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Understanding 'political stability': party action and political discourse in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT *In contrast to the party political turmoil that plagued New Delhi during the 1990s, West Bengal is an Indian state that has demonstrated remarkable stability. Atul Kohli has made much of this contrast, arguing that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has held power in West Bengal since 1977 through the combination of its organisational and ideological coherence. His wider conclusion is that the institutionalisation of political parties is essential in staving off the 'crises of governability' faced by many democracies in developing countries. At a time when 'good governance' is a major theme within development studies, Kohli's thesis deserves close attention. This paper critically examines his work in two ways. Empirically, it questions elements of his portrayal of the* CPI(M)*, and West Bengal's politics more generally, as 'exceptional'. In theoretical terms, it questions Kohli's treatment of political institutions, arguing that more attention should be given to institutional culture and political discourses.*

Introduction: political parties, stability and order in the work of Atul Kohli

Political stability appears to be a commodity currently in short supply in India. The close of the last decade saw four rounds of national elections in as many years, and many changes to the country's political landscape. Support for the Congress Party, once the unquestioned party of government, collapsed dramatically over the 1990s. In the 1999 elections the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made much of Atal Behari Vajpayee's ability to deliver stability, but within his coalition government, floor-crossing, factional rivalries and the associated stories of personal aggrandisement and corruption of those in office have continued. Even before this most recent period of political turmoil, political scientists were reflecting on the destabilising effect of unbridled popularism, 'demand groups' (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987), the spread of communalist politics (Vanaik, 1990; Vanaik, 1997), and the resultant 'crisis of governability' (Kohli, 1990) in India. In contrast to this turmoil at the national level, the political landscape of West Bengal has been remarkably stable.[1] Since 1977 politics in the states has been

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dominated by the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI(M)). The CPI(M) is the leading partner of the Left Front, who have been consistently successful in State Assembly and rural local government elections for over two decades.

In this paper I use observations of the electoral competition for *panchayats* (local councils) to examine whether West Bengal's politics is, in any sense, 'exceptional'. The empirical study is guided by a critical evaluation of the work of a leading political scientist working on South Asia, Atul Kohli. Atul Kohli's work has been highlighted here for two reasons. First, he has been important in suggesting that West Bengal has managed to reverse the 'crisis of governability' that is plaguing other parts of India. As will be seen below, his reading of Bengal's politics shares points in common with that of the CPI(M), which emphasises the (relatively) peaceful nature of the state, the absence of caste and communal conflict, and the orderly functioning of political life. Although Kohli offers a far from uncritical account of the CPI(M)'s rule, these elements of 'success' perhaps demand closer scrutiny.

The second reason for examining Kohli's work reflects a concern with the way in which Kohli approaches the study of politics. Kohli's approach focuses on the analysis of political variables, in which the actions of political leaders, parties and social forces play an important role. This 'scientific' mode of research contrasts with recent attempts to take a more ethnographic approach to the study of politics and political cultures in which political discourses are placed much more in the foreground (see, *inter alia*, Chatterjee, 1997; Gupta, 1995; Harriss, 1998). My argument here is that this latter style of work can offer important insights missed by more 'traditional' political science, especially when proper attention is paid to the different geographies that political discourses inhabit and create.

Kohli's thesis in *Democracy and Discontent* (1990; reiterated in Kohli, 1994) is that political parties are essential institutions to address the decay of India's political culture. Since the mid-1960s, Kohli claims that there has been a decline in the state's capacity to govern, accompanied by the erosion of order and authority, a surface manifestation of which has been 'widespread activism outside of the established political channels that often leads to political violence' (Kohli, 1990: 5). The research on which Kohli draws—a comparative study of politics in five districts, three states and in New Delhi—attempts to find the variables responsible for this political breakdown. Kohli's analysis centres on the role of political elites and the decay of political organisations, and in particular he argues that the organisational decline of the Congress party has caused the erosion of established authority patterns in the countryside that ensured political order during the 1950s and 1960s. As the spread of democracy encouraged more widespread political mobilisation, the Congress (and others) failed to incorporate newly emergent social groups within the party's structure. Instead, India's leaders have increasingly resorted to popularist rhetoric and personality cults to gain electoral mandates, and neglected the important task of party building. With the decline of the Congress, there is thus 'a growing organizational vacuum at the core of India's political space' (Kohli, 1990: 6), where 'personalistic and centralising leaders' (Kohli, 1994: 105) have replaced institutionalised power and mediation with cronyism and weak, active government.

In this analysis, politically inspired violence is the net result of party decay: political parties ally with criminal forces in the capture of ballot boxes (Kohli, 1990: 214), are responsible for the partisan use of the state repressive apparatus to punish their opponents (pp 283–284), or even (in the case of central Bihar) are complicit in the partial replacement of the state by private caste-based armies (pp 224–225). Kohli argues that the absence of effective political institutions leads to the violent politicisation of social conflict, rather than its peaceful mediation, an argument that has much in common with earlier accounts of India's 'weak–strong state' (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). For Kohli, the only chance to arrest this process of decay lies in the rebuilding of political parties. In a process implicitly informed by the experiences of the West, he hopes that alternative growth- and redistribution-based social coalitions can be incorporated within a competitive party system, thus replacing violence with political debate.[2]

West Bengal is something of a special case within Kohli's work, reversing these national trends of breakdown and growing disorder. His earlier work on poverty and the developmental state (Kohli, 1987) saw the CPI(M) as leading a highly effective government that was able to implement pro-poor policies while curbing the political violence that had plagued the state through the 1960s and 1970s. Revitalisation of local government through politicised *panchayats* (local councils) in 1978 and tenancy reform through controlled mass mobilisation (1978/9 to c 1983) were key elements of this programme, which Kohli sees as having dramatic and exceptional results:

> The CPM has thus achieved what no other Indian political force has been able to achieve as yet, namely, comprehensive penetration of the countryside without depending on large landowners. From this perspective, it may not be an exaggeration to argue that the politics of West Bengal are undergoing a fundamental structural change. While the class structure remains intact, not only has institutional penetration been achieved but also institutional power has been transferred from the hands of the dominant propertied groups to a politicized lower strata. (Kohli, 1987: 113)

Here, and in subsequent work, it is the CPI(M) itself that Kohli sees as the crucial factor in explaining West Bengal's success. As a 'disciplined, left-of-centre party' the CPI(M) is deemed to have the capacity and the political will to drive through (mildly) redistributive reforms, producing a stable coalition of lower-class supporters. Furthermore, and of key importance within this reading, the CPI(M)'s leadership has successfully developed the party as a state-wide institution. The party built up a network of disciplined cadres throughout the Bengali countryside from the late 1960s, activists who were loyal to the CPI(M) as a whole rather than any individual, and attuned to and supportive of the party's social democratic values. Kohli argues that this network has not merely filled the 'organisational vacuum' left by the collapse of the Congress party post-Nehru, but has replaced it with a truly modern political institution. In sharp contrast to the vicious circle of decaying political organisation elsewhere in India, he thus sees in West Bengal a virtuous circle of party discipline, delivery of development programmes, and regime legitimation through the ballot box.

Kohli's account of the Left Front in West Bengal is not an uncritical one, but it primarily draws upon field research completed in the early years of the CPI(M)'s rule when the *panchayats* were new, and the tenancy reform movement recently completed. Given the Left Front's longevity, and continued academic and official perceptions of the regime as an example of 'good governance' within the Indian context,[3] there are good reasons to re-examine this narrative of success and to discuss the CPI(M)'s role in Bengal's 'exceptional' polity today. The main body of this paper takes up these tasks, but before doing so I will raise some criticisms of Kohli's wider intellectual project that will guide this process.

The broader thrust of Kohli's work is to recapture the importance of 'independent political variables' and a 'political sphere' within academic work on the state in developing countries. This is a valid and important project, and Kohli rightly argues that structural functionalist or Marxist accounts that see politics and the state as fundamentally determined by socioeconomic forces are in danger of eclipsing the agency of political institutions (Kohli, 1990: 28). As such, Kohli is one of a number of scholars who subscribe to a 'state-in-society' perspective, a brand of political anthropology that treats both states and societies as complex and multi-dimensional categories that must be understood through careful fieldwork and 'middle-level' theory building (Migdal, 1994). The balance and style of Kohli's own work on political institutions, however, is open to criticism on three points: he overemphasises the role of parties in producing coherent rule, 'society' is in danger of becoming a residual category in his analysis, and within his political sphere, discourse and language are marginalised. All three points are not only of importance in their own right, but also—as I argue below—lead Kohli to emphasise elements of the CPI(M)'s rule that show the party in a particularly favourable light.

In common with others subscribing to the 'state-in-society' perspective, the question of coherence of rule is very important for Kohli. Joel Migdal's description of the 'state-in-society' perspective carefully emphasises that states comprise various arenas and interest groups, and that the nature and effectiveness of a political regime cannot be read off from the actions of those at the 'commanding heights' of its institutions (Migdal, 1994: 11–18). Having done this, he argues that a key question for political anthropologists is whether a state can weld these various parts of its institutions back together, working with and against a diverse array of social forces, to achieve 'integrated domination'.[4] This issue *is* important, not only because it is almost inevitably a key objective of those who wish to control the state, but also because it draws our attention to the fact that this very joining together of interest groups is a key source of the state's power. Throughout Kohli's work the issue of coherent rule is emphasised, but here political parties are put forward as one of the only forms of 'glue' that will hold integrated domination together.[5] Thus for Kohli parties as organisations determine policy delivery, and policy delivery in turn determines social legitimation. The ordered nature of the CPI(M) in West Bengal is therefore key to his account:

> Four political characteristics are important for understanding the CPM's reformist capacities. First, the rule is coherent. A unified leadership allows not only clear policy thinking, but also sustained political attention to developmental tasks. Second, the ideological goals as well as the disciplined organizational arrangements of the CPM do not allow direct access to the upper classes … Third, the CPM's

> organizational arrangement is both centralized and decentralized. While the decision-making power is concentrated, local initiative and knowledge can be combined within the framework of central directives. And fourth, the CPM's ideology is flexible enough to … [make] the prospect of reformism tolerable for the socially powerful. (Kohli, 1987: 143)

The organisational coherence of the CPI(M) thus enables it to act as an efficient mechanism for the dissemination of political ideas and the implementation of policy, both of which are predominantly transmitted 'downwards' through its hierarchical structure. I will argue below that although the CPI(M) is in many ways a unique political organisation, various acts of translation are involved in this transmission, and are an important part of the CPI(M)'s operation 'on the ground'.

My second criticism of Kohli's work, itself a consequence of this over-emphasis on the role of political parties as organisations, is that societal forces become compartmentalised within his analysis. As noted above, Kohli is consciously working against the reductive tendencies of structural functionalism and Marxism, and so he highlights 'the "autonomous" significance of political structures and processes' (Kohli, 1990: 19). 'Society' is not written off altogether, but rather social changes pose problems that political systems then have to deal with. The role of violence is a case in point: where 'social pressures' are expressed through parties, society is peaceful, where they are not, violence is the outcome (pp 14–15). An important difficulty with this approach is that it posits a rather too neat separation of 'political institutions' from 'society': parties aggregate and accommodate a set of pre-defined forces and interests 'out there' in society. Among other problems this ignores political parties' role in creating interest groups: as I will argue below, violence is a constitutive part of this process, not a mere 'outcome' of party failure.

The final criticism is the absence of political discourse or political culture within Kohli's work. His criticism of India's political decay and his alternative vision of Indian parties representing alternative growth- and redistribution-centred coalitions of social forces (Kohli, 1994: 106) suggest that he subscribes to a vision of 'proper' political discourse where 'right versus left' debates are appropriate, but the 'populism' of appealing to alternative bases of identity, such as caste, is not. There are numerous scholars who would dispute the relevance of such 'Western' terms of reference in a post-colonial context, and there are certainly good historical reasons why a discourse of 'modern' politics is not all-pervasive within India today (Kaviraj, 1991). Without pursuing these arguments further at an abstract level, it is worth noting that, within West Bengal, the CPI(M)'s public presentation of itself as a class-based party would also accord with Kohli's vision of what 'proper' politics involves. Such a reading of the CPI(M)'s electoral success could also reinforce the perception of West Bengal as a 'modern' society where political parties can organise on class lines, and the 'primordial loyalties' of caste, ethnicity and religion are residual categories, properly excluded from the political sphere. Comforting though such a vision may be (for urbane Bengalis as much as for Western(ised) academics), I will argue that it is a highly selective one. West Bengal's political discourse is, inevitably, inseparable from its wider culture: ideas of class are important here, but in no way crowd out 'primordial loyalties', and 'good governance' takes on local meanings drawing on a variety of sources.

Taken together, these criticism of Kohli's work suggest that an alternative assessment of the nature of West Bengal's political stability is necessary in which due attention is given to practices and discourses of politics, alongside the state's political institutions. The rest of this paper attempts to achieve this task, beginning with a description of CPI(M)'s own 'official' position on its role—past and present—in the Bengali countryside. I then look at the party's practices of gaining and maintaining political support, before turning to the actions of its political opponents. In this way the paper addresses the three criticisms of Kohli's work I noted in turn. First, looking at the CPI(M) itself allows us to investigate Kohli's ideas about the organisational coherence of the party. The CPI(M) emerges as a rather exceptional political institution, but does not simply deliver the party line (in terms of ideas, policies and strategies for action) to the 'grassroots' unchanged. Second, examining the mobilisation of political support questions the distinction between politics and the social sphere made by Kohli. Interest groups are not simply 'out there' waiting to be incorporated within parties, but are to some degree created by the process of political competition itself. Finally, by examining how the CPI(M) and its opponents talk about politics, we can gain a fuller picture of what constitutes valid political discourse in West Bengal. This discourse extends far beyond 'right' versus 'left' debates: looking at how and when opposition emerges and is successful allows us to see some of the alternative spaces for political action that exist within the CPI(M)'s rule.

The study

My discussion of Kohli's work is based around political activity in, and competition for, West Bengal's *panchayats* or local councils. In 1978 West Bengal held its first elections for the local government system that the CPI(M) had revitalised on gaining power in Calcutta the year before. Every district, development block and *anchal*[6] directly elected its own council, with councillors standing on party-political tickets. Over the following two decades, the *panchayat* system has been further refined and developed (for details, see Webster, 1992), and the councils are now important political prizes, playing a major role in rural life, including the implementation of a range of development programmes.

In the analysis that follows, I use interview materials gathered in Birbhum District to look at the process of political competition from the points of view of the protagonists of the main parties involved; the CPM, the Congress and the BJP. Two rural locations were chosen for the study. The first, lying to the southwest of the district town of Siuri, was an area where the CPI(M) was strong, and the party controlled all *gram panchayats* bar one. The second, an area along the banks of the Mayurakshi river east of the small market town of Sainthia, was an area of weaker CPI(M) control. Although the party held a majority in the local block council, its rivals (both Congress and the BJP) controlled a number of *gram panchayats.*

Within each location, I interviewed *pradhans* (chairpersons) and ordinary members of CPI(M)- and opposition-led *gram panchayats*, party activists, the chairpersons of the block councils, the Block Development Officers and other administrative staff.[7] These interviews were supplemented by discussions at the district level with leading representatives of the Congress and CPI(M), with senior figures within the district bureaucracy, and by my own direct observations of *panchayat* elections during earlier fieldwork conducted in these locations in 1992–93.

Although this study cannot claim to be representative of West Bengal in a statistical sense, the range of interviewees allowed a detailed view of the political culture of an area that should show the CPI(M) in a reasonably favourable light. The fieldwork was conducted *before* recent increases in political violence associated with the rise of the Trinamul Congress, and thus reflects a period when the CPI(M)'s rule was solid across much of rural Bengal. Within Birbhum District, CPI(M) control of the *panchayats* was even stronger than elsewhere in the state at this time. It is important to note that the materials presented here aim to show how CPI(M) rule operates and was contested under conditions 'typical' of the late 1990s, rather than deliberately attempting to highlight party weakness or political instability.

Maintaining CPI(M) dominance: small arms fire in the class war[8]

West Bengal's political history as presented by the CPI(M), both in official documents and in the recollections of party activists, is a story of class struggle. Although this struggle is presented as having deep historical roots, two key moments within it are the communist-led United Front governments of 1966–67 and 1968–69 (the first periods of non-Congress rule of West Bengal), and the implementation of pro-poor policies that followed the inauguration of the Left Front Government in 1977. During the United Front governments, the CPI(M) and others supported a mass campaign to seize land held by landlords in excess of legal limits, a campaign that led to widespread rural unrest. The CPI(M) claim that they were able to challenge the power of rural landholders through this action: they removed the support landholders had enjoyed from the repressive apparatus of the state, and unleashed the power of the rural proletariat. Although this 'revolutionary' moment was not sustainable, it did demonstrate to the rural poor that the power of the rural elites was not insurmountable. The elements of pro-poor policy emphasised by the CPI(M) in the Left Front period have been the implementation of land reforms, and *panchayat raj*, the revitalisation of local government. Both programmes were important subjects in Kohli's (1987) evaluation of the regime and are seen by the CPI(M) leadership as constituting an alternative approach to rural development (see, for example, Mishra, 1991: 8–10). In the party's public statements reformist policies are presented as part of a broader strategy of building socialism from a situation of partial political power within India. Although not revolutionary in themselves, these policies are intended to protect the poor in the immediate term while raising class-consciousness in preparation for the transition to socialism. The policy decisions and electoral battles of recent decades are therefore located within a wider discourse of politics in which class is the most important term.[9]

Within the Birbhum localities, many elements of the party line were reiterated by party members both in their public sentiments and in their private assessments of the political history of the area. In the latter, the CPI(M)'s victory in the first *panchayat* elections emerged as a watershed:

> In the 1978 elections there was a turn around … There was an overall change of leadership: not only the panchayat leaders but also the village leadership had changed. The village leadership, that means all the decisions—about the development of the village, about incidents in the village, all the confrontations between the people—after that election, people did not go to the landlord, but the people came to us … This change of leadership did not come easily. It came from the land struggle, the land movement. It showed the people who were their friends and who were not. (CPI(M) activist, Mayurakshi, 19 November 1997)

CPI(M) members' accounts of the events leading up to the 1978 victory did not attempt to hide the violence of the land struggle; rather this was contrasted against the domination of village life by the old village elite, where public beatings, rape of lower caste women, usury and theft were reported as being common events. By contrast, the period since 1978 is presented as one of relative peace and prosperity. Here, some party members privately admitted that the strength of the mass movement that brought them to power 20 years ago had dissipated, but in their public statements they emphasised the range of development works that had occurred in both localities (the provision of sealed roads, electricity and irrigation), attributing all the benefits to the CPI(M) government.

In the local presentation of the CPI(M)'s history, the party therefore emerged as a successful revolutionary force that had become the provider of peaceful, good government. Unlike the official party line, talk of long-term transition to socialism was largely absent from their comments during interviews, and instead party members focused on the difficulties of maintaining a pro-poor support base.[10] In a candid set of comments, the district leader of Kisan Sabha (the CPI(M)-affiliated peasant union) described how a relatively small shift in the 'middle peasant' (ie owner-cultivator) vote would be sufficient to oust the CPM from power (interview, 26 November 1997). Party members were thus acutely aware of the need to maintain and develop their support networks, and used both agitational methods and the power associated with their political office to achieve this.

Local struggles over land rights provided an arena in which the CPI(M) could pursue agitational politics to bolster its support. Given the complexity of land holding and inheritance, there are many plots of land where ownership or tenancy rights are contested, or are currently tied up in court cases. In such cases, the party used the Kisan Sabha to enforce tenants' rights and to recover land held in excess of ceiling laws. The party deliberately and publicly presented itself as the champion of the (numerically dominant) small peasants, tenants and agricultural labourers in these conflicts, making sure their 'class interests' were protected on the ground well before the legal cases were settled:

> There are many cases [involving tenancy registration] still on going—say 1000 cases in the Calcutta courts. But in some cases there are troubles. The role of the High Court is first to give an injunction to the District Magistrate or DLLRO and Police, that landlords should be given police protection. So, we tell the Superintendent of Police, 'Very good, you give two or three officers to provide police protection for the landlord: we will gather together 500 or 1000 persons to cultivate the land. You cannot shoot us. So, if you obey the high court order, we will be forced to do our work.' (District Chair, West Bengal Kisan Sabha, interview, 26 November 1997)

In practice, such disputes were often less heroic than this vision of unarmed tenants valiantly facing armed police would suggest: the ‘class struggle’ was far from spontaneous, and there were inevitably instances where the party did not press the interests of poorer villagers in order to maintain the support of ‘middle peasants’ (cf Webster, 1999). Nevertheless, party and opposition activists alike acknowledged the political success of repeated CPI(M) involvement in land disputes, which provided important public reconfirmation of the post-1977 ‘change in leadership’ noted above. Alongside this continued use of agitational politics, the CPI(M) was also able to reinforce its electoral support through the massive institutional power of the *panchayats*. Through its overall control of the *panchayat* boards, the CPI(M) had a solid grip on local government spending in Birbhum, which was backed up with a degree of influence over the police and development bureaucracy.[11] This power could be put to ‘positive’ use (the effective implementation of policy decisions as per Kohli), or used more ‘negatively’ by bolstering networks of political support through patronage relationships, or stalling and disrupting the activities of lower-tier *panchayats* belonging to its political opponents. Of course, any attempt to use this institutional power in a partisan manner would leave the party open to accusations of corruption and nepotism, so the party constantly needed to balance the contrasting demands of support-building and the wider legitimation of its power.

Where the CPI(M)’s rule was solid, these tensions were relatively easy to accommodate. In Nagari, a ‘model’ *gram panchayat* within the Siuri locality, mass participation in grassroots development planning was actively encouraged by the party, public meetings ran well, and opposition members of the *panchayat* board were encouraged to voice their opinions at council meetings. The party gained support through its efficient running of the council, and could combine this with public shows of ‘fairness’ to its opponents. By comparison, council chairs in the Mayurakshi locality faced more open and active criticism of their power, including demonstrations against corruption. One common strategy to counter such accusations, whether or not they were grounded in ‘truth’, was to make a clear distinction between ‘party work’ and the role of an elected representative. The following statement, from a CPI(M) head of a *gram panchayat*, was repeated almost verbatim by a variety of other party members who had gained office:

> If I am to be a good *pradhan* (chairperson), I have to mix with all the people, and the people must be free to come to me. There should be no party feeling … When I am with the party, then I am a party member, but when I am in the chair of the *pradhan*, I must forget my party and I should do the work of the people. (CPI(M) *Pradhan*, Mayurakshi locality, 19 November 1997)

These comments received general approval from all present, including opposition party members, as being representative of ‘proper’ political conduct. On the positive side, this support suggests that local leaders were aiming to link their actions to a discourse of ‘good government’ in which equality and fair play were important ideals. At another level, however, this distinction between ‘party work’, which is partisan, and government action, which is ‘apolitical’, is quite debilitating. Politicians’ attempts to demonstrate their ‘impartiality’ focuses the attention of public debate on corruption, nepotism and the correct implementation of government rules, while drawing it away from questions of what rule should be used *for*, and how this relates to real and healthy differences between parties' political projects. Given that *panchayat* activities were commonly described as 'help' by all concerned, this assessment of correct political behaviour suggests that, rather than raising consciousness at the grassroots, the CPI(M) are content to play a role in government as fair patrons.[12]

In manoeuvring between agitational politics, the use of institutional power and the presentation of 'good government', individual leaders were supported by an impressive party organisation. The CPI(M) has a hierarchical structure of party committees, and although the quality of the party cadres in Birbhum was less controlled than Kohli suggests, there were at least sporadic 'rectification campaigns' to weed out corrupt members. Beyond the core members are the party's associated 'mass fronts' and unions, the largest of which was the Kisan Sabha, which had a membership of 580 000 in Birbhum in 1997. The effects of this mass organisation were visible throughout the study areas in large rallies that were held in the run up to the 1993 *panchayat* elections (cf Chatterjee, 1997), and in the occasional symbolic act of class struggle. In addition to the land disputes mentioned above, these included strikes for increased agricultural wage rates which were sometimes no more than routinised pieces of political theatre (cf Bhattacharyya, 1999).

A more subtle but equally important demonstration of the party's organisational capacity was its ability to co-ordinate the activities of this membership effectively. At the zonal level[13] leaders of the party and its fronts formed a steering committee that then 'advised' the chairpersons of the block and *gram panchayats* within its jurisdiction about a range of issues from the implementation of development work to setting wage rates and settling land disputes. Such behind-the-scenes fixing of *panchayat* decisions may run counter to the spirit of government reform, but there is no doubt that it enabled the party to marshal its resources effectively, directing development programmes, public demonstrations and 'class struggles' in such a way that it could enhance its support base (cf Rogaly, 1998). An Indian Administrative Service officer noted that the CPI(M)'s ability to use the *panchayat* system in this way far exceeded that of other parties thanks to its superior organisational structure (interview, 2 December 1997). It is important to note, however, that this did not simply result in the efficient local execution of central party directives. Zonal committees had to scope to reinterpret these directives in the light of the 'local constellation of class forces', balancing ideological commitments and electoral calculations with a considerable degree of autonomy.

The combination of the organisational strength of the party, the control of the *panchayats* and their resources, and a history of effective pro-poor action—what Partha Chatterjee (1997) has described as a linking of 'discipline and development'—have made the CPI(M) a powerful force in Birbhum. Despite the initial parallels with Kohli's account of the CPI(M)'s role, some important differences begin to emerge. First, although the party acts as an efficient conduit of ideas and actions, important acts of translation occur within this organisation when the 'official' narrative of class struggle and progression towards socialism travels from the central party offices to the *panchayats* and grassroots party workers. Most CPI(M) workers would recognise the broader contours of the narrative, and there are undoubtedly a significant number of full party members—often school teachers—who place their own experiences of party struggle within an intellectual context informed by their own readings of party documents and the works of Marx and Lenin (interviews, 14, 19 and 26 November 1997). When addressing 'the public', however, the more transformative elements of this story are downplayed: the CPI(M) presents itself as being primarily concerned with providing good government. These differences can be read in various ways: as a shift from a radicalism to a bureaucratisation, as a failure to recognise the importance of mass consciousness-raising, or (most generously) of a tactical decision to delay class struggle. Whichever reading one prefers, the CPI(M)'s political programme has meaning to a subset of party members and supporters, but is not a message that is openly and actively discussed by 'the people'.

These translations would in turn suggest that the relationship between political parties and interest groups is somewhat more complicated than Kohli's work suggests. The CPI(M) was acting as a careful mediator of 'class struggle', stoking it up through agitation (however stylised) in some places, containing it in others. Different forms of operation were appropriate in different places—debate and discussion emerge as possibilities where the party is in a position of solid control, displays of physical strength through 'class struggle' appear to play a greater part where the political opposition is stronger. Kohli notes that within the CPI(M)'s centralised structure there is room for local party members to *respond* to different local conditions, but what I am suggesting here is slightly more pro-active. The act of portraying small peasants, tenant farmers and labourers variously as citizens within a participatory democracy (in Nagari *panchayat*), as the beneficiaries of a top-down gift of 'good government' (in the Mayurakshi locality), or even as a 'class force' opposing acts of landlord/employer injustice is significant in itself. These different representations help to set these groups' terms of engagement with the party, the local government system and indeed their fellow villagers: CPI(M) thus has an active role in *producing* interest groups. This serves as an important reminder that, when political parties 'represent interests and concentrate them' (Kohli, 1994: 106), they do not merely agglomerate pre-formed social entities.

A final comment relates to political discourse. As noted above, alongside a 'higher' discourse of class struggle and transformation, the CPI(M) also plays to more 'vernacular' readings of good government and displays of power. The local ideological terrain over which CPI(M) rule is contested is inevitably broader and messier than a series of debates about economic growth versus redistribution, or revolution versus reform. In the following section, I show how much room there is for politicians to exploit other, often less palatable, political discourses within contemporary West Bengal.

Opposing power: the Congress and the BJP[14]

Here I present two vignettes of opposition to the CPI(M)'s dominance of *panchayats* in Birbhum, both drawn from the Mayurakshi locality where electoral competition was more fiercely contested. The first is fairly typical of the processes whereby opposition politicians create reputations for themselves. The second is a more unusual case of a 'communal riot', and is used to illustrate the potential that exists for politicians to profit from linkages between collective violence and political discourse.

BB was a lower-caste farmer and Congress organiser in the Mayurakshi locality. Depending on who one interviewed, he was either described as a selfless social worker or a thug. He was well known in the local area for campaigning actively for the Congress party, which in practice meant that he involved himself in situations where the local communists were behaving in an 'unjust' manner. Sometimes this was through low-key acts, such as advising people on how to press a claim for social security benefits, but often he deliberately chose to give himself a higher profile by publicly backing Congress supporters in village disputes. A certain degree of almost farcical performance was present in these acts, as when BB—not known for his adherence to non-violence—staged a one-man 'Gandhian' protest against corruption in the block council. He chose to stage a sit-in outside the block development office, a readily accessible symbol of CPI(M) 'misrule', conveniently located next to a market and road junction that ensured maximum publicity.

Behind such symbolic acts of protest, physical strength and violence had an important role to play in building political support. BB had a number of court charges against him for disturbing the peace, organising armed gangs and violent assault, often associated with defending 'wronged' Congress supporters in conflicts over land. In return, his protest outside the block office resulted in him being imprisoned without trial in the local police station for a number of weeks, where he received beatings that put him in hospital, and in 1996, a gang (probably CPI(M)-led) tried to burn him and his family alive in their house. When I asked him why he thought that the CPI(M) were persecuting him in this manner, he said that the communists knew that if he could be bullied into submission—or into supporting the CPI(M)—the Congress party in the local area would be eliminated in the coming *panchayat* elections. It is the one part of his story that no-one contested.[15]

Actions such as BB's are, I suggest, typical of those aiming to become important opposition politicians. Here, the demonstration of strength is important: BB was described locally as possessing the 'courage' to challenge the CPI(M) and to publicly 'give voice' against them (interviews, 14 November 1997). He was known throughout the *panchayat* area, and in adjoining *panchayats*, because of the public nature of his actions. It was through the performance of open resistance to 'CPI(M) misrule' that BB's political status was raised, that stories circulated about him, and he became a 'big man' in the locality. This status was confirmed by the fact that the CPI(M) did not dare to enter 'his' village to campaign for the elections. Violence, actual and threatened, clearly underpinned much of this performance. The stories told in the locality about ND, the District Congress president, suggested that a similar process of political performance and use of force to bolster one's reputation was equally important further up the political hierarchy:

> In retaliation for an attack on a Congress member in a village near Sainthia, ND ordered 15 huts to be set on fire. Whilst the arson was going on, the police and the block development officer came to investigate, but they were stopped by ND on the road. He held up a *lathi* [bamboo cudgel] and told them not to go to the village. They turned back. (Field notes, 14 November 1997)

> A CPI(M) MLA [member of the state parliament] had been badly beaten by Congress youths, who had broken his leg. The MLA filed a case against them, and this went to court. The youths were acquitted. To celebrate, ND hired two lorries, which he then packed with supporters and drove around Sainthia, throwing flowers in the road. (Field notes, 1 December 1997)

The objective truth of these stories—both were recounted by Congress supporters, and therefore are open to doubt—is not the issue here, but rather the effect that recounting the events is supposed to achieve. ND was portrayed as a man of action, a dispenser of rough justice, and his reputation was maintained through active performances of the control he enjoyed over his 'turf'. BB clearly aimed to build up a similar reputation, and without other resources (such as demonstrating his ability to rule through control of a *panchayat* board), physical strength and courage was a quick way of achieving this end.

The second example of resistance to CPI(M) rule is an instance of 'communal rioting' that occurred in 1991, and its political aftermath. Here, as with Paul Brass's account of riots in Uttar Pradesh (Brass, 1997), my primary focus is on people's interpretations of the events; their own attempts to fit this incidence of collective violence into an understanding of local politics.

In April 1991 a 'Hindu–Muslim' riot broke out in a large, mixed-community village of the Mayurakshi locality. At the time the council's chairman was a Muslim of the village, standing on a CPI(M) ticket. Before the riots broke out, there had been widespread complaints of corruption in the *panchayat*, and the chairman's name was linked to criminal activities undertaken by a (Muslim) gang. DKM, a BJP activist, had organised local Hindus to go to the police station to protest about the activities of this gang, but the officer in charge 'had no courage to help the Hindu people for fear of the Muslim people's reaction' (DKM, interview, 21 November 1997). 'Communal tensions' were thus running high in the area when, following a dispute, a number of houses belonging to Hindus in the village were set on fire.[16] Widespread rioting resulted, and BJP activists were a clearly visible presence in their aftermath, giving food and shelter to the Hindus who had lost their houses.

In the run-up to the *panchayat* elections two years later, inter-community relations were still strained, and this was exacerbated by the fact that party support was to some degree polarised along religious lines. BJP activists were circulating widely in the area, campaigning against the Left Front but with a distinctively religious tone,[17] and most of those openly campaigning for the CPI(M) were Muslims. There was further tension during the elections themselves (the BJP allegedly barred the CPI(M) election agents from entering the booths on polling day) and the BJP swept to power with 14 out of 22 of the council seats. After this, 'communal tensions' dissipated and the BJP became something of a presence throughout the Mayurakshi locality, standing candidates in all neighbouring *gram* *panchayats* for the 1998 elections. DKM's interpretation of the area's return to harmony is that he runs a corruption-free *panchayat* and helps all people equally. The reasons he gives for his electoral success are that the people of the area have had enough of corruption, and that they gained faith in the BJP after they had seen them giving support to the victims of the riots.

The CPI(M) interpretation of events was, unsurprisingly, somewhat different, and can be summarised as follows. The BJP knew that they would not get the votes of the Muslim community, who were solidly behind the CPI(M), and so they were looking for issues that would win the support of the (majority) Hindu community. When the trouble first arose, the CPI(M) leaders should have gone en masse to the locality with Hindu and Muslim supporters to protest against communal tension. Because they didn't, and the only vocal members of the party in the area were Muslims, it was easy for the BJP to make this a communal issue. The CPI(M) block council chairman said that there would not be trouble in the forthcoming elections because 'the agricultural labourers and poorer sections of the Hindus are now going to the CPI(M)'—this cross-community support and the fact that 'the people had gradually come to understand that the politics of the BJP is religious' would ensure that communal tensions were not raised again (interviews, 21 November 1997, 4 December 1997).

These differences of interpretation hide important and worrying underlying assumptions held in common by both parties. No one involved denied that the riots were directly bound up with local electoral calculations where religious identities played an important part. Also, no one was surprised at the important shift that occurred from anger at particular 'corrupt politicians' and 'known criminals' to aggression directed at the Muslim community as a whole. If anything, the interpretations placed on events by the CPI(M) naturalised the shift: because of their political miscalculation, it was always like that 'communal' problems would result. I don't want to suggest that events such as those that occurred in this Mayurakshi village are 'typical' of West Bengal. The fact that even six years later the riot was still a talking point throughout the area suggests that such incidents are relatively rare. They are not, however, unique and suggest that the discourse of Hindu–Muslim tension could be tactically deployed as a means of attacking 'corrupt rule' that enjoyed a degree of local support.[18]

Through the actions of both DKM and BB, we can begin to see the breadth of what constitutes 'legitimate' political action within contemporary Birbhum. For both activists, the underlying patterns of their political action—public shows of physical strength when in opposition, attempts to demonstrate 'good rule' when in power—were not entirely dissimilar to those of the CPI(M) described earlier. As such, their actions raise important questions both about the portrayal of West Bengal as a 'politically stable' state, and about Kohli's understanding of political action. Beginning with the activities of BB, his attempts to create a support base were, at some level, similar to the process by which the CPI(M) had 'changed the village leadership' in the 1970s, although lacking the same ideological justification. The images portrayed by BB—of Gandhian self-sacrifice, mixed with physical courage and the means to control acts of violence—may appear internally inconsistent, but are effective engagements with local concepts of good leadership and just political struggle. His actions are also typical of the day-today competition within the *panchayat* system that is often hidden by West Bengal's macro-scale political stability. The separation noted above of the CPI(M)'s 'political' activities from its provision of 'good rule' ironically gives activists like BB greater scope to challenge the party. The CPI(M) by playing down the transformative elements of its programme fails to demonstrate through its everyday practice the 'ideological coherence' deemed so important by Kohli, and undoubtedly so lacking within the Congress.[19]

Turning to the activities of DKM, one is forced to accept that the differences in 'acceptable' political discourse between West Bengal and other areas of India are not as great as many would hope. A discourse of caste has never enjoyed political salience within rural West Bengal (Chatterjee, 1982), but prejudices and tensions between Hindus and the sizeable Muslim community are a fertile ground for those wanting to generate a political 'wave' in opposition. The CPI(M) in Mayurakshi also appeared uncertain of its ground when resisting such waves. Local party members were able to reflect on their tactical blunders in letting the BJP get to power, but an understanding of how the CPI(M) might play a broader role in the de-communalisation of political discourse was absent.

In both instances, the discursive space within which opposition parties operate is a space of the CPI(M)'s own making, or at least a space that the party has failed adequately to close down. Generously, it could be suggested that communalism and violence are a hangover of 'feudal politics', destined for eventual decline in the state. Following Chatterjee, however, I would argue that both play a more complicated role *within* the political discourse of the left:

> Leftism in Bengal is parasitic upon a whole cultural heritage among the Bengali intelligentsia in which patriotism has been intimately tied with a distinctly religious (and needless to add, upper-caste Hindu) expression of the signs of power, in which the celebration of the power of the masses has been accompanied by an unquestioned assumption of the natural right of the intelligentsia to represent the whole people, in which utopian dreams of liberation have found expression in a barely concealed admiration for the politics of terrorism. (Chatterjee, 1997: 3–4)

Chatterjee's case is somewhat baldly stated, but his observation suggests that the political violence in Mayurakshi described above is not merely indicative of the crass opportunism of the opposition, and of the local CPI(M) unit's difficulties in handling this. Rather, the violence illustrates latent tensions at the heart of a specifically Bengali version of communism.[20] In the final section, I discuss the implications of this argument for Kohli's assessment of the CPI(M) and his wider intellectual project.

Rethinking 'stability' through political discourse

If these areas of Birbhum are in any way representative of broader processes operating within West Bengal, as I would suggest they are, then the remarkable longevity of the CPI(M) and the state's macro-political stability does not appear to be based around an exceptional form of grassroots political culture. There has been no 'great leap forward' towards either popular socialism or revolutionary class consciousness, even if (as elsewhere in India) rural lower classes are undoubtedly more vocal than a generation ago. Rather, the CPI(M)'s electoral success is the result of a combination of its past record of effective pro-poor action, its current control (and relatively efficient running) of government, and its careful maintenance of vote banks through a well organised party. The fact that this combination has been successful for so long is in part a result of the weakness of its political opponents: its long-term future is, however, less certain.[21]

To some extent, this description of the current state of Bengali politics appears to vindicate Kohli's thesis. Strong, well disciplined parties clearly *do* have an effect, and it is precisely the lack of organisation of the Congress that has led the CPI(M) to be repeatedly re-elected. Activists such as BB and DKM carve out political spaces for themselves where the CPI(M) can be defeated, but without the backing of a well organised party machine these local successes are not integrated into a coherent pattern of rule. However, the discussion above has also indicated aspects of Bengal's political (in)stability not anticipated within Kohli's account, and here I return to the three criticisms of Kohli's broader intellectual project raised further.

The first criticism was the over-emphasis on political parties' ideological and organisational coherence in Kohli's work. Such coherence was deemed to be a key way in which West Bengal under the CPI(M) differentiated itself from the political decline experienced elsewhere in India. Certainly, the CPI(M) is able to present a picture of 'coherent rule' to scholars and outsiders, and consciously places itself and Bengali society within a narrative of class struggle that accurately describes important elements of social change that have affected West Bengal since 1977. But while the party is able to display coherence to a far greater degree than its political opponents within the state, to take this narrative as reflecting the party's entire political practice would be an error. As noted above, the CPI(M)'s selection and mixing of different messages and forms of action for particular contexts was essential to party success. Party organisation has been important to the CPI(M)'s success, but this exists alongside inconsistency in action, as shown by the disjunction between the party approach towards winning power and demonstrating good rule.

The second criticism of Kohli's work concerned the role he attributes to social forces. Within his account parties should aim to represent interest groups that exist in a clearly demarcated 'social sphere', and when they do not political violence is deemed to be the result. The evidence presented here would suggest instead that violence plays an integral role in creating political support, and forms a blunt but effective way of demarcating the boundaries of who is included and excluded from particular 'social forces'. The land struggles launched selectively by the CPI(M) are thus important local reminders of differing economic interests which the party uses to build into class-based identity. Equally, the provocation of Hindu–Muslim tension by politicians is important in the re-stating of group identity and difference. The relationship between political parties and social forces is thus far more reflexive than Kohli appears to acknowledge, and as a result his core task of 'crafting well organised parties' emerges as a potentially *disruptive* activity rather than necessarily contributing to political stability. The BJP's use of communal sentiments was 'anti-democratic' in that it resulted in the violent expression of majority prejudices, but this violence was itself central to the party's development as a significant political organisation within the locality.

Underlying both of these points is the importance of political discourse in the creation of political (in)stability. My final criticism of Kohli's work was his neglect of political discourse, a neglect he combines with an implicit link between 'rational' political objectives and idealised Western norms. Again, at first sight the CPI(M) performs well by Kohli's criteria: the regime's leaders present a coherent political programme intelligible as 'progressive' within Western terms, its political rivals seem more 'populist' or 'reactionary' by comparison. To focus on this apparent contrast would, however, ignore the breadth of what constitutes valid political discourse in West Bengal. Local understandings of the operation of political power draw on religious identity, physical strength and fear of violence as much as they do on ideas of 'good government', democratisation and participatory politics.

The fact that the CPI(M) openly opposes the communalisation of politics in the public spheres served by state- and nation-wide media is much to the party's credit, as is the fact that it has built up the institutional structure of the *panchayats* across the state. At the level of local politics, however, the CPI(M) has not been able to close down the discursive power of communalism, and through its own actions continues to glorify socially 'just' violence as part of valid political practice. The links Kohli suggests between 'rational' political discourse and regime legitimation are thus not a full representation of the state's political landscape, nor is the dominance of leftist ideology in any way inevitable. Rather, West Bengal has been fortunate that the only efficient political 'machine' to emerge in the state over recent decades has been socially inclusive and pro-poor.

The important wider point here is that approaching the study of the politics of developing countries in the way that Kohli does—emphasising political organisations to the detriment of discourse and local political practice—risks severe and important omissions. To the extent that there is a strong normative line running through Kohli's work, any resulting omissions become all the more important. If one of the great 'success' stories of democratic political stability in India appears to be more fragile and complex in practice than at first thought, the fault certainly cannot be found in a lack of political institutions. Instead, the West Bengal example serves as an important reminder that concepts of democracy and political citizenship are constantly re-interpreted for and by electorates.

The alternative approach attempted here—paying greater attention to political culture and practice through ethnographic investigation—does reveal important insights missed by more 'scientific' accounts. Given that there is increasing international pressure for developing nations to conform to Westernised models of competitive democracy, such an alternative approach to the study of politics becomes more rather than less important. The fact that political violence emerges as an integral part of inter-party competition in this 'stable' state serves as a useful counterpoint to the current fervour for decentralisation and democratisation sweeping India, and elsewhere in the South. However worthy the ideals embodied in such reforms, they are unlikely to lead to a practice of politics that is 'democratic' in an idealised sense unless serious efforts are made to engage with the local public spheres that electorates inhabit. A shift towards a more culturally sensitive and localised study of political discourse and practice is an essential part of this engagement.

Notes

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[1] One major exception would be the Gorkhaland agitations of the mid-1980s, an ethno-regional conflict in Darjeeling that the CPI(M) managed to effectively contain and resolve by granting partial autonomy to the district. A second exception is the widespread political violence that has engulfed several districts of the state in the run-up to the 2001 Legislative Assembly elections.

[2] Kohli is not unaware of the difficulty of this task, which is compounded by the fact that the Indian state, unlike its Western counterparts, has acquired a massive interventionist role *before* the development of the stable two-party system he recommends.

[3] A recent example would be the UK Department For International Development's (DFID) decision to include West Bengal in a group of four states within which DFID–India will focus its activities because of its record of good governance and poverty reduction.

[4] Migdal's definition of 'integrated domination' is as follows

> The state, whether as an authoritative legal system, or a coercive mechanism of the ruling class, is at the center of the process of creating and maintaining social control. Its various components are integrated and coordinated enough to play the central role at all levels in the existing hegemonic domination. That domination includes those areas of life regulated directly by the state, as well as the organizations and activities of society that are authorized by the state within given limits. (Migdal, 1994: 27)

[5] The normative dimension to Kohli's argument is strong:

> Within developing country democracies, where political communities are not well established, and where the state must perform important economic functions, the need for well-organized parties of competing orientations becomes that much greater. Well-organized parties are one of the few available political instruments that can both represent interests and concentrate them at the top, enabling party leaders, if they win majority support, to pursue development democratically. Crafting well-organized parties thus remains an important long-term goal of political engineering in the Third World. (Kohli, 1994: 106)

Bob Jessop's strategic–theoretical approach to the state (Jessop, 1990: ch 9) provides an alternative reading of how the various interest groups competing for state power can be welded together, and one in which discourse has an important role alongside political organisations.

[6] There are 17 districts in West Bengal, each with a population of a few million. Districts are subdivided into development blocks, which are then further divided into *anchals*, which are 'village clusters' of a dozen or so villages and smaller hamlets. An *anchal*'s council is called a *gram panchayat* (lit 'village council'). For simplicity I have avoided other Bengali terms.

[7] Interviews were conducted in Bengali and English in November and December 1997. Individual respondents have not been named because of the sensitive nature of much of the material presented.

[8] A title 'borrowed' from James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott, 1985). Unlike the spontaneous verbal skirmishes between rich and poor Scott observed in Sedaka, Malaysia, the incidents in West Bengal were organised, closely tied to electoral competition and explicitly presented as part of a wider class struggle by the CPI(M).

[9] There are, unsurprisingly, some important absences in this account. Arild Ruud argues that the mass mobilisation of the peasantry in the 1960s was as much the result of the CPI(M)'s tactical engagement with factional disputes among traditional village elites as it was to do with the raising of a 'revolutionary class consciousness' (Ruud, 1994). Also, although the state has seen economic growth and moderate reductions in rural poverty since 1997, the Left Front's record on the provision of health and education services is far from impressive (for a thorough review see Gazdar & Sen Gupta (1997) and Rogaly *et al* (1999)). These caveats aside, most commentators agree that the CPI(M) achieved significant shifts in village power relations between the 1960s and the early 1980s, although there is also general consensus that land and tenancy reforms were running out of steam by the end of this period.

[10] Some well educated members reiterated the official distinction between the 'tactical' provision of good government and the 'strategic' development of class consciousness, but this did not immediately inform their political practice (interviews, Mayurakshi locality, 14 and 18 November 1997; Suiri locality, 26–27 November 1997).

[11] The CPI(M) did not use its strength over state personnel in as partisan a manner as the politicians in

Uttar Pradesh described by Brass (1997). Nevertheless, powers of promotion and transfer effectively lie with the CPI(M), and many police and administrative officers were all too painfully aware of this fact.

[12] We were able to observe the same *pradhan* in a public meeting later in our research. His speech to the meeting—which was ostensibly held to debate local development plans publicly—focused on how much economic conditions had improved for all under the CPI(M)'s rule, before getting down to the serious business of drawing up lists of beneficiaries to receive government support. The irony here is that, in his efficient distribution of government resources, the *pradhan* was actively contributing to the spread of a depoliticised democratic practice that the World Bank would surely approve of.

[13] The area covered by a 'zone' varies, but is often contiguous with a development block.

[14] These were the major opposition parties in 1997. Although the dominant party in the district until the 1970s, the Congress had neither the density of party offices nor the breadth of membership of the CPI(M). The BJP in West Bengal appears to be taking its organisational role much more seriously, but is a relative newcomer to the state and is building its support from particular pockets.

[15] Although local CPI(M) members described BB as a hooligan, his support was sufficiently large to feature in their predictions of voting patterns for the 1998 *panchayat* elections (interviews, 19 November and 4 December 1997).

[16] The particular 'trigger event' that started the riot is unclear. DKM made the (rather unlikely) claim that a local mullah had used the mosque's public address system to 'tell the Muslims to rise up and burn the Hindu houses' during a festival. A local CPI(M) leader made the equally improbable claim that the BJP had started the fires themselves in order to provoke the rioting.

[17] While conducting interviews near the riot village immediately before the 1993 *panchayat* elections, I met a BJP candidate campaigning at a tea-stall—a typical location for informal hustings. His speech centred on the moral decay of the times, of which the following is an extract:

> I don't know what the world is coming to—six of my tenants have gone and registered themselves as sharecroppers behind my back, stealing my land from me. When I asked on whose authority they thought they were acting, they had the effrontery to say, 'We are only acting as we are told to by the law—Jyoti Basu [the CPI(M) Chief Minister of West Bengal] is our Babu'. 'Jyoti Basu?' I replied 'Ram is my Babu'. I blame the school teachers … they are all sons of pigs, spending their time stirring up trouble leaving my daughters to fail their education. (Field notes, 11 May 1993)

Politicised school teachers and 'uppity' sharecroppers are common enough caricatures of Left Front supporters within West Bengal, but to invoke Ram—a god central to the BJP's rhetoric—as a symbol of Hindu moral order is unusual in the state where Kali and Durga are far more important deities.

[18] Congress politicians in the Siuri locality complained about 'Mokhim', a Muslim 'known criminal' and CPI(M) council chairman who was allegedly terrorising villagers in the neighbouring block. Again, the failure of the CPI(M) and the police to act against him had raised 'communal tensions' in the area, and rioting was deemed likely (interview, 25 November 1997). I did not follow this story up, as 'Mokhim' operated outside the Siuri locality, but both this and the Mayurakshi events emerged spontaneously from my research, not from a deliberate strategy to search out 'communal' incidents.

[19] Despite repeated attempts in interviews to get opposition politicians to talk about their programmes and policies, very few ideas emerged: beyond the single-point programme of defeating the Communists, no alternative vision of West Bengal's political future was proposed.

[20] It is important to state here that I am *not* arguing that the CPI(M) is 'communal', but rather that there are elements of the party's cultural and political inheritance that have not been worked through and openly discussed, making it more difficult for the party to oppose communalism in practice.

[21] The gradual replacement of CPI(M) politicians associated with the party's successes of the 1960s and 1970s by a generation of more self-interested activists is undoubtedly posing problems for the party today.

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