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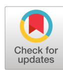

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating power: Disputes over electrification in rural India

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Abstract
How are infrastructures socially appropriated? This article uses my fortuitous presence in a rural locality in eastern India as its residents discussed proposals for its complete electrification, allowing me to reflect on social negotiations around infrastructure prior to its installation. Drawing on a detailed ethnography of electrification in a West Bengal village, I illustrate the nuanced ways in which people inflect infrastructural projects with their collective ideas of what is right and good. As far as they can see, such projects are neither the unalloyed benefit that proponents celebrate nor the unmitigated evil that opponents lament. Rather, they are evaluated in relation to people's imagination of the collective good, to which such infrastructures may or may not be central. Drawing on the insights offered by my interlocutors as well as recent advances in the literature on the politics of infrastructures, this article interrogates the perspective that infrastructures advance governmental rationalities. Building on well-established insights that technological infrastructures are not socially neutral and that infrastructures are socially appropriated, disputed, and negotiated, this article demonstrates that people's engagement with infrastructures politicizes, rather than governmentalizes, them.

Keywords: Infrastructure; development; West Bengal; ethnography; politicization

Introduction

It was early evening in the spring of 2010 when an entourage of local politicians approached Daulat Bibi, a landless destitute widow who lived with her daughter in their mud hut at the edge of their rural ward in India's West Bengal state.[1] They were led by Babar Hossain, the elected representative of the Rahimpur ward in which Daulat Bibi lived. Babar Hossain and his colleagues, all affiliated with the Congress Party that held power in the village council of which Rahimpur was a part, came with a specific proposal, couched as a request but in fact an instruction. Advised by state-appointed

[1]I have used pseudonyms throughout the article to protect the identity of my interlocutors and different names for all locations below the district level.

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technicians, they were identifying spots in the hamlet to install electricity poles, which would transmit electricity to the ward's 400-odd households. One such spot was just outside Daulat Bibi's hut, by her front and only door.

To the politicians' shocked dismay, Daulat Bibi refused permission. The pole would block the entrance to her hut. Her door opened outwards, and she did not earn enough to replace its hinges so it could open inwards. Could the powerful office-bearers of the Congress Party, which held power not only in the ward, but also controlled India's national government back then, not shift the location of the pole somewhat and leave a destitute woman like her, a *gorib manush* (or poor person), alone? When the politicians tried to persuade her to give them permission, to think of the greater good of the village, and to be reasonable, Daulat Bibi's neighbours gathered and warned them to lay off. Just because they were powerful and just because the village needed electricity, did not mean they could bully poor people like themselves. It was the votes of people like them—Daulat Bibi and her neighbours—that had brought Babar Hossein to power in the first place.

As the disheartened politicians beat a hasty retreat, their brief, but by no means exceptional, exchange evoked an affective moment that brought together governmental power, electrification, and disputed notions of the collective good. Electrification infrastructures (and infrastructures in general) are often taken for granted. They are assumed to be a socially neutral cog in the wheels of technological development. Yet, as the exchange between Daulat Bibi and Babar Hossein showed, infrastructures are material assemblages that are socially appropriated, and disputed. Along with scholars who view infrastructures as 'sites of expression for dominant ideologies, collective subjectivities and socio-environmental contestations',[2] I could not but think of electrification as an arena where people negotiated with politicians who both held and distributed power. Despite their imbrications with power relations, infrastructures are not always successful examples of governmental rationalities.

In the years since the fieldwork was completed, electrification continued at a frenzied pace across India. By 2022, the Government of India was in a position to declare household electrification to be complete.[3] Nevertheless, the electrification process was by no means as unquestioned as the achievement of complete electrification might post facto suggest. As Daulat Bibi's pushback against her village's politicians indicates, the process was fraught with negotiations, disagreements, and disputes.

Part I

Infrastructure and popular politics

Ethnographic investigations into the social life of infrastructure have blossomed in recent years as a field in which investigators explore and examine, at once, the necessities of mediated and modern life, the material ordering of social relations, and the hopes and imaginings attending to global connections that underpin much

[2] T. Loloum, S. Abram and N. Ortar (eds), *Ethnographies of power: A political anthropology of energy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

[3] R. Lakshmanan, 'Saubhagya: A dream we dared to achieve', LiveMint, 1 April 2022.

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contemporary politics.[4] A parallel literature directs attention to the materiality and agency of the infrastructure of modern life, including the vast networks that both entangle and isolate human and non-human powers, highlighting the complexes of material connections, actions, and reactions that only eventually, and contingently, come to gain wider social meaning.[5] Both strands of the literature provoke further questions about the ways in which people engage with, and negotiate, dispute, challenge, or comply with infrastructure programmes, especially the smaller-scale schemes, interventions, and pilots that are often the precursor to large-scale projects. These bodies of work compel us to critically engage with arguments that people's encounters with development projects depoliticize them by institutionalizing governmental rationalities among them.[6]

The focus on political socialities distinguishes the ethnographic account presented in this article from the attention given to material forces and instrumental logics of infrastructures emphasized elsewhere.[7] While appreciating the value of charting material connections that challenge the static symbolic and material associations that restrict accounts of infrastructural politics and powers to arbitrarily bounded confines, such accounts neglect the 'social appropriations to which material assemblages are subject, and through which they take form'.[8]

Infrastructures provide populations with points of popular leverage. Akhil Gupta suggests that, notwithstanding the diverse failures of development programmes in India, farmers seek to make strategic use of them in their dealings with local elites.[9] Tania Murray Li proposes that such schemes should be perceived as a terrain of struggle constituted by banal and intimate compromises that animate relations of domination and subordination.[10] Thinking about infrastructures as levers of negotiation, contention, and compromise—rather than as singularly revealing forms of political rationalities that give rise to an 'apparatus of governmentality'[11]—helps to open up conceptual spaces to envisage how ideas pertaining to infrastructures work

[4]N. Anand, 'PRESSURE: The poliTechnics of water supply in Mumbai', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2011, pp. 542–654; B. Larkin, *Signal and noise: Media, infrastructure, and urban culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

[5]B. Latour, *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[6]See, for example, A. Escobar, *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); J. Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine: 'Development', depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and M. Foucault, *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Coll'ege de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Picador, 2010).

[7]H. C. Appel, 'Walls and white elephants: Oil extraction, responsibility, and infrastructural violence in Equatorial Guinea', *Ethnography*, no. 13, 2012, pp. 439–465; Latour, *Reassembling the social*; T. Mitchell, *Carbon democracy: Political power in the age of oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

[8]L. Coleman, 'Infrastructure and interpretation: Meters, dams, and state imagination in Scotland and India', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2014, pp. 457–472, at p. 470.

[9]A. Gupta, *Postcolonial developments: Agriculture in the making of modern India* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1998).

[10]T. M. Li, *The will to improve: Governmentality, development, and the practice of politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[11]M. Foucault, *The government of self and others: Lectures at the Coll'ege de France, 1982–1983*, (ed.) A. I. Davidson; (trans.) G Burchell (New York: Picador, 2011).

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in practice. Against perspectives that portray infrastructures as conduits of governmentality, this article highlights the unintended politicization of populations who negotiate such projects.

Daulat Bibi's dispute with her elected representative resonates with popular negotiations vis-à-vis electrification projects documented by ethnographers of energy infrastructures.[12] In disputing the location of electricity poles in their village, Daulat Bibi and her neighbours were careful to emphasize their relationship with the state and membership of the broader political community. Such emphasis departs from an emerging body of work that highlights the performance of sovereignty of populations who resist energy infrastructures in their neighbourhoods.

Indeed, Jamie Cross's fascinating ethnography reveals the material effects of the absence of energy infrastructures in rural India.[13] The English word 'current', which refers to the flow of electricity, is vernacularized into *karant* to describe the movement of electricity from poles and wires into everyday life. As he notes, rural India's electricity infrastructures do not just distribute electricity, they also distribute inequality. The disputes over the location of electricity poles in Rahimpur illustrate its residents' attempts at negotiating such distribution of inequalities. Against the ward member's attempts to concentrate all decision-making to himself and his technocrats, the disputants insist on having a say in the location of the electricity poles. Their insistence resonates with similar entanglements between people and the politicians who exercise power over them.

In her prescient intervention, Amita Baviskar urges social analysts to consider the entanglements between large-scale infrastructural projects and people's responses to them.[14] She underscores the need to eschew the dichotomous lenses through which development projects and resistance to development are viewed. Based on her fine-grained analysis of the gigantic Sardar Sarovar hydro-electric project implemented by the Indian Government in central India, she criticizes the view that people likely to be displaced by the project eagerly await the perceived benefits. Her ethnography also interrogates the view that the potentially displaced people are singularly against the project and want to resist it at all costs. Rather, Baviskar notes the manifold, often contradictory, perspectives among people who are affected by the project. In general, she notes that even as some are pleased with the compensation, others resolutely resist the project, while many try to engage with the implementation of the project in order to better understand the situation and make meaning of it. Her work enlivens us to the complexities underpinning projects of improvement and popular responses to them. In a similar vein, Gail Omvedt reminds celebrity activist Arundhati

[12] S. Strauss, S. Rupp and T. Love (eds), *Cultures of energy: Power, practices, technologies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). See also M. Degani, *The city electric: Infrastructure and ingenuity in postsocialist Tanzania* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); D. Mains, *Under construction: Technologies of development in urban Ethiopia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); and D. Powell, *Landscapes of power: Politics of energy in the Navajo nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[13] J. Cross, 'No current: Electricity and disconnection in rural India', in *Electrifying anthropology: Exploring electrical practices and infrastructures*, (eds) S. Abram, B. Ross Winthereik and T. Yarrow (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 65–82.

[14] A. Baviskar, *In the belly of the river: Tribal conflicts over development in the Narmada Valley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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Roy (and all of us) that people's 'refusal to be victims of development does not mean an opposition to development; they would like a share in it; they would like it to be just and sustainable'.[15] Drawing on her rich ethnography on people's negotiations with improvement schemes in Indonesia, Tania Murray Li also arrives at a similar conclusion, and insists on highlighting 'specificity, locatedness, ambivalence, contradiction, dissent, errors, disasters, regrets, and the hierarchies of gender, class and brute force' that characterized their politics.[16]

The arguments in this article follow recent ethnographic studies that reflect on popular politics in post-colonial contexts. These studies urge us to appreciate the wide variety of negotiations that make up poor people's political practices in post-colonial India and which step beyond binaries of coping and resistance.[17] Drawing on these literatures, I understand negotiations as an ensemble of interim exchanges between transient collectives of people who come together for the purpose of solving specific problems.

The semiotics of infrastructure: The case of electrification

Electrification provides a powerful entry point for an appreciation of the semiotics of infrastructure. Early accounts situating electrification in its social context tended to assume its independence of social influences. This view suggests that electrification determines cultural and political processes rather than being shaped by it. Lenin's famous quip that communism was Soviet power combined with electrification is instructive in this regard. The introduction of the electricity grid was imbued with much promise across the ideological spectrum: Henry Ford was no less a proponent of electrification than Lenin. The Soviet animation film for children titled 'Onward to the Shining Future: Plus Electrification' provides a fascinating example of the anthropomorphic qualities with which governments imbued electricity poles. The film shows electricity poles marching across the diverse landscapes of the Soviet Union and other East European nations to an exciting musical score.[18] The English subtitles, starting approximately two minutes into this nine-minute film, read:

> Through the village, one by one, power poles rise up and run
> How the wires hum with spark keen, that's a sight we've never seen
> Its a sight not seen in dreams, now the Sun in darkness gleams.

Indeed, in the policy literature, electrification projects, like other infrastructure projects, are often embedded in a teleological narrative whereby their introduction is mechanistically assumed to pull people out of the drudgery and misery of their lives. These accounts do not specify the ways in which the vulnerability, powerlessness,

[15] G. Omvedt, 'An open letter to Arundhati Roy', 1999, available at: http://insaf.net/pipermail/sacw_insaf.net/1999/000249.html, [accessed 14 May 2024].

[16] Li, *The will to improve*, p. 157.

[17] See, for example, I. Roy, *Politics of the poor: Negotiating democracy in contemporary India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); D. Maiorano, S. Thapar- Björkert and H. Blomkvist, 'Politics as negotiation: Changing caste norms in rural India', *Development and Change*, vol. 53, no. 10, pp. 217–248; and U. Chandra, 'Rethinking subaltern resistance', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 563–573.

[18] The film is available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvhhjayTB74, [last accessed 6 January 2015].

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and discrimination that mark poor people's lives will be addressed by electrification. Mining coal and damning rivers—the basis of electrification—is an impoverishing process when seen from the point of view of those displaced. Roads may facilitate the movement of labourers hoping to secure livelihoods and reclaim their dignity in urban areas. But they also facilitate the extraction of surpluses and movements of troops in ways that may be inimical to rural residents. Any teleological belief in the efficacy of roads or electrification to poverty reduction would have to account for the existence and reproduction of the urban poor, for whom access to neither is a problem. This scepticism is to be distinguished from a postmodernist dismissal or disavowal of such infrastructural interventions and a romanticization of a preservationist stance. Instead, the suggestion here is more modest: any celebration or condemnation must be rooted in the specific circumstances of the intervention.

Social scientists have long attended to the specific social and political circumstances of infrastructure. Extending a semiotic understanding of energy infrastructure, Akhil Gupta reminds us that the absence of electrification is almost universally considered a source of deprivation, not only from the point of view of 'built things' and 'knowledge things' but—perhaps more importantly—'people things'.[19] Electrification is commonly believed to result in the improvement of people's lives. Consequently, governments commit to linking people to electricity grids, although poorer populations may in fact not be able to use electricity because of the expectation that they will pay for it.[20] The urban poor, often compelled to live in informal settlements whose legality is not recognized by governments, may find that electricity companies refuse to officially provide electricity connections but unofficially allow them to tap into power lines. The situation is rural India, however, is very different: political competition and the organizational abilities of (richer) farmers have made the provision of *free* electricity an important electoral platform.[21] Politicians in rural India commit to, at least rhetorically if not always in practice, redressing the deprivation caused by the lack of access to electrification without making their constituents pay for it.

Electrifying India

Of the 1.3 billion people in the world *without* electricity in 2011, 300 million lived in India alone. Although governments and political parties in the country sought to politicize the uneven pace and spread of electrification from time to time, the Congress-led United Progress Alliance (UPA) explicitly committed to providing electrification for all rural households in its campaign manifesto during the 2004 elections. After being unexpectedly swept to power, the government instituted the Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana, named in the memory of India's former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, with the goal of extending electrification to all rural habitations across the country.

[19] A. Gupta, 'An anthropology of electricity from the Global South', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 555–568.

[20] A. von Schnitzler, 'Citizenship prepaid: Water, calculability, and techno-politics in South Africa', *Journal of South African Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 899–917.

[21] S. Kale, *Electrifying India: Regional political economies of development* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

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India's constitution lists electricity as a state subject, which means the country's 29 states are responsible for undertaking the electrification of households in their jurisdictions. Under the aegis of the scheme, therefore, the West Bengal state government selected partially electrified[22] villages for intensive electrification in February 2010. I happened to be living in a ward of one such village at that time, undertaking ethnographic fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on the ways in which local government in India shaped poor people's lives. The village was located in Maldah district, ranked by several official agencies as among India's 100 poorest districts and certainly among the poorest districts in the state in which it was located, West Bengal. I call this ward Rahimpur.[23]

The news that 35 electricity poles had been allocated to this ward generated an important spark. Rahimpur already possessed a distribution transformer which routed power to a hundred-odd houses located around the main village square, which belonged to the relatively prosperous Shaikh Muslim families who dominated the socioeconomic and political life of the village. Five electricity poles catered to the needs of these households, and consequently suffered from high load. Several households, especially the more precarious Shaikh Musim and Dalit Hindu families, sourced electricity connections illegally, further increasing the load. Entire hamlets—such as those in which impoverished Shershabadiya Muslims lived—had no access to electricity. For the ward's Congress politicians, this was an excellent opportunity to drive home their argument that their Congress Party was indeed the party committed to the welfare of the people. For these politicians, the arrival of the poles represented one of the successes of electing a Congress government. For me, the discussion spawned by the arrival of the poles proved to be a fortuitous occasion to observe the ways in which people in Rahimpur negotiated with their local government, elected representatives, and other politicians and political mediators. It also encouraged me to reflect on the meanings people attributed to infrastructures of power, most obviously to politicians who held office but also vis-à-vis electricity, fast emerging as a basic need in an India that was, in 2010, witnessing rapid rates of economic growth, a burgeoning middle class, and global adulation as a 'Rising Power' on the basis of its impressive gross domestic product.

By the time the poles arrived, my presence in the locality as a harmless student from faraway England was somewhat taken for granted. As a male from the Kayasth community, a privileged community among Hindus, the son of a (deceased) private sector employee (my mother's work as a charity worker did not count of course!), with some ancestral property in Delhi, India's capital, I had already been accurately marked as a person who had benefitted from the same social, economic, and political processes that had oppressed many of my interlocutors. My acknowledgement of my privilege was welcomed by them, and they eventually came to find my presence more amusing than annoying. I could therefore be a 'fly on the wall' during the furious exchanges on the topic without the worry that my being there would distort people's interactions with one another and with their elected representative, the ward member Babar Hossein.

[22]Partial electrification in official Indian parlance refers to any village where less than 10 per cent households have a legal electricity connection.

[23]Social and demographic details about Rahimpur are presented in greater detail in Roy, *Politics of the poor*, pp. 128–142.

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Part II

Enchanted infrastructure: Electrification, progress, and improvement

When the poles arrived in Rahimpur, it was a year since Babar Hossein had been elected ward member. As in the rest of West Bengal State, the Congress Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), were directly pitted against one another. Unlike the state, where the CPI(M) had held power for over three decades, Maldah had remained a Congress stronghold throughout that period. Rahimpur ward, however, frequently changed sides. Babar Hossein was a member of the Congress Party. In a closely fought election, he had narrowly defeated the CPI(M) which had held office from 2003 to 2008.

I happened to be hanging out with Babar and his associates at his office when he received the call on his mobile phone from the Panchayat Office that 35 poles had been allocated to Rahimpur and were on their way. His exuberance knew no bounds. He spoke of the arrival of the poles as the fulfilment of the dreams of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, whom he adored to the point of reverence. They also represented the fulfilment of the vision *they*—Babar and other Congress politicians—had seen for their co-villagers. With the arrival of the electricity poles, the village would be one step closer to modernity. Its condition would improve, as would the condition of its inhabitants. '*Gramer unnati hobey*' (The village will witness *unnati*, the Bangla word for improvement), he gushed, to indicate his belief that life in the village would improve with electrification. His associates agreed wholeheartedly. The gap between Rahimpur and the nearby Maldah town would be further narrowed, averred Akbar Ali. A new era would dawn. It would only be a matter of time before the sleepy village would 'become like' Maldah (*Maldah'r moton*), suggested Alauddin Ali. For far too long, especially because of communist 'misrule'—Babar Hossein did not fail to repeat—the village had remained a backwater. Now, finally, it would 'catch up' with Maldah (*Maldah ke dhore phelbe*).

Babar decreed that the electricity poles would be installed in consultation with a technical team of electrical engineers. Once installed, they would be connected with the transformer. A group of technicians had already completed their survey of the locality under his supervision. They knew exactly where it would be feasible to erect the poles. They then generated a map which they shared with the ward member. He in turn confided its contents with only his closest associates, Akbar Ali, Abdur Rehman, and Alauddin Ali—and made it clear to his colleagues that they were not to share these contents with anyone else, because he did not want what he considered to be unnecessary discussion of the matter. He feared that his adversaries in the CPI(M) might use the contents of the map to foment opposition to his plans. Nonetheless, he was confident that Rahimpur's residents, especially the ward's poorest people, would completely acquiesce to any decision he took. The possibility of isolated instances of dissent could not be ruled out. But that, he believed, would be limited to a few 'unreasonable persons' (*ajuktipurno manush*). As he mused, 'Who does not want *unnati*?'

Akbar Ali was less sanguine. He feared that the ward's population might not be as enthused as they were about the electrification project. Households could be impacted in several ways. Their connection to the grid via the allocated pole was only one among many considerations. The physical location of the pole might be too close to the entrance of a household, to which the occupiers might object. Or the wires might

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pass too close to their windows. As one of the most committed Congress Party workers in Rahimpur, Akbar Ali had a pulse on his co-villagers' collective opinions. He had been at the forefront of the campaign to get Babar Hossein elected. He could thus claim with some justification to really understand the mood of his village. He also noted the setback to the CPI(M)'s reputation because of its heavy-handed interventions in Singur and Nandigram a few years earlier[24] and was loathe to let Babar repeat its mistakes.

As we shall see, Akbar Ali's fears were not entirely unfounded. Rahimpur's residents refused to uncritically embrace the electrification drive promoted by their elected representative, although they were just as unwilling to uncritically reject it. Recognizing that the ramifications of installing the electricity poles exceeded its technical aspects, Akbar Ali insisted that they involve the people in their discussions. 'If there are any objections they could be made right away. Who is afraid of conflict? If there is an issue, it has to be resolved. If we hide from it today, it will "find" us tomorrow.' Abdur Rehman and Alauddin Ali worried that consultations would lead to so much discussion and conflict that 'it would be impossible to take decisions'.[25] Eventually though, Babar Hossein and Akbar Ali compromised. They agreed to consult households directly affected by the installation of a specific pole. By convening meetings with households in a single neighbourhood, they reasoned they could avoid large-scale gatherings, while at the same time, they would be able to tell critics that they had in fact consulted the public. Babar remained convinced that, consultations notwithstanding, villagers would acquiesce to his decisions.

He and his associates agreed to begin their trek through the village with the neighbourhoods whose inhabitants were known Congress supporters and sympathizers. However, they would not ignore the neighbourhoods that supported the opposition CPI(M): indeed, the electrification exercise was an important method of recruiting voters at the expense of the CPI(M), they reckoned. They also agreed to begin their discussions with the most impoverished among the Congress supporters who they expected to be less confrontational about any doubts or concerns they might have. Early successes were more likely to bolster their chances of persuading the entire population to accept their proposals. By the end of their discussions on planning the operation, the Congress team had convinced itself that a grateful village would agree with their proposals. With the exception of Akbar Ali, they expected their operation to be over in about two hours.

The use of power

The next morning, and over the two subsequent days, Akbar Ali's worst fears were confirmed. The Congress politicians' proposals were disputed at each one of the proposed locations. What was expected to be a walkover took three days, with seemingly endless discussions. More than once, Babar fumed: 'Let the poles be taken away. They will never

[24]The CPI(M) eventually lost power in the state during the legislative elections of 2011, a year after the fieldwork was over.

[25]Hanging out, Nani's Chai Kiosk, Rahimpur, 13 February 2010 (approx. 6.30 pm to 8.00 pm). All cited matter until the next footnote is from this source.

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be seen again.'[26] Alauddin Ali threatened his interlocutors: 'If we return the poles to the block, *you* will be responsible.'[27] Akbar Ali pleaded: 'This is a lifetime opportunity. Don't waste it.'[28] But Rahimpur's inhabitants, some of whom were staunch supporters of Babar Hossein and his Congress Party, remained unmoved by their persuasion. They carefully considered their ward member's proposals. While they agreed that the village needed electrification, they disagreed with his approach and insisted that people be *collectively* consulted. Despite not intentionally coordinating their stances, inhabitants of the ward's various neighbourhoods seemed to engage in a collective action that was, simultaneously, not collective.

Babar and his colleagues tried to highlight the common good towards which they were using their power so that Rahimpur's residents would benefit. In referring to their power, they used the Bangla term *khomota* to impress their stance upon their interlocutors. That same term also undergirded people's complaints that they could not be bullied by those in power. Arild Ruud notes that *khomota* can denote several meanings in English.[29] One has to do with authority. Thus, it might be said that Party X attained *khomota* in the elections: this would relate to the assumption of formal authority by Party X. Or, it might be said that Person X has *khomota* to refer to the informal authority that they might wield. Groups possess *khomota* as well, so it might be said that Group X wields *khomota* at the state level.

A related meaning of the term has to do with command over resources. For instance, it was standard male gossip (the kind to which I was privy) to refer to other men's *khomota* (or otherwise) to 'raise' a wife, as in '*bou pala'r khomota*'. This would refer not only to the authority that men were expected to wield over their wives or to their sexual prowess (or, for that matter, to the sexual prowess of women), but also to their ability in terms of earning and providing for a family. It was also used to describe the physical or mental ability of individuals, to describe the ability of Person A to think or of Person B to walk, for instance.

Another meaning, the one that Ruud is more inclined to pursue in his study, has to do with an intentionality centred view of power. In this rendition, *khomota* refers to power, 'the capacity an individual has to mobilize others, into action or non-action, a capacity for "getting things done" or making others agree, inspiring confidence, arousing interest or enthusiasm, or "forcing" people'.[30] *Khomota* then refers to the ability to mobilize consent and recruit cooperation. It is not only about possessing resources, but about negotiating a relationship.[31]

[26]Hanging out, Rahimpur Ward, Locations L11, L25, and L2, 13–15 February 2010.

[27]A block is an administrative jurisdiction that organizes rural development in India. A cluster of villages makes up one block, so block officials are responsible for the development and governance of the villages within their jurisdiction.

[28]Hanging out, Rahimpur Ward, Location L5, 13–15 February 2010.

[29]A. Ruud, *Poetics of village politics: The making of West Bengal's rural communism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

[30]Ibid., p. 65.

[31]The use of the term *khomota* is often distinguished from *shakti* or *bal*, which refers to physical strength. It is also different from *probhab*, which is used more directly to refer to influence. And it is also distinct from *probhutto*, a word that is often invoked to refer to supremacy: an example might be '*amerika'r probhutto*' to describe American supremacy.

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Indeed, the way in which my interlocutors used the term *khomota* linked it more closely to control over resources and relationships. Poor people, or *gorib manush*, were typically referred to as people with little or no *khomota* since they possessed neither resources nor commanded relationships. By contrast, people like Babar, Akbar, Abdur, and Alauddin, who either held public office or had access to it, were considered to have more *khomota*.

It was not only control over public office that conferred *khomota* on them, however. Each of the four individuals were scions of landholding families of the region. They and their families recalled with pride their origins as direct tenants of the zamindar of Muchia under the Permanent Settlement, the colonial-era law that made landlords not only collectors of revenue but also owners of the land. Direct tenants such as the ancestors of the four Congress politicians emerged as the real masters of the countryside, since the zamindar was mostly an absentee landlord. These tenant-landlords, I was informed by each one of the four politicians, were responsible for maintenance of law and order, the upholding of principles of justice and punishment, and responsibility for the welfare of the villagers. Such welfare, sceptical villagers who worked on the fields of the Congress politicians or leased land from them cautioned me, usually meant advancing loans at exorbitant rates, providing starch water meant for buffaloes when families starved, and meeting the tiniest of infringements with brutal punishment. The abolition of the Permanent Settlement by independent India's first Congress government stripped absentee landlords of their rights and considerably enhanced the *khomota* of their direct tenants. They supported the Congress Party and became its committed members. They became the 'big men' (*bodo lok*, in Bangla) who buttressed Congress rule in the countryside during the first two decades after India's independence.

The emergence of the CPI(M) as a political force in the state challenged the *khomota* of the *bodo lok*. Led by the sharecroppers and tenants, the CPI(M) stormed to power in the state of West Bengal and introduced agrarian reforms that directly undermined the *khomota* of men like Babar Hossein, Akbar Ali, Alauddin Ali, and Abdur Rehman. The challenge from the CPI(M) made their families even stauncher supporters of the Congress Party. But they realized they could no longer make a living out of agrarian incomes. Although little of the land they held was redistributed, tenancy reforms meant that their share of the crop was considerably reduced. Moreover, CPI(M) activists ensured that sharecroppers were no longer penalized if they did not deliver the crop to the landlord: rather it became the landlord's responsibility to collect their share. In the evocative metaphor deployed by a landless labourer who described the most important change he had witnessed in his lifetime: 'The CPI(M) tamed the *bodo lok*,' he said, referring to Babar Hossein, Akbar Ali, and others. 'The roaring tigers have now become purring cats.'

However, that *khomota* was not a zero-sum game which destroyed social relations could not be ignored. Negotiating relationships was key to maintaining *khomota*. The political emergence of the middle peasants and sharecroppers supporting the CPI(M) did not lead to the economic and social decimation of landlords affiliated with the Congress Party. Hierarchical relations were certainly disturbed but did not completely collapse, as Abdul Bari, one of Akbar Ali's many sharecroppers and affiliated with the CPI(M), testified. After each harvest, Akbar Ali insisted that Abdul Bari deliver the share of the produce on the very day he completed his tasks. At each insistence, Abdul Bari

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told his landlord he could not afford to. With each rejection, Akbar Ali threatened to send musclemen to confiscate the produce. At each threat, Abdul Bari dared him to do so. This cycle was enacted season after season for at least seven years, I gathered from Abdul Bari's account. What was striking for me was the repetition of the cycle as neither Abdul Bari nor Akbar Ali appeared too keen to exit what was obviously a fraught relationship. And, to the best of my knowledge, the men Akbar Ali threatened to unleash on Abdul Bari never actually materialized. Both described *the other* as crucial to maintaining their own *khomota. Khomota* here begins to resemble 'a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation'.[32]

The threat to their privileges compelled Rahimpur's landlords to diversify into other professions. Akbar Ali became a labour contractor supplying workers to construction companies in Delhi and other urban centres in north India. Abdur Rehman doubled up as a homeopathic practitioner. Alauddin Ali hired out machinery to the smaller farmers in the vicinity. Babar Hossein contested elections, a move his detractors alleged was aimed at bolstering his private agricultural income with rents from public office. His wife was studying to become a doctor ('a proper doctor, not like him', he told me often, pointing to Abdur Rehman). In a context where politics was entwined with everyday practices, all four gentlemen wore their political affiliation on their sleeves and were explicitly associated with the Congress Party. They were called, and revelled in being called, *congress netas* (Congress politicians). 'We stayed with the party when there was no one to even lay the floor mats,' Akbar Ali recalled. Affiliation with the Congress Party most likely offset some of the loss in *khomota* that they experienced with the emergence of the CPI(M) and its implementation of land reforms. But it is important to recognize the alternative sources of *khomota* on which Congress politicians could draw.

Rahimpur's residents did not deny that the power used by Babar as their elected representative and a member of the Congress Party that ruled the district may well have been of benefit to them. In what appeared to be a recognition of the generative and productive use of power to which Foucauldian scholarship has directed our attention, they appreciated that Babar having *khomota* could have beneficial consequences, especially when it came to making available crucial infrastructure such as electricity poles. What annoyed them was Congress politicians' *blackmail* (the English word was used by my interlocutors) that if the villagers did not do as they were told, they would forfeit the poles.

Disputing power

Rahimpur's residents were especially annoyed with the more practical aspects of Babar's efforts. In Masjid *pada*, one of the very first neighbourhoods that Babar and his team visited, their women interlocutors ridiculed the timing of their visit. Masjid *pada* was one of the impoverished neighbourhoods where the majority of voters were known to be Congress supporters. Shefali Bibi and Arif Miya lived here. Shefali Bibi remonstrated with her ward member that he had chosen a bad time for such discussions. At the time of Babar's visit, her husband Arif Miya was in Maldah town,

[32]M. Foucault, 'The subject and power', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, pp. 777–795.

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where he worked in brick kilns or on construction sites depending on the availability of work. She explained: 'Men take these decisions. They are away at work. We don't understand these things. What is the point of talking to us?'[33] Shefali and her neighbours expressed their inability and unwillingness to commit to agreeing to Babar's proposals regarding the location of the poles. They were unsure about the nuances of the proposed arrangement. Consequently, they refused to endorse any decision without consulting their husbands. Some of the more vocal women accused Babar of conspiring to time his visit in such a way that none of the real decision-makers would be available. Babar protested that he had to keep in mind the technicians' availability—and they could not possibly be expected to come in the evening, after their working hours. Moreover, it would be dark in the evenings, which would inhibit accurate marking of most of the locations. He even invoked the notion of women's empowerment, suggesting that they were, after all, 'equal to men in all respects, and more so in household decision-making'.[34] His interlocutors giggled at this. None of them consented to be talked into agreement.

Babar and his associates realized the futility of continuing to try and persuade them and decided to revisit the sites the following day. They told their interlocutors to ask their husbands to be at home the following day. Shefali Bibi protested that such a request would mean the loss of a day's work and wages. If her husband waited until late in the morning for Babar, he would lose out on an opportunity for any work at all for the entire day. And that would imply the loss of an entire day's wage. How could Babar Hossein even contemplate making a request like that? At that point, Akbar Ali intervened and assured both Shefali Bibi and Babar Hossein that he would find a way to talk with her husband and secure his agreement. From what I gathered, the matter remained unresolved till the *next* evening, primarily because Arif Miya and Akbar Ali could not agree between themselves about the potential location of the pole.

Babar and other Congress politicians' assumption that impoverished people in neighbourhoods with sympathies for their party would offer little or no opposition to their proposals were wrecked. Even more difficult challenges awaited them than their failure to convince Shefali Bibi and her neighbours to agree with their proposals. The disagreements spawned by Babar's proposals were of four types. Most commonly, people disputed the technically feasible location for the installation of the poles because the proposed locations encroached on their homesteads. Others objected to the proposed overhead route of the transmission wires that would connect the poles to the houses they were to service: the objection was that these wires would pass over the roofs of existing mud houses, or be too close to their doors and windows. The third sort of opposition, of the kind that Daulat Bibi and her neighbours made, was directed against plans to install poles in locations where they would block the doorways through which people entered or exited their homesteads. A fourth set of objections arose against the technicians' proposals to install the poles at street corners, where people feared they would obstruct the passage of vehicles. Each of these objections was advanced, supported by an appeal to the politicians to be *shotheek* (correct, fair in this case). The politicians responded by requesting plaintiffs to be *juktipurna*

[33]Hanging out, Rahimpur Ward, Location L26, 13 February 2010.
[34]Ibid.

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(reasonable). Their people countered such allegations of unreasonableness by asking their politicians not to bully or blackmail them just because they had power.

Reason against justice: Conflicting claims of the common good

An analysis of the disputes in Rahimpur directs attention to the way appeals to the poor to be reasonable (*juktipurna*) conflicted with the popular perspective that justice (*nyay*) had to be done. Several meanings permeate the oft-mentioned term *jukti* and its cognates, *juktipurna* (being reasonable), *ajuktipurna* (being unreasonable), and *juktiheen* (without reason). One interpretation of the term *jukti* imbues it with a transcendental quality of thought and argumentation: there appear to be certain standards that can be applied to determine adherence to *jukti*. Adhering to these standards makes a person *juktipurna*. These standards apply to the nature and the structure of thought/argumentation. Thus, a *juktipurna* argument could be one that critically considers all aspects of a certain viewpoint: in this sense, it may be contrasted with a self-serving (or, for that matter, overtly altruistic) argument. It could also refer to an argument that is presented calmly and without excitement (even if it might be entirely self-serving): in this sense, it may be distinguished from the public display of emotion and passion. In another interpretation, the term is associated with the connotation of being 'sensible', emphasizing a contingent and relative meaning. Adjudging a person as *juktipurna* would involve considering the context in which they were making an intervention. Babar and his colleagues appear to primarily use the transcendental quality of the term in order to coax their co-villagers to think about the greater common good of the village, although the normative connotations of being sensible and thoughtful weigh heavily in their exhortations.

The most numerous disputes pertained to Babar Hossein's proposals to install the electricity poles in people's privately owned homestead properties. In 25 of the locations, the owners of the modest plots complained that the proposed locations encroached into a part of their property. Consequently, they feared their property's devaluation. Such devaluation would prevent them from benefitting from the anticipated spurt in real estate values that would occur when the village would become part of Maldah town, 'as it surely would', my interlocutors assured me time and again. They were 'thinking ahead',[35] said Sirajul Islam. A marginal farmer with four years of primary education, he and his family of five lived in a single-storeyed mud hut. When Babar and his associates arrived at the spot marked L22, they realized that the site was located in Sirajul Islam's homestead property. Sirajul Islam refused permission to allow the pole to be located here. Alauddin Ali and Abdur Rehman followed up and asked Sirajul Islam to be reasonable, or *juktipurna*. If everyone began to only think about themselves, how would the village's condition improve, they asked? People had to be reasonable, to think of the common good of their village and to make sacrifices. Improvements in life demanded that certain comforts be foregone, they emphasized.

Their intervention irritated their interlocutor. Sirajul Islam retorted by alleging that the Congress politicians were being unreasonable (*ajuktipurna*). How would Babar Hossein like it if he, Sirajul Islam, trooped into his house with an entourage and asked him to erect electricity poles on *his* plot? As others before him, Sirajul Islam turned

[35]Hanging out, Rahimpur Ward, Location L22, 13 February 2010.

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to Akbar Ali and asked him do what was right (*shotheek*) and just (*nyayjyo*). Eventually, Babar's team of technicians identified an alternative public spot where the pole could be erected.

The tension between reasonableness and justice haunted Babar's team throughout their negotiations with Rahimpur's people. The exchanges at the spot L16 exemplified these tensions.[36] The aforementioned Daulat Bibi, a destitute widow, lived on the property adjacent to this location with her teenage daughter. She objected to the proposed installation as it would block the entrance to her homestead property. Babar dismissed her objection by telling her she did not own the public space. The exchange that ensued went along these lines:

> Daulat Bibi: The door to my house opens outwards. If you erect a pole there, I won't be able to open it.
> Abdur Rehman: Well, get a new one made. [Laughs] Make sure it opens inwards though. Ask [her neighbor who did some carpentry].
> Daulat Bibi: And your father-in-law will pay for it, isn't it? I can't afford it. Do you know how much it costs? Can't you move the pole just a little bit?
> Abdur Rehman: Babar can't listen to everyone now, can he? Don't you see how much he's doing for everyone? Why are you being so unreasonable?
> Daulat Bibi: I am being unreasonable? I am a widow, with an unmarried daughter. [Breaks into sobs] You come here and mess with my space. And then you call me unreasonable. Is this fair? [Turning to Babar. Babar looks away]
> Alauddin Ali: Look, we are trying to speak with you to make you understand (*bujhiye bolchhi*). Do you understand what an important thing this is? It will improve the condition of the village. You will thank us for it. If you object, you will be ruining any prospect for the village's improvement.
> Daulat Bibi: It can't be more important than my moving in and out of my own house. If you erect that pole here, I will have to build a new door. I don't have any money for that. [Continues to sob] If my husband would have been here, he would have taught you a lesson for talking to me like that. I have always been a Congress voter. Is this the way to treat me?

Approximately four-to-five of Daulat Bibi's neighbours, small and medium landowners who usually voted for the CPI(M), gathered at the spot after hearing the commotion. They lost no time defending her.

> Neighbour 1: Now, look here. You are *chengras* (lads) of this locality. You grew up here. Just because you are in a political party doesn't mean you boss around us.
> Neighbour 2: You should stop behaving like *babus* (bureaucrats).
> Neighbour 3: She might be a widow. But she is not alone. Don't think you can oppress (*atyachar*) her.
> Neighbour 2: Let's see how you install a pole here against her wishes.
> Neighbour 3: We will not let any injustice (*anyay*) happen to her.

[36]Hanging out, Rahimpur Ward, Location L16, 15 February, 2010. All cited matter until the next footnote from this source.

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Layered upon the oppositional construction between reasonableness and justice are tussles over meanings of reasonableness. Both Sirajul Islam and Daulat Bibi baulk at Babar Hossein's characterization of them as unreasonable, and do not allow him to appropriate the mantle of reasonableness. Indeed, they aver that Babar and his team of technicians and politicians are unreasonable for making these kinds of demands upon impoverished villagers. Both repudiate his attempts at characterizing them as unreasonable people. Such contestations over the production of reasonable subjectivities pit the trustees who dream of the improvement of their village against the villagers whom they believe to be under their tutelage. The exchanges between the self-appointed trustees and Rahimpur's villagers was not, therefore, only one of identifying the locations for installing electricity poles. The exchanges represented disagreements over what it meant to be a reasonable person in the context of schemes designed for Rahimpur's improvement.

Shekhar Shil, a 55-year-old farmer who owned one *bigha* of land and had completed primary education, objected to the placement of the poles at the corner of the path. The technicians had proposed to install the poles at the T-point at which the mud path leading to Shekhar Shil's house intersected with the laterite path that connected Rahimpur ward with the neighbouring Dokkhin Hajra ward. Shekhar Shil and his neighbours pointed out that such a location would encumber the passage of motorized vehicles. The presence of an electricity pole would prevent larger vehicles from turning into the mud path or out of it. Two of his three sons attended the village school, and the eldest was reading for a degree in History at a college in Maldah town. He and his wife cultivated the one *bigha* of land they owned and leased two more *bigha*s from wealthier neighbours. They deployed their own family labour on the fields. Nonetheless, he and his wife expected their situation to improve over the next generation or so, especially after their sons began to earn. Although he acknowledged that his sons might not be interested in staying in the village, he anticipated that he and his wife would continue to live here, in the very same neighbourhood.[37]

> My son will have a car. He will come to visit us. And then, this pole will be standing here … My son won't be able to drive through. He won't be able to turn his car into this path. What good will come of placing this pole in the middle of the road, at the T-point? Can the technicians not shift the pole ever so slightly?

Babar was at first taken aback. He then burst into mocking laughter and told Shekhar Shil:

> In the BPL survey [an official survey to identify households living 'below poverty line'], you tell me you have nothing to eat. Now you are telling me that your son will have a car in ten years. Your son doesn't even have a moustache yet. Don't be unreasonable (*ajuktipurna*): think about the future. When your son starts earning, I will come and remove the pole from here. Don't worry.

[37] Hanging out, Rahimpur Ward, Location L5, 15 February 2010. All cited matter until the next footnote is from this source.

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But Shekhar Shil held his ground. By now, he was joined by three of his neighbours. All of them protested at the proposed location of the pole with the same argument: what was to happen when cars would be commonly used for travel, when visitors would come calling, when sons and sons-in-law would buy their own cars. Babar Hossein smirked at their protests and told the technicians to take note of these 'dreams'. At this Shekhar Shil retorted:

> We are poor today. Does that mean we will remain poor tomorrow? We too have dreams … I am poor today. Does it mean that my children cannot lead a better life tomorrow? Will he not be able to buy a car (*gaadi*) tomorrow? We work hard. We save as much as we can. We do not gamble. Nor do we drink. I have dreams for my children. Are you trying to tell us that we should have no reason to dream (*amader shopno dekhar jukti ki*)? What is this injustice (*eta ki anyay, bolo*)?

Against Babar Hossen's exhortations asking them to be reasonable, Shekhar Shil and his neighbours posit the reasonableness of their own and their children's future. They deflect their elected representative's characterization of them as unreasonable by emphasizing their 'reason' to dream. But they went further. Shekhar Shil and his neighbours appropriate the association that Babar tries to make between being reasonable and thinking about the future. It is *they*—Shekhar Shil and his neighbours—who are thinking about the future and therefore being reasonable. Babar Hossein is only concerned about the present. Shekhar Shil and his neighbours noted their prospects for the future with hope. Against the mockery heaped by their elected representative, they defend these prospects. Indeed, they subject his assumptions to scrutiny and criticism, and interpret his demand on them to be reasonable as unjust and do not hesitate to tell him so.

Tussles over the interpretation of being reasonable remained enmeshed in the recurrent tension between being reasonable and being just. While Rahimpur's residents rejected nomenclatures labelling them as unreasonable, they were quick to point out the injustice of their politicians' claims on them. In most cases, Rahimpur's Congress politicians were identified as people with *khomota*. When they demanded acquiescence to their proposals from Rahimpur's inhabitants, the latter advanced their own claims in the name of justice. By positing a vocabulary of justice against their politicians' vocabulary of reason, they were able to prevent the installation of electricity poles at the sites where they believed that their current and future interests would be harmed.

Part III

Negotiating power

'[I]t is always good to remind ourselves that we mustn't take people for fools', Michel de Certeau tells us during his reflections on the practice of everyday life.[38] Infrastructures are sites of negotiation between populations and those with power. They are not—at

[38] M. de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

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least not invariably and only—about reproducing the political rationalities of governmentality. The disputes over the installation of electricity poles were as much, if not more, about Rahimpur's residents negotiating the power of their political elites as they were about agreeing on locations through which their homes would be powered.

The negotiations between Rahimpur's people and politicians resonate with what Asef Bayat has called 'social nonmovements': the 'collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognisable leaderships and organisations'.[39] Rahimpur's residents did not organize to mount collective opposition to Babar Hossein's proposals: they could not, since their elected representative refrained from convening a village meeting and preferred to meet individually with inhabitants of neighbourhoods where he thought he could persuade them to comply with his proposals. Their disputes did not stem from an ideological aversion to modernity, development, or improvement. Nor were they ideologically committed to Babar's CPI(M) opponents: if anything, as we have seen, it was often supporters of his own Congress Party who disputed his proposals.

It is not that Rahimpur's residents did not organize at all. They did, to support the claims made by their neighbours—men and women like Daulat Bibi and Shekhar Shil. But such organization was transient: no committees were established, no parties were formed, no movements were launched. Any collectives that formed were temporary and dissolved once their specific demands had been achieved: as soon as Babar Hossein and his party colleagues backed off, the residents went their own way. Their exchanges with their elected representative were provisional, however. They did not routinely oppose what he had to say. They listened, they objected, they pleaded, they got angry, but then they listened to him some more. The provisional nature of their exchanges makes it difficult to offer any flattened trope within which the disputes over electrification in Rahimpur can be subsumed.

The disputes analysed in this article serve to highlight the attempts by Rahimpur's population to ensure that the electrification programme conforms to their needs, values, and collective understandings of the common good. Against suggestions that state-led development interventions depoliticize populations, the account presented here reveals a considerable *politicization* in Rahimpur.[40] The population opposes Babar Hossein's proposals for the installation of the electricity poles for many reasons, none of which has to do with any ideological opposition to electrification, much less any sort of inscrutable antipathy to development. Contrary to what post-development scholars would have us believe, Rahimpur's population look forward to being part of that process and to benefit from it, not to oppose it.[41] Neither compliant subjects nor contentious revolutionaries, they negotiated with their politicians, hoping to influence the electrification programme in ways that would maximize their benefits and minimize their costs.

[39] A. Bayat, *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 14.

[40] Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine*.

[41] Escobar, *Encountering development*.

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Indeed, each of the 35 poles allocated to Rahimpur was eventually installed in the village. In almost all cases, the installations were near, but not at, the spots originally identified by technicians. The worries of Shekhar Shil, Sirajul Islam, and their neighbours were accommodated and the location of the poles shifted appropriately. Where this was deemed technically inappropriate, such as outside Daulat Bibi's door, Babar Hossein approved panchayat funding to replace the hinges of her door so it opened inwards rather than outwards. By the end of the year, almost all Rahimpur's houses had obtained electricity connections. In subsequent years, electrification gathered momentum across India, eventually being completed in 2022. Underpinning this achievement was the politicization of millions of Sirajul Islams, Daulat Bibis, and Shekhar Shils across India.

Politicization, rather than governmentalization

In an important intervention that situates infrastructure and imaginations in comparative perspective, the anthropologist Leo Coleman laments the ways in which social appropriations of the material assemblages that make up infrastructures continue to be neglected.[42] Whereas the literature that charts the material associations of infrastructural projects is undoubtedly valuable, social scientists ignore the social appropriations to which material infrastructures are subjected at their own peril. The account in this article takes up this challenge by directing attention to the politicizing, collective, interpretive work that shapes infrastructure and affords them shared meanings.

Drawing on my detailed ethnography of an incipient electrification project in rural West Bengal, I illustrate the myriad ways in which people dispute their elected representatives' decisions about the installation of electricity poles in their neighbourhood. Their disputes reveal their evaluation of the electrification project in relation to their own hopes for their future, to which the infrastructures themselves may or may not be relevant. Conflicting claims of the right and the good are advanced, disputed, and negotiated—belying the ward member's assumption that his visions for the improvement of the village would prevail without question. People dispute the technically feasible location for the installation of the poles because the proposed locations encroached into their homesteads. Others object to the proposed overhead route of the transmission wires that would connect the poles to the houses they were to service. Yet other objections are directed against plans to install poles in locations where they would block the doorways through which people entered or exited their homesteads. A fourth set of oppositions arise against the technicians' proposals for installing the poles at street corners, where people feared they would obstruct the passage of vehicles.

The arguments advanced by my interlocutors—men and women such as Sirajul Islam, Daulat Bibi, and Shekhar Shil—chime with recent advances in the literature on the politics of infrastructures that remind us that technological infrastructures are not socially neutral. Their social appropriations reveal that, although infrastructure projects may comprise efforts by political elites to extend their power over society,

[42] Coleman, 'Infrastructure and interpretation', pp. 457–472.

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they are not always successful examples of governmental rationalities. Against the thesis that development interventions depoliticize populations, this article illustrates the vigorous politics they spawn among affected populations. That infrastructures politicize people rather than governmentalize them may eventually be their most enduring legacy.

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