many large, medium and small landowners of other castes, as well as a many landless villagers. In addition, the legacy of migration to the village, particularly during the last couple of hundred years, had given a particular shape to the village — its population saw itself as consisting of a large number of differing groups in terms of caste, language and religion.®

Although considered an agriculturally favoured village, few families in Ekkaraiyur were able to support themselves entirely from agriculture, whether they were landowning or not. Many families consequently had some members in non-agricultural professions, in or outside the village. These ranged from manual labour on hill plantations and city building sites, to industrial jobs, technical professions, military service and white-collar jobs.

Several white-collar jobs could be found in the village as the state was an active and constant companion in ordinary people’s lives in Ekkaraiyur at the end of the 1980s (cf. Fuller and Bénéï 2001). Numerous state institutions were located in the village or nearby. Ekkaraiyur had a state-run school, a public library, a post office, a small hospital, and a veterinary clinic. A government department supervised the management of Ekkaraiyur’s major temples. A branch office of the nationalised Canara Bank was located in the village. There were two ‘Fair Price’ shops, which were part of a state system of distribution. Most of the buses that served Ekkaraiyur belonged to a state-owned company. A police station and several branch offices of various state enterprises, such as the agricultural department and the electricity board, were located at nearby Velpatti and Yarkottai. At a rough estimate, a couple of hundred people in Ekkaraiyur were employed by the state in one form or another.

® The number of castes in Ekkaraiyur depends on how one defines a caste. Loosely speaking, about 20–25 castes were represented in the village. However, most of these comprised subdivisions that could also be seen as castes in their own right. Regarding language, most people considered Tamil as their mother tongue, but a sizeable minority considered themselves as Telugu-speakers. In religious terms, the majority of people in Ekkaraiyur were Hindus, of different strands. However, large groups of Christians, mostly Roman Catholics, and Muslims also lived in the village.
Moreover, Ekkaraiyur was part of several state administrative and political structures. Administratively, the village belonged to Dindigul district, headed by a collector in Dindigul, and represented in Ekkaraiyur by a village administrative officer (VAO). The village was also part of a development block, which was a basic unit for a regional administration that had been set up to bring about rural change (Misra 1983: 292–96). A number of extension workers, led by two block development officers, were located at its headquarters in Velpatti. Politically, Ekkaraiyur formed part of two constituencies. It formed the major part of a constituency for the Legislative Assembly in Madras, and a lesser part of a constituency for the Lok Sabha. Moreover, some aspects of local self-government were entrusted to a village panchayat, which in turn was part of a panchayat union. The administrative and political structures were expected to reinforce each other. At the local level, for example, panchayat leaders were expected to co-ordinate their aims and activities with those of the development block.

Presenting Karuppuvan

Karuppuvan befriended me when I lived in Ekkaraiyur. We used to discuss politics in the evenings, sitting in a tea stall, in the Style King Tailors’ shop across the street from my home or on my front porch. Our discussions ranged from the personal and local, to the abstract and global.

Karuppuvan was in his late twenties. He was of small, almost puny build, and walked with a shuffling gait. At times, his grin seemed excessively sly. Karuppuvan was married and had one child, a son aged five, and the family lived in his father’s house, together with his brothers and their families.

Karuppuvan was a Kallar by caste. This is a fairly low-ranking caste by orthodox Tamil standards, even labelled as a ‘criminal caste’

4 In 1986, Dindigul was separated from Madurai district and named Anna district. The name was subsequently changed to Quaid-e-Milleth district, but after a few years it was renamed Anna district. Now it is known as Dindigul district. Locally, many people have always preferred the name Dindigul district.
by the British in their time, on account of the Kallars’ alleged inclination for robbery and freebooting (Dumont [1957] 1986: 26–30). Kallars, of various subcastes, were fairly numerous in the area. In Ekkaraiyur, most of them belonged to the Isanadu group, as did Karuppuvan, which indicated their historical origin in a region to the south of the Kaveri delta.

Karuppuvan belonged to an Ekkaraiyur family of small farmers. They owned a small amount of land, but had mostly been tenants to larger landowners. Karuppuvan, however, was no farmer. He had some secondary education and had worked as a clerk on hill estates and in various lawyers’ offices in nearby towns. In Ekkaraiyur, when I knew him, Karuppuvan had no specific occupation. He looked upon himself as being a local politician, acted as a broker and was considered by some young men as their leader.

Karuppuvan held no officially recognised political position in the village, but his ambition was to establish himself as an influential local leader. In Alm (2006), I argue that a new type of leader had emerged in Ekkaraiyur by the end of the 1980s. My argument primarily focuses on two elements in the drawn out and complex shift in local leadership. One is the dissolution of former relationships of interdependence within the village. Central to this was tenants’ forcible take over of land from landowners, the emergence of new types of tenancy agreements and contracts for labour recruitment. The other element is the increasing importance of the state and political parties as references for local leadership. In conjunction, these elements worked to undermine an earlier mode of leadership that was based on the control of land. Patronage characterised earlier as well as new types of local leaders, but the content of patronage seemed to me to be different. Instead of using access to land as a means for patronage, as the earlier type of leader did, the new type of leader strove to harness various state-distributed resources for patronage. In agreement with Mitra’s study of leaders in Gujarat and Orissa (1992), and with André Béteille’s study of a Tanjore village (1971), I characterise the new local leadership as a more open, fluid and socially heterogeneous category than it had been earlier. In Ekkaraiyur that meant that leaders were neither necessarily large landowners nor of high caste as village leaders of earlier days often appear to have been. To this can be added that some of them were quite young.

Karuppuvan fitted this category well, except that he can be described as an aspiring local leader, rather than an established one.
In Alm (2006) I note that leaders in Ekkaraiyur operated in a context of competition and alliances. Competing with each other in influence over local followers, a successful leader required contacts with the administration and alliances with more powerful leaders, resulting in hierarchical networks in which positions of patrons and clients are occupied at various levels. These networks have been alternatively described with the related concepts of ‘machine style politics’ (de Witt 1993) and ‘the institutional big-man’ (Mines and Gourishankar 1990).

Being part of one such hierarchical network, Karuppuvan considered himself the follower of Perumal. Perumal was at the time a member of the Legislative Assembly in Madras for the Ekkaraiyur constituency (Perumal was popularly known as the ‘MLA’ in Ekkaraiyur). In his mid-thirties, Perumal was not so much older than Karuppuvan, and he was a member of the DMK party, as was Karuppuvan.

Perumal was elected MLA in the state elections of 1989. His election, as well as DMK’s overall victory in Tamil Nadu, was helped along the way by the fact that the ADMK party, the principal antagonist of the DMK, had by then split into three different parties. Bitter infighting between them prevented many of the ADMK candidates from being serious contenders in the state elections.

Karuppuvan had been active in Perumal’s election campaign. His activities ranged widely, including speaking at public functions, decorating the walls of the houses with party tags and emblems, organising manifestations, canvassing support, and, most important, keeping an eye on other candidates’ electioneering in order to come up with suitable counter-measures. This could include preventing opponents from buying votes, or upholding the schedule for public broadcasting as laid down by the police. Alternatively, it could mean organising the buying of votes on behalf of Perumal, or subverting the opponents’ use of their allotted time-slots for broadcasting.

Karuppuvan claimed a very close relationship to the newly elected MLA. He also claimed that their relationship had been close even before Perumal’s election. Thus, Karuppuvan occasionally referred

5 ADMK is the abbreviation for Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, which translates as Anna’s Dravidian Progress Party. The full, but seldom used, name of the party was AIADMK, an abbreviation for All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.
to himself in public as ‘Perumal’s local secretary’, although he held no such position. He also made a point of the fact that he was always invited courteously into the MLA’s home in a nearby town, while other people from Ekkaraiyur had to wait outside until they were received. Karuppuvan not only visited Perumal regularly at home, he also frequently accompanied Perumal on local tours, as well as on trips to Madras on party business, as when, for example, they went to Madras to celebrate the birthday of the chief minister. Moreover, Perumal was married to a woman from Ekkaraiyur to whom Karuppuvan was related. Karuppuvan therefore claimed bonds of kinship with Perumal.

The importance of Karuppuvan’s relationship with Perumal was illustrated when the manager of the local branch office of Canara Bank came to look for Karuppuvan at the Style King Tailors’ shop, where we were sitting one evening. The manager had a favour to ask. He confided in Karuppuvan that the bank was having trouble fulfilling its target for savings (a fact that Karuppuvan already knew). Stressing the possible negative consequences of this for the viability of the branch office in Ekkaraiyur, he asked if Karuppuvan could arrange for new deposits to be made. It was not mentioned that a target failure could negatively affect the bank manager’s own professional career, but this was well understood. He suggested that Karuppuvan could solicit a deposit from Perumal. Although he had no great love for the bank manager, Karuppuvan promised to do his best.

Karuppuvan’s best was good enough for the bank manager. Some time afterwards Karuppuvan told me that he had managed to arranged for a very large sum of money to be deposited as ‘savings’ in the bank. According to Karuppuvan, he convinced Perumal together with another DMK party-man to make up the sum. Perumal’s share was Rs 200,000, and the money was transferred from other bank accounts to the Ekkaraiyur branch office, which in this way achieved its target.

There were several motives behind Karuppuvan’s readiness to help, despite his distrust of the bank manager. First, he was flattered by being approached by the bank manager. The request was in fact a confirmation of Karuppuvan’s local importance. It singled out Karuppuvan as a person with access to influence and resources through his relationship with Perumal. Second, Karuppuvan was motivated by a desire to put the bank manager in his debt. Having done the bank manager a favour, he could expect to be repaid in
some way, Karuppuvan reasoned. The repayment Karuppuvan had in mind concerned a loan the bank had refused. It was a convoluted story, about which I only knew what Karuppuvan choose to tell me. The gist was, however, that Karuppuvan had made a proposal to a government agency to start a soap factory in Ekkaraiyur. The agency had agreed and consequently recommended Karuppuvan to the bank in Ekkaraiyur for a loan of Rs 35,000. The bank manager, however, had refused to lend the money, arguing that the soap factory would be an assured loss.

Karuppuvan had already unsuccessfully tried ways to overcome the bank manager’s reluctance. Through a friend, who was friendly with an employee of the bank, he had offered the manager a bribe of Rs 3,000. When the bribe was refused, he petitioned the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, at the time Mr Karunanidhi of the DMK party, to intervene with both the agency that had recommended the loan and bank that had refused it. The petition was forwarded to the chief minister by Perumal when he and Karuppuvan were in Madras to celebrate the chief minister’s birthday.

At the time when the bank manager asked Karuppuvan to arrange for deposits in the bank, Karuppuvan had not yet seen any effects of the petition. However, now having done the bank manager a favour, things could work out anyhow, Karuppuvan told me. Without having explicitly been promised so, he expected the bank manager to repay his debt by approving the loan. Moreover, Karuppuvan told me that from now on he expected that the bank manager would favour people Karuppuvan himself recommended for loans.

**Karuppuvan’s Friend Virasamy**

Virasamy was another important person for Karuppuvan. He too was a few years older than Karuppuvan. Married, with two children, Virasamy lived in the house of his father-in-law in Ekkaraiyur.

In contrast to Perumal, whom Karuppuvan looked upon as his patron, Virasamy was Karuppuvan’s friend. The friendship implied an equality that put their relationship outside the hierarchical network of patrons and clients. Nevertheless, Virasamy provided Karuppuvan with important means for realising his leadership aspirations.

Virasamy was a large landowner by Ekkaraiyur standards. I cannot specify Virasamy’s landowning in detail, but the total figure...
was impressive: about 30 acres of land in a nearby village and about 12 acres in Ekkaraiyur, including both wet and dry land, as well as land that could potentially be used for gardens.

Virasamy was a Vellalar by caste. Earlier village landownership had been dominated by Vellalars and Brahmins. In terms of caste ranking, Vellalars and Brahmins, or rather these two groups of castes, were ranked as the highest castes. Although landownership was more varied at the end of the 1980s, in part due to tenants’ forcible takeover of land, many of the remaining large landowners were Vellalars.

Virasamy also belonged to a family that earlier had been able to translate landownership and caste into locally prominent and potentially powerful positions. His mother’s father, for example, had been the last ‘village secretary’ for Ekkaraiyur before the position was abolished, and the office, although defunct and replaced by the government post of VAO, was regarded as hereditary in the family. In fact, Virasamy was the VAO of a nearby village. In addition, the appointment as a trustee of the village’s main temple was considered hereditary in the family, and Virasamy sometimes acted as a substitute for his ageing grandfather.

Virasamy’s family, consequently, was well positioned in terms of landowning, caste and general influence, which earlier had been important attributes of local leadership. Virasamy’s personal position was, however, more doubtful. For one thing, he appeared to have limited control over the land he owned. Almost all of it was either in the hands of tenants, had been used as security in loans, or was cultivated by relatives, who themselves were substantial landowners. Moreover, Virasamy appeared to lack the drive to establish himself as a person of influence. Karuppuvan supplied that drive, as well as the necessary ruthlessness, to their friendship. This was clearly shown in Karuppuvan’s ‘problem solving’, involving a plot of land that Virasamy sold in a nearby village to a government employee. The buyer had meant to construct a house on the land but before work could begin another man put up a shed there. This man, it turned out, had once given a loan to the father-in-law of the government employee, and would vacate the land once the loan was repaid, either by the government employee or by his father-in-law. Indeed, the loan was not Virasamy’s problem. Nevertheless, two considerations involved Virasamy, and Karuppuvan. First, as long as the government employee could not take possession of the land, he would not pay Virasamy. Second, the affair challenged Virasamy’s local prestige and questioned
his claim to control his land in the village. Unless Virasamy reacted, he would find it difficult to sell other pieces of land, and his other possessions could also be threatened by takeovers.

Karuppuvan’s solution to the problem was not to repay the loan. Instead, he planned to enlist the help of a lawyer in whose office he had earlier worked as a clerk. This lawyer would ‘explain’ the matter to a circle inspector of police, who, in turn, would order the local police force to tear down the shed and arrest the man in case he did not comply. Karuppuvan considered this to be a simple solution, whose cost would not exceed Rs 500, most of which would go to the police. The alternative, to evict the man without the help of the police, was less desirable, according to Karuppuvan. The man belonged to a caste of known fighters, and the outcome of a physical confrontation was uncertain.

Karuppuvan’s plan was put in action when he and Virasamy went to see the lawyer one Saturday. Promising them his full support, the lawyer said that he did not foresee any problems in activating the local police force. The fact that he was friendly with the local sub inspector of police, having met him in an earlier murder case, would facilitate the matter.

As it turned out, the police did not have to take part in the eviction. Karuppuvan had prudently sent an agent to warn the trespassing man of the imminent forces which had gathered against him, and the man had equally prudently dismantled his shed. To cap the matter, Karuppuvan warned him not to cause any more problems for the future, unless he wanted the police turned against him.

**Putting Influence to Work**

Broadly speaking, Karuppuvan put his relationships with Perumal and Virasamy to use in different ways. His friendship with Virasamy gave Karuppuvan opportunities to act as a local ‘fixer’, a solver of problems. Virasamy’s situation, in a manner of speaking, produced problems, while his position could help solve them.

One evening at the Style King Tailors’ shop we were joking about corruption. Upon being teased that quite a lot of money, liquor and biryani came their way, Karuppuvan and Virasamy, slightly embarrassed, defended themselves by claiming to abhor ‘criminal corruption’. As a matter of fact, they consistently supported the honest against dishonest practices, they answered to our bantering.
While we were talking, a car stopped outside. Some men emerged from it, and came over to speak with Virasamy and Karuppuvan. Karuppuvan quietly explained to me that a ‘big man’ from a neighbouring village had asked for their help. The ‘big man’ had arranged electricity to a temple in his village and in the process cut down some trees. An enemy of the ‘big man’, Karuppuvan said, had written a letter to the revenue inspector, who supervised a number of VAOs in the region, alleging that the trees had been cut down and sold for personal profit. Now, the ‘big man’ together with Virasamy and Karuppuvan would be going to the inspector’s home in Dindigul to ‘clear up the matter’. Virasamy and Karuppuvan would testify that the allegation was untrue, and what the ‘big man’ had done had been for the benefit of the public. Karuppuvan invited me to come along. Regretfully, I declined, fearing that they would be away all night.

Some evenings later Karuppuvan told me the rest of the story. They had first called on a relative of the revenue inspector. Also a VAO, he had come along in order to introduce them to the inspector. The inspector was asleep, for it was late at night by the time they came to his home, but they had been received thanks to his relative’s introduction. They stated their case to the inspector, gave him a bribe of Rs 500, and in return got a signed statement, written by Karuppuvan, that settled the case in the ‘big man’s’ favour. An earlier statement, written after the inspector had visited the temple and heard the complaints against the ‘big man’, was annulled. So far, so good. Karuppuvan and Virasamy had helped the innocent fight injustice, albeit with questionable means.

Nevertheless, what Karuppuvan told me next somewhat changed the moral of the story. In the car, back from visiting the revenue inspector, the ‘big man’ told Karuppuvan and Virasamy that he had in fact felled the trees with personal profit in mind. True, he had given some trees of inferior quality to a brickmaker in exchange for bricks for repairing the temple. But, the trees of higher quality, usable for making doors, he had kept for himself.

I do not know how much of the facts of the case Karuppuvan knew in advance. Perhaps, he sincerely believed that the ‘big man’ was in the right until the true destiny of the trees was revealed in the car. However, as Karuppuvan did not say anything about being hoodwinked, I suspect that he willingly let himself and Virasamy be involved in a rather shady affair, even if he did not know of all the details in advance. In fact, Karuppuvan’s conclusion of the story was a calculation of costs and profit: the inspector had got Rs 500, the car rent had come to about
Rs 150 and about Rs 100 had been used for a meal afterwards. As the trees the ‘big man’ had kept for himself were worth about Rs 3,000, he had evidently made a handsome profit. But, the profit would have been higher if nobody had complained, Karuppuvan concluded.

In contrast to the local nature of Virasamy’s influence, Karuppuvan’s relationship with Perumal provided him with indirect access to the higher echelons of political and administrative power in Tamil Nadu. Karuppuvan strove to enlist Perumal’s support when heavy external pressure was necessary for solving a local problem that he could not handle on his own. Typically, Karuppuvan first tried on his own and then turned to Perumal, as Karuppuvan’s ongoing conflict with Mohan illustrates. Karuppuvan’s reason was, perhaps, that making too frequent appeals to the Perumal could erode his own personal standing of local influence.

Mohan was the president of a village organisation called the Pattadari Committee. This was a self-constituted local organisation that claimed to represent the landowners in Ekkaraiyur. It was not formally associated with any organisations of a similar or wider scope, and it did not have any formal links to the state. In important ways, Ekkaraiyur’s Pattadari Committee operated as a local alternative to the state. Its activities focused on some agricultural areas: it maintained parts of Ekkaraiyur’s irrigation system, and controlled the distribution of water to the fields. It also employed field guards to protect the crops against grazing animals and human thieves. Moreover, the Pattadari Committee enlisted lawyers to fight lawsuits on behalf of the landowners in Ekkaraiyur. Some of these lawsuits had progressed to the Madras High Court. Probably, the legal involvement of the Pattadari Committee\(^6\) was vital for the viability of agriculture in Ekkaraiyur.

The conflict between Karuppuvan and Mohan was a complex entanglement, as was usual with conflicts in Ekkaraiyur and the ones Karuppuvan was involved in, in particular, one is tempted to say. In short, Prakasam, a Brahmin landlord, had once gifted some land (or perhaps the income of the land, my informants, including Prakasam himself, were not clear on the point) to the temples of the Kannimar goddesses for celebrating a yearly festival. However, the tenant, Velsamy Nadavi, who worked the land, stopped paying the rent and

\(^6\) I describe the Pattadari Committee in some detail in Alm (2006).
the temples were therefore unable to find the funds to celebrate the festival. Prakasam and the temple trustees tried in vain to force the tenant either to pay or to leave the land. Eventually, they enlisted the help of the Pattadari Committee.

As the Pattadari Committee entered the conflict on the side of the landowner, so did Karuppuvan enlist on the side of the tenant. They were enemies earlier, but Velsamy Nadavi nonetheless asked him for help, Karuppuvan told me.

The full range of Karuppuvan’s reasons for siding with Velsamy Nadavi were never entirely clear to me, but he claimed that he helped Nadavi because he wanted to fight against the injustice done to him by the Pattadari Committee. According to Karuppuvan, Velsamy Nadavi had cultivated the land for 35 years as a tenant, a fact he could prove by revenue receipts, and the tenancy acts of the 1970s gave him the right to the land. In the background was probably the possibility that Velsamy Nadavi would be forced to leave his tenancy if the Kannimar temple trustees could take control of the land. Another strong reason was that Karuppuvan, which he stressed to me, wanted to find a way to oppose the dishonesty of Mohan. Among other things, he suspected that Mohan coveted the temple land for himself.

The dispute over Velsamy Nadavi’s tenancy was the most violent of actions that Karuppuvan described to me. Both sides were prepared to use force, or at least the threat of force. In fact, as Karuppuvan told me, the dispute at one time nearly resulted in a violent confrontation, which he claimed to have won. Forcing a confrontation, he leased a tractor to plough the land. In addition, he enlisted four local ruffians, ‘men who would do anything for me and who were used to going to prison’, as Karuppuvan expressed it. While the tractor worked the land, these ruffians guarded the field, stripped to their underwear, fortified by country liquor and armed with slashing knives. Meanwhile, Mohan assembled his force at some distance, intending to stop the tractor. His force chiefly consisted of the watchmen employed by the Pattadari Committee for crop protection, also armed with slashing knives as well as cudgels. The fight never started, however. As Karuppuvan told it to me, he went over to Mohan’s men and promised them a stiff fight with serious bodily injuries if they interfered with the tractor. At that, Mohan’s force melted away, and the land was ploughed and sown. Moreover, Karuppuvan brought the village VAO, the tahsildar,\textsuperscript{7} as

\textsuperscript{7} The tahsildar heads the taluk, which is a subdivision of the district.
well as the circle inspector of police to the land when the seeds had sprouted, in order to witness a sworn statement that Velsamy Nadavi cultivated the land on his own expense.

Karuppuvan’s victory was not a definitive one. By the end of my stay in Ekkaraiyur, Mohan had managed to remove Velsamy Nadavi from the land, backed by a court order executed by the police. The police, against whom Karuppuvan’s ruffians in this case did not dare stand up, had been paid Rs 3,000, according to Karuppuvan, and the court order was based on the (unlikely) assertion that the conflict could lead to a full scale ‘communal’ (that is, caste) conflict in Ekkaraiyur. The situation provided an excuse for what was seen as Mohan’s victory celebration, staging the festival of the Kannimar goddesses for the first time in 12 years. However, few if anybody believed that this was the final say in the matter. Even if he had lost this time, Karuppuvan had not given up. He had taken the matter to Perumal, the MLA of Ekkaraiyur, who in turn was going to speak with some senior police officers. Karuppuvan was confident that he would prevail over Mohan in the end. Meanwhile, he kept a close eye on Mohan’s other activities as the president of the Pattadari Committee, and was even consulting a lawyer about the best way he could do harm to such a self-constituted organisation as the Pattadari Committee.

**Motives and Means**

Different motives were apparent in Karuppuvan’s activities. His desire to make a personal profit was evident. Although he did not mention it, Karuppuvan almost certainly was paid for his services to the ‘big man’ who had felled the temple trees. For Karuppuvan, such services were a means of making a living. Likewise, he expected to profit materially by being in a position to ‘recommend’ people to the bank manager. In the longer run, Karuppuvan also aimed at establishing himself in more permanently profitable positions: on the one hand, as the owner of a small soap factory, realised by the approval of his loan application; on the other hand, as the manager of his friend Virasamy’s resources.

The dominant motive, however, was Karuppuvan’s desire to become a person others looked up to and listened to, a man to whom people turned for advice and help. In short, to become a local leader reputed to achieve things. And, in the process he had to confront others with
similar ambitions, for example, Mohan, the president of the Pattadari Committee, to whom Karuppuvan in fact was closely related.

The catalogue of Karuppuvan’s rather shady affairs can be extended. However, they all involved the same mixture of a desire for personal profit and an ambition to become a man of influence. The means also reappeared in a typical mixture, the ingredients of which were connections with the more powerful and know-how of the workings of the state administration, spiced with bribery, threats and violence. Rather than detailing more of the wheeling and dealing of Karuppuvan, I think some general points can now be made.

A first point is that Karuppuvan was not unusual. There were several others like him in Ekkaraiyr who, using more or less similar methods, with varying success rates, were driven by the same mixture of motives. And, no doubt, Karuppuvans could be found in many places in the rest of Tamil Nadu. They, like Karuppuvan, moved in highly competitive arenas, in which the value of alliances with the more powerful, know-how of how to work the system, ready wit and ruthlessness were important. The competitiveness made positions of leadership highly fluid.

A second point is that Karuppuvan operated in a context permeated by the institutions of the state. Various representatives of state institutions were involved in Karuppuvan’s problem solving: bank managers, chief ministers, MLAs, the police, VAOs, and others. The context in which Karuppuvan operated was permeated by the state and also by ideas of state-ness. The state, generally speaking, was seen as creating problems and was appealed to for solving them. Importantly, it was requested to give legitimacy to local solutions.

A third point, however, is needed to qualify the second. Seen from Ekkaraiyr’s perspective the state does not appear paramount. For example, the monopoly of violence, the classical prerogative of the state, appears weak. The state appears, from Ekkaraiyr’s perspective, just as fragmented as it did to north Indian villagers in Gupta’s findings — conceptualised as having plural centres, multiple layers of authority and widely disparate institutions with little or no apparent co-ordination among them (Gupta 1995: 392). Indeed, Karuppuvan skilfully got the police to work in his interest, as well as mobilised extra-state violence on his own. Rather than submissively acknowledging the hegemony of a monolithic state’s power, he was able to manipulate a fragmented state to his own ends.
This brings in a fourth point: the use of fear to obtain positions of leadership. Karuppuvan was very clear about the matter. He told me that he intentionally tried to intimidate his opponents. If they feared him, they would hesitate to oppose him, he said. Whether Karuppuvan really inspired fear, I do not know. As a matter of fact, he was rather puny himself, but then personal physical strength was not required for the fear he aimed at inspiring in others. He wanted to be known as a person who could unleash the politically influential as well as the ruffian against his opponents. In fact, even his own father feared him, Karuppuvan told me. Prakasam, the Brahmin landowner, had asked Karuppuvan’s father to restrain his son. His father had, however, according to Karuppuvan, told Prakasam that he feared to ‘get in the way of his son’.

These points in turn bring us to the question of how Karuppuvan ought to be understood in terms of a wider context. It is certainly difficult to see him as a member or a henchman of an established elite that tries to secure its positions by taking recourse to state as well as non-state related coercion. It is equally difficult to see Karuppuvan as some kind of revolutionary or as offering resistance to an established order. It is true that his doings undermined the authority of the state, and, it should be noted, the authority of more established leaders in Ekkaraiyur. It is also true that Karuppuvan habitually spoke of himself as fighting the established order. However, rather than either subverting or upholding the system, Karuppuvan strove to put it to his own use. Perhaps, as Fuller and Bénéï have put it in their book dealing with the role of the state in India, ‘...it is striking that the ordinary people described in this volume are mostly not resisting the state, but using the “system” as best they can’ (2001: 25).

People like Karuppuvan favoured the English term ‘social worker’ to describe themselves. For them, this meant that they helped other people, for example, by arranging matters such as selections for state schemes, programmes and projects, selection for jobs, transfers of postings, bank loans, admittance to schools, recommendations for scholarships, and so on. Less often mentioned, but well-known to all, was their readiness to ‘explain’ matters to potentially unfriendly civil servants, to cover up irregularities and to negotiate bribes. ‘Social workers’ had varying reputations for success. Consequently, the strategy was to build up a reputation for being able to ‘deliver the goods’. In this respect, the public advertisement of closeness to the powerful and a record of achievements became an important means of establishing a position of local leadership.
Thus described, the ‘social worker’ appears predominantly as a mercenary, ‘a fixer’ whose success is measured in tangible returns. Yet, the Ekkaraiyur understanding of ‘the social worker’ contained a duality that made it an almost unattainable ideal. In fact, impartiality towards partisan interests, humility towards those one helped and selfless regard for one’s own interests were also expected from ‘the social worker’. Not surprisingly, these could be hard to combine with the realities of a ‘fixer’.

The difficulties of what perhaps can be termed ‘the social worker model of leadership’ can clearly be seen in the case of Karuppuvan. On the one hand, he was evidently successful in getting things done. Without doubt, he was a successful ‘fixer’. On the other hand, by openly serving partisan interests, as well as favouring his own interests, he violated the other side expected of the ‘social worker’. Moreover, his use of force and fear hardly squared with the humility expected of a social worker.

However, despite the difficulties of these realities Karuppuvan did uphold the non-mercenary side of ‘the social worker’, but perhaps more in words than in deeds. For example, when Perumal became Ekkaraiyur’s MLA in 1989, he disappointed many of his followers by proclaiming that he considered himself to be representing all the people of the constituency, regardless of whether they had voted for him or not. This announcement, superficially speaking, was quite unremarkable, but its implied meaning was that his followers could not expect any preferential treatment. According to Karuppuvan, who had worked hard for Perumal’s election, and was one of the disappointed followers, this statement reflected the proper attitude of an MLA. It was the duty of the MLA to listen to all the people’s grievances, and to right their wrongs, regardless of individual party affiliations, Karuppuvan told me.

Karuppuvan’s own views of his activities, likewise, bring forward the non-mercenary side of ‘the social worker’. In his view, he was fighting the established order. According to Karuppuvan, India was not a true democracy because every village was ruled by locally powerful people who were selfish and profit-minded. Instead of working for the common good, these people upheld a regime of injustice and divisions, which benefited their own ends. If India was to become a better society, one had to struggle against the powerful and Karuppuvan viewed himself as part of this struggle. In particular, he argued that the injustice of the powerful had to be countered on behalf of the defenceless poor and weak.
The powerful were driven by their desire for ‘prestige, power and money’, according to Karuppuvan. With approval he told me that Annadurai, one time leader of the DMK party, had said once that a man needs only a shirt and a dhoti, but not a towel. The towel indicated an elevated social position, and Karuppuvan told me that Annadurai had meant that people who claim this to be the most necessary piece of dress, one without which they cannot live, are in error. For Karuppuvan, the people who valued the towel too much were the people to fight.

Karuppuvan saw me off at the railway station in Dindigul in 1990, when I ended my fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur. Except for an occasional letter during the next few years, I have not heard from or about him. Hence, I do not know whether he remained a minor ‘fixer’ among other Ekkaraiyur ‘fixers’, or established a more secure economic base for himself, as Virasamy’s manager or as the owner of a soap factory, or if he managed to realise the contradictory possibilities of becoming a truly ‘social worker’ in the Ekkaraiyur sense. In the latter case, he would have had to shed several aspects of the strategies he used while I knew him. Although violence, self-oriented ambitions and the espousal of partisan interests are certainly included in the toolkit of many successful leaders, local as well as global, they ought not to be too prominently displayed in the image of the successful ‘social worker’. As F. G. Bailey observed in his now classic account of leadership, there are two ideal types of groups formed around a leader. One is the transactional team, held together by an interest in profit or potential profit. The other is the moral team, held together by a common cause. Both types impose their constraints on the leader, but the transactional team is not only unlikely to hold together in the face of difficulties, its potential size is also more limited than that the moral team (2001: 43, 45 passim). Although life certainly is more complex than ideal types indicate, I expect that Karuppuvan at some point of time would have had to chose between either of two diverging ways: foregrounding the political cause he felt himself a part of, or sharpening the strategies of the ‘fixer’.

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8 The dhoti is a white loincloth worn by men, often with coloured borders sometimes in party colours.
References


Leadership and Political Work

Mukulika Banerjee

You need not see what someone is doing
to know if it is his vocation,
you have only to watch his eyes:
a cook mixing his sauce, a surgeon
making a primary incision,
a clerk completing a bill of lading,
wear the same rapt expression,
forgetting themselves in a function.
How beautiful it is,
that eye-on-the-object look. . . .

— W. H. Auden, Horae Canonicae (1954)

In the 2006 state-level elections, West Bengal’s ruling coalition of Communist parties, called the Left Front (LF), registered one of their biggest victories in over 20 elections and completed 29 years of continuous rule in the state. However, despite their phenomenal victory, since then the government has been severely discredited for a number of reasons and this was in evidence at their poor showing in the panchayat elections of 2008 and the national elections of 2009. Both phenomena — three decades of incumbency and their loss of credibility — require explanation. Were the two phenomena linked in any intrinsic way or did they just happen to have occurred in the same setting? Was the LF’s loss of credibility sudden and caused by specific events or had it been brewing for some years? Much has already been analysed, specially taking into consideration state-level factors, the government’s and the chief minister’s performance and the significance of the key events at Nandigram and Singur. In this article, I move away from these macro perspectives to focus attention on the local level, to examine the nature of the communist parties’ presence at the village level, and to see if an understanding of how their
influence works at this local level provides an explanation for their growing failures. As we know, in West Bengal, the most important figure around whom local politics revolves is the local ‘Comrade’, and the state has thousands of such functioning figures. Ultimately, the mass appeal and the credibility of the LF government relied on the day-to-day performance of these figures; by examining the workings of power and leadership at this level, therefore, we might be able to gain some insight into how exactly the LF sustained power for so long, and what could cause its downfall.

The Comrade

The local party boss in the adjoining villages of Chishti and Madanpur, where I conducted research in Birbhum district of West Bengal, the only man who was unambiguously and unfailingly referred to as ‘Comrade’, even by his wives, was the main Communist Party representative. He had been a Party\(^1\) worker for over 25 years. Comrade was the most powerful man, serving as the gatekeeper to the villages controlling access to news, information and opportunities to the villagers. His house lay on the edge of the highway and of the two villages, officially within the administrative boundary of Madanpur but on the side of the road where Chishti is situated. He thus lived at the cusp of both villages, commanding access to both and also enjoying the easiest access to the main road for his loud and unmistakeable motorcycle, the first privately-owned motorised transport in the villages. Both villages were full of men who were his erstwhile comrades and whom he had outmanoeuvred to become the local party boss.

Such a figure is fairly typical of Bengal. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M), realising the fragility of vanguard political movements such as the Naxalite movement, which mobilised the urban intelligentsia to revolutionise peasants, has, over the years, built up an intricate network of such Comrades across the state. These men and women are Party members, and belong to the area in which

\(^1\) While ‘Party’ (marked here with a capital P) in most instances referred in short to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), it also did refer to its allies, such as the Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Communist Party of India and others. In West Bengal, ‘Party’ does not refer to the opposition political parties, Congress or the Trinamul Congress.
they work, where they often own land and businesses that sustain their political activities. They take their orders from the Party and organise political activities in their area, and are the conduit for the disbursal of funds, loans and benefits for much of the rural population. The Party headquarters in the capital utilises this capillary network of Comrades and cadres to exercise control in the farthest corners of the state. The most visible evidence of the efficiency of this machinery is available during elections, when voters are mobilised to turn up, resulting in consistently high voter turnouts in West Bengal. The entire election campaign and its conduct is dominated by the activities of the Comrades and Party cadres. Elections are held practically every year because panchayat, state and national-level elections occur at overlapping five-yearly intervals. But, even between elections, political activity continues, conducted through meetings of the various labour unions of the Party, who pass decisions that are in turn implemented by the cadres. In these meetings, agricultural and housing loans are awarded, budgets are allocated for various developmental activities and strategies for inducting new members into the Party organisation are discussed. Through the allocation of shares among the villages they work in, the cadres build their allegiances which when aggregated at the state level gives the Communist Party its power base among the rural population. The success of the Communists in West Bengal has thus relied heavily on the success of the tireless efforts of its Party cadres. While this fact is widely recognised, in this article I will place the nature of these local-level efforts under closer examination to outline what these efforts entail in real terms (see Chatterjee 1997; Ruud 2003; Bhattacharya 2009).

In Bengal, the popular way to describe someone involved in Party politics, at any level, but especially at the local level, is to say that ‘he does Party’ (o Party korey). A person who is involved in the activities of the Communist Party is never described as merely ‘belonging’ or ‘supporting’ it or ‘campaigning’ for the Party, but actually ‘doing’ it. I call this ‘political work’, for it is clear that the popular perception of being a communist is that they do something. But given the wide

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2 The elected representatives such as those of the panchayat also play a role but I will come back to them later.

3 ‘Doing Party’ was thus an activity that not only ‘Comrades’ such as the one I introduced here did, but also hangers on, activists and others, whom I place in the Comrade’s penumbra later in the article.
Leadership and Political Work

Range of tasks undertaken by these local leaders, it is often quite hard to pin down what exactly they do. In this article, through a fine-grained description of these activities I aim to test the utility of the notion of ‘political work’ as an analytical category to understand the nature of political leadership. It is a category that may have wider resonances for other local and non-local kinds of leadership in India and elsewhere.

The lines from Auden quoted at the start of this article, close the engaging Introduction to The Oxford Book of Work by Keith Thomas. In this volume, work of every age and profession is discussed, from that of fishing folk to office workers, school teachers to actors. Even the idleness of the rich and the beggars is discussed, as is the unrecognised work of the homemaker. But the work of the politician is strikingly missing. This prompts us to ask the question: is there something about the nature of political work that is strangely elusive, that resists description? Or does our usual scepticism about politics lead us to assume that we know what politicians do and concentrate instead on understanding institutions and the machinations of larger structures, such as political parties and governments? Or do most people simply assume that politicians are opportunistic parasites who do not actually do much work of their own? And yet, those of us who have spent time in the company of consummate politicians, recognise instantly Auden’s observation that you have only to watch their eyes to know how seriously they take their vocation, how far-reaching their strategy can be as they plan their next move, even when the rest of their countenance is inscrutable. Like the other professionals that Auden lists, you do not need to see politicians doing work to be convinced that they do any. However, the ineffable quality of political work resists it being counted among other kinds of labour. In this article, therefore, I explore this elusive nature of ‘political work’ to examine what political leaders do. In particular, I focus on the work of local leadership — based at the level of a village but whose sphere of influence covers a much wider area. In a democracy, where the government is expected to be mindful and responsive to popular desires, it is clear that work done by local leaders plays a crucial mediating role between voters and policy-makers. As I have argued elsewhere, in the case of West Bengal at least, it is the work of such leaders that has ensured the continuing electoral successes of the Communist-led government, for almost three decades (see Banerjee 2008, 2010). My argument is based on research in two adjacent villages in Birbhum district of West Bengal, conducted over a period of 10 years.
The first thing that one noticed about the Comrade is that he was rarely, if ever, seen doing anything. He was often absent from the village, leaving it at daybreak and returning only in the shadows of dusk when most people were indoors or in the confines of the residential areas of the village. Yet his departures and arrivals through the main village lane were invariably noticed and at any given point of time one could quite reliably establish if he might be found at home by asking anyone, anywhere, in the village for his whereabouts. Even when he was around, one never saw him actually doing anything in particular. Although the owner of land, he was never seen farming, or mending a tube well, or carrying diesel — the sort of jobs that able-bodied men of the village routinely do. Instead, one occasionally saw him in conversation with people, seeing off visitors and sometimes at the tea stall. In fact, one never even saw him eating or drinking; an occasional cigarette or bidi (cigarette made of tobacco rolled in a tendu leaf) was all he consumed in public. His figure was unmistakable, well-built and fit, though padded with more fat than the average farmer, skin complexion just a shade lighter than those being burnt by the sun as they toiled in fields and brick kilns everyday. And while he dressed like everyone else, his lungi (sarong) was always less faded and frayed. He usually wore slippers, whereas everyone else was bare feet, and he wore a gold chain around his neck. These small differences made him stand out, but only just, to make people take note of him, to know that he was someone different and important. He was a man of the people, just like everyone else, but a little different, a bit more prosperous and important. Thus, much like the gods of India, he ate and drank in private, rested in private, was better looking than his devotees, and his public appearances were just that — ‘appearances’. To glimpse him, therefore, was almost akin to a divine darshan.

Despite this lack of evidence of doing any work, he enjoyed a reputation for working hard, from dawn to dusk, at all hours of the day and at night when he would be sometimes called away from the comfort of his bed. People would say that he was well connected, to a wide network of Party workers throughout the state, with whom he met, consulted and negotiated funds and facilities for his village. He was widely considered to be the most important asset of the village. When he was elected to the president’s post of the Block Kisan Sabha (a farmer’s union) it fact was noted with pride by all, and interpreted as a reward for his political talents, his deft manoeuvrings and ability to stand out within a large Party network. That the new post could
bring him even more power to wrestle resources for the village was acknowledged but not stated overtly. Instead, people would call attention to the fact that it was their Comrade who was frequently called upon to fire fight when there was trouble elsewhere or when urgent help was required for the Party’s business, and these were cited as further evidence of his personal abilities. It was assumed by most people, therefore, that a large measure of his political work was conducted beyond the village, in the nearby town or district headquarters or the various Party offices that dotted the countryside. The mobility afforded him by his coveted motorcycle was seen to be a fitting symbol of this ability to bridge the vast distances between the life of the village and that of far off official spaces. This was an important aspect of the ‘work’ he did. His political work thus did not necessarily include any of the obvious activities that one may assume to be the stuff of a villager’s life, at least not at the village level.

Among hard-working farmers, his status was clearly that of a bhadralok, whose minimum requirement was the eschewing of any manual work (see Broomfield 1968; Ruud 2003: 72–75). The work that he did was manifestly not like the work done by the rest of the people of the village, who performed hard physical labour. The work they did as part of their jobs as well as what they had to do in their homes, was mostly physical. It would leave their bodies covered in dirt, mud and dung, age their complexions and use up every ounce of energy that they had. Moreover, this work was relentless, especially given the lack of basic amenities such as running water and electricity. There was always yet another chore that needed to be completed before darkness fell — animals to be tended, another meal to be cooked or a yard to be swept. Even when paid work had been completed for the day, the domestic chores of a village life demanded more time and energy of the people and so even ‘leisure’ time was dominated by a multitude of tasks, big and small. Even the bhadralok of the village, the schoolteachers for instance, who spent their working day in a white-collar job, returned home to carry out tasks similar to the daily-wage labourers. Almost all of them also had modest landholdings and therefore spent the remaining daylight hours tending to their fields and crops, mending fences, fetching diesel on their cycles, tying up cattle, etc. Thus everyone apart from the Comrade did manual work that placed enormous demands on their bodies and time.

The Comrade’s political work on the other hand, while obscured from public view, manifested itself in very different ways. Over a
period of 10 years, while this study was being conducted, the physical changes undergone by the villages themselves were noteworthy. Each visit revealed new roofs, submersible pumps, freshly installed electric wires, mobile phones — all of which were evidence that someone somewhere was doing something to make this happen. There were also non-material signs — members of lower castes assumed an air of self-respect vis-à-vis the elite, landowners lived in nervousness of the sharecropper’s whims, women belonged to co-operatives, rival political groups waxed and waned, people could explain the virtues of democracy in a language of citizenship and rights — these were all signs of some work being done somewhere by someone.

But, rather bizarrely, the Comrade’s actual physical absence from the village led to his omnipresence in conversations and decisions among people. No disputes could be considered resolved until the Comrade’s opinion had been considered and all major decisions, big or small, whether about new businesses or village festivals or even private events such as weddings, were finalised only after his approval was received. After years of living among them, once I had developed a fairly astute sense of most of people in the villages and their personalities, I began to appreciate just how well the Comrade knew his constituency. Conversations with the Comrade revealed his thorough knowledge of the goings on in each and every household, what people refer to as haandir khobor (‘news of the cooking pot’). This allowed him to anticipate where trouble was brewing and the reasons behind it and he would then spend a considerable length of time planning and plotting his moves. On more than one occasion, his seemingly inexplicable decisions would make sense once the full set of events triggered by his actions had unfolded.

However, in my occasional chats with him, the people of the village did not feature much. What was presented before the anthropologist then was the face of a local leader who had a good grasp of Communist ideology and his diatribes against American neo-imperialism. After 9/11 he demonstrated to me, using some rather deft arguments, how the incidents in New York and the subsequent war on terror by launched NATO had serious implications for India and its Muslims — Muslims like him and his fellow villagers. His grasp of international politics was characterised by an anger and ideological hatred of capitalist America and its allies, a line that was held resolutely from the headquarters of the CPI(M) to workers like him. In fact, on any given day, by noon, he usually knew what the ‘Party line’ on any current issue was. This of course was a result of the discipline and order maintained by the
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Cadres, who would read the official Communist Party paper *Ganashakti* every morning and avidly discuss its articles with other cadres whom they would meet during the day in the local Party office. By the evening the Comrade was able to slip some of these ideas into the circle of men at the tea stall.

Over the years, his language, ideas and reportage grew familiar and the people there came to expect this of him. Their own ideas about communism, empowerment and the place of their struggles on a larger stage were all filtered through the Comrade’s prism. His main asset, therefore, was his connectedness, i.e., the ability to bring some of the outside world into the village. In choosing to discuss with me issues relating to the economy or international politics, the Comrade was thus keen to give me the impression that his work was ideological, or at least driven by ideology, rather than the petty machinations he knew I was hearing about from the rest of the village. While we were both aware of how much of his work was humdrum, even ‘dirty’, he chose never to mention it. But it is to this aspect that I now turn.

Entrepreneurial Work

West Bengal functions within the Indian democracy, displaying all the usual qualifications — regular elections, a multi-party system, a free press, and division of powers between the executive and judiciary arms of the state. The Communist Party and its allies, however, have dominated politics in this state, and have aimed to control more and more aspects of society than what is considered typical of an ordinary political party. Through its workers it has sought to embed itself not only within the political processes but also exercise control over the non-political arenas of social activity. The most significant aspect of communist rule in West Bengal is the CPI(M)’s extensive network of cadres all over the state, such that every group of villages has a Party office as well as Comrades who co-ordinate political and social activities in that area. The CPI(M) and its allies have persisted without undue totalitarianism for the first three decades of their rule, because it has equipped individual Comrades throughout the state with a small amount of social capital (that accrues from their membership and networks of ties within the Party) and encourages them to use it to build on their power and influence. This has worked to their mutual advantage; the Comrade has increased his power base by extending his networks and, therefore, his social capital and the Party has benefited by increasing its reach into the lives of the people through its cadre.
Therefore the Comrade’s social network is his biggest asset. It is men who already possess this power base, some basic, start-up social capital, who are inducted into the Party. Once selected by the Party to serve as its local representative, the Comrade is expected to multiply his networks such that his power base should ideally include every member of his constituency. At election time, every voter who is part of this network can then be expected to cast their vote in favour of the Comrade’s Party, serving as the moment when the interest that had accrued on social capital was finally banked. By the time I began my research, in the later part of 1990, the Party had been in power for several years and could back its cadres with unprecedented confidence. This allowed its workers greater room to manoeuvre. Both the Party and its Comrades took greater risks, with a confidence that bordered on complacency about their positive electoral performance. With time the aims of their enterprise became even more ambitious. Rather than aiming only to win elections, the Party decided to turn its attention to the quieter periods in between elections; here political activity continued. A large part of the political work done by the Comrades in this respect was to fulfil the Party’s ambition to supplant all traditional institutions, both of the state and of the family, by controlling all aspects of social life. This was done by limiting the powers of the police and the district administration on the one hand, while simultaneously filling the gap left by their absence. At the same time, the Party ingratiated itself into each and every aspect of community life such that even innocuous non-political organisations, such as youth clubs or religious organisations, were controlled — directly or indirectly — by Party cadres. The party thus effaced the traditional distinctions between state and civil society through its own overwhelming and ubiquitous presence; best represented by Partha Chatterjee’s label of ‘political society’. It was the hegemonic capture of these non-electoral spaces that allowed for the Party’s success during elections (Chatterjee 2008).

Let us now examine how the Party conducted this sort of exercise through its local village-level representative, by looking in some detail at the functioning of the Comrade in the villages of Madanpur and Chishti. This Comrade had 27 bigha\(^4\) of land on which he cultivated rice largely through hired labour. He had not suffered the financial ruin that other members of the middle peasantry with similar-sized

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\(^4\) Measure of land; typically half to two-thirds of an acre.
landholdings underwent when land reforms were introduced in Bengal in the early 1980s. One of the main provisions of the land reforms had been to transfer a share of the land to any *bargadar* (labourer) who had worked on a patron’s land for longer than three years. Having been alerted to the impending reforms, the Comrade in question had gotten rid of his *bargadar* and switched to hired labour. In addition to rice farming the Comrade also had a number of other businesses on the side. He had been the first in the village to exploit the nearby riverbed to extract sand, sold to building contractors in the cities. He also utilised the sand for a brickmaking business, and set up the first kilns in the village. His latest venture had been to set up a fisheries business, which he did by draining some of the village’s communal tanks of water (used for washing and bathing) for lucrative fish farming. For all of these ventures the financial capital was either provided by interest-free government loans or came from capital accumulated from his previous enterprises. It was no surprise to learn therefore that the Comrade was also the most prosperous man in the village.

The Comrade belonged to the Syed caste, which constituted the elite in these two largely Muslim villages. Further, he belonged to a specific clan of Syeds, originally descended from a *pir* (a holy man) from Iran, who therefore considered themselves among the Ashraf of West Bengal. Most Syeds owned landholdings of 5–30 bighas and therefore made up the middle peasantry. They were largely endogamous, they emphasised their foreign origins by speaking in Urdu among themselves and they considered themselves more pious and superior to any other Muslim group in West Bengal. As a result, in the villages under the Comrade’s jurisdiction, a large proportion of the economic and political elite was Syeds who were both his relatives as well as political contemporaries.

Given this description it would be fair to assume that this Comrade was not very different from a typical feudal *padrone* — a type of ‘big man’ found in most rural societies. Indeed, to a certain extent that is what he was. But what made him a ‘social capital-ist’, so to speak, was

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5 Richard Eaton in his definitive study on the spread of Islam in Bengal, identifies the Ashraf as a category that included ‘those Muslims claiming descent from immigrants beyond the Khyber — or at least from beyond Bengal, who cultivated high Perso-Islamic civilisation and its associated literature in Arabic, Persian and Urdu’ (2000: 249).
a whole range of different activities that are best described as political entrepreneurship, which I discuss below. Unlike a feudal lord, whose main aim is to increase the power of his economic capital, which he holds together using patronage links, the Comrade also had an obligation to the Party. It was through his contacts within the Party that he got advance information on loans or was able to threaten a local bureaucrat to obtain a permit for one of his ventures. These enterprises not only increased his personal wealth but also his social networks as more people came to bound to him by ties of loyalty and obligation. These networks would be activated when the Party required a show of his loyalty, mainly at times of elections. The Comrade thus played a delicately balanced game, simultaneously increasing his personal wealth and his party’s popularity.

However, there were also potential competitors in the village among the other Syed landowners, who despite their economic impoverishment after the reforms continued to have enormous influence over the poorer labouring classes of the villages. There was also a large proportion of people who belonged to the lower castes of Muslims such as Sheikhs and Pathans. These castes belonged to the same economic strata as the minority Hindus of the Dom and Bagdi castes. These lower caste Hindus and Muslims together made up the poorer section of the villages and it is they who worked as bargadars and hired labour on the lands of the Syeds. But because it was this class that had benefited most from the communist land reforms, the Comrade had little trouble in commanding their loyalty and much of his ‘ideological work’ was done among them. It was while sitting among them in their huts that the Comrade shared his communist vision for greater social equality and fairness and relayed ideas about how this could be achieved. Thus, for instance, it was at this level that the post-2001 elections initiative of setting up self-help groups through women’s co-operatives was executed. Using his status within the village as leverage, he was able to swiftly and efficiently persuade some women (and their families) that this was both necessary and beneficial in the long run. Also, by listening to their demands the Comrade was able to provide feedback to his Party colleagues about the lacunae in their policies. He thus acted as a crucial go-between for the Party and the people, facilitating the government’s responsiveness to the electorate.

Despite his standing in the village, the Comrade had to be constantly vigilant that other Syeds, with different political leanings, did not encroach on his support base. This has become a real possibility as
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more and more peasants were beginning to question whether the communist government was a one-reform wonder. Daily wages, which had not increased since the mid-1980s, did not seem as radical or generous given the inflated prices of the new century, and the reach of the land reform programme had remained patchy. Further, the much-needed reform of agricultural markets had never materialised (Harriss-White 2008), leaving West Bengal among the country’s least prosperous states despite recording the highest levels of rice production. The possibility of questioning the credibility of the communist government was thus a distinct possibility. Such a critique was most likely to be provoked by the Syeds who had been hardest hit by communist policies. It was they who formed the literate minority in the village and who commanded an old, feudal hold over their poorer tenants.

In order to oust the communists from power, however, the Syeds would have to mobilise members of the poorer labour force who formed the bulk of the electorate and thus were constantly looking to woo their attention. The Comrade therefore had to pay a lot of attention to his networks among the Syeds and make sure that no one became too powerful or influential in his own right. He ensured this in a number of ways. The main tactic was to keep the politics of the two villages separate from each other. Despite extensive kinship and marriage links across the two villages, and similar caste and class profiles, Madanpur and Chishti had very different reputations and maintained a distance from each other. This schism had its roots in the personal life of the Comrade who belonged to Madanpur but at the age of 17 had run away with and married a girl from Chishti, leaving his first wife behind in Madanpur. Since then, the men of Chishti were seen to be emasculated, unable to control their women. Ever since, the Comrade had maintained two households, run by his two wives, one in each village, and through these he commanded the loyalty of the large number of retainers who worked there. Further, his brother lived in Madanpur, as did one of his sisters. Two other sisters lived in Chishti. In Madanpur, there were three Syed households who disagreed with his politics and it was widely known that they voted for the opposition party, the Congress. He limited their opposition through impoverishment caused by the forced imposition of additional *bargadars* on their land, by denying them jobs that they were qualified for and by threatening their livelihoods by encouraging rival businesses. In Chishti too, any sign of dissent from his former
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political allies was carefully dealt with so as to ultimately humiliate or compromise the principal actor. In one case when the political ambitions of a young, educated Syed man became apparent, the Comrade personally slapped him in full view of several people including the young man’s friends. The news spread quickly and the reason provided on that occasion was that he had been punished for harassing a girl, thus allowing the Comrade to occupy the higher moral ground. Everyone knew, however, that this was retribution for the young man’s attempts to set up the Trinamul Congress as a rival political cell in the village.

In Madanpur there were about five Syed households, which he controlled in other ways. Most of these households were headed by men who had brothers living in Chishti. It was striking that of the dozen or so pairs of brothers who lived in the two villages, most were not on talking terms with each other. Investigation into these enmities revealed that in each case the roots of the discord lay in jealousy over the prosperity of one brother while the other struggled to turn his luck. The affluence in each case had been facilitated by a job or a loan or a marriage proposal arranged by the Comrade. By keeping the brothers divided through preferential treatment the Comrade constantly had one of them in his debt for having done him a favour, while keeping the other in the sullen hope of being the next recipient of a favour. As a result, through the jealousy generated between them, the possibility of a united front of two brothers together challenging the might of the Comrade lay unrealised.

It was also striking that in the daily life of the village, with all its accompanying gossip, envy and avarice, each conflict was resolved only after the personal mediation of the Comrade. Employing considerable skills in magnifying ordinary village disputes to peace threatening proportions, the Comrade was able to make himself an indispensable arbitrator in all disputes. This embedded the Comrade in the daily life of every household, leaving no matter to be considered too small to escape his attention. In each case, he restored order by issuing threats to the suspected mischief makers or by mollifying the injured party. But this did not necessarily follow a principled policy of seeking justice and truth. The accusations were usually arbitrary and the punishments too did not bear any relation to the seriousness of the crime. It was this arbitrariness which resulted in everyone living in a state of constant fear, even terror, regarding the actions of the Comrade.
By behaving in this fashion, every dispute became an occasion for the Comrade to entrench himself further in village politics and in the minds of the people.6

The power thus consolidated, manifested itself in an exaggerated display from time to time. This was achieved through a series of actions, daring in their scope and originality. One of the more spectacular occasions was when the Comrade was seen to be helping arrange a suitable marriage for a young girl whose father was an active member of his political clique. In private though, he had carried on an affair with the young girl and her mother, simultaneously. While news of the goings on were the subject of hushed but outraged gossip among both men and women of the village, no one tried to directly accuse the Comrade of having transgressed sacrosanct moral boundaries. The reason for this was that each and every one of his possible critics were themselves involved in some other dispute, which inevitably required the Comrade’s attention. It would therefore have compromised their own interests severely to have publicly criticised him at this time. Their silence thus was further proof of the Comrade’s invincibility. In this instance he had taken a risky gamble that had paid off as he successfully outfaced his severest critics. A large measure of his working/waking hours can thus be seen as being spent dreaming up strategies to increase his self worth, reputation or consideration (Davis 1998). Davis lists at least four ways in which consideration is enhanced: letting people know that they cannot harm his interests without harming their own; by demonstration on third parties to evoke fear among observers; enticement; routinised coding of superiority through as dress and manners — and the Comrade appears to have used all of them at some point in time.

It is evident that the Comrade was able to enhance his social networks through his well-laid out plans, but these networks also needed constant nurturing and involved people whose loyalties and indebtedness needed constant feeding and nurturing. When establishing his numerous businesses for instance, through which he created new clients by offering employment, he was aware that this might alienate others. To take a small example, when he started his fisheries business in a particular tank, he transgressed communal

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6 See Arild Ruud’s valuable discussion on the role of gossip in constituting both the reputations of village leaders and the village political agenda (2003: 183–204).
rights to the tank which compromised the power of other owners and inconvenienced their women who now had to walk further for their daily bath. He countervailed his unilateral capture of communal resources by giving the man of the house most inconvenienced by the hatchery a subsidy for his transport business when the next round of loans came up six months later. Thus, sustaining this web of networks required his constant vigilance, and in each relationship the risks were high. In the case described earlier, he deflected gossip about his affair with the young girl by arranging a spectacular match which her parents could never have managed themselves, thereby silencing any criticism from the rest of the village. He was able to do this because of his links across many villages and towns in the area, and bringing a proposal from a prosperous city family in this case was precisely a demonstration of the reach of his networks. In all of these instances, timing was of the essence. The Comrade was patient; he was patient while formulating his strategy and he also had the ability to wait patiently to witness the results of his machinations. He could afford to play this game only because his Party was always present as the back-up, the guarantor, in case a strategy went wrong and he needed bailing out.

The Comrade was thus very similar to the kind of ‘wheeler-dealing rural politico-cum-businessman revelling in a socialist environment’ that appeared all over eastern Europe, and whom Katherine Verdery dubbed ‘entrepratchiki’ — half entrepreneur and half apparatchik (Verdery 1995). A dense web of such men cover West Bengal, each having taken the small amounts of social and financial capital that the Party provided, i.e., the Left Front franchise, and investing it energetically to build popular support. They have thus carried out an informal but thorough penetration of every aspect of ‘civil society’ in rural life — from village football clubs to Id festivity committees. As a result, for many villagers, any political figure of influence or achievement, whatever their actual political sympathies, is referred to as a ‘Comrade’ (I was asked, for example, who my Comrade was back home). Much like the ‘big men’ described by Mattison Mines in Tamil Nadu and Thomas Hansen in Mumbai, these Comrades rest their credibility on their efficacy and generosity and form the elementary units of local politics in Bengal (Mines and Gourishankar 1990; Hansen 2008). But unlike ‘fixers’ in other parts of India, these local leaders are also directly answerable to a capillary network of ‘Comrade’ figures all over West Bengal and form the basis of the Communist Parties’ success in building a party organisation in the state (Manor 2004).
It is their loyalty and efficiency in co-ordinating development programmes, political activities and agricultural know-how across local units, which has made them the envy of their political rivals.

While this has made demands on the Party’s resources, the gains have been far in excess of the initial investment because it is through the political work done by these ‘Comrade’ figures that it has been able to widen its role and influence every village in West Bengal, a feat otherwise impossible for a political party. Further, when observers assessed the performance of the communist government, the Party was able to demonstrate this control as evidence of having democratically devolved power to the most local and micro levels of the state. Such is the aggregate benefit of this investment in the local Comrades that through them the Party has been able to capture the vocabulary of politics itself. In the villages of Bengal there is only one word used to refer to the most powerful institution of the state: ‘Party’.

**Work and the Division of Labour**

The overall political work done in West Bengal is of course the aggregate of many diverse kinds of work done by different types of political leaders. At the level of the villages discussed, there were a number of other Communist leaders with varying degrees of importance. While most people use the traditional language of *dols* (groups or political factions), the various ‘Comrades’ who make up the ‘following’, in F. G. Bailey’s sense of the word, can be a fairly mutable group (Bailey 1969). In these *dols* there is a relatively permanent core of Comrades, who are surrounded by those who had been co-opted for specific projects and there is a sliding scale of who is ‘in’ and who was ‘out’. As projects are completed and newer tasks emerge, others more suitable or committed to it are drafted in to replace the older ones. Thus maintaining the *dol* is in fact an important aspect of political work done by its members.

In the communist *dol* of the villages, proportionate representation of all four Muslim castes and the two Hindu ones of Dom and Bagdi was thus ensured at any given time. Predictably, some were more important than others and foremost among them was the Okho Dom — the most aggressive and powerful *bargadar* and who has one of the largest shares of land in the villages and was thus the most direct beneficiary of the LF’s main reform programmes. Other Comrades included an entrepreneur who was an outsider to the village (save for an estranged brother). He was a committed and eager member, who
used his Party work to create networks that other villagers had through existing kin. Party work and the circle of camaraderie it created served to fill the place of a much-missed family. Other young men (and they were all men) included the sons of erstwhile Communist Party workers who had been outmanoeuvred by the Comrade and those who had been to the local college and participated in union politics there. Each had something politically noteworthy in their personal histories that made them ideal choices as party functionaries. Whatever their differences, they were all people who had received a sound political education and also had a fire in their bellies. It was this penumbra of workers surrounding the core, which made their leader, the Comrade, shine brighter. By their loyalty and faith in the Comrade’s leadership they added credibility to his ideas, by following his instructions they added to his authority and by their own convictions they added to his charisma. Most of those who had been associated with the Party’s work saw themselves very much as Party workers, at least for a limited period of time. But this label was prone to fade unless its association with political work was energetically renewed. Not many people could, even if they wished to, become permanent members of the core and certainly not without the support of the Comrade. This aspiration was the incentive for their labours and as we have seen in the previous section, the Comrade managed them adroitly.

Within the core, the most important division of labour was maintained between the Comrade and a man called Nathu Dom who was the pradhan (president) of the local panchayat committee. As an elected candidate Nathu occupied his position of importance on the basis of a popular mandate. His personality was perfectly suited to the business of fighting elections. He was soft spoken, sober and the characteristic bend of his head slightly to one side gave the impression of him always willing to lend his ear to any demands and problems. He was seen around the village, strolling in the lanes around dusk for his daily constitutional but also tending to his fields industriously like others. He had a good reputation for even-handedness in disbursing benefits channelled through his office and its allocated budget. His visibility, accessibility and honesty made him an excellent candidate for a popular politician. But it was also widely accepted, implicitly even by Nathu himself, that he could make no decision without prior consultation with the Comrade. They strove for consensus but overall the Comrade had the last word. It was Nathu’s job to make sure that decisions were executed fairly and judiciously. In fact their roles were entirely complementary; the Comrade spoke on behalf of the Party to the village and Nathu spoke on behalf of the village to the Party.
Thus, when people had a problem or a request they approached Nathu for help, and they did this not so much for his personal leadership qualities, but for his position in the panchayat organisation. This village-level ethnographic observation of faith in the institutions of the panchayat is true for most of the state of West Bengal. Here, the panchayat enjoyed an ‘intensive and extensive’ appeal over all other rural institutions and people preferred ‘institutionalised problem solving…(such as a Panchayat) rather than individuals when in need’ (Bhattacharya 2009: 335–36). The same research also revealed, perhaps surprisingly, that the appeal of the institution of the panchayat cut across party loyalties, such that Congress supporters were slightly more likely to approach the panchayat with a problem. The sharing of responsibilities between Nathu and the Comrade, which was a crucial aspect of their political work, also helped them achieve wider appeal. Even though the Comrade was unambiguously a Party man, by keeping his distance from him, Nathu could project the panchayat as a non-partisan body in the village. Finally, this division of labour between the two most prominent politicians in the village reflected what was a well recognised fact in West Bengal, namely that all policy decisions were made by the Left Front and the civil service and other administrative bodies were ‘mere rubber stamps’ — the executors of these policies.

7 The figures from the NES (National Election Studies, survey conducted by Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi) data analysed in Bhattacharya (2009) show that 47 per cent of Congress supporters as compared to 44 per cent LF supporters were likely to approach the panchayat. See Bhattacharya (2009: 336, Fig. 17.7).

8 It would, however, be erroneous to conclude that this made Left Front politicians, big or small, personally powerful. Rather, it was the ‘Party’ that was considered to be the ultimate basis (bhitti) for all decision-making, not any one individual. The Comrade narrated an anecdote that illustrated this belief perfectly: the local MP of the area, Somnath Chatterjee, was a prominent parliamentarian in the central government and speaker of the house. But on one of his election campaigns he made the error of promising a school to a village that had petitioned him for one. The local Comrades, among whom was ‘our’ Comrade, told him off roundly after the petitioners had left. They pointed out to him that all he could promise to do, in return for votes, was to look into the matter. He was told that the actual allocation of a school was a decision that only the local Party office could take after consulting with the local Comrades who could keep the Party’s grand design for the whole district in mind.
Thus, political work, it could be said, was carried out by a division of labour between Nathu and the Comrade on the one hand, who in Weber’s schema were ‘professional’ politicians, i.e., people who had made politics their vocation, and those whom Weber characterised as ‘part-time’ politicians. Further, Nathu could be described fairly clearly as the one who lived ‘off’ politics whereas the Comrade lived ‘for’ politics. This crucial Weberian distinction is a matter of economics because the politician who lives ‘off’ politics does so because he depends on it as a source of income. Nathu’s modest background and history of poverty, widely recognised as having been dramatically alleviated as a result of his occupation of the elected office, is a good example of how living off politics can be beneficial. This despite the fact that panchayat members are not paid a salary. Nathu’s increased affluence, therefore, was the result of benefits that had probably accrued as a secondary ‘outcome’ of his development projects. Interestingly, no one saw this as corruption, they read it as one of the legitimate benefits of occupying an elected post. Indeed, they tended to highlight his commitment to the welfare of the village, for which his attendance of meetings, negotiations with other panchayats for a share of the budget and fighting elections were seen to be onerous and arduous tasks. His dedication to the common good was seen to be no less than the Comrade’s, an observation that finds support in Weber’s point that even such a person can be motivated with the same sincerity to the cause as the one who lives purely ‘for’ politics. In Nathu’s case this could certainly be said to have been the case. The Comrade, on the other hand, could afford to live ‘for’ politics because of his private income, which Weber insists is a prerequisite for this kind of professional politician. It was widely known that his family managed the Comrade’s lands for him and his sons his business ventures. His brother once pointed out to me, sarcastically, ‘well, someone has to look after the fields so the others can “do” Party’.

As Weber confirms, someone who lives ‘for’ politics must also be economically dispensable, that is, ‘his income must not be dependant upon a constant and personal management of his labour and thinking

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9 This is not a category that appears in the much-cited 1946 translation of Weber’s essay ‘Politics as a Vocation’ by Gerth and Mills (1946). Instead a more recent translation (Gunlicks 1978) shows that Weber makes more than just a distinction between ‘occasional’ and ‘professional’ politicians, implying a third category of the ‘part-time’ politician.
entirely, or at least predominantly, in the service of economic gain’ (Gunlicks 1978: 506–07). This leads to the rather important conclusion that a daily-wage labourer, for instance, cannot make an ideal vocational politician for he would need to prioritise selling his labour for economic survival over his political commitments. This leads to a phenomenon that is so familiar in politics everywhere — of professional politicians invariably being drawn from some sort of plutocratic elite. However, here Weber’s warning against reaching the hasty conclusion that it is only the elite therefore who can be genuinely motivated for a political cause is worth heeding as he asserts that ‘there has never been a stratum that has not somehow lived off politics’ (ibid.: 508). The main advantage of having an elite leadership, he qualifies, is merely that they do not ‘need to seek direct remuneration for their political service, as every politician without means must do’ (ibid.). Thus, our evidence too confirms that those who live ‘for’ politics probably make as much money ‘doing’ politics but what distinguishes them from elected representatives is that they can afford to be seen not gaining any direct material benefit from their political dedication.

This emphasis on what a politician cannot appear to be seen deriving from politics lies at the heart of our understanding of the Comrade and the work that he does. Thus while evidence pointed to the fact that he was clearly the wealthiest man in the village and that this had something to do with his association with the Party, it was, impossible nevertheless, for anyone to pinpoint which of his political activities had led to his accumulating wealth. His membership of an elite caste and ancestral landholdings obscured the source of his wealth further. What was visible were the endless journeys he performed to attend meetings with other party workers and address union gatherings — all of which were conducted away from the scrutiny of his fellow villagers. The resulting connections, his immense social capital, were the only visible product of his labours. When he banked this ephemeral treasure, he gained benefits in the form of a loan being approved or tube wells being issued, which he could pass on to Nathu and the

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10 In fact, Weber cynically concluded, exactly the opposite was true: that in fact that the only uncompromising and unconditional political idealism can only be found among the property-less who ‘stand entirely outside of the circles interested in maintaining the economic order of the society’ (Gunlicks 1978: 509).
others to develop as ‘projects’ that would add to the prosperity of the village. This allowed him to develop a higher worth than any other politician working in the village, whether professional or part-time. The leverage gained enabled him to extract recognition for it as and when required. But as we have seen, this was a finely calibrated judgement at all times; if he was too ham-fisted he ran the danger of being seen as authoritarian, if he was too lily-fingered he could lose ground to other aspirants. And while this delicate dance carried on, his son and the rest of his family were reaping the ‘real’, i.e., financial benefits of his consideration. He of course was the main beneficiary of these economic pursuits, having the first and last word on all projects, yet he was never seen to be directly involved in or benefiting from them. Further, unlike the worker who sold his labour for a wage, the Comrade’s social and financial entrepreneurship lay in the wait and in his ability to wait for a lucrative opportunity without being seen to be doing so.

Conclusion

Just prior to the 2006 assembly elections a visit to Madanpur and Chishti revealed that the next ‘Comrade’ was being groomed. A young man, Shontosh Dom, had been identified as the ideal heir to the mantle and his biography did indeed seem well-suited to the job. A young man, in his early twenties, he had just completed an undergraduate degree from the local college. Like his contemporaries in the region, he was unlikely to find a white-collar job and had therefore returned to working on his family’s modest lands as well as being a bargadar on someone else’s. He came from a small close-knit family of two brothers and a sister who shared the farming responsibilities with the father and a mother who helped out during harvest. The atmosphere within their dark and ramshackle hut was one of easy harmony, dominated equally by the mother’s good humour and pride in her children and the father’s ethic of hard work and honesty. They seemed to take collective pride in Shontosh’s new role as a Comrade and took turns to outline for me how he spent his day. The sister, who was visiting from her in-laws, showed genuine enthusiasm and possibly a touch of wistfulness, for the political work her brother now did. She too had decided to make the most of her own education by running a little school for the children in the village where she now lived. Shontosh himself spent most of the time watching them with
a shy smile on his lips, adding only a quiet word from time to time. But this demeanour clearly belied a fiery disposition for politics. At college he had been involved in student politics and it was his role in SFI-led\textsuperscript{11} agitations against the Congress-led union that had brought him the attention of the Party. In the induction process for his new job, he had been entrusted with the responsibility of helping people get their voter identification cards made for the forthcoming elections. This involved accompanying them to the local BDO’s office,\textsuperscript{12} filling out forms, checking their accuracy and generally helping them with paperwork. In his opinion this had been a very worthwhile experience as it had enabled him to meet people, learn about their insecurities, demands and desires, and had allowed him to develop a bond of trust with them. He was also expected to travel to the surrounding villages, making a note for the Party of what the government was doing and also what it was not managing to achieve in his area. In this, his two monthly meetings with more senior Comrades had been invaluable. From them he had started to learn the art of rhetoric, interpretation of the Party’s ideology and techniques for its dissemination and was given basic lessons in ‘how to behave with people’. In the grooming process of this new ‘Comrade’, the elements of political work discussed in this paper could be observed clearly.

By the time of the elections of 2009, Shontosh was already more self confident, though a bit defensive on behalf of his party. A rival political faction supporting the Trinamul Congress had finally taken root in the area, and for the first time since the 1960s Congress supporters openly expressed their preference and campaigned volubly for the Lok Sabha elections. The hitherto hidden resentment against the Comrade’s interference in their lives had begun to be expressed publicly after the LF itself had been held accountable, at the national level, for its actions against the Singur and Nandigram agitations. As a result, one of the Comrade’s own penumbra had stood against the LF candidate in the 2008 panchayat elections and managed to register a respectable defeat. In addition, the young Syed man, whom the Comrade had humiliated in front of people many years back, had persisted with his political ambitions and had now established a strong and visible

\textsuperscript{11} SFI stands for Students Federation of India, the students wing of the CPI(M).

\textsuperscript{12} BDO stands for Block Development Officer.
following who were actively campaigning for him for the forthcoming elections. Initial forecasts had in fact projected a drubbing for the LF in 2009. The scenario for the budding Comrade, therefore, was not entirely dissimilar to the one that the older Comrade had faced at the start of his political career. But unlike his predecessor, he might not have the luxury of a strong and ascendant political party backing him. The results of the national elections revealed a severe loss of LF seats in the national parliament from West Bengal and the LF candidate from the parliamentary constituency containing Madanpur and Chishti also lost to the Trinamul Congress candidate. It will be interesting therefore to watch Shontosh’s career grow in coming years and to observe whether he chooses or needs to redefine the nature of his political work, of how he ‘does Party’. Will he continue to follow the divide and rule policy? How long will he continue to borrow his father’s cycle to make his journeys to do his political work? How long will it be before he acquires his own cycle? Or motorcycle? Or even a Tata Nano? Will his brother have to gradually take over all of the family’s farming responsibilities? Will he continue to assert that the Party paid him nothing, that he had to work hard for what he got? Or will he continue to insist that he wants to work selflessly? Will his work too slowly become invisible? We will have to wait and see, especially with the forthcoming uncertainties of the 2012 state assembly elections in West Bengal.

References


13 This is the Rs 100,000 affordable ‘people’s’ car that Tata Motors built in 2009 for the growing Indian market. Ironically, this is the car plant that had to be moved out of Singur, West Bengal, because of the way in which the LF government had handled the acquisition of land for the factory and the protests that followed. The plant has now been relocated to Gujarat.


Before the Indian parliamentary elections of 2004 the Election Commission appealed to political parties not to give tickets to criminals and make a special effort to have ‘clean’ candidates. However, newspapers and TV were full of stories discussing the criminal records of a number of contestants and narrating stories of maverick politicians who were contesting from jail, of flamboyant candidates with ‘disregard for the law’, of ‘crime lists’, of ‘the power of the strongman image’, and of the ‘muscle power’ of Indian politicians. Most of these accounts came from the state of Uttar Pradesh or from the neighbouring state of Bihar (which is known as India’s lawless state).

The state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) with its 172 million people, located in the Hindi heartland, is one of the most backward in India in terms of socio-economic conditions. However, with one-sixth of the members of Parliament coming from the state, it occupies a central position in the electoral calculation of all the national political parties in India. In 2002, during the UP state assembly elections, almost 50 per cent of the candidates had criminal charges registered against them or were under investigation.1 ‘Criminal’ candidates were also disproportionately successful, winning 206 out of 403 seats, an absolute majority of 51.1 per cent.2 It follows that the Samajwadi Party (SP) government, which ran the state between 2002 and 2007, has been

1 See India Today, 14 January 2002; The Hindu, 22 January 2002; The Times of India, 3 February 2002; The Pioneer, 8 February 2002; The Indian Express, 10 February 2002; The Times of India, 26 February 2002.
2 Financial Times, 2 May 2007, p. 11.
labelled often as ‘goonda raj’ (criminal rule).\(^3\) The 2007 UP state assembly election marked the end of the Samajwadi Party’s rule and the rise to power of a rival party, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The election was not, however, any less criminalised. Indeed, for the 2007 UP elections, the number of party candidates facing criminal trial increased and the BSP (the winning party) had the highest proportion of criminal candidates (34 per cent). News papers and TV channels once again reported candidates conducting their election campaigns from jail, broadcasting speeches before rallies from ‘illegal’ mobile phones that had been connected to microphones.\(^4\) At the time of writing the 2009 Lok Sabha election campaign has just started and a similar trend is once again emerging. This time politicians have been caught on camera, distributing allegedly ‘dirty money’ at public functions. The most discussed case has been ‘the holi bribe’. Mulayam Singh Yadav (former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and president of the Samajwadi Party) was filmed distributing money to potential voters during a Holi celebration in his constituency Etawah district of UP.\(^5\) Headlines like ‘Cash for voters immoral but here to stay’ and ‘India cashing democracy’ critically point at the rising corruption in the political sphere and, in particular, at the open injection of criminal money into the electoral machine.

The widespread take on contemporary goonda politics is that it reflects a general moral decay which is an integral part of the failure of the Indian post-colonial narrative of modernisation, secularisation and development. Scholars have causally linked the ‘vacuum of authority’ created by the fragmentation of the dominant Congress

\(^3\) The word \textit{goonda} (muscleman or gangster) and associated concepts of goonda politics and goondaism are used here in a loose way to indicate individuals, activities and political styles that rely on the use (or threat) of force and muscular power to protect personal and community material and symbolic interests. But the term goonda politics is also widely used to denote corruption, bribes and, in general, all illegal activities linked to patronage politics. I focus on this issue elsewhere (Michelutti 2008c).


party to a rise in corruption, political violence and criminality in the political arena (see, for example, Kohli 1990; Kothari 2001). As a matter of fact, the link between criminality and politics in North India is not new. The criminalisation of politics in India has been linked to the politicisation of bureaucracy and the police that took place soon after Independence (see, for example, Brass, in this volume). However, in recent times, the nexus between crime and politics has been increasingly coupled with the politicisation of the lower castes and communities, which gathered pace during the 1990s (Bardhan 1998: 133). The so-called ‘second democratic upsurge’ (Yadav 2000) has brought political leaders from some of the historically lower and more ‘backward’ castes to the fore. New political parties who obtain their support from marginalised social groups have been formed (such as the above mentioned Samajwadi [Socialist] Party and the Bahujan Samaj [Common Folk] Party). Their principle demand is ‘social justice’. In their political propaganda ‘democracy’ is often thought of in narrow terms, relating to caste/community socio-economic uplift (cf. Khilnani 1997: 59). It follows that in states like UP, democratic practices (such as voting, participating in election campaigns, organising political meetings and so on) are increasingly seen as direct or indirect ways of getting a share of state resources and as ways to obtain or maximise power in what has been described as a ‘patronage democracy’ (see Chandra 2004: 133). Politicians in this political environment often choose to project an image of themselves as men of action — i.e., as men who can get things done for other people. And a reputation for goondaism often complements such an image, ensuring the effectiveness of the political leader. As Hansen summarises, drawing from his study of popular politics in Bombay: ‘It is the performance of a certain style of public authority — generous but also with a capacity for ruthless violence — that determines who can define and represent “the community”, defend neighbourhoods, punish and discipline’ (2005: 136). In short, the goonda politician is known to be corrupt and to resort to violence, but if he/she is considered ‘our man’ and’ loyal to ‘our community’, then he/she may be able to command wide support in majoritarian electoral politics.

Partha Chatterjee, commenting on this political landscape, highlights how ‘in the field of popular democratic practices, crime and violence are not fixed black-and-white legal categories’ (2004: 76). He also recognises that little is known about how caste violence,
criminality and local political violence — ‘the dark side of political society’ *(ibid.*: 75) works on the ground. Indeed, the politics–community–goonda nexus that so frequently appears in political speeches, newspapers, movies (like *Satyaa* [1998] or *Sarkar* [2005]) and novels (see for example Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* [2007] on Bombay and *The Peacock Throne* [2007], by Sukit Saraf on Delhi) has been accompanied by little systematic academic attention to how these links developed historically and socially and still persist in Indian everyday life. It is, therefore, particularly timely to try to understand why ordinary people vote for goonda politicians; why they attach positive values to the use of force in governance and, take part in ‘muscular politics’. These issues are particularly intriguing given the fact that many contemporary ethnographies and surveys illustrate Indians’ dismal view of their political class (see, for example, Ruud 2000: 116; also, Parry 2000 and Jaoul 2007). In these accounts, politicians are described as corrupt, self-serving and amoral, and ‘politics’ is a dirty realm from which one needs to keep distance.

I tackle this contrast by using the political ethnography of one of the most visible and assertive caste formations in north India, the Yadavs, and by showing how muscular political styles enter the everyday life of a neighbourhood in the town of Mathura, UP. Fieldwork was conducted between 1998 and 2000 and in 2001. While I give some attention to examining the appeal of local and regional career politicians, the focus here is more on exploring why and how ordinary people use and legitimise muscle politics when they engage with democratic practices. In short, why do some people support ‘muscular political leaders’ rather than other types of leaders? I will answer these questions by examining muscular politics and the rhetoric of martial politics through the prism of what I have called ‘the process of vernacularisation of Indian democracy’ (Michelutti 2008a), meaning the ways in which values and practices of democracy become embedded in particular cultural and social practices, and in the process become entrenched in the consciousness of ordinary people. The analysis of how local idioms of caste, myth-making and heroic traditions, ideas and practices of masculinity, popular deities, martial epics, and folk kinship theories (‘the vernacular’) inform popular perceptions of the political world and of how the democratic process shapes in turn ‘the vernacular’ will provide a line of enquiry to understand a political styles such as goondaism which mixes the boss and lord types of leadership in a creative way.
**Mathura’s Yadavs: The Importance of being ‘Goondas’**

The Yadavs were traditionally a low- to middle-ranking cluster of agricultural–pastoral castes. In the last 30 years, they have become a significant political force in UP and other northern states (like Bihar), and have become one of the key protagonists in the rise of the Other Backward Classes in north India. Emblematic examples of this political trend are regional Yadav caste leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav. Mulayam Singh Yadav is a wrestler-turned-politician. He has been chief minister of Uttar Pradesh several times and, as already mentioned, is the leader of the Samajwadi Party. The Samajwadi Party is the single largest party in Uttar Pradesh; it is mainly supported by members of the Yadav community and is also often labelled the ‘goonda party’ (muscleman party). Laloo Prasad Yadav is one of the most colourful Indian politicians. He has been for the past decade the unofficial raja (king) of Bihar. He is well-known for his corruption and for allegedly patronising criminals. He served as railway minister in the central Indian government of 2004–09. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav have become key figures in the contemporary political scene. They are either perceived as heroes, as modern Robin Hoods who steal from the rich to help the poor, or as goondas who exploit state resources for personal benefit.

In UP the Yadavs have been gaining economic power since the 1950s. With the abolition of the zamindari system,6 a large section of Yadavs, Gujars and Jats purchased ownership rights from the state and emerged as the dominant agricultural communities in rural UP. In western UP, the wealth and power of the AJGAR caste alliance (Ahirs, Jats, Gujars, and Rajputs) increased considerably, thanks to the economic gains promoted by the introduction of high-yielding seeds in the mid-1960s and from the use of fertilisers and the development of irrigation — the so-called Green Revolution. The new ‘bullock capitalists’, who were generally smallholders rather than members of the dominant landowning class, were given a political voice by the kisan (peasant) movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Backed by socialist leaders, these low- to middle-ranking castes began to challenge Congress Party domination.

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6 Zamindari is a system of land revenue administration under which the estate landlord collected rents from peasants for payment to the (colonial) government.
By the 1970s, the Yadavs of UP had gradually introduced themselves to political processes at the local, state and national levels. In UP, the Yadavs mainly support the Samajwadi Party. The party is centred around its leader Mulayam Singh Yadav and does not have a well-developed organisational structure. However, it benefits from the support of the well-developed social networks set up by the All India Yadav Mahasabha (AIYM). Since colonial times the AIYM has been promoting the process of Yadav ethnicisation and politicisation in different parts of India. At the core of the Yadav community lies a specific folk theory of descent according to which all Indian pastoral castes are said to descend from the Yadu dynasty (hence the label Yadav) to which the god Krishna (a cowherder, and supposedly a Kshatriya) belonged. The main goal of the theory of religious descent sponsored by the AIYM is to promote the creation of a numerically strong Yadav community by including more and more castes, clans and lineages into the Yadav category. I call this process ‘Yadavisation’. A folk understanding of democracy is coupled with this process. Yadav political rhetoric portrays ‘democracy’ as a primordial phenomenon, passed in blood from the democratic ancestor-god Krishna to the contemporary Yadavs, and describes the Yadavs, political skills as innate. In this sense contemporary Yadavs are also seen as the heirs of a ‘democratic’ tradition and political skill and Yadav political leaders as later incarnations of Krishna. In this rhetoric Krishna is represented as a virile, historical, political leader.

My research focused on the neighbourhood of Ahir Para in Sadar Bazaar locality of Mathura town. Mathura lies about 100 miles south of New Delhi, in the so-called Braj area of western UP. This area is well known as the mythical homeland of the god Krishna. \(^7\) Today, local Yadavs say that their population in Sadar Bazaar is about 4,000. Within this locality the Yadav and Muslim communities are numerically the strongest. They are followed by other caste/communities: Malis (gardeners), Banias (businessmen), Dhobis, Dhobis, Dhobis, Dhobis, Dhobis, Dhobis.

\(^7\) In recent years this religious site has been politicised by the Hindu nationalist agenda. Hindu nationalists believe that Krishna was born 3,500 years ago in a prison cell where his parents were held captive by the tyrannical king Kamsa. As will become evident in the following sections, ‘the political recruitment’ of Krishna by Hindu nationalists has indirectly helped the local Yadav community to think about Krishna as an ‘historical’ and ‘virile’ political hero.
Brahmins, and Jatavs. Sadar Bazaar’s varied social composition is related to the establishment of the cantonment station on whose outskirts it has developed during the last 200 years. In the 20th century, the local Yadavs shifted from cow herding and selling milk to the transport business (from bullock carts to motor vehicles) and then to construction. A significant number of Yadavs in western UP are involved in the real estate and construction sectors. Those Yadavs who did not set up their own business sought jobs in the army and the police, the two other traditional spheres of occupation for Yadavs in north India. More recently, the government has become one of the most esteemed sources of employment, especially amongst the new generations who have benefited from caste reservation. Hence, in Ahir Para, the number of people involved in the ‘traditional’ milk business is not very high and has decreased over the years. In the economy of Ahir Para, parallel to these activities, there is a realm of illegal ones: extortion, protection-rackets, usury, and petty criminality.

Usury and protection rackets are two of the main Yadav under-world activities. Sadar Bazaar’s Bania community commonly complained that they were not able to conduct their business anymore. They complain that they have to pay ‘protection money’ to the Yadavs in order to keep their shops open. In the last 20 years the Yadavs have become Sadar Bazaar’s main moneylenders. Unlike the Banias, they lend money without mortgage and thus can be more competitive in the market. They are able to offer such terms because they have the muscle power to ensure that their creditors will pay them back in due time. As B. Yadav (moneylender, 45 years) put it: ‘creditors know that we do not have water in our guns’.

Upon my arrival in town, non-Yadav informants kept telling me that doing fieldwork among the Yadavs was dangerous and that I should have chosen another caste for my study. In particular, they insisted on telling me how my reputation would be in danger if I kept associating with ‘politicians’, especially with supporters of the Samajwadi Party, the ‘goonda party’. Even some members of the Yadav community advised me not to live in Sadar Bazaar because it was a violent neighbourhood and therefore not suitable for a lady. However, they also added that living in Sadar Bazaar had some positive practical aspects, i.e., uninterrupted electricity and water supply throughout the day, something one should not underestimate when for three-quarters of the year temperatures are above 35 degrees
It turned out that these services were guaranteed by the muscle power and political connections of local Yadavs. Indeed, the local Yadavs are politically active and very well connected.

I shall briefly describe Yadav political involvement in Mathura. Since the late 1980s three out of the four ward representatives of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar area have belonged to the Yadav community. In almost all Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar households there is at least one person involved directly or indirectly with local politics or who has relatives who are ward representatives, village representatives or MLAs or MPs in nearby towns and villages. Most local Yadavs vote, are members of political parties, actively participate during election campaigns, and love to talk about politics. Similarly, a very high percentage of local Yadavs personally know someone in politics, and on a regular basis contact politicians in their constituency. Local politicians are also local fixers and brokers. In fact, Yadavs act as brokers for all the communities and not only for their caste mates. I saw many high-caste people, who refer to Yadavs as goondas in a disapproving fashion, using their ‘services’. Their connections, political influence and abilities are thus practically acknowledged. By the end of my fieldwork the same non-Yadav informants who advised me not to go around with politicians asked me to use my ‘Yadav contacts’ to help them get their telephone line troubles sorted out, to get a taxi licence or to speed up a court case.

The local political rise of the Yadavs began in the 1980s and peaked in the 1990s. Before that time the representatives of the local government bodies belonged mainly to members of the Bania community. Now, as a Bania informant commented, ‘each Yadav who lives in Sadar Bazar, believes he is Mulayam Singh Yadav and wants to be the boss’. This comment not only describes the political ascendancy of the Yadavs and the decline of the Banias but also underlines the unceasing rivalry that exists between different Yadav factions. In everyday life the struggle for local state resources is accompanied by feudal fights between and within parivars (families) and often questions of honour and respect get mixed up with more pragmatic political and economic issues (cf. Michelutti 2004). During my fieldwork the atmosphere between the different factions was often incredibly tense, and violent confrontations between them occurred regularly. In this environment, the use of force or the threat of force were daily political languages used to set boundaries both within and outside the community.
Thus, muscular political languages were not used only by ‘career politicians’ or ‘political activists’. Indeed, who was a ‘politician’ and who was not was quite blurred. Local Yadavs often describe their deep and widespread involvement in politics by referring to their community as ‘a caste of politicians’. It follows that, in this locality, the distinction between ‘voters’ and ‘politicians’ was not as rigidly defined as comparative ethnographies in other Indian states seem to suggest (see, for example, Banerjee and Ruud in this volume). ‘Politics’ here has entered the everyday life of ordinary Yadavs in such a way that it is not considered an activity restricted only to particular individuals. For example, being a relative of an officially-elected political leader or even a close friend could make a person, in the eyes of the community and of outsiders, a ‘political leader’, i.e., a person with political contacts and, therefore, influence.

*Constructing and Performing a Goonda Reputation: Force and Lordly Idioms*

If, on the one hand, the Yadav underworld’s illegal activities are difficult to assess (and problematic to illustrate), on the other, the Yadavs’ daily display of strength and muscle power on the streets of Mathura are clearly visible public performances. I will now illustrate how the local Yadavs construct and perform a goonda reputation, which supports their local reputation for being a ‘caste of politicians’. I will start from the local *akhara* (wrestling gymnasium), Mahadev Ghat. Akharas and *bagichas* (gardens) are at the heart of Mathura’s local culture (see Lynch 1996). These gymnasiaums and gardens, where there is also a wrestling arena, provide a space for exercising, worshipping and engaging in other social activities (see Kumar 1988; Alter 1993 on akharas in UP towns). These places are the locus of local political activities and they are important stages where politics is performed locally (cf. Hansen 1996; Gooptu 2001: 215–19).

Mahadev Ghat is the place where local Yadavs produce and cultivate their sense of community, their fighting spirit and a reputation for being goondas. This socio-religious and political stage brings together or condenses many of the symbols and values that serve as primary reference points in the development and performance of Yadav muscular political styles. Central to this rhetoric are Krishna’s muscular pro-socialist deeds, Yadav martial qualities and their heroic traditions.
Mahadev Ghat is not only a place where people go to exercise and pray but it is also the informal headquarters of the Mathura Yadav Sammelan (MYS), a caste association affiliated to AIYM. MYS is very active and organises numerous meetings and religious festivals. Most of its leadership is composed of men who also hold key positions in the Samajwadi Party and have a reputation for being close to the national political leader Mulayam Singh Yadav.

Mahadev Ghat lies on the bank of the river Yamuna. It is a religious complex comprising a wrestling area and a number of shrines situated in a forest-like landscape. The principle shrines are dedicated to Shiva, Hanuman and Krishna. Indeed, the morphology of this religious landscape, the position of the trees, of the wrestling arena, the lingam (an iconic representation of Shiva) are said to have been designed by Krishna himself. There are small alcoves dedicated to local Yadav hero-gods, known as kuldevtas (male lineage hero deities), and avataras (incarnations) of Krishna. Kuldevtas are often linked to cowherder-kings, believed to have been thieves and robbers of the Robin Hood kind. These cowherder-kings, or village strongmen who become deified as lineage deities, are conceptualised as good protectors despite their weak moral integrity. The cults that have grown around these hero-gods are often accompanied by epic mythological accounts (allahs and lok kathas) and typical Ahir songs (known as virahas) that are acted out by local castes who specialise in their performance in the form of songs and dances. Yadavs who come to Mahadev Ghat regularly consider these epics and songs to be histories of their caste/clan/family. These stories highlight the heroism of their ancestors and provide ‘historical proof of Yadav martial glory’ (cf. Coccari 1989). Martial oral epics are extremely important in the construction of a Yadav masculine caste/community image. Yadav local ‘historians’ recognise the importance of this idiom and in their literature they include writings on the martial legends and gestures of local Ahir/Yadav heroes.

Mahadev Ghat is maintained by Yadav sadhus (ascetics) who belong mainly to the Vaishnava sects (in particular the Ramanandi sect). This religious complex is patronised not only by the local Yadavs but also by the relatives of the sadhus who run it. Funds come from all over UP. Indeed, a large number of Yadav ascetics from different parts of north India, in particular from eastern UP, Bihar and Gujarat, stop for brief periods at the Mahadev Ghat. They use this place as a base during their stay in Mathura. In the last 40 years this network of Yadav sadhus has collected money for the construction of a Yadav
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guesthouse in Ahir Para. Nowadays the guesthouse is used by Yadav pilgrims who come to Mathura, and as a venue for local marriages and the meetings of the local caste association. Thus, despite choosing to lead an ascetic life and, hence, to renounce their caste, Yadav sadhus still maintain strong relations with their community. This is particularly evident in their overwhelming presence at local Yadav caste meetings. Moreover, during the parliamentary election campaign of 1999, local Yadav renunciants campaigned for the Samajwadi Party throughout western and central UP. The Yadav sadhus’ political network thus transforms Mahadev Ghat into a public socio-religious arena where regional Yadav politics and community issues are discussed before being internalised by the local political fabric.

At Mahadev Ghat, Yadav men from different generations meet each other. Often complaining about their ‘aggressive wives’, first older and then young men come here throughout the day to exercise, sunbathe, smoke, chat and do puja (worship). Women do not go to the temple because they say ‘it is an akhara’ and hence men are always indecent (i.e., almost naked). Indeed, the absence of women is determined by the public and ‘political’ character of the place. Women are not part of the public political life of the locality. However, in the private sphere they actively support their men’s ethos of honour and virility, which informs a great deal of Yadav political discourse. Yadav women appreciate tough and strong men and they raise their male children to be so as well. They often stressed to me that it is because of the way they feed their sons that they are so strong, tall and beautiful. Emphasis is placed on milk products, especially on cow milk (see also Michelutti 2008b). Yadav women do not work outside the house, however, within the house one of their main duties and ‘privileges’ is to take care of the cows which provide dudh (milk) and ghee (clarified butter) for the family’s daily diet. Milk and butter are meant primarily for male consumption. In fact, drinking milk is part of Yadav macho culture.

Mahadev Ghat is not only a place where ‘politics’ is usually discussed but also where local Yadavs build on their image as men of strength. The Yadavs of Madhura generally are extremely body conscious and exercise regularly. Although only a few of them are professional wrestlers (i.e., earn their living from wrestling competitions), almost every young Yadav in the neighbourhood practises wrestling and body building as a form of exercise and leisure activity. In my conversations with them, young Yadav informants often pointed out the importance of physical strength and muscle power. They are proud
of being ‘a caste of wrestlers’ and of having an ‘innate’ fighting spirit. They thus portray wrestling as a Yadav prerogative.

J. S. Alter (1997: 45–46) underlines how in north India a majority of the members of the akharas are of Yadav caste. He explains the preponderance of Yadav wrestlers because of their involvement in the milk business and dairy farms. Yadavs traditionally had access to two of the most important and otherwise expensive ingredients in a wrestler’s diet: milk and clarified butter. Thus paramount to Yadavs’ conception of masculinity is the idiom of milk, associated with both physical strength and virility (ibid.: 148–49). Local Yadavs believe that ‘milk’ has helped the members of their caste become strong and in doing so they indirectly recognise the role of their women as providers of ‘first class’ milk and strength. They also believe that, apart from the ‘milk factor’, Yadavs are by birth predisposed to be great wrestlers and skilled politicians.

The symbolic equation between physical strength and political capacity is continuously expressed by informants with the aid of metaphors, parables and mythic narratives. Local Yadavs emphasise that their ancestor Krishna was a skilful wrestler and a ‘democratic’ politician and that Yadav kings were also wrestlers or patrons of dangals (wrestling tournaments). Alha and Udal, the protagonists of a popular regional martial oral epic, are described as belonging to the Yadav caste and as being skilful wrestlers. Alha is often described as an incarnation of Balram, Krishna’s brother, and Udal as an incarnation of Krishna. The wrestling ground of the Mahadev Ghat is said to be used in the night by these two heroes.

In Hindu cosmology, in theory, any person can become a ‘deified hero’. However, in north India the members of particular communities, the Ahir/Yadavs for instance, are considered to be more likely to become hero-gods than members of other castes. The Yadavs are said to have ‘heroic substance’ (Coccari 1989: 260). Nandini Gooptu’s study of urban dynamics in colonial north India highlights the connections between akharas, local political leaders (dadas or goondas) and the figure of the deified heroes. ‘Dadas were neighbourhood bosses among the poor or in working-class localities, often based at akharas. They boasted muscular physique of exceptional quality and were reputed for having perfected their “fighting” techniques, which enabled them to assert their power and superiority in the mohalla’ (Gooptu 2001: 218). Similar to contemporary Yadav dadas, the dadas described by
Gooptu established their informal authority by offering protection, through money lending and violence. She further points out: ‘Of course, the police considered them to be thugs, or goondas. However, among the poor, despite the heavy-handedness of the dadas, they enjoy a degree of legitimacy and popularity as protectors…’ (ibid.: 218). And, importantly, for the sake of the argument of this article: ‘They were also looked upon as repositories of a certain heroism for being able to face up to the powerful exploitative forces…. The figure of the dada, arguably a kind of non-deified, profane “beer” [defied hero] of everyday life, could thus embody the aspiration of workers for self-assertion through martial masculinity and virility…’ (ibid.).

Almost a century later, a similar pattern is still visible in the town of Mathura. The only difference is the amplification that electoral democracy has brought to what was indeed a historical and familiar phenomenon. It follows that today, in the eyes of my Yadav informants, nothing embodies the relationship between political skill, physical strength and issues of honour and self-respect better than the Yadav political leader Mulayam Singh Yadav. Mulayam Singh is said to have paid for his studies and financed the first part of his political career by winning wrestling competitions. He is described locally as being a wrestler first and a politician later. In August 1999, the Samajwadi Party parliamentary candidate for Mathura was presented in Ahir Para on the occasion of the annual dangal organised to celebrate Nag Panchami. Nag Panchami is the festival in which wrestling is celebrated as a way of life for everyone. However, the Samjwadi Party candidate portrayed wrestling as a culturally distinctive feature of the Yadavs and of the strongmen voting for the Samajwadi Party.

The Ahir Para Yadavs are proud to be ‘a caste of wrestlers’ and of having an ‘innate’ fighting spirit and ‘heroic substance’. Such an understanding of knowledge transmission needs to be conceptualised within the ideological framework of the caste system, where the members of each caste are usually believed to have a special aptitude for their caste occupation and this propensity is thought to be transmitted ‘in the blood’ (Parry 1979: 85). Thus, inherited ‘substance’ provides propensity for certain kind of actions and professions (see Marriot and Inden 1977). And it is by re-shaping and drawing from this deeply ingrained folk ideology of kinship and caste that Yadav politicians and caste activists have come to elaborate a powerful martial and socialist rhetoric.
A Martial Socialist Rhetoric: Mixing Honour and Material Gains

I will now show how the local politics of ‘self respect’, entrenched in a vernacular idiom (of kinship ideologies, popular religion and ideas of masculinity), is reinforced and shaped by regional politicians and Yadav caste associations through the production and spread of a more explicit socialist and martial political rhetoric. Indeed, the local images of ‘wrestling’, ‘Krishna-the-socialist-wrestler’ and contemporary ‘Yadav-wrestler/politicians’ have enriched the political rhetoric developed by Yadav caste associations and political parties. The central focus of this rhetoric is to instill svabhiman (self-respect) in ‘ordinary’ Yadavs. An outcome of this is the emphasis laid by young Yadavs on their muscular bodies and the creation of a goonda reputation within their neighbourhood and town. Young Yadavs portray themselves as physically strong, brave and bold and hence powerful and fearless. Ram Prasad Yadav (85 years old), once a famous wrestler and today a patron of many Yadav caste association activities, proudly asserts that Yadavs in Mathura have regained respect since they began to use their lathis (sticks) again.

Local mobilisation around the issue of ‘self-respect’ is heavily promoted by Yadav caste association literature, which highlights the inherited bravery and revolutionary pathos of contemporary Yadavs. By the same token local and regional politicians in their speeches often use Krishna symbolism and the Yadav valorous martial and revolutionary ‘socialist past’ to appeal to their audience. As a matter of fact, in India, the association between politicians and deities is neither completely new, nor unique to Yadavs. There are many examples of politicians who link themselves to deities. This trait of Hindu political culture has usually been associated with the persistence and the contemporary reworking of Hindu models of divine kingship (Price 1989). However, in the Yadav case such a phenomenon is reinforced by the continuous references, from both ordinary people and political leaders, to an inherited substance being the basis of gaining divine and political skills. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav are at times described by their caste supporters as avatars (incarnations) of Krishna, sent to earth to protect ‘the oppressed’ and to promote social justice. The following is an extract from a speech delivered by Harmohan Singh (a Samajwadi Party MP and at the time president of the AIYM) at a Yadav national conference held in New Delhi in December 1999.
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Have you, in the whole life, seen such a Krishna-like personality who has never wished to be in power or to be king. Krishna always fought for the upliftment of the poor… Do you know? He was the son of a King, he was a prince. He could have easily become a King. But he never did so. He always associated himself with his poor friends, the farmers, the shelterless, etc. He passed his life with these people, he struggled for them…. He really struggled very hard…. Lord Krishna’s descendants, from all over the country, the AIYM has achieved the object of bringing all the Yadavs spread all over the country under one title, i.e., Yadav and the Yadav Mahasabha also inculcated the spirit of unity thereby bringing strength in the collective attempt in the development of India. In the Indian History particularly with reference to the Vedic Period the Yadavs had a great past, a glorious past and Yadavas were known for their bravery and diplomatic wisdom. The Mahabharata period which was the period of Yadavas is known for republican and democratic government.8

Similarly, during political speeches also, the multivocal symbolism of Krishna is often used to prompt the audience to fight injustice through politics and to fight for their own rights, if necessary with force. The following extract is from a speech made by a local Samajwadi Party leader at a caste association’s meeting in Mathura.

We should follow Sri Krishna. Krishna made impossible tasks possible. His contributions in those days made the Yadav community respectable, not only in India but even abroad…. The Yadav community should follow his path. This is the only way we can reinforce our power…. Krishna’s parents were imprisoned and their seven children were killed by Kamsa. In the life of Krishna, his anger towards the bad and rude persons is clearly expressed: he never tolerated the exploitation of people and always helped the poor and oppressed…. He killed many authoritative and cruel kings and replaced them with democratic ones.9

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8 Harmohan Singh Yadav, Presidential Address, AIYM Convention, Vaishali–New Delhi, 25 December 1999, author’s transcription. Through the chapter extracts from speeches and texts originally in Hindi appear in the English translation. Whenever the quote is originally in English, this is indicated in parantheses.

9 Samajwadi Party activist speaking at a local caste association meeting, Mathura, May 1999, author’s transcription.
Moreover, when politicians address a gathering of people they often exhort the audience to ‘indulge into politics’ as the most effective vehicle for socio-economic mobility. For example: ‘we shall all try to become as Mulayamji and Lalooji’, the vice-president of the Uttar Pradesh Yadav Sabha said during a meeting in Agra in 1999, and then added, ‘in every Yadav there is a Mulayam’. Hence, caste association meetings often are the political theatres in which local politicians construct their support at the regional and local levels. They are also the places often where electoral deals are cut and where ordinary people are promised a share of state resources. During these events Yadav politicians are often reminded by ‘ordinary Yadavs’ that they need to work for their caste mates if they wish to be supported:

I must remind our political leaders that they should not forget the mother who fed and trained them at the time of their infancy. It was the Mahasabha who took them out of the dungeon of ignorance and made them heralds of the new civilization. They are the able sons of the Mahasabha through whom we can realize our demand and redress our grievances from Government. It is bounded duty of our MLA and MPs as well as ministers to help our educated boys in the endeavour to settle their lives.\(^{10}\)

This statement exemplifies how in an ‘Indian patronage-democracy’ caste really does matter. It matters to the extent that voting for a caste fellow is considered an efficient way of assuring access to some kind of political power; that politicians will always help their caste (\textit{samaj/parivar}) members first is an accepted political fact. In reality, however, this might not happen, indeed, many a time it does not happen (see Chandra 2004: 136). However, people continue to think that by supporting a caste fellow they maximise their chances of getting a share of state resources. The Yadavs are not unique in this respect. K. Chandra (2004) describes how in UP people from the Scheduled Castes follow similar patterns of voting behaviour. She also reports how widespread in UP is the idea that Mulayam Singh Yadav is a champion of Yadav interests. The following is a comment from one her informants: ‘The minute Mulayam Singh Yadav... becomes Chief Minister, the Yadavs will put on their best clothes and show up at the door of the district magistrate, demanding that he do their work…and just to get rid of them he will do it’ (\textit{ibid.}: 137).

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\(^{10}\) Samajwadi Party member.
As a matter of fact Indian political leaders have often been described as having a ‘duty to care for the material interests of [their] followers’ (Brass 1990: 96). Pamela Price (1989) identifies this phenomenon by discussing historically embedded but persistent models of lordship. She points out how the ‘beauty and dazzle’ of the king ‘symbolized the potentialities of wealth for the community as a whole’ (quoted in Dickey 1993: 353). In the context of contemporary north Indian politics I would say that it is the ‘strongman’ reputation of a political leader which symbolises the potential of wealth for his caste as a whole and more even so for his followers. However, voting for a strongman caste politician not only means maximising their probability of getting a share of the cake but also getting symbolic gains (cf. Price, in this volume).

**Dissenting Voices**

Thus, ‘force’ is generally conceived as a legitimate way of getting ‘respect’ and as an integral part of the Yadav public image. Most local Yadavs think that it is precisely through politics and ‘goondaism’ that they obtained dignity, power and, importantly, wealth. However, there are also several dissenting voices, which belong mainly to elder Yadavs and to non-Yadav informants. These people do not approve of the use of ‘force’ by the younger generations and their political leaders. They often make a distinction between bal (brute and raw strength) and shakti (power and energy). Young muscular Yadavs are thus said to have bal but not shakti. Bal is considered a purely physical energy. To that extent, gang leaders, and anyone else who makes a spectacle of his strength or uses it to advance selfish personal interests, are regarded as physically strong but also morally corrupt (cf. Alter 1997). These dissenting voices illustrate how Yadavs are not so much respected but feared. In particular, older informants often nostalgically recall the old Congress netas (career politicians). They point out how these leaders were properly trained for their jobs: ‘They were educated, they could speak English, they were generally honest and reliable people. And they did not need muscular power to be heard’.11 Today, however, ‘without muscle power there is no politics’, added J. S. Singh (80 years old). As previously illustrated

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11 H. H. Yadav, 70 years old, milk seller.
muscle politics has been a part of the history of UP’s urban life since colonial times. However, what it is now considered ‘new’ is that people with criminal records have begun to stand for elections and have become neighbourhood leaders, not just the supporters of politicians as in the past. Criminals, thus, are no longer used to ‘mould’ the electoral process (by capturing ballot boxes, for example); they have become ‘the politicians’. But why do people vote for them? A widely shared view among my informants is that even honest people, when they enter politics, become corrupt and hence it is perceived as more straightforward or honest to vote for someone who is openly corrupt: ‘at least one knows what he gets’, stated Jaya Santosh a 30-year-old lawyer.

Despite this widespread view a number of people have also distanced themselves from the murky world of politics and corruption. Pavan Yadav (30 years old) is the son of one of the leaders of the local dominant clan. His father is a powerful local politician and an active member of the Samajwadi Party. Pavan told me that he does not like politics. By this statement he meant that he does not like the roughness and corruption that ‘doing politics’ involves. He knows that he was able to attend the best public school in Mathura because his father and uncle threatened and bribed the school’s principal. He is aware that he obtained his job because of political contacts and bribes. He also knows that most of the wealth of his family comes from usury, sustained by continuous acts of violence and usurpation. He knows that his uncle’s main job is to speed up legal proceedings and that his ‘customers’ come from all over western UP. Pavan views these practices as illegitimate. In line with Jonathan Parry’s ethnography of corruption (2000), Pavan does not think that bhrashtachar (corruption) and ghus (bribes) are ‘morally neutral’ activities. He also thinks that the caste title Yadav is not ‘morally neutral’, and that a ‘bad’ reputation is intrinsic to it. Similarly, as part of a campaign against corruption, Rajiv Yadav (26 years old, student) dropped the suffix Yadav from his name. He also wrote a couple of articles in the local Yadav newsletter in which he proposed that the challenge to Yadav youths in the 21st century should be to make the Yadav caste title respectable. Yadavs, he said, need to regain a clean and respectable image that can overcome the unfortunate but popular goonda stereotype. However, among the Yadavs, I have not found any major attempt to relocate political participation ‘outside the realm of “dirty” electoral politics’, as has been happening among the Dalits in UP (Jaoul 2007: 193). At the local level, Pavan and Rajiv’s dissenting voices remain very
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weak and are strongly criticised, or barely noticed, by the significant number of people for whom having a goonda reputation and being actively involved in ‘politics’ is a matter of pride, not shame. Yadav boys who put on weight, do not enjoy wrestling or have peaceful and quiet personalities are teased by their companions with Bania nicknames. Banias are considered cowardly and incapable of fighting by the Yadavs. The majority of informants strongly value their ability to make ‘political’ contacts, and often proudly emphasise how in Mathura town people prefer to approach Yadav fixers rather than fixers from other castes. They highlight their ability to ‘do politics’, and they do not attempt to disguise their illegal activities. To have influential political contacts (even better if they are within the family) is locally considered a source of prestige, and not something to be ashamed of.

When local Yadavs refer to their politicians as goondas, their use of the word does not necessarily imply moral judgement. For example, during a discussion with a group of Yadavs about the forthcoming municipality elections in Sadar Bazaar, three people were ready to bet Rs 500 that S. A. Yadav would win. When I asked why they were so sure, they told me that ‘he had the look of a goonda’, and people (especially women) like that. The ‘goonda look’ typically implies a strong muscular physique, a leather jacket (worn even in 45°C heat), sunglasses, a powerful motorbike, and a mischievous smile. In many instances, the goonda appellation is used to convey a ‘cool’, ‘successful’ and charismatic image. Hence, goonda qualities and skills are considered attractive characteristics and virtually a necessity for a leader operating in contemporary urban north India.

In Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar, I rarely overheard local Yadavs passing moral judgements about the conduct of local goonda politicians. Whenever politicians were criticised, they were not accused of being corrupt, but of not being ‘loyal’ to their community and not protecting their community. Consider, for example, the case of a local Samajwadi Party Yadav politician who during the 1999 parliamentary election campaign was publicly criticised for keeping a part of the campaign

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12 This masculine image is certainly shaped by popular culture and in particular by television, soaps operas and films (see Osella and Osella 2004). The cultural importance of movie stars who become political heroes in India politics is well known (see Dickey 1993) and the heroic image of the goonda man/woman has become an important character of Hindi movies. At the moment the author is conducting more research on this aspect of the ‘goonda image’.
Wrestling with (Body) Politics

budget for himself and his alleged ‘Brahmin’ mistress. This protest was articulated in a spectacular way and by taking recourse to a language of masculinity. One morning, the inhabitants of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar woke up and found their neighbourhood covered with hundreds of leaflets. The text was written in a powerful, ironic language, and portraying the Yadav politician as a castrated man. It described the politician as having completely lost control of his manliness and having become the puppet of his Brahmin mistress. Again, the public protest did not criticise corruption per se, it contested the ‘unfair’ distribution of ‘the fruits of corruption’. Thus, what was at stake and considered ‘wrong’ and ‘amoral’ was his lack of loyalty towards his community.

This example shows that citizens possess the means to make their local political leaders accountable. It also suggests that, locally, corruption does not provoke strong outrage, at least not enough to push people onto the streets in protest (cf. Osella and Osella 2000b). I suspect that politicians in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar are generally not criticised openly, in part because they behave according to the same social norms that are present within the larger society they operate in. After all, leaders are socially constructed and legitimised by the particularities of their local political cultures. It is true that in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar there are some dissenting voices, like that of Pavan, however, these voices remain ambiguous. People like Pavan may criticise the dirtiness of politics and distance themselves from it verbally, but their actions are not always consistent with their words. After all, Pavan did not refuse the job he was offered in the local post office, even though he was aware that his uncle had paid for it. Pavan’s behaviour exemplifies how politics remains a complex and ambiguous world that does not offer to any simple ‘moral’ guidelines (see Ruud 2000). In general, the Yadavs think that they have for a long time been victims in a society whose laws and institutions have been regularly manipulated against them. While there is little support for the idea of political violence as a legal and moral concept, however, by the same token it should be noted that the Yadavs greatly value another moral principle — loyalty to ones community.

The Vernacularisation of Democracy and Goondaism

My focus here has been on offering some explanations as to why muscle politics, as a political style, is so successful in India and how this particular way of ‘doing politics’ has been able to coexist with
strong support for a participatory democracy and the empowerment of poor people. In Mathura we encountered the proliferation of muscle politics in a community which commonly describes itself as ‘a caste of politicians’. Political ethnographies of Mathura Yadavs show how politicians (both local and regional) and the people they intend to mobilise use a muscular body languages, virile symbols and martial–heroic narratives to appeal to their audiences and to legitimise their support for criminal politics and their involvement in ‘goonda’ type of political acts.

In a recent discussion on the role of strongmen political figures in urban India, Thomas Blom Hansen (2005) suggests that one key to understand the appeal of muscle politics lies in the concept of *mardangi* (manliness/virility), a Persian term that is also found in Urdu, Hindi and other Indian languages. Indeed many have noted how there has been a modern revaluation of Kshatriya-type masculine ideals of honour, martial strength and valour (see Pinch 1996; Hansen 1996). Virile and warrior martial politics, which are solidly grounded in Hindu traditions and cosmologies, have been mobilised by different political and social actors. For example, the rise of Hindu nationalism has witnessed a martial reinvigoration of deities like Ram and also Krishna. In particular, the Ayodhya Ramjanmabhumi issue has remodelled Ram into a symbol demarcating geographic, territorial and spiritual boundaries. He has been transformed into a ‘militant’ god (Kapur 1993). The new images depict him in an aggressive posture, striding forward with a bow ready for combat. With a muscular body, he is heavily armed, *ugra* (angry) and ready for a war. In short, he represents a virile Hinduism. The same process is visible in recent narrative and iconographic portrayals of Krishna. Krishna, the ‘lovable-but-untrustworthy’ god (Davis 1996: 35), has been transformed into a ‘quasi ideal king’; what we are witnessing thus is a martial reinvigoration of the Krishna mythology (Haberman, quoted in Pinch 1996: 196).

However, if Ram has been represented as the perfect king and his rule (*Ram-rajya*) as the ideal of good government for Hindu India, the Yadav caste/community and Samajwadi Party political rhetoric depict Krishna as the first democratic leader of a secular republican government. During rallies and political meetings, in order to create a bond with the audience, Yadav politicians compare themselves to a virile Krishna who has lost his sexual ambiguity, but not his mischievousness, his statecraft abilities and, importantly, his human touch: a Krishna, whose morality is ambiguous in a manner similar to that of Yadav musclemen politicians. The following is an example
extracted from a speech made by Laloo Prasad Yadav where the politician explicitly refers to the ‘fodder scam’ in which he was implicated in the mid-1990s.

So Lord Krishna, our god, was known as *makhan chor* (butter thief) and when Laloo was seated on Bihar’s throne, he was blamed as a *ghas-chor* (the grass thief). I repeat, they blame me as a grass thief. I ask you to have a glance all around — whether it is a village in Uttar Pradesh…in every police station…you will find Laloo’s name as thief of grass. They want to stop the success of the heirs of Krishna!\(^\text{13}\)

In many ways Krishna’s ambiguity — his relationship with muscular hero-gods and his humanity — make him the perfect god with whom Yadav strongmen politicians can claim an affinity. But Krishna’s political recruitment (both by Hindu nationalism and its opposition) also reflects the effectiveness of the use of virile deities and heroes in the larger political arena, as well as a strong interest in the elaboration of the language of masculinity. This, however, is not an exclusively Hindu phenomenon but an Indian one, I would say. For example, a muscular styles of politics has also been embraced by the Muslim community of Mumbai, which supports the Samajwadi Party (see, for example, Hansen 2001). Low-class Muslims might not share with their Yadav political allies their identification with Krishna (although in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar two of the main Muslim communities, the Meos and Bhistis, claim descent from Krishna) but they do share, for example, a wrestling and Kshatriya culture (on Muslim wrestlers see Alter 1993). For the Yadav and Muslim Samajwadi Party supporters the body and personhood of iconic figures like Mulayam Singh Yadav are a constant reference point, indeed these ‘mimetic relations reveal the power of some men to be “more male” than others’ (Osella, Osella and Chopra 2004: 30).

This model of masculinity, however, is opposed by some communities who construct their political rhetoric on different registers. Educated young people from the Chamar caste (a former Untouchable caste and one of the main supporters of the BSP) of Bijnor district in UP, studied by C. Jeffrey, P. Jefferey and R. Jefferey (2004), constructed an effective political language through discourses of education and ‘genteel masculinity’. In contrast to young Yadavs, the young educated

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\(^{13}\) Laloo Prasad Yadav, speech made at the AIYM Convention, Vaishali–New Delhi, 26 December 1999.
Chamars did not engage ‘in aggressive, extreme and exaggerated forms of masculinity or violent political action. Rather, the experience of educated underemployment has generated a multitude of small scale tactics oriented around moral narratives of genteel masculinity’ (ibid.: 15). Young Chamars avoid ostentation in their dress, they do not leave their shirts hanging out of their trousers, and they wear clean clothes. These are viewed as the cultural codes of educated and civilised people, whereas uneducated people are said to wear chains and not tuck in their shirts.

In a recent publication on South Asian masculinities Osella, Osella and Chopra (2004) point out how they encounter in their ethnographic material, again and again, ‘strong essentialisms’ that ‘secretly’ recognise the importance of performance (ibid.: 12). Yadav boys need to learn and be crafted into virile/goonda male models through wrestling and politics. Women’s appreciation for strong men contributes to shaping this type of masculinity and, by extension, political style. Careful attention to dress is required of the young politicised Chamars, who seek to present to the world a male body that is clearly marked as ‘educated’ and ‘civilised’. The Chamars’ popular understanding of democracy is evidently constructed in opposition to the violent and macho political culture of traditional local dominant north Indian ‘martial’ castes like Yadavs, Jats, Gujjars, and Thakurs. Nevertheless, in so doing their interpretation also highlights the political importance of performing masculinity (whether genteel or rough) in Indian society. Contrasting the Mathura Yadavs’ political culture with the Chamars of Varanasi, Manuela Ciotti (2006) describes how while the Yadavs believe in caste substance and in descent, ‘the Chamars are affected by ‘genealogical amnesia’ and wish to build a new but specifically Chamar identity through education.’ (ibid.: 909) — and, I would add, through particular corporeal political languages. Democracy is thus vernacularised by the Yadavs and Chamars through similar channels (i.e., in the domains of kinship, personhood, masculinity, and ‘the past’) but when it is subsequently internalised, it acquires different meanings, agendas, body languages, and political styles.

Contemporary ethnographies show how the cultural salience and allure of muscle politics, embedded as it is in such vernacular resources as local myths, heroic legends and popular Hinduism, has been reshaped by India’s popular ‘patronage democracy’ in both similar and different ways. The hypothesis behind this approach is that the
moment democracy enters a particular historical and sociocultural setting it becomes vernacularised; producing new social relations and values, which in turn become the raw material for new relations, political rhetoric and political cultures. Hence, despite historical and cultural continuities with the past, the goonda model of masculinity as a basis of leadership is a vernacular idiom that is neither ‘modern’ nor ‘traditional’ but is a byproduct of a particular reinterpretation and internalisation of ‘democracy’.

Muscular styles of political participation, evidently, do not correspond with the ideals of liberal democracy that shaped the Indian Constitution. I would argue, however, that they should be ultimately be viewed as a reinterpretation of such principles (cf. Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 138). In India the so-called ‘Backward Classes’ have successfully inserted themselves into the political process at the local, state and national levels and they have been incorporated into the ‘democratic’ world which was previously almost entirely monopolised by the upper-caste/middle-class elites. Through political participation the lower strata of society seem to have been able to gain state resources previously inaccessible to them. And even if their methods appear ‘undemocratic’, disadvantaged caste/communities continue to demand empowerment with reference to the values associated with liberal democracy. Indeed, the issue to be explored is how ‘differently’ the ideas and practices of liberal democracy are reinterpreted by different communities and within communities in India and elsewhere around the world and how in the process democracy becomes part of conceptual worlds that are far removed from theories of liberal democracy and produces forms of leadership in which ‘boss’ and ‘lordly’ idioms overlap and inform each other in a complex, effective and ‘legitimate’ way.

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To Create a Crowd: Student Leaders in Dhaka

Arild Engelsen Ruud*

In August 2007 curfew was imposed for two days in Dhaka and other cities of Bangladesh after widespread and violent protests against the army-backed caretaker government. Students were prominent in the protests, first as the group from within which the protests started and second as one of the most visible groups participating in the demonstrations and violence that followed. In response, the universities and student halls were closed. They were reopened only two months later. Police cases were registered against 400 students, and the one-man inquiry commission set up to investigate the unrest also focused mainly on student participation.1

The protests were one case among many in which students have participated in large numbers and in which violence has been part of the picture. Mass mobilised students led by student organisations have been an integral element in the unrest that has characterised much of the country’s democratic history. It was, for instance, the case in the violent unrest that triggered the imposition of emergency rule in the country in January 2007.2 Student organisations are not the only set of activist organisations to play such a role, but they figure very

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2 Army-backed emergency rule was imposed against a background of the government and the opposition’s inability to agree on election procedures as well as widespread unrest and violence. Emergency rule was lifted after general elections in December 2008.
prominently among those that do. Moreover, student organisations are also often engaged in violent clashes against one another on campus, and there are quite frequently even reports of violent clashes between factions of the same student organisation.

The incidents in which Dhaka University student organisations take part are often violent. In addition, such incidents seem to flare up very suddenly and tend to involve a large number of people; in some cases they are called riots.\(^3\) The argument I make in this article is that these forms of unrest have some of the same characteristics as the north Indian riots that Paul Brass and others have analysed (Brass 1997, 2003; Wilkinson 2005). Such riots previously were understood to have structural causes, such as economic or political marginalisation, but these more recent studies have convincingly shown the existence of an ‘institutionalised riot system’ (Brass 2003: 258–61), with specialised roles and the strategic political use of riots. These traits are evident in the case of Bangladeshi student politics as well. There are important differences too, of course. Communal riots is a term most commonly used for large-scale dangerous events with many casualties and great disruption. The routine violence that characterises much of the unrest at Dhaka University is somewhat more mundane and controlled. There are the occasional deaths, but more often broken bones, head injuries and wounds that require medical treatment. Nonetheless, student politics is violent, and behind this violence is, as I shall suggest here, an institutionalised system, specialised roles and strategic use — very much similar to what is found in the more large-scale communal riot. This article investigates the production of crowds that participate in these violent encounters.\(^4\)

**Routine Violence: The Case of a Street Accident**

Under normal circumstances violent incidents will take place at Dhaka University campus several times a year, but on a relatively small scale. Larger scale incidents are rarer, but still happen often enough to have recognisable features. Most of the main features were evident in the case we turn to below, a series of events following a street accident. On the morning of 28 May 2005 a female student of

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\(^4\) The interviews for this research were conducted on six different visits to Dhaka between October 2004 and November 2007. Most informants have been anonymised.
Dhaka University named Shammi Akhtar Happy was hit by a bus and killed at the notoriously dangerous Shahbagh crossing. Two other students and two women were also injured in the accident. A few hours later a number of students ‘went on the rampage’ in reaction. They blocked roads for traffic and burnt several buses and dozens of other passing motor vehicles in the area around campus. The police intervened, trying at first to restore normalcy through a ‘baton charge’, but ended up with a fairly hefty street battle in which they resorted to firing tear gas shells and rubber bullets. The fighting spread to the university campus. Under normal circumstances the police does not enter a university campus but on this occasion they had obtained permission from the proctor to do so. On campus the fighting continued, and students and teachers were now allegedly being ‘harassed’ and injured by police officers. This marked the high point of what one newspaper characterised as a ‘six-hour battle’. The proctor’s office was ‘vandalised’ during the skirmishes.

In this case we see, first, how this ordinary and all-too-frequent street accident, within hours, turned into a ‘battle’. Second, we note how swiftly other organs of the state, including the university leadership and the police, were involved in a partisan manner in a violent imbroglio over what originally had to do with student welfare and safety. As we move along, in the narration of events in the following days, we shall see how these features became even more prominent. And we shall note that in spite of large numbers of students participating in the all-engulfing protests, student participation was not univocally enthusiastic and how some people’s support was distinctly lacklustre. We should also note that in my interviews on student politics conducted only six months later this series of events did not figure prominently. It was one among many incidents and cases of unrest students would recall.

Just hours after the fatal bus accident, friends, classmates and peers of the deceased student assembled at the Dhaka Medical College hospital morgue, where the body had been brought. Some of them wanted to bring the body to the department and to the university morgue. Others were against moving the body. Even at this early

5 Apart from interviews, primarily conducted in November 2005 and April 2006, the narrative is based on reports in the newspapers New Age and Daily Star. The press reports were given by correspondents on campus, often students, and were probably accurate.
stage, the active role of student activists was evident to some. ‘It is simple politics’, one student said, according to a report. Those who wanted to move the body to the department were leaders and activists from the Chhatra League, and those who objected were leaders and activists of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD).\(^6\) These are the two largest student organisations on campus and in the country. They are affiliated to each of the two main political parties in the country and are fiercely opposed to each another. The JCD people — affiliated to the party in government at the time — succeeded in preventing the body from being moved over to campus. The body was instead sent directly to the student’s home town after a post-mortem examination. The reason for preventing the body from being sent to campus was probably to avoid any rallying point for further protests. But the protests came nonetheless.

The next day a gathering of students that included activists and members of the Chhatra League and other opposition student organisations, confined the vice-chancellor, the proctor and a number of teachers in the fine arts building for three hours. The officials had come to this building to express their condolences and sympathy. However, they found themselves surrounded by students protesting against the police harassment of the previous day and demanding the resignation of the proctor. Finally, activists of the JCD arrived and, after a first effort that failed, succeeded in driving the protesters away and freeing the vice-chancellor and his party. The same evening ‘a huge contingent of police’ was posted around campus to prevent further incidents.

On the third day protesters made effigies of the vice-chancellor and the proctor and tried to set these on fire while demanding their resignation. The JCD prevented the burning of the effigies and any

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\(^6\) The different organisations go under a variety of acronyms and names (for instance, BSL, BCL, Chatro League, Chhatra League, and Student League all refer to the same organisation). For the sake of simplicity I refer to the two main ones as the JCD and the Chhatra League. Their full names are Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal and Bangladesh Chhatra League. The JCD is the student wing of the Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Dal or Nationalist Party (BNP), the largest party in the four-party coalition that ended its term in October 2006. The Chhatra League is the student wing (although formally independent) of the Awami League — the main party in the coalition that won the December 2008 election.
further demonstrations by chasing away the protesters. Later the same
day, leaders of the protesters, now more clearly identified as activists
of the opposition student organisations, and the Chhatra League in
particular, filed petitions with the police. They named 86 JCD activists
and some teachers and accused them of launching attacks on mourn-
ing students, referring to the incidents in the Fine Arts Building.

To calm things down, the vice-chancellor formed a probe committee
from among the university’s academic staff to look into the three days
of violence. Within the next day, however, four members of the com-
mite resigned. They belonged to the ‘blue panel’, that is they were
supporters of the Awami League, the Chhatra League’s mother party.
They claimed the inquiry would be ineffective and that the university
administration had a political bias.

The same day, the Chhatra League and other left-leaning student
organisations held a protest rally on campus when a bomb went off
nearby. No one was injured, but in retaliation activists of the JCD
attacked the protesting students and ‘went berserk’ throughout campus.
Leaders of the Chhatra League and other opposition organisations
were hunted down from different hiding places and many of them
were beaten. The Chhatra League’s national organisation announced
a nationwide student strike in protest against the attacks. They also
threatened to launch an indefinite strike if their protest rallies con-
tinued to be obstructed. The JCD reacted to this by stating that they
would not tolerate the active presence of the Chhatra League in
Dhaka University until the investigations were over. To ensure that
such activities could not take place, JCD activists roamed around
campus ‘on motorbikes’ in search of Chhatra League activists. They
also opened up a new JCD unit at the Fine Arts Building, and the
newly-enlisted activists kept an eye on the entrance to the building
while looking for activists from the opposition. In effect, they threw
the Chhatra League off of campus.

The Chhatra League carried out processions the following day
just outside campus, and they were closely followed by ‘police in
riot gear’ and activists of the JCD. The processions were disrupted by
the JCD activists present, and the marchers were dispersed. The police
did not interfere. Later the same day, in protest, the Chhatra League
called a nationwide strike, but this did not have much of an impact.
The Dhaka University campus was by now deserted and many students
had left the halls for home. Over the days that followed it was clear
that the JCD was in control of the campus and could relax the gate
patrols. When the Chhatra League gathered for a protest rally at the
Central Shahid Minar, located at a distance from campus, they were easily chased away by JCD activists. The university administration once again sought to intervene and organise negotiations, but the Chhatra League objected. And while the JCD agreed to negotiations in principle, it still would not allow ‘outsiders and criminals’ entry into the university campus and in effect continued to prevent Chhatra League activities from taking place.

Only three weeks later did the Chhatra League and the other Left-leaning organisations return to Dhaka University campus, on invitation from the JCD. They all met, a little coldly, around the tables of Madhu’s Canteen — the dingy canteen that forms the headquarters of all Dhaka University student organisations. With this initial symbolic meeting the normal atmosphere of Dhaka University returned, and students, activists and leaders of the different student organisations would once again share, in a relatively amicable fashion, the confined space of Madhu’s Canteen where all of them drink tea, smoke cigarettes and discuss politics, strategies and events.

**Spontaneity and Leadership**

An interesting aspect of student politics is brought out in the rapid escalation of an accident of no particular significance (people are killed all the time in the notorious Dhaka traffic) to a battle between students and the police. It is not uncommon for street accidents to cause small riots. Frustrated and frightened passengers, pedestrians and other passers-by vent their anger by intimidating the driver involved, sometimes they beat him, and often they set fire to the vehicle. This happened in the case discussed above as well. Some of the protesters were students, as the campus was located nearby. However, the incident did not remain a local skirmish, but turned into a drawn out ‘battle’ involving a substantial number of police forces and a large number of students and even university teachers as well as the university leadership, and at times was quite violent.

One reason given for the escalation was student frustration. ‘The situation for the ordinary student under this regime’ was such that they seized this opportunity to vent their anger. The frustration had been caused by ‘the government’s neglect of [the] basic need for safety of the ordinary student’. Interview with a Chhatra League leader, 18 October 2008.
of the table, held that it was the criminal elements in the opposition party who wanted to take full advantage of the accident and ‘create chaos at the university to damage the reputation of the government’ who were responsible.\(^8\)

Both interpretations seek to explain why the initial incident escalated into a more sinister series of events. However, both interpretations seem a little tall considering the scope of the confrontation that followed: riot-like street protests, violent clashes the police and the confinement of university officials, including the vice-chancellor. We should recall that protests such as these often lead to bloodshed — in most cases minor cuts and bruises, but in some cases broken arms, head injuries or other such serious injuries that require hospitalisation. In other words, those who are mobilised into activities such as these demonstrations and the subsequent fighting need to be willing to take a chance and risk injury.

Although frustration and criminal elements may have been part of the picture, and although my information is scanty as to the principal players, it is more than likely that there were some consultations between the leaders of different opposition student organisations as early as during the events at the morgue. Apart from the activists present, the leftist student activists I spoke with and who had been part of the street protests and campus fights on the first day, knew of consultation between some leaders of the main opposition student organisations on that day — initially over mobile phone but eventually at a meeting in the canteen.\(^9\) The same information was shared with me by a group of Mohsin Hall residents, two of whom were JCD activists.\(^10\) This last group also stated that the counter measures taken by the JCD were initiated by the JCD leader on campus and organised by him personally as well as by his closest activist colleagues. At the very least we see in all of this the existence of active and motivated student leaders and their importance in generating the protests that otherwise seemed to simply ‘flare up’. As one of the informants said, ‘Students may be angry, but someone must give them direction’.

One still needs to ask though, how did the individual leaders mobilise participants for the protests. The large number of protesters mobilised in the early days of unrest needs to be explained, but the

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\(^8\) Interview with JCD leader and president of the students union, 17 November 2005.

\(^9\) Interview with Student Union activists, 18 October 2005.

\(^10\) Interview with a group of Mohsin Hall residents, 18 October 2005.
question becomes even more acute in view of the fact that many of them subsequently vanished from campus as the unrest refused to die down. After the first day of struggle that followed the accident, the campus of Dhaka University had a ‘deserted look’ according to a newspaper report, as most students tried to shy away and many had already left the city for home in anticipation of more unrest. ‘Thank God! They did not call on me’ to patrol the gates, one student reportedly said during the JCD boycott of the Chhatra League.  
It was early June, the hottest time of the year. This report and my Mohsin Hall informants suggested that although ordinary students had participated in fairly large numbers in the unrest, they had done so with no great sense of enthusiasm. The idea that the majority of students voluntarily participated in strenuous demonstrations or were mobilised because of some ideological conviction or frustration alone, therefore, is not wholly credible.

**Leaders and ‘Seat Politics’**

‘To make a movement you need student activists’, said a former JCD leader explaining to me the importance of student halls. A group of students I spoke with the same day agreed, and explained that ‘the main source of activists is in the student halls’. It is also here that we can see why student leaders’ support can be remarkably broad and at the same time be remarkably fickle.

There are a large number of halls attached to Dhaka University. Each hall has a nominally elected but in fact appointed ‘hall representative’ as its front person and in effect is its executive leader. He invariably belongs to the dominant student organisation and is surrounded by a number of junior activists, all of whom live in the hall. He reports to more senior leaders on campus, such as the campus unit’s general secretary or any of his associate secretaries, and in some cases to the organisation’s national president, who very often hails from Dhaka University.

To be a hall representative is an important stepping stone towards higher positions and each one carefully selected by the president. An important task for hall representatives is to maintain a group of

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12 Interview with a former JCD leader, 17 October 2005.
13 Interview with a group of Mohsin Hall residents, 18 October 2005.
activists and to ensure the success of any activity that the organisation initiates. These two aims hang together in the most tangible of ways. For instance, on days of important demonstrations, activists posted at the gates will ensure that students do not leave the halls with their books and head for the library. Instead, students are stopped and persuaded to participate in the demonstration. If someone still persists, he may be shouted at, beaten, and most likely noted for future disapproval or even punishment. Activists are able to put such pressure on individual students because of what students today commonly refer to as ‘seat politics’ — perhaps the strongest tool in a student leader’s toolkit.

A ‘seat’ refers to the right of a student to reside in one of the student halls. These halls provide inexpensive accommodation to them and are usually located close to the university campus. As such they are attractive to out-of-town students, most of whom come from families of modest income at best. A huge problem is that the number of seats available is limited. Nominally there are close to 11,000 seats available to Dhaka University students, but the university has about 30,000 students. According to a press report, there are about 20,000 students staying in the different halls.\textsuperscript{14} To accommodate the extra numbers additional mattresses are put on the floor of rooms that originally housed only four students to provide sleeping space for more. One room I visited allegedly housed 26 students. Some students sleep in prayer rooms, reception rooms, common rooms, etc. Such ‘seats’ are jokingly referred to as ‘F-seats’ — F stands for floor. Some rooms are described as a ‘dumping yard for non-allotted residents’ or ‘refugee camps’.\textsuperscript{15} The students’ private belongings are stored in boxes piled up in corners.

Students accept being squeezed in because the halls are cheap and ‘their father sends money with great difficulty’.\textsuperscript{16} For many, perhaps most, a seat is what makes it possible to study at the university at all. One provost said he allowed the large number of students in his hall for ‘humanitarian reasons’.\textsuperscript{17} Most students complain about their living

\textsuperscript{14} ‘Crammed Rooms Define DU Dormitory Life’, \textit{New Age}, 8 October 2005.
\textsuperscript{16} Interview with a former Chhatra League activist, 18 October 2005.
\textsuperscript{17} ‘Crammed Rooms Define DU Dormitory Life’, \textit{New Age}, 8 October 2005; interview with group of Mohsin Hall residents, 18 October 2005.
conditions, which obviously are crammed and squalid, but still accept it as necessary suffering for a better future.

‘Seat politics’, then, has to do with helping students with accommodation. This service is provided by student organisations, in fact monopolised by them, and comes with an unstated but generally known and accepted cost: participation in the organisation’s activities.

I joined JCD because of seat politics. To get a seat I approached the JCD activists at the hall, and assured them that I supported them. I had no alternative. For one year I assisted the JCD, joined processions, participated in meetings, took part in several fights [maramari], was present in the canteen. Then I left, after one year. But I suffered terrible pressure for six to eight months and I had to leave the seat. Their tactics is to scare people [bhoy dekhano], threaten to beat, shouting [galagali], both in the hall and on campus. I now live with relatives in the city. This [involuntary participation] is the tradition, and accounts for 90 per cent of the students.18

Even if only a few students come to a point where they are threatened with eviction, there are enough cases for the possibility of violence to be known to all. The guards at the gates, the floor seats and the crammed rooms, and the whole procedure through which students obtain a seat and thus find themselves dependent on activists, point to the fact that seats, in particular ‘floor seats’, are never entirely secure. And there are of course innumerable ways in which this lack of security can be hinted at by the hall leaders.

It follows that control over halls is of great importance to student organisations and ambitious student leaders. Control over these halls has been the source of severe conflicts between the main student organisations for a long time, and has increasingly become more important. During the Awami League’s rule (1996–2001), the Chhatra League, which supported that government and in turn was supported by it, used its clout with the university administration and the police to secure control over an increasing number of halls — ‘hall capture’. After the BNP’s election victory in 2001, the JCD reversed the situation and took control of the halls. It is generally agreed that the JCD’s move represented a bit of an escalation in conflict. After the election, leaders

18 Interview with a former JCD activist, now associated with leftist organisations, 19 October 2005. For a similar case see ‘JCD Men Beat DU Students’, New Age, 3 September 2003.
and activists of the JCD arrived at the gates of several of the Dhaka University halls. According to one Chhatra League leader, ‘They did not come in. They stood outside making a lot of noise. They had guns and sticks and shouted and shouted. The police was also there. But they didn’t have to tell us. We understood. So we left the halls’. The move to take over control of the halls came shortly after the election, not in stages, and it affected almost all the halls (at Dhaka University there were one or two exceptions, besides the girls’ hostels which tend to be excluded from this). Those who left were Chhatra League leaders and activists, whereas the large body of largely uncommitted students remained and were instead asked to enlist their support for the JCD. Now they would added to the JCD’s sources of influence.

After the Awami League’s election victory in December 2008, the party’s leader Sheikh Hasina asked its student organisation, the Chhatra League, to avoid ‘politics of vengeance’. Nonetheless, the Chhatra League activists forced JCD leaders and activists out of DU halls in January 2009.

‘Muscle’ or Not?

Seat politics, as can be seen, is a tough game, one of pressure and coercion. But this is not the entire picture. If a student asks to be excused for some legitimate reason — sick relative, feeling unwell, exam coming up, etc. — the activists will normally accept this. In this acknowledgement by the opponents lies an important insight, that highhanded pressure cannot be used in excess even with the threat of ‘seat politics’ hanging over the individual student’s head. In general, more senior students are exempted from the obligation to join demonstrations, although they do tend to keep a low profile in order to avoid trouble.

In the opinion of a former student leader, personality is (or at least was) critically important in mobilising student support. ‘We talked [amra golpo kortam — expressing a wider social activity than mere talking], talked with friends, made them feel at ease, were friends, included newcomers, and always discussed political issues’. Another former leftist student leader felt it had been necessary ‘To be an orator,

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19 Interview with a Chhatra League leader, 17 October 2004.
21 Interview with a former Chhatra League leader, now a prominent Awami League leader and businessman, 5 April 2006.
To Create a Crowd

a good talker, to have an ability to make others enthusiastic’. A very crucial point to him was that leaders in his days had to have ‘mass contact, remember names and be in touch with many people’. These points have interesting parallels in the styles Craig Jeffrey (this volume) found to characterise student leaders in north India.

Leaders today emphasise the same requirements. To be able to mobilise fellow students even under less adverse circumstances than the hot summer sun requires a certain amount of individual capacity for persuasion. One JCD-affiliated hall secretary said, ‘I must keep them happy. There are always so many problems. So many small issues. They must be solved and everyone must be happy’. A Chhatra League activist, until recently of some importance, held that ‘to talk to people, make them feel at ease, that they are liked’ is important. An expression of this takes place in Madhu’s Canteen every day. As mentioned, this canteen functions as the daily headquarters of all student organisations at Dhaka University (except the Islamist Chhatra Shibir) and every day, and for most of the day, a number of activists and leaders of most organisations can be found there sipping tea and smoking. The largest table is occupied by the dominant student organisation. And it is here that many students come to seek help regarding all sorts of minor and major problems that they might have. The leader of the JCD explained the organisations’ activities in this way:

We give help to the students against the authorities, against unruly elements. We sit in Madhu’s Canteen and they can come to us. It is our duty. If there is a fight, we help them. We help them if there is teacher’s abuse or maltreatment. We talk to teachers. Also, if there are problems in the halls, regarding the library, reading room, gym … if there is a problem at the hall, the JCD will go to the provost. If provost says no, then to the government.

This student leader was among many who claimed that student leaders are always helpful to all students. A former student leader who belonged to the socialist opposition said of the JCD that ‘They hold office in Madhu, which makes them accessible, everyone can come.

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22 Interview with a former Chhatra Union leader, currently a university professor, 9 April 2006.
23 Interview with a JCD-affiliated hall secretary, 6 April 2006.
24 Interview with a Chhatra League activist, 7 April 2006.
25 Interview with a JCD leader and president, 17 October 2005.
There is always someone who is there, can answer questions, help with suggestions, say whom to talk to. Not just serious student organisers, but likable people of all sorts’. Coming from an opponent the statement substantiates the claim that the main student organisations are represented by people who can ‘fix things’ for you and be a ‘middleman’. Such help creates a natural sense of gratitude or at least one of obligation in the student who receives a seat or some other form of assistance. And in the process, at some level, personal bonds are created between individual students and the student organisation’s activists or leaders, one that is not mechanical or entirely instrumental but is based on ties of intimacy, friendship and sympathy between the newcomer in town and ‘likeable people’ who have been around a few years.

In the everyday life of a student hall the forms of address are those of fictitious kinship. For instance, the more senior students will be addressed using the term for elder brother or sister (dada or didi, alternatively as a suffix to their names, Madhu-da, Sayeda-di). Students invariably address one another using the familiar or the intimate pronoun (tumi or tui), or they use nicknames, which also suggest relationships of familiarity. Even senior hall leaders are addressed in this manner. This is a common Bengali courtesy and a popular way of relating to other people. The point here though, is that at the level of individuals in the student halls relationships are personalised. This entails social interaction’s being framed by the same expectations that commonly apply to social relations between friends, neighbours, colleagues, or kin. They carry obligations of mutuality, support and respect. They are not binding, but if not respected will reflect badly on the erring individual. In this context it is difficult to conceive of someone maintaining a position of leadership for very long by commanding or using threats only.

**Tenders and Bullies**

Control over halls is not only used to mobilise students for demonstrations but also to extract other forms of support and resources.

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26 Interview with a former Student Union leader, now a Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) activist, 21 October 2005.
As such, control over halls is an example of how different sources of influence are used to reinforce one another with great creativity. It is also an example of how vulnerable positions may be, and how easily a brutal exploitation of hall control or seat politics can cause great difficulties elsewhere.

An important element in a student leader’s position is the cooperation he is able to effect with other state bodies or formal institutions or any other agent with some clout, such as entrepreneurs, small businesses, leaders of other political organisations, etc. Without the support of the university administration ‘seat politics’ would not be possible, and without the manpower that stems from control over halls one’s value to the party and its willingness to lean on the police would be limited. Elements of such a logic were evident in the series of events that followed Happy’s death. The JCD could disrupt a procession brought out by the Chhatra League even though the police was present in large numbers. The day before, the JCD had rescued the vice-chancellor and other members of the teaching staff, who had been confined for hours in the Fine Arts Building by angry and shouting Chhatra League students. We can very well imagine that the vice-chancellor and his party would have been grateful, and that these events would have helped construe a relationship between that JCD leader and the university leadership that was both political and personal.

Another case suggests that student leaders can be engaged on behalf of a wider institutional interest. A graduate student and supporter of the leftist student union explained how he had initiated a protest against the cutting of 18 trees on campus. The university wanted to expand the library building, and many students suspected heavy financial interests and important paybacks behind the deal. The campaign to save trees threatened to prevent this. After one fairly successful procession, the student was approached late in the evening by a JCD leader.

He was a senior leader, not from my hall. He said to the others to leave [the room]. He said to me ‘Protests are OK, but enough now’. Then he offered me five lakhs [500,000] to call off the protests. Five lakhs was a small sum compared to costs of building. I refused. This was for the greenery, for the students, not for my benefit. Again the next night he came back. Then he was angry, tried to persuade me. ‘This is not right. What you are doing is dangerous, bad. Something may happen.’
Veiled threats, like that. I was very scared and the next day I moved to another hall, Jagannath Hall. This hall is for minorities, there is not so much student movement. I had friends there, and I stayed there for two-and-a-half years.\footnote{Interview with a student, 19 October 2005.}

The student who told me this story was of leftist inclination, although unaffiliated. His story was corroborated by others present, who pointed out that the trees were eventually cut and the library extension building is now built. The interesting point here is that a student leader came as a middleman on behalf of the university administration and the contractor. The threat also made it clear that he would use his clout as a student leader to enforce the goal. This sort of incident is common enough for students to suspect that leaders have a financial interest in most deals and that they receive a cut.

It may well be that Dhaka University students exaggerate the extent of financial deals, but they point to the regular expenses leaders have in order to retain activists — including mobile phones, tea, lunch, drugs (mostly the cough syrup Phensidyl), and pocket money — and argue that these relatively small expenses do add up. It may be noted that funds are not made available from the mother party; on the contrary, ambitious activists may be expected to make contributions to the war chest themselves. It is common knowledge that at least some of the money comes from regular contributions by canteen managers on campus or shop owners in the vicinity. However, most assume that far more serious money comes from the occasional cuts student leaders are able to take from new constructions on and around campus. As a government agency puts out the tender for construction and contractors bid for it, the leader of the student organisation will talk to prospective contractors, and in exchange for a slice of the pie — a cut of 5 to 10 per cent — may ‘recommend’ the contract to the higher authorities. Regardless of whether or not the practice is as extensive as rumoured, or the percentage as high as suggested, we can safely assume the general existence of this practice. It even has a name: ‘tender business’.

They will take money from the contractors. If they don’t get any money from the contractors, they will break in through the fence at night [at the construction site] and scare away the night guards. Then they will ruin the equipment. They can also scare away the workers during
the day. The workers can easily be scared away. This is B-T, bhoy-toy [fear and such]. Or they can create other kinds of trouble. To do with permits or such. The contractors know this. They always have provisions for this in their calculations when they bid for the tender. Some years ago there were also some businessmen who were kidnapped. Kept in the hostels for many days. They demanded money from their families. That was some years ago, not now.  

Interestingly, although this came in an interview with a Student Union activist, whom one might suspect of being biased, two JCD activists present at the interview did not object to what was being said. Similar cases of student organisations involved in scams are often covered by the press, such as the case of JCD involvement in a property deal reported in July 2005.  

Although student leaders may be involved in such schemes, scams or night-time operations of vandalism, my informants were adamant that regular students do not take part. Those who do are known as mastans, bullies or thugs (or goondas, in India). These characters are sometimes registered as students and sometimes not, but they are a common tool in the kit of student leaders—indeed of all political leaders in the country. There are interesting parallels here with political operators located on the fringes of organised party politics described by Björn Alm for a village in Tamil Nadu and by Lucia Michelutti for a town in north India (both this volume). For student leaders in Dhaka, mastans are used to intimidate opponents, scare ordinary students into submission, and in general send a message of serious intent. One member of the Dhaka University staff, very reluctant to disclose anything, said ‘People get beaten! These boys beat up people!’  

In addition to the possibility of being beaten up, there was the more serious threat of being shot at. Between 1988 and 1994, 15 students are alleged to have been killed and more than 1,000 injured in violent clashes. After a famous gun battle between the JCD and the Chhatra League in 1994, the use of guns has somewhat abated (Rahman 2006: 58).  

In the tender business of today, guns and violence are no longer common, partly because the interests of student organisations and leaders are already calculated into the overall budget, just as contacts

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28 Interview with a former Chhatra League activist, 21 October 2005.
30 Interview with a Dhaka University staff member, 22 October 2005.
are made beforehand and deals sorted out well ahead of final decisions. Guns are not brandished in the open because, as a former JCD leader who is now a prosperous businessman and a high-ranking BNP leader said, ‘they are still there in the halls’ and function as veiled threats. ‘Today student politics is like the mafia, with the muscle and networking. They have pulled away from the streets, it is now all behind stage’. However, guns are still around. As late as the clashes that followed the road accident referred to in the beginning of this article guns were being brandished by JCD activists and mastans as they drove around campus looking for Chhatra League activists. In February 2007, some weeks after the imposition of emergency government in the country, police and army personnel raided student hostels for arms. However, a JCD activist and a Chhatra League mastan told me, independently of one another, that students had been tipped off and that more than a thousand pieces of firearms had been carried away from hiding places in the halls ahead of the raid.

Mastans no doubt are a part of student politics. They live in student halls and use the hall or Madhu’s Canteen as the centre of their operations. Leaders depend on them as they help bring in cash, intimidate opponents and help ambitious leaders with deals and operations that require brute force. In some cases, the employment of mastans allows the student activist to solve tricky problems on his own or his superior’s behalf. But, although integral to student politics, mastani is hidden and is considered a shameful and illegitimate part of student life, and interestingly a perennial risk for the leader. Real mastans rarely get very far in politics. ‘Mastani gives you a bad name’ (or ‘reputation’) in the words of one informant, himself known as a mastan. The ambitious student leader knows he must keep mastans at an arm’s length, making use of them only as one important tool in a larger kit that helps him cut deals — to keep control over halls, for instance, or to extract compliance from local businessmen.

Doing Deals

The tender business, building networks, arranging deals for oneself or for others, including private deals, in contemporary Bangladesh

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31 Interview with a former JCD leader, 23 October 2005.
33 Interview with a mastan, 24 February 2007.
such activities are commonly known as *tadbir kora* — ‘supervising’ or ‘looking after’ one’s deals, or rather ‘doing deals’. It is common enough in the sense that everybody needs friends and allies in an uncertain world, but in the case of businessmen and politicians such as student leaders tadbir kora is by far their main modus operandi. But it is a complex and delicate mode that requires many skills and many tools. One tool is the employment of some mastans, who can effectuate or intimidate. Another tool is contacts — in the police, the university administration or leadership, among local businessmen. Control over halls is important of course, and entails accommodation for supporters, a command centre, muscle power and manpower for demonstrations. And a fourth tool is money, which helps the other tools work. Tadbir kora is making use of all this, effectuating deals through a network of allies and friends. It is an informal way of proceeding and relies on mutual trust. Trust is crucial yet fickle requirement in the trade, because the relationships are personal and the deals are often innovative, secretive and constantly (re-)negotiated. One informant — a former JCD leader and now a businessman with political ambition — gave me this example by way of explaining tadbir kora:

Tadbir kora means lobbying, pressure, influence. Example: Someone comes to me and says I will give you three lakh taka if you can help me get this permit. He comes to me because he knows I have friends. So I will go to one of my friends who knows the Minister and ask my friend to talk to the Minister. And so perhaps my friend will agree, and perhaps he will ask for one lakh taka for the job. If so, I will give him. Then the Minister will look at it, and he will say yes or no, or maybe he will ask for one lakh taka. So I will give him, and I will be left with one lakh for the job. If my friend does not take one lakh and the Minister does not take one lakh, then I will keep three lakh.\(^{34}\)

The quote suggests a strong relation between business and politics, which has been also brought out by research (Monem 2007). A former student leader who had become a senior yet disillusioned government official said ‘Student leaders are now into business, but business is a vague term. Everything is business’.\(^{35}\) The divide between politics and business is bridged by tadbir kora. It is not uncommon for student leaders to turn to business once or even before they leave student life.

\(^{34}\) Interview with a former JCD leader, 26 October 2006.

\(^{35}\) Interview with a former student leader, 20 October 2005.
(Some are of course business students, but student politics is more common in the arts and social science faculties.) Even after these student leaders turn to business, they continue to retain links with the world of politics, their colleagues and friends from student days and the party leaders they had met then. They should perhaps be understood as businessmen-cum-politicians, or as politicians in the process of accumulating the necessary resources. In the words of a person who had managed to be both and who held a high position in the Awami League, ‘Without business you cannot do politics’.\(^{36}\)

However, such a view may leave us with a picture of student politics as one of largely individualistic student leaders who scramble for power and influence by making creative use of the sources available to them. But there is a system to this seemingly chaotic scramble, and it concerns the criteria by which advancement is secured. What seems like an erratic process is in fact a highly calculated one.

**The Leader Cult and the ‘High Command’**

In an interview with a very dedicated young student leader in the Chhatra League, I asked what characterised in her opinion ‘a good leader’. She did not mention anything that would indicate the importance of maintaining relationships with followers, supporters or fellow students. Instead, she was anxious to impress on me her dedication to the party’s leader. ‘I will gladly give my life to Sheikh Hasina. She represents the country, the *muktijuddhora* [freedom fighters].’\(^{37}\) She added:

> We adhere to Sheikh Hasina’s thinking [*chinta-bhabna*]. Sheikh Hasina is our leader too [*amader-o netri*]. It is her ideas and her leadership that we follow, although [the Chhatra League] is independent of the Awami League. She gives us direction, she gives us advice, and guidance [*diknir shona*]. She is our guardian. She follows and interprets Awami League’s ideology, like her father.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{36}\) Interview with an Awami League politician, 31 October 2007.

\(^{37}\) Interview with a Chhatra League student leader, 5 April 2006.

\(^{38}\) The ‘father’ is Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, ‘father of the nation’, Awami League’s founder, the leader of the independence movement, the country’s first president and the father of Awami League’s current leader, Sheikh Hasina.
Perhaps she saw in this researcher more of a journalist. In a sense she was rehearsing a particular kind of political rhetoric, which may nonetheless still be very real in a practical sense. This ‘leader cult’, *netabhkita* as it is called by some, is part and parcel of most activities by the student organisations. ‘Any declaration by Khaleda Zia we will take to the streets!’, said a high-ranking JCD leader. The political and personal conflict between the leaders of the BNP and the Awami League, between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, is reflected in all struggles in which the JCD and Chhatra League confront each other and forms the rhetorical framework within which most confrontations take place. At regular intervals the two student organisations bring out processions that shout slogans glorifying their leaders.

More seasoned and cynical politicians gave a different colour to this dedication. A former Chhatra League leader who had become a journalist said bluntly that ‘Who Sheikh Hasina loves, this is the main criteria [for becoming a leader]’, while another held that ‘You must keep the big leaders happy’. A former JCD leader who had now become a businessman underlined the need for being in favour with the ‘high command’. At the time of this interview he was in the early stages of trying to secure a parliamentary nomination from his party.

The higher ups have information from different levels. The high command [knows] who is good, who is doing well, good image, can implement decisions, who is smart and talks well. And has good relationship with the high command and can tell the high command that I will obey you; so it is necessary to have a channel to the high command, and make it clear to them how good I am.

It is interesting to note that these politicians seem to distance themselves from the basic rules of the game of politics, as though they find politics somehow sullying. At the same time, however, they engage in politics and adhere to the rules. A former leader of the Chhatra League who at the time of the interview had a senior party position characterised the internal politics of his party in the following way: ‘You must please the high command, make her feel happy. No one says anything against our netri [leader], to do so you have to be very strong [i.e., her nearest advisors]’. And in an acknowledgement

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39 Interview with a JCD leader, 17 October 2005.
40 Interview with a former Chhatra League leader, 5 April 2005.
41 Interview with a former JCD leader, 6 April 2006.
42 Interview with a former Chhatra League leader, 6 April 2006.
of such practices within the BNP too, a senior JCD leader admitted ‘To be [a senior leader], I must use my knowledge. It is very hard. [Khaleda] Zia’s decision is above everything, even above our party’s constitution. So I must win Khaleda Zia’s mind too!’\(^{43}\) The general cynicism with which most people view politicians and political organisations in Bangladesh today is echoed even among politicians themselves. Said one of my Chhatra League activist informants, ‘Student politics today has no goal, only tow the line of the leader’\(^{44}\)

Leadership positions are not open to election. Holders of organisational positions, even at a fairly low level in the organisations, have been nominated by the levels higher up. All the top leaders of student organisations are nominated by the national leaders. An interesting illustration of how this works was provided by what was allegedly an attempt to break with this tradition. In April 2006, the Chhatra League held elections to the posts of president and general secretary, the two most powerful positions in the organisation. This was a much advertised election, with a high media profile, held during a two-day conference in Dhaka with some 2,000 delegates from Chhatra League bodies all over the country.\(^{45}\)

Most delegates had been brought to Dhaka by senior party men, who also paid for their boarding and lodging. There was much merriment during the conference, and the ground in which it was held was densely packed. In theory the election was open, free and fair, but the party’s top leadership, known as the ‘high command’, still had a heavy influence over the process. As one of the senior party men present at the meeting explained, he expected ‘his’ delegates to vote in accordance with his suggestions. And he himself was in close contact with the high command.\(^{46}\) Along with other senior party men I interviewed at the time, they regarded the ‘free and fair’ election as an eye-wash.

What was surprising then was that a very real ‘election campaign’ of sorts did take place at the venue, and that at times it even turned violent.

\(^{43}\) Interview with a senior JCD leader, 17 October 2005.  
\(^{44}\) Interview with a Chhatra League activist, 22 October 2005.  
\(^{46}\) Interview with a senior party man of the Awami League, 3 April 2006.
The 2,000-plus delegates engaged in heated debates and some violence: ‘Gunshots, bomb blasts, chase and counter-chase, ransacking of transparent ballot boxes and damaging of dais and furniture’. 47

The unrest was partly caused by the fact that the Awami League’s national leader, Sheikh Hasina, delayed a decision on whether or not to impose an age limit for the two positions up for election. At the eleventh hour she decided to impose an age limit of 29 for both positions. The decision made some 1,500 supporters of the older contenders assemble outside her house, where they proceeded to ‘damage three vehicles, a car and two micro buses parked near [Sheikh Hasina’s] house, and chased away two young BCL leaders’. 48

These incidents of violence took place both before and after Sheikh Hasina’s decision, and were seen as part of the process of filling the organisation’s various positions — as part of the election campaign, in other words. Interestingly, these incidents of violence do not seem to have been interpreted by the party high command as acts of gross disobedience that could damage the party’s reputation. They seem, instead, to have been interpreted as outbursts of intense and barely containable loyalty to the leader. ‘They could not serve her, so they are frustrated’, explained one Awami League leader. 49

Violence, even against one’s fellow partisans, seems to have been acceptable to the party leadership. In any event, many of the losing contenders, on behalf of whom the acts of violence had been carried out, were accommodated within the organisation’s central committee a few days after the election. The central committee is the Chhatra League’s highest governing body and has no less than 201 members, all of whom are selected, not elected. The committee has several types of members, from vice presidents to secretaries. About half are ordinary members, the rest have positions of some influence and status (secretary for culture, for external relations, etc.). Violence within the party is not punished, but allowed as part of an ongoing process by which the stronger leader is selected. It is treated as an integral part of organisational life, and not as an aberration.

49 Interview with an Awami League leader, 3 April 2006.
Rivals Within

For the individual leader, challenges from within one’s own organisation are sometimes more serious than challenges from outside. Internal challenges — factional strife, which is quite common in student organisations — can be as violent as external challenges, but the violence does not seem to affect a leader’s prospects. One former JCD president told me how he had had to cope with internal rivals.

I was a secretary of Dhaka University JCD. But I had enemies, strong enemies. They got me out. I was no longer the secretary. I had to wait for two years. [Author: Who were these enemies?] Enemies within the JCD. They talked bad about me. You see, in Bangladesh in student organisations there are no elections. Secretary, president, standing committee, all are appointed. From the top. So my enemies got me out. Then I had to wait for two years. I stayed in contact with students. They all loved me. I didn’t go to campus. Outside of campus. So then I was appointed as election secretary. Then I became the president. After two years.30

This was in 2003. The struggle went on for a long time even after he had been appointed president. His rival’s unit was dissolved, but the rival retained contacts higher up and continued have some clout on campus. Over the next year or so his faction grew stronger, but his rival still had influence in some student halls and control over a decent number of rooms. In September 2004 their rivalry intensified, and a clash took place inside one of the halls in which one supporter of his rival was severely beaten and wounded. The wounded student was left bleeding outside of the hall, and when the police tried to intervene he was instead brought back into the hostel by our first man’s supporters. The wounded student was taken to hospital only several hours later, where he died from his wounds. The same day the body was sent to his provincial home, in spite of protests and demands for a post mortem. The same day the remaining supporters of the rival were chased away from the hall they had been living in and the following day expelled from the organisation by its central committee.51

There was an important difference between my informant and his rival. My informant was, I believe, more popular, had a reputation

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30 Interview with former JCD president, 20 November 2007.
51 ‘Nightlong JCD Infighting at DU’, *New Age*, 16 September 2004.
for being in favour of a good learning environment, was opposed to guns on campus and generally kept bullies at arm’s length. He was, relatively speaking, ‘the good guy’. And yet he also resorted to the muscle of mastans and activists willing to engage in bloodshed and help cover up the fallout. And in spite of certain immediate and negative reactions, such as bad media coverage, the incident did not impede his progress towards becoming an increasingly powerful leader. The fact that his rivals had manipulated decision-making higher up in the organisation to keep him out, and the fact that his newly won position could be reinforced in a manner that led to the violent death of a student, more than suggest that the organisation is open to manipulation and unorthodox methods.

Internal challenges are also interesting because they help propel events, making it imperative for individual rivals to find new sources of influence or new tools to employ against rivals. External challenges, on the other hand, may come in handy and help bolster an emerging leader by bridging internal divisions. In May 2005, the newspapers reported clashes between two factions of the Chhatra League at Dhaka University campus. At one point the rivalry culminated in a fight that lasted eight hours, with gangs roaming the corridors of the university buildings and halls according to reports.\textsuperscript{52} Several leaders were admitted to hospital. The serious nature of the rivalry prompted the ‘high command’ to intervene for once. A week later the whole Dhaka University unit was dissolved because of ‘repeated factional violence’,\textsuperscript{53} and the organisation’s national leadership took charge.

Interestingly, less than six days after these enfeebling events, the organisation found itself engaged in violent clashes with its rival organisation, the JCD — following the street accident in which the female student, Happy, died. As mentioned earlier in this article, my information is not sufficiently detailed to identify who initiated the Chhatra League’s violent protests at that stage, but the large number of reluctant students that were mobilised indicates that someone influential was involved.

\textsuperscript{52} ‘BCL May Dissolve DU Unit’, \textit{Daily Star}, 16 May 2005.
Characteristics of a Political System

Student politics in Dhaka is characterised by an intense rivalry between ambitious leaders. In 2005 the magazine *Probe* named no less than 24 former student leaders who were lobbying for a nomination as their party’s parliamentary candidate for the forthcoming 2006 election. These ambitious leaders fight over positions, followers, contacts, means and, to a more limited extent, ideas and ideological positions, in which they help, exploit, intimidate or charm university teachers, political contacts, students, colleagues, thugs and local businessmen. The tools they employ, the arenas and the auxiliary roles that exist, together form what we may call a system. The system includes crowds as a tool, and specialists to create, maintain and mobilise them. The aim is to create movements — mass movements — in support of one’s chosen political party.

The system is manned by individuals with different and distinct roles. There are the hall representatives and activists who meet the students, mobilise them, help them or put pressure on them. They are supported, somewhat shamefacedly and certainly not in the open, by the mastan, who is a thug with no particular ideological or political convictions, or perhaps he is an activist with a strong physique and an unpleasant personality. Lastly, there are the leaders, often the public face of organisations, invariably master manipulators, and mostly politically ambitious.

This role for student organisations has been part of independent Bangladesh’s history since the beginning (Karim 2005). Even allowing for the myopic exaggeration that follows close observation of unpleasant phenomena (e.g., corruption in India, see Parry 2000), there is general agreement in Bangladesh that political unrest has increased and that student organisations have been increasingly associated with such political unrest, rather than with student welfare, for instance. From the material presented in this article, one may find evidence of two driving forces in the system that help explain the system’s dynamism and gradual expansion. One is the strong competition between would-be leaders. Due to the many potential sources of influence, which may

be variously mobilised, manipulated and creatively found anew, the ensuing political environment is innately unstable. Also inherent in it is the tendency to expand, for would-be leaders to seek ever new sources of influence to outdo their competitors. Influence or power is, to borrow a phrase from elsewhere, ‘a scarce resource’.

A second driving force is the importance of the ‘high command’ of the two major political parties. Both high commands are better termed ‘supreme’ commands, armed with the ultimate decision-making power, never to be questioned. This power is manifested in an ability to empower and disempower individual leaders at lower levels. Both high commands also encourage rather than discourage rivalry among the lower levels. Most crucially, both entertain decision-making procedures that come across as opaque at best. This creates a rich soil for gossip, conspiracy theories and hectic networking. What is taken into consideration for advancement or deals, and what is not, is not made explicit. Your best bet, as an ambitious student leader, is to ensure that you are able to supply that crucial tool — the crowd.

References

Contradictory Youth Politics: Student Mobilisation in Uttar Pradesh
Craig Jeffrey

During research with student politicians in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh (UP), conducted between September 2004 and April 2005, I met a young man named Suresh. In his late twenties, Suresh came from a Dalit (ex-Untouchable) background and worked as a student political leader in the city. The rise of the pro-Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) emboldened young men such as Suresh, who saw an opportunity to challenge historical inequalities through political organising. Suresh staged protests against the local government bureaucracy around the issues of corruption and educational decay. He believed ardently in the possibility of students from different social backgrounds coming together to express political demands. But Suresh was also frustrated with the slow pace of change. He said that higher castes often undermined broad student protests in the city by colluding with corrupt government and university officials. Suresh told me that, ‘dominant student leaders are drinking our blood’.

In this article I use ethnographic research conducted in north India to highlight the emergence of collective forms of student protest in the mid-2000s. It contributes to the book’s larger concern with leadership and other genres of local politicking by offering ethnographic material on student political transformation in north India, and, more specifically, probing the importance of youth as a site and stake in everyday politics. There is nothing new about young people playing prominent roles in politics in the South Asian region (e.g., Altbach 1984; Hazary 1987). But in the late 1990s and 2000s in many parts of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh young people became more visible in formal party politics and ground-level social

1 All names are pseudonyms. I have also changed details of the stories of individuals to protect anonymity.
mobilisation. Student politics, in particular, has re-emerged as a key issue for political commentators.

The prominence of young people in political spheres raises important questions about the nature and potential of youth mobilisation. Karl Mannheim (1972) famously argued that youth may be especially likely to challenge entrenched social ideas because of their structural liminality within society and because they often possess a shared generational sense of exclusion (see also Keniston 1971). Paul Willis (1977) later ascribed to youth a distinctive mischievousness and capacity for cultural innovation (see also Hebdige 1979). Recent ‘new anthropologies of youth’ go further, discussing young people’s ability to ‘orchestrate’ or ‘self-author’ their social and political lives (see Cole and Durham 2008). But persistent questions remain: are youth necessarily more idealistic than older generations? Does their age-based or generational identity trump other forms of inequality? And what do recent political studies tell us about youth as a social category or political discourse? I address these questions in this article by considering the nature and effectiveness of collective student protest in Meerut, north India.

My discussion of youth mobilisation is based upon research I conducted on student politics in Meerut in 2004 and 2005. I worked mainly in two higher educational institutions: Chaudhry Charan Singh University (CCSU) and Meerut College (MC). CCSU contained 2,600 students in 2004: 25 per cent of which were upper caste, 40 per cent middle caste Jats or Gujars, and 25 per cent Dalit. MC is the oldest college affiliated to CCSU and also the largest in terms of student numbers. In 2003–04 over 16,000 students were enrolled in MC, of which about 15 per cent were upper caste, 50 per cent Jat or Gujar, and 15 per cent Dalit.

The next section sketches the predicament of many students studying in Meerut in 2004 and 2005. I then discuss collective student protests with reference to the activities of four sets of male political animators. The penultimate section of the chapter reflects on the effectiveness of student mobilisation and the conclusions consider the wider significance of my analysis.

Marooned in Meerut?

Meerut City (population 1 million) is a military and administrative centre located near the western edge of UP. Between the mid-1960s
and late 1980s, the intensification of cash crop agriculture encouraged commercial development in the city, and since the early 1990s, Meerut has become a major provider of private healthcare, education and financial services. But the prosperity of the city should not be exaggerated. Meerut remains outside the areas of most significant economic expansion fanning out from Delhi and there was only one single information technology firm based in Meerut in 2005.

Meerut has long been a hub for higher education and possesses a rich history of student politics. Prior to 1947, the main higher educational institution in the district, MC, drew its students principally from upper-caste urban families (Nevill 1922: 56). This socially homogeneous, all-male body of students was involved in India’s nationalist struggle. Meerut students joined in Gandhi’s swadeshi (self-provisioning) drive, and, in 1919 and 1920, they were at the forefront of the Non-Cooperation movement in UP. In 1929, students established an ostensibly communist organisation — the Naujavan Bharat Sabha (NBS) — committed to ‘demolishing British imperialism by all means, fair or foul, and preparing the masses for revolution’ (quoted in Mittal 1978: 45).

After 1947, the MC campus became an arena for party political competition. In the 1950s, the Congress party cultivated support in MC and its student wing, the All-India International Student Federation, became prominent in Meerut at that time. From this period until his death in 1987, the Jat politician and ex-Prime Minister of India, Chaudhry Charan Singh, himself a graduate of MC, also used the college as a political recruiting ground. Four student leaders in MC in the 1950s and 1960s went on to become state- or national-level politicians. Student leaders in the 1960s and 1970s in Meerut were primarily concerned with creating a personalised support base within their university and developing individual links to politicians who could assist them in their careers. As a result, student politics in Meerut between 1960 and 1980, as in other parts of India (e.g., Hazary 1987: 15ff.), was limited in scope and mainly oriented around university issues, especially the welfare of students, administration of higher education, and distribution of patronage associated with the privatisation of education.

Such political activity frequently disrupted campuses and the surrounding parts of Meerut, and Charan Singh banned student union elections in MC in 1978 in response to growing fears about the effects of student politicians on urban life. Police supervision of hostel students
in the city intensified after the religious communal riots in Meerut in 1982 and 1987, in which some Hindu students from MC and CCSU were involved (see Brass 1997). The absence of student union elections in the most politically important college in the district — MC — and tight restrictions on students’ political activity meant that political parties were much less active in Meerut student politics in the 1980s and 1990s than they were in other historically significant sites of student political activism in UP, such as Allahabad University (see DiBona 1969) and Lucknow University (Syed 1997).

The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a revival in student politics in Meerut. The foundation of a student union at CCSU in 1991 encouraged students interested in developing political careers. But the real reawakening of student interest in politics related to the rapid commercialisation of higher education and enormous expansion in the numbers and diversity of young people studying in Meerut institutions from the late 1990s onwards. This commercialisation centred on CCSU, which began to offer an array of so-called ‘self-funded’ programmes alongside traditional courses and granted affiliation to a wide variety of private colleges conferring vocational degrees. In 1997 there were between 60,000 and 80,000 students enrolled in institutions affiliated to CCSU, in 2005 there were over a quarter of a million students studying in some 380 institutions.

Unemployment was a common topic among MC and CCSU students when I stayed in MC in 1996. By 2004, this issue had become even more pressing, especially among young men. Most young people studying in CCSU and MC, particularly men, had been led by their parents and the state to expect that they would enter white-collar employment within the government. But economic reforms in India, beginning in the early 1990s, undermined opportunities for government employment without creating new jobs in the private economy. Simultaneously, the number of qualified graduates increased hugely in UP in the late 1990s. A vast problem of unemployment was the result. Students were furious, not only at the prospect of educated joblessness but at the manner of their exclusion from government work. Stories about bribery, favouritism, and other forms of ‘corruption’ in recruitment to government work abounded in the hostels of CCSU and MC. Most students also argued that they lacked the social connections and cultural capital required to obtain jobs in the new economy in metropolitan India.

Students’ frustrations with respect to employment were exacerbated by concerns regarding the quality of their education and the value of
their degrees. Student anger regarding educational provisions can be traced to the colonial period. The British in India established a system of impersonal examinations within schools and universities, which eroded teachers’ autonomy and discouraged student initiative (Kumar 1988, 1994; Spivak 2004). The colonial educational regime also privileged subjects and styles of teaching that bore little relation to students’ milieu. This system survived into the post-colonial era, especially within government-funded higher education. Moreover, the liberalisation of the Indian economy from the early 1990s onwards undermined opportunities for curricular reform by diverting money away from state support for higher education. In 2004 and 2005 most syllabi in MC and CCSU were arcane and structured around the accumulation of facts, learning by rote and the memorisation of information for examinations. MC and CCSU’s reputation had fallen to new lows; some advertisements for private-sector jobs in Delhi included a note that ‘Meerut students need not apply’.

The irregularity of classes, frequency of holidays and strikes, and lack of continuous assessment meant that students had little with which to structure their time. Most young men living in MC and CCSU hostels spent short periods studying on campus and divided their days instead between activities which they regarded as ‘timepass’ — hanging out at local tea stalls, reading newspapers, listening to music and playing games, especially cards, cricket and badminton — all the while in-tensely concerned about the deteriorating value of their degrees and the problems of unemployment.

The threat of unemployment and the decline in the standard of locally-available higher education loomed large in the minds of almost all students and, therefore, became topics around which young men from different caste and class backgrounds could mobilise. But students were unequally equipped to manage employment and educational uncertainties, and this gave rise to tensions within the student body. Jats act as local dominant castes in many parts of western UP. Despite comprising just 8 per cent of the population of western UP, they monopolise landownership, non-agricultural sources of wealth and influence within local state institutions. Jats were often better provided than Dalits and Muslims to pay for private tutorials outside the university and acquire face-saving, service-type work in the informal economy, for example as private sales agents or managers of internet cafes. Non-Jats frequently resented these apparent advantages. At the same time, the rise of the pro-Dalit BSP, which held power in
UP four times between 1993 and 2003, opened up new educational and employment opportunities for Dalits. The BSP encouraged Dalits to get an education, often by drawing on the vision of upward mobility based upon schooling and entry into white-collar employment promoted by the Dalit hero, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar. The BSP also improved the Dalits’ capacity to negotiate with local government bureaucrats and take advantage of reservations in public sector employment for the Scheduled Castes. In 2004 and 2005, many Jats felt that Dalits were threatening their historical privileges.

Collective Student Protest

In spite of caste and other tensions within the student body, students from widely varying caste and class backgrounds often worked together to protest against university bureaucracies and the state. Collective student mobilisation in Meerut in 2004 and 2005 occurred mainly through the everyday attempts of a range of male political animators to politicise students, especially around the topic of student rights (haq). Student protests often began with particular ‘triggering events’ (cf. Tambiah 1997: 234), such as a quarrel over the disbursement of a college fund or the arrest of a student on a criminal charge, which political animators used as a basis for galvanising students into action. Students would often then assemble either in hostels, in the main public areas of CCSU or MC, or at city street corners, to plan tactics. In many cases, students began their protests by forming large delegations — often of up to 100 students — who visited a senior government official in the city to plead their cause. In other cases, or where the strategy of petitioning officials failed, students staged demonstrations. Students frequently intimidated government officers or barred professors from sections of the university to stop classes taking place (band). Other common protests took the form of roadblocks (rasta roko), processions (jalus), hunger strikes (bhuk hartal), or sit ins (dharna). Sometimes protesters simply shut down CCSU or MC altogether. As Arild Ruud (this volume) observes in parallel research in Bangladesh, such actions required the mobilisation of local ‘muscle’, and sometimes involved students seeking assistance from ex-student leaders and politicians.

Young women were not entirely excluded from leading protests. There were four young women, two Brahmins and two Jats, who sometimes became involved in public efforts to promote student
demonstrations. Two worked mainly behind the scenes, instructing politically conscious young men among their peers on issues that required student attention and the other two were engaged in more public agitations with a view to securing a position in the CCSU student union in the future. Yet men almost always played lead roles in mobilisations, and local forms of student leadership also reflected masculinised cultures of youth politicking.

Four ‘analytic sets’ of young male political animators were especially important in Meerut in the staging of collective protest. These sets are mainly heuristic constructs rather than being clearly observable ‘groups’ on the ground. Moreover, not all politically active young men belong to these four sets. It is nevertheless broadly possible to discern different categories of political animators and to identify ways in which each set worked together and with other sets to achieve political goals.

First, a collection of self-styled middle-caste (mainly Jat) ‘social reformers’ (samajik shudharan) were often at the forefront of protests. One of the effects of a widespread awareness of likely unemployment among students in CCSU and MC in the early 2000s was to encourage the emergence of a set of strong-willed young men from middle-caste backgrounds who believed passionately in ‘social service’ (samaj sewa) (cf. Ruud 1997; Krishna 2002). Although comprising only about 3 per cent of the middle-caste men studying at CCSU or MC, there were between 20 and 30 such self-proclaimed social reformers playing important political roles on and around these campuses in 2004–05, and I was able to interview nine of these men. These nine middle-caste social reformers all defined themselves as unemployed and said that their negative experiences of competing for government employment had been important in their decision to engage in social reform.

Consideration of the experiences of a Jat young man named Balraj provides insights into the activities of the nine middle-caste social reformers with whom I worked. I first met Balraj at the hustings for the student union election. He was smartly dressed in a white slacks and a blue shirt, and he was delighted to hear that I was interested in youth politics in Meerut. Balraj was in his late twenties in 2004 and came from a village about 25 miles southwest of Meerut, in neighbouring Ghaziabad district. Balraj’s father owned 8 hectares of agricultural land and a small sugarcane crushing business but wanted his sons to enter non-farm work. Balraj attended private nursery, primary and secondary schools close to his rural home then enrolled in a private college in Delhi for a pharmacy diploma, in MC for a physics BSc and then in CCSU for a degree in mass communications.
Balraj referred to himself as a social reformer in order to distinguish his actions from *rajinīti* (politics), which he defined as the self-interested competition for government posts, and *netagiri* (leadership), which in turn denoted cultivating useful political contacts and building a student following. In practice, Balraj’s activity involved him in a range of leadership roles. Most notably, he was frequently involved in orchestrating demonstrations in CCSU. These protests tended to focus on three issues. First, Balraj and the other middle-caste social reformers protested about the cost of higher education for ‘ordinary students’ and ‘youth’. In 2004, students were especially concerned with the expense associated with obtaining admission to higher education institutions affiliated to CCSU. Admission to private institutions with CCSU affiliation was organised such that 50 per cent of the seats in the courses were reserved for students with high merit in admissions examinations and the remaining 50 per cent, termed the ‘management quota’, could be disbursed at the whim of a college’s private managers. In practice, even those high on the merit list had to pay large bribes to enter professional courses in private institutions, and the amounts that students had to pay for management quota seats had become astronomical. Social reformers and other political animators argued that private educational entrepreneurs and their cronies were ruining students’ futures and preventing ordinary students from obtaining a good education.

Balraj and his compatriots also frequently launched protests regarding university corruption — a second major issue. Akhil Gupta (1995) has argued on the basis of field research in the 1980s in Bulandshahr district, western UP, that ordinary people in north India tend to regard the misappropriation of government funds by state officials as unacceptable, immoral and corrupt (*bhrashtachar*). He shows how local people’s critiques of ‘corruption’ are a central means through which north Indians articulate political goals, express their sense of marginalisation and define what they regard as acceptable state practice. My work in Meerut supports Gupta’s conclusions in many respects: students were eagerly involved in perpetuating a public culture of anti-corruption protest, where corruption was principally defined, as it is in much of the social science literature, as the abuse of public office for private gain. The issue of corruption became especially prominent in 2002 when the vice chancellor of CCSU was removed from office after being found guilty of embezzling university funds. It emerged powerfully again in 2004, when the new vice-chancellor of CCSU was accused of similar chicanery, and he was...
also subsequently removed from his post. While middle-caste social reformers and other students tended to regard all instances of university officials earning private money from their positions as corrupt and wrong (*galat*), they reserved their greatest ire for instances in which the administrators’ corruption interfered with students’ progress through higher education or compromised their ability to acquire jobs. For example, concerns over corruption erupted violently in August 2006 in CCSU when it emerged that the university registrar had economised on the cost of administering degree examinations by subcontracting the grading of postgraduate dissertations to students at other educational institutions. This practice was occurring at other UP universities too, where undergraduate students were charged with assessing the work of postgraduates. But at CCSU the scandal took an especially extreme form; it was widely alleged that school students as young as eight years old had been grading masters dissertations, a practice which, when uncovered, brought students from all backgrounds into the streets to burn their degrees.

Third, Balraj and other social reformers launched protests on the issue of the harassment of students. For example, they frequently accused local shopkeepers of verbally or physically abusing those enrolled at CCSU or MC. Student reformers also complained about ‘exploitative’ professors and university administrators. For example, students engaged in four days of protest when it emerged that a professor had sexually assaulted a student in a college close to Meerut in 2004, an incident which they felt exemplified the much wider physical and psychological abuse of students within higher education.

For Balraj, the importance of his protests on these issues lay, in part, in the opportunities they provided for deriving wider socio-economic and political lessons. Balraj was preoccupied with the challenge of developing what C. Wright Mills (1959) called a ‘sociological imagination’ among a wide range of students: the capacity to link personal struggle with broader processes of social transformation. Balraj criticised student leaders in Meerut in the 1960s and 1970s for putting their own political advancement before the needs of poor students and other oppressed communities and for failing to think about how their own insecurities might be linked to the concerns of other students in other places. Balraj said that students in Meerut needed to recover the spirit of anti-colonial student protests, a spirit that involved understanding the connections between political movements in multiple contexts.
Balraj repeatedly used events that emerged in the life of the university as a starting point for generating reflective discussion among students and young people. He also made monthly trips to his village and surrounding rural areas to hold workshops among rural youth on land reform, unemployment, youth rights, and environmental issues. Balraj said that during these trips he tried to address caste, class and age-based inequalities and instill in young people a thirst for change. Balraj and two other social reformers also established a cell of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS) in 2004 to coordinate their work. Balraj had read about the history of NBS struggles in Meerut district and wanted to reference the efforts of previous generations of students when conducting protests. Balraj and his friends collected literature on the NBS, kept in touch with NBS cells in three other colleges, and pasted photographs of the NBS hero, Bhagat Singh, in his room. Bhagat Singh (1907–34), often referred to as ‘Shaheed (martyr) Bhagat Singh’ was a freedom fighter influenced by communism and anarchism who became involved, as a teenager, in a number of revolutionary anti-British organisations. He was hanged for shooting a police officer in response to the killing of a veteran freedom fighter. Balraj and his allies did much to promote the image of Bhagat Singh in CCSU. But the NBS in CCSU in 2004 had no formal office, committee members or membership, and most hostel students regarded the institution as moribund.

This sketch of Balraj’s activities offers insights into the background and strategies of the eight other middle-caste social reformers whom I met in 2004/05, five of whom were Jat, two Gujar and one Yadav. Seven of the social reformers came from moderately prosperous farming families living near Meerut. Although coming from relatively ‘advantaged’ backgrounds, these social reformers tended to try to enrol lower castes and some young women in their protests and fight on behalf of the poorest students. They tended to avoid violent conflict and focused instead on peaceful demonstrations and workshop-style meetings. The work of Balraj and his social reformer friends points to the counter-intuitive possibility that young people may work across caste and class lines in defence of student or youth interests.

A second important set of political animators on campus was comprised of Dalit and Muslim politically-minded young men, most of whom — like Balraj — referred to their distaste for rajniti and netagiri, preferring to label themselves ‘social re-formers’. The backgrounds and activities of Dalit and Muslim leaders were diverse,
but the example of a Muslim young man named Iqbal is instructive. Over tea in a small textile shop in a Muslim neighbourhood of Meerut, Iqbal enthusiastically documented his work. He was the son of an uneducated Muslim tailor in Meerut and had eight siblings. In the face of competing demands on their meagre resources, Iqbal’s parents tried to persuade him to abandon school. But he was determined to continue his studies, and Iqbal worked for long hours in a shop to finance his education. More recently, he began selling computer software products on a freelance basis. In his early twenties, Iqbal was studying for a MA in CCSU in 2004 and described himself as underemployed.

Iqbal and other Muslim and Dalit political animators assisted middle-caste social reformers in organising protests regarding the costs of education, corruption and the harassment of students. Building good networks as a basis for successfully petitioning government officials formed the cornerstone of Iqbal’s political activity. He spent time and money developing good relationships within the police, local intelligence units, newspaper offices, and university administration. I often wondered at the extraordinary energy Iqbal invested in constructing social links and then enrolling a broad range of other students in his projects. I remember this in a series of images: Iqbal screaming to a halt on his motorcycle to shake hands with a policeman, frantically waving a group of 20 students into a government lawyer’s office, and carefully signing multiple copies of a petition to the district magistrate. When I commented on his restless energy, Iqbal grinned and told me that his life is ‘total politics’.

Iqbal denied that his total politics was oriented to helping Muslims in particular. But he frequently complained that statues of Muslim freedom fighters should be erected in colleges. He also criticised the BJP for anti-Muslim policies and expressed his concern over Muslims’ lack of confidence in the face of institutionalised communalism.

A muscular masculinity ran through Iqbal’s politicking and that of the other Dalit and Muslim politicos whom I met. Iqbal asked me once whether I had successfully obtained data from a college office. I said that I was having some difficulties. He spat on the ground and said: ‘Ack! Do you want me to come to this office? You need to pick up the clerk and give him a good slap’.

This sketch of Iqbal’s actions and preoccupations draws out key features of the strategies of Dalit and Muslim politicos more generally. There were between 6 and 10 Muslim politicos and 10 and 15 Dalit
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I interviewed 14 of these men. Like Iqbal, the Dalits and other Muslim reformers or leaders were usually from poor backgrounds. Their power rested in large part on their capacity to enrol other students in political projects, especially in projects that involved negotiating with government officials. Dalit and Muslim reformers and leaders were points of contact for Muslims and low castes living in CCSU and MC hostels and for Muslim and Dalit kin. But middle and higher castes often saw men like Iqbal as important lobbyists.

For middle-caste social reformers, Muslim and Dalit reformers and leaders were allies in processes of collective student mobilisation. Making direct appeals to government officials was important in protests against the rising cost of education, corruption and student harassment. While the BSP was in power in UP, Dalit political animators, in particular, were often able to persuade university and government officials to act in the interests of students. It is also interesting to note in this context that letter-writing was becoming a key tool of student protest in 2004 and 2005, and Dalits and Muslims — partly because they wanted to avoid too many face-to-face meetings with the mainly upper-caste Hindu local government and the associated risk of discrimination — were often especially well-versed in the delicate art of crafting letters to officials.

A third set of political animators consisted of middle-caste young men who called themselves netas — a word that can mean either ‘leaders’ or ‘politicians’. Unlike the middle-caste social reformers and Dalit and Muslim politicos, this set of men either possessed a position on the CCSU student union or, more commonly, planned to contest student union elections in the future. The example of Surendra, a Jat aged 22 in 2001, brings out some of the chief activities of these student leaders in the arena of collective student politics. Surendra was from a wealthy Jat family living about 40 kilometres from Meerut and had a room in HG Hostel, MC. He was keen on obtaining a government job and had already failed three times in this quest when I first met him in 2004. I did not hear him refer to himself as ‘unemployed’, but he was intensely concerned about his employment future and he commonly lamented young men’s difficulties in finding work.

Surendra said that boredom was a constant problem in MC but that he had responded to the ennui by developing a reputation as a leader in HG hostel. HG hostel students with grievances against the MC administration typically went straight to Surendra’s small room
on the second floor of the hostel and described their complaint. After
listening to a student’s appeals for assistance, Surendra often called
together those present in the hostel and made contact with friends via
cellphone. He then discussed possible courses of action with his con-
fidants and, in many cases, proceeded to organise demonstrations
that involved students from a wide variety of backgrounds, including
Muslims and Dalits.

In addition to the issues about which middle-caste social reformers
and Dalit and muslim politicos protested, aspiring student leaders
such as Surendra frequently launched populist campaigns aimed at
protecting the rights of students who had experienced problems in
their passage through higher education. A particular focus of anger
among middle-caste leaders was a proposal made by CCSU in 2001
to end the practice of awarding grace marks to students who failed
their exams. During the 1990s, CCSU and affiliated government-
aided colleges often allowed students who obtained a grade within
10 per cent of a pass to be given top up marks to prevent them having
to retake a year of study. In 2001, the CCSU decided to abolish this
provision, arguing that the practice cheapened the value of a CCSU
degree. Students reacted furiously to this move and invoked images of
‘exploited students’ being preyed upon by university officials. The irony
here — that defending the students’ right to grace marks might have
been contributing to the direful reputation of Meerut degrees among
Delhi employers — was keenly felt by some of my informants.

To a greater extent than middle-caste social reformers and Muslim
and Dalit political animators, middle-caste leaders frequently com-
plained about police harassment. The first police raid of a MC hostel
in search of firearms or criminals occurred in 1929 (Mittal 1978). By
the 2000s, such raids had become a regular feature of university life, and
hostel students, in particular, deeply resented this perceived invasion
of their privacy. They were unhappy about the failure of the police to
inform the university administration about raids, and they were equally
unsettled by what they perceived to be the heavy handed treatment
doled out by the police.

Surendra said that his skill in social networking and staging dem-
onstrations reflected his ‘political eye’. He said that a political eye
was not about having close contacts with a political party; he had
not developed good links with a politician or political party in 2005.
Nor did Surendra seem especially concerned with political ideologies,
of the left or right. Instead, Surendra explained that a political eye
amounted to a ‘feel’ for the ‘game’ (khel) of politics in MC. He elaborated on this notion with reference to strongly gendered ideas that placed the image of the experienced male student equipped with knowledge and political skill alongside that of disoriented freshmen or young women.

Surendra said that his desire to assist students was something that emerged ‘from his heart’ (dil se). But he was also aware that there might be an opportunity to capitalise on his growing popularity in the future. Surendra said, ‘There are two roads I could follow: either I go into government service or I enter student union politics at CCSU. To keep the politics route open I need to develop a political reputation (nam) among students.’

In each student hostel, there tended to be two or three young men like Surendra, usually Jats but also sometimes Gujars or Yadavs, who had become the ‘go to figures’ for their fellow hostellers and who aspired one day to become CCSU student union leaders — thus probably 30 young men across MC and CCSU as a whole. Like the student representatives of university halls of residence described by Ruud (this volume) for Bangladesh, these hostel leaders tended to exert some control over the disbursement of hostel rooms to students, and cultivated groups of supporters (chelas) via the judicious distribution of the rooms they controlled. Aspiring middle-caste leaders had not typically developed close links with a political party but concentrated instead on organising and participating in broad-based student protests on campus.

Middle-caste student leaders usually worked closely with social reformers such as Balraj and Iqbal. Middle-caste leaders such as Surendra were especially adept at organising violent protests. They tended to have developed a good knowledge of the varied strong-arm tactics that might be deployed to persuade university and government officials to act on the students’ behalf and they had relatively good access to local muscle.

A fourth set of political animators consisted of seven male students, four Brahmins and three Yadavs, who provided much of the intellectual ballast and some financial support for student protest on campus and who came from upper middle class, urban backgrounds. These urban intellectuals shared middle-caste social reformers’ interest in linking local student issues to broader national and global dynamics. Three of these seven men had rooms in CCSU or MC hostel and the other four lived with their parents.
The example of a Brahmin young man, Om Prakash, offers insights into the activities of this set of young men. Om Prakash was in his late twenties in 2004 and always smartly turned out. He often convened small discussion groups involving me and his close friends in his urban middle-class home near CCSU. He classed himself as ‘underemployed’ and hoped that through diligent study and learning English he would one day work for an international news organisation.

Like other Brahmin and OBC young men working with middle-caste social reformers, one of Om Prakash’s main roles was to offer middle-caste social reformers guidance and friendship. Om Prakash read newspapers and watched local television reports avidly and was often quick to phone a middle-caste reformer friend to comment on an issue or express indignation at a recent turn of events. He also offered middle-caste social reformers logistical support, for example by providing transport on motorcycles around the city or offering hospitality in their urban homes. Om Prakash was also an excellent source of ideas for how to frame social protest. Quick to learn of a breaking story and good at coming up with sound-bites, Om Prakash sometimes advised middle caste social reformers about how to pitch a particular issue in order to spur students to action.

Thus, four sets of politically motivated young men studying in CCSU and MC in 2004/05 were crucial in generating collective student protest: middle-caste social reformers (such as Balraj), Dalit and Muslim politicos (Iqbal), middle castes who aspired to become leaders or who held positions on the CCSU student union (Surendra), and Brahmin and OBC young men relatively removed from student politics but important as sources of information and advice (Om Prakash). Each set of young men played a different role: upper caste and OBC urban intellectuals were often important in spurring students to action; Muslim and Dalit politicos frequently took a lead where a protest involved petitioning government officials; middle-caste leaders specialised in public, violent demonstrations; and middle-caste social reformers were crucial in trying to link specific struggles to broader ideological issues and events occurring outside Meerut district. The manner in which these men worked together should not be romanticised, but I was often impressed by how the four sets of men acted in concert. Like different parts of a well-oiled machine, one set frequently sprung into action when another set had performed their function.
It is important to note that individual young men sometimes moved from one ‘set’ to another. For example, urban intellectuals sometimes became aspiring student leaders. In other cases, aspiring student leaders abandoned their attempts to acquire student union positions and adopted the role of social reformers. The boundaries between different sets of actors were also rather fuzzy. For example, in the early 2000s, there were several Dalit and Muslim politicos who harboured ambitions to acquire positions in the students union, and some had been successful at capturing such posts.

There were certain characteristics that all political animators shared. They all had weak links to political parties, did not participate actively in youth party organisations within or outside Meerut, and displayed a detached attitude towards state and national elections and the machinations of local politicians. Moreover, young men belonging to all four sets of political animators constructed images of themselves as guardians of students’ rights and protectors of young women’s security. These gendered discourses and the sometimes blunt masculine manner in which politicos went about their business discouraged young women from becoming involved in collective student demonstrations, and further marginalised the few female students who did sometimes work to encourage student protest.

At the same time, however, the four sets of political animators comported themselves differently with respect to the idea of student politics (rajniti) and leadership (netagiri). Middle-caste social reformers and OBC and Brahmin young men, like the few female agitators I met on campus, regarded rajniti and netagiri as immoral and dirty. In contrast, aspiring middle-caste leaders and some Dalit and Muslim politicos embraced their roles as adroit political entrepreneurs and future politicians. The four sets of animators also had different views on violence. For social reformers and urban intellectuals, violence was to be avoided and critiqued. By contrast, aspiring middle-caste student leaders and Dalit and Muslim politicos tended to regard violence as a political tool. I must add a disclaimer here, however; even those students who incorporated violence into their repertoire of political tactics displayed a moral ambivalence about violent practice. For example, political animators of all hues were often keen to distinguish their relatively ‘civilised’ politicking from the ‘criminal violence’ (goondagardi) purportedly characteristic of uneducated urban young men. Reflecting such ambivalence, aspiring student leaders and Dalit and Muslim politicos’ tended to adopt an ironic or humorous tone when discussing violent action.
Are Collective Student Protests Effective?

Collective student protests were partially successful. For example, sustained protests over the cost of education in 2002 led the CCSU administration to backtrack on a proposal to raise tuition fees. Similarly, student demonstrations regarding the corruption of high-level university officials influenced the UP government’s decision to remove two vice-chancellors from their positions at CCSU in 2002 and 2006. In addition, protests regarding harassment from professors or government officials regularly led to small victories for MC and CCSU students. Even short-lived student protests often left certain traces on the UP educational landscape that could provide part of the inspiration for future struggles, such as graffiti complaining about university bureaucrats’ negligence, photographs of agitation that were subsequently circulated by newspapers and local television stations, or stories of the heroism of political animators that became enshrined in student hostel lore. Moreover, middle-caste social reformers were occasionally able to stage-manage wider demonstrations regarding the privatisation (nijikaran) of education, social inequality, and the politics of environmental change.

In spite of a few successes, however, collective student protest in Meerut remained sporadic and organised largely around individual incidents occurring on or close to campus. Political animators were unable to generate sustained, widespread collective student protests in Meerut on the type of national and international questions — concerning poverty, illiteracy, capitalist change, and political freedom, for example — that animated student protest in the colonial period in Meerut. Students in the 2000s were largely concerned with a narrower student or youth agenda and, within this, on issues that directly affected their studies in Meerut and future employment prospects. Political animators and students participating in demonstrations often claimed that this was no simple omission on their part. Some said that it is better to concentrate on protesting about local grievances, where there are possibilities of success, rather than spending long periods trying to connect their grievances to those of students in distant locations. Other students explained their lack of attention to national and international issues by drawing attention to a regional split in north Indian student politics, between ‘Delhi student politics’, in which students more routinely displayed the type of sociological imagination that Balraj desired, and ‘provincial student politics’ wherein students’ immediate
Concerns were paramount. Kavita Krishnan (2007) offers a picture of politics in Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi in 2005–06 that lends some credence to this geographical imagination. Still other students said that the lack of attention to the connections between ‘Meerut issues’ and wider social and political change reflects weaknesses in the UP education system. Middle-caste social reformers and Brahmin and OBC urbanites complained about the low value attached to critical enquiry and the social sciences within Meerut higher education, and they discussed the failure of professors to politicise the student body with respect to ideological questions.

During the anti-colonial protests, students often formed alliances with professors, low-paid workers and the poor. In the 2000s, despite the efforts of men such as Balraj, student protests seemed somewhat divorced from a wider public. The gulf between the political activity of students and that of bureaucrats and professors was reflected in the latter’s views on youth activism. Government officials, university bureaucrats and professors typically perceive student demonstrations to be bothersome and counterproductive. The short-term political aims of principals and professors were often diametrically opposed to collective student demands. Professors commonly wanted to protect their income from private tutorials and avoid being compelled to spend long periods on campus, and principals wanted to defend their access to bribe money and kickbacks. One of the central goals of a union of college principals in western UP in 2001 was to discourage students from organising politically to express demands. In 2005 the police and college principals in Meerut called the parents of leading political animators to campus to complain about the actions of their sons. Similarly, whereas students often involved the lowest-ranked government workers in universities and colleges in their collective protests in the first half of the 20th century, such broad collective action was rare in the 2000s. Students were usually at loggerheads with cleaners, clerks and other poorly paid staff.

The limited nature of collective student protests partly reflects the unwillingness of political parties to invest resources in gathering up the strands of collective youth frustration into a durable organisational form. During the 1990s and early 2000s, political parties tried to mobilise Meerut students, and the BJP was particularly keen to support young people through its student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad. In 2005 the Rashtriya Lok Dal leader and son of Chaudhry Charan Singh, Ajit Singh, visited Meerut to obtain student support for
the creation of a separate state of ‘Western UP’ (Paschim Pradesh). Yet political parties remained largely unwilling to invest resources in the student politics of Meerut in the 1990s and early 2000s.

A still more important reason why student political protests failed was that middle-caste student leaders undermined the protests from within. Middle-caste student leaders, especially Jats, had largely dominated the CCSU student union. Jats captured the top posts in the union in part by developing a reputation for articulating the moral indignation of students as a whole. Like Surendra, they launched protests against corruption within university and government offices and these were reported in favourable terms by friends within local newspapers and television stations. These efforts at developing a reputation for ethical action drew heavily on national-level political styles and histories of the anti-colonial struggle. To loud cheers at public gatherings, Jat leaders frequently referred to their readiness to ‘go to jail for students’ or ‘die in the cause of a just politics’. Jats also used caste solidarities to mobilise votes.

Some Jats continued to work in the interest of students as a whole once they obtained a position in the student union. But most leaders concentrated on building personalised social networks that would yield rapid economic profits. Jat student leaders made money by arranging backdoor admission to colleges affiliated to CCSU; acting as intermediaries between the CCSU administration and private educational entrepreneurs; intervening in the distribution of government posts in higher education; and working as brokers between university bigwigs and contractors charged with constructing new educational institutions. Individual Jat student leaders on the CCSU student union could earn between Rs 800,000 and Rs 1,000,000 in a single year in the early and mid-2000s, according to many estimates. After leaving their student union post, Jat politicians often used their social contacts to obtain permanent employment as university professors or advocates, jobs which they could combine with political work. They had not entered formal (local, regional or national) representative politics; Jat leaders believed that the chances of obtaining power within formal government structures were remote relative to the rich pickings within the local informal economy of the state.

In the terms of the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), the power of Jat student leaders rested on their economic capital, social networking resources and cultural capital. In a manner that recalls
Bourdieu’s emphasis on the importance of a ‘feel for the game’, Jat student leaders said that they had become so practiced in the art of politicking that, in many political situations, they experience ‘a strange feeling of power welling up from within’: a power that allowed them to forge connections effectively and impress caste peers. Jat power was also founded on their control over the means of force. Student leaders often had better access to the police than Dalits or even the upper castes on campus, largely because Jats could draw upon social networks established by their rural senior kin and exploit cultural affinities between themselves and middle-caste police officers.

Jat student leaders not only subverted the anti-corruption drive of the collective student protests, they also circulated discourses of political action that diverged from those enunciated by men such as Balraj, Iqbal and Om Prakash. Political animators working for students as a whole tended to operate with vertical visions of local politics in which a sphere ‘up there’, comprising state officials, was imagined exploiting students or youth ‘down below’ (cf. Ferguson and Gupta 2002). In contrast, Jat student leaders espoused horizontal notions of political action, centred on the understanding that they inhabited distinct fields of practice or gaming spaces. Jat student leaders argued that in order to be able to succeed locally as a political broker you must isolate, study and experience various ‘games’ (khel) or ‘fields’, especially the game of obtaining a CCSU student union post, the game of negotiating with government and university officials over backdoor admissions to higher education, and the game of making money from building construction in Meerut. Jat leaders said that, like many games (such as cards and cricket), these spheres of political competition take a definite temporal form: for example, the CCSU elections occur once a year and people have ‘turns’ (dafa) at trying to win. They also said that, like any game, ‘you reap what you sow’: skilful or committed players see their efforts rewarded in terms of money, social influence or votes. Moreover, each game was associated with a particular space, such as the campus or government office. These arenas were not static arenas for political power plays but flexible and somewhat indeterminate spaces constituted through the flow of people, ideas and objects (cf. Ruud this volume). Jats said that their gaming spaces were also complexly connected, and those student leaders who were able to dominate a variety of games simultaneously were said to possess a ‘setting’ (they used the English word): a polycentric nexus of contacts which needed to be nurtured through accumulating ‘force’, the police
or caste peers willing to intimidate or beat up opponents; ‘source’, which denoted access to a high-level political connection; and a certain type of judicious opportunism (*jugar*), the capacity to deploy resources in a shrewd, enterprising and timely manner (see Jeffrey 2009).

**Conclusion**

Resentment over educational decay, unemployment and corruption had resulted in the emergence of different sets of young male political animators among unemployed students in Meerut. These varied sets of agent provocateurs coordinated with each other to mobilise a broad range of students. Animators assembled information, petitioned government officials and staged popular protests. The types of demonstrations in which students engaged and the topics of their protests are broadly similar to those of students in Meerut and other parts of India in the 1960s and 1970s. Like male students in an earlier period, politically active young men in Meerut were preoccupied with issues that related to their progress through the university and access to employment. But the rapid privatisation of education and the scale and extent of malpractice within CCSU and MC in the mid-2000s lent a distinctive flavour and intensity to Meerut student activism. It also encouraged alliances across social boundaries within the student community that might not have been forged were the students’ anxieties less pronounced. I have nevertheless emphasised the fragility of these collective student protests. In the absence of durable organisations representing the students’ shared interest in governance and educational reform, collective protests tended to be sporadic, piecemeal and shortlived. Moreover, a small set of opportunistic middle-caste students engaged in ‘corrupt’ practices that undermined the broader cause.

These conclusions underline two important points made elsewhere in this volume. First, I have shown that the process of leading and representing others, coordinating political action and taking advantage of political opportunities is interminably bound up with class, caste, gender, and other forms of inequality and exclusion. Second, I have emphasised the importance of local political idioms of leadership and political practice. Vernacular notions of the political, such as ‘game’ and ‘field’ need to be placed more centrally in our accounts of how politics works in South Asian settings and given more credence as guides to theorising everyday political forms.
More broadly, my conclusions point to the political importance of unemployed youths in contemporary South Asia and highlight the often ambivalent nature of youth politics. Much recent writing on local politics in South Asia takes a Manichean approach wherein the government and the dominant castes and elites are pitted against the subalterns, the downtrodden, the poor. But what is striking about the predicament of many of the students with whom I worked was precisely their interstitial and highly variable position with respect to local hierarchies of power and their equally uncertain and fluid position vis-à-vis democratic politics. Jat young men both critiqued corruption and encouraged it, fought for a broad student cause and undermined it, lambasted venal officials and colluded with them. Indeed, for Jat student leaders the identity of a youth social reformer is a key staging post in their efforts to find a niche within local patronage networks (Jeffrey 2008, 2009). A key contribution of this article to the broader aims of this volume is therefore to draw attention to the compromised potential of young people as political agents (cf. Willis 1977) and especially the contradictory politics of lower middle-class young men.

References

The New Caste Headmen? Dalit Movement Leadership in Tamil Nadu*

Hugo Gorringe

Tamil Dalits, initially seduced by the rhetorical radicalism of Tamil nationalism, were late to mobilise autonomously but their political progress has been rapid. In the past two decades Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu, south India, have raised consciousness, challenged residual forms of untouchability and forced Dalit issues into the political limelight. Whilst Dalit organisations are still peripheral to the corridors of power, they have gained political recognition and placed their concerns onto the agenda. The two largest Dalit parties in the state are now regarded as acceptable, albeit lesser, alliance partners and have contested elections alongside both the dominant political parties (Gorringe 2007).

This progress is remarkable considering Den Ouden’s (1975) finding that ‘the capacity of the Scheduled Castes to organise and take risks is...limited due to their weak economical position, their illiteracy and fatalism’ (quoted in De Wit 1996: 211). More recently, Deliège observed that Paraiyars (the most populous Tamil Dalit caste) evinced a general antipathy to authority within the caste which ‘forestalls the development of hierarchy within Paraiyar society itself, by maintaining egalitarian

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1 ‘Dalit’ is a Marathi term meaning downtrodden, but it has been adopted by politically active ex-Untouchables across India in an explicit rejection of caste hierarchies. The bureaucratic term for those entitled to positive discrimination is Scheduled Caste.
The political paralysis this occasioned was apparent, but Paraiyars are depicted as so divided, that ‘it would take a superior personality to be able to assert himself [sic] as a respected leader of all’ (ibid.: 40).

J. W. De Wit’s study of patronage politics in Madras was similarly sceptical about the possibilities for Dalit mobilisation. He noted the lack of resources and internal distrust, but also argued that Tamil politics inculcated a ‘political culture of dependency’ (1996: 14, 264). M. S. S. Pandian likewise concluded that the subaltern Tamil classes accept the hegemony of the elites and seek to emulate their values. This ‘hegemonising sweep was [never] total’ (1992: 144) and politics remained a contested terrain, but dissent and the ability to articulate alternatives were emasculated by the predominance of key Tamil politicians and their political styles.

Indeed, De Wit (1996: 51) asserts that the urban poor rarely ‘form associations in relation to ideological commitments’, preferring tangible benefits instead. Clientelism, ‘machine politics’ in his terms, ‘relies heavily on material inducements and rewards to win and hold the loyalty of party cadre and the voting public’ (ibid.: 24). The patrimonial populism of the established parties shapes the political terrain (Subramanian 1999), placing Dalit movements in an impossible position: to gain support leaders need resources, but in the context of a clientelist state Dalit leaders are invariably outbidd. These pessimistic prognoses render contemporary Dalit mobilisation more significant and raise important questions regarding its mode, rationale and objectives. Dalit leaders are pivotal to this process, but they operate within specific contexts and must negotiate the expectations, constraints and opportunities afforded by the twin institutions of caste and political culture.

Extensive literature on the political culture of leadership in Tamil Nadu (cf. Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993; Mines 1994; Widlund 2000) attempts to explain the significance of dominant leader figures and the persistence of excessively hierarchical organisations in the state. Several of these studies resort to the concept of ‘charisma’, but this can hinder analysis and obscure the complex processes, mechanisms and relationships that constitute leadership. De Wit, Mattison Mines and Pamela Price, by contrast, emphasise the cultural precedents that

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2 On similar intra-caste egalitarianism see Michelutti (this volume).
legitimise these forms of leadership. They note the continuing salience of caste and kingship models in structuring political relationships. Whilst the rhetoric of Dravidianism and the gradual intrusion of Dalit interests into mainstream politics suggest an erosion of caste as a systemic form of exclusion, the modus operandi of Dalit politics indicates its continuing relevance.

Recent years have witnessed a substantialisation of caste identities by groups that have not benefited from Dravidian reforms. This logic of caste-based mobilisation has informed contemporary Dalit activism and eroded the promise of the casteless term ‘Dalit’. Matters which might more profitably be analysed in terms of resources, education or region, are thus, reduced to the overdetermined categorisation of caste. This prompts the recurrent assertion that only someone who has experienced what it means to be ‘untouchable’ can be entrusted with leadership. In this process, Dalit leaders, ideologically committed to the eradication of caste, assume positions that are analogous to caste headmen. Understanding the political leadership of Tamil Dalits, thus, requires an analysis of cultural patterns of authority.

This article begins by raising the question of leadership in a theoretical sense before turning to the empirical data and seeking to elucidate the interplay between Dalit leaders, caste and Tamil politics. It argues that the expansion of the Tamil polity to previously excluded social categories has enabled tangible resources to be supplemented (if not offset) by an emphasis on symbolic capital. In extending the terrain of political contestation this shift erodes the pre-eminence of populist patrons and highlights the relational nature of leadership, thus creating avenues for change.

**Questioning Leadership**

Until recently social movement leadership was a neglected area of study, but whilst analyses of available resources, shifting political opportunities and changing social attitudes contribute to our understanding, neglecting the agency of individual actors reveals little about the mechanisms and processes underpinning activism (cf. Barker et al. 2001: 2). Paradoxically, where analysts have highlighted the significance of key figures (Martin Luther King and Mohandas Gandhi, for example), they have casted movement members as ‘devotees’ or ‘followers’. If, however, we define ‘leaders as strategic decision-makers
who inspire and organise others to participate’ (Morris and Staggenborg 2004: 171), then it clear that leadership is relational.

Belinda Robnett’s research emphasises this in differentiating between ‘formal’ (titular), ‘secondary’ and ‘bridge’ leaders (1997: 22). She argues that formal leaders tend to be men with social, cultural and educational capital and connections with central institutions (such as caste in a Tamil context). Secondary leaders mediate between the figureheads and the others, and are vested with authority in part because of their association with the formal leadership. As Robnett (ibid.: 28) notes, these tiers of leadership are often torn by the conflicting requirements of the state apparatus (requiring rational, measured and calculated interventions) and mobilisation/inspiration of the masses. Dalit leaders, as we shall see, were certainly caught between their members’ distrust of political institutions and the pragmatic need to negotiate with them.

Fulfilling both roles is problematic, meaning that bridge leaders are primarily responsible for ‘mobilizing and sustaining the movement’ (ibid.: 22). The concept of a bridge leader highlights the critical importance of maintaining the trust and interest of supporters through sustained engagement and interaction. Bridge leaders operate at the grassroots level and ‘cross the boundaries between the public life of a movement organization and the private spheres of adherents and potential constituents’ (ibid.: 19). Such figures assume greater importance in times of crisis when formal leaders may be absent (ibid.: 20). Robnett’s work, thus, provides a useful corrective to analyses which focus on a central figure and neglect the painstaking work which is the essence of political mobilisation (cf. Gorringe 2005: 84).

This is significant for an examination of Tamil Dalit leadership because the ‘leader-centred’ (Mines 1994: 41) nature of most movements renders the nebulous concept of charisma — commonly reduced to personality type — attractive. In emphasising the charismatic appeal of a leader, however, ‘the social relationship of leadership tends to become blurred, because one of the terms of the relation, the masses, is annulled as an actor’ (Melucci 1996: 336). Analyses of leadership, in other words, must incorporate the interface between leaders and the led and the social relations that give it significance. Rather than reifying a singular leader we need to unpack the intricate networks that constitute a movement. Charisma may be a mobilising ‘tool’ (Robnett 1997: 31), but it cannot perform the daily work on which movement allegiance depends.
Leadership, in other words, has to be legitimated and created socially — it cannot be divinely ordained nor can it escape the constraints imposed by prevailing sociocultural attitudes and relations. Social movement studies point to ‘repertoires of contention’ which constitute the stock of political tactics, styles and legitimising notions that activists draw upon. This repertoire provides a diverse palette of organisational possibilities, but it also ‘constrains collective action’ (Tilly 1986: 390). I contend that this finding applies equally to leadership, and an analysis of the politico-cultural context too reveals an array of legitimate leadership styles that do not exhaust but do constrain the modes of operation that are available to Tamil Dalit leaders.

The Cultural Context of Leadership

Accounts of leadership in India stress the need for cultural contextualisation and, almost invariably, point to the influence of the authority structures of religion and caste. Sudhir Kakar thus notes that ‘the superior’s right to command derived from traditional–moral factors, although these were strongly supported by his [sic] charismatic personality’ (1971: 300). Such authority relations, he argues, were reinforced from early childhood by means of the dominant stories and relationships depicted in school texts. Phyllis Arora likewise found that Indian peasants are ‘socialised to accept not merely the authority of a recognised leader, but the collective authority of the group’ (1967: 645). She highlights the continuing significance of caste and tribe clusters, noting that political responses tend to be group-based. The result is that ‘national politics at the village level tends to be a matter of mobilising traditional groups rather than individuals’ (ibid.: 648).

Arora’s insistence that elections ‘should facilitate a weaning from traditional postures before outside authority to more independent, and meaningful, interaction’ (ibid.: 658), however, echoes the prevalent dichotomy between tradition and modernity rather than exploring the interplay between the two. De Wit’s (1996: 65) more detailed study of political intermediaries in Tamil Nadu, by contrast, highlights how the imbrication of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ forms have created a ‘politics of mass idolatry’ which renders people dependent on the state. Common to both accounts is a tendency to downplay the agency of subalterns and present them as blindly following leaders vested with the authority of tradition or the resources of state.

Where Kakar employs the concept of charisma, Arora (1967: 648–50) introduces the particular cultural variants that recur in Indian literature:
the concepts of the guru (religious teacher), and the darshan-seeker (suppliant seeking blessing). She notes that guru–disciple relations are typified by the latter’s surrender to the former’s instruction. Darshan-seeking is most commonly associated with religious figures, but it has informed modes of political engagement and results in a form of leader–led relations which is distinctly unequal. The follower will regard the ‘leader with reverence; revel in his very presence; ceremonially greet, praise, and touch him’, but rarely if at all engage with the leader’s ideological objectives (ibid.: 652). Both disciples and darshan-seekers are portrayed as responding ‘to the person and not the message’ (Arora 1967: 652, cf. Zelliot 1996: 225).

Both accounts are dated but they raise crucial questions about the extent to which leadership patterns and forms of political engagement are shaped by hierarchical cultural forms. De Wit’s (1996) more recent study supports this view and notes the absence of ideological ties binding the poor to their chosen leaders. Though the asymmetric focus on great leaders obscures the conscious actions of supporters and the relations underpinning leadership, these aspects are discernible. Kakar notes that the most effective form of authority ‘was a nurtuant one. This kind of superior behaviour obtained compliance by providing emotional rewards or by arousing guilt’ (1971: 300). The implications of this assertion are neglected, and the complex and dynamic interactions that constitute leadership are obscured by the black box marked ‘tradition and charisma’. De Wit (1996: 141) similarly notes that leaders ‘must demonstrate an ability to get things done’, but neglects how this mitigates the assertion that the poor are tied to the political system.

Mines’ study of ‘big-men’ in Tamil Nadu brings the relational nature of leadership to the fore. Despite the retention of private armies, the archetypal authority of the caste headman largely rested upon consensus and ‘was limited to the locale. That consensus was abruptly withdrawn when western style education expanded possibilities of occupational and physical mobility’ (Mines 1994:112). These themes are further explored by Price (1989: 559) who argues that the ‘person-centred aspects of Indian political behaviour’ need to be explained by reference to culture. Price points to the persistence of organisational aspects of monarchical culture, such as ‘the conviction that daily well-being or relief from distress is dependent on discrete acts of mercy and generosity from superior beings, human or divine’ (ibid.: 571). She notes, however, that superiority arises from practice (ibid.: 563).
Kings, thus, had to extend protection and patronage to their subjects to receive ‘devoted service’.

Price’s work explains the ubiquity of person-centred organisations by pointing to long-standing patterns of political engagement, but the dynamic nature of the interaction between leaders and the led is implicit here. In this regard, Mines and Gourishankar’s work complements her analysis. Whilst agreeing that kingly figures (big-men) are central to politics in south India, these authors offer a fine-grained study of the mechanisms through which ‘big-men’ achieve and retain influence. Despite the assumption of ‘ready-made caste and kin constituencies’, they observe, ‘the fact is that even hereditary leaders have few followers when they lack charisma and skill’ (Mines and Gouri Shankar 1990: 762). The litany of issues that leaders have to negotiate makes it plain that charisma does not imply an unquestioned right to lead. The privileges accorded to leaders, rather, are ‘circumscribed by values that sub-ordinate his [sic] liberty to the common good’ (ibid.: 763). Leaders who are unaccountable or aloof, thus, are subject to accusations of self-aggrandisement and venality.

Mines and Gourishankar note how organisations reflect the pre-eminence of the ‘big-man’ and spiral outwards in such a way that the central leader is linked ‘to all members of his group’ (1990: 764). This can, however, only be accomplished through the means of able secondary or bridge leaders (ibid.: 772). This dynamic, they note, fosters a perennial tension that helps explain the frequency with which Tamil institutions split, re-form and fade away: leader-centred groups, by definition, only have ‘room for one man at the top’ (ibid.: 773). Secondary leaders who aspire to greater things, thus, must form their own groups. By the same token, the issue of succession is rendered problematic and contentious. Orderly transfers of power are nearly impossible when the group is so personalised and leaders gain power through personal connections or qualities rather than accountable processes. The ‘informal, personal and face-to-face relationships’ that constitute patronage, as De Wit (1996: 49) observes, ‘… are defined by particularism’. The literature, thus, outlines the socio-political context which frames and constrains the possibilities for leadership, but does it make sense of the Dalit experience?

At first sight, the models of leadership premised on traditional (and asymmetric) relations between guru and disciple, benefactor and darshan-seeker, king and subject appear to resonate with, and explain, the Tamil Dalit situation. Dalit leaders are portrayed as
‘superior beings’ — to be revered and followed. The majority of those encountered during my research extolled the virtues of their chosen leader while explaining their decision to join one particular movement. The modes of expression establish the activists as subservient. ‘Firebrand’ Murugan, a movement orator, thus, frequently addressed panegyrics to his leader: ‘the honest son of an honest mother, the promised leader from the promised mother, the pure Tamil prophet’.  

This seemingly neat fit needs to be problematised, however, given Simon Charsley’s focus on the specificities of Dalit-hood. His study raises three particular problems for effective Dalit leadership: disputes ‘over caste identity, over religious affiliation, and over generational succession. They were sharpened by the practicalities of mobilising resources’ (Charsley 2002: 5239). Whilst the import of each factor varies across time and space, similar questions confront contemporary Dalit movements. Contrary to those who can downplay or derive strength from their caste background, Dalits are frequently identified as such by others and are seen as ashamed of their origins (De Wit 1996; Deliège 1997). Furthermore, as untouchability is characterised by dependency, there are few Dalit authority figures who can serve as exemplars. In a context where class status reflects caste position, the opportunities for relations of patronage are similarly weak — indeed, Tamil Dalit leaders were compelled to canvass for funds in a most un-kingly manner.

The ambiguous status of Dalit leader figures is perhaps best captured in the debates concerning representation. Whilst Indian politicians are commonly seen to represent the interests of their caste or ethnic group (Chandra 2004), the prevalent perception of Dalit parliamentarians is that they toe the party line. Their ability to act as intermediaries between state/government and community is believed to be compromised. We cannot presume, therefore, that prevalent cultural patterns and relationships extend to those who have habitually been excluded from the body politic. In what follows this article interrogates the conceptual material in light of the empirical data on Tamil Dalit leadership.  

3 Speech, Emmaneswaram, 18 July 1999. All cited speeches and interviews were in Tamil and have been translated into English by the author.

4 This article draws on my field notes and interview data. For more details see Gorringe (2005).
Gurus or Conjurers? Leader-centred Movements

The Melavalavu massacre\(^5\) encapsulated the issues confronting Dalit movements, and the second anniversary in 1999 saw leaders from all Dalit castes, parties and organisations gather in the hamlet to commemorate the dead and address the crowds. Whilst some of the audience stayed throughout the day to hear the various speeches, the choreography of the occasion — influenced by police concerns — saw leaders and followers drive in, pay respects and depart in quick succession. It almost seemed calculated to capture the fragmented and leader-centred nature of Tamil Dalit assertion. The event was so arranged that no two leaders shared a platform. Instead, the various figureheads and their entourages arrived, paid their respects, made speeches and left in synchronised manner. The vast bulk of those attending each speech arrived in a convoy behind their chosen leader, and left when he did (there were no female leaders present).

As Thirumavalavan, the convenor of the Liberation Panthers (DPI — the largest Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu) wound up his peroration and moved through the crowd into a waiting vehicle, a crush of people surged forward to shake his hand, raise an issue or simply get close to him. As his jeep nosed its way onto the road a woman thrust a young baby through the open window and into Thirumavalavan’s lap. ‘Please name him, annan [elder brother]’ she said. Thirumavalavan barely batted an eyelid. He picked up the child, asked if it was a boy and declared to all within hearing that he would, thenceforth, be known as Murugesan. This was relayed to the gathering as honouring the panchayat president whose death was being marked. The baby was returned as the jeep picked up speed and the DPI adherents clambered aboard their own buses, cars and vans to follow in its wake.

The devotion, dependency and trust invested in Dalit leaders are illustrated in this vignette. Thirumavalavan is cast in the mould of a king or chief minister. The ‘darshan model’ of leadership resonates here and with the propensity of figures from established parties to prostrate themselves before the leader. Such actions, Neera Chandhoke (1999) observes, symbolically deny the possibility of ‘cadre autonomy’

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\(^5\) In 1997 the panchayat (local council) president, Murugesan, and six followers were butchered by a Thevar (backward caste) mob. See Gorringe (2005: 349) for details.
The examples of Thirumavalavan naming a child and ‘gracing’ nuptials, house warmings and memorials with his presence, all evoke the image of a benevolent superior who blesses his supplicants. In Tamil political life, Sara Dickey (1993: 350) avers, ‘the presence of the politician, or any respected person, also bestows honour on the ceremony or the occasion’. Leadership here, it is clear, is not simply a matter of political representation or brokerage but is a form of social relations that filters into everyday practices and concerns. Whilst Robnett perceives bridge leaders as linking the public and private realms, in a Tamil context formal leaders name children, bless marriages and housewarmings, arbitrate between disputants, mediate between supporters and the state, and act as brokers for a range of resources.

The leader/led relationship in Dalit movements, thus, is more active than the word darshan implies. Dalit leaders are not other-worldly and engage more actively in the lives of adherents; they highlight injustices, educate people about their rights, prescribe courses of action (whether to vote or not and whom to vote for) and modes of thought (Dalits are not Hindus, for example.). A critical aspect of leadership, as Alberto Melucci observes, is ‘the capacity to choose between alternatives and reduce uncertainties’ (1996: 340). Whilst Melucci refers to this as ‘decision making’, community education would be more apt. In hamlets 20–30 kilometres outside urban centres, Dalits quoted Thirumavalavan as an authority and cited speeches or interviews as the source of their opinions. Movement events, furthermore, often resembled lectures with the leaders standing on podiums to address the throng and educate them on issues ranging across politics, history, women’s rights, and the law.

As Meena Kandasamy opines, ‘in a state with pathetically low literacy levels, oral dissemination of ideology enabled even the unlettered rural people to become politically conscious’ (2004: xxii). Thirumavalavan’s speeches, she maintains, ‘have been the genesis for building the movement’ (ibid.: xxiii). Such analysis casts the leader as a guru guiding the actions of disciples. The model of the guru is felicitous because it suggests someone who is venerated but not superhuman. The guru’s task, as Fredrik Barth (1989: 643) notes, ‘is to instruct, clarify and educate in relation with his audience’. Eleanor Zelliot (1996: 225) likewise describes a guru as ‘one who brings his disciples into self-realisation’. Movement organisations, however, reflected the asymmetry of power and resources between educated,
middle-class leaders and impoverished cadre. As Sunder, a Dalit activist in the Working Peasant’s Movement put it:

Now even Thirumavalavan, this so-called radical leader, when he takes decisions he takes them as an individual…. There are no systematic organisations here. There are supporters, but no proper organisation. The majority of Dalit leaders — what they do is make decisions within a small circle. This is the general tendency that needs to be changed.6

N. V. Jayaseelan, the state general secretary of the Republican Party of India, confirmed this impression. Speaking of his party’s decision to contest elections in 1999 he said:

Our leader is Sakthidaasan who has announced that we are for involvement in the election. Now, I am in third position in the party, one could even say second. Now I condemn this stand as mistaken. I say it is wrong and uncalled for — despite this, that is the route they have chosen.7

When the views of senior figures pale into insignificance against the stated intentions of the leader, one can imagine how the opinions of party cadre are of even less consequence. ‘Most leaders’, as Ravichandran of Marutham Network (a coalition of charitable and social organisations) confirmed, ‘simply announced who they were supporting’.8 This places the leader in the role of the ‘conjurer’ who withholds ‘essential truths’ and stage manages performances that transform novices through rites rather than knowledge (Barth 1989: 642–43). The leader-focussed nature of most Tamil Dalit movements, however, is not in question.9 The question is: what underpins this organisation and how is it articulated and negotiated in relation to activists?

During my research, Thirumavalavan made one of the most momentous decisions in the short history of the Liberation Panthers. Abandoning a 10-year boycott of the polls he decided to contest the

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6 Interview, Perambalur, 27 September 1999.
7 Interview, Cuddalore, 26 April 1999.
8 Interview, Perambalur, 27 September 1999.
9 This is not to say that all movements were similarly structured. Women’s movements and some smaller Dalit organisations sought to create more participatory leadership styles (Gorringe 2005: Chapter 7).
elections, rendering the contingent nature of decision-making and the fragility of authority apparent. The decision was undoubtedly significant, but persuading his supporters of its wisdom was also an imperative. Thirumavalavan, as Kandasamy notes, ‘addresses public meetings a minimum of 20 days a month, sometimes even two or three a day, and spends more than half the month in travel, criss-crossing across the state’ (ibid.: xxiii). I have charted the travails of leadership elsewhere (Gorringe 2005: 248–50); these are enforced by the centrality of communication, education and persuasion to the leadership of Dalit movements.

The exhausting itinerary is required precisely because the leader is not an oracle and must present a case to secure allegiance. This was not a formulaic requirement for the purposes of image management, as confirmed by numerous interviews with a sceptical cadre. Speaking of institutional politics, Subramani, a committed activist, insisted that that ‘not all those who are members of this DPI organisation will go with him [Thirumavalavan]’.10 Others found the transition from radicalism to party politics frustrating and railed against the new emphasis on ‘hunger fasts’ rather than road blockades. The leader is clearly not immune to questioning or above reproach. The intimacy of the relationship, characterised by terms of fictive kinship that are given to leaders, predicates a relationship with give and take on both sides.

Leaders, thus, must exert themselves and meet ‘the people’ who do not view them in purely instrumental terms as brokers or fixers. Leaders are bestowed with gifts, invited into homes and asked to bless weddings. This personalisation of the relationship cements the loyalty shown to leaders. Members of the Dalit Liberation Movement (DLM) in Allalaberi, on the outskirts of Madurai, were typical in this regard. They castigated their leader for his lengthy absence, but when I suggested that they seek the intervention of another movement they were appalled: ‘We owe it to [our leader]! He did so much for us, we are his followers’.11 Dalit leaders have elements of both of Barth’s categories, guru and conjurer — they impart knowledge and they entertain — but are closer to the model of a guru. They must be consistent, ever-present and articulate, otherwise they are ‘quickly eclipsed by rivals or pupils’ (Barth 1989: 643). The guru–disciple model, thus,

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10 Interview, Melpattambakkam, 27 March 1999.
11 Interview, Allalaberi, 16 February 1999.
only makes sense if we incorporate discussion, argument and exchange into the ‘personal and enduring relationship’ (ibid.).

**Dalit Standpoint?**

The sustained interaction required to build up a sense of personal trust and loyalty has shaped the changing contours of Dalit leadership. According to Suresh Nambath, Dalits initially eulogised ‘criminal elements who indulged in isolated acts of violence against the oppressor caste for personal ends…. But in time the leadership of the community [has] passed on to organisations which systematically and therefore effectively, resisted caste oppression’ (quoted in Gorringe 2005: 251). In Allalaberi, Moses insisted that his community’s allegiance to the DLM resulted from the leader’s engagement in their problems and from bitter experiences with other groups. The significance of durable relationships was underscored by Dalit youth in Melavalavu — scene of the massacre mentioned above — who rebutted DPI calls to action saying: ‘It is easy for you to say that, you can come and go as you like. But we live here’.  

Clearly, occasional stage managed visits are inadequate to sustain commitment or to inspire participation. No matter how attractive, persuasive or skilled a leader is, therefore, bridge leaders are indispensable as local intermediaries. They introduce people to the movement/leader, articulate local concerns and channel them upwards, organise people in a given locality and do the painstaking legwork required to maintain a movement. This entails offering advice on a range of issues from court cases to insurance, from wife-beating to love marriages. Bridge leaders intervene in cases of intimidation or discrimination and give people a sense that the movement is interested in them. Travelling round Tamil Nadu it was obvious that the villages lacking such leadership felt isolated. Conversely, where a secondary figure was active, the movement thrived. In Vadianpatti, a village 20 kilometres from Madurai, for example, the Dalits bemoaned the fact that their transfer of allegiance to the DPI had not countered caste discrimination. By contrast, elderly Dalit women in the Madurai suburb of Keerathurai extolled the work of their local leader and insisted that ‘when she stands forward we cannot stand back…when you are doing good

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[they reassured her] everyone will come behind you’.\footnote{Group interview, Madurai, 28 March 1999.} Taking the time to meet, reassure and encourage people is an essential aspect of leadership.

Consequently, the ubiquity of recorded speeches, photographs and videotapes has ‘not obviated the need for the personal appearance and the personal favour’ from the figurehead (Dickey 1993: 353). Distant leaders, perceived to have no connection with the Dalits’ everyday lives are sidelined. Leaders who remain aloof, insulated in their air conditioned cars, are depicted as self-interested. The preference for reliable leaders who will ‘be there’ when needed has propelled the move away from bombastic populists. The incendiary oratory skills of militants like Sathai Baikiaraj, the leader of the All India Paraiyar Peravai, wins rousing applause, but there is growing awareness that isolated action cannot address the issues confronting Dalit movements today. Indeed, violence in the absence of strong organisation can prompt ‘extra-vagant revenge’ by higher caste groups (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 53). Even ‘Bomb Baikiaraj’, therefore, has adopted a more muted approach.\footnote{Interview with Guruvijay Paraiyar (10 October 1999): ‘We were a violent mob who used to inspire fear in people, but we have reduced that tendency. … Sathai Baikiaraj will turn up and explode bombs if necessary…. However, if you use bombs like Deepavali crackers then they lose impact’.

Dalit leaders lack the resources to bestow patronage. They can intervene to oil the wheels of state — arranging for caste certificates to be issued, chasing up land deeds and so on — but the lack of movement infrastructure constrains the ability of Dalit leaders to act as fixers like those from established parties (see Alm, this volume). ‘Educational capital’, as Morris and Staggenborg insist, is a ‘key resource’ (2004: 175), especially in less literate societies where leadership entails mediation and the provision of information (cf. Kandasamy 2004). In the Dalit context, however, education is insufficient since well educated elites are often viewed with distrust. The significance of representation and advocacy means that formal education must be supplemented in ‘schools of hard knocks’.

‘Politics are a means of identification to the poor’, as De Wit observes, ‘and issues of cultural identity have always been important in Tamil Nadu’ (1996: 284). Political affiliation, thus, is not merely a
question of material gains. Symbolic resources and a sense of belonging are also powerful inducements to action. Pandian (2002) shows how a heightened sense of caste pride has been used by Tamil groups to sustain commitment. Dalits are increasingly drawing on symbols of caste pride, such as Ambedkar or Dalit drums, to assert themselves as equals. Key to this symbolic politics is the demand for Dalit leaders to be ‘one of us’. Palinivelu Swamy, an office bearer in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had rejected the option of autonomous Dalit mobilisation but his analysis of Dalit leadership captured the prevailing prescription:

Thirumavalavan is there today...his father was quite poor and he took great difficulty to study, but Krishnasamy is not like that; he has been well off since the start and continues to act like a well heeled man. How many cheri’s [Dalit residential areas] has he walked through? How many cheris has he met people in?¹⁵

Ignoring the unfair caricature, the crucial point is the repeated assertion that leaders should be not only Dalit, but they should also have experienced what it means to be untouchable, ostracised and poor. Communist parties were rejected, in large part, because they did not elevate Dalits to positions of leadership. Political reservations have prompted further introspection amongst Dalit activists over the question of leadership since all politicians contesting for reserved seats are Dalits. The result has been a re-categorisation of leaders into Dalits (autonomous, radical militants), Scheduled Castes (institutionalised, dependent figures) and NGO staff (those who ‘use their name to make money and live off it’¹⁶). As Ravichandran insists:

A Dalit worker has to take on board what it means: sleeping with Dalits, eating with them, only then can he become close to them and participate in many matters. At present many speak of Dalit organisations that spout about ‘Dalit Liberation’ but come here and stay in five-star lodges.¹⁷

This dual emphasis on caste pride and experience helps explain the apparent contradiction between the requirement for Dalit leaders to be ‘one of us’ even as they are venerated as superiors. The admiration

¹⁵ Interview, Ayyankottai, 10 April 1999.
¹⁶ Interview with Ravichandran, Perambalur, 27 September 1999.
¹⁷ Ibid.
stems in part from the fact that the leaders are figures that the supporters can relate to and seek to emulate.

**Caste Headmen?**

The importance accorded to ‘experience’ as a form of social capital safeguards against the venality that Mines and Gourishankar (1990) rightly see as the most common critique of leadership. It has also become a normative commitment. Dr Krishnasamy thus argued that ‘only Dalit people and Dalit people’s own leaders must fight for their problem — identifying themselves with others is like heaping mud onto their own heads’.\(^\text{18}\) The logic that demands a Dalit leader for Dalit parties, however, increasingly stipulates that a leader should be from the same caste as most supporters and thus fuels a trend towards caste-based mobilisation. The differential status, economic standing and level of organisation of each caste subsumed under the Dalit tag\(^\text{19}\) is advanced to legitimate the retreat to caste constituencies. Guruvijay Paraiyar, a local leader in the Paraiyar Peravai (Front — PP) was typical:

> In Ramnathapuram District, Pallars are the ones oppressing Paraiyars. We can join with Chakkiliyars, therefore, but not them. Pallars are developed… [nor can we] join with Backward Castes.\(^\text{20}\)

Such movements assert their ultimate adherence to Dalit issues but the immediate objective is to increase the social mobility and cohesion of their own caste. Dr Krishnasamy emphasised that just as diverse instruments may merge in a symphony, the different caste movements could work in harmony on Dalit issues.\(^\text{21}\)

> In a society so divided by caste we three [main Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu] cannot become one leader or one body, but the three of us do need to unite. In an egg the white and the yolk are separate, but only if they become one is a chick produced. Without the two merging there can be no chick: the yellow and the white cannot be chicks independently.

\(^\text{19}\) See Gorringe (2005: 58–59) for details on the main Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu.
\(^\text{20}\) Interview, Madurai, 10 October 1999.
\(^\text{21}\) Speech, Chennai, 1 December 1999.
In the same way when attempting to gain political power we need to unite all three, but the three remaining apart and fighting apart is *neither wrong nor is it complying with society*.\(^2^2\)

Emphasising the rights and wellbeing of one caste, however, severs attachment to an emerging Dalit consciousness and can foster inter-caste rivalries (as the PP’s critique of Pallars shows above). Despite the pitfalls of particularist mobilisation the option remains attractive, as Dalit Gnanasekaran, leader of the Dalit Liberation Movement admitted, because organising people on the basis of caste is an easier pro-position than mobilising disparate individuals *against* caste.\(^2^3\) The internal solidarity of caste is cemented by proximity within a locality, endogamous marriage practices and the rhetoric of blood relationship. Gnanasekaran, therefore, planned to jettison the Dalit label:

> It is the need of the hour. That is the only way to go. I am being forced to become a caste movement. Look *thambi* [little brother], all movements and parties are organising along caste lines — that is the way it is, that is the sign of these times. It is easy and unproblematic to organise on the basis of caste, but very difficult to call yourself a Dalit.\(^2^4\)

Given the leader-centred nature of Dalit movements there is clearly an incentive for movement entrepreneurs to foster divisions and become leaders in their own right. The earlier discussion on charisma, and Gnanasekaran’s mention of compulsion, should caution us against the automatic assumption that this trend is directed by Dalit leaders. Certainly, leaders cannot create a caste feeling, though they can exacerbate or help to diminish it. We need, therefore, to appreciate the context within which contemporary leaders operate. It is abundantly clear that caste concerns continue to inform daily lives and that people habitually distinguish themselves from others along caste lines. The term Dalit has yet to overcome the appeal to more parochial loyalties, as seen in the fact that Ambedkar was often portrayed as a Paraiyar in Tamil Nadu. The retreat to caste-specific movements, thus, is partly a reflection of local priorities.

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\(^2^2\) Speech by Dr Krishnaswamy, Madurai, 25 November 1999, emphasis added.

\(^2^3\) See Anandan (2001) for a critique of ‘anti-caste’ movements, and Duncan (1999: 36) for an analysis of similar trends in UP.

\(^2^4\) Interview, Madurai, 12 October 1999.
Of more interest here, therefore, are those organisations that resist the allure of caste due to directive leadership. As Pudhupatti Aseervadam, a new recruit to the DPI, recalled:

When we first went to meet him [Thirumavalavan]...I knew full well that he was a Paraiyar. We said, ‘we are inviting you on behalf of the Paraiyar Peravai and you must come and speak to us’. He agreed, but as soon as I said that we would write: ‘Thirumavalavan Paraiyar is Coming to Speak’ ... he spoke in a demeaning manner to me: ‘Do not use any speech except “DALIT”. I am not proud to be a Paraiyar, nor am I proud to be a Pallar or a Chakkiliyar, but I am a Dalit’.25

Aseervadam highlights the leader’s importance in terms of direction, vision and decision-making, but his assumption that Thirumavalavan’s utterances capture the behaviour of DPI activists betrays a naïve and leader-centric understanding. Melucci (1996) has rightly ridiculed the notion that a movement is a unitary entity that is embodied in the leader. Collective action, he shows, is always a dynamic process. Whatever Thirumavalavan’s convictions may be, he is forced to work within the constraints imposed by the protest constituency and the wider society.26 Thus, whilst the DPI retains a (half-hearted) commitment to the Dalit label, this attachment is not always apparent. Speakers frequently hail Thirumavalavan as a Paraiyar Ambedkar, most DPI supporters are Paraiyars, and the movement thrives in Paraiyar-dominated locations. Furthermore, when an established secondary leader left the DPI, his new movement was an avowedly Paraiyar front.

Anti-caste politics, therefore remains embedded in caste constituencies. Ravichandran of the Marutham Network pin-pointed the dilemmas this throws up:

Krishnasamy doesn’t respect anyone — his is a casteist organisation. He is from a Pallar community and he is fighting for their cause. Using Puthiya Tamizhagam [New Tamil Nadu] he is providing a separate identity for Pallars. Then how can he become a Dalit leader?...How can you become a Dalit leader by heading a caste movement?27

25 Interview, Melavasal, 28 March 1999.
26 See Alm (this volume) and Ruud (this volume) on the constraints within which leaders operate.
27 Interview with Ravichandran, Perambalur, 27 September 1999.
Whilst Dr Krishnasamy openly advocates separate development he is not alone. No Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu has systematically crossed the caste divides that fissure the Dalit polity. There is a distinction between those who seek Dalit unity and fail and those whose mode of operation is caste-based. However, the distinction is a fine one whilst concrete steps towards the eradication of caste barriers (via a systematic programme of inter-marriage and the promotion of people of all castes to leadership positions, for example) are neglected. Thirumavalavan, by default, is the leader of a (mostly) Paraiyar party, and the habitual actions of Dalit leaders cast them as contemporary caste headmen. They act as the ultimate authority within the group and even slightly contentious decisions (the wording of a poster, for instance) are referred to them. They direct people’s votes; arbitrate between disputants; sanction (or at least solemnise) marriages to the extent that several marriages were postponed whilst Thirumavalavan was ill and unable to attend; lay down the law (‘we will not block roads’, for example); represent the caste cadres to a wider constituency and inherit the leadership through personal or caste connections.

The parallels are not exact, but the processes by which castes are created and how they operate have altered. The communities bound by marriage, kinship and locality were gradually replaced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by state-wide caste associations tied by political affiliations as much as blood ties. As Steven Barnett notes: ‘A stress on blood as embodying a caste-wide code for conduct replace[d] caste hierarchy; a stress on blood as embodying natural substance open[ed] the ideological field to other identity choices’ (1977: 396–97). This transition from a hierarchy of interdependent social categories to a universe of ‘essentially identical’ competing blocs is what Louis Dumont terms the ‘substantialisation’ of caste (1980: 222). The formation of state-wide associations and the extension of marriage boundaries, he notes, facilitate mobilisation so that castes now appear as collective individuals (ibid.). In this context, Dalit movements resemble sub-castes vying for leadership over the entire group.

Improvements in communications technology eroded the authority of the traditional caste headman, but the same mechanisms ushered in new leaders. As Mines (1994: 112) observed, the authority of caste heads ultimately rested on a consensus that could be (and was) withdrawn. As the examples of internal disputes and schisms highlight, this facet remains constant and the leader’s authority is not permanent or unconditional. Barnett notes how the emergence of state politics
enabled the creation of new identities, and the emergence of Dalit parties arguably has the same effect today. Dalit leader’s assumptions that they can safely count on the votes of the downtrodden have been belied in recent elections and the consensus that underpinned the rise of autonomous Dalit politicians may be in decline.

Losing Direction? Developments in Dalit Politics

Parliamentary politics is problematic for Dalit leaders: it offers the prospect of media coverage, political influence and remunerative alliances, but the inability of Dalit parties to command electoral majorities in Tamil constituencies relegates them to a position of secondary importance (as lesser figures in grand coalitions, or as gallant losers) and prompts accusations of self-aggrandisement. The experiences of the DPI and PT, subsequent to their political initiation, are instructive. Both Krishnasamy and Thirumavalavan burst onto the political scene amidst a welter of publicity which cast them as radical new actors. Their alliance in 1999 — when they joined a Third Front, independent of the main Dravidian parties — bolstered the impression that they would upset the equilibrium and reinvigorate political contest. Recent elections, however, suggest that they have been co-opted (Gorringe 2007). The initial appeal of both movements was that they would bring politics closer to the people as a consequence of their grassroots activism. It seems rather that political participation has alienated leaders from their constituents and brought them in line with established modes of doing politics.

In the 2006 state elections, thus, ‘dedicated local cadre’ were passed over in the nomination of DPI candidates.28 A local Catholic priest further confirmed the impression that the DPI leadership was alienating core supporters.29 The perpetual jockeying for positions, negotiations over alliances and the frequency with which the DPI has swapped sides between competing parties has dismayed party activists and fostered a sense of detachment from the workings of the party. The institutionalisation of the movement, in other words, has

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29 Interview, Edinburgh, 28 March 2006.
expanded the divide between leaders and the led and opened avenues for individual civic activism. In such situations competent bridge leaders are essential to maintain momentum, but the by-passing of local activists in the elections suggests that they are being neglected.

These issues are also reflected in the trajectory of Puthiya Tamizhagam, whose waning fortunes are reflected in declining political returns and the search for distant allies. Puthiya Tamizhagam’s attempts to forge closer ties with the UP-based Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP, the most successful Dalit-led party in India) may be ideologically consistent, but the BSP has little credibility in Tamil Nadu. Few respondents in 1999 or 2002 were aware of the party and though movement speeches often hailed it as a forerunner, it had little mass resonance. Both Puthiya Tamizhagam and the DPI came to prominence on the back of sustained campaigns on local issues that affected their constituents’ daily lives. The compulsions of political negotiation have intruded on this relationship.

Three by-elections in 2000 intimated the impact of the increasingly frayed relationship between Dalit parties and their members, when the ‘DMK gained from Dalits’ apathy to the AIADMK’ (Nambath 2000). Contrary to their depiction as pawns manipulated by political parties (Chandra 2004), or their own leaders (Arora 1967), the Dalit electorate refused to endorse a political party that they were ideologically opposed to. Prior to the 1999 election, Thirumavalavan had repeatedly condemned the AIADMK and insisted that the atrocities committed under its rule could not be forgiven. His decision to ally with them, therefore, alienated supporters. The limitations of charisma in explaining leadership are revealed here: when the relationship that endows a leader with charismatic appeal is undermined, the leader’s attractiveness also declines.

Whilst they championed an unrepresented and oppressed minority who looked to them to articulate grievances and redress wrongs, Dalit leaders carried their following with them. The realisation that their mass appeal does not necessarily translate into votes has forced a reconsideration of the social relationships upon which leadership is built. ‘We must be with the people’, Thirumavalavan declared after his entry into electoral competition. ‘Politics, by definition, means not being alienated from the people’.\textsuperscript{30} Entry into politics, however, has

\textsuperscript{30} Interview, Chennai, 3 November 1999.
altered the composition of the ‘people’ in question. As Dalits cannot win seats on their own, due heed must be paid to the votes of other constituents. If this process waters down the symbolic aspects of Dalit assertion and marginalises core supporters, however, then the rationale for a specifically Dalit leadership disappears.

**Conclusion**

In this light, the tendency to prioritise the leader needs to be corrected. Obviously, where leaders lose the trust of their supporters, their leadership fails. ‘Supporter’, thus, is more apposite than ‘follower’ since the latter implicitly negates the agency of movement among participants. The mechanisms and relationships through which fragile bonds of trust are maintained are as important to an understanding of leadership, if not more, than the qualities and characteristics of individual figures. Robnett’s (1997) analysis and empirical data urge caution in relation to leader-centred accounts and compel us to consider a movement as a network of dense relationships rather than the fiefdom of a demagogue.

Leaders also act within cultural models of leadership, which simultaneously validate and constrain their authority. It is abundantly clear that leaders do not operate in a vacuum and cannot impose arbitrary frames on an unwilling constituency. As important as educational capital in this regard is social or experiential ‘capital’. A leader needs to be able to persuade people of his/her authenticity (here, Dalit-ness) to gain support and it is often a movement’s interactions with opponents that unites cadres around an identity (cf. Barker et al. 2001: 4). Leaders, thus, need to be analysed in context.

In the Tamil case, caste identity remains paramount and the thorny problem of whether Dalit mobilisation should attempt to eradicate caste or organise on that basis is omnipresent. Debates over the contingencies of political affiliation and the relative efficacy of institutional or extra-institutional politics are fuelled (for Dalits, at least) by the continuing disparity between political rhetoric and legislation relating to untouchability and the social practice and experience of caste. Political engagement legitimises failing political institutions, but poll boycotts undermine the legitimacy of challenging groups (Gorringe 2005). Dalit leaders lacking resources, thus, must negotiate a path through the constraints and opportunities offered by state authorities and the demands for social change articulated by their supporters.
De Wit (1996: 94) argues that the poor are trapped within the confines of the Tamil political machinery. The exigencies of machine politics can blunt the edges of ideological platforms in favour of a politics of incentives. The data above shows that this is a real danger for Dalit leaders, but not an inevitable one. Dalit supporters eschewed the attractions of the clientelist state to ‘vote for ourselves’ and, thus, offer the scope to articulate an alternative to the current regime. In 2006, the actor–politician Vijayakanth showed that it is possible to act within the particular politico-cultural constraints and norms of Tamil politics and challenge the status quo (see Wyatt, this volume). If Dalit leaders merely replicate and reproduce the relations from which they are excluded, the radical impulse of Dalit assertion will be diluted.

In this regard, the pervasive question of intra-movement succession and the transfer of power from one leader to the next is especially troublesome (cf. Charsley 2002). If the various movements are to avoid repeated schisms, the workings of leadership must be rendered transparent. Entry into politics has made Dalit leaders vulnerable to accusations of venality precisely because centralisation has divorced these leaders from the masses. Leadership styles suited to radical and under-resourced groups are less apt for the compromises of ‘normal politics’. Also, political contestation mitigates the asymmetric social relations on which Dalit leaders depend, and affords the supporters more say (voting for others, for instance). The authority of contemporary leaders, like that of caste headmen, ultimately rests on consensus. They emerged to challenge the conservatism of existing Dalit elders and if they do not adapt to changing circumstances now they too, in their turn, will be swept away.

References


The 2006 assembly election in Tamil Nadu generated considerable interest. It was the closest fought election for nearly 20 years. The opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) had assembled what was on paper a superior alliance but — headed by an octogenarian leader — it was not clear that it offered the dynamism demanded by the electorate. The governing AIADMK (All-India Anna DMK) had avoided a major scandal of the type that had damaged its image when it was in power between 1991 and 1996. In an impressive display of responsiveness Chief Minister Jayalalithaa reversed a series of painful economic reforms in May 2004 and made amends to groups that had been antagonised by the regime during the reform period. It was possible that the AIADMK, headed by a younger leader, could be re-elected on the basis of performance in office. This two-way contest was disrupted by the entry of Vijayakanth, an actor–politician at the head of a new party. Vijayakanth expressed clear chief ministerial ambitions and by the end of the campaign he had emerged as a substantial figure in state politics. The 2006 election campaign and its outcome provide some good vantage points from which to reflect on the practice of political leadership in Tamil Nadu. The theme of populist leadership was brought back to prominence in Tamil Nadu in 2006, after a period of nearly two decades in which most new developments in the state’s party system were denominated in terms of identity politics.

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In this article I use the case of the actor-politician Vijayakanth to illustrate the ways in which political leaders in Tamil Nadu seek support for their political parties and how they build their constituencies. In assessing and explaining his success I dispel any suggestion that Vijayakanth’s rise to political prominence is the consequence of a suggestible Tamil electorate that produces unpredictable electoral ‘waves’. Instead I argue that Vijayakanth’s leadership needs to be located in a widely understood and accepted style of politics that has been practiced in Tamil Nadu since the 1970s. This ‘protective’ or ‘paternalist’ populism is expressed in terms of a general appeal to the people but key policies associated with it are aimed at the poor (Swamy 1998: 109; Subramanian 1999: 74–75).¹

In what follows I work from a state-level perspective, providing a view of the convergence between the three largest regional parties in Tamil Nadu. In the first section of the article I review several existing accounts of political leadership in Tamil Nadu and India. In the second section I draw on this review to construct an analytical framework. In the third I establish the relevance of populism in Tamil Nadu and summarise the recent fragmentation in the state’s party system. In the fourth section of the article I profile and analyse the emergence of Vijayakanth as a state-level leader. In the conclusion I reflect on the significance of Vijayakanth’s populist style of leadership. I also consider the implications of Vijayakanth’s preferred mode of populist mobilisation for the pattern of party politics in Tamil Nadu.

Agency, Structure and Leadership

In the literature on political leadership in India and Tamil Nadu, one can identify scholars who emphasise the role of individual agency and those who see leadership as being shaped by structural factors. This survey begins with authors who have more to say about agency before considering several interpretations that link patterns of leadership to various structural factors. James Manor has drawn attention to the way in which state chief ministers are able to shape political processes and outcomes. His work suggests that politicians have more room to manoeuvre than is assumed by those working with

¹ These terms were coined by Swamy (1998) and Subramanian (1999) respectively.
structuralist assumptions. Manor characterises chief ministers like Digvijay Singh in Madhya Pradesh as innovative risk-takers who are able to alter the direction of government policy (2004). Manor’s assessments of inept and corrupt chief ministers also suggest ways in which a lack, or misapplication, of political skills also makes a difference to political outcomes (2000: 833–84). Political institutions available to chief ministers, including robust political parties, are important but a possible alternative lies in the activity of ‘lower-level activists’ or non-party political fixers who mediate between the state and civil society. However, Manor argues that chief ministers still have to make skilful use of these resources (1995: 70–72).

Mattison Mines and Vijayalakshmi Gourishankar, writing about leadership in a very broad sense, argue that skill is an essential attribute of individuals who achieve pre-eminence in south India. They further argue that these ‘big-men’ (and women) amplify their eminence through institutions, which they control. The emphasis is strongly on agency, for these institutions expand and contract according to the activity of the leader. The agency of leaders is not absolute though; they have to take some care to respond to the expectations of their followers (Mines and Gourishankar 1990: 775). They show how institutions develop according to the skill and ambition of the leader. Sara Dickey applies this model to the case of the actor–politician M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), showing how satellite institutions, in particular his fan clubs, reproduced the image of a generous leader (1993).

Henry Hart, writing mostly about national leadership in India, argues for a balance between skill and the effectiveness of such institutions as political parties and the bureaucracy when analysing the efficacy of individual leaders. However, an obviously structural element does emerge in Hart’s account when he argues that national leaders seeking to effect social change are often constrained by structural factors at the village level (1990: 49–50).

Accounts of leadership that are more attentive to structural factors of a cultural nature include those offered by Pamela Price (1989) and Hugo Gorringe (2005). Price argues that leadership in India is frequently shaped by ‘structures of meaning’ in the form of ‘political values with roots in precolonial political formations and culture’ that echo historical models of kingly behaviour (1989: 560). A key element of this kingly behaviour includes acts of generosity towards one’s followers. Again the case of MGR, both dazzling and generous, is used to illustrate the argument. In a subsequent study, Price explores the
cultural legacy of the DMK arguing that party propagandists put in place a set of values that have been used to justify the superior standing, and often the wealth, of elected politicians in Tamil Nadu. A successful candidate elected to the state assembly gains prestige from association with the state and ‘his capacity to make himself — and possibly others — wealthy’ (Price 1996: 378).

S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha provide a complementary account of the re-interpretation of Tamil history and epic literature by the leadership of the DMK. The DMK leader Karunanidhi, identified senior party figures with characters from the courts of former Tamil kings (Rajadurai and Geetha 1996: 567). Thomas Blom Hansen, using the case of the Shiv Sena in western India, argues that leadership has a performative aspect, an important element of which is the staging of spectacles that raise the profile of an emerging leader or help persuade followers of the continuing importance of an existing leader (2004: 22). Carole Spary develops this argument further showing the ways in which performativity is presented and assessed in gendered terms (2006: 14). That these performances are understood within structures of meaning is a point I return to below.

Gorringe (2005, 2006b) provides another account, using cases of Dalit leaders in Tamil Nadu, with a stronger structural emphasis. In common with Price, he attributes importance to structures of social meaning. Gorringe follows Geertz, who understands charisma as the ability of leaders to align themselves with prevailing cultural values. Dalit leaders express the concerns and aspirations of their followers. Gorringe also emphasises the ‘social relations of leadership’ which means that leaders are closely tied to their followers and possess legitimacy because they resemble their followers as well as representing their concerns (2005: 246). Thus, leaders cannot get too far ahead of the members of the movement that they lead or else they will lose their support. While it is essential to take account of the agency of followers, I offer two observations. First, the cultural values described by Gorringe are the values of a social movement committed to change and are not identical to the values prevalent in other party subcultures. The values of the Dalit Panther Iyyakkam (DPI) are much more likely to encourage critical responses than the shared culture of the fan clubs discussed below. Second, it is also the case that leaders of other parties in Tamil Nadu have resources which can be used to insulate themselves from internal critics. For example, at the time of the formation of the Anna DMK (ADMK) it was rumoured that
Karunanidhi had resources available to keep legislators loyal to the parent party (Barnett 1976: 299). Thirumavalvan’s leadership, and the achievements of DPI activists, are especially impressive given the slender material resources available to the movement.

**Synthesis: Analysing Leadership**

This literature on leadership provides good reasons for taking elite agency seriously, though there is some consensus that this agency needs to be understood in a structural context. The literature also draws attention to the place of ideas in politics and the ways in which political leaders make use of structures of meaning. It is also worth emphasising that political leaders in Tamil Nadu (and elsewhere) are engaged in defining choices and ways of understanding politics (Swamy 1996: 49; Wyatt 2010). This theme has been played out over the last 40 years in Tamil Nadu in the contest between leaders who have emphasised the fortunes of particular caste groups and those, including Annadurai, Karunanidhi and MGR, who have promoted broad populist coalitions. Mines and Gourishankar (1990) provide a clear account of how leaders exert their agency. They emphasise individual skill and they also draw attention to the opportunities for giving patronage that are provided by institutions.

In order to succeed, political leaders need to be found plausible by their followers. There are two obvious routes to this objective. First, successful political leaders are perceived to be special individuals and second, leaders have to demonstrate that they are effective leaders. Prospective supporters are interested in what makes a leader pre-eminent or a unique individual (ibid.: 762–63). Social background might, or might not, be an important consideration. As Gorringe notes it is critical for an authentic Dalit leader to have the appropriate caste background in Tamil Nadu (2006b: 15), and the same qualification would apply to leaders of other caste-based parties. Caste identity is far from irrelevant for leaders of other parties, but it is not always an essential mark of authenticity nor does it operate in the precise way that applies among Dalit movements. So, for example, the current leader of the AIADMK is a Brahmin and while it is remarked upon by commentators it seems not to be a political liability. In terms of personal distinctiveness, a leader needs a ‘politically attractive image’ (Dickey 1993: 368). Weberian notions of charisma have been subject to criticisms which draw attention back to the agency of followers.
and prevailing social assumptions. In terms of my own analysis of political leadership, an important insight I take from the social relations approach is that leadership needs to be considered an on-going task.

The second aspect of being a plausible leader is the continual persuading of supporters to support their leader’s party. An obvious way of establishing efficacy is to win elections and hold office. However, given the limited opportunities for controlling the state government, leaders have to be creative in defining what supporters understand by ‘winning’. One alternative, which is certainly used in Tamil Nadu, for demonstrating the leader’s relevance, is a turn towards performativity (Spary 2006: 14). There is a long tradition of emerging parties engaging in agitational politics or as Gorringe (2005) puts it, drawing on established repertoires of action.

A framework for investigation

This review of the literature suggests a five-part framework for investigating and analysing political leadership. First, an initial review of the skill and qualifications that a leader brings to his or her party provides essential background for the discussion of leadership. What makes a leader pre-eminent? Or, following Dickey’s formulation (1993: 368), what gives a leader a politically attractive image? Second, attention needs to be paid to ways in which a leader seeks to demonstrate his or her efficacy as a party leader. Third, thought needs to be given to the institutions which a leader uses to nurture their party. Fourth, consideration needs to be given to the extent to which a party is embedded in, or deviates from, existing structures of meaning in the political culture of Tamil Nadu. I am careful not to describe this as an entirely Dravidian political culture given the emergence of various new parties since the late 1980s. Fifth, there are key social divisions that enable or inhibit the emergence of party leaders. Caste dynamics are particularly important — both caste groups that support parties and caste forces that stand in opposition to emerging leaders.

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2 Spary argues that Weber does not consider the extent to which a leader’s legitimacy is constructed according to gendered notions of authority (2006:12–14). Gorringe is critical of the Weberian perspective, arguing that an exclusive focus on the leader’s personal qualities obscures the agency exercised by their followers (2005: 245).
Populist Politics in Tamil Nadu

The previous section of this article has argued that there are good reasons for taking political leaders seriously. Leaders are more than the reflection of underlying social structures, and their skills and capabilities are factors that shape political events. In this section, I show how leadership is esteemed in Tamil Nadu in the context of a populist style of politics. The case of Vijayakanth is important because he stands in this populist tradition and his approach to politics contrasts with the heavy emphasis placed on identity politics by most other aspiring political entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu since 1987. Populism is a word with strong pejorative connotations. It is commonly used, especially in the Indian press, to refer to a crowd-pleasing style of politics accompanied by the profligate spending of public money. Freed from its negative overtones the term has been used more helpfully to describe a form of politics that revolves around the idea of the common people or as Peter Wiles argues, it is a creed or a movement in which ‘virtue resides in the simple people’ (1970: 166, italics in the original). An anti-elitist attitude is another key feature of populist rhetoric (Canovan 1981: 294). Populists frequently depict the common people as oppressed and cheated of their natural due by powerful vested interests. The vagueness of the core features of populism makes it difficult to give populist movements and populist leaders a fixed ideological home. Populism can appear both reactionary and radical. While it may be an ambiguous phenomenon, populism can be an effective way of mobilising political support. This has certainly been the case in Tamil politics where the DMK and the AIADMK have resorted to distinctive variants of populist mobilisation (Swamy 1998; Subramanian 1999).

The populist approach favoured by the DMK in the 1960s was designed to build a broad coalition. It encouraged a Tamil nationalist sentiment that overlooked local differences. What mattered was the unity of a larger community threatened by north Indian interests. This was powerfully portrayed in films with which DMK activists were associated in the 1950s and 1960s (Pandian 1992: 34). Caste differences were considered to be of secondary importance as the DMK emphasised the need for unity among the Dravidian people being oppressed by north Indian interests. The DMK did not integrate caste associations into its organisational structure (Subramanian 1999: 142). This contrasted with the Congress strategy of building links between different caste groups by careful candidate selection.
and nurturing locally powerful caste leaders. The approach used by the DMK was so successful in 1967 that contemporary observers judged caste to be of dwindling importance in Tamil politics (Forrester 1970: 57–58). The heroic leader figure who has special empathy for the people can be an important element of a populist political style. Annadurai was warmly regarded as a leader in touch with the people (Swamy 1996: 173). The stature of the leader became even more central as the AIADMK, under the leadership of MGR, developed its own variant of Dravidian populism. MGR was projected as a heroic figure who fought for the interests of the poor masses of the state.

The populist strategies of the two parties have been analysed in terms of their attempts to target different socio-economic groups. The DMK linked its fortunes to intermediate and moderately well-off groups, presenting itself as the champion of the ‘common man’, with an image that would appeal variously to ‘the rising urban lower middle class, the educated, unemployed youth, the middling farmer, and particularly the backward castes’ (Barnett 1976: 318). The DMK has used ‘empowerment’ or ‘assertive’ populist appeals that tended to win support among a more upwardly mobile section of the electorate (Swamy 1998: 109; Subramanian 1999: 74–75). The actor–politician MGR left the DMK in dramatic circumstances in October 1972 and formed his own party the ADMK. The party, later renamed the AIADMK, won a substantial victory in the state assembly election in 1977. MGR proved an extremely popular chief minister and an iconic political leader (Pandian 1992). He led the AIADMK to victory again in the 1980 and 1984 assembly elections. The AIADMK was first defeated in a full state assembly election in 1989, two years after the death of MGR. In contrast to the DMK, the AIADMK has gained stronger support from women and poorer voters, with its protectionist populism. This is the political style that the actor–politician Vijayakanth has attempted to emulate as well, both in terms of a personal political image that resembles MGR and in terms of policies that address the same social groups favoured by MGR.

**Dravidian drift: leadership and party system change in contemporary Tamil Nadu**

Events since the death of MGR in 1987 have opened up political space for aspiring leaders like Vijayakanth. While the DMK and the AIADMK still remain the largest parties in the state they have experienced a degree of involution that encourages leaders to form new parties. Voters have been willing to support new parties and
the DMK and the AIADMK are heavily dependent on electoral allies in order to win elections. A number of splits in all of the major parties in the state has opened up the political market in Tamil Nadu. While Jayalalithaa emerged as a strong leader of the AIADMK, very capable of winning elections, this did not completely stifle dissent in the party or bring all of the original members back to it. The controversy surrounding the sumptuous celebrations of the marriage of Jayalalithaa’s ‘foster’ son Sudhakaran, damaged the image of the AIADMK prior to the 1996 assembly elections (Swamy 1998: 130–31). The AIADMK was obliged to seek the support of minor allies to contest the 1998 Lok Sabha elections.

The most substantial split in the DMK since MGR was expelled from the party in 1972 came with the expulsion in December 1993 of a senior DMK leader V. Gopalsamy, popularly known as ‘Vaiko’ (Widlund 2000: 93). In May 1994, Vaiko, with the support of a number of middle-ranking DMK party officials, launched a new party: the Marumalarchi (renaissance) DMK (MDMK). In various elections since 1996 the MDMK has drawn the support of about 5 per cent of the electorate and has been an important, even if junior, partner in numerous electoral alliances. A central part of the MDMK’s appeal is Vaiko’s leadership which is narrated as courageous and above corruption (ibid.: 177).

Caste-based mobilisation has cut into the support of all of the major parties in the state since the late 1980s. The Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) (the toiling people’s party) was formed in July 1989 after a series of disruptive protests took place across northern Tamil Nadu as members of the backward Vanniar caste rose in opposition to the reservation policy of the state government (Suresh 1992: 2317). The geographic concentration of the Vanniar vote enabled the PMK to emerge as a highly prized electoral ally as alliance politics began to deepen in 1998. Its leader, Dr S. Ramadoss, is a shrewd practitioner of alliance politics. In 1999, a social movement, the DPI, also entered electoral politics. The DPI seeks broad support among the Dalits of Tamil Nadu, and the movement-party is active in many parts of the state, but it is strongly associated with the Paraiyar caste group that is concentrated in the northern districts of the state. It is difficult to gauge the extent of state-wide electoral support for the DPI because it has almost always contested elections as part of an alliance. The DPI, like the PMK, is also valued by its allies for its concentrations of support in the northern districts. This has caused periodic tension with the PMK, which is strong in similar areas (Gorringe 2005: 316–17).
The Puthiya Thamizhagam is another identity-based party with some following in the southern part of Tamil Nadu. The social base of this party is concentrated among the Pallars in southern Tamil Nadu, a caste group with the highest ritual status of the three largest Dalit groups of Tamil Nadu (Wyatt 2010).

The weakening of the Congress party in Tamil Nadu has also created space for aspiring political entrepreneurs. The party suffered a major split in 1996 and even though most of the party was reunited in 2002, open factionalism remains a problem for the party. The Congress enjoyed electoral success in the 2004 Lok Sabha and 2006 state assembly elections but only because it was part of a strong electoral alliance. The interactions between political parties in the late 1990s were denominated in terms of caste in a way not seen since the 1950s. The resurgence of identity politics in Tamil Nadu revealed ‘the inability of Dravidian politics to address contemporary anxieties’ (Harriss 2002: 98). The changes summarised above demonstrated that the DMK and the AIADMK were not as responsive to the electorate as they might have been. Developments at the national level, with the turn towards coalition politics meant that both Congress and the BJP were anxious to make alliances with parties in south India. The party system in Tamil Nadu was becoming more plural and offered new opportunities to ambitious political entrepreneurs.

The Emergence of Vijayakanth as a Political Leader

On 14 September 2005 the actor–politician Vijayakanth launched a new party, the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK). The name of the party was an attempt to give Vijayakanth as broad an appeal as possible though as we shall see below it was the inclination towards MGR’s populist style that resonated most strongly with existing political traditions in the state. Vijayakanth nods in the direction of supporters of national parties like Congress and the BJP. He takes a soft line on the issue of Hindi and Vijayakanth has let it be known that he comes from a Congress family. The word ‘Desiya’ in the party name suggests a national view of politics. At the same time the reference to the Dravida Kazhagam brings to mind a Dravidian approach to politics.

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The launch rally of the DMDK was a glittering spectacle held on a site covering 74 acres of private land outside Madurai. Vijayakanth arrived in the old blue van used by MGR for campaigning. The van was said to be a gift from MGR’s widow, Janaki. The stage from which Vijayakanth addressed the crowds was decorated with images of the actor himself, Annadurai, Periar, Kamaraj, and MGR. The colours favoured by Dravidian organisations, black and red, were used in the DMDK party flag and were much in evidence in the elaborate decorations of the rally site. Images of MGR were a common sight, including a montage that depicted the social service activities of both MGR and Vijayakanth. Party sources claimed that 200,000 people attended the rally. In the rest of this section I use the five-part framework outlined at the beginning of the chapter to explain why Vijayakanth was seen as a plausible political leader.

1. Vijayakanth’s pre-eminence

Vijayakanth is a popular figure in Tamil Nadu. He has enjoyed a substantial career in Tamil cinema having acted in 148 films by early 2006. Vijayakanth’s popularity is reflected in numerous fan clubs that follow his films and celebrate his image. Vijayakanth is also known as ‘The Captain’, a popular nickname coined from his 1991 hit Captain Prabhakaran. Vijayakanth frequently plays the part of an action hero who thwarts the designs of terrorists, criminals and corrupt politicians. In the film Sudesi (2006) he forces a corrupt

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chief minister to govern responsibly. In the film *Vanchinathan* (2001) Vijayakanth plays a principled policeman who confronts a scheming newspaper proprietor. Accounts of the film’s production suggested convergence between Vijayakanth’s on-screen and off-screen persona. It was reported that the producer sacked the director, Shaji Kailas, but Vijayakanth was able to get him reinstated as director.\(^9\) In short, the scripts present Vijayakanth as an ‘honest, courageous and forthright person who would not be cowed down’.\(^{10}\) His films are popular among a mass, rather than an elite audience, and are deliberately marketed in the so-called B and C theatres.

Vijayakanth served for a number of years as the elected president of the industry association, the Nadigar Sangam (South Indian Film Artistes Association), which gave him a number of opportunities to appear as a patron and conciliator in an industry noted for political divisions.\(^{11}\) Vijayakanth’s political rise contrasts with the uneven political career of another superstar of Tamil cinema: Rajinikanth. The two actors share a certain amount in common, both having intimated a long-term ambition to enter party politics. Rajinikanth famously opposed the AIADMK chief minister in 1996 and endorsed the DMK–TMC alliance.\(^{12}\) This intervention raised the expectation that Rajinikanth might pursue a more substantial political career. Rajinikanth’s extensive fan clubs were considered to be a valuable political resource and a number of parties attempted to link their fortunes to his great popularity. The PMK, with some success, attempted to weaken his political position. Rajinikanth did not make the decisive entry into politics that his fans hoped for, though he remains a very popular figure (Vijayabaskar and Wyatt 2007). Rajinikanth’s political fortunes reached their nadir when he backed

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the losing BJP–AIADMK alliance in the 2004 Lok Sabha election. Rajinikanth’s enigmatic political career may have floundered but he proved that cinema was still a valuable resource that could be exploited by individuals seeking an alternative route into party politics (Krishnan 2007). Vijayakanth’s entry into formal politics came just after Rajinikanth appeared to have retired from the political scene.

2. The efficacy of Vijayakanth’s leadership

Vijayakanth has demonstrated the efficacy of his leadership in a number of ways. Other actors, including Rajinikanth and Sivaji Ganesan, failed to translate their widespread popularity into an electoral asset. Vijayakanth’s participation in party politics has been marked by determination and seriousness of purpose. Vijayakanth refused to be intimidated in 2004 when the PMK attacked his fan clubs in a way that echoed the earlier confrontation between Ramadoss of the PMK and Rajinikanth. Vijayakanth’s fans retaliated. Effigies of the PMK leader were burnt and PMK offices were attacked. After two weeks of incipient violence between the two sides the PMK president G. K. Mani called a halt to direct action.13

Vijayakanth made sufficient headway in the 2006 assembly election to maintain his credibility in the medium term. He won his own contest in the Vridhachalam constituency. This contrasted with the record of a number of other smaller parties in the state, including the DPI, the MDMK and the BJP, that did not field their party leader in constituency contests. Ostensibly this was done to free senior leaders for the task of state-wide campaigning but it also ensured that they avoided the taint of losing an election. Even though it only won a single seat the DMDK won 8.4 per cent of the state-wide vote. In other words, the DMDK equalled the Congress share (8.4 per cent), won more votes than any of the minor parties, but trailed behind the AIADMK (32.6 per cent) and the DMK (26.5 per cent). The DMK, leader of the strongest alliance, won the most seats (96). The DMK, with ‘outside support’ from Congress, was able to form a minority government. The DMDK won more votes than the margin of victory in 144 out of the 234 constituencies in Tamil Nadu, which indicated that the DMDK could be a very influential ally in future contests.14

14 Figures calculated by the author from Election Commission of India (2006).
The DMDK followed up on its performance in the state assembly election with a similar result in the local body elections in October 2006. The DMDK won fewer seats than the DMK and the AIADMK but more seats than any of the other minor parties who were part of the two alliances. The DMDK also improved its share of the vote in the Madurai by-election, coming close to pushing the AIADMK into third place. After these results were declared Chief Minister Karunanidhi recognised the DMDK’s ‘appreciable improvement’. The importance of the DMDK was also acknowledged when the AIADMK subsequently attacked Vijayakanth’s character and dismissed his association with MGR. In May 2006, the DMDK did not win the number of seats that would have accrued to a party with the same share of the vote that participated in an alliance. The rules of a single member simple plurality electoral system marginalise parties that do not concentrate their vote geographically (Duverger 1964). However, Vijayakanth demonstrated enough potential, in terms of votes won, to be considered a credible leader.

3. Vijayakanth as an institutional leader

Vijayakanth was able to use a number of institutional advantages at the start of his career as a party leader in 2005. First, he was already an acknowledged leader in the film industry and was able to exploit networks inside the film industry for political purposes. Disaggregated records of his film takings were used as an alternative form of opinion polling to get a sense of concentrations of popularity. Vijayakanth was also able to call on the services of members of the film industry.

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Some stood as candidates and others supported him through personal appearances. Second, Vijayakanth had built an organisational base through his fan clubs that was quickly converted into a political party. Wings that represented students, women and young people were formed in 2005. A security wing was established using trained volunteers from among his fans. Vijayakanth’s supporters claim that he has around 35,000 fan clubs. This number is impossible to verify and seems at odds with the 4,000–5,000 claimed for MGR’s fan clubs (Hardgrave 1973: 303), but it is certainly the case that the DMDK was a very visible presence across the state during the 2006 assembly campaign. The DMDK lagged in terms of press coverage but it was able to compensate for this with posters and street art. The party flag and election booths were nearly as ubiquitous as those of the DMK and the AIADMK.

The fan clubs that follow filmstars can be a very important political resource. Dickey’s study of MGR’s fan clubs reveals how this resource can be exploited. Above all, fan clubs provide a network that connects a state-level leader with the locality (Dickey 1993: 357). The fans are available to canvas at election time and between elections they often carry out acts of charity or social service. In doing so they re-enact on- and off-screen acts of generosity performed by the leader (*ibid.*: 352–53). These acts of generosity help to promote patronage ties and re-enact the kingly model of leadership in the locality (Price 1989: 560). The activities of fan clubs can overlap with functions carried out by the party when they recruit activists and provide opportunities for lower level leaders to learn their craft (Dickey 1993: 357).

Whether the DMDK party organisation promotes institutional pluralism remains an open question. Second rank leaders interact with the press but it is not clear whether a plurality of opinion is tolerated inside the party. I have not come across reports of defections that would suggest resentment against a high-handed leader. On the other hand the leader is an exalted figure and the party is built around the persona of one individual.

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20 Personal observations, April–May 2006.
4. Locating Vijayakanth's leadership in the political culture of Tamil Nadu

Leadership is a central element in the political culture of Tamil Nadu. Party leaders are accorded a great deal of respect by the party cadres. Charismatic leaders attract the admiration of supporters of other parties too. Opinion poll respondents holding MGR in high regard exceeded the number voting for the AIADMK in the 1980s (Swamy 1996: 121). The string of AIADMK election victories in the 1970s and 1980s could be taken as demonstrating the farthest limits of personal appeal (Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993). However exceptional MGR’s leadership might have been, his career reminds us of the importance of leadership in Tamil Nadu, even if the imprint of personality is felt in different ways in different parties. Jayalalithaa, whose image has been carefully cultivated (Jacob 1997: 160–61), remains a popular figure among the voting public. In contrast Karunanidhi, still a notable figure, is most effective at inspiring the cadres of the DMK, who service the party’s superior organisation (Widlund 2000). Vaiko of the MDMK gives the impression of a leader of integrity and courage. Thirumavalavan of the Dalit Panthers cuts a striking figure in his representations on wall paintings that depict him as handsome, resolute and determined.

Vijayakanth is a distinctive and well-known figure in Tamil Nadu. He conforms with many of the expectations held about leaders in the state. Vijayakanth has, in part, achieved this by linking himself to the style developed by MGR. In the prelude to his party political career Vijayakanth became well known for playing heroic figures which echoed MGR’s image as defender of the poor and vulnerable. Vijayakanth continues the tradition of the generous leader for which MGR was renowned (Hardgrave 1973: 298). Shortly before the DMDK was launched Vijayakanth marked his birthday in August 2005 by giving gifts to poor school children and college students. He gave away Rs 2.5 million in scholarships, uniforms and books. As with MGR these acts were reflected in the social activities of Vijayakanth’s fan clubs. The actor Karthik, who made his electoral

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The connection with MGR was reinforced as Vijayakanth began his formal entry into party politics. The launch rally, as mentioned above, emphasised Vijayakanth’s intention to bid for MGR’s legacy. In posters produced for the DMDK Vijayakanth is often associated with MGR, either by including a picture of MGR or showing Vijayakanth in poses that evoke MGR’s image.\footnote{‘PIL Against State Emblem in Vijayakanth Hoardings’, 14 September 2005, http://www.hindu.com/2005/09/14/stories/2005091409320100.htm (accessed 21 November 2006); ‘Vijayakant Comes Down on Two Dravidian Parties’, The Hindu, 5 October 2006, http://www.hindu.com/2006/10/05/stories/2006100507290300.htm (accessed 5 October 2006).}

The film Sudesi, starring Vijayakanth, released just before the 2006 assembly election campaign, also intertwined the fortunes of the two leaders with images of MGR intercut into the film.\footnote{‘Sudesi’ is Vijayakanth’s Poll Manifesto’, The Hindu, 13 March 2006, http://www.hindu.com/2006/03/13/stories/2006031315860400.htm (accessed 5 June 2006).}

Publicity material for the 2006 assembly election campaign included posters of Vijayakanth wearing a fur cap similar to the one that MGR used to wear for his public appearances as chief minister. During the assembly election there were reports that voters picked up this cue and approved the association that the DMDK made between MGR and Vijayakanth.\footnote{‘MGR Flashback in Virudhachalam’, Indian Express, 16 May 2006, http://www.indianexpress.com/story/4510.html (accessed 5 June 2006).}

of seats for women in the state assembly. Then shortly before the election Vijayakanth announced that 40 to 50 per cent of the DMDK candidates for the assembly election would be women.

Vijayakanth has carefully emulated MGR’s leadership style and has emerged as a very persuasive leader advocating protection/paternalist populism. Vijayakanth is not the first to exploit MGR’s image. The AIADMK continues to use MGR’s image and reminds voters of Jayalalithaa’s connections with MGR though over time the party’s iconography has brought the current leader into the foreground (Jacob 1997). Politicians, such as R. M. Veerappan of the MGR Kazhagam or Thirunavukkarasu of the MGR-ADMK have established parties that make strong links with MGR, but Vijayakanth surpassed both of them, appearing as an embodiment of the former AIADMK leader.

5. Vijayakanth and social structure
Vijayakanth is from a Telugu Naidu background which is not an obvious electoral asset. The community is relatively small, geographically dispersed and has already provided one contemporary leader of state-level significance, Vaiko. The Naidus, popularly depicted as privileged by business and landowning activity, are sometimes the focus of resentment on the part of lower status groups (Arnold 1977: 155). This issue was raised in the Cuddalore district, where Vijayakanth was also a candidate. The suggestion was made that he would continue the Naidu ‘exploitation’ of the lower caste Vanniars.

In class terms Vijayakanth is also from a minority background. His father was a ‘prosperous rice mill owner’.

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30 M. Vijayabaskar, personal communication, 22 November 2006.
his film career and has also diversified his business interests. He and his wife, Premalatha, declared a combined wealth of Rs 125 million in the affidavits submitted along with their election nomination forms in April 2006. These assets included agricultural land and shares in a substantial marriage hall in Chennai.\(^{32}\) Premalatha also chairs the trust that runs the Shri Andal Alagar College of Engineering (SAACE) founded by Vijayakanth in 2001. Academic activities at the college are supplemented by some welfare activities (SAACE 2005). However, Vijayakanth has downplayed his privileged class status and fostered the image of an individual in touch with the aspirations of ordinary people. Vijayakanth is proud of his roots in ‘rural Madurai’ and claims to be in close touch with the aspirations of ordinary Tamils, stating that ‘all my close friends came from the lower strata of society like rickshawallahs and ordinary labourers’.\(^{33}\) MGR also held rickshaw men in great esteem. He bestowed acts of charity on them and, paying the ultimate compliment, MGR played just such a part in *Rickshawkaran* (1971). The attention was reciprocated as many were ardent fans of the actor (Hardgrave 1973: 298; Pandian 1992: 39). Vijayakanth’s claims to be close to ordinary people may seem contrived but there is no denying that he is extremely popular among a mass audience.

In contrast to Vijayakanth’s deep familiarity with popular conceptions of leadership the links between the success of his leadership and the prevailing social structure are less direct. By this I mean that there is no straightforward link between his political project and the interests of a caste or class group. Vijayakanth’s populist style transcends a variety of particular social divisions as he attempts to build a broad coalition of support. Social structures are far from irrelevant but they have to be seen as a force that enables or constrains, rather than directs action. Social structure is relevant to Vijayakanth’s leadership in two ways. First, his privileged class status gives him the resources needed to build party institutions and fund electioneering. Second, Vijayakanth addresses the social and economic vulnerability of the


poorer strata of Tamil society. Once again Vijayakanth echoes the leadership of MGR. The AIADMK oriented itself towards the needs of the poor and expressed these needs in both socio-economic and psychological terms. There were elements of class-based appeal in the populist style of the AIADMK. However, the AIADMK provided leadership ‘for’ rather than leadership ‘by’ subaltern groups. MGR was the protector of the poor rather than a leader promoting the long term and organised incorporation of weaker groups into the state party system. In the same sense it would be misleading to describe the DMDK as a class-based party. Vijayakanth’s policy proposals are directed at the amelioration of poverty. He does not, however, advocate structural changes that would transform the livelihoods of subaltern groups in Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

Tamil Nadu has an abundance of political parties and no shortage of able political leaders. Since 1989 circumstances have been fortuitous for ambitious political entrepreneurs seeking to form and sustain new parties in Tamil Nadu. At a time when the market seemed saturated the actor–politician Vijayakanth formed another substantial party. I will conclude this article by reflecting on the implications of Vijayakanth’s leadership for the construction of a constituency in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

The party system in Tamil Nadu has moved in the direction of multi-party politics as the established parties have struggled to hold on to their existing constituencies and new parties have carved out niches of support for themselves (Wyatt 2010). Vijayakanth has drawn support away from the Dravidian parties and if he maintains or improves his position he will have further contributed to the process of decline that has been underway since the 1980s. The two main Dravidian parties have responded to changes in the state party system by introducing variations in their political tactics since the late 1980s. Superior alliance building has been the favoured technique. This expedient continues to deliver electoral success for the DMK and the AIADMK but negotiations with junior partners are unpredictable and the current state government is controlled by a party without a majority in the legislature. In short, in the decade after the death of MGR, neither the DMK nor the AIADMK developed a viable political strategy that would strengthen their partisan links with the electorate.
Vijayakanth helped make the 2006 election highly competitive and it was in this context that the DMK evolved a more effective strategy. Vijayakanth’s personal prospects remain uncertain. He strongly appealed to voters as an alternative to the DMK and the AIADMK in May 2006 and he presented himself as a plausible candidate for the post of chief minister. In the 2009 Lok Sabha election his party improved its performance to 10.1 per cent of the state-wide vote but did not win any seats. The DMDK has not made the transition to alliance politics, which has been the path taken by most new parties formed in Tamil Nadu in the last two decades. This will be an awkward manoeuvre, given Vijayakanth’s strident attacks on the main Dravidian parties, and his chief ministerial ambitions.

The assembly election campaign in 2006 provided an interesting insight into the politics of cleavage manipulation in the state. The DMK’s populist manifesto was cleverly conceived and the AIADMK struggled to respond to it. There is no doubt that Vijayakanth would have announced similar policies regardless of the DMK’s manifesto, although the media coverage suggested that the DMK had set the agenda of the campaign. The end result was that the AIADMK, Vijayakanth’s DMDK and the DMK strongly committed themselves to the paternalist/protectionist populism favoured by MGR. Vijayakanth went further than the DMK by emulating the actions and the sentiments of MGR. This strategy of promoting populist welfare provision ahead of particular caste identities is one way of building a cross-caste coalition and attempting to neutralise the cleavage-based strategy used by caste-based parties. Parties seeking to build broad and populist support often act on caste considerations in individual constituencies but this is for the most part a supplementary tool of mobilisation. The DMDK is significant because it is an attempt at broad-based mobilisation and it has established itself as a third force in Tamil politics.

In July 2005, shortly before the DMDK was launched, Vijayakanth asked his fans to resign from other parties and in particular from caste-based parties. There were clashes, both before and after this

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statement, between Vijayakanth’s fans and the cadres of the PMK and the DPI. Some commentators using opinion poll evidence suggested that Vijayakanth cut into the support of caste-based parties in May 2006, noting in particular that the support for the PMK had appeared to sag.\textsuperscript{36} This was corroborated by Vijayakanth’s victory in Vridhachalam, a constituency in which Dalits and Vanniars are a majority. Data from polling booth returns in the same constituency suggest that Vijayakanth picked up strong support from both of these lower status groups.\textsuperscript{37} Taken together this evidence suggests that protective/paternalist populism continues to resonate with the voters in Tamil Nadu and is correspondingly feared by those who mobilise along caste lines.

In terms of agency, it is clear that Vijayakanth does not have unlimited options and that the existing structures, both in terms of meaning and social divisions, offer political options to him. However, Vijayakanth has demonstrated considerable skill in making choices, organising his party and presenting himself as a plausible leader. The failure of Rajinikanth, Sivaji Ganesan and Karthik show that filmstars cannot easily transform themselves into political leaders. Vijayakanth’s entry into politics was carefully planned and well-orchestrated. He is a political entrepreneur who has engaged in the politics of cleavage manipulation. He has attempted to close off certain avenues of political conflict, especially along caste lines and defined politics in very broad terms. There was no inevitability about his emergence as a political leader. The outcome of the 2006 assembly election in Tamil Nadu demonstrated that elite agency, enabled and constrained by existing structures, can contribute to political change. The changes discussed above were not fundamental in the sense that the vocabulary of politics was enriched by innovative ideas or the original interpretation of widely held assumptions. However, Vijayakanth’s intervention in the 2006 election demonstrated that the trend toward identity politics in Tamil Nadu is not inexorable. It is still possible for skilful political entrepreneurs to aggregate votes and


shift the terms of political debate, even if that shift involves returning to an existing, if somewhat neglected, vocabulary of politics.

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Leadership and the Power of Honour in a Corrupt System*

Paul R. Brass†

The Passions that most of all cause the differences of Wit, are principally, the more or lesse Desire of Power, of Riches, of Knowledge, and of Honour. All which may be reduced to the first, that is Desire of Power. For Riches, Knowledge and Honour are but several sorts of Power.

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 59

Introduction: Leadership Styles

It is possible to identify a multiplicity of different ‘leadership styles’ that have actually existed in different political systems along the entire spectrum of regimes from ‘totalitarian’ to ‘democratic’. It is questionable, however, whether leadership style is something that exists independently of the political system or cultural environment or historical period or state of communications technology in which leaders operate. In some societies, especially diverse, culturally complex and highly competitive political societies such as India, a range of workable political styles may coexist side by side. Certainly, during the past century, Indian political leaders have adopted a considerable range of different styles, among which the most prominent would be the charismatic, non-violent revolutionary strategy of Mahatma Gandhi, the ‘tutelary’ leadership style of Jawaharlal Nehru and the populist style of Indira Gandhi. But these strategies have been superimposed over a multiplicity of other styles that would include the princely style of the rulers and former rulers of the princely states.

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† I have drawn a few passages for this article verbatim from Brass (1965) and Brass (1993).
1 Edward Shils coined this term in Geertz (1963).
and the former big zamindars and talukdars (Brass 1965: 69–71), the guru–shishya relationship that is widespread in Indian society and has manifested itself also in leader–follower relations in factions and parties from time to time (ibid.: 55), the recent emergence in local politics of various forms of thuggish, ‘mafia’-style leadership, and many other variations.

In the pre-Independence period, many leaders occupied transcendent positions of authority resting on dual pillars: the principles for which they stood and the purity of their character. The outstanding example, of course, was Gandhi, who, in addition to these two pillars, had a third, namely, his ability to touch the core of cultural values within Hindu society. But, there were many others who stood solidly enough on the other two pillars. One such pillar was modernist/secular, represented especially by Nehru. A second pillar was a form of Hindu revivalism, represented especially in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in an earlier period by Madan Mohan Malaviya and later by Purushottam Das Tandon, who challenged Nehru for the presidency of the Indian National Congress in 1952 and gained the support of the entire following of Nehru’s principal rival, Sardar Patel. There were also in those days socialist ideologues such as Acharya Narendra Dev, who stood fast enough for his principles to leave the Congress at Independence, giving up the certain prospect of high position in the UP government for the sake of building a socialist party organisation in the state. All these men, whatever their ideological stance, were also noted for their personal honesty, integrity and devotion to the country above personal interest. And it was these types of men, who naturally rose to the top positions of power in the central government and in most of the Indian states.

In UP, it was Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant, who held the position of transcendent authority and became the premier (later termed chief minister) of the first Congress government in the state from 1937 to 1939, and again of the Congress government formed just before Independence in 1946. But, Pant’s authority rested on yet another pillar, that is, his neutrality, aloofness from any kind of ideological or group commitment and loyalty to the leader of the country, Jawaharlal Nehru. He held no strong views that would alienate him from any of the competing parties and groups in the Congress or outside of it. Like the other principal leaders, he was considered to be a man of integrity as well as a person who examined all issues on their merits, irrespective of which of his subordinates and followers promoted any particular view on a subject at hand. For these reasons, he was
leadership and the power of honour in a corrupt system

always the man who acted as arbiter in resolving conflicts among contending groups in UP politics even after he was taken into the central government by Nehru in 1955.

But alongside these types of political personalities, and indeed providing for them the political — as opposed to the personal — bases on which their power rested, were a new and different breed of politician and an entirely different political style, that of the virtuoso politician or political entrepreneur. It was this kind of political style and personality that soon became the predominant one and the principal method of aggregating a political following and political power. In UP, the most important figure of this new breed before Independence was Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, Nehru’s trusted political operator. In contrast to the socialist leader Acharya Narendra Dev, and to Nehru himself, Kidwai adhered to no ideological principles (though he had moderate socialist leanings that mirrored Nehru’s own). Instead, he had a different kind of orientation and loyalty, to men, to his leaders — initially Jawaharlal Nehru’s father, Motilal, and then to Jawaharlal himself — and to his followers, ‘a motley band of district leaders who loved him and worked with him throughout his career’ (Brass 1965: 38). Indeed, his loyalty to both was legendary in the 1960s after his death. In addition to loyalty, Kidwai was noted for his generosity, not only to his followers, but even to his enemies. In this sense, he fits the traditional princely model of the ruler who distributes his largesse to his subjects. He was, as I noted in 1965, ‘the prototype of the modern faction leader in Indian politics’ (ibid.: 39).

In fact, after Kidwai’s departure to the central government, his followers in UP had to confront another person whose political style was similar to that of Kidwai, namely Chandra Bhan Gupta, the first post-Independence state party boss in UP, a formidable political entrepreneur, who built the principal intra-party faction in the state Congress on a base of followers in all the then 54 districts of this huge state. Upon this base, C. B. Gupta came to power as chief minister from 1960 to 1963, and again for a brief period in 1967. However, despite his massive support base throughout the state of UP, he was never able to maintain a secure position of power in the state government.

Gupta was never able to consolidate his power because he had several factional rivals, some operating in a style similar to his own,

\[2\] And indeed, in death, he was honoured like a Muslim prince, buried in his home town of Masauli in Bara Banki district in a Mughal-style mausoleum.
others resting upon a broad base of support among particular castes, and yet a third representing an entirely different political style, led by Chaudhuri Charan Singh. It was, in the end, Charan Singh, who displaced C. B. Gupta in power in 1967, after which Gupta never regained the position of chief minister and was never able to reconstruct his political power in the state.

The focus of this article is on Charan Singh, a politician who moved within the milieu of the corrupt political society that already existed at the time of Indian Independence in 1947 while striving successfully to establish a position of leadership based on his own incorruptibility. In other words, this is a study (part of a much larger one) of political leadership that ran counter to prevailing political practices and that was, nevertheless, effective. The great contest between Charan Singh and C. B. Gupta will be the subject of several chapters in my forthcoming biography of Charan Singh, but will not be discussed further herein. My focus here is on the political style of Charan Singh at the time, just before and after Independence, when both these men were building their support bases throughout the state, but in entirely different ways.

**Chaudhuri Charan Singh**

Charan Singh came from a Jat peasant family in Meerut district in western UP. He was an Arya Samajist, who, as a matter of principle, rejected all forms of caste identification in social and public life while at the same time retaining the near total support of his own caste — the most important landholding caste of Meerut district — throughout his life. But this was only one factor in his early domination over district politics. He had also become a favorite of Pandit Pant, whom he admired greatly, and was brought into the Pant government as a parliamentary secretary in 1946. He became a full-fledged cabinet minister in 1951 and enjoyed Pant’s patronage until the latter’s death in 1960. Thanks to his position in the state government and his special relationship with Pandit Pant, both party and government patronage for Meerut district filtered through his hands. In this respect, therefore, he was able to act like other Indian faction leaders, including C. B. Gupta. But, in fact, he acted quite differently in other ways. Unlike either Kidwai or Gupta, he was not considered to be accommodating. He did not distribute patronage indiscriminately, irrespective of the character of the persons who asked for his help.
He expected not only loyalty from his followers — and was deeply grieved when followers he trusted betrayed him — but honesty and probity as well. He demanded, in other words, that his followers emulate him and his standards of public behaviour.

Despite his famous rigidity in these matters, Charan Singh developed a base of power across the state of UP that made it possible for him to become chief minister twice, in the course of which he and the political following he had developed across the state became the critical factor in the displacement of the Congress for the first time after Independence. He also played major roles in formulating and implementing policies that transformed the agricultural economy of north India in the post-Independence period, and in the politics of his home state and of the country as a whole during the last two decades of his life. His political career involved him at all levels of the Indian political system, from his own district of Meerut in western UP to the state as a whole and ultimately to national politics, when he became prime minister of India for a brief period (1979–80) after the fall of the Janata government (the first non-Congress central government in post-Independence India). In his rise to power and influence, he became identified as the principal spokesman of the middle peasantry of India. Further, he was identified also with the aspirations of the so-called backward castes of intermediate social status between the elite castes and the lower castes. He was also a politician with intellectual credentials, who had written several books as well as political pamphlets that presented an extremely sophisticated and coherent alternative development strategy for India entirely different from that of former prime ministers Nehru and Indira Gandhi.

Clearly, therefore, in the course of his political career, Charan Singh played a central role in several of the most crucial turning points in the history of the politics of India’s largest state and that of the country as a whole. Charan Singh was both a politically ambitious man and a man with clear policy proposals. His political life, therefore, raises the issue of how one successfully pursues both power and policy in a rough-and-tumble representative political system.

The dialogue of virtue and corruption that existed in the first two decades of Independence permeates Charan Singh’s papers on district,
state and national politics. They are filled with charges, counter-charges and defences traded back and forth between him and other politicians, his rivals and the rivals of his supporters. They include complaints about bribery, casteism, favouritism in appointments, misuse of election machinery, and connections between politicians and criminals.

These papers also provide further insights into the dynamics of political mobilisation and competition. Equally important are the ways that charges and accusations are received and answered, what they reveal about the values and moral standards of the participants at the time, especially, of course, Charan Singh, who valued his personal honesty and integrity and devalued all others who departed from his own rigorous standards. However serious the accusations and charges appeared at the time, they are qualitatively different from those that are made now, as are the facts. Bribery, casteism, favouritism, misuse of the election machinery, and the criminal connections of a few politicians have been replaced by large-scale institutionalised political and bureaucratic corruption, charges and actual cases of considerable local violence before and during elections, and the interlinking of politics, politicians and criminals in networks of illegal activity, including murder and the deliberate instigation of so-called communal riots for political purposes.

At the same time, even today, however weak it may be, the dialogue of virtue and corruption persists in contemporary Indian politics. The dialogue is covered by thick layers of hypocrisy, but elements of it continue to rise to the surface, particularly for what I call the unending diogenic search in a corrupted polity and society for the one honest man to lead the country, which also has its counterparts at lower levels, in the Indian states. It also persists in the efforts of some, very few no doubt, who seek to offer policy alternatives that rise above a mere politics of patronage and corruption. In his life, Charan Singh, with all his faults, provided a model of a politician who, as skilled as any of his rivals in political tactics, nevertheless retained throughout his life a dedication to personal integrity, public probity and the pursuit of public policies for the good of the country, not just for his caste or community.

**Corruption and Anti-corruption**

At Independence, and until his death in 1964, Jawaharlal Nehru was seen as the one honest man fit to lead the country, though, at that time
there were many other nationalist leaders of untarnished reputation. In several of the states also there were such men, holding the position of chief minister. In UP, as I noted in my study of *Factional Politics in Uttar Pradesh*, Pandit Pant was such a man, ‘who occupied a position of unchallengeable authority and esteem because of his seniority in the [nationalist] movement, because of his integrity, and because of a certain touch of charisma drawn partly from his own personality and partly from his association with the great leaders of the nationalist movement in the country’ (Brass 1965: 45). But, at the local level, the situation was far different. Nehru himself provided the astonishing revelation in a conversation with Rammanohar Lohia in May–June 1946, still more than a year away from Independence, of the extent of the ‘degradation’ of his party men in Uttar Pradesh.

[Nehru] told me with some vehemence how low Congressmen had fallen and that I did not possibly possess a full picture of their degradation.

He told me of an annual report of the Uttar Pradesh congress tribunal for internal elections, which stated that congressmen violated every single section of the Indian Penal Code in their fights with each other. I could not understand how the whole penal code [comprising 511 sections] could come into operation but was again told with some vehemence that that was so, which of course may have been true. (Lohia 1960: 20)

In this reported statement of Nehru’s, the reference is to internecine conflicts for power within the Congress organisation. But what were the stakes? And what was going on in society, the bureaucracy and in the government that had made the stakes so high? Charan Singh’s files provide ample evidence of what was at stake, how pervasive the system of corruption was and how difficult it was for any person to maintain a reputation for honesty and integrity.

Charan Singh had been elected to the UP Legislative Assembly in 1937 and re-elected from Meerut district (southwest) in the March 1946 elections. In the government of Premier Govind Ballabh Pant, he became parliamentary secretary to the minister for revenue. In the politics of the district in those days, he was associated with another MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly), one Vishnu Saran Dublish, a legendary figure who had turned to violent revolutionary action against British rule in the 1920s, was a defendant in the Kakori Conspiracy Case in 1925 and was imprisoned in the Andaman Islands from 1929 to 1937. Within a few months after the 1946 elections and the re-establishment of the Congress government in the province,
an investigation was conducted by the Anti-Corruption Department (ACD) on charges of corruption against one O. N. Jauhari, a subdivisional officer (SDO) posted in Baghpat Tahsil (subdivision) of Meerut district, the home base of Charan Singh. The charges against Mr Jauhari were that ‘he gave some fine cloth quota[s] to shop keepers of [C]ongress views’. The officers who conducted the investigation complained that Mr Jauhari was a favourite of both Charan Singh and Dublish and that the latter two, along with ‘some other local congress leaders’ were ‘openly siding’ with Mr Jauhari and hampering the investigation. In contrast, the report of the ACD remarked, ‘Mr [Raghukul] Tilak’, who was also a parliamentary secretary in the state Congress government, was said to be ‘giving all possible assistance’.

Ostensibly, we have here an issue that begins with a characteristic action in the early stages of the ‘permit–license–quota raj’, namely, the awarding of a quota for ‘some fine cloth’ to shopkeepers ‘with Congress views’, patronised by Congress politicians. The report further names one shopkeeper so patronised, Prakash Chand, who is described as ‘an established black marketier [sic]’. It is suggested also, but not confirmed in the report, that he paid a bribe of Rs 300 to Dublish for the favour. But the report is curious in many respects. It provides no substantial evidence for the charges made, repeatedly alleges the involvement of two leading politicians of the district, and includes a favourable reference to another district politician of apparently equal status in the UP government of the time. What is not noted is that Charan Singh and his ally Dublish were in different factional camps in the Congress from that of Tilak. The final report addressed to the Deputy Inspector-General (DIG), Anti-Corruption on 29 May 1947 states that the investigator ‘had great difficulty in unearthing the true facts’ because Mr Jauhari ‘had already got scent of the complaints against him’ from the Congress group led by Charan Singh and Dublish, who ‘were out to defend him’. It also notes that Mr Jauhari, in his statement before the investigator, showed him a letter dated 14 June 1945 from Charan Singh to ‘one Mr Sirohan Mukhtar, … a resident of Baghpat Tahsil wherein Chaudhri Saheb had disclosed that Kashmiri Lal of Baghpat had complaints against Mr Jauhari’. The report concludes: ‘This tendency of the public together with the influence of the zamindars and rich men like Krishan Dutta etc. the men of Mr Jauhari backed by the congress group of ch. Charan Singh MLA and Mr Vishnu Saran Dublish MLA present difficulties in investigation’.
So we begin with a rather trivial matter that, however, suggests already a nexus of relationships of alliance and conflict among multiple segments of society, the bureaucracy, political party and factions, and the government, including shopkeepers, an administrative officer in a part of the district, an anti-corruption agency of the state government, and rival groups within the Congress and the state government. Running through it all are allegations and charges of favouritism and bribery, none of them substantiated. Further, the names of some persons are mentioned, whose identities, reliability and character are not clearly specified.

This final report was submitted on 29 May 1947. Apparently, the report was not sent to Charan Singh for nearly a year, and was forwarded to him by the premier, Pandit Pant himself, to which Charan Singh responded on 5 March 1948. In the meantime, however, Charan Singh gathered information from various sources concerning the conduct of the investigation and the character of both Mr Jauhari and the officers who investigated him. One document, addressed to the premier and dated 17 June 1947, described the investigation undertaken against Mr Jauhari as ‘unfair and biased, even vindictive’. It said further that Mr Zafar, the author of the final report, and Inspector Raghubar Dayal had ‘satisfied themselves that Mr Jauhari was a very corrupt officer’ on the basis of little evidence and the statement of one Badlumal which the writer believed was ‘concocted and untrue’. The statement also laid the responsibility upon Mr Abu Zafar for allowing an investigation to be undertaken ‘in a biased and dishonest manner’. It concludes by asking how the ACD can ‘be relied upon to investigate and discover real cases of corruption and bribery if they themselves resort to dishonest ways and concoction of evidence?’.

In the second document, also addressed to the premier, but unsigned and apparently not sent to him, though evidently written by Charan Singh himself, he acknowledged in his opening remarks that he once ‘expressed’ to the premier that, in his opinion, Mr Jauhari was ‘an honest and efficient officer’. In support of his opinion concerning Mr Jauhari, he noted that he had avoided the opportunity to earn ‘huge

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4 Files of Chaudhuri Charan Singh in my possession: CX File No. 282/46, entitled ‘Enquiry into the conduct of Mr. Prem Narain Jauhari, SDM, Baghpat, Meerut’, signed by one T. R. Misra (whose designation is not indicated), and dated 6 June 1947.
amounts [of money] from smuggling which went on unchecked across the Yamuna [River] throughout the whole Tahsil' with the complicity of the police. Instead he ‘came into conflict with the police over this smuggling business’. Further, ‘his record of criminal court work was very clean; nobody ever suspected that he could be approached in the discharge of his judicial work’. Moreover, he had not succumbed to the influence of Nawab Jamshed Ali, the dominant landowner of the area, ‘as almost every SDO previous to him did’. On the contrary, ‘he stood up to him’.

Charan Singh traced the origins of the entire Jauhari affair to ‘this smuggling business’ and ‘the prosecution of one Lachchmi Chand for smuggling’. The alleged smuggler then turned for help to ‘Kashmiri Lal Jain an ex-patwari of the worst possible repute’, who in turn ‘was a favourite of Mr P. W. Marsh’, the previous district magistrate, who had taken up a position at Lahore in the Public Service Commission of pre-partition Punjab, where he ‘summoned’ Kashmiri Lal and provided him ‘agencies, permits and contracts’ that enriched him (and presumably Mr Marsh as well). Further, this now wealthy ex-patwari ‘had a joint agency of cement with one Ganga Prasad, resident of Meerut city who had some influence in a certain section of congressmen’. The trouble with Mr Jauhari began because Kashmiri Lal had ‘some cause for grouse’ against the latter. So, he gathered some support from ‘one or two congressmen of Meerut who personally knew nothing about Mr Johari [sic] or persons or affairs of Tahsil Baghpat’ — the reference here is clearly to Raghukul Tilak — and, at the same time, ‘entered into a conspiracy with one Mr Kamta Prasad an ex-Mukhtar [attorney or solicitor] of Baraut’. The latter man was ‘easily the worst man in Baraut and there can be no two opinions about this definite assertion of mine’. He had only recently been released from jail after serving a sentence of five years ‘for removal of corpse of a relative of his whom he had murdered for the sake of a few hundred rupees’.

The chain of corrupt and criminal activity from Lahore to Meerut now extended to Inspector Raghubar Dayal and his superior, Abu Zafar, in the ACD. The former man, Charan Singh noted, was someone against whom he had previously ‘brought definite allegations’ that ‘he had accepted as bribe a huge sum of money from the black marketers of Pilakhua [a town in the southern part of Meerut district] whose cases he was deputed to investigate’. Abu Zafar was complicit with him in the matter. Raghubar Dayal then ‘carried on the investigation with the help of Kashmiri Lal and Kamta Prasad, two very discredited
persons’. Among Mr Jauhari’s problems with this discredited group of people was that he had instituted proceedings of some sort against one of them, Kamta Prasad. Thus, the chain of corrupt and criminal activity, according to Charan Singh’s information, brought these disreputable people up against an obstruction in the form of the SDO, Mr Jauhari, whom it was necessary for them to displace.

The material from these documents apparently formed the basis for Charan Singh’s ultimate response to the issue concerning his own alleged involvement in the matter in his signed note to the premier dated 4 March 1948. His response, clear and precise on several points, thoroughly discredited the report, the investigative officers and the entire ACD. In this statement, Charan Singh remarked that the premier would recall ‘that in a party meeting held in July 1946 I had said that the Anti-Corruption Department had been staffed with corrupt officers. Events that followed have conclusively proved that instead of combating corruption, these officers added to it’. Further, he claimed that the allegations concerning his own interference in the case against Mr Jauhari arose as a consequence of the fact that the inspector in the case, Raghubar Dayal, a man who ‘was so boastful about his honesty’, and his ‘Superintendent’ (Mr M. A. Zafar) had been accused by Congress workers from the town of Pilakhua of having ‘accepted a huge sum as bribe’ in the course of his investigation of another case of black marketing in that town.

In fact, Raghubar Dayal approached Charan Singh initially on 30 September 1946, when they were both travelling on the train to Lucknow, to complain that these Congressmen had made allegations against his integrity. But Charan Singh had just met with those Congressmen during his stay in the district and had instead learned from them that there was not just suspicion of his integrity, but ‘a definite complaint against him’. Furthermore, upon presenting Raghubar Dayal with this complaint, the latter promised to come to his office the next day in the state secretariat, but failed to appear. Consequently, on 2 October, two days after his meeting with Raghubar Dayal, he sent a note to the premier ‘suggesting an inquiry into the latter’s conduct in the matter of Pilakhua cases. The result is that this man along with his boss, M. A. Zafar, has sought to cover up his sins by throwing mud at me’.

As for the involvement of Raghukul Tilak and the person named Kashmiri Lal, Charan Singh stated that the latter person was sent to him by Tilak, to whom he first went with his complaints against
Mr Jauhari. Charan Singh refused to oblige Kashmiri Lal because, he said, he was not satisfied that the charges against Jauhari were justified and because he knew, and had stated ‘before in another note’ that Kashmiri Lal, an ‘ex-patwari’, and one of the latter’s associates, ‘were themselves corrupt beyond measure’.

With regard to the alleged bribe of Rs 300 paid to Mr Dublish, Charan Singh noted that this was the amount of a subscription paid by ‘six persons of Baraut’ for a ‘subscription for membership of the Congress Reception Committee’. The money was handed over to Mr Jauhari, who made a memorandum to file about it, and then handed it over to Mr Dublish. Concerning the allegations that he and Mr Dublish had obstructed the investigation whereas Tilak was assisting it fully, he characterised this as an unmitigated lie’. He noted that Jauhari had been ‘transferred by telegram to Hardoi’ on 30 September 1946, which was the first time he had learned that there were any charges against him, so he could hardly have interfered in the matter, ‘even if’, he remarked, he ‘could stoop to such low depths as to hamper investigations’. In any case, he knew nothing about the substance of the charges ‘and who the witnesses were’ until 20 October.

With regard to Mr Jauhari, Charan Singh acknowledged that he did in fact consider that he was ‘not a corrupt officer’ and noted that Congress workers in Baghpat Tahsil held ‘a good opinion’ of him. Nevertheless, when the charges were made against Jauhari and, as a result of the report of the ACD, when he was transferred to another district on 2 October 1946, Charan Singh ‘kept mum’. Further, when his Congress workers came to him in defense of Jauhari, he ‘told them that they should suspend their judgement [sic], that human nature is very complex and there are very few men, indeed, about whose honesty we can swear’. Only 13 months later did he write ‘a note reiterating my opinion about Mr Jauhari and saying that findings of corrupt officers like Raghubar Dayal in an inquiry conducted with the help of men like Kashmiri Lal and Kamta Prasad should be taken with a grain of salt’. (The reference here is clearly to the unsigned note discussed above.) In concluding his remarks to the premier, Charan Singh noted that the premier, having informed him just the day before, after he had completed his note on the matter, ‘that Raghubar Dayal was being made to retire’ and ‘Mr M. A. Zafar has already gone to Pakistan’, there was no need for him to say anything more ‘except… perhaps, we have to take some drastic steps, more drastic than those taken hitherto, to weed out black sheep from the ranks of the Police’.
The Jauhari case ended with a complete vindication of both Mr Jauhari and Charan Singh and a severe indictment of the ACD in the findings of the UP Administrative Tribunal dated 24 December 1948. The authors of the report concluded that the ACD investigation was faulty from beginning to end. It began by assuming that Mr Jauhari and another officer were guilty, then looked for ‘instances’ to support the charges against them; in other words, they deliberately framed the case against them. The evidence they collected was inherently faulty, based as it was on the testimony of persons who had been denied favours by these two officers and held ‘personal enmities’ against them. The witnesses, Kashmiri Lal, characterised as ‘a dismissed Patwari’, and Luxmi Chand, had previously ‘threatened to sue Shri Jauhari in the civil court in respect of acts for which Shri Jauhari was complimented by the Government’. The inquiries conducted by the ACD concerning alleged favouritism were not only conducted ‘in a very haphazard manner, but were also not quite fair and above board’. Further, the tribunal suggested that charges were concocted that Mr Jauhari had issued permits to cloth dealers without application when, in fact, it seems that the police were in collusion with the ACD in concealing the fact that such permits had been issued according to proper procedure by simply hiding the bundles that contained them. The tribunal concluded by remarking that it was ‘very unfortunate that the agency entrusted with the task of enquiring into the doubtful condu[c]t of others should itself be of a doubtful character’.

Let us return now to examining the nexus of relationships in this local case. Several agencies and offices of government at all levels were involved, paralleled by party agencies at the same level (see Figure 8.1). The central person around whom the controversy revolved was a sub divisional officer, that is to say, a civil-cum-judicial administrative officer intermediate between the district administration and the general population, the seniormost officer in a tahsil, the subdivision just below the district itself. The tahsil in question was Baghpat, Charan Singh’s home base, within which the pargana (the next lowest administrative level in a district) of Baraut was situated. Throughout his political life from 1937 onward, Charan Singh was the elected MLA or MP (Member of Parliament) and the predominant political figure in the area. To maintain his political base, he would naturally visit this area to meet with his Congress workers. Moreover, as a junior member in the state government, but one of the most prominent men.
from the entire district of Meerut in the government, he would naturally even at this time be sought after by Congressmen from other parts of the district, such as the men from Pilakhua with whom he also met in connection with this case. His status in these regards would also be enhanced by the fact that he was known to have the confidence of the premier of the state.

Congressmen in a district which was then dominated entirely by the Congress were intermediaries between the public and both the local administration and the elected representatives, the MLAs. The Congress itself, however, was divided into factions at all political levels. Tilak was a member of a different faction, but not the one that was later to be the principal factional group opposed to Charan Singh and his group. But, whether intentionally or not, Tilak acted, or appeared to be acting on behalf of those who were complaining about Mr Jauhari. It is clear enough that, whether he was honest or corrupt, Mr Jauhari had excellent relations with the local Congress workers. Tilak, a quite genteel and educated man, was not at all a grassroots politician.

Now, what about the question of whether or not Mr Jauhari was corrupt? Nothing in the file actually provides any evidence that he was.
All that is certain is that he was in the good books of the predominant local Congressmen. Further, there can be no mistaking the obvious fact that the position of this sub divisional officer, as of all other similarly-placed administrative personnel in the state at this time, was inevitably compromised by his implication in, or identification with, locally dominant politicians. This in turn meant that those Congressmen were satisfied with the way in which he distributed the resources at his disposal, that is, the permits and licenses over which he had authority. Since they were satisfied, they considered him an honest officer. Those on the other side were dissatisfied, so they considered him a dishonest officer — or used the tactic of accusing him of being one in order to get rid of him. Moreover, despite the superior strength of Charan Singh and his Congress workers in the area, they succeeded in getting the ACD to investigate Jauhari, as a consequence of which he was transferred out of the district to another district remote from Meerut.

In the transfer of the officer in this way, we note the early operation of a process that gradually magnified during the heyday of the permit–license–quota raj and the elaboration of the system of corruption in the state. In India’s civil service system, officers of the state are well-protected in their positions in the sense that they cannot be easily dismissed. Where corrupt activity is at issue, the standard action for all officers, including the police, is to simply transfer to another place. But the transfer system then, and since, was never really a method of dealing quickly with corruption and malfeasance. Rather, it has had two other purposes. The first, coming from the local politicians, is simply to get rid of an officer who has not been obliging to their side. The second, as the system of graft and corruption became highly profitable for the local officials, came from the officers themselves. They began to seek postings and transfers to the districts that offered the greatest opportunities for garnering large-scale corrupt income. As the scale of such opportunities increased, these postings became — literally — for sale on payment of a very substantial sum directly to ministers in the state governments or to their intermediaries.

It has become quite rare, however, for administrative officers to be actually punished, and deprived of all opportunities for corrupt income through dismissal. Yet, at this time, it seems that such action was indeed taken in this case, perhaps by the premier himself, since Charan Singh noted that the latter had informed him that Raghubar Dayal, the allegedly corrupt anti-corruption officer, ‘was being made
to retire’. So, in the end, both Charan Singh and Mr Jauhari were vindicated. Charan Singh established the honesty of his favored officer and the dishonesty of the investigator. However, leaving aside the question of corrupt income, Mr Jauhari was transferred away from a much better-situated district and a more favourable posting to a more remote and less favourable posting in a poorer district.

It is noteworthy also that a dispute over one administrative officer in a subdivision of one of UP’s then 54 districts reached the highest levels of the government of the state. The premier himself had ultimately to deal with the situation. Nor, to be sure, was this the only case of its type with which he must have dealt during his tenure as premier. Moreover, the chief ministers of the state have ever since taken a vastly increased interest in the whole question of transfers and postings in an increasingly corrupt system. With each change of government and party, the newly-elected chief minister deals with requests for, and sanctions the transfers of hundreds of officers from one district to another in order to satisfy the members of his or her party in every district in this vast state.

This single case also illustrates quite clearly the existence at this time of a complex network of entanglements in the system of corruption, from which it would seem almost impossible for anyone to become disentangled, in which indeed the honesty of virtually everyone was suspect. Everyone indeed proclaimed, even ‘boasted’ of his honesty; everyone, including Charan Singh, was obliged to defend himself. Nor was there any clear boundary line between corrupt and exemplary behaviour. The terms used over and over again are highly personalised, framed in opposites, stated or implied, and graded in qualitative vocabulary. Corruption versus honesty; boasting about one’s honesty as a cover for corruption; corrupt or not corrupt; covering up one’s sins by mud-slinging of another; bribery and black marketeering posited opposite the term ‘integrity’; mere suspicion of a person’s integrity versus a definite complaint against a person; persons said to be ‘corrupt beyond measure’; persons of ‘the worst possible repute’; ‘very discredited persons’; truthfulness versus unmitigated lies; truth versus false and concocted charges. In the midst of all this, however, there is Charan Singh’s personal commentary upon the human condition. Even with regard to Mr Jauhari, for whom Charan Singh had some positive regard, his praise for this officer was limited to the phrase that he thought he was ‘not corrupt’. But when his own men rushed to Jauhari’s defense, he was very circumspect, telling them
Leadership and the Power of Honour in a Corrupt System

‘they should suspend their judgement [sic], that human nature is very complex and there are very few men, indeed, about whose honesty we can swear’. That then leads in Charan Singh’s own personal life and in Indian political life in general to a personal and social search. For Charan Singh, it meant that he must search for and pursue in his life a course that would make his own integrity unchallengeable. For Indian political life, it has meant the unending search for the one honest man to head the state. For Charan Singh, Premier Pandit Pant was such a man. But, he had scant regard for the honesty of others.

Honour and Reputation in a Corrupt System

The question that I want to raise next is how an honest man or woman functions in such a system. A reputation for integrity, honour and honesty was central to Charan Singh’s sense of himself. It was equally central to his evaluation of the political order as a whole. Yet, he felt all his life that the Indian political order was populated mostly with corrupt persons. But Charan Singh himself did succeed in establishing and maintaining an untarnished reputation as an honest man, an imandar admi, and it served him in good stead throughout his political life. Indeed, though the guarding of his reputation was central to his sense of himself, reflective of the core of his being as a man of integrity, it also served him well as a political strategy. And, although it was for him a deeply personal matter, the struggle for recognition as a man of integrity in the Indian political order was also a strategic game that was constantly played by both the corrupt and the honest and all those in between, that is, mere ordinary men and women for whom maintaining a straight path in life frequently involves difficult and borderline decisions. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, a reputation for honour constitutes a ‘a particular form of capital’ ([1985] 1990: 22), social and political capital that pays a return in social and political life. For some, like Charan Singh, the struggle for recognition of oneself as a man of integrity is not a conscious strategy so much as a practice integral to one’s being. But the fact that it was so central to his personhood also made him vulnerable in a strategic game in which honour and a reputation for honesty could be translated into power whilst its opposite could threaten one’s position in the political order.

In a system that became increasingly corrupt as Charan Singh became more prominent and more influential, and as his political
base expanded until he became a central figure in any political calculations for attaining power in north Indian politics, he also became feared and hated. His very reputation for integrity and his relentless attacks upon all those whom he saw as corrupt indeed underlay those fears and fed the hatred of his opponents. Charan Singh was feared because he was not playing the game, because he was serious about preserving his own reputation and about pursuing, relentlessly when he had the chance, those he considered corrupt.

But most others were playing the game, which has taken many forms in post-Independence Indian politics ever since. Indeed, the corrupt state of the politicians in the ruling party has become the staple refrain in virtually every election campaign since Independence at the state and central government levels, no matter which party or coalition of parties is in power. Then, in the 1960s, when non-Congress parties finally achieved power in half the Indian states, it became the practice in many states in the country to appoint commissions of inquiry against the outgoing party, which sometimes led to voluminous reports, but hardly ever any convictions or other serious consequences for those charged. But, when the Congress returned to power, it responded in kind with corruption inquiry commissions of its own directed against the cabinet ministers of the previous government. Most political parties now and then also launched so-called ‘anti-corruption movements’ to mobilise mass support in the interim between elections. By the 1980s, it had become the stock in trade of politicians and political parties also to trade accusations of corruption. Often, especially in the case of persons of rigid integrity such as Charan Singh and Morarji Desai, attempts were made to attack the integrity of their family members. In Charan Singh’s case, the attempts were made to discredit his father and other relatives in his home village. In other cases, allegations have been made (often correctly) that the offspring of important politicians were taking bribes in exchange for their presumed ability to influence their politically powerful fathers. These kinds of charges especially targeted the few other politicians with established reputations for integrity. Indeed, it was Charan Singh himself who later levelled such charges against Morarji’s son.

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5 B. D. Dua (1985: 420), for example, refers to the ‘increase in political scandals involving the “sons and daughters” of illustrious and not so illustrious politicians’, and increases in various forms of corruption by the 1980s.
But there can be no denying, all rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, that corruption in all segments of Indian society and the political order was already widespread at Independence, that it has increased since, and that it has spread ever more widely and deeply into the police,\textsuperscript{6} into the highest levels of the Indian Administrative Service as well, and down to the voting public.\textsuperscript{7} There is here yet another paradox. In virtually every election in India political parties stress the corruption of the incumbent regime. The voters everywhere complain incessantly of corruption. It is also believed that these anti-corruption campaigns and the feelings of the voters have been responsible for the apparent tendency of voters in many Indian states to vote incumbents out of power in very large proportions. But the true picture is rather different. Anti-corruption campaigns scarcely mask the corruption of the campaigners. Parties that come to office usually have no policies of consequence to develop into legislation, but seek primarily to gain control of the resources of government to distribute to their supporters, who in turn distribute them to the voters.\textsuperscript{8} Once in power, with rare exceptions in India, governments reveal that they have no intention to eliminate corruption (Wariavwalla 1988: 121). As for the voters themselves, however much they may complain about corruption, they vote for those ‘whom they think can give them the most favors, in a particularist way. Most voters do not see an “issue”

\textsuperscript{6} Described by many observers in India, including high court judges, as often constituting in their areas ‘one of a number of criminal gangs’ (Rubin 1987: 382).

\textsuperscript{7} Hardly any serious research has been done on the state of ‘moral’ values among ordinary people in India, especially in the countryside, and especially concerning what value still adheres, with what consequences, to men of character, and to whom honour and respect are due. Pamela Price’s work (1999, 2005 and 2006) is an exception. See especially Price (1999: 149–76), where she examines the kind of respect that is given to criminals and gang leaders, and how they themselves seek respect in society.

\textsuperscript{8} Much of this distribution does not technically constitute corrupt behaviour, that is, behaviour involving illegal acts of bribery, favouritism and nepotism, but is mere patronage. But, Wade and Kochanek years ago found that much, if not most of the distribution did, in fact, involve outright corruption. The Charan Singh files support the latter view; see Wade (1985: 467–97) and Kochanek (1987).
of corruption; they see that they themselves have not been successful enough in corrupting’ (Wade 1985: 487).9

**Honesty and Popularity in a Corrupt System**

How then does an honest man in a corrupt system not only maintain his reputation for integrity, but retain popular support in a society where the public, the ordinary people, themselves expect and anticipate that everyone in political life and in the bureaucracy is corrupt and that the only way to derive any personal benefit for oneself, one’s group, one’s village is either to pay a fee to the bureaucrats or to get help from a politician to whom they have given their support or their vote? In the early years after Independence certainly — and probably even today — most politicians of any status did not expect cash in hand from ordinary, poor villagers and other poorly placed people in society in return for favours they are asked to grant. What they expect in return is gratitude manifested in electoral support. If they do not get it from groups, villages and other segments of Indian society whose members they benefit, they will withhold both legal and illegal benefits to such groups and even seek to make them suffer in concrete ways. Since this is virtually a universal practice, how did Charan Singh manage to maintain and increase his popular support throughout his long political career without soiling his own hands in this system of rewards and punishments?

The pressures that Charan Singh faced came not only from big-time smugglers, black marketeers and the like, but from everyday folk. Like every other politician in India with power, influence and any kind of following, he was besieged every morning by ordinary people from the villages, who travelled from their abodes to meet him in Meerut or Lucknow or Delhi to present their grievances and requests before him, to complain about the corrupt officials they had to face, the abusive police who harassed them and the failure of the authorities to provide them with benefits to which they felt themselves entitled. In all such

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9 See also Chandra (2004), who articulates clearly the ethnic particularism of voters who vote for candidates of their own caste in the expectation that this will give them access to government resources. However, she uses the rather less pejorative term, ‘patronage democracy’, for the Indian political order and for the practices associated with it.
cases, Charan Singh sought to satisfy himself that his intervention was justified by the circumstances. But, as a matter of fact, his followers and admirers were reluctant to approach him for anything that could not be justified legally. It is not that most of his followers were any different from other people in Indian society and politics, but that he was different and was known to be different. Had they thought otherwise, they would not have hesitated to make the usual requests for benefits from him, legal or illegal.

Pamela Price has noted that there are two types of honour that are respected in Indian society. One type, associated with royal power, revolves around generosity to one’s subjects, followers and subordinates. In the contemporary Indian context, that would include also, of course, the distribution of patronage, including the rewarding of one’s followers with positions of power and influence, especially positions which would allow one’s followers to garner corrupt income for themselves and their own followers. It would not be the concern of the person distributing such benefits to monitor the behaviour of his followers to ensure that they too behaved honourably.

This type of leadership based on generosity has continued; indeed, it has become the predominant form in contemporary Indian politics. It is best exemplified in its traditional form by the practices of those few former talukdars and zamindars, who managed to retain enough of their former land and wealth, despite zamindari abolition, to continue to be generous towards, and protective of their former ‘subjects’ and to use their continued loyalty to get themselves elected to the state legislature and/or to achieve positions of prominence from which they can continue to provide for their subjects, turned constituents, who now provide them the votes they need to retain their positions.

It was also noted above that this kind of generosity was practiced by Rafi Ahmad Kidwai and that his generosity extended even to former enemies. Charan Singh, in contrast, was, as I noted in an earlier work, ‘faithful to his friends, provided their requests for favors [were] both reasonable and just to his satisfaction. He [was] ruthless towards those he [considered] his enemies’ (Brass 1965: 142).

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10 In earlier comments on this chapter and in her own work cited above.
11 The Raja of Mankapur, focus of chapter iv in Brass (1965), exemplifies this style of leadership, esp. pp. 69–71.
Many other politicians, perhaps most, have adopted some variation of the old princely style. Virtually all hold *durbars* (courts) in the mornings and evenings at their residences, where they hear the complaints and grievances of their constituents and provide succour to them or sign applications for them to obtain places in educational or other institutions.\(^{12}\) Charan Singh too held his durbars every morning, listened to grievances, and helped his constituents. But, in my personal observation, he was different from most of the rest. He made his own judgments in each case, even sent away those with frivolous complaints, and otherwise satisfied himself that his intervention was justified because a wrong had been committed. But that did not prevent his constituents from trying, nevertheless, to gain his support for less worthy goals.

A striking illustration of the peculiar position of Charan Singh in relation to his followers is provided in a letter written to him from a villager in his own home area. This man claimed that he had learned from one of Charan Singh’s closest allies, Fateh Singh Rana, ‘that Charan Singh had got a plot allotted to his brother’, and wrote to him as follows in light of this information.

> I would like to ask you whether it was true. If yes, please, help me obtain a plot there. If there is any hitch in my case, do something about the power connection I have already applied for. If not even that, manage to get a bus permit for me, at least.

> Sh. Shyam Singh is your brother, but you may consider me your humble [sudama] friend. I know only you. Please consider me your brother. I shall be highly obliged to you. I have been long craving for something. But I never asked you anything as I knew that you keep your hands off such things. But, now as I learnt it from Sh. Rana, I had the courage to ask you something.\(^{13}\)

In short — assuming the letter is authentic — the writer never asked Charan Singh for any favour since he had thought he was an honest man, but now that he has learned otherwise, he requests his help for

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\(^{12}\) Again, the Raja of Mankapur provides an example; see Brass (1965: 70).

\(^{13}\) Letter of Mulki Ram, Village Alaklapur, P. O. Baraut, Tahsil Baghpat to CCS, handwritten in Hindi, date illegible; marked item 9 in file ‘Miscellaneous’, Charan Singh files.
anything that would benefit or enrich him. If the letter is authentic or representative of the feelings of Charan Singh’s constituents, it suggests that his honesty does not really matter to the writer. If he is a politician like all the rest, he should help him.

Now, the possibility, indeed the likelihood, is that the letter was itself a trick played by Charan Singh’s enemies to see if he would believe that his own man, Fateh Singh Rana, had said that he (Charan Singh) had engaged in nepotism on behalf of his brother and, as well, to see if he would respond by compromising his much-vaunted integrity and satisfying the letter writer. But, even if the letter was a trick, it would nevertheless reflect the prevailing social and political norms. The trick would be to see if Charan Singh would go for the bait. The file contains no response from Charan Singh to this letter nor any comment upon it.

So, we return to the question of how Charan Singh could maintain his extensive popular support and a degree of admiration that was uncommon in UP politics then or since. What would prevent such a letter writer from voting next time, or trying to get his caste and village fellows to vote next time, for some other more responsive candidate? Is it to be believed that, in a society in which such a letter would be written, a man like Charan Singh would be able to retain the votes, admiration and persistent loyalty of such people? Was, and is, honesty, integrity and reputation truly valued to such an extent that ordinary people would vote for such a person rather than pursue their own personal interests by siding with someone who would be willing to provide a plot of land, a power connection, or a bus permit? I believe that many would do so, and many did in fact do so in Charan Singh’s case, but there were other reasons as well, namely, that he stood for, and provided benefits for, whole classes of people by pursuing and succeeding in implementing policies that benefited large categories in society, most especially the middle peasants and the backward classes. In short, his followers believed he was honest and believed that he stood for their interests and their well-being. He did so especially through his roles in overturning the zamindari land system in the state and shoring up a system of peasant proprietorship, through agricultural policies that benefited most middle and small landholders, and through his unswerving support for the advancement of the classes and castes that constituted a majority in north Indian society.


Beyond Clientelism: Digvijay Singh’s Participatory, Pro-Poor Strategy in Madhya Pradesh

James Manor

We often learn more about political systems by studying lesser leaders rather than senior politicians.\(^1\) But the literature on development has, astonishingly, largely ignored the latter, even though they take most of the crucial decisions. It thus offers us Hamlet without the prince. Three articles on chief ministers of Indian states in this volume react against that bizarre trend. This one considers an imaginative and quite successful politician: Digvijay Singh, chief minister of Madhya Pradesh between 1993 and 2003.

It examines his background and the ways in which he sought to cultivate popular support, implement policies and achieve important goals. The material presented here is drawn from research for a book which focuses on his partially successful attempts to reduce poverty (broadly defined to include, among other things, poor people’s lack of political capacity and influence). That book (Melo, Ng’ethe and Manor, forthcoming) compares him in far greater detail to leaders in Brazil and Uganda who also machinated in ways that eased poverty, and argues that poverty reduction and other progressive outcomes can serve the interests of politicians who achieve them.\(^2\)

Digvijay Singh recognised that politics as usual — in his state and in India more generally — was not working. It mainly stressed clientelism, the distribution of patronage (goods, services and funds) through networks of clients to selected social groups in the (often vain) hope of winning their support at elections. He therefore developed

\(^1\) See for example Morris-Jones (1977).
\(^2\) The other two politicians are former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil and President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda.
a new strategy and a new type of politics which supplemented and, over time, displaced the old to a significant degree. It entailed the generous devolution of powers and resources to elected councils at lower levels and an imaginative array of new policies and programmes intended to promote ‘development’ (the main theme that he stressed) in a participatory manner. He also sought to broaden the dangerously narrow base of his Congress party by mounting several initiatives to benefit poor people, some of which were remarkably successful.

In recent years, many chief ministers in Indian states have seen the need to supplement clientelism with something extra. The ‘somethings extra’, the varied post-clientelist strategies that they have developed, have caused states to be governed in an extraordinary (and possibly worrying) diversity of ways. In this context, the choice of Madhya Pradesh is important. It is one of the more underdeveloped states, but it is not untypical, so the achievements that occurred there under Singh can also happen in other states. Those achievements are therefore far more important than what has been accomplished in Kerala or West Bengal — of which we have heard much but which are not replicable because they are explained by the efforts of a progressive party that cannot gain power in other states. Singh’s approach deserves special attention because, among the post-clientelist strategies which are widely replicable, his has the greatest constructive potential by far.3

**Digvijay Singh’s Background and the Issue of Ideology**

Digvijay Singh was plainly a progressive chief minister who devoted himself to poverty reduction and, associated with this goal, to empowering ordinary people through democratic decentralisation. But can we say that he developed this approach out of an ideological commitment? His party, the Congress, had long advertised its social democratic credentials, its commitment to building ‘a socialist pattern of society’. But the reality was different. The Congress had always been broadly inclusive, containing elements from the left, the right and the centre. Its brand of ‘socialism’ had mainly served the interests of prosperous groups who received the lion’s share of the spoils that ‘socialism’ enabled governments to control and to distribute through clientelist networks — not least in Madhya Pradesh.

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3 This is assessed in greater detail in Manor (2006).
Neither before nor during his decade as chief minister did Digvijay Singh show much interest in this or any ideology. In contrast to many other progressive politicians across the world who started life as leftists and then became reformers on the centre-left, he was decidedly apolitical in his youth. He grew up in the family of a minor raja who had been stripped of his princely title and other privileges in 1969 by the then leader of the Congress, Indira Gandhi. He came from the elite Rajput caste, and received his secondary education at Daly College which had been developed before Independence on British public school lines for the sons of the princely elite. This was not a background likely to produce a progressive politician, but that is what happened. What did not happen was the development of any sort of ideology, be it leftish or conservative.

After Daly College, Singh went on to study engineering (a decidedly non-ideological subject) at a university in his home state of Madhya Pradesh. His university was a hotbed of political activity, but he did not join a political organisation there nor did he vote in student elections. He was drawn into politics later by people who urged him to perform his filial duty by following in the footsteps of his late father, a minor Congress party figure. He thus entered the political fray with no articulated ideological stance and became a progressive only because he gradually realised that it was both the right thing and the politically shrewd thing to do. He also concluded — during his early years as a low-level politician and then as a Member of Parliament (MP) — that open, participatory processes produced better and more sustainable developmental outcomes. Being the kind of progressive who encourages these processes made good practical sense, since they were more efficacious.

There are however, two oddities in this. First, Digvijay Singh — more than any other Congress leader since Devaraj Urs in Karnataka a generation earlier — demonstrated that the party could reap substantial rewards by adopting left-of-centre policies (Manor 1980). Like Urs, Singh too was largely oblivious to ideological tenets or labels. They were both distinctly ‘pragmatic progressives’ who undertook redistributive programmes mainly because they were politically advantageous. Others of a more ideological turn of mind

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4 These comments are based on several interviews with Digvijay Singh in Bhopal and New Delhi between 2001 and 2005.
might erroneously attach ideological labels to Singh’s progressive programmes. (It is worth noting that his left-of-centre approach predated and presaged something very similar by the Congress-led government after the national level of 2004. He has received no credit for this. But that was to be expected, since in his party, praise for young-ish leaders is more or less forbidden lest it undercut the dominance of the dynasty.)

There is also a second oddity here. Digvijay Singh gradually came to recognise that there was considerable political mileage in one part of the Congress party’s tradition which had been largely ignored since independence, the legacy (one might even say the ‘ideology’) of Mahatma Gandhi. Singh found that by generously empowering and funding panchayats (elected councils at lower levels), his government gained, (i) popularity which helped it succeed in re-election in 1998, and (ii) political instruments at and just above the local level that enabled key demand-driven programmes to succeed. Panchayats were one of Gandhi’s passions. Singh also moved forcefully to promote the interests of Dalits (ex-Untouchables). This again resonated with the Gandhian canon. Singh has explicitly stated in private that he would like to see more efforts being made to remind Indians that Gandhi was part of the Congress party’s history. However, in his view, the best way to achieve this is not to publicise Gandhian ‘ideology’, but rather to take actions that are consistent with it.

We thus begin to see Digvijay Singh’s approach to the ‘presentation’ of himself and his government’s initiatives: (i) let actions and policies do most of the talking, (ii) avoid public references to his actual goals (which might be seen as elements of an ideology), such as ‘poverty reduction’ and ‘Gandhian principles’, and instead (iii) use public statements to call attention to specific actions which are the means to achieve those goals, and which are more tangible and real to ordinary people. Examples of these means include the newly empowered panchayats, new schools for the villages that lacked them and specific actions to support Dalits.

Singh believed that people in Madhya Pradesh had tired of hearing empty rhetoric from politicians, especially fellow-Congressmen who had loudly advertised their commitment to the poor but had done precious little to substantiate this claim. In pursuing pro-poor policies, he thought it better to concentrate on tangible actions and to give the word ‘poverty’ a rest. In a country that has put Gandhi’s face on every currency note but ignored his ideas for half-a-century, people
have grown used to disregarding invocations of his name. It made sense, therefore, to concentrate on actions that were consistent with Gandhi’s agenda, without referring to him and or to Gandhianism as an ideology.

**His ‘Presentation’ of Himself and His Policies**

Digvijay Singh’s political style in pursuing development contrasted a great deal from that of the then chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu (1995–2004). As Pamela Price (in this volume) shows, Naidu’s approach to being perceived as a dynamic leader involved a highly person-centred articulation of his goals.

Anyone who has seen Digvijay Singh address crowds or speak on television will know that he is extremely persuasive and delivers cogent messages, presenting himself as a shrewd, reasonable and attractive leader. (This has made him one of the most visible and successful television spokespersons for the Congress party, both in Hindi and in English) It is thus rather odd that as chief minister, he made only limited efforts to publicise himself and his policies, and that he was extraordinarily reticent about stressing his efforts at poverty reduction, which were a central element of his overall project.

At least some part of the explanation for his reticence is personal, not political. Singh had concluded, from the courtly manners that he had learned from his family — and perhaps from his years at Daly College — that to blow his own horn and to inflate his own importance was inappropriate behaviour. Instead, he developed a habit of unfailing courtesy, which entailed a degree of self-effacement. An example from his years in power will illustrate this point.

When he became chief minister, as a result of discussions within his family, especially his mother — who was serious about a commitment to public service, but also to restrained manners — he decided that he needed to give something up while he was chief minister. He therefore decided to become a vegetarian for the duration that he would be in office. He stuck to this decision for a decade, and in 2003 on the morning that election results began trickling in, suggesting that his party might be ousted from power, his wife and children teased him by saying that by sundown he might cease to be a vegetarian. The most remarkable aspect of all this is that he was too reticent to announce to people his decision to give up meat eating, even though it
would have pleased many voters. That would have been in bad taste, the exploitation of a private decision for public benefit. To this day, in fact, this story remains unknown to most people within and beyond Madhya Pradesh.5

Like all senior political leaders in India, he had a publicity machinery. But he invested comparatively little in it — far less than, for example, the vast sums spent (largely on myth-making) by Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh. His reticence is explained in part by his knowledge that his party’s organisation lacked the capacity to penetrate effectively below the district level, therefore could not help him deliver his message to most voters, and that he had to avoid organisation-building because it would lift the lid on serious factional tensions within the Congress party in his state.

His reluctance to speak explicitly and often on ‘poverty’ takes some explaining. Digvijay Singh made greater attempts to tackle poverty than did senior politicians in most other Indian states and in most other less developed countries. And at least in the case of one initiative, the Education Guarantee Scheme (discussed below), he also achieved much more than most others did. Yet he made very few references to ‘poverty’ in his public statements.

His reticence, indeed, his near silence on the subject, is not explained by an anxiety to not alienate non-poor voters. Many people, in Madhya Pradesh and in India, who are not ‘poor’ by any objective measure, nevertheless consider themselves to be ‘poor’.6 So there is always potential political mileage in stressing the issue. His reticence is explained largely by his belief that voters had grown sceptical of such talk, and needed to be persuaded by action, in the absence of such rhetoric. His most recent predecessor as a Congress party chief minister had made a habit of speaking often and loudly about poverty, while actually doing precious little about it. This placed him squarely in the tradition of Indira Gandhi who in 1971 gained an election landslide with a promise to ‘abolish poverty’ (garibi hatao), but who also did little thereafter to follow this up with action. This is not the sort of thing that Congress party leaders dare say, but he was well aware that many voters felt sceptical of promises to tackle poverty, so he chose, probably wisely, not to make much use of that word.

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5 Interview with Digvijay Singh, 24 May 2005, New Delhi.
6 I am grateful to Yogendra Yadav for stressing this point.
Beyond Clientelism

The key theme that he stressed upon was not ‘poverty’ but ‘development’. There was something for everyone in ‘development’. He (and his modest publicity machinery) also spoke of people’s empowerment through decentralisation. This comes closer to ‘poverty’, but it is still some distance away from it.  

Congress ideology also included a commitment to secularism. Until the early 1980s, there was real substance in this. But then Indira Gandhi rashly and ineptly fomented divisions between Hindus and Muslims, and between Hindus and Sikhs — on the naïve assumption that bigotry was safe in her hands. The results of the second of these two gambits were vastly damaging. Mrs Gandhi paid with her life, the Punjab faced a decade of ghastly strife, and for a time the defence of India was compromised. Rajiv Gandhi persisted in this vein. He first built the 1984 election campaign in part around anti-Sikh comments and newspaper advertisements. Then his bungling intervention in Kashmir triggered violence that persists to this day.

Digvijay Singh has been accused of departing from both Congress and Gandhian ‘ideology’ by using soft Hindutva as chief minister. In this writer’s view, the charge is unfair. Singh wrote a letter to the Hindu nationalist Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, complaining that the national government had done too little to prevent cow slaughter, a classic Hindu nationalist issue. This was essentially a ploy that would enable Singh to respond to criticisms that he was oblivious to Hindu concerns by saying, as he did on public platforms, that on the contrary, he had called the Hindu nationalist prime minister’s attention to the latter’s inattention to just such an issue. Those who accuse Singh of popularising Hindutva should note two things. First, the issue that he chose here was not one that would inflame relations between Hindus and Muslims. Second, he took very aggressive actions against a fire-breathing Hindu nationalist bigot, and in so doing, demonstrated both his government’s opposition to preachers of hate, and that such extreme views inspired little popular enthusiasm in his state.

Establishing Himself in Power, and a New Approach to Policy

In an article of this length, it is necessary to deal rather too briefly with certain fundamental matters that are examined in much greater detail.

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7 This is based on several interviews with Digvijay Singh in Bhopal and New Delhi between 2002 and 2005.
in the book comparing Digvijay Singh to two other leaders. When he became chief minister in 1993, he was chosen as a compromise candidate, a comparatively obscure alternative to several major Congress party ‘barons’ from his state. His first task was to establish himself as the pre-eminent figure in state politics. Within two years, Singh had managed this as a result of three things. First, it was beneath the dignity of the ‘barons’ to serve as ministers under him, so they concentrated on manoeuvring for power at the national level. Second, Singh moved adroitly to achieve near complete dominance over policy-making. Third, unlike most other chief ministers, he used that dominance to develop innovative policies that would give him and his party mass popularity, so that national-level Congress leaders would protect him against factional challenges (partly inspired by the ‘barons’) from within the state-level unit of the party.

As Singh set out to establish his dominance over policy-making, he shrewdly made use of certain key advantages. Many of the ministers in his cabinet were at least somewhat maladroit. More crucially, most of them were also mighty bored by policy issues and pre-occupied with two other things: fortifying their personal networks of support (none of which were formidable enough to threaten Singh) and self-enrichment. He permitted them to pursue these things since they were potent distractions from policy matters, about which he cared the most. As a result of their profiteering, corruption was becoming a serious problem. As ministers (and, indeed, legislators) tended their bailiwicks, the old patronage politics on which the Congress had long relied persisted. But all of this now co-existed with a new kind of politics which the chief minister’s policy innovations had brought into being, stressing decentralisation, bottom-up participation, development, and poverty reduction.

In developing new policies, Singh drew heavily upon a small circle of gifted civil servants, and on advice from distinguished figures from enlightened Indian civil society organisations and research centres outside his state. The latter, including extremely perceptive analysts who are deeply sceptical of most politicians, attest to his sophisticated grasp of and commitment to imaginative ideas. Singh also spent a great deal of time holding discussions with representatives of groups at the grassroots level within Madhya Pradesh. These encounters never yielded big ideas for new programmes, but they helped him see how such programmes were (or were not) working and how adjustments on matters of detail might improve them. He often attended conferences of members of local councils and ‘user committees’, and moved
from table to table to conduct dialogues with small groups. The chief minister’s manner in all such contacts was quiet, open and immensely courteous, and he was adept at giving people the impression that he too shared their concerns.

Singh clearly wished to be seen doing this. But he often took up modest insights that emerged from these encounters and sought to implement them. The result was a succession of adjustments to promising policy initiatives which tended to conform to a new development paradigm. This stressed participation from below and the devolution of significant powers and resources onto elected representatives at lower levels.

To legitimise these new programmes and to foster popular awareness about them, Singh commissioned a United Nations-style ‘Human Development Report’ for Madhya Pradesh calling attention to the state’s problems and failings, the kinds of things that most other chief ministers usually sought to hush up. One key aim of this, and of the publicity which was given to it, was to make ‘development’ the most salient issue in the public sphere, more salient than factional squabbles or religious and caste issues.

Early in his term in office, Singh provided greater powers and resources to elected panchayats at the district and lower levels than almost any other government in India or elsewhere. The result was one of the four most robust experiments with democratic decentralisation in India’s 28 states, and one of the six most robust in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A curious paradox stands at the core of this story. Policy-making at the apex of the political system was kept tightly closed, but the policies that emerged did much to open up the political and policy processes to bottom-up influences from ordinary people at the grassroots. This is worth exploring in a somewhat greater detail.

This attempt to open up governance at lower levels was in a way rather curious. All state governments in India had long struggled to cope with the demand overload from below. Their failure to do so is, in turn, an adequate explanation for the failure of a majority of incumbent state governments to be re-elected in the period since 1980. And yet, despite this, Singh took the risk of catalysing still greater demand. He did so principally because he correctly believed that the existing demands were coming disproportionately from prosperous groups. By stimulating demand from a wider array of groups — including many that were not prosperous and often very poor — he could broaden his own appeal and the base of his Congress party.
But he could accomplish these goals safely only if he had some means of responding to the fresh demands. The programmes that he created helped to achieve that, but only up to a point. The participatory mechanisms that he established at the lower levels of the system were important at least in enabling many of the demands from the previously excluded groups (and some long-standing demands from prosperous groups that had gone unmet) to receive responses. This occurred because his government empowered councils at low levels to act swiftly and provide responses. Thus, the speed and quantity of responses increased, and so did the quality, if we measure 'quality' by the degree to which responses conform to popular preferences.

On its own, however, decentralisation would not suffice to redistribute resources, because, as he well knew, such systems tend to be dominated by the non-poor. So he had to go further, since redistribution was essential if he was to offer poor people more than the patronage politics that his ministers and legislators were assiduously pursuing, and if he was to tackle a further, deeply urgent political problem to which we now turn.

**Broadening the Congress Party’s Social Base**

Digvijay Singh’s party’s social base had been contracting since the 1960s, till when the Congress had enjoyed pre-eminence in Madhya Pradesh. A political awakening had gradually been taking place among the ordinary, even poor people. They had become more politically aware, independent and skilled, more impatient with tokenism, and more demanding of politicians. As this happened, the instruments through which politicians might respond had been undergoing decay. Both the formal institutions of state and, crucially, informal institutions like the Congress party’s organisation, had lost substance, reach, autonomy, and flexibility. The confluence of these two trends posed serious dangers to politicians, ruling parties and the democratic process. An imaginative response was thus required that would promote renewal and political regeneration (Manor 1994).

Table 9.1 offers is a rough sketch of the traditional caste hierarchy (the potency of which has been seriously eroded even in underdeveloped states like Madhya Pradesh), plus the Scheduled Tribes

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8 This is based on discussions with Adrian Mayer.
and Muslims. The groups whose names are given in bold below are those with which Singh made special efforts to cultivate ties.

Digvijay Singh is a Rajput. The Other Backward Castes (OBCs) are a highly fragmented caste category. Cognisant of this he reached out to some of them, while ignoring the others. He also mounted a serious initiative to cultivate Dalit support. This alienated the Scheduled Tribes to some extent, but he took further steps to reassure them. Muslims had been so greatly alienated by his principal opponent, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has preached bigotry against them, that they could be depended upon to lend the Congress party strong support.

There are social tensions between higher- and lower-status elements of this diverse coalition, and among groups on the lower rungs of the old hierarchy. He was aware of this, but believed that he could do enough to prevent it from wrecking his social coalition.

Singh felt compelled to construct this coalition because of two challenges that previous Congress chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh had not encountered. A historic change had occurred in Indian politics in 1990. Two new themes were brought ferociously to the fore, with critical implications for his party across the entire country and especially for politics in his state.

First, a non-Congress, secular government in New Delhi committed itself to reserving a substantial proportion of places in educational institutions and government employment for members of the OBCs. Many of the OBC people were ‘poor’ or close to it. This commitment triggered both a significant popular response among those who stood to gain and angry, often violent, opposition from those who did not.

Table 9.1 Composition of the traditional caste hierarchy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social group</th>
<th>Percentage of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmins</td>
<td>5.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajputs and other high castes</td>
<td>7.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate castes</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Backward Castes†</td>
<td>41.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Castes (ex-Untouchables or Dalits)</td>
<td>14.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis</td>
<td>21.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Christophe Jaffrelot, personal communication.

Note: † Singh sought to cultivate some of the groups in this rather artificial category.
It also sparked a competition for the votes of this large OBC bloc, in which the Congress party too would need to be involved.

Second, the Hindu nationalist BJP reacted to this decision on reservations by launching an agitation for the destruction of a mosque at Ayodhya, allegedly built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. This evoked a substantial popular response from Hindus, which cut across the caste-based appeal of the first issue and made strident Hindu chauvinism a major force for the first time.

In Madhya Pradesh, Hindu nationalism has had a long and potent presence. Then as now, the state polity functioned as a two-party system in which the Congress faced the BJP. Congress leaders like Singh needed to redouble their efforts to resist the BJP. Far less had been done by rival parties in the state to mobilise the OBCs or other numerically powerful groups of poor people. These latter groups were the Dalits or Scheduled Castes who stood below the OBCs at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy, and the Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes, impoverished groups situated largely outside the Hindu social order. Singh recognised that his party would have to offer these groups many more tangible benefits if it was to prevent other parties from ending their traditional support for the Congress. The old reliance on the rural dominance of his Rajput caste and political bosses mainly from other high status groups would not suffice for long.9

This impelled Singh, when he became chief minister in 1993, to give ‘development’ greater emphasis as the core issue in the politics of Madhya Pradesh. Previously, it had preoccupied politicians far less than had patronage distribution, faction fights and other mundane matters. By stressing ‘development’, he could respond to both the challenges that had emerged — Hindu nationalism and caste-based appeals — without giving ground to either.

Singh followed this up with an array of specific programmes to promote ‘development’, including several pro-poor initiatives (two of which are examined later in this article). These marked him out as a new kind of Congress leader. Singh’s energetic pursuit of this approach eventually led to his being identified in a national fortnightly magazine as one of two chief ministers who were sufficiently imaginative and dynamic to qualify as ‘Wow Guys’.10

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9 Interview with Digvijay Singh, 16 May 2004, New Delhi.
10 Business World, 7–21 March 1999: 22–34. The other ‘Wow Guy’ was Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh.
Making His Influence Penetrate Downward into Society

How did Digvijay Singh make his influence penetrate downward into society, a key element in constructing a constituency for himself and his party? There were, broadly speaking, three possible strategies available, which were not mutually exclusive. They were: (i) to develop ties with civil society organisations; (ii) to enhance the penetrative capacity of the Congress party organisation; and (iii) to extend the downward reach of the formal institutions and agencies of state. He depended almost entirely on the last of these options. To understand why, let us consider each individually.

Civil society in Madhya Pradesh was weaker than in many other parts of India, but some development- and rights-oriented organisations had gained strength in its principal urban centres, and a small number had forged links with similar organisations at the intermediate levels and even in some local arenas. Two rather formidable such organisations were, first, Ekta Parishad, a Gandhian organisation working among disadvantaged groups and that put pressure on the government regarding various injustices, especially land-related issues. It was often very critical of Singh, but he eventually developed an understanding with it. And second, the internationally known Narmada Bachao Andolan, that has sought to resist the Narmada dam project and represent the large numbers of people likely to be displaced by it.

Digvijay Singh was the first chief minister of Madhya Pradesh to reach out to civil society organisations in a meaningful manner. In his first term, he sought advice on policy issues from enlightened, development-oriented civic groups and involved a small number of them as partners in development programmes. He also sought to develop an understanding with the Narmada Bachao Andolan. One early encounter with its members offers an insight into his style of personal engagement, visible throughout his time in power.

A sizeable body of demonstrators from the Andolan once gathered outside his official residence. Instead of ignoring them, which would have been the response of most chief ministers, he invited them in. When Singh saw that there were too many of them to seat even in his large reception room, he suggested that he and they sit together on the front steps of his house and talk, and there too he sat on one of the lower steps. He spoke to them, as he spoke to everyone, in a relaxed and thoroughly courteous manner, as if they were his equals.
This kind of behaviour is highly unusual in Indian politics, and many who encountered it on that and numerous other occasions were disarmed by it.

Despite this, however, the Andolan was unwilling to make any significant compromise. As Singh later put it, ‘they insisted on “no dam”, and it was beyond my power to deliver that’. What he could offer was money to enable displaced people to purchase new lands. This was his only option, since the state did not possess enough suitable and conveniently located land for redistribution among them. He also promised to encourage governments in neighbouring states to follow suit. Their response was to sustain their non-violent but energetic protests.

This persuaded some of Singh’s cabinet colleagues to think that he had been naïve to assume that civil society organisations would make useful partners and they forcefully put this view before him. This and his exasperation over dealing with the Andolan appear to have persuaded him to distance himself, unnecessarily and unwisely, from many other organisations that were not at all confrontational. The main exception was the Gandhian Ekta Parishad. Thus the option of cultivating civil society participation was largely set aside.

The second option was to build a penetrative party organisation. The most obvious approach to making his influence penetrate downward would have been to strengthen the Congress party’s organisation. It had not still recovered from the severe damage wrought when Indira Gandhi had abandoned intra-party democracy, radically centralised power within it, systematically inspired factional conflict in all state-level party units, and ruthlessly cut down any state-level leader who appeared to have gained significant strength.

If Singh had sought to revive the party organisation in Madhya Pradesh, he would have run two risks. He would have opened up space for factional infighting (lurking just below the surface). He might also have begun to look even more powerful than he already was, and that might have invited punitive intervention from Sonia Gandhi, the party president. So he wisely avoided party building, a sad and painful necessity.

The third option, and the best choice left for Singh, was to extend the downward reach of the state, by implementing imaginative

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11 Interview with Digvijay Singh, 16 May 2004, New Delhi.
programmes through formal institutions and agencies. It is remarkable that, in an era when the state’s role was supposed to be shrinking (and in which his government was indeed cautiously downsizing) major progress should have been made under this chief minister in extending the downward reach of the state. But that is what happened.

During his first term in power, 1993–1998, he concentrated his energies on two main approaches to governance which, taken together, were intended to improve the lives of ordinary people at the grassroots. First, he sought to enhance the capacity of state agencies to deliver goods and services to the poorer sections of society. Second, and more crucially, he generously empowered elected councils at the lower levels to give villagers in this predominantly rural state opportunities to exercise some influence from below over the political and policy-making processes.

**The Education Guarantee Scheme**

For a better understanding of how Digvijay Singh sought to cultivate popular support by pursuing pro-poor policies, let us consider his most successful initiative, the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS). Its success was intimately linked to his prior empowerment of panchayats. Democratic decentralisation, a major element of Digvijay Singh’s policy agenda, often fails to serve the interests of poor people at the grassroots. But this programme was deliberately structured to ensure that, in this instance at least, it could advance poverty reduction.

The Scheme, which was introduced in 1997, was preceded by and grew out of a major literacy campaign designed to tackle one of the most severe problems affecting poor people. That campaign was pushed hard from the top by the chief minister. It mobilised a huge number of literates at the grassroots to teach others how to read, and awarded them a ‘bounty’ for each person successfully taught — an inexpensive way to accomplish this in an era of tight fiscal constraints.

This, together with the EGS, led to a spectacular increase in the official literacy rate between the censuses of 1991 and 2001 — of 22 per cent among females and 20 per cent overall. Comparable gains

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12 A fiscal stabilisation programme, funded by the Asian Development Bank, partly entailed a reduction in the number of ‘Class IV’ government employees — that is, those performing largely menial, unskilled tasks.
have been achieved in only one other Indian state (Rajasthan) over recent decades. The figures appear to be somewhat inflated, but not excessively so.\(^\text{13}\)

During the literacy drive, it had become apparent to Singh, and the two very bright civil servants who worked with him, that one reason for the state’s low literacy was that many remote villages did not possess primary schools. (It may seem surprising, but this fact had not registered fully with previous chief ministers.) Students had to walk long distances to reach the nearest school — and many did not do so. This led the two civil servants to ponder on how schools might be provided to such villages.

They eventually hit upon an idea that became the basis for the EGS. Any village with 40 children (25 in ‘tribal’ hamlets) without a school nearby would be given the right to demand one, and to hire a literate person (usually from within the village) to teach local students up to grade five.\(^\text{14}\) These new teachers were given three months of training and were also paid some money. At first they were paid much less than teachers in conventional government schools, later, their remuneration was increased substantially. This was done partly in response to demands by them, but principally as a result of their positive performance.

This programme was an example of the government stimulating demands for goods, services and other responses from below, from poor people, even though demand overload was already a serious problem. It was undertaken because Singh understood that insufficient demands had been made by the state’s poorest villages, and because he was (rightly) confident that the government would be able to respond adequately.

The scale of the demand was remarkable, and it surprised Singh himself. Before Madhya Pradesh was bifurcated in 2000, 26,000 villages demanded and got new schools where none had existed before. Of these 21,000 were in districts that remained within Madhya Pradesh. After bifurcation, the state added still more schools, bringing the total number in late 2003 to 26,571. A total of 1,233,000 students

\(^{13}\) This comment is based on a detailed assessment of the methods used to estimate the rise in literacy, in discussions with two education specialists, 4 and 7 December 2004, Bhopal.

were enrolled in them. Of these, 90 per cent were drawn from poorer groups — the OBCs, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The state government disbursed the funds for this programme, but its day-to-day management was placed in the hands of elected village councils. This was crucial, since the new teachers were made accountable to the councils and because local residents were quick to inform councillors of slack performance by teachers, absenteeism among them (a severe problem in schools right across north India) was very low. Absenteeism also declined because the teachers in these schools lived close by and did not have to commute from urban centres, as did many teachers in conventional village schools. During the rainy season, which lasts many weeks in Madhya Pradesh, those teachers who have to commute find it impossible to reach a very large number of villages where the schools are located because the roads become unusable. The new schools, like the village panchayats, were intended by Singh to show villagers that a shift had occurred from rajniti (governance by the state) to lokniti (governance by newly empowered ordinary folk, and ‘owned’ by them). Or, to put it slightly differently, he wanted them to see that at the local level, the ‘government’ now consisted of the people themselves.

Who opposed the EGS? Singh himself says ‘no one’, and he is almost correct. Legislators and ministers welcomed it because they could claim credit for the new schools, even though they had little to do with founding them. Those interests that did not benefit offered little objection, because few funds were diverted to the programme which they might otherwise have garnered. Nor did the higher castes in rural areas oppose it. Since many of them could afford to pay private school fees for their children, they were unconcerned with what was happening in the public sector. Many others who sent their

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15 Interview with Amita Sharma, the civil servant who oversaw the Education Guarantee Scheme, 4 December 2003, Bhopal.
16 Ibid.; see also Gopalakrishnan and Sharma (1998).
18 Interview with Digvijay Singh, 16 May 2004, New Delhi.
children to conventional government schools were pleased because the programme meant that low caste or ‘tribal’ children who had previously (to their dismay) trekked long distances to sit beside their children now had schools of their own. The only group that felt unhappy were the teachers in pre-existing government schools, and they were neither sufficiently discontented (their lives changed little) nor powerful to make much of an impact.

Some others were understandably anxious about the quality of education provided in these new schools. One response to this is to argue that schools of indifferent quality are an improvement on no schools at all. But the government did not content itself with this. It took steps to ensure as much quality control as possible in the new schools. It injected considerable rigour and substance into the three-month training course provided to teachers, and instituted a further nine-month correspondence course based on the diploma of education syllabus, through which roughly 21,000 teachers passed over a two-year period.

Fresh legislation, which is harder to rescind than executive action, was then passed, requiring regular assessments of the quality of all types of schools in every constituency in the state, to be conducted and placed before the legislature every six months. The aim of this was to embarrass legislators whose constituencies yielded low ratings into committing themselves to take action to improve matters. (The tactic worked. For example, ministers whose constituencies showed poor results were quietly laughed at by their colleagues when reports were presented at cabinet meetings, and corrective action swiftly ensued.19) The government then decided to hire not one but two teachers for each new school, one of whom had to be a woman, partly to attract more female pupils, and partly to ease the burden on solo teachers.20

These efforts had an impact. Comparisons of pass rates in examinations for fifth-year students in conventional schools and the new EGS schools tell their own story (see Table 9.2). This success owes much to the lower rates of teachers’ absenteeism in EGS schools (and to lower dropout rates among students in them). It was lower because teachers in these

19 Interview with Amita Sharma, the civil servant who supervised EGS, 4 December 2003, Bhopal.
20 Ibid.
schools, as mentioned earlier, were accountable to village panchayats, unlike the teachers in conventional schools.

One set of figures noted above is worth reiterating, since it tells us something important, both about underdevelopment in the state and about the impact of this scheme. There were roughly 52,000 villages in undivided Madhya Pradesh, and the scheme brought new schools to 26,000 of these before the state was bifurcated, and still more thereafter. In other words, until then, over half of the state’s villages lacked schools, and it was the EGS provided them. These are extraordinary numbers that indicate both how serious the neglect of rural development had been before Singh, and how much was achieved during his time.

We learn three other important things from all of this. First, although the grassroots sections of society had suffered from severe underdevelopment, the state’s pre-existing institutional structures were in certain important ways reasonably well developed. They possessed the capacity (i) to transmit downward to remote villages the information that they had the right to demand schools, and (ii) to transmit demands for schools upward to the relevant state authorities. Second, over half a century, the democratic process had inspired a sufficient political awakening even among people from severely deprived social groups living in exceedingly poor villages to ensure that the demand for schools both existed and could be voiced. There was nothing half-hearted about the response to the scheme — it was massive. Third, once the demand emerged from the common people, the constructive potential of India’s state institutions became still more apparent. The EGS reoriented existing administrative institutions such that they were able to respond to this democratic demand, and supplement the efforts of these institutions by incorporating still new ones — such as elected local councils — into the political and policy-making processes.

### Table 9.2 Comparative success rates of conventional and EGS schools (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Conventional schools</th>
<th>EGS schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001–02</td>
<td>68.29</td>
<td>72.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002–03</td>
<td>71.50</td>
<td>72.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Figures provided by Amita Sharma (see n. 20).
Conclusion

Many chief ministers in India — unlike leading politicians in Africa — have come to recognise that the old politics of patronage distribution no longer suffices in getting re-elected. Many of them have responded with post-clientelist experiments, with ‘something extra’ to supplement the old politics. But there are marked variations among the ‘somethings extra’ that chief ministers have introduced, and as a result, different Indian states have lately been governed in strikingly different ways. For example, Narendra Modi in Gujarat has used social polarisation along communal lines as his ‘something extra’, while Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar polarised society very differently, between the have and have-nots. Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh undertook an energetic drive for ‘development’ in a top-down, illiberal manner which smacked of Malaysia-style control-freakery (explicitly identifying that country as his model). Digvijay Singh also pursued ‘development’, but in a very different, far more liberal way, through devolution, bottom-up participation and programmes targeted on poorer groups. His brand of ‘post-clientelism’ is more constructive and more exportable to other Indian states than the other three, although little has been explicitly made of it by his party which reserves its fulsome praise for just one family.

In order to broaden his party’s base, Singh felt compelled to cultivate popularity not informally, through his party, but formally, by mounting new government policies and creating new structures, in particular, genuinely empowered panchayati raj institutions. The policies included some that addressed poverty, and some of those met with considerable success.

He neither thought nor spoke in ‘ideological’ terms. But he did more than nearly all other chief ministers to experiment with promising new ideas from two overlapping sources: the new development paradigm being created within international and (not least) Indian civil society organisations and research centres, which stressed on bottom-up, demand-driven development approaches, and Gandhian traditions.

And yet, even though Singh did more than most to tackle poverty, he was remarkably reticent about discussing to it explicitly — because his Congress predecessors had overused that word and inspired popular cynicism about governments’ commitment to poverty alleviation. Instead he stressed ‘development’, which offered something for everyone, and he did enjoy some success on that broad front.
Beyond Clientelism

This got him re-elected once, something that only about 10 per cent of chief ministers outside West Bengal have achieved since 1980. Digvijay Singh also miscalculated on certain key occasions, and his first priority, like that of all other leaders across India, was his own political interest. So he, like all of the rest, is also attended by ambiguities. But he has managed to achieve more to facilitate liberal practices and deepen democracy, and to address the needs of poor, socially excluded groups, than any leader of a state whose achievements can be replicated elsewhere. He demonstrated not just that progressive strategies are practicable, but that they can also serve the interests of the leaders and parties that pursue them.

References


A common characterisation of leadership in post-colonial Indian politics is that political parties tend to maintain strong focus on the person of their main leader, more than his or her policies of governance. Studies of populism in the 1970s and 1980s have produced the most systematic explorations of the nature of person-centred politics. These include, to greater and lesser degrees, examinations of the role of ‘welfare’ distribution as an element in the representation of the main leader. In the 1990s, however, simultaneous to the expansion of discourses nationwide about ‘liberalising [economic] reform’, some staples of populist politics, including subsidies of food, electricity, fertiliser, seeds, etc., became suspect among those politicians who were preoccupied with economic growth and investment. Rhetoric about ‘development’ replaced ‘poverty’ as a focus in political performances in several states. A question explored in this article is the fate of person-centred politics in states where development has found a high priority in rhetoric performances.

In this volume, James Manor discusses the focus on development in the career of Digvijay Singh, the Congress party chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, 1993–2003, in central India. Manor explores the reasons why Singh maintained a modest profile as the development chief minister of his state. Contiguous to Madhya Pradesh is the state of Andhra Pradesh, where Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu of

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* For reading and commenting on various drafts of this paper I am grateful to David Gilmartin, Ronald Herring, Arild Ruud, K. C. Suri, and participants at the original conference. Errors of interpretation remain mine.

1 The contributions of Pandian (1992), Swamy (1998) and Subramanian (1999) are particularly noteworthy.
the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) held, as well, development as the main plank of his regime. Unlike Singh, however, Naidu took a highly personalised approach to his venture. In the opinion of his detractors, during his tenure as chief minister, from 1995 to 2004, Naidu maintained a strong and expensive focus on his person, even as he departed from many of the well-known ingredients of populist appeals. Critics complained about the carefully managed ‘hype’ surrounding the chief minister, who projected himself as the chief executive officer (CEO) of his state and, therefore, as being above the conventions of state politics. Unlike in Madhya Pradesh, in Andhra Pradesh during this period there was political space for a strong focus on the person of a ‘development’ head of government.

Both Singh and Naidu failed in their re-election attempts, in 2003 and 2004, respectively. It appears that they were felled, at least in part, by being incumbents going for a third term (see below).

During his tenure as chief minister, Chandrababu had become an icon of neo-liberal reform, even though there were distributive programmes under the TDP regime. Following 2004, an out-of-power Naidu has been a strident critic of forms of development that are not ‘inclusive’, promoting himself as committed to the needs of farmers. This, however, is not a stance that he assumed only upon electoral failure. In 2003–04, in keeping with his high-profile style, Chandrababu Naidu attempted to lead his party to victory by wrapping ‘development’ in highly personalised statements and symbols demonstrating his interest in improving lives, especially in rural areas. He attempted to shed neoliberal glossiness, as the TDP leadership asserted on occasion that their goal was a ‘welfare state’ in Andhra Pradesh. This article provides a narrative and analysis of Naidu’s redesign of his image, through interpretations of English-language reporting of the campaign. I provide representations by and of the TDP chief minister in four English-language newspapers (Hyderabad editions) leading up to the elections in the spring of 2004. These I read, clipped and collected while I lived in Andhra Pradesh from September 2003 to February 2004.

Campaign rhetoric rarely comes under focus in studies of post-Independence Indian politics. It can lose interest as a topic when

\[2\] A rare exception is *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) by Bernard Bate, which discusses language usage and the staging of speech performances. My two earlier studies are Price (1996 and 1999).
careful analysis of electoral results shows difficulty in ascertaining the influence of campaign rhetoric on voter choices (e.g., Suri 2004a). Another reason for skirting the topic may be an observer’s conviction that campaign rhetoric is not materially significant, considering decades of failure on the part of party leaders to fulfil promises of *inter alia* abolishing poverty. This article explores campaign dynamics, finding in 2003–04 a powerful opening in rhetoric for increased attention to the needs of vulnerable groups in an agrarian society. A major element in these dynamics was a long-term drought, a condition which promises to repeat itself with increasing vehemence in other parts of India as well in the near future.

In the assembly election of 2004, the Congress and its allies heavily defeated the TDP and its ally, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). During the campaign the victors had shamed the incumbent TDP regime with charges that its focus on liberalising reforms during a period of extended drought constituted callous neglect of rural society. Writings on the assembly campaign have focussed in the main on the Congress’ winning strategy, sometimes characterising the TDP’s loss as a rejection by voters of the regime’s policies of economic liberalisation (Sridhar 2004: 213). There has been little discussion of the ways in which the leadership of the TDP attempted to defend the party’s record. TDP politicians in general needed to counter the wide perception in the state that development in the agricultural sector had been slighted under TDP rule. Prominent academicians, among others, believed that for Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, goals of rapid economic growth overshadowed the need for attention to an agrarian crisis. According to Narasimha Reddy, Dean of School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad:

[Naidu] issued a White Paper on agriculture as being part of ‘an old paradigm’. The ‘new’ thinking, according to him, was to make agriculture work for global markets, through contract and corporate farming. ‘There was a benign neglect of agriculture, despite the talk of investing in irrigation’. (Quoted in Sridhar 2004: 213)

After the TDP’s sharp loss of seats in 2004, analyst K. C. Suri found it likely that Naidu would cease to be an ardent supporter of World Bank-approved reform strategies and would begin to call for an ‘alternative policy agenda’ (2004b: 5497). Such a change of stance could be expected, following Suri’s observation of the proclivity of political parties to criticise liberalisation when they were in the opposition and
to follow policies of economic reform when they returned to power (Suri 2004a). In 2003–04, however, as Naidu sought to stay in power, he began his personal and policy ‘make-over’, implicitly critiquing the principles of neoliberal economic thought. Chandrababu became the supremo who was deeply engaged in the fate of the ‘unreformed’ agricultural sector.

**Brief Introduction to Chandrababu Naidu as Chief Minister**

By the autumn of 2003 Chandrababu had become famous, not only in his own state, but nationally and to some extent internationally, for his support of economic liberalisation and his attempts to accommodate the principles of structural adjustment. Naidu continuously declared that the policies of his regime would make his state the most developed in India. Andhra Pradesh — with an extensive dry and dusty inland area — would someday, in the not-so-distant-future, match Singapore in economic significance and in the delivery of services. Soon after he took office in 1995, Naidu commissioned McKinsey, an international management consulting firm, to study the state. He adopted some of their recommendations for the document, *Vision 2020*, an ambitious outline for the coming decades in Andhra Pradesh.\(^3\) His approach to economic liberalisation and his encouragement of investment stemmed from attempts to increase administrative efficiency and transparency. The chief minister also initiated and extended programmes for the ‘uplift’ of specially targeted social and vocational groups.

The popular image of the chief minister as never being too far from his computer symbolised his enthusiasm for both an expansion of computer industries and services in the state and the results for governance which he believed would accrue from the rapid adoption of new communication technologies. Here, he avowed, lay possibilities for a more efficient and honest district and village administration. At the same time, Naidu tried to encourage an attitude among ordinary citizens which he believed would be necessary for the achievement of his vision of development. The chief minister declared that citizens should cease to expect ‘handouts’ from the government and, indeed,

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3 Lorraine Kennedy writes that McKinsey prepared *Vision 2020* in its entirety (Kennedy 2004: 41), while others report that the TDP compiled it.
during his tenure there was a reduction of subsidies and an increase in charges for water and electricity (Kennedy 2004: 46). Externally supplied grants, loans and investment, however, allowed the TDP regime to continue with some forms of distribution (ibid.). That these schemes did not include proportionately heavy investment in irrigation development, however, became a major issue in campaign discourses in 2003–04.

Encouraging new investment in his state was a major preoccupation for the chief minister. A regular visitor to the World Economic Forum at Davos, Naidu believed in the importance of appearances in being able to successfully woo investors. To this end he encouraged the beautification of parts of the state capital Hyderabad with newly paved, landscaped roads and gleaming industrial complexes. He undertook a reorganisation of the state energy sector and mollified World Bank officers with attempts to mobilise rural society outside the conventional arenas of state administration and local governance. The World Bank rewarded Naidu’s efforts with loans. Bill Gates chose to build Microsoft’s first research and development centre outside the US in Andhra Pradesh, and the then US President Bill Clinton skipped Bangalore for a stop in Hyderabad.

‘Janmabhoomi’ (literally, land of birth) was Chandrababu’s ambitious programme of rural mobilisation to initiate changes in rural attitudes toward development and the state. It failed, however, to sustain popular support. Unrealistic as well were portions of the document, Vision 2020. Its compilers underestimated the challenges to rapid economic growth that would be posed in a state where two out of the three main regions, Telangana and Rayalaseema, suffer from chronic shortages of water. By 2003, three consecutive years of drought had not improved the state’s chances for reaching the Vision 2020 targets. The Times of India reported that Andhra Pradesh’s Vision 2020 was predicated on a growth rate of 10 per cent between 1995–96 and 1999–2000, whereas the state recorded a growth rate of just 5.7 per cent (Sreedhar Rao 2003). Agriculture was limping along at 3 per cent. If Vision 2020 was to be achieved, the newspaper announced, the state would have to grow at 8.6 per cent between 2000–01 and 2004–05. The article noted the regime’s response to these figures: ‘Officials

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4 For a discussion of Janmabhoomi as a form of populism in a neoliberal regime, see Krishna Reddy (2002).
say growth momentum could not be maintained during the last five years due to the drought for three consecutive years (ibid.). The gross state domestic product (GSDP) for Andhra Pradesh for 1997–98 to 2001–02 was 5.32 per cent, while the national average was 5.46 per cent. Karnataka was first in growth in India with 7.09 per cent.

Reports of large numbers of farmers committing suicide drew attention to the impact of the drought on the agricultural sector. The deaths appeared to have been a result of despair in the face of enhanced debt, possibly incurred as a result of wider participation in agricultural markets. *The Times of India* reported in November 2003, that out of 495 farmers who had committed suicide nationwide in the last two years, 385 were from Andhra Pradesh.5

In the first half of 2003, a powerful challenge emerged from the Congress party, that potentially undermined the TDP government’s chances of being re-elected in the next assembly election. The main Congress contender for the office of chief minister, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR), succeeded in drawing wide attention in the media to the difficulties facing farmers and other groups in agrarian society. In the heat of summer YSR walked approximately 1,500 kilometres through rural areas, meeting with villagers and listening to their complaints. He sought in this way to spread and intensify perceptions of insensitivity towards hardship on the part of the TDP leadership (Price, forthcoming).

A different kind of threat to TDP leadership came from revolutionary guerrilla fighters, referred to in the English-language press as Naxalites, the Peoples’ War Group (PWG), or just the Peoples’ War (PW). These were violent in their criticism of the TDP’s trickle-down approach to the improvement of rural livelihoods. Living and travelling in small cells comprising both men and women, these guerrillas threatened and sometimes attacked wealthy farmers, merchants and government officers and installations. The assassination of state politicians also became part of their revolutionary repertoire. Naidu’s regime charted a tough course in dealing with these groups and had given the police, critics allege, a free reign in killing these revolutionaries, often in circumstances that violated their human rights. By the fall of 2003,

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Naxalites were reacting with intensified violence to the movement of TDP politicians in areas where they had bases.

The TDP lost badly in the 2004 assembly elections. It won only 47 seats to the Congress party’s tally of 185.\(^6\) Of the parties in alliance with the Congress, the left parties, including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, won a total of 15 seats and the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS), dedicated to the secession of Telangana region from the state, won 26 seats. The TDP’s ally, the BJP, won only 2 seats. The Congress alliance received 48.37 per cent of the vote share, against the TDP–BJP’s 39.66 per cent. In terms of the percentage of votes cast, however, the Congress received 38.5 per cent versus the TDP’s 37.5 per cent. Therefore, the great seat gains of the Congress party were more the result of the politics of electoral coalitions and the ‘first past the post’ rule in electoral practice, than a powerful popular rejection of the TDP.

As remarked above, some observers did see the TDP loss as repudiation of its reform agenda. Dissatisfaction with TDP priorities probably played a role in determining voter choices, however, as Suri has pointed out: ‘Surely, one cannot say that all those 40 per cent who voted in favor of the TDP alliance were in favor of reforms, nor can we say that the majority who voted in favor of the Congress alliance were opposed to reforms’ (2004b: 5496). TDP’s incumbency most likely contributed to the party’s failure. It would have been highly unusual, in the context of the recent pattern of voting in most state elections, if a regime had been voted back to power for a third term.

**Deciding for an Early Assembly Election**

On 1 October 2003, Chandrababu Naidu drove through the hills surrounding the famous temple of Lord Venkateswara at Tirupati in south-eastern Andhra Pradesh. At Alipiri, claymore mines set up by members of the PWG exploded and hit the car carrying the chief minister. The car was an armoured vehicle and Naidu survived the blast with broken bones in his right hand, a broken collar bone and

\(^6\) The assembly election figures mentioned in this paragraph are taken from Suri (2004b: 5495). In the simultaneous parliamentary elections, the Congress and its allies won 36 seats and the TDP won five (the BJP, the latter’s ally, won none.)
other minor injuries. Several of the members of his entourage, however, were seriously wounded. The car was completely destroyed. This event played a major role in setting the frame for TDP activities in the next seven months.

September had been a particularly difficult period for the chief minister, who had to deal, inter alia, with a multi-million rupee stamp paper scam involving a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the TDP, a multi-regional conflict over the release of waters of the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers for irrigation for his state, and agitations in four districts. Writing in hindsight, an analyst for The Hindu commented, ‘The Naxalite attack on Mr. Naidu altered the complexion of the political scenario overnight and these issues receded to the background. Regional passions cooled further with the heavy rains even in the drought-prone Rayalaseema’ (Kesava Rao 2003).

In the next few months, those thinking positively about the prospects for the TDP considered that:

> From being seen as a weak administrator who was unable to reign in the Naxalite threat, he has suddenly transformed himself into a courageous but beleaguered leader. If Indian political history is any guide, this kind of sympathy usually translates into electoral windfall. At the very least, it will nullify the Chief Minister’s biggest nemesis, anti-incumbency.\(^7\)

It appears that Naidu and his partymen\(^8\) began to follow this line of reasoning soon after the blast, as speculation grew to the effect that the TDP would call for early elections to the assembly. By mid-October Naidu had begun consultations on the feasibility of an early vote and attempted to accelerate the distribution of ration cards and the expediting of welfare schemes that had been promised in May 2003. At that time, at a major party gathering, the government had announced the coming distribution of `one crore [10 million] boons’.\(^9\)

Twenty days after the blast, the TDP called for a debate on the ways in which ‘extremists’ were undermining democracy through violence. The TDP announced that the attack on the chief minister had been an attack on the constitution and on democracy. Shortly thereafter

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\(^7\) ‘Dissolution of the Andhra Assembly: View’, The Times of India, 15 November 2003.

\(^8\) Women played minor public roles in TDP affairs.

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Naidu suggested that the Naxalites were impeding development, which could only take place within the context of law and order.

In the course of the few next weeks the TDP leadership took a decision in favour of early polls and organised a general body meeting in mid-November where it was announced that assembly elections would be brought forward. The TDP leadership had hoped that the elections could take place in January or February 2004, leaving the opposition unprepared. However, the Election Commission decided that they needed at least five months to carry out necessary preparations.

The main arguments for the decision to hold early elections included: (i) the TDP needed a ‘fresh mandate…to accelerate the development process which had been halted at various stages by the Opposition, particularly Congress’, and similarly, (ii) because Naxalite activities hindered development, ‘we want a clear mandate from the people to face the challenge and go ahead with our work boldly’, said a senior TDP leader.

Major Themes in the TDP Campaign

Soon TDP speakers began talking about an alleged Congress–Naxalite nexus as hindering development in the state. The Congress leadership was implicated because they had criticised the TDP’s hardline policy on extremism and TDP leaders’ refusal to negotiate with revolutionaries. In the months to come the TDP was pressed by its critics and the media to explain how calling for early elections would assist the party in carrying forward its development agenda. Some asked that since Naxalites had been active in the state for the past 30 years, how could a referendum at this point make a difference? Naidu’s unconvincing response was that ‘the Government’s hands would be strengthened in its efforts to put an end to Naxalism’.

There was also the apparent contradiction between the TDP’s pointing

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to what it had achieved in terms of ‘high development’ and its complaints regarding the ‘prevention of development by [the] Naxalite–Opposition combine’. When asked to say specifically how Naxalite activities had hindered development in the state, TDP spokesmen said that they had scared off potential investors.

There was disagreement among TDP politicians about putting emphasis on PWG. Some feared that doing so would result in a guerrilla backlash during electoral campaigning, resulting in even more assassinations. Some TDP politicians wanted greater focus instead on the opposition Congress party’s alleged obstruction of the TDP’s economic and social development agenda. Others argued that ‘Naxalism’ was no longer a socio-economic problem since the TDP ‘had succeeded in the tackling of social and economic disparities to a certain extent’ (Nagesh Kumar 2003a). Senior TDP leaders became increasingly apprehensive that a major focus on Naxalites was not going to bring votes to the party, and from the beginning of December, therefore, Naidu began to lay less emphasis on that theme. He brought forward a new focus, but, before I introduce that, we need to examine a companion issue to the focus on the Naxalite menace.

A major element of the TDP campaign was its concentration on the person of the party leader. From its establishment in 1982, the TDP had always given a central place to the supreme decision-maker. The style of domination seen in the first party leader, N. T. Rama Rao (NTR), differed greatly from that of Chandrababu, his son-in-law and successor. The image of Chief Minister Naidu as his state’s CEO was a radical departure from the populist glamour of movie star NTR. From NTR to Naidu, though, the party continued to centre its rhetoric on the ‘achievements’ of the party leader, who personified and represented the moral and political strength of the organisation.

The TDP campaign rhetoric implied that development in the state was taking place due principally to the leadership of Naidu and that its continued achievement was dependent on his staying in office: Naidu, thus, embodied development. The rhetoric about the effects of Naxalite activity on development focussed on people being killed and, of course, the most extravagant example in this respect was the attack at Alipiri. Naidu emphasised over and over again that his

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life was development, not only for the state, but for India. An example of Naidu’s promotion of his role appears in an interview in February 2004. Here, as elsewhere, the chief minister explained that he was only part of the way through his programme for the state. Fulfilling the aims of development required his being in office for a total of at least 20 years:

[Question:] Are these polls the most crucial elections for AP?

[Answer:] Yes, they are very, very crucial. I am a politician and I might be set back by five years. But what will be the consequences for the state? They (the opposition) will pull the state back at least 20 years. I’ve brought money to the state — from the World Bank, from Delhi. Today, people talk of progress. But if they come to power, things will return to ground zero. I need a minimum of 10 more years to implement my full agenda. (Mukherji and Sreedhar Rao 2003)

The notion that creating progress in Andhra Pradesh was a collective effort of the TDP leadership was underplayed in Naidu’s public utterances. It was difficult to tell when his ‘we-s’ referred to himself or the party. Another excerpt from the interview illustrates this:

[Question:] How long will you need to overtake Bangalore?

[Answer:] Now things are very favourable. Bangalore has a headstart of 20 years. But now, I am going for a huge expansion of the [Hyderabad] city development project. I am considering a metro railway network. I am talking of setting up sophisticated satellite townships…. So, I am setting myself a deadline of another five years. We’ll overtake them. (Ibid.)

Shortly after the Alipiri attack, the person of the chief minister received more than usual attention in newspapers and from TDP operatives. In October, as speculation grew concerning a call for early elections, TDP leaders hoped that the attack on the chief minister, and sympathy for his suffering, would counteract the disadvantages of incumbency. Women voters would be especially vulnerable to such a focus. The party presented the wounded chief minister as an object of adoration and awe, and his supporters gathered by the thousands around his home in a fashionable part of Hyderabad. They were augmented by TDP party workers and ordinary members who had been bussed in from all parts of the state. Naidu made
periodic appearances outside the villa, greeting well-wishers with his left arm in a sling.

Security officials tried to strike a balance between giving people access to Naidu and protecting him:

The crowds waiting for the darshan [usually, viewing the deity] are not too discomfited by the security checks. ‘Even after such a close shave, he (Naidu) is discharging his duties as a chief minister and is also allowing well wishers to meet him…. We don’t mind waiting for our turn’, said a Telugu Desam Party member with reverence in his voice.

The rules of the darshan are the same for everyone — even if your [sic] are from Naidu’s native village Naravaripally.14

At the end of October, the Deccan Chronicle, which followed an editorial policy that was critical of the TDP, reported that ‘there is no denying that Naidu is enjoying public support. He is riding on a huge sympathy wave at the moment due to the attempt on his life…’ (quoted in Ahmad 2003).

The chief minister began making statements in public about his escape from death as a ‘rebirth’ and his ministers echoed the refrain: Naidu had been reborn ‘to complete the unfulfilled tasks’.15 The incumbent promised that in his rebirth he would ‘rededicate his life for the uplift of the poor’.16 In the context of laying a foundation stone for a textile park, Naidu talked at some length about the attack, saying that he had been saved by Lord Venkateswara (whose temple he had intended to visit) and speaking of his physical pain.17

‘A person can shed off his burdens by sharing them with others. You are my well wishers and I would like to share my pains with you. My collar bone was fractured in the attack. I work throughout the day and feel the pain in the nights. I am not even getting sleep,’ he said. ‘I do not hesitate to give my life for your service. I would serve you till my last drop of blood,’ Naidu said.18

14 ‘All Roads Lead to CM’s House’, The Times of India, 7 October 2003.
16 ‘Naidu Tries to Make Most of Blast’, The Times of India, 4 November 2003.
18 ‘Naidu Tries to Make the Most of Blast’, The Times of India, 4 November 2003.
The newspaper went on to observe:

However, Naidu’s emotive speech did not get the desired response from the [villagers]…as they were expecting a ‘special assurance’ from him [of compensation for their lands, which were acquired by the government for the construction of Shamshabad international airport]. (Ibid.)

Even with such signs of the limits of sympathy, Naidu continued ‘harping’ on the rebirth theme (Kesava Rao 2003), making it a central focus, for two more weeks. He said in a newspaper interview:

I survived only because of the blessings of Lord Venkateswara and the people of the state…. I think I survived because of my good deeds…. Since I survived the attack because of the blessings…I have made up my mind that I should do something good for the people for the rest of my life.19

TDP’s attempts to highlight Naidu as someone specially blessed by the popular Lord Venkateswara were illustrated in a large hoarding in Vizianagaram District in the north-eastern part of the state. It featured Chandrababu emerging from a blown-up car, with Lord Venkateswara and NTR, the TDP founder, blessing him. On the hoarding was the paraphrasing of a popular religious song: ‘Just as the Lord rules the seven hills [the location of the temple], Naidu rules the people’s hearts’ (Ramachandra Rao 2003). On the same day, however, The Times of India reported that there was little sign of a sympathy factor generally in the northeast (ibid.).

Shortly thereafter, a political analyst observed that to decide on ‘sympathy’ as the emotion experienced by the public after the Alipiri blast was a miscalculation on the part of the TDP:

Mr. Naidu’s survival in the claymore mine attack has transformed him into an object of awe and admiration rather than sympathy. In the eyes of Telugu Desam Party spin-doctors, Mr Naidu is to be projected as a combination of Superman and James Bond rolled into one, an individual with an inexhaustible will to power and life…. They speak of a transformation in him after the attack, but one that is channelled toward greater resolve in accomplishing his agenda, coupled with less

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tolerance for inefficiency and corruption. Sympathy, then, is an emotion more appropriate for martyrs, not for a hero who is *mrityunjaya* or conqueror of death. (Sharma 2003)

Later in November, the chief minister gave a speech which signalled the sidelining of his brush with death. Chandrababu continued to make references to the assassination attempt by saying that he was willing to lay down his life in the service of the people of Andhra Pradesh, but the theme receded as the prime focus of his appeals. In the meantime he continued promoting another theme.

Writing about an event to kick off the TDP campaign in coastal Guntur, two journalists reported that Naidu had made it evident that farmers were his main target (Nagesh Kumar and Saye Sekhar 2003). As if confirming his resolve, Naidu posed for the camera with a plough lifted over one shoulder, wearing an elaborate blue and gold turban (usually symbolic of a ruler) (Akbar 2003). Three days later he presided over a video conference, standing at the podium in front of a nearly life-size poster of himself, dressed in his usual shirt and pants, driving a pair of bullocks through a field, stick in hand.\(^\text{20}\) The party leader appears to have decided that, more important than projecting himself as a figure of sympathy, was convincing farmers that their interests had been and still were at the top of his list of concerns as chief minister.

While Chandrababu Naidu was convalescing from his wounds from the PWG attack, in early October, President of India A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, paid him a visit. Kalam said afterwards that the chief minister had talked for ten minutes about the failed rains and low water levels in the state.\(^\text{21}\) Later in the month, as mentioned above, there were some good rains, but these did not seriously mitigate the agrarian crisis. All through October and for the rest of the campaign, Naidu attempted to deal with the opposition charge that he had been too fixated on advanced technology and on appealing to foreign investors to bother to listen to farmers’ concerns about the effects of drought.

The chief minister announced that the state would give subsidies on seeds and fertilizers, and followed this up by adding that irrigation


construction activities were to be accelerated.\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps reacting to the criticism of a farmers’ association that he laid foundation stones for irrigation schemes which eventually came to nothing,\textsuperscript{23} in a speech on Andhra Pradesh Formation Day, Naidu added to the list of works to be done — the execution of irrigation projects.\textsuperscript{24} At a news conference shortly thereafter the chief minister said that he would take questions only on irrigation.\textsuperscript{25} In the months that followed, Naidu repeatedly spoke about his regime’s support to the agricultural sector and his plans for the future. He talked about crop loans and interest concessions, insurance compensation, rice for the Food for Work programme, and the regime’s self-help schemes for rural women under the micro-credit component of the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) programme of the Union Ministry of Rural Development. Naidu struggled against an image of himself as having produced a ‘hyper-concentration on Information Technology [that] did not touch [ordinary peoples’] lives’,\textsuperscript{26} and claimed that top priority had been given during his tenure to ‘irrigation, education and alleviation of poverty’. In his speeches, Naidu periodically itemised those of his regime’s programmes which were directed toward the agricultural sector, including DWCRA, Rythu Mitra groups and Velugu.\textsuperscript{27} Talking to farmers in semi-arid Rayalaseema, the chief minister tried to meet the Congress challenge:

Naidu took strong exception to the Congress allegation that the ruling party had done precious little on the irrigation front. He juxtaposed the failure of the Congress government to utilise the World Bank funds for implementation of the SRBD [irrigation] project [in Rayalaseema]

\textsuperscript{22} ‘TDP Plans Campaign Against PW’, \textit{The Hindu}, 21 October 2003.
\textsuperscript{23} ‘TDP Sops are Poll Stunt, says Ryoto Sangham’, \textit{Deccan Chronicle}, 1 November 2003.
\textsuperscript{24} ‘Govt. will Focus on Development of Backward Areas’, \textit{New Sunday Express}, 2 November 2003.
\textsuperscript{26} ‘Andhra Pradesh in Election Mode’, \textit{The Hindu}, 7 November 2003.
\textsuperscript{27} Rythu Mitra groups, whose members included small and marginal farmers as well as tenant farmers, were intended to function as an interface between agricultural extension systems and farmers for the transfer of technology. The Velugu programme is part of the Andhra Pradesh government’s \textit{Vision 2020}, being implemented in two phases: the Andhra Pradesh District Poverty Initiatives Projects and the Andhra Pradesh Rural Poverty Reduction Project.
with the Telugu Desam Party which was determined to complete the irrigation scheme after successfully securing World Bank aid for the purpose. Admitting delay in completion of the project, he said it was mainly due to monsoon failure in the past two years.\(^\text{28}\)

The chief minister formed plans for irrigation development, discussing them at times in the context of his overall vision. He argued that he was guided by a total conception of progress, of initiating reforms in ‘all major sectors to ensure a better delivery mechanism’\(^\text{29}\) and said that his intention was ‘all-round development of the State’.\(^\text{30}\) The TDP had not neglected any particular sector, it seemed. On the contrary, at the time of the formal call for early elections, the state cabinet wrote about ‘sustained efforts by the Telugu Desam Government…for all-round development through Vision 2020, resulting in “tangible gains” on all fronts’.\(^\text{31}\)

The Congress party presented the TDP with a particularly knotty challenge: a promise of free electricity to agriculturalists. Naidu argued in response that the promise was ‘impractical’,\(^\text{32}\) and it showed a lack of interest in developing the state. He eventually announced that he was not adverse to free power to the farm sector, but that such a policy would stop foreign investment.\(^\text{33}\) Electricity rates in Andhra Pradesh, he argued, were already the lowest in India. Power was being supplied to the agricultural sector at 31 paise per unit, though generation and transmission costs went up to Rs 2.80 per unit.\(^\text{34}\) Electricity supply was a tender issue, however, since ‘low-voltage power’ had recently helped bring down the reform-friendly government in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh. Naidu sought to secure at least seven


\(^{29}\) ‘TDP Ends Early Poll Suspense’, New Indian Express, 14 November 2003.


\(^{31}\) ‘TDP Ends Early Poll Suspense’, New Indian Express, 14 November 2003.

\(^{32}\) ‘Naidu Hints at Early Polls, Calls Party Meet’, The Hindu, 10 November 2003.

\(^{33}\) ‘CM Changes Tune, Says is not Averse to Free Power’, Deccan Chronicle, 1 December 2003.

\(^{34}\) ‘Yellow Surge in Seema; Babu Attacks Sonia, TRS, Naxals’, New Indian Express, 12 December 2003.
hours supply per day to farmers, but was told by the generating and conveying institutions, Andhra Pradesh Transcom and the discoms, that this was not possible (Ramakrishna 2003). In mid-December the energy minister announced in a display of goodwill that for the next four months the focus of the government in energy supply would be on agriculture (ibid.).

Special appeals to agriculturalists continued while, as mentioned above, the Naxalite threat to development received less rhetorical space.³⁵ Naidu started instead a new focus in the campaign, criticism of the person and foreign origin of the head of the Congress party, Rajiv Gandhi’s Italy-born widow, Sonia Gandhi. He began by framing this appeal in terms of competency in governance. At a press conference he is reported to have charged that Sonia ‘does not have any political perspective or political depth. She does not know the socio-economic issues. There’s no maturity in her. She cannot understand Indian politics’.³⁶ Later he became ‘shrill’ on the topic of her foreign origin (Nagesh Kumar 2003b): ‘It’s a shame. It appears there is no Indian leader in the party capable to lead them…. She cannot even speak. Someone has to draft her speeches for her’.³⁷ Naidu dismissed Sonia: ‘She is no leader. She is a reader — yes, a reader of speeches. She doesn’t even understand what she’s reading. At a recent election meeting, she ended up reading the wrong speech’ (Veerabhadra Rao and Ram 2003).

News commentator Syed Amin Jafri tied Chandrababu’s increasing emphasis on Sonia Gandhi’s inexperience and foreign origin to the outcome of assembly elections held in three states in December 2003. Anti-incumbency votes were widely thought to have contributed to the Congress’ loss of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh to the BJP. Thus, Jafri (2003) wrote: ‘The anti-incumbency sentiment catches up with every ruling party — whether it has been in power for a term or two. The longer the tenure, far greater is the possibility of a pronounced anti-incumbency wave’. He speculated that Naidu hoped that simultaneous polls to the parliament and state assembly

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would soften the effect of incumbency: ‘He wants to romp home riding on the shoulders of Atal Behari Vajpayee. This is the reason why he is lambasting Sonia Gandhi…’ (ibid.).

Chandrababu began to put special emphasis on the theme of shame, speaking about the national disgrace which would result from having a ‘foreigner’ as the leader of the land should the Congress win the parliamentary election. Sometimes he put this critique of the Congress party and its leader in the context of a familiar theme in TDP politics, that of Telugu self-respect.

NTR had founded the TDP in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s dismissal of chief ministers in the state over a five-year period. Mrs Gandhi had treated the state with disrespect, he charged. The theme of Telugu self-respect became famously associated with NTR, but appears to have been less of a ploy in the everyday politics for his son-in-law. When Chandrababu did lift the theme to prominence in the run-up to the assembly election, the party augmented the meaning of ‘self-respect’ with reference to Naidu’s ruling agenda and the predicaments that he and his party faced.

Telugu self-respect was the focus during the celebration of Andhra Pradesh Formation Day at the end of October 2003. Self-respect was interpreted here in terms of the chief minister’s economic goals: the state deserved respect because it was ‘an achiever’ and the state, under the TDP, had received ‘international recognition’ (Ravichander 2003). The compulsions of electoral politics appeared in an essay written for the occasion in which sentences about international recognition for Andhra Pradesh were intermixed with references to TDP programmes for the alleviation of poverty (ibid.).

Self-respect entered the party’s campaign discourse as a major theme in January 2004. It was placed here in the context not only of the loss of self-respect which would follow India’s acquiring a foreign-born prime minister, but also with the alleged humiliation which state Congressmen had suffered in having a Kashmiri, Ghulam Nabi Azad, as the representative of the party high command in the state.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\) Claims of having suffered humiliation or of being treated like a slave are among the stock concepts in the political language of honour and respect. On this topic with reference to state-level politics in neighbouring Karnataka, see Price (2005, 2008).
Complaints about Telugu Congressmen being Azad’s ‘slaves’ implied a similar fate for all Telugus if the Congress was to come back to power both in the state and at the centre.\footnote{‘Fight Against Cong Led by “ Outsiders”, Babu’s Clarion Call to Partymen’, \textit{New Indian Express}, 22 January 2004.} 

Towards the end of February, at a massive rally in Hyderabad with which he formally commenced the campaign, the party leader included an attack on Sonia Gandhi among his main appeals. ‘He said the TDP, which was born to uphold the self-respect of Telugus, would also strive for the self-respect of Indians’.\footnote{‘Yellow Tidal Wave Sweeps City’, \textit{New Indian Express}, 23 February 2004.} Following the rally, however, Naidu appears to have pulled back on the self-respect theme, concentrating mainly on Sonia’s comments on his regime during her campaign visit to the state. He accused her of being hypocritical on the subjects, \textit{inter alia}, of free electricity and the suffering of Andhra farmers.

On 10 March 2004, Chandrababu released his party’s election manifesto, titled ‘Toward Swarna Andhra Pradesh — Leadership and Excellence in the 21st Century’ (Nagesh Kumar 2004). The manifesto indicated a new direction in the party’s vision, as the TDP promised to spend Rs 600 trillion on rural development. In keeping with Naidu’s new, pro-poor persona, the manifesto declared that the eradication of poverty would be a high priority for the next five years and in 10 years poverty would be completely eradicated in the state. The document mentioned only in passing the obstacle that Naxalites posed to development.

The major new emphasis in the months remaining before the assembly election was on women’s needs. In the course of the campaign, commentators had often written that Chandrababu was counting heavily on support from women because of his regime’s expansion of women’s self-help groups through the DWCRA microcredit programme. In November \textit{The Times of India} wrote that the DWCRA network had over 400,000 members and that the network’s savings were worth more than Rs 10 billion.\footnote{‘TDP Seeks New Mandate from Villagers, Mothers’, \textit{The Times of India}, 13 November 2003.} That month the party declared that its main campaign slogan would be, ‘Ask any village, ask any mother, they will tell you what the TDP had done to develop
that particular area’.\(^{42}\) Indications began to appear, however, that women could not so easily be counted on to vote for the TDP, and Naidu’s considerable intelligence networks may have picked up on these (Maitreyi 2004). At the end of February the TDP decided that they would celebrate International Women’s Day, 8 March, in all the assembly constituencies. Announcing the celebrations, Naidu listed some of the TDP’s achievements in supporting women and added:

> The TDP undoubtedly strove hard for women as no other party had. If they were an enlightened lot today, it was because of the party’s struggle in the past nine years. The results were not achieved overnight, he remarked.\(^{43}\)

Three weeks before the election Naidu promised, ‘We will fight for justice …[for] women’,\(^{44}\) and when talking about the TDP scheme to secure that every poor household had a gas stove and cylinder, ‘We are doing everything for women’ (Krishnamoorthy 2004). Chandrababu pledged, ‘I will be with you till you are all free from financial crisis’.\(^{45}\)

Throughout the campaign the Congress charged that the failure to complete irrigation projects proved the hollowness of the TDP’s claims that it was preoccupied with the needs of rural communities. In the last weeks of the campaign, as Naidu summed up his case for re-election, he reiterated his promises of project completion. His summaries also included criticism of the alliance between Congress and the TRS (Telangana separatists) — an ‘unholy nexus’. He argued that the Marxist parties were obsolete and that the TRS and Congress were soft on Naxalites. Rounding off his electioneering for the first phase of voting on 18 April, Naidu said that the choice for the people was between ‘development or anarchy, separatism or an integrated Andhra Pradesh, peace or violence and political stability or instability’ (Mallikarjun 2004).

\(^{42}\) ‘TDP Seeks New Mandate from Villagers, Mothers’, *The Times of India*, 13 November 2003.


Rhetorical Meanings

The events in Andhra Pradesh contradict, in some respects, a conclusion of economic writer Narender Pani. Pani sees a general shift, since the early 1990s, in the way governing regimes in Indian states have presented their approach to reforms related to economic liberalisation. He writes:

After a decade of reforms...the reforms created constituencies that had no reason to be abashed in their support of reforms. Politicians who needed to reach out to this group for financial and other support had reason to present themselves as icons of economic reforms. (Pani 2006: 239)

By the fall of 2003 Chandrababu Naidu appears to have decided that the constituencies created electoral by electoral reforms in his state would not be sufficient to bring about the re-election of his party. The chief minister thus began to shed his iconic status as a neoliberal economic reformer, seeking recourse to more inclusive processes of development than he had earlier promoted.

As Naidu and his partymen sought electoral influence they encompassed religious and ethnic symbolism in their arguments about development and leadership. However, assertions of the chief minister’s being reborn as pro-poor through a near-death experience were in competition with, for example, farmers’ needs for more rapid compensation by the state for the acquisition of their land for projects of economic modernisation. Naidu’s verbal attacks on Sonia Gandhi failed to generate a mass mobilisation of sentiments of cultural nationalism. Perhaps significant numbers of voters did not perceive any injustice from her hand; appeals to self-respect work best when voters believe that they have, in some fashion, suffered humiliation.

K. Srinivasulu provided an analysis of the campaign rhetoric surrounding the 2004 assembly election. In examining differences between the TDP and the Congress, Srinivasulu wrote that his interest was in what he called policy discourse. He argued that the Congress discourse left openings for poor and marginalised groups to get a foothold in policy-making processes. The TDP’s strategy he found to be, in comparison, ‘closed’, exclusive and unresponsive (Srinivasulu 2004: 3852). The TDP, he wrote, ‘sought to define the electoral discourse in terms of sharp polarities’ (ibid.). These polarities, he argued,
were: development versus anarchy, separatism versus integration, and stability versus instability.

Srinivasulu’s structural approach to campaign performances gives a mechanistic hue to TDP’s electoral appeals. The series of polarities which Srinivasulu has listed do not encapsulate the dynamic processes of selection in the sorting out of campaign content. TDP’s electoral discourse emerged through processes of trial and error, with themes being introduced with much enthusiasm, which was later dampened, amidst other themes being discussed in the course of the campaign. The formulation that Naidu offered at the end of the campaign — cited by Srinivasulu — was an abstract summation of appeals that he and his partymen had made, and that did not reveal any of the uncertainty involved in their selection.

The TDP campaign contained more inclusive elements than Srinivasulu’s reading suggests. The party leadership responded to opposition charges of callous neglect of agrarian society with pledges of concern and promises of increased funding and improved project implementation. Chief Minister Naidu turned his back on a global, market-oriented vision of agricultural development in order to serve another priority — retaining his office and his party’s continued control of the state government.

Looking at his appeals out of context results in a narrowing down of their meaning, such that one can miss, for example, the way in which references to Naxalites, anarchy and violence resonated with notions of the person of Naidu as being synonymous with development — which presumably almost came to end with the assassination attempt. Political rhetoric in Andhra Pradesh, as in many other parts of India, is often very much about leaders being an embodiment of sociopolitical values and goals. Even with a focus on ‘development’, cultural spaces remained in the TDP for the identification of goals with the person of a leader. Naidu and other TDP leaders reworked and elaborated party conventions and popular notions of moral authority as they responded to the contingencies of drought and Congress’ criticism and campaigns of voter mobilisation.

**Audiences for Campaign Rhetoric**

It is commonly asserted that ordinary voters in India — including poor people with low capacities in literacy — tend to vote in assembly elections on the basis of what they believe an MLA has done for them
and/or their locality. If that is the case, one can well ask, what purposes do state-wide assembly electoral campaigns serve? Part of the answer may lie in Suri’s analysis of data from the National Election Study 2004. He suggests that voters may articulate their dissatisfaction with an incumbent MLA with reference to his party’s policies, even if other factors are at play (Suri 2004a: 5410).

There are, however, swing voters who open to persuasion beyond either local interests or long-term party loyalties. Swing voters are of particular importance in close contests, where tiny margins determine the distribution of seats in India’s ‘first past the post system’. Party leaders need to influence those voters who are interested in general issues of policy and/or can be touched by the persona of the leaders.

In connection with swing voters, in particular, we need to consider another important audience for campaign performances — party workers. These are often spoken of as party cadres, though the latter can occupy a higher status in the party. Electoral politics in India — even with increased access in rural localities to television — has required that the policies and alleged achievements of a government be conveyed to constituencies by party workers/cadres. Preferably these are persons who can engage adequately, face to face, in discussing campaign issues. They are similar to the ‘bridge’ leaders discussed by Hugo Gorringe in this volume. Party workers are vital in attempting to convince voters of the superior qualities of their leader(s) and their party’s overall aims and broader accomplishments, beyond local disillusionment with the party’s incumbent.

An example of the importance of inspiring party workers to action during a campaign comes from Harold Gould’s account of the poor showing of the Hindu nationalist BJP in Karnataka in the assembly elections of 1999. Gould argues that BJP party workers were so demoralised by the alliance the party’s leaders had made with a large breakaway faction of the Janata Dal, that a significant number

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46 Since 1996 the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi has conducted large-scale empirical studies with large sample sizes following parliamentary and state elections in India. Information on these can be found at http://www.csd.in/dataarchive/html (accessed 12 March 2010).

47 I discuss this topic further in Price (forthcoming).
lost interest in campaigning in localities during that election (Gould 2003: 116). There are indications that some part of the TDP rhetoric and campaign events were directed with the aim of, as Naidu phrased the issue, ‘rousing’ the cadres (Mukherji and Sreedhar Rao 2004).

In November 2003, when the TDP’s faith in the sympathy factor was still strong, a party worker — the head of a district cultural wing of the TDP — recorded an audio cassette called ‘Rebirth’. He was an artist and had composed seven songs and set them to music. On the cover of the cassette was Lord Venkateswara, flanked by Jesus and an (Islamic) crescent moon, all three blessing a smiling Naidu. The songs were based on the rebirth theme, referring to Naidu’s ‘miraculous’ escape. The cassettes cost between Rs 30,000 and 40,000 to make and the party worker was selling them at the TDP general body meeting for Rs 25 a piece. He told prospective customers, ‘The songs will give you a better idea of what you should tell people in the election campaign’ (Srimali 2003). The party worker articulated implicitly an important responsibility of the TDP leadership in this campaign, as in others: to educate and inspire party workers, ‘the cadres’, to act persuasively for the cause of victory.

Chandrababu spoke on this point in an interview:

[Question:] How different is CEO Chandrababu Naidu from poll-fighter Chandrababu Naidu?

[Answer:] I have to be in both worlds. Every five years we have to return to the people. But the rest of the time, I don’t talk politics. My whole focus is on development. But during the polls, I change, my language is different. I have to rouse my cadres. I also have to make the people aware of what the opposition is up to. (Mukherji and Sreedhar Rao 2004, emphasis added)

Along these lines, the TDP planned local campaigns involving party workers to increase their effectiveness in explaining the aims and achievements of the regime.48

We can acquire a better understanding of the dynamics of meaning in this assembly campaign with a consideration of the potential importance of swing voters and enthusiastic party workers for electoral

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48 For example, ‘TDP to Hold Vijayabheri in City’, The Hindu, 23 November 2003.
outcomes. ‘Rousing’ party workers involved more than reciting reams of statistics on the cost, reach and aims of development schemes and programmes. Especially for the TDP, the image and status of the party leader was significant. Naidu could expect that party workers would be aware of opposing leaders’ verbal attacks on him. His prominence and the responsibility he claimed for development in the state made him a magnet for criticism. The language of complaint was often harsh, mocking and satirical, with great potential for humiliation.49 Some charges, such as those of corruption, Naidu sloughed off. To others, in order to secure and maintain the loyalty of party workers, he responded with an expansive, heroic language and images.

A particularly damning opposition charge was that of Naidu’s (moral) failure in not dealing aggressively with the causes and effects of the long-term scarcity of water. Naidu responded severally to accusations that he was insensitive to the suffering of farmers and other vulnerable groups. He needed to meet this challenge to fulfil an important requirement of honour for a leading politician, i.e., to project an image of generosity. Party workers, especially those with connections to rural society, would be aware of suppositions among ordinary voters that a good leader, one worthy of honour and respect, was one who gave to those in need (Price 1989, 2006). Naidu reiterated that the TDP had carried out programmes for rural development. He employed as well a tactic which countered more directly the accusation of moral failure. Naidu steadily reminded his audiences that he had narrowly escaped death at the hands of enemies of the state. He had almost died in public service and was willing to give up his life again, in service of ‘the poor’. Such heroic assertions might reasonably have had an inspiring effect on party workers, facing both TDP incumbency and drought in the cause of the party and its supreme leader.

Afterthoughts

During most of his tenure as chief minister, Chandrababu Naidu sought and received wide recognition as an executor of liberalising

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49 Elements of the tone appeared in the English language press, but were stronger in the political writing in Telugu newspapers. Thanks to K. C. Suri for sharing this observation.
economic reforms. His status as an icon of neoliberal economic reform had an impact on political debates in Andhra Pradesh in 2003–04. The intensification of hardship in rural society gave his electoral rivals superb opportunities to paint him with the brush of indifference. Naidu’s attempts to counter their attacks and protest his concern resulted in his participation in rhetorical performances which gave powerful presence to agrarian society in public discourses leading up to the assembly campaign of 2004. We would seem to find an impact of this political dynamic in the post-election attempts of the Congress regime to complete unfinished projects of the TDP, as well as to undertake new ones.

Once in power, the state Congress commenced a major focus on irrigation development, as well as other programmes directed towards rural society. At the same time it followed paths laid out by its TDP rival *inter alia* in courting foreign investment, setting up Special Economic Zones, and maintaining ties with the World Bank. Through speeches, announcements of programme successes and visits to programme sites, the leadership of the ruling Congress sought to convince agriculturalists, including poor farmers and landless labourers, that tending to their needs and interests remained, post-election, a high priority for the regime. Thus, perhaps, could the Congress counter the curse of incumbency. Early post-poll analysis suggests that this strategy worked, even if the party had kept control of the state government with only 36.53 per cent of votes cast.

Post-election, in 2004, the TDP followed patterns in rhetorical practices that were common among opposition parties in India. The party leadership argued that Congress programmes of agrarian relief were rife with corruption and that Congressmen and party supporters — including, in particular, Chief Minister YSR and his kinsmen — constituted major beneficiaries of the focus on irrigation development. Chandrababu Naidu elaborated further on his campaign...
image from 2003–04, posing as the primary protector of rural society. Amartya Sen and M. S. Swaminathan became the intellectual idols of the TDP leadership in search of an ‘alternative economic policy’, and Naidu periodically offered to lay down his life for the welfare of farmers. He expressed concern for wider distribution of the fruits of India’s recent successes in economic growth. For example, on the topic of the union budget proposed by the Congress-led national government in 2008, Naidu commented, ‘There is no attempt to ensure that the wealth generated from economic reforms reaches the common man and the poor’. It, thus, became plausible for the CPI and CPI(M) to join forces with the TDP in the formation of the Grand Alliance leading up to the assembly and parliamentary elections in the spring of 2009. Early analysis of the failure of the Grand Alliance, by both The Hindu and the TDP leadership (Mallikarjun 2009), was that they had failed to provide a creditable alternative to the Congress. A new political party, the Praja Rajyam Party, started by a widely admired filmstar, cut into the TDP’s support, taking 18 seats with 16.12 per cent of the vote share.

In 2003–04, the leadership of the TDP made a strong focus on the future in the agricultural sector a campaign plank, to be subsumed within the wider plank of development. The compulsions of drought in an election year forced a dulling of the neoliberal edge in Naidu’s policies for development. The TDP needed to counter the opposition’s charges of heartlessness and to communicate with and inspire, especially, party workers and cadres and, through them, swing voters.

55 The separatist TRS was also an (unreliable) partner in the alliance.
57 The TDP won 91 of the 221 seats it contested, up from 47 in the previous election. However, its vote share was only 28.03 per cent, down 9.47 per cent from 2004. Its partners in the pre-election grand alliance fared much worse, winning 15 seats of 73 contested, down 86 per cent of their vote share from 2004.
These goals gave force to the articulation of moral postures which were embedded in recognisable themes and symbols of the political culture of Andhra Pradesh and were associated with the person of the chief minister.

One of the results of the election dynamics appears to have been, as suggested above, a powerful concentration of effort on the part of the winning regime to improve and expand the irrigation infrastructure, among other programmes of agricultural relief. The Congress leadership articulated periodically their fear of negative results at the next assembly election, if their regime did not bring about recognisable progress.\(^{59}\) So, the 2004 assembly polls did not quite result in the ‘politics as usual’ mourned by many observers in India. The increasing pressure of environmental challenges in the subcontinent may also, in other parts of India, result in the introduction of some new rules in political games.

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