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CLASS POLITICS IN INDIA

Euphemization, identity, and power

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Class? Politics?

Class is a pervasive force in all societies. Like race, its effects may be subtle or overt, unmentioned in polite society or explosive. The methodological problem is similar: euphemizations of race and class are common; there are strong interests in disguising or denying effects, particularly among those especially advantaged. What we observe empirically is frequently difficult to code, and inevitably entangled with other identities and causes. Partly as a result of uncertainty, partly because of ideological commitments embedded in class analytics historically, mis-recognition of class politics is pervasive.

Class politics in much of the academic literature and media coverage is specifically associated with overtly contentious politics—strikes, lock-outs, demonstrations—or with the electoral politics of parties espousing a class agenda: the rise or fall of ‘the left.’ These behaviors are observable and widely recognized. Their relative infrequency has led many practitioners of dominant scholarship on Indian politics to discount class politics explicitly or implicitly (e.g. Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). There are good reasons for this silence. The effects of class on politics that are not readily observable as proximate causes, but enable and limit conditions for other forms of political behavior, are difficult to access and account for. As James Scott noted for ‘peasant politics,’ the focus on the dramatic and legible struggles obscures and silences the pervasive ‘slow, grinding, quiet struggle’ of rural under-classes in ‘quotidian’ politics of resistance, springing from ‘hidden transcripts’ that challenge the normative order (Scott 1985: 35–36, passim). Coding the importance of class politics by whether or not left fronts are winning or losing may reveal little about the pervasive structuring effects of class. Nor is proxy of an essentially relational concept with indicators of individuals such as income or wealth theoretically satisfactory in the context of class structural effects. The discussion that follows sketches some exemplars that indicate uses and limits of class analysis in Indian politics. Proxyate and readily observable class politics such as rural insurrection and communist electoral victories will be paralleled by reference to distal structuring effects of class in terms of quiescence, clientelism, populism and social-movement dynamics. Of necessity in so brief a chapter, all will receive only indicative treatment.

What is class?

So many involuted and baroque theoretical discussions have treated this question that we forget the stunning simplicity and power of Marx’s primary formulation: the world made by capitalism
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is divided into those who have to sell their labor power in order to survive and those who do not. The welfare of the former depends on market conditions of supply and demand for commoditized labor power. This fundamental dependency renders life chances typically more precarious and limited than those of citizens who buy labor power and profit from its deployment, or sell less commoditized skilled labor (e.g. professionally certified labor, as in medicine, law, management, etc.). In the simplest terms, class determines what one must do to survive and what one is free to do (Wright 1997a, 1997b). For all the fussiness in theory, this is the basic class question. Some children must work long hours daily, others are free to attend school, others are free to choose among the best schools. These compulsions and freedoms have life-long, path-dependent effects on skills, networks, cultural capital and life chances generally.

The essential elements of a class framework to explain political phenomena are four: class structure (class-in-itself for Marx), class consciousness (understanding by individual actors of their objective class interests), class formation (collectively organized actors of similar structural position, constituting a class-for-itself in Marx), and class struggle (collective practices of actors for the realization of class interests against interests of other classes). A class structure is formally the articulation of classes in a particular society at a particular time, but operationalization creates formidable difficulties. Even what constitutes a class is variable across analysts—and, more critical to class politics, across individuals occupying positions in that imagined class structure. There are both lumpers and splitters of classes, yielding either very few (Marx) or very many (stratification sociology) (Herring and Agarwala 2006). Class politics in a behavioral sense presupposes first a class identity, and shares with other political identities the fundamental problems of variable recognition, salience and stability. For Marx, the central political problem of a class was making the transition from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself—that is, from objective standing in an economic structure—worker, farmer—to subjective identification as a member of a collectivity sharing common goals (Elster 1985; Agarwala 2006). The success or failure of this transition is a central problematic for class analytics; its common failure tells us much about problems of collective action and cultural constructions of identity, but does not indicate any reason to ignore class structure as a cause. Indeed, though analysts often make the easy assumption of political relevance of ‘identity politics,’ there is evidence that political identities are unstable over time, subject to strong suggestibility and situational pressures, and only poorly predictive of policy preferences (Kuo and Margalit 2010). Class identities suffer the same problems as other identities for political analysis.

What is politics?

Again to simplify for sake of argument, I find it useful to rely on Harold Lasswell’s (1936) classic position: politics is ‘who gets what ... and how.’ The overlay of politics with class position is then immediately apparent. Much of what one gets, and how, is dependent on position in a class structure. From some class positions, lack of resources and connections leaves few options other than direct action: demonstration, petition, hortal, riot, insurgency. At the opposite end of the class spectrum, getting what one wants may require no overtly political behavior at all, since the structural power of capital exerts great force on politicians and the state, independently of class mobilization. Likewise, from some class positions, deep connections through class networks yield a broad range of special entitlements or political connections. Mechanisms at the top of the class ladder are difficult for the external observer—even an observer of comparable class standing—to analyze. It is remarkable how little we actually know about class politics at these levels; there are interests involved in obscuring privilege and access, or masking both in terms of ostensibly meritocratic necessity. This is a class politics of euphemization and stealth.
The most consequential class politics in democracies typically requires stealth and symbolic politics to be effective. An appeal to mass publics to vote for further enriching the already rich at the cost of their own interests would seem to be politically fruitless, but it works, frequently. In the place of blunt and unattractive class appeals, symbolic politics around a narrative of abstract nouns covers many shifts in redistribution of life chances to the advantage of some classes and not others (Edelman 1967). 'Development' has certainly been among the most powerful of these narratives. Development imposes a set of imperatives inimical to the interests of lower orders. As the poor have a very low marginal propensity to save (and invest) they can hardly serve as an engine of growth. Instead, public policy often takes the form of enticing capital to invest via tax and fiscal incentives. Once invested, the great strategic advantage of the rich is that the structural power of capital works for their interests. The structural power of capital is evident in the imperative facing every regime of whatever nominal ideology to maintain 'business confidence,' or spur investment, increase growth rates and employment, improve foreign exchange positions, or improve geo-political security (Herring and Mohan 2001). No explicit mobilization is necessary for these outcomes; if capital is not pleased with state policies, it will move away or stop investing. Regimes of necessity must heed market imperatives, but it is never clear what exactly the market demands. Structural imperatives imposed by the market require interpretation by modern oracles predisposed to find market rigging for the lower orders unsustainable—this was the core of the so-called ‘Washington Consensus.’ Politics so enabled maintain or enhance a distribution of privilege without its beneficiaries having to make a fuss in the streets or at the polls.

Much discussion of class politics curiously ignores this most materially significant element of class power. In poorer countries, distribution and redistribution are typically covered by the elusive term 'development.' However, the phenomenon is general. A recent massive redistribution of income up the class ladder was a political project of the administrations of George W. Bush in the USA; officials and supporters denounced any critique of redistribution of income to the already wealthy as ‘inciting class war.’ The New York Times columnist Paul Krugman (2006: A19) rightly asked: 'So what's our bitter partisan divide really about? In two words: class warfare.’ Class is taboo in American political praxis; in India, as in Europe, the ideological spectrum is much broader, but some obfuscation of class universality serves political interests. Regimes seeking credit for growth emphasize aggregate gains, not uneven distribution or deprivation (Herring 1999). The ruling coalition in India in the 2004 elections claimed success for an aggregate ‘India Shining’; opposition parties tried to disaggregate the picture into winners and losers. Because the ‘nation’ needs ‘development,’ some people are going to lose land, subsistence livelihoods, living space, and others are going to make it out like bandits. The strategy in class terms is to obscure differential rewards of aggressive capitalist development in favor of universal valents summarized by a growing gross domestic product (GDP). In India, much of the ‘tribal’ confrontations with the state historically, and currently in the Maoist insurgency mentioned below, are explicit rejections of both the right to commoditize and appropriate natural resources and the exclusion from development of peoples in poor areas containing natural resources.

This chapter approaches the politics of class by asking first: in what sense can class be said to determine what modes of political behavior are necessary or available to individuals: what they must do, what they are free to do? This is the fundamental divide that class imposes on political behavior, but in a more subtle form than in the case of economic behavior. Many visible forms of politics are conditioned by class structure, though described, perhaps experienced, in ways innocent of the concept of economic class. We then move on to consider a central critique of class analytics: if class is of central importance in politics, why are class politics only intermittently successful in formal institutional spheres such as elections? Finally, we will consider those rare
conditions under which class politics produces transformative structural change, within and outside the limited sphere of elections, largely from an agrarian, not industrial, base.

Class and classes in India

Objectively, class differences in India are significantly changing form and magnitude. Since initiation of liberalization policies in 1991, economic growth has accelerated. Per capita income differentials across states have risen, along with inequality within states. These trends have moderated the effects of economic growth on poverty reduction (Deaton and Drèze 2002). There is almost certainly more mobility of labor, and thus more opportunity, along with greater volatility and insecurity in labor markets. The historic ideal of India's developmental state posited a secure, protected labor force—though for only a tiny fraction of the working classes, the 'organized' or 'formal' sector (Teitelbaum 2011). This ideal has been replaced by a regime that recognizes the aggregate (growth) advantages of flexible informal workers without state protection. The 'informal sector,' which already dwarfs the formal sector, is gaining workers; the formal sector is losing workers proportionately (NSSO 2001). A growing 'middle class' is celebrated as evidence of increased opportunities, and by some accounts is increasingly active in forming itself politically (Fernandes and Heller 2006). Rural class structure is changing as well. Agriculture accounts for a smaller percentage of the workforce each year, though the change is slow by comparative historic standards. In 1951, four years after independence, 82.7% of the population was rural; 71.9% of rural people were cultivators, 28.1% were (mostly landless) agricultural laborers. Rural society was thus dominated numerically by farmers, with a significant rural proletariat. One could then legitimately speak of a peasant society. By 2001, only 72.2% of the population was 'rural,' but farmers were a bare majority of the rural population: 54.4%. Agricultural workers—now more diversified in employment—constituted 45.6% of the rural population (GOI 2004). This agrarian proletariat is the truly awkward class: increasingly not attached to anyone's land or patronage, selling labor power in an unpredictable market, often uprooted by pushes and pulls of market forces, and largely without political representation.

Rural politics of class in India have run the spectrum from abject dependence and quiescence to insurrection. Neither is understandable without an analysis of class structure and conditions for class mobilization. Quiescence has been rooted in the dyadic dependency of agrarian relations; it is typically irrational for subordinates to attack the system given the balance of power locally and connections of superordinates to the local state. Even state schemes to uplift subordinate classes via land reform often failed precisely because the poor knew how irrational alienating their masters would be. Because big men in villages had power over under-classes through dependency relations, they could credibly claim to control 'vote banks' attractive to politicians otherwise unconnected to the villages. Mobilization of vote banks blunted redistributive policy along class lines and skewed distribution of state resources of development schemes to superordinate classes along lines of region and primordial loyalties. Rural elite power sustained business as usual, whatever the rhetoric of land reforms (Herring 1983). At the opposite end of the spectrum was sporadic agrarian radicalism rooted in demands for social justice, more jacqueries than programmatic movements.

The great puzzle of the twentieth century for orthodox Marxists was that revolutions were made through agrarian upheavals, not the proletariat (Wolf 1969; Paige 1975). Marx had evidently assigned agency to the wrong class. India became the center of a global debate around models of peasant economies and trajectories under capitalism. The technical change that underlay improvements in material production attracted special angu: might the 'green revolution turn red'? This possibility seemed real in the wake of the Maoist-influenced Naxalite movement, and
of widespread 'agrarian tension'—as officially described in a report of the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1969. However, contrary to some expectations, rural capitalism and state responses generated not revolution, but what Terri Byres referred to as 'partial proletarianisation'; marginal peasants continued to reproduce themselves rather than either waging class war as predicted by class theorists or disappearing as predicted by developmentalists (Byres 1981; Harris 1994; Harris-White and Janakan 2004). This process was sustained materially not only by Chayanovian self-exploitation, but increasingly by migration, associated remittances, diversification of employment outside agriculture and improved productivity of agriculture. Constantly shifting development 'schemes' contributed as well—rural public works, micro-finance programs, intermittently subsidised credit—and by minimalist state welfare. A democratic state preserved a peasantry of sorts, but not with the income supports of a Japan or a European Union (EU).

Diversification of rural livelihoods and increased importance of nonagricultural employment, both locally and in distant places, have altered relations between agrarian capital and rural labor. The 'patron-client relationship' romanticized in academic work is fading as personal relations among families in hierarchical class relations diminish. Where rural poverty has declined, it has been because of purposive public policy or the tightening of labor markets, both of which may reduce abject dependence of labor on capital. As both aspiric status and economic class converted less easily to political power at the top of village society, one found emergence of new local leaders from among educated but often unemployed younger men (Krishna 2002, 2003). Erosion of the political power of the big landlords was hastened to some extent by land reforms, but as importantly by the widening of the opportunity matrix for the relatively well-off. For considerations of economics and social standing, big landowners often abandoned agriculture. Likewise, subordinate assertiveness contributed to what Frankel and Rao described as 'the decline of dominance'. Ties of dependency of the rural poor in agrarian class relations thus loosened, but their interests were only weakly articulated politically—except in regional pockets and in the 'red belt' of Kerala and West Bengal. For all these reasons, the relational class power of 'rich farmers' of higher-ranked castes appears to have declined significantly. Yet the power of poor farmers and landless workers in political parties and public policy has not noticeably increased.

Globalization and accompanying neoliberal policies have increased pressures on the agricultural sector, but means of class formation remain elusive. One attempted formulation has been a politically imagined super-class led by more prosperous farmers, but incorporating a diverse class coalition. This aggregated class conceived of agriculturists as an exploited sector of society. Promulgators of the class coalition conceived of Bharat as a place, agriculture as an occupation: both neglected and culturally denigrated. India lived well in its cities, Bharat lived miserably in rural squalor. The Bharat-vs.-India formulation attempted cultural and economic synthesis of rural society as a class for itself, focused on rolling back 'urban bias' in development policy. Collective action of farmers reached a high point in the 1980s, built on multi-class, sometimes caste-based, mobilization around costs of production and prices of outputs. Euphemization of the power of rich farmers was nominally apparent: most rural households were food deficit, and thus increases in prices would harm, not help, most denizens of Bharat absent significant price controls and subsidies from the state. That outcome is possible, but class structure in this case deterred an otherwise attractive political option. The movement demonstrated the difficulty of collective action based on coalitions of classes: the farmer's cost is a laborer's wage. Subsequently, the ability of this imagined aggregate class to influence prices and subsidies was diminished by failure of political organization; it had no national party nor alternative mechanism to obtain its goals. Defeat of this attempt at an agrarian class coalition marked the beginning of a decline of collective action by agrarian classes at the national level.
Technology and material progress have remained sources of mobilization and conflict, but not on a national scale. Some of the largest collective actions of farmers in recent years mobilized against Delhi’s restrictive regulation of genetically engineered (Bt) cotton seeds, beginning in 2001 (Ommen 2005; Herring 2005). The issue was again urban bias, in different form; farmers demanded access to knowledge—biotechnology—that regulators in Delhi sought to ‘bottle up in the cities’ (Joshi 2001). Urban groups that claimed to represent farmers took an anti-biotech line inconsistent with farmer interests, leading to significant fracturing of rural representation of any kind (Herring 2006).

Though the national coalescent class strategy—a rural class for itself—largely failed, other rural class movements succeeded at the local level. In the two states with more successful mobilization of subordinate agrarian class power, policies diverged. Kerala’s dominant communist party—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M))—organized agricultural workers as a class, not as a subset of an organization of farmers who pay their wages. West Bengal’s CPI(M) preferred the national kisan sabha construction that assumes class interests in agriculture to be complementary, not antagonistic. Bengali communists papered over the class contradiction between labor-hiring farmers and labor-selling workers; Kerala communists accepted the reality of conflict and built organizations accordingly. Kerala’s communists knowingly risked embourgeoisement by turning tenants into owners with a radical agrarian reform that abolished landlordism and passed all land to tenants. Bengali communists left the sharecroppers in a subordinate class position, but with enhanced rights (Herring 2001, 2003; Mallick 1993). Judging by electoral results, the Bengal model of rural class cooperation—and dependency on the party-state—worked better politically than Kerala’s confrontationist model.9 The Bengal communists won elections continuously for 33 years before a decisive electoral defeat in 2011.

In the state’s view of rural India, the specter has long been rural class violence. The cycle has recently returned with fears of ‘Maoist’ insurgency. In April 2006, India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressed chief ministers of six states affected by violent agrarian confrontations: ‘It would not be exaggeration to say that the problem of Naxalism is the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country.’10 Ranjit Kumar Gupta, former police commissioner of Calcutta, estimated that the Naxalite movement had spread to 20% of India’s districts (159 districts in 14 states) since it began in 1967 (Gupta 2004). In neighboring Nepal, Maoist rebels exercised total sovereignty over vast areas with de facto freedom to operate in virtually all rural areas by 2005 (Kalyvas 2006: 211), and subsequently succeeded in altering Nepal’s political structure. Agrarian radicals in India, as in Nepal, claim to be fighting a class war, a war for a classless society. They assassinate ‘class enemies’ and confront military forces and police in pursuit of a new system of class justice. This insurgency is too complex to render in a short piece, but it seems clear that failures in the euphemizations of development as a national project account for much of the moral outrage of rebels. Many of the affected areas are ‘tribal,’ with two consequences: decades of neglect by state authorities and political parties have left many people poor and desperate; simultaneously, India’s aggressive growth process has led to intensified exploitation of natural resources in areas claimed by Adivasis (‘tribals’) as sovereign terrain. Beneficiaries of the growth machine so enabled have not needed to mobilize along class lines for appropriation of new opportunities. On the other hand, the threat of exploitation to people in the ‘tribal’ areas is both economic and political; the defensive reaction has been violent, in line with other trends in India’s democracy (Chandra 2011). The obstacles to mobilization along class lines involve serious risk of detention and death; under these circumstances it is not surprising that a class project faces daunting odds.

Anti-globalization campaigns portray in India a severe and generalized agrarian crisis, as indicated by what is held to be a rising tide of farmer suicides.11 That picture is not entirely
true; some crops have done remarkably well and many farmers have made a lot of money, especially in cotton, in which India recently surpassed the USA in exports. More accurately, class in rural India continues, much as before, to manifest widespread insecurity of direct producers; multiple dimensions of degradation and inequality continue to fuel misery, migration and occasional confrontation. Typically, though, there has been no electoral party with both the credible commitment to removing agrarian exploitation and reasonable probability of success to produce social-democratic outcomes based on a rural uprising of the sort witnessed in Kerala historically.

Distal conditioning of ordinary politics

It is common to pose explanatory frameworks in either/or terms—as opposed and mutually exclusive theoretical options. If class has the fundamental structuring effects suggested above, class analysis is compatible with forms of theorizing politics that take for granted structural inequalities. In this case, class operates as a more distal cause than is the case for rural insurrection or land invasions in which explicitly class demands are overt and decisive. For purposes of illustration, we can consider three forms of competing characterizations of Indian politics.

Though class politics is usually associated with parties of the left, much political behavior coded as decidedly non-left is deeply conditioned by class structure. Consider the electoral success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a party associated with upper-class support, neoliberal economic policies, and religious-fundamentalist prescriptions for resurrection of Hinduism—a reign of Hinduism as national policy. Its cultural politics appeal to a tradition that relegates outcast status to some subordinate groups, including Dalits (the former ‘untouchables’) and Adivasis. Surprisingly, BJP electoral support among the most oppressed social groupings, dalits and adivasis, is quite strong in many Indian states. In some states, the BJP wins a plurality of the dalit/adivasi vote (Thachil and Herring 2008: figures 1 and 2). This is an anomalous outcome for a party typically considered a ‘high’-caste party with strong inclinations toward Hinduism as social policy. Though there is great variance across states—illustrating decisively the problem of ‘caste-is’ or ‘identity’ explanations of voting—the BJP does especially well with oppressed sections of society in states that fail in developmental terms, as indicated by a very low Human Development Index ranking.

The reason for success of a ‘religious’ party in such unlikely populations is not explained by ideational shifts or false consciousness (Thachil 2009). Rather, the BJP is capable of meeting un-met class needs in these populations. The party is the electoral wing of a social-movement coalition of service organizations—the Sangh Parivar—which influence voters by provision of social services, much like some Islamist parties in West Asia. Village-level workers of the Parivar provide basic human needs—especially in health and medical care—that many states fail to provide (Thachil and Herring 2008: 452–56). That some identifiable populations lack, and need, these services provides a precondition for this episodically successful party strategy. Such conditions also provide an explanation for electoral behavior. People who lack critical services such as education also lack the resulting asset, precisely because of their class standing. If they were rich, they would not need the BJP’s ancillaries to provide education; if they lived in states such as Kerala, where social democracy has operated to equalize life chances to some extent, they would likewise not need the BJP, because of state provisioning. Failure in other states reflects the absence of lower-class political power of the sort that created social democracy in Kerala. The profile of social-needs spending in Kerala represents the outcome of anomalous class formation and mobilization from the bottom of society over time (Heller 1999; Herring 2007). Massive investments in organizational development by the Sangh Parivar in Kerala have not
paid off electorally, in part because of struggles that made social services public goods in the state. However, in states with little class mobilization from below, the poor lack access both to services and to a political vehicle for change (Drèze and Sen 1996: 10–128, passim; Ramachandran 1996).

Class likewise conditions two common modes of political tactics in India. One thinks of clientelism and populism, for example, as alternative politics to class, but what is the structural basis for the pervasive clientelism in local politics? A necessary condition is that people from some classes have the power to provide what people from other classes lack. The landlord may choose to become a patron; it is a matter of strategy and choice. The landless laborer is unlikely to become a patron, but instead probably needs one. We may euphemize clientage in many ways, but the basic structure of the power imbalance is control of resources, which is hard to understand without attention to class structure. Like the social services of BJP activists, social services of patrons are less needed in states with basic human needs provisioning, or in villages where mobilizations behind new leaders have provided better links with a ballyk state (Krishna 2002). The economic populism that is pervasive in Indian politics works on similar principles. Whatever the demorization tactic, or the us-them narrative of history, populism in India presupposes a susceptible population. The two-rupee rice scheme of the Telegu Desham Party had appeal because even this most basic food grain was too expensive for millions of voters. The noon-day meals provided by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)/Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) populism in Tamil Nadu succeeded with voters too poor to afford school lunches for their children. Populist politicians in these two states had multiple sources of symbolic connections to the voters, including film stardom, but they also confronted an economically vulnerable population in need of material transfers to provide basic human needs.

Populism and clientelism are modes of politics that run counter to the programmatic politics of at least some political parties. Left parties in India are programmatic, especially with regard to class: they espouse educational reform, minimum wages, job security, land reforms, strengthening the safety net. As fewer political parties espouse believable policies, and as politics is increasingly perceived to be a ‘dirty river’ dominated by unsavory types and their goons (Harris 2006), alternative politics of the programmatic sort has emerged in civil society. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are archetypal—at least in their presentation of self and their common image in Europe. Because NGOs have policy goals, connected to their transnational advocacy networks, they seek to influence political parties. A cliché of contemporary Indian politics is that the left is plagued by ‘NGO-ization’ and NGOs are plagued by ‘projectization.’ ‘NGO-ization’ means abandoning traditional class projects in favor of NGO visions. ‘Projectization’ means that visions will be attuned to funding sources, typically multilateral financial institutions, EU foreign aid, or international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) such as Greenpeace.

NGO visions may or may not accord with material class interests on the ground, but it seems clear that class structure conditions the prospects of social–movement dynamics in civil society, sometimes because class interests are mis-recognized by NGO practitioners. One example will serve to illustrate the dynamic. ‘Operation Cremate Monsanto’ attempted to block the entry of biotechnology into Indian agriculture. It failed because middle-class advocates of banning Bt cotton had interests that were diametrically opposed to the material interests of cotton farmers. Part of what it means to be ‘middle class’ in contemporary India is to engage in some form of activism (Harris 2006), but because of their class position, activists in the movement faced no consequences from the success or failure of cotton crops, and hence no pressure to get the facts on the ground right. Cotton farmers, who lack this freedom, face compelling economic pressure; seed choice is critical to livelihood. They experimented with Bt seeds, and in the aggregate adopted them rapidly for increased income and lessened pesticides on their
land. Operation Cremate Monsanto failed in part because activists misunderstood class interests in biotechnology, its property configuration and production relations: particularly the capacity of farmers to appropriate the technology via stealth seeds under the radar of both Monsanto and Delhi. As important, the failure of movement leaders to take a class perspective hindered their ability to represent the class they claimed to represent (Joshi 2001; Herring 2006, 2008b). Amita Baviskar (2005) noted a similar division in class representations of environmental movements but concludes that strategic ambiguity about divergent class objectives may in some cases contribute to movement strength, not failure.

Electoral politics: under what conditions does class mobilization win?

Indian politics is often described by journalists as the moving about of blocks on a chess board—this caste supports X, this caste Y, and so the election went. Empirically, there is little support for the collectivist social-morphology view of voting (Thachil and Herring 2008: 441–49; Krishna 2002, 2003). Missing from the vote-bank, voting-bloc or primordial-affiliation views of voting are individual choice and agency, and the resultant variance within imagined groups. Electoral behavior is inherently over-determined; causes are multiple and over-lapping, temporally unstable and often inaccessible to outside observers. Voters have multiple possible identities which may be engaged by particular issues in particular elections—sector, region, nation, gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, and so on. The ‘class’ element of voting is like other dimensions of social being: at some times more relevant to electoral behavior than at others. The relationship of class to elections is contingent on situational variables: what candidates, what alliances, what platforms?

Under what conditions might class drive electoral processes to favorable outcomes for workers and other property-less classes? The first class distinction is clear: collective action will be required. The lower orders cannot generally rely on the state’s recognition of their structural power. Conditions for success are then quite daunting, and explain both the exceptions and the rule in Indian electoral politics: property-less classes are only intermittently and marginally successful (Herring and Agarwala 2006: 325–31).

Consider the individual subordinate–class voter: should she vote her class interests? The conditions for doing so are: first, the presence of a programmatic party of the left with plausible policies for altering the distribution of life chances; second, candidates who can be trusted to carry out programmatic pledges once elected (as opposed to the common assumption about politicians: sub chiv huch—all are thieves); third, organizational effectiveness of such parties to reach voters; fourth, elections in which class issues are available for choice (if no party supports land reform, for example, landless laborers may choose on other criteria, such as populism, clientage, caste identity); fifth, a meaningful probability that the party could win—i.e. that a vote will not be wasted; and finally, and most contested theoretically, fifth, choosing class identification over alternatives if there is conflict.12

These conditions are rarely met. Variation across Indian states is in part a reflection of different party systems: a vote for a communist in Gujarat is likely wasted, but in Kerala potentially effective. Communist parties have been successful only in pockets, most importantly Kerala and West Bengal, but in much of India the choices facing voters are not favorable to class voting. Historically, expressing left politics in much of India would be difficult because programmatic parties are not contenders. In some cases, left politics could lead to reprisals. At the extremes of party systems, consider that left politics in Pakistan could get one killed (Candland 2007), whereas the same behavior in Kerala or Bengal could lead to a comfortable career (Mallick 1993, 1994). Moreover, it is increasingly unclear that platforms of left parties coincide with the interests of subordinate classes or will be acted on by ordinary politicians once in power. In
contrast, non-programmatic parties have great latitude in adopting symbols to mobilize support, deploying social identities, charismatic leadership, populism and other strategies. The disintegration of the Congress system made for a politics of opportunistic alliances that rendered all political parties less programmatic and simultaneously less relevant to redistributive politics (Thachil and Herring 2008). Under these systemic conditions, the possibilities for obfuscation of material interests via alternative identities ramify: nation, region, caste, community. Though academic analysts oppose class politics with identity politics, the interpenetration of class and identity is present in all societies. As identity politics was sweeping academic treatments in the 1980s, a strong leftist coalition led by the CPI(M) was consolidating in West Bengal, a state of 82 million people, a government continuously elected over the last 33 years, an electoral success unprecedented for India and rare anywhere in the world. However, class is only one of many possible political identities. We really know little about the conditions under which different appeals will resonate. Political parties do exploit existing cleavages in society—the basis for much of the left-right conceptualization of political parties based on the European experience—but such cleavages may not be phenomenologically relevant to voters, or subject to credible mobilization. In these circumstances, non-programmatic parties are free to 'sture' together themes and practices that create new collective actors (Leon et al. 2009).

When parties do claim to offer programmatic support for subordinate classes, as in West Bengal, class structure itself intermittently raises strains within class coalitions. Such conflicts within multi-class coalitions are inevitable when classes are politically mobilized. Use of eminent domain to obtain land from farmers for industrial parks created major conflicts in West Bengal in the 2000s. Certainly the dynamics around Singur and Nandigram, where confrontation was severe, contributed to the CPI(M)'s loss of electoral support in rural areas of the state in 2009, and ultimate loss of office in 2011. Nevertheless, in a worker/peasant alliance, there are objective contradictions in interest—the price of food if nothing else, but also investment priorities, taxes and the like. The party lost some rural support in trying to open new jobs for workers by encouraging factory development, but there were some gains among non-farm workers in comparison to previous elections. That state acquisition of agricultural land for industrial development would not play well electorally in the farm sector, but would play better among industrial workers, is not surprising. What is surprising is that this coalition has kept together through so many electoral cycles given that structural tension. Governing parties of the left are vulnerable to class conflicts within a mobilized base. To win, they must become class coalitions. These periodic contradictions of interest are difficult enough, but political parties also have periodic compulsions that have nothing to do with material class interests. One such issue for the CPI(M) was India's nuclear pact with the USA. The party in 2009 withdrew support from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition governing in New Delhi because of the nuclear pact and therefore lost the opportunity to campaign on achievements of a government they had backed, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee and forgiving of farm loans. In contemporary India, parties increasingly hang their electoral chances on coalition choices; in this case, the CPI(M) made a poor choice strategically. That left parties make poor choices does affect votes, and illustrates how difficult electoral expression of even mobilized class politics can be, but consequent reversals hardly disqualify class analytics.14

How important the electoral sphere is to class interests is a debatable proposition in any event. As states cede more authority to markets, electoral success may prove less efficacious in improving life chances of subordinate classes. Simultaneously, globalization and liberalization are widely held to reduce the efficacy of working-class options outside the electoral sphere. Global competition among firms puts downward pressure on job security. Informalization of work means fewer protections for workers; in the formal sector, states reduce implementation of laws
protecting workers' rights (Tilly 1995). Though social scientists have long written off the Indian formal-sector working class as divided and weak, new empirical work indicates otherwise (Teitelbaum 2006, 2011). However, the informal sector dwarfs the formal sector and is especially difficult to organize. Nevertheless, new class-based organizations among informal workers are appearing. Rina Agarwala's field work confirms the most basic premise of class theory: changing production relations lead to changes in class struggle. In these cases, some organizational success among informal workers resulted from adapting their tactics to increasingly fragmented and unstable capital—a bewildering and shifting coterie of sub-contractors beyond state labor law. The factory floor of a single firm is becoming more rare, and to meet this change in production relations workers have developed new tactics to carry on a struggle for recognition and rights (Agarwala 2006, 2013).

Conclusions

Dueling orthodoxies and partisan theoretical product differentiation have certainly obscured recognition of class politics in India (Chibber 2006; Hutnyk 2003; Sinha 2009). However, even without obscurantist theory, some of the most important elements of class politics are inherently difficult to delineate. This difficulty runs on a gradient depending on the explanandum: what exactly do we expect class theory to do? By one definition of politics, class is indisputably both direct and pervasive causal importance. Economic class determines not only who gets what, but how: what must be done, can be done, to alter life chances? That is the most fundamental effect of class politics on politics on class. Most important for the politics of reproducing or replacing class inequality, the structural power of capital is widely recognized by regimes and the political class. Euphemization of this privileged position does not obscure its reality, though narratives built around euphemization have proved remarkably effective in mass politics. The problem for subordinate classes is that they lack the structural power of capital; states are not compelled to improve their prospects in the 'national interest.' Subordinate classes must therefore engage in ordinary politics to gain common objectives, or engage in contentious politics outside the boundaries of institutionalized forums. Class structure thus determines to some extent who has to do what to succeed in class-specific, political projects.

Structure can be said to have effects when mechanisms can be demonstrated. Those mechanisms for subordinate classes typically involve some form of collective action. Success in large-scale, collective action in general is difficult for reasons well understood in social science; for lower classes, collective action offers especially daunting prospects. First, the formation of collective identities is inherently difficult for large numbers of disparate individuals. The 'fragmentation' and segmentation of Indian society is one of the reasons Barrington Moore, Jr. gave for the seemingly surprising absence of communist revolution in so deprived and degraded a peasantry. Second, should that recognition of common class standing be achieved, or politically manufactured, organization remains a daunting precondition for collective action (Wade 1988). Organizations first need resources, precisely what is in short supply in deprived communities. Moreover, organizations themselves frequently produce their own pathologies; this is true of political parties, trade unions and NGOs. In sum, vehicles for advancing class interests of the poor are likely to be rare or ephemeral. Even in the electoral sphere of a vibrant democracy, the opportunity structure facing voters may offer little prospect for expressing class solidarity and goals. Party system matters. Few viable parties with credible prospects for winning office address subordinate class needs in India; fewer act on their campaign promises when elected. For these reasons, historical path dependency runs deep; credible parties with appropriate practical theory have evolved over time through incorporation and learning from residues of past
conflicts—both victories and defeats—but the re-running of history is not an option for political entrepreneurs.\textsuperscript{15}

These multiple disabilities of class politics at the bottom of society helps explain the infrequency of success; a class perspective on politics helps us understand why poor majorities may remain poor, even in vibrant democratic settings. Whether forces espousing alternation of the class structure win or lose in any particular juncture, class remains a pervasive force in the many forms politics may take, and thereby profoundly influences future distributions of life chances and new forms of politics. Despite the current decline of class as a lens through which to view India and its politics (Chhibber 2006), much is eclipsed and lost in that analytical choice.

Notes

1 This essay owes much to collaborative work with Rina Agarwala, Tariq Thachil and John Harris, and to critiques, insights and discussions from and with Ramola Sen, Patrick Heller, Subir Sinha, Leela Fernandes, Emmanuel Teitelbaum, Anil Kohli and the late Smriti Kothari.
2 More expansive treatments of the ideas sketched below are available (Herring and Agarwala 2006). Positions on class per se are similar to those of Wright 1997a, 1997b; Elster 1985.
3 For representative views of the class consequences of developmental policy in India, see for example Bardhan 1984; Chhibber 2003; Herring 1983; Drèze and Sen 1996; Corbridge and Harris 2000.
4 The idiom of ‘caste’ in India is frequently deployed both for strategically dividing class formation and for facilitating class collective action by appealing to an existing identity. There is no space here for examining the caste-class dynamic, but an indicative account can be found in Herring and Agarwala 2008. On the declining significance of caste as a basis for local leadership or political affiliation, based on village studies in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, see Krishna (2002: 6–7, 48, 53, 156ff, 181).
6 Frankel and Rao 1989: 2; see also Mendelsohn 1993; Harris 2003.
8 Varshney 1998; see also Lindberg 1995; Brass 1995.
9 Patrick Heller (1999: 237–48) emphasizes the resultant pressure on Keralan communists to make their own class compromises, which he finds to have enhanced prospects for economic development.
10 Singh’s comments in GOI 2006. Members of the People’s Guerrilla Army, People’s War Group (PWG), Maoists Communist Center (MCC), Communist Party of India (Maoist), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Janashakti are called ultra-leftists or Naxals, after the 1967 agrarian uprising in Naxalbari, West Bengal. See Jaffrelot 2011 for analysis.
11 A highly politicized, media-driven event, the tragedy of farmer suicides cannot be empirically verified nationally, nor connected to Bt cotton. See Vaidyanathan 2006; Herring 2008a; Gruère et al. 2008. At the popular level, a good explanation of some dynamics is available in the film Peopl Live.
12 Gail Omvedt’s Reinventing Revolution (1993) is tellingly subtitled ‘New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India.’ On material interests in ethnic politics, see Herring and Esman 2001; Chandra 2004; on the critical role of party and organization, see Kohli 1987; on parties and land reform, see Herring 2007.
14 The Kerala vote in 2009 was reflective of a long-standing cleavage in the state: the rich are more likely to vote Congress and allies; the poor, Communist and allies (ibid.).
15 Certainly this was the case for Kerala (Herring 2008a).

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