

***Caste, Communism and Cultivation:  
Perceptions of Democracy in West Bengal, India***

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**Introduction**

A few years ago, I became fascinated by the striking contrast between low and falling voter turnout in the affluent west, and the continued high rates of voting seen in India. Moreover, whereas the likelihood of voting in the west declined with lower incomes and education, in India the poorer, rural-based and socially disadvantaged members of Indian society are more likely to turn up to vote, attend political meetings and participate in campaigning, than their affluent urban counterparts<sup>1</sup>.

I thus commenced ethnographic fieldwork to seek qualitative answers to this riddle. Put bluntly, why do the great mass of rural poor whose lives in fact improve very little from election to election, nonetheless continue to think of them as important events that *demand* their participation? Why does their faith in their votes continue despite the continued subjection of their interests to those of the minority urbanites?

I located my research in two 'representative' villages, Madanpur and Chishti, in the Indian state of West Bengal, where adult illiteracy, but also voter turnouts, are around 90%, the supply of electricity and running water is sparse, the houses are made of mud and thatch and the inhabitants are either Muslim or Scheduled Caste. Over time, I got to know the people who lived there intimately, participated in all their major festivals and harvests, witnessed several elections and won enough trust to have been told some well-kept secrets. But this research has in turn provoked a broader agenda of interests. Between elections, what is the peasantry's lived experience of politics in the intense and unusual West Bengal combination of democracy, and hegemonic but not totalitarian Communist rule? What opinions about the nature of politics, government and power does this experience lead the peasantry to? Who is 'doing' politics and why? And what are

the social and cultural contours of change and continuity in the wake of the radical reforms of the last three decades?

I am currently striving to draw these themes together in a monograph which I hope will be as ethnographically grounded as any classical 'village India' study, yet driven analytically by these wider perspectives of political anthropology. I do believe that when the results of the ethnography are laid out in more detail as in a monograph then it is possible to give clear answers to my original question, and explain the continued importance of voting to this population.

But it may be possible to give an indication of this wider argument even within a smaller compass, as dictated by the current context. So for the purpose of the present paper and the interests of my Agrarian Studies audience, I would like to focus on some of these core concerns through the prism (and 'thick description') of the rice harvest. I believe that even this single activity, the harvest itself, has a significant role in assisting us in acknowledging and accounting for this larger question. What I will argue is that rather like elections themselves, the harvest is a highly concentrated and somewhat ritualised activity in which what is brought home is not just grain, but a renewed consciousness of the relationship between individual participation and collective welfare.

I note that previously at this colloquium Liana Vardi analysed European fine art to suggest that scenes of harvest were used as a device by artists to re-imagine the countryside as a place of harmony and peaceful interaction at a time when the nobility had moved away to living in country houses (Vardi 2001)<sup>2</sup>. Depictions of the gathering of harvest seemed to offer a solution 'to the problem of how to show labour without showing its dangerous aspects'. In some respects my reading of the rice harvest also notes some genuine sense of harmony and cooperation. But in the Bengal village there has been no removal to grand houses, and with landlords and tenants still cheek by jowl, the harvest also encodes the enduring tensions in this agrarian society.

### **Islam, Rice and Politics**

As Eaton has shown in his definitive study, 'the interaction between the [Gangetic] delta's Sanskritic, political, agrarian and Islamic frontiers forms one of the great

themes of Bengal's history' (Eaton 1993:xxv). Eaton's persuasive thesis argues that the spread of Islam eastwards across the Bengal plain in the sixteenth century is inextricably linked to the clearance of forests, that brought the resulting land under the plough for paddy cultivation by small Muslim cultivators who also took on the task of proselytising their religion. Until then, even though 'Muslim regimes had ruled over Bengal since the early thirteenth century, a noticeable community of Muslim cultivators did not emerge there until the late sixteenth century' (Eaton 2000:259). This was largely due to the condescension with which the meat and wheat eating *ashraf* - administrators, soldiers, scholars or merchants from Western India - held the local effete, fish and rice eating Bengalis.

The Syeds of modern day Madanpur and Chishti, who claim descent from Kamal Baba of Kirman in Iran, seem to belong to the same *ashraf* classes, a category that 'included those Muslims claiming descent from immigrants beyond the Khyber - or at least from beyond Bengal - who cultivated high Perso-Islamic civilization and its associated literatures in Arabic, Persian and Urdu' (Eaton 2000:249). As a nod to their foreign origins, they still, rather uniquely in Bengal, continue to speak Urdu among themselves. In general, historically, what served to distinguish *ashraf* identity alongside their foreign origins and cultivation of high Perso-Islamic civilization was the refusal of *ashraf* classes to engage in agricultural operations. Whereas local Bengali paddy farmers defined their Muslim identity around cultivating the soil, the *ashraf* maintained a disdain for the plough, which they refused to touch. This continued into the twentieth century and a 1901 survey among the Muslims of the Nadia district in Bengal found that 'the *Ashraf* will not adopt cultivation for their living. They consider cultivation to be a degraded occupation and shun it for that reason'. And in the Census of the same year H.H.Risley wrote that 'like the higher Hindu castes, the *Ashraf* consider it degrading to accept menial service or to handle the plough'. This *ashraf* disdain for the plough continued right into the 1980s.

Accordingly, the Syeds of Madanpur and Chishti marked their distinction within the village social hierarchy by a taboo against their handling of the plough and by implication, for manual labour. Until the 1980s, this fact manifest itself in a cleavage among the Muslims, between the elite Syeds who owned most of the land and the other Muslim castes of Shekhs, Pathan and Mughal who worked on their land. The size of landholdings was never very large, 40 *bighas* being the biggest l

heard of, the average was more between 10 and 15 *bighas*<sup>1</sup>. While the owners lived in the village and supervised cultivation they rarely stepped into the fields themselves. The relationship between *munim* and *mushib*, the owner and the tenant farmer, was a strained one owing to mutual dependence. The sharecropper was beholden to the owner's capricious choice of labour every year and hoped for secure tenancy. The owner was dependant on the sharecropper both for his labour and his knowledge of farming given he was unable to farm himself as a Syed. But ultimately it was an exploitative relationship in which the Syeds set the terms of contract and labour arrangements and the sharecroppers suffered precarious employment and pitiful wages that were paid mostly in kind and at the whim of the landowner.

### **The New Dawn...**

However, in 1977 the Left Front (a coalition of Communist parties) won the state level elections, and in the 1980s introduced some radical land reforms in Operation Barga that provided a much-improved deal for the sharecroppers. Henceforth, any sharecropper, *bargadar*, who had worked an area of land for a landlord for more than three years, could register his name against in it, was guaranteed work on that land and was due fifty per cent of its produce in return for his labour. The landlord received the remaining fifty per cent but remained responsible for the outlay of capital for seeds, fertilisers, bullocks and irrigation. The farming decisions now came to be made jointly, indeed were often dominated by the greater practical experience of the sharecroppers. Their new stake in the land also led them to work harder and invest themselves, and harvests flourished and West Bengal emerged as the largest rice producing state of India. Meanwhile, casual labourers were recruited into peasant trade unions and enjoyed a new government prescribed gender-blind daily minimum wage of 50 Rs, which had to be paid to them the moment they showed up for work, ending the old humiliating wait at the end of the day. While the implementation of these reforms has been extremely uneven across the state, in areas where they *did* take effect, as in my field site, the results were significant. Together with the introduction of high yielding varieties (HYV) of rice, it meant the majority of even poorer families could now eat three meals a day; "no one went hungry anymore", as my informants put it. The

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<sup>1</sup> 2.5 *bigha* = 1 acre

material effect of the reforms was therefore significant, as food insecurity and perpetual indebtedness decreased considerably.

Meanwhile, a quieter but profound social revolution has occurred. For guaranteed tenancy, higher wages and half the share of the harvest has meant that the sharecroppers, who were typically lower caste (Hindu or Muslim), had a new bargaining power in cultivation. As one sharecropper had put it to me: 'In the past the Congress used to only give us 'relief'. Once a year when we had to go and queue for their benefits, but now we can get the rewards of our hard work that should have always been ours.' This newfound sense of entitlement, combined with growing experience of mass mobilisation (not only at election time but in the agricultural unions or Kisan Sabhas), and, latterly, participation in the local Panchayat councils, engendered and strengthened a growing self-confidence in daily dealings with the higher castes.

However, the Left Front's choice of tenancy reform, rather than the disbursement of 'land-to-the-tiller' that was adopted by the Communist parties in Kerala, has had enduring political effects. For one thing, it avoided the petty embourgeoisement of the poorer peasantry that might have otherwise reduced their electoral enthusiasm for the Left Front. Moreover, it meant that the *bargadar* 'remains secure in the possession of land and payment of below-market rents only as long as the state sides with the tenants rather than the landlords' (Herring 1989:90; emphasis added)<sup>3</sup>. As a result, a mutual dependence between the Left Front government and its rural support base was established.

Consider the case of one of my informants; a *bargadar* called Okho Dom. Okho was the biggest *bargadar* across the two villages, by virtue of working on Mukhtar's twenty bighas, which meant that his share of every harvest was equivalent to 10 *bighas*. The landowner Mukhtar, belonged to the elite Syed caste and had inherited his land from his father-in-law. The land came attached with Okho the *bargadar* who had worked on it. When Operation Barga was announced in the 1980s, all the sharecroppers were asked to register their names only against the land they were currently working on (to avoid divisions among them) and Mukhtar recognising Okho's value having worked with him for five years, accompanied him to the local block office and helped with the paper work involved in acquiring the certificate.

The certificate was then deposited in a bank against which Okho could take out a loan for Rs 12,000, a sum he had since taken eight years to pay back.

Okho's relatively large share of land, his cordial relations with Mukhtar who himself was a widely respected man, and his reputation for being a good farmer gave him a natural place as a leader among the sharecroppers. His support for the Left Front cause was passionate. He could remember his father's days as a sharecropper, when the family were dependant on the whims of the landowners who rarely renewed their contract beyond a year. The resulting peripatetic childhood, the memories of his father's constant humiliation when he would be held by his ears and dragged off to do a job, of having to punctuate each of their sentences with the respectful 'ji' while talking to anyone from the landowners' household, the constant hunger as they survived on the Rs10 daily wage and the quarter share of the harvest which was dispensed at the whim of the landowner rather than the need of the share cropper and his family- were memories that drove Okho to make time in his own adulthood for political work. As he had told me, 'In those days when we wore nice clothes, our *munibs* accused us to having stolen them...if anyone had the temerity to acquire a bicycle, he had to dismount if he came across a member of a Syed household.'

For someone like Okho therefore, the party programme, the agitational activities for reform and the need for solidarity among the landless were central pillars of his existence. It was through these that he had been able to reverse the experiences of his childhood. His success and association with the Party had given him enormous self-confidence, was taken seriously by everyone and he could now stand tall even among the Syeds. His place among the political workers in the village who formed the coterie around the omnipotent cadre 'Comrade', and his fierce protectiveness towards other sharecroppers, was at all times a thinly veiled threat that the slightest insult to his honour or his friends' would be met with retribution.

### **The Harvest**

The harvest is the moment of reckoning for all peasants anywhere when the proof of months of hard work can be finally collected, weighed, divided and stored. One elderly informant had advised me to make sure that I was in the village to witness at least one harvest, 'when you will see what you are looking for', as he put it.

Given that I had made it plain that my interest was in understanding people's ideas about politics and democracy, I was naturally curious about this connection between the harvest and politics. The harvest itself lasts for a relatively short window of time, lasting about ten to fifteen days. In 2001 the harvest of the *swarna* paddy luckily coincided with my university's winter break and a day after I had taught my last class for the term, I alighted at the familiar bus stop on the highway.

It was immediately obvious that things were afoot. The entrance to Chishti that was usually clear and quiet had two bullock carts blocking them and unfamiliar men carrying and loading bundles, with paddy spilled over from bulging sacks. The village lanes were strewn with straw, sticks and bits of rope, and every courtyard and open space I looked into was covered with freshly cut paddy that lay in piles taller than me. Winding my way through the familiar lanes was like walking through a maze of paddy walls, with the voices of workers and threshing machines the only way of locating people.

Everyone was busy, immersed in his or her tasks, working with a sense of urgency and impatience; there was no opportunity for small talk. After a cursory welcoming nod and grin as they spotted me, everyone returned to what they were doing - in marked contrast to the usual chatter, cries of excitement and cups of tea that usually greeted my visits. Words remained at a premium over the following weeks. As I watched people list the tasks for the day, designate groups to carry them out, thresh the grain and so on, and without their usual running commentaries, I was really challenged to *observe* and to make sense of what was going on in light of the many previous conversations we had shared about the land reforms, changing labour relations, caste dynamics, and kinship networks.

These villages, lying in the well-irrigated areas of Birbhum district, are able to grow two paddy crops a year. High Yielding Varieties of rice had been introduced in the 1980s and eagerly adopted for yields that were ten-fold the traditional. The crop also matured in just three months as opposed to the six months that the *swarna* variety and others took. 'This crop is a lottery, the prize is much bigger than the price of the ticket' people had told me in the past. But the HYV was expensive to cultivate, requiring large amounts of expensive fertilisers and water extracted by diesel-run pumps. The use of fertilisers in the field also meant that

mosquitoes which otherwise thrived in the standing water of the paddy fields were driven into the village, causing a distinct rise in the incidence of malaria. But despite these aspects, HYV enjoyed enduring popularity because the returns from this crop were nearly three times as much as the capital outlay required.

In contrast, *swarna* paddy was cheaper to cultivate, it was fed by monsoon rains but took longer to mature, and was cultivated for various different reasons. It was grown mainly for food and income security but also because a number of the by-products it generated were not available from HYV of rice. For instance, the staple and ubiquitous snacks of Bengal, *mudi* and *khoi* (puffed rice) could not be made from HYV paddy, nor were its stalks any good for thatching or fodder. Furthermore, ritual offerings of rice to deities were never made with HYV rice as it was considered too synthetic, too manmade, too dry (*khora*), to be offered to the gods.

There was also an implicit reasoning that the success of the HYV crop was more reliant on money and capital inputs than on the labour of the farmers and was therefore less sincere an offering than the *swarna* rice. For the same reason HYV was never used for the *pulao* of wedding feasts; instead people routinely cultivated small plots of *gobindobhog* and other traditional varieties expressly for these purposes<sup>4</sup>.

But perhaps just as important a reason for growing this less plentiful *swarna* variety was its restorative quality for the soil. Farmers believed that the HYV sapped the ground of nutrients which only alternating with *swarna*, and also with different kinds of HYV rice, could restore.

All this meant that the harvest of the *swarna* was met with greater trepidation than the HYV; the yields were never very high so not one grain could be wasted, the by-products were precious and so had to be collected carefully and the grain had to be stored separately and set aside for the whole year to be used at future festivals and for *mudi* making. It was the rice they knew better and loved but also one that they had to work harder for and whose yields varied from year to year depending on the rainfall. This added to the *frisson* of the harvest.

Anticipating the crop yield was a delicate business, with wide variations across fields. Since the reforms, landowners attributed the variation in yields across



different holdings to the amount of involvement by the *bargadar* in the cultivation process<sup>5</sup>. The Syed landowners insisted that the yields were always lower when cultivation was left to the *bargadar*. Their reasoning was that *bargadars* worked slower and less efficiently ever since their wages had been raised and had been given entitlement rights to the harvest. Thus while a single sharecropper would have planted a whole *bigha* in one day, it now took four or five, they had told me in the past. Further, their greater standing meant that they could ask for more labour to be supplied, making the cost of cultivation much higher overall and thereby reducing the profit margins. Given the size of the holdings were not very large for most part of the Syed population, they found themselves increasingly impoverished.

As a result, sometime in the late eighties, they had taken a collective decision to give up their traditional taboo of handling the plough and invented a small ritual to mark this transgression ceremonially. The Syed men of the two villages had got together one day and gone down to the river bed behind Madanpur in a solemn procession with their bullocks and ploughs. They then said a collective *namaz* and ploughed the riverbed, as the first earth they, as Syeds, would ever turn. Having marked that important rite of passage the Syed men of these two villages had begun to work in their own fields. They insisted that ever since they had begun to cultivate their land with their own hands, using their own labour and paying attention to the crop, the yields had been significantly higher. It was for this reason that a large number of landowners had tried to circumvent the reforms by having *bargadars* cultivate only a small portion of their land and used their own and some hired daily wage labour for the rest. They insisted that the yield was much higher in the latter.

In contrast, the sharecroppers didn't think that the extra *shrm* or labour by anyone made any difference to the crop and any increase in productivity could be entirely put down to the introduction of High Yielding Varieties of rice. In complete contradiction to what the Syeds had told me, they felt that the landowners took even less interest in farming ever since their share of the harvest had been so radically reduced by the reforms.

At the time of harvest and during the days of threshing and winnowing, no one reiterated any of these opinions - but the worry and tension on their faces revealed

that everyone was waiting with bated breath to measure the final yield of the *swarna* crop.

The harvest was made up of a series of tasks - cutting the ripe paddy in the field, tying them into bundles, carrying them to the courtyards, setting up threshing machines or transporting the sacks to local mills, collecting the grain and husk, winnowing it, dividing the grain and the husks separately - and finally storing them into tins ready to be milled. All this took about two weeks. Throughout this period, a large number of people were involved as each task had to be completed quickly and efficiently to get the maximum benefit of the harvest. Alongside the sharecropper extra labour was therefore frequently deployed during this period and sometimes 40-50 people worked each day for a landowner. The crop from 10 *bighas* was reaped and tied each day and the winnowing took another three days. About 10 people were employed on each of these days to work the threshing machine, separating the grain from the straw and storing them carefully.

The terms of contract for this extra labour were finely calibrated. The most usual sort was the daily wage labourer who had to be paid Rs. 50 at the start of the working day but there were also others. The most commonly seen, especially among women, was payment in grain for specific jobs of husking or boiling rice. In the past the amount of grain offered as payment was at the discretion of the landowner though now it had become necessary for them to agree this amount mutually with the recipient. A third kind of labour arrangement of the past was that of the *mahinder* when a small child was attached to a landowner's household and all the child's expenses were met in return for his or her help with small tasks.

Since the reforms of Operation Barga in the 1980s labour used during most of the year had to be paid in cash, but during the harvest season, older labour arrangements were briefly brought into play. For the workers it worked to their advantage because their household stocks of rice from previous harvests were usually at dangerously low levels by the time of the next harvest and so instant replenishments from the freshly harvested grain were welcome. Children were particularly useful as hired hands at this time as they joined their parents after school, helping with some of the innumerable but low skill jobs that needed to be accomplished within a very short space of time. Landowners too found it beneficial

to make instant payments in kind rather than have to regulate their cash flow so as to organize for cash payments.

All jobs seemed to be coordinated jointly by the landowner and his bargadar. Decisions about - when and how much grain would be harvested, how much labour was required, where the unhusked paddy would be stored, where the threshing machines would be set up, who would guard the grain through the night - were made as much by the sharecropper as the landowner. This meant that the two had to work closely together. The *bargadar* usually arranged for the extra labour required, drawing on members of his family first and other close allies among the daily wage labour pool in the villages. Men, women and even children all got involved.

However, given a large amount of open space was required for the winnowing process; it was the open courtyards of the wealthier landowners houses that were used. This was as much functional for the work itself as it was for the owner to keep a close eye on the security of the harvest. But the disadvantage of this arrangement for the landowner was that this made him entirely reliant on the bargadar to actually transport the harvest from the field to the village and to his courtyard. This was hard and backbreaking work and required the physical labour of many people specially as there was virtually no motorised transport and the village lanes were narrow. Given the landowning Syeds' abhorrence of manual labour, they were entirely dependant on the sharecropper for such portage. Such dependence had been used as a powerful tool of protest and negotiation by the tenants when the reforms were being introduced and countless stories of the humiliation of a landowner whose harvest had been left to rot in the fields still circulated. This threat was still real and was the source of much tension among bargadars and the landowners.

A second source of tension was the actual safety of the grain when it was brought in. Most landowners did not in fact have enough space in their courtyards to store their entire harvest. They were therefore reliant on some of the village's communal spaces to store the paddy and often set up threshing machines next to the stockpiles. This made them vulnerable to arson and theft and forced the landowners to trust their bargadar to guard the precious stocks through the night.

Once the grain had been threshed, there came the moment of sharing of the grain heap. After hours of work<sup>6</sup> on a simple motorised threshing machine (or one run by a foot pedal) the grain was collected in a large heap on a freshly prepared courtyard. The bargadar and his family then undertook the delicate task of actually dividing the grain heap. Before the division, the grain brought in from the thresher, was carefully winnowed once more by hand to remove any remaining stalks of straw. The straw was swept up separately and just as carefully as the grain as this was an important part of the harvest<sup>7</sup>. Each product, including every twig and straw, was then carefully swept up into separate heaps and each one was carefully divided into two, one for each party.

Watching this in Meher Bibi's courtyard, I noticed that she stopped her usual bustling around to watch very carefully the process - whilst trying not to make her interest too evident. And so did all the other workers, including the playing children, and even, it seemed, the chicken and cattle. All eyes were on the grain - the precious treasure for which everyone had worked for six hard months. The silence was pregnant with meaning, replete with both the remembrances of angry and humiliating times past, and a present palpable threat of disorder and even violence.

For the reforms had been the culmination of nearly two decades of violence, meetings and demonstrations, with the Birbhum area had been at the centre of much of the agitation, and few subsequent settlements between owner and tenant had been as amicable as that of Okho Dom (discussed above). Thus, during the harvest, when all able bodied men were to be found among the ripe stalks in the field, the memories of days when they had had to hide in the tall paddy to avoid being killed, re-surfaced. Equally, the sight of the Syeds, who until recently held such disdain for manual work, working shoulder to shoulder with the tenants evoked memories of the crops that had been burnt of those who would not support the reforms.

Every man in the village had his own story and the scars of past violence were inscribed on bodies and relationships. Mukhtar's next-door neighbour Akbar, who was also his father-in-law's brother, was now one of the wealthiest in the village but remained forever tight-lipped about politics. He had been severely beaten and outmanoeuvred decades before by the man who emerged as the Comrade, and the

continuing threat of violence meant that he kept to himself and had given up all aspirations to political work. His only revenge had been to keep all *bargadars* off his land by discontinuing their tenancy before the reforms were introduced and used hired daily wage labour instead. He now worked harder than anyone else on his land, aided by his two sons who though they were educated had been unable to find salaried jobs. This led to disgruntlement during the year but their enormous harvest brought brief smiles to their faces. Stories like Akbar's abounded in the villages, of Syeds who had been outmanoeuvred or punished by the Comrade, and long dreamed or even plotted of how to get even.

The sheer visual impact of Syed men in their hitched up dhotis and dusty torsos, indistinguishable from any other castes, as they worked alongside others to bring in the grain, was a powerful reminder of the impact on them of the land reforms, and they looked embarrassed during the harvest at being caught looking like peasants. This degree of social levelling was rarely expressed in words - on the contrary, people continued to use the popular saying *Je khaney bhaath, shey khaney jaat* i.e. 'where there is rice, there is caste' (implying that the caste system and hierarchy is as ubiquitous and resilient as eating rice). But in practice, what one could observe during a harvest at least, was the sight of a low caste tenant looking straight into the eyes of an elite landowner, his body language that of the man in charge, as they discussed arrangements. Given the deep inequities of the caste system this would have been unimaginable less than a generation ago and had to be, literally seen, to be believed.

Similarly, the constant comings and goings from the landlord's house particularly during the harvest period was a reminder of how relations had changed over time. Earlier the tenant was essentially a household retainer who was expected to spend all his daylight hours at the landlord's house, available at his beck and call. But now he comes and went as he needed to, controlling his own time and work (and to that extent, farming and the accompanying harvests had become more like paid jobs than the overwhelming life occupation that they had been in the past). Further, the low caste Hindus, the Doms and Bagdi tenants, who earlier used to gratefully accept gifts of meat from the Syed's Qurbani sacrifices, now rejected it, asserting the Hindu taboo against consuming beef. 'Now they have enough to eat and hang out with 'big' people [i.e. the Party workers] so they are choosy' is how the Syeds put it.

To watch the tense and silent dividing of the crop was thus to grasp how significant and revolutionary the reforms had been, replacing as they did the older jajmani divisions when the grain heap was divided according to the whim of the landowner. Each party shared a history and memories of a time past that had to be contained and accommodated in the present so as to carry out the division peacefully. For the bargadar, this division marked the end of the humiliation their fathers had to suffer when they had to repeatedly 'beg' for their rightful share; for the landowners, it was the harshest reminder that they could no longer enjoy a lion's share and had to now pay a man his due. Little wonder then, that as the workers started filling the two piles of grains into tins, everyone seemed to breathe again.

After the drama of the division of the grain heap, came the anti-climax of the storage. The Syeds could afford to store their grain, as they had larger compounds and had managed to build themselves two storied brick houses. But the tenants continued to live in mud and thatch huts where the lack of space and vulnerability to the elements meant storing grain was impossible. Just enough grain for daily consumption was kept in sacks (after being twice boiled and husked to increase its weight and to increase its longevity). Any share of the harvest that was required for a future wedding or as insurance had to be kept well away from hungry mouths of the household. Thus, once sharecropper collected his share of the crop in tins, instead of carrying it off home with pride, he had to store it in 'his' landlord's house. For this he remained under obligation to him - which rather sullied the triumph of the larger share of harvest.

Hierarchy continued to be expressed more subtly too. The constant social interaction during the harvest meant the rules of hospitality were tested, and matters of who was invited to sit and rest, and who not, took on immense significance<sup>8</sup>. Thus, during the harvest, the Syeds ostensibly respected their tenants by serving them tea in china cups, a marked contrast from days gone by when they would never have been invited into the house or to sit down. Yet the cups were specially set aside for that purpose, as china, being porous, was seen as being polluted by a lower caste drinker. In contrast, when Syeds visited, they were served tea in the family's own metal or glass tumblers as they were considered to be appropriately pure<sup>9</sup>. Thus even the enhanced social exchanges still encoded an unambiguous message of relative 'purity' and worth.

Such scenarios are indicative of the partial, or becalmed pursuit of the Communist agenda. The minimum wage of Rs. 50 is no longer the princely sum it seemed 15 years ago and surely needs revision, whilst new forms of indebtedness are being created through government pricing policies<sup>10</sup>. The tenants' inability to expand their premises in over three decades brought home this fact starkly. Despite its vast rice production, West Bengal remains among the lowest performing Indian states on every human development indicator, with most people still denied basic access to education, health and employment. The Left Front's track record is thus being called increasingly into question<sup>11</sup>.

This threat to the peasantry's faith is compounded at the local level by what they see of the behaviour of the party cadres. The Comrade had also used his advance knowledge of impending reforms to rid his land of all *bargadars* before their tenancy rights could be enforced. Thus he had pushed his ideological and political agenda of fighting for the rights of the tenants, whilst suffering none of the financial loss of his fellow Syeds, and being able to remain aloof from manual work in the fields. Indeed, he had used the reforms to impose additional grateful tenants on the lands of any Syeds who threatened his political career.

After many years of power, his landholdings were now the largest in the village, and through the use of an army of daily wage labourers brought in from outside the village, and working under the supervision of his sons, his harvest was of a different order of magnitude to anyone else's. This reasserted annually his omnipotence in the local politics, but also made the cynical workings of the 'vanguard' ideology conspicuous even to party supporters like Okho and his friends. They understood that they had to tolerate the personal enrichment of the Comrade in order to gain any benefits themselves, for he alone had access to the higher echelons of the Party and state administrative machinery which could bring investment to the village and grants to individuals (i.e. what Herring calls 'the political -administrative means to retain proprietary claims').

Nonetheless, the solidarity of even the Comrade's coterie was not always entirely robust, and during the harvest especially, with its sharing of labour and know-how, older solidarities could briefly surge stronger than even the bonds of party membership. For example, in 2001, the harvest happened also to coincide with

the Islamic month of fasting, Ramzan, and so prayer meetings called *milads* were held in the evenings after the day's fast was broken and harvesting work for the day had been completed<sup>12</sup>. But as these meetings were held in the roomier courtyards of Syed households, the Syeds could use them - their timing, the guest lists, the choice of orator and the size of the audience - to play their own political games. For, attendance at a particular *milad* was taken as a show of political support to the host, so if a particular Syed could attract, through his various techniques, the right people to attend his *milad* then he could expand his network. If these new links were successful and acceptable, they were reinforced at future *milads* held in the home of the new allies, when the invitations were returned.

The second objective of these *milads* was to try and attract a large number of the poorer sections of the village as audience. A Syed would typically invite his *bargadar*, his family and a large section of the daily wage labour to these events. This achieved a number of purposes. It revived, at least for a moment, a vertical, older style patronage between a landowner and his tenants in the face of growing horizontal ties among the tenants. It also demonstrated to the Comrade the benefits of these ties, implicitly criticising his past expulsion of his own *bargadar*, and sending the message that people came voluntarily, rather than out of the fear and dependence that drove attendance at the Comrade's own *milad*.

Of course, the poorer peasants went to *milads* largely for a relaxing diversion at the end of a hard day's work and for the rare luxury of sweets. The Hindu tenants particularly enjoyed the egalitarian spirit of these Islamic gatherings - sitting shoulder to shoulder irrespective of caste - a spirit that they found sorely lacking in their own religion<sup>13</sup>. But for the scheming Syeds, the *milads* presented opportunity for politicking under a culturally respectable veneer of piety and hospitality that restrained the comrade from the extreme reprisals that more overt mobilisation against him would have provoked.

So political activity was not confined only to the work of professional politicians like the Comrade, with his union activities and budget disbursements, but also included the work done by people who Weber would have characterized as 'part-time' and 'amateur' politicians (respectively Okho, and the rival Syeds). While the Comrade lived 'off' politics, they lived 'for' it. In colloquial Bengali, however, all these brands of political activity would be covered by the phrase '*O Party korey*' i.e. 'he



*does Party*'. Most people of course do not 'do' political work in this sense. But even then, the capillary structure of the Left Front, with a 'comrade' in each village and a Communist Party office in each administrative block, means that each voter is close enough to a professional politician to see how politics is really done.

This perhaps helps explain the sophisticated political discourse that could sometimes emerge from even the humblest peasants. Once people had completed their harvesting, during the twilight zone betwixt seasons, when the stumps of harvested paddy were still wet in the fields and the village was enveloped in a haze of paddy dust, many of the *bargadars* who were otherwise too busy or shy to talk with me much became suddenly more voluble. It was as if the intense labour of bringing in the harvest, the knowledge that half of it was theirs, the practical respect with which, perforce, they had been treated during the daily decisions with the landowners, and the sheer performative power of the harvest, had emboldened them, in the brief pause before returning to the grind of earning a living. These conversations always began with the state of the markets and the price that the harvest was likely to fetch in the *mandi*, before leading on to talk about the government's role in regulating prices and more generally. Distinctions between *shorkar* (government) and *Party* (The Left front coalition) were finely drawn, as most felt they had distinct functions. As one man said to me: 'the job of the *shorkar* is to keep peace but the job of the Party is *andolan* (agitation). So each needs the other but they also have to work against each other'. Such talk inevitably led back to the land reforms and what they had meant to ordinary peasants in gaining self-respect and dignity. And so I listened and learnt some more.

## Conclusion

There is a well-known story in India, which several informants told me after I had asked them why bothered to vote:

*A king once suggested a feast to his people. He said he would provide the main courses, but asked if everyone could help with the dessert. It was a simple dish, a rice pudding, for which he would supply the rice and sugar, but requested that everyone bring just one cup of milk from their homes and pour into a large vat in the centre of the village. This was agreed and on the appointed day, accordingly,*

*a large copper vessel was suspended over a fire in the centre of the village. There was one man, known for his miserliness, who told himself that he could not be bothered to share milk that was his own and instead took along a cup of water. 'No one will notice that the milk is slightly thinner as a result, it is only one cup of water after all!' he told himself as he emptied the cup into the boiling vat. At the end of the evening, when everyone had filled their bellies with the delicacies that the royal kitchen had provided and it was time for dessert, the vat was uncovered with eager anticipation of this rarely enjoyed luxury of rice pudding. But as the cover came off, Lo and Behold! The vat was full of boiling ... water! Clearly everyone had had the same idea as the miser...*

Like all stories, the details varied in each telling, but the basic message was the same, namely, the importance of not cheating in a collective activity because ultimately, the people would themselves be the losers. Despite the setting of royal sovereignty, the parallels with democratic politics were plain and explicitly glossed by them:

'Our individual vote is like our cup of milk, which on its own could never make pudding. But by adding it to several other cups of milk, we could collect rather a lot of milk and create something rare and luxurious, which we can then enjoy together. To ask us why we vote is to ask why we contribute milk rather than water in our cups. After all, it is a small contribution: one cup of milk, one day of our lives, when we have to rearrange things a bit and make arrangements to visit the polling station. Don't we do this for things that we must do? What's the point of knowing this story otherwise?'

The story is part of popular folklore and is narrated in India in various contexts to explain different things. That it was chosen by my informants to explain their engagement with the thoroughly modern ideas of democracy makes this particular iteration more interesting. They understood that while parting with a cup of milk for a communal vat rather than saving it for a child was a big sacrifice for a poor person, the benefits were bigger. Likening this to their vote, they argued, that while the effort of the mile long journey to the polling station without any private transport, the re-organisation of their schedules, the queuing to vote under the blazing sun - all required numerous efforts on their part, the rewards were even more plentiful. The parallel they drew between the cups of milk required to make

a vat of rice pudding and their relatively small individual acts of voting required to achieve a democratic polity, was sophisticated and used the full range of vocabulary in Bengali to describe citizenship (*nagorikota*), duty (*kortobbo*) and rights (*odhikar*) and notions of votes as 'weapons' (*ostro*).

These statements of great sophistication were however, not the stuff of everyday conversation, but were triggered by special events such as elections and harvests. During elections, for instance, the atmosphere created by the campaigns of political parties, attendance at rallies and the act of voting itself acted as catalysts for these articulations. In more normal times, people were more prone to discussing the vicissitudes of farming, village gossip or the fine points of Islam. And not everyone was voluble. Women spoke more than men, and the upper caste men talked more than lower caste men. Devoid of self-confidence, burdened by work and wracked by suspicion these daily wageworkers had little inclination to sit down and talk to me at any length about anything, least of all political ideas. But as we have seen this silence was occasionally broken, even by tenant farmers at harvest.

There are both key points in common and key points of difference between a harvest and an election that help us appreciate the influence of the former over the latter. It is a fairly common notion that traditionally, harvests are liminal moments in a village's life with an air of carnival, times when normality was disrupted and the taken for granted nature of things questioned, and hopefully my account bears out that view. The harvest brought with it cooperation based on a division of labour and the creation of plenty that could never be achieved by a single farmer alone. In this the bundles of paddy were just like the large vat of rice pudding in the story above. Further, it was evident, that even highly discriminatory institutions such as caste and religion had within them the resources and values that could foster solidarity and egalitarianism to achieve these collective goals. To that extent, harvest is akin to the other festivals and scandals that form the moral dramas of social life.

Elections, in India at least, seem to have much of the same 'sacred' and moral aspect to them. More specifically, the intense but also brief and ambiguous experience of social levelling which the Bengal peasants experience at harvest is closely comparable to their experience and understanding of political equality on Election Day. On that one day, people understood the power of the notion of 'one

person one vote', of each vote counting for exactly the same as any other, regardless of the identity of the voter. This notion translated into real terms into a piece of plastic, the laminated Voter ID card, a unique and essential identifier, that listed people by a number and their personal details rather than by any social indicators. It was no surprise therefore to see that most people treated these cards as their most treasured possession. This notion of citizenship was further enhanced by the experience of having to queue at the polling station, standing cheek by jowl with others (as they had in the fields) regardless of caste, gender or occupation, which in a society of deep social divisions and separation was a powerful one. Most importantly, they pointed out that this was one moment when it was possible to register their membership of the nation 'If we do not even vote, how will the rest of the country be reminded that we exist?' they said<sup>14</sup>. Thus, popular sovereignty was experienced powerfully, if briefly, on election days. It is for these reasons, I have argued, that elections are treated as sacrosanct events that demand participation.

The distilled message that people took away from these occasional and sacrosanct activities such as harvest and elections were therefore the following:

- Each individual had a crucial role to play and therefore everyone was as important as the next person:
- There were certain arenas of social life where the rules of pollution and hierarchy did not matter. Thus, to extend the metaphor of the rice pudding, rituals like elections and harvests provided the opportunity to contribute an individual cup of milk (a vote/ labour) to a common vat (election results/the grain heap) without worrying about the polluting material of the cups involved. On these occasions the only identity at work was that of a universal citizenship rather than any other identity'; and 'labour' and 'votes' were above and beyond traditional categories of purity and hierarchy.
- An aggregate of individual efforts could create a whole larger than the sum of its parts; and that mass participation was a prerequisite for attaining the common good
- They saw the role of the Party as the guarantor of this hard earned goal.

These, in sum, were how the population of Madanpur and Chishti interpreted the abstract ideas of Democracy and Communism. Transcendent events such as elections and harvest both had analogous roles in shaping this understanding. It will

be interesting to explore in our discussion the differences and similarities in the ways they function.

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<sup>1</sup>See Anirudh Krishna (ed) 2008 **Poverty, Participation and Democracy: A Global Perspective** CUP for evidence from twenty four diverse countries from Asia, Latin America and Africa that poor people from poor countries do not value democracy any less than their richer counterparts.

<sup>2</sup> Vardi, L. 2001 *Imagining the Harvest in Early Modern Europe* in **Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge** (ed) James Scott and Nina Bhatt

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Herring 1989 'Dilemmas of agrarian communism: Peasant differentiation, sectoral and village politics' **Third World Quarterly**, Volume 11 Issue 1 pp89-115

<sup>4</sup> In a quick quiz one afternoon, a bunch of women named me more than thirty varieties of rice in five minutes, that they had themselves cultivated in the past but which had been discontinued since the introduction of HYV of rice. They reckoned there were at least a hundred different varieties of rice only a generation ago.

<sup>5</sup> In a good year, 3 bighas of land could yield anything from 113 tins (1tin=10kilos) to 180 tins of rice, depending on the input of care and attention.

<sup>6</sup> Paddy from 8 bighas of land took 4 days of continuous daylight work by an electric machine to thresh. A foot pedal manual machine took 8 days.

<sup>7</sup> The *swarna* grain with its tougher and longer stalks generated this precious resource that had innumerable uses but mainly was used for thatching huts and as cattle fodder. The second crop of the HYV has stalks that were softer and prone to pests and were therefore inferior for this purpose. If used for thatch toadstools grew on them and made them useless, forcing a re-thatch that was an expensive business.

<sup>8</sup> One such marker of distinction was the Syed usage of Urdu as a private language shared only with other Syeds. While other castes understood much of what was said, it was still unacceptable for them to actually employ Urdu for their own conversation.

<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, I too was served in these china cups, not being Muslim myself, and that gave me a personal experience of being discriminated against, a relatively unique one for a Hindu Brahmin in India. For that experience, I am grateful.

<sup>10</sup> In an important scholarly work on this process, Barbara Harriss-White has demonstrated through her recent account of agrarian markets in West Bengal, their crucial role in influencing a society's performance in raising poverty, nutrition, health and education. Harriss-White's main criticism of the LF government is that it has made no attempt to reform this structure of the dominance of middlemen and the agro commercial elite. 'Not only have the reforms in production not been matched by any reform in the structure of control in rice markets, but for most of the last quarter century, the LF government has been reinforcing the old pattern.' (2008:2). As a result, despite the revolutionary claims and results of Operation Barga which revolutionized land ownership and agricultural production (along with other factors) there has been de facto a protection of the privileges of the agro-commercial elite at the cost of the agro-commercial poor and the producers of rice. The main reason for this H-W states was to keep the costs of state procurement and trading down. But in the end, there were in turn held hostage by their 'clients' in the agro-commercial elite. What was required therefore was a coherent policy (linked to but separate from production policy) for the emerging agro-commercial petty bourgeoisie which would have allowed for the gains from trade to be spread more widely - and 'the balance of returns to agro-commerce and returns to production might also have been less disadvantageous to production. Production incentives would have been enhanced, conditions would have been created for agricultural labour to claim a higher proportion of the distributive share and the agricultural miracle would have had a manifest impact on rural poverty. (2008:3)

She shows that the manner in which firms in WB have controlled the marketed surplus for staple foods have affected the continuing agrarian poverty in WB, despite being India's largest rice producing state. 'The system of circulation and post-harvest production is polarized: on the one hand, there is a large sub-circuit of petty trade, and on the other, a numerically small sub-circuit of large rice mills. Petty commodity production and trade has mostly taken the form of seasonal livelihoods that are essential not only to the system of circulation but also to the survival of petty production in agriculture itself. Meanwhile, the big mills have increasingly become the property of non-landed fractions of the business class. Using money advances to preserve their indirect control over the primary production

structure, and to tie their suppliers to themselves so long as agriculture grew rapidly, they were able to stave off any threat to their supplies that might have arisen from small-scale traders buying from the producers. ' (Ibid:2)

<sup>11</sup> As events over the past two years in Singur and Nandigram have demonstrated, the government is also unable to articulate an industrial policy that does not rob tenants of land. Worse still, it has not hesitated to unleash state led violence against any retractors.

<sup>12</sup> See Banerjee 2008 'Democracy: Scared and Everyday' in Julia Paley (ed) **Democracy: Sacred and Everyday** SAR Press for a more detailed discussion of these *milads*.

<sup>13</sup> It was therefore not surprising to learn that Okho and others had started celebrating Saraswati Puja annually in the village. This was started in the mid 1990s when as the first generation of the beneficiaries of the land reforms had enough money to spare for small donations towards the celebrations. They hired a Brahman priest from a neighbouring village or in some years, just made do with the owner of the roadside tea stall who happened to be Brahmin by caste. By choosing the goddess of learning as their object of worship, the Doms and Bagdis had made their intentions clear. It was education that was likely to get them out of their stigmatised existence and it was her worship that was traditionally organised by children and students in Bengali society. The image was installed for about five days (to make it similar to the Durga worship and to make the most of the investment) and a series of functions of video evenings and music programmes were organised in the evenings. It was clearly the biggest religious ritual in their calendar to complement the Qurbani and Id festivities of their Muslim neighbours. All Syed and other households willingly gave them generous donations for the event as reciprocal gesture for their participation in their festivals.

<sup>14</sup> Please see my published paper 'Sacred Elections' in May 2007 **Economic and Political Weekly of India** easily available through Google or the EPW website.