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Patronage as Politics in South Asia

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Chapter

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India's demotic democracy and its 'depravities' in the ethnographic *longue durée*

6

Anastasia Piliavsky

In the spring of 2012 the Socialist Party in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) won a landslide election to the State Legislative Assembly.¹ The victory became India's political event of the year, marking the return of the notoriously corrupt and criminalised political party to the helm of India's flagship state. A year earlier in 2011 political activist Baburao 'Anna' Hazare had gone on an indefinite anti-corruption hunger strike, which became the most dramatic political statement made in the same country that year. The stated ambition of Hazare and his (mostly middle-class) followers was to wipe the tarnish of corruption off India's biggest political trophy: its status as the 'world's largest democracy'. Celebrations of India's democratic boom and lamentations over its corruption crisis are equally audible in political statements made at home and abroad. Reports on the UP election were but an instance of this bipolar view.² Here commentators noted that while electoral participation reached some of the highest national and global levels, peaking in 2012,³ corruption also rose to astonishing proportions, even by South Asian standards.⁴

¹ This chapter benefitted from discussions with Naor Ben-Yehoyada, Mattison Mines, and especially Piers Vitebsky and John Dunn. Its earlier version was presented at the Department of South Asian Studies at Harvard, whose participants I thank for their useful comments.

² For anthropologists' remarks on the spread of 'corruption' and political 'criminalisation' in the press, see for instance Béteille (1994, 565), Gupta (1995; 2005) and Parry (2000). On India's democratic boom, see Banerjee (2007) and Yadav (2009a; 2009b).

³ The first round of polling in the 2012 elections in UP saw a record voter turnout of 62–64% (Election Commission of India). Compare this, for instance, to voter turnout at the local council elections in the South East of England: 44.3% (Louise Stewart. 2012. BBC. 'England: Local Elections, One Week to Go'. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-17855636>).

⁴ Between 2002 and 2007, the last time the Socialist Party was at large in UP, 51% of the Legislative Assembly had criminal histories, giving the party the accolade of

This paradox raises several questions. How can the two Indias—the populist and the corrupt—exist side by side, and not just coexist, but also seemingly reinforce one another? Why do so many Indian citizens continue to elect so many corrupt politicians into office, supporting what looks like rampant political chaos in their state? Why do the reportedly widespread depravities of India's political life fail to instil endemic apathy in its electorate? And what does this tell us about the relation between 'democracy' and 'corruption'—and indeed about what democracy is, what it is not, and what we hope it may be—not only in India, but also in the wider world?

This chapter invites readers to reflect on these questions by taking them on a tour of rural Rajasthan at the time of the 2008 State Assembly Election. As we watch the run-up to polling date in the market town I shall call 'Danapur', we will learn about the sentiments behind voters' choices, and indeed about what causes them to vote at all. We will also learn about how politicians and their electors relate to one another, what hopes people invest in their political leaders, how politicians try to win their votes and what disappointments await both on the other side of the polls. To a political scientist much of what I describe—the feasts organised by politicians, the distribution of cash and gifts, and the popular choreography of supplication—will look like 'clientelism', or the purchase of votes. I will argue here, however, that the participants' own sense of engagement in electoral politics rejects this view. As they see it, the choices they make are not instrumental, but distinctly moral: grounded in what they see as the sound basis for political authority, in how they imagine good politicians and good relations with them, what obligations they think these relations entail and how they envision a worthwhile political life as a whole. Needless to say, in Danapur just as elsewhere in the world, politicians constantly betray this moral vision. But the cynicism of practical politics does not destroy its normative sense. No matter how often electors may be disappointed by politicians, and indeed grow despondent about politics as such, they continue to judge political leaders and make political choices through a widely shared value set.

goonda raj, gangster rule (*Financial Times* 2 May 2007, 11; *ibid.* 6 March 2012; also Michelutti, Chapter 12 in this volume). A recent pre-election study of candidates fielded by the major political parties in the province revealed that more than a third had criminal histories (Ians 2012).

In rural Rajasthan, the normative logic of electoral politics is substantially articulated in the old and widespread idiom of ‘patronage’—the relation of donors and servants—which substantially defines the roles and obligations involved in the electoral process. This relational formulation shapes politicians’ styles, voters’ preferences and popular modes of political participation. It also informs the ways in which people make political demands, insist on accountability and define ‘corruption’.

The normative form I call ‘patronage’ is not confined to political and economic life but shapes relations on a much broader temporal and social scale. To give a sense of this scale, I cast my ethnographic snapshots in the ethnographic *longue durée*, drawing on the largest archive of cumulative anthropological wisdom about patronage in South Asia. This archive is the body of *jajmani* studies, which has long been confined to the dustbin of South Asianists’ research themes, but which still hold lessons of vital substance for anyone who attempts to understand subcontinental politics today. I do not call on the *jajmani* archive in an antiquarian spirit, to rehabilitate vintage ethnography for its own sake. Nor do I argue that the same set of practical arrangements once observed by anthropologists in the villages are still replicated throughout South Asia (or that indeed they ever were). I invoke it instead to draw attention to some durable *relational principles* of north India’s rural political life, whose import cannot be grasped without awareness of their historical and social reach.

Know Wiser?

In 1936 William Wiser, an American missionary and Chicago-trained anthropologist, described what he called ‘the Hindu *jajmani* system’ in a little book entitled just that. He wrote that in a north Indian village where he conducted research, castes (*jatis*) related to one another through formalised, durable and often inherited exchanges of services for payments and gifts:

The priest, bard, accountant, goldsmith, florist, vegetable grower and so on are served by all other castes. In turn each of these castes has a form of service to perform for the others. Each in turn is master. Each in turn is servant. Each has his own clientele comprising members of different castes which is his ‘*jajmani*’ (1936, 10).

In the days of positivist, village-bound ethnography Wiser's neat formulation had great appeal and an entire generation of anthropologists followed suit, proceeding to describe jajmani exchanges in villages across the subcontinent's length and breadth. Over the next 5 or so decades, what Wiser originally described as an *order of rules and conventions* was consolidated by anthropologists into a pan-Indian 'system' that bound villages into closed exchange communities.⁵ At the height of the jajmani era (1960s–1970s) this system appeared as a rigid structure of transactions with a single 'dominant' patron family at its head: a 'system corresponding to the prestations and counter-prestations by which the castes as a whole are bound together in the village, and which is more or less universal in India' (Dumont 1980, 97). This 'system' took on 'a life of its own through the various simplifications and idealizations of innumerable textbooks and lecture courses' (Good 1982, 31). The reification of *relational principles* into a *transactional system* went hand in hand with the installation of an immutable, age-old village republic—an Indian 'village-community' *à la* Henry Maine (1861)—at the centre of South Asianist anthropology (Caldwell 1991, 3).

By the early 1980s, the jajmani edifice began to crumble. Critics argued that it was at once too broad and too narrow an analytical category. Some observed that it was neither a pan-Indian nor an age-old phenomenon but an institution observed only on a very limited historical and spatial scale.⁶ Others pointed out that its origins, once presumed to have medieval (Beidelman 1959) or even ancient (Gough 1960, 89; Wiser 1936, xxv) provenance, could only be traced back in written record to the mid-19th century, or perhaps even to Wiser's 1936 account.⁷ Yet others showed that jajmani-type relations were not restricted to villages, but extended far beyond village bounds into broader political, economic and ritual spheres.⁸ They were as

⁵ For classic examples, see Kolenda (1967), Mandelbaum (1970, 161–162) and Dumont (1980, 98ff).

⁶ See Commander (1983, 287), Neale and Adams (1990, 52–54) and (Fukuzawa 1972).

⁷ See Mayer (1993), Commander (1983), Fuller (1989) and Raychaudhuri (1984, 9).

⁸ Chris Fuller (1977), for instance, argued that historically people made jajmani offerings to village-based jajmans as much as to supra-local military elites and that it is only colonial meddling with the local political and economic structures that truncated jajmani exchange, leaving anthropologists with the artefact of a village-bound, 'caste-based economic system' (Fuller 1977, 107–109; 1989; also Wolf 1966, 47–57; Karanth 1987, 2217).

much a feature of exchanges *within* castes as between them.⁹ By the late 1980s, anthropologists reached a consensus: given the great variation in the contexts and ways in which jajmani relations manifested themselves,¹⁰ the ‘system’ did not correspond to any actually observed phenomenon and therefore it did not exist.¹¹ Its demise was in keeping with the spirit of the times, which saw the last days of village ethnography (Fuller and Spencer 1990).

This shift precipitated broader changes in Indian anthropology, some positive and others less so. Among the former was the ousting of the myth of a timeless village republic. Among the latter was a wholesale, and rather counterintuitive, disappearance of patronage from the radar of Indianists’ concerns. One might have expected that, once rescued from its village island, patronage would acquire a new lease of life, especially given its persistence in current politics. Instead, patronage altogether vanished from anthropologists’ writings, including the burgeoning literature on electoral politics, corruption and the state.

The trouble with the jajmani critics, no less than with its advocates, was that they tended to see village relations as *transactional networks*, or sets of exchanges with a materially predetermined form. The more they got involved in either erecting or dismantling the transactional framework, the more they neglected the shared substance of what they saw—the ideas that shape the transactions. Whereas for Wisner the ‘system’ was a set of ‘rules and conventions’ which took on various material forms, three decades later this was a rigid transactional structure. While dismantling this structure, its critics lost

⁹ Anthony Good showed that prestations that have been conventionally treated as exclusive to customary exchange between service-castes and their jajmans were also part of exchange *within* castes at various rites of passage (Good 1982, 26; also Raheja 1988b).

¹⁰ These included different identities of participants, the types of payments and services involved, the frequencies of exchange and the tenure of such relations, among other things.

¹¹ In Simon Commander’s summary, ‘the fragmented and rather partial sense in which the *jajmani* structure can be found to be functioning’ bears ‘a very dim resemblance to the pure model’ (1983, 307 and 310), that is jajmani exchanges did not add up to an isolable, village-based, intercaste exchange ‘system’. On variation in payments, see Grierson (1926 [1885], 317–322), Lerche (1993, 246) and Kothari (1994). The final blow was Chris Fuller’s seminal article in which he pronounced that ‘there is no pan-Indian *jajmani* system of the patron-client type’ and that the term is ‘a complete misnomer’ (1989, 37 and 41).

sight of patronage as a widespread and durable *relational mode* that embodies the principles of relatedness and exchange (Karanth 1987). Yet, as the critics themselves convincingly showed, jajmani relations never added up to an isolable, self-contained, material system, but permeated an extremely wide range of settings—from the formal political to the informal and intimate, between and within castes, in households and around the marketplace. These principles still inform—if often in new material forms—modern political processes.

What jajmani studies crucially showed was that in South Asia 'patronage' was not an economically or a politically isolable institution, but a pervasive social norm that contained the key principles of relations at large. The donor-servant relation was the basic formula through which people exchanged things, exercised power and related socially, and through which their identities effectively took shape. Classic accounts highlighted the degree to which personal and group identities were bound up in this relation, which was thought to contain in a concrete and visible form the basic principles of caste and hierarchy at large. This totalising view may jar with mainstream styles of current anthropology, but it underscored an essential point that often escapes analyses of today.

Patronage was not a transactional and purely economic practice but an existentially vital form. Giving was not only an act of exchange but also an intrinsic aspect of the way donors and recipients related to, and defined, one another. As the 'Chicago school' analysts (led by McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden) showed, gifts quite literally carried the donors' selves to their recipients, conveying the patrons' 'bio-moral substance', as Indianists used to call the sum of corporeal essence and social standing comprising Indian personhood (Marriott 1976).¹² Jajmans were thus not just important economic and political agents. They comprised a socially

¹² Marcel Mauss (2002 [1925], 70–77) thought that Indian society illustrated this proposition perfectly. The notion that Indian gifts, paradigmatically food, carry the giver's nature has been discussed in great detail by South Asianist ethnographers (recent overviews include Heim 2004 and Copeman 2011), who developed Mauss' idea of transposition of self through gift exchange into a full-fledged theory of substantive contingency. This theory was pioneered by the Chicago 'transactionalists' led by McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden, who argued that in India exchange was a substantively constitutive process, in which gifts (most importantly food) carried the givers' nature (e.g., Marriott and Inden 1973; 1977; also Parry 1986; Raheja 1988a; 1988b).

constitutive force.¹³ Food was the honoured and paradigmatic gift and ‘feeding’ and ‘eating’—both the act and the metaphor—was the crucial link between donors and servants, which offered as vivid an image as there can be of the internal entanglement between those who give and those who receive. As I show in this chapter, the acts and expressions of ‘feeding’ and ‘eating’ have not lost their moral efficacy as links between citizens and political leaders. The logic of mutual constitution remains indispensable to relations between South Asia’s politicians and their followers, to the way local political communities are formed, and indeed to some meanings of ‘political representation’ in rural India today.

Jajmani studies taught us another important lesson. While South Asian patronage entailed an asymmetry of status, it did not necessarily prescribe an imbalance of power. Each party depended on the other, economically, politically and ritually. As Wiser insisted, the system ‘contained a mutuality that was lacking in the [European] feudal system’ and the Euro-American notion of ‘patronage’ as top-down bossism (1936, viii). Wiser’s view was probably far too benign and it overlooked abuses present in the system, but his insistence on the basic mutuality of the donor–servant bond distinguished jajmani studies from most other accounts of patronage, which presented patrons as largely independent wielders of power over their clients and patronage as a top-down system of domination. As later ethnographers showed, jajmans often relied on servants just as much as servants depended on jajmans. The patrons’ superior standing prevented them from performing various tasks, requiring them to commission services needed to maintain their standing. Jajmans needed servants not only to uphold their wealth and political supremacy, but crucially to maintain the ritual purity which ensured their place at the top. The servants’ prerogative to transform landlords into patrons, thus authorising the patrons’ ‘rule’, gave servants a certain degree of leverage over their overlords.¹⁴

Finally, jajmani studies suggested that giving alone was never enough and that to have moral import, it had to be put on display. This idea is iconically represented by the public distribution of grain

¹³ On the significance of patron-deities for contemporary political parties in India, see Michelutti (2008, esp. Chapters 3 and 6; also Chapter 12 in this volume).

¹⁴ For an historical account of protests staged by the low-caste Chamars, see Dube (1998).

to servants on the jajman's threshing floor. As we shall see, display remains crucial to exchanges between voters and politicians and to popular deliberations about 'corruption', or how Rajasthani villagers distinguish between (virtuous) 'gifts' and (immoral) 'bribes'. But let us now turn to Danapur to see all this at work.

Feast in the time of elections

In November 2008 the town of Danapur was ablaze with festivity. Shop fronts, temple walls, billboards, lamp-posts and boulders on roadsides were plastered with the insignia of India's two main political parties—the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Parishad (BJP). From the early hours of dawn loudspeakers in the bazaar blared out echoing loops of party slogans and instructions to 'vote for the hand' or 'vote for the lotus' (the respective icons of the Congress and the BJP).¹⁵ All day long brightly coloured processions and jeeps full of youths raced through the narrow streets of the town, dispensing sweets, leaflets, firecrackers and caps to children who quickly disseminated them in the town. Excitement reached fever pitch when on the day before the election a retired Bollywood star descended in a helicopter onto a local cricket field. This hullabaloo marked the run-up to the Rajasthan State Legislative Assembly Election, a much anticipated and celebrated event, a 'great festival', as one woman put it, 'grander than any wedding'.¹⁶

The bazaar was abuzz with talk of politics, and there was a great deal to discuss. For almost two decades the BJP had been at large in the town, and all the important appointed and elected officials were its members. The current MLA from the locally dominant farmer caste was in his third term in office, but in recent years he was losing support. Having done close to nothing for his constituents, he stopped spending time in the town and his car was sighted less and less frequently as it raised clouds of dust on its way to and from his new home in the state capital, Jaipur. Even the BJP bosses had not seen him for months on end. This left the BJP without a reliable candidate. The Congress, meanwhile, was too deeply divided to put forward a viable contender, and several independently running candidates suddenly came to the fore. Some were deserters from the fractious

¹⁵ On Indian ballots (and since 2004, electronic voting machines) parties and candidates are designated with icons which can be readily identified by illiterate voters.

¹⁶ See Mukulika Banerjee's descriptions of elections as festivals in rural Bengal (2007; 2008).

Congress and others were pawns put forward by one of the parties to detract handfuls of votes from competitors. For almost a month, not a day passed in the smallest of villages without jeep-loads of party henchmen, festooned with banners and spewing mottos through megaphones, racing through.

At the centre of the festivities were electoral feasts (known usually as *bandaras* or *savamanis*),¹⁷ hosted by candidates. Until 2013, when the Election Commission cracked down on electoral feasting, at times of election in Rajasthan feasts were held everywhere, in villages, town squares and middle-class 'farm houses'. They could be simple meals for a dozen under a tree or vast banquets at which thousands might eat. Electoral feasting is a tradition dating back to the first elections held in independent India in 1952, and not only in Rajasthan.¹⁸ Today reports on electoral feeding, some of which is very elaborately ritualised, still come from all corners of India.¹⁹ Consider, for instance, this:

Tribal communities in Arunachal would pledge their support to a certain candidate over a feast of roasted *mithun* (domesticated gaur or a wild ox) and vote accordingly on polling day. This practice had been traditionally passed down the generations. The system ... is that the most influential member of the community offers to sacrifice a *mithun* to exhibit his loyalty to the candidate or the party. Anyone from the community who joins the feast is expected to support the candidate throwing it. At the end of the meal the local leader makes a declaration and all those who have partaken of the meal pledge their support to the candidate concerned (Rana 2006, 158).

A more recent report on the electoral race in Himachal Pradesh tells us that 'No election victory, and sometimes even a loss, is complete without big mutton feasts' in the state: 'supporters of many candidates have already purchased goats from shepherds' (*Times of India* 2012).

¹⁷ *Savamani* is formally a feast offered in the name of the gods, especially the god Hanuman known locally as Balaji. It derives from the Hindi words *sava* (one and a quarter) and *man* (a weight unit equal to 40 kg). Thus the host must offer '50 kilograms', in other words, a vast lot of food.

¹⁸ An elections manual of the time noted that 'feeding the voters is a matter of very common experience' (Srivastava 1957, 328).

¹⁹ For more descriptions of electoral feeding across the country, see Subha (1997, 77ff) on Kerala, and Vij (2010) on northern Rajasthan.

The ultimate election-time feast takes place on the eve of the polling day, during the all-night electoral vigil known as the Murderous Night—or *katal ki raat*—a tradition dating back at least to the early 1950s.²⁰ During the Murderous Night (or more often during 2 or 3 nights before an election) the contestants' henchmen dash from village to village in a last-minute bid to feed and, most crucially, provide drink.²¹ From the middle distance, this may look like vulgar pork barrel: the buying of poor villagers' votes on the cheap. But this is not how the residents of Danapur, including some of corruption's fiercest local critics, see it. For them, the ability to provide is the politician's duty, and if you ask any child in a Rajasthani village about what politicians do, they will readily tell you: 'they feed!' (something they experience during elections, if hardly at any other time). Politicians certainly complain that their opponents buy votes or confuse voters' judgement by getting them drunk the night before polling dates. But when they themselves feed and water their electors, they say that this is what people want. And indeed, people are disappointed when food and drink fail to arrive. 'Feeding' is not just about putting food into people's mouths. It is also crucially about generating bonds that last, what one may call loyalty. The language of feeding is the key moral idiom in which people evaluate politicians and conceive of the ways in which politicians relate, or ought to relate, to their constituents. As one old man put it, 'When a politician puts bread into people's mouths, people know that he is their man, they trust him, their heart rests with him. There is love (*prem*) between them'. Or, in the words of a young girl from a herder (Gujar) caste, 'political leaders feed us from the heart (*man se*)'. One old woman said: 'it is the duty (*dharm*) of politicians to feed us. If they feed us, we give them our votes'. Loyalties and their procurement are never this clear-cut, and voters cheat no less than do politicians. They may take freebies, but they never do so in public view. Children and youths may hop from feast to feast, eating from this and that candidate, but no self-respecting adults do.

²⁰ Adrian Mayer, personal communication.

²¹ *Katal ki raat* is a term adopted from Muslim celebrations of the Muharram festival, in which the vigil commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein is held on the ninth evening called the 'Murderous Night'. The term also refers to other eves of major transitional events, whether before a wedding night or before the announcement of the Indian Administrative Service examination results. In the electoral context, the reference alludes to this being the final battle among candidates.

'You can fill your stomach today' (by feasting with different candidates) said one farmer, 'but then you have to live in the village for the rest of your life'.

As politicians pursue electors' loyalties, they often put on magnificent shows of largesse. At village feasts they dish out not only food but also crockery, blankets, clothing, bottles of alcohol and promises of the much coveted fruits of 'development' (*vikas*): hospitals, roads, electricity and shortcuts through the bureaucratic maze. The gifts they give are themselves promises more than anything and they express a politician's commitment to continue to give. Every South Asianist can conjure a host of colourful images of patronage as communion, be it a spectacle of royal largesse or a grain heap divvied up on the jajman's threshing floor. Voters' expectations of provision express unambiguously the idea that politicians stand above ordinary men and that their primary duty is to provide. This hierarchical sense is reflected perhaps most plainly in the honorifics, like *maa-i-baap* (mother and father), *dada* (grandfather or elder brother) and *anndata* (bread giver), which are commonly used to address politicians in rural north India.²² Taken together, the titles of parent, grandparent and feeder express the conception of patron as genitor and provider, as a source of both sustenance and personal substance for his clientele.²³ Bonds between feeders and eaters run deep, and people describe them in terms of trust and love, provision and protection or, in one formulation, as ties that transcend the give-and-take logic of reciprocity: 'a pukka politician gives from the heart—he gives all the time, before and after we give him our vote, whether or not we give him our vote'. In the ideal, the donor–donee relation creates a structure of mutual obligation, which makes politicians accountable—in hopes if only rarely in practice—and which gives people leverage to press demands on politicians and lay claims to the goods of the state (e.g., Subrahmanian 2009).

²² Thomas Hansen has argued that in Indian cities reference to political leaders as *dadas* (literally 'elder brothers' or 'grandfathers') has largely displaced the older language of *maa-i-baap* and *anndata* (2001, 72). In the decade of research I have conducted, I have noted that in much of rural and provincial north India this is not so; here the terms *anndata* and *maa-i-baap* are still in wide use. Besides, the term 'grandfather' or 'older brother' (which prevail in *urban* 'dadaism') preserve the hierarchical logic of more traditional honorifics.

²³ Historically, the titles *maa-i-baap* and *anndata* have been used across northern India in reference to all kinds of patrons: landlords, gods, kings, bureaucrats and so on.

The cosy vision of moral bonds is a far cry from how politicians in fact perceive and pursue electoral competition—as a race to win, by whatever means. Yet to advance their campaigns they appeal, unsurprisingly, to the pervasive moral logic of donor–donee relations. As one candidate put it, ‘these people are very simple, very innocent—if you feed them, they will give you their vote’. The ‘innocence’ of the villagers is their apparent preference for commensally meaningful feasts over financial profit. ‘They would rather fill their stomachs and drink their fill’, he added, ‘than put shoes on their children’s feet; but of course if they want me to act like their bread giver, I will’, he added meaningfully. As another political boss reflected, ‘A politician must feed and care for his constituents, just like a father. We treat all these people here like our own children’, he said with a wink, ‘Who will feed them, if we do not?’

Politicians ceaselessly promise to ‘get things done’ (*kaam karna*) for ‘their own people’ (*aapane log*), to deliver exactly what they think voters want: not generalised improvements to policy, but concrete, targeted benefits such as roads, water, electricity and jobs, stopping just shy of guaranteeing better harvests and heavier monsoons. But promises are not enough. Voters demand instantiations of the politicians’ will and capacity to provide. During elections, candidates need to put on a show of superiority, but this superiority must be carefully calibrated to display a proper balance of intimacy and supremacy, to be above-standing but not too distant, an attitude one might describe as populist grandeur. In the run-up to elections, the choreography of populist grandeur is everywhere on display: the politicians’ magnanimous vague nods of the head, waves of the giving palm or the superior’s form of the *namaskar* greeting, and the bystanders’ genuflections, accompanied by the cries ‘anndata’ (bread giver) and ‘Jay ho!’ (May you be victorious!).

Despite mounting charges of corruption from the Election Commission and litigious political rivals, feasts remain the best—both the most convincing and cost-effective—ways to promise largesse. So contestants continue to bend over backwards to host feasts whose logistics require increasing ingenuity. How do you hide a party for 1000 people? In 2012 there were reports from UP that candidates organised bogus weddings in order to host banquets. In the summer of the same year then India’s Chief Election Commissioner, Dr S. Y. Quraishi, told me that one of his officers walked into one such ‘wedding’ in UP, only to find, to his great amazement, neither a bride

nor a groom, but a crowd of more than 1000 people enjoying food and drink (personal communication, August 2012).²⁴ There are other ways to hold smaller-scale feasts: birthdays, for instance, which are hardly ever celebrated in Indian villages, become strikingly fashionable during elections.

So why do politicians go through such Gogolesque rigmaroles to risk criminal conviction while hosting public banquets, if all they need do is buy votes? Legal pressure has pushed public feeding increasingly out of view with the result that more and more politicians nowadays offer voters cash behind closed doors. In Danapur gangs of young men often go door-to-door in the night, offering cash on behalf of their political bosses. A close friend's description of one such nocturnal visit in Danapur is revealing:

I woke up in the middle of the night because I heard knocking at the front door. I opened it and saw two young boys. I recognized them, they were our neighbours. Nice boys, you know, one of them was that Brahmin lawyer's son. So, I let them in and asked whether something had gone amiss. They came in and at first they didn't say anything. Then Kalpesh [my husband] and my mother-in-law woke up. So, I asked the boys to come in. They sat down right here, on this couch, and one of them put down 1000 rupees. That's when I understood what they were up to. My husband asked what the money was for, and they said: 'BJP'. Our family has always voted for Congress, so Kalpesh refused to take it. They didn't say much of anything else. When I was showing them out, they threw the money into my hands and ran away. Kalpesh saw this and you will not believe the row we had that night! He told me the money was dirty and that I should throw it away. This money, he said, has the filth of politics (*rajniti ki gandbagi*) on it. He said this money will ruin us. But I thought: why should I throw

²⁴ See also Alekh Angre. 2012. 'Politicians Have Ingenuous Ways of Using Black Money for Elections'. *MoneyLife*. <http://www.moneylife.in>. In response to such reports the Election Commission of India has been keeping a closer watch on the weddings, sometimes to comic effect. In 2013, for instance, a wedding party in Bangalore was called off because the Commission suspected a feast for 1500 people of electoral corruption. Its representative said: 'in a large congregation, it's very difficult to determine who is [a] genuine guest, whether one is a party agent or not, etc'. (*Times of India*, Bangalore edition, 19 April 2013, 'Polls Throw Spanner in Wedding Feast').

it away? Politicians have lots of money and they eat people's money, so why shouldn't I take some too? I still voted for the Congress. We always vote for the Hand [the Congress symbol].

The domestic brawl provoked by the visit dramatised the moral tension that riddles political competition. When the cynicism of the electoral game, the hoarding of votes to win the race, is laid as bare as it was in this case, people react with moral disgust or instrumental contempt. Financial accounts (no doubt incomplete, but still revealing) of the local BJP caucus, which I was shown by one of the party's senior members, suggest that the money allotted to 'individual donations' quickly disappears. Few occupy the moral high ground taken up by my friend's husband, and most take the cash. And why should they not? The shoving of cash into voters' pockets is blatantly not a gift, but a bribe (*rishwat*) that obligates no-one.

Although it is difficult to distinguish 'gifts' from 'bribes' in practice, villagers draw a sharp moral line between the two. Gifts are things donors *choose* to give. They involve the exercise of will—good will directed at others. Like the 'favours' described by Caroline Humphrey in the Russian and Mongolian contexts, the giving of gifts is 'initiatory, extra, ethical, and gratuitous' (2012, 23). In the vernacular people say that gifts come 'from the heart of hearts' (*man se*) and that, as such, they have nothing to do with self-advancement or the helpless necessity of privation, staked by political scientists as the drivers of 'clientelism'. Bribes are, conversely, made 'out of helpless compulsion' (*majburi se*). You can either reject or accept the payment, but, either way, the paying candidates do not deserve votes. Interpretations of the same act vary, and what a politician may construe as a 'gift' may be treated as 'bribe' by the voters. While candidates hope that their constituents will treat all donations as gifts, the only way to ensure that donations secure voter's loyalties is to put giving on display, something that Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) also note. Several senior party bosses (both from the Congress and the BJP) in Danapur confirmed this. According to them, clandestine giving generally convinces few. Indeed, bosses in both parties concluded that because nocturnal visits are often perceived as attempts to buy votes, they may do their campaigns more harm than good. Having spent nearly 150,000,000 rupees on the campaign in Danapur (almost twice what the Congress spent), two-thirds of which was distributed

surreptitiously in cash, the BJP lost the 2008 election. It was decided subsequently at the party caucus that funds for such 'individual donations' should be drastically reduced and reallocated in bulk to 'social charities', like 'weddings' and 'birthday feasts'. Despite some dramatic changes in metropolitan centres, in rural north India elected and appointed officials continue to be popularly styled patrons and are expected, as such, to act as all-giving protectors. Few politicians can live up to such expectations, and fewer yet sincerely try. But during campaigns and, if they wish to carry on, also outside them, they appeal to the widely shared moral trope.

The law of the fishes

Electoral spectacles of munificence are duplicitous, and they manage to fool very few. More often than not, once ballots are cast, the rhetoric of 'good governance' replaces prior promises of generosity. Ordinary people see through these charades, deriding them as 'corruption', a term in as wide a circulation in Indian villages as it is in the international airspace (Gupta 1995; 2005; Parry 2000). The villagers are all too well aware of the gap between politicians' pre-polling promises and their post-polling failures to deliver on them. Most promises are empty and many are in fact undeliverable, even if protagonists were inclined to try. The Bread Giver's role is impossible. One candidate lamented that when he was first elected MLA he kept his doors open, but was soon overwhelmed by requests for latrines, money, schools, jobs and so on. He said (in English):

People here have very primitive thinking. They do not understand politics and they do not understand my position—that I am a government servant only. Instead, they think I am a king or a God who can give them anything they may want. Their thinking is from the olden *raja-maharaja* days. This backward thinking, madam, is the biggest problem in our India, which keeps our progress behind.

While speaking to me he was doing what linguists would call 'code switching', well aware that 'feeding-and-eating' was not my idiom for political life and not the way people like me think about what politicians should do. But with villagers he speaks very differently. Politicians' doubletalk is not just disappointing; it causes much more

comprehensive moral upset. Villagers express the sense of betrayal through a nostalgic contrast between today's 'hungry' (*bhuka*) politician and the apocryphal generous leader who 'feeds from the heart'. 'Once upon a time', said an elderly school teacher, fingering Gandhi's portrait, which hung slightly crookedly on his office's crumbling wall,

our Indian politicians fed the poor and the poor belonged to them, but these days politicians just buy our votes: at elections they promise villagers all kinds of things. But when the votes are cast, they do not even open the windows of their cars when they drive through the bazaar, and nobody can even approach their office.

Most do not wax as lyrical on imaginary Gandhian leaders but denounce politicians as utterly corrupt, scoffing at the neglectful MP as a *kamin*, a 'servant' or simply 'the low'. Indeed, as several anthropologists have pointed out, India is rife with talk of corruption (*bhrashtachar*).²⁵ But in places like Danapur 'corruption' refers to something very different from what it means for Transparency International and in courts of law. The local sense of 'corruption' stands in sharp contrast to the idea of the 'abuse of public office for private gain' (as Transparency International defines corruption). As the residents of Danapur see it, corruption is not the assault on public office, impersonal governance or disinterested abstractions of the modern state. They bemoan instead the betrayal of particularistic, and often deeply personal, relations, lamenting that politicians fail to give consistently or enough and that they take instead of giving, as they sink into greed. While the courts of law may prosecute politicians who throw electoral feasts for 'bribery',²⁶ the electorate on the contrary sees 'corruption' in their failure to feed. When instead of 'feeding' politicians 'eat', they do not just reverse the transaction but turn the normative order of giving into the chaos of avarice. In the words of one farmer, 'all politicians eat from everyone else. If you need any work done and you come into his office, he will take 50 rupees, 10 rupees, a bottle, anything he can eat from you—the dog!' As an elderly Brahmin of my acquaintance noted, 'this is how our Degenerate Era (*kaliyug*) is'.

²⁵ For example, Wade (1982), Gupta (1995; 2005), Parry (2000) and Das (2001).

²⁶ Election cases brought to the Supreme Court today are as full of accusations of 'bribery' with food, alcohol and cash as they were in the first decades of the Republic's existence (Lal 1973; Dundas 1998, 8–10).

He described this Degenerate Era as subject to the 'law of the fishes' (*matsya-nyaya*), when the big fish consume the small or, even more unnervingly, when the small fish gobble up the big (see also Parry 1994, 112–15; Peabody 2003, Ch. 1). 'These days', he explained,

instead of feeding the small people, the big people eat—this is today's dirty politics, child. Oh! At elections they only buy votes, but once they get them, they start filling their stomachs. Just look at our MLA. He is my friend's son and I saw him when he was so small I could hardly see him. But his gut is full now [after fifteen years in power] and he does not even notice me anymore.

This is not about the mismanagement of public funds for private gain but about a different moral order which villagers see being besieged. By inverting the local order of mutual interdependence through the top-down flows of gifts, politicians' greed creates a moral horror reflected starkly in the image of ontological chaos in the degenerate age when fish consume one another. The real 'dirt' of politics lies in its mockery of the dearly held ideal, which candidates invoke only to pervert.

The politicians' cunning goes further, as they shift from the language of kingly largesse to the language of *seva*, or selfless service. Take this campaign speech by one of the candidates in Danapur:

These are not the old *raja-maharaja* days. Everything is different now. The common man (*aam aadmi*) now rules. Before, the common man bowed down (*dhok diya*) before politicians, but these days politicians must bow down before the common man. The 'reign of the kings' (*raajon ka raaj*) is gone; now the common man is king. He has the power of the vote-gift (*mat-daan*) and he has the right to demand service from the government. The politician now serves the citizen. This is our new India. Victory to the common man!

The rhetoric of *seva* is duplicitous and the 'common man' standing below the podium is not taken in by such sermons. Off stage, the same politicians who style themselves 'people's servants' (*lok sevaks*), throw feasts and promise gifts. In reality, everyone knows that politicians neither act nor see themselves as anyone's servants. Nor are they thought of as servants by anyone else.

Their reputations, as we have seen, rely on the opposite image of a beneficent donor, placed conspicuously and unambiguously above the 'servants'. Talk of service is strategic and politicians shape-shift into servants as and when it may suit. In the local idiom, 'servant' means something very different from the servant of state. Servants are below-standing, and they can only receive, never give. When politicians say they are the people's servants, they relinquish responsibility and use a language that abnegates their duty to give. When politicians shuttle between the rhetoric of giving and serving, they deceive their voters in two distinct ways, lying both about what they *can do* and—much worse—about what they *intend*.

The residents of Danapur thought the idea of a state representative, who is part of their government, as a 'servant' preposterous. They thought it inverted the politicians' proper role and the order of government as a whole. Many were indeed furious at the deception. 'How can big politicians serve us, poor people (*garib log*)?' said one woman; 'they do upside-down/crooked (*ulta-shulta*) talk'. 'If we accept our politicians as our servants, how can we ask them for anything?' said another, 'They will say: I am your servant, you are the big man, so you give us money. But what can we, poor people, give?' Village voters do not see themselves as masters over politicians. Instead, they style themselves 'poor men' (*garib aadmi*), the title of inferiority and the term central to making demands on one's representatives.²⁷ Everyone knows that when politicians speak of 'serving the poor', they are speaking the foreign, and indeed menacingly duplicitous 'language of officialdom' (*sarkari boli*). As one young man plainly put it, 'it is the politicians' business to rule (*raj karna*), so they must rule and feed, not eat or serve'. As the schoolteacher I quoted above pointed out, despite Gandhi's language of *seva*, India's great political hero is locally seen as a donor and a great father figure, not a servant. Despite much talk of 'service', when politicians really try to woo voters, consistently invoke the ideal of generosity.²⁸

²⁷ A street-beggar, a devotee, a villager beseeching a lawyer, or a petitioner at a government office calls himself 'poor man' in order to get what he wants. This is also the language of the claims used by voters, and not only in rural Rajasthan, but apparently all over India (Subrahmaniam 2009). In a survey conducted by the *State of Democracy in South Asia* (SDSA), more than 90% of all and 80% of 'rich' respondents presented themselves as 'poor people', producing, as Yogendra Yadav pointed out, 'a significant mismatch between people's "objective" class measured by their income and assets and their self-perceived' level of poverty (2009, 33).

²⁸ For a discussion of the importance of the language of *seva* in politics, see Mayer (1981, 153–173).

Hierarchy, representation and the depravity of competition

Measuring the temperature of popular sentiments of this magnitude is not a task anyone can sanely attempt. What I have described in this chapter is one powerful relational formulation and a charismatic set of orientating values that have long been central to how rural north Indian society operates. Whereas much of South Asianist anthropology today is concerned with urban life, places like Danapur and the villages that surround it still house most of the people on the subcontinent (according to the last Census of India, still more than 60%), and we can ignore their thought worlds only at our peril.

Over the past three decades analysts have commented on the dramatic impact of democratic governance and its attendant ideas (civil society, public sphere, good governance and so on) on the shape of Indian society, claiming that electoral politics have prompted the old values of hierarchy, or ranked interdependence, to give way to the new values of equality and competitive independence. As a result, they contend, the old order of rank has been flattened into an assemblage of increasingly separate groups wrestling with one another over political and economic resources (for an overview of this literature, see Manor 2010b). My ethnography nevertheless suggests that, at least in rural north India, hierarchy remains central to popular politics. This 'hierarchy', however, is not a total edifice built out of Brahminical or any other abstracted, substantive values (as described by Dumont 1980), but rests on a normative logic that casts rank difference as a sound basis for political, and indeed any other, relations.

This logic finds concrete formulation in the donor–servant relation, which, as I show, is the warp and weft of political rhetoric in Danapur. The language of giving and serving shapes the ways in which people envision political authority, what they expect from politicians, the sorts of demands they press on them and the ways politicians style themselves in order to gain citizens' votes. It constructs authority in a way that can hold it responsible by those whom it governs and represents and by whom it is in the end authorised. Acts of 'patronage' which I describe are derided by international critics and prosecuted in electoral law as 'corruption' or the immoral purchase of electors' votes. But, as it is understood locally, acts of patronage are highly moral, and insofar as they express the values of selflessness

and generosity, they are antithetical to haggling and self-interested gain. While blaming one another for selfishness and for greed, both voters and politicians do not see what they themselves do as cynical and they judge one another by the moral standards that they themselves profess. This makes the view that India's democracy has been reduced to a purely instrumental 'give there, take here' affair not only analytically problematic but also empirically incorrect.

The very mention of 'hierarchy' makes contemporary social scientists, no less than lay Western observers, imagine deep conservatism and authoritarianism inimical to the dynamism we associate with democratic life. Indeed, hierarchical values, which offend the liberal master principles of equality and independence, are widely thought to be incompatible with democracy. Yet, as I suggest, in Danapur (and not only there) relations of ranked dependence are fully consonant with electoral politics. More broadly, I suggest that attachments to political leaders as donors, and the hierarchical orientation on which these attachments rest, underpin democracy's efflorescence in rural north India. These observations offer insights of broader relevance to democracy as a prescription for political life—and its relation to what we see as 'corruption'—far beyond rural Rajasthan. They show that by placing people in mutually dependent relationships, patronage does not necessarily imperil democracy's success, but may on the contrary sustain it. Thus, in many places around the world where people may not share the neoliberal, individualist vision of human life, democracy and what we term 'corruption' often go hand in hand. Indeed the more democratically engaged a political system, the more 'corrupt' it appears.

As David Gilmartin (Chapter 5) shows, not so long ago in Europe's own history the fact that democracy required patronage—the politicians' ability to 'influence' voters and the voters' propensity to acquire loyalties and cast votes for one and not another politician—was well-understood. But by now the belief that equality and independence are the only bases for sound democratic rule has obscured the fact that acts of campaigning as much as voting require particular, and at times deeply personal, preferences and attachments. Democracy can thus hardly do without 'patronage'. The liberal rhetoric makes us forget another crucial fact—that electoral politics mediates an intrinsically *ranked* political relationship between those who govern and those who are governed, which is inscribed nowadays in the global binary of 'the government' versus 'the people'. People

who do not find inequality offensive can cope with this fact no worse, and perhaps substantially better, than those who do. And they see no internal conflict between paternalism, with its hierarchical thinking, and democracy's rule.

What we saw in Danapur is not the 'politics of the belly' driven by starvation and greed, as described by Jean-François Bayart in the African context (2009). 'Feeding and eating'—whether literally at electoral feasts or by 'getting things done' for one's people—forms tight bonds between politicians and the electors they feed. As a basis for political relations, this idiom is key to the ways that the residents of Danapur perceive political representation. The cultural content of political representation, as manifest in rural Rajasthan's electoral practices, is based on a robust theory of 'visceral' social contingency, which makes 'eaters' not just economically, but existentially bound to their 'feeders'. It is indeed difficult to imagine a better basis for relating than the intense mingling of personal substance through the passage of 'gifts'. We can judge what relational ideology, whether contractual individualism or hierarchical interdependence, may be better suited to democracy's central aim—the involvement of the largest number of citizens in the governmental process. The successes of Indian democracy, like another rise in voter turnouts in state elections held in November and December 2013, show that relational logics that differ drastically from an outsider's are no less potent a fuel for popular democratic life.

So, where may the real depravities of democracy lie? Electoral politics, as described by both voters and politicians, are cloaked in laments which shade into disgust. Voters say that politicians are stingy and selfish, that they fail on their promises, that they grab and lie and that they take away from, instead of providing for, the poor. Politicians, in turn, say that voters misunderstand modern governance, demanding from them much more than they can in practice provide; and that, having thus set up themselves for disappointment, voters bewail corruption. (Both of these views are not without truth.) If you ask anyone about how they see 'politics' (*raajniti*), they will tell you that it is decidedly immoral and 'dirty', befitting the degeneracy of our times (see also Ruud 2001; Harriss 2005). Perhaps, as Gilmartin suggests, the intrinsic conflict between the normative basis and the instrumental requirements of patronage politics—and I would add any other kind of politics—has always and everywhere made it suspect in the eyes of the ruled. But there is a distinctive element of

democracy that magnifies this contradiction, making politics appear more disappointing to its participants.

Democracy, whether in India, Switzerland or the United States, is a moral scheme. It is an ideal. And, as I suggest in the Introduction, this ideal is necessarily collective. In Washington DC no less than in Danapur it requires people to rise above themselves and act in the name of something beyond their individual interests, whether for a concrete 'community' of 'their own people' or a more abstract social or national good. Democratic ideology of any cultural hue is thus opposed to self-interest and instrumental gain. This is precisely where conflict lies, emerging from the clash between democracy as a *normative form* and democracy as a *competitive practice*. Representative democracy is necessarily a competitive system that sets personal victory as the politicians' goal. Competition naturally predisposes—indeed requires—politicians to pursue selfish aims, causing them to betray democracy's society-minded moral sense. Politicians everywhere hijack society's moral discourse in pursuit of success. This Janus-faced politics is bound to disappoint and to give politics the stench of cynicism and moral rot. This tension is nowhere more strikingly on display than during elections. It is in this conflict that the real depravities of democracy, for Rajasthani villagers and by no means only for them alone, lie.