

Manufacturing Polarisation in Contemporary India: The Case of Identity Politics in Post-Left Bengal

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Research & Appraisal, Kolkata

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Manufacturing Polarisation in Contemporary India: The Case of Identity Politics in Post-Left Bengal

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This article explores ethnographically the manufacturing of religious polarisation and violence in West Bengal, India. Since 2014, India has experienced a rise in religion-based identity conflict. Although West Bengal experienced riots during the partition of India, it remained unaffected during the subsequent three decades of Left rule. More recently, however, secular democratic forces have been marginalised and riot-like conflicts have emerged. We argue that identity consolidation in West Bengal is part of an increasing trend of religious polarisation in the country. To bridge the gap between scholarly discussions on the concepts of secularism and communalisation, the paper presents micro-narratives illuminating the background of religious polarisation and violence. We provide ethnographic details of the mechanisms by which religious identities are consolidated. With a case-based approach, this article unearths the mechanisms of identity-based polarisation, and its politicisation in a region which has not experienced this level of violence for several decades.

Keywords: religious polarisation, identity politics, riots, secularism, West Bengal

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1. Introduction – Constructivism and West Bengal

Across the world, religious violence has been on the rise for decades (Juergensmeyer 2000, 2010). This includes India, where religious conflict is not uncommon, and Hindu-Muslim conflict has the capacity to split the country in two (Chhibber and Petrocik, 1989; Varshney 1998; Guha 2016). Since the formation of the pro-Hindu BJP-led government in 2014, there has been an unprecedented proliferation of Hindutva, which has included riots and lynching (“Lynch Mob Rashtra”, Frontline, 1 July 2017). The results are significant, as Guha (2016, 39) explains: “Perhaps for the first time in our history as an independent nation, serious, well respected writers are murdered, physically eliminated for their views.”

These events are particularly alarming as practices of secularism have been diluted (Nandy 1998; Bhargava 2010). Al-

though there have been attempts to separate state affairs from religion in India, in practice, secularism is largely alien to the country (Madan 1987, 2006, 2009; Nandy 1998). Thapar (2010) finds Indian secularism to be too Brahmanical to bring communal harmony. As a consequence, India oscillates between the Indian National Congress’s accommodative secularism and a form of Hindu nationalism, most conspicuously promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Copley 1993; Ganguly 2003; Gupta 1996). Distorted histories, invented traditions, a particular form of “pseudo-nationalism”, and of late, “post-truth” hoaxes are used to stoke communal tensions (Thapar 2014; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Thapar, Noorani and Menon 2016). Benei (2008) describes some of the mechanisms which increase tension between identity groups. These include the use of symbols such

Mapping Polarisation: Four Ethnographic Cases from West Bengal

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Abstract: Religious polarisation is on the rise in India especially after the BharatiyaJanata Party led National Democratic Alliance assumed power of the center in 2014. West Bengal with instances of numerous riots during the partition of the country has a history of peasant uprising followed by party-mediate public transactions for more than three decades. With party becoming the major mediating mechanism the state presents a picture of being relatively immune to riots and primordial identity issues. However, of late, there has been a significant rise in the number of riots and identity polarisation. We have studied four major cases of religious polarisation and riots since 2015 to reflect on how identity issues are propagated through a mix of invented traditions, hoax and use of dubious means like employing goons and in what ways riots pay electoral dividends to the political parties.

Key words : Politics, Identity, Riot, Conflict, Communalism

INTRODUCTION

West Bengal, one of the 29 States of India, has seen identity-based polarisation in 1930s and religious riots during the partition of the country in 1947 (Bose 1986; Das 1991). Different scholars have studied them as clashes between traditionalists and fundamentalists within Islam, as a social class conflict, and as an outcome of economic inequalities increasingly taking an organised form (Das 1991). However, radical leftist movements known as Naxalite movements in 1970s pushed religious identity issues at the backseat (Pal 2017). With repeated failures of state governments and presidential interventions, finally in 1977 Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM)- led Left Front (LF) assumed power to rule the State for more than three decades. In the year 2011, Trinamool Congress (TMC) in alliance with Indian National Congress (INC) dislodged them. TMC then came out of the alliance and continued to rule the state till now. During their tenure, it was LF who promoted party based political mediation in public affairs. It suppressed other competing channels of public transactions including those linked with primordial identity issues. Such mediation is termed as 'Party Society' (a modified version of Chatterjee 2004 by Bhattacharyya 2009, 2016) and systemic misrecognition where people were made to recognise party as an alternative and accessible form of government for all practical purposes (Nath 2018). Das (2005) tries to show post Babri Mosque demolition-led Calcutta riots in 1992 as symptoms of the subsurface continuation of Hindu-Muslim fissure. In a much recent ethnographic work, Roy (2014) reports continuation of such a trend in everyday life of the people in West Bengal. Chatterjee (2017) reports



360 / *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 53, 2 (2019): 341–362

of important themes that have to be explored if one is to make sense of what is going on in India today.

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HARIPRIYA NARASIMHAN

Sarbeswar Sahoo. 2018. *Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press. xviii + 205 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. £ 75.00 (hardback).

DOI: 10.1177/0069966719833465

Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India is an important contribution to the study of the multifaceted dimensions of religious conversion with a special emphasis on Pentecostalism in India. The author, trained in political sociology and ethnography, explores the interplay of religion, everyday life, state and politics in rural Rajasthan. The book aptly maps India—especially Rajasthan—to the global rise of Pentecostal Christianity.

The book is divided into six chapters and each of them opens up important dimensions of the spread of Pentecostalism from the same series of ethnography, often from the same sets of qualitative interviews. This very approach gives the work an interesting methodological position. A reader will find each of the chapters offering addition to the existing interpretations. Although it appears that the book is not strictly an outcome of participant observation, some of the anecdotes in the initial chapters show the nature and extent of the author's immersion in the field situation. He relied more on interview sessions to find out major dimensions of Pentecostalism and its everyday interplay with people's lives, politics and state policies.

spiritual belief and free will or material benefits drive people to go for conversion. The author reviews a rich literature on conversion addressing the issue from a variety of disciplines and shows through ethnographic narratives how people attach meanings including relief from health problems, family tension, black magic and the like as reasons for conversion. He shows that exclusion from the tribal society and common property resources are some of the extreme consequences which in some cases converts have faced.

Chapter 4 brings out the dimensions of gender in conversion. Focusing on existing literature on women Pentecostals, who are greater in number than men, this chapter gives ethnographic details of the issues of alcohol consumption and polygamous nature of men as two unique reasons cited by women to go for conversion. Furthermore, the author gives details of how converted women found conversion as giving them a sense of self-esteem.

Chapter 5 situates the author's ethnographic findings in the broad spectrum of politics of India and issues of conversion. It explores the claim of Hindutva forces that conversion to Christianity is a threat to integration of the nation. They firmly believe India to be a Hindu nation. While in contrast, the Church perceives conversion not as a threat to Hindus and shows how heavily marginalised and excluded people 'seek refuge in Christ'. Hence, missionaries project themselves as agents of progress.

In a rather brief conclusion the book contests the materialist approach of seeing conversion as an outcome of immediate material gains and argues for the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon of conversion as investigated through ethnography.

This book is perhaps one of the first attempts that focuses on Pentecostalism in India through ethnographic details. Hence, it is an extremely valuable contribution to a social–scientific understanding of the issues of religious conversion at large, and Pentecostalism in particular. The author has successfully presented multiple perceptions and dimensions of the issue of conversion and Pentecostalism with ethnographic details. This book is definitely going to bridge the gap in existing knowledge about (a) the rise of Pentecostalism in practice, (b) Christianity in India, (c) the Hindutva interface and (d) policy and politics interplay.

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Party-people and local governance in an Indian state: a longitudinal study on the roots of electoral violence

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Party-people and local governance in an Indian state: a longitudinal study on the roots of electoral violence

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ABSTRACT

West Bengal, in comparison to other states of India, witnesses large-scale political violence throughout the year which, however, sees an upswing particularly during the time of elections. Nonetheless, apart from a few sporadic mentions, such violence is yet to get scholarly attention. Based on my longitudinal ethnography (2008–2017) in four Gram Panchayats – the lowest to the three-tier local governance system, I show the ways in which political polarization and violence occupy a dominant position in everyday village life of the state. I show that while domains of dominance-subordination and hate speech shape much of the discursive spheres of the state, people, through a variety of formal and informal channels, tend to depend on political party and panchayat. Such politico-economic dependence, development of hooligan dominated political control, and continuation of violence through direct and subtler means are some of the major roots of violence.

Introduction

Election-related violence is distinguished from other forms of violence in terms of motive and timing,¹ and the extent to which these can influence elections.² Scholars have classified pre-, during and postelection categories of violence and then documented their aims, relative impact, and effectiveness on voting behavior.³ Poll violence, as random or organized threat on political stakeholders to influence election outcome,⁴ is a perennial feature of West Bengal.⁵ National Crime Records Bureau data show that West Bengal has the highest number of murders related to politics.⁶ While it is well documented that politics in West Bengal entails violence,⁷ it is relatively lesser known how the violence is cultivated and rooted in people's everydayness. It is seen that apart from sporadic mentions of poll violence and the impact of electoral malpractice, there is a lack of systematic study on election-related violence in West Bengal.⁸ Globally, apart from African studies reporting large-scale poll violence,⁹ other studies are quite limited in number and extent. There are reports of regular poll violence in India,

Farmers' Politics in West Bengal

Left Front and Post-Left Front Period

SUMAN NATH

After the end of 34 years of the Left Front rule, West Bengal has seen a renewed emphasis on agriculture. A decade-long ethnographic study conducted during and after the political transition unravels the reasons why such emphasis fails to benefit the small and marginal farmers, at places where farming is still profitable. The local elites, through a particular nature of land–water–debt network and influence on local governance, continue to affect the political economy of farm-based resources. Therefore, the policy preference for agriculture, without addressing such local and micro issues, would not be fruitful for small and marginal farmers.

West Bengal saw the end of the longest democratically elected “communist” government in 2011 and the beginning of a decisive second term of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government in 2016. The TMC’s rise is popularly linked with land-related movements against the car factory project at Singur and the proposed chemical hub at Nandigram (*Zee News* 2006; *Hindu* 2006; Rajagopal 2016).¹ With the state’s failure to invite any large industrial investments since 2011, there is a policy thrust towards the development of farming and related infrastructure. Due to land reforms during the Left Front rule, the rural economic equations turned upside down (Lieten 1996a, 1996b).

Unsurprisingly, the state has a high concentration of small and marginal farmers (Sengupta 1981; Sengupta and Gazdar 1997). Looking at the 71.23 lakh farmer families in the state, of which officially 96% are small and marginal farmers (Gowb 2017a), I attempt to explore the policy emphasis on farming and its interface with agrarian politics. I argue that the existing agrarian structure has successfully withstood the disruptions of political change and utilised the existing dependency network in its favour.

Scholars reveal a structural mechanism of party-mobilised governance through the organisational strength of the Left Front parties in West Bengal. Atul Kohli (1987) and Richard Crook and James Manor (1998) argue that the ideologically pro-poor Left Front had the advantage of addressing the issues of poverty and social justice through instruments of local governance. Harihar Bhattacharyya (1998), Moitree Bhattacharyya (2002), Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee (2004), Rajarshi Dasgupta (2009) and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya (2009) find that the Left Front had virtually established a complete control over decision-making related to every sphere of village life. Partha Chatterjee (2009: 42) stresses on two issues—first, the

institutional effectiveness of the structures of rural government and mobilisation of political support built by the Left Front (LF), and in particular its principal constituent, the CPI(M) [Communist Party of India (Marxist)], that has been able to respond to some of the key demands of large sections of the middle, poor and landless sections of rural people.

Second, he argues for

a form of clientelism in which the Left parties hold their supporters under some sort of permanent dependence by making various governmental and other benefits conditional upon their continued electoral support.

While the party was the chief mediator for the poor’s access to a variety of public resources during the Left Front government

The author would like to acknowledge the reviewers whose comments have shaped this paper, and also the research participants.

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Resolving Disagreements in Panchayats

Elected Representatives and Local Bureaucracy Interface in West Bengal

SUMAN NATH, BHASKAR CHAKRABARTI

Based on the long-term ethnographic research in four districts during a political transition in West Bengal and analysing narratives of disagreements between elected representatives and local bureaucrats in their gram panchayats, it is argued that the interface between the elected members and the bureaucracy is dialectical and is influenced by external as well as local contexts. Conflicting demands from stakeholders as well as factors like conflict, violence, elite control, and resistance from certain sections of the society could result in such disagreements. While there are instances of political “deep probe” in local bureaucracy, resultant decisions are often unpredictable and can come through unforeseen mechanisms. Informal mechanisms of resolution of disagreements, often associated with corruption, are either challenged by the counterpublics or give rise to an altered form of corruption to adjust itself to the process of political change.

In this paper, we study the mechanisms by which political disagreements are addressed by elected representatives and bureaucrats in panchayats and, in turn, the effect of such disagreements on the local policy decisions. Elected representatives and the bureaucracy are the two major actors in any local government institutional network. Political disagreements between these key actors often affects the process of decision-making (Oosterwaal et al 2011). Scholars have reflected on the interplay of differences in decision-making and the context of local history where tradition and electoral systems have significant influence over such disagreements (Jatto et al 2013; Warioba 2008). While the dichotomy remains (Stocker and Thompson-Fawcett 2014), disagreements can have positive effects on decisions (Hammond and Knott 1996) or can have negative effects on the outcomes (Thomson and Torenlvlied 2010).

There are models of politics/administration dichotomies and complementarities with limited explanatory capacities (Stocker and Thompson-Fawcett 2014), but factors that result in positive or negative outcomes of political disagreements are largely unknown (Franchino 2004; Huber and Shipan 2002; Thomson and Torenlvlied 2010). Scholars have shown how elected members often carry power over the bureaucracy within constitutional arrangements and the ways in which bureaucratic leaders handle conflicting demands (Page and Jenkins 2005; Christensen and Opstrup 2018). The exact process of how political disagreement translates to the degree of discretion available to the local government institutions remains unresolved (Oosterwaal et al 2011).

We locate our study within the context of political disagreements and its impact on the dialectical relationship between the bureaucracy and the elected representatives who work at the lowest of the three-tier rural local governance system in India—the gram panchayat (GP). We attempt to understand how disagreements are dealt within the GPs and the way these disagreements influence policy implementation process at the grassroots.

Three mechanisms—compromise, agency preference, and coalition support—are used in addressing disagreements (Oosterwaal et al 2011). With high levels of disagreement, compromised decisions resulting in an implementing agency having discretion is often visible (Huber and Shipan 2002; Torenlvlied 2000). This happens because the implementers wish

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**July
2022**

Editorial

Intersections: From Research to Outreach in Indian Prehistory <i>Shanti Pappu</i>	97
Protohistoric human skeletal evidence in India: Research status and prospects <i>Subhash Walimbe</i>	103
Ruined or resurrected: Contemporary realities shaping heritage buildings of Chandannagar <i>Lina Bose and Jenia Mukherjee</i>	123
Four compartmental model of body composition for assessment of predictor of hypertension among the Tangkhul males of Manipur <i>Urapam Zimik and Hijam Sorojini Devi</i>	143
Pregnancy outcomes of adolescent and adult mothers belonging to Adi-Minyong tribal population of Arunachal Pradesh <i>Maitreyee Sharma</i>	158
Menstrual hygiene: Knowledge and practices among the Muslim rural adolescent girls of Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India <i>Mahua Samanta and Sovanjan Sarkar</i>	177
<i>Book Review</i>	
<i>Being Adivasi: Existence, Entitlements, Exclusion</i> by Abhay Flavian Xaxa and G.N. Devy [Ghanashyam Giri]	192
<i>Book Review</i>	
<i>Re-Creating Anthropology: Sociality, Matter, and the Imagination.</i> <i>ASA Monographs Series.</i> by David N. Gellner and Dolores P. Martinez. [Suman Nath]	196

BOOK REVIEW

David N. Gellner and Dolores P. Martinez. Eds. *Re-Creating Anthropology: Sociality, Matter, and the Imagination*. ASA Monographs Series. New York: Routledge (2022). ISBN 978-1-00-327361-5 (Electronic Version). Pages xiv + 227. Price: Hard Bound £160.00

This edited book is a creative blend of keynote lectures and some selected presentations from the 2018 ASA conference held in Oxford, 18–21 September, under the title *Sociality, Matter, and the Imagination: Re-Creating Anthropology*. The conference invited participants from all areas of Anthropology and Archaeology. The primary aim was of engaging in debates on visual, material, ideological, biological, forensic, evolutionary, cognitive and linguistic domains that has dominated Anthropology for more the two centuries. The book has twelve chapters apart from an introduction and an afterwards written by social-cultural anthropologists and a human geographer having very specialised set of skills and areas. Although, each of the chapters is unrelated in so far as their areas are concerned, they nevertheless address the core themes of the discipline which include a perennial mistrust towards the generalisations and the questions of positions. The book begins by reaffirming the three key aspects of anthropology, viz., scepticism, empathy (or at least openness), and holism. It is the scepticism towards the totalizing and grand generalizations, especially the taken-for-granted and/or dominant regimes that often defines what anthropology does in practice. It calls for a relook at the subtleties of everyday life that escapes most of the *a priori* deductive theoretical schemes and methods such as an option-based questionnaire. Such scepticism in part results in care for the ignored and marginalised people's point of view through empathy and finally the recognition that world is an interconnected hole. The book shows possibilities of an amalgamation of the three to provide options to defeat or destroy the establishment, so as to make Anthropology work as a weapon to give voice to the powerless. In consequence it can become a counter example to the expansions of the natural sciences. As one reads the book one begins to understand that there are immense possibilities to use this amalgamation to address the contemporary issues and work for a future world.

One of the major aspects of the disciplinary self-reflexivity of anthropology is that it often stops, reflects back, criticises and progresses. Anthropologists often note an existence of disciplinary crisis and strive for the future. We can think of the death and revival of urban anthropology with spatial turn or publication of "*Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*" by James Clifford and George E. Marcus as such moments. This book is not just an addition to such reflexivity, but it also carries the capacity to shake the Anthropology fraternity to look at the abstract thematic dimensions with which they can map in their own research and imagination. These abstract themes are also the major divisions of the books, viz., time, imagination and future.

Time as it redefines Anthropology: History as a discipline, today looks at the past as it is manifested in the present, Anthropology too has a deep engagement with time in a similar manner. One of the contradictions that remains associated with the discipline is the connection between the colonial imagination of Anthropology and the recognition of cultural relativism that says everyone on earth occupies the same time and that there are no living fossils. Yet, at the empirical level, we have different perceptions of time across generations and even within the same generation. In Chapter 3, DeSilvey argues that different layers of 'pastness' is embedded in landscapes. He brings the notion of imagination in sensing time and that past is an experience as people encounter certain kinds of materialities and worldly capacities. The book devotes itself to an academic

in the environment. She shows that the discourse on health-environment interplay as manifested in the public health policies, and much of the politics is an anthropocene that anthropologists need to take up in both interesting and often worrying ways. This is even more important as people in this era can no longer blame some supernatural beings, power or forces. She suggests that Anthropology is uniquely placed to ensure the incorporation of invisible and micro points of views while major decisions for the future world is made. The idea of psychological universals – an anthropological search through comparative method is culturally deterministic as Astuti in Chapter 13 argues. The answer to the future of Anthropology lies in the combination of its particularizing mission and comparison along with the reflexivity and subjective positionality of the researchers.

Re-creating Anthropology shows possibilities beyond pessimism that is slowly crippling much of the science and humanities across the world as we are facing rapid climate-change, lack of alternative and green technology, increasing gap between have and have-nots, repeated failures in achieving a just society, return of the pandemic and the return of war. It unravels the potentials of the ‘classic’ and often reinvented methodologies like ethnography and holism, approaches like micro-perspectives and skills like empathy. The book shapes and sharpens the anthropological perspectives and threads a variety of approaches into the major and abstract domains of time, imagination and future. The book carries a potential to guide much of the present and near future ways of doing Anthropology. The book, however, speaks less about the existing social cleavages like religion, class and gender, challenges like human migration and refugee issues, and process failures like dangerous similarities of democracy and dictation. Such absence in a sense provides more room for the readers to define their own research agendas that can be framed within the three domains that this book convincingly portrays.

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Politics of Cultural Misrecognitions and the Rise of Identity Consolidations in Post-left West Bengal

SUMAN NATH

West Bengal has a substantive presence of minority population with 27% Muslims and 5.5% Scheduled Tribes. They often have a ghettoised presence and political parties take special care to secure electoral dividends from them. After the end to the left regime in 2011, the Trinamool Congress in its second term has percolated in most of the traditional left bastions, especially among the ethnic and religious minorities. This paper explores the mechanisms of TMC's percolation among the ethnic and religious minorities through "cultural misrecognition." Through an ethnographic work on the promotion of cultural expressions and recent ethnic conflicts, it is argued that, while the organisation-based political mechanism has been put in the backseat, West Bengal is observing a rapid rise of primordial identity-based political practices.

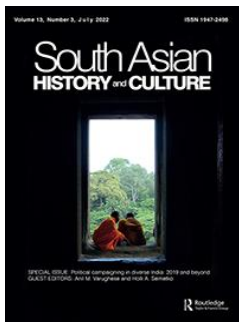
West Bengal has seen a political change after the world's longest democratically elected left regime was defeated in the assembly election 2011 by the alliance of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Indian National Congress (or the Congress). In 2016, the TMC secured an even greater mandate with definite percolation at places considered as left bastions (*Ei Samay* 2016). A question that arises is, what made these changes possible? One explanation is the impact of direct benefit giving schemes like the Kanyashree Prakalpa, which gives money for education to the girl child, Sabooj Sathi, which gives bicycles to every schoolgoing student, and distribution of subsidised foodgrains (Hafeez 2016). Additionally, there is a visible drive to improve the rural connectivity and to make cities cleaner. Such initiatives have earned international recognitions (*NDTV* 2016; *Business Line* 2017). These explanations to the TMC's increasing political stronghold fail to understand its political strategy at the grassroots.

I have argued that in response to political society and party society (as conceptualised by Chatterjee 2004 and Bhattacharyya 2009, 2010, 2016) where party became the chief mediator during the Left Front, the TMC has promoted a distinctive, individual and dependent misrecognition-based politics. This is conceptualised as cultural misrecognition (Nath 2018). The TMC has promoted traditional cultural expressions through numerous means and has integrated traditional political systems within the party hierarchy. Such mechanisms of integration and promotion of traditions are quite distinctive. During the 34 years long Left Front rule, the issues of identity-based cultural expressions, including religion, were pushed back to the main concern of the party hierarchy. Even the opposition forces did not use religious ideologies or identity politics to expand their base. Nevertheless, the opposition leaders, especially from the TMC, had directly patronised Durgotsava (largest festival of the state) for several decades. The festive and carnivalesque nature of Durgotsava has always made its religious association secondary. This mode of popular politics was consciously avoided by the Left Front, with a few exceptions. However, the situation started to change post 2011.

For this, a brief discussion on cultural misrecognition is important. Misrecognition has a strong connection with the lack of people's consciousness about exploitation. In West Bengal, a single party domination for three decades implies a context of hegemony where people gave consent to their domination (Gramsci 1971). Since West Bengal has not seen any rise of organic intellectuals to overthrow the hegemonic apparatus

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Political campaigning in West Bengal: violence, professionalisation, and communalisation

Suman Nath & Subhasish Ray

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Political campaigning in West Bengal: violence, professionalisation, and communalisation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving dynamics of political campaigning in the state of West Bengal in eastern India. West Bengal offers an ideal case to trace the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and the implications of this development for political campaigning since, until recently, the political culture of the state, profoundly shaped by 34 years of continuous Left rule from 1977 to 2011, had, at least institutionally and organizationally, eschewed open expressions of identity-based politics. Nonetheless, West Bengal now stands at the cusp of a major political transformation with the emergence of the BJP as the main opposition party in the state. Our analysis identifies two crucial ways in which the rise of the BJP has altered the dominant mode of political campaigning in the state since the 2016 state assembly elections. First, the state has witnessed a dramatic professionalization of campaigns, with the BJP being a clear frontrunner on this dimension. Second, political violence, a distinctive aspect of campaigns in the state since independence, has taken a sharp communal turn in the post-2016 period, departing from the partisan violence of *elaka dokhol* (area domination) that was the hallmark of the pre-2016 period. We argue that both these shifts were facilitated by a rapid increase in smartphone usage for consuming news, with the BJP leveraging the technological shock to streamline its organizational resources, and by extension, to set the tone of campaigns. We note that these trends have been accentuated during the recently concluded 2021 state assembly elections.

KEYWORDS

Communalization; fake news; political campaigning; post-truth; political violence; professionalization; West Bengal

The borders of the contemporary state of West Bengal are the result of different partitions, the first of which occurred in 1905 and the second in 1947. Violence, though directed towards radically different purposes, was an integral part of both of these partition experiences. Subsequently, for a significant stretch of the post-independence period, political campaigning in the state occurred alongside Maoist violence. Political parties have also used political violence strategically.

Against this general backdrop of politically motivated violence, which assumed the proportions of a full-blown political crisis in the late 1960s and 1970s,¹ West Bengal nonetheless experienced remarkable political stability from 1977 to 2011, when it was ruled continuously by the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM)-led Left Front (LF) government. In the course of its three decades of unbroken rule, the LF developed an elaborate party structure that could successfully replace other channels of public transactions.² The primary mechanisms of political campaigning during the LF period were rallies, street meetings, and subtle ‘hypodermic’³ channelizations of Left ideology through translations of Soviet texts and the performance of songs and movement-related theatres

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CONTENTS

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Editorial	252
'Voices in the Shadows': Indigenous Narratives from Karbi Anglong, Assam on Land, Autonomy and Development Jasodhara Borthakur	257
Untouchability and the Caste System: Questioning Its Banality Socio-phenomenologically Rahul Singh	283
Measurement of Overweight and Obesity among a group of Affluent Children Aged 6-11 Years in Mumbai: A Comparison of Three Growth References Manjiri Gupte and Anjali Kurane	297
Understanding the Significance of Temples in Representing the Pahadi Culture of Western Himalayas in Kathua District of Jammu & Kashmir Ankush Sharma, Shruti Gupta, Saba Parveen, Ashwani Kumar, Divya Sharma	343
Book Review	
<i>Encountering Land Grab: An Ethnographic Journey</i> , by Abhijit Guha [Suman Nath]	344
<i>Centenary Year of Teaching of Anthropology in India</i> by Nabakumar Duary. Biraja Shankar Guha [P. C. Joshi]	348
Note of Appreciation	351

Book Review

Abhijit Guha. *Encountering Land Grab: An Ethnographic Journey*. New Delhi: Manohar (2022). ISBN 978-03-90729-38-8. Pages 186. Hard Bound: 1195

When I was mounting on research on everyday politics and resource allocation in West Bengal, I came across a series of publications by Abhijit Guha especially in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Apart from his methodological meticulousness, one can learn a lot from the formulation of far-reaching arguments from a specific field site which Guha has shown in the book. Hence, one can comprehend the fact that it was not until the popular movements in Singur and Nandigram that attracted attention of the Kolkata-based intellectuals, that land was seen as a really serious issue in West Bengal politics. Peasant resistance, at rather 'unknown' villages was largely overlooked. His continuous work on land-related issues have generated a literature on several aspects of land acquisition ranging from issues of compensation and, public sentiment to political transformation and forced displacement. While his first monograph (2017) *Land, Law and Left* speaks more generally of the 'disempowerment' of the 'weak' peasants facing powerful 'globalisation', writing at par with the existing literature and ends with a list of 'recommendations' for better handling of the issue, Guha nevertheless acknowledged the weapon of social networking and global attention through movements like Singur and Nandigram. With this new book on the shelf, Guha more strongly takes a critical political position and uses the word 'grab' – and not the more polite and polished word 'acquisition.' The issue of land immediately becomes a subject of political manipulation and critical analysis. Guha successfully walks through a rather difficult terrain of ethnography. His ethnography enables him to gain a deeper and richer experience around land grab. *Encountering Land Grab* is an effective tale of Guha's rich and deep probe into the issue. The eight chapters of the book unearth multi-layered and multifaceted dimensions of 'land grab' through ethnography. An engaged foreword by Michael M. Cernea adds a fantastic overview of the issue at large and sets the stage for the readers to experience his journey.

The book begins with a personal touch almost like an auto-ethnography, Guha speaks about his rather incidental and much fortunate accidental interface with the issue. Although it

ethnographic field level narratives, policy dynamics and assembly discourses. Guha shows the impossibility to grasp 'reality' and while one ends reading this piece, one is already questioning the bewildering nature of reality, understanding of reality, multiplicity of the actors and agencies and the historical forces like the expansion of profit driven market capital which are impossible to ignore and yet difficult to accept and digest.

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One can see Abhijit Guha's publications at *EPW* here: <https://www.epw.in/author/abhijit-guha>

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Intriguing Issues in the Corruption Discourse and Challenges of Governance

SUMAN NATH

Corruption issues are dominating public discourse at least since the earlier part of the last decade. Yet the theorisation of the issue, public policy implications and political usage, especially in the era of post-truth, is hitherto studied inadequately. If one reason is the vastness of the issue that ranges from petty bribery to large multinational scams, the other surely is theoretical and methodological in nature. When broadly defined, corruption is commonly seen as the abuse of public power for private gains. It happens to be one of the most intriguing issues across the world, whether in mature or emerging democracies or hybrid autocratic regimes. Likewise, corruption and anti-corruption movements form much of what is known as public opinion in the recent past in countries like India and Brazil.

It is seen that corruption issues are quite widespread; consequently, anti-corruption is firmly intertwined with the global drive for good governance. The presence of corruption is often equated with a failure of public administration. While, broadly, the concept of abuse of public power is adopted by organisations such as Transparency International to define corruption and its perceptions, often the conceptual and contextual paradoxes are ignored. Such a definition primarily demands a contextual specificity because comprehending what is meant by “public power” and what are its “abuses” is not only case-specific but also at times confusing. At the field level, a descriptive definition is needed.

Perhaps the most precise description of corruption in a third-world scenario is given by Drèze and Sen (1996). They document (i) rent-seeking behaviour of

BOOK REVIEWS

Discourses on Corruption: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives

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the leaders, (ii) absenteeism and poor performance, (iii) lack of trust and hence, lack of partnership between state and civil society, and finally (iv) the development of a culture of corruption within the public sector, as important dimensions of corruption. Existing literature dwells on the involvement of complex public-private relationships and “networks grown over prolonged periods of time” (p 2). It is seen that the existing literature deals less with certain fields like criminal justice, actors like corporations and broad structural issues like historical embeddedness in colonial, imperial and capitalist legacies. Furthermore, the impact of neo-liberal political and economic projects that give rise to paradoxes like the simultaneous promotion of shadow economy and public-sector reform is largely understudied.

This book does not attempt to fill such existing gaps in corruption research like addressing the structural issues or narrating corruption in sectors like criminal justice; instead, it aims at questioning the widely used corruption measuring tools and bringing much-needed contextual references in the studies of corruption by presenting cases that utilise, among the other rather unconventional methods like ethnography and designs like a case study. The book contains 10 essays apart from the introduction that deal with corruption in India, Brazil, and Switzerland. It covers vast arrays of issues ranging from conceptual tools such as

corruption indices and social capital and corruption interface, through contextually rich narratives from India, Brazil, and Switzerland to “corruption complex” in the literary imagination. Although, each of the articles is unrelated and often reiterative, especially in the conceptualisation of the issue of corruption itself. With an aim of contextualisation and problematisation of the entire discourses of corruption, the book can be read by dividing it into two halves. The first half deals with conceptual parameters and the second one with empirical and concrete practices. While the conceptual chapters directly question the existing methods of discourses on corruption, the empirical and concrete practices also carry the potential for different, often radically alternative interpretations.

Conceptual Handicaps

It appears that despite having corruption indices like the Corruption Perceptions Index, Bribe Payers Index, Global Corruption Barometer, and one of the mechanisms of control of corruption, that is, Worldwide Governance Indicators from the perspectives of pragmatist economic ethics popularised by Transparency International, we are at a serious handicap in understanding and documenting corruption. Using the ideas of situativity of action, physicality of action and sociality of action, it becomes clear that there are severe limitations of existing measurements that can only be overcome by a more qualitative, culturally specific, contextually grounded designing of indices. Although the concept of corruption has been influencing the democratic systems, even changing the regimes, we are still way behind in terms of conceptualising corruption and developing specific indices. The Westernised models are inherently problematic and therefore inclusion of alternative and critical dimensions of corruption, namely emotions and other qualitative facets, becomes important.

Furthermore, the compartmentalisation of forms of corruption like grand and petty corruptions needs to be complemented by a continuity model



The Electoral Legacies of Civil War Violence: Theory and Evidence from a Maoist-affected State in India

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Abstract

The literature on the electoral legacies of civil war violence offers a puzzle. While one strand of research argues that indiscriminate rebel violence will have no effect on the electoral success of rebel-aligned parties, another argues that such violence will harden anti-rebel political attitudes in the long term. This article reconciles these conflicting predictions by examining post-conflict political attitudes over the short *and* medium term. We hypothesize that the organizational weaknesses that both underpin and result from indiscriminate rebel violence during civil war will constrain the vote mobilization strategies of rebel-aligned parties in post-civil war elections, eventually leading to a reversal of fortune in the medium term. We assess our hypothesis in the empirical context of the state of West Bengal in India, whose southwestern districts, collectively known as Junglemahal, experienced a spell of Maoist insurgency from 2005–2014. Taking a mixed methods approach, combining surveys across West Bengal and within Junglemahal with ethnographic research, we show that voter assessments of pre-election violence had changed sharply between the 2016 legislative assembly and 2019 parliamentary elections with violence triggering a backlash against the rebel-aligned incumbent party in 2019, but not in 2016.

Keywords Elections and voting · Public opinion · Political attitudes · Civil war · Civil war violence · Insurgency · Rebel organizations · Political parties · Security voting · Clientelism · Election violence · Post-conflict reconstruction · Maoist insurgency · South Asia · India · West Bengal

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