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The Everyday State and Political Society in Eastern India Structuring Access to the Employment Assurance Scheme

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Abstract – The positive roles that political parties might play in development have recently been downplayed in favour of accounts of the virtues of civil society and participatory development. This paper challenges some assumptions inherent in this shift in emphasis. It considers how political society has mediated the agency of the rural poor in three locales in eastern India in respect of the national demand-driven Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS). In Debra block (Midnapore, West Bengal), where the scheme worked best in terms of employment creation and participation, the dominant political party, in collusion with lower-level government officials, subdued popular demand in anticipation of limited state capacity. In Old Malda block (Malda district, West Bengal), rent-seeking councillors withheld information about the EAS from the poor. In Bidupur block (Vaishali district, Bihar) a key politician ensured that the EAS was converted into a scheme for the production of durable assets that mostly benefited the non-poor. These

findings suggest that participatory development in a country like India, where civil society is poorly developed, needs to be considered in relation to particular constructions of political society and the local 'everyday' state.

‘At the doorstep of [a district-level government office], we recognised one of our village respondents, a poor tribal woman. She explained that she had been waiting for four hours to see the officer and was afraid of losing her ‘turn’ if she left for a few minutes to have her lunch. By contrast, the peon allowed a large group of men led by *netas* [political leaders] to enter the office immediately. This group stormed in while we were still having our discussion with the district-level bureaucrat’

Authors' field note, Malda district, West Bengal, 28 January 2000

1 Introduction

Mainstream development theory and practice has undergone significant changes in the past two decades. In the 1980s the idea of state-led development was challenged by an emerging neo-liberal orthodoxy and for a while the idea took hold, at least within the Bretton Woods institutions, that more efficient and extensive market relations would solve the problems of poorer people. This view faded in the wake of the continuing problems of sub-Saharan Africa and the transitional economies of the ex-Soviet Union. The major development agencies now came to the conclusion that poorer people needed to build support networks in their communities in order to access the market and to defend themselves against predatory forms of rule. They also needed to pull themselves out of

poverty. According to the World Bank: ‘The poor are the main actors in the fight against poverty. And they must be brought center-stage in designing, implementing, and monitoring anti-poverty strategies’ (World Bank 2001: 12).

But what does this mean exactly? The World Bank believes that the developmental state is a thing of the past. Modern states must learn to intervene rather less in the day to day management of enterprises, and rather more in the provision of those public goods –including well defined property rights and a transparent system of law and order – that help to foster synergistic relationships between government servants and ordinary men and women. Above all, perhaps, the state must learn to be responsive to civil society. Very much in line with the new orthodoxy of ‘participatory development’, the World Bank has been keen to press the claims of community empowerment and public service reforms. Taking a cue from the work of Peter Evans (1996a, 1996b), the World Bank has argued that positive state-society synergies can be constructed even in regions that suffer from political and social ‘distortions’. These synergies will emerge from a scaling-up of existing stocks of social capital and the transformation of parochial ties into more encompassing forms of association. The state can help in this process by raising awareness of its development programmes, and by making sure that information is disseminated rapidly and in an appropriate manner, perhaps with the assistance of non-governmental organisations. The state can also reform itself. Building on the insights of Judith Tandler (1997) and Merilee Grindle (1996), among others, the World Bank has urged developing countries to experiment with new systems of public administration. The new orthodoxy suggests that public servants should be rewarded for treating members of the public as clients and not as supplicants. This change in culture will be brought about by a mixture of financial

incentives and performance-led promotions, and by encouraging a culture of professionalism among career bureaucrats.

This agenda is certainly a step in the right direction, at least where it does not become a pretext for cuts in development spending. But the idea that the poor can be pushed to the centre-stage of development only by their own efforts or those of a reforming government is odd to say the least. What of the role of politicians? It is true that Peter Evans considered politics and interests in his analysis of state-society synergies. He paid attention to the interests of public officials and described political competitiveness in terms of its 'salutary effect on possibilities for synergy' (Evans 1996: 1127). But even Evans has little to say about the ways that politicians are already embedded in the construction of precisely those 'dense networks' between the state and rural communities that the World Bank is so anxious to promote. And yet in a democracy like India it is likely that the workings of a participatory development scheme will be shaped more by existing political networks than it will by village-based stocks of social capital. The dealings of politicians and bureaucrats will affect efforts by the state to disseminate information to the grassroots, and will largely shape the ways in which the benefits of a development project are made available to different groups of villagers. This will certainly be the case where NGOs are not looking to link 'their' communities to the state, perhaps because of a fear of co-optation. For politicians, in contrast, this is a bread and butter activity.

It is important to challenge the mainstream view that an apolitical civil society is the main intermediary between the state and local communities, and that it can function as an effective incubator for state-sponsored participatory development. In this paper we draw

on Partha Chatterjee's ideas about 'political society' to make a rather different argument about the workings of the developmental state in eastern India. Chatterjee (1998, 2001) has argued that the concept of civil society, with its emphasis on equality, individual rights and freedoms, and autonomy from the state, is poorly placed to capture the realities of social exchange in post-Independence India (or, indeed, in other postcolonial countries: see Mbembe 2001). A modernising and formally democratic state arose there not in response to impulses from within civil society, as was perhaps the case in some western countries, but rather as the means by which civil society could be called into existence (see also Rudolph 2000). But if the Nehruvian project of modernisation can be understood as a 'project ... to *create* a civil society' (Chatterjee 1998: 10-11, emphasis added), it is important to recognise that this project was reshaped by elements within political society. No matter how hard New Delhi tried to build a 'developmental state which [sought] to relate to different sections of the population through the governmental function of *welfare*' (ibid.: 15; emphasis in original) and by means of well crafted and carefully targeted development programmes, all of which were presented in the neutral language of 'objective planning', the fact remained that these programmes were reinvented at the district and block levels by politicians and lower-level bureaucrats who did not always share the worldviews of their English-educated, metropolitan superiors (see also Kaviraj 1991).

These acts of translation continue to shape the workings of the everyday state in India, as we shall demonstrate in the main body of this paper. It is important to insist, even so, that the process of translation is two-way and that the agencies and institutions that comprise political society (including political parties, brokers and councillors) help to bridge the gulf

that exists between government and ‘the public’. Chatterjee (2000) has usefully pointed to political society’s ability to represent non-justiciable collective and cultural rights, such as those of displaced groups in resettlement and rehabilitation programmes. The pursuit of collective rights may include the violation of constitutional norms (Bhattacharyya 2001), but Chatterjee also sees in political society the possibility of forming an alternative framework for ‘development’ that would depart from ‘imported’ models of the modern state or of a civil society based on the rights of individual citizens.¹

It isn’t necessary to agree with the normative thrust of Chatterjee’s remarks to accept that the partial failure of developmentalism in India since 1947 has coincided with the diffusion of ideas about impartiality, equality and democracy, and that these are ideas that have encouraged Indians to place the state at the centre of their political imaginaries and to make well-informed demands of it. This is Chatterjee’s more specific point, following on from the work of F.G. Bailey (1963) and others, and the truth of it is apparent in the political struggles of ‘backward’ or low caste communities. These struggles embody a measure of exceptionalism (more of the state’s largesse for us), while also making a claim on the state in terms of the state’s understandings of itself (we are entitled to these funds because of the state’s commitment to equality of opportunity by means of compensatory discrimination). We see it too in people’s interactions with what has been called the ‘everyday state’. There is a wealth of evidence which suggests that poor people are not in retreat from the state, but use ‘the “system” as best they can’ in the expectation that they will ‘sometimes benefit from their own adequately competent manipulation of political and administrative systems’ (Fuller and Harriss 2000: 25). It is largely for this reason, of course, that poor people judge politicians in terms of ‘their ability and capacity to get things done’ (Ruud

2000: 130; and see also Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000; Tarlo 2000). However reluctantly, they accept that politics is a dirty game based on ‘compromises, alliances (sometimes with old enemies), deals and power equations rather than principles’ (ibid.: 134). As Chatterjee has so sharply observed, this explains why it is that the deepening of democracy in India has gone hand-in-glove with the growth of forms of political participation that refuse the ‘norms of democratic restraint’ (Kaviraj 2001: 318, summarising Chatterjee on political society). But whereas Chatterjee suggests that political society works to ensure the representation of every interest group, we would insist that poverty and powerlessness are the fate of those who lack political connections and who cannot successfully break the law when required to do so. This is the implication of the passage at the top of the paper.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to consider how and in what measure the capacity of ‘the poor’ to become ‘the main actors in the fight against poverty’ is mediated by the workings of political society as they are constructed in three localities in rural eastern India. By political society we mean the political institutions and actors that mediate between higher-level government authorities and the population. These institutions and actors will certainly include recognised political parties and their operatives, but they will also include local political brokers and councillors, whether or not they belong to these parties.ⁱⁱ On occasions, too, the definition of political society can usefully be stretched to include those lower-level public servants who depend upon the grace and favours of locally powerful politicians. (The state-society boundary in rural India is often blurred, as both Akhil Gupta [1995] and Barbara Harriss-White [1997] have demonstrated).ⁱⁱⁱ

Our analysis derives from a study of the Employment Assurance Scheme in five village-block-district locales in rural areas of West Bengal and erstwhile Bihar. In the next section of the paper (2) we recap the stated aims of the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), and we explain why an analysis of this demand-led programme for rural poverty alleviation provides a useful window into the workings of political society and the everyday state. We also explain how and why we structured our field research to explore these issues. In the rest of the paper we present our findings from three of these localities. In each case we consider the ways in which agencies within political society helped or hindered the dissemination of information about the EAS to its intended beneficiaries, and how they dealt with the issue of supporting community groups for the purpose of acquiring paid employment. We also consider the conditions under which different groups of the rural poor were able to build links to political society.

Section 3 considers the workings of the EAS in a part of Debra block, Midnapore district, West Bengal, where the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) has been in the ascendancy. We show that local CPI-M officials joined with their counterparts in the bureaucracy to clamp down on demands for employment from local labourers. They did so because of a shared concern for capacity constraints and a fear that the demands of the poor, once unleashed, could not be met. The CPI-M has been the dominant force in the governments of West Bengal since 1977 and the party is insistently aware of the need to keep people's expectations at a level that matches the state's capacity to provide.^{iv} But if the CPI-M clings to a vanguardist model of politics, in which the poor are not yet thought able to represent themselves (*pace* the World Bank), it is significant that in terms of

employment creation and participation the EAS worked much better in Debra than in our other locations.

In Sections 4 and 5 we turn our attention to Old Malda block in Malda district, West Bengal, and Bidupur block in Vaishali district, Bihar. The number of eligible labourers receiving work from the EAS in these two districts was much lower than it was in Midnapore, but for different reasons. In Old Malda block, the domination of political society by rent-seeking councillors and contractors led to the deliberate withholding of information about the EAS and to the generally poor performance of the scheme. In the absence of functioning political parties, the poor were able to bring pressure to bear on their representatives only fleetingly, and then mainly at election time. Their capacity to act on their own behalf was further diminished by the capacity of local elites to bring in contract workers from outside. In Bidupur block, in contrast, the dominance of one key politician, BB, ensured that the EAS was converted into a scheme for the production of durable assets, in this case roads. Roads or contracts for building roads were a gift to his key supporters among the rural middle classes (and the *Yadavs* especially), a claim that we are able to support with reference to the geography of spending on the EAS within Bidupur block. Poorer households were asked to wait on the trickle-down effects of this spending. There are signs, though, that the dominance of the *Yadavs* in Bidupur is being challenged by *dalits* ('scheduled castes', or former 'untouchables') loyal to the national politician Ram Vilas Paswan, and attempts are increasingly being made by the *dalit* communities to access the local state through the organisers of his party. The conclusion to the paper, Section 6, reflects further on these different outcomes and considers the implications of our analysis

for the construction of state-society synergies in the domain of ‘participatory development’.

2 Researching the Employment Assurance Scheme

The Employment Assurance Scheme began life in 1993 with backing from the Ministry of Rural Development in New Delhi. Although the scheme drew inspiration from various state-level schemes to guarantee employment in the off-season, and most notably from the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra, the EAS was distinctive in its ambition to be a demand-led programme of employment generation that would draw down unlimited resources from the central government.^v The EAS was meant ‘to provide gainful employment during the lean agricultural season in manual work to all able-bodied adults in rural areas who are in need and who are desirous of work, but who cannot find it’ (Government of India 1993: 1). As conceived by New Delhi, and as later confirmed by the state governments of West Bengal and Bihar (in our case), the intention was to provide sufficient resources to assure up to 100 days of waged employment for a maximum of two adults per household in need. The demand for such employment was to come from within the labouring classes. Men and women who could not otherwise find work, and who were eligible for support, were asked to petition their local government office for employment. Where possible, this work was meant to come from existing plan and non-plan ‘works in progress’. In other cases, the labouring poor were asked to identify schemes that would benefit their locality, and to demand employment on these schemes once they had been sanctioned at the block level. If these schemes did not provide sufficient opportunities for employment, then fresh demands could be made on the state. According to the EAS

guidelines published by the Government of India, it would be incumbent upon New Delhi to provide 80 per cent of the funding for these new schemes, with state governments providing matching funds. The guidelines further specified that 60 per cent of scheme funds should be spent on ‘unskilled labour’, and they suggested that this target would be met if new works were commissioned as follows: 40 per cent on water and soil conservation measures, including afforestation, agro-horticulture and silvipasture; 20 per cent on minor irrigation works; 20 per cent on roads, and 20 per cent on primary school buildings and local *anganwadi* [child development] centres.

Thus described, it will be apparent that the EAS is not only a major poverty-relief scheme, but that it also makes a number of assumptions about the capacity of poorer people to make demands of government officials, and about the workings of the everyday state. It was for this reason that we concentrated on the EAS when we came to research the ‘developmental function’ of the state in rural areas of West Bengal and Bihar.^{vi} The research was conducted throughout 1999 and the first quarter of 2000 in two village-block-district combinations in West Bengal, and in three such locales in the erstwhile state of Bihar (a province that was divided into Bihar and Jharkhand in November 2000).

In West Bengal the team worked in Debra block in Midnapore, an area of established CPI-M hegemony, and in Old Malda block, Malda, an area where government officers had to function amid a more ‘traditional’ politics of clientelism, and where political parties were only weakly established.^{vii} In Bihar, the team worked in Bidupur block, Vaishali district, in Sahar block, Bhojpur district, and in Murhu block, Ranchi district (now in Jharkhand: see Figure 1). As in West Bengal, the districts and blocks were selected in

order that we might investigate the effects of different political conditions, or ‘regime-types’, on the performance of the state. Bidupur block was chosen because it typified a part of Bihar that has experienced high levels of political competition between different castes, and the mobilisation of ‘backward class’ communities.

In all of the blocks we worked at two separate and yet interlinked geographical scales. In each case, the team worked intensively in one village community. This community was chosen to be not atypical of its block, and a local field assistant was employed to work throughout the year with a stratified random sample of 100 households, including 80 that were identified as ‘poor’ on the basis of an earlier village census. The team collected data on how such people (and 20 other, better-off households) defined the boundaries of the local state and chose (or chose not) to work with particular state functionaries. We also collected data on a household’s understandings and/or experiences of the EAS and other development schemes, as well as of the provision of schooling, and on the ability of family members to deal with the judiciary or police. In the case of the EAS, these data sets were supplemented by the collection of block and district-level data on the sanctioning of schemes and the disbursement of funds, as well as by a large number of interviews with people who were linked to some aspect of the EAS. These interviews extended from District Magistrates and District Development Officers, to Block Development Officers, junior engineers, accountants, *panchayat sewaks* [village extension workers], party politicians, councillors, political brokers, contractors and others. The EAS can be thought of as a series of interactions that links a village community (possibly a hamlet, or *tola*) to the block (in terms of scheme selection), and then to the district (for the sanctioning of schemes), before connecting back to the village by way of an executing agent (the

contractor), and the men or women responsible for preparing financial or technical estimates, and monitoring the work(s) performed. The iterative field methodologies that we worked with sought to capture this constant moving of files and funds, as well as of people and petitioners, from village to block and district and back again. It sought, in large part, to mirror the workings of political society.

3 Managing Demand in Debra Block

The Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI-M) has been a dominant presence in Debra block since the CPI-M-led Left Front government came to power in West Bengal in 1977, and at the time of our fieldwork it had a well-deserved reputation for working with and on behalf of poorer villagers. The CPI-M dominated the district, block and local councils, it ran party offices down to every village cluster (*gram panchayat*), and the party organisation was generally very strong. In our research village, which consisted of more than 300 households, about seven party workers were very active and ‘always roaming around’, as a group of poorer villagers put it. Tribal peasants, in particular, who accounted for about half of the local population, formed a strong support base for the CPI-M. They had benefited from the land reforms of the early 1980s. By the late-1990s, however, the CPI-M was being challenged in Debra block by the opposition Trinamool Congress (TC), and the party faced a serious challenge in the local council elections of 1998. The growing strength of the TC was further confirmed in 2000 when the party won a parliamentary by-election in Panksura constituency. The TC enjoyed growing support among sections of the rural middle class in Debra block.^{viii}

Given this degree of political competition, and given the track record of the CPI-M in raising levels of political consciousness and awareness in Debra, we hypothesised that the Employment Assurance Scheme would be working here as well as anywhere, and perhaps as effectively as the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra. And in some respects this was the case. Among eligible households in the research village 75 per cent had gained some work from the EAS over a period of five years, a much higher figure than at the other research sites (see Table 1). This work often came at critical times for a poor household, including in the run up to major festivals. It is significant, even so, that the work was mainly provided to the villagers by CPI-M workers, rather than being actively demanded by poorer men and women themselves. Only 30 per cent of households in our survey village had heard of the EAS, whether or not they had gained work from what was usually called '*panchayat* [local council] work', and while this figure is higher than at the other research sites, it is noteworthy that just six per cent of the surveyed poor households in Debra knew that the EAS was a demand-led employment scheme (see Table 2).

At first sight these figures are surprising, as information flows seem to be open and well institutionalised. In the fairly well attended biannual *gram sansad* (West Bengal's mandatory village assembly), government officers and local councillors give verbal and written information about the sanctioning of various development schemes, including under the EAS, and of the expenditures that are proposed. Some villagers also told us that they had heard about the EAS and its demand-led provisions from local politicians when the scheme started in Midnapore. It seems, though, that these same politicians did not repeat or stress their messages later on, and the low rates of recall that we found in the study village suggest that the message was not getting across in an effective manner. By

late-1999 and the early part of 2000, when we could attend local meetings, it was apparent that officials were concerned to emphasise that government funds to *panchayats* were decreasing. They appealed to the assembly to be patient and to lower their expectations.

We also noted that the EAS registration card was not being used to raise awareness. The scheme called for beneficiaries to be registered and given a card on which the days of employment could be entered. If this exercise were carried out on a routine basis it would make the scheme more visible and distinctive to the poor, stressing as it did their right to demand work. In the research village 53 per cent of poor households were given an EAS card, but the cards were not filled in when the cardholder received employment under the scheme (Table 3). The villagers had a vague idea that the card related to government work, but it was possible to get EAS work without the card. The maintenance of EAS cards was probably an over-ambitious objective on the part of central government, given the nature of the capacity constraints that are evident in the lower levels of the bureaucracy. In 1998/99, for example, the Job Assistant in our area – a government employee at the *gram panchayat* level – had to look after more than 60 very small EAS projects. He was also responsible for non-developmental work and a further 120 development projects. The officer had no access to a vehicle, but was required to carry out technical estimates for development schemes over an area of 23 square kilometres, as well as weekly on-the-spot estimates of schemes that had already been sanctioned. A district-level bureaucrat joked that his employees in the *gram panchayat* offices were busier than he was, but the joke was laced with more than a grain of truth.^{ix}

In Midnapore district, however, as in other areas where the CPI-M is dominant, it has become customary for the party to assist the bureaucracy in distributing such things as EAS cards. The party, after all, is well organised and well staffed, and it is keen to fill the spaces of local political society. In the research village, CPI-M party workers had drawn up the list of households that are ‘below the poverty line’ (BPL) and which are entitled to access various government programmes and subsidised food grains. This strategy leads to a situation in which the CPI-M ‘encroaches’ on the functions of the local administration and blurs the boundaries between state and society. The local officer responsible for the EAS register freely admitted that he had no idea how many cards were distributed, or to whom these went. This strategy can also deepen the dependence of poor people on the party, and broaden the scope for political favouritism. But the fact that most poor villagers were (or portrayed themselves as) supporters of the CPI-M reduced the extent of such favouritism in the research village. Because the party was keen to maintain its vote bank there – given an emerging challenge from the Trinamool Congress – it did not favour some poor villagers at the expense of others.

The distribution of employment cards, however, was not accompanied by an attempt to disseminate information about the crucial provisions of the EAS, at least not in a sustained or imaginative manner. Nor did the CPI-M make an effort to mobilise the poor in favour of their right to demand work under the EAS, although it had done just this on coming to power in 1977 through struggles over land reform.^x Why was this? The lower bureaucracy, as we have said, was well aware of its limited technical capacity. The initiation of the EAS was not supported by an expansion of technical staff at the block and *gram panchayat* level. Block-level bureaucrats also did not trust central government to

make over allotments of EAS on demand, or an unlimited basis. They treated the EAS as they would a normal programme with fixed funds and targets. A block-level officer told us that, ‘it would create further problems for a Block Development Officer if labourers came forward when the EAS account is empty.’ The officer also commented on the lack of pressure from senior officers to make the EAS more demand led: ‘The [state] government knows about these shortcomings. That is why it does not insist on maintaining the EAS cards and registers. This is an open secret.’^{xi}

Local CPI-M politicians and councillors accepted this explanation, and did not push the bureaucratic machinery to get more instalments. They believed that the sanctioning of additional allotments of EAS funds ‘from above’ would be too slow to address actual demands for labour, should they arise. This being the case, they chose not to mobilise the poor to demand work from the EAS. They reasoned that, if the CPI-M-ruled local council provoked but then failed to meet enormous demands for labour from unemployed workers, the party would be open to criticism and might face unrest among its key supporters. A more proactive strategy to raise people’s awareness about the EAS would also have the potential to threaten the good working relationship that had been established in Debra between the party’s officials and the bureaucracy, some elements of which had been recruited from former CPI-M party workers.

The CPI-M and the bureaucracy thus had powerful incentives to contain the pressures that might have been placed on them by well-informed villagers, at least in regard to the EAS. Lower-level bureaucrats and other influential members in political society sought to manage – indeed restrict – what they acknowledged would be the legitimate claims of poor

villagers, and they faced no sanctions from above for doing so. District-level bureaucrats and CPI-M district councillors were unconcerned about the lack of awareness of the EAS that we observed at the village-level, and which was well known to them. Nor did opposition parties attack the CPI-M-dominated councils at the village-cluster or block levels for their relatively poor performance in providing employment under the EAS. The TC felt that its interests were better served by intervening around the issue of land conflicts between sharecroppers and land owners – an area which has traditionally been a centrepiece of CPI-M campaigns in West Bengal and an important basis of that party’s assembly election victories since 1977 (Rogaly 1998). Although the TC has made inroads into the labouring class, its main constituency is drawn from the middle classes, or among people who have little interest in the employment-intensive EAS. Opposition leaders and party workers were poorly informed about the EAS, and the increasingly high level of political competition in Debra block did not contribute to better information flows.

The close links between the CPI-M and the bureaucracy in Debra meant that the dominant voices in the block’s political society were able to manage and even redirect local demands for empowerment. Poorer households in our research village had learned to wait for the CPI-M-dominated local council to provide them with some work. Only six out of the 60 households that received EAS work had initiated the labour contracts themselves. The comments of a group of Santal tribals illustrate the attitude of many poorer villagers: ‘[We] do not go to the *gram panchayat* to demand work. If government work comes, the *gram panchayat* sends the information and then we get work. When the work comes, we ... get the details about how much labour will be needed etc. If we don’t get any message from the *gram panchayat*, we don’t go ... neither individually nor as a group.’^{xiii} Interestingly,

those few labourers who were aware of their right to demand work under the EAS had failed to act successfully on this entitlement. After some initial attempts to demand work from the local council, they appear to have accepted the futility of trying to bypass local political society, including party workers.

Although the CPI-M managed to contain the demand that undoubtedly existed in Debra for off-season work, the party still felt compelled by electoral considerations to distribute any employment that was created on an impartial basis, at least within its main support areas. The CPI-M party workers who were responsible for calling labourers for work under the EAS were not obviously biased in favour of active party supporters. Among poorer households, 72 per cent of active CPI-M supporters and 76 per cent of more tacit supporters received employment under the EAS, but the former received more days of employment than the latter (15 versus 8 days: active supporters of the opposition were non-existent among poorer households in the research village). Matters were a little more complicated at the block level, at least after the 1998 *panchayat* elections. Our data suggest that the CPI-M now moved to decrease the flow of funds to the four *gram panchayats* that fell to the opposition TC-BJP coalition. In three of these cases funding in 1998/99 dropped by 70 per cent, 23 per cent and 3 per cent, when compared to 1997/98, while overall expenditure on EAS projects in the block rose by 18 per cent. It is significant, even so, that the CPI-M bowed to pressures from the fourth ‘opposition’ *gram panchayat*, where a forceful *pradhan* (chairperson) was able to argue his case in front of a ‘neutral’ [his description] Block Development Officer (BDO). The BDO also told us that he had some room for manoeuvre when it came to pushing through EAS projects on the basis of ‘evident need’. Although the selection and prioritisation of schemes in Debra was a matter for the

panchayat samiti (block council; in practice, the block-level committee of the CPI-M was responsible for the selection), the BDO was able to push through one or two projects of his own by threatening to delay the signing of cheques for all EAS schemes. ‘As per rules’, he said, ‘we [officers] don’t have any say, but by ‘blackmailing’ we can ... do something for the sake of the people. That is our job satisfaction. But this can be done only to a small extent. The bureaucracy can reduce discrimination only a little.’^{xiii}

Notwithstanding these small fissures within political society, the capacity of the CPI-M to manage information flows to and from ‘the grassroots’ is vital to its continuing success in Midnapore. In most parts of Debra block, the first point of contact for villagers wishing to suggest a development project is not the official *gram sansad*, but CPI-M-organised *baithaks*, or neighbourhood-level group meetings. It is here that socially excluded households or individuals find it possible to express their points of view. And it is here that local CPI-M leaders have an opportunity to listen carefully to their problems, before deciding whether and how to take action. Set against this, it is the party leadership that decides which ideas for schemes are going to be put forward, and by whom, in the official *gram sansad*. In this way, the CPI-M ensures that the ‘voices of the poor’ are heard, but not directly. The party acts as a vanguard for its supporters, and largely decides where and when the ‘interests’ of poorer people can be pressed upon the state.

To sum up, local political society and the lower bureaucracy in Midnapore had strong disincentives to disseminate information on the demand-driven nature of the EAS and chose not to mobilise unemployed labourers around their right to work under this scheme. Given the capacity constraints of the lower bureaucracy, and a lack of trust in the

possibility of a swift allotment of EAS funds, local politicians and government officers were afraid of creating a level of demand that could embarrass them. Nevertheless, a strong and committed CPI-M ensured that the EAS projects that were sanctioned were implemented in favour of the poor, and without a high level of funds leakage.^{xiv}

4 Rent-Seeking in Old Malda

The research village in Old Malda block, Malda district, in the northern reaches of West Bengal, is typical of the district in that it suffers from low levels of literacy and social cohesion. At the time of our research the CPI-M dominated the block council but had to share power with the Indian National Congress (INC) in the *gram panchayat*. Although the level of political competition here – as measured by the balance of votes in recent elections – is not significantly higher than in Midnapore, the conduct of local politics is often aggressive and disruptive.^{xv} Politics is based around personalised networks of patronage and violence, and not on strong party organisations. The CPI-M is relatively weak, and its leadership, as we explain later, lacks deep roots in the locality. Agriculturally, the area is not as rich as the central parts of Midnapore, and many poor households rely on non-agricultural day labour in Malda town. Given the low-levels of political consciousness, and being mindful of the aggressive, non-developmental type of politics in Malda, we hypothesised that the demand-led EAS would not work as well here as in Midnapore, even though the same formal institutions were in place for its implementation.

In the research village, only 24 per cent of eligible households received employment under the EAS over a period of five years (see Table 1). This figure is actually quite high when

one considers that awareness of the EAS was all but limited to a few well-informed richer households. No formally institutionalised channels of communication were used to disseminate information about the EAS. The only poor respondent of our sample household who had heard of the scheme received the information by chance on a visit to the *gram panchayat* office. Despite the efforts of the Block Development Officer, *gram sansad* meetings were often conducted ‘on paper’ or with a minimum of publicity, and they were never used to inform people about the aims of the EAS. The mandatory public meetings that should have taken place at the inception of each project were either not held or not held properly.^{xvi} And the EAS cards had not been distributed at all (see Table 3). It is hardly surprising, then, that levels of awareness of the EAS were extremely low, and that none of the poor sample households knew of its demand-led provisions. The villagers only got to know about an EAS project – or a ‘government project’ - when they saw that work was already in hand in their neighbourhood.

In Old Malda, key elements in political society withheld information from villagers and brought pressure to bear on those bureaucrats who were minded to advertise the EAS. We discovered that the Job Assistant of our *gram panchayat* was unable to distribute EAS cards to the intended beneficiaries because the *sabhapati* (block-council chairperson) had refused to finalise the EAS register. The EAS cards lay unused and locked away in a cupboard in the *gram panchayat* office. Block-level officers also told us that councillors of both political parties hindered their efforts to disseminate information on development schemes. Rather than mediating between the bureaucracy and the local community, local councillors and political leaders were deliberately obstructing the flow of information to the grassroots.

Politicians were motivated to act in this manner by greed. Villagers who are unaware of their rights are poorly placed to prevent councillors from diverting money into their own pockets. With people more or less unaware of the scheme, and EAS cards safely hidden in cupboards, the scope for directing schemes to private contractors is considerable, as is the opportunity for skimming-off funds. A district-level officer told us that: ‘If EAS cards had to be shown, this practice [of employing private contractors] would be revealed. EAS cards would also reveal that payments were made long after the completion of the works – a strategy that is applied here to cover up the diversion of funds. In fact, the distribution of cards may be a good indicator whether contractors are involved behind the scene or not. If there are no EAS cards, it is likely that corruption is higher. EAS cards make the “hide-and-seek policy” more difficult.’^{xvii}

We found that both smaller, labour-intensive, and bigger, more material-intensive EAS projects were employing contract labourers from other blocks or districts. The contract labourers, who were mostly healthy young men, accepted work on a piece rate basis. When they were employed at all, local labourers were paid 20 per cent below the statutory rate (of which, in turn, they were unaware, just as they were unaware that they were working on an EAS scheme). Villagers told us that outside labourers were preferred by their councillors because they showed little concern for the quality of the work performed, and didn’t care about the accuracy of the accounts. Claims about corruption are always difficult to substantiate, but a comparison of the official records with our own observations of a small pond-digging project suggested that as much as 60-80 per cent of earmarked funds were

being skimmed off by the over-reporting and underpaying of contract labourers – a rate of ‘leakage’ that was higher than we found even in Bihar, a state famed for its corruption.

The mere fact, then, of political competition between the CPI-M and the INC did not prevent local councillors in Old Malda from practising rent-seeking on a grand scale. Competition on its own means rather little when political relationships are conducted on the basis of clientelism, or where this is little in the way of accountability. In Old Malda, the residents of a *para* (a hamlet or neighbourhood that is more or less homogeneous in terms of caste and class) tend to vote *en bloc* for one political party. Poorer members of a *para* are dependent on one key political broker and have few political alternatives. These brokers are crucial for making contact with more influential politicians and councillors, including the people who control state benefits. The poor thought it too risky to jeopardise this relationship by challenging the corruption that dogged the EAS and other development schemes. They told us that they would not do so because they needed the services of these people in order to access the more crucial government services of disaster relief and police protection. Government relief is particularly important in Malda because of perennial floods in the months of September and October. The police also play an important role in mediating the frequent intra-village conflicts between different caste groups, or between older settlers (mostly tribals and lower castes) and recent immigrants from Bangladesh (mostly better-off Hindu middle castes). Demand for police protection is also high because of frequent and often violent cross-border cattle thefts.

Politics in Malda district – unlike in Midnapore – is conducted with little sustained reference to ‘development’, and in this respect it resembles parts of Bihar. It is rather

characterised by an emphasis upon the power of the individual patron, an emphasis that is reinforced by the practice of vote buying at election time. The prospective councillor is expected to distribute gifts at election time, but thereafter there are few expectations of him or her. And when the elected local councillor is from a party other than the one for which she or she voted, a person will have no expectations at all. The dominant perception is that all politicians and councillors are dishonest. Although the poor disapprove of corruption, knowing that they are its major victims, they also know they have to play the game and pick up what spoils they can. When the better-informed villagers see their councillor employing non-local contract labourers, illegally, in government schemes that should be employing them or their fellow villagers, they generally allow themselves to be bought off with a few days of paid employment.

When villagers did, exceptionally, challenge the rights of a contractor to bring in outside labour, the challenge was made not in legal terms, but by resort to a moral argument – and this challenge was extended to even include the right to employment in some nearby private sector factories. The actions in support of these claims lasted for no more than one or two days, and were largely ineffective. For most poor households, open protests are not a viable option: they rely upon their patrons for non-employment reasons (as shown above) and they often work away from home themselves. They are aware of their disadvantaged position in relation to rent-seeking forces within political society: ‘The local councillors know that we cannot afford to stay here to protest and not go to work outside for more than one day.’^{xviii}

More effective actions against illegality or corruption need the support of agents within political society, but during our time in Old Malda we came to know of only one instance when politicians mobilised their supporters in a protest against corruption. This happened when two Congress leaders organised a demonstration against an attempted diversion of funds (80 per cent of the total, allegedly) for road construction under the Basic Minimum Programme. When they got wind of a likely official inquiry into this alleged misuse of funds, the ‘accused’ councillor, block-level official and contractor organised a group of labourers to fix the road at night – but only to be met by an angry group of villagers led by the aforementioned politicians. Rumours have it, however, that the motivation of the Congress bosses in this instance was far from noble: it was widely believed that they were seeking revenge on a contractor who had refused to give them their usual ‘cut’.

‘Decentralised rent-seeking’ is thus endemic in our research area because of the absence of checks within or upon political society and the generally low ‘density’ of political society. The two main political parties are only weakly organised and are not well connected to the grassroots. The CPI-M leadership did not emerge from the peasant and land reform movement as it did in many other parts of West Bengal, and it is obliged, just like the INC, to make use of local strongmen at election time. It might be argued, indeed, that the decentralisation of funds and decision-making powers to the *gram panchayats* has encouraged the major political parties to rely upon or even ‘invent’ those local political bosses (now councillors) who are often described as ‘feudal’ or as ‘feudal relics’. As a consequence, and in sharp contrast to the CPI-M in Midnapore, political parties in Malda have little control over the ways in which local councillors spend government monies. Development funds are not used systematically to nurture vote banks for political parties,

but are rather treated as the personal assets of councillors. In Old Malda block, two INC-ruled *gram panchayats* received a disproportionately high amount of EAS funds from the CPI-M-ruled block council. A block-level officer explained: ‘[One of these two *gram panchayats*] is the constituency of the *sabhapati*, and [the other] is the territory of Mr. Ch_____ [an influential block councillor and former contractor]. They are getting the most under the EAS from the block council.’^{xix} The geographical distribution of EAS expenditures in Old Malda block reflected not so much party-political bias but rather the attempts of individuals to extend their local power and enrich themselves. The scope for party favouritism was also reduced by a decision of the district administration to allocate 50% of EAS funds directly to the *gram panchayats* (as opposed to the block councils), in order to avoid allegations of discrimination where two councils are ruled by different parties. This decentralised allocation system had the effect of further reducing the control of political parties over the use of EAS monies.

Bureaucratic checks on corruption are often ineffective, and honest officers are met with violence if they investigate a possible misuse of government funds. One Block Development Officer, who we knew quite well, had her windows broken when she tried to introduce a less corruption-prone system of funds disbursement for a house-building scheme. This was just a warning shot, but the message was clear. The domination of political society by criminal elements was sufficiently complete that there could be no question of allowing the poor to participate effectively in targeted anti-poverty schemes like the EAS.

5 *Building Roads in Bidupur*

The nature of political society is different again in Bidupur block in Vaishali district, north Bihar. The southern part of Bidupur has been turned into a banana plantation, and even in the northern part of the block, where we worked, the demand for off-season work is perhaps less than in some other parts of the state because of the proximity of Hajipur town or the state capital, Patna. Nevertheless, our survey showed that there was a hunger for work on government schemes among some members of the labouring classes, and particularly among the most disadvantaged communities like the *Paswans*.

These communities, however, although they are increasingly being mobilised as supporters of Ram Vilas Paswan and the Lok Jan Shakti Party^{xx}, have to contend with the fact that a recent deepening of political society in Bidupur has not yet reached down to the rural poor, at least not directly. In this part of north Bihar the traditional authority of the ‘forward castes’ – the *Brahmins*, *Bhumihars* and *Rajputs* especially – has been broken by the rise of the ‘backward castes’. The struggle for state funds in Bidupur is intense, but it is largely dominated by village leaders and brokers (*dalaals*) from within the ranks of the *Yadavs* and the *Kurmis*. These leaders in turn are loyal to BB, the local Member of the Legislative Council and *de facto* MLA. BB is a leading light in the ruling party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and an ally of the *de facto* Chief Minister of Bihar (and husband of the *de jure* Chief Minister), Laloo Prasad Yadav. He is widely seen as a protagonist for the *Yadav* farmers of the area. For his part, BB has to negotiate with different village leaders to secure his continued pre-eminence. These negotiations often centre on the distribution and use of government funds, and while BB is able to control these funds more effectively than his

‘counterparts’ in Malda or Midnapore he is attentive to the demands that arise in the dense and competitive political society of Bidupur. BB is not a ‘pro-poor’ politician, but he is keenly aware of the need to maintain his support across the block that he dominates.

Given the nature of political society in Bidupur we were not surprised to discover that only six per cent of our sample poor households had heard of the Employment Assurance Scheme, or that just 2.5 per cent were aware of its major (demand-led) provisions. Nor did it come as a great surprise to find that not a single villager had found work on the EAS schemes that had been sanctioned in the research village over a period of three years.

(Some *dalits* had obtained work on a non-EAS road scheme to connect the village school to the western-most *Yadav tola*, but they had been promptly dismissed in favour of outside skilled labourers when it came time for black-topping the road). This was consistent with our understanding of the nature of politics in Vaishali district where, we had hypothesised, the local state was facing insistent pressures from the dominant castes, and especially from the *Yadavs*, and where there were no countervailing institutions at the *panchayat* level, given the failure of the state to hold local elections through the 1980s and 1990s. In Bihar, unlike in West Bengal, power was concentrated in the hands of the Block Development Officer and the District Magistrate, as well as with the MLAs and MPs. And in Bidupur, at least, the bureaucrats found it convenient to leave most decisions about the disbursement of funds to BB.^{xxi} Given the intense nature of the competition for funds between locally dominant groups and their brokers, government officers worried about the backlash they would face from disappointed groups. Far better, one Block Development Officer confessed, to hand over effective decision-making powers to BB, and to let him take any credit or blame.

But if political society in Bidupur is dominated by BB and his allies, not all of the outcomes of the EAS were as we expected. Unlike in Sahar block in central Bihar, where the sitting MLA (a member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist) was uninformed about the EAS, and where scheme selection was more or less in the hands of the District Magistrate and District Development Officer, BB was extremely well informed about the EAS. His knowledge of the guidelines extended not only to the ‘proper balance’ of unskilled labour and materials in different schemes, but also to a critique of their prescriptive nature. It would be an absurdity, he said, to make afforestation or water management schemes a priority in Bidupur, given its location on the north bank of the Ganges. What Bidupur needed was all-weather roads, and if their construction required the importation of skilled labour, that was how it must be. In his view, the rural poor would benefit more in the long run from improved roads and market access, than from a few worthless ‘labour intensive’ schemes that might be washed away in the rains.

This view was clearly self-serving, for BB knew full well that it was the *Yadav* farmers – as well as those *dalaals* he relied upon at election time – who stood to gain most from this reshaping of the objectives of the Employment Assurance Scheme. It is important to insist, even so, that BB’s preference for road building was shared by most of the local leaders he took care to consult, and even by some members of the rural poor. Key bureaucrats were also supportive of this move to play down the labour-intensive nature of the EAS. As we explain in another paper, there was concern among the bureaucracy that small, labour-intensive schemes were time-consuming to manage and could lead to greater levels of ‘fund leakage’ than schemes that were material-intensive (see Srivastava *et al.*, 2001).

A combination of factors thus ensured that the EAS in Bidupur would be converted into a scheme for the building of metalled roads, and that these roads would be constructed throughout the 19 *gram panchayats* within Bidupur block that came under BB's control. Given the competitive and yet also exclusionary nature of political society in Bidupur, it was unsurprising, finally, that BB sought to distribute EAS funds in such a way that inter-village rivalries would be played down, and his key supporters rewarded with contractorships, even as the vast majority of EAS funds were concentrated in just 30 per cent of the villages or *tolas* that made up the population of the block. In the remaining 70 per cent of localities, including almost all of those in which the rural poor were in a majority, hardly any schemes were sanctioned under the EAS in the 1990s.

In Bidupur, then, as in Old Malda and Debra blocks for quite different reasons, a combination of political forces came together to redefine the aims and objectives of the EAS. These forces also helped to determine the outcomes that could be associated with the EAS. Although it has not been our purpose here to evaluate the EAS in 'developmental' terms, it is possible that the EAS will have its longest lasting effects in Bidupur (among our research sites), much as BB has claimed. The poorest households might yet benefit from the trickle-down effects of a concerted programme of road building. But we need to treat this argument with caution. We have already noted that the poorest households in our research village failed to gain work from a local EAS scheme, and if some of these households expressed an interest in road-building it is clear that very few of them had been consulted about possible alternative uses of EAS funds. The thickening of political society in Bidupur has yet to extend to the poorest or scheduled communities, and such levels of 'participation' as these communities manage is largely confined to impromptu *janata*

durbars that confront passing politicians with road-blocks or shouted demands. In the medium term it is likely that the poorest communities will campaign more openly for Ram Vilas Paswan and his supporters, in the process building a new and challenging network within the extending and already competitive political societies of this part of Vaishali district. For the present, though, they can expect to receive few benefits from government ‘anti-poverty’ schemes, and they continue to look after their livelihoods mainly by labouring in local fields or by exiting to Hajipur, Patna or more distant cities.

6 Conclusion: Political Society and State-Society Synergies

Decentralisation under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, and attempts to introduce democratic planning ‘from below’, suggest that the central government is keen to redraw the boundaries of state-society relationships in India. People’s participation is to be given a greater role, and elements of participatory democracy are supposed to complement a well-established system of representative democracy. This trend is also discernible in the latest generation of anti-poverty programmes. In addition to the EAS, the main self-employment programme has recently been moved away from fixed targets and towards a group-based approach to poverty alleviation.^{xxii}

In normative terms there is something to be said for this approach, but it is disturbing that the state continues to regard the formation of these ‘groups’ as unproblematic or as somehow expressive of the poor taking charge of their own destinies. Much like the World Bank, it is proposing an identity theory of empowerment in which the poor are only empowered by their own actions. But this is to misunderstand – perhaps wilfully – the

ways in which poorer people can be empowered by political parties, as we saw in Midnapore, or the ways in which the workings of political society, themselves often dominated by sectional interests or ‘groups’, have conditioned people to structure their access to the state in particular ways. Over the past 50 years the poor have come to regard the government as ‘*ma-bap sarkar*’ (mother-father state), and it will not be easy to create a participatory democracy that enfranchises men and women as ‘the people’. The Planning Commission has recently acknowledged that the ‘demand-driven nature’ of the EAS allowed the ‘better-off states [to] grab a lion’s share of funds while the needy ones were left out’ (Government of India, 2000, p.216).

‘Decentralisation’ and ‘participation’ take shape in very different political societies, and it is unhelpful to expect either of these strategies to be a panacea for development (see Crook and Manor 1998). In Old Malda block, where the Employment Assurance Scheme has been working less effectively even than in Bidupur block, a further decentralisation of financial resources to the *gram panchayat* will probably not lead to the empowerment of poorer villagers. The poorest households suffer from an absence of voice, and they are not helped by the weakness of local political parties. In Old Malda, indeed, the avarice of many local councillors and contractors, and the poor performance of those EAS schemes which are sanctioned, can be explained by the fact that financial decentralisation has occurred in advance of the embedding of functioning political parties in local political society. If matters are slightly better in Bidupur it is because the block office has remained at the heart of funding decisions, and because the poorest there – and most especially the *Paswans* – are beginning to organise themselves to compete with the ‘forward’ and ‘backward’ castes for a share of the government pie.

But here too there is irony, for the ‘groups’ that are being formed by the *dalits* of north Bihar are distinctively caste-based groups, and their goal is very much the capture of the state for sectional ends. It is only in areas like Midnapore district, as Atul Kohli (1987) and others have several times insisted, where political society has been constructed largely along class lines, and by a well organised left-of-centre political party, that poorer men and women can reasonably hope to make ‘development schemes’ work for their collective benefit.^{xxiii} Our work suggests that the CPI-M in Debra block has not yet learned to trust its constituents to take charge of their own destinies. The CPI-M acts as an institutional patron, and when it is not in ‘campaign mode’ it seeks to control popular participation to ensure that the provision of developmental benefits is not disturbed (see also Williams *et al.* 2001). The poor might yet benefit from a greater measure of political competition in Debra, although this is by no means assured as the erupting political violence in neighbouring Keshpur illustrates. The benefits will depend on the forms in which political competition is made flesh. But our work also suggests, very strongly, that calls for ‘participation’ will amount to very little if the designated ‘participants’ are unable to access political society in a meaningful way. In a country like India, where civil society is poorly developed, and where the incentives for government reform are not always clear, it is vital that ‘state-society synergies’ are considered in relation to particular constructions of political society. It is also important to recognise, as the World Bank seems unwilling to do, that poor people can be empowered by strong left-of-centre political parties acting on their behalf.

Figure 1: Map of the Studied Districts

Table 1: Employment Provided under the EAS, Poor Households, 1995-99

	Debra, West Bengal	Old Malda, West Bengal	Bidupur, Bihar
Received work under the EAS	75%	24%	0%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	12.8	5.7	0
Average days of work received (all poor households)	9.6	1.4	0

Source: village surveys

Table 2: Awareness of the EAS, Poor Households

	Debra, West Bengal	Old Malda, West Bengal	Bidupur Bihar
Heard of the EAS	30%	1%	6%
Aware of Demand-Led Provisions of the EAS	6%	0%	0%

Source: village surveys

Table 3: Possession of EAS registration cards, Poor Households

	Debra, West Bengal	Old Malda, West Bengal	Bidupur, Bihar
Have EAS Card	53%	0%	15%

Source: village surveys

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Endnotes

ⁱ André Béteille, in sharp contrast to Chatterjee, values universal citizenship and derived individual rights higher than collective representation through political society. Indeed, he argues that ‘the greatest threat to civil society in India today comes from the intrusion of collective identities...’ and that ‘politicians, legislators and even judges seek to advance the claims of castes and communities in the name of social justice’ (Béteille 1999: 2589; see also Mahajan 1999).

ⁱⁱ India’s federal system contributes to a complex array of institutions and actors of political society. Formal elected representatives include members of the national parliament (MPs), members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) at the state level, and elected councillors at the district, block, and village-cluster level. (In Bihar, these local councils (or *panchayats*) had been suspended at the time of our study, but were re-instated in 2001.) The relationships between the formal representatives, political parties and non-elected power brokers are even more complex. In the case of West Bengal it is particularly important to take note of the relationship between councillors and the dominant political party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), hereafter CPI-M. It takes time and effort to become a full member of this cadre-based party. Some of the councillors who represent the CPI-M at the local level will not be full members of the party: they are still earning their spurs. The local party committee may decide to grant informal party workers the status of ‘auxiliary member’ after having observed them for two or three years. To become a ‘candidate member’ (who can stand as party candidates in elections to the district council) and finally a ‘full member’ can take another three to 10 years. With the introduction of reserved seats for women and lower castes, more persons without formal party membership have been included in the local councils.

ⁱⁱⁱ This blurring is often considered to have detrimental effects for the social formation as a whole. In Midnapore, however, as we will show, the ability of the CPI-M to capture the state, or to bend the state to its will, has sometimes ‘encouraged’ the bureaucracy to take the part of the poor.

^{iv} This point was brought to us by an anonymous referee of this paper. We would like to thank two anonymous referees for their very useful comments.

^v The Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra has been reviewed by many authors, including, notably, Dandekar (1983), Echeverri-Gent (1988, 1993), Herring and Edwards (1983), Joshi and Moore (2000), and Lieberman (1985).

^{vi} The project also considered three further functions of the state: the ‘empowerment function’ (which we examined mainly in terms of primary education provision and uptake); the ‘protective function’ (or the capacity of the state to enforce land or labour laws); and the ‘disciplinary function’ (how poorer people deal with the police, forest guards, revenue officials, and so on).

^{vii} Unlike in many parts of West Bengal the CPI-M in Malda district has generally not been able to draw on older established grassroots workers who were active in the struggle for land and tenancy reform in the 1960s. With the exception of one or two blocks, this movement was weak in Malda district, and all political parties therefore need to rely on more vertical systems of political mobilisation. Although numerous studies have discussed the performance and politics of the CPI-M, the main constituent of West Bengal’s Left Front

coalition that has formed the state government since 1977, there is a notable absence of research on micro-politics and governance in Malda district and north West Bengal more generally. The studies on West Bengal have either been confined to southern parts of the state – for example, Echeverri-Gent (1993), Lieten (1996) and Bhattacharyya (1999) on Midnapore district; Ruud (2000), Webster (1992), Lieten (1996) on Burdwan district; and Lieten (1992) and Williams (2001) on Birbhum district – or to the macro level – e.g., Kohli (1987), Nossiter (1988) and Mallick (1993).

^{viii} Debra block in some ways mirrored West Bengal's political situation in the run up to the state assembly elections in 2001. The Trinamool Congress (TC) attempted to expand from its fairly strong constituencies in and around Kolkata, and seemed to gain strength in rural areas. Its charismatic and publicity-courting leader, Mamata Banerjee, had provided the major focus for opposition to the Left Front government in West Bengal since the early 1990s – before and after the mid-1990s when she left the Congress Party and founded the TC. Yet the state assembly elections in 2001 resulted in the sixth consecutive victory of the CPI-M-led Left Front coalition. Other factors of the state-level political scenario were less clearly reflected in Debra at the time of our research. For example, the growing factions within the state-level CPI-M had no significant ramifications for the local party.

^{ix} The capacity constraints of the lower bureaucracy are even more pronounced in Bihar, where the lowest government offices in 1999 were at the block level rather than at the *gram panchayat* level.

^x In the initial years of the Left Front government the campaign for the mass registration of sharecroppers, Operation Barga (c.1978-81), had involved mass mobilisation of the poor, as well as innovative attempts to overcome bureaucratic constraints by forcing land-reform officials to hold registration 'camps' in rural areas. Arild Ruud (1994) provides a discussion of the CPI-M's politicisation of land issue from the 1960s onwards. The CPI-M still has the capacity to arrange such large-scale mobilisation, but the targets in its 'class war' today are sometimes more obscure. For example, in our locality, the CPI-M chose to organise sizeable demonstrations against the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia in early 1999.

^{xi} Interview, 23 November 1999.

^{xii} Interview, 7 January 2000.

^{xiii} Interview, 2 December 1999.

^{xiv} This is not to suggest that the CPI-M was totally free of corruption in Debra block, but interestingly when corruption did occur it appeared to accrue not to individuals but to the CPI-M collectively via 'donations' to party funds.

^{xv} Aggressive politics that involve violence also appeared in Midnapore district – not in the studied Debra block but in the neighbouring Keshpur block where many people lost their homes and lives in inter-party clashes during 1999-2000.

^{xvi} In Old Malda, only 23 per cent of poor households had ever gone to an official village meeting. In Debra, the comparable figure was 75 per cent.

^{xvii} Interview, 7 September 1999. As noted earlier, the full and official recording of an individual's work on the EAS through these cards would be a major (if not impossible) undertaking, and certainly the relationship

between card ownership, involvement of contractors and levels of corruption appeared less clear in Midnapore and Vaishali districts. The more general importance of the officer's complaint is that the intended mechanisms by which the EAS was to be made visible to the poor – whether through the filling-in of EAS cards or through holding of public meetings – were failing in practice in Malda. In turn, this lack of transparency enabled the official records of the scheme to be rewritten in the interests of corrupt insiders.

^{xviii} Interview, 10 November 1999.

^{xix} Interview, 7 September 1999.

^{xx} Ram Vilas Paswan, who is from a *dalit* community, has had his main constituency in Vaishali district since 1977 but has also held political weight at the national level. Paswan parted ways with Laloo Prasad Yadav when the latter broke with the Janata Dal in the mid-1990s and formed his own party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), which has remained in power in Bihar until now. Soon after Paswan formed his own Lok Jan Shakti Party intending to mobilise the *dalit* community and other marginalised castes. In the 1999 elections to the national parliament, the formidable combination of Ram Vilas Paswan and his sizeable following among Bihar's *dalits*, Nitish Kumar's Samata Party and their following from powerful sections among middle castes, and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) represented the first serious challenge to Laloo Prasad Yadav's ten-year hold over Bihar politics. But the emerging rivalry between Paswan and Kumar fragmented the votes in the 2000 state assembly elections and prevented a change in the state government. At the national level Ram Vilas Paswan was cabinet minister for several times, first under Janata Dal's government in 1989 and most recently in the BJP-led coalition government.

^{xxi} A former District Magistrate of Vaishali told us that during his long tenure in the district he had adopted a quota system wherein local MPs and MLAs were asked to recommend and decide upon the schemes that would operate in their constituencies. His formula was simple, if quite at odds with the instructions he received from Patna or New Delhi. All programme resources that came to his district were to be divided up on a 70:30 basis between the MLAs and the MP. If a block fell between two constituencies, the resources would be divided in proportion to the number of *panchayats* in each constituency. The representatives could then use the money as they saw fit.

^{xxii} The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was India's most important self-employment scheme for almost two decades. In April 1999 the Government of India restructured it as the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) that 'aims at establishing a large number of micro-enterprises to build up the potential of the rural poor.' Unlike the IRDP that gave loans to individual beneficiaries, the SGSY covers 'all aspects of self-employment such as organisation of the poor into *self-help groups* and extension of credit, technology, infrastructure and marketing to them' (Government of India, Press Information Bureau, 25 November 1999; emphasis added).

^{xxiii} However, Kohli's portrayal of organisational strength and ideological coherence of the CPI-M in West Bengal needs to be accompanied by greater attention to institutional culture and political discourses at the local level (Williams 2001).