

Cancelled by conveners: participants are not able to attend the conference.

Panel 27 – Contextualizing ‘Political and Epistemological Challenges’

LIST OF PAPER PRESENTERS AND ABSTRACTS

Rethinking Everyday Politics in India through Ethnographic Research on Student Politics in Uttar Pradesh

Craig Jeffrey, St. John's College, University of Oxford

This paper uses long-term ethnographic research in western Uttar Pradesh (UP) to rethink how politics works at the local level in India. Partha Chatterjee's oft-cited attempts to theorise Indian politics with reference to civil society and political society are problematic in two respects. First, in positing a binary divide between bourgeois and subaltern terrains of politics, Chatterjee distracts attention from important inequalities emerging within local society between lower middle classes and the poor. Second, Chatterjee's lack of engagement with ethnographic evidence of politics as it is prosecuted in different parts of India leads him to rather idiosyncratic conclusions about non-elite political mobilisation, for example that is typically para-legal and violent. I highlight these weaknesses in Chatterjee's framework with reference to research I conducted with student politicians in Meerut, western UP in 2004 and 2005. Students in Meerut frequently came together across caste and class boundaries to mobilize vis-a-vis the state and university bureaucracy. Contra Chatterjee, this politics was not typically unruly and violent; rather, a type of calculated restraint marked student activism in the city as well as a respect for the law and ethic of civility. I also show a section of relatively well-connected, lower middle class students undermined broader collective student action through making money within multiple "fields" of political struggle (they used the English word "fields"), such as the quest to control illegal admissions to local universities and the field of influencing the local police force. In the last part of the paper I reflect on the implications of my analysis for theorizing everyday politics. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, game, habitus, and cultural capital are more suggestive for scholars trying to understand everyday politics in India than the concepts of political society and civil society offered by Partha Chatterjee. One way forward might be to retain the term political society but imagine this terrain as divided into intersecting fields - which never obey formal laws but do tend to reproduce social inequalities, and which are often open to ethnographic analysis by scholars committed to long-term, grounded research.

Saffron Forests: Hindutva in Chhattisgarh

Tariq Thachil, Yale University

This paper outlines how the complex set of interrelationships within the Hindu nationalist organizational ‘family’ reveal as problematic the conceptualization of a ‘political society’ distinct from civil society, and mediating the relationship between state and society. Specifically, I argue that the Sangh Parivar’s efforts to woo lower caste communities through ‘service’ work create classificatory and theoretical problems for Chatterjee’s schema. The work of ‘service’ organizations operating within the Hindu nationalist penumbra has received

increasing attention in recent scholarship on Indian politics. However, there has been little systematic assessment of the impact of these organizations on the electoral performance of the Bharatiya Janata Party. My research seeks to provide such an evaluation through analyzing the recent surge in the BJP's popularity among Adivasi communities in the state of Chhattisgarh in eastern India. I rely on a combination of interviews with Hindu nationalist activists, as well as party leaders and workers for both the BJP and its main political rivals, coupled with a survey I conducted in four districts within the state. My analysis reveals that the effectiveness of the BJP's organizational affiliates working to provide social services to Adivasi populations has begun to pay electoral dividends for the party. By framing their activities as 'service' these organizations are able to gain access to otherwise distrustful communities, and then use this constructed neutrality to political advantage at election time. I outline the myriad ways in which Sangh activists have helped the BJP's cause through creating a cadre of Adivasi politicians for the party, generating a base of youth workers for the party at election time, and through spreading rumors against opposition party candidates. I conclude by discussing whether the success of Hindu nationalists in accruing electoral support from Adivasis communities also facilitates their larger project of reformulating tribal political identity.

Civic spaces and civil individuals in 'political society'?

Philippa Williams, University of Cambridge

This paper draws on qualitative research in contemporary North India to examine what the politics of multiculturalism or difference looks like from a Muslim subaltern perspective. By engaging with the question of Muslim agency in inter-relational urban settings the paper seeks to show how mediation between different citizens and the state takes place and how this promotes experiences of citizenship (see Corbridge 2005: 257).

Unlike the typically illegal and violent spaces of engagement outlined by Chatterjee (2004), this paper documents the creative, generally legal, non-violent ways in which Muslim agencies engaged with the state and other citizens. In the city of Varanasi these have been centrally concerned with establishing complementary civic publics, reproducing civil spaces and protecting the community's reputation as comprising civil individuals and above all good Indian citizens.

Drawing upon the experiences of state *and* societal marginalisation, and within a context of middle-class Hindu hegemonic processes, I therefore argue that Muslim residents articulated the capacity as well as the need to expand their citizenship opportunities by producing improvised, alternative *civic* spaces within what Chatterjee terms 'political society'.

In the name of 'capturing political power': Dalit women, NGO activism and Panchayati Raj

Radhika Govinda, University of Cambridge and Ambedkar University Delhi

Scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Gordon White have raised doubt over the relevance of the conventional dichotomy between 'state' and 'civil society' for understanding the empirical reality of relations between citizens and the state, especially in postcolonial developing countries. They have argued that we need to distinguish further between 'civil society',

‘political society’ and ‘the state’, where political society refers to the range of institutions and actors, which mediate and channel the relationships between civil society and the state. Through the case study of Dalit women first mobilised by NGO-led women’s activism and subsequently choosing on their own to contest the Panchayat elections in southern Uttar Pradesh, I reflect upon how much importance those mobilised by NGO-led women’s activism actually give to the Indian state and to civil society, and whether the distinctions between ‘civil society’, ‘political society’ and the ‘state’ are relevant for understanding the positions and perspectives of all those directly associated with NGO-led women’s activism on involvement in Panchayat politics.

I first examine the Dalit women’s motivations for contesting the elections, and the different sources from which they draw support and inspiration. I pay special attention to the women’s perceived and real relationship with the state in this regard. These women have already been involved in the work of a NGO, which has both collaborated with and challenged the state in ameliorating the condition of their kind. Why do these women now want to contest elections to institutions of local self-government? I then examine the NGO’s position on the Dalit women (who are associated with it) contesting the Panchayat elections. I probe into the dilemmas that the NGO staff and leadership face when it comes to taking a clear stand on the issue of Dalit women fighting the Panchayat elections and aspiring to lead institutions of local self-government. Finally, I explore the factors that have determined the way the women have fared at the elections. I also ask how those who managed to win performed once they were elected, especially whether they were really able to capture and wield political power the way they had hoped.