

SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES
IN RURAL
WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of broad rural support in West Bengal for the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) is here studied through the history (1960 to present) of two villages in Burdwan district. The focus is on the relationship between the dynamics of village politics and political and ideological changes of the larger polity. Village politics constitutes an important realm of informal rules for political action and public participation where popular perceptions of wider political events and cultural changes are created. The communist mobilization of the late 1960s followed from an informal alliance formed between sections of the educated (and politicized) middle-class peasantry and certain groups (castes) of poor. The middle-class peasantry drew inspiration from Bengal's high-status and literary but radicalized tradition. However, the establishment and dynamics of the alliance, at the local level, can only be understood within the normative framework of the village. The poor appeared previously as marginal to public exercise of village affairs, but were nonetheless able to manipulate resources available to them (numbers, assertion, norms) and thus achieve some leverage vis-à-vis village leaders dependent on man-support or "moral economy" sentiments for legitimacy. The interests of these groups of poor, particularly of the social or cultural kind since the material resources available were very limited, became crucial in the bonds village leaders sought to create to retain their support. Following on this practice, also the CPM's local party leadership, in the 1980s and 1990s, consistently confirmed social aspirations and status considerations. This leads to the conclusions that not only do communist movements too depend on considerations of social status, honours, and symbolic displays of respect but that the scope for change and the manner in which the communist movement can function at the local level derive from popular perceptions, formed and enacted in villages.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Urbanites tend to regard villagers as dour, slow, and reactionary — as "stupid peasants". This stereotype is of course not shared by scholars of agrarian change. Instead there tend to be a representation of the rural population as the repositories and enactors of structures that are beyond their knowledge or consciousness, as the social space where the great forces of history are enacted by an unself-conscious peasantry. To take but one example: according to Dipesh Chakrabarty the main reason for the Calcutta mill-workers' inability to unionize, develop a class-solidarity, and relate to the mill authorities from a class-perspective, was that they were still basically peasants, who had come out of the villages only recently and only for a short while.¹ And the villages, Chakrabarty¹ informs us, were the homeland of a culture of inequality, hierarchy and violence. This culture was merely there as the traditional normative environment for the rural population of India, and the peasant-turned-mill worker could only re-enact its basic tenets in the new (industrial) environment. The unself-conscious peasant is not an autonomous subject-actor, on the contrary, he appears as the opposite, "the other", of the self-conscious and reflected scholar.

Of course, I am far from the first to have pointed to the problems in such a conception of the peasant, whether in Chakrabarty's study or in general, nor the first to have studied peasant behaviour and village politics from the perspective of the peasant as an autonomous subject-actor. Many more illustrious scholars, such as James Scott, will be referred to in this study. However, what I have specifically sought to do here is to combine a study of village politics with the larger questions of peasant mobilization and with socio-cultural changes. This has led to a number of problems, primary among which have been the linking of the norms and practices of village politics, where the peasant appears as an independent subject-actor, to the historical

¹Chakrabarty 1989. I have used Chakrabarty here because this is a minor blemish on an otherwise excellent and interesting study. Nonetheless, it indicates how even a "Subalternist" can harbour a facile conception of village society.

developments of the larger polity, where he does not. At this point of potential despair I was aided by Jean and John Comaroff's recent book, *Of revelation and revolution*,² where they suggest that sign systems should be understood as polyvalent, and that "consciousness" should be taken not as an on-and-off thing (conscious or unconscious) but as a "chain" ranging from the level of articulated discourse to the level of the taken-for-granted and unspoken-of. In a word, the peasant, as anyone else, is a subject-actor in a limited sense, active within certain confines that are not of his making nor of his undoing. Villagers pursue their interests, as they see them, within a given normative environment, a given social structure, and a given political build-up. But the subject-actor will be able, given the right circumstances, to consider some of the confines of society, some of the cultural constructions, if not objectively at least subjectively, in a new light. Such considerations may give rise to reinterpretations, although within the situation's historic specificity.

There are two interesting aspects to this. One is with changes that are internal to the system, the other one with changes from outside — but the two are closely connected. New ideologies may be appropriated because they suit the needs of specific social groups. These "needs" have been formed within the existing normative environment. However, aims and values may already have changed, before being practised into "habitus". This was the case of the initial conversion to communist ideology in the two villages under study. Ideological conversions created a new praxis in villages, a praxis that did not only grow out of local society. The groups that were involved identified themselves with social groups and values outside of village society. They came to regard village society and its practice with new eyes.

The ideology which they converted to was at the time about to become a dominant ideology. It was shared by the Government, government servants, and most of the intelligentsia alike. So, one could argue, that it was a modern phenomenon, grown out of the drastic changes of modern world. And, indeed, I shall call it "the modern tradition". But there is of course no reason to believe that drastic value changes

²Comaroff and Comaroff 1991.

belong to the contemporary world rather than "traditional" society. India is an ancient country, and to postulate, as does Dumont for instance, the absolute hegemony of one ideology only, seems to negate the historical and cultural variety that has contributed towards creating what we have come to regard as (a unitary) tradition. As I hope to show, even where the one (brahminical) ideology appears as dominant, even hegemonic in a Gramscian sense, it has nonetheless not displaced all alternative sets of values. These alternative sets of values, partly embodied in life-styles, enacted and maintained through practice, made appropriation of new ideologies smoother because the new ones fitted on to the older ones.

What I have wanted to consider in this study is how alternative values and interpretations may not necessarily challenge the existing power-structure or its legitimizing ideology. There is a space of practice — the subject's manipulation of categories of hegemonic knowledge — where hegemony is not openly defied or challenged but eluded and avoided. This space suggests that hegemony is never entirely hegemonic, and that practice is an awkward category which may hide alternative, if unarticulated, values. This space not only allows for uncertainty (which accords the actor with space), but also contradictions and value-contestations.

Such an angle ^{requires} ~~require~~ much material of an intimate nature, and so during the course of its collection my symbolic debt has accrued in many quarters. Most material used here was collected through interviews and participant observation while living in the neighbouring villages of Udaynala and Gopinathpur (fictitious names). I lived in these villages for altogether 11 months in 1992-93, although at the beginning of my field-work I was already familiar with Udaynala and some of the people there through a previous visit (in 1989).

I started by conducting extensive interviews with villagers of all groups, high and low, with former and present village leaders and panchayat members. Some material was also collected from party people, administrators and politicians from the larger area — although these were not as forthcoming as most villagers were. Much of the contemporary statistical material was collected from a survey conducted in 1984 (and

updated each year ever since) for the Integrated Child Development Scheme. I was given access to that material by one of the workers of that scheme, Rizia Begum, who lives in Udaynala but is positioned in Gopinathpur.

However, here we come to a crucial point. Most of the material used here was not collected in the manners described. Most material and most of the insights were gained when I was not enacting the role of the visiting anthropologist-cum-historian, but when I was relaxing, chatting and gossiping and exchanging stories and views. And my favourite partner in this was the same Rizia Begum. Her extensive and intimate knowledge of both villages, of births, deaths, education, illness and health, land and loans, and, above all, the latest gossip — about who was doing what, for what reason, in collaboration with whom — proved an invaluable source of insight into the workings of the village community.

She was my main informant³ for contemporary material. But the extensive historical material could be collected due to two other factors. One was the notebook and diaries (maintained for a full thirty years period, 1956-1985) by the late "Waselmaster" — primary schoolteacher in Udaynala and one of the main actors on its public scene. That notebook, on the village, its population and "problems" in the early 1960s, was written as part of a teacher-training seminar Waselmaster attended in 1961-2. Both the book and the diaries were made available to me by his son, Fajlul.

The second but by far the more important factor was Najir Hosen, poet, party-member and village historian. He was one of the main reasons for picking Udaynala in the first place, since my project depended on extensive information on village history.³ His innumerable hand-written books and records filled seven sacks and cover every thinkable aspect of the village's and region's history and society: peasant movement, religious practices, proverbs, records of every marriage and every death since 1958, landownership in 1958, near-forgotten agricultural practices, diaries, his own life-

³Later on I discovered that a large number of villages have one or even more individuals who maintain extensive records and diaries. However, few would perhaps have been willing to share these with a foreign historian.

history, village and caste myths, etc, etc. He made most of his material available to me (except the "juicy" stories), and also helped fill out the rather oblique entries in Waselmaster's diaries. Without his help it would not have been possible to write this thesis.

I am in particular grateful to Rizia and Najir-chacha for their friendship and dedication, and for their willingness to spend long hours discussing, gossiping and assisting in what in the literature is known as "information gathering". In general, however, my gratitude extends to all villagers of Udaynala and Gopinathpur for the huge amounts of information, but I wish to mention, in particular, Alok Mandal, Kesto Sarkar, Shyamsundar Malik, Sakti Dhara, and Rabi Hak, all of whom generously assisted me. Having said this, and in accordance with what I mentioned above, I learnt as much from gossiping with friends — Chayna, Chandan, Akram, Ajam, Badam, Saiful, Taleb-bhai, Bulu-bhai, Bhadu-bhai and all the others — all of whom not only provided insights and information but friendship and a sense of being welcome and wanted — not at all a bad feeling on a field-trip. I also wish to acknowledge my debt to Haksheb and kakima for their most generous hospitality. Lastly, I would like mention Emanul Hak, whose friendship I cherish and whose interest and immediate trust made this study possible.

In Burdwan Town I had the good fortune to enjoy the hospitality of Dr Girindranath Chattopadhyay, kakima and Mainak while passing through or staying for some other business. It was there I occasionally could discuss aspects of my research, the politics of West Bengal, or life in general with the fabulous "gang of four" — while learning what Tagore songs are all about. And it was in Burdwan Town I also enjoyed the good and stimulating company of LSE alumni Arup and Paramita Maharatna.

My debt has also accrued in other corners of the world. I also to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr John Harriss, who got me to the LSE in the first place and introduced me to that place more alien than Indian villages. Unfortunately he left the School in the middle of my study. Fortunately he did arrange for me to be inherited by two most competent supervisors, Professor Chris Fuller and Dr James Putzel. Their lucid

readings of my confused drafts were indeed clarifying, and their surprisingly detailed comments a constant source of both frustration and motivation. I am particularly grateful to James for his unfailing encouragement and support.

I would have failed my duties as a true client had I not acknowledged my everlasting gratitude and debt to my patron and mentor, Dr Pamela Price. She not only introduced me to India but showed me how thrilling it was. Her ~~exiting~~^{exciting} views, thorough scholarship and relentless encouragement plus a never failing and vivid interest often seemed wasted on that resisting matter that was me.

Among the many friends and colleagues that have been subjected to discussions about things Indian and historical, there is one milieu I shall forever cherish, that of 15, Patina Walk, headed by Razmik Panossian, Light of the East and Maître du canard rôti.

My wife, Elisabet, spent much time helping me with the statistics and relentlessly haunted me with theoretical questions far beyond my comprehension. This study is what it is in spite of her.

All errors, needless to say, are mine.

To the most charming kids in the world, Titir and Pavel.

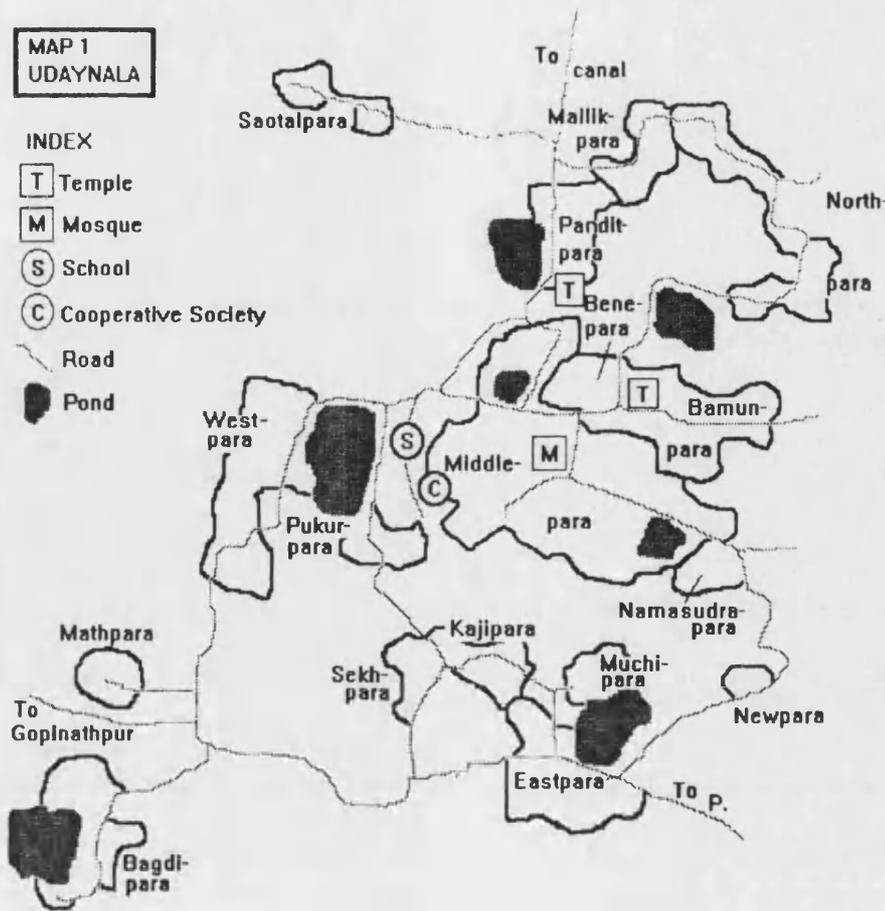
MAPS

**MAP 1
UDAYNALA**

INDEX

- T Temple
- M Mosque
- S School
- C Cooperative Society

- Road
- Pond

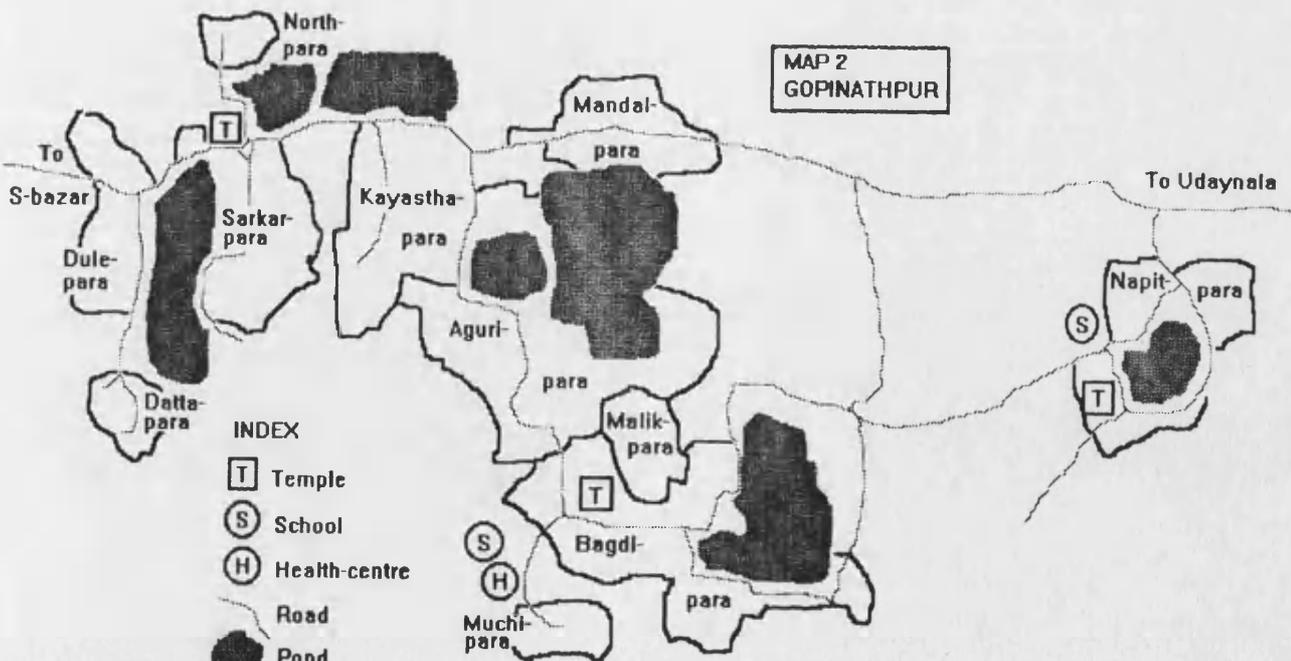


**MAP 2
GOPINATHPUR**

INDEX

- T Temple
- S School
- H Health-centre

- Road
- Pond



ONE

INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural changes through village politics

Most decisions and deliberations concerning and regulating life in village communities, whether it is distribution of scarce resources such as irrigation water, or the normative regulation of society, are taken within the villages — although affected by the larger society. The village scene is also the first and main arena for the public participation of the rural population. For these reasons alone the village and its political life are important for the study of Indian society. In addition, village politics is important because what happens there, and the manner in which it happens, directly or indirectly affect the developments of the larger society and its politics. The sheer numbers create influence, but villagers' participation in the larger polity, whether by foot or vote, is formed in the village polity, a polity in many ways different from the world of interest-based political parties, elected office and independent judiciary. The manner in which village politics works, at least as we have learnt to understand it (concepts such as factionalist or primordial loyalties, or class or false consciousness come to mind), and forms perceptions of parties, ideologies, costs and benefits, for translation into action or non-action, is of direct concern to any would-be politician, major political party, and student of Indian society.

Thirty years of politics and social changes (*ca.* 1960-1990) in the two villages I have called Udaynala and Gopinathpur, will here be used to illuminate peasant mobilization in West Bengal, or what we may call the emergence of rural communism. The villages are situated in Raina *thana* (police station area) in the Dakshin Damodar region of Burdwan district, West Bengal. It is a fertile area that lives almost exclusively from its agriculture. It has also been a very fertile area for the Communist Party of India (Marxist) — CPM for short — the dominant party of West Bengal's Left Front Government (LFG), in power since 1977. As with most of Burdwan, the Dakshin Damodar provides firm support for the party,¹ both in elections and in the running of local affairs. Indeed, the district of Burdwan is known as the CPM's *durga* (fortress).

The emergence of rural communism was not the only important change to have taken place in rural West Bengal over the period under study. Rural communism came alongside drastic changes in the position of women and caste practices, economic improvements and "development" efforts, and, crucially, an increase in the ^{incidence} ~~incident~~ of village poetry recitals. These changes are thought to be connected. Firstly, they are connected through association with various social groups, some of which were external to village society, an association that was actively embodied by ^{specific} ~~specific~~ groups of villagers. Secondly, these changes are connected by forming part of more or less clearly understood or articulated bodies of norms and ideologies. These

¹"The party" is here used to refer to the CPM, or the CPI before the 1964 split. The CPM is in local parlance known by its acronym or just "the party" (*partita*). Its major opponent, the Indian National Congress, is known, as it is all over India, as "Congress" and rarely referred to as a "party".

represented not only bodies of great symbolic value to would-be village leaders but constituted markers for villagers seeking to cope with a changing environment. Poetry-recitals may seem peripheral to the main theme of the history, peasant mobilization, but both to villagers themselves and to this student, the appropriation of symbols through poetry-recitals formed part of a drawn-out history of struggle over status and position to command. This could only be possible if command, or authority, was not only based in power, the ability to enforce, but also in ability to appear (or be) legitimate. Village politics is a transparent arena for public action, where motives are not easily hidden and the division of private and public not clear-cut.

Because of its day-to-day and intimate face-to-face character, village politics is a very informal arena for public participation, where all sorts of sentiments, concerns, aspirations and ambitions can be expressed, interpreted, evaluated, and possibly translated into action. Both poor and rich villagers are as concerned with their economic position as with values, norms, social status and their own personal ambitions. All these are matters that influence the individual's outlook and political behaviour. His ability to act publicly from these concerns and influence the selection of village leaders is exacerbated by village politics being a struggle over very limited material resources. Village politics is mostly not about material resources. Only as a struggle over symbolic resources does village politics know no bounds. This will become clear as we investigate the potentiality of rumours and gossip and poetry recitals on village politics, and the adverse potency of the unmasked use of force on village leadership.

Thus we have a fairly broad understanding of village politics. All activities related to struggles over material, social or symbolic resources fall within what I here understand as "village politics" because they affect the relationship between individuals or groups and their influence in village society.

A somewhat different and more common, although somewhat restricted understanding would be to regard village politics as merely a set of principles or social mechanisms for the daily regulation of community affairs and distribution of scarce resources. This is the approach we meet in "traditional" village politics studies, where concepts such as "dominant caste", "faction" and "patron-client relationships" were developed. However useful, these concepts do easily land us in an anthropological never-never land, where particularly the normative system within which struggles take place is seen as largely unchanging. This results in a view of the polity as a set of fixed and permanent mechanisms.

A major impetus towards a broader approach came with James Scott's *Weapons of the weak*, where village politics acquired another level, the publicly unspoken-of. In this approach, norm systems were introduced not only as changing with altered material conditions, but as potentially exploited by high and low to defend one's interests. Ideologies and norms were brought down from the pedestal of near-eternity to the mud of everyday interaction and struggle. And so, influenced by the notion of everyday forms of peasant resistance, a third approach was introduced into Indian historiography with the "Subaltern" school, which (initially at least) focused on the not-so-everyday forms of peasant resistance. In the occasional eruptions of peasant

protest, one found expressions of a village-formed peasant "autonomy" from the hegemony of the elite, political or otherwise. Later on this school developed a trend which sought to understand the subaltern mentalité through the everyday acts of submission yet occasional eruption of resistance.

I will return to these approaches in more detail below but shall in this study regard all three as representing something which is real, at different levels. Both the everyday cooperation (or co-option), the everyday resistance, and the not-so-everyday resistance are tangible features that constitute a village's reality. The three approaches represent ways of regarding the formation of the village as a varied, multi-focal and multi-voiced polity. Here I employ all three to investigate the formation of the normative as well as practical-political environment in which peasant mentalité is formed and conditioned and the villager's political engagement created and acted out. The result has been a broad, but, I hope, not unwarranted, conception of village politics, one that includes the not-so-everyday with the everyday, the public and semi-public with both the common and uncommon manifestations of individual and group concerns as these change under various influences.

The setting

Udaynala is a Muslim-majority village, although the majority is slim and 45% of the population is Hindu.² Population and landowning statistics are given in table 1.1.

²Both Udaynala and Gopinathpur were technically divided into two distinct mouzas (revenue villages) and panchayat seats, which, for the sake of simplicity, I have merely called Udaynala North and Udaynala South, and Gopinathpur East and

The Muslim population is divided in two groups — *jatis* (castes) seems an appropriate term³ — the sekhs (who constitute a "dominant caste" in terms of its land-owning and political clout), and the malliks, who are much poorer. The Hindus are divided into several *jatis*: among the high and clean castes we find several families of bamuns (or Brahmins) and benes (Baniyas), and one family each of kayastha and kalu.⁴ These live in close proximity to one another, in the bene- and bamun-*paras* (neighbourhoods) in the north mouza. The rest of the Hindu population is Scheduled Caste (SC, formerly "untouchable"), the major groups being the namasudra, the bagdi and the muchhi, who live in separate neighbourhoods, mainly in the south mouza. The bagdis live at a distance from the main village, and so do, a bit further north, the saotals (Santals), a Scheduled Tribe (ST), settled in the village since the 1950s. Although they acknowledge certain distinctly saotal customs, the saotals consider themselves Hindu. Not all Hindus accept this claim.

Gopinathpur West, respectively. Both appear physically as one village, and were formerly referred to as such. Of Udaynala South it was said that "previously only the Kajis [the dominant family there] knew how to read and write". Gopinathpur West was considered but a part of Gopinathpur East. Only in 1993 did it get its own panchayat seat.

³At least following the common understanding of *jati*, as an endogamous group, see Kolenda 1978. For "caste" among Muslims, see Ahmad 1977.

⁴I prefer the colloquial *jati* names since many of the "sanskritized" names are long (such as Barga-Kshatriya for bagdi) and little used. Lower case initial letters will be used for the colloquialisms, upper case for sanskritized names.

Table 1.1
Population and landownership by jati, Udaynala 1993⁵

<u>Jati</u>	Population		Landownership (in percent)
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	
Bamun	41	2.0	1.2
Kayastha	4	0.2	0.3
Bene	43	2.2	4.4
Kalu	6	0.3	0.8
Sekh (Muslim)	935	46.6	62.0
Namasudra (SC)	299	14.9	8.3
Mallik (Muslim)	190	9.5	5.5
Bagdi (SC)	304	15.2	14.2
Muchi (SC)	91	4.5	2.8
<u>Saotal (ST)</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>4.6</u>	<u>0.7</u>
Total	2006	100.0	100.0

Source: field-data

Table 1.2
Population and landownership by jati, Gopinathpur 1993

<u>Jati</u>	Population		Landownership (in percent)
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	
Bamun	15	1.4	4.7
Kayastha	96	8.6	8.5
Aguri	214	19.2	29.1
Napit	165	14.8	23.1
Bagdi (SC)	371	33.4	28.9
Dule (SC)	85	7.7	2.8
<u>Muchi (SC)</u>	<u>165</u>	<u>14.8</u>	<u>2.9</u>
Total	1111	100.2	100.0

Source: field-data

Gopinathpur, bordering on Udaynala in the west, is all-Hindu, and quite evenly divided between the lower castes (Scheduled Caste) and the clean and high castes

⁵The different jatis have been placed in an approximate socio-ritual ranking. Though Muslims and Hindus do not rank on the same ritual scale, Muslim jatis tend to be ranked socially as comparable Hindu jatis would.

(table 1.2). The aguri jati forms the village's dominant caste, numerically large and both economically and ^{formerly} politically dominant. Of other clean or high castes, we find a few bamun families, and a fairly large number of kayasthas. These two jatis have contributed a large number of important village leaders and landlords, and could well be counted among the "dominant castes" of Gopinathpur. Among the lower castes, we find bagdis and muchis plus the ^{dules} ~~dule~~, a jati closely related to the bagdis.⁶ The bagdis rival the aguris in terms of numbers. The "home" paras of these two communities border on each other and constitute the centre and the bulk of the physical village. The muchis contribute a larger proportion of the total village population than their Udaynala counterparts but here live in a small para to the south of the village. Also situated away from the main village are the napits (Barbers), who live along the road, towards Udaynala.

This road, a mud-road (although "mud" does not fully convey its condition during the rainy season), runs from P. in the east, passes through first Udaynala and next Gopinathpur, and ends in S-bazar in the west. Both P. and S-bazar are well connected with frequent buses. Buses have operated on these two roads since the 1950s and have become the main means of transportation for villagers. Two kilometres to the north of these villages, a little used narrow-gauge railway runs from Bankura in the west, only to end up in the middle of a field some kilometres north-east of Udaynala.⁷

⁶Satadal Dasgupta 1986.

⁷The line's official name, Bankura Damodar River Railway, is abbreviated to BDR and hence the local name *boro dukkho rel* ("The railway of great sorrow") since it runs very infrequently and is of minimal commercial interest.

Of even less use than this railway is the canal that runs between the railway and the villages. It was dug in the early 1960s as part of the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) development to provide irrigation for the adjoining areas, but it turned out that the plans were grander than the water supply, and so this canal has been dry for the last 20 years. Instead, fields are irrigated by rainwater for the main *aman*-crop (late summer, autumn), and increasingly by mini deep-tubewells and various other diesel or electricity-run pumps for the smaller but crucial *boro*-crop (winter). This crop was nearly non-existent until some 20 years back, when a few individuals first invested in pumping equipment. In the 1980s and 1990s, mainly with the help of subsidized government loans to village cooperative societies, the number of mini deep-tubewells has increased fantastically (and the water-level sunk comparatively), so that for the boro-season of 1994-5 (when I last visited these villages), Udaynala planned to pump-irrigate about one half of its total acreage, while Gopinathpur planned for about one third. For the period under study, this is the single most important economic change.

The main crop for both the *aman* and the *boro*-seasons is paddy, although we find neighbouring areas also thriving on crops such as potato and sunflowers (for cooking oil) for the commercialized and intensive *boro*-season. But paddy remains the main crop for the region, and the Dakshin Damodar has a very large number of both private, government and co-operative rice mills, all in all 15, mostly located around S-bazar and another village somewhat closer to Burdwan Town.

Burdwan Town, just across the wide Damodar river, is the commercial and political centre of the district, and the town to which people of Udaynala and Gopinathpur turn

for what they cannot get locally, in particular medical expertise and university education. In the main, however, daily needs are satisfied in the immediate vicinity. Both villages have primary schools, a number of doctors, Gopinathpur has a "health centre" with a resident health worker, and both villages have several small shops selling a wide range of items for daily consumption (cooking oil, chilies, *biris* or country cigarettes, cheap plastic toys, soap, etc.) — occasionally even for barter. For the not-so-everyday items or services, villagers turn to P., which has a twice-weekly market, or S-bazar, which has a permanent market. There are higher secondary schools both in P. and S-bazar; in S-bazar even a small college. To the north of P., easily accessible on bicycle from Udaynala and Gopinathpur, is another larger college. Close to this college are the new buildings of a full-fledged "country hospital", a hospital that, however, has not opened due to lack of funds.

This description, which has sought to situate these two villages in their landscape, gives an impression of a placid, unremarkable, sleepy village society. And in many ways it is, but it is also an area of broad support for a communist (marxist) party. The Panchayat Samiti⁸ under which Udaynala and Gopinathpur fall has not seen elected one non-CPM panchayat member since 1978. But the story starts much further back...

⁸The "panchayat system" of elected bodies of local government has in West Bengal three "tiers": Gram Panchayat (or village council, covering some 10-15 villages), Panchayat Samiti (covering some 8-12 Gram Panchayats), and the Jela (or district) Parishad.

A short sketch of state political history

As I have argued elsewhere, the turning of the tide of communist support in rural Burdwan came during the United Front (UF) period (1967-1972)⁹ — as can be seen from table 1.3. The table gives election results from the overwhelmingly agricultural "Central and Eastern Burdwan" (subdivisions Sadar, Kalna and Katwa).¹⁰ Table 1.4 reports figures of "mobilized vote", i.e. the percentage of all those with a right to vote ("electors") actually mobilized into voting by the various parties ("voters").¹¹ It was during the UF period that the vote for the CPM increased substantially. The increase followed an increase in voter turn-out, a near doubling of the "mobilized vote" from 1967 to 1971.

⁹Ruud 1994a.

¹⁰Substantial industries are located in the western regions of the district.

¹¹For the concept of "mobilized vote", see Vanderbok 1990.

Table 1.3
Percentage of votes polled by major political parties and "Independents" in
Central and Eastern Burdwan, 1952-1982

Political party	<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>1972</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1982</u>
Congress	43.0	48.7	48.2	46.5	30.3	26.6	68.6	22.7	39.3
Janata Dal								16.4	-
Bangla Congress					3.9	9.2			
CPI	11.3	21.7	31.1	2.7	4.3	2.2	2.7	-	-
CPM (since 1964)				34.7	42.4	52.6	26.2	51.7	51.9
Forward Bloc	3.1	4.8	4.2	2.0	-	-		8.2	3.4
Socialists*	11.3	8.0	4.5	6.3	-	-			
Independents	20.1	14.2	9.4	7.9	4.4	-	2.5	-	4.7

For asterisk and sources, see table 1.4

Table 1.4
"Mobilized vote" for major political parties and "Independents" in Central and Eastern Burdwan, 1952-1982

Political party	<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>1972</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1982</u>
Congress	17.7	23.0	24.0	28.1	25.4	19.6	44.3	13.0	30.6
Janata Dal								9.4	-
Bangla Congress				-	2.5	6.8			
CPI	4.6	10.2	15.5	1.6	2.8	1.6	1.7	-	
CPM (since 1964)				20.9	27.4	38.8	17.0	29.6	40.4
Forward Bloc	1.3	2.3	2.1	1.2				4.7	2.7
Socialists*	4.6	3.8	2.2	3.8	-	-			
Independents	8.3	6.7	4.7	4.8	2.2	-	1.6	-	3.6
Voters	41.1	47.2	49.8	60.4	64.6	73.7	64.6	57.2	77.9

* Figures for "Socialists" combine the results for the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP), the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), and the Socialist Party.

Results of less than one per cent are indicated by a dash.

Compiled and calculated from Baxter 1969, Field and Franda 1974, and Singh and Bose 1987.

Table 1.5
Percentage of votes polled: Raina constituency, 1952-1982

Political party	<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>1972</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1982</u>
Congress	40.5	45.8	66.0	36.0	37.4	36.6	56.4	22.3	32.7
KMPP/PSP*	41.6	54.3	30.5	37.9	1.7				
CPM			23.4	52.2	60.3	43.6	63.4	65.4	
Other**	18.0		3.5	2.7	8.7	3.2		14.3	1.9

For asterisks and sources, see table 1.6

Table 1.6
Percentage of mobilized vote; Raina constituency, 1952-1982

Political party	<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>1972</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1982</u>
Congress	14.6	23.6	37.5	20.5	24.6	23.5	35.9	12.9	26.2
KMPP/PSP*	15.0	28.0	17.3	21.6	1.1				
CPM			13.3	34.3	38.8	27.7	36.7	52.3	
Other**	6.5		2.0	1.5	5.7	2.1		8.3	1.5
Voters	36.0	51.6	56.8	57.0	65.7	64.3	63.6	57.9	80.0

* The Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) merged in 1952 with the Socialist Party to form the Praja Socialist Party (PSP).

** "Other" includes independent candidates plus the Jana Sangh and Bolshevik Party (both ran in 1952), the Indian National Democratic Front (1969), the Congress (O) (1971), and the Janata Dal (1977 and 1982).

Compiled and calculated from Singh and Bose 1987

Tables 1.5 and 1.6 give the comparable figures for Raina constituency (which comprises Udaynala and Gopinathpur). It may appear that in Raina the CPM did not achieve much in terms of mobilization during the UF years, and that its increase from 1967 to 1969 merely reflected the demise of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), the old party of the opposition. However, the increase in mobilized vote for the Congress probably came mainly from ex-PSP voters, following the lead of the main PSP figure at the time, Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for Raina since 1952, Dasarathi Tah. A number of ex-PSP voters also voted for the INDF, a party of dissatisfied ex-PSP organizers. There is reason to believe that most of the increase in mobilized vote went in the direction of the CPM, as it did in most of Burdwan.

The first impetus towards this radically changed political situation in West Bengal seems, at first glance anyway, to have taken place in Calcutta. After a split in the Congress in 1966, the Congress lost its majority in the state Legislative Assembly in the 1967 election, and the two opposition fronts merged to form the United Front (including the Congress splinter group and both communist parties) and the state's first non-Congress Government. That Government was ousted later the same year, the Front ran for re-election, won, and again formed Government in 1969. It was again ousted in 1970, and broke down before the 1971 elections. The CPM emerged as the single largest party in the Assembly from the 1971 elections but was denied Government positions by a combination of former allies and foes. A little later the same year, repression started to be unleashed on communists, and police and para-military troops were stationed in rural localities and reversed many land occupations. The 1972 elections were rigged in favour of the Congress in many constituencies, including some in Burdwan.¹²

Few have directly addressed the rural mobilization of this period; it has mostly been mentioned in passing or analyzed from a set of assumptions about peasant behaviour. During the period itself, according to one line of analysis, inner squabbles in the UF and struggles over positions made the various constituents to the Front use their Government posts and whatever other means at their disposal to strengthen and widen

¹²Field and Franda 1974:19.

strongholds.¹³ Another line argues that the period opened politicians' eyes to the possibilities available from rural mobilization.

The "call" for mobilization, and the middle-class leadership

Bhabani Sen Gupta, a prominent student of Indian communism, points to economic developments at work throughout the 20th century — "growing agrarian unrest" and a "disintegration of the peasantry"¹⁴ — in seeking to understand communist peasant mobilization in West Bengal. However, what specifically made peasant mobilization possible was "a new tactical thinking" on the part of communist parties, after having "discovered — to the surprise of their own leaders" that rural support bases tended to be more stable than urban ones.¹⁵

Much along the same lines, Marcus Franda asserts that by the time of the UF period, the CPM "showed a new flexibility" which allowed for different strategies in localities with different socio-economic structures.¹⁶ In some they focused on agricultural labourers, in others on a collaboration between landless and middle-class peasants against landlords. In an extremely detailed study, but not directly concerned with peasant mobilization, Nossiter points to the West Bengal CPI unit's history of internal

¹³Franda 1971a: Chapter 7, S. Chakrabarty 1978:304-46. This line of argument formed the tenor of newspaper reports and analysis during the UF period, plus some books; see for instance Sajal Basu 1974, Anjali Ghosh 1981, or Sankar Ghosh 1971.

¹⁴B. Sen Gupta 1979:56 and 151.

¹⁵B. Sen Gupta 1979:53.

¹⁶Franda 1971a:184.

"cohesion and purpose" from the 1950s onwards.¹⁷ Also important, according to Nossiter, was the decline of the same within the Congress, and an increased internal factionalism.

One crucial point seems to have been the pressure from the Naxalites, a break-away group of China-supported CPM activists mobilizing rural proletariat in north Bengal, which proved very attractive to younger CPM activists all over the state and caused self-doubts among important wings of the party.¹⁸ This point is raised by Atul Kohli, who also points to several important contributing factors internal to the party itself: the CPM's ideological reorientation, partly under pressure from the leftist wings of its own organization inspired by the Naxalites; its well-knit cadre-based organization, with dedicated village youth turned students and teachers; and lastly economic unrest and divisions. With this ideological turn towards the rural masses and the 1969 call for occupation of illegally held land, forces were "let loose ... that the CPM itself could not control".¹⁹ Moreover, he finds that economic inequalities and "massive poverty" had caused a deep cleavage in rural society — a "hostility of the lower classes to their superiors".²⁰ Absentee landlordism had caused a lack of landlord political control over the village population, and, subsequently, once the party turned its attention to the countryside and called for mobilization of the landless, reactionary forces did not have sufficient local clout to suppress the upsurge. However, Kohli

¹⁷Nossiter 1988:129.

¹⁸Franda 1971a, Ch. 3, and Ruud 1994a.

¹⁹Kohli 1987:101.

²⁰Kohli 1990:377.

points out, the party depended to a large extent on middle-class peasants for the mobilization.

And this middle-class character of both cadre and local activists is another interesting feature of the CPM's support in rural West Bengal. It is generally agreed that the background of political radicalism in West Bengal can be traced to the historical development of the so-called *bhadralok* ("gentlefolk"), the archetypical Bengali class (or status group) of educated urbanites, professionals or government employees.²¹ It is to Marcus Franda that we owe the exploration of the cultural linkage between Bengali radicalism/communism and the *bhadralok*. However, his insistence on a politically "frustrated *bhadralok*" turning communist in the pre-Independence period has been rightfully criticized by Gordon: "In fact, most of the *bhadralok* were pillars of the establishment..."²²

One reason why Harekrishna Konar, CPM leader and twice minister, labelled Burdwan a "model" district during the UF mobilization was, according to Sen Gupta, that the party had "succeeded in enlisting the support of the middle peasants against the jotedars (big landowners)".²³ In an interview with me on the same topic, Benoy

²¹Franda 1971a, Kohli 1990, Nossiter 1988, B. Sen Gupta 1972. Partha Chatterjee (1993, Ch. 3) rightfully questions the meaningfulness of the term in a colonial situation.

²²Gordon 1972.

²³B. Sen Gupta 1979:55. Konar was the most prominent CPM leader on the rural front. Apart from his positions within the party, he was also Secretary of the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS, autonomous peasant organization, affiliated to the CPM) and minister for Land and Land Revenue in both United Front Governments (1967 and 1969-70).

Chowdhuri, LFG Land and Land Reform Minister, commented on the middle peasant leadership of the UF mobilization.

These middle peasants, they are educated, they are vocal, so they would sometimes lead, due to certain traditions. They enjoyed more clout with the local people who were mostly illiterate.²⁴

The CPM-led LFG has been in power in West Bengal since 1977, which, at the time of writing, makes for 18 years of continuous rule. It is argued that the party was still manned and controlled mainly ^{by} the people of high ritual and social rank, and has in effect only transferred power from the very rich to the middle classes. "The CPM is dominated by the lower-middle income rural groups and is not really a party of the poor", although the poor support the party and benefit from Government policies.²⁵

Although such observations are no doubt accurate, there is nonetheless a lack of appreciation of their implications and many questions are left unanswered. What does it tell us about how politics functions at the local level when the poor accept, or co-opt, middle class leadership? And if middle-class leadership is a fact, were middle class rather than poor interests behind the UF period mobilization? So what groups did respond to the CPM's "call" in the late 1960s? Were the poor only waiting for the CPM to call them in order to discover their real interest? And what happens to

²⁴Interview, Calcutta, January 1989. During the UF period Benoy Chowdhuri was Secretary of the CPM in Burdwan and leader of the West Bengal branch of the AIKS, the Krishak Samiti.

²⁵Kohli 1990:380, see also his 1983 article. More explicit critique is found in Mallick 1990 and 1992.

the legitimacy of middle class political leadership when it becomes, at least to an extent, a mouthpiece for unarticulated interests of the poor? Do themes such as "middle-class leadership" and "co-option" explain the CPM's entrenchment in rural West Bengal? The particularities of Bengal's history gave rise to a radical elite, as pointed out, but this does not explain how that urban, educated and high-status elite connected to the rural masses. To assume that it comes naturally once the educated communist worker visits a village would be to overrate his ability of persuasion. I will not try here to deny the relevance of any of the points raised by the scholars mentioned, but instead fill out the picture by looking backwards, into the immediate and not so immediate past of village society. I shall point to how a heterogenous cultural environment specific to Bengal formed its history in interaction with political events and ideological currents, constantly changing and interpreted through the process of village politics.

Village politics in the literature

Though dated (from the 1950s and 1960s) village politics studies still contain much interesting material, often detailed and lucidly observed.²⁶ The most prominent of concepts developed here, from the observation that Indian villages are often economically and politically dominated by members of one caste, is "dominant caste", which Srinivas described thus:

²⁶Village politics studies have unfortunately been out of fashion since the early 1980s. Fuller and Spencer 1990.

A caste may be said to be 'dominant' when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low.²⁷

The concept has been widely used, also for understanding change. It is generally accepted that many castes transformed socio-economic clout and relatively high ritual position into political dominance over other castes, from where they could take advantage of new opportunities more easily.²⁸ However, the concept has also been criticized for being ambiguous,²⁹ and for ignoring the fact that several castes may be competing for dominance or sharing in dominance.³⁰

A very fundamental problem with the concept is that it is not the caste which is dominant, but a limited number of individuals who hail from that caste. In Mayer's words, "The whole caste group in a village participates in the dominant position, but all aspects of this position are made manifest in a few men only".³¹ More critically, the notion of a dominant caste cannot be retained, according to Dube, unless one

²⁷Srinivas 1987:4. The point about numerical preponderance was later abandoned by Srinivas himself (1987, "Introduction"). See also Dumont 1980:161-2.

²⁸Frankel ("Introduction" in Frankel and Rao 1993) argues that at least some "dominant castes" were able to translate their local dominance into control over the (local) state. B eteille (1965) holds that new institutions such as general suffrage, education, and political parties have broken the monopoly of power.

²⁹Oommen (1970) points out that Srinivas has no less than seven elements of "dominance": numbers, economic status, political power, ritual status, non-traditional education, modern education, physical force. Some of these follow from others, but none have given relative significance.

³⁰Mayer 1960 and Miller 1975.

³¹Mayer 1958:425.

assumes the unity of that caste,³² and, pace Oommen, it is "a matter of common knowledge [that] there exists a high degree of factionalism in Indian villages...".³³ According to Mayer again, where one caste is dominant the principal political cleavages tend to be vertical, not between castes but within the dominant caste. From Rampur, Lewis reported that "...the community in the sense of a cohesive and united village community ... hardly exists".³⁴ The "dominant caste" is the first victim of factionalism. Faction leaders most often belong to the same caste, and members of that caste pay allegiance to either one of them, as do also members of other castes.

Does this critique mean that we must discard the concept of dominant caste? Probably not. Such castes can be readily observed in most villages, sometimes more sometimes less dominant, but invariably with a sense of pride in their traditions and position, often, as Mayer in particular has observed, following a particular codex deemed appropriate to their historical position.³⁵ This pride is shared by the whole caste, not only the powerful few individuals, and is an element in what perpetuates their dominance. Below I turn to cultural constructs supporting both dominant castes and village leaders. However, it may be better to start at a lower level, that of factions or patron-client relationships.

³²Dube 1968.

³³Oommen 1970:76-7.

³⁴Lewis, quoted in Pocock 1957:297.

³⁵Mayer 1960, Ch. 6.

The "dominant caste" concept does not deny the relevance of faction and patron-client relationships in everyday village politics. Carter, from a region-wide study, found it "better to separate caste from dominance and to speak of dominant groups as comprising a political class".³⁶ Politicians engage in shifting ("horizontal") alliances and alliance-building within their own (political) class while retaining fairly lasting ("vertical") alliances with clients in villages.³⁷ Such alliances, or patron-client relationships, form factions.

The term faction to describe Indian village life was first used by Lewis, who wrote that factions were not primarily political or built around patron-client relationships, but basically apolitical kin or neighbour groups.³⁸ This understanding of faction is very different from the politicized cross-caste patron-client relationships found by later scholars, including Carter.³⁹ To Carter the linkage between politicians and villagers (the "vertical alliances") were primarily based on "ties of economic dependence"⁴⁰ and "the distribution of patronage".⁴¹

³⁶Carter 1974:50.

³⁷Carter 1974:7.

³⁸Lewis 1958:503.

³⁹There are two sorts of groups in a faction, says Alavi (1971): the core and the rest, where the core consists of family and immediate retainers. This is a point to be taken up later.

⁴⁰Carter 1974:8.

⁴¹Carter 1974:163.

The distribution of patronage creates supporters, groups of whom (factions) are generally thought to maintain political dominance whether in a village or a region.⁴² In Carter's opinion, patronage created relatively stable relationships, a view not shared by most scholars. Pocock saw exchanges of support as creating only circumstantial and shifting alliances, occasionally appearing to be more permanent, but ultimately "determined by the precise circumstances of their occurrence".⁴³ This interest-oriented ("transactional") understanding comes out even more strongly in Marvin Davis's study of a Bengali village, where membership in a faction "depends on a return for support given [...] Simply, individuals can switch their loyalties and support at will".⁴⁴

In this analysis factions are different from relationships such as family or caste, which are based on "natural or moral ties". In the case of the faction there is only the bargain.⁴⁵ This view of the faction is supported by Hardiman, who argues that in villages a faction is a collection of patron-client relationships, where the clients are demanded to support the patron politically in order to receive patronage, or just employment. Factions are instances of circumstantial "class collaboration", based on economic ties "or perhaps because of ties of caste and kinship which require 'brothers' to stick together".⁴⁶

⁴²For "factionalist" perspectives on state politics, see Brass 1965 and Franda 1970.

⁴³Pocock 1957:295.

⁴⁴Davis 1983:163.

⁴⁵Davis 1983:163.

⁴⁶Hardiman 1982:231.

Feudal magnanimity and legitimacy

However, the picture may not be that simple. From Breman's study of servitude and agrarian relations in Gujarat, although the relationship was ultimately one of "unfree labor", it had, nonetheless, at some point in time, been "complicated and mitigated by a relationship of patronage".⁴⁷ As Harriss notes from Tamil Nadu, patronage continued to be forthcoming because it enhanced the status of the patrons in local society, even after such relationships had largely become economically unnecessary.⁴⁸ Paternalist structures were upheld, and this diffused class antagonism, prevented eviction of the poor from their lands, and reinforced the notion of the village community.

Moreover, an observation made by the late Abdul Rasul on the failure of a sharecroppers' movement in certain areas belies the notion of agrarian relations as purely economic.

...there was some sort of social relation and sentimental attachment between exploiter and exploited. Some feudal generosity or magnanimity could be found in the exploiting class. In Burdwan, for example, the landlord and tenant trusted one another and shares would be distributed and little else taken.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Breman 1974:21.

⁴⁸Harriss 1982.

⁴⁹Cited in Cooper 1984:200. Abdul Rasul was a prominent CPI/CPM leader and peasant organizer, and author of several books on the peasant movement and organizations in India (see Rasul 1974). He was a leading activist in the *tebhaga*-movement (1946-47) — to which he referred in the quotation — a sharecroppers' revolt for an increase in their share of the crop.

Mayer and Cohn pointed to cultural underpinnings by showing that locally "dominant castes", in their villages, filled a role akin to the king, and replicated a "kingly" life-style. From Senapur village in Uttar Pradesh, Cohn comments that "The Rajputs, their way of life, values, and power were dominant in the little kingdom. Everyone else was subservient to them...".⁵⁰ And according to Mayer, the Rajputs of Ramkheri regarded short temper, martial arts, and dominance as constitutive elements in the kingly model on which they moulded themselves.⁵¹ Dumont comments that there seems to be "a homology between the function of dominance at village level and the royal function at the level of the large territory: the dominant caste reproduces the royal function at the village level",⁵² a homology he sums up in neat points:

1. relatively eminent right over land, and thus;
2. power to employ, build up clientele;
3. power of justice (also within other castes or among these) and to extract penalties;
4. monopoly of authority; and
5. occasionally the locally dominant caste is also a royal caste or allied to or similar to a royal caste.

In addition, dominance is legitimized by the special relationship to village priests — exemplified in "royal" patterns of ritual and gifting which many see as possibly more important than the caste system in regulating village inter-caste relations.⁵³ Here, the ideological point of reference is the king whose duty (*dharma*, or *rajadharma*, the

⁵⁰Cohn 1990:92 ("Some notes on law and change in North India") and Mayer 1958.

⁵¹Mayer 1958.

⁵²Dumont 1980:162.

⁵³Raheja 1988a and 1988b.

king's duty) is to protect the kingdom from evil. Other castes — the service castes — assist him in the project by supplying products and services and by removing pollutants.⁵⁴ In Raheja's words, "the dominant landholding caste stands at the centre of a complex ritual organization that permeates nearly every aspect of the everyday life of the village".⁵⁵

The reproduction of the king by dominant castes has a North Indian avatar in the so-called *jajmani* system. This concept should not be taken as an economic "system" but represents cultural constructs on mutuality and reciprocity between unequal partners,⁵⁶ exemplified in the notions surrounding the role of the king and in the hierarchical relation of village landowners and the landless. The construct can be seen to inform (and be informed by) all structurally similar relationships, such as provider/receiver, king/subject, and even father/child or god/devotee relationships. As a father is responsible for his family, so a cultivator is responsible for his dependents and the king for his subjects. From a small town in West Bengal, Östör remarks that "We may parallel the relation between king and subject to merchant and supplier, deity and worshipper".⁵⁷

⁵⁴Gould 1958, Pocock 1962.

⁵⁵Raheja 1988a:517.

⁵⁶The *jajmani* system was thought of as a money-free system of exchange of services and kinds for the (basically ritual) upholding of the entire village society — to have existed in "traditional India" (see for example Kolenda 1978:46ff, Dumont 1980, Ch. 4). Referring to recent historical research, Fuller (1989:57) concludes that the notion of a money-free economic system "is predicated upon a combination of historical inaccuracy and the ahistorical premise of unchanging, 'traditional' India".

⁵⁷Östör 1984:179.

Furthermore, Östör and Greenough suggest, both king and cultivator-employer are subordinate to "a *dharmic* and *karmic* restraint on superiority and power — against exploitation, for cooperation".⁵⁸ This construct obliges them to provide for their subjects. "The essence of this code [writes Greenough] was that the king protect and nourish his tenant-subjects. [...] Like a master of a household, the king was also a 'destined provider of subsistence'... He was expected to give rice to the needy and to make grants of paddy-land to his subjects".⁵⁹ The king's role model is thus also a fatherly role, and everyone in a position of superiority shares in a superior mediating power in their respective domains which obliges them to protect, feed and even indulge their subordinates. I shall return later to the element of the inferior's clout in such a scheme. The point here has been to underscore that cultivators (or dominant castes) as kings were at a focal point of an ideology regulating intra-village relations. This construct of mutual if unequal hierarchical relationships between providers and receivers was an important ideology for regulating relationships between high-caste, dominant leaders and powerless, low-caste followers.

Contested ideology

This looks peculiarly like what Gramsci termed "hegemonic ideology" (although nowhere entirely clearly stated), a dominant conception, established as "historically

⁵⁸Östör 1984:180.

⁵⁹Greenough 1982:19.

true" and appearing as "universal".⁶⁰ Its main feature is to maintain the existing social and power relations of a society. It is this view of hegemony's all-pervasive nature, internalized in "normal times", that Scott challenges in a study of a Malaysian village society whose paternalist ideology was not too different from India's. Scott instead sees culture as "an arena for contest". Gramsci's concept of hegemony, he writes, "...ignores the extent to which most subordinate classes are able, on the basis of their daily material experience, to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology".⁶¹ He found that "everyday forms of peasant resistance" take the form of "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance" plus social and symbolic "backbiting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures, and silences of contempt".⁶² Subordinates, says Scott, are "[not] mystified about their situation",⁶³ but realize their dependence. Although they find the existing social relations amoral they also realize their own limited power to correct these. Discussing how norms and ideologies can be manipulated by the weaker sections of a village community, Scott writes that

...the key symbols animating class relations [...] — generosity, stinginess, arrogance, humility, help, assistance, wealth and poverty — do not constitute a set of given rules or principles that actors simply follow. They are instead

⁶⁰Gramsci 1971:348. Komter comments on hegemonic ideology, "Thus [in Gramsci's view] social interests of dominant groups are presented as those of general interest, which can be freely accepted by the dominated group." A. Komter *De macht van de vanzelfsprekendheid* 1985, quoted in Risseuw 1988:165. For a recent discussion of Gramsci, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, Introduction.

⁶¹Scott 1985:317.

⁶²Scott 1985: xvi-xvii.

⁶³Scott 1985:304.

the normative raw material that is created, maintained, changed, and above all manipulated by daily human activity.⁶⁴

This normative raw material constitutes the means the poor use to secure at least some concessions. These means exist within the same context in which dependence is worked out: a given, normative environment. Every such normative environment postulates degrees of paternalism to legitimize inequalities — as Gramsci pointed out — and so gives rise to divergent interpretations over the correct, the good, the morally justified. Thus Scott sees ideology as dominant, prevailing, rather than hegemonic: not the exclusive realm of one class but the ideology "euphemizing" and legitimizing social inequalities.⁶⁵

The Subaltern Studies: from "autonomy" to "rajadharma"

Partly inspired by Scott, a new Indian historiographic school emerged in the *Subaltern Studies* group.⁶⁶ This school sought a reinterpretation of Indian history through the study of peasant rebellions and the "subaltern", the non-elite.⁶⁷ A major concern has

⁶⁴Scott 1985:309.

⁶⁵Scott 1985:307.

⁶⁶The "school" is represented in particular by the *Subaltern Studies* series but also by a good body of excellent monographs. Guha (ed) 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989 and Chatterjee and Pandey (eds) 1992. Primary among the monographs are Guha 1983, Chakrabarty 1989, Sarkar 1989b, Pandey 1985 and 1990, Hardiman 1981.

⁶⁷A disputed concept, variously understood as "tribals", "peasants", "low castes", "women", "the colonized", and urban labourers. For subalternist and opposing interpretations of who the "subaltern" is, see Guha 1982, Guha 1983:92-3, Sen 1987, Mukherjee 1988, Chakrabarty 1985, Social Scientist 1984, Spivak 1985.

been with "subaltern autonomy" vis-à-vis the elites, the non-elite's ability to perceive a separate world-view in relation or opposition to power, the elite and the hegemonic ideological constructs. Ranajit Guha, a major force behind the Subaltern Studies initiative, saw the subalterns as independent from elite leadership, secure in a separate, independent ideology. Although this ideology related to power, subaltern action (as a "political domain") nonetheless constituted "...an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter".⁶⁸ This "'bravado' attempt", writes Mridula Mukherjee, ignores the studies of several subalternists. These show the subaltern classes incapable of throwing up leadership from among themselves, relying instead on outsiders or elites.⁶⁹ This points to what Rosalind O'Hanlon identifies as a main problem with the Subaltern Studies. The "autonomy" concern has by many contributors been taken too far and understood as a wholly separate field of knowledge, unrelated to power and to the hegemonic constructs the subaltern revolt against.⁷⁰

One aspect that Mukherjee ignores is that though leaders of those rebellions were outsiders, their control over the rebellions was limited. Shahid Amin, for instance, shows that though images of "Gandhiji" were at the forefront of Gorakhpuri peasant perceptions of the ongoing (Non-cooperation) struggle, these images were not controlled by the Congress (though partly exploited).⁷¹ "Unauthorized" perceptions

⁶⁸Guha 1982:4. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹Mukherjee 1988:2115, she refers to Henningham 1983.

⁷⁰O'Hanlon 1988.

⁷¹Amin 1984.

of Gandhi and of the aim of the struggle led to the Chauri Chaura massacre, which prompted Gandhi to call off the whole campaign.

In a turn away from the autonomous peasant, other Subalternists have focused on the issue of elite dominance of the subaltern, on the hegemonic constructs of some duration. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, is very explicit in understanding "subaltern autonomy" as an analytical category, as "only 'relative'".

It is only by giving this 'consciousness' a central place in historical analysis that we see the subaltern as the maker of the history s/he lives out. However, this does not mean that we place this consciousness outside history...⁷²

He understands "subalternity" as "the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of dominance and hierarchy",⁷³ as visualized in his own study of the Calcutta jute-mill workers' relations with superiors and trade unionists. Even as an emerging industrial proletariat the jute-mill workers' attitudes and expectations to superiors were moulded by the village culture whence they came: a culture of inequality, violence, ideologies of superiority and dominance, where only superiors could represent one's cause.⁷⁴ Pre-capitalist community notions remained powerful and explain the erratic and arbitrary degree of organization among those workers.⁷⁵

⁷²Chakrabarty 1985:374.

⁷³Chakrabarty 1985:376.

⁷⁴Chakrabarty 1989:141.

⁷⁵Chakrabarty 1989:219.

Following Chakrabarty, we may say that the subalterns are immersed in a culture which is shared by (indigenous) elite and subaltern alike. Subaltern action, perceptions, and consciousness are formed within a given (although not finite) culture. It is only within that culture that subaltern autonomy becomes an issue. Peasant autonomy is limited by, but also given form and expression by "hierarchy" and its notions of "fairness", protection and interdependence. The subordination of the subaltern to dominance is not necessarily complete or servile, but may contain elements of assertion, a cognition of social and cultural inequalities that entail (paternalist) demands on the superior. Sumit Sarkar has called this "assertion-within-deference".⁷⁶ Gautam Bhadra elaborates much the same idea.

Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality. [...] First, the idioms of domination, subordination and revolt, I believe, are often inextricably linked together; we separate them here only to facilitate analysis. If this is true, it follows that subordination or domination is seldom complete, if ever.⁷⁷

In Bhadra's study, the concept of *rajdharmā* — the duty of kings — constitutes a key (remark the completion of a circle from Greenough and Östör who use the same concept). Within an ideal of dominance and subordination, notions of the just or the fair gave the subalterns room for consciousness and leverage for protest. "The worker reacts when he sees himself being deprived of something that he thinks is justly

⁷⁶Sarkar 1989a:6.

⁷⁷Bhadra 1989:54.

his".⁷⁸ However, "The worker's idea of fairness was related to his idea of what was customary (or *riwaz*)."⁷⁹ But this was again a very fluid category, far from historically fixed. "'Custom', 'tradition', and 'legitimacy' were [...] open to interpretation."⁸⁰ This understanding left the subaltern a large space for protest and assertion within an acceptance of domination. The pattern of dominance was not challenged, but the relative weight of categories and interests could be.

The manipulation of elements of paternalism by the subordinates is very interesting. It is not the existing cultural categories — dominance, subordination — that are challenged, but perceived non-conformity to ideals. Since ideals by necessity are vague, they are open to manipulation. This may resemble Scott's "everyday forms of resistance", but unlike Scott the subalternists (at least some contributors) do not regard culture itself as "an arena for contest". Rather, the contest takes place within culture. Expectations, demands, obligations, complaints, all are culturally constituted and formed. It is in this manner that subordination can be understood, as a real-life experience nonetheless mediated in culture, persuasive but manipulable. Cultural categories are contested, even challenged, but never escaped. Not all deference implies assertion, but all submission contributes towards creating authority, and so there is leverage if manipulated with care.

⁷⁸Chakrabarty 1989:178.

⁷⁹Chakrabarty 1989:179.

⁸⁰Chakrabarty 1989:180.

Polyvalent sign systems: the multi-voiced

The society under study underwent over the last three to four decades extensive socio-cultural changes, with a high level of awareness of normative changes. Efforts of distancing from the ways of the past were undertaken by some — a number of whom had much to lose — and resisted by others. This took place within a pattern of unequal but reciprocal interaction of village leaders and followers, the one group influencing the other. In particular, the middle-class-led communist movement can be seen to have moved away from much of its own middle-classness towards a more rustic, earthy style of action familiar to the lower castes. In this context, "assertion through submission" makes potentially much sense. The only question is, does it help us understand the dynamics of changes in normative systems? Appeals to "rajadharma" can only be effective if the norms are kept alive.⁸¹

One crucial element is, I believe, that the poor did not represent a unified class pressing in one direction. Instead they played different roles in village politics, had different relations with village leaders and the nascent communist movement, and can be seen pressing in different directions. This pattern represented very different normative systems (although not unrelated to one another) that gave rise to different courses of action and different perceptions of and options in both village politics and the communist movement. These differences related primarily to different castes, for

⁸¹As Gayatri Spivak (1985:331) writes, the Subalternists "perceive their task as making a theory of consciousness or culture rather than specifically a theory of change". Also O'Hanlon (1988:211) criticises the Subalternists for a tendency towards assuming timeless significant, "primordial loyalties", and "essences" in representations of peasant culture.

whom life-style, material conditions, myths and history, and role in village politics, combined to create different self-images and social restrictions. These self-images and norms made the opportunities represented by communist ideology and policy appear in very different light to the different castes. To understand this situation we need a different set of concepts than the sole notion of a dominant "rajadharma". Recently, Jean and John Comaroff have argued that culture cannot be seen as a given whole.

...far from being reducible to a closed system of signs and relations, the meaningful world always presents itself as a fluid, often contested, and only partially integrated mosaic.⁸²

Although not entirely, some of the world looks permanent and stable. The Comaroffs discriminate different levels by differentiating analytically the "unconscious" culture (simply covering the entire sign system) from "ideology", "an articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] 'worldview' of any social grouping".⁸³ In the Comaroffs' view, the regnant ideology will be the one of the dominant group but "other, subordinate populations, at least those with communal identities, also have ideologies".⁸⁴ I will use this understanding of ideology as a system of more or less clearly articulated norms, systems that do not exclude other comparative systems (^{ideologies} ~~ideologies~~). In between conscious ideology and unconscious culture there is "hegemony", which is understood as the quasi-conscious

⁸²Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:27.

⁸³Following in part Raymond Williams's definition of ideology in *Marxism and literature* 1977. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:24.

⁸⁴Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:24.

realm which supports the existing social system in a broad sense, allowing for different ideologies within.

This somewhat standard view is made most original by pointing out that the conscious/unconscious opposition is not a dichotomy but two ends of a continuum, "a chain of consciousness".⁸⁵ In between the two opposites lies the most fascinating realm, namely

...the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and, sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even articulate conceptions of the world [...] It is from this realm, we suggest, that silent signifiers and unmarked practices may rise to the level of explicit consciousness, of ideological assertion, and become the subject of overt political and social contestation.⁸⁶

This is a dynamic field, where seeds of alternative interpretations may slowly be born into awareness and where, equally, signs and symbols may recede into the unremarked taken-for-granted. Here, the Comaroffs refer the graduation of protest to its practice, and to the response of the dominant, which leads in the end to the production of consciousness. Consciousness is not a priori but grows out of practice and recognition — "with varying degrees of inchoateness and clarity".⁸⁷ Thus hegemony is never entirely dominant. It is made and remade, will seek to dominate conflicting norms which it with smaller or larger degrees of success presses away. But there is always

⁸⁵Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:29.

⁸⁶Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:29.

⁸⁷Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:31.

a field where other (previous) ideologies go when overtaken, where values that do not fit the dominant ideology exist, a field of more or less powerful value-systems and possibly counter-ideologies.⁸⁸ It is the field from which resistance may arise because no power can command all signs and symbols.

Using this understanding of the "cultural field" as a myriad of signs and norms, although not all immediately available for justification of action, we can handle the striking and tangible differences in the appropriation of new ideologies and political opportunities displayed by groups of villagers, including the differences in response to a changing political environment by groups of poor. Recognizing "rajadharma" as suggestive of the dominant but complex theme of rank and mutuality in Indian culture should not mean ignoring alternative norm systems or the possibility of alternative interpretations of any one situation, even if these interpretations do not appear to contradict the theme of hierarchy and dominance. Although I have relied much on both the village politics studies tradition and the Scott/subalternist school for understanding socio-cultural changes in rural West Bengal, only the aid of an advanced conception of culture has made it possible to break through the monolithic views of hierarchical cultures to grasp the dynamics of change.

Chapters 2 and 3 will in the main investigate aspects of village politics. Firstly, a historical study of village leaders and their respective sources of "power" will be used to "deconstruct" the nature of village leadership. Following that, I will use contemporary material — the daily workings of village politics that I was able to

⁸⁸Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:25-6.

observe — to "reconstruct" village leadership from a consideration of the circumstantial and the idiosyncratic.

With this understanding of village politics in mind, the study turns, in Chapter 4, to the history of communism in rural West Bengal and to the radicalization of sections of the middle-class peasantry. The investigation builds mainly on events from before the mobilization of the late 1960s, and will concern itself with reading of practices such as road constructions and poetry recitals. Following that I turn to the mobilization of poorer sections of society, and in particular to the United Front period. The main aim of Chapter 5 is to investigate the meaning of the mobilization to those mobilized. I am particularly concerned with the observed differences in appropriation of opportunities that the CPM represented by the different castes. This leads to an investigation into the nature of caste and its significance for political participation and mobilization. That investigation is carried into the 1980s and 1990s in Chapter 6, which concerns itself with the different roles different low castes have in the local political structure under the LFG.

TWO "POWER" — AS IN "INFLUENCE"

Introduction: "We were all in it together"

"We were all in it together", uttered in public, is a standard answer by village leaders to queries about who initiated or led one or the other project. Other villagers will, in private, be more explicit: "This road was built by Ehiasaheb", or "Bhasu-kes organized the building of this school". But Ehiasaheb and Bhaskar Kes themselves will understate their own role and instead emphasize the community or the collectivity, "We were all in it together".

In a society as preoccupied with rank and hierarchy as rural India, would a village leader not seek to underline his own role and contribution to enhance his status and prestige? And why should he even be bothered? Did wealth, political contacts and traditional status not yield sufficient clout? It does not seem so. Village ethnographies present the same self-denial of importance. Lewis, for instance, wrote from a village in north India that:

A fundamental requisite for leadership in this village is humility, self-abnegation, and hospitality, especially within the in-group. [...] Leaders will never refer to themselves as such and will make a point of attributing leadership qualities to the others who are present.¹

¹Lewis 1958:129.

Leaders publicly present themselves as just one among many, as perhaps not important at all. On the subject of decision-making, Dhillon writes that in the "traditional panchayat":

The *Yajmans* [here: leaders] must make decisions in consultation with all concerned, and the confidence in them must be constantly reaffirmed by the people.²

This looks like some sort of rudimentary democracy. The people "elect" their leaders through extending or withdrawing support. Dhillon may have overstated his case, but there seems nonetheless to be a substantial degree of "consultation" between leaders and the led, also in Bengali villages. But rather than commoners electing leaders by extending or withdrawing support, the leaders seem to take great care to accommodate themselves to public opinion. This is a typical pattern: the elders first "scan" the general mood and only then pronounce a verdict — one in line with the commonly held opinion.³ This phenomenon is evident in *bichars* (village courts).⁴ Discussions may last for hours, with a large number of those present participating, including some

²Dhillon quoted in Mandelbaum 1970a:292.

³Mayer (1960:257) noted that "The most influential men say nothing at first" in village meetings. They leave the floor to the less influential.

⁴A *bichar* is a particular kind of village meeting in which culprits are sentenced, or disputes discussed and solved. In *bichars*, villagers together deliberate upon or pass sentence in a dispute, or on someone who has committed an offence. *Samsad Bengali-English dictionary* gives *bichar* as "consideration, deliberation; argument; discussion; decision; inference; a (judicial) trial; judgment, finding". *Bichars* and other meetings are called on an ad hoc basis every now and then with an attendance varying from five to 50-60 or more. They are central arenas for community affairs.

of the younger ones.⁵ Only women do not participate, although a number of women are almost invariably present in the outskirts of the bichar site and throw in remarks and arguments.⁶ Finally, the responsibility for the decision is laid on all those assembled. It is the decision of all assembled, and its implementation is their responsibility.⁷

Both these aspects can be seen from the instance of one bichar I witnessed. A son had accused his father and step-mother ^{of} wanting to cheat him of his inheritance, and the decision for an immediate sharing of the land was firmly in the son's favour. His father, "the defendant", protested vehemently and raised the very valid point that, "A man's land is not divided before his death!". This was the recognized tradition and was not argued with, but the desire to right the wrong and provide security for the son precipitated the demand to see the lands shared immediately. His argument was dismissed by senior-most judge Haksahab: "Right or wrong, this is the *samaj's* [society, community] decision", and everybody agreed. Haksahab's phrasing pointed to how everyone, ideally, was involved in the verdict and was responsible for it. There was no final legitimation in law or tradition, only in the will of those present.

⁵Risseuw 1988 contains repeated references to the "young men" who transgress the limits of respect and reverence.

⁶The extent to which their opinion is considered constitutes of course an altogether different issue. No doubt women have subtle ways of influencing village affairs, although their public participation is severely restricted. Unfortunately, space does not permit an elaboration of this issue.

⁷The importance laid on consensus in Indian village councils is outlined in Bailey 1968.

Their decision was based on how they perceived the arguments in view of the circumstances.⁸

The phrasing also points to the reality of village affairs: the limits of the powers of village leaders in issues such as this. The decision was a collective one that would stand and fall with the unity, will and unanimity of those present. Alone, village leader and at the time panchayat member Haksahab — owner of a mere 22 bighas — would not have been able to enforce the verdict. Even assisted by other village "elders", verdicts such as this would have been largely ineffectual had there not been social pressure to legitimate and enforce it. This will become even more evident in a case to be presented in Chapter Three, where Haksahab and his supporters were unsuccessful in ostracizing a woman because most villagers disagreed or saw the effort as part of a factional struggle for influence and prestige.

The informal arena of village politics

What I have called "village leader" exists primarily as an analytical entity. Udaynala and Gopinathpur do not have institutionalized positions of village headman or leader,⁹ nor is there any proper term for "village leader" in the vocabulary of the villagers there. The Bengali term *morol* (derived from *mandal*, village headman) was in some

⁸Cohn (1990:465) points out that in the 18th century Indian perception law was circumstantial.

⁹Both villages had families entitled Mandal who according to tradition belonged to the lineage of village headmen (hence the title). But these positions no longer carried responsibilities nor were they heeded except for a few ritual roles.

use previously, but is now only used sarcastically. The other common term for "leader", *neta*, refers more to leaders of larger organizations or at least within some institutional framework. At present, the statutory powers of the panchayat members make people show them respect in public although many are ridiculed in private to the extent of disallowing them any extra-official, informal powers or authority. As we shall see here panchayat members also spend their time "being around" guarding their name and reputation in the same fashion as other would-be village leaders. "Village leader" is a position created locally, through mechanisms that are informal.

Bichars such as the above took place within what we may term "the informal arena" of village politics (or, more accurate but less elegant, "the non-institutionalized arena" of village politics). The administrative apparatus of rural West Bengal is involved in such issues only when they cannot be handled satisfactorily by the villagers themselves. The local level governmental bodies, the Gram Panchayat or "village councils" (a direct translation), normally cover 10-15 villages, and have one or two representatives from each village. It goes without saying that these bodies are incapable of being involved in the everyday affairs of each and every village. Even political parties do not become involved in such issues of contention until they reach proportions of wider implications. Firstly, the political organizations do not have the capacity to become involved in all such issues in all villages. Secondly, they are probably not interested. Issues such as the one presented above has no bearing on

political affiliations or political questions. On the contrary, involvement could easily cause embarrassment and strain.¹⁰

However, exactly such issues are of crucial importance for the positions of (would-be) village leaders. This is the arena in which their stature is gossiped about and where they create confidence (see Chapter Three). Apart from all the time spent in "being around", the village leaders' stature is also measured and assessed in meetings such as bichars.¹¹

But where does this leave the more hard-core social science economic structures, political clout, or social status? Particularly West Bengal's much-discussed panchayat system surely lends clout — even in "the informal arena" — to the individual village leader cum panchayat member? Furthermore, village leaders are more often than not of clean caste (in Udaynala high status Muslims), owners of more than subsistence land, and with wide political contacts. Such factors, particularly when in the hands of one individual, should surely contribute towards a dominant position in the village? However, these factors rarely form sufficient clout to "rule" a village by personal will, without cooperation from other villagers. Moreover, other villagers, as we shall see, have "powers" of their own, "powers" that may rival the (would-be) village leader —

¹⁰There is also a strong sense of outside involvement being regarded as undesired interference. This has been found in a number of cases; most strikingly, Hitchcock (1959) found it to hold for two different kinds of leaders, with thirty years apart.

¹¹See for instance Epstein 1962:129-40 on village meetings and competition between groups. See also Chapter Three.

"power" being understood in the conventional Weberian sense of the ability to exercise one's preference against the will of others.

Rural West Bengal — including Udaynala and Gopinathpur — was an area characterized by economic, ritual, and political inequalities. The higher castes tended to have more land and more political clout. The various rankings coincided. But what is often ignored is that village leaders needed to be accepted as such, as legitimate leaders. Not only were personal "powers" (in particular, land) limited for the individual village leader (and thus the number of dependants was limited); he also found a large number of people equally wealthy or wealthier. Other structural categories, for instance ritual status, only further expanded the group of peers or potential rivals. Relatively well-off owner-cultivators (owners of 20 or more bighas) and the "dominant caste(-s)" formed respectively 16% and 44% of the population of Udaynala and 22% and 50% of Gopinathpur by 1960. The "dominant caste" may have been dominant, but the individual village leader was but one individual in a large pool of people who were not his subordinates. Instead they were his peers with a status and possibly also "powers" that matched his. Many were also his rivals for the position of village leader.¹²

What needs to be kept in mind when dealing with socio-cultural changes is that in addition to being part of a group or a class, individuals also act as individuals, i.e. in relation to other individuals within or outside their own group or class. This is

¹²For West Bengal see Nicholas 1963 and 1965, and Davis 1983. For a comparative study, see Cohn 1990 ("Anthropological notes on law and disputes in North India").

particularly so in the case of village leaders who have to seek to stand out as "individuals extraordinaires" in order to rise above the group from which they emerged and reach out beyond their own group, to other groups in the village community, to find support against rivals.

As to the material having been collected from what is now a "communist" area, I will underline how this code of behaviour grows out of pre-communist notions or social principles. The status of high rank in the opposition between the labourer and the owner-cultivator, and the status of the *swajati* ("same caste"), both conflict with "the humiliation of dependence" to prevent the subordination to a village leader of comparable status. Having said that, it needs to be emphasized that the norm of equality under communist influence has been expanded to include other social groups. From having been part of the reproduction of hierarchy, the norm of equality established itself as the dominant norm (in the sense of a value, not statistically). The arrival of communist ideology has resulted in a vast expansion of the "equality" group, of the number and character of those to whom notions of egalitarian interaction are applicable.¹³ This, however, was a later development in these villages.

Factionalism and rivalry

Thirty years ago "groupism" — nowadays the English term is used — or *daladali* (factionalism) or the affairs of the *dals* (factions, groups), was rampant in both

¹³Béteille (1991, Ch. 8) has argued — and I quite agree — that the value of equality has spread in India through the government's "affirmative action". However, he points out, it is still far from dominant, particularly in the countryside.

Udaynala and Gopinathpur. Daladali was a well-known phenomenon with a long history, and village politics was perceived as having centred around dals led by powerful or influential individuals. These dals and the subsequent daladali were important enough to form the core of village history; "In the days of Hekimsaheb's dal" or "When the bagdis were in the Kaji dal" are common shorthand for fixing historical periods. From several quarters I was given a listing of the main divisions in the recent history of Udaynala's village leadership.

<u>Primary village leaders</u>	<u>Period of leadership</u>
Hekimsaheb vs. Raju Munsu	until early 1950s
Jikukaji vs. Baset Ali	mid-1950s
Hanukaji vs. Rahim Ali	late 1950s
Ehiasaheb vs. Haksahaeb	early 1960s to 1971
Ehiasaheb unrivalled	1971-75
Haksahaeb unrivalled	1975-1992
Haksahaeb vs. Rabieli	1992-

In addition to these main groupings there were other dals. Most paras had at least one each, some had two. The larger dals encompassed several minor ones and so covered several paras. At the time of the Hanukaji vs. Rahim division, there were two minor factions among the north-para sekhs (one led by Waselmaster, Rabieli's father's brother), and two among the west-para namasudras. The village twice-born normally acted as one dal although not everyone there would be considered "part" of the faction. Most prominent among them was Bhola Sarkar, a cultivator but well-connected, with cousins in business and service in Calcutta. The Udaynala bagdis were divided between two dals at that time, one led by Manik Bag, an up-and-coming money-lender allied to Rahim, and one anti-Manik consisting of the rest in the main

allied to the Kaji family. In addition there were some minor dals among the middle-para sekhs.

With the division between Ehiasaheb and Haksahab village politics came closer to resembling party politics, with Ehiasaheb in the Congress party and Haksahab a long-time communist, and both supported by and engaged in the activities of their respective parties. During the 1960s these two at least tried to work together. They were both part of the so-called *tarun dal* ("young group" or "faction" — its reformist activities will be taken up in Chapter Four) which included Waselmaster, Imam Hosen, Najir Hosen and others. The only ones excluded were Rahim and Manik. A "faire sembler" cooperation between Ehiasaheb and Haksahab lasted through the troubled years of United Front Governments, land occupations and general rural unrest (1968-71), but broke when repression was unleashed on communists and Haksahab fled. From then until 1975 Ehiasaheb was the unrivalled, if repressive, leader of Udaynala.

In neighbouring Gopinathpur daladali was somewhat less pronounced. A major factor in this was the long-standing position of strength held by Bhaskar Kes, and his ability to gather other groups around him. The list of major leaders of Gopinathpur looks like this:

<u>Primary village leaders</u>	<u>Period of leadership</u>
Bhaskar Kes vs. Ranjan Kes	late 1950s — early 1960s
Bhaskar Kes unrivalled	early 1960s — early 1970s
Bhaskar Kes vs. Anadi Sarkar	early 1970s to 1977
Sailen Kes and others	1977 to mid-1980s
Shyamsundar and others	mid-1980s onwards

This picture however is too placid and conceals many intrigues. Though Bhaskar — aguri by jati — retained his position over many years, he did so by balancing various secondary leaders. He maintained a long-standing alliance with the two bagdi leaders, Gobardhan Porel and Sakti Dhara, although not without many instances of co-opting the support of Paritas Sarkar or Bijay Chakrabarti — high-caste leaders. In the 1970s, Bhaskar's alliance came to an end when Gobardhan sided with Anadi Sarkar, Bhaskar's rival. In the 1960s the aguris were further sub-divided into groups headed by Mohan Sen and Sakti Jos, with Ranjan Kes's family excluded. The kayasthas were headed by Paritas Sarkar for many years, and later on by Anadi Sarkar (distantly related). The bamun Bijay Chakrabarti gained notorious importance due to his extensive money-lending in the west mouza. Later on Jagatnath Majumdar as leader of the village napits also entered the scene.

The term "faction leader" should be properly understood as the informal, vague leadership it refers to. Among those who took an active interest in village affairs, some were more prominent than others. There is no way of making final distinctions between para or jati leader and the all-village leaders. Some kept their activities limited to para or jati while others expanded their time and efforts (and ambitions) to include the entire village, though also all-village leaders often enjoyed a core of support in their own more limited group. Others were less committed and appeared

only now and then for meetings or bichars. From among the latter group, again, some individuals might emerge as prominent, with maturity, interest or opportunity.

There was, both in Udaynala and Gopinathpur of the early 1960s, a high degree of rivalry among a fairly large number of individuals. This high degree of factionalism was not unknown elsewhere, occasionally with one or two main leaders only, occasionally with more, but always with a number of secondary leaders. The level of competition varied, but for instance the relatively long period of limited factionalism in Gopinathpur under Bhaskar reflected effective alliance-building rather than any strong sense of cooperation. Occasionally degrees of "faire ssembler" cooperation were enough to prevent overt factionalism. Below we shall investigate more closely the "powers" held by the individuals in question.

Sources of "power"

In his diaries, Waselmaster mentioned a range of individuals who were active in the village affairs of Udaynala in the 1960s. They regularly attended the many meetings called, gained positions in the increasing number of institutions or were in other ways influential in determining the course of village politics. They are listed in table 2.1, together with information on jati, landownership, and the activities they were involved in. Under "Other" I have listed their most obvious (if any) extra source of authority or influence. What I have not included is "knowledge" — except as in "educated". The land figures refer to land held by families, some of whom were large and joint,

others small. The table thus does not give an accurate indication of wealth per member of family, but an indication of land controlled by each head of family.

Table 2.1
Details of main village leaders, Udaynala, early 1960s¹⁴

<u>Head of family</u>	<u>Land- (bighas)</u>	<u>Jati</u>	<u>Activities*</u>	<u>Other</u>
Haksaheb	65	Sekh	PA S C D	Prestigious family; communist
Hanukaji**	60	Sekh	P S C D	Prestigious family; bagdi support
Rahim Ali**	40	Sekh	P S	Money-lender
Bhola Sarkar	30	Kayastha	P C	Money-lender
Najir Hosen	25	Sekh	P S C D	Communist
Waselmaster**	16	Sekh	S C D	Educated
Ehiasaheb	14	Sekh	PA S C	Congress contacts
Manik Bag**	12	Bagdi	P S C	Money-lender
Imam Hosen	8	Sekh	S D	Educated; prestigious family

*"Activities" refers to involvement in one of the following at one point or another during the early 1960s: member of the 1964 Gram Panchayat (P) or Anchal Panchayat (A); member of the village school board (S) or the village cooperative society board (C); founding member of the Udaynala Village Development Society (D).

**Joint family

Source: field-data

Both Haksaheb and Hanukaji headed old "prestigious" (*baniadi*) families with large lands — lands they were losing rather than gaining. Haksaheb was a primary village leader for many years and had been involved with the communists since the late 1950s. Hanukaji never managed to fill the footsteps of his more illustrious father

¹⁴The figures on landholding relate to 1957 and were mainly given by Najir Hosen, who returned to his native village that year and started keeping records.

Jikukaji, and the family's historical bagdi support was eventually transferred to Haksahab and Ehiasahab. Rahim was more of an "up-start" who had gained land through extensive money-lending and hard work. Bholu Sarkar had inherited land and maintained it well; he was also deeply engaged in money-lending. His position was based on his influence among the caste Hindus. Imam Hosen headed a poor but prestigious family. He and a few others, Najir Hosen, Waselmaster, Haksahab and Hanukaji, were among the few educated (i.e. with 6-8 years of schooling). Najir Hosen, Waselmaster, and Ehiasahab all belong to the dominant sekha jati but headed non-prestigious families. Ehiasahab originally held only 16 bighas, but became a primary village leader in the 1960s through incessant activity and broad "alliances" in the village. He also represented the Congress in the village, but this gave him little extra clout in the 1960s.

Table 2.2
Households by landownership, sekha vs other jatis, Udaynala 1957

<u>Land held</u> <u>(in bigha)</u>	<u>Sekha</u> <u>(N)</u>	<u>Sekha</u> <u>(%)</u>	<u>Others</u> <u>(N)</u>	<u>Others</u> <u>(%)</u>
0-4.9	12	16.2	50	54.9
5-9.9	26	35.1	12	13.2
10-19.9	19	25.7	19	20.9
20+	<u>17</u>	<u>23.0</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>11.0</u>
	74	100.0	91	100.0

Source: field-data

Table 2.1 shows that the sekha community was more prominent in village affairs than other jatis. They were in general wealthier than the other communities. Table 2.2 shows a larger percentage of sekhs in the 10-19 bighas and the 20+ bighas groups than of the other jatis combined. However, whereas two non-sekha heads of family

were actively engaged, many well-off sekhs heads of family were not active in village affairs. There were ten sekhs households holding 20 or more bighas of land that did not have a member active in village affairs. On the other hand, both Bhola Sarkar and Manik Bag — the two non-sekhs — played important roles, were elected to positions, and received repeated mention in Waselmaster's diaries for their initiatives.

Table 2.3
Details of main village leaders, Gopinathpur early 1960s

<u>Head of family</u>	<u>Land (bighas)</u>	<u>Jati</u>	<u>Activity*</u>	<u>Other</u>
Paritas Sarkar	47	Kayastha	C P	Ex-lawyer
Mohan Sen	32	Aguri	C B	
Bhaskar Kes**	32	Aguri	S C B PA	Strong alliance, large and old family
Gobardhan Porel	27	Bagdi	C P	"Sanskritized", religious leader; alliance
Bijay Chakrabarti	22	Bamun	P	Money-lender; village priest
Paritas Malik**	20	Bagdi	S	Educated; service
Ranjan Kes	17	Aguri	B	Large and old family
Sakti Jos	16	Aguri	B	Devout
Anadi Sarkar	5	Kayastha	PA	Political contacts
Sakti Dhara	2	Bagdi	S C P	Alliance
Baul Porel	2	Bagdi	S	

*"Activity" refers to involvement in one of the following: the 1957 building of the school (S); the 1963 relaunch or position on the board of the cooperative society (C); chairman of the *baroari* (public) committee between 1957-1965 (B); selected to the 1964 Gram Panchayat (P) or Anchal Panchayat (A).

**Joint family

Source: field-data

Table 2.3 comprises all prominent villagers in Gopinathpur from 1957 to 1965. They include initiators behind the 1957 building of the school, the 1963 relaunch of the

cooperative society, *baroari* committee chairmen in the early 1960s,¹⁵ and members of the 1964 Gram or Anchal Panchayats. The clean- and upper castes dominate the list. Paritas Sarkar was a well-off landowner who for many years had been absentee while practising law in Burdwan Town. Mohan Sen was also well-off, moderately involved in village affairs but never one who carried great weight. Most prominent of all was Bhaskar Kes, who qualified for the title village leader and was still during my stay presented by fellow villagers as "Gopinathpur's *morol*" (leader). Interestingly he was not particularly wealthy, and the 32 bighas he held around 1960 were towards the end of the 1960s divided when his younger brother established a separate household. The next, very interesting, persona on the list was a culturally reforming bagdi whose family had gained land through hard work, a moderate life-style, and moderate money-lending. Gobardhan himself was local guru of a reformist Hindu sect (the Satsangha) to which Anadi Sarkar also belonged. Gobardhan and Sakti Dhara were the two major bagdi leaders of the village, and in the 1960s both were allied to Bhaskar — an alliance that made the three prominent for many years.

Bijay Chakrabarti was once a poor village priest who amassed land through unscrupulous money-lending (he took security in land). He seems to have been particularly unpopular, but demanded and obtained influence through the large number of people indebted to him. Paritas Malik lived only for a short while in the village: he was the most educated of the village bagdis and had a service position (in Bihar). Ranjan Kes and Sakti Jos were both relatively poor owner-cultivators of the dominant

¹⁵Gopinathpur's *baroari* (public) committee was fairly prosperous, controlling about 20 bighas of land, and engaged in most communal activities in the village. It was a central forum in village politics.

caste, both moderately involved in village affairs. Ranjan had a larger role cut out for himself but was forced out by his cousin Bhaskar. Lastly, there were the two bagdis Sakti Dhara and Baul Porel. Baul was involved only in the establishing of the village school — although towards the late 1960s he was the first CPM supporter in the village. Sakti Dhara was a very poor but energetic leader of the bagdis, and allied, with Gobardhan, to Bhaskar.

Table 2.4
Households (in numbers) by landownership, all jatis, Gopinathpur, ca 1960

Land held (bigha)	<u>Bamun</u>	Kaya- <u>stha</u>	<u>Aguri</u>	<u>Napit</u>	<u>Bagdi</u>	<u>Dule</u>	<u>Muchi</u>
0-4	3	3	1	-	7	5	4
5-9	-	-	1	2	4	-	-
10-19	-	5	4	-	1	-	-
<u>20+</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>-</u>
Total	4	9	14	3	15	5	4

Source: field-data

Again, from table 2.4 it appears that several of the large landowning heads of family in Gopinathpur were not engaged in village affairs. Of the twelve owners of 20 bighas or more, only six were actively involved in village affairs. The wealthiest landowner, Jagatnath of the napit jati, energetic and hard-working head of a huge family (his brother died early but left five sons), was a decade or so later on to engage himself in various committees, such as the baroari. But of the rest, only one (Ram Mandal, aguri) ever became at all involved.

This section has shown that in the early 1960s those villagers most prominent in village affairs were not necessarily the wealthiest though they were usually well-off. Occasionally but significantly village leaders were not from among the village economic elite. Some, such as Sakti Dhara, were influential in spite of being both low caste and almost landless. Ignoring such special cases, we still find that influential leaders such as both Ehasaheb and Anadi Sarkar, although of the right jati(-s), were outsiders in terms of landholding. Anadi was from a very poor family and remained so. They were both supported by the Congress and the police during the years of repression of CPM activists after 1971, but had crucially been influential village leaders long before that. Both became for instance Anchal Panchayat members in 1964. Also among other village leaders, not decisively supported by any party in power, we find that village leaders were not necessarily from among the richest: Bhaskar Kes headed a joint family holding 32 bighas of land or a mere 16 bighas per brother, while four other heads of family held respectively 32, 42, 47 and 50 bighas alone, with no brothers to share with. These four were not involved in village affairs.

Village leaders were recruited from certain jatis rather than others. These jatis — in Udaynala the sekhs and in Gopinathpur the aguris and to an extent bamuns and kayasthas — can be characterized as "dominant castes" following their political and economic position within each village. But it is nonetheless striking that these jatis were not entirely dominant. Occasionally someone from a lower jati made an appearance and an impact. For instance, Gopinathpur's Sakti Dhara and Gobardhan Porel were active for nearly two decades as leaders of their own community but also involved in village affairs at large. In Udaynala, Manik Bag was aligned to Rahim

for some time and then with Ehiasaheb, but gradually gained his own political weight. Like the dominant caste village leaders, these low-caste village leaders were also active in factions, alignments, and the bickering of village politics.

Landlords and money-lenders

Lastly we should consider the "power" of money-lending, and, with it, the formation of "political interest groups". None of the villages were fully "owned" by single zamindar families. Zamindar rights¹⁶ to much of Udaynala were held by a Burdwan Town family that did not own demesne-land in the village and never interfered in its affairs (except rent collection). Zamindari rights to minor — often tiny — plots were held by others, including a number of local villagers. In Gopinathpur both zamindari rights and substantial private lands were held at the time of the zamindari abolition by one Dawn family. The family did not live in the village but leased out its 150 bighas for sharecropping. Two-thirds of this land was sold in the decades after Independence, mostly bought by local families in minor plots. Another landlord was one bamun who moved in the late 1950s to Burdwan Town and had his 50 bighas sharecropped. Over the years he too sold all except 8 bighas to local villagers.

Udaynala's one major absentee landlord was Hitu Munsu, son and heir of Raju who had amassed 200 bighas through money-lending and court cases (the "mamla business"). Raju and his three brothers did play a major role in village affairs, but the

¹⁶I use the term zamindari rights in a generic sense; in reality these were subtenureships such as dar-patnidari, dar-darpatnidari, etc.

next generation much less so (one died heir-less, and two left altogether eight sons, none of whom could qualify as landlord). Hitu moved to Burdwan Town and left the management of his sharecropped lands to his local manager, Manuar. Manuar was a money-lender but with his own means, not those of Hitu Munsī. During the 1970s, Hitu sold almost all his lands. The buyers were all locals, many of them his (land-rich) sharecroppers.

It was not landlords but mostly substantial owner-cultivators who functioned as money-lenders: in Udaynala Raju Munsī, Mohammed Hosen, Baset and Rahim Ali, Sobhachacha, and others. All of these started off as relatively poor or only moderately well-off, only to work their way up through money-lending. One remarkable but not unusual case was Manik Bag, who worked his way up from near-landlessness to rich peasant status through money-lending. In Gopinathpur, a number of landowners engaged in some form of money- or grain-lending, and village leader Bhaskar Kes admitted that it was a common practice. However, only one, Bijay Chakrabarty, made money-lending a major source of income. Most others extended credit or advances only to secure what was known as *bandha lok* ("tied people") — labourers thus contracted for the peak season. Such advances were most often not expected to be repaid. In addition to the advances, "tied people" were paid at the current rate for their work.

In spite of the good profit to be reaped from money-lending, a strangely limited number of people made it a source of income. Landowners — "peasants" — wanted labourers not only to work but to work as hard as possible. There was an interesting

social mechanism in this, where the most unpopular landowner got the least interested or hard-working labourer. Conversely, landowners could not afford to make themselves unpopular through money-lending lest they forfeit willing peak season labour. They needed the social acceptance that translates into labour input ("symbolic capital" in Bourdieu's parlance; more of this in Chapter Three). Money-lending was heavily stigmatized, an activity respectable people would not get involved in at least partly because it was detrimental to the cultivation process.

In emergency cases such as illness — which often caused major expenses that did not promise to readily translate into labour input for the creditor — landowners were generally not willing to assist (would-be) dependants. The latter in such cases turned to the major money-lenders who demanded land as security, and at an interest of 3% per month the land was lost within three years.

Landowner-labourer relations

Almost every landowning household employed one or several landless individuals as *kirsen* — on year-long contracts. A *kirsen* was an all-purpose labourer expected to work for the employer from dawn to dusk and sometimes to late night if required, with only an hour's rest at midday. Another form of attached labour was the *mas-maine* who was hired for one month at a time. The *kirsen* was paid in paddy, cash and cloth. The pay was less than the daily wages (*majuri*), but all-year employment

was secured.¹⁷ Among women, only saotalas were regularly employed in the fields. Out-working women of other poor jatis were most often domestic servants (or they worked in their own fields). Of these there were two kinds: the very few long-term domestic servants (at any one time possibly no more than six or seven in Udaynala), and the many who could be hired for special occasions. The former were poorly paid, with meals only, though some cloth and paddy once a year. The latter were rewarded relatively generously. The appropriate code of conduct demanded generous feeding, gifting of cloth and some cash.

Some individual kirsens were employed in one household for years in a row, some for 15-20 years. Those, however, were exceptional cases, and most were rarely employed for more than one year, at the most two or three. For kirsens, assistance was occasionally extended in case of illness or mishap. In most cases, however, the labourer was left to himself. "Tied people" were mainly employed one season at a time. A few were employed by the same landowner several years in a row, but that was also rather exceptional.

The absence of multiple long-term relationships was particularly evident in the case of sharecropping. The land sharecropped on a long-term basis was almost exclusively owned by absentee landlords such as Gopinathpur's Banerjee, Udaynala's Hitu Munsii, or the Dawn family. In the 1950s and 1960s (if not before), the sharecroppers were mainly substantial landowners in their own right, particularly Sobhachacha and the

¹⁷Cf. Chandra 1983 on types of labour contracts in Burdwan. Davis 1983 mentions a distinction between "mojur" and "munsi", long and short-term labourers.

Dhaure family (sharecropping 55 and 40 bighas respectively). Absentee owners of huge lands seem to have preferred long-term leasing out of land in large chunks instead of dealing with a large number of sharecroppers.

Intra-village sharecropping consisted mainly of short-term arrangements for small plots of land rarely exceeding a few bighas. In general, sharecropping was not deemed profitable and was often undertaken reluctantly. Today, the land-poor complain how harsh such contracts were, and landowners how difficult it was to find willing and reliable sharecroppers. The sharecropper's scope for cheating seems to have been more prominent than the landowner's scope for demanding deductions, particularly where the sharecropped land was far from the main lands of the owner. The sharing was commonly 50:50 and the sharecropper normally contributed all expenses. Sharecropping arrangements rarely exceeded a few years.

Interested patron-client relationships

It seems that patron-client relationships of the archetypical kind were most pronounced in the case of major village leaders. Jikukaji —^a major village leader~~y~~ in the 1950s — maintained a very close and multiple relationship with the bagdis of Udaynala. They were settled on land owned by his family, and Jikukaji used the bagdis to guard the family's position and his own prestige in the village. The bagdis were in his dal and his dal only, they were his lathials who intimidated insubordinate "subjects" or opponents. The extent of credit relations between the Kajis and the bagdis is difficult to ascertain. However, in the 1950s the money-lending brothers Baset and Rahim Ali

sought to challenge Jikukaji's position and take over his bagdi support through an extension of credit in their direction. To counter the move, Jikukaji too extended credit to the bagdis (presumably more extensively than earlier), an exercise which over the years came to cost him about half of his land while the Ali brothers kept losing what they gained elsewhere. This is the very opposite of the cases of Bijay Chakrabarty and Manik Bag, who through money-lending extended their lands. In Jikukaji's case, the credit was not expected to be repaid; it was not a financial investment but a symbolic one. In addition to the defaulted credit advances, bagdis in the Kaji dal more easily secured employment than non-aligned labourers. Jikukaji himself was not in a position to employ them all, but his supporters among the landholding group, in order to assist Jikukaji, employed "Jikukaji's bagdis". Credit and employment together with favourable arbitration and support were basic elements in a relationship of wider implications, of general, mutual support between village leaders and groups of supporters. Credit tied the debtor to the creditor, which in the case of people such as Jikukaji was the point. When repaid, it ended the relationship, and only augmented the creditor's material assets, which for many was only half a point. In short, the relationship between village leaders and crucial groups of supporters (on occasions lathials) was not built on economic dependency alone but on broader relationships where credit was one element, although not in the favour of the landlord-village leader. Credit could be detrimental to political positions as extortion could alienate potential supporters.

Few of the Udaynala or Gopinathpur village leaders that emerged in the early 1960s engaged in money-lending to any extent. There were only two exceptions to this rule,

Manik Bag and Bijay Chakrabarti, both ^{immensely}~~immensely~~ unpopular. Outside the realm of political bonds, economic exploitation was quite possible and did take place only mildly softened by ideological considerations. However, in the case of political bonds — "interested" relationships — the ideological considerations of symbolic capital took precedence, particularly when the relationship was challenged.

To sum up this section, the many village leaders of the early 1960s had, firstly, a fairly wide range of different "powers" behind them — ranging from debtors and employees to prestige and alliances. Secondly, few if any of the prominent village leaders had enough personal "power" — derived from whatever source — to out-do other would-be village leaders, or at least a combination of them. One village leader's large number of debtors could outbalance someone else's prestige; one's land and refined manners could be outbalanced by another's large number of supporters.

What has been lurking behind the scene in this section without being properly addressed is the growth of institutional bodies and organized politics over the following decades. We obviously need to investigate the extent to which those changes influenced and altered the picture drawn from the situation of the early 1960s.

Growth and limits of local level governmental bodies

It is interesting to note that of the three major village leaders of the early to mid-1960s — Haksheh, Ehiasaheb and Bhaskar Kes — only Ehiasaheb was aligned to the political party in power, the Congress. A village leader is expected to be influential

and assist his followers (to be taken up in more detail in Chapter Three). In seeking to do so he is naturally advantaged by contacts in the dominant political party. In one view of this, village level patron-client relationships are tied into a district level net of patron-client relationships (in the dominant political party), which again is tied to a similar net of relationships at state and perhaps even national levels.¹⁸ Nicholas writes for the 1950s and 1960s that, in general, village leaders (or "the village establishment") aligned themselves to the Congress in an alliance of convenience, whereas "the village opposition" became by default aligned to — for instance — the Communist Party of India (CPI) or any other locally important party of the opposition.¹⁹ According to Nicholas, there was no difference between the two groups; the CPI-supporting village group also included rich peasants and the Congress group sported poor people.

This does not seem to be quite the case for these villages. I shall argue later on for the very specific and conscious choice of the CPI/CPM by leading villagers (Chapter Four). Moreover, we find that until at least 1967 and the instalment of the first non-Congress United Front Government, the alignment to the dominant political party made little difference to the general power situation in the villages, and had in particular only a limited impact on the selection of the major village leaders. True, Anadi Sarkar and Ehiasaheb both became major village leaders — and used their

¹⁸The most well-known exponent of this view is Brass 1965. Weiner 1967 presents a thorough study of the "expediting" functioning of the Congress party in power. Franda 1971a has applied it to West Bengal. The theory is criticized by Hardiman 1982. For a more recent example see Robinson 1988.

¹⁹Nicholas 1965.

political contacts to that effect. Anadi organized meetings with a proper agenda, attended rallies in central villages, enlisted members of the Congress party from 1961 onwards. But he was not able to rival Bhaskar and become a major village leader until the 1970s, almost ten years later. Bhaskar himself was more informally aligned to the ~~People's~~ ^{Praja} Socialist Party (PSP) — and although the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) was a PSP man, the party belonged to the opposition. In 1966 Bhaskar switched to the Congress — where he and Anadi maintained an uneasy alliance — but he never organized or attended formal Congress meetings, and his local position rested on his local alliance. The same applied to the case of Haksahab in Udaynala. He had been known as a communist since the late 1950s and was thus in opposition to the dominant political party, without this seemingly affecting his position in the village adversely.

By the 1980s, the infant party politics had grown into a solid network of large institutions with increased economic powers, particularly in the panchayat system of local level "government". Its growth and increased power merit a presentation. The colonial government's Union Boards had been manned through the appointment of, and from among, influential individuals in the localities. These bodies were continued after Independence although suffrage was extended. However, at least in this area elections were never held and the selection of Union Board members continued to be monopolized by local influential figures. Union Boards were replaced by the 1957 panchayat system which was organized on four levels: the lowest comprised single villages (composed of wards with one or two representatives each), and the highest

at the district level (the Jela Parishad).²⁰ In Burdwan, the only panchayat under this system was formed in 1964. Following on a Gandhian ideal, election to these bodies was depoliticized, i.e. candidates could not run on party tickets. In Gopinathpur the practice of appointment rather than election was continued, but in Udaynala elections were held due to rivalry. In general these bodies had limited powers and even more limited means at their disposal. They became largely defunct with the political unrest of the late 1960s.

In 1978, the Left Front Government implemented a new panchayat system with the lowest tier abolished. Candidates were allowed to run on party tickets, and the CPM with its tight organization was highly successful, continuously winning around 60% of all Gram Panchayat seats in the state ever since. In the anchal that includes Gopinathpur and Udaynala no non-CPM candidate has been elected in the four elections held since 1978 — in spite of Congress candidates being fielded at each election (and in 1993 BJP candidates).²¹ The CPM's organizational efficiency (compared to the Congress) has contributed an additional source of influence and power in villages.

In addition the state Government has infused the panchayat system with powers of decisive economic and political importance — which combined have ensured a vastly

²⁰The legislation in the West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed in 1957, however (s-)elections were in many cases held years later.

²¹Elections have been held regularly, in 1978, 1983, 1987, and 1993.

increased role for the panchayats.²² The panchayats and the chairman are together with the Block Development Officers (BDOs) in charge of the local level implementation of the land redistribution programme, and influence the allocation of the large number of development programmes (the IRDP, NREP, RLEGP, Food for work, etc.²³) to eligible individuals, families or projects. These programmes combined represent large sums of money. In 1988 much of the allocation process was transferred from the state government to the panchayats, bringing the total sum handled by the panchayats to Rs 7,000 million, or Rs 175 per capita of the rural population.²⁴

The most important of these was the Central Government-funded IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme). In the reality of Burdwan in the 1980s, the signature of the local panchayat member (more often than not CPM-affiliated) was indispensable for an IRDP application to be successful. In effect, these resources were (at least in Burdwan district, given the party's dominant position) controlled by the CPM. The panchayat members were answerable to the party; they were not members as individuals but as representatives of a political party. Larger decisions — for instance budgets or the allocation of programme resources — were discussed and decided upon

²²For a full history of the panchayats in West Bengal as well as a detailed outline of its functions, see Webster 1992.

²³IRDP = Integrated Rural Development Programme, NREP = National Rural Employment Programme, RLEGP = Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme.

²⁴Lieten 1988. Rs 175 is slightly more than one full week's minimum pay for an agricultural labourer. Considering that the sum refers to "per capita of the rural population", i.e. including women and children, it appears that the panchayats control quite substantial sums of money.

in the party's organs some time before the formal panchayat meetings. This practice — common enough in modern-day parliamentary democracies — was rigorously implemented, and the party made no bones about it. In this set-up, the more influential figure was not necessarily the panchayat member but the party worker. This division was also apparent in popular perceptions; villagers tended to first turn to their panchayat member for assistance with problems, and if that failed they turned to the party men.

But the potential of both party and panchayats was still limited. Under the 1978 panchayat system each village had one representative (for larger villages more than one: in the case of Udaynala and Gopinathpur, one representative for each mouza), and the Gram Panchayat — the "village council" — covered normally some 10-15 villages. In other words, the Gram Panchayat was not a village level governmental body. The area covered (*anchal*) was too large for everyday involvement in each village, and, from the other perspective, each village had only one person, one individual, invested with the authority of the Gram Panchayat. Although there was also the party's presence to be accounted for as it had more than one activist in each village (occasionally the panchayat member was not a senior party worker), what can be termed village politics or village affairs were still conducted within each village by a number of people of whom only a few were affiliated to the party, and of whom only one was a panchayat member. Disputes over inheritance, land or irrigation water, quarrels or allegations, and cases of theft, were all effectively dealt with by villagers themselves without reference to the Gram Panchayat and without reference to the party.

In other words, there was and continues to be a large social space outside the reach of formal institutions or organized politics. There are thus two arenas of local politics: the Gram Panchayat area, i.e. the anchal, and the village or below (i.e. para or jati).²⁵ Issues dealt with at the village level are most often of little direct interest to the party or the Gram Panchayat. Except for labour disputes or open political challenges, the party rarely intervenes, and the administrative apparatus is too limited to be able to cope with village level disputes. The obvious obstacles against involvement in village affairs include an absence of local knowledge and of a capacity to cope with the never-ending flow of small issues of conflict in each and every village.²⁶ Instead, they prefer to stay out of the conflicts and let these be solved by the villagers themselves, although the party finds it useful to let potential panchayat members or party workers establish their credentials as leaders before being admitted to positions it sanctioned.²⁷

²⁵Davis (1983, Ch.s 4 and 5) found a division between "sorkari kaj" ("government affairs") and "gramer kaj" (or "village affairs"); to the first belong concerns with laws, political parties and modern-day political ideologies, and the second concerns with caste, ritual status, family affairs, and village leadership. He has made the point that the two arenas seem (to villagers) conceptually different in orientations, concerns, practices and mechanisms.

²⁶It was the recognition of its inability to control affairs at the village level that made the CPM, in 1988, initiate the Gram Sabha (village committees, commonly known as Gram Committee): village level bodies informally invested with party authority. The Gram Committees were nominally open to anyone but in reality restricted to CPM supporters. They formed an integral part of the party's efforts to bring its policies to the villages and they have been involved in various projects, the largest being the organizing and mobilization of instructors for the mass literacy programme (see Banerjee 1992); but their success varied considerably.

²⁷This was a common practice within the party; to obtain a position within the mother party long-term work at the lowest level of the affiliated organizations — normally the Krishak Samiti (peasant organization), the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), the Student Federation of India (SFI), or the Mahila Samiti (women's organization) — was required. Such involvement created exposure to popular

Without doubt, institutional politics has increased radically in importance. It may, however, be safely assumed that at no point have political contacts been as important as during the Emergency period imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from 1975 until 1977, and in the case of West Bengal from a few months before the 1972 election onwards. During those years, communist party activities were repressed and workers and activists beaten, jailed and some even killed.²⁸ Surprisingly enough, as we shall see from the case of Ehiasaheb, even during those years backing from the party in government was not sufficient to keep a village leader in position.

A village leader's fall

Ehiasaheb was a prominent village leader of Udaynala for many years, and the most prominent for a few years. His "power" derived partly from his political contacts although he was also socially active and a protector of his supporters. However, without losing his political contacts he still lost control over the village, just as Indira Gandhi's Emergency was implemented. Ehiasaheb's authoritarian manners denied him acceptance by villagers. Popular support from among one's peers derives from the ability to evoke their acceptance, which again is based on their perception of their own prestige relative to that of the village leader.

concerns, arguments, and a wider section of society.

²⁸See for instance Sajal Basu 1974, B. Sen Gupta 1979, Anjali Ghosh 1981, Nossiter 1988.

All Udaynala's village leaders in the 1960s, especially the "young group", placed themselves somewhere between the Communist party and the left wing of the Congress, with Ehiasaheb as the one most influential among the latter. He and Haksahab had cooperated on occasions, and Ehiasaheb's well-known antipathy towards landlords and money-lenders led him to join in land occupations in 1969 and to raise a red flag on the occupied plot.

In the autumn of 1971 the S. S. Ray regime started repression of the communists. During this autumn Hitu Munsu — owner of 200 bigha in Udaynala, some of which had been occupied by the "young group" including Ehiasaheb — brought a police party to secure his harvest. Ehiasaheb unexpectedly supported them. It was a harder political climate in both the state and the village, with a clear dichotomy between the Congress and the CPM and no middle ground. With Congress and police backing Ehiasaheb became the most powerful man in Udaynala, while other prominent leaders backed out: Najir Hosen fled to an uncle in Murshidabad for four years, and Haksahab spent his nights in the fields for two years to avoid arrest.²⁹ Waselmaster and Imam Hosen denounced their involvement in activities led by communists, and turned their attention to the Muslim layman-organization Tabligh Jamat.

On several occasions over the next few years Ehiasaheb brought in the police (with guns) to arrest people, and at least ten individuals were either arrested or fled the village for opposing Ehiasaheb. He also invariably won court cases — there were four or five in this period — and cheated on government resources extended to the

²⁹The police prefer to raid at night.

village school and cooperative society without facing prosecution. In the village he also came to enjoy support from a section of the village bagdis and a small group of young sekhs — the Ohabs, sons and nephews of his former arch-enemy, Rahim. This was very limited support, considering the size of the village and the hardened climate, and so the position was maintained by a degree of intimidation.

During these years every day a group of bagdis was found sitting in front of Ehiasaheb's house during day-time. They were his retainers, his *lathials*, a presence which suggested a potential use of force. Some bagdis even accompanied him on his rounds. On occasions, his supporters ran through the village at night — the Ohabs with a gun or two, the bagdis with lathis — shouting loudly and intimidating people. The threat or actual use of violence was manifest. Individuals were beaten on several occasions. In general, however, intimidation, use of force, and violence were limited. The potential use of violence, the threat of doing so, was as important in maintaining his position as actual force.

Moreover, people from the other side of the political divide acknowledged that "He was not all bad". On many occasions he helped the poor (particularly his own — would-be — supporters), brought grain to the village in times of scarcity and assisted villagers in conflict with outside forces. During his reign he initiated a *dharmagola*,³⁰ and organized the final construction of a road between Udaynala and P., a road that had been planned and replanned for nearly ten years.

³⁰A dharmagola is a communal paddy store for times of crisis.

But Ehiasaheb's many initiatives were not enough, or not right. His authoritarian manners made him increasingly unpopular in the village. His house was once set on fire (straw roof), though without much damage. On another occasion, in 1973, his daughter's marriage almost turned into a fiasco since none of his neighbours were willing to come forward to assist in the preparations or be present at the festivities. Only Haksahab's unexpected intervention saved the occasion.

Ehiasaheb's problem was that though constantly in contact with a large number of people through his ayurvedic practice both in Udaynala and by the road in P., he was nonetheless known as someone who was not able to listen properly, prone to give short authoritarian orders and impatiently dismiss people. Rather than listening, gossiping, ^{arguing} ~~arguing~~, and spending time with others, he used his lathials, his Congress party contacts, and his guns to enforce his will and decisions.

The final turning point came in 1975. The school board elections were due, and Ehiasaheb, as had been his custom for some years by then, appointed himself and Manik Bag. However, resentment was already strong and this instance of high-handedness in the case of the communally constructed and funded village school was the last straw for many. During the days before the formal election meeting, hectic albeit secret discussions took place in the village, and an unusually large crowd turned up at the meeting. Ehiasaheb gave a speech and proposed his candidates. Haksahab immediately got up and counter-proposed Waselmaster and Imam Hosen — Congressites but not on friendly terms with Ehiasaheb. The latter two were elected with near unanimity by the assembly.

With this Ehiasaheb's authority was effectively broken. A large assembly of villagers had turned down his suggestions, and did so facing the bagdi-dal he had used to build his position. When the physical power he commanded was no longer sufficient to implement his plans, he became impotent as village leader. Even though this was only at the beginning of Indira Gandhi's Emergency period, he could from then onwards not assert his authority in the village. Fearing for his life, Ehiasaheb moved to P. and did not spend nights in Udaynala for the next three years.

This case shows the limits of political contacts for village leaders and how dissatisfaction can translate into support for a rival leader who may eventually "(re-)conquer" the position. Haksahab's "power" resided in his "authority" and his position as a representative of the just, the rightful, and what most thought and wanted done. Ehiasaheb's increasing unpopularity was due to instances of intimidation which denied others a right to participate in village affairs — however benevolent his ultimate aims may have been.

The limited significance of party and panchayat

It may be argued that by the 1990s, fifteen years on, the nascent political system had grown into a more solid and fully-fledged institutionalized political system, one which provided vastly increased means at the disposal of panchayat members. In addition there has been an increased political will on the part of the state Government and the dominant political party to infuse this system with real powers. This has combined to create a new situation and new, important sources of influence and power. It is,

however, still striking how some have enjoyed positions of influence and status in their respective villages even without connection to the ruling party. In Udaynala, Haksahab has been an important leader both in the village and in the area for at least thirty years. Except for altogether a little over two years in the late 1960s (the United Front period), he was aligned to an opposition party for what amounts to almost half his career, until 1977, and then again party-less after 1989. His rival Ehiasahab lost his standing in the village in 1975 just as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency and the party he represented became all-mighty. After Ehiasahab's fall his rival, Haksahab, emerged again as village leader — though without political contacts during the Emergency period.

Haksahab's rival from 1989-90 onwards has been Rabel, also a party worker, who emerged as a rival after Haksahab relinquished his party membership and in 1993 lost his position as panchayat member. Haksahab, however, has remained a major or perhaps the major village leader in Udaynala. His political contacts may have gone, but he has retained considerable support among a large number of fellow villagers and could still be counted as a major village leader four years after relinquishing his party membership.

The opposite was the case with Biswanath, panchayat member for Udaynala South for ten years (1983-93). At the time of the 1983 election he was under age — only 17 whereas the minimum age for candidates was 18 — but Haksahab "managed" that small problem. During his decade in power, Biswanath learned to use his influence. In the beginning his IRDP signature could be "bought" with a good meal, preferably

chicken. Later on he started demanding a share of the loan, approximating 10 per cent. He also demanded and got attention at both para and all-village meetings. However, a turning-point came in 1988, when he, as secretary of the village cooperative society, embezzled between Rs 18 and 24 thousand of the society's funds. There were but muffled protests at the time, but these grew over the following years and eventually the party relieved him of most positions in 1990. From then onwards, although still a panchayat member, his informal, extra-institutional influence declined, and he was given only scant attention or respect at village meetings and was not consulted in disputes. The party did not relaunch him as a candidate in the 1993 panchayat elections.

There was no automatic relation between political contacts (party or panchayats) and a position of influence in the villages. The role of the "informal arena" has shrunk under the increased importance of the growing institutions, but it has far from vanished. This is related to Mayer's point, that historically statutory powers do not necessarily spill over into informal influence. He argues, however, for the decreasing importance of the informal and particularistic, and the comparatively increased role of specific and government-related institutions. He found that the headman's "powers in unofficial contexts have diminished".³¹ However, his material suggests that, although the headman's position has diminished in importance, the particularistic has not. Major villagers of Ramkheri felt dissatisfied with the statutory institutions and set up their own (unelected) "Comprehensive Committee" which soon came to be the

³¹Mayer 1960:113.

real centre of power.³² Similarly, Oommen remarks that "Power reservoirs may not be on the formal power bodies, such as the Gram Sabha executive committee [...] and yet they count in community affairs and may run the entire business from behind".³³ Béteille states that "functionally diffuse" bodies such as groups of elders "have to compete increasingly with functionally specific structures of power" — but they have not been replaced.³⁴

I do not wish to argue for the irrelevance of modern-type institutions, but to suggest that the process is still far from complete and that the role of institutionalized politics may well be overrated. In the 1990s, in Burdwan, institutional politics reached into the daily affairs of villages still only in a limited manner. Disputes, quarrels or allegations, and issues such as sentencing thieves, continued to be settled without the intervention of party-workers or panchayat members. Naturally, these were often present, but not in their official capacity, and they did not lend the authority of their institutions to press for a solution. Issues were still settled by consensus among the villagers themselves, and the authority of the decision-making was entirely in the hands of those present.

³²Mayer 1960:114-123.

³³Oommen 1966:103.

³⁴Béteille 1970:260-1.

Conclusion

We have seen that many different sorts of "power" could be "matched" in several ways. Where one individual enjoyed "power" or influence (by his authority for instance, derived from superior knowledge), others might enjoy other forms of "power", for instance with a large number of dependent debtors. These "powers" have very unclear relations to one another. They seem to outweigh one another at times, at others they reinforce one another. This view is quite close to ideas developed by Marvin Davis, whose cultural anthropological study focuses on how people became equal in a society thoroughly concerned with rank and status.³⁵ They are concerned with rank, he says, but the criteria for the actual ranking are not always clearly defined, or they overlap. There are in his findings a set of criteria for the ranking of groups, including ritual status and life-stage, and of individuals, including power, knowledge, wealth, and respect or honour.³⁶ Each of these, in the villagers' perception, represents separate hierarchical rankings. But in the case of individuals, who have values on each of the rankings, one ranking can invalidate another. According to Davis, it is the profound preoccupation with hierarchy but unclarity on how to rank within it that eventually sets off rivalry. It is when these different criteria, without relative ranking, are at work at the same time that controversies over rank arise.

³⁵Davis 1983, particularly Chapter 3.

³⁶Davis 1983:99, see also Inden and Nicholas 1977:26. Gough (1955:45) found non-dominant caste leaders to have "above-average intelligence".

But rather than confusion as to the correct ranking of individuals in interaction, I see a fluid and circumstantial evaluation of different forms of "power" and authority. As one would expect, the set of criteria forwarded by these scholars is quite close to the one suggested by villagers of Udaynala and Gopinathpur. Upon my queries on what qualities a villager needs to become a leader, they gave me the following list: "power" (*khamata*), wealth (*dhan*, or land), (caste) status and prestige (*ūchu jati*, and *ijjat* or *samman*), "compassion" (*sarad*), and intelligence or cleverness (*buddhi*). These should not be read as fixed criteria but as indicators of what kind of qualities a village leader needs. The beauty of this set of criteria and the one developed by Inden and Nicholas plus Davis lies in its inclusion of "knowledge" and "prestige" — which must be regarded as creating "authority", in the Weberian sense — together with elements that create "power".³⁷ By grouping these elements together, it is recognized that people may behave as "supporters", "followers" or willing "clients" for a variety of reasons. They may be compulsory supporters (debtors, labourers), or they may be attracted by ideas and values: the "justice of it all".

The "power" derived from land, political contacts or ritual status was limited, and also easily "matched" by a large number of people — potential rivals. These forms of "power" could vary widely. Some had land, some had followers, while others had "knowledge". Any one sort of "power" could potentially outdo any other. Low ritual status could be outdone by having followers, while "prestige" could weight heavily

³⁷Heesterman (1985:152) has analysed the *srauta* rite with respect to the division between the king/kshatriya ("power") and the priest/brahmin ("authority"): "All this, however, is remote from the strict separation of power and authority [...]. In fact, it is the very opposite. Coming together in the nexus of the sacrificial contest, power and authority as well as priesthood are inextricably interwoven".

against the clout of money-lenders. Secondly, village leaders emerged from the relatively large pool of people for whom subordination was not an economic imperative. These were both valuable supporters ("allies") and potential rivals. It is to be noted that a large number of people interacted with one another as equals, using terms of address to that effect.³⁸ The size of this group, its outer borders, were ambiguous, fluid, and open to contestation. Sakti Dhara, for instance, was addressed with the pronoun suggesting inferiority by some, and the one suggesting equality by others.

The bottom line, I believe, can be found in the Bengali term *khamata* (or *ksamata*), which only awkwardly translates as "power". "Influence" or "ability" seem better translations. "Khamata" concerns both "real" material or political power (in the Weberian sense of ability to enforce one's will on others) and more specifically agility and social influence, the capacity to mobilize people based on whatever ground.³⁹ It may have a material base, but it is not solely linked to Weberian power. It is closely linked to an ability to mobilize people (followers or potential rivals), to have things done, make projects or arrangements succeed, to have contacts and be able to mobilize these for whatever reason. Some may be mobilized from a sense of duty (e.g. family), others from a sense of obligation (dependent labourers, debtors), others again from a

³⁸Bengali has three different terms for the second person pronoun: *apni* (polite, respectful), *tumi* (common), and *tui* (used to inferiors, children, dogs or among very close friends).

³⁹Interestingly, Fuller points out that in pre-colonial India the politico-economic system centred upon control over both land and people. "Considered economically, what counted was control over the *produce* of the land. Considered politically, what counted was control over the *people* on the land." Fuller 1977:95–6, emphasis in original.

sense of common cause (friends in a faith or ideology). The immediate cause of the bond that ties two individuals together thus and lets one "dictate" the actions of the other, is not immediately of importance to the net effect of influence. This is because bonds and leadership should be socially acceptable, and should be shrouded in a garb that does not hurt the feelings of the (analytically) subordinated. This is where phrases such as "We were all in it together" come in, as indicative of efforts of "alliance-building" both towards potential rivals and towards less powerful followers whose sentiments one does not wish to hurt.

In a very interesting article, Inden presents the role and image of the Hindu king as found in middle Bengali literature (15th to 18th centuries).⁴⁰ He points to the importance in decision-making of people surrounding the king, people who were included in decision-making. These people were of different kinds: kin, both agnates and affines, subordinate chiefs, village headmen, respected leaders of caste groups, and finally dependent though powerful (court) officials. All were powerful in their own ways, enjoying individual forms of influence, and had to be respected. Inden comments that:

In order for a *raja* to rule and maintain his power, he has to perform a balancing act between the different groups in his following as well as between members of each group.⁴¹

⁴⁰Inden 1965.

⁴¹Inden 1965:29.

The obvious reason for this was that the king alone could not enforce any decisions against the will of the rest. Many decisions concerned disputes over authority and prestige among or within caste groups or families, disputes in which a recognition among the powerful individuals present was a sine qua non. Without that recognition there could not be a decision. As one king was quoted as saying in a genealogy, "If I do not have the consent of everyone, what power have I?"⁴²

The king was here conceived of as a *primus inter pares*, who "ruled" by consensus. He was not a law-maker and did not sway decisions alone. He was to a large extent a medium for the common will, albeit also part of the group and as such someone with an agenda of his own. The king was still king, and enjoyed a privileged and unusual position and status, and he had forces behind him, in the army, the administration, and the treasury. However, in these institutions were more people with whom he had to relate. Furthermore, these forces were limited and brute force could not make a population accept decisions such as changes in ritual status (as was the case in Inden's example).

The inclusion of family members, allies and other influentials into the realm and the "power" of the king was also found by Heesterman's reading of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.⁴³ Kautilya continuously stressed the dependence of the king on his associates. Even in the annual auditing process in Kautilya's elaborate bureaucracy

⁴²Inden 1965:31.

⁴³Heesterman 1985. Kautilya is known as "the Indian Machiavelli". His *Arthashastra* is a treatise on politics.

(where the officials perform their own auditing process), the top officials appear as "a body of cosharers with the king rather than regular bureaucrats".⁴⁴ The king also accommodated the interests of others, such as kin and allies. This stems, in Heesterman's reading, from the obvious fact of the king's limited power, from the existence of others with rights in the realm, its territory and harvested crop. With a complex and overlapping system of rights and shares, it was not possible (or perhaps desirable) to reduce these to a numerical formula. Instead, the king was "the hub of the wheel" of delicate balancing acts, "reduced to operating the system of personal relationships from within, as a participant in it, by balancing the different factions that jealously watch each other".⁴⁵

The Arthashastra also indicates "the open-endedness of the state": including allies and allies's allies, reducing the "state" to essentially personal relations to the king. People representing or symbolizing officials, kin, and allies and allies's allies, and even potential rivals — the paternal cousin — participated in the king's consecration, and were considered important to the king's legitimacy through being constituent parts of his "realm". Essentially, Kautilya's state was one of continuous strife, of eternal renewal and maintenance of the king's position.

This picture, read from ancient texts, fits surprisingly well with the situation in the villages of Udaynala and Gopinathpur. Many individuals had influence and could thus (claim to) participate in the running of the affairs of the village. Their sources of

⁴⁴Heesterman 1985:133.

⁴⁵Heesterman 1985:139.

influence varied, from a large family to political contacts, from being part of the "dominant caste" to having debtors or economic clout. These various people, with their "knowledge" and their "wealth", were placated by the major village leader. They were allies, and at the same time potential rivals. The major village leader, or the king, was no more than a *primus inter pares*, both ideally and in real terms. His influence could be matched, and he was structurally more often than not equal to many others.

In the endeavour to understand village politics and socio-cultural changes, these observations are crucial. The main points to underline are that in a society of much inequality, a number of people could still be found to be near-equals in terms of influence and equals in terms of sentiments and norms. This situation entailed competition and rivalry, groups and alliance-building, balancing one against the other. The Bengali term *khamata* is most interesting here and yields a wide understanding of village politics. The term refers to agility and influence, the ability to have things done and to mobilize people for the project or cause one initiates. In this, "power" and "authority" can be differentiated only with difficulty because both may yield supporters — although in different manners. "Knowledge", or in the history of rural West Bengal, modernist or communist ideology (to be taken up in Chapter Four), becomes an entity comparable to wealth or political contacts in political rivalry, or perhaps even an entity of superior importance and quality because it constitutes what may ultimately decide competition among individuals of more or less comparable wealth.

However, before going on to an investigation of the appropriateness of these ideas to the political history of rural West Bengal and the region's socio-cultural changes, we need to find a new set of concepts to deal with the "making" of the individual village leader from among the larger pool of would-be's. I am particularly concerned with understanding the importance of "knowledge" and how this is evaluated among people, with that other perspective on the village leader, from below. It is to this Chapter Three turns.

THREE

GOSSIP AND CONFIDENCE: THE MAKING OF VILLAGE LEADERS

Introduction

In a village people tend to spend much time gossiping. Gossip — *adda* — is rural Bengal's favourite pastime. Women visit one another during the day to exchange views and news. Men meet in the fields or, preferably, in the evening, at one another's home, where they discuss and smoke *biris* (country cigarettes) together. Younger people meet in the alleys, at street corners, or in purpose-built meeting-places, to tell stories, joke, play cards and sing the latest hit-songs. They all gossip — about people they know, about people of the village in general, or about recent events. Rumours (*gujab*) arise and thrive, and people's reputations for this or that are constantly under construction. Nicknames and suggestive couplets are invented by the more daring and creative, and old incriminating rumours or stories told and retold.

Gossip is an important social mechanism because everyone is "in the know". Everyone is informed and all contribute with their own information towards a communal body of knowledge and opinion. Gossip is particularly important for village leaders because leadership naturally means being in the forefront, exposed to village gossip. Their actions, motives and personalities are chatted over, argued over, subject to reflection and eventually evaluated against popular sentiments and shared

values. It is crucial to a village leader to have a good reputation because otherwise people will find it difficult to associate with him and heed him at village meetings. Taken together, gossip, rumours, nicknames, jokes, and suggestive couplets, constitute a semi-public realm for the making and unmaking of individuals' "names" (*nam*) or reputations, with a bearing on individual leaders' political capability. This realm is free from the constraints of public life — the show of respect, the rules of address, seniority — because it takes place in private, between intimates.

It is not gossip in itself that is interesting, but what it reveals of the relationship between commoners and village leaders, and the restraints it poses on the actions of the latter. At issue here is the relationship between a small number of villagers and the rest. Are the few — in spite of perhaps superior "powers" at their disposal — capable of swaying the population in the desired direction if this is against a majority sentiment? I will suggest below that they are not. If we consider only the structural criteria — land, ritual status, or political contacts — we lose the dynamics of village politics, of the intimate and circumstantial of small-scale societies, and, subsequently, of the environment in which social change can take place.

Gossip, Gluckman suggested, holds communities together and maintains their values. He makes the very interesting observation that gossip ultimately refers to and sustains group values. It is to these shared values that people, in gossip, refer when standard codes of behaviour are broken. Errant members of (small-scale) communities are

brought in line by being whispered about. Even where gossip is "malicious", i.e. not based on errant behaviour, it will refer to shared values for the resonance effect.¹

This view is in contrast to the one suggested by James Scott, who sees gossip as one of the "weapons of the weak" — although not particularly effective. The weak gain leverage but above all express themselves through this semi-public and danger-free realm, where the rich are talked about in disrespectful and satirical ways that could not be used in public. "...gossip is a kind of democratic 'voice' in conditions where power and possible repression make open acts of disrespect dangerous".² Even the rich do not want to have a bad reputation and everybody is afraid of bad rumours being spread about them. They therefore accommodate, to an extent, public sentiment. Scott also suggests that people may be reluctant to work for someone of whom they have heard bad things.

Together with other "weapons", gossip represents a partly unarticulated poor man's discourse, according to Scott. Gluckman's "shared values" are here divided between the rich and their ideological hegemony and the poor and their alternative values. In gossip, argues Scott, is found a perspective on labour or social relations often different from the "official" public one presented by the rich. "Gossip", he writes, "is never 'disinterested'; it is a partisan effort (by class, faction, family) to advance its claims and interests against those of others".³ Gossip, like other forms of everyday

¹Gluckman 1963.

²Scott 1985:282.

³Scott 1985:282.

resistance, refers back to a shared value-system but contests the interpretations of the rich. Theft, for instance, may be interpreted by some poor as "a kind of self-help *zakat* [Islamic tithe] gift".⁴

Udaynala and Gopinathpur seem to have been very different from the society studied by Scott. As seen in Chapter Two, there was a large degree of rivalry among village leaders. Furthermore, although village society was very far from egalitarian, there was nonetheless a severe limit on the "powers" enjoyed by the village leaders. Rather, broad support was a *sine qua non* of village leadership. Village leaders, when engaged as judges or deliberators in issues ranging from family disputes to allegations of theft, could hope for a decision to be effective only if it was based on popular sentiment, on a near-general consensus.

In respect of the emphasis laid on consensus in decision-making and the importance of gossip on individual leaders' capabilities, Udaynala and Gopinathpur seem more akin to the egalitarian village society studied by Brison. She makes two points of interest here. Firstly, she shows that community leaders are particularly exposed to the dangers of gossip and rumour. In relatively egalitarian societies, where leaders stand out, she says, command and respect are based on and ruined by hints, unsubstantiated interpretations, and suggestions. Gossip and rumour "are essential both to constituting, and, ultimately, destroying the position of leaders."⁵ But leaders also use these themselves, to destroy their rivals or prop up their own position.

⁴Scott 1985:291.

⁵Brison 1992:3.

Although Udaynala and Gopinathpur were not egalitarian societies, we will still find that mechanism at work; gossip and more or less substantiated rumours severely affecting the effectiveness of individual village leaders. Brison's second point is that this realm of gossip and rumour is not dominated by either (would-be) leaders — who may be attacked in gossip, but who likewise manipulate names and reputations — or by "commoners" — who may use the realm in much the same way as rivalling leaders. Rather than being dominated by one or the other, says Brison, sustained rumours reflect social values or perceptions, and contribute towards making sense of events.⁶ In her study, gossip appears as a realm where everybody can participate, and eventually, she says, gossip and rumours "comprise a sort of oral history and come to constitute the 'map' of events, relationships, and personalities".⁷

From Udaynala it will be observed that not only is gossip important to village politics, but it is also crucial to a village leader's effectiveness that he obtains a positive evaluation in the semi-public realm of gossip. He can do so by compliance to the expectations villagers have of the appropriate behaviour and activities of leaders, particularly their ability to assist, intervene, advise, and be "an elder brother". Thus it will be seen how village leaders spend much of their time "being around" talking to people or seeing people at home. Leaders with statutory powers, such as panchayat members, are not excused from such time-consuming activities. They are all requested to assist fellow villagers in different ways and manners, and in practice do so to the extent they find required or possible.

⁶Brison 1992:23.

⁷Brison 1992:4.

People enter into relationships with one another which result in mutual assistance and consideration. If A is helped by B, he will not talk badly about B lest he ruin his own reputation. A village leader who has a reputation for being able and helpful will be talked about respectfully and will more easily command sympathetic ears when making a point in a large discussion or when making an appeal, suggestion, etc. Engagement on behalf of villagers constitutes a crucial element in what people expect of leaders. More importantly, such engagement creates relationships of mutual trust and confidence, and an obligation to reciprocate — ties of obligation that the village leader depends on. Village leaders are not elected, and although they are normally wealthy and high-status, their "office" is not official and their position qua leader depends entirely on the popular acceptance and the confidence they are able to muster. The role of supplications in reputation-building is a double-barrelled affair, where only people's requests make it possible for someone to show his concern for fellow villagers, only a successful intervention makes it possible for him to create a reputation as a potential village leader. In order to settle disputes or solve problems successfully, he would need to find solutions acceptable to a large number of people. The ambitious village leader is thus very preoccupied by what is going on in the village, what is happening, what this or that person is up to, and particularly by what "is being said", both to help create his own reputation and to know the general drift of public opinion.

However, village leaders do not appear as ambitious wheeler-dealers. What is particularly emphasized for leadership in Udaynala — both by villagers and in my analysis — are personal qualities and the respect, reputation and confidence bestowed

on individual village leaders qua individuals by other villagers. This is quite irrespective of positions with statutory powers, a proviso with manifest implications, so that even officially appointed or elected village leaders (or *Gram Panchayat* members) need to engage in the same semi-public realm of confidence-building to maintain their efficiency. Mayer noted from Ramkheri — a village of once four headmen with statutory powers — that personal qualities and interest mattered particularly in maintaining their influence in unofficial matters and in selecting from among the four the one or two major village leaders. At the time of Mayer's field study, elected offices had been institutionalized but had proved impotent. Instead, an unofficial committee (the "Comprehensive Committee") was initiated by villagers and became the influential organ of local government.⁸

In Udaynala and Gopinathpur, a number of village leaders existed quite in spite of a lack of any office even after 15 years of *panchayati raj* ("panchayat rule"). Even the office of panchayat membership was not sufficient in itself either to be heeded in informal, unofficial matters or to explain the mechanisms for the selection of village leaders (as shown in Chapter Two). In these villages, the absence of institutionalized village leadership (or headmanship) made the competition all the more open. Village leadership was a fickle position, easily lost, and continuously in need of maintenance.

The role of gossip and the informal, semi-public realm in constituting both the reputations of village leaders and the village political agenda is explored below through a history of groups, alliances and conflicts in Udaynala. It will show the

⁸Mayer 1960:92-114; this in the "traditional" system.

workings of village politics: how prestige and reputations, gossip and rumours are part of subtle political struggles — struggles that do not appear publicly, that go on without being expressed, hidden somewhere in silences and in arguments on different issues. This story suggests the implications of rumours and gossip on the village agenda, and on village leaders and their reputations. More profoundly, it will suggest how limited the village leader's own capacity is to form the agenda or follow his own preferred strategy. Village leaders are often overtaken by events, and find their position constantly challenged. It will emerge how the village leader is not so much a force in himself as an extension of the society of which he is part.

Gossip and rumour become particularly important for the agenda of village politics in societies without formal village leader positions or with a large number of people who for different reasons (such as ritual ranking) can and will not consider themselves inferior. Here crucial elements in the maintenance of leadership are the subtleties of alliances with other individuals of importance. These alliances are informal, even implicit, personal and multi-faceted ad hoc understandings based on mutual confidence. But "confidence" is crucial in a more general sense. It is the building-block for the relationship the individual leader has to create with all villagers — relationships for which the term "alliance" can be used but only in a vague sense. We prefer instead Bourdieu's term "symbolic capital" — the exchange of unpaid labour or goods, and support — and apply this to village leaders' relations with other villagers. The leader needs an ability to make people comfortable with his leadership, or to hide the subordination. The exercise of power must translate subordination into

a socially recognized relationship in a situation where broad acquiescence or even support are needed — both for legitimation and effectiveness.

In this situation, gossip is not only a "weapon of the weak" — a largely ineffectual counter-hegemonic discourse — but *the* village discourse. Gossip is integral to village politics and forms its agenda and the reputation and thus effectiveness of individual leaders. Because it refers to commonly held beliefs and to individual characters, gossip ultimately concerns the relationship between villagers, the confidence that ties them together, or the suspicion that divides them. It affects the ability of village leaders to be heeded, sway the opinion at village meetings, and remain leaders.

Most of the material here refers to Udaynala, with only an occasional reference to Gopinathpur. Furthermore, most of the material draws on the activities of one community only, that of the *sekh jati* (caste, or sub-caste). Other *jatis* are involved only in a more limited manner. However, there is no reason to believe that the social mechanisms presented here vary markedly from one *jati* to another. Specific inter-*jati* relations will be taken up later on, in Chapter Six.

The making and unmaking of individual reputations

Semi-public displays of respect or disrespect are made in one's absence, among a group of friends. Rumours, allegations, suggestive couplets and nicknames thrive in the most widespread of all pastimes in rural Bengal: gossiping (*adda dewa*). Gossip is a semi-public realm outside the confines of formality such as in public meetings

where rules of address, respect, seniority, etc. apply. It is largely danger-free because it is rarely possible to punish for slander. The ultimate evasive source for sensitive information in Bengali is "It is being said among people" (*loke bale*). This refers to gossip, where one is talked about and evaluated.⁹ In gossip motives and intentions are interpreted and potentially given unintended meaning, one's influence is questioned, one's behaviour commented upon and evaluated with reference to commonly accepted norms. Furthermore, liaisons between different individuals can and are suggested and may cause a questioning of one's honesty and integrity. It is a semi-public realm, but it is public enough — because everyone "is in the know" — to be important to individual reputations. Gossip and rumours affect all villagers in general and village leaders in particular.

Consider nicknames such as "Dairy-Anuar", whose dairy project flopped 15 years ago due to a cow disease; or "Mad-Kaji" who is considered a bit eccentric; "Goat-Santi" (or, more pointedly, "Stud-Santi") whose young wife ran away with a lover; or the small, dark and energetic but generally disliked Manik Chaudhuri who was known as "Manki-Chaudhuri" (i.e. Monkey). There were other more subtle ways, as in referring to Habib Rahman — although known to all — not by his name but as "khet majur neta" (leader of labourers), a satirical twist implying that he was not quite what he wanted to be. Of a more serious sort, often with implications for their political ambitions, were rumours of love affairs. A former panchayat member for Udaynala South, Biswanath, was "known" to be involved with an attractive married woman, and

⁹I was myself once informed that according to what "loke bale" my "respect" was going downwards. It was made known to me by a friend so that I could act upon it and correct my ways.

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this contributed to his poor reputation, his inability to be considered a potential all-village leader or obtain attention at meetings (even while panchayat member). There was also a tendency to associate certain individuals with incriminating or ridiculing incidents. Such stories were plentiful and well-known, and a reference in a word or two is often enough to arouse anger or laughter. "Dairy-Anuar" was a case in point. Although pious, moderately well-off, and unblemished in the failure of his dairy project, his nickname and that association made it difficult for "Dairy-Anuar" to be taken seriously.

Reputations could be "made" through public displays of respect, by accommodating individuals and attributing to them their "due" prestige. Dignitaries of all sorts were expected to be given proper seating and an opportunity to address an assembly. Meetings with microphones were notoriously long-drawn (even lesser leaders like the respect suggested in the opportunity to address an assembly), and I have witnessed several meetings in which the number of speakers was as large as or larger than the number of spectators. Important people were also expected to be served tea, the most senior in the best cups, the lesser ones in glasses.

The public and the semi-public thrive on each other: The public realm is very often a reflection of the semi-public but not necessarily. The public realm may also contradict the semi-public perception. The semi-public, on the other hand, gains sustenance, material, from the public. Credentials, statements and names — as displayed in the public realm — translate into village influence only if corroborated by general consensus in the semi-public realm. One's "name" consists of the respect others are

prepared to show. It is based on social consensus and can be made or unmade through social processes.

These are only minor cases — although serious enough for people involved. Below I will follow a case where gossip came to have a decisive impact on the course of village politics and on the actions of village leaders. It points to the close interrelationship between village leaders and commoners, particularly to village leaders' preoccupation with their "names" and the impact of gossip on the creation of these — a gossip dominated by non-leaders.

Towards Bhadubhai's bichar

In the following we shall see how a string of *bichar* ("village courts") and meetings held in Udaynala in 1992-3 — although on widely different issues — became connected to one another and to other incidents and developments in people's perception (as expressed in the gossip), and how these (for the main actors) unintended interpretations gained a momentum of their own with severe implications for the main characters and their political effectiveness. What became of particular concern was a struggle over influence, name, reputation and prestige in the village. Vital to this development were the interpretations of ambitions that people made, interpretations the main actors had perhaps intended, perhaps not. Motives were read into actions, conspiracies suggested, and actors and actions interpreted through popular perceptions of prestige and of what "should be done".

Let me start by introducing the background for the two main characters, Haksahab and Rabiell. Haksahab was a dominant figure in both the village and the area for several decades. He was the panchayat member for Udaynala North from the first election in 1964 until 1993, and he was member of the CPM from the mid-1970s.¹⁰ After the "fall" of Ehiasahab in 1975 (see Chapter Two), Haksahab became the unrivalled leader, a position only strengthened by the instalment of the CPM in 1977. The panchayat members for Udaynala South until 1993, both of the low-caste bagdi jati, were chosen by him. In the village, Haksahab was in particular supported by the middle-para families, of which his own family was one, a group which was well united and backed Haksahab in meetings and with volunteers. Particularly the youth of these families, led by Ajam Chaudhuri, were active supporters of Haksahab. His personal position was such that he was rarely, and never seriously, challenged between 1977 and 1992. He was also a very prominent figure in the area, with contacts far and wide.

However, the year after his re-election as panchayat member in 1988 he relinquished his party membership card due to "differences" with the party. He also stopped attending panchayat meetings. He was not reappointed to run as the party's panchayat candidate in 1993, the seat being reserved for women.¹¹ In spite of this loss of

¹⁰The 1964 panchayat system had four tiers, the 1978 one has three. Haksahab was in the second from lowest level in the old system, in the lowest in the new; i.e. he was always in the level that covered the *anchal* (10-15 villages). Under the 1978 system Udaynala had two panchayat seats (here known as Udaynala North and Udaynala South).

¹¹About one third of all panchayat seats in West Bengal were reserved for women with effect from the 1993 election.

institutionalized influence, he retained his informal position in Udaynala where he continued to hold various positions, was always made chairman in village meetings and was consulted on, or involved in, practically everything going on. He continued to be the major village leader, about whom it was said that "Without Haksahab there will be no bichar".

In about early 1992 Haksahab's position started to decline. The decline was not immediately obvious, but came in small incidents. These incidents may be regarded individually, in which case they do not add up to much. But they were interpreted — in the semi-public realm — in light of a growing opposition to him by younger would-be leaders. There was a number of them from among the first cohort of college-educated in the village, all active during the 1980s, and mainly from non-middle-para families: Rabiell, Fajlul, Santi, Ohab, Biswanath and others. Rabiell was the more important. A low-key, cerebral organizer, he rose in the party over the years and always sought collaboration not disruption. He remained second to Haksahab, but that seemed only natural given differences in age and experience. However, in 1993 his wife, Sandha, who was politically inexperienced, was chosen as the party's candidate for panchayat member in Udaynala North. Due to her lack of political experience, Rabiell became the de facto panchayat member.¹² After this election the long-standing and continued dominance in village affairs by the middle-para group and Haksahab started to be an irritant to Rabiell. The increased dissonance between him and Haksahab became progressively evident and "known", although Rabiell did not

¹²It was "known" in Udaynala that Sandha was appointed by the party so that Rabiell could become the de facto panchayat member for a seat nominally reserved for women.

express any dissatisfaction and continued to work with Haksahab. Rabiell also kept his distance from the more open "opposition", including his cousin Fajlul.

The fact that it was Haksahab's panchayat seat, Udaynala North, that was reserved for women, and that the party selected Sandha, politically inexperienced but wife of Rabiell, added to the gossip about why Haksahab had left the party in the first place — whether he had been rejected or himself had declined a ^{fourth} ~~forth~~ period. Four months after the election, Haksahab's once party-supported elevation into the position of secretary of the cooperative society (he had been chosen to clean up the mess left by the former secretary, the heavily corrupt then panchayat member for Udaynala South, Biswanath) came under open attack as undemocratic at the annual general assembly. There had been no protests at the previous general assembly, and the party's role in Haksahab's elevation had surprised no-one. What was surprising was that Haksahab was now publicly attacked, and that the attack was lead by Ohab and his brother Raja, both of whom had "secretly" met Biswanath a few days earlier. Biswanath was "known" to be quite close to Santi, new panchayat member of Udaynala South and a favourite of the party. These "connections" gave gossipers a field-day.

Some months later Haksahab's 17-year-old son was beaten up by some youngsters from a neighbouring village. The immediate cause of the beating was a quarrel over a *kabaddi*-game a few weeks earlier, but — again — the fact that someone dared beat Haksahab's son was to him and others a sign of his declining prestige and reputation. He sought to have the culprits subjected to a bichar in Udaynala, a bichar that would

have vindicated and reasserted his authority and influence. But the party was not behind him.

The major threat to his prestige and influence, however, came in connection with Bhadubhai, a poor labourer often employed by Haksahab and considered his protégé. Bhadubhai's family had a several years-old dispute over some land and a small amount of money with their immediate neighbours, particularly with Milon, a young woman "known" to be terrifically quarrelsome. The dispute resulted in a dramatic night-time police raid in the village in 1992, in which a police party came to arrest Bhadubhai and his brother for the attempted murder of Milon. It was Milon who had filed the complaint, but it was unlikely to be true (though she may have been beaten by them). In spite of the flimsy ground for the allegation and the fact that the police rarely act on such unsubstantiated reports, the police had nonetheless come to arrest Bhadubhai. And without even consulting Haksahab, panchayat member and Bhadubhai's patron. Haksahab was caught off-guard, and although on the following day he did manage to secure permission from the police for Bhadubhai to remain in the village for the time being, he could not prevent the case from proceeding to court.

The police, it was argued in village gossip, were unlikely to have raided or persisted without some political pressure. They would not have been reacting to Milon's allegations without consulting someone influential and knowledgeable in the village. In a grand conspiracy theory involving power balances and struggles within the party

and the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA),¹³ it was alleged that Rabel had machinated the whole thing.

A few weeks later Haksahab called a bichar to settle the score between the Bhadubhais and the Milons. At the bichar the middle-para group was in the majority, and Haksahab presided together with Abdul Kabir and Panchu Mandal. Panchu Mandal was a generally respected but politically disinterested cultivator. He headed the family traditionally considered descendants of the village headman's lineage, but the post had no significance any longer except for a few ritual occasions, although it lent him some prestige. Abdul Kabir was head of the "nine-brothers" family — some of whom are well-off landowners, others of whom have become rich from doing business in Calcutta. The father of the nine was poor, and their financial success gave them self-confidence and ultimately problems in the village. They have generally been shunned by the middle-para youth because of their role in the downfall of the ABC club ten years earlier (see below). However, Haksahab always sought to calm them down, assisted them when needed, and has included Kabir in his circle. This was eventually to the benefit of Kabir who — middle-aged — sought to present himself as a reliable and responsible member of society.

The bichar was a disaster. It was dominated by the middle-para people but Milon refused to accept their authority. She refused to comply with the compromise reached, and kept calling for "her panchayat member" to be present, i.e. Rabel. By that time

¹³The CPM's internal divisions, particularly between the "pragmatists" and the "ideologues", were well-known to much of the population, although often interpreted in terms of individual ambitions and animosities.

Sandha had been elected but not inaugurated, and Haksahab was still officially the village panchayat member. Milon's calls for Rabiell were ignored by those present; he was not informed or sent for. Her refusal to accept Haksahab and the assembly's authority was a slap in the face for the veteran panchayat member and for the middle-para families. She was accused of disrespect (*anyaya*). Eventually Milon's *mama* ("uncle", her "guardian" since her husband worked in Delhi) declined to be further involved and went home. But as judge (or deliberator: *bicharak*) Panchu Mandal insisted on a solution. He went to fetch the *mama*, but they started to quarrel. To the utmost humiliation of Panchu Mandal they ended up fighting in the mud, where they were soon joined by others.

Afterwards the large group of middle-para youth vigorously campaigned for the ultimate social weapon, ostracism (*ekghare rakha*) — an aim implicitly accepted by the elders. The next day the youth went around the village collecting signatures for Milon's ostracization. The endeavour largely flopped, however, and one reason seems to have been that people saw this conflict not only in light of Milon's or Bhadubhai's right or wrong, but increasingly in light of how the two sides appeared to be involved in a dispute over influence in the village. And people were unwilling to take sides. Normally such an endeavour would have been entirely successful with the middle-para group's support, but now their influence was diminishing because of interpretations made in village gossip.

To Haksahab's opponents, the Milon-bichar was a painful example of how the middle-para group sought to dominate and had dominated village affairs for too long. The

group had ignored Milon's calls for Rabiél's mediation and proceeded to have her ostracized. A few days later a party meeting was held at the local party office in S-bazar. Here Rabiél vented his frustration for the first time. "Rule [*sason*] in Udaynala", he said, "is all done by Ajam [Chaudhuri, of the middle-para] and his friends, they are all Haksahéb's boys. What right [*adhikar*] do these households have to run things?" His grudge was supported by others from Udaynala at the meeting, particularly by Biswanath, former panchayat member for Udaynala South and opponent of Haksahéb. Biswanath made sure the party's reluctance to support Haksahéb was made known in the village.

It was at this time that Fajlul decided to arrange a "cultural function" (a common thing to do, as we shall see more of in Chapter Four). His cousin Rabiél was also involved in the preparations, although the two had so far not been on speaking terms. Rabiél was prominently seated during the function itself together with a number of other outside invitees, and participated in a small play staged during the function. Haksahéb, however, was not invited, and when he appeared nonetheless, he was not requested to sit among the prominent invitees. Fajlul made sure he had already left before he "invited" him to address the assembly. These not-so-subtle insults and the implications of Rabiél's role were lost on no one.

It was also at this time "heard" in Udaynala that the village imam had been seen with a woman in a shed very late at night. It was Bhadubhai who had seen them, the ^{woman}~~women~~-in question being a sister-in-law of Milon, Bhadubhai's long-standing enemy.

He gave a precise date of the sighting, and this lent additional credence to an already

existing rumour that the imam-saheb was indeed having an affair with her. That rumour had been around for some time, sustained with particular glee by the middle-para families. They had but scant respect for the imam who was active in the Muslim proselytizing layman organization Tabligh Jamat. A number of villagers had long wanted to stop the rumours, but these were very unspecific and it had not been possible to confront directly the powerful middle-para families on such flimsy grounds. When Bhadubhai started spreading his rumour, however, the allegations became very specific and at the same time the middle-para group's influence was seen to be diminishing. The imam's associates demanded a bichar and partly because of the weakened position of the middle-para families, the bichar demand was not opposed.

It was in this situation of a prolonged "nibbling away" of Haksahab's and the middle-para families' prestige and their historical claim on respect, and a week or so before the bichar against Bhadubhai, that they decided to relaunch their once famous ABC club. The ABC club had been active in Udaynala from 1976 to 1984. It was headed by a number of prominent villagers (Haksahab, Waselmaster, Imam Hosen — see Chapter Two — the last two later died), but the drive behind it was in the hands of the fairly large number of youth. They were the first large cohort in the village to have been college educated. Among them dominated the sons of the four or five traditionally dominating middle-*para*¹⁴ families: Ajam Chaudhuri (Imam Hosen's eldest son), three of Haksahab's sons, and four or five from the Sekh and Munsii

¹⁴*para* = neighbourhood, defined ad hoc following loose social or geographical criteria. Most of the historically dominant families lived in the "middle-para".

families. In addition to these, there were some of the younger ones of the "nine-brothers"-family (also middle-para) — the elder brothers doing well in the steel polish business in Calcutta. Lastly there were the cousins Rabiul and Fajlul (Waselmaster's son and school teacher) from the north-para, and panchayat members-to-be Biswanath and Santi.

The club was particularly active and efficient after the instalment of the CPM and the Left Front Government in 1977 when the first years of communist rule created a euphoric atmosphere of cooperation and social work. The ABC activists were all associated with the CPM. The club was a major and efficient organizer of various communal activities: the *rakh* (guarding the ripe paddy), football matches and other games, economic assistance to poor households, it brought electricity to the village, and had pipes dug in under the road (to prevent flooding). It also organized a library and various cultural functions, especially poetry readings and theatre performances. It enjoyed enormous prestige.

The club ceased to function in about 1984 for a number of reasons. With their elder brothers' increased business success in Calcutta, the younger "nine-brothers" sought a more prominent position within the village and refused to bow to the will of the youngsters from the historically dominant families. There were two indecisive fights over this. When Fajlul — after the death of his father — opposed the middle-para youth's dominance by starting his own theatre club, then he was supported by the "nine-brothers". The final blow was then delivered by Imam Hosen, secretary of the club, who had registered in his own name four bighas of land intended for the ABC

to sharecrop. After this, Fajlul, the "nine-brothers" and Imam Hosen (whose younger sister was married to Haksahab) were all prevented from any major role in village affairs by the group of middle-para families which saw them as enemies and disruptive elements. The club's demise created a cleavage in the village — cutting local CPM support in two — that was to last for a long time. The "middle-para" families, the group around Haksahab, came to enjoy a preeminent position in the village.

The ABC remained a glorious memory until the position of Haksahab and his supporters went into rapid decline, in 1993. It was Ajam who formally called for a meeting as son of previous secretary Imam Hosen — who had misappropriated four bighas from the club. Fajlul — who had been prominent in the old ABC but had contributed to its downfall — was not invited. Rabiul — who had been prominent but not disruptive — was also left out, whereas the "nine-brothers" — with a terrific reputation for disruption — were invited. Also invited was Panchu Mandal, who had not been part of the old ABC. He was invited by Haksahab and Ajam in a special and unusual deputation to his home.

The relaunch was a success. Forty to fifty people were present, and a full-fledged organization was established with a board of twenty-two from which a secretariat was elected. Ajam was made secretary, Panchu Mandal President, and Haksahab chairman of an "Advisory Committee". The only dissonance was the issue of the four bighas misappropriated by Ajam's faltering father. But after a short discussion it was dismissed by Haksahab with a "What's done is done", and "Let us start afresh." He

then proceeded to donate Rs 100 towards a new fund and Ajam donated Rs 50 (the cheapest four bighas in the history of the village, it was later mumbled). In the following week the new ABC initiated guarding the ripe paddy, football and kabaddi matches, and various other activities. The organizational force behind these initiatives was Ajam.

In light of these circumstances and developments Bhadubhai's bichar — the following week — was held and seen. At the bichar itself there was relatively little argument. Milon's family continuously pressed on Bhadubhai, who was questioned by Haksahab as chairman of the meeting and senior-most judge. Haksahab's opponents, such as Rabiul or Fajlul, Biswanath or Santi, were all absent. The middle-para group (Abdul Kabir, Ajam, and others) was present but quiet. The case, they told me later on, was lost in advance. There was no defence for Bhadubhai, only his word against that of the imam. They did not seek to dominate this bichar like they had with Milon's. They were weakened, but they were present, showing that they had strength enough to take the blow.

Gossip and the village agenda

Bhadubhai had gone too far by alleging a sighting of the imam and the woman. However, the bichar would not have been called without the negative developments in Haksahab's position and the implicit support of his opponents. With the Milon-bichar fresh in mind, which the middle-para group had sought but failed to dominate, the Bhadubhai-bichar could have become an indictment of the entire group. It is in

this light that the relaunch of the ABC gains its proper perspective. The choice of the ABC instead of a new name was seen as an un-camouflaged slight at Fajlul and by extension Rabiél. In the relaunch of the ABC, the middle-para group headed by Haksahéb showed its size, cohesion and influence by pulling off a major meeting and organizing a club that took care of important activities. Their sphere of influence had been expanded by including the respected Panchu Mandal — politically inexperienced and no doubt manipulatable in the hands of the experienced Haksahéb — who had been deeply humiliated by being dragged into a fight in the mud by Milon's "guardian". By conferring honours, extending invitations, through praise and protection, he had instead been incorporated into the sphere of influence which Haksahéb was in the process of consolidating and extending to counter the rivalry from Rabiél.

Gossip contributes towards the creation of the village agenda. Through gossiping events and actions are associated and interpreted in context, with patterns of previous events, rumours, and known facts. Together this leads to a setting in which positions, goals, links, and relative strengths are perceived. More importantly, these popularly held interpretations or perceptions lead to expectations of courses of action — expectations that must be acted upon because failure to do so leads to the corrosion of reputations. This was what we saw in the immediate pre-history of the Bhadubhai-bichar. The bichar itself concerned the imam, Bhadubhai, the woman, and village social standards. However the circumstances of it — the linking of those involved to the previous Milon-bichar, the Milon family's association to Rabiél, the increased tension between Rabiél and Haksahéb in the aftermath of the Milon-bichar, and

Haksaheb's increasingly difficult relation to the party — created an environment in which Haksaheb's authority was severely threatened. To retain it demanded actions that would impress the villagers with his (continued) powers. As it became clear that Bhadubhai had to face a bichar he could not win, it became necessary, almost imperative, for the middle-para group to regain a momentum, to retain its reputation. The relaunching of the ABC club secured this by confirming the size, cohesion and ability of the group and of Haksaheb. The careful inclusion of Panchu Mandal was a further consolidation and mark of influence.

The whole history from the fall of the ABC to Bhadubhai's bichar concerned disputes and quarrels that ended up in what was perceived of (increasingly also by those involved) as part of a power struggle between the two major village leaders and their groups over influence in the village. The pace was set by village gossip. Protagonists, important incidents and relevant factors were identified and interpreted through what was "being said". Notably, neither the final struggle nor the many disputes or quarrels that went before it were concerned with anything near issues of "real power". There was no land involved, no wealth (except the four ABC bighas, but only as a part of the conflict), and no positions of statutory powers (the panchayat election was held and over before Milon's bichar). Instead, some of the burning issues centred around the prestige of a village club, a rumour about the imam-saheb, ostracization of a perceived quarrelsome woman, and the beating up of a young boy. These incidents were considered insults, challenges, and feuds, and reflected on individuals' reputations, their reputation for being influential. Ultimately gossip affected the ability of individuals to influence village affairs.

Gossip — this seemingly never-ending waste of time — sets the village agenda, and also the expectations and limitations for village leaders, the very frame within which they have to operate. The "name" or image the leader needs in order to be eligible and to proceed in his endeavours is created within this informal realm of gossip. Though village leaders no doubt have their own agendas, gossip and their ultimate dependence on general goodwill nonetheless require that they stay within the confines of popularly held sentiments.

***Fingerspitzgefühl* and "symbolic capital"**

The informal realm, however, is not (only) about confines, restrictions or limited options. It is a quite open, dynamic, and changing field. It can be manipulated, and represents opportunities rather than restrictions for the discerning. As the above story showed, "timing" (Bourdieu's *tempo*), manipulation, the ever-changing village rumours, are elements in what is less a restricted field than a field of possibilities for the willing and able player. Rather than a game of fixed rules, it is a game of constantly new moves and rules, of changing constellations, and, above all, of context-based acceptance or denial. What would be unacceptable for one would be acceptable for another; what would be unacceptable at one point would be acceptable at another. Take for instance Haksahab's little manipulation at the end of Bhadubhai's bichar.

Towards the end of Bhadubhai's bichar, after it was agreed that he was guilty of spreading malicious rumours about the imam, the lively discussions continued on the question of appropriate punishment. Many suggestions and arguments were launched:

he should pay a fine; the fine should go to the mosque; no, the fine should go to a village fund; the imam is not from our village, he is our guest, so the punishment must be severe; Bhadubhai should work for the mosque; he should walk from house to house and apologize.

"Listen, listen!" Haksahab cut the discussion short at the last suggestion and called people to be quiet. Other comments and argument were muffled. As senior-most villager present he — as is common — talked through the arguments against Bhadubhai and ended by saying that the bichar had reached the conclusion that Bhadubhai should walk from house to house to apologize. "Am I right? Is this a fair verdict, and is that the verdict of this bichar?" "Yes, yes! That is our decision" agreed those around him. Among those were the man who had suggested that punishment, and his friends. Other voices drowned in the immediate relapse into general debate. The verdict they suddenly had agreed upon was perhaps the least severe or disadvantageous for Bhadubhai. Eventually someone disagreed, "He should walk barefooted!". This was dismissed by Haksahab with reference to an undisputed principle: "The verdict has been pronounced and we must stand by it." Amendments to a common sentence were out of the question.

By means of a little manipulation Haksahab had reduced a potentially more severe punishment. His manipulation was relatively obvious, but he was supported by other "elders" present, such as Kabir and Panchu Mandal — a support he had secured and made manifest only the week before. This small piece of manipulation was very interesting. It pointed to the degree of manoeuvrability village leaders have. No

single village leader would have been able to assert his own preference against the will of the majority without losing respect and influence in the long term or dividing the village. But Haksahab was "allowed" some recompense after Bhadubhai's opponents had been vindicated. The manipulation did not severely affect the general consensus and did not offend popular sentiments. If anything it contributed towards Haksahab's standing as both an able judge and protector of Bhadubhai at the same time. Above all, it showed his "feel" of the situation, his understanding or rather sensitivity for how far he could go and what would be acceptable, given his own position, the circumstances of the bichar and popular views of Bhadubhai, Panchu Mandal and others.

He overruled protest, gambling with his reputation as built over the preceding week, and won. Without the relaunch of the ABC, he might have lost, and would have had a severe blemish on his reputation. Much of Haksahab's influence lay in his "feel" of the situation, his knowledge of how to exploit it, how to stay on top. He was an able player in the game of village politics, manoeuvring between gossip and facts of life, gaining support, showing respect, acquiring knowledge of others' reputations and how these were affected, of what people to be surrounded by and how to attract them, how comments, arguments, circumstances were or would be interpreted. His coup with the relaunch of the ABC showed this. Haksahab owned only 22 bighas of land and was not a major employer, and, in the thick of the developments described above, he had no position with statutory powers. He countered a challenge — successfully, in the general village perception — by "playing the game", a game he could play because of his intimate knowledge of the village, its people and their personal enmities

and friendships, episodes from recent and not-so-recent village history, groups and alliances, the local concerns, the here-and-now gossip, the permissible, the rules and norms. This "feel" was also crucial to understanding how "alliances" can be formed, such as that recently formed between himself and Panchu Mandal: Panchu's personal concerns, what it would take to coax him into village politics, the effect his presence would have.

Bourdieu has called this "the art of being in society" — which he applies to all members of a community.¹⁵ For the case of village leaders we may call it (from German) *Fingerspitzgefühl*; "the feel in the tip of one's fingers", the almost instinctive understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, and, in particular, what needs to be done next — an understanding that the individuals in question are perhaps not able to put into words, to define; they just "know". *Fingerspitzgefühl* is based on intimate knowledge; what is permissible, how names and reputations are made and unmade, how actions are interpreted against the background of commonly held values, individual concerns and desires. In this, *Fingerspitzgefühl* is far from manipulation pure and simple. On the contrary, it is important for its effect that it refers very closely to social norms and has to be confined within the borders of the acceptable. It has to be employed in such a way as to create confidence in the leader.

¹⁵Or "the art of necessary improvisation", that is, the "virtuoso's" juggling with options of response, recognition, improvisation, and delay, his "play on all the resources inherent in the ambiguities and uncertainties of behaviour and situation in order to produce the actions appropriate to each case, to do that of which people will say 'There was nothing else to be done', and do it the right way" (Bourdieu 1977:8). Although his point was another, to free us from "the objectivist model of the mechanical interlocking of preregulated actions", Bourdieu may have overstated his case, as people do make mistakes.

We find from the above history of village politics that the alliances or ties that were created and maintained between, for instance, Haksahab and Ajam, Panchu Mandal or Kabir, did not immediately concern exchanges of things material but a mutual implicit showing of respect and support for the creation or preservation of names. But the position of Haksahab and others did not merely rely on a few "alliances". At issue were relations to a much larger number of people. Ultimately it is the "image" people have of a leader, or his reputation, and the confidence created continuously, day-by-day, that make the village leader's position legitimate and acceptable. It is necessary for the village leader to be able to inspire confidence, to ensure that people trust him and his judgements. Such a confidence constitutes what Bourdieu has termed "symbolic capital", and which refers to social obligations and reciprocity, in other words the number of people, families or clans one may call upon for assistance (for harvests, or feuds). It is, says Bourdieu, "credit, in the widest sense of the word, i.e. a sort of advance which the group alone can grant those who give it the best material and symbolic *guarantees*" and ensures networks of allies.¹⁶ Bourdieu's outline of how symbolic capital is typically created, seems especially appropriate for Bengali village leaders, and deserves to be quoted in extenso.

Wastage of money, energy, time, and ingenuity is the very essence of the social alchemy through which an interested relationship is transmuted into a disinterested, gratuitous relationship, overt domination into misrecognized, 'socially recognized' domination, in other words, *legitimate authority*. The active principle is the labour, time, care, attention and *savoir-faire* which must be squandered to produce a personal gift irreducible to its equivalent in money, a present in which what counts is not so much what you give as the way you give it, the seemingly "gratuitous" surrender not only of goods or women but of things that are even more personal and therefore more precious, because, as

¹⁶Bourdieu 1977:181, emphasis in original.

the Kabyles say, they can "neither be borrowed nor lent", such as *time* — the time that has been taken to do the things that "won't be forgotten", because they are done the right way at the right time — marks of appreciation, "gestures", "kindnesses", and "considerations".¹⁷

This form of authority is based on *fides*, an inherently personal quality, the ability to inspire confidence or trust, or a sense of protective authority. Such authority, says Bourdieu, "is neither officially declared nor institutionally guaranteed"¹⁸ and has to be continuously maintained.

The expectation of intervention on behalf of dependants or would-be dependants is the concrete tangible aspect of the relationship, exemplifying its content and strength. Not that everybody at all times needs the intervention of somebody influential, but such intervention is an important way in which relationships are formed because they entail reciprocation — for instance in the form of informal (political) support. Such acts of intervention are important in creating one's name and reputation.

The ancient Bengali practice of *len-den* (approximately translatable as "taking and giving") constitutes a close parallel to symbolic capital. It involved the gratuitous giving of fish to neighbours after a catch in one's pond, lending a good shirt or a particularly fine shawl to someone off on an important errand, or immediately and voluntarily sending over eggs, fish, vegetables or other items, to the neighbour who had just received important guests. "Len-den" created trust, confidence, and mutuality.

¹⁷Bourdieu 1977:192-3, emphasis in original.

¹⁸Bourdieu 1977:193.

It ensured reciprocation — when you needed a shirt or some fish yourself — and support when disputes arouse, or when extra money or labour was needed. To lend or give away created "credit"; to receive was "debt" that at one point would have to be reciprocated. Reciprocation both paid off debt and created new symbolic capital. A proper act of reciprocation was a statement of acceptance of the relationship and of a willingness to extend and maintain it. A proper reciprocation should not come too soon, nor be the same "gift" though it should be somehow equivalent. It should indicate the quality of the relationship rather than constitute a repayment of debt. For instance, if your neighbour gave you fish when you had none, you could support him in a dispute. Such relationships were not mechanical nor solely material. They were based on confidence and extended to all spheres of life.

Although the practice of *len-den* has almost vanished over the decades, there was a parallel practice in relations between village leaders and commoners. Village leaders were expected to assist fellow villagers when required. This assistance was "exchanged" — or reciprocated — with political support and a willingness to be associated with the particular leader. In such a case one would not, for instance, spread malicious rumours about him. *Fingerspitzgefühl* refers in part to the individual leader's capacity to "play the game", to coax, manipulate and manoeuvre in a community of his intimate knowledge. As is well known to all villagers, any leader has some ambitions. *Fingerspitzgefühl* refers to his ability to pursue these without appearing to, while still creating symbolic capital.

The other side of this concerns the background of values against which his actions were interpreted by individuals approached and by the community at large, as translated in the communal "discussion" of gossip. But gossip can influence one's "power" only if power is understood as influence derived from the command of people over whom one has no "power", i.e. people whose participation is "voluntary", "socially (mis-)recognized" and thus influenced by social processes. Basic for the individual village leader with limited "power" in a community of small scale is the trust or confidence he is able to create between himself and potential followers, the creation and maintenance in all social relations of a sense of mutuality and personal interest and of confidence. Confidence is bestowed on those who can be seen engaged for others, taking others seriously, treating them as someone worthy of spending time and energy on. "Alliances" are rarely explicit, they are merely "there", inspired by a previous record, by an expectation that family or other relations matter, that to disregard such relations would be detrimental to one's symbolic capital, to one's "name" or reputation. Village leaders and would-be village leaders will spend time and energy on their co-villagers because by doing so they portray themselves as proper and good village leaders.

Supplications

The nature and importance of the expectation villagers have in relation to community leaders becomes clearer when we look at the requests made to village leaders. Villagers commonly turn to actual or would-be leaders for assistance in using a new seed, spraying the fields, or finding a remedy for an ailing cow. In this we find an

expectation of "knowledge" in a somewhat limited sense. But we also find the expectation of "knowledge" in a much broader sense. People turn to certain individuals for advice on the right step to take in a dispute, for advice on the dowry negotiations for the marriage of their daughter, or with problems with the authorities. Some of these supplications concern issues related to outside people or powers (police, administration, political authorities). A larger number of supplications concern intra-village disputes or misunderstandings: the distribution of irrigation water, a quarrel between heirs, allegations of malicious rumour-mongering, illicit love affairs, the sharing of a harvest — the list would never end. Issues such as these are constantly brought to the attention of the leaders. It is expected of the village leader to take an interest and find a solution. It is crucial to note that people do not turn to their leaders with such requests because they are "leaders". It is the ability and willingness to comply with such requests that create the leader, plus his interest in people's lives, his (apparent) dedication to their problems. Some former village leaders called this "compassion" (*sarad*) — which seems slightly overstated but indicative of the importance put on the appearances of such a relationship. We may call it (an expectation of) interest or concern. Again, there is nothing mechanical in such a relationship. To be on friendly terms with an influential village leader does not necessarily mean that he will support you through thick and thin. Nor does his support oblige you for ever and anything. Symbolic capital is not cement; it is a moral obligation open to dispute and contestation.

Any dispute, such as those presented here, involves a number of people in close contact with one another, people who will mobilize their symbolic capital in order to

achieve an advantageous solution, plus people whose reciprocal relationship with either contestant will contribute towards deciding their attitude to the dispute at hand. However, and this is the point where we have to remember the popularity of gossip, the number of people involved with the judging of a dispute is (most often) much larger than the number of people actually involved, even larger than the number of people actually present. Villagers all participate in judgements, either directly as spectators, or indirectly by accepting or rejecting any judgement reached in the following days and weeks. Moreover, the number of people who contribute towards the settling or worsening of a dispute, by throwing in comments, arguments and suggestions, is much larger than the group actually tied to one another by symbolic capital, or, at any rate, only loosely tied by symbolic capital to any of the major contestants. And one should also keep in mind that not everybody is an able or willing player in the game of village politics; even though perhaps tied to one or the other contestant by symbolic capital, it may well be that one accidentally or for some other reason contributes towards his misery.

The point is that what counts towards the making of the village leader is not merely the people tied to him by personal bonds, but the evaluation made by the village population in general. Apart from "tying in" people in a web of symbolic capital, which also severely affects his time and his ability to manoeuvre, the village leader is also evaluated in the larger forum of village gossip. Although the main burden of acceptance or rejection of the verdict reached lies on the contestants of the dispute, any verdict will also have to be accepted by the audience present, and by the larger village community. It must be in line with their understanding of the case at hand and

of right and wrong. Otherwise they may simply choose not to act in accordance with the ~~verdit~~^{verdict}. This is the same audience that ultimately accepts or rejects the individual village leader's claim to leadership.

For this larger audience, the same "principles" that we encountered with reference to individuals are at work, although perhaps in a watered-down version. Also for this audience village leadership will have to be "(mis-)recognized, socially acceptable". The difference is that most villagers are not necessarily personally involved with the village leader, only as members of a community he claims to represent. Symbolic capital, as Bourdieu points out, costs money. The majority of the village population will not have such close relations to any one village leader. Their "bond" to him does not depend on his material resources. In this context, it is involvement for society at large which becomes crucial, the village leader's capability to "take care of" community affairs, to preserve its prestige vis-à-vis the outside, to represent it in an acceptable manner to outsiders, and to insiders (at times of important functions or festivities), to initiate projects, to settle disruptive conflicts. In a word, the symbolic capital he has in relation to the village population at large is what above was called his "name", or his reputation.

A survey of time spent

One particular week in the autumn of 1992 I conducted a small survey to discover how seven village leaders of Udaynala and Gopinathpur spent their time. The individuals selected were the most prominent and active villagers: Haksahab (former

panchayat member for Udaynala North); Rabiell (de facto panchayat member for Udaynala North); Biswanath (ex-panchayat member for Udaynala South); Santi (panchayat member for Udaynala South); Shyamsundar (former panchayat member for Gopinathpur, since 1993 Jela Parishad Member); Angsuman (secretary of the cooperative society, and brother of Shyamsundar); and finally Kesto Sarkar (prominent but ailing party activist in Gopinathpur). It is worth noting that at the time of the survey, only four of them had formal positions. People like the Gopinathpur Congress leader, Sukumar Mandal, and the CPM member of Udaynala, Najir Hosen — both respected and occasionally sought out for advice, but not active in day-to-day affairs — were left out. Gopinathpur's very active BJP leader, Uday Majumdar, declined to participate. The remaining seven were interviewed every day about what they had been doing since the last interview.

The survey took place at a time when the paddy was ripening and the villagers subsequently had little cultivation-related work except to wait and prepare for the harvesting, and so there was much time to engage in village affairs. There was some anxiety in Udaynala when insects appeared on the paddy straws, but pesticides were applied and only minor portions of the harvest were lost. Several meetings were held on this issue. There was also a problem of potential labour shortage that had to be sorted out. Another topic of much interest in Udaynala at the time was the upcoming general meeting of the cooperative society for which it was known that one group (the Ohabs) were planning a take-over bid. In Gopinathpur conversations revolved around an upcoming Gram Committee meeting, and above all the annual large *baroari*

(public) puja to be held towards the end of the harvesting season with *jatra* (plays), visiting relatives and general festivities.¹⁹

The details of the survey are given in the Appendix. The number of meetings these seven attended appears very high, although, according to their own assessments, it was not. In Udaynala three major meetings were held, plus a number of minor meetings. In Gopinathpur two major meetings were held. The "meetings" were of different types. Some were institutionalized and more or less fixed like those of the Gram Committee. Others were less institutionalized though nonetheless took place within a fixed framework (such as the baroari committee meetings in Gopinathpur or the cooperative society committee's meetings in Udaynala). Again there was a kind of meeting which takes place on an ad hoc basis, though with a chairman and ordered speeches. These would include bichars. Lastly, there were entirely informal meetings, where a few interested individuals had agreed to come together to discuss or plan an upcoming event or a problem, such as those in Udaynala on the division of hired-in labourers.

Though much time was spent planning, discussing and executing various public or party-related activities, the actual meetings were relatively short, and the informants were often at a loss to explain their activities since our last interview. Gram Committee meetings, the half-informal cooperative society meetings, discussion-meetings on issues such as the insects or the division of labourers, and bichars, were

¹⁹The timing of the Gopinathpur baroari puja was awkward and unusual; most baroari pujas were held well after the harvesting between late January and early April.

in practice over within an hour or two. Occasionally they dragged out, but the rule was that much of the time was spent in small group discussions over a wide range of issues before and after the actual meeting.

Six of the interviewees — the seventh being Biswanath — were visited at home by individual or groups of villagers every morning, for consultations or assistance. Later during the day, but particularly in the evenings, both major and minor village leaders — irrespective of formal positions — spent their time visiting people, gossiping, attending meetings, or, in Udaynala, engaging in card-games. They spent most of their time being around, being available, and getting involved even where no one wanted them to. The institutional "power" enjoyed by Shyamsundar and his brother, by Santi and indirectly by Rabiél, did not ease this lot. The role of village leader and the expectations bestowed upon formal panchayat members were in no way different from those bestowed on informal village leaders; the role of a community leader, expected to take a personal interest in issues far removed from the confines of formal offices.

Previously, twenty, thirty years back, many would come asking for material assistance. Most people were poorer than nowadays, and many sought loans (in grain or cash), charity, or donations to cover expenses for a daughter's wedding feast. These material pleas for assistance could easily have made the relationship between village leaders and commoners appear as purely materialistic, in which the wealthy exploited the poor, even in face of evidence of occasional requests for non-material assistance. But the fact that the pleas for assistance continued into the 1990s, and that only a portion

of these requests now concerned grain or money, indicate that the relationship has always been more than an exchange of political support for material benefits.

The survey relates to two closely related issues: the village leader's need for information about "what is going on", an information he gathers by "being around", gossiping; and, secondly, the requirement that he engage himself on another's behalf. A village leader's authority is constantly evaluated in village gossip. A positive evaluation in village gossip is part of what creates his influence, a negative evaluation may ruin it. Crucial for a (would-be) leader is an understanding of what may contribute towards building one's reputation; where to put pressure, what initiatives to take, which individuals to be associated with and which not, and what is permissible. In short, village leaders need a "feel" for a situation constantly in flux, as Bhadubhai's bichar illustrated.

In order to create his symbolic capital the village leader is required to move around in the village, talk to villagers, listen to their problems, get involved in community affairs. In doing so he also obtains the information necessary to "play the game". Here the term "knowledge" obviously becomes important, but rather more than in the restricted sense of "the game". "Knowledge" should here be taken in the broader sense of "(mis-)recognized" social acceptance. To villagers the individual village leader has to appear as knowledgeable; or rather, they have to accept him as knowledgeable, as someone they know to be a proper, intelligent person, morally just — someone they can accept as a village leader, to represent them, someone they will listen to.

Conclusion

Slander, rumour-mongering, and gossip are weapons of the weak but not only the weak; they are the "weapons" of the whole of the community, imperfect but far from ineffectual safeguards against faltering village leaders. There are times when the position of a village leader is so strong as to prevent opposition, even prevent public rebuke when something has obviously been done wrong. (Bhadubhai might not have been tried under other conditions.) But even during such times the village leader needs to build relationships with a large number of villagers — to sustain their confidence in him as someone capable of safeguarding their interests — and he is exposed to malicious gossip if he does not do so or does not conform to expectations. Dissatisfaction immediately translates into comments, arguments and opinions, in the loose, informal, and danger-free talk that is gossip. Such dissatisfaction may be difficult to translate into rejection of the leader, but it undermines his authority and his ability to put into practice decisions (see the rejection of the middle-para group's efforts to have Milon ostracized). Gossip and rumours continuously nibble away at personal reputations, and responses have to be found counteracting and operating within the same realm as gossip. Gossip also gives potential leverage to would-be leaders who would easily gain support once they oppose the old leader.

I have sought to complement Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital with a discussion of gossip. Symbolic capital refers to the individual's, or the family's, ability to call on someone else's "voluntary" assistance — closely resembling what Bengalis term "len-den" ("taking and giving"). The multi-faceted nature of len-den or symbolic

capital indicates how personal relations can be translated into political support (and vice versa). In the case of village leaders, I have suggested, this symbolic capital may not be as "material" as in the case of most relationships. In Chapter Two we found that what in particular makes one village leader stand out from a larger group of would-be's, potential rivals and others of equal wealth or social status, are his personal qualities, in particular his "knowledge" and ability to persuade people. The village leader relies more than most on a positive evaluation and interpretation in the realm of gossip. His symbolic capital is based on his ability to make people respect him, accept him as a leader, acknowledge him as "knowledgeable" — an acceptance and evaluation which is inherently social. His reputation, or "name", is created or ruined in the semi-public and informal realm of gossip, which without potential repercussions questions motives, interprets any action, and weighs "evidence" — all to "disclose" what is "really" going on. Gossip is based on implicit moral judgements, and refers to generally held values. The village leader thus appears as an exponent of common values, although one with *Fingerspitzengefühl*, the one who most ably plays in the open, dynamic and constantly changing field of village gossip and interpretations, the one who brings in new arguments from a wide range of norms and ideologies to defend his position.

The next chapter will turn to an example of how new values could be conducive to establish village leadership. The example is historical, one of wide-ranging repercussions for social values and political developments, and takes us into the main historical context for this study, the making of rural communism in West Bengal.

FOUR MARXISM AND POETRY: BENGAL'S "MODERN TRADITION" ENTERS THE VILLAGES

Introduction

In the olden days one had an institutionalized venue for broad social interaction, particularly for the village leader and his group, the "faction". This venue was the *baithakkhana*, discussion house, ornately decorated small buildings in which the head of wealthy families received his male neighbours, friends, supporters, and relatives in the evenings. He had tea and snacks served. Betel-nuts and the hookah were sent around, while the lesser guests were offered *biri* (country cigarettes). Here people played cards, gossiped and discussed, and quite frequently someone present sang or told stories. Thirty or more years back there were a large number of such discussion houses in Udaynala and Gopinathpur: possibly as many as fifteen in Udaynala, and six or seven in Gopinathpur. The evening social life centred around the discussion houses and it was expected of commoners to attend. The *baithakkhana* represented the village-scale ostentatious display of wealth and entourage required of village leaders.

Except for one in Udaynala, none of the discussion houses functioned in 1992-3 in the sense of being used for evening-gatherings. Most discussion houses had by the 1970s fallen into disuse, and eventually fell into decay. Ostentatious displays of wealth and

entourage were no longer acceptable. Nowadays, people gathered outside, at one or several locations in each para, preferably at some central place where they could see who was passing. Here they sat down and idled away the evenings long into the night. They gossiped, discussed and occasionally someone sung songs or told stories (though some of the entertainment had been taken over by television). Card-game tournaments were regularly arranged. In the case of Udaynala, this change was brought about within a relatively short time, and consciously. The village leader could no longer expect people to come to contribute to his prestige. Instead, it has become necessary for him to run around looking for people.

There is a reason for this change, one that indicates the nature and origin of the ideological changes rural West Bengal has experienced. In Udaynala the changes in the use and meaning of the baithakkhana were consciously brought about with a generational change of village leaders around 1960. In Gopinathpur it took more time, stretching into the 1970s, but there too those instrumental in bringing the changes about belonged to the same generation as their counterparts in Udaynala. In the first post-Independence decade and a half, increasingly large numbers of youth from high-status middle and rich peasant families were introduced, through education and through family ties, to an ideology that was fast gaining acceptance among the urban class of professionals and government employees. It was the ideology of modernizing India, personified above all by Prime Minister Nehru, although in West Bengal it contained a strong element of radical thought. It had indeed become the ideology — or, as more encompassing, the culture — of that segment of society which was

regarded as high-status and dominant: the *bhadralok* ("gentlefolk").¹ Education brought village youth into close contact with ideas critical to existing village society. Back in their villages, the youth — in Udaynala they quickly became village leaders due to death of their fathers — sought to put their new ideas into practice. They arranged cooperative societies, schools, poetry readings and theatre performances. They were the most active, but there is no reason to believe that they were the only ones acquainted with at least the general content of the new ideology of modernity. How successful they were in terms of actually changing village society is open to question. Their achievement lay elsewhere. Firstly, they recreated themselves in the image of the modernizing and socially concerned village leader. Secondly, they employed arguments and engaged in actions that familiarized other villagers with the new ideology and possibly gave them new arguments for old grievances. Above all, the 1960s reads as a *Kulturkampf* which eventually came to lay the foundations of the political mobilization of the United Front period (to be taken up in the following chapter).

I will seek to address the multifaceted character of the changes. These were value changes, not merely political regroupings. The history of these two villages shows that ideological reorientations among at least one crucial section of the population preceded political changes. The seeds of these social changes were sowed before they found political expressions. The profound socio-cultural and political changes in West

¹I take note of Partha Chatterjee's (1993, Ch. Three) critical assessment of the term, and that he prefers the term "the (Calcutta) middle class" to denote its "middleness". In the present context, however, I prefer the term *bhadralok* since, seen from a village, particularly after Independence, this "middle class" is not "middle" to anything but superior to most.

Bengal derived, I shall argue, from an involvement by a village "elite" (the middle and rich peasants) of increasingly literary and progressivist inclination in social initiatives and eventually political mobilization. Through expansions in education they became culturally linked to the broad discourse that had hitherto been the domain of the urbanite — and they became its village representatives. The linkage to the world of the *bhadralok* — with a strong radical strand — altered their outlook and opened the terrain for new political alignments and courses of social action. It will be seen that the ideological reorientation allowed for actions that would have been detrimental to the all-crucial consideration under the previous "tradition" of prestige and distance.

The decade or so of enacting this ideology in institution building, *jatra* (theatre performances) and rhetoric was a prerequisite for the orientation of the political unrest to follow. The enactment created the arguments, a legitimation in a larger ideology, and thus the expanded the field of discussion by identifying problems and solutions. This enactment was more important than economic divisions to the direction and the specific features of the unrest and socio-cultural changes. Having said this, I do not intend to argue or regard economic divisions and forces as irrelevant, but as interpreted, and therefore acted upon, within parameters of a particular cultural outlook, of an ideology. In these areas, significant economic inequalities had already over many years — decades or more — given rise to many "everyday" and not-so-everyday forms of resistance: theft, foot-dragging or gossip (as seen in Chapter Three), and the occasional incident of looting and dacoity (more of which in Chapter Five). What village CPM activists did was to direct these forms into a coherent and ideologized movement, to imbue such actions with public political symbolic value.

If we attribute a political "awareness" and communist mobilization to the entire unrest in the late 1960s because of an affiliation to or a nominal overlordship by the CPM — without regard for previous forms of actions and historical linkages — we create false breaks in history.

From the discussion house to the alley, and other changes

The discussion houses were architectural expressions of family prestige and wealth, an integral aspect of the leadership "style" it was reacted against in the early 1960s. The discussion houses were always placed outside the compound, which symbolized that one could entertain guests without bringing them inside the compound, that the "honour" of the women of the household would be preserved.² Lesser discussion houses were normally plain mud buildings with a simple straw roof, while those of well-off households were ornately decorated, with intricate patterns in fine clay (for which there were specialist artisans), beautifully carved wooden doors and elaborate, carved wooden structures for the porch roof. There were three of these in Udaynala (the Hak, Kaji and Sekh families) but none in Gopinathpur.

The distinction between decorated or plain discussion houses was not accidental but of symbolic importance. In investigating the styles of village leadership until the 1950s we find two "models", corresponding to similar findings elsewhere. Both "models" were concerned with "prestige" and "distance" (to the poor and low caste).

²For studies of the role of purdah in family prestige, see Papanek and Minault (eds) 1982.

But there was a difference in their self-perceptions. Land-wealthy villagers such as Hekimsaheb, Raju and Hitu Munsu, Jikukaji, and in Gopinathpur Paritas Sarkar were never seen walking from the village to the road. They were driven in a cart, walked only short distances, and were beautifully dressed. To be seen walking over paddy fields — let alone work there — was unthinkable for someone of their prestige. There was also a certain trait of "largesse" in their behaviour. They gave lavish feasts, kept retainers and engaged in conspicuous consumption.³ This we may call a "kingly" (or "nawabi" for the Muslims) style of village leadership.

On the other hand, people such as Bhaskar Kes, Shyamal Mandal, Muhammad Hosen — of moderate wealth but of great political importance — were rarely seen driven in a cart to the road. They walked on foot. They never wore beautiful clothes except on special occasions, and instead soiled their hands working the land. Even in 1993 the then octogenarian Bhaskar hesitated to be driven anywhere in a cart. To a peasant householder (*chashi grihastha*) it was intolerable to be seen driven in a cart. This we may call a "peasant" (*chasi*) style of political leadership: the image of the frugal and thrifty devout Hindu or Muslim peasant householder.⁴

³For "largesse", see Price 1989. Largesse among Rajputs was found by Mayer (1958:411). For the replication of the "royal" model in villages, see Dumont and Pocock 1957.

⁴Mayer (1958) noted the existence of two different "styles" in Ramkheri: one "kingly" and one "peasant". The two styles correspond to the kshatriya and the vaishya "models" in Mandelbaum 1970b:452ff. Contrary to Lal Behari Day, author of *Peasant life in Bengal* (cited in Mandelbaum 1970b:453) — who found the Ugra-Kshatriyas (or aguris) to be warrior-like ("a strong and somewhat fierce race") — the aguris of Gopinathpur were frugal and peaceful.

These two styles also seem to correspond to two of the three found by Rajat Ray in Tarashankar's novels, though with the difference that the bhadralok culture of the refined urban-educated protagonists of Tarashankar's novels was not quite the same as the somewhat flashy style of the rustic landlords of Udaynala.⁵

Ritual purity was a crucial consideration for both "styles". The ritually clean (in the case of Muslims, the high-status sekhs) preserved a clear distance to the lower castes in general and to the ritually very polluting muchis in particular. The kingly, or nawabi, model may have emphasized commensality more than did the more frugal "chashi" model followed by the Gopinathpur aguris. But as in the case of Mayer's rajputs, commensality was fairly well restricted even among the would-be kingly landlords of Udaynala — who even were Muslims.⁶ They too considered the muchis too polluting to touch. It was common practice for landowners (Muslim or Hindu) wanting a *majur* (labourer) or having other business with the low-castes, to stand outside their *para* ("neighbourhood") and call in. It was also common to avoid situations where one had to touch the labourer if low-caste, in particular if muchis. The paddy and oil parts of *majuri* (a *majur*'s daily pay) were left on the ground for them to pick up, and the daily biri and occasional cash payments were dropped into their hands. On two occasions, in the early 1950s, muchis were beaten up for wearing

⁵Ray 1983 and 1987. The third "style" being the culture of the low-caste landless *majur* (labourer), to which I will return in Chapters Five and Six.

⁶The rajputs of Ramkheri emphasized commensality as one of their characteristics as the dominant caste. However, even they restricted their commensality to a limited number of "allied castes". Mayer 1960, Chapters IV and VI.

shoes. One of them was the young son of the moderately well-off Rishikesh Das, who owned 8 bighas.

A change in attitude is discernable from the following story. During one deputation by some Udaynala villagers (about the construction of a road towards their village) to some local administrator, one of the sekh (high-status) Muslims accidentally ate some *muri* (parched rice) from the plate belonging to one muchi, and that he too was eating from. "Oh, I ate your *muri*!", the Muslim exclaimed — and they all laughed.⁷ There were no protests on the ground of ritual pollution. The laughter suggests perhaps a certain uneasiness; it was quite something of a novelty. Few if any had ever accepted food from a muchi's plate. But by the early 1960s, these relatively young middle peasant villagers felt that to ignore it would be the right (if unusual) thing to do. That they were Muslims probably made the transition easier, but, as we shall see more of in Chapter Six, also among the high- and clean-caste Hindus of Gopinathpur commensality (although not extending to food) increased between the castes in this period.

Another change in inter-caste relations is perhaps more indicative of altered views on the legitimacy of strict caste divisions. Previously, low-caste labourers were served on banana leaves in the middle of the employer's courtyard while ritually clean labourers sat on the porch eating from plates. For labourers employed over some

⁷"*oh, tor muri kee fellum*". It may be noted that the muchi was addressed using the lowliest pronoun, a pronoun he would probably not use in response. The incident probably took place in the early 1960s. The fact that the story was still remembered and told to a foreigner in the 1990s suggests that the incident was unique, and that they regard it with a certain measure of pride.

time, a separate plate was kept under the paddy storage. From there the labourer would take it out himself, hold it out for food to be dropped onto it, and, having cleaned it himself, put it back afterwards. "Untouchable" labourers were also expected to cleanse the ground they had been sitting on with cow dung. These practices changed in the 1960s, but in an interesting narrative of the process of change that the practice of untouchability went through, Nimai Das (muchhi) remembered how, in his youth (late 1960s or early 1970s), while working as a labourer for a ritually clean household, he would be seated on the porch with the others, though at a distance from them, and receive food on a plate as they did. No one demanded him to rinse the plate or cleanse the place where he had been eating with cow dung, but he did it nonetheless since, as he said, it was customary (*ritimata*). By this time these practices had been discontinued in the case of most former "untouchables". Although Nimai Das still felt people's unexpressed abhorrence at his "untouchability", sanctions against pollution had been abandoned and caste divisions were not publicly expressed any more.

In the course of this and the following chapters we shall mark the decline in publicly expressed caste divisions and the general (if unequal) improvement of economic and political positions of lower castes and classes. There have also been marked changes in commensality, appearances, education, and lower caste public participation. Previously the lower castes could be marked out by their dress and comportment, while it now has become very difficult to tell the difference. From the 1970s onwards, the low castes increasingly visit the market, stroll around in the village and even sit to gossip by the village temple. Changes were particularly evident in the

comportment of adolescent boys. Nowadays they all go to school, sport fancy shirts and fashionable trousers and top it off with sunglasses. Not that social divisions have vanished; they do persist. But the visible division has become a class division, between well-off and poor, irrespective of jati.⁸

One important aspect of the olden "style" of leadership, or so it was argued by those to follow, was that the preoccupation with prestige led to continuous factional strife. It was suggested in Chapter Two that village politics until the 1960s had been characterized by factionalism. Such factionalism could be found irrespective of the chosen "model" of leadership. To note but one example: sometime in the early 1950s, a follower of Raju Munsu complained that the owner of a plot of paddy-land adjacent to his own had encroached on his land by moving the bank between the plots. Raju Munsu announced that such a wrongdoing would have to be corrected, and he would himself see to it. The owner of that adjacent plot was Hekimsaheb, Raju Munsu's arch-enemy. For Hekimsaheb such allegations were intolerable (albeit not unlikely to be true). The dispute eventually led to a huge fight on the site, both sides present with 30-40 men armed with *lathis* (sticks) and some guns. The case represented only one element in what formed a drawn-out rivalry between the two, a rivalry which formed the centre stage for village politics for many years to come.

This rivalry formed a cornerstone in the following generation's social and political critique of their predecessors. They came to regard factionalism, the "factionalist

⁸The same changes were observed by Gough (1989:510ff). In her villages, and in south India in general, caste divisions were probably much more pronounced than in Bengal.

mentality", with abhorrence. This we will in particular find in Waselmaster's notebook.

Waselmaster's notebook

While attending a teacher-training seminar during the years 1961 and 1962, the late Waselmaster of Udaynala was requested to write about his village (presumably as part of the course). He produced a small hand-written and hand-coloured notebook which expresses his views on the good and the bad sides of Udaynala, ca. 1960. Over the following six years he filled in "major events" at the back.

Waselmaster did not hesitate to include what he saw as negative aspects of village life, and there are several pages on the "inconveniences" (or problems) of the village (*gramer asubidha*), more than on the positive aspects. Negative aspects included the poor standing of women, in particular their education, oppression of the poor and low-caste, and all sorts of other social, economic and material problems. A reading of his lamentations suggests that he saw four main problems in the village: laziness, money-lending, the lack of a road, and factionalism.

In his section on the economic situation of the village, he started by stating that, "The economic situation of the villagers is difficult" because "most villagers are reluctant to work" — they were "lazy". "They are satisfied if they can in one way or the other fill their stomachs." Then he went on to lament the propensity of loan-taking (*mahajani*): "They [the poor] have immense loans. Land and even household sites

have been pawned to the money-lenders". He identified money lenders and money-lending as among the major causes of village misery.

Again and again he mentioned another major problem: the lack of a road. From May-June till December-January cow-carts could not reach the outside world. To travel out even by foot was strenuous. There was also no proper bridge across the canal to the north of the village, and so one would have to take a long detour to reach the railway station. In consequence, according to him, it was very difficult for the cultivators to sell their paddy when they wanted, and economic life suffered.

The last major problem was *daladali* or "the factionalist mentality". Due to *daladali* it was difficult to do "good work", because somebody would always feel that "they would lose and so start opposing you". People were full of "envy" and it was not possible to get them to work together. It was an unfortunate village because it did not have "competent leaders". In a later chapter on "Possible redress" of the problems facing the village, his favourite catch-words were *unnayan* (development) and *paribartan* (change, progress), goals that were hampered by factionalism, money-lending and the lack of an all-weather road. Towards the end of his notebook, he summed up an almost utopic outline of redress, strongly influenced by socialist thinking.

If everybody in the village worked together all would profit from it. One would have to stop *daladali* (factionalism) and the *mamla*-business [litigation: the common practice of taking disputes — particularly over land — to court; for money-lenders a secure way of obtaining land mortgaged to them]. A group of young volunteers would have to be formed. A communal paddy storage will have to be arranged and money-lending will have to be curbed.

The cooperative society will have to be improved [or "developed"] and land should be tilled cooperatively. One would have to work in close collaboration with the government. If the honourable government helps the villages then village development will be possible.

Waselmaster's notebook suggests that foremost in the minds of himself and his peers was a strong emphasis on cooperation and on institution-building for the improvement of the village, together with a vision of state-assisted development. The problems of society — factionalism, money-lending and the "mamla-business" — were identified with the old society and with the older generation. He portrayed contemporary village society as underdeveloped, sunk in ignorance, superstitious, divided, lacking in economic life and cooperation, problems only "A group of young volunteers" could possibly solve.

There are lacunae in Waselmaster's "socialist" thinking, for instance the material problems of the poor (whom he saw as "lazy") or with women's freedom of movement (apart from education, there is no mention of any problem) — which suggests a strong paternalistic attitude. However, his notebook echoed what Partha Chatterjee found for the literature emerging in the 19th century: "If there is one theme that dominates [...] it is the theme of change. Everything was changing; nothing was likely to remain the same."⁹ Waselmaster saw a village society on the brink of moving closer to the "modern" world. Juxtaposed to the money-lenders, the factionalists, and those engaging in the "mamla-business" were the "young volunteers" who through cooperation and good work would usher in a new era of development

⁹Chatterjee 1993:135.

and progress. The age of (young) men with a vision was dawning. Waselmaster counted himself among a group of young would-be village leaders, called the "young group" (*tarun dal*).

The circumstances for the production of this notebook are worth noting. As a young man from a middle-class peasant family in a poor and road-less village, Wasel Hak (he was not yet "master") attended a teaching seminar at which he met progressive-minded teachers, some possibly leftists, representatives of the *bhadralok*, who taught him new ideas, opened up for him the literary world of Bengali writers, and showed him the ideology and aims of modern India. The notebook was written with the latter as audience but does not seem to have expressed views contradictory to those of Waselmaster himself. At least his actions after returning to the village or his later notes in the same notebook do not suggest any qualms with the first views expressed.

What Waselmaster met at this teacher-training seminar was a distinctly Bengali "tradition" that young boys and later on girls of middle-class peasant families were hinged onto, through education in particular. The "tradition" was already a century or more old, well-entrenched in urban, middle-class Bengali society. By the 1950s the "tradition" also contained a strong radical strand — though it remained within the domain of the *bhadralok*.

The bhadralok and Bengali exceptionalism

In sociological terms, the bhadralok were distinguished from the rest of the population by dress, mannerisms and language. As Broomfield writes on the turn-of-the-century bhadralok:

They were distinguished by many aspects of their behaviour — their deportment, their speech, their dress, their style of housing, their eating habits, their occupations, and their associations — and quite as fundamentally by their cultural values and their sense of social propriety.¹⁰

It was through education that the bhadralok obtained his positions and was distinguished from the general population. "Education [...] became the hallmark of bhadralok status"¹¹ — both defining and excluding. The culture of the bhadralok — both because he was defined by his education, and because of the parallel development of fiction and debates, and of the modern Bengali language (see below) — was a very literature-conscious culture, centring on novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and on conducting debates through the medium of literature. The "heroes" of the bhadralok were not so much the important politicians nor the aristocrats, as the social reformers, the novelists, the short story writers, and the philosophers. The major ones include such figures as the debater, polemicist, and novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), religious reformer Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Nobel laureate in literature, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

¹⁰Broomfield 1968:5-6.

¹¹Broomfield 1968:8.

In the words of Sumit Sarkar, the Bengali nationalist discourse was subject to "a variety of influences".¹² From the mid-19th century the agenda of the national discourse took shape from, and turned around, the central issue of ~~adaption~~^{adaptation} to Western ideas, or rejection of the same to find an independent path or to resurrect the lost glories of the past. A conservative strand caused "sophisticated and intellectualized revivalism" in the writings of Bankimchandra. Within this, a persistent, albeit minor, set of traditionalist-reactionary ideas argued for a wholesale rejection of Western values and institutions and "found" that Western inventions had actually been made by Hindus centuries ago.¹³ Stronger, however, was a willingness to seek some accommodation to, or adoption of, selected ideas from the West. The core of "a growing awareness of contemporary developments in the West"¹⁴ gave raise to many different lines of thought, ideologies, and courses of action over the decades. Within this, an important strand was represented by the social reformers, inspired by Vivekananda's ideals of social service, self-help and manly strength.

Politically the strands translated during the first decades of the present century into the famous division — among the bhadralok in general but specifically within the Congress — between the "moderates" (seeking concessions from the British through the available channels of influence within the framework of the colonial state) and the "extremists" (seeking concessions — and eventually independence — through mobilization and actions of "terrorism"). These reflected the two dominant but

¹²Sarkar 1989b:113.

¹³Sarkar 1973:27-8.

¹⁴Sarkar 1989b:67.

conflicting interpretations of the political circumstances but also different values arising from the grand debate: adoption and acceptance of the validity of British institutions and values in India vs. the call for action, "self-reliance", and national pride. However, Sarkar finds many different trends also within the Swadeshi movement,¹⁵ heir to the "self-reliance" ideology: the influence from the sakti-devotion of most higher castes in Bengal, the inspiration from Ireland and Italy (Mazzini), Bankimchandra's and Vivekananda's calls for physical strength and combat, and Tagore's call for strength built through social engagement and education.

The radical strand

The differences were never "solved" but continued to influence people toward different strategies. From the 1930s onwards, an additional strand of socialist and communist ideas grew out of the existing discourse and social environment. This radical strand was a further development of ideas already developed within the existing debate. Admiration for the exploits of the Soviet Union, for instance — both as an anti-imperialist and communist model — was evident from the time of the Russian revolution. The radical strand grew in importance particularly after Independence, and found political although divided expression in the large and increasing number of leftist and marxist political parties: the Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Socialist Unity Centre, etc.¹⁶ In addition there was the CPI, which became

¹⁵The Swadeshi movement, the bhadralok's hour of pride, was conducted in protest against ~~Governor-General~~ Curzon's partition of Bengal, 1905-12.

Viceroy

¹⁶Franda (1971a:117) calls the non-communist leftist parties "The most distinctively Bengali political parties".

the major opposition party in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly after Independence. These parties were the "bhadralok-parties", dominated by and representing the bhadralok (if far from all bhadralok); they represented politically Bengal's "exceptionalism", a radical middle class.

The reasons for this radicalization are difficult to pinpoint. An important development since the turn of the century was increasing unemployment among educated bhadralok, plus British "racial discrimination and arrogance".¹⁷ Franda attributes the leftist turn among the bhadralok to their becoming "permanently disenchanted with electoral politics" after having been politically marginalized.¹⁸ In a more sensitive analysis, Kohli emphasizes "the political diversity of this group [of bhadralok]", and sees "political alienation" as having affected only a section of the bhadralok.¹⁹ Instead Kohli traces bhadralok radicalism in their literature. He finds Tagore to have been sympathetic to the Soviet Union and so seeks to explain Bengali radicalism as having developed from some older sets of ideas.²⁰

However, both these explanations deprive the "tradition" of an ability to change, to renew and to respond to history as it goes on. The radical strand was more than a development of previous ideas. It was the result of a continuous "conversation" between Bengali bhadralok and the world around them: famine and war in Bengal,

¹⁷Sarkar 1973:24.

¹⁸Franda 1971a:11.

¹⁹Kohli 1990:394; see also Gordon's critique of Franda. Gordon 1972.

²⁰Kohli 1990.

Gandhi's "obscurantism", communal clashes, nationalism and anti-imperialism throughout the world, the cold war, etc. I believe the more plausible reason for the association between radicals and poets lies in the history of bhadralok discourse, the sentiments and orientations being closely formed in a political and cultural society. In a way, the discourse was no more than a local (Bengali, only in some ways Indian) variety of a world-wide discourse — although in some respects it may have been more advanced than what was common. We may therefore give it a name: the "modern tradition", with its belief in progress, development, institutions, and equality.²¹ Although spiced to a distinctly Bengali flavour the "meat" was a product of several countries.

Family ties and education

It was with this cultural world the village youth of Waselmaster's kind became familiarized. There is no doubt that education constituted a main artery for the entry of the bhadralok culture into the villages, particularly in view of the place of education in the bhadralok model. Prior to this, well-off villagers were not unfamiliar with the bhadralok world. Though more *chasi* ("peasant", "owner-cultivator") than bhadralok, a number of families in Udaynala (fewer in Gopinathpur) were descendants of lesser zamindar-families for whom literary pursuits were not unknown. The Kaji, Hak, and Chaudhuri families were all descendants or relatives of zamindar-families, and the Sekhs and Munsis somewhat more distantly so. Some families had family links to people in government service or business. Tahur Chaudhuri, for instance, married the

²¹The term "tradition of modernity" is from Heesterman 1985:9.

daughter of a family of school-inspectors and teachers from Asansol. A maternal uncle of the bamun Umakanta was a general practitioner educated in England, and Udaynala's lone kayastha-family, the Sarkars, were related to a large family of businessmen in Calcutta. In Gopinathpur one kayastha-family were themselves well-educated government employees, the head-of-family, Paritas, being a retired lawyer pursuing a quasi-urban bhadralok life-style. Other villagers could also boast zamindari ancestry without sharing the same ideology.

Nevertheless, education does seem to have constituted a more crucial source of cultural influence, in particular because it was so closely tied to the bhadralok-ideal. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 report the 1993 level of education (or schooling) by age-groups for males of the "dominant castes", i.e. for males of the jati(-s) with more well-off families to afford education for their sons and from which village leaders would emerge.

Among the interesting findings is the marked increase in years of schooling for the age-group 46-55 (in 1993) compared to the older group. In Udaynala, with only 14.5 per cent of the 56+ group having any formal schooling, 34 per cent of the next group had some. Of these as many as 18 per cent had more than 5 years in school, that is they went to schools outside the village for some time. These were educated during the decade 1944-1953. Of the next batch, educated during the 1950s and early 1960s, more than half had some formal training, one in three had more than 5 years of schooling, and eight per cent went to higher secondary or more.

Table 4.1**Education and age-groups, men above 16 years of age, of sekha jati, Udaynala 1993**

<u>Years of schooling</u>	<u>Age-groups</u>				
	<u>16-25</u>	<u>26-35</u>	<u>36-45</u>	<u>46-55</u>	<u>56-90</u>
None	7.2	16.0	25.9	28.6	46.1
Some*	8.7	16.0	19.6	37.5	39.3
1-5	20.5	24.4	16.1	16.1	2.2
6-10	38.5	29.8	29.5	17.9	11.2
11+	4.1	13.7	8.0	-	1.1
Under education	21.0				
Sum	100.0	99.9	99.1	100.1	99.9
N	194	131	111	56	89

For asterisk and source, see Table 4.2

Table 4.2**Education and age-groups, men above 16 years of age, of bamun, kayastha and aguri jatis, Gopinathpur 1993**

<u>Years of schooling</u>	<u>Age-groups</u>				
	<u>16-25</u>	<u>26-35</u>	<u>36-45</u>	<u>46-55</u>	<u>56-90</u>
None	-	-	-	12.5	11.1
Some*	-	-	3.7	-	5.6
1-5	14.7	36.4	40.7	37.5	77.7
6-10	44.1	36.4	33.3	25.0	5.6
11+	11.7	27.3	22.2	25.0	-
Under education	29.4				
Sum	99.9	100.1	99.9	100.0	100.0
N	34	44	27	8	17

* "Some" = literate; in case of elder generations often acquired at a *pathshala*, while most of the younger generations were taught at the literacy campaign classes.

Source: field-data

Contrasted with Udaynala's leading jati, the three clean castes of Gopinathpur sported a much higher level of literacy four to five decades back. Of the 56+ batch three out

of four had a few years of formal schooling (there were primary schools in the nearby villages of S-bazar, B., and K.). Though the numbers of individuals concerned are small for most age-groups, the trend seen for Udaynala is evident also here: increasingly, from the 46-55 batch onwards, the males of these jatis were given formal education. In Gopinathpur, one in two of those who started schooling in the 1944-1953 decade went on to 6th or more. One in four went beyond 10th. And of the 36-45 batch, again 50% received more than 5 years of schooling, with six individuals (22.2%) going for higher secondary or more.

Reading material in the villages

The young villagers who went to school after Independence became avid readers of novels and poetry from the tradition that developed with Bengali/Indian nationalism and that eventually developed a radical strand. However, there had been a number of literate villagers among the older generations — including people such as Hekimsaheb, Jikukaji, Mohammed Hosen, and others of Udaynala, and Bhaskar Kes, Shyamal Mandal, Paritas Sarkar and others of Gopinathpur. A striking difference between the two generations is in reading material. Although information on these issues is limited mainly to recollections by their siblings (except in the case of Bhaskar Kes himself, now more than 80), a general impression of their reading habits seems clear. The main source of reading material was religious literature. For Muslims, tracts on the Koran, on the history of Muslims in India, on the Muslim way of life, were available and read. Hindus naturally read the epics, particularly the Mahabharata and Ramayan. Of the vast body of "modern" Bengali literature they read little if anything. Bhaskar

admits to not "liking" the writings of Tagore — the pre-eminent writer of "modern" Bengal.

It should be kept in mind that that generation grew up and were formed during India's Independence movement and — more significantly — her partition. Although anti-colonial movements were limited in this area (Bhaskar could remember only two meetings/demonstrations), there is not much doubt of a general pro-Independence attitude. More controversial was the issue of Hindu-Muslim agitation. Mohammed Hosen collected a large number of pre-Independence Muslim League pamphlets (mostly undated), which suggests the degree of penetration of the politics of the Hindu-Muslim divide and of the Muslim League into the countryside. The pamphlets, held in an Urdu-inspired Bengali, do not speak of partition or mention Pakistan, but call on all Muslims to be "good Muslims", to pray for the preservation of the faith. A number of Muslim League meetings were held in central villages (more, it seems, than pro-Independence meetings).²²

Contrasted to this is the reading material of the following generation, who turned their avid attention to modern Bengali literature. I conducted closer interviews on reading habits with 15 individuals. Apart from two 45-year-olds, all those interviewed were aged 50 or more. Six were school teachers, all have attended 8th grade or higher. The emphasis in the interviews was on literature read while young, i.e. no later than the late 1960s (and thus excluding more recent literature). However, to put a year,

²²The material was shown me by his son, Najir Hosen.

even an approximation, on the reading of a famous (much talked-about) novel is very difficult. Thus, the following "top-10" chart is more suggestive than accurate.

<u>Author</u>	<u>Novel</u>	<u>"Score"</u>
Saratchandra Chattopadhyay	<i>Palli samaj</i>	15
Manik Bandyopadhyay	<i>Putulnacher itikatha</i>	14
Saratchandra Chattopadhyay	<i>Srikanta</i>	13
Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay	<i>Pather panchali</i>	13
Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay	<i>Panchagram</i>	13
Manik Bandyopadhyay	<i>Padma nadir majhi</i>	11
Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay	<i>Ganadebata</i>	10
Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay	<i>Aranak</i>	9
Saratchandra Chattopadhyay	<i>Sesh prasna</i>	8
Saratchandra Chattopadhyay	<i>Baikunther uil</i>	8

This small and limited survey indicates the propensity towards literature among well-off Bengali villagers. When asked whether they have read Saratchandra's *Palli samaj*, the standard answer was a slightly insulted "Yes, of course". Immensely popular were also Rabindranath's and Kazi Nazrul Islam's poetry and in particular their songs. Sung, read and memorized, *rabindra-sangit* and *najrul-sangit* were staple food for thought in Bengal villages, praised and sung at every "cultural function" and even heard hummed in the fields.

Conspicuous by their absence from the chart are novels by the great masters — Rabindranath, Bankimchandra, Vivekananda, Vidyasagar, etc. Those works were mostly not read because of difficulties of language, argumentation, or the advanced use of allegories. Though a household name all over Bengal, novels by Nobel laureate

Rabindranath were not among the most widely read in villages. His novels were considered "too complicated", dealing more with "typical middle class" problems, as one informant put it, to be of interest. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the novels listed in the chart are works developed within the same tradition, but held to be in a language and style more accessible to common people.

Bengali exceptionalism in the literature

In general and at least in its beginnings, the "national" debate had not been much concerned with the peasantry as such. The relationship between the nationalist leadership with its debaters on the one hand, and the peasantry on the other was less than close.

In Bengal, the intelligentsia's indifference to peasant problems [was also due to] the long bhadralok tradition of contempt or at best condescension for the men who worked with their hands, [and] the sense of alienation flowing from education through a foreign medium...²³

That communist or marxist ideology eventually came to be prominent among bhadralok intelligentsia and literati is evident from the large number of "Marxists" in Zbavitel's listing of "After Independence" Bengali writers.²⁴ But it had already been turned towards the countryside, and village life for some decades by then, largely thanks to Saratchandra Chatterjee. From the second quarter of the 20th century

²³Sarkar 1973:515.

²⁴Zbavitel 1976, Chapter "After Independence".

onwards the literature started to abound in village settings and "humanist" concerns with child-marriages, the position of women, casteism, and development. From the mid-century onwards, socialist ideas and affinities were becoming evident in Bengali literature. In the following I shall take up themes prominent in the novels and writings of six authors, known affectionately as Rabindranath and Nazrul (both more widely read as poets), and the writers Saratchandra, Bibhutibhusan, Tarashankar and Manik. These six have been selected from among the large number of Bengali writers partly from their popularity in the villages (as suggested by the chart above), and partly from a general assessment of them as the most influential and trend-setting writers in this century. The impact of these six can hardly be underestimated in the formation of a "conversation" (however one-way in the beginning) between the countryside and the world of the bhadrakok in which these writers lived.

Rabindranath's poetry and short stories were much appreciated in villages, filled as they are with concern for and observations of everyday life. The "unifying idea" in Rabindranath's short stories and much of his writing, says Zbavitel, is "humanism".²⁵ His "rejection of religious reaction", criticism of "the empty shell of Hindu traditionalism and conservatism", and his attention to "social problems and the sad lot of Indian women",²⁶ marked him out as a fearless social critic. At the outbreak of the Swadeshi movement Rabindranath called for his countrymen to give up "paper-patriotism" and take to active involvement in the building of a national society. His

²⁵Zbavitel 1976:251-2.

²⁶The citations are Zbavitel's; 1976:249-50.

brand of nationalism, centring around the concept of *atmasakti*,²⁷ called for social work in villages, to build strength "through constructive and educational work", for bringing education to the population — and the "need to bridge the gulf between the educated and the masses."²⁸

Rabindranath's literary production is enormous and his span of themes and his intellectual creativity make it impossible to do him justice here. We need to note, however, that this writer of unprecedented influence on his society was a man with radical social and political ideas — ideas that were reflected in his short stories, his poetry, in how he is presented in school books and is generally perceived. However, Rabindranath cannot be said to have been a revolutionary. He always shunned violence. The poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-¹⁹⁷⁶), however, was a revolutionary. Some of his poetry openly praises revolutions, even Bolsheviks,²⁹ and he was a close friend of M. N. Roy, the founder of the CPI. Nazrul is still immensely popular in Bengal. The poetry and songs of this "poor village boy and [...] orphan" reflect "the revolutionary moods" of the period³⁰ but are still quite on a par with Rabindranath's poetry and songs in terms of popularity. His poems are either nationalistic or revolutionary and, in spite of a certain "emotionality" or even "sentimentalism" that offends the refined Zbavitel, have a "distinct social undertone often protesting against

²⁷Sarkar (1973:47ff) translates "atmasakti" as "self-reliance", a term which does not cover the "building-of-the-self" element which he shows to be an important ingredient.

²⁸Sarkar 1973:52.

²⁹Chattopadhyay 1970:19-20.

³⁰Zbavitel 1976:278-9.

economic discrimination and exploitation of the poor".³¹ Nazrul's poetry linked a revolutionary anger to the chores of common people and to the nature-mystique nationalist sentiments much developed by Rabindranath.

Writers such as Saratchandra (Chattopadhyay or Chatterjee), Tarashankar, Bibhutibhusan and Manik (all Bandyopadhyay or Banerjee) developed in their own distinctive fictional forms many of the same sentiments and ideas developed in more high-brow style by their predecessors Vivekananda, Rabindranath and others. These four authors are probably the most popular and influential of all Bengali littérateurs. Their impact can hardly be exaggerated. With profound insight they set many of their novels in contemporary village society, which made these themes readily recognizable and accessible to village readers.

The novelist and short story writer Saratchandra (1876-1938) had a more profound impact on village readers than Rabindranath. Saratchandra is probably "the only Indian writer who needed no official patronage to get translated from Bengal into other Indian languages",³² and he was the first to live from his writings. His books are widely read; his famous *Palli samaj* figures at the top of my small survey chart. His stories are also popular as films: "No plot on the Bengali screen can insure box-office successes as easily as a story by Sarat Chandra. The appeal is absolute and universal".³³ But it would be wrong to see Saratchandra as a writer of easy-to-read,

³¹Zbavitel 1976:279.

³²Mukherjee 1985:102.

³³Roy 1975:54.

light novels. He was a serious writer, dealing in serious issues. He made accessible to a larger audience the themes that the masters of the Bengali renaissance had raised.

"Where Rabindranath stopped Śaratchandra Chatterjee began".³⁴

Zbavitel quotes another work holding Saratchandra as "an exalted opponent of conservatism".³⁵ Zbavitel opposes this view but nonetheless acknowledges that in his writings Saratchandra was "to a remarkable degree, free from social conventions and prejudice" and showed a "deep-felt and sincere" hatred of discrimination against women.³⁶ A prominent theme in his novels concerns "victims of social and economic oppression" — women, low-castes, and the poor. His novels take up caste oppression, religious bigotry, and stiffening reaction. However, though critical of existing social customs, Saratchandra was not revolutionary. His novels were popular precisely because "he did not rise above his themes and poor heroes but wrote as if being one of them".³⁷ He points out the problems and lets his heroes speak without pressing the "answers".

Bengali literature's perhaps most famous novel, *Pather panchali* ("Song of the road", with the sequel *Aparajita*) by Bibhutibhusan (1899-1950), is also widely read in villages. The story — the life of the family of a poor village Brahmin hardly able to scrape through and who eventually has to move away, all seen through the eyes of the

³⁴Surendranath Sen in an 1924 article, quoted in Zbavitel 1976:280.

³⁵Zbavitel 1976:281.

³⁶Zbavitel 1976:280.

³⁷Zbavitel 1976:281.

son Apu — is, in Mukherjee's reading, heavily interwoven with themes of nature-mystique, the smells of the village and its surrounding forests, the sounds of festivals, the rhythm of the seasons, and the songs.³⁸ It is not about poverty as such, but about a mystical nostalgia for an innocence lost (particularly embodied in the deceased daughter, Durga). The novel is sensitive to the personal experience of growing up in a village, and constitutes a careful poetic but realistic rendering of a poor family in a readily recognizable (Bengali) village society.

In Zbavitel's opinion, though strongly emotional and "very often bordering on sentimentality", Saratchandra's impact "paved the way" for the next generation of Bengali writers — a generation "on a higher level" but some of whom were often more explicitly critical and political. Into the 1940s and the post-Independence period, "The leftist group of writers and poets in Bengal grew in number and quality", particularly so with the formation of the Progressive Writers Association in 1938.³⁹ One of the more prominent and "outstanding" among them was the marxist Manik Bandyopadhyay (1910-1956), whose novel *Putulnacher itikatha* ("The puppets' tale") had been read by 14 out of 15 of the Udaynala and Gopinathpur interviewees. According to Zbavitel, "the hard fight with ever new clashes and defeats" of "man against nature and all those blind forces dominating his life and the old society" is in this novel depicted "as never before".⁴⁰ Manik's other main work, *Padma nadir majhi* ("Boatman of the Padma"), also appears among the top ten.

³⁸Mukherjee 1985:127-144.

³⁹Zbavitel 1976:285.

⁴⁰Zbavitel 1976:287.

The last author on the chart is Tarashankar (1898-1971) who drew most of his material from his native Birbhum, where he was active as a social worker for many years before turning to writing. Tarashankar's knowledge and depiction of life and problems of rural society was more than usually penetrating. His novels — in the chart the two most widely read, *Panchagram* and *Ganadebata* — reflect his "deep insight into [village life's] problems".⁴¹ According to Rajat Ray, Rabindranath himself ordered his lieutenants to read Tarashankar's novels to village elders — who readily "understood and appreciated" these because they were so "firmly rooted in his indigenous rural experience".⁴² Tarashankar was also "always active in politics" (on the Congress side), an activity which is reflected in his writings: casteism, money-lending, inertia, problems of poverty, of pride, frustration, all figure in his novels as in most of the novels mentioned here.

Before we return to the village, a small recapitulation may be in order. I have tried to point out a number of connections. In Bengal a social group of educated, urban high-caste professionals — the so-called *bhadralok* — dominated the region's cultural as well as political life. Due to the circumstances of its infancy, the Bengali *bhadralok*'s variety of the "modern tradition" was closely coupled with literature. Ideas and themes from the "modern tradition", as interpreted in literature, were to gain immense popularity, at least in part through the popularity of many novels. Many of the issues raised in literature were more often ^{than} ~~then~~ not short of the revolutionary but nonetheless radical for the village society in which the novels were set. Over the

⁴¹Zbavitel 1976:287.

⁴²Ray 1983:274-5.

decades of this century, a radical strand became increasingly important, both in the general debate and in literature. Through expanded educational facilities after Independence, the (male) youth of middle and rich peasant families came into contact with a "tradition" that was both strongly literary and high-status, and that was presented to them by its radical representatives. Now we turn to the effects this acquaintance was to have in village societies such as Udaynala and Gopinathpur.

Of poetry and roads: the "modern tradition" in villages

Literature may have presented the educated villagers with a radical strand, but only as a radical version of a larger discourse. The "modern tradition" gained prominence — even dominance — in India after Independence. Foremost were the various economic programmes and the government's policy of economic development. Prime Minister Nehru's socialist progressivism found expression in five-year plans, numerous rural development programmes,⁴³ the abolition of zamindars, and land-ceilings and reforms (however half-heartedly implemented in West Bengal and elsewhere). We also find almost all political parties using the rhetoric of progress, development, and equality (the exception being some minor soon-to-vanish Hindu revivalist parties). Politicians were regularly brought into villages for election campaigns, at least from 1957 onwards and possibly before that. There were also a number of government officials of leftist leanings who sought to implement their ideas in spite of the constraints. We may note that in 1956 the local Block Development Officer (BDO)

⁴³Burdwan district was selected for the Intensive Agricultural Districts Programme. For a study see Frankel 1972.

insisted the Union Board sponsored well be dug in the bagdi-para of Gopinathpur (and not in the aguri-para, as the clean-castes insisted). During the land occupations of the late 1960s, many local officials (BDOs, Junior Land Reform Officers) assisted in identifying vested land.⁴⁴ Waselmaster and his peers in the village were situated between the village world they knew well and the world of the educated bhadralok and schoolteacher and bureaucrat they met or were related to. To Waselmaster, his school and its culture seemed at the centre of the world, and his home village at the periphery. We find from his notebook a sense of the village having to catch up with the rest of the world.

In Udaynala, the young generation of village leaders-to-be had already formed a loose group and started their "good work" by the late 1950s and continued through the 1960s. A striking although limited development was the position of women. Young women were increasingly allowed access to education and "the women's question" raised in various fora, such as village theatre performances (in particular the position of the "new bride"). However, the issue of the purdah was left largely untouched. Some did encourage their wives to move outside of the household compound, but this seems to have been late in becoming a widespread practice, abandoned finally only in the mid-1970s.⁴⁵

⁴⁴However, the majority of officials were probably anti-communist, and the CPM Land and Land Revenue Minister, Harekrishna Konar, sought ways of circumventing his ministry's officials during the second UF Government's tenure. Interestingly, Waselmaster wrote that an anti-hoarding drive in the Block in 1974 first targeted the biggest hoarders — who were all major Congress figures — and only thereafter minor hoarders. See Konar 1979, Ruud 1994a.

⁴⁵Waselmaster's widow still practised the purdah in 1993.

They were more successful (or eager) in other fields. In 1956–57 they started a "night school" where they, as the literate members of society, taught elementary reading, writing and mathematics to illiterate co-villagers. Another important initiative was taken in 1958, when they re-launched the village's defunct cooperative society, with the help of the local BDO, and gave it the grand name "South Damodar Appointed Cooperative Agrarian Development Society". A few years later again, a separate "Village Development Society" was established as an overall organ for development questions, planning and discussions. Then came the Udaynala Village Friendship Club which organized visits to other villages and mutual exchange of help and of *jatras* (theatre performances), then a bridge club, a permanent jatra club, and a library with some 200 books. And so it went on for the next 10 years. Below is a list of the major initiatives.⁴⁶

- 1956/57 The night school opened, and a larger school building constructed.
A board established for equitable sharing of sharecropped paddy.
Village branch of Red Cross established, some money and milk obtained.
- 1958 Reorganization and revitalization of village cooperative society.
A Primary School Managing Committee established.
- 1959 The school building again expanded.
- 1960 Meetings held and a committee for "social development" constituted,
mainly to be concerned with the building of a road.
Free tiffin for the school obtained.
Collective guarding of ripe paddy fields initiated.
- 1961 The "Village Development Society" constituted, plus the "Udaynala
Village Friendship Club".
- 1963 Village library opened with 200 books, partly bestowed by the
government, partly private donations.
- 1964 Political cooperation to end factionalism and to secure the Gram
Panchayat seats. Two counselling organizations created to supervise
school work.
- 1965 First "people's education day" arranged; Rs 40 collected towards a new
school.
A building constructed for the cooperative and the development society.

⁴⁶The dates are mainly from Waselmaster's diaries.

- 1966 A dirt-road constructed towards the canal north of the village.
Brick go-down and office raised for the cooperative.
- 1967 New school-building raised with tiled roof on land donated by Haksahab.
New efforts towards a road construction, collection of signatures, mapping of land.
- 1968 Expansion of the school into Junior High School; one month's pay donated by all service-holders. A "Managing Committee" established. Proceeds raised through entertainment channelled towards school expansion.

These are only the major initiatives and efforts. Waselmaster's diaries are filled with entries on meetings — at least once a week — and incessant discussions back and forth outside the more formal fora. In addition to these initiatives, they arranged annual celebrations of Rabindranath with recitals of his poetry, songs, and occasionally a play. From 1961 onwards, they introduced jattras (see below) to the annual *baroari* (public) celebrations, an annual cultural function for the Bengali New Year with poetry recitals, songs and speeches, and lastly occasional cultural functions, jattras, or similar functions for specific purposes (fund-raising, specific celebrations). On four occasions during the 1960s they organized "people's education days".

In Gopinathpur, the level of activities was less marked. Particularly innovations such as the "Village Development Committee" were never tried out, possibly because of less enthusiasm on the part of the Gopinathpur village leadership, all of whom were old-timers such as Bhaskar Kes and Paritas Sarkar. The following generation, as we shall see below, did engage in some of the same type of activities as the Udaynala "young group", but throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s these activities were carried out by individuals of minor political influence. Nonetheless, the ideological and political influences so marked in Udaynala did not leave the Gopinathpur leaders

untouched.⁴⁷ Initiatives were taken and projects implemented for a primary school, a village cooperative society (see Chapter Two), and wells, and they donated land to and participated in the building of a road between Gopinathpur and the metalled road by S-bazar.

It is among the younger generation in Gopinathpur we find most activity. Jatras were one important aspect. Another was the establishment of a village youth club in 1965, and a library in 1974. From 1976 to 1984 a volunteer primary school — unpaid and unsanctioned — was run by three educated (but ritually incompatible) individuals: one CPM-supporting kayastha, the money-lending bamun Bijay Chakrabarti's only son, and one last person who was *dule* by jati and from a land-poor family. Bijay Chakrabarti was against it due to the presence of the *dule*, and used his political influence to deny them government sanction — and thus salaries. After eight years they gave up.

Enacting the "modern tradition": bichar

Though Waselmaster's diaries we get a glimpse of how the "modern tradition" had come to be the dominant discourse within Udaynala prior to 1967 and influenced decisions in *bichars* (village courts). The following is a summary of the highlights.

1. It had previously not been unusual that money or means were given to village festivals, but from about 1959 onwards, punishment was meted out in money, to

⁴⁷Major village leader-to-be, Anadi Sarkar, who was affiliated to the left wing of the Congress party, was often thought of as a potential CPM supporter and sought recruited by Udaynala's Haksahab and Najir Hosen.

be donated to some project or the other (school construction, cooperative society, road).

2. In 1963 a series of test-case bichars was held against Rahim and Hitu Munsî's local "manager", Manuar Ali, for excessive money-lending and confiscation of mortgaged land. One sought to stall the confiscation with cooperative money, which was not accepted by Rahim. Rahim and Manuar did not attend the bichars and refused to abide by their decision. In the end nothing concrete came out of the efforts.
3. In 1963 Waselmaster asked his diary, "Who will do a poor man's bichar?" It was difficult to get arbitrators for disputes among the poor and uninfluential because such disputes had no effect on the power-balance in the village. The following year it was decided that any dispute brought to the attention of the village leaders would be addressed.
4. In a dispute over the sharing of sharecropped paddy in 1966, it was decided that although the sharecropper may have cheated (as was the allegation) he was poor and should receive assistance from the cooperative.
5. As late as February 1972 — as repression was being unleashed in various parts of West Bengal — a bichar decided against Hitu Munsî. He had sent police against one Sadek who sharecropped 5-6 bighas of Hitu's lands. The bichar decided that Sadek should continue to sharecrop three bighas.

Decisions such as these may well have been seen as parts of ongoing factionalist struggles, and the different decisions understood within a very different framework.

The particular opponent of the "young group" was the money-lending Rahim, whom they portrayed as backward, scheming and anti-social. Above all they portrayed him and his like (including Manik Bag, Hitu Munsî and his manager) as not part of the new discourse. Rahim was not only their political opponent (he was included in some institutions because of the influence he enjoyed) but was above all their ideological opponent and as such excluded from participation in jatras and other cultural functions.

In spite of the possibility of these actions and decisions being interpreted within a factionalist framework, we may all the same see the kind of rhetoric employed on

these occasions, and how arguments were drawn from the "modern tradition". At least from as late as 1960 onwards, in Udaynala, and most likely in most other villages in West Bengal although perhaps only rarely at such a scale (for instance Gopinathpur), a discourse already prominent among the literati and employed by the government was employed as justification in disputes and gave impetus to new actions denouncing the ways of old. The process was one of learning, of becoming acquainted at close range with values radically different from those hitherto dominant, values that affected the relationship between man and woman, between low castes and high castes, and between landless and landowners.

Though much of the "changes" may have remained at the level of argument and rhetoric, we still find a number of efforts to implement ideologies in real life. The building of a school, establishment of a cooperative society, female education and lesser restrictions on commensality are all developments that characterized the 1960s in these two villages — although more so in case of Udaynala than Gopinathpur.

It may be noted that to cause disruption is not appreciated in villages in Bengal, and so the argumentation could probably not reach its potential. Instead, other means were employed of both portraying oneself as part of the outside society's ideology and advancing the ideology's points of social criticism. The major means for relegating ideas, presenting an ideology, and recreating village leaders into "modern men", was the *jatra*.

Enacting political literature: jatra

Jatra denotes (the staging of) plays on (temporary) village stages. The tradition of jatra is ancient in Bengal, dating back at least to the 16th century and the increasingly widespread bhakti-cult to which Chaitanya's ^{Vaishnavite} ~~Vaishnavite~~ movement gave rise. Jatra remained popular in the countryside over the centuries, mainly using themes from the scriptures or devotional themes — "as an associative ritual of religion",⁴⁸ "operatic and hallucinatory, relying on songs and religious fervour for its effects."⁴⁹

The gap that had developed during British times between the European-style and Calcutta-based theatre and the disdained "folk" forms was bridged during the last decade of the Raj when leftists, particularly in the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), sought to bring their message to villagers through the medium of jatra, an effort that lasted into the 1950s.⁵⁰ The increasingly radical milieu of Bengali literati incorporated "folk forms" into their acting, and their style and plays were staged on village stages.⁵¹ In spite of its "operatic conventions, melodramatic gestures, and hypnotic songs", this effort showed how

⁴⁸Saha 1978:4.

⁴⁹Bharucha 1983:7.

⁵⁰The IPTA's rise and decline has been treated in great detail in an M.Phil.dissertation by Shamita Basu (1988).

⁵¹Bharucha 1983.

The structure of *jatra* was so resilient that it was able to incorporate radical alterations in its subject matter and adopt a contemporary idiom.⁵²

Gods and goddesses became freedom fighters, and demons and villains became representatives of the ruling classes, with British officers waving, shouting and screaming like the demons of old-style *jatra*. Radical actors and playwrights wrote and enacted plays that were "folk" in form but radical in content. Radical theatre adapted to certain requirements, certain expectations to form and style, but found ample space for a development of its own themes. *Jatra* has become an increasingly important vehicle for spreading political messages and ideology. Communist-ideological themes were received with the same enthusiasm accorded previous *jatras*.⁵³

The IPTA declined and vanished but left an imprint on rural society. A remarkable revival of *jatra* has taken place in West Bengal since Independence. Over the years the repertoire has become broader, and standard characters in contemporary *jatra* include the easily recognizable money-lender, the bad father-in-law, the corrupt politician and the political goonda. In form the revitalized *jatra* is "increasingly urbanised — raised platforms, theatrical lighting, microphones are not uncommon these days..."⁵⁴ Whereas old-style (pre-IPTA) *jatras* were performed by professional

⁵²Bharucha 1983:90.

⁵³Interestingly, Basu (1988:212) comments that the decline of the IPTA was in part due to "the urban bias which led to the selection of sophisticated themes unintelligible to the rural folk...".

⁵⁴Saha 1978:8.

troupes, post-Independence jattras were increasingly staged by amateur teams of village boys. They stage the same plays with the same themes, although the amateurs stage somewhat less elaborate plays. Although professional jatra performances are more popular (one I visited had an audience of nearly three thousand), the majority of performances are staged by amateurs. Udaynala's no less than five jattras over two days in 1993 attracted several hundred spectators, transfixed well into the night. Gopinathpur, for its festivities later the same year, had three performances, funded in part from the village baroari fund and thus most seriously controlled and supervised by village leaders. Amateur staging of plays is nowadays a common occurrence in most villages. Jattras have become an integral part of the village main festivals — in addition to the pujas, fairs, and visiting relatives — and outsiders, relatives and guests are always proudly invited to attend.

But it would be wrong to see this recent development in the forms of jatra as a one-way influence, from outside, from the educated and already converted. The plays were written by educated urbanites but were chosen by the performers themselves. The first to start doing jatra in Gopinathpur "50 years ago" were Dasarathi Mandal, Sakti and Ranjan Kes, and Bibhuti Chakrabarti — all four in their late teens and from the more well-off families. Three of them had some experience of jatra performance from nearby villages. Jatra in Gopinathpur did not immediately become standard fare at the baroari festivities but was staged on and off over the next decades. With the growing-up of the next generation — in particular Sukumar Mandal and the brothers Chandi and Sailen Kes — jatra became an annual event from 1965 onwards, with the exception of 1969 and 1972.

All jatra-enthusiasts were also politically active. Dasarathi and Bibhuti died at an early age but Sakti and Ranjan became important figures in village affairs in the 1960s. The Kes brothers (sons of Ranjan) were CPM supporters while Sukumar (son of Dasarathi) was in the left-wing of the Congress (although anti-militant). Sailen became Gopinathpur's first CPM panchayat member, and both he and Sukumar have become school teachers. Chandi is a professional full-time actor in a Calcutta-based jatra troupe.

In Udaynala, the first jatras were staged a little after Independence but did not give rise to a local tradition. Comprehensive jatra performances started only in the late 1950s, by Najir Hosen, Haksahab, and Bhola Sarkar. Later on many others joined in to comprise a few steady groups that staged at least one but more often two performances at the annual baroari festivities, plus one or two during the year. The "people's education days" included jatra performances, and occasionally they even staged performances in other villages (Gopinathpur 1961, and nearby P. 1962). The most prolific actor was Haksahab, who participated in other jatra troupes, for a period also in other districts. All those of the "young group" participated as organizers of and actors in jatras — with the exception of Ehiasahab (and also excluded were their opponents, Manik Bag and Rahim).

Among the first locally staged plays in Gopinathpur and Udaynala some were "nationalist" but most "historical", i.e. with known "romantic" themes from the history of Bengal or India. A few puranic plays were also staged, i.e. with themes from the epics. From the late 1950s "social" plays were staged, typically with themes centring

on casteism, "superstition", arranged marriages, the fate of the "new bride", money-lending, and poverty. These themes, as indeed the authors, belonged firmly to the "modern tradition" and were perceived as such. A typical jatra has a "happy ending" where the "good" forces win against the "bad". Such is also the case of "social" jatras, with the addition that both moral lesson and main heroes point towards values of equality between man and woman, between high and low, or towards social or economic progress. According to Sukumar and Chandi, they were careful to stage two plays each year: one historical and one social. The social plays were often regarded as a bit tedious and did not provide the colourful entertainment required, and the actors were conscious of the need to entertain. A good jatra, in the opinion of Chandi and Sukumar (and Utpal Datta), was entertaining at the same time as it conveyed a moral, an idea, and particularly a criticism of social conditions. It should enlighten the audience and give them something to think about. "A good jatra", said Sukumar, "makes people discuss on the way home." They entertained only in order to achieve that other aim, to teach.

In this we see another interesting feature. In addition to bringing new ideas and a new ideology into village society, jatra also represented a captivating new role for those who thus engaged themselves. They formed themselves and identified/were identified with the culture of literature, and with the role model of the "modern" social reformer bhadralok.

The bhadralok as a role model: the new village leader

It is remarkable that most heroes in the popular novels — particularly in Saratchandra's works but evident in others as well — were bhadralok. They were educated, most often had some landed income (the daily meal was not a concern), and occasionally held a service position. For example, *Pandit masai's* hero was the schoolteacher ("pandit masai") Brindavan, who naturally was educated. So was also Debu Ghosh, *Panchagram's* village schoolteacher. The hero of *Putulnacher itikatha*, Sashi, was the village doctor, and in *Palli samaj*, the man to stir things up was the liberal Romesh, an educated landlord. Other main characters might be non-bhadralok, but the principal characters, the ones who "see" the problems and who seek changes, were most often bhadralok. Their education identifies them with a larger set of values — familiarity with which can be taken for granted. Moreover, Saratchandra's central concern, writes Mukherjee in her excellent analysis of him, "never shifts beyond the bhadralok",⁵⁵ and most of the novels were written within the politically or socially conscious and even explicit discourse of the bhadralok.

Young village men were exposed to this world both through the curriculum (which included standard works on or by the famous novelists) and through the influence exercised by school or college teachers — bhadralok almost by definition — many of whom were of leftist inclination.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, the material — statistical or

⁵⁵Mukherjee 1985:107; "The novelist for all seasons".

⁵⁶A Burdwan and Midnapur survey conducted by Atul Kohli in the early 1980s indicates some of the leftist inclination of the village intelligentsia, by revealing that 31 per cent of all CPM Gram Panchayat members were "mainly teachers or social

otherwise — to show the propensity of school or college teachers to be leftist back in the 1950s is very limited. Most may still have been more moderate, but the number of leftist teachers in West Bengal was sufficient to give rise to a popular stereotype. And there is no doubt that teachers did constitute a major channel for the flow of leftist ideas into the rural areas. Haksahab told the following story of how he became a communist.

From 5th to 10th [1947-52] I read in a boarding-school. In the beginning I was scared and did not like it. A teacher named Shyamal Nandi took care of me. He was very good at football, and I liked football. In the evenings he assembled some students at his house, served us tea and biscuits, and engaged us in long discussions. He was a communist and thought the Congress was bad. Many of us became communists under his influence. At that time I did not understand much about politics and communism. It was only later, when the CPI arranged a meeting in S-bazar commemorating the death of Stalin, that I was able to buy and read some communist literature.

A scrutiny of the literature he has read reveals, however, that he has read much more Bengali novels and poetry than communist literature. No-one in the village has read anything original (in translation) Marx, Lenin, Mao or others. The main source of communist literature was the party papers and pamphlets. The main bulk of reading material, however, consisted of the Bengali masters.

Then there is the issue of language. Even when villagers did read communist pamphlets or newspapers, the information came through Standard Colloquial Bengali (SCB) — the medium of the bhadralok. Schooling meant exposure to an environment

workers". In a Midnapur study cited by him, 217 of 515 Gram Panchayat chairmen were found to be teachers (Kohli 1983:792).

that was not socially neutral. The culture and values of the bhadralok were high-status both through association with power, high caste, the refined and technically advanced, and the abstention from manual labour. And their language was different — and of higher status. As Jnanabrata Bhattacharyya and Poromesh Acharya point out, in the context of Bengal, literacy was not rank-neutral. Standard Colloquial Bengali, or the *chalit bhasa*, developed from a Hugli dialect into what is now the written form of the language and the form used in public or non-local contexts. It is separate from dialects, from "peasant language", even from a daily language as used in homes or in the para (even by bhadralok).⁵⁷

Bhattacharyya feels that social usage of standard Bengali reinforces social inequalities.

While serving to unify the Hindu elite, social hierarchies of class, caste and religion were reinforced by a conscious moulding of the Bengali language.⁵⁸

Acharya feels that particularly English-medium but also much of the Bengali-medium education in contemporary West Bengal is elitist and exclusivist, designed so as to in effect deprive the poor and low caste access to higher education.⁵⁹ Education, even mere literacy, was in West Bengal never quite free from its social identity, its association with the higher castes, the high-status bhadralok, with social refinement

⁵⁷Chowdhuri 1960.

⁵⁸Bhattacharyya 1987:62.

⁵⁹Acharya 1978, 1986. Acharya (1981) has a particular grudge against Rabindranath's primer, *sahaj path*. This "poetic" primer is by many bhadralok considered essential to a proper "Bengali" education.

and non-manual labour. For the middle-class peasant sons, schools and colleges were much more than literacy. They meant close acquaintance with and possibly entrance into a social group, into a cultural world in many respects different from and definitely higher than their original village society.⁶⁰

Below we shall turn to the re-emergence of the *jatra*, the rustic theatre, during this period. Before doing so, let us consider the language used in *jatra*. All *jatras* were held in the form of the standard (Calcutta-spoken) variety of Bengali — devoid of the rusticities of local language. Conscious efforts were made to conform in performance to the written form. We may note in this connection some recent changes in local dialect; the old verb-ending form for first person (e.g. *chinu*, I was) was over the decades replaced by a more standard ending, namely *-lum* (e.g. *chilum*). This has become the accepted form within the village, although the older form can still be heard — among the uneducated of the lower castes in particular. The new form is a standard variation of SCB's form *-lam* (e.g. *chilam*, I was, standard variation but only rarely to be found in writing). Other language changes, too, took the same direction, from a dialect form towards the SCB.⁶¹ The "-lam" variety was at first used in *jatras*, which thus came to represent both the idealized language of the high-status, and the radical strand's obligation to work with "the people".

⁶⁰There is a close association between education and identity. Whereas the uneducated are known by various local *jati* identities (aguri, saotal, namasudra, bagdi, etc), the educated are referred to as "Bengali" (*bangali*), i.e. the people of Bengal, those who have no localized identity smaller than the region.

⁶¹For instance, the use of the negative *ni* in both past, present and future (e.g. *ami karbo ni*) was abolished in favour of the SCB form (*ami karbo na*).

It is interesting that "elite" villagers should turn to jattras as a medium. They took upon themselves this role of teacher at the same time as radicals such as Utpal Datta and others were urging for "people's education" through the medium of popular entertainment. From the point of view of the urban bhadralok — a view educated villagers no doubt tended to subscribe to — jatra was a lowly form of theatre, "operatic and hallucinatory". But within the radical strand, such inhibitions could be overcome for the sake of a higher goal. There was in this appropriation of a popular form a statement of ideological orientation. Jatra was more than entertainment or even education/social reform; it was a willingness to be "part of the people" and to abolish pretensions to a higher elite or bhadralok status. Participation in jatra was to break with expected behaviour, to renounce the life-style and claims to superiority of their (fore-)fathers. It was a "statement" about a willingness to be part of, or not different from, the "folk", which in effect meant the "chhotolok", or the non-educated.

However, such a "statement" is interesting in more than one way. As Chakrabarty remarks, renunciation is for those with something to give up.⁶² The breaking away from a high-status past was for those with a high-status past to break away from. In that way, the performance of rustic folk-theatre by educated middle-class peasants only reinforced a basic status difference although in a different mode. Moreover, that participation linked them to a larger cultural movement and constituted a part of their linking-up to the radical but still high-status universe to which Utpal Datta and others belonged. It was a statement about being part of a current debate and movement, of

⁶²"In order to be able to make sacrifices, one needed to possess; he who did not possess could not sacrifice. The glory of the renouncer belonged to the 'possessor'" (Chakrabarty 1989:152).

being in the forefront of the discourse, of being more "modern". Jatra linked village leaders to that part of society which was most vigilant, most active, most prominent. That part was leftist in ideology.⁶³ Leftism was at this time a well-known and spreading ideology. Newspapers, schools and schoolteachers, and bureaucrats in private participated in a discourse increasingly using leftist ideology to criticize existing social conditions and the political set-up.

By enacting their new found identity in the villages, they reinforced their link to the urban elite, the high-status bhadrak. Particularly the jatra were important here (and still are). Using Turner's concept of "liminality" and regarding jatra as reflexive forms of ritual or art, we may see the young village leaders as stepping out of an older mould of village leader to create a new role, that of the "modern leader". The "modern leader" was culturally close to the attractive and high-status culture of the world outside, close to the bhadrak in manners, training and ideas. For Turner, "liminality" was the "realm of the possible" and "seedbeds of cultural creativity".⁶⁴ By entering into the "liminal" space of jatra they portrayed themselves as part of another social sphere, that of the bhadrak, and could use jatra to define themselves in a close relation to the same outside world of the bhadrak. Not that they quite "became" bhadrak — they seem rather to have remained superior chasis (cultivators)

⁶³From my account it may appear that I doubt the sincerity of the individuals' motives: that is not so. I know most of those mentioned here personally and have no reason to believe their ideological convictions to be faulty. My concern is with the social situation; how were such actions interpreted, what were the precedents and the context? I see no contradiction if I say the activists in this were well aware of the same factors.

⁶⁴Victor Turner 1977, quoted in Asheley 1990:xviii.

— but they were cast in a mould that at the same time was high-status and pro-poor. David Raybin uses Turner's "social drama" concept to investigate art's role and found in chivalric romances of the French Middle Ages an example of "how art's symbolic, indeed ritualistic, role allows it to be a center for the establishment and ordering of a definable, self-aware social unit" — in his case the new nonfeudal nobility, in my case the "new" quasi-bhadralok village leader.⁶⁵

In effect, a new model was established, that of the "modern village leader" as opposed to the previous "peasant householder" or "kingly" models. The ideology to which these new village leaders aligned themselves — whether mainstream or radical — demanded certain sacrifices from them as relatively well-off landowners. In the following chapter we shall turn to the large mobilization that took place during the late 1960s. Apart from that, and earlier in the 1960s, the new leaders continuously sacrificed their time and energy, their potentially comfortable lives, for the sake of village welfare. It should also be noted that they on occasions sacrificed some of their material capital. In June 1961 Haksahab donated land for the establishment of both a cooperative society building and the school. Throughout the 1960s they donated paddy and occasionally money for one or the other project. In 1962 Hanukaji donated the large sum of Rs 1000 as the cooperative society's starting capital. And land and money were continuously pledged for the road.

To a large extent, the "modern leaders" continued to act in the mould of the old-type village leader, i.e. in all aspects of village affairs, arranging communal activities (such

⁶⁵Raybin 1990:27.

as the guarding of ripe paddy, cooperative societies, clubs and committees), or settling disputes. Such activities did not distinguish the new leaders from the previous generations. The same new leaders also had "powers" (land, for instance, or ritual superiority) which they continued to enjoy in their individual quests for position. But they also sought to build the "confidence" and "symbolic capital" necessary for effective leadership with reference to a new ideology and new symbols. As with all "symbolic capital" it was costly, and they continued to lose material capital on the maintenance of their positions. The donation of land for the cooperative society or the school is in many respects not much different from donations to a temple or feast for villagers (which we term "largesse" and attribute to the kingly model). Both establish the village leader's credentials as someone with the village's welfare foremost in mind. The major difference is in the rationalization, from the maintenance of an established social and ritual order to "progress" and "development".

Indeed, the "new" leader met the same requirements as the older leaders — only more so. The requirements of "knowledge", "compassion", involvement, concern and respect had been crucial to the selection of a leader from among the "group of equals". The "new" leader filled these requirements with his anchorage in an egalitarian ideology aimed at social and economic development and political progress.

Conclusion

The meeting of the "modern tradition, Bengali flavour" with villagers caused two developments in the villages under study. Firstly, that section of the village leadership

most exposed to this tradition sought to recreate itself and portray itself as connected to or even part of that wider tradition. They sought to give the impression through their actions and rhetoric of being different from old-style village leaders and instead being part of that high-status world outside. They created for themselves a new model: the modern-minded villager, free from superstition, free from the "prestige" and "distance" considerations of the past, and knowledgeable and conversant in most things new (literature, the ideology of parties, the international scene).

Secondly, by doing so and because of the imperatives of the specific adopted culture, the village leaders came to promote particular ideas in village society, ideas that were radical. Through their jatras, rhetoric and actions, a discourse was introduced, one in which "equality", "anti-casteism", "cooperation" and "progress" were catch-words for interaction with all including the poor and low caste. This discourse identified a wide range of "problems" in village society. The discourse they engaged in legitimized new and possibly even radical courses of action, new social relations, new attitudes to old grievances. For the larger society of poor and low caste, jatras addressed social problems in a new manner, within an ideology different from the one hitherto dominant. Through the medium of jatras problems and solutions and moral points could be suggested without directly threatening the existing social order.

There is naturally nothing deterministic in this. The impact and response among villagers depended on more than jatra performances, as I shall demonstrate in the next chapter. However (following Bourdieu to an extent), we may say that these jatra performances opened up the field of discussion, and addressed old grievances against

casteism, poverty and oppression. Addressing such grievances, however unarticulated these may have been, brought into question dominant "truths". A new discourse was formed within village society. It is important here that the questioning did not take place in a void, but in a situation where these issues referred to a broad new and persuasive ideology.

Due to limited material, it has not been possible to come very close to the issue of how much if at all these "modern" or communist ideas were distorted on the way into the villages, or of how much they were adapted or reinterpreted to suit local circumstances. We may well imagine that ideas could be misunderstood, only superficially adopted, or inconsistently selected from a wide body of literature (which in itself was not too consistent). Some of these issues will be addressed in the following chapters, where we will see how harbingers of the modern tradition willingly adapted to local traditions and how local traditions are never fully supplanted.

In many respects the advances made by the "modern tradition" into rural society in this pre-UF period were limited and restricted to a narrow section of society. It has not been my point to argue that by the jatra performances and the bichars these ideas effectively changed village life. There were some changes, but mainly at the level of discourse. In other respects the gains were much more limited or entirely absent. Few if any in the 1960s had thought seriously about land redistribution, and collective tilling of land was perhaps attractive as utopias go but otherwise far-fetched. Interaction with lower castes was freer, but not free. The point has rather been to

show how a new discourse came to influence the activities and actions of village leaders in partly setting the agenda for them, and in giving them new arguments and a new outlook.

FIVE CASTE, STEREOTYPES, AND MOBILIZATION

Introduction

Gyan Prakash discusses how oral traditions, or myths, of certain groups (castes) can be regarded as more than irrelevant stories from a past age. They form apologata for contemporary social and economic (low) positions, explaining, excusing, and attributing alternative qualities to the group.¹ Myths of this kind, which are historically formed, are of here-and-now relevance, and, following on Prakash, in non-literate societies myths are (in a wide sense) contemporary statements. However, it may be that myths can be regarded as more than apologata growing out of a group's contemporary predicament, that they can be partly amendable to present interests, and may be used — manipulated — to serve existing interests. "Histories" rarely come in singulars with a neatly definable moral or unitary values. Rather, myths are open to contestation and manipulation, to what Sahlins called "mytho-praxis". He comments that:

¹Prakash 1990~~2~~, particularly page 38ff contains a good discussion on the historicity of oral traditions. See also Darnton 1991.

Clearly, Maori are cunning mythologists, who are able to select from the supple body of traditions those most appropriate to the satisfaction of their current interests, as they conceive them.²

According to this understanding, myths can be conveniently remembered or forgotten, emphasized or perhaps even to an extent recreated to make a point or advance an interest. However, myths are not taken out of thin air but created in history, both recent and more distant, and are moulded by both social identity and material conditions. Myths both inform practice and are informed by practice, and they form part of identities — of self-image as well as social image. Following from such a view, myths may have real tangible effects on the behaviour of the self and of others towards the self.

This introduction, I believe, is of interest to our understanding of caste. Throughout this text I have talked about "caste" (or *jati*) without any clear statement about why caste should be important in village politics, of why, or to what extent, people belonging to ritually defined groups act in consorted manners in politics. One clue to these questions is found in the observation that, in these two village, in spite of poverty and low status, certain castes of poor were able to gain some advantages, some concessions from the dominant groups. The ability to do so depended on local circumstances, even on individuals, but above all on popular stereotypes about the castes in question, and the ability of the individual caste groups to exploit these social stereotypes.

²Sahlins 1985:55. Obeyesekere's 1992 critique of Sahlins might have been unjustified had Sahlins incorporated his own ideas into his interpretations.

Most castes (jatis, or sub-castes) are endogamous, and they have a fairly well established (if not uncontested) ritual rank in any given locality.³ Ritual rank derives for some castes from the ritual service they locally or historically execute. However, the great majority of people belong to castes that only in the vaguest sense have a specific ritual occupation (the huge "peasant" or "agricultural" castes), or follow that occupation. Moreover, all castes have myths of origin, more or less clearly stated, which link them to known epic characters or incidents. Lastly, local castes have a regional, often even local, distinct history (which may cause intra-caste divisions and the establishment of separate sub-castes). These many elements in a caste's identity do not make up a neat body of consistent claims and arguments defining the caste's place and role in society and ritual. Rather, it is a body filled with claims and counter claims, inconsistencies, and great spatial and temporal variation. These variations — the scope for interpretation — are partly limited by the restrictions imposed by surrounding society, but also partly amendable to changes and initiatives from the caste itself. Local initiative and the ability to use local traditions and histories, within the limits set by society, give rise to stories (myths, or traditions) that are stable over some time. I prefer to call these stereotypes.

My argument is perhaps best visualized. The image of the un-oiled and dark, fierce, lathi-waving, and often dangerously drunk bagdi was used in Udaynala by village leaders to intimidate opponents, and to keep other villagers subordinated. Their role as indispensable supporters for village leaders secured a clout for the bagdis which their economic position did not allow. On the other hand, the image of the

³Kolenda 1978, Dumont 1980, Ch. 5.

untouchable-but-want-to-be-clean muchis evoked not fear but ridicule. Muchis instead exploited the potential in the notion that only the protection of all groups, in particular those necessary for the ritual order, defines the legitimate leader (re. *rajadharma*). This notion obliged the village leader to protect all including the muchis, or perhaps in particular the muchis (as village servants), provided that they, as "subordinates", accepted his leadership. These two stereotypes and the respective options available made the two jatis react very differently to the CPM's mobilization efforts.

Close relationships between landowner-village leaders, on the one hand, and labourer-followers, on the other, are often termed patron-client relationships. The term implies exchanges of some sort, often involving employment, protection, and occasional credit in exchange for secured labour, support in disputes, perhaps votes.⁴ I shall try to argue for a more nuanced picture, one of the patron-client relationship as filled with different matter, reflecting different norms or different political realities. This is a picture where the "client" is not necessarily powerless but can manipulate social stereotypes and appeal to different values to strengthen his own position within the relationship.

Although all subordinate groups established some "clout" in this manner, groups living under equal economic conditions did not pursue equal roles or obtain similar degrees of influence in village affairs. The bagdis became *lathials* (fighters, who fight with *lathis*, sticks) while the muchis became quiet *prajas* (subordinates, subjects). The

⁴For a typical example see Nicholas 1963 and 1965. A recent version is found in Robinson 1988.

present chapter will look into the relationship between village leaders and those sections of the population to a larger extent (formerly) excluded from open, public influence — a relationship, it will be seen, that was extended to the CPM.⁵

Caste and class, ca. 1960

A breakdown of landownership by jati (tables 5.1 and 5.2) suggests a strong correlation between ritual status and landowning status around 1960; the higher jatis owned in general sufficient amounts of land to pass as owner-cultivators, while the lower jatis were landless. Among some of the low castes one found a few owner-cultivator and rich peasant families but in general they were close to landless. The jatis muchhi, dule and saotal were invariably land-poor. The higher status groups (aguri, sekh, etc.), were in general well-off, though these too included a number of land-poor families.

⁵Other groups too exploited stereotypes and cultural constructs in this manner. Women, for instance, both as a group and as individuals, were able on occasions to exploit an image of women as quarrelsome to embarrass the men (as in the case of Milon in Chapter Three). Equally, male adolescents were commonly given an unusual leverage in public affairs, using their vigilance and recklessness within the larger "game" (see also Risseuw 1988).

Table 5.1

Landownership per household, by size group and jati, in percentage of total, Udaynala, 1957

<u>Land bighas</u>	<u>Clean- caste*</u>	<u>Sekh</u>	<u>Nama- sudra</u>	<u>Mallik</u>	<u>Bagdi</u>	<u>Muchi</u>	<u>Saotal</u>	<u>Total</u>
0-4.9	12.5	13.9	34.8	50.0	54.2	81.8	91.7	35.2
5-9.9	25.0	30.6	4.3	33.3	25.0	18.2	8.3	23.1
10-19.9	12.5	33.3	43.5	16.7	12.5	-	-	25.0
<u>20+</u>	<u>50.0</u>	<u>22.2</u>	<u>17.4</u>	<u>=</u>	<u>8.3</u>	<u>=</u>	<u>=</u>	<u>16.7</u>
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	8	72	23	6	24	11	12	156
Percent	5.1	46.2	14.7	3.8	15.4	7.0	7.7	99.9

* "Clean-caste" includes bamun, kayastha, bene and kalu

Source: field-data

Table 5.2

Landownership per household, by size group and jati, in percentage of total, Gopinathpur, ca. 1960

<u>In bighas</u>	<u>Bamun</u>	<u>Kay- astha</u>	<u>Aguri</u>	<u>Napit</u>	<u>Bagdi</u>	<u>Dule</u>	<u>Muchi</u>	<u>Total</u>
0-4.9	75.0	33.3	7.1	-	53.8	100.0	100.0	44.2
5-9.9	-	-	7.1	-	30.8	-	-	9.6
10-19.9	-	55.6	28.6	66.7	7.7	-	-	23.1
<u>20+</u>	<u>25.0</u>	<u>11.1</u>	<u>57.1</u>	<u>33.3</u>	<u>7.7</u>	<u>=</u>	<u>=</u>	<u>23.1</u>
Total	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	4	9	14	3	13	5	4	52
Per cent	7.7	17.3	26.9	5.8	25.0	9.6	7.7	100.0

Source: field-data

The economic position of the poor was reflected in their appearance: very simple and often torn clothing, commonly a mere loincloth, and shirt-less even in winter. They lived in poor and cramped conditions, and to outsiders their para was congested and unclean. All lower castes, in these villages the bagdis, muchis and saotals in

particular, were "known" to be energetic producers and consumers of alcohol. Their sexual norms were considered immoral by the higher groups, and "typically low-caste". The overlap of material poverty, life-style and certain norms also overlapped with ritual status.⁶

"We made ourselves low": an untouchable identity

Muchis were found everywhere in Bengal but nowhere numerically dominant. Their numbers in Burdwan and Raina were small; the 1901 Census gives them as 4.9% of the Raina thana population, and they were 4.0% of the total population of Burdwan according to the 1931 Census.⁷ In Gopinathpur circa 1960, four of a total of 52 households were muchis, and in 1993 they made up 14.9% of the total population. In Udaynala they formed 4.5% of the population in 1993. They were poor though not entirely landless. The five muchis families in Gopinathpur owned among themselves 21 bighas. In Udaynala their position was worse. Most were landless, one family owned 8 bighas, another 5 bighas and the rest minor plots (see tables 5.1 and 5.2).

The muchis' ritual occupation was the carrying away and disposal of cow carrion, the preparation of drums and shoes from leather, and the beating of drums during rituals. They made shoes and drums from the hides of cow carcasses,⁸ and these

⁶See also Ray 1983 and 1987.

⁷Peterson 1910, and *Census of India 1931* Volume V, Bengal, Part II, Tables.

⁸The muchis, however, were not tanners. That task was carried out by another jati.

drums were beaten by muchis at Hindu rituals. They performed tasks necessary for the well-being of the entire Hindu society and were integral to the ritual hierarchy and its maintenance. Together with *napits* (barbers) and *bamuns* (priests), muchis were one of the three *jatis* in this area with ritually defined tasks. These ritual tasks were seen as highly polluting because of their association with death, blood, and rotting flesh. Muchis were further stigmatized because they ate the flesh of dead cows. Even Muslims considered them polluting.

Their position at the bottom of the ritual and social hierarchy was excused in a typical manner. According to one story, muchis were once kings of this area. Among the muchis of Udaynala, two households were *rajbanshi*, or of royal lineage. But that, they say, was before their "fall" and the advent of *bamuns* and caste Hindus. The many stories all suggest that the fall was accidental. One story goes like this:

It was usual for owners of cows to mark these with their individual signs in ink. Some muchi ancestor was fooled into stealing cows, but in order to get rid of the ink marks, that area of the hide was cut off. Slowly, increasingly more hide was cut off, and eventually a cow died from the wound. They became untouchable as a punishment for having killed a cow.

Another story said that:

A *bamun* on his way to the Ganges brought a flower garland for the muchis' ancestor to the river for offering. He brought the consecrated garland back, and the muchi-to-be planted a tree in the goddess's name and offered the garland. But he did not manage to keep the tree alive, and as punishment he and all his descendants became untouchable.

The muchis' general attitude to their present condition is that "we have made ourselves low".⁹ They attribute their fall to accidental circumstances or treachery. I did not encounter any general critique of the (Hindu hierarchical) system as such.¹⁰

In addition to the severe economic constraints under which they lived and to the constant, if not continuous, reminder of their untouchability by members of other jatis, muchis were also not able or allowed to operate on the village political scene. Paradoxically, the low ritual status offered them some respite from economic duress and a limited degree of influence in village affairs.

The distance muchis were required to observe from the divine image (*thakur*) underlined their low position, while at the same time the beating of the drum signified the muchis as integral to Hindu cosmology. Their position was ambiguous: they were polluting and dangerous but indispensable.¹¹ Without the beating of the drums the puja could not be performed, and without scavengers other Hindus could not remain ritually pure. The muchis' subordination as recipients of pollution was necessary for the well-being and ritual cleanliness of the whole.¹² This ascribed role in Hindu cosmology contrasts to other low castes in these villages, and gave muchis a more clearly defined position within Hindu society than most jatis.

⁹*nijeko neme diechhi.*

¹⁰This kind of apologata is very similar to what Prakash (1988a) found.

¹¹For the "ambiguous position" of Harijans in rituals see Fuller 1992, Ch. 6.

¹²Gould 1958, Pocock 1962.

Due to this defined ritual occupation grants of land were occasionally extended to muchis as gratuity for their ritual services. Commonly a few bighas of land were given them in perpetuity — though the landlord or committee remained legal owner. In exchange, muchis performed their ritual tasks. In Gopinathpur, seven bighas of the village communal land was set aside for drumming and divided between originally two muchi households. In Udaynala two muchi households held 3.5 bighas granted by the former zamindar family of the village for the village *gajan* (a Shiva festival), and three bighas had been granted by the Kaji family for a Kali festival discontinued in the early 1960s. Drumming can only be done by muchis and so the land grants can be held by them only as dictated by custom. They were also normally fed at the pujas, given *prasad* (what had been offered to the deity — mainly food) and some extra recompense (cash, paddy, and/or cloth) at the organizer's discretion. In addition muchis were paid for both disposing of cow carcasses and for the shoes they made from the hides, and so the meat (which they ate) and the hide (raw material for further income-generation) were theirs by custom.

If a village did not have muchi inhabitants, non-resident muchis could be hired for special occasions from neighbouring villages. However, there was a sense of prestige in having "our own muchis" (*amader-i muchi*), a prestige reflected in the widespread practice of granting them lands and thereby tying them to the place.

Some 65 years ago Gopinathpur was left without muchis after illness and death in the family of muchis that had lived there. The village sought to entice other families to settle there, but those approached asked "What will we eat?" The village relied for

some years on hired-in muchis for the necessary tasks, but found this dependence (on muchis from the rival village of K.) demeaning and unsatisfactory. A few years later, the village received what was to be the core of its *baroari* (public) land, some 12 bighas.¹³ It was decided that one-third should be used to entice a muchi family to settle. The year after another three bighas was given to another muchi, a relative of the first family.

The presence in the village of muchis was desired but not imperative (they could be hired from outside). Resident muchis ensured the ritual purity of the village, but above all their presence was a matter of prestige and evoked the image of a wholesome, good Hindu village. "Every [caste] Hindu village has muchis", and Gopinathpur without the services of "the untouchable" was a bothersome image. The villagers preferred to settle muchis than to be rich in communal land.¹⁴

In the same way that their low position in society was defined by Hindu tradition, so too was this small but secure source of income, and a measure of protection from leading villagers. This income was tied to their ritual status, as low but indispensable to Hindu society. They were granted some "moral economy" minimum income and

¹³A dacoit from neighbouring K. had murdered a man but escaped with a lot of money. After many years he returned to settle in Gopinathpur where he bought land and was protected against revenge from K. After his death the lands lapsed to the village community.

¹⁴The unusually large lands given — 7 bighas — should probably be seen in connection with the age-old rivalry with the village of K., where people, according to one K. informant, had much spite left for "poor Gopinathpur".

employment — but at leading villagers' discretion, subject to the benevolence of their patrons.

Muchis in village public affairs

As a group and as individuals muchis of Gopinathpur and Udaynala have kept a low profile and were never publicly involved in village affairs or spoke at meetings, if they attended at all. Historically, the Gopinathpur muchis have always been "known" to be aligned with the village leaders, particularly the chairmen of the baroari committee. They were "known" to have been so in the sense that this is how village history presents them, and this is how they presented and present themselves. Living off communal land they were aligned with Bhaskar Kes for the twenty years he was baroari committee chairman. During the years when Congress-supported Anadi Sarkar rivalled Bhaskar in the 1970s, young Ram Das joined for a while the reformist Hindu sect Satsangha in which Anadi Sarkar was prominent.

This "official" alignment with the major village leader was more evident in the case of Udaynala, where the division among would-be village leaders was more pronounced. Here, too, muchis were "known" to have been aligned with villager leaders. While the Kaji family was still important — until the death of Jikukaji — the muchis "belonged" to them. The Kajis were wealthy and had a special claim, based on history and practice, to the leadership of Udaynala South and the loyalty of its inhabitants, including the muchi para.

When all-village leadership lapsed to Haksahab and Ehiasahab of the north mouza, the muchis found themselves there, together with Jikukaji's son Hanukaji. Throughout the 1960s the muchis were "known" supporters of the "young group" and not its rival Rahim. This support was shown only in a very limited manner. They rarely attended meetings, and only Tarapada Das participated in land occupations during the United Front years (see below) — and only once. When Haksahab fled and Ehiasahab took over as main village leader, the muchis did not welcome the developments: "Haksahab", said Nimai Das, "is *baniadi* [family with prestige to protect], and they used to do more [for us]". Haksahab and Hanukaji had taken the muchi subdued support more seriously than did Ehiasahab, who demanded more explicit support. However, Ananda Das came to frequent Ehiasahab's house. Ananda was unblemished by land occupations and had once come into some trouble because he opposed the sexual exploitation of their womenfolk by the village top families — a practice also opposed by Ehiasahab. Through him muchis again had a link to the village leader, while others, in particular Tarapada, lay low. Their limited previous involvement prevented them from targeting in the aftermath of the land occupations.

During the euphoria of the first post-1977 years of LFG rule, frequent and huge processions, demonstrations, and meetings were organized. In these, a few individual muchis participated along with members of all other poor jatis, though never with any organizational position. Gour-da, of Haksahab's entourage, was the lone muchi who occasionally attended village meetings or bichars during my visit. As with muchis in all public connections, he never spoke up. According to village historian Najir Hosen,

muchis never spoke at meetings, nor were they expected to. According to Nimai Das, "Nobody would have listened".

In this way muchis were "known" to be with this or that village leader. Though the leader might well have been disliked, he was not opposed or given an opportunity to doubt their general albeit subdued alignment or acquiescence. Other groups, including bagdis, as we shall see below, were "out of favour" for periods. The muchis were more clearly "in favour" most of the time, occasionally through the good office of one or the other of their jati but primarily because they never assumed any position of influence on the central village political scene. Their "role" had been defined by society as that of the village servant. And through subservience that emphasized this role and their special place in village life, and by quietly supporting the major village leader as a matter of course, they contributed towards his creation as village leader.

The relationship between economic dependants and landowners, subjects and kings, devotees and gods, and children and parents, it has been suggested, constitutes a dominant, paradigmatic cultural idiom. This structural relationship is typically exemplified, according to Östör, in situations of request and supplication. When the economic dependant asks for a favour he does so in a vocabulary and a manner that invokes the imagery of a child asking for indulgence, or of a devotee without whom the gods would not be worshipped, evoking the obligation to protect.¹⁵ Greenough

¹⁵Östör 1984: 1984: 179

makes this view more explicitly valid for the sharecropper-landowner relationship.¹⁶ The proper code of conduct for superiors demands them to both indulge and feed, as well as to guide and punish. Such a requirement to feed and protect can be "created" by submission: the superior is "appointed". In the case of muchis the element of choice was of course limited. Nonetheless, submission had an element of effect because of the moral obligations of the (would-be) all-village leader to protect and care for all villagers. To support muchis as integral to an ideal society established the credentials for would-be all-village leaders as someone who has the interests of all groups and the whole group in mind, and sees to the maintenance of a good society in the style of a good king. By their submission muchis contributed towards the making of that image for individual village leaders.

The muchis' role in society was somewhat less marked in Muslim than in Hindu villages, where they symbolised the good society. To an extent, however, it was also found in Udaynala; nearly half the population there too were Hindus, and even the Muslims were of course not unfamiliar with the notion. The Kajis' bestowal of land for drumming at the Kajis' Kali puja symbolized their concern for the well-being of their Hindu "subjects".¹⁷ Moreover, the specifically religious content is but a particular case of a more general construct. A leader of society, as also a householder or a king, was ideally responsible for the well-being of all subordinates, including

¹⁶Greenough 1982, Ch. 1. See also Inden and Nicholas 1977, Ch. 1.

¹⁷For possibly several hundred years the Kaji family sponsored a Kali puja (*kajider kali*), revered the image (although they did not worship), and bequeathed land for the expenses. Three bighas of this land were held by village muchis. The image for Kajis' Kali paused in front of the Kaji household, the Kajis kept the door facing the site of the puja open throughout the year, and they did not eat beef.

their religious lives. It was in providing for all inhabitants of a village that one morally substantiated a claim to all-village leadership.

This picture of "influence through submission" is contrasted in the following section where it will be shown how the bagdis created influence through assertion. By juxtaposing the two it is possible to see the extent to which two groups of poor and low caste were able to exploit numbers, stereotypes and cultural constructs in different ways.

"We are bagdis!": the bagdi stereotype

The phrase "We are bagdis!" (*amra bagdi!*) is commonly pointed to by bagdis and others alike to suggest the pride with which bagdis regarded themselves. Though poor (see tables 5.1 and 5.2 above), low-caste ("untouchable", or, in contemporary parlance, "Scheduled Caste"), and until recently considered filthy and uncivilized, bagdis were thought of as not having hidden or felt any shame about their identity. On the contrary, they were regarded as fierce and were feared. One elderly bagdi leader (Sankar Dhaure), in a solid case of understatement, called them "mischievous" and went on at great length to describe how they used to fight, steal and drink. This was not a new self-image. Bagdis were known to be fierce and warrior-like by the British, and at least in one report they were termed "Criminal caste" although never officially branded as such.¹⁸

¹⁸J. N. Bhattacharya *Hindu castes and sects* Calcutta 1896, cited in Satadal Dasgupta 1986. The *Burdwan Gazetteer* (Peterson 1910) held the people of Raina to be particularly notorious for dacoity.

Bagdis comprise a sizeable portion of the population in the area. The 1901 Census reported them as comprising 24.3% of the total population (the single largest jati) of Raina thana, with "Musalman Sekh" and aguri as number two and three with respectively 20.0 and 11.1% of the total.¹⁹ In the last census to list caste (the 1931 Census), bagdis figured as 11% of the total population of Burdwan district, with sekhs as the single largest at 18%. The 1921 Census gave aguris as 7.6% of the Burdwan population.²⁰ In Udaynala the bagdis comprised 15% of the population in 1957, in Gopinathpur 33% in 1960.

Most bagdis were illiterate, and, as opposed to the higher status jatis, their women worked in the fields (their own) or as servants in landowner households. Before the late 1960s and 1970s, dowry was not common in bagdi marriages as opposed to most other Hindu jatis (including muchis). According to some informants, though others disagreed, bagdis held relatively liberal views on sex. Sexual intercourse before marriage and extra-marital affairs are suggested to have found place with some frequency.²¹ Furthermore, divorce was not uncommon (and not a big deal), and bagdis of both villages practised widow-remarriage at least until the 1960s. Sexual prowess was an important part of the bagdi image.

¹⁹Peterson 1910: statistics 1901-2, Table V, pp. 6-7.

²⁰For 1921 figures: *Census of India 1921* Volume V, Bengal, Part II: Tables. For 1931 figures: *Census of India 1931* Volume V, Part II: Tables. Aguris, a relatively small and geographically confined jati, was dropped in the 1931 census.

²¹The same was found by Ray 1983 and 1987 for kahars (bauris) in Birbhum.

They were known to pursue a frivolous life-style, with heavy drinking, brawling and much quarrelling. The excesses at their festivities made others stay away. The bagdi Ulaichandi celebration was particularly notorious for excessive drinking. Their production of liquor was immense, with almost every household producing their own liquor — often for sale. Bagdis also had a reputation for being quarrelsome and fond of fights, to which numerous stories of disputes, fights and spilling of blood testify.

Bagdis were also "known" to be prone towards small-scale theft, a common practice particularly during times of duress. Quite often well-off villagers found that some of their ripe paddy had been cut from the fields at night, or that fish had been caught in their ponds. Occasionally chickens, goats or husked rice or straw vanished from compounds in the main parts of the village. Whether the bagdis were more involved in such practices than other jatis is not certain though probable. Waselmaster's diaries contain numerous references to instances of theft and subsequent allegations against one or the other bagdi. Some bagdis also acknowledge that their contribution to the rate of these activities was quite substantial. Whether or not this was so, the blame was more readily put on bagdis than on other low-status and poor jatis. Because of this image, bagdis were excluded from the *rakh* (guarding of ripe paddy fields against theft); to an extent it was directed against them. They were included only in the early 1980s.

Whether this picture is entirely accurate or not is not all-important. What is important is that bagdis themselves actively cultivated this image and exploited it vis-à-vis other villagers. As landless majurs one would have expected bagdis, like other jatis, to have

behaved in a subordinate fashion. But instead of being subordinate they were insubordinate. They openly defied norms of interaction between superior and inferior, between labourer and employing landowner. They smoked in front of employers, refused but the bare necessities of respect, and could on occasion even pick an argument with landowners and yell at them. During festivities bagdis did not hide their drinking even from the eyes of high-status people such as the quasi-aristocratic Jikukaji. This tendency to defy superiors, or at least to deny them customary displays of respect, is attributed to bagdis only. Other jatis, such as muchis or namasudras, did not allow themselves such liberties, it is held.

Myth and history connect bagdis to the peasant-warriors of the ancient and once powerful Hindu kingdom of Bishnupur (in today's Bankura district) — its demise followed on the Maratha raids in the mid-18th century. Bagdis' sanskritized name for themselves, *barga-kshatriya*, meaning something close to "cultivating warrior", reflects this myth. Some bagdi "surnames" (*padabi*, "title") suggest particular roles in the royal entourage or administrative set-up: Dhaure ("runner", troop), Bag and Pakre (who arrests, *chaukidar*), and Thandar (collector). Until recently bagdis supposedly smoked the hookah with members of the royal lineage jati — Mal or Rajbansi Mal — a practice which suggests equal ritual status and common origin.²² Their claim to the kshatriya-status was, however, qualified by the preposition "barga", suggesting that they were not real kshatriyas, not themselves rulers, but peasants called upon to defend the realm or dharma. They did not claim to have been kings, only to have been farmers who also constituted the army of a king. In the Hindu order of things,

²²Peterson 1910.

they would not have been independent but subject to the king's rule, albeit subjects with an important role to fulfil.

On the other hand, in the claim of not having been mere peasants but peasant warriors lies an element legitimizing adherence to practices not normally acceptable for peasants (*sudras*). The opportunity to take to arms and ability to use these were cherished life-style aspects derived from these myths. In conversations some also expressed satisfaction with a valued freedom from perceived Hindu restrictions on meat-eating and drinking, and subordination to superiors — which they attributed to their kshatriya-status. Though it is common for all low castes to eat meat and drink, some bagdis see this in light of their past and their quasi-kshatriya status.²³

The way non-bagdis saw bagdis was not all that different from how they saw themselves, although they themselves saw these characteristics as positive: physically strong, black and beautiful, with curly hair, somewhat uncontrollable, and at the same time attractive. As for instance in the following story.²⁴

The god Mahadev (Shiva) has gone to earth but does not return. His wife, Parvati, sends some retainers to look for him, and they return telling her that he has found a place on earth of such abundance and beauty that he does not want to leave. The place is Bengal. She goes out to have a look for herself,

²³The "kshatriya-model" as a code of conduct is found to have been followed by jatis in many different places. The model is associated with notions of rule, valour, physical prowess, and dispensation from rules of ritual piety. See for instance Srinivas 1955, Hitchcock 1959, Mayer 1960:63, Mandelbaum 1970b, Ch. 24.

²⁴The story was collected and recorded by "Rajaram's son Rameswar" in the village of Madanagar (Burdwan), in its bagdi-para, in the Bengali year 1264 (1858 AD), and written on a *pīthi* (scroll).

and she sees the abundance, the fertile paddy fields, the ponds filled with fish, the trees abounding in fruit. She understands perfectly why he does not want to return to her. So in order to have him back, she decides to ruin the place.

khusti

One day (the story goes) Mahadev's nephew is out walking in the fields. There he sees a bagdi woman (*bagdini*) destroying the ripe paddy, ruining the fruit trees and emptying the ponds of fish. He rushes over to stop her, but she uses foul language (~~at~~) at him. This scares him, and he runs back to his uncle. Mahadev asks his nephew what the woman looked like, was it perhaps your aunt? No, answers the nephew, this woman is short, dark with curly hair, and has big breasts. Determined to prevent this woman from ruining his fields, Mahadev goes to find her. He is very angry and decides to shout at her. However, when he sees her beauty he cannot shout at her and only asks in a low voice, "Where is your husband?" Her husband, she answers, is old, beats his wife, and has gone far away. Mahadev thought the description was not unfit for himself. So he offers to fish and harvest for the woman, and does so. After the fishing and harvesting, he wants her to cook him a meal while he is having a bath and resting. She agrees and says she will go and find some ingredients. To tie her to himself and make her come back, he gives her a ring. She takes the ring and leaves, but she never returns. Mahadev goes looking for her in heaven, where he meets Parvati. Parvati asks him if he has given his ring to a bagdini. He admits his errors and stays in heaven.

The story suggests that bagdis are both dangerous and destructive, and at the same time irresistibly attractive even to gods. A beautiful but wild and uncontrollable people, the story seems to say, the very opposite of the refined and elaborate caste-Hindus with their fair skin, values of chastity, and frugal and respectable life-styles. This "bagdiness", this image of bagdis as irresponsible, quarrelsome, prone to theft, and of dangerous beauty and pride, was shared by bagdis and non-bagdis alike.

Bagdis and dacoity

In addition to their reputation for quarrelsomeness, insubordination, and theft, bagdis were also known as prolific in the trade of "dacoity". Dacoity (*dakati*, nightly raids by small bands) was a fairly widespread practice until the late 1970s in this area.

Small bands of five to ten would steal out at night and raid valuables from rich households — preferably far away from home. Dacoits returned to their home village before the break of dawn, and passed the loot on to middle-men who sold it elsewhere. Famous gun-touting cases involved two raids into the household of the well-off *napit* Jagatnath Majumdar in Gopinathpur, and once in Udaynala in the house of Sobhachacha the money-lender. There were also many other minor cases of dacoity.

The bagdis' central place in the local history of dacoity is suggested by the bagdi-dacoit as standard character in *jatra* (plays performed on village stages) — together with other standard characters such as the *garib musalman* (poor Muslim) and the *boka bamun* (stupid Brahmin). I was given a list of the most famous dacoits of Raina thana after Independence, and of the eleven listed seven were bagdis. There was even one from the bagdi-para of Udaynala, the locally famous Nitai Singh, active with his group of five in the 1940s and 1950s. Other active bagdi groups operated from six immediately neighbouring villages. In addition there were two Muslim-led groups, one group led by a clean-caste Hindu and one by a *saotal*. Some of these groups ceased to be active in the 1950s, others kept going into the 1970s. Dacoit leaders such as these were rarely married (although not childless), and spent all their wealth on bribes, on feasting, and on gifts to poorer villagers. Few left any fortune to pass on.

These dacoit leaders were the professionals but did not raid alone. With them went small groups of people, four, five or ten or more. Most participants in dacoity gangs

were bagdi, even when the gang was led by non-bagdis. These participants were "semi-professionals". To participate in dacoity demanded knowledge and dexterity. Physical strength was required for the long marches, most often through mud since the best time for dacoity was the dark and muddy rainy season. For a hasty retreat through muddy fields dacoits often used stilts. Should the alarm be raised during a raid, the dacoits would communicate in codes unintelligible to outsiders. Above all, courage was required: to be caught meant a beating, possibly death, at least imprisonment, and starvation for the family.

The code of conduct for dacoity prevented raiding in neighbouring villages or hamlets. The killing of victims did take place but was avoided if possible as repercussions would be severe. An important mark not to be overstepped was the sexual exploitation of female victims. An instance of rape during a raid between 1950 and 1955 in near-by P. led other dacoits to kill the culprit.

According to informants, the non-professional dacoits were motivated by need. It could be hunger, debt or expenses for ceremonial feasts. The non-professionals were ordinary — albeit hardy and daring — majurs in their daily life. In the general climate of poverty, the occasional poor harvest, flood or drought, dacoits enjoyed a degree of sympathy, at least among a large number of people. The need and sympathy may not have been extended to the whole practice of dacoity. Dacoity was not acceptable as a legitimate form of action among the general population. If caught, dacoits were always summarily punished (in near-by Kh. one dacoit was caught and beaten to death in 1971). At the same time they were shielded by their own

communities, and to a large extent accepted by their co-villagers. Although continuously chased by the police, dacoits were rarely caught during day-time because co-villagers would raise the alarm if the police was seen arriving over the fields. Equally, police-informants were few and far between. Dacoity was of course in the main directed against richer households (although far from always) and could not expect much understanding from those sections. Among low-status sections, however, dacoits were close to being accepted and occasionally accorded near-hero status. People in the bagdi-paras used to tell stories about dramatic events during raids, about the exploits of famous dacoits, of their courage and cunning, of the amount of loot they got, of close escapes and dramatic deaths. Pride was attached to daring exploits and in general to their somewhat reckless reputation. These were stories of daring courage, close escapes, fabulous wealth, and largesse. Below follow two examples.

Baldeb Pakre was a big dacoit. He was very dark, and his shoulders were so broad he had to walk sideways through doors. His home was in S-pur [in Raina], his father's family was very poor and he had many brothers and sisters. When Baldeb was young, his father stole some paddy for his starving family, but he was caught by the landlord's lathials and beaten to death. In anger Baldeb set fire to [the straw roofs of] the landlord's houses and fled the village. For many years he lived from begging and majuri in Hugli and many other places, where he came to learn about the rich landlords there. He made his name as lathial and became part of Gautam Mandal's [dacoity] gang. After ~~Gautam Subha~~ ^{Gautam} died, Baldeb became leader of that gang and raided many villages there. He became a famous dacoit and all villages were afraid of his gang. Then he came back to Raina and raided the household of the man who had killed his father. With the loot, he went home to his mother, and gave all his sisters more splendid marriages than had been seen in Raina for many years.

Uday Sandra and his brother Amal were big dacoits in Khandaghosh [a thana neighbouring on Raina], and the police were always chasing them. But they were both very cunning and always got away. One night they were staying in the village of R., when the landlord there heard about it. He came with all his lathials, but Uday and Amal got away and ran quickly over the muddy fields and raided his house. A week later, Amal went to the thana and said, "Daroga-saheb, I am tired of running. I will tell you how to get my brother

and his gang, and you will let me go." The daroga agreed, and Amal said that next Monday they will raid the house of the big money-lender Subol Chatterjee in B-nagar. On that day the daroga took all his men to B-nagar and hid there. But Uday took his gang to the thana, freed his brother, and together they raided and burnt the thana.

Sankar Dhaure (who told me these stories) was himself rumoured to have been involved in dacoity. And his rival in the para, Manik Bag, allegedly functioned as middle-man for a dacoity gang over many years, and at one point even cheated them. The mode in which these stories was narrated suggested a broad acceptance of the practice. Dacoity stories primarily find justification in poverty but only as an introduction to the central themes of heroism, cunning, physical prowess, and largesse. We find in the narration of such stories a delight in the ability to fool the more powerful, to get hold of their wealth and "distribute" these in frantic spending-sprees. The tradition of telling stories of this kind was prominent and made dacoits a valued part of low-caste folklore: "Robin Hood" heroes with an unarticulated sense of ~~injustice.~~ justice.

I suspect these stories to be a bit "updated" and adapted to the "political correctness" of contemporary society, particularly this targeting of landlords and money-lenders. In practice far from all victims were rich. Many were relatively poor, but were raided at a point where they had accumulated cash or valuables (such as borrowed money for dowry). On occasions, dacoity gangs were "employed" by landlords or others to raid an enemy's household. The pattern would be the same, and it was thus difficult to tell that the target had not been picked accidentally. As village historian Najir Hosen put it:

When someone unknown raids your house and takes your gold, how do you know why they picked you? Maybe they were sent by your enemy, or maybe they knew you have an enemy and will blame him.

Such use of dacoity, a blending of motives, was a well-known practice. That was the case when two major Raina landlords fought each other in the late 1940s. Banerjee of N-gram had a long-standing dispute over 150 bighas of land with Subhas Ghosh, landlord and zamindar in B. Banerjee allegedly sent a gang of dacoits to raid Ghosh's household. In retaliation Ghosh brought a gang of lathials and majurs to cut and carry away the ripe paddy on Banerjee's lands. Banerjee turned up with his lathials, but lost in the ensuing fight. Two days later, Ghosh's in-laws' household was raided by dacoits, and the straw roofs set on fire. In both cases the dacoits got to keep the loot.

Historically, there were also other informal ways for the occasional redress of grievances, including covert action. Their antiquity and entrenchment are suggested by the existence of codes of conduct for each. There were different types: *danga* (big fight), *marpit* (small fight), and *lut* (looting). A *danga* was a relatively small affair, a big "fight", involving "hundreds", over a limited issue. *Dangas* did not occur very frequently but still constituted a well-established institution, with a code of unwritten rules of behaviour and norms. A *danga* would normally occur in cases of serious disputes between villages or major landlords over land or access to water, over serious matters of prestige, or when insults had been exchanged between whole village communities. Looking into the rationale for each, we find that they were commonly justified with reference to material want or moral injustice, just as poverty for many was a legitimate ground for participation in dacoity, quite in spite of the suffering of

other poor. It seems from stories of such forms of action that the motives were rarely clear-cut.

Lacking a better term, I shall call these forms "proto-political" — inspired by Hobsbawm's term "proto-nationalism". This term is meant to suggest largely inarticulated and/or morally grounded sentiments and traditions that also contained an element of economic injustice — of class. The proto-political forms of action, whether fights or dacoity, typically fed on several motives, one of which could well be poverty. But such action would not necessarily address poverty as such and could well target other poor. Although not expressing a sense of class per se but legitimized by religious or moral views, these sentiments and traditions could nevertheless later on be reformulated into more clearly formulated and ideologically explicit movements — led by political parties — without major changes. Unfortunately, the term proto-politics suffers from the same shortcomings as Hobsbawm's proto-nationalism in that it refers to what was to come and not purely to the initial situation. Nonetheless, the term may still be useful because it enables us to see lines of continuation in what appears as sudden ruptures, and at the same time accord the poor and low caste with a sense of their own class position, even before "mobilization" during the late 1960s. But before reaching this point, we have to address specifically the bagdis' pre-UF role in village politics.

Bagdis as lathials

The bagdiness image was actively maintained and exploited in village politics by both village leaders and bagdis themselves. For the bagdis, it secured them a peculiar place in village society and allowed them some freedom from the constraints of subordination demanded by mainstream society. They were not "reliable" or amendable as labourers, but instead known to be strong and sought after when heavy work was to be executed. They were not ideal subordinates but rather needed subordinates because of their dexterity with sticks and their physical prowess. Bagdis were not employed in spite of their insubordination, but because of it.

The Kaji family has historically been the dominant family in the south mouza of Udaynala, which includes the bagdi-para.²⁵ The Kajis were owners of huge lands, held official positions, were considered a "prestige family" (*baniadi*), and held a preeminent position in the mouza that was enacted in certain rituals. The Udaynala bagdis lived on the Kajis' land as tenants and functioned as their fighters, or lathials. The Kajis' position was challenged in the 1950's by the Sekh brothers, Baset and Rahim, of the same mouza. Up and coming and ambitious, they engaged in money-lending and village affairs and built their position on land and on debtors among sekhs and namasudras. However, the namasudras were not known to be good fighters, and though sekhs were, the crucial jati was the bagdis (the sekhs, as befits a "dominant caste" were divided in factions). According to village lore, the Sekh brothers tried to

²⁵The mouza of Udaynala South was according to oral tradition granted to the Kaji family by Bengal's Nawab Alivardi Khan (~~1728s~~).

1740s

win bagdis over with easy-term loans, employment, occasional intervention in disputes. In response to these threats and effective challenges from the Sekhs, Jikukaji, head of the Kaji family, over the years came to hand over most homestead land in the bagdi-para to the bagdis. In addition, the rivalry involved court cases, feasts and loans never recovered which altogether cost Jikukaji 50 of the 120 bighas he originally held.

The bagdis' power lay in both their image as fierce and good fighters, and in their actual willingness to fight and function as lathials. The role of bagdis in village affairs is well illustrated by the two following incidents. The first is famous in village lore and is also mentioned in Waselmaster's diaries (under 19 September 1967). Major village leader Ehiasaheb was at this time manager of the village cooperative, but it was discovered that he had embezzled 60 kg of sugar from the cooperative and sold it in a neighbouring village. Many were very angry with him and a *bichar* (village court) was called. At the bichar itself, held in the school compound, people angry with Ehiasaheb shouted at and intimidated him "in a militant manner" (wrote Waselmaster). Before the meeting could get properly started, however, they heard sounds from behind the school building. A large group of people — who could not be seen — were shouting and making intimidating sounds by beating lathis on the ground. Everyone knew immediately that they were bagdis and had probably drunk a lot — "and everyone knew what the bagdis were capable of when drunk", I was informed. The meeting rapidly disintegrated and people went home. The issue was left unsolved.

The second incident took place two years later, and again Ehiasaheb, now as secretary of the cooperative society, was discovered to have cheated the cooperative of several thousand Rupees. Villagers sought to have Ehiasaheb tried at a bichar, but he avoided it. However, the bagdis normally supportive of him were also angry, as they had apparently not been in on the deal. Paddy started to vanish from Ehiasaheb's fields at night, and a stack of straw was set on fire. Everybody "knew" these were the doings of bagdis. Eventually, Ehiasaheb's father-in-law, Sobhachacha, paid a large sum of money towards the forthcoming festival season in bagdi-para and the problem blew over. Whatever grip Ehiasaheb as major village leader had on the bagdis, it was tenuous.

As mentioned, proto-politics was readily recognized and identified with the low castes, or the *chhotolok* (the "small people", the opposite of the *bhadralok*), in particular the bagdi jati. Bagdis also came to form the one crucial element in the CPM's local mobilization and land-occupations — more so than any other economically poor jati. There was a sense of pride and identity in these activities, where bagdis were (self-)identified as different from other jatis, and that created for them a role in village affairs, ensured some patronage and closeness to the exercise of power.

When we now turn to the period of the United Front Governments (1967 and 1969-70) we find a continuation of the bagdis' role in local politics, but under another banner. The CPM, although led by high-status villagers, aimed at mobilizing exactly the sections of the population identified and identifying with proto-politics, and would come to rely primarily on "volunteers" and "activists" able to perform the same tasks

as lathials of old. Although the lines of continuation are not as clear-cut as that, I would still argue that this created an identification of interest and sentiment between many poor and low-caste and the CPM. To the poor, the CPM became "our" party in a broad sense.

Proto-politics and political mobilization

There is nothing unnatural in some mistakes occurring or some excesses being caused through over-enthusiasm in a movement involving lakhs ["hundreds of thousands"] of peasants out in the drive for recovery of vested and benami land [held under false name]. A child learning to walk, stumbles now and then. [...] Similarly, there have been some mistakes and excesses during the peasants march.²⁶

The speech from which this quotation is taken was given over the radio in 1969 by Harekrishna Konar, then Minister for Land and Land Revenue in West Bengal's second UF Government. The speech concerned the success and aims of the CPM-led land occupation movement, but also the difficulty involved in preventing a popular movement from transgressing finer legal boundaries. Thus, lands owned in excess of the ceiling of 75 bighas could be occupied, but in many cases also lands belonging to owners of less than 75 bighas were occupied.

The CPM experienced an upsurge of support in the rural areas, as reflected in both the election results and in the mobilization. The party came to be regarded as "our" by

²⁶Speech by Harekrishna Konar in 1969. Konar was then chairman of the All-India Kisan Sabha (CPM's peasant organization) and Land and Land Revenue Minister. Konar 1979:72-3.

the poor.²⁷ No doubt, as Konar argued, much of the movement, the CPM-led mobilization of peasants during the years 1969-71, unfolded without problems, without turning into or ending in "excesses". However, quite regularly the mobilization became entangled in "typical village politics",²⁸ where "excesses" did take place.²⁹ Rather than constituting the odd mistake, these "excesses" seem to represent something more permanent and integral to the movement. It is striking how a movement led by a reputedly well-organized and disciplined political party such as the CPM was still marred by deviations, eruptions of energy in non-ideological directions, and even the misappropriation of party symbols for non-political disputes.

During the "food-movement" (1964-5) but particularly during the mobilization and land occupation phase from 1969 onwards, the CPM (and other parties although not in Burdwan) employed forms of action that were distinctly proto-political — what Konar interpreted as "excesses". The movement blended its own general aims and targets with those the lower castes and poor in particular were both identified and familiar with. Landlords and money-lenders were targeted, a redistribution of wealth was sought, and redress of old grievances often accomplished. In addition, much of

²⁷A characterization is always more powerful when admitted by opponents. According to a newspaper report, a leading Congress man admitted the poor had come to regard the CPM as "their party". *The Statesman* 28 February 1972.

²⁸A phrase ^{Konar} ~~he~~ used in commenting on a riot between local land-poor (supporters of the CPM) and immigrant landless (supporters of the Forward Bloc) in West Dinajpur district. Both groups were Muslim. *The Statesman* 25 July 1969.

²⁹See for instance the numerous reports in *The Statesman* (Calcutta daily) during the period December 1969 to January 1970.

the movement appeared as covert, illegal, occasionally violent, and always militant, all of which were integral aspects of practices the lower castes identified with.

These "excesses" reflected the views and interests held by those mobilized by the movement, views that were not ideologically "correct" but that expressed the very (particularistic) sentiments the movement fed on. For instance, in choosing targets for the early stages of its mobilization efforts, the CPM in Burdwan was careful to select a limited number of "the most unpopular jotedars".³⁰ The movement represented and fed on two coinciding aims: the targeting of an "exploiter" class, and the targeting of individuals who did not conform to popularly held moral codes of conduct. The local party could not offer land on any scale, nor cheap loans, higher majuri, or protection from potential repercussions. What it could offer, and did, was a sense of identification through involving itself in the manners, aims and concerns of the low caste and poor. These concerns would not always coincide with the general (ideologically inspired) policy of the CPM movement, but such inconsistencies were often enough ignored in local action. The one did not necessarily contradict the other, but confusion did arise on occasion and caused "excesses".

Moreover, in the context of the movement in Raina much of the mobilization (such as land occupations) took part through covert action, even when formally legal. The strong smell of militancy that permeated the mobilization and land occupations appears to contradict the *bhadralok* aspirations of the recently radicalized middle-class peasants (see Chapter Four), who emerged as local leaders of the movement. But then

³⁰Interview with Samar Baura of Burdwan CPM, Burdwan 1989.

the number of local party workers was very limited only a few years earlier. In the mid-1960s, the CPM had some support in S-bazar, particularly among the schoolteachers there. But they amounted to no more than four or five active individuals who never initiated covert or illegal actions but confined themselves to demonstrations, meetings, an occasional strike and deputations to local administrators. In less central villages, a number of middle-class peasants were closely affiliated to the party. However, even these were few and far between, and their impact before 1967 was limited. In Udaynala Haksahab arranged election meetings with CPI/CPM activists for each general election from 1957 onwards. Apart from these meetings, no directly party-related activities ever took place. In Gopinathpur, the party was "represented" by the bagdi labourer Sakti Porel, but his "following" comprised only his brother and one dule. Communist activities were disallowed both in Gopinathpur and most neighbouring villages. The few activists met privately in the fields or in other villages, even during the height of the movement.

During the years of food scarcity in the mid-1960s a spurt of political activity took place in Burdwan (which contributed towards the CPM's later "discovery" of its rural potential). In Raina there were several instances of looting or similar incidents, and even more rumours of the same. Though the food situation in Raina and Dakshin Damodar was not particularly precarious, many took the opportunity to rally against the Government. Raina's Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Dasarathi Tah, is alleged to have led a procession of several thousand peasants and looted hoarding landlords' paddy storage in several villages in Dakshin Damodar. Included in this was

the looting of paddy ready for the market from the land of the Dawn family (who also owned land in Udaynala and Gopinathpur).

After a lull in 1966-7, looting was resumed after the instalment of the first UF Government. Looting became so rampant that the then Krishak Sabha leader in Burdwan, Benoy Chowdhuri, had to repeatedly denounce it at village meetings throughout Raina: "Looting is not our ideology". At least officially the party tried to prevent its members and supporters from looting or other irregular practices, but it proved difficult. Some months after Chowdhuri's speech, one cloth and ready-made shop and one grocery store in the village of S-pur were looted, and the post office in P. was burnt down. Efforts were also made to set fire to the Raina police building. A large gang tried to loot the ration go-down in S-bazar, but this was prevented by police forces. Minor cases of looting took place all the time. On the 20th of April 1968, 360 kg of paddy owned by two Udaynala inhabitants but stored in S-bazar was looted and lost.³¹

It is quite clear that many CPM-affiliated individuals (many of whom later converted to the Congress) did participate both in lootings and in dacoity. It was even rumoured in 1967 that the locally prominent CPM leader (now panchayat member) Rabin Mukherjee assassinated one big dacoit named Ganesh Sarkar. Ganesh Sarkar was party-affiliated and had organized and participated in dacoities and looting. In one instance during the food movement he had apprehended and stolen a cargo of paddy

³¹Mentioned in Waselmaster's diary. All places mentioned here are within or near Raina.

illegally destined for the market. Ganesh Sarkar sold the paddy locally at below the going rate, in the party's name. The owner of the cargo was one Akbar who was also a CPM supporter.

In 1969, a dacoit in the neighbouring thana of Khandaghosh was being chased by the police and hid his weaponry at his sister's husband's house, Rahim of Udaynala. One Ehia tipped off the police, and Rahim was sure this was his old enemy Ehiasaheb of Udaynala. His dacoit brother-in-law's gang consisted mainly of bagdis, and the Udaynala bagdis for once supported Rahim against Ehiasaheb. Ehiasaheb's house was "bombed" (a Molotov cocktail perhaps, the straw roof caught fire). However, a week later it was accepted that he was not the informer.

In 1970 it was rumoured in Udaynala that Haksahab's eldest son was involved with party-affiliated dacoits, and that the loot was shared in Haksahab's discussion house, with Haksahab's consent.³² A year later a militant Congress man, Naba Sain, and a locally famous CPM-supporting dacoit, had a shoot-out in the village of Alladipur in Khandaghosh. Locals hid the dacoit, while Naba Sain fled. Both were wounded and there had been casualties on both sides. The village was generally known as supporting the CPM, and the following day Naba Sain returned with a large gang of Congress strongmen, and they burnt the village to the ground. The affair was a famous one, connected to the subsequent killings of Naba Sain and his brother.³³

³²The information is from a friend and party colleague of Haksahab.

³³The killing of the Sain brothers in 1972 caused large demonstrations and much unrest. It reached the Calcutta newspapers and that came to form some of the rationale for government-supported persecution of communists.

Most people in Udaynala believed Ehasaheb was involved in the burning of Alladipur, although he denied this.

Land occupations in Udaynala

Land occupations constituted a more clearly ideologically defined means of action, and although for long its legality was unclear, land occupation was during the late 1960s a much more public statement than the forms encountered above. Nevertheless land occupations too came to have an air of secrecy and militancy that seem to have attracted the attention of the people and social groups previously identifying with proto-politics.

The occupation of land held in excess of the legal limit (*khas-land*) or land held under false name (*benami-land*) was the most striking aspect of the unrest of the UF period. Such land could legally be taken by the government and redistributed to the landless and much of it had already been vested in the government. But the Congress Governments never put much effort into implementing this legislation.³⁴ During its first period in office, the UF and its Land and Land Revenue Minister, Harekrishna Konar (CPM), sought to implement these measures through the ministry's machinery. The efforts were largely unsuccessful. During the UF's second period in office, Konar called for the land to be occupied by peasants themselves and for the bureaucrats to

³⁴For evasions see Bandyopadhyaya 1985, particularly appendix VA-B which cites P. Bandyopadhyay (Settlement Officer) *A study on evasion of Land Ceiling-X under West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act 1953*. See also B. Sen Gupta 1979, Dasgupta 1984b, Franda 1971a and B. Bose 1981.

come in afterwards to register the new owners. Following the law, however, lands under injunction (i.e. with the courts) could not be occupied or redistributed.³⁵ Although the legality of such occupation was unclear, the CPM and its leadership supported the strategy. Furthermore, in speeches throughout the countryside, Konar called peasants to fight the landlords, occupy lands forcefully if necessary, and cultivate the occupied lands before the legal matters had been dealt with. The party coined the slogan "Peasant, occupy the land, and then cultivate it",³⁶ and the policy became perceived as a major aspect of the party's mobilization efforts, and perhaps its most popular aspect.

In Burdwan, the problem for local mobilizers was not merely that occupation was legally unclear, although that could and did lead to clashes with the police.³⁷ Another problem, particularly pronounced in the beginning of the land-occupation movement, was that land occupation was perceived by many as dangerous and even morally wrong. The poor hesitated, were reluctant and cautious, and did not press forward.

The first instance of land occupation within Udaynala took place in 1967. A letter had reached the village from the panchayat chairman (the only leftist chairman in the Block) urging them to occupy vested land. According to Najir Hosen's account, the

³⁵For the history of land reforms under the UF Governments, see B. Sen Gupta 1972, Nossiter 1988, Ruud 1994a.

³⁶*casi tumi ~~dakhal~~ karo, ~~dakhal~~ kare cas karo.*

³⁷Jyoti Basu of the CPM took charge of the Home (Police) portfolio in the second UF Government. After this, the police increasingly sought to stay out of politicized conflicts.

leftists (including himself) hesitated because they felt that the people were not prepared, that "people believed in the ideas of the olden days".³⁸ Only the Congressite Ehiasaheb urged land occupation. He wanted to implement the legislation of his party, but nothing came of this. When land occupations were finally undertaken, two years later, the initiative was given by both those associated with the CPM and the village Congressites. A CPM activist brought a list of vested land in the four mouzas of Udaynala and Gopinathpur, and by then land occupations had become prominent elsewhere in the district. Vested land was open to occupation, and the following day a meeting was held with a representative from the Junior Land Reform Office (JLRO). The names and plots of 15-16 individuals owning vested land in Udaynala and Gopinathpur were checked. The same day people went into the fields and occupied the plots by raising the red flag on them. Elsewhere large fights took place over such attempts and some people were even shot. But here the targeted landowners were absentee, like the Dawns, and clashes did not take place.

Leadership was provided by the prominent and well-off village leaders (Ehiasaheb, Hanukaji, Hosen Imam, Waselmaster, Najir Hosen and Haksahab). Poor villagers participated in large numbers, not least people from poor or low-caste households. We note a fairly large and enthusiastic participation, on two occasions numbering several hundred — quite substantial for a village of 1,200-1,300 — "all with lathis and Abdul Alim with his gun". Among the participants there were three "core groups": the sekhs of East-para, the saotals, and the bagdis — the latter being the most active.

³⁸Village historian Najir Hosen has written a notebook entitled "Raina's peasant movement". All quotations in this section are from that notebook.

From among the remaining jatis of poor — the namasudras, the malliks and the muchis — only one or two individuals participated. Altogether some 15 bighas were occupied, all belonging to absentee owners.

Somewhat later rumours circulated that the land of Hitu Munsu had been vested. There was much discussion about how appropriate it would be to occupy land held by a co-villager. Nonetheless, in March 1970 a delegation of important villagers went to the JLRO office to have the rumours confirmed. They obtained a signature for occupation in spite of bribes paid by Hitu Munsu. Nothing might have come of this had not the second UF Government been dismissed a few days later, on the 16th of March 1970. A number of villagers went by foot to Calcutta to participate in a protest demonstration (among them were Haksahab and ten or eleven others) while back home Najir Hosen, Ehiasahab and others went into the fields to occupy Hitu Munsu's land, equally in a show of protest, again with guns and red flags.

Other minor plots had been occupied in the meantime, and some of the Udaynala people participated in similar operations in adjacent villages. These actions never appeared quite safe, and an air of semi-legality seems to have stuck to the practice. According to Najir Hosen's written account, in an incident in 1971 it was decided that the ripe paddy on a certain plot in Kh., would be cut "tonight unless there is a clear moon". Some women were sent away to relatives for safety.

All occupations were characterized by militant language and militancy (the lathis and a gun or two were standard equipment), even when no immediate threat faced them.

Harekrishna Konar is allegedly to have said in Raina, "You the poor, you have often given your life in fights [danga] over land, spilt your blood, for somebody else's land. Now fight [*larai koro*, "make war"] for your own land, not others' land". This spirit was also found in Udaynala, where the villagers talked in terms of "war", "spilling blood", of "force" and "conquering" the land, while waving lathis and shouting slogans.

Conclusion

Looting could perhaps be easily interpreted as a more legitimate and direct expression of popular sentiments than dacoity. It took place in broad day-light and demanded more people than a dacoity raid. But the borderline was thin, and dacoity too was to a large extent aimed at popularly accepted targets, even when the raid was part of a personal dispute. In the mid-1960s, if not before, the line between the political parties, including the CPM, and gangs of dacoits was far from clear — at least in the popular perception and in rumours. Rumours contribute towards creating the environment in which options are created, and action is taken or forsaken.³⁹ Rumours alleging the involvement of locally important party politicians in close relationships with dacoits and in looting, created an unstable and fluid situation. Equally, rumours contributed towards giving the CPM a more popular image. The party of the *bhadralok* was coming to the *chhotok*, so to speak, and was seen as using, even if unintentionally, ways and means associated with the poor and the lower castes, with quasi-legitimate if desperate action. The party appeared to have stepped down from

³⁹For a lucid account of rumours forming political action, see Amin 1984.

its pedestal of meetings, petitions and "calls" for action, which had so far been its main contribution to political life in Burdwan. Instead, its activists were seen as engaged in familiar, proto-political forms of action — action that could in the popular perception and historically have arisen both from a sense of injustice and from political motivation. The new addition was in the concertedness of action, and its backing from a party with an obvious pro-poor agenda.

Proto-political practices were previously widespread in redress of morally grounded grievances but also in the assertion of one's interests. This use of proto-political action ties in with the quite explicitly "political" — or interested — content of village leader-follower relations as they existed. It was difficult to distinguish between personal objectives, personal animosities, or particularistic considerations, and the broader, or universalistic, aims of the movement. As discussed in Chapter Two, multi-faceted or complex patron-client relationships did not characterize all employer-employee relations but only those centring on a limited number of village leaders. The relationships these built with larger groups of the population were implicitly understood as political relations, as "alliances" that could forward the interests of those involved. The politics of such groups was part of the same cultural world as proto-political forms of action, and the latter had often been used in the former.

In the creation of these ^{specific}~~specific~~ relationships, we found "caste" to have been important. Caste can be understood as any other group society and man use to create order, and to which we apply stereotypes, prejudices that extend from the group to the individual and eases interpersonal and intergroup relationships. These stereotypes

consist of a number of restrictions and obligations, behavioural norms and understanding of acceptable transgressions that society applies to each group. An example would be adolescent men, who in rural West Bengal may transgress caste limits or rules of politeness only to meet with a shrugging of shoulders, "They're just boys".

Caste is different in that it is a ritually defined, and endogamous, and so more clearly defined and less subject to nuances. Still, locally caste too is largely understood in terms of its stereotypes not its ritual position. This "understanding" is created in history, as an accumulation of more or less noteworthy events, persuasive pieces of myths or traditions, individual achievements or failures, and material conditions and opportunities. It would be impossible to go into the details of the creation of specific caste stereotypes. What is interesting in the present context is that these stereotypes set parameters for specific castes' roles in village politics, which again gave rise to different opportunities in a situation of changing political alignments and of "calls for mobilization".

Muchis could not fend for themselves as fighters, and had come to rely on their image as village servants dependent on discretionary benevolence. Through submission they were able to assert their interests, although this path had its obvious constraints. Bagdis, on the other hand, identified closely with proto-political forms of action, and took a great deal of pride in their ability with lathis, their dacoit heroes, and their recklessness. This not only gave them an impetus to join the looting and the land occupations, but also created a place for them in village politics that could not be

dismissed by would-be village leaders. In a way, the bagdis' recklessness secured them patronage from (old-style) village leaders, and it secured them a special place in the CPM's local set-up.

SIX

WEALTH, POWER, AND STATUS: CPM-AFFILIATION AS A CULTURAL REFORM PROCESS

Introduction

Social aspirations cannot be ignored as a constitutive element in rural and village politics.¹ This chapter puts forward two arguments about the continued (electoral) popularity of the CPM in rural West Bengal. Firstly, the CPM has come to represent a path for upward social mobility for groups of poor. Secondly, the CPM has taken social ambitions into consideration in its on-the-ground distribution of divisible boons. Other factors have also contributed towards the party's position, such as economic reform and land redistribution, political mobilization and organization.² These were important factors and have in general benefited all the rural poor. The noteworthy aspect is, however, that not all poor had benefited to the same extent. The distribution of benefits in Udaynala and Gopinathpur followed approximately *jati* divisions — a point particularly evident in political representation. Certain favoured groups of poor were more active in the CPM than other groups, and were more closely identified with

¹A different version of this chapter was presented at the *Workshop on agricultural growth and agrarian structure in contemporary West Bengal and Bangladesh* (Calcutta, January 9-12, 1995). I am grateful to John Harriss, Biplab Dasgupta, Ben Rogaly, Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya and Glyn Williams for comments.

²For some of the debate on the LFG's programmes and policies, see Nossiter 1988, Kohli 1990, Lieten 1990, 1992 and 1994; Sengupta 1981; B. Bose 1981; Dasgupta 1984b; Mallick 1992; Webster 1992; Bhattacharya 1993; Acharya 1994.

the party. Their support was reciprocated by the local party leadership which considered closely these groups' economic needs and social status as expressed politically and culturally. The party's local leadership continued to build and maintain bonds with groups and individuals, bonds based on both material and non-material considerations, "symbolic capital" as I called it, built and maintained with solid and sensitive local knowledge (*Fingerspitzengefühl*, fingertip feeling), and particularly evident in their sensitive handling of various groups' internal disputes.

The literature on contemporary politics in West Bengal has largely ignored how, in addition to its economic and political programmes, the CPM also represents a cultural programme. As argued in Chapter Four, the party's image and local representation grew out of the bhadralok's history and culture, an image and representation that was extended to its rural manifestation, with some adjustments. To a large extent, the party was still represented and dominated by rustic bhadralok in the early 1990s, although, as we shall see, lower-caste representation was fast increasing. More importantly, the party continued to represent values that were imbedded in the bhadralok tradition, values that were translated into party initiatives, particularly in what I call its "civilizational project". By historical association and ideological conviction the CPM has come to represent causes such as anti-casteism, social equality for the poor, teetotalism, and literacy. The party has sought to implement these objectives — successfully to a significant degree — but one should be careful to note that these were objectives which followed closely on earlier efforts of cultural and social reform (or "sanskritization", a concept I discuss below).

Because of the limitations in the party's economic reform programme and because of the limited "control" jatis of poor have on the party, it is here, in the social implications of the party's policy, that we need to look for why so many poor and in particular this one jati identify themselves with the party.

In this chapter I will show the party's involvement in local politics, for instance in how the local CPM leadership has paid closer attention to the status-ambitions of one certain jati, the bagdis, than of other jatis. The attention has led to a favouring in the distribution of economic assets, political representation and social status concerns. The reason for this particular attention lies partly in local history and partly in structural considerations. The bagdis were numerically important, although not all that important in Udaynala. In spite of not having a history of close cooperation with the CPM, bagdis did have a history of involvement in local politics. This involvement was formerly as "fighters" (*lathials*) of village leaders who depended on this support for the continuation of leadership (as argued in Chapter Five). In particular, their militancy (or threat thereof) had been a crucial element in intimidating opposition, rivals and insubordinate subjects. The local CPM leadership of the LFG era depended on this jati for much the same reasons: numbers and activists. Bagdis were particularly active in demonstrations, strikes and instances of intimidation of opponents during the early years of CPM rule when there was still much opposition to the party's reforms.

Bagdi support has enabled the CPM to "pacify" and control the area in terms of, firstly, winning elections and implementing its economic reform programme, and,

secondly, winning broad acceptance among the poor for the main objectives of its cultural programme. Conversely, for the bagdis, their identification with the party has firstly led to uneven distribution of certain boons in their favour, and secondly to symbolic gestures of recognition of importance by the local party leadership and other important villagers. Moreover, a close involvement by bagdis in the CPM's "civilizational project" — which followed closely on their own previous reforms — has gained them a higher social position. The same attention has not benefited comparable jatis although there is no immediate reason why these should be less CPM-friendly.

This chapter will outline the social, political and economic gains made by the poor over a thirty-year period, and how these gains show marked differences among groups of poor identified by jatis. I will focus primarily on the bagdi and muchhi jatis, both classified as Scheduled Castes, for whom the difference in treatment comes out quite starkly. However, it may need underlining that when I talk about jati I do not intend an essentialist interpretation. On the contrary, my own experience in these villages and the material presented here show that jati is above all a social construct that can be employed by the individuals concerned to obtain advantages; in other words, caste is a conscious entity. Here I have concerned myself with jati identities because they were important social markers. The status of one's jati reflected upon oneself and constituted part of one's own identity and status in society. Jati was not the whole story of one's identity or social standing, but it was an important part of the story. I have also concerned myself with jati because there were obvious differences in how various jatis have fared during the last decade and a half. These differences ^{arise} ~~arouse~~

from the unequal distribution of economic means and political influence, and from unequal engagement in and ability to use the mechanisms for social reform on offer under the present regime.

Economic changes

Details of amounts of land owned per individual among the different *jatis* in these two villages show a significant levelling of economic inequalities over the last thirty years (see Tables 6.1 and 6.2). The 1960 figures show a situation of marked economic differences, differences that to a large extent followed social (caste or *jati*) divisions. By 1993 the differences had not disappeared but were much less marked, and certain groups of poor had fared quite well. However, the figures also show marked variations among groups of poor.

Table 6.1
Landownership by person and jati, Gopinathpur 1960 and 1993

	<u>High caste*</u>	<u>Aguri</u>	<u>Napit</u>	<u>Bagdi</u>	<u>Dule</u>	<u>Muchi</u>	
Population in numbers							Total
1960	71	137	79	203	47	69	606
1993	111	214	165	371	85	165	1111
Land per person (in <i>bigha</i>)							Average
1960	2.53	3.18	1.66	0.71	0.38	0.30	1.53
1993	1.30	1.83	1.53	0.85	0.36	0.19	0.99
Percentage of village land owned							Total
1960	19.3	46.8	14.1	15.7	2.0	2.1	100.0
1993	13.2	29.1	23.1	28.9	2.8	2.9	100.0

* "High caste" includes bamun and kayastha

Source: field-data

In Gopinathpur the bagdi population has almost doubled its ownership of village land over the 33 years period. In 1993 they controlled nearly the same amount as the former "dominant caste", the aguris. Over the same period, only the bagdis saw an increase in their "land per person" figure, a development contrary to the average trend and quite a feat in view of a near doubling of their population. The muchis of Gopinathpur have seen a small increase in their proportion of village land, but this increase has not been comparable to the increase in population so their "land per person" figure has decreased at the average rate.

Table 6.2
Landownership by person and jati, Udaynala 1957 and 1993

	<u>Clean</u> <u>caste*</u>	<u>Muslim</u>	<u>Nama-</u> <u>sudra</u>	<u>Bagdi</u>	<u>Muchi</u>	<u>Saotal</u>	
Population in numbers							Total
1957	97	538	217	165	48	35	1100
1993	94	1125	299	304	91	93	2006
Land per person (in <i>bigha</i>)							Average
1957	1.64	2.14	1.39	0.99	0.35	0.40	1.15
1993	1.40	1.20	0.55	0.93	0.60	0.15	0.79
Percentage of village land owned							Total
1957	8.6	64.3	16.4	8.9	0.9	0.8	99.9
1993	6.6	67.5	8.3	14.2	2.8	0.7	100.1

* "Clean caste" includes bamun, kayastha, kalu, and bene

Source: field-data

In Udaynala too bagdis have collectively gained control over a much larger proportion of village land than they previously held. Their average "land per person" has decreased slightly (from 0.99 to 0.93), but this was negligible compared to the all-village decrease (from 1.15 to 0.79). Only the muchis have fared better, with a near doubling of "land per person". However, they still fell short of the all-village average, whereas by 1993 the bagdis were better off than average.

In sum, the population increase over the three decades caused a substantial decrease in landholding per person (or household). The former "dominant" high-status jatis have been most severely affected and have lost their former dominant economic position, and they have also lost in terms of land per person. The lower castes have in the main gained (with the exception of the Udaynala namasudras, but that was due

to the decline of a once wealthy family). Among the various jatis of poor, muchis of Udaynala seem to have fared the best although still short of the all-village average. Their counterparts in Gopinathpur have become relatively poorer over the period in question. Bagdis, on the other hand, have done very well in both villages. Where muchis in Udaynala have done well, bagdis have reached an above average "land per person" figure; where muchis of Gopinathpur have fared devastatingly, bagdis have increased their "land per person".

Unfortunately, I do not have figures that can confirm whether this development was significantly under way before the 1977 instalment of the LFG or not. However, local history does suggest that all major absentee landowners sold their lands after the rural unrest and the CPM-led mobilization of the late 1960s — leaving little to be redistributed. This may explain some of the changes.³

Redistribution of wealth: majuri, khas and IRDP

The LFG initiated diverse programmes on the rural front: land redistribution, sharecropping registration (the so-called Operation Barga), a fairer distribution of subsidized loans, and an increase in daily wages. Contrary to the attention the issue has received, it does not appear from these villages that land redistribution by itself accounted for the changes in landownership. In Gopinathpur only 17 *bighas* (equal to 5.6 acres, or 1.3% of total village lands) were ever confiscated and redistributed.

³Most of the major absentee landowners were originally locals and their lands have been included in the 1960 figures of Tables 6.1 and 6.2.

In Udaynala a more significant 53 bighas (but only 2.8% of total village land) were redistributed.

A more decisive instrument in this process of redistribution involved increases in *majuri* (daily wages for agricultural labourers) — a point acknowledged as significant and positive even by the local opposition. At the time the LFG took over, *majuri* consisted normally of Rs 2, 1 kg of paddy (*chal*), 10 country cigarettes (*biri*) and some body oil. At the time the price of paddy varied from Rs 2 to Rs 2.50 pr kg, which makes total *majuri* about 1.75–2 kg of paddy plus the cigarettes and oil. Wages were raised under CPM pressure on four occasions between 1978 and 1993, mainly against landowner opposition. The situation was particularly bad in Gopinathpur, which saw two prolonged strikes (of 15 and 10 days, in 1977 and 1982). Striking labourers from Gopinathpur were on both occasions given employment in Udaynala (by the party-supporters there) to secure an income for the duration of the strikes. On two other occasions, wages were raised after quiet discussions. In 1993 standard *majuri* stood at Rs 12 and 2 kg paddy, with biris and oil being dropped (this was still slightly under the official minimum of Rs 14 and 2 kg paddy). The paddy price approximated Rs 5.50 per kg in 1993, which made total *majuri* equal about 4 kg of paddy. Calculated in paddy then, *majuri* has doubled over the 16-17 years in question. More significantly, perhaps, was that the number of working days (and thus of income) has vastly increased. The traditional *aman*-crop takes about 20-25 man-days per bigha, while the more intensive *boro*-crop takes 35-40 man-days. The *aus*-crop falls in between. Until the late 1970s the *aman*-crop was all-important, and the *aus* insignificant in comparison. There was no *boro*-crop. Recent expansion of irrigation

facilities plus the high yielding seed varieties (HYVs) have made possible extensive boro-crops. Whereas previously labourers were unemployed — "sitting around" — for more than six to seven months a year, most were fully employed for at least 9-10 full months in the early 1990s.

These developments concern non-divisible boons and do not help us to explain the variations in land acquisition among different groups of labourers. It is pertinent to glance at other aspects of LFG's redistributive measures, in particular the more discriminate redistribution of land and distribution of IRDP loans.

As mentioned much of the originally designated vested land (*khas*) had vanished by the inauguration of the LFG in 1977. However, some land was redistributed during the early years of that Government. The general pattern was that land was redistributed in minuscule plots, ranging normally between 8 or ten *katha* to a bigha and a half.⁴ During the second half of the 1980s, the distribution of subsidized loans under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) became increasingly important as a means of distribution of wealth. The distribution of *khas* land in Udaynala is given in Table 6.3, and the distribution of IRDPs is given in Table 6.4 (unfortunately I do not possess comparably reliable figures for Gopinathpur).

⁴There is twelve *katha* to one bigha.

Table 6.3
Recipients of redistributed *khas* by jati-group, Udaynala, 1993

<u>Jati group</u>	<u>Population</u> N	<u>N</u>	<u>Khas recipients</u> % of <u>total</u>	<u>per 100</u> <u>persons</u>
Clean caste*	94	0	0.0	0.0
Sekh	935	40	41.2	4.3
Namasudra	299	12	12.4	4.0
Mallik	190	11	11.3	5.8
Bagdi	304	23	23.7	7.6
Muchi	91	5	7.2	5.5
<u>Saotal</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>5.1</u>	<u>5.4</u>
Sum	2006	97	100.0	4.8

* "Clean caste" comprises bamun, kayastha, bene and kalu.

Source: field-data

Table 6.4
Recipients of IRDP by jati group, Udaynala, 1993

<u>Jati group</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>IRDP recipients</u> % of <u>total</u>	<u>per 100</u> <u>persons</u>
Clean caste*	94	0	0.0	0.0
Sekh	935	51	40.2	5.5
Namasudra	299	22	17.3	7.4
Mallik	190	12	9.4	6.3
Bagdi	304	27	21.3	8.9
Muchi	91	6	4.7	6.7
<u>Saotal</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>7.1</u>	<u>9.7</u>
Sum	2006	127	100.0	6.3

* "Clean caste" comprises bamun, kayastha, bene and kalu.

Source: field-data

From these two tables we find that the distribution of both khas-land and IRDPs has been overwhelmingly in favour of jatis that comprise poor households. Clean-caste households have received neither khas nor IRDP.⁵ Moreover, my information suggests that most recipients were poor households. However, there are again interesting variations among various groups of poor. Bagdis stand out in both tables as having received more khas-grants per population than other jatis, and more IRDP loans — with the exception of the utterly poor saotals (who are classified as Scheduled Tribe and come under special provisions).

Both my own observations as well as Raina party activists and Burdwan party leaders reveal that favouring of party affiliates in the distribution of khas and IRDP almost amounted to an unofficial party line.⁶ This should not be exaggerated; the tendency was rather to disfavour anyone publicly affiliated to the opposition. In general, the party line has been to favour the distribution of marginal plots of khas instead of "viable" plots, so as to "reach" as many people as possible.⁷

⁵After my survey, two clean-caste households received IRDP signatures from the panchayat member; one of the recipients was a moderately well-off money-lender. Normally, even the poor among the higher castes did not ~~receive~~ loans, but then they ^{receive} — having perhaps internalized the stereotypes of their caste — tended to support the Congress rather than the CPM.

⁶CPM MP Somnath Chatterjee argued that "Of course people become CPM-supporters when there is a question of redistributing land." Interview in Guskara, Birbhum, 1989. Mallick (1990 and 1992) argues that well-off families do receive IRDPs, but Swaminathan 1990 finds such practices not to be prominent. See also Westergaard 1987.

⁷Baruah 1990 and Lieten 1992:140-1. Sengupta (1981:A-69) calculates that one in three landless households have benefited from land redistribution. However, excess land has been redistributed in very small plots, from 0.33 to 2 acres, "hardly more than homesteads" (Lieten 1990:2268).

But the question of why bagdis should be favoured against other jatis in the redistribution still remains. Were other jatis of poor less inclined towards the CPM? The somewhat uneven pattern in the redistribution is again made evident as we turn to political representation.

Political representation

The other main aspect of the CPM's nearly two decades long rule in West Bengal to have caught the attention of scholars is the broader political participation as represented in the *panchayat* system of local elected government. In one recent contribution to the debate, Lieten writes that in terms of caste composition the panchayats in Memari II (also in Burdwan) saw a "remarkable" increase in the representation of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST).⁸ The percentage of SC/ST representatives rose to 51.1% — in Lieten's own words, "well above their proportion in the population".⁹ I have no knowledge of Memari II or the specific composition of the SC/ST group there, but the case of "over-representation" is in itself interesting. In the Gram Panchayat to which Udaynala and Gopinathpur belong a similar trend in representation was evident: increased representation for the SCs and decreased representation for "cultivator jatis" and what Lieten calls "bhadralok" jatis (see Table 6.5). However, a breakdown of the SC/ST group into individual jatis shows that the well-above average representation pertains to certain jatis rather than the entire group.

⁸Lieten 1994:1835.

⁹Lieten 1994:1835.

Table 6.5
Representation by jati in S. Gram Panchayat

	1988–93	1993–
Namasudra (SC)	1	2
Bagdi (SC)	6	8
Aguri	6	4
Muslim	3	2
Kayastha	-	1
<u>Bamun</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	18	19

Source: field-data

We find that ^{SCs} ~~SCs~~ were well represented, and that an increase in their representation has taken place. Bagdis, who account for about one fourth of the population in the area (see Chapter Five), have been over-represented in the panchayats, contributing a third of the members in the 1988–93 period, and 44% in the period since 1993.

Table 6.6**Gram Panchayat representation by jati from Udaynala and Gopinathpur, 1978-1993+ (in periods)**

	1978	1983	1988	1993*	Total	Percentage of village population 1993
Gopinathpur						
Aguri	1	1	-	1	3	19.3
Bagdi	-	-	1	2	3	33.4
Unrepresented groups						
High-castes						10.0
Intermediary caste						14.9
Other SC						22.5
Total SC population						55.9
Udaynala						
Sekh	1	1	1	1	4	56.1
Bagdi	1	1	1	-	3	15.2
Namasudra	-	-	-	1	1	14.9
Unrepresented groups						
Clean-castes						4.7
Other SC/ST						9.2
Total SC/ST population						39.3

* From the originally three Gram Panchayat seats from 1978, an extra seat was created in Gopinathpur in 1993. In addition one former Gram Panchayat Member was elected Member of the Jela Parishad. Two seats were reserved for women in 1993.

Source: field-data

From Table 6.6 it appears that as a bloc the lower castes have been well represented and increasingly so. Combined, the ST/SC have been represented in proportion to their share of the total population. However, apart from one representative, elected as late as in 1993, all low-caste members were bagdis. The Udaynala bagdis were represented for the 15-year period 1978-1993, and from 1988 onwards also in Gopinathpur. More than forty per cent of the panchayat members from these two villages were from a jati that constitutes one fifth of the total population.

Representation in the panchayats constitutes only one form of political influence. It is worth noting, although space does not permit a detailed outline, that bagdis were also well represented in other fora, such as the boards of village cooperative societies and in the recently created Gram Committees.¹⁰

In terms of actual political influence at an all-village or extra-village level the picture seems more varied. Gopinathpur's former bagdi Gram Panchayat member from 1988 and from 1993 Jela Parishad member, Shyamsundar, was by all acknowledged as articulate and intelligent. As a prominent party member he wielded much influence with the party in the area. In addition his brother was full-time secretary of the local cooperative society that comprised Gopinathpur and three other villages. On the other hand, Udaynala's two bagdi Gram Panchayat members never wielded much influence. The first member, Sankar Dhaure, who sat for one period only, was quasi-illiterate, and although powerful within his own *para* (neighbourhood) he had limited interest in and capacity for the affairs of the larger polity. The second member, Biswanath, was only 17 when first elected, and his youth effectively prevented much clout with senior party workers or administrators even after 10 years as member.

In her study of low-caste and tribal representation vs. control of panchayats, Westergaard noted that in spite of fair representation of the poor, "...by and large this representation has not resulted in any significant increase in their [the poor's] control

¹⁰For the Gram Committee, see footnote 27, Chapter Two.

over these institutions".¹¹ This would seem right for one village here although not for the other.

In view of increased representation, what we need to investigate is the social meaning of Gram Panchayat representation, the context in which such representation is accepted or extended without necessarily being followed by increased control. Firstly, it should be noted that panchayat members were not representatives of their individual communities as much as the party's people. As is well-known from the functioning of the panchayat system in West Bengal (and most of the democratic world) decisions were taken by the party in its own internal meetings, and only presented as a *fait accompli* at the official panchayat meeting. This becomes particularly interesting when we know that although ultimately relying on popular support, the individual panchayat members were not *elected* by the people qua individuals but were *selected* by the party and appointed as its candidates. The CPM did normally not select candidates that could not be trusted. Most panchayat members had long records of party-affiliated work, very often in one of the auxiliary organizations (the Kisan Sabha, the SFI or DYFI, the Mahila Samiti, etc.). In an over-simplified but not entirely inaccurate description, the panchayat members were primarily the party's people, and the people was represented by the party. People voted for the party more than for the individual candidate. The party was strong enough to secure its candidates as members, so why did it continue to select candidates from certain jatis of poor rather than others?

¹¹Westergaard 1987:109-10.

The jati in question here, the bagdis, constituted a major proportion of the local population; in Udaynala the bagdis constituted one eighth of the total population, in Gopinathpur one third. This to a large extent rationalizes representation, although not (at least in Udaynala) over-representation among the poor.

Chapter Five showed the role of bagdis in old-style village politics, as a core group of lathials for the village leaders, and later on, for Udaynala, how they were drawn into the land occupations and general agrarian unrest of the late 1960s, together with sekhs (of the east-para) and saotals. In the following period (as covered in Chapter Two) they supported Ehiasaheb in his suppression of communists as lathials. In 1977 they were again coaxed into the CPM camp by Haksahab, and the former Ehiasaheb supporter Sankar Dhaure was made the CPM's candidate for the 1978 panchayat election. During the first eight to ten years of the LFG-era there was a large amount of opposition to the party and its policies, in particular to the raises in majuri plus various anti-casteist measures. During these years frequent and huge processions, demonstrations, and meetings were organized, often with hundreds of participants.¹² In Udaynala, at the beginning of the harvesting season in 1981, demonstrations for higher majuri were organized, and a counter-demonstration was held by village landowners. The size (and noise — they shouted slogans) of the pro-raise demonstration convinced the land-owners to step down. In Gopinathpur the party's authority was underlined in two prolonged strikes on majuri (led by the aguri

¹²From a study of party activities in Midnapur district, Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya (1993) distinguishes distinct phases in the CPM's policies vis-à-vis rural classes: from an early phase of low-class and low-caste militancy towards a later phase (mid-1980s) of class cooperation.

panchayat member Sailen Kes but opposed by most clean-caste and high-caste landowners). Bagdis played a crucial role in both strikes, as most majurs were bagdis and their solidarity was integral to the success of the strikes.

I have no doubt that in other regions and areas, even where there were bagdis, the CPM found itself relying on other groups. But representation, or over-representation, constituted an important means of tying bonds, of creating an enduring alliance to an active and very useful group. Their numbers and willingness to participate in activities such as strikes and demonstrations, made this jati particularly important in establishing the CPM's authority. Their support, as potential lathials, had been sought since time immemorial by village leaders, and was more recently sought and maintained by local CPM leaders. The loss of their support would be devastating to the CPM's local position and clout.

However, as Westergaard suggested, representation has not necessarily been followed by increased control. I would argue that "representation" may be as important as "control" in establishing links between party and people. Bagdis were tied to the party by being given representation in — not control of — public positions. Considerations of jati for the selection of a candidate were important and gave rise to both pride and hurt feelings. This was made evident for me in the election process for one of the two Gram Committees in Udaynala in late 1993. Gram Committees were officially constituted through public elections, but in practice only one list of "candidates" was made up by the assembled party people and was "voted" over — yes or no — by those assembled. At this particular meeting, sekh Muslims advocated in private during

the meeting to assure the election of one of theirs, arguing that they (the sekhs) had as long a record of party work as bagdis. However, Biswanath, former bagdi panchayat member, advocated his candidacy (also in private, to the leading party member present, "I will be chairman, will I not?"). Eventually he was made chairman, and most sekhs left the meeting before the formal "election".

The sekhs argued entirely along jati lines, "us" and "them". There was never a question of allegiance to another party. The Gram Committee chairman did have some prerogatives but in reality his powers were nil and void unless backed by other sources, such as the party or the panchayat chairman. For instance, the Gram Committee drew up the list of candidates for the IRDP loans, but these needed the signature of the panchayat member to be successful. Nonetheless, what was important for the agitated sekhs was not "control" but "representation". Sekhs in general were well represented in the local party set-up and some yielded substantial power, although no-one from the east-para enjoyed party positions. Representation in a position such as the Gram Committee Chairman would, according to the sekh Muslims of this para, would have reflected their importance in the party's local history, their allegiance and support of the party. Representation would have been an acknowledgement from the party leadership of this importance. Only one individual would have gained such a position, but the implicit acknowledgement would have reflected on all. As indeed it did in the case of the "winner", in the same way that his Gram Panchayat membership for two periods had reflected on his group.

We should remember the fact that previously, in the 1960s for instance, public political positions, formal or informal, were invariably dominated by the higher castes (or high-status Muslims). In the 1990s, on the other hand, the lower castes and the poor were at a fast increasing rate given formal political positions and participated in public meetings on a par with everyone else. Political representation gains its social relevance from these historical circumstances. It was not merely a question of gaining influence, of obtaining control over institutions. In some cases representation was extended without an automatic sharing of control. This, however, did not necessarily give rise to discontent because for a group previously not publicly included in the fora of power, public representation in itself was a step forward, an enhancement of status, an acknowledgement of importance. Such an acknowledgement could be expressed in other ways as well, such as in dispute settlements.

The politics of dispute settlement

Interesting insights into how the relationship between village leaders and groups of low-caste poor functioned may be gained from dispute settlement within non-dominant castes. Srinivas mentions that dominant caste leaders often performed arbitration in other castes.¹³ The same was found in other parts of India.¹⁴ Such intervention, however, did not apply to all castes. Particularly those of equal or higher ritual rank

¹³Srinivas 1959.

¹⁴Gough 1955, Mayer 1958, Hitchcock 1959, Dumont and Pocock 1957.

(e.g. Brahmins), but also some of lower rank, did not accept external arbitration.¹⁵ Bailey argues that in the "traditional system" only the dominant castes had a proper "corporate political existence" and could consider the affairs of other castes the affairs of the whole village and thus theirs.¹⁶ But Mandelbaum rightfully points to a large number of cases of the opposite, of villages with several castes managing their own affairs.¹⁷ Nonetheless, mediation or arbitration from outside was a strong tendency.

We may argue that such intervention was a sign of dominance, and changes in intervention pointed to changes in dominance. Put differently, the authority to mediate was a function of the specifics of the relationship between the jatis in question. The settlement of disputes within or between non-dominant castes was often performed by members of the dominant caste. They sought to maintain a monopoly on authority. In most cases, non-dominant groups had their own "elders" who saw to smaller disputes, but these were often "representatives" of the dominant group. Srinivas writes:

This highlights a feature of rural social organization in this area, the council of the dominant castes tries to create a structure of authority within each group it has to deal with, though its efforts frequently fail.¹⁸

¹⁵The Khatis in Ramkheri did not accept arbitration by the Rajputs; Mayer 1958.

¹⁶Bailey 1960:191.

¹⁷Mandelbaum 1970b:365ff.

¹⁸Srinivas 1959:12, see also Gough 1955.

Such a structure represented an extension of the authority of the dominant caste. The lesser "elders" managed affairs within their own group, and only when this was not sufficient were the "elders" of the dominant caste engaged. Such intervention would normally be in support of the lesser elder. External intervention in the village — by for instance the police — was generally disallowed, or at least limited to the upholding of the existing structure of authority. In Hitchcock's study, the two village leaders (the "mukhia" and the "principal") prevented on occasions police intervention in their "realms".¹⁹

If this "monopoly on authority" was a major concern in the status considerations of all-village leaders, would not an effort to establish a local monopoly on authority also be a concern for leaders of lesser groups, for lower, semi-subordinated jatis, given the chance? And vice versa, would abstention from interference not constitute marks of respect from the all-village leader bestowed on the lesser ally?

From the villages of Udaynala and Gopinathpur we shall see how outside arbitration in disputes among members of the bagdi jati was accepted at certain points and under certain circumstances, but at other times and under other circumstances it was not. The absence of intervention reflects either antagonism, or, quite the opposite, recognition by village leaders of the importance of the jati and authority (however limited) of the jati's own leaders to dissolve inner conflicts. When the absence of intervention does not reflect antagonism, then it reflects a basic trust, an understanding

¹⁹Hitchcock 1959; see also Gough 1955. In Mandelbaum's words, "A disputant who deliberately tries to take his quarrel outside the village for settlement is declared guilty of slighting the local patrons" (1970b:360).

of shared objectives — an "alliance". Together with other elements, such as innumerable signs of "equality" (as per the modern tradition), the absence of external arbitration for some jatis, when compared with intervention in the affairs of comparable jatis of the same village at the same time, reflects a recognition of social status. Groups of high social status cannot accept outside intervention while groups of low social status can very often not avoid it. The absence of outside arbitration thus becomes part of a recognition of a relative social status.

The following section will investigate how disputes among bagdis were solved, who the mediators were, and under what circumstances mediation was accepted or discontinued. We find that mediation/acceptance of authority was generally paralleled by a large degree of intimacy, and rejection of mediation most often reflected a situation of enmity. In both Udaynala and Gopinathpur even purely internal bagdi disputes were largely sought settled through arbitration and mediation by village leaders, i.e. non-bagdis. The authority to mediate was located with the village leaders, but village leaders whose authority the lesser group recognized. The arbitrator was always someone to whom the group already lent support.

Among the bagdis of Gopinathpur in the 1960s, the two main bagdi leaders, Sakti Dhara and Gobardhan, each with their group of family and followers, always sought to settle internal disputes themselves. However, their authority was not always accepted, by cousins for instance, and non-bagdi village leaders could be approached by anyone involved in a dispute. Arbitration very often took place in the presence of main village leaders — invariably "dominant caste" aguris, and in particular their ally,

Bhaskar Kes. Bamun or napit leaders never mediated bagdi disputes, and kayasthas only on very rare occasions. During these years no bagdi ever participated in the settling of aguri disputes.

In the 1970s the situation changed a little when one kayastha village leader, Anadi Sarkar, emerged with the support of the Congress. Gobardhan shifted his allegiance. Because both of them were members of a religious reform movement, the Satsangha, which does not recognize caste, the bagdi leader often participated as one of several village leaders called upon to settle disputes. However, he never attended the settlement of purely internal aguri disputes. Bagdis continued to be subjected to the arbitration of all-village leaders, in particular the kayastha.

With the arrival of the LFG in 1977, the situation changed radically. The village's main CPM activist (and Gram Panchayat member), Sailen Kes, aguri by caste, ensured the presence of two bagdi leaders at all dispute settlements: Sakti Dhara and the Gram Panchayat member-to-be, Shyamsundar. When the aguri CPM activist left politics and the village, the fronts between the village's two main communities, aguri and bagdi, hardened. In the 1980s and early 1990s most bagdis voted for the CPM while most clean castes voted for Congress (and in 1993 for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party — BJP). Shyamsundar was respected as Gram Panchayat member, but his intervention was not sought in intra-aguri disputes nor in disputes among other clean-caste villagers. Only one lone CPM-affiliated kayastha, Kesto Sarkar, attended dispute settlements among bagdis, otherwise external intervention was not sought.

In Udaynala, all-village leaders were in the 1960s often called upon to mediate intra-bagdi disputes. One such village leader, Jikukaji, of aristocratic background and on whose land most bagdis lived, considered the Bagdi-para part of his "realm", as his fathers had done before him. His intervention was a sine qua non of dispute settlement among bagdis in those days. His son did not have the same personality, and authority drifted to other village leaders, in particular Ehiasaheb and Haksahab, all of same sekh jati. These leaders continued the tradition of intervention and dominance, although they depended on bagdi support. Increased political tension in the village during the late 1960s led to rivalry over bagdi support between several would-be village leaders, and the bagdis came to enjoy a period of "non-intervention". However, the repression of communists ended the rivalry, and bagdis again found themselves subjected to one single village leader — Ehiasaheb, supported by the Congress and whom they supported as lathials. Ehiasaheb eventually had to flee the village, and in the absence of any prominent village leader the bagdis again enjoyed some autonomy between 1974 and 1977.

In 1977 the absence of clear authority was ended with the unquestioned position of the CPM and its local activists. The new main village leader, Haksahab, had a 20-year record of party work and his authority was unquestioned over the entire anchal. However, this did not mean the reimposition of outside authority on the Udaynala bagdis. The most prominent bagdi leader, Sankar Dhaure, was made Gram Panchayat candidate by the party. His track record as Congressite lathial leader and lack of a record of cooperation with the CPM did not prevent this. He was effectively put "in charge" of the Bagdi-para so that after 1978 only on two occasions has outside

mediation been required, both times under his young successor, and both times concerning a dispute with the one non-CPM family in the para. Absence of external mediation represented in the old days an extension of the authority of the village leaders of dominant castes to lesser leaders of subordinated castes, and also enhanced the local authority of the latter. The same absence of external arbitration during the LFG era represented an extension of the authority of the party to lesser groups of supporters, and enhanced the position of the lesser leaders.

Throughout this period village leaders mediated disputes among muchis of both villages. In Gopinathpur it was previously the aguri village leaders who did this, but in the 1990s the bagdi village leaders and panchayat members performed this duty. In Udaynala, muchi disputes have always been and were still mediated by sekhs even though the muchi-para falls within the seat represented by the bagdis in the Gram Panchayat.

The acceptance of authority in dispute mediation is a reflection of a more general relationship. The equation of the contemporary local CPM leadership with village leaders of the past is not to say there is no difference in political content or ideological orientation of dispute management, but that the relationship of authority has in many ways remained the same in spite of a change of personalities. The mediator is an outsider whose authority is accepted and who wields powers that may potentially be put to use. Non-involvement in bagdi disputes symbolizes that bagdi leaders are part of the same authority as other (more important) local party people — a recognition not bestowed on muchi leaders. This non-involvement in bagdi disputes

suggested the same acknowledgement of importance evident in the distribution of institutionalized positions.

In brief summary, the local village leaders, who were also the local party leadership, have taken into consideration a local mode for expressing status differences among different groups. This relied on differences in importance for the party (or in the party's perception), but the publicly expressed acknowledgement of this difference tied the one jati to the exercise of power. In Gopinathpur this tie has become very real in that bagdis have become the party unit there. In Udaynala somewhat less so, but the bagdis there were still in symbolically significant ways associated with power. Apart from individuals who become influential in the party, representation and subtle signs of acknowledgement seem to have enhanced the bagdis' self-respect and their position in society.

It might perhaps be argued that the relationship between the CPM and the bagdis was a not too extraordinary patron-client relationship with exchange of votes and man-support for benefits both material and political. However, the case may not be that simple. As stated earlier, most bagdis and a number of other poor low-caste people were staunch defenders of the party and identified with it. Bagdis in particular seem to have adopted the party's ideology, and very few among them support the Congress or the BJP.²⁰

²⁰During the last panchayat election (June 1993) a number of bagdi and other low-caste families supported the BJP. One reason, as outlined in Ruud 1994b, seems to be that the BJP was able to offer a ritual recognition, of which the atheistic CPM was entirely unable.

However, there were elements in this adoption of ideology which require closer scrutiny. Locally bagdis constitute a backbone in the party apparatus, but they also constitute a "success story" in having adapted to the requirements of the party's "civilization project" and having achieved higher social status through cultural reform. At the same time they have become more scrupulous in their religious observances.

Cultural reform processes and models

Srinivas' concept "sanskritization" refers to the reforms engaged in by various jatis to enhance their social and ritual status.²¹ The term, as Fuller has pointed out, confuses rhetoric with actual practice (as there is no agreed Sanskritic Hinduism).²² Furthermore, the ritual-religious reforms are but one type of cultural reform processes. Another type has been termed "modernization" or "westernization".²³ What is generally agreed is that the models aspired to are not universal, All-Indian. Rather, the model is locally prominent, a replication of the life-style of a dominant caste or some other locally well-known model. These limitations notwithstanding, the concept has gained wide currency in the anthropological literature and refers in general to efforts of social status enhancement engaged in by whole groups, more often than not jatis. It may however be better to term such cultural reform processes exactly that, "cultural reform processes", with the provision that they have to be locally and historically understood. A cultural reform process aims at a locally well-known model

²¹Srinivas 1965.

²²Fuller 1992:24-8.
1990, Part III

²³See Cohn 1990.

— a model that may change over time — with the life-style and/or religious practices emulated by that model.

Any such cultural reform process aims at attaining a higher relative status. Attainment can be expressed in a number of ways, although always from outside the reforming group, in particular by those whose higher status is obviously accepted. Attainment can be expressed in terms of ritual services rendered by Brahmins as priests or other service castes, or the acceptance of food, wedding invitations or new names by the locally dominant caste.²⁴

There were in rural West Bengal three distinct and strong socio-cultural models: the *bhadralok* (the "gentlefolk", the educated), the *chasi* (the "peasant"), and the *majur* (labourer).²⁵ These were historically formed and corresponded roughly to caste divisions (high castes; peasant castes; low castes and tribals), as well as to ownership classes (landlords, owner-cultivators, and landless).²⁶ The first two have functioned as models for cultural reform. Integral to these were distinct life-styles. The *chasi* was stereotypically a sturdy cultivator of his own lands, frugal, morally upright and conscientious in his religious observances. The *bhadralok*, on the other hand, enjoyed a service position or enough land to keep him comfortable in non-manual engagement.

²⁴See for instance Davis 1983.

²⁵See Ray 1983 and 1987, and Bose 1986, Ch. 1.

²⁶The tripartite social, religious and economic division was not as clear as it may appear; there was a great deal of overlap and individual household mobility.

He was not merely literate, but had a lively interest in literary pursuits, poetry, drama and songs.

The bhadralok of the landlord kind vanished from the rural scene in the decades prior to 1977. The only figure close to that style after the 1970s was the schoolteacher. However, as suggested in Chapter Four, during this same period, a blending of the chasi model with the pursuits and interests of the bhadralok took place. The well-off owner-cultivator sent his sons and increasingly also daughters to school, where they were familiarized with the cultural world of educated Bengal. Literacy in the extended sense of knowledge of poetry, staging dramas (*jatra*), and singing Tagore songs has come to be deemed necessary ingredients in the ideal life of a chasi. These tendencies were also much evident in village life in Burdwan in the second decade of LFG rule. Shame on the village that did not stage at least one *jatra* performance during its main festival, that did not have a "function" for Rabindranath's anniversary, or that was still without a library. Both Gopinathpur and Udaynala have a number of trained singers, many would-be and some published poets, and a few dramatists.²⁷ Most of these belong to "peasant castes", not the "bhadralok castes". Few males of the peasant castes have not at one point acted in a *jatra* performance.

²⁷In Gopinathpur there were two poets with published works plus a number of people whose writings have been published in newspapers or magazines. One individual has become a professional actor in Calcutta. In Udaynala four individuals have published collections of poetry or writings of a scholarly kind, an additional three have had articles or poetry published in magazines or newspapers. Two have had their own plays staged, one of which by a professional troupe. There was no achieved singer in either village, but fairly large numbers had been taking training. Someone told me that, "In Bengal, you're not a real man until you have written poetry".

Such "cultured" activities were at one time not available to all castes. Some discrimination seems to have taken place, though more as a result of difficulties in bridging a long-standing social gap than of a conscious exclusion of the lower castes. The caste barrier has gradually been removed. A more enduring obstacle for participation in such activities, both in the 1960s and in the 1990s, was illiteracy. Disability on this front not only precluded participation in activities such as jatra or poetry recitals but hampered inclusion in the status group that engaged in such activities. In other words, aspirations towards higher status became increasingly difficult because a higher status for majurs meant a chasi status — which was becoming increasingly literate and "literature-conscious". Literacy became a sine qua non of an even marginally improved social status for majurs; it became the hallmark of the upwardly mobile.

Bagdi and muchhi social changes

Over the last three or four decades a movement has emerged among muchhis to abandon some of the most polluting and stigmatizing aspects of their life-style and image. One of the most stigmatizing aspects of muchhi life-style was the consumption of beef, an aspect integral to popular perceptions of muchhis not sanctioned by scriptures. Over this period more and more muchhi communities in the area declared to have abandoned the practice. As the movement gained momentum it became increasingly difficult for beef-eating muchhis to marry off sons and daughters. By 1993

all but one muchi-community in Raina had publicly declared to have abandoned eating beef.²⁸

Another aspect of their life-style contributing to a low position was the production and consumption of alcohol. Particularly the annual puja-festivities for the rustic and non-Vedic Mansa were associated with a large consumption of home-made liquor. Muchis in both Udaynala and Gopinathpur had produced liquor for sale, and this became particularly profitable during the years of unclear political leadership in the 1970s. However, once CPM rule had been properly established, they were requested to end production — and they did. Only the consumption of liquor continued, and in Udaynala's muchi-para this caused a drawn-out division in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The public annual puja became the centre of contention. The group that favoured less drinking abstained from the common puja and staged a separate one a month later. This lasted for six years until, under pressure from muchis elsewhere, they agreed to celebrate a common puja but with less alcohol. During my visit there was little alcohol involved, and the drinking routs of the past had almost disappeared.

These efforts have not gained them a higher position within the all-Hindu ritual ranking. However, together with the general cultural changes in rural society, this made muchis less exposed to openly expressed untouchability. The other side of the coin was the ridicule. "The muchi who wanted to be *borolok* ["big-man", respected]" was a great source of non-muchi amusement. To outsiders, muchis as co-villagers

²⁸Though, as Nimai Das said, "There's no telling what people eat in the privacy of their homes".

were referred to in respectful terms and their para called Das-para (Das being their preferred name). But within the village, they continued to be objects of scant respect and their para referred to as muchi-para. The myth about muchis once having been kings, although known to all muchis, was practically unknown outside their community. When I retold the story, it was met with incredulity and laughter.

At the beginning of our period, several bagdi families sought to rid themselves of the image of the unruly bagdi. In Udaynala the Bag family and in Gopinathpur the Porel and Malik families went through religious reform, literacy, or life-style changes trying to make themselves into chasi (peasant) Hindus. In this they were aided by their landholdings or, in case of the Maliks, by a service position. The model on which the few bagdi families shaped themselves was the clean-caste Hindu chasi: meticulous in religious observances, teetotal and vegetarian, always sporting dhoti and shirt (not shirtless as was common), and a supervisory rather than participatory engagement in cultivation. Cultivation remained crucial in their life-style, as it is to clean-caste Hindu chasis.²⁹ Gobardhan Porel's wealthy household and large family has been leading the sanskritization processes. He himself was "guru" in a Hindu reformist sect, the Satsangha, which emphasized thrift, cleanliness, and personalized religious observances. The Satsangha's philosophy was directed towards the "householder" (*grihastha*) who also has to consider the welfare of his family and his land. God is worshipped, according to Satsanghi philosophy, through work, through concern for fellow human beings, and through fulfilment of one's social obligations. Through the

²⁹The "model" of the thrifty and frugal peasant, with a vegetarian and introvert life-style, was first described by Mayer (1958).

fulfilment of these religious obligations, Gobardhan took his family away from the social world and life-style of most of Gopinathpur's bagdis, a move which had a great impact on the village bagdis' life-style.

The Maliks followed a different route, one which may better be described as "modernization". Originally from a poor household, one young boy was sent to a relative in Bihar, where he was educated and eventually obtained a service position. Most of his life he stayed away from the village, but over the years bought land and provided his six children with some education. One son, Shyamsundar, was for one period the panchayat member for Gopinathpur and later Jela Parishad member. The second son became full-time secretary of the village cooperative society, while the third tends to the family's 20 bighas of land. The family's sanskritization consisted mainly of education, abstention from drink and meat-eating, and the life-style that went with landownership and service positions. They did not observe any religious activities except village festivals. All were communists — which connected them to the quasi-bhadralok of "the modern tradition", a connection which further enhanced their status.

Udaynala had only one sanskritizing bagdi family, the Bags. The Bag family's background was not different from others in bagdi-para, but extensive money-lending gave them a platform for cultural reform. They were the first in Udaynala's bagdi-para to refrain from drinking and gambling. Manik, self-taught literate, was an ardent reader of the epics (Mahabharata being a favourite), also as the first in the para. They took to wearing shirts, gave dowry, and kept the women from outside work. They

were also meticulous in religious observances, and were the first to bring the Hindu religious calendar to the para, and to follow it. The Bag family came to be considered the "most Hindu in bagdi-para".

Previously low-caste labourers were served on banana-leaves, sitting in the middle of the employer's courtyard. Payment was dropped onto their hands to avoid touch, and they were not allowed near the temple for fear of polluting the deity. These practices had vanished gradually over the decades after the 1950s — although more recently in the case of muchis than bagdis. By the 1990s, any Hindu was allowed close to the temple, any labourer irrespective of his jati seated on the porch and served on plates. But the position of muchis was still more ambivalent than that of bagdis. Muchis were more explicitly polluting than bagdis and this reflected in everyday behaviour. As muchis informed me, while bagdi labourers leave their plates unwashed, muchis labourers wash their plates before leaving these for the employer's household's women to pick up. A bagdi could socialize with anyone anywhere restrained only by an inferior economic status. The muchis' ability to socialize was restrained by both an inferior economic status and an implicit, never expressed ritual distance. If touched by a low-caste individual high-caste Hindus did not rush off to take a ritual bath (*snan*), but muchis took care to avoid touch and thus putting high-caste individuals in an embarrassing situation. The same reluctance was evident in approaching temples. Muchis approached one by one, gave offerings and returned to stand at a distance, while other Hindus including bagdis lingered around in front of the temple. Bagdis were respected as ordinary Hindus whereas muchis were still stigmatized as

"untouchables". The bagdi reform process's aim of a higher social status has been accepted as legitimate while the muchhi effort was ridiculed and scorned.

In a large measure, ritual changes have paradoxically been caused by the arrival of an atheistic party. Firstly, the CPM has made it impossible to publicly express sentiments of casteism or ritual pollution. Moreover, aspects of the CPM's general policy have indeed directly assisted certain jatis to an improved ritual position and higher social status. The CPM's ideological emphasis on the "upliftment" of the poor includes measures that have most of the signs of the "sanskritization" efforts: literacy, teetotalism, material improvement, and political representation.

The CPM's "civilizational project"

In 1981 gambling was abolished from the all-village public celebrations (the *baroari puja*) of Gopinathpur after pressure from Sailen Kes, village leader, CPM activist and Gram Panchayat member, and Shyamsundar, "modernized" bagdi leader and Gram Panchayat member-to-be. The following year gambling was abolished from the same celebrations in Udaynala after an initiative by Haksahab, prominent local CPM leader and Gram Panchayat member. Only in the case of the annual *baroari puja* of Udaynala's bagdi-para was gambling not discontinued; that move was resisted by (not sanskritized or modernized) bagdi leader Sankar Dhaure, Gram Panchayat member.

This pattern was replicated on the issue of excessive drinking. The local CPM leadership was instrumental in ending liquor production among both muchhis and

bagdis. The muchis, as mentioned above, yielded without protest. But the bagdis did not, and that event and its political circumstances are noteworthy. Having taken part in the repression of communists in the early 1970s, the Udaynala bagdis had disassociated themselves from local politics in the mid-1970s. Both they and the muchis had exploited a local political lacuna between 1974 and 1977 to engage in the liquor business. Some time after the 1977 instalment of the LFG, a party of local CPM-activists campaigned for the abolition of liquor-production and sale from the bagdi- and muchi-paras. But the bagdis put up resistance, and waved lathis and threw pieces of dried mud at an anti-liquor procession of local notables approaching their para in the autumn of 1977. A few days later, the police was brought in and broke the production-utensils. Some months after this incident, a rapprochement took place. Sankar Dhaure, the bagdi-leader who previously had collaborated with Ehiasaheb until three years earlier, agreed to end all liquor-production in the para and to advocate support of the party instead. In the 1978 panchayat elections he was made the party's candidate, was elected and sat for one period. His successor was another bagdi — literate but under-aged at the time. The bagdis of Udaynala have since not produced liquor for sale, but they were represented in the Gram Panchayat until 1993 and received a large share of the boons distributed by the party.

This was not an "exchange" in any normal sense of the word, but an inclusion in a sphere of power through the adoption of certain values. On the whole the relationship seems governed by exactly such subtle understandings and identification. Over the years the bagdis have not only become staunch supporters of the CPM, but they have also reformed their life-styles based on the chasi model — a reform made possible

through the connection to the CPM. These reforms show influences from the dominant party's ideology, but also from previous "sanskritization" efforts. For instance, following pressure from the party bagdis in most villages in this area have abolished gambling and heavy drinking from fairs and festivals. On the other hand, however, money has been diverted into the building of new brick temples, increasingly larger and more expensive celebrations with an immense increase in the number of sacrificed goats. The Udaynala bagdis 15-20 years back commonly sacrificed 5-10 goats, with the goddess placed in a temporarily constructed shed. In 1993 they sacrificed 32 goats with the goddess placed in a brick temple.

Literacy represents one dramatic change. When I conducted my first round of informal interviews in the poor paras of Udaynala, I was told by bagdis that thirty years ago, "No one here knew how to read or write. When we received a letter or a notice from the authorities, we had to go to the middle paras to have it read to us." This was true for most people — the exception being the "sanskritizing" families. By the 1990s, most young bagdis and a majority of young muchis attended classes and the incident of literacy was increasing rapidly.

Table 6.7

Education and age-groups, men and women above 16 years of age, of bagdi jati, Udaynala and Gopinathpur 1993

Level of literacy/ grade	Age-groups					Total
	<u>16-25</u>	<u>26-35</u>	<u>36-45</u>	<u>46-55</u>	<u>56-90</u>	
None	19.4	33.9	49.2	39.1	60.9	35.0
Some*	11.5	22.9	18.5	41.3	26.1	20.8
1-5	26.6	16.9	15.4	15.2	10.9	19.1
6-10	26.6	22.0	13.8	2.2	2.2	17.9
11+	2.2	4.2	3.1	2.2	-	2.7
Under education	13.7					4.6
Sum	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0	100.1	100.1
N	139	118	65	46	46	414

For asterisk and source see table 6.8.

Table 6.8

Education and age-groups, men and women above 16 years of age, of muchhi jati, Udaynala and Gopinathpur 1993

Level of literacy/ grade	Age-groups					Total
	<u>16-25</u>	<u>26-35</u>	<u>36-45</u>	<u>46-55</u>	<u>56-90</u>	
None	37.5	71.4	73.3	84.0	86.7	65.0
Some*	6.3	9.5	10.0	16.0	13.3	10.0
1-5	27.1	16.7	16.7	-	-	15.6
6-10	12.5	2.4	-	-	-	4.4
11+	-	-	-	-	-	-
Under education	16.7					5.0
Sum	100.1	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	48	42	30	25	15	160

* "Some" indicates literacy achieved either at a *pathshala* (older form of informal village school, in existence until the 1950s), taught at home (by a relative) or at the present-day literacy campaign centres.

Source: field-data

Table 6.7 shows the level of literacy or grade passed for the bagdi jati of both Udaynala and Gopinathpur. In the table both men and women of 16 years of age or more are included. The correlation between age and education is striking. The table shows that until 40 years ago, less than 20 per cent of bagdis in these villages had any formal education. Sixty per cent of those now 56 years old or more are illiterate, while one fourth know "some" — a category ranging from the ability to write one's name to fairly fluent. Local knowledge suggests however that few bagdis attended pathshalas for any length of time; instead a number of the older bagdis have learnt to read and write at the village literacy campaign centres.³⁰ The opposite was the case for the younger generations. Only one in three received no formal education or had been taught at the literacy campaign centres, and an increasing proportion reached higher levels, with a little more than one out of four having reached Grade 6 or higher (the "Under education" category is to a large extent made up of people who have failed lower level exams). Eleven individuals (4.6%) have reached Grade 11 or higher, of whom eight are 35 or younger.

Table 6.8 gives the same figures for muchis. The figures reflect the same trend of increased literacy and education. However, the development was slower. Until 1960 no muchis had any formal training, and four in five were illiterate. This situation has slowly changed, with remarkable developments only for the last batch, those aged 25 or below at the time of the survey. This batch reached school-age at around the time

³⁰The state Government and the CPM combined to launch a literacy campaign in Burdwan district in 1990. In most villages teaching centres were organized by the Gram Committees, kerosene was supplied through the Panchayats, and inexpensive material was provided by the Government. Many youths contributed as volunteer teachers.

of the instalment of the LFG. It is noticeable, however, that even this batch contained a substantial number of illiterates, more than one in three. Moreover, only three individuals have attended the literacy campaign classes. The proportion of illiterate muchis in this age-group was twice that of bagdis. And still by 1993 no muchi had gone for higher education (which would take them out of the villages).

These developments do not compare favourably with similar figures for the higher jatis. Here I will only mention some of the trends for these "dominant castes". Among the sekhs Muslims, illiteracy was down to 7.3%, with an additional 8.8% trained in the literacy campaign centres. The rest, or some 85%, have formal education. More than one in ten of the below 35's have completed class 11 or more. Among the three dominant castes of Gopinathpur, the situation was even more striking. Illiteracy has been eradicated among the youngest batch, and only a very few individuals of these jatis have ever attended the literacy campaign classes. Some 45% of the youngest batch have passed class six or more. One in ten or more of those aged 55 or less have passed class 11 or more.

Literacy is not merely about the ability to read and write, to know and assert one's rights, to make one's daily or not-so-daily life less strenuous; as long as literacy is not taken for granted, not an ability automatically made available to every member of society, then literacy also has a social meaning, a statement about difference and status. In rural West Bengal, as in most agrarian societies, it was the well-off who were literate. This difference was underlined by a parallel division of life-style,

between the bhadralok, the chasi, and the majur, with the bhadralok literate, the chasi increasingly literate, and the majur archetypically illiterate.

Furthermore, as Poromesh Acharya has pointed out, due to historical circumstances schooling and the mode of education in (West) Bengal were attuned to a particular style of learning and to the literary interests of the bhadralok — not to the practical interests of other social groups.³¹ The spread of literacy under the aegis of a mass party has not changed this markedly.³² The increase in the number of village schools (in Udaynala since 1958, in Gopinathpur since 1964) has done much to universalize literacy and thus to reduce its social significance. However, it still retained quite a lot of potential as a social marker. We should remember that not everyone was literate and that the high rate of school attendance was a very recent phenomenon indeed. The social significance was evident from the way teenagers who have been to school engage themselves in clubs, in jatra performances and in bringing libraries and books to their village. Again and again I witnessed how eager youth — irrespective of jati but not irrespective of education — engage in "cultural functions" where they played music, read poetry (some self-composed) and made speeches about the need for a cultural uplift. Literacy was not merely about the ability to read and write, it was about being part of a "culture", it was about social belonging and status.

³¹Acharya 1981 and 1986.

³²Only the material for the current literacy campaign has much improved in this respect compared to primary school material. However, even here the interests derived from the bhadralok's literary traditions were evident. For instance, about one third of the campaign material's "Part Two" was devoted to poems by famous Bengali poets and to a lengthier story by Saratchandra Chatterjee. *saksharatar dvitiya path*, State Research Centre (West Bengal), Calcutta 1990.

It is therefore significant that the bagdis have achieved a higher level of literacy than muchis, that they have invested relatively more in schooling. We find in this investment a closer identification with the objectives of the party they support. A higher level of literacy and other signs of cultural reform plus an improved economic position have contributed to create for bagdis the outward signs of a chasi, a much improved social status than the majur status they previously held. This improvement has been further strengthened by the CPM which has shown gestures to this jati which suggest a favoured political position.

Conclusion

It has been the aim of this chapter to suggest the linkage of political allegiance to cultural reform and social status. Enduring political allegiance of the type found in rural West Bengal between the CPM and groups of poor low caste cannot be properly understood unless the social significance of representation, cultural reform and economic improvements are taken into consideration. The CPM's ideology has led it to include the poor into the public exercise of power, and it has organized drives against drink, illiteracy and casteism — practices that stigmatised the poor and low caste and that by being eliminated elevated their self-perception and social standing.

All poor, irrespective of jati, have experienced an enhancement in their publicly expressed social position as well as their economic well-being and political representation. Beyond this, a close link, a "special relationship", has been established in this locality between the local CPM leadership and one particular jati. The jati

received disproportional attention from the party leadership, which has led to an improved economic position and a closer relationship with the sources of local power. The same jati has, more than comparable jatis, also embraced more closely basic tenets of the party's drives against social malpractices — an embracing which follows quite closely on previous efforts of cultural reform. Closeness to the party has made possible ambitions they have long nourished.

SEVEN CONCLUSION

The first major point of this study has been to argue for the understanding of the CPM's emergence, entrenchment and position in rural Bengal in light of its ability to play the game and be part of village politics. Apart from its obvious implications of economic redistribution (or efforts in that direction), a main result of the LFG raj has been the involvement of increasingly large groups of people in government, and simultaneously an increase in the involvement of the party in the everyday lives of villagers. In the 1990s party and government reached down to villages in a more tangible and powerful way than thirty years back. Nonetheless, in spite of all its economic power and bureaucratic might, the party administration nexus was still far from able to control village affairs and was largely excluded from involvement in the daily lives of villages. The financial means at the state's disposal were immense, but not that immense, and its administrative capacity was limited to a handful of individuals covering areas of thousands of inhabitants. Even after the introduction of panchayati raj and mass mobilization villages retained a large degree of internal self-rule. And it was from the formation of loyalties and perceptions in the thousand villages that parties were directly affected. The CPM's desire to control villagers' votes obliged it to be part of villages politics.

Important elements in the game of village politics are those I have called symbolic capital and *Fingerspitzengefühl*. I will not repeat them here, only state that these are

crucial concepts for understanding a face-to-face polity in which no-one in particular has extraordinary powers; that is, some may have access to means nobody else has access to (such as state resources), but only in extraordinary circumstances will such means be of decisive influence in a village because a large number of people are not imperatively dependent on such resources, and the limited nature of these means cannot at any one point of time reach and be of decisive importance to but a limited number of people. The magnitude of state resources may be thus visualized: IRDP loans were about 9 thousand Rupees during my visit, and were distributed to 5-6 families in each village (depending on size) each year; the dowry for a girl of a moderately well-off family amounted to 10-15 times that sum, and even for a poor family, the IRDP loan could only cover some of the expenses for a wedding.

Other elements equally decisive for the individual villager's strategic considerations included the imperative of a reservoir of symbolic capital (also in the more extended sense not used here, i.e. applying to non-leaders as well), and political support (both intra- and extra-village).

If political loyalty did not derive directly from economic necessity, the individual villager would seek other qualities in the person he would accept as leader. Or he might chose not to accept anyone at all, in which case the would-be village leader would have to appeal to shared values or innovative norms to mobilize support. This would particularly apply in an electoral democracy. Even in villages, where people more or less know who votes for what party, there was still no guarantee that votes were actually cast for the party people said they supported. Any one would-be village

leader, politician or party seeking re-election, would have to attract support based on more than its material capacity.

To take one problem at a time; presuming that the party would like to "buy" its voters if it had the (material) resources, we find that it does not, and so has to rely on other means of enticing supporters into voting for it. In a status-conscious society such as rural West Bengal, one crucial way in which this could be achieved and the lack of material resources compensated, was by symbolic gestures (towards) affirming a status ambition. Such subtle signs constituted and cemented relationships, whether the relationship involved (old-style) village leaders, party activists or individual or group actors on the village political scene.

Much of village politics, as I have argued, evolved around non-material issues (allegations, theft, disputes), and in particular around "names" and reputations, rumours and gossip. Rumours and gossip were crucial parts of village politics, to a large extent gossip was what village politics was all about. Reputations were crucial to authority, reputations for being powerful, active and considerate. Not that this did not require some "real" content, it did. People were able to distinguish real action from "faire ssembler" action from their larger reservoir of knowledge about the actors involved. This is where *Fingerspitzgefühl* gains its full meaning, in playing the game of real confidence. Bengali villages were not "theatre states", where the symbolic was the real. They were states where "resources" other than material were also fought over, where elements such as status and signs of status acknowledgement, names and

reputations, were important because they were much desired and little else was available to be fought over.

With this in mind Chapters Four and Five focused on the late 1960s, the main period of the CPM's expansion into the rural areas. The "conversion" to communism as represented by the erstwhile CPI and later CPM, was first evident among younger members of the middle to rich peasantry. Through family links but more generally through exposure to new ideas via education, these sections of the village population were familiarized with "the modern tradition" — the ideology of the "modern" world, where notions of equality and progress constituted a core to which Nehru paid allegiance, to which the government of West Bengal at least paid lip-service, and which was fast becoming the dominant ideology. This was an ideology that was firmly part of the culture of the high-status, educated and urban Bengali *bhadralok* (gentlefolk) — the "modern tradition, Bengali flavour". An important strand within "the modern tradition" in Bengal was radical and favoured closer ties with the lower classes. This radicalism was particularly enacted in *jatras* (theatre performances) — formerly perceived as a lowly form of entertainment — where new views on the position of women, inter-caste relations, poverty and development were presented.

This radical strand also justified for a number of (would-be) village leaders a move away from typically *bhadralok* forms of conducting politics (pamphlets, meetings, resolutions, petitions) towards what was perceived of as typically low-caste and low-class forms — what I called "proto-political" forms of politics. This took place during the United Front period, the most restless in West Bengal's history, and was

particularly evident in the close personal contacts many CPM activists with former "criminals", in the militant forms of action which replicated low caste or class heroic actions — forms of action that had largely the same people as targets and the same issues at the forefront.

But this turn appears as more than a move of political expediency to coax the lower classes. What we found to have taken place was the dynamics of local society in its diversity taking over a political movement. The party gave a semblance of organization and justification to the wide range of actions, and certainly coherence. But the range and energy of the actions followed proto-political forms of action, as did also the mobilization pattern, and the pattern of command. Middle-class peasants, some of whom qualified as village leaders, following the logic of their ideological convictions and political ambitions, together with large numbers of low-class and low-caste villagers seeking the redress of old and new grievances through manners they were familiar with and under the banner of the party that allowed them to do so, did not constitute "the poor" all of a sudden "called" into action but particular groups of the rural population taking advantage of an opportunity to fulfill what had been long in coming. The difference was that now the actions were concerted and legitimized by an ideological party's call for mobilization. The party became "ours" in more senses than just "for us". It gave justification to "our" actions.

Interestingly the party did not become "ours" to all poor or low caste. The degree of identification was limited to certain groups, to certain pre-existing identities. In the main only those groups that for a long time had had a decisive influence on village

politics were mobilized in the CPM's movement, and although they from the party's point of view could hardly be described as faithful supporters during the 1970s, they were incorporated into the realm of the new powers after 1977 and gained a larger share of the frills than other groups of the poor (Chapter Six). The two groups of poor and low caste (the muchis and the bagdis) followed two different models in their interaction with village leaders, and came to play different roles in the CPM set-up. This leads us to two considerations. The varied manipulation of stereotypes, numbers, economic clout and cultural constructs — in short, of available material — by groups of poor, suggests that "patron-client relationships" were not unitary. That concept seems to hide more than it reveals. Instead individual (fluid) groups were able to exploit a host of factors to further and preserve their interests. The means varied much, and not all groups enjoyed equal amounts of influence. However, in view of the CPM's mobilization, this becomes quite interesting. Would the CPM have been able to mobilize had it not engaged in forms of action associated with the stereotype of the fierce low-class bagdi? It is not possible here to consider that question with regard to all of West Bengal, but it seems certain that it would not have been possible in the present area to mobilize large groups such as the bagdis based on a "meek" (Gandhian?) attitude.

This leads us to the second main argument of this study, to show how the CPM could gain and retain its broad rural support from the early beginnings in the 1960s to the mature state of LFG raj in the 1990s. This argument also relates to a point above, where I assumed that the CPM was willing to buy its voters if it could. It cannot, so it does not, and it involves itself in village politics. But this is not an entirely accurate

picture. The CPM has not infiltrated itself in village politics. The movement — with its specific features and the manner in which it functions — grows out of village politics. It grows out of village politics just as the movement and the particularities of its early phase of mobilization grew out of particularities in Bengali history in conjunction with rural society. The CPM has retained its support in rural society by being part of it, by allowing its lower echelons to be as much part of rural society as they are part of the party machinery. Or, better still, the other way around, because such a picture of political calculation ignores the fact that the party was not different from society but grew out of it. The lower echelons of the party were members of rural society, they were villagers. The higher echelons, or more interestingly, the party's ethos, belong firmly to a Bengali tradition that was different from (both in social and in cultural terms) village society, but as two traditions within the same society they were not unrelated to one another, nor entirely disassociated. The modern tradition grew out of a meeting with Western tradition, while rural tradition remained in continuous interaction with the changing modern tradition (through the landed gentry and lesser bhadralok, later through schoolteachers, volunteer social workers and activists of various political hues, finally through the education of increasingly larger numbers of villagers).

I have no intention of arguing for a view of history with no actors, only "cultural trends" moving forward. One significant historical element that cannot be explained in terms of culture was the "discovery" of the rural scene and the call for mobilization of peasants that gripped the CPM in the wake of the Naxalite allure for radical but crucial elements within the party. That event proved decisive in the history of West

Bengal. But it would have been another futile call had there not been an environment that could respond positively and intelligently. The response was to mobilize along the lines the lower castes and classes readily understood and identified with, abandoning the ways and mores of the bhadralok for a while (the political equivalent of the IPTA going rustic 20 years earlier). In a way, this was both an instance of mobilization and integration of the lower classes and castes into the polity; it amounted to an appropriation of the polity by the lower castes. But it was not an appropriation on their own terms for long. By the 1980s and 1990s they were turning into another variety of the ruling classes, sharing in the latter's values and interests, abandoning their own former ways, the mode of involvement that had characterized their participation in politics.

The relationship of the CPM vis-à-vis the lower castes has changed, from an involvement of the party in the territory of the lower castes, to an involvement of the lower castes in the ways and mores of the dominant social group and ideology — although not entirely. The party retains its position, but the relationship receives its sustenance, from a continued attention to the social concerns or ambitions of the lower castes — in particular those of immediate interest to the party.

A preoccupation in this study has been to avoid portraying villages and villagers as recipients of external influences, as objects, not subjects of history. I have instead sought to regard villagers as active appropriators of elements from the outside, these being either "calls for mobilization", certain symbols of status, political or economic opportunities — according to their own needs, concerns and ambitions. This could

of course never be the full picture. Villagers both react to the larger society that exists, as it exists, and they influence it and its formation. They are not the sole creators of the larger society, and no society can be understood entirely in terms of its local society and history, nor can it be understood without local society.

APPENDIX

TIME-SPENDING SURVEY

Haksaheb (former panchayat member for Udaynala North): little time spent on his fields, over the entire week only three short visits. Mornings spent at home, visited by three to five individuals or groups. Before noon: field visits, shopping pesticides (near-by S-bazar), twice meetings with Rabiell on the cooperative, thrice to the local party office in near-by village (presumably in connection with the takeover bid to come in the cooperative), twice meetings with fellow-villagers over the distribution of man-power (a shortage of hired-in hands threatened to become a problem). Afternoons: largely the same activities with the addition of one bichar. Evenings: engaged in gossiping and card-games every evening till late except once.

Rabiell (party worker and de facto panchayat member for Udaynala North): little time spent on the fields (he owns very little). Mornings: at home, visited by up to seven individuals or groups. Before noon: twice meetings with Haksaheb on the cooperative society bid, every day except one to local party office on various issues (cooperative society bid, Gram Committee meetings all over the region, general party matters), one visit to a near-by village in some party affairs. Afternoons: once with his wife to a panchayat meeting (in near-by village), discussions and meetings in Udaynala over the insects and the distribution of hired-in labourers. Not to the bichar. Evenings: ditto, but mostly at home where he was called upon by people wanting advice or assistance (in all six groups or individuals), or around in para for gossip.

Biswanath (former panchayat member for Udaynala South): Mornings spent in the para, not at home but at various neighbours'. Before noon: tending the fields,

weeding or spraying pesticides. Around noon at least two hours every day spent gossiping and fishing in the *namasudra-para*, near Santi's house. Afternoon: four afternoons spent in the fields or in cultivation-related activities, one largely spent at home quarrelling with his elder brother, once to the party office, one discussion with Santi on the upcoming meeting in the cooperative society, and once a secret meeting with Ohab (that everybody soon learnt about). Evenings: two evenings spent in the *home-para*, the other five in the *namasudra-para*, each evening in card-games.

Santi (panchayat member for Udaynala South): Mornings visited by people, from two to five groups or individuals. Before noon: mainly engaged in agricultural activities, though thrice to party office for meetings, brought back pesticides for his family and two other families on his bicycle. Afternoons and evenings: minimal agricultural activities, mainly meetings of various sorts: the cooperative bid, the shortage of hired-in labourers, one Gram Committee meeting and one with the volunteer teachers of the literacy campaign over lack of kerosene, conducting a survey of IRDP-eligibles. Home very late into the night, no card-games.

Shyamsundar (Jela Parishad member and teacher): Mornings: three to seven visitors at his home. Midday: as Jela Parishad member and teacher he was naturally quite busy, teaching six days a week between 10 am and 2.30 pm (Saturdays to 1 pm) except the days he went for meetings of the Jela Parishad. Afternoons: more meetings and party-related work, visited three other villages plus two evenings to the party office. Remaining two evenings around in the village, talking and gossiping, planning the upcoming Gram Committee meeting.

Angsuman (full-time secretary of the cooperative society that includes Gopinathpur, brother of Shyamsundar): Mornings: saw visitors together with his brother at their joint household. Midday: attended to the cooperative society at the office in near-by S-bazar, once to another village, once to Burdwan town. Evenings: one large meeting on dispute on the *baroari puja*, plus planning the *puja*. Two evenings at home (visited by neighbours, relatives, for gossiping), five evenings around in village visiting, gossiping, planning.

Kesto Sarkar: because he was too ill to do any cultivation on the small amount of land he owned, he spent his entire day engaged in various village activities. Over the week he was approached by an average of four a day (from two to eight) individuals or groups who wanted his assistance or advice. Not out of the village, once to the field. One afternoon-evening to the weekly Satsangha meeting, other evenings to the other meetings in the village (the planning of the Gram Committee meeting, the big baroari meeting, the planning meetings on the puja).

GLOSSARY

The explanations for certain expressions are those of the current political parlance (e.g. *jotdar* used to denote a sharecropper in this area but is now generally recognized as referring to a major landholder).

Transliteration: I have used standard transliteration, though without the diacritical marks. Terms commonly used in the literature are not italicized or transliterated (e.g. bargadar).

adda

gossip or gossiping

aguri

landholding ritually clean hindu jati, also known as uggra-kshatriya, major jati in the Burdwan district

anchal

area, region; administrative unit of 15-20 villages

Anchal Panchayat

level above the Gram Panchayat in the pre 1978 four-tier panchayat system

anyaya

disrespect

apni

you (honorific pronoun)

atmia-swajan

(litt.) one's own people; relatives in a broad sense

bagdi

ritually low hindu jati, also known as barga-khatriya

baithakkhana

discussion-house

bamun

"Brahmin" in local dialect

bandha lok

"tied people", pre-engaged labourer for peak agricultural season

baniadi

prestigious family

bargadar

sharecropper; the term mostly used for sharecroppers registred under the Operation Barga scheme

baroari

(litt.) public; particularly used for public festivities (baroari puja) or for the committees established to arrange the pujas (baroari committee)

BDO

Block Development Officer; position in the West Bengal Administrative Services, responsible for the Development Block, the lowest rung of the administration

benami

land held (illegally) under false name

bene

baniya; ritually high (clean sudra) hindu jati; traditional occupation traders

bhadralok

(litt.) the gentlefolk, person of education and refinement, in the rural areas the elite

bhagchasi

Sharecropper, more commonly used than bargadar though now often refers to non-registered sharecropper

bichar

village meeting to deliberate in cases of dispute

bicharak

"judge", deliberator in a bicar

bigha

Measure of land, normally considered equivalent of one third of an acre, in this area closer to one fourth of an acre

biri

country cigarette

boro-lok

"big-people", slightly derogatory or sarcastic expression

chasi

cultivator, owner-cultivator

chhotolok

(litt.) the small people, the opposite of bhadralok

Congress

the Indian National Congress (I)

CPI

Communist Party of India, until 1964 including the CPM

CPM

CPI-M; Communist Party of India (Marxist); split from the CPI in 1964

dacoity (dakati)

robbery by gangs

dal

group; "faction"

daladali

(litt.) the affairs of the groups; "groupism", "factionalism"

danga

large-scale fight

daroga

officer in charge of the local police station (thana)

dharma

hindu religious concept; duty; right order of things; behavioural code

dharmagola

communal paddy storage for future periods of scarcity

dule

a ritually low hindu jati, close to the bagdis

ekghare rakha

ostracization

Gram Committee

village-level committees of the Krishak Samiti; nominally open but in practice CPM-controlled

Gram Panchayat

the statutory Village Council system; 1. name of lowest (village-level) tier of old four-tier panchayat system, 2. name of lowest but area (ancal) level tier (comprising 10-15 villages) of present-day three-tier panchayat system, in operation since 1978

grihastha

householder

gujab

rumour

ijjat

(izzat) honour, respect

imam

muslim scholar; "priest"

IRDP

Integrated Rural Development Project; Central Government scheme controlled by state Governments; relatively cheap loans distributed to villagers for purchase of small-scale equipment; 50% subsidy for Scheduled Castes and Tribes

jati

sub-caste

jatra

theatre performance, amateur or professional

Jela Parishad

(or: Zilla Parishad) district-level tier of the panchayat system

JLRO

Junior Land Reform Officer; the Land and Land Reform Ministry's man at the BDO

jotdar (or jotedar)

major landholder, in contemporary political parlance reserved for big landholders employing labourers

katha

land-measure; one eight of a bigha

kayastha

a ritually high hindu jati, traditionally scribes

khamata

(ksamata) influence

khas

excess land, vested in the government

khet majur

(litt.) land labourer; contemporary term for agricultural labourers

kirsan

labourer employed on a one-year contract

Krishak Samity

CPM's peasant wing, outside West Bengal known as the Kisan Sabha

lathi

stick; sticks used as weapons

lathial

(litt.) who carries a lathi, stick; commonly a strong-man of landlord or village leader

len-den

"giving and taking"; a practice of voluntary assistance

mahajan

(litt.) big people/person; money-lender

mahajani

money-lending

majur

labourer, oftenmost near-or completely landless

majuri

the labourer's daily wages

mallik

name given here to a section of the muslim community, considered socially low

mamla

litigation

marpit

small fight

mas-maine

labourer on month-long contract

MLA

Member of the Legislative Assembly (of West Bengal)

morol

(litt.) leader, from mandal; somewhat negative expression

mouza

"Revenue village", revenue-paying unit from the time of the mughals, more often than not a village.

MP

Member of Parliament

muchi

ritually lowest hindu jati, drummers and shoe-makers, also known as das, ruidas, etc.

nam

name, reputation

namasudra

a ritually low hindu jati, also known as chandal or chorol

napit

the hindu barber jati, ritually middle to low hindu

neta

leader; mostly used of political leaders above village level

nyaya

respect

Panchayat

village council; in the text used as shorthand for the statutory Gram Panchayat;
lower-case initial used to denote the whole system

Panchayat Samiti

second tier of new three-tier Panchayat system

para

neighbourhood, hamlet; socially and/or geographically distinct clusters of houses

paribartan

development

pathshala

old-type "school"

patta

land lease

PSP

Praja Socialist Party

puja

hindu worship

raja

king

rakh

guarding the ripe paddy to prevent theft

riti

tradition

sabha

assembly, organization, meeting

samman

honour, respect

santal

a "Scheduled Tribe" group

Satsangha

a hindu reform-movement

sekh

name here applied to the landholding section of the muslim community,
considered socially middle to high

swajati

of the same jati

Tabligh

short-hand for Tabligh Jamaat, a muslim lay-man organization

tarun dal

young faction; name given to group of Udaynala village leaders in the 1960s

thana

police station or police station area

tui

you (intimate or derisive pronoun); used between close friends, to children, or derisively to people of clearly lower status

tumi

you (common pronoun); used between equals

unnayan

development, progress

zamindar

superior landholder, intermediary rent-collectors between cultivators and Government introduced by British in 1793 and abandoned in West Bengal in 1953

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