

POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

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Abstract

The idea of political culture is integral to thinking about democracy. There are, however, different ways of thinking about what is 'salient' to the political culture of a country. In the recent past two influential works of Hindi literature – *Sanskriti ke Chaar Adhyaaya* by Ramdhari Singh Dinkar and *Raag Darbaari* by Shri Lal Shukla – entered commemorative signposts in their literary lives. In the moments of their commemoration, these texts manifested both dissonance and convergence with the debates in academic writings on political culture in India. An examination of the historical contexts of the 'present' life of these texts is important for understanding the dominant registers of politics and the 'life-worlds' of institutions and public life. Both texts in their different ways throw light on questions of pluralism and tolerance in the domain of culture and trust in political authority, questions which continue to be of immense importance for Indian democracy.

Keywords: Political culture, trust, toleration, political authority, democratisation

For a category and framework that has come to be used ubiquitously while comparing nation-states and for identifying the cultures of politics of particular nation-states, "political culture" is difficult to

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pin down – almost like “nailing jelly to a wall” (Formisano 2001: 394). The question what is the political culture of India – has led to different trajectories of exploration and search for what could be identified as the ‘salient’ features of the *culture* of politics in India. In the political context following the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government in the Centre, two influential works of Hindi literature – *Sanskriti ke Chaar Adhyaaya* (henceforth *Sanskriti*), a book on ‘Indian culture’ by the renowned poet and litterateur, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar and *Raag Darbaari* (henceforth *Darbaari*), a political satire by Shri Lal Shukla - stepped into commemorative signposts in their literary lives. Their commemoration, albeit in different ways, inserted the books into cultural milieus of politics which were distinct from those in which they were originally written. While the narrative structures of the books are a complex literary rendition of the legacy of cultural and institutional worlds of their time, in significant ways, they also represent the interlacing between literary expressions of cultural attitudes and the world of institutional and popular politics they continue to inhabit. In these renditions and representations across historical frames of time, they manifest both dissonance and convergence with the influential academic writings on political culture in India. In addition, the contemporary politics of ‘recall’ and ‘re-inscription’ in the register of dominant Hindutva politics (in the case of *Sanskriti*) and in the ‘life-worlds’ of institutions and public life ‘then and now’ (in the case of *Darbaari*), add fresh dimensions to the debates on political culture in India that have arrayed broadly around questions of pluralism and tolerance in the domain of culture and trust in political authority. For a country making the transition from colonialism to self-rule, both the questions were considered immensely important for establishing a stable democracy.

Sanskriti ke Chaar Adhyaaya: Re-Presenting the Past

\Ramdhari Singh Dinkar’s book *Sanskriti ke Chaar Adhyaaya*, translated literally as *Four Chapters of [Indian] Culture*, was published in 1956, with a foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru, who considered Dinkar his friend. Later Dinkar was to write a book *Lokdev Nehru, (The People’s Deity, Nehru)*. *Lokdev* was considered an “intimate biography” of Nehru. *Sanskriti* itself was largely seen as following the Nehruvian framework laid down in Nehru’s *Discovery of India* – indeed - a Hindi version of the same. In 1959 when *Sanskriti* received the Sahitya Academy Award, Nehru joked that part of the award belonged to him.² In the third edition of *Sanskriti* published in 1962, Dinkar refers to the

enormous attention the book had attracted in its previous editions, much more than *Urvashi*—for which he received the Jnanpith award—and *Kurukshetra*. The attention was not always laudatory and was often in the form of what he calls ‘*prabal virodh*’ (strong opposition) presented by the *sanatani* Hindus as well as the Brahmo and Arya Samajis; but the strongest critique came from the followers of ‘*ugra*’ (radical) Hindutva, and sometimes from Muslims.

In *Sanskriti*, Dinkar argues that the history of what is called Indian culture can be seen as having gone through four periods of transformation or what he calls *kranti*, (translated as revolution). Indeed, the history of Indian culture, he writes, is the history of these four periods of revolutionary change. Each of these four periods represented a zone of contact which generated a process of acculturation, whereby a pre-existing culture came in contact with a new culture arriving from outside the soil of India. This contact generated a process of harmonisation to produce a composite form of a new culture. The foundational culture of India was the product of the assimilation of an alien culture (the Aryan) with an existing one, which became for Dinkar the first period of momentous change.³ The second revolutionary moment occurred when Mahavir and Buddha initiated a revolt (*vidroh*) against the established religion/culture to interpret religious scriptures in a way so as to give them a desired democratic direction. The third phase of revolution presented itself when Islam came to India as a conqueror’s religion and the fourth was the contemporary/modern phase when both Hinduism and Islam came in touch with European ideas, which opened up new possibilities of cultural transformation. The idea that religion and culture were historically inflected by a ferment which produced harmonious tendencies prompted Dinkar to criticise extreme features in any religion and identify Kabeer, Akbar and Gandhi as three practitioners of religious harmony, singling out Kabeer in particular as the insurgent (*vidrohi*) who was relentlessly brave in his criticism of *varnashram dharma* and the caste system.

In 2015, which marked the 60th year of *Sanskriti*’s life in the literary domain, the BJP decided to celebrate the jubilee year of the book. The celebrations were announced to coincide with the state assembly elections in the state of Bihar - Dinkar’s home state. The book was subsequently propelled into the political domain as a trope around which the Hindi/Hindu identity of a state (Bihar) could be rallied. The commemoration of *Sanskriti* took place at several sites, including the national capital Delhi, in Vigyaan Bhawan, the space and symbol of authoritative knowledge, and in Begusarai in Bihar, a local site of state politics. Dinkar was born in village Simaria in

Begusarai district. The commemorative event in Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi was inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi, where he quoted a letter from Dinkar written in the 1950s, which appealed to voters to exercise their franchise by disregarding caste. With less than a month to the Bihar state assembly election, a politics of universalism specific to Hindutva was presented as an exhortation to reject a politics based on caste identities. In his speech in Simaria in Bihar, the Prime Minister sought to strike a chord with people who had grown up with Dinkar's poems inscribed on the walls of their houses. Modi chose in particular to invoke Dinkar's famous lines from a poem written on the occasion of the first Republic Day of India (26 January 1950): "*Sinhaasan khaali karo ki Janataa Aati hai*" ("vacate the throne, the people are arriving"). These lines were evocative at their inception (i.e. January 1950) of the momentous transformation taking place in the lives of the people – who were making the transition from colonial subject-hood to a republican citizenship founded on principles of popular sovereignty. Published in the anthology 'Neel Darpan' in 1954, the poem was famously invoked by Jaya Prakash Narayan (JP) in his speech on 25 June 1975 at the Ramlila Maidan before a mammoth gathering attended among others by Morarji Desai, Chandrashekhar and Atal Behari Vajpayee. The emergency came into force the same day. JP turned '*sinhasaan*' into a political slogan with perlocutionary effect weaving it into the call for 'total revolution', reminiscent of the 'insurgent' form the slogan had acquired from an earlier public gathering by JP in Patna's Gandhi Maidan in 1974. The slogan was re-iterated by Atal Behari Vajpayee after the emergency, this time inserted into the competitive electoral politics of an election which would install a Janata Party-led government in the Centre with Vajpayee as Prime Minister. The poetic locution of '*sinhasaan*' in 1950 invoked the sovereign people as an embodiment of the transformative moment of passage to democratic citizenship and republican constitutionalism. In its subsequent re-iterations the idea of the 'people' was placed in distinctive speech act contexts intended to have the effect of dismantling a pre-existing 'immoral' regime or 'unethical' ruling practices, through 'revolutionary' changes, wrought through a people's movement or the will of the people made manifest as a determinate democratic majority.

Prime Minister Modi's call to the ruling coalition of Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Janata Dal United (JDU) in Simaria in October 2015 to 'vacate the throne' was, however, inscribed in a different register. Located within a theatre of competitive electoral politics, Modi's call sought an inversion of the manner in which contests over

representation had been expressed and resolved in the 1980s and 1990s through a rolling back of the 'deference' legitimacy (Kaviraj 2003) elicited by the elite from the masses. The invocation of Dinkar's poems in Simaria was seen by many as an act of restoration, of recalling and re-inscribing into Bihar's present, the glory which one man born in the village in September 1908, had brought to the state as '*Rashtra Kavi*' - the nation's poet. Yet, amidst the competitive electoral politics of the region, Nitish Kumar, who like Narendra Modi was in a way a 'product' of the anti-emergency movement and recited Dinkar with *elan*, presented himself as the son of Bihar pitted against the 'outsider' - Modi.

The 'outsider' has been seen in different ways in Indian politics. In the political context, the outsider could be a person who does not belong to the familiar network of local politics. In this sense the outsider is a stranger not to be trusted with matters which were 'intimate' to the community. In his study of the culture of politics in India, in particular the relationship between the elite and mass cultures Weiner (1965) has seen the outsider as performing an important political role of dispute resolution in the specialised but traditional mode of conflict resolution through arbitration (as distinct from bargaining). Modi was, however, making a different claim - one of authoritatively reclaiming a local icon to communicate with the electors in Bihar through a vocabulary of affect. But simultaneously he inscribed onto the icon a universality encompassing the national political space. As the patriarch presiding over national politics, Modi could straddle the local and the national, remain an outsider and yet have the power to comment on the local, and ease thereby, the cohabitation of the local within the national political space. Yet, the cohabitation sought by Modi was uneasy and fraught. Before Prime Minister Modi spoke in Simaria about the dignity of Bihar drawing upon the iconisation of Dinkar, he had made a series of comments on the caste-ridden and caste-driven politics of Bihar. All of these comments were considered and presented by local politicians to the 'electors' in Bihar as offensive, humiliating, and an affront to their dignity. In what turned out to be a spectacular display of competing and adversarial electoral rhetoric, Narendra Modi and Nitish Kumar accused each other of hurting sentiments - in Kumar's case by abandoning the *ati-dalit* BJP leader Jeetan Manjhi for Lalu Yadav, and in Modi's case for humiliating the people of the state by questioning their DNA.⁴

Writing in the early 1960s, about the forms of leadership in India, W.H. Morris-Jones saw political leadership in India make itself manifest in three political idioms - modern, traditional and saintly.

The two dominant forms of leadership — and traditional — Morris-Jones argued, had their antecedents in the political structures of the nation-state and in the structures of an ancient society, respectively. With their contrasting lineages, the two were like ‘strangers’ who had not grown up together, but who now cohabited ‘two parallel worlds of politics’, and ‘effectively also represent[ed] two different languages or idioms of politics’. While the two were strangers to each other, they were able to co-exist in a relationship of contradictory cohabitation, as parallel languages without a point of coincidence. Under such a framework, the electoral space in Bihar in 2015 could well be seen as a contest between two adversarial ideologies and political worldviews and lineages – of Modi’s Hindutva which conjured up nostalgia for a glorious Hindu past, and Kumar’s Socialism which spoke a language of equality and redistribution drawing from an ideology which had alien roots. Yet, the political space elaborated by the both Modi and Kumar sought points of convergence in the familiar and prevalent tropes of caste and community. These then framed the ideological space of the ‘here and now’ of elections, unleashing a politics of expediency. This was then not a cohabitation of parallel political idioms, as Morris-Jones saw in the 1950s and 60s, but a convergence, where the two idioms sought a meeting point, and did not exist nor express themselves in ‘pure forms’. Indeed, the domains of pure expressions are less significant for their political provenance than the areas of convergence, since this is where questions of social power, of political expediency, and political rhetoric make themselves manifest and become consequential for electoral gains. It is not surprising then, that about two years after the *Mahagathbandhan* of JD(U), RJD and the Congress won the election and formed the government with Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister, JD(U) broke out of the alliance and Kumar once again became the Chief Minister, this time with the support of the BJP. This alliance formed in 2017 has sustained, winning another assembly election in November 2020, re-installing a ‘diminished’ Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister.

Popular control over political institutions has the potential of aggregating modern demands through the mobilisation of ethnic loyalties. Much of this aggregation took place, as the Bihar elections in 2015 showed, around an identity prompted by styles of leadership that promoted deference to intimate authority compatible with chauvinistic conservatism (Nandy 1970: 78-79). The ‘*bahari-bihari*’ binary invoked by Nitish Kumar in 2015, referring to Modi as the outsider and Modi’s message of a ‘Hindu-Hindi’ universal reflected this mobilisation and aggregation. Indeed, the iconisation of Dinkar

and his work *Sanskriti* was sought by Modi's BJP in Bihar as a moment of manoeuvre, and not intended to put in place a different language of politics. Ironically, the BJP chose an icon, which was not amenable to being manoeuvred into the Hindutva discourse. Having become a ubiquitous trope in the politics of the right wing in India, the word *sanskriti* has been reduced to banality, which makes its practitioners impervious to the plural meanings which the word carries. The Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, who wears saffron and represents the orthodox RSS sections within the BJP, has elaborated the religious idiom within the political-institutional space with dexterity, defying Kothari's observations on the dissociation between the political and social spaces and the democratic orientation of the social. Even as democratic demands in the space of mass politics accumulate, e.g., for better facilities in government hospitals which have seen a spate of deaths of infants and children for lack of oxygen, Yogi Adityanath has become the new frontline leader for the BJP, indeed a Hindutva icon for the nation. The Yogi has been assigned the task of expanding the political space of the BJP, unabashedly propagating a Hindu religious identity presented as universally Indian. Interestingly, in its election campaign in Gujarat in 2017, the BJP used pictures of Yogi's Dussehra celebrations in Gorakhpur to mobilise the Hindu vote.⁵ Serving as the *Mahanth* of the temple, *Chief Minister* Yogi performed special *Navratra pujas* every day.⁶ It was, however, in Ayodhya in Diwali (19 October 2017) that the spectacle of 'Ram Rajya' was staged by CM Yogi on the banks of the Saryu river. Following on his promise to build a gigantic statue of Ram in Ayodhya, Yogi turned Ayodhya into a spectacle in Diwali.⁷ In a speech interspersed with shouts of 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' from the exhilarated crowd bewitched by the unprecedented Diwali, Yogi sketched his idea of *Ram Rajya* as a political slogan for development and freedom from poverty, pain, grief and discrimination, a home for everyone with LPG cylinders and electricity for all – a concept – he emphasised came from Ayodhya.⁸ The mega '*Deepotsava*' event launched on the banks of the Saryu has been repeated every year and now being taken to the holy city of Varanasi on the occasion of Dev Deepavali. Arguably, these grand shows which are being used for political purposes have enhanced the popularity of Yogi, catapulting him to the status of a most sought after 'star' campaigner for BJP after Modi in state level elections, the most recent one held in Bihar in 2020.

Writing in 1970, amidst what was turning out to be failed prophecies of doom of Indian democracy coming from western scholars, Rajni

Kothari sought to establish the ‘uniqueness’ of India. As ‘a great historical civilization’, argued Kothari, India ‘maintained its cultural integrity without identifying itself with a particular *political* culture’ (emphasis added). The unity of India was *anchored* in ‘the wide diffusion’ of ‘cultural symbols’, ‘spiritual values’ and ‘structure of roles and functions’ characteristic of a ‘*continuous* civilization’, and not in ‘the authority of a given political system’ (Kothari [1970] 1985: 251). It was this ‘cultural unity’ that gave durability to India even in the absence of a political identity predicated on a strong political centre (*ibid*). Among the characteristics that Kothari considered integral to India’s political culture, the foremost was ‘tolerance’ - of ‘cleavages and factional disputes, autonomy of individual and group ethics’ - which generated the ‘cultivation of differentiated and overlapping identities’ (*ibid*: 258). Tolerance became possible because of the *antecedent dissociation* between cultural and secular traditions - both of which were embedded in ‘a differentiated structure of identities’ and a ‘highly permissive’, ‘accommodative’ and ‘self-consciously pluralistic’ worldview - and the tradition of change that characterized both (*ibid*: 253). It is significant that Dinkar too saw the cultural space in India borne out of a long history of contact among diverse religions that made India their home, a distinguishing feature of India’s identity and an enduring foundation on which the ferment in the political space would find anchor. Yet, the history of contact which Dinkar traces as a series of ‘unions’ between often incompatible worldviews of different religions, were not, as Kothari suggests characterised by an antecedent dissociation between the cultural and political domains and a harmonious pluralism in each, but as Kaviraj (1979) has pointed out, a fraught process. The ‘*vidroh*’ or rebellion against established religion (e.g., by Vardhman Mahavir and Gautam Buddha) or the conflict generated by the arrival in India of a conqueror/victor’s religion, i.e., Islam, that set out to convert people to its faith, were moments when the cultural domain became ‘political’. The political was made manifest through processes of both eruption and irruption - as a deliberative/insurgent space and as a ‘power’ that would legitimate itself through force. It is through these contradictory tendencies within the domain of the political that the different chapters or adhyays of Indian *sanskriti* took shape. Dinkar sees ‘harmony’ as a tendency that made Indian culture ‘*samasik*’ or composite, and the route to harmony required affirming those aspects of religion that were held in common rather than identifying what was different and unbridgeable. It was literature (*sahitya*) and education (*shiksha*)

and not politics that would, according to Dinkar, make this possible. While Dinkar is not concerned with the nature of political authority in *Sanskriti*, the book is replete with the histories of ferment in religions due to the reflexivity they were compelled into when they came in contact with an alien way of life or the 'momentum' that all religions experienced while addressing material and social changes, especially those wrought by political power established through conquest. The institutionalisation of political power commensurate with democracy was a fraught process, however. The centrality of the 'people' in the transition to democracy was evident in Dinakar's poem '*Janatantra ka janma*' (birth of democracy), which had the famous lines 'sinhasan khali karo', summoned at different moments by political leaders for *lokaahvaan* (calling/mobilising the people) for total revolution (e.g., Jaya Prakash Narayan) or electoral participation for regime change (e.g., Atal Behari Vajpayee in 1977 and Narendra Modi in 2015).

In a manifestation of a paradox that informs Indian democracy, even as the size of the electorate and the electoral turnout has increased incrementally with every election, people have shown trust in non-elected institutions such as the Election Commission and the Supreme Court of India, in preference to the elected bodies that wield the authority of the state. The belief that politicians are corrupt and the political arena is not an ethical space is widespread among people. Anna Hazare's hunger fast at the Ramlila Maidan against corruption in high offices in the summer of 2011, mobilised unprecedented crowds. The India Against Corruption movement demanding an Ombudsman to enquire into corruption by public officials and politicians, became critical in the decline of the legitimacy of the Congress Party-led UPA-II government, its subsequently replacement by the BJP-led NDA government in 2014, and the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party which formed the government in the state of Delhi. It is to the question of political authority and trust that we turn in the next section, pegging it onto the political satire *Raag Darbaari* written by Shri Lal Shukla, a civil servant, which like *Sanskriti* won the Sahitya Academy Award for literary excellence.

Raag Darbaari: Political Authority and the Question of Trust

A raag is a melody or a musical scale. *Raag Darbaari* is a melody associated with the famous musician Tansen who was part of Akbar's court. Indeed, *darbaar* means court. *Raag darbaari* is considered especially intricate, and when played with dexterity, it is expected to induce tranquillity in its audience. The novel *Raag Darbaari* is,

however, not intended to induce passivity. Published in 1968, *Raag Darbaari* is a scathing satire on the way in which authority is constituted and performed in a village in the Hindi heartland region through patronage and coercion. Seen from the vantage point of a city-bred, university graduate, as a ring-side view of the 'court' or the darbaar of his maternal uncle who wields considerable influence in the village Shivpalganj, the narrative presents quotidian details of the forging of networks of power, the contempt of authority that breeds on the belief that it is corrupt and corruptible, and the 'trust' that people simultaneously place in the local authority in 'deference' but also in response to the patronage and protection they offer.

The narrative in *Raag Darbaari* shows how power and authority are configured in the rural landscape. As the site of 'dispersed and fragmented' power, the village of Shivpalganj exists at the border of the city, which is crossed by Ranganath, a University graduate who is visiting his uncle for a few months to recuperate after a prolonged illness. Vaidyaji, the uncle, is not just the village medicine man, he is the fulcrum around which the power structures of the village revolve and on whose behest social and economic deals are struck. Power is manipulated and is used as a collusive network of politicians, criminals and policemen. The manipulation of the village bureaucracy at the *kutchehry*, the *thana*, the *panchayat*, cooperatives, and the college, are fraught with the rampant prevalence of *bakhshish* as the dominant mode of transaction and caste-based factionalism and conflicts. The contest over controlling these sites of social and governmental power among the dominant castes, especially the Brahmins and Thakurs, and the complete subservience of the village bureaucracy to the dominant social and political forces, is narrated through anecdotes, spun around the main characters. Vaidyaji and Ramadheen constitute the two power blocs in the village, both of whom wish to dominate the village panchayat by stacking it with their men. Vaidyaji is also the manager of the local school, which gives him the handle to procure funds, but as a *vaidya*, he makes it his job to ensure that the young men of the village retain their masculinity through his prescription of drugs and observation of *brahmacharya* (celibacy). His two sons – Ruppan and Badri – manifest the duality of social and political power wielded by the *vaidya*. Ruppan is called Ruppan *Babu* – the suffix *babu* is an expression of obeisance – and reflects the power Ruppan exercises on behalf of his father and often on his behest. He is the younger son, who is still in school/college which his father manages, having failed in his school Board exams for ten years, and is considered a leader among the villagers. Badri, the older son, is a *pehelwan* or bodybuilder who does not himself

participate in the meetings called by Vaidyaji, but is represented by his protégé *chhote pehelwan*. If Badri the *pehelwan* represents symbolic power, ponderous in bearing, but content to remain dormant, Ruppen does not stand apart but operates within society, tapping into it as an agent of surveillance for Vaidyaji and also as an active mobiliser and trouble-shooter. Ramadheen is Vaidyaji's adversary who wishes to control the college and the village panchayat through his clique of men and money acquired through trade in narcotics. The moneylender, who continues to be a pervasive presence in the lives of villagers, figures in the form of Gayadeen who is apathetic towards both political corruption and malpractices and towards the destitution of the common man who is burdened by loss of hope for justice due to decadent corruption in public institutions. Sanichar and Langad, whose names are reflective of their subordinate social status, are figures who represent two significant strands in local politics – Sanichar, Vaidyaji's servant who is made the village pradhan as a surrogate through and around whom Vaidyaji spawns his power, and Langad, called so, because of his 'deformity' - a victim of the corrupt village bureaucracy, whose rightful claims are perpetually deferred by the *patwari's* office, even as Langad himself insists on claiming his entitlement in the lawful/appropriate way.

Written in the political milieu of the late nineteen sixties, when the Congress was still riding high on popularity with successive electoral victories in four general elections, *Darbaari* portrayed the dilution of the legacy of the national movement and its ideals that promised a pristine form of democracy. While the expansion of franchise and electoral turnouts were reflective of the broadening social base of democracy, 'traditional' figures of authority, like Vaidyaji, were quickly accommodating and thriving in the new opportunities for enhancing social and political power. The iconisation of figures that stood for distinct modalities of sustaining democracy, in particular through 'social justice' and the corresponding logic of transformation through redistribution – the figure of Gandhi then and Ambedkar now – became veneers concealing clientelism, nepotism, crime and corruption. In 1971 Indira Gandhi sought to go past the structures of power located in unscrupulous local elite in connivance with petty officials, by representing the voice of the poor in the populist slogan '*garibi hatao*'. The contemporariness of the novel more than five decades of its publication lies precisely in the continuing concern with decay in democratic institutions and values.

Indeed, unlike Kothari's suggestion that the expansion of franchise and dispersion of politics at the grassroots enable the aggregation of demands to hold the government accountable, there appears

to be an increasing acceptance of corruption at the grassroots and simultaneously lack of trust in authority bred by familiarity with it. Paradoxically, however, it is to the local structures of authority – political and bureaucratic – that people turn to, because of their capacity of ‘facilitate’ things. In such a context, trust seems to become ‘effective’, even in the absence of the components that make authority ‘trustworthy’. When *Rag Darbaari* was re-inserted in the literary, academic, and indeed, the political world of the 2010s to recall the world of Shivpalganj, it was evident that absolute trust in political authority had further diminished, with the power that money and muscle played in politics, having become a publicly acknowledged fact. In his comprehensive study of criminalisation of politics in India, Milan Vaishnav makes an important point about the reasons why ‘crime pays’ in politics. Just as markets favour intermediaries who help to match buyers and sellers, political parties, argues Vaishnav, have welcomed to the party politicians with dubious backgrounds in search for financial ‘rents’: ‘While these campaign funds are raised to cover the exorbitant costs of elections, undoubtedly some of these resources end up lining the pockets of party leaders’ (Vaishnav 2017: 19). In addition, political office has itself become a source for amassing wealth. In the run up to the state assembly elections in the states of Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Mizoram in December 2013, for example, the *Indian Express* ran a series of columns titled ‘I hereby declare’. The columns carried bulleted information on the personal assets declared by candidates in their ‘disclosure statements’, that is, the affidavits which the candidates submitted at the time of filing their nomination papers. Among these was the truly bewildering disclosure of the wealth accumulated by candidates which had witnessed an exponential increase when in power.⁹ In the recently concluded election of the Bihar state assembly election, according to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), 163 newly elected Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) comprising 68 per cent of the Assembly’s total strength had serious criminal charges against them – from murder and attempt to murder to crimes against women. This was 10 per cent more than the earlier Assembly. The ADR’s findings were based on disclosures made by elected members in the affidavits they submitted at the time of filing their nominations. Ironically, while all candidates contesting elections are required since 2002, to submit an affidavit at the time of filing their nomination papers, disclosing details pertaining to their income and criminal cases against them, the Bihar state assembly elections in October-November 2020

were the first to be held after the Supreme Court of India asked all political parties to publish not just the details of the candidates put up by them with criminal charges, but also state the reasons for giving them the tickets (Arnimesh 2020). What is important to note, however, is that public knowledge of corruption and criminal background did not prevent large numbers of such candidates from being elected, and some of them from being appointed by the Chief Minister to his Council of Ministers.

A study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) with Azim Premji University, based on a survey of people between elections, to develop an understanding of how people perceive the effectiveness and procedural fairness for the police, courts and government officials, has significant findings. The CSDS study aggregated the responses for each institution to create an index of institutional effectiveness and procedural fairness (IEP). The key findings of the study as far as IEP is concerned, and going by our (that is, the authors of this paper) interpretation of the findings, the respondents seem to make a distinction between institutions at the local level and those that exist at a distance, that is at the higher and encompassing scale of the nation. Thus, generic seats of political authority like the executive (the Prime Minister) were considered trustworthy by a substantial number of people. Yet, it was the army that was rated the highest in terms of 'effective trust', that is being trusted absolutely by the people. The higher rating of a non-political body, which is seen as self-less, as distinct from the selfishness and corruption which is seen as marking the political class, is not surprising. Of significance, however, is the finding that it is the institutions of political participation and representation at the local level – the *gram panchayats* and the *nagar palikas* – which exercise executive powers and function as deliberative assemblies that enjoy higher levels of trust than the Parliament and state assemblies. The lowest levels of trust, similar to the earlier surveys conducted by the CSDS are seen for the police, government officials and political parties, yet, the District Commissioner and the *Tehsildar* enjoy greater trust. Trust in the entire court system from the Supreme Court to the district courts was present across all respondents. A break up of the trust index along caste and religion, particularly dalits, adivasis and Muslims, however, showed variations. While the report does not give reasons for these differences, it may be assumed that the effectiveness and responsiveness of local institutional regimes matter to people, and those at the national scale may have only symbolic relevance. On the other hand, the findings also suggest the sustenance

of patron-client relationships that characterise traditional forms of authority structures that made themselves manifest in Shivpalganj in *Darbaari*. The old forms of this relationship may have, however, declined due to the “penetration of national and state institutions such as competitive elections and commercial economy” (Michie 1981: 21). The imbrication of localised power structures in shifting alliances of caste and class in relationship with national political coalitions in competitive electoral politics, have generated networks of relationship that may not be vertically integrated. In their study of reproduction of social trust and relational hierarchies through an anthropological study of the movement of money in elections, Lisa Bjorkman and Jeffrey Witsoe have shown that the direction of exchange is lateral and multidirectional (Bjorkman and Witsoe 2018). The new networks of transaction manifest what Yogendra Yadav calls “the simultaneity of involvement and alienation” which has characterised people’s relationship with politics, political authority and institutions (2010: 187). The waning of people’s faith in representative, administrative and political institutions is seen by Yadav as an accentuation in the 1990s of tensions between two fundamentally conflicting tendencies in Indian politics. While the process of democratisation advanced further with higher mobilisation and greater politicisation, particularly of the marginal sections, this democratic upsurge did not translate effectively into the institutionalised world of politics. The argument that is being made is that the deepening of democracy opened up fresh possibilities without leading to transformative politics. The relevance of *Darbaari* lies in the manner in which it opens up the messy ways in which authority is produced and legitimated through the interplay of traditional and modern forms of power and trust remains tentative rather than substantial and enduring.

Conclusion

Academic debates on political culture in India have veered between locating it in an enduring civilisational identity characterised by tolerance and pluralism, a political authority that is dissociated from the cultural realm but draws its integrity from it (Kothari [1970] 1985); and on the other hand, in the transformations that take place in the interactions between the elite and masses which become significant for the manner in which the institutionalisation of political authority takes place (Weiner 1965). For a country that was making the transition to republican citizenship, the democratisation and dispersal of power, to roll back the residues of both colonial

power and traditional authority, assumed significance. Indeed, the idea of a sovereign people as the source of state power became an emphatic principle for the legitimation of political authority. Reading Kothari in the post-Emergency context, Sudipta Kaviraj rejected Kothari's framework on the ground that it presented 'a double romanticisation' - a romanticised past and a romanticised present. Indeed, Kothari's representation of Indian democracy as 'a wide open' political system based on 'perfect competition' and 'unlimited bargaining', that 'would leave little room for discontent', was far from the reality. The 'consensus' had shown strain, especially when the economy was under stress, and political crises occurred with 'regularity' in 1957-58, 1967, 1974-75, and in 1977. These periods of crisis showed the ease with which democratic structures could be dismantled with authoritarianism. Authoritarianism was overthrown, not by bargaining through consensus. It collapsed because the people got an opportunity to use the electoral weapon (Kaviraj 1979). Yet, for Kaviraj, the change in political regime through elections did not achieve any substantive change: 'The electoral process helps in converting private dissent into formal assent. The system is rejected in such a way that is further strengthened. This is why its mandates are brittle, for they are votes against, not for anything' (1979: 16).

Almost two decades later Kaviraj revisited the nature of democratisation in the electoral domain to argue that state in India, after Independence had a 'contradictory inheritance' which produced opposing logics - the logic of *rule*, which persisted from the legacy of colonial rule - identified in the legal, coercive and persuasive apparatus of the state, which were also entrusted with the task of 'development'; and the logic of *democracy* which drew from the legacy of the national liberation struggle and expressed itself in the representative institutions of the state. Elaborating on the idea of franchise as the manifestation of an expanding 'logic of democracy', amidst a dominant 'logic of rule' of the state, Kaviraj noted that unlike the incremental enhancement of franchise in most countries, Independence marked a single moment of inclusion. The new voters were numerous, and indeed, they outnumbered the social elites who were already entrenched in the political domain. But the conflict over representation did not occur immediately, due to what Kaviraj calls 'deference' or 'traditional legitimacy' elicited by the elite from the masses. Through the late 1970s and the 1980s, however, a democratic upsurge occurred, where the poor used their votes strategically for resource distribution, but more significantly, as Kaviraj puts it for 'real distribution of dignity' in which the 'order of caste life' adapted itself to electoral politics and parliamentary

democracy, producing caste based political coalitions (Kaviraj 2003). In 1970, around the time Kothari was addressing the question of political stability in India within the systems theory frameworks, Ashis Nandy drew attention to what he called 'the psycho-cultural aspects of contemporary politics'. Arguing against formulations which considered India a static civilisation, Nandy contended that 'primordial identities can be made to yield a culturally viable national political style', and 'this new style on its part can be integrated within the community life-style as a legitimate force of change'. In such a reading political culture was '*mainly the evolving style of meeting a historical challenge*' (Nandy 1970: 57).

The works of Rajni Kothari, Myron Weiner, Sudipta Kaviraj and Ashis Nandy, cited above, have put forward specific analytical categories that are useful for explaining the features of India's political culture. They also point towards the difficulty of pinning it down to immutable characteristics and the fraught debate that exists among scholars on what should be attributed 'salience' in understanding political culture and how they may be understood. Features such as pluralism and tolerance in the 'traditional' domain, the subsidiarity of political authority which finds stability because of the harmonious tendencies in the traditional domain, and the reciprocity between the culture of the masses and elite, which lead to transformations in each, especially in the location of power and authority and the expansion and permeation of the people in the power sharing arrangements, have been points of contestation.

While the dispersal and democratisation of power in India has taken place through the electoral domain, the questions of belonging and its articulation have taken dense forms with the 'local' playing an important role as the 'site' where familiar/localised networks of power become the conduits for these relationships. What constitutes authoritative power depends on the practices of legitimation that are spun around it, and the trust they elicit from the people in its effective and absolute forms. In the recent past, as mentioned above, two works from Hindi literature – *Sanskriti ke Chaar Adhyaaya* and *Raag Darbaari*, were brought 'back' into the public domain through commemorative events. The commemoration was in different registers indicative of the distinct cultural milieus of the politics in which their literary lives were being recalled. *Sanskriti* was invoked by the BJP in the electoral politics of Bihar in 2015 to assert a 'universal' Indian identity against what was presented as divisive caste identities that had captured political power in the state. Indeed, the fractious iteration of *Sanskriti* in an adversarial field was made emphatic by

the call by Prime Minister Modi in Dinkar's village through Dinkar's 'insurgent' poetic locution - '*sinhasan khali karo*'. The inscription of the 'people' in electoral politics, constrained the original call given by Dinkar through these lines in 1950 at the constituent moment of the Indian Republic. *Raag Darbaari* likewise, brings to the fore the centrality of localised power structures which over the decades have deepened further, the question of 'people's' trust in these structures, and the manner in which these questions become interlaced with politics of a higher order – at the scale of the 'nation' and 'state'. At the core for the two literary works and the cultures of politics in which they were first written and later recalled is a 'normative' world – of democratic iteration of the people – in the contact zones that spell belonging in *Sanskriti* and in the relationships between political institutions and citizens in *Darbaari*. These iterations continue to present questions for evolving cultures of democratic politics in India.

Notes

1. This article is a revised version of the paper 'Political Culture, Democracy and Citizenship in India' presented by the authors in a conference in Julius Maximilian University at Wurzburg, Germany on 8 December 2017 under the UGC-DAAD project on Constitutional Democracy in India. The authors are grateful to Michael Becker who organised the conference and to all the participants for their comments and suggestions.
2. Ashutosh Bhardwaj, 'Author from Bihar who drew from Nehru and became the toast of BJP', *The Indian Express*, 25 September 2017.
3. The origins of Aryans has been the subject of intense academic debate in India.
4. 'P.M. Modi's DNA remark is an insult to people of Bihar', *The Indian Express*, 6 August 2015. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/nitish-kumar-charges-pm-modi-of-denigrating-bihars-legacy-in-open-letter/> (accessed on 23 November 2017).
5. 'CM Yogi to double up as Mahant Adityanath till Dussehra', *Hindustan Times*, 27 September 2017. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cm-yogi-adityanath-to-double-up-as-mahant-adityanath-till-dussehra/story-SdcPuPgtCVb4NAG3vjJTL.html> (accessed on 23 November 2017).
6. 'Yogi Adityanath's double role; Chief Minister and Mahant', *Indian Express*, 30 September 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/yogi-adityanath-double-role-chief-minister-mahant-navarati-puja-4867508/> (accessed on 23 November 2017).
7. Swati Chaturvedi, 'With Modi in Crisis Project Adityanath goes National', *The Wire*, 12 October 2017. <https://thewire.in/caste/modi-crisis-project-adityanath-goes-national> (accessed on 22 November 2017).
8. 'Ram Rajya means progress', *NDTV*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ram-rajya-means-progress-no-discrimination-says-yogi-adityanath-in-ayodhya-1764682> (accessed on 4 November 2017).
9. 'I Hereby Declare', *The Indian Express*, 4 December 2013, p. 4.

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