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## **Political Leadership and Political Behaviour: the Rubik's Cube of Social Sciences**

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### **Abstract**

The following paper is an attempt to broadly understand political behaviour in the Indian subcontinent and the type of political leaders societies in this region produce. The prevalent mode of political behaviour was found to operate around patron-client networks and the type of political leaders such contexts produce was found to be less prone to charisma building and more prone to building social capital above and below in order to remain in power. The paper consequently recommends the use of Bourdieu's methodology rather than Weber's to deconstruct effectively, such political behaviour and contexts.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, Capital, Charisma, Political Leadership, Weber

### **Article**

#### **Things that Survive Nuclear Warfare: Cockroaches and Patron-Client Relationships**

Disappointed in Miriam-Webster's lack of definitions for the words 'Political' and 'Politics', I decided to state the obvious fact that has circulated in families and associations of all kinds across the world for centuries, and reiterated by the feminist movement: "the personal is political". The insistence of dictionaries on the 'political' being the exclusive domain for political parties and the state machineries, while productive, is severely limiting to the political theorist and anthropologist. There are either decisions and actions by individuals and/or communities that are political in nature, i.e. satisfying some urge for power or means that may not always be economic like rights, positions etc. or, their social actions may have reflections in the arenas traditionally segregated for the political like the nation state and/or political parties or associations. As such political action remains under defined and ambiguous with challenges being offered up every now and then by societies that are demarcated as the post-colonial. An overview of contemporary political studies may allow us to put into perspective political behaviour in the South Asia region, although such a study will possibly not be completely exhaustive.

This paper seeks to understand political practices by individuals and those who can be considered 'leaders' in certain contexts- people who are either in power in the state machinery- members of Parliament or Chief Ministers etc. or those who are political fixers or middlemen (unofficial brokers of power or resources) and suggest a suitable theoretical model to understand and place such behaviour in the ambit of anthropological study. An overwhelming number of studies in the region mentioned above have shown the persistence of patron-client relationships throughout colonial rule (Newbury), persisting till date and if anything, getting more entrenched in political society (Khan).

The proliferation of democratic ideals into post-colonial societies meant that there would be a mediated existence of the modern nation state in operation and that there would be a continuation of many pre-existing social structures in such societies. The lack of suitable methods to study the political behaviour of agents in such societies has been elaborated by Hamza Alavi (Alavi) where she laments the lack of theoretical methodologies in existing political studies to study peasant society in post-colonial settings and their politics in times that are less extraordinary like those not during peasant revolutions. Furthermore, the failure of Marxist appropriations in theory have led to a fragmented picture of rural political behaviour, not true to the constant negotiations and politics practiced by members of peasant societies. Contemporary political studies however, have been focusing more and more on the local and seeing the operation of patron-client relationships in society as productive of agentic political behaviour on the part of both- clients and patrons. What is even more interesting is that such models of study put into perspective the existence of political players with varying political motives in societies with a federal government and decentralised power structures like India. Be they the lowly political fixers (Manor), the slightly more powerful power brokers (Alm), the locally omnipotent 'Comrade' (Banerjee, Leadership and Political Work) or the charismatic chief minister who is simultaneously approachable and yet larger than life (Banerjee, Populist Leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu: Mamata and Jayalalitha Compared), the model of patron-client

politics seems to be all pervasive in the operations of the political. The implications of the pervasiveness of such a model in society are far-reaching as it posits the behaviour of political actors with greater agency through their ability to bargain with their superiors and assert their demands tacitly, all the while maintaining the illusion of almost absolute compliance (Banerjee, Leadership and Political Work). Thus, the bourgeois illusion of the lower classes and castes succumbing to political charisma- a term yet to be properly defined- and/or money or payoffs (Banerjee, Why India Votes? 149) stands shaken in the face of such models of political behaviour on the part of the 'other'. There is a visible exchange of favours, in the form of money, jobs (Banerjee, Why India Votes?) and other material/immaterial goods (Alm) or 'protection' (Alavi) and such favours often determine the winners of elections and the persistence of leaders/parties in certain states.

While literature has shown the ability of well-structured parties like the CPIM or DMK to stay in power due to their organisational prowess (Banerjee, Populist Leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu: Mamata and Jayalithaa Compared), (Kohli), there have been other aspects that these studies have either missed out or not emphasised on, like the existence of more individualistic leaders within party hierarchies (Williams) and the fact that these local leaders themselves function as 'patrons' with linkages to the outside world (Banerjee, Leadership and Political Work) much like the archetypal patrons described by Weingrod(Weingrod) who control the flow of resources inside their areas of influence and act as channels of influence for those under his 'protection', despite the appearance of overarching political parties. Thus, the very nature of the local leaders remains the same, whether or not parties are 'loosely structured' or 'better organised', with there being subtle differences in organisation and operation. As such, the existence of charismatic leaders like Mamata or Jayalalithaa depends to a large extent on their ability to forge alliances with institutional and non-institutional 'big-men' (Mines and Gourishankar). A recent event made this clear in Bengal when renowned Islamic leader Toha Siddiqui (Pirzada of Furfurasharif) accused the CM Mamata Banerjee of having done nothing for Muslims and threatened to withdraw his support that would lead to a considerable weakening of the Muslim vote bank in Mamata's favour, with Mamata attempting to pacify him in a matter of days (Times News Network). This reiterates what Partha Chatterjee had observed in his 'Politics of the Governed' where he observed how slowly political groups were withdrawing political support from the CPIM and joining Mamata's ranks of power (P. Chatterjee) and such political bargaining on her part has allowed her stay in power despite her widespread discrediting, putting a serious question mark on the phenomena of women being the new political cleaners- the new anti-corruption force in politics (Goetz) as many of these female politicians have been accused of being corrupt. The big-men however, institutional and non-institutional, function as intermediaries who acquire benefits on the behalf of their constituents from seemingly charismatic leaders who can seemingly hold their respective forts- something that the BJP is well aware of and attempting to reproduce in the 2017 UP election by weaning away local leaders from SP, BSP and Congress (Shah). The people however are not mere spectators of these elaborate schemes and are often critical of their leaders and overlords as is the case in Bangladesh with the freedom fighters turning into official big-men after the war of 1971(Mookherjee) or even in West Bengal where the all-powerful comrade is criticised behind closed doors and his rival faction is encouraged by some (Banerjee, Leadership and Political Work). My fieldwork in Kolkata, brought me in contact with a middle-aged Muslim man who had told me, "*Hum log hain King Maker* (We Muslims are the king makers), we decide who should be in power", and he further emphasised how he was now impressed with Mamata Banerjee's appeasement strategies of keeping in her posse, well known Muslim faces and often had pictures of her wearing the hijab circulated on posters all over the city. He was clearly enjoying the patron bowing down to her constituents, further elaborating the agency on the part of the clients in the patron-client nexuses where the appeasement is never one-directional. It also shows how the term vote-bank cannot be used uncritically without providing agency to the members of the community in question for in the words of Iqbal, my respondent, "*bank se kuchhnikalnahaitohkuchchenabhichahiyena*" (you have to invest something in the bank to take something from it later- on the question of vote banks).

Questions then come up about how the bureaucracy functions in these societies- why the rational-legal guardians of the resources of the state are not involved in the day-to-day alleviation of poverty and dispersion of government welfare to which we find the answer in Akhil Gupta's seminal work 'Red Tape' (Gupta) where he shows how disenfranchised the bureaucracy itself is, and how people with more social capital are able to exert their influence through political channels to acquire limited resources that the state has to offer. The partisan nature of the patrons in villages and other settings thus make people vote

for support these leaders often as a show of their loyalty for things they have doled out in the past like jobs or loans etc. (Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* 148) making the parties remain incumbent over long periods of time, not necessarily out of the appreciation of a party ideology, but due to the economic reasoning of voters within their structural constraints of societal obligations and limited party options. A famous story in West Bengal helps narrate just how much Gramsci's 'good sense' (Gramsci 346) had percolated down to the masses- once a tribal leader in Birbhum who was a big man in the employ of the CPIM was asked by an educated 'bhadralok', "Hey, you've become a communist?" to which he answered promptly, "Never! I'm a supporter of CPIM!".

Partha Chatterjee's 'The Politics of the Governed' shed new light on the area of popular politics and how people with less economic or cultural capital are able to negotiate resources for themselves (P. Chatterjee). The significance of such a study lies in the fact that even repeated re-iteration cannot do justice to the agency of the people who are beneficiaries of the patron-client relationships that may seem regressive at the outset owing to their archaic nature and persistence across centuries following caste and kinship lines. Exercising one's agentic assertions within structural limits to wean away crucial resources for oneself is nothing short of agentic, and Marxist notions of agency and political action fail to account for such exercises as has been iterated earlier (Alavi). The political possibilities however, are not always so bright as many other studies and contemporary events have shown, the scarce resources doled out by the state and NGOs are hardly 'redistributed', rather, they are 'circulated' through channels in villages and slums. Not only is the bureaucracy's fiscal and/or structural constraints responsible for inequality to persist (Gupta), but as other studies have shown, the proliferation of NGOs in the rural countryside and slums has led to the professionalization (Escobar 388) of the entrenchments of patron-client relationships. The 'dark side of social capital' is evident in many cases as important goods doled out by the government and NGOs often find their way into privileged channels of circulation in times of crisis and otherwise (Huda, Rahman and Guirguis) and even top level leaders are not very subtle in their portrayal of being the all merciful patrons of the masses. Recently, Tamil Nadu CM Jayalalitha's or 'Amma's' pictures were seen on relief packets doled out during the Chennai floods (Stalin), making her look more like an overlord than a Chief Minister. A similar case can be seen in the utilisation of central government funds by Mamata Banerjee, CM of West Bengal as she implements policies like Kanyasree (providing money to the families having a girl child for her to study) and rice at 2 Rs/KG to woo voters, all the while making sure that her name is attached to these schemes (Ghoshal). While Mukulika Banerjee's study has shown that people are not weaned away completely by such gestures and dole-outs (Banerjee, *Why India Votes?*), the fact that they are least invested in party ideology and often have economising tendencies with their voting, makes them vote for incumbent leaders like Mamata and Jayalalitha with rationales like, "Atleast she is doing something!"- my own fieldwork in slums of Kolkata has shown. The people however, can hardly be called mesmerised as they are well aware of their own situations and know that they have value as long as they vote for the 'right' party. The language is often, one of economic exchange rather than complete and utter faith as many would have suggested. However, such political behaviour cannot be construed as rational on the part of the voters and political actors as they economise within structural constraints utilising kinship networks, familial ties and secondary groups to acquire information, on the basis of which decisions to support parties or leaders are made (Sircar). Caste groups too, have great influence on elections- the Yadavs in Bihar and UP actively cultivate their political ambitions and political leaders from within their castes, by asserting their caste identities and hence, political and physical superiority (Michelutti). The Jats in Meerut are no exception as their active participation in local and college politics has been documented showing how political leaders and their respective support bases are nurtured actively within the Jat community to facilitate takeover of relevant political positions and hence control the power in areas of their prevalence (Jeffrey). The problem of theorising political behaviour in post-colonial contexts with vast differences in the behaviour of people and yet sharing certain similarities in their perception of leadership and politics in terms of patron-client relations is that few methodologies stand the test of ambivalent behaviour in people. How people may behave somewhat differently across time and space and yet retain certain basic aspects of their identity and behaviour- especially when it comes to politics, that allows them to protest and support people or ideals they feel, represent their interests the best- the same interests that have been shaped by families, peer groups and education.

#### **What Bourdieu Brings to the Table**

Bourdieu's concept of capital allows us to see how society and its actors are locked in pursuit of various species of capital and how such capital is accumulated, lost, re-signified and exchanged by various leaders and their supporters. His structuralist background allows us to see how political capital is not necessarily defined by individual charisma but by relative positions in 'fields' of politics (Jentges) with individuals claiming greater legitimacy by virtue of the variety of capital in their possessions: social, economic, symbolic among others. The interesting point noted by Jentges is that such theorising does not point to abstract concepts based on frivolous personal qualities like 'charisma', but rather, are based on the constant workings on the part of politicians, parties, and other relevant factors that matter in the 'field'. The individual then, is directed to choose the person more or less suitable with the greatest amounts of capital in the field- however, the process is not as simple as it looks/sounds- rather, to appeal to the tastes of people, one has to cater to the groups that hold greatest capital in the field of power that is currently relevant- hence the catering to dominant castes or classes or communities or vote banks by political parties- however, the leader and/or the party seeking the mandate of such a group has to be legitimate in his/their position as the representative(s) of the community/group in question- an identity that is reinforced by the representation of the group vis-à-vis other groups (Jentges). Voting along caste lines (Michelutti) for a member of one's community is quite common in India (Jeffrey). Thus, a Bourdieuan intervention also answers Hamza Alavi's question as to how the study of peasant society's politics is to be done keeping in mind their social entrenchments and ties and also their unique agentic decisions (Alavi).

Weber's assertions that charismatic authority rests on the follower's beliefs in the leader's "gift of grace (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership. This is 'charismatic' domination, as exercised by the prophet or--in the field of politics--by the elected war lord, the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue, or the political party leader" (Weber) falls flat in the face of Bourdieu's more rugged methodology of unearthing the exchange of various forms of capital in the processes of leadership building and maintenance (Benit-Gbaffou and Katsaura). If anything, Newbury's assertions allow us to see how charismatic leadership was never existent in the sub-continent owing to the prevalence of patron-client relationships at every level (Newbury). The fact that in the Indian context, despite there being widespread discrediting of political leaders on corruption charges like Mamata's recent debacle in a sting operation (G. Chatterjee) or Jayalalitha's disproportionate assets case (India Today), there are fewer alternatives available for people to vote for and their 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*) often determines whom they go ahead and support within the available options. However, as most local leaders operate through the patronage of centralised rulers (Weingrod), and it is through the support of these local leaders that chief ministers or other MPs and MLAs maintain their incumbency, the people often end up voting for those already in power as the other alternatives have either been bought by the ruling party or 'managed' (Williams) – an example being how the congress leaders in West Bengal are called 'Watermelons'- they are congress (green) on the outside, but communist (red) on the inside, denoting how they essentially are in league with the very people they are supposed to oppose on the political field. And yet, as voting is often a celebration, a community event and an exercise of one's 'birth right' (Banerjee, *Why India Votes?*), people vote in large numbers, and sometimes even teach a much-required lesson to the political leaders. The denotation of leaders in derogatory terms, the lack of pervasiveness of political ideologies and the economising tendencies on the part of voters all show us how people are well aware of the nature of political leaders and their short-comings, but still support them out of some habituated necessity ingrained in the political practice of the citizens of this country- an exercise of an unconscious second nature or habitus (Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*).

The habitus is a repository of people's historical identities such as caste ties or oppression and is simultaneously a tool for the absorption of people's subjective experiences (Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*), making it an essential tool in the study of human behaviour that consists of making choices- the information acquired from one's primary and/or secondary groups and one's own life, help facilitate the choices of people when they make 'informed' decisions. However, such decisions are hardly conscious and often in the realm of the unconscious, instilled by the societal inculcations of habits, identity practices and 'tastes' that are practiced by people (Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*). Furthermore, Bourdieu's insistence on culture being a matter of practice rather than a matter to be internalised unmediated (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*) is why his methodology is so apt for a society where

there have been significant political upheavals in the form of the rise of lower castes and classes in many parts of the country (Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*) with lull periods of extreme incumbency for decades at a go (Williams). The brilliant use of Bourdieu's methodology in the small town of Meerut by Jeffrey has shown us how his own respondents often referred to methodological terms like 'field', 'feel for the game' as a part of their daily usage (Jeffrey) making the origin of Bourdieu's terminology and methodology a truly post-colonial one by not only finding its usage in the fields of study, but also in its spirit of disrupting the eurocentrism inherent in most anthropological works (Puwar).

The exercise of one's taste in the arena of politics is what often also determines one's identity- whether one's identity determines one's actions in the field of politics or whether one's political actions determine one's identity is a chicken-egg question that has little possibility of concrete answer as we have observed cases where people are critical of the kind of identity politics that their community members indulge in (Michelutti) and people have also managed to self-fashion their identities with their political actions (Banerjee, *Populist Leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu: Mamata and Jayalalithaa Compared*)- making matters of choice and rejection occupy primary positions in the fields of politics if not ascribed statuses. One's taste bears testimony to one's position in society as well as one's subjective capabilities (Rahkonen)- thus one's taste in politicians or parties makes one susceptible to ascription in society where there are multiple fields of power operating and facilitating hierarchies. Often, as superior tastes are seen as the 'inherent' qualities of higher classes or higher castes, one finds in India, a preference among middle classes consisting largely of upper castes to be voting for parties or supporting parties on the basis of their 'development' agenda- a factor greatly utilised by BJP in its 2014 Lok Sabha polls leading to a consolidation of its power in the majority of North India (Sridharan). The middle-class population of India claims to vote for more relevant issues like development and international affairs- having superior political and economic judgement and to protect it God given rights on property and education (Singh) echoing Bourdieu's observations of the claims of the bourgeois of having superior taste as a part of their innate qualities (Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*) furthermore prompting us to use a Bourdieuan methodology to understand why these claims are made and how they can be effectively deconstructed. Banerjee's observation that urban middle classes preferred important decisions to be taken not by elected representatives, but by educated bureaucrats (Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* 166) shows us clearly how middle classes hold in higher preference, those qualities that they deem to be superior and those qualities that they themselves possess, but the problem with such claims are that none of the so-called superiority of governance or education is inherent, but rather the result of cultivation of cultural capital and education capital in middle class populations for many generations (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*)- qualities that they feel separate them from the uneducated poor or lower classes/castes and have exclusive rights over. The same attitude is seen when middle class citizens reject lower caste/class leaders like Mayawati, Lalu Prasad, Mamata Banerjee etc. (Jaffrelot, *'Why Should We Vote?': The Indian Middle Class and Functioning of the World's Largest Democracy* 50) for reasons like their lack of fluency in English, their rustic accents, their looks and often their lack of ability to understand development and economic principles- things every educated middle class person is endowed with. My own fieldwork demonstrated to me how middle classes reject reason on the part of their lower class counterparts because they vote for freebies and not for industrialisation or development, making a Bourdieuan intervention necessary to show how people are classed by others not only because of their dress, education and consumption of popular culture, but also because of their political preferences- something the lower/lower middle classes also returned with their scorn for upper/middle classes when they mentioned to me how they had experience dealing with politicians ever day to bargain for basic amenities and how the middle classes were simply glued to their TV sets to know the rigors of everyday politics. The class wars are evident, but not entirely due to economic bases operating in society as Marxists would have us think, but rather due to cultural forces operating within people, their habits, groups, sources of information and their differences in value systems and lifestyles making for a society that is a tacit battlefield with each class/caste attempting to bring about its own version of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, *The Market of Symbolic Goods*) whereby its superiority in terms of sheer number or education are flaunted through political acts like voting or vocal support in order for classes and/or castes to show their power over forms of classification and state machinery, rather than head-on physical violence.

To sum up, the political leaders of post-colonial societies like India are hardly ever elected on the basis of their individual qualities, and even if it appears to be so, there is great rigor put in by politicians and political parties to secure their positions are omnipotent in local settings by cultivating their social capital among dominant caste/class groups. The patron-client framework has been operational in the subcontinent for centuries and still persists not only in village societies but also in large cities where basic amenities are still fought for by various classes and/or castes. The consequent political behaviour is economic without necessarily being rational owing to its economising arising from caste/familial ties and localised cultural knowledge. Even when there are apparently charismatic leaders ruling states for long periods, there are political equations they have to secure on the ground for them to remain in power. However, such management of local leaders does not go entirely unnoticed by the constituents, who try to make most out of their available political connections.

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