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Managing political space: authority, marginalised people's agency and governance in West Bengal

This paper investigates governance reform which aims to 'move the state' closer to people, arguing that greater attention needs to be paid to two questions: how does political decentralisation affect the ways in which authority is exercised? And what spaces does it leave open for poor people's agency? It focuses on West Bengal, an Indian innovator of decentralisation through *panchayati raj* ('rule by local councils') in the late 1970s, investigating the everyday practices through which rural political space was being managed through in-depth qualitative evidence gathered from two *panchayats* towards the end of the Left Front government's long rule (1977–2011). This work indicates the ways in which patronage, coercion and surveillance were melded by those exercising political power in the Bengali countryside, and the limited political opportunities which these practices left open to the poor. The ostensibly democratic structures of *panchayati raj* thus coexisted with the informal exercise of power and the reproduction of new forms of ascribed political identity for poorer and marginal groups. This in turn raises critical questions about programmes of governance reform being pursued across the global South.

Keywords: governance, decentralisation, authority, informal politics, West Bengal

Since the 1990s, international development interventions, driven largely by agencies such as the World Bank, have aimed to transform the actions and capabilities of states across the global South. As part of a broader agenda of good governance, states have been strongly encouraged to decentralise, with the assumption being that 'moving the state' (Heller, 2001) physically and conceptually closer to its citizens is an essential part of 'making government work for poor people' (World Bank, 2000). This paper draws on a wider project of comparative research in India that has sought to investigate the practical effects of decentralisation in Kerala and West Bengal for poor and marginalised rural citizens' democratic engagement. By looking at these states, where experiments with decentralisation have long and indigenously driven histories, our research has sought to illustrate the contradictions and tensions of conscious attempts to engineer 'empowered participatory governance'. In doing so, we join with other critical scholars who seek to counter narrowly instrumental approaches to building participatory institutions (Li, 2007; Mohan, 2007; Robins et al., 2008) and to understand the complexities of their potential contributions to poor people's substantive citizenship (Harriss et al., 2004; Heller, 2009).

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The specific questions which this paper addresses are, how does political decentralisation affect the ways in which authority is exercised? And what spaces does this leave open for poor people's agency? Both questions fundamentally concern inclusive citizenship and empowered participatory governance – key themes within good-governance debates – but here we foreground the interplay between political decentralisation and everyday practices of rule as they are experienced 'on the ground'. We do so to deliberately move our analytical attention away from the specific programmes, events and organisations designed to promote citizen participation, and focus instead on the social contexts within which these 'invited spaces' (Cornwall, 2004) are located. Such invited spaces are always 'etched with the traces of existing relationships of power' (Robins et al., 2008, 1072), and our shift in perspective aims to bring these relationships into view.

Viewing political authority and agency 'from below'

The first task of our paper is to trace out the history through which participatory governance institutions have evolved in West Bengal, and the ways in which they have embedded open (and often violent) competition and state-backed welfare programmes as integral parts of local political space in the Bengali countryside. Our understanding here is informed not only by previous research on West Bengal itself, but also by a broader sensitivity to Jonathon Fox's 'political construction' approach which 'focuses on recursive cycles of interaction between state and societal actors to account for the uneven emergence of representative societal organization under less-than-democratic conditions' (Fox, 1996, 1090). Placing decentralisation initiatives within this historical context provides a thicker account of how far they can contribute towards substantial democracy, which we define here as 'movement towards people's capacity actually to make use of democratic means to produce democratic ends' (Harriss et al., 2004, 14). Our shift in perspective has an additional consequence for our analysis: that *formal* institutions and practices should not be privileged over and above other aspects of the local political landscape. Here we briefly explore how our approach is informed by other work that views political authority and agency 'from below'.

Christian Lund (2006a; 2006b) outlines why this shift in perspective matters for our first question around the exercise of authority. For him, public authority is the ability to 'define and enforce collectively binding decisions on society' with some degree of legitimacy (Lund, 2006a, 676). This is not the exclusive preserve of formal institutions but a contingent and emergent property, and as a result all institutions have to continually perform their '*state*liness' in order to ensure that their claims to authority gain local recognition. This in turn means that various everyday activities become central to institutions' reproduction: paying attention to ritual and symbolic practices that 'naturalise' their rule, intervening to settle public disputes, asserting

control over a specific geographical area, and collecting taxes and dues. For those over whom rule is being practised, the latter three activities each interlink the experience of being subject to coercive power with the establishment of a relationship of belonging or (quasi-)citizenship, regardless how 'official' the status of these exchanges is. For example, 'taxes' may take the form of structured and normalised bribes, and leaders' need to demonstrate community management may result in them actively seeking out disputes over which they can make binding judgments (Lund, 2006a, 676). Public authority is therefore continually performed, and this performance involves an element of improvisation: leaders engage in processes of 'bricolage', the adaptation of locally meaningful symbols and practices, to shore up their status and legitimacy (Lund, 2006b, 692; see also Cleaver, 2012).

This approach to authority as contingent and performed, with its even-handed treatment of formal and informal local institutions, draws our attention to what are often remarkably resilient local idioms and practices of rule. For Blom Hansen, the formal state and legal system in India do 'not exercise any monopoly of legitimate violence' (2005, 170) in practice, but are intertwined with two informal modes of exercising authority: that of 'big men', and that practised collectively by 'the community', enforced in particular through crowd violence. It is the 'big man' (or *dada*) that is of particular interest here:[1] these individuals actively build their reputations for dispute mediation and practical efficacy, often achieved through short-circuiting the operation of formal governmental systems (cf. Brass, 1997; Price and Ruud, 2010). Their authority is asserted in deliberately performative ways: through public displays of their generosity, of their position 'above' the law, and of their capacity to mete out retribution. For these authors, informal structures of power are therefore not mere 'shadows' (High et al., 2006) or residual forms, but are constitutive of how authority is enacted and experienced on a day-to-day basis.

This ongoing presence of informal authority raises important questions about India's potential to enact governance reform. For James Manor (2000) or Ananth Pur (2007) informal authority in rural India – expressed through caste councils or political fixers – flourishes today precisely because it is functionally useful to India's democracy: it translates policy in ways acceptable to local custom, or fills in for gaps in state capacity, but is ultimately subservient to formal institutions and legal power. For Blom Hansen, as for Chatterjee (2004; 2008), its presence poses a more fundamental challenge to the formal state. It produces lasting 'paralegal' arrangements that 'lead over time to substantial redefinitions of property and law within the actually existing modern state' (Chatterjee, 2004, 75), and set limits to 'the possibilities of social reform and accountability through legislation' (Blom Hansen, 2005, 191). We return to

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1   The exercise of crowd violence is vitally important in understanding communal politics (Blom Hansen, 2004; 2005), 'institutionalised riot systems' (Brass, 1997) and their relation to formal elections in India, but is of less direct relevance to the everyday expression of authority addressed here.

these debates in our conclusions, but also note that participatory governance reforms themselves bring into being new political boundaries and practices that require new (and inherently spatialised) performances on the part of citizens and their representatives (Lemanski, 2017; see also Bénit-Gbaffou and Katsura, 2014). Accordingly, we see 'top-down' projects of governance reform as not merely meeting resistance when they seek to restrict the scope of informal practices and institutions, but as inadvertently new creating spaces in which informal authority is produced in dynamic forms.

Within our second question, *what spaces does decentralisation provide for poor and marginalised people to express their political agency?*, we consider the ways in which a locally constituted political sphere and the active presence of informal politics are central in allowing us 'to depict the way in which authority is encountered from below' (Webster and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002, 24). Understandably, whilst the literature recognises informal authority figures as leaders who can be central to the lives of poor and marginalised citizens, they are often viewed negatively. For Wood (2003), being subject to forms of patronage and dependency is a 'Faustian bargain' that poor people must undertake in return for limited livelihood security. In the absence of other reliable ways of managing risk, they enter into informal economic and non-economic relationships with local power holders, which themselves reproduce socially regressive norms of authority. This is a constriction of their agency, in terms of their scope both to act and to represent themselves independently. Bénit-Gbaffou (2011), however, warns against simplistic a priori judgments against informal authority, noting that clientelism and local democracy are closely intertwined in practice. First, and particularly when viewed from the perspective of the poor, the actions and sources of authority of the traditional patron may not be distinct from those of formal political representatives. Second, clientelism and ideas of decentralised or participatory governance justify themselves in the same normative terms: that there *should* be a closer and more personal relationship between clients/citizens and power holders, and that public policy *should* be open to local negotiation and adaptation (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2011, 458). Intentional programmes of participatory governance reform therefore not only are undertaken within an environment in which informal authority figures and practices are already present, but also promote practices which are likely to blur into forms of political clientelism.

The practical value to the poor of engaging with informal power within India is disputed. Whilst de Wit and Berner (2009) largely follow Wood (2003) in seeing the urban poor's engagement with 'vertical' patronage relationships as a forced response to survival needs, Chatterjee sees instead a productive space in which 'people in most of the world are devising new ways in which they can choose to be governed' (Chatterjee, 2004, 77). For him, contemporary India exemplifies neither republican citizenship nor unaltered patron–client relations (Chatterjee, 2011, 306), but rather a 'political society'. Within this, people are improvising new forms of political community through tactical engagement with the mechanisms of the modern state (elections, and various state programmes to

develop its 'target populations') and appeals to elements of moral economy and primordial identity. Chatterjee therefore has a much more positive reading of informal power, but within his work its actual impact on poor and marginal groups is only sketchily outlined. For example, he argues that the gains made by slum dwellers through political society have been reversed since the 1990s as the middle classes have recaptured the contemporary Indian city (Chatterjee, 2004, 139–47), and that some marginalised groups 'represent an outside beyond the boundaries of political society' (Chatterjee, 2008, 61). However he does not explore in detail people's responses to these reversals, or who may be excluded from political society and with what consequences. We wish to push this work further by understanding how intentional governance reforms reshape their poor people's identity and scope to express their political agency.

There are therefore good theoretical arguments to withhold quick normative judgements about governance reform in the abstract, and instead to undertake a more grounded analysis of the everyday relationships that such reform opens up between local power holders, the poor and the state. Accordingly, we examine West Bengal's experience of rural decentralization within its wider historical context, noting the form of political space this has established. Our empirical work then looks at how this space is managed, taking seriously the challenge which informal authority poses for intentional programmes of governance reform. Similarly, when we evaluate its effects on poor people's expression of political agency, we do so with pragmatic questions in mind: how does reform interlink with informal practices, and what is their value to the poor?

Governance in rural West Bengal: investigating decentralisation in a party-politicised space

West Bengal has a political history of interest to those studying (or designing) programmes of governance reform in the global South. From 1977 to 2011 the Left Front government, a coalition led by the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI(M) hereafter), was re-elected for seven consecutive terms, making it India's longest incumbent State-level government. It was also an early innovator in 'deepening democracy', setting up a system of elected rural local councils (*panchayats*) in 1978 that pre-dated India's Constitutional requirement for States to establish such institutions by a decade and a half. From the outset, empowering the councils was closely intertwined with bolstering the rural support base of the CPI(M): the initial impetus for decentralisation was partially about defending the party's presence in the Bengali countryside,[2]

2   The Communists had won West Bengal's State Assembly elections in 1967 and 1969, only to have direct rule imposed by New Delhi soon afterwards on the pretext of restoring law and order. The quick establishment of elected *panchayats* in 1978 was therefore partially a defensive measure to produce an additional tier of government within which the CPI(M) could remain active.

but the *panchayats* quickly became central to the Left Front's development vision (Mishra, 1991). They played a vital part in distributing flood relief soon after the 1978 elections, and particularly over its first decade in office, the CPI(M) also used them to implement significant tenancy registration and land reform drives, consolidating a rural lower-class power base in the process (see Kohli, 1987, for the 'classic' account of the CPI(M)'s success in this period). After this initial radicalism, West Bengal's *panchayats* were principally used as vehicles to implement national poverty alleviation programmes; as a result their lowest tier, the *gram panchayats* (village councils), became key sites of state welfare distribution for many rural dwellers.

Although West Bengal's *panchayats* continued to have limited fiscal or policy autonomy,[3] they steadily evolved as institutions over the remainder of the Left Front's term of office. Their position within representative democracy was ensured through holding regular *panchayat* elections every five years, and council seats and chairs were later reserved for women and for historically marginalised groups, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.[4] Given the relatively large size of West Bengal's *gram panchayats*, there was further innovation to ensure participatory democracy at the ward level,[5] and from the 1990s all wards were required to hold village open meetings (*gram sangshads*) to publicly debate *panchayat* annual development plans and expenditure. This was extended in 2003 with the establishment of ward-level village development committees (*gram unnayan samities*) to boost local engagement with the *panchayats*: these were chaired by the local *gram panchayat* member but included the representation of local opposition parties and NGOs. *Panchayati raj* therefore established formal processes and spaces which were intended not only to ensure efficient implementation of welfare measures, but also to allow some degree of local control over rural development planning. From the outset, the CPI(M) explicitly linked its creation and management of these spaces to its broader commitment to ruling in the interests of the rural poor (Lieten, 1992; Bhattacharyya, 1999; Williams 2001): this was a discourse of 'discipline', enforced by the party's democratic centralism, and 'development', grounded in effective implementation of national development programmes

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3   Kerala undertook a more thorough fiscal decentralisation, giving *panchayats* significant 'untied' resources (those not linked to specific national welfare programmes), and encouraging them to make active use of their own revenue-raising powers.

4   Scheduled Castes incorporate former 'untouchable' (ritually 'unclean') castes, and Scheduled Tribes encompass indigenous peoples outside the Hindu–Muslim mainstream. These are government-defined categories intended to support historically disadvantaged groups, but there is a degree of contention over both because they do not always match groups' self-identification or map neatly onto those actually suffering ritual/cultural discrimination.

5   West Bengal's districts are large, with most exceeding 2.5 million inhabitants: rural areas are split into development blocks (around 150,000 population), and further subdivided into *gram panchayats* ('village councils' of around 20,000 population). Unlike some other parts of India, West Bengal's *gram panchayats* are not single villages, but sizable clusters of rural settlements. Typically, *gram panchayats* would be composed of a dozen or more electoral wards: each might encompass a single village, or one or more smaller hamlets.

(Chatterjee et al., 1997) through which it claimed moral authority for its rule across West Bengal as a whole.

The story of how the Left Front ultimately lost that moral authority at state level is told elsewhere (Chatterjee, 2009; Bag, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 2016): our concern here is rather with the ways in which *panchayat* rule has changed local relationships between the state, political leaders and poor and marginalised groups in rural Bengal. The first of these has been to increase the 'institutional surface area' (Heller, 2009) of the state: most rural dwellers are within a few kilometres' walk of their *gram panchayat* office, and their own elected ward members and the 'invited spaces' of participation in elections and village open meetings should be found even closer to their homes. Second, driven by struggles to control the *panchayats* through competitive elections, party politics has penetrated deeply into the everyday life of the Bengali countryside. Unlike many other states in India, candidates within West Bengal's *panchayat* elections are allowed to stand as representatives of political parties. As a result, commentators drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the early 2000s noted that the political party had become 'the elementary institution of rural life in the State' (Chatterjee, 2009, 43) and that 'the organizational grid of the political party [is] largely accepted as the chief mediator, the central conduit, in the settling of every village matter: private or public, individual or collective, familial or associational' (Bhattacharyya, 2009, 68). This dominance of political parties meant that even registering a voluntary association or club would usually be impossible without party backing (Harrison, 2012).

Our empirical research aimed to deepen this work by understanding how rule was practised and experienced, and so adopted mixed-method qualitative research undertaken over nine months in two case study *panchayats* in Birbhum District. To address our first question, *how is political authority established and exercised?*, we conducted over twenty in-depth interviews with local resource persons (elected *panchayat* members, administrators, leading local political-party figures and traditional leaders) within each *panchayat*, extending to higher-level bureaucratic figures – such as the block development officer – whose offices lay beyond the boundaries of the *panchayat*. Interviews were supplemented by extensive field observations which enabled us to see their conduct within and beyond the 'invited spaces' created by *panchayat* rule. To address the question *how do poor people express their agency?*, we worked with purposively sampled groups of households from communities facing different forms of marginalisation, again using participant observation and detailed interviews alongside focus groups to outline the strategies they deployed to extract benefits, or even a degree of security, from local power brokers. This work focused on three wards within each *panchayat* identified as containing high levels of poverty. A brief survey, measuring poverty and indicators of political participation, was administered to all households in the selected wards (n > 800 for each *panchayat*), and from this a set of five poor neighbourhoods was identified for detailed qualitative study, involving at least ten detailed household inter-

views per neighbourhood. Here, respondents were purposively selected to be representative of the different levels of participation/non-participation in key government projects and programmes within their communities. Case-study based work cannot claim to statistically represent conditions across West Bengal, but rather to provoke analytical insights through detailed comparison,[6] and here our pair of *panchayats* were deliberately selected to reflect broader patterns of poverty and contrasting local party-political histories. Using 2001 census data and 2008 *panchayat* election results, and guided by key informants, we choose *panchayats* with proportions of disadvantaged communities close to district averages. One was controlled by the CPI(M), the other by the opposition; each was situated within a development block controlled by the same party, to avoid instances where *panchayats* were being deliberately undermined by block-level politicians.

The first of our *panchayats* was in Dubrajpur Block, which had remained a solid area of CPI(M) support from 1977 to 2008. Older local party leaders active in struggles for land reform and tenancy registration in the Left Front's early years, many of whom were from landowning families themselves despite their left-wing politics, had been supplanted by a new generation of 'party professionals', associated more closely with the management of the area's new economic opportunities. These centred on the establishment of a 630-megawatt thermal power station which had provided a boost to the local economy through construction work, direct employment in the plant and small businesses in its immediate vicinity and around the *gram panchayat* office. The rival All India Trinamool Congress (AITC),[7] campaigning on issues including compensation for those displaced by the power plant, came within 5 per cent of the CPI(M)'s vote in the 2008 *panchayat* elections; despite this declining support, which mirrored state-wide patterns, the CPI(M) still held all *panchayat* seats at the time of our study. By contrast, leadership of our other *panchayat* in Mayureswar-I Block had repeatedly shifted between the Congress (1977–83, 1993–2003) and the CPI(M) (1983–93, 2003–8), with the AITC–Congress–BJP Alliance gaining control of both the *gram panchayat* and Mayureswar-I Block council in the 2008 elections. The area's economy remained exclusively dominated by agriculture, with leaders of all local parties primarily being drawn from long-established landholding families, for whom landownership meant close engagement with – and the electoral support of – 'their' labourers and tenants.

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6   The validity of our analytical insights was cross-checked first with research participants themselves (via a return visit to the *panchayats* to present findings), and then in a workshop with Kolkata-based academics and civil servants in December 2009. The latter was useful in confirming that our methodological choices had not led us to *panchayats* that were social or political 'outliers'.

7   The AITC emerged from a breakaway faction of West Bengal's Congress party: it was founded in 1998 by Mamata Banerjee, who went on become chief minister following the eventual defeat of the CPI(M) in the 2011 state assembly elections.

Our fieldwork was undertaken after more than three decades of *panchayat*-based development and welfare support, but the marginalised communities we worked with still suffered high levels of material deprivation. Dubrajpur, in the drier west of the district, was characterised by single-crop rice cultivation, meaning that the 41 per cent of the population who were agricultural labourers also had to search for casual work as daily labourers in nearby brick factories, quarries or construction in the slack season. While some households had gained employment through the power plant, craft-based work (particularly carpentry and pottery) was in decline and outlying parts of the *panchayat* remained underdeveloped – with households lacking metaled roads, electricity, water and sanitation. The dam supplying the plant's water had also submerged agricultural land and housing, particularly that of local Scheduled Caste and Tribe households, leading to displacement and loss of livelihoods. In Mayureswar-I, canal irrigation allowed double-cropping of rice, alongside some vegetable production: 45 per cent of the population were agricultural labourers, and other sources of livelihood for poorer households included small-scale trade in vegetables, flowers and fishing, alongside domestic labour and some minor traditional artisanal production. National poverty-alleviation schemes in theory offered routes out of these precarious livelihoods (see Williams et al., 2012): up to 100 days' work for registered unemployed households (via NREGP), credit for microenterprises based around self-help groups (via the SGSY), and further support for the most deprived neighborhoods (through the RSVY).[8] As we will explore further below, the need to supplement precarious livelihoods with *panchayat* support shaped poorer households' expression of agency, but first we outline the strategies local leaders used to control the political space created by decentralisation. Here, we outline three modes through which they exercised power: the establishment of patronage networks, the assertion of authority with its associated threat of violence, and the surveillance and management of the 'public sphere'.

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8   The NREGP (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme) followed a long line of previous national programmes aiming to provide slack-season labour opportunities within public-works programmes, and the SGSY (Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana) was the latest incarnation of national schemes to build up assets and skills for micro-enterprise among rural households. Both forms of anti-poverty intervention had provided the mainstay of the work implemented by village *panchayats* throughout the Left Front's period in office. RSVY (Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana), launched in 2004, aimed to support India's most 'backward' districts: in West Bengal it primarily delivered infrastructure improvements, particularly to remote Scheduled Tribe settlements.

Exercising power: controlling political space

Patronage and resource distribution

The first, and perhaps most simple, form of controlling political space was through building patronage networks. In both *panchayats*, this involved directing the distribution of local government-controlled welfare benefits and development programmes, but also managing wider opportunities present within the local economy. In Dubrajpur, the CPI(M)'s continued electoral dominance made the party's support vital to gaining access to various social support mechanisms and benefits distributed by the local *panchayat*, but there were important differences between the ways in which its control over these resources was publicly portrayed and manner in which it was actually practised. The CPI(M) claimed to serve the whole *panchayat*, and to be particularly supportive of all poor households. As a result, party representatives never openly refused requests for help coming from the poor, and actively encouraged those who were *not* CPI(M) supporters to turn to the party for support. Through its mediation of these requests, the local CPI(M) publicly performed its equal treatment of all people, and also claimed that its protection encompassed the entire population:

> I am looking at the development of the area's people, area's labouring people, tribal people, poor people, their work opportunities, or progress of their financial situation […] Regarding our village *panchayat*, I should say that the leaders there have always stood beside our people. They always rush to help them in times of need or danger. This is my only hope that whenever there is an incident in my own area, for example, a feud between the husband and the wife, and you call out for [CPI(M) party workers], they are there. I and my people can rely upon this. (Local CPI(M) leader, Dubrajpur, interview, 12 April 2009)

This self-portrayal deliberately refused to recognise the possible existence of a 'rival camp' of non-supporters. The execution of this 'universal' patronage was, of course, curtailed by the limited resources at the party's disposal. In practice, benefits were distributed favouring those neighbourhoods and households which were of strategic significance to the party's electoral future, or those party supporters whose loyalty had been demonstrated over a long period of time. Not only this, but all requests for help were mediated through the local party high command: official forums for deciding on the distribution of benefits – such as village open meetings and the village development committees – were therefore used to 'consult' the public, but decision-making power was held by the *panchayat* leader, and particularly the local party bosses.

This distribution of government resources was leaving many people discontented, and some neighbourhoods and communities, particularly those physically distant from the *panchayat* office, cut off. Here, party leaders' control of wider economic opportunities within and beyond the *panchayat* area bolstered the reach of their patronage.

The new generation of party local leaders controlled access to bank loans and to temporary and unskilled employment in the power plant, and their clearance was also required to set up a new business in the *panchayat*'s economically developing hub. Of less absolute value, but critical to the livelihoods of many poorer households, was the local CPI(M) committee secretary's ability to provide people with labouring employment in neighbouring *panchayats* and elsewhere throughout Dubrajpur Block based on his social networks and political standing within the wider area. In this *panchayat*, those able to engage with India's largest unemployment guarantee scheme, NREGP, were gaining on average only eighteen days' work through it (interview with *panchayat* chair, 10 April 2009) in a context where full-time agricultural work was plentiful for less than half the year. The secretary's ability to demonstrate that his support and influence mattered in enabling (or denying) people access to other slack-season employment was therefore important in controlling poorer groups in outlying hamlets and villages receiving relatively few direct benefits from *panchayat*-administered programmes.

In Mayureswar, relationships between landowners and agricultural labourers created more 'traditional' forms of patronage overlain by party politics. Landowners supplied thrift loans, regular agricultural employment and assistance in times of crisis, in return for labourers' loyalty in providing work according to their seasonal needs and votes at election time, binding both together in the relationships of unequal but mutual support noted by Wood (2003). For poorer households, the security gained through maintaining these relationships was bought at the expense of forgoing other opportunities: more 'anonymous' work under the NREGP may have been financially attractive to labouring households, but if there was any conflict of interest here, poor households would not risk antagonising 'their' landowners simply to gain a few days of government employment.

The combination of agriculture-focused patronage networks and the *panchayat*'s electoral history meant that the distribution of government resources was expected to be partisan, with neither political block aspiring to embrace to the whole of the (poor) population. The *panchayat*'s ruling alliance selected only their own supporters as beneficiaries for key poverty-alleviation schemes, such as pensions, housing provision or help for destitute families. In 2008 they had deliberately manipulated an official household poverty survey that determined the distribution of BPL (below poverty line) cards, the documents which entitled households to subsidised commodities and other benefits, in favour of their supporters. Among other irregularities, this excluded an entire neighbourhood of Scheduled Caste fishermen known to support the CPI(M) from accessing BPL cards, something that was seen as neither out of the ordinary nor particularly problematic by local civil servants:

> last term another party [i.e. the CPI(M)] favoured a part of the population who
> supported it for being in beneficiary lists, through active exclusion of non-supporters.
> This time around, the opposite is happening. The ruling alliance will take care of the

other half that was excluded last time around from the beneficiary lists […] all is well for everyone. (Senior bureaucrat, Mayureswar-I Block office, interview, 10 November 2009)

Patronage was also expressed through NREGP work schemes: local leaders channelled these into redigging ponds on their own properties, thereby controlling both project-based employment and the additional opportunities that enhanced fish production allowed. By delivering locally visible projects that produced benefits distributed among their community, leaders reiterated their status as powerful, and thus sought-after, figures within their locality.

In both *panchayats*, the boundaries between official sources of welfare support and informal practices of patronage were deliberately blurred: all leaders would portray either form of assistance equally, as the 'gift' of the party/individual concerned, and the dependency this engendered was directly cultivated by leaders to keep people in a 'close' relationship with them. The key difference, of course, was in the CPI(M)'s claim to be the only effective patron in Dubrajpur – a contrast with Mayureswar-I that was reflected in the ways in which authority was projected in each.

Authority, mediation and violence

The CPI(M)'s dominance in Dubrajpur was not maintained through patronage alone, but through a wider projection of its authority over all areas of village life. Everyone, including the opposition leaders, knew that key decisions in their area needed to be referred to the CPI(M), which judged over matters from family disputes to the settling of wage rates within the locality. The party could mediate this range of activities in part by continually performing its presence through the regular conduct of local party meetings at various levels ranging from the neighbourhood to the entire *panchayat*. These meetings were an important part of the CPI(M)'s information feedback mechanism noted by Dasgupta (2009; see also Williams et al., 2003), and were used to persuade households of the party's value to them: giving advice to the poor, urging them to continue their trust in the party and highlighting their lack of alternative sources of support. At election time, this political pedagogy could shift from persuasion to coercion, with both senior party leaders and their subordinates adopting overtly forceful language. One of our interviewees had been openly threatened by CPI(M) party workers who 'said they would come after us after the votes are over' (Scheduled Caste female labourer, interview, 25 March 2009) if her neighbourhood shifted its political allegiance in the 2008 *panchayat* polls. This resort to more open threats perhaps reflected the CPI(M)'s anxieties surrounding these elections, given the AITC-led Alliance's growing support both locally and across West Bengal. Whatever its cause, the change in the local party's tone was widely noted, and resented:

Earlier the CPI(M) leaders maintained close links with the local people and took care to visit the villages and were always on top of things. The present leaders do not feel the need to come and meet the local people; rather the common people are supposed to approach them for help. The party leaders are no longer interested to stand by the side of the people like in earlier times and often make false promises to the people. The common people are tired and fed up with the false promises and this lack of faith was evident in the 2008 *panchayat* elections when the Left Front's vote share got shrunk. These days, party leaders only visit the village before the elections. (Scheduled Caste marginal farmer, interview, 26 March 2009)

Whilst there was increasing dissatisfaction with the local party's actions, the public perception of its power and reach was sufficient to stop open challenges to the party's authority, and as a result threats of violence remained more common than their actual use.

The Mayureswar-I *panchayat*, by contrast, saw more open contests over authority. Some of these were explicitly 'party-political', and political feuds could turn extremely violent at *panchayat* election time: the Congress ex-chairs of the block council and local *panchayat* had allegedly been involved in a group who hacked a local CPI(M) leader to death in the year 2000. Open violence between Congress and CPI(M) supporters forced our fieldwork to be temporarily suspended in late 2008, when membership of the *panchayat*'s village development councils was being decided. The irony here was that these councils were institutions intended to build transparency and consensus over development work at the village level. Other disputes had sources outside party politics – such as fights over family honour – but also reopened tensions between existing political factions within the *gram panchayat*.

Significantly, this violence was largely inter-elite, or aimed at those putting themselves forward as political leaders in the area, rather than being directed at the general public. Also, there were no claims that this constituted 'legitimate' behaviour: it was simply the open and aggressive settlement of scores. As such, there was no attempt to subject people to party 'discipline' through the threat of violence, as seen in Dubrajpur. Alongside this, because neither political camp staked a claim to complete dominance of political space in Mayureswar-I, the opportunity remained for families to have disputes or other issues resolved through non-party agents such as community elders, senior schoolteachers and religious leaders. For example, community elders still played a role in mediating intra- and inter-family rivalry among landed households, and sometimes did so independently from party-political conflicts.

Surveillance and the control of public space

The monopoly over patronage networks, and the constant presence and projection of the authority of the party (backed by a generalised threat of retribution) made the

CPI(M)'s control over political space in Dubrajpur stronger than that of any party in Mayureswar-I. It was further reinforced by practices of surveillance, with the general public, CPI(M) supporters and even junior party operatives aware that their public behaviour and statements would be observed. The party's grass-roots meetings were important within these practices, but more generally party activists and aspirant leaders reported back to senior local CPI(M) figures. These reports included instances where people (including fellow party members) revealed their political sympathies through everyday activities such as complaining about resource distribution, accessing health and education or searching for work. This created a sense that it was not possible to act without the party's knowledge, and people adjusted their public behaviour accordingly, as a party worker from Dubrajpur explained:

> Nobody declares opposition publicly […] I mean they [CPI(M) party leaders) will get to know whether we are in opposition as soon as we start speaking. Many people thus remain quiet at village open meetings, and do not involve themselves in party politics openly. (Scheduled Caste CPI(M) party worker, interview, 7 April 2009)

People would therefore seek out a CPI(M) party leader or resource person to settle local conflicts, as seeking resolution through any other means would be read as challenging party authority within their neighbourhood. In one example reported to us, this even included seeking the party's support in proceeding with a divorce (Scheduled Caste self-employed male, interview, 24 March 2009). In addition, any criticism of the local council's role was carefully guarded. Within those neighbourhoods where the opposition parties had made significant inroads in the latest *panchayat* elections, complaints about the CPI(M) were heard in public spaces, such as informal village gatherings, or in the community halls where our focus group discussions took place. However, when it came to raising their voices in the *panchayat*'s formal platforms for public participation, the village development committee or ward-level open meetings, the same people were careful to censor their speech in front of people from outside the village who might report back to the party.

The collection of *chanda*, the 'voluntary' contribution to party funds, provided an additional check on people's loyalty to the CPI(M). The sums involved were not insignificant – more than half a labourer's daily wage – and all households and local businesses were approached by local party workers at least once a year for payment. Where households could not provide cash, party members would collect two kilos of rice instead, and households would sometimes help out poorer neighbours with payment. Non-payment, particularly if spread across a group of households, was, however, seen as defiance of party authority, and would label the neighbourhood concerned as political opponents.

Given the weaker control of all parties over the public sphere in Mayureswar-I, surveillance of people's behaviour was more limited. In the official platforms for

engagement with the affairs of the *panchayat* such as ward-level open meetings, any participation from members of the public would be overtly 'political', in that requests for help, or criticisms of council actions, would directly label the speaker in terms of her/his party loyalty. Away from these formal meetings, however, there was far less sense of political loyalties being observed, except through the collection of *chanda*. Here, all parties sought donations, and households faced no pressure to donate to the Alliance just because it controlled the *panchayat* board. Households gave money in hope that this would deliver support from the relevant political party if needed, and this was seen as a form of social insurance that reinforced existing relationships to their chosen patrons.

These practices of exercising power in Dubrajpur and Mayureswar outline important differences in the local management of political space, but also raise important questions about their impacts for the poor in expressing their political agency and meeting their livelihood needs. We therefore turn now to poorer people's strategies to negotiate within these highly politicised spaces.

Spaces for poor people's agency

Dubrajpur: working within the space of the party

The tight control of public space within Dubrajpur by the CPI(M) undoubtedly set the 'organisational grid' (Bhattacharyya, 2009) within which all households had to operate: access to power was mediated through the local party and its grass-roots operatives, and so poor people's strategies centred on building relationships with them. For those fortunate enough to be part of the core support group of energetic party activists, single-party dominance was undoubtedly working to their advantage. The newly elected CPI(M) *panchayat* member of one of our case study groups had built strong support among poorer families within his own (Muslim) community, and was praised for the close attention he paid to their needs: 'Whenever there is anything urgent, or we are in need of money, he takes us in, he helps us' (labourer's wife, interview, 26 February 2009). He also managed to ensure that his neighbourhood was well represented within *panchayat* beneficiary lists, despite the fact that poorer parts of his own electoral ward were not, and was active in contacting the *panchayat* office on households' behalf. In return, villagers were happy to route all their requests for help through him, and to turn up in numbers whenever a public show of his standing or support for the CPI(M) was required.

For poor hamlets and neighbourhoods less central to the interests of local party activists, loyalty to the CPI(M) was no guarantee of such benefits. In one isolated hamlet made up of *Santal* (Scheduled Tribe) and Muslim households, the CPI(M) had managed to gain the political support of the *Santal* community by making their

community headman a member of the party's village committee, the lowest tier of the party's hierarchal network of organisations. He clearly took his role of representing the community's interests seriously, and the whole *Santal* population conscientiously voted for the party, but it appeared that the CPI(M) had bought this support relatively cheaply. He had no influence within party meetings, and the hamlet had seen little benefit from development programmes, even though it was officially labelled as deserving support under RSVY, the programme for destitute areas. For any assistance around the workings of government, the whole hamlet instead turned for advice to a local Muslim leader who was a retired secretary of a neighbouring *panchayat*: he in turn was careful to be discrete about his own Congress-supporting background.

For those neighbourhoods openly identified with the political opposition, things were undoubtedly more difficult. One community of lower-caste potters had one of its members beaten up for his public support of the AITC, but they had been resourceful in dealing with the resulting political isolation from the CPI(M). They sought economic support from the secretary of the local agricultural cooperative society, a wealthy Congress supporter who provided them with jobs and thrift loans in times of need, but at the same time made a show of publicly backing a local CPI(M) leader as secretary of the ward's village development committee. The villagers knew that this CPI(M) member was corrupt – the party had publicly beaten him for theft of wages from a *panchayat* work scheme – but also knew that he was both close to their supporter in the cooperative society, and well connected to the local CPI(M) committee secretary, universally recognised as the most significant power broker in the *panchayat*.[9] This, they argued, was their best chance of keeping peace with the party. Other 'opposition' communities responding less strategically had been cut off by the party altogether. One Scheduled Caste community had openly voiced its support for the AITC in the 2008 elections, and had been punished as a result by being completely excluded from *panchayat* work programmes despite its status as an RSVY target hamlet.

Mayureswar-I: maintaining security amid political flux

In our Mayureswar-I *panchayat*, poorer households again needed to position themselves relative to local power brokers, but within a situation of longer-term political flux. Because no single party was dominant, individuals had some freedom to switch their party alliances, and both Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households sought to exploit this. In the 2008 elections, the position of *panchayat* chair had been reserved

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9 The committee secretary was recognised as the *pradhan chalak*, a widely used term in West Bengal to denote 'the power behind the throne'. The Bengali phrase is, however, far more derogatory: the *pradhan* is the *panchayat* chairman, and a *chalak* is the driver of a bullock cart, the implication being that the chairman was a draft animal under the yoke of the committee secretary.

for a Scheduled Tribe candidate, and the Congress had installed BH, a local *Santali* man, under the tutelage of the party's senior local leader, who came from a long-established higher-caste landholding family. BH secured a range of benefits for families in his own hamlet, including government house-building loans, and old-age and tribal development pensions. Many in BH's hamlet openly criticised the outgoing *panchayat* office holders, who had allegedly ignored the neighbourhood's needs, with one women claiming that she had been equally vocal to CPI(M) activists at election time, threatening to drive them away from her house with a broom. For new (and existing) Congress supporters in the neighbourhood, public displays of their support, and maintaining close contact with BH, were not optional, but performances vital in maintaining their longer-term security:

> Q: If you fall sick, what do you do?
>
> A: I go to the party; you have to join the party to get something done … Either that, or you would have to manage 500 rupees to go to the hospital. And if you are sick you might have to pay out 500 or 1,000 rupees depending on how much they charge you. If you don't pay, you don't receive treatment. I am not blaming the party, I simply don't have the money, so I have to carry on like this. This is what happens if you are too poor. (Landless Scheduled Tribe man, interview, 24 March 2009)

Here, and elsewhere across the *panchayat*, it was clear that poorer households were trying to maintain relationships with both political parties, with some households even containing individuals who were actively campaigning for each. More common, however, was to work through a set of local intermediaries: in one mixed-community village, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households relied on the more influential of their high-caste neighbours, both directly for work on their fields, and in using their more extensive social networks to petition help from either political party. Poor but higher-caste or Muslim households in the area generally used their own social networks to approach the families of the local Congress leadership for support, rather than the *panchayat* directly. In part this reflected the real power held by the leadership, but also their social discomfort in petitioning a political representative from the tribal community for help: when they did need to deal with the *panchayat*, they did so through intermediaries.

Some households were not able to switch political allegiances so easily. One of our focus neighbourhoods was a Scheduled Caste community that had been particularly close to the CPI(M) during its time in office, and had received various benefits (including some households gaining an electricity connection) for being so. Not only this, but many households were sharecroppers who had been involved in the tenancy-reform struggles of the early years of the Left Front government, and were tenants of powerful upper-caste leaders of the local CPI(M). These families were thus unable

to tactically reinvent their political affiliation: they could draw on the wider political connections of their landlords, but were cut off from any *panchayat* support for the foreseeable future. For these people, and others like this Scheduled Caste widow, any attempt to renegotiate their access to the new power holders was likely to be met with a degree of public humiliation:

> The Congress never cares for us […] if we ask them for any help they say, 'You voted for the CPI(M) – go and ask them for your help'. The *pradhan* [*panchayat* chair] says, 'Why didn't the CPI(M) help you out?' […] We can't say anything more, and have to keep silent. (Scheduled Caste widow, interview, 27 February 2009)

Ultimately, the implicit local rules of political patronage were widely known: 'swing voters' were no doubt wise to talk up the support they had given to the Alliance in the 2008 *panchayat* elections, but this in itself was not a strategy that would necessarily deliver results:

> Only those who actively work for the party get help, and those who cannot spare sufficient time for the party to attend all the meetings get nothing. This is the condition of our *panchayat*. (Lower-caste respondent, interview, 28 February 2009)

Even when it could be accessed, this 'help' often came at a price: the corruption of elected *panchayat* representatives of all parties was spontaneously mentioned by many interviewees, and they were clearly extracting rents from the government resources at their disposal. Gaining a 'below poverty line' ration card was not only restricted to those who had shown political support, but was also reported as costing 500 rupees to 'arrange' (a sum equivalent to around a week's agricultural wages at that time). Those offered government house-building loans were similarly asked to give a cut of up to 40 per cent of the total loan amount. The openness with which these figures were discussed indicated the frustration that most poorer households had experienced by finding themselves on the wrong side of the *panchayat*'s changing political divide. Similar cuts were certainly being taken in our Dubrjapur *panchayat*:[10] people's relative reticence in mentioning them was due to the continued dominance of the CPI(M) there, and its consequences for those who spoke out.

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10   Although open discussion of this was more circumspect than in Mayureswar, Durbrajpur's CPI(M) workers also requested that beneficiaries give them a cut of any government resources received, but presented this as a de-personalised 'party donation'. This was a structured form of corruption which attempted to build some sense of legitimacy for this action (the money would help the party's good works for the poor), whilst making the ultimate distribution of this cut within the party untraceable to those 'donating' it.

Structuring political space: implications for governance reform

The fieldwork has confirmed that earlier ethnographic accounts are right to focus on political parties as key actors in West Bengal, but has pushed this analysis further by illustrating the different modes through which rule is practised and the implications of this for poor people's agency. Our two case-study *panchayats* showed important differences in both regards, which we present in a stylised form in Table 1. The CPI(M) in Dubrajpur was attempting to maintain a more complete domination of the *panchayat*'s politics and public space than either party grouping could aspire to in Mayureswar-I. The local CPI(M)'s ambitions were extensive in the range of affairs and people (the entire *panchayat* population) over which it aimed to exercise its authority. A key difference between the *panchayats* was the heightened level of surveillance experienced (or perceived) within Dubrajpur: there was a palpable sense that the party would come to know about anything said or done in public that was in any way 'political'. These differences are an important reminder that although West Bengal's political culture was dominated by the CPI(M) for over three decades, practices of the party 'machine' varied significantly on the ground. From the perspective of those engaging with it at a local level, the CPI(M) was either an all-dominating presence, or merely one of several competing sources of political patronage. Explaining and structuring these differences, however, we can see some common underlying elements to the political logic of both *panchayats* that provide answers to the two questions posed within this paper.

We begin with the question of how political decentralisation affects the ways in which authority is exercised. For Chatterjee, West Bengal's *panchayats* opened up a 'field of negotiations' between citizens and a local state that was expected to deliver developmental benefits: this was visible from our fieldwork, but here we wish to make two important observations about how this space was managed. First, as suggested by Lund (2006a; 2006b), performances matter: leaders secured their rule by stitching together the roles of feudal patron, political boss and moral patriarch to project a unified and generic sense of authority. Government programmes and grants were thus presented as being the 'gift' of particular leaders in Mayureswar, or in Dubrajpur of 'the party', an entity which was deliberately hazily defined to maintain its aura of omnipotence. Importantly, however, power came not only from exchanging these 'gifts' for electoral support: efficacy, a key attribute of 'big men', was also demonstrated through leaders' ability to deploy their contacts, to settle disputes, or to extract the 'quasi-tax' of political subscriptions, and these abilities were equally important in displaying and shoring up their control. The resources needed to back these performances were therefore not merely those of the local state itself, but also extended to the social capital of the leaders concerned.

Table 1   Authority and agency in the case-study *panchayats*

		Dubrajpur	Mayureswar-I
Power holders' modes of Exercising Political Authority	*Patronage*	Resources largely monopolised by CPI(M). Distribution presented as supporting everyone across the whole *panchayat*, but is partial in practice.	Private resources split across rival landowner-based support groups. Overtly partisan distribution of state resources by party in power.
	Coercion	Generalised and coordinated threats against anyone opposing the CPI(M), presented as maintaining discipline: actual violence rare	Violent rivalry between political actors based on retribution, not claims to moral authority: threats not directed at the general public
	Surveillance	Strong – CPI(M) leaders create the impression that they are aware of all acts and speech throughout the *panchayat*, leading to widespread self-censorship by voters.	Weak – voters' self-censorship is largely restricted to formal public arenas: open criticism of politicians is far more commonplace elsewhere
Strategies of the poorest (agency shaped by ascribed identity)	*'Key supporters'*	Public performances of loyalty to the CPI(M), developing/ maintaining good links to key power brokers.	Public performances of loyalty to the AITC, clear expectations of material support in return.
	'Political neutrals'	Attempts to build links with well-placed CPI(M) figures and hide any other political connections	Opportunities to lobby and/or switch allegiance to new power holders
	'Political rivals'	Highly restricted – limited to covert searches for alternative sources of support	No expectations of access to government support: reliance on rival CPI(M) patrons for non-state-based forms of support

Second, localised competition over Bengal's *panchayats* has created a political field in which any attempt to assert authority publicly was drawn into the arena of party rivalry. In Dubrajpur, the CPI(M)'s subtly invasive exercise of power could be practised precisely because the party had long enjoyed local electoral dominance, and could exercise this in a disciplined and disciplining manner under the overall leadership of the local committee secretary. In Mayureswar-I, the same logic in less stable conditions produced personalisation of patronage, and open rivalry and dramatic violence. This qualifies and develops earlier research on West Bengal's 'party society', importantly seeing this not merely as resulting from the CPI(M) itself, but rather as a systemic effect of West Bengal's institutionalisation of party-politicised *panchayat* rule. With the creation of an electoral majority being a central concern of anyone who aimed to exercise power from the ward level upwards, local leaders of all parties had an interest in framing their actions within the context of inter-party competition.

Turning to the spaces this leaves open for poor people's agency, these structuring

elements of local political society have important outcomes for the poor, reflected in the lower half of Table 1. For everyone, but particularly for poor and marginalised groups directly dependent on the support of patrons, identity was inescapably bound up with public perceptions of party support. This was often rather coarsely grained, with whole neighbourhoods or local caste groups being labelled as key supporters, political neutrals or rivals, and as such poorer households had limited control over the political identities ascribed to them. Poor people expressed agency in working around these identities, making public displays of loyalty to a particular party, or aiming to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the local 'fixers' that would give them better access to those in power. In Dubrajpur, the dangers inherent in being explicitly labelled as an opposition supporter meant that this agency was primarily expressed by seeking out better links to the CPI(M) publicly, and/or to non-CPI(M) potential patrons far more covertly. In Mayureswar-I, electoral fluidity meant that there were greater opportunities for some neighbourhoods or communities to 'cross the floor', reinventing themselves as keen supporters of the incoming alliance.

With their agency constrained within this frame of party identity, poor households negotiated local power relations through everyday practices which often did little to support their wider strategic interests. Repositioning one's community relative to a particular party did not challenge underlying structures of patronage, and it is perhaps significant that in Dubrajpur poor households were often willing to report neighbours' behaviour to local CPI(M) activists in order to secure their own support. The final cruel fact remains that however actively poor people tried to tactically position themselves within this space, they had no guarantee of success. In any *panchayat*, some of these micro-constituencies were simply ignored by the party in power locally: they were deemed to be irreparably linked to opposition patrons and fixers, or worse still simply irrelevant to the calculus of gaining an electoral majority. Being a 'political outcast' in this sense mattered far beyond the label itself, having very real consequences for households' access to a range of official and unofficial forms of social security. In contrast to James Scott's depiction of the moral economy of rural Malaysia, poorer villagers' ability to request charity and support from their more powerful neighbours was therefore limited according to their value in party-political struggles, thus severely blunting these 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985).

As such, this study of local politics has wider lessons for the study of intentional governance reform. First, following Fox (1996), attempts to change the institutional architecture need to reflect on their situation within and contribution to the historical 'layering up' of local political space. Thus the development of *panchayat* rule under the Left Front has to be understood both as a response to the challenges facing the CPI(M) from the late 1970s, and as profoundly reshaping the structure and conduct of local politics. More generally, any programme for empowered participatory governance should recognise that it does not work on a blank slate, but rather with formal institu-

tions whose actual operation is inevitably hybridised with other parts of a complex local political landscape. Our own analysis, echoing that of Lemanski (2017), has emphasised the spatiality of this landscape, with governance reform restructuring the range over which institutions operate, the terrain over which rule is contested and the identity of communities.

Second, the double shift in perspective that we have proposed here, in focusing on local political space, and in treating formal and informal practices of rule on an equal footing, is one of theoretical and practical importance. Conditions on the ground certainly indicate the inadequacy of hiving off 'formal' governance structures as a self-contained unit of study: *panchayat* resources helped to shore up the authority of political leaders, who in turn provided services – such as dispute resolution – which the developmental state simply could not undertake itself. Following Blom Hansen (2004) we could see this as not simply 'corruption' but a reflection of the incompleteness of formal authority in contemporary India: official practices of rule remained linked to and dependent on 'informal sovereignty'. More widely, we need to recognise the importance of leaders' performances in stitching together this symbiosis, deliberately blurring the actions of political parties, private patronage and the official duties of the state when establishing their authority and exercising power.

Equally, the exclusion felt by the 'political outcasts' and curtailed agency of other groups of poor households was not a relic of a premodern social order, but rather was an inherent product of a system of electoral competition brought in through *panchayat* rule. Not only did this sharply contrast with the normative ideal of the rights-bearing citizen promoted within ideas of empowered participatory governance, but it also qualifies and develops ideas of 'governed populations' within Chatterjee's formula-tion of political society. Poor households were aware of the importance of conforming to governmental categories to gain access to state benefits and programmes, and fixers and intermediaries were sought out to achieve these goals. However, it should be recognised that their struggles did not merely encompass gaining resources of the local state, but also access to effective dispute resolution, and privately provided work, credit and other forms of social security. More broadly, the fact that many poorer villagers saw *panchayat* benefits as 'gifts' instead of the outcome of government bodies fulfilling their statutory duties towards them was not mere ignorance of how formal structures of governance should work. Rather, they knew that they had to rely on local fixers and leaders to access a range of resources, whether public or private, and as such were providing a reasoned analysis of how hybridised governance structures actually worked in practice.

These theoretical insights should temper the enthusiasm with which 'good-gover-nance' interventions are promoted in the global South. Those expecting to restructure local governance practices need to recognise that it is only the formal state that can be easily made subject to programmes of reform. Even when such reform is sought in the

name of the poor, relationships with the formal state are unlikely to be poorer groups' sole cause of concern. Much of the world finds itself in a situation of ongoing 'state scarcity', where maintaining (or seeking to create) social ties with 'big men' might be very important to day-to-day survival, and engagement with official mechanisms of participatory governance of secondary concern. As such, understanding how everyday practices of rule are experienced and negotiated 'from below' is an important first step in identifying pathways towards more democratic local governance.

Acknowledgements

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