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*Leadership and Political Work*

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*You need not see what someone is doing  
To know if it is his vocation,*

*you have only to watch his eyes:  
a cook mixing his sauce, a surgeon*

*making a primary incision,  
a clerk completing a bill of lading,*

*wear the same rapt expression,  
forgetting themselves in a function.*

*How beautiful it is,  
that eye-on-the-object look.*

(W.H. Auden *Horae Canonicae*, 1954)

In the 2006 state level elections, West Bengal's ruling coalition of Communist parties called the Left Front (LF), registered one of their biggest victories in over twenty elections and completed twenty-nine years of continuous rule in the state. However, despite their phenomenal victory, since then the government has been severely discredited for a number of reasons and this was in evidence at their poor showing in the Panchayat elections of 2008 and the national elections of 2009. Both phenomena - three decades of incumbency and their loss of credibility - require explanation. Were the two phenomena linked in any intrinsic way or did they just happen to have occurred in the same setting? Was the LF's loss of credibility sudden, and caused by specific events or had it been brewing for some years? Much has already been analysed, specially taking into consideration state-level factors, the government's and the Chief Minister's performance and the significance of the key events at Nandigram and Singur. In this paper, I move away from these macro perspectives to focus attention on the local level, to examine the nature of the Communist Parties' presence at the village level, and to see if an understanding of how their influence works at this local level provides an explanation for their growing failures. As we know, in West Bengal, the most important figure around whom local politics revolves is the local 'Comrade', and the state has thousands of such functioning figures. Ultimately, the mass appeal and the credibility of the LF government relied on the day to day performance of these figures; it is, therefore, by examining the workings of power and leadership at this level, that we might be able to gain some insight into how exactly the Left Front sustained power for so long, and what could cause their downfall.

### *The Comrade*

The local Party boss in the adjoining villages of Chishti and Madanpur, where I conducted research in Birbhum district of West Bengal, the only man who was unambiguously and unfailingly referred to as 'Comrade', even by his wives, was the main Communist Party representative. He had been a Party worker for over 25 years. Comrade was the most powerful man, serving as the gatekeeper to the villages controlling access to news, information and opportunities to the villagers. His house lay on the edge of the highway and of the two villages, officially within the administrative boundary of Madanpur but on the side of the road where Chishti is situated. He thus lived at the cusp of both villages, commanding access to both and

also enjoying the easiest access to the main road for his loud and unmistakeable motorcycle, the first privately owned motorised transport in the villages. Both villages were full of men who were his erstwhile comrades and whom he had outmanoeuvred to become the party boss.

Such a figure was fairly typical of Bengal. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), realising the fragility of vanguard political movements such as the Naxalites which mobilized the urban intelligentsia to revolutionize peasants, had over the years built up an intricate network of such Comrades across the State who were Party members, and who belonged to the area in which they worked and where they often owned land and businesses that sustained their political activities. They took their orders from the Party and organised political activities in their area, and were the conduit for the disbursement of funds, loans and benefits for much of the rural population.<sup>1</sup> The Party headquarters in the capital utilized this capillary network of Comrades and cadres to exercise control in the furthest corners of the State. The most visible evidence of the efficiency of this machinery was available during elections, when voters were mobilized to turn up resulting in consistently high voter turnouts in West Bengal. The entire election campaign and its conduct were dominated by the activities of the Comrades and Party cadres. Elections were held practically every year because Panchayat, state and national level elections occurred in overlapping five yearly intervals. But in between elections political activity continued and was conducted through meetings of various labour unions of the Party who passed decisions that were in turn implemented by the cadres. In these meetings, agricultural and housing loans were awarded, budgets were allocated for various developmental activities and strategies for inducting new members into the Party organisation were discussed. Through the allocation of their shares among the villages they work in, the cadres built their allegiances which when aggregated at the state level gave the Communist Party its power base among the rural population. The success of the Communists in West Bengal thus relied heavily on the success of the tireless efforts of its Party cadres. While this fact is widely recognised, in this paper I will place the nature of these local level efforts under closer examination to outline what those efforts entailed in real terms (see Ruud 2003, Chatterjee 1997, Bhattacharya 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The elected representatives such as those of the Panchayat also play a role but I will come back to them later.

In Bengal, the common way to describe someone involved in Party politics at any level, but especially at the local level, was to say that 'he does Party' (*o Party korey*).<sup>2</sup> A person who was involved in the activities of the Communist Party's work was therefore never described as merely 'belonging' or 'supporting' it or 'campaigning' for that party, but actually 'doing' it.<sup>3</sup> I call this 'political work' for it is clear that the popular perception of being a Communist was clearly that they *did* something. But given the wide-range of tasks undertaken by these local leaders, it was often quite hard to pin down what *exactly* they did. In this paper, through a fine grained description of these activities I aim to test the utility of the notion of 'political work' as an analytical category to understand the nature of political leadership. It is a category that may have wider resonances for other local and non-local kinds of leadership in India and elsewhere.

The lines from W.H. Auden quoted at the start of this paper, close the engaging Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Work* by Keith Thomas. In this volume work of every age and profession is discussed, from that of fishing folk to office workers, schoolteachers to actors. Even the idleness of the rich and the beggars is discussed, as is the unrecognised work of the homemaker. But the work of the politician is strikingly missing. This raises the question whether there is something about the nature of political work which is strangely elusive, that resists description? Or does our usual scepticism about politics make us assume we know what politicians do and concentrate instead on understandings institutions and the machinations of larger structures such as political parties and governments? Or do most people simply assume that politicians are opportunistic parasites who don't actually do much work of their own? And yet those of us who have spent time in the company of a consummate politician, recognise instantly Auden's observation that you had only to watch the eyes to know how seriously he took his vocation, how far reaching his strategy could be as he planned his next move, even when the rest of his countenance is inscrutable. Like the other professionals Auden lists, you don't have to see him doing work to be convinced that he does any, however the ineffable quality of political work resists it being counted among other kinds of labour. In this paper therefore, I will explore this elusive nature of 'political work' to examine what political leaders do. In particular, I

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<sup>2</sup> While 'Party' (marked here with a capital P) in most instances referred in short to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), it also did refer to its allies, such as the Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Communist Party of India and others. In West Bengal, 'Party' does not refer to the opposition Congress or the Trinamul Congress.

<sup>3</sup> 'Doing Party' was thus an activity that not only 'Comrades' such as the one I introduced here did, but also hangers on, activists and others, whom I place in the penumbra of the Comrade's later in the paper.

will focus on the work of local leadership based at the level of a village but whose sphere of influence covers a wider area. In a democracy where the government is expected to be mindful and responsive to popular desires, it is clear that work done by local leaders plays a crucial mediatory role between voters and policy makers. As I have argued elsewhere, in the case of West Bengal at least, it is the work of such leaders that ensured the continuing electoral success of the Communist-led government over nearly three decades (see Banerjee 2008 and 2009). The argument is based on research in two adjacent villages in Birbhum district of West Bengal, conducted over a period of ten years.

The first thing to note about the Comrade is that he was rarely, if ever, seen to be doing anything. He was often absent from the village, leaving it at daybreak and returning in the shadows of dusk when most people were indoors or in the confines of the residential areas of the village. Yet his departures and arrivals through the main village lane was invariably noted and at any given point of time one could quite reliably establish if he was to be found at home by asking anyone, anywhere, in the village for his whereabouts. But even when he *was* around, one never saw him actually doing anything in particular. Although the owner of land, he was never seen to be farming, or mending a tube well, or carrying diesel - the sort of jobs that able-bodied men of the village routinely did. Instead, one occasionally saw him in conversation or seeing off visitors or sometimes at the tea stall. One never in fact even saw him eating or drinking; an occasional cigarette or *bidi* was all he consumed in public. His figure was unmistakable, well-built and fit though padded with more fat than your average farmer, a complexion just a shade lighter than those burnt by the sun as they toiled in the fields and brick kilns every day of the year. And while he dressed like everyone else, his *lungi* (sarong) was always less faded and frayed, he usually wore slippers though everyone else was bare feet and he had a gold chain around his neck. These slight differences made him different, but only just, to make people take note of him, to know that he was someone different and important. He was a man of the people, just like everyone else, but a bit different, a bit more prosperous and important. Thus, much like the gods of India, he ate and drank in private, rested in private, was better looking than his devotees, and his public appearances were just that - 'appearances'. To glimpse him therefore was almost akin to divine *darsan*.

But despite this lack of evidence of doing any work, he enjoyed a reputation for working hard, from dawn to dusk and at all hours of day and night when he would

be sometimes called away from the comfort of his bed. People said that he was well connected to a wide network of Party workers throughout the State, with whom he met, consulted and negotiated funds and facilities for his village and was widely considered to be the most important asset of the villages' life. When he was elected to the President's post of the Block Kisan Sabha (a farmer's union) this fact was noted with pride by all, and interpreted as a reward for his political talents, his deft manoeuvrings and ability to stand out within a large Party network. That the new post might bring him even more power to wrestle resources for the village was acknowledged but not overtly stated. Instead people called attention to the fact that it was *their* Comrade who was frequently called upon to fire fight when there was trouble elsewhere or when urgent help was required in the Party's business, and these were cited as further evidence of his personal abilities. It was therefore assumed by most people that the large measure of his political work was conducted beyond the village, at the nearby town, or district headquarters or the various Party offices dotted around the countryside. The mobility afforded him by his coveted motorcycle was seen to be a fitting symbol of this ability to bridge the vast distances between the life of the village and of far off official spaces. This was an important aspect of the 'work' he did. His political work thus did not necessarily include any of the obvious activities that one may assume to be the stuff of a villager's life, at least not at the village level.

Among hard working farmers, his status was clearly of a *bhadralok*, a status whose minimum requirement was the eschewing of any manual work (see Broomfield 1968 and Ruud 2003: 72-75). The work that he did was manifestly not like the work done by the rest of the people of the village, who conducted hard physical labour. The work they did in their jobs as well as what they had to do in their homes, was mostly physical and covered their bodies in dirt, mud and dung, aged their complexions and used up every ounce of energy that they had. And this work was relentless, especially given the lack of basic amenities such as running water and electricity. So, there was always another chore to be completed before darkness fell, animals to be tended, another meal to be cooked, and a yard to be swept. Even when paid work was completed for the day, the domestic chores of a village life demanded the time and energy of those who lived in it, and so even 'leisure' time was dominated by a multitude of tasks big and small. Even the other *bhadralok* of the village, the schoolteachers, who spent their working day in white-collar work, returned home to

carry out similar sorts of tasks to the daily wage labourers that needed their attention. Almost all of them continued to have modest landholdings and therefore spent the daylight hours outside their working day tending to their fields and crops with their own hands, mending fences, fetching diesel on their cycles, tying up cattle. Thus everyone apart from the Comrade did work that placed an enormous demand on their bodies and time.

The Comrade's political work on the other hand, while obscured from view, was manifest in very different ways. Over a period of ten years while this study was conducted, the physical changes undergone by the villages themselves were noteworthy. Each visit revealed new roofs, submersible pumps, freshly installed electric wires, mobile phones - all of which were evidence that someone somewhere was doing something to make this all happen. There were also non-material signs - members of lower castes assumed an air of self-respect *vis-à-vis* the elite, landowners lived in nervousness of the share cropper's whims, women belonged to cooperatives, rival political groups waxed and waned, people could explain the virtues of democracy in a language of citizenship and rights - these were all signs of some work being done somewhere by someone.

But rather bizarrely, the Comrade's actual physical absence from the village led to his omnipresence in conversations and decisions among people. No disputes could be considered resolved until the Comrade's opinion had been considered and all major decisions, big or small, whether about new businesses or village festivals or even private events such as weddings were finalised only after his final approval. After years of living among them, when I could say that I had a fairly astute sense of most of the people in the villages and their personalities, I began to appreciate just how well the Comrade knew his constituency. Conversations with the Comrade himself revealed his thorough knowledge of the goings on in each and every household, of what people described as *haandir khobor* (news of the cooking pot). This allowed him to anticipate where trouble was brewing and the reasons behind them and he spent considerable time in planning and plotting his moves. On more than one occasion, his inexplicable decisions made sense only once the full set of events his actions had triggered, had unfolded. But in my occasional chats with him, the people of the village did not feature much. What he presented to the anthropologist was the face of the local leader who had a good grasp of Communist ideology and his diatribes against American neo-imperialism. After 9/11 he demonstrated to me with some deft arguments how

the incidents in New York and the subsequent war on terror by NATO had serious implications for India and its Muslims, Muslims like him, and his fellow villagers. His grasp of international politics was characterised by the anger and ideological hate of capitalist America and its allies, a line that was held resolutely from the headquarters of the CPI (M) to workers like him. In fact, on any given day, by noon, he usually knew what the 'Party line' on any current issue was. This of course was the result of the discipline and order of the cadres who read the official Communist paper *Ganashakti* every morning and avidly discussed its articles with other cadres whom he met during the day in the local Party office. By the evening he was able to slip some of these ideas into the circle of men at the tea stall. Over the years, his language, ideas and reportage have grown familiar and people expect this of him. Their ideas about communism, empowerment, and the place of their struggles on a larger stage were all filtered through his prism. His main asset therefore was his connectedness, i.e. the ability to bring some of the outside world into the village. In choosing to discuss issues about the economy or international politics with me, the Comrade was thus keen to give off the impression that his work was mainly ideological or at least driven by ideology rather than about the petty machinations he knew I was hearing about from the rest of the village. While we were both aware of how much of his work in act was more humdrum and even 'dirty', he chose never to mention this aspect of his work. But it is to this aspect I now turn.

### *Entrepreneurial work*

West Bengal functions within Indian democracy, displaying the usual qualifications of regular elections, a multi-party system, a free press and a division of powers between the executive and judiciary arms of the State. The Communist Party and its allies however have dominated its politics, and have aimed to control more and more aspects of society than an ordinary political party. Through its workers, it has hoped to embed itself not only within the political process but exercise control over the non-political arena of social activity. The most significant aspect of Communist rule in West Bengal was its extensive network of cadres all over the state, such that every group of villages had a Party office and Comrade who coordinated political and social activity in that area. For the first three decades of their rule, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allies persisted without undue totalitarianism, because it endowed individual Comrades throughout the state with a small sum of social capital (accrued as a result of their membership and networks within the Party) and



encouraged them to use it to build up their power and influence further. This worked to their mutual advantage; the Comrade increased his power base by extending his networks and therefore his social capital and the Party benefited by increasing its reach into the lives of the people through its cadre.

Thus the Comrade's social network was his biggest asset. It was men who already possessed some of this power base, a sort of basic start-up social capital, who are inducted into the Party. Once selected by the Party to serve as its local representative, the Comrade was expected to multiply his networks to the extent that his power base ideally included every member of his constituency. At elections, every voter who was part of this network could be expected to cast their vote in favour of the Comrade's Party, and so served as the moment when the interest accrued on social capital was banked. By the time my research began in the later 1990, the Party had been in power for several years and could back its cadres with an unprecedented confidence, and this allowed its workers greater room for manoeuvre. This meant that the Party and its comrades took greater risks with confidence that bordered on complacency about their positive electoral performance. The aims of their enterprise therefore became even more ambitious. Rather than just aiming to win elections, the Party turned its attention to the quieter periods in between elections, when political activity continued. As a result, a large part of the political work done by the Comrade was to fulfil the Party's ambition to supplant all the traditional institutions both of the State and of the family, by controlling all aspects of social life. It did this by limiting the powers of the police and the district administration on the one hand while simultaneously filling the gap left by their absence. At the same time it ingratiated itself into each and every aspect of community life such that even innocuous non-political organisations such as youth clubs or religious organisations were directly or indirectly controlled by Party cadres. It has thus effaced the traditional distinctions between state and civil society through its own overwhelming and ubiquitous presence, and is better represented by Chatterjee's label of 'political society'. It was the hegemonic capture of these non-electoral spaces, which in turn allowed for its success during elections (Chatterjee 2008).

Let us now examine how the Party conducted this sort of exercise through its local representative at the village level, through looking in some detail at the workings of the Comrade in the villages of Madanpur and Chishti. The Comrade had 27 *bigha* of land on which he cultivated rice largely through hired labour. As a result he had not

suffered the financial ruin, which other members of the middle peasantry with similar sized landholdings underwent when land reforms were introduced in the early 1980s. One of the main outcomes of the reforms was to transfer share of the land to any labourer (*bargadar*) who had worked on a patron's land for longer than 3 years. Having been alerted to the impending reforms, the Comrade had got rid of his *bargadar* in time and switched to hired labour. In addition to rice farming he also had a number of other businesses on the side. He was the first in the village to exploit the nearby riverbed to extract sand, which was sold to building contractors in the cities. He also utilised the sand for a brick-making business, and set up the first kilns in the village. His latest venture had been to set up a fisheries business, which he did by draining some of the village's communal tanks of water (used for washing and bathing) for lucrative fish farming. For all of these ventures the financial capital was provided either by government's interest free loans or capital accumulated from his previous enterprises. It was no surprise therefore to learn that the Comrade was also the most prosperous man in the village.

The Comrade belonged to the Syed caste, which formed the elite in these two largely Muslim villages. Further he belonged to a specific network of Syeds who originally descended from a *pir* (a holy man) from Iran and therefore considered themselves among the *ashraf* of West Bengal.<sup>4</sup> The Syeds mostly owned landholdings of 5-30 bighas and made up the middle peasantry. They were largely endogamous, they evoked their foreign origins by speaking in Urdu among themselves and they considered themselves more pious and elite than any other Muslim group in West Bengal. As a result, in the villages under the Comrade's jurisdiction, a large proportion of the economic and political elite was Syed who were both his relatives as well as political contemporaries.

Given this description it would also be fair to assume that this Comrade was not very different from a typical feudal *padrone* a type of 'big man' found in most rural societies. Indeed to a certain extent that is what he was. But what made him a 'social capital-ist', so to speak, was a whole different range of activities best described as political entrepreneurship, which I describe below. Unlike a mere feudal lord, whose main aim is to increase the power of his economic capital, which he holds

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Eaton in his definitive study on the spread of Islam in Bengal, identifies the *ashraf* as a category that included 'those Muslim claiming descent from immigrants beyond the Khyber — or at least from beyond Bengal, who cultivated high Perso-Islamic civilisation and its associated literature in Arabic, Persian and Urdu' (Eaton 2000: 249).

together with patronage links, the Comrade also had an obligation to the Party. It was through his contacts within the Party that he could get advance information on loans or threaten a local bureaucrat for a permit for one of his ventures. These enterprises increased his personal wealth and well as his networks with more people who were bound to him by ties of loyalty and obligation. These networks were then activated when the Party required a show of their loyalty, mainly at times of elections. The Comrade thus played a delicately balanced game, which simultaneously increased his personal prosperity and his Party's popularity.

However, there were also potential competitors to him in the village among other Syed landowners, who despite their economic impoverishment after the reforms continued to have an enormous influence among the poorer labour classes of the villages. There were also a large proportion of people in the village who belonged to the lower castes of Muslims such as Sheikh and Pathan. These castes belonged to the same economic strata as the minority Hindus from the two castes of Dom and Bagdi. These lower castes together made up the poorer section of the villages and it is they who worked as *bargadars* and hired labour on the lands of the Syeds. But because it was this class which had benefited most from the land reforms brought in by the Communists, the Comrade had little trouble in commanding the loyalty of this section of the village population and much of his 'ideological work' was done here. It was sitting among their huts that the Comrade shared his communist vision for greater social equality and fairness and relayed ideas about how these could be achieved. Thus, for instance, the post 2001 elections initiative of setting up self-help groups through women's cooperatives was executed at this level. Using his leverage within the village, he was able to swiftly and efficiently persuade some women (and their families) that this was necessary and beneficial in the long run. And it was by listening to their demands that the Comrade could feed back to his Party colleagues the lacunae in their policies. He thus acted as the crucial go-between between the Party and the people and facilitated the government's responsiveness to the electorate.

Despite his standing in the village, the Comrade had to be constantly vigilant that other Syeds, with different political leanings, did not encroach on his support. This was a real possibility as more and more peasants are beginning to question whether the government was a one-reform wonder. The daily wage, which had not increased again since the mid 1980s, did not seem as radical or generous in inflated prices of the new century, and the reach of the land reform programme had remained

patchy. Further, the much-needed reform of the agricultural markets had never materialized (see Harriss-White 2008), leaving West Bengal among the country's least prosperous states despite recording the highest levels of rice production. The possibility of questioning the credibility of the Communists was thus a distinct possibility. Such a critique was most likely to be provoked by the Syeds who had been hardest hit by Communist policies. It was they who formed the literate minority in the village and who commanded an old feudal hold over their poorer tenants.

But in order to oust the Communists from power, they needed to mobilise members of the poorer labour force who formed the bulk of the electorate and thus constantly wooed their attention. The Comrade therefore had to constantly pay attention to his networks among the Syeds and to make sure that no one man became too powerful or influential in his own right. He ensured this in a number of ways. The main tactic had been to keep the politics of the two villages separate from each other. Despite extensive kinship and marriage links across the two villages, and similar caste and class profiles, the two villages had very different reputations and maintained a distance from the other. This schism had roots in the personal biography of the Comrade who belonged to Madanpur but at the age of 17 ran away with and married a girl from Chishti leaving his first wife behind in Madanpur. Since then, the men of Chishti were seen to be emasculated and unable to control their women. The Comrade had since maintained two households, run by his two wives, one in each village, and through which he commanded the loyalty of the large number of retainers who worked in them. Further, his own brother lived in Madanpur, as did one of his sisters. Two other sisters lived in Chishti. In Madanpur, there were 3 Syed households who disagreed with his politics and it was widely known that they voted for the opposition party, Congress. He limited their opposition through impoverishment caused by the forced imposition of additional *bargadars* on their land, denying them jobs that they were qualified for and by threatening their livelihood by encouraging rival businesses. In Chishti, any sign of dissent from his former political allies was carefully dealt with to ultimately humiliate or compromise the principal actor. In one case when the political ambitions of a young educated Syed man became apparent, the Comrade personally slapped him in full view of several people including the young man's friends. The news spread quickly and the reason provided on that occasion was that he had been punished for harassing a girl, thus allowing the Comrade to occupy

the higher moral ground, but everyone knew that this was retribution for the young man's attempts to set up the Trinamul as a rival political cell in the village.

There were about 5 other Syed households in Madanpur, which he controlled in other ways. Men who had brothers living in Chishti head most of these households. It was striking that of the dozen or so pairs of brothers who lived in the two villages, most of them were not on talking terms with each other. Investigation into these enmities revealed that in each case the roots of the discord lay in jealousy of the prosperity of one brother while the other struggled to turn his luck. The affluence in each case had been facilitated by a job or a loan or a marriage proposal arranged by the Comrade. By keeping the brothers divided through preferential treatment the Comrade had one of them constantly in his debt for having done him a favour, while keeping the other in sullen hope of being the next recipient of a favour. As a result the possibility of a united front of two brothers together challenging the might of the Comrade lay unrealised through the jealousy generated between them.

It was also striking that in the daily life of the village with all its accompanying gossip, envy and avarice, each conflict was resolved only after the personal mediation of the Comrade. Employing considerable skills in magnifying ordinary village disputes to peace threatening proportions, the Comrade was able to make himself an indispensable arbitrator in all disputes. This embedded the Comrade in the daily life of every household allowing no matter to be considered too small to escape his attention. In each case, he restored order by issuing threats to the suspected mischief-makers or by mollifying the injured party. But this did not necessarily follow a principled policy of seeking justice and truth. The accusations were usually arbitrary and the punishments did not bear any relation to the seriousness of the crime. It was this arbitrariness which resulted in everyone existing in a constant state of fear and even terror regarding the actions of the Comrade. By behaving in this fashion, every dispute became an occasion for the Comrade to entrench himself further in village politics and in the minds of the people.<sup>5</sup>

The power consolidated thus, was also manifested itself in an exaggerated display from time to time. This was achieved through a series of actions daring in their scope and originality. One of the more spectacular ones was when he was seen to be helping to arrange a suitable marriage for a young girl, whose father was an active

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<sup>5</sup> See Arild Ruud's valuable discussion on the role of gossip in constituting both the reputations of village leaders and the village political agenda in his *Poetics of Village Politics*, especially pages 183-204.

member of his political clique. But in private he carried on an affair with the young girl and her mother, simultaneously. While news of the goings on were the subject of hushed but outraged gossip among both men and women of the village, no one directly actually accused the Comrade of having transgressed sacrosanct moral boundaries. The reason for this was that each and everyone of his possible critics were themselves involved in some other dispute, which inevitably required the Comrade's attention. It would have therefore have compromised their own interests severely to have publicly criticised him at this time. Their silence was thus further proof of the Comrade's invincibility. In this instance he had taken a risky gamble that had paid off as he had successfully outfaced his severest critics. A large measure of his working/waking hours could thus be seen as dreaming up strategies to increase his self worth, reputation or *consideration* (Davis 1998). Davis lists at least four ways in which *consideration* is enhanced - letting people know that they can't harm his interests without harming their own; by demonstration on third parties to evoke fear among observers; enticement; routinised coding of superiority such as dress and manners - and the Comrade appears to have used all of them at some point in time.

It was evident that the Comrade was able to increase his social networks through his well-laid plans, but also that these networks needed constant nurturing and involved people whose loyalties and indebtedness needed constant feeding and nurturing. When establishing his numerous businesses for instance, through which he also created new clients through employment, he was aware that these might alienate others. To take a small example, when he started his fisheries business in a particular pond, he transgressed communal rights to the ponds which compromised the power of other owners and inconvenienced their women who had further to walk for their daily bath. He thus countervailed his unilateral capture of communal resources by giving the man of the house most inconvenienced by the hatchery a subsidy for his transport business when they next round of loans came up 6 months later. Sustaining a web of networks thus required his constant vigilance, and in each relationship the risks were high. In the case described earlier, he deflected gossip about his affair with the young girl by arranging a spectacular match which her parents could never have managed themselves, thereby silencing any criticism from the rest of the village. He was able to do this because of his wide links across many villages and towns in the area, and his bringing in a proposal from a prosperous city family in this case was precisely a demonstration of the reach of his networks. In all of these instances, timing was of the

essence. The Comrade was patient; he was patient while formulating his strategy, and he had the ability to wait patiently to witness the results of his machinations. He could afford to play this game mainly because his Party was always present as the back up, the guarantor, in case a strategy went wrong and he needed bailing out. The Comrade was thus very similar to the kind of 'wheeler-dealing rural politico-cum-businessman revelling in a socialist environment' that appeared all over Eastern Europe, and which Katherine Verdery dubbed '*entrepratchiki*' - half entrepreneur and half apparatchik (Verdery 1995). A dense web of such men covered West Bengal, each took the small amounts of social and financial capital that the Party provided, i.e. the Left Front franchise, and invested it energetically to build popular support. They had carried out an informal but thorough penetration of every aspect of 'civil society' in rural life, from village football clubs to Id festivity committees. As a result, for many villagers *any* political figure of influence or achievement, whatever their actual political sympathies, was referred to as a 'Comrade'. (I was asked, for example, who my Comrade was back home). Much like the 'big men' described by Mines in Tamil Nadu and Hansen in Mumbai, these Comrades rested their credibility on their efficacy and generosity and formed the elementary units of local politics in Bengal (Mines 1990 and Hansen 2008). But unlike 'fixers' in other parts of India, these local leaders were also directly answerable to a capillary network of 'Comrade' figures all over West Bengal and formed the basis of the Communist Parties' success in building a party organisation in the state (Manor 2004). It was their loyalty and efficiency in coordinating development programmes, political activities, and agricultural know-how across local units, which made them the envy of their political rivals. While this made demands on the Party's resources, the gains were far in excess of the initial investment because it was through these 'comrade' figures it was able to widen its role and influence over every village in West Bengal, a feat otherwise impossible for a political party. Further, when observers assessed the performance of the Communist government, the Party was able to demonstrate this control as evidence of having democratically devolved powers to the most local, the most micro levels of the state. Such was the aggregate benefit of this investment in the local Comrades that through them the Party was able to capture the vocabulary of politics itself. In Bengal villages, there was only one word used to refer to the most powerful institution of the state: '*Party*'.

*Work and the division of labour*

The overall political work done in West Bengal was of course the aggregate of very different kinds of work done by different types of political leaders. At the level of the villages itself, there were a number of other Communist leaders, with varying degrees of importance. While most people used the traditional language of *dols*, the various 'comrades' who made up the 'following' in Bailey's sense of the word, could be a fairly mutable group (Bailey 1969). In these *dols* or groups, there was a relatively permanent core of comrades, who were surrounded by those who had been co-opted for specific projects and there was a sliding scale of who was 'in' and who was 'out'. As projects were completed and newer tasks emerged, others more suitable or committed to it were drafted in to replace the older ones. Maintaining the *dol* thus was in fact an important aspect of political work done by its members. In the Communist *dol* a proportionate representation of all the four Muslim castes and the two Hindu ones of Dom and Bagdi was ensured at any given time. Predictably, some were more important than others and foremost of these was Okho Dom - the most aggressive and powerful *bargadar* (sharecropper) and who had one of the largest shares of land in the village and was thus a most direct beneficiary of the LF's main reform programmes. Other comrades included an entrepreneur who was an outsider to the village (save for an estranged brother). He was a committed and eager member, who used his Party work to create the networks other villagers had through existing kin. The Party work and the circle of camaraderie served to fill the place of a much-missed family. Other young men (and they were all men) included the sons of erstwhile Communist Party workers who had been outmanoeuvred by the Comrade or those who had been to the local college and participated in union politics there. Each had something politically noteworthy in their personal histories that made them ideal choices. Whatever their differences, they were all people who had had a sound political education one way or another and who had a fire in their bellies. It was this penumbra of workers surrounding the core, which made their leader, the Comrade, shine brighter. By their loyalty and faith in the Comrade's leadership they added credibility to his ideas, by following his instructions they added to his authority and by their own convictions they added to his charisma. Most of those who had been associated with the Party's work saw themselves very much as Party workers at least for a limited period of time. But this label was prone to fade unless its association with political work was energetically renewed. Not many people could, even if they wished to, become permanent members of the core and they certainly could not



without the support of the Comrade. This aspiration was the incentive for their labours and as we have seen in the previous section, the Comrade managed them adroitly.

Within the core, the most important division of labour was maintained between the Comrade and a man called Nathu Dom who was the Pradhan (President) of the local Panchayat Committee. As an elected candidate Nathu occupied his position of importance on the basis of a popular mandate. His personality was perfectly suited to the business of fighting elections. He was softly spoken, sober and the characteristic bend of his head slightly to one side gave the impression of him always willing to lend his ear to any demands and problems. He was seen around the village, strolling in the lanes around dusk for his daily constitutional but also tending to his fields industriously like others. He had a good reputation for even-handedness in disbursing benefits channelled through his office and its allocated budget. His visibility, accessibility and honesty made him an excellent candidate for a popular politician. But it was also widely accepted, implicitly even by Nathu himself, that he could make no decision without prior consultation with the Comrade. They strove for consensus but overall the Comrade had the last word. It was Nathu's job to make sure that the decisions were executed fairly and judiciously. In fact their roles were entirely complementary; the Comrade spoke on behalf of the Party to the village and Nathu spoke on behalf of the village to the Party. Thus, when people had a problem or a request they approached Nathu for help, and they did this not so much for his personal leadership qualities, but for his position in the Panchayat organisation. This village level ethnographic observation of faith in the institutions of the Panchayat is true for most of the state of West Bengal. Here, the Panchayat enjoyed an 'intensive and extensive' appeal over all other rural institutions and people preferred 'institutionalised problem solving ... (such as a Panchayat) rather than individuals when in need' (Bhattacharya 2009: 335-6). The same research also revealed, perhaps surprisingly, that the appeal of the institution of the Panchayat cut across party loyalties, such that Congress supporters were slightly *more* likely to approach the Panchayat with a problem.<sup>6</sup> The sharing of responsibilities between Nathu and the Comrade that was a crucial aspect of their political work also helped them achieve a wide appeal. Even though the Comrade was unambiguously a Party man, by keeping his distance from him, Nathu could project the Panchayat as a

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<sup>6</sup> The figures from the NES (National Election Studies conducted by Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Democracy) survey data analysed in Bhattacharya 2009 show that 47 per cent of Congress supporters as compared to 44 per cent LF supporters were likely to approach the Panchayat. See figure 17.7 on p 336 in Bhattacharya 2009.

non-partisan body to the village. Further, this division of labour between the two most prominent village politicians reflected what was a widely recognised phenomenon in West Bengal, namely that all policy decisions were made by the Left Front and the civil service and other bodies were seen to be 'mere rubber stamps' and executors of these policies.<sup>7</sup>

Political work could thus be said to be carried out by a division of labour between Nathu and the Comrade on the one hand who in Weber's schema were the 'professional' politicians i.e. people who had made politics their vocation, and those whom Weber characterized as 'part-time' politicians.<sup>8</sup> Further Nathu could be said more obviously to be the one who lived 'off' politics and the Comrade who lived 'for' politics. The crucial Weberian distinction is a matter of economics because the politician who lives 'off' politics depends on it as a source of income. Nathu's modest background and history of poverty, which was widely recognised as having been dramatically alleviated as a result of his occupation of the elected office, is a good example of how living off politics can be beneficial. This is despite the fact that Panchayat members are not paid a salary and so Nathu's increased affluence was the result of benefits accrued as a secondary 'outcome' of his development projects. Interestingly, no one saw this as corruption and read it instead as one of the benefits of occupying an elected post. Instead they tended to highlight his commitment to the welfare of the village for which his attendance of meetings, negotiations with other Panchayats for a share of the budget and fighting elections were seen to be onerous and arduous tasks. His dedication to the common good was seen to be no less than the Comrade's, an observation that finds support in Weber's point that even such a person could be motivated with the same sincerity to the cause as the one who lives purely 'for' politics. In Nathu's case this could certainly be said to be the case. The Comrade could, on the other hand, could afford to live 'for' politics alone because of his private

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<sup>7</sup> It would however be erroneous to conclude that this made Left Front politicians, big or small, personally powerful. Rather, it was the 'Party' that was considered to be the ultimate basis (*bhitt*) for all decision-making rather than any one individual. The Comrade narrated an anecdote that illustrated this belief perfectly: the local MP of the area was Somnath Chatterjee a prominent parliamentarian in the central government and Speaker of the house. But on one of his election campaigns, he made the error of promising a school to a village, which petitioned him for one. The local Comrades, among who was 'our' Comrade, told him off roundly after the petitioners had left. They pointed out to him that all he could promise to do, in return for votes, was to look into the matter. He was told that the actual allocation of a school was a decision that only the local Party office could take after consulting with the local Comrades who could keep the Party's grand design for the whole district in mind.

<sup>8</sup> This is not a category that appears in the much-cited 1946 translation of Weber's essay 'Politics as a Vocation' by Gerth and Mills (1946). Instead a more recent translation (Gunlicks 1978) shows that Weber made more than just a distinction between 'occasional' and 'professional' politicians, and had implied a third category of the 'part-time' politician.

income, which Weber insisted is a prerequisite for this kind of professional politician. It was widely known that his family managed the Comrade's lands for him and his sons his business ventures. As his brother pointed out to me sarcastically 'well, someone has to look after the fields so the others can "do" Party'.

As Weber confirmed the one who lives 'for' politics must also be economically dispensable, that is, 'his income must not be dependant upon a constant and personal management of his labour and thinking entirely, or at least predominantly, in the service of economic gain' (Gunlicks1978: 506-507). This leads to the rather important conclusion that a daily wage labourer for instance, could not therefore make for an ideal vocational politician for he would need to prioritise selling his labour for economic survival over political commitment. This therefore leads to the phenomenon so familiar in politics everywhere of professional politicians invariably drawn from some sort of plutocratic elite. But here Weber warning against the hasty conclusion that it is therefore only the elite who can be genuinely motivated for a political cause is worth heeding for he asserted that 'there has never been a stratum that has not somehow lived off politics' (ibid:508).<sup>9</sup> The main advantage of having an elite leadership, he qualified, was merely that they did not 'need to seek *direct remuneration for their political service, as every politician without means must do*' (ibid:508). Thus our evidence too confirms that those who live 'for' politics probably make as much money 'doing' politics but what distinguishes them from elected representatives is that they can afford to be seen not to be gaining any direct material benefit from their political dedication.

This emphasis on what a politician cannot *appear* to be seen to be getting out of being in politics lies at the heart of our understanding of the Comrade and the work that he does. For while evidence pointed to the fact that he was clearly the wealthiest man in the village and that this had something to do with his association with the Party, it was nevertheless impossible for anyone to pinpoint which of his political activities led to his wealth. His membership of an elite caste and family landholdings obscured the source of his wealth further. What was visible were the endless journeys he performed to attend meetings with other Party workers, address union gatherings, all of which were conducted away from the scrutiny of his fellow villagers. The

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, Weber concluded cynically exactly the opposite to be true: that in fact that the only uncompromising and unconditional political idealism can only be found among the property-less who 'stand entirely outside of the circles interested in maintaining the economic order of the society' (Gunlicks 1978:509).

resulting connections, his immense social capital, were the only visible product of his labours. When he banked this ephemeral treasure, he gained the benefits in the form of a loan approved or tube wells issued, which he could pass on to Nathu and others to develop as 'projects' which enhanced the prosperity of the village. This allowed him to develop a higher worth than any other politician working in the village, whether professional or part-time. The leverage gained enabled him to extract recognition for it as and when he required it. But as we have seen, this was a finely calibrated judgement at all times; if he was too ham fisted he ran the danger of being seen as authoritarian, if he was too lily fingered he could lose ground to other aspirants. And while this delicate dance carried on, his son and the rest of his family could reap the 'real' i.e. financial benefits of his *consideration*. He of course was the main beneficiary of these economic pursuits, having the first and last word on all projects, but he was never *seen* to be directly involved or benefiting from them. Further, unlike the worker who sold his labour for a wage, the Comrade's social and financial entrepreneurship lay in the wait, in the *ability* to wait for a lucrative opportunity without being seen to be doing so.

### *Conclusion*

Just prior to the 2006 Assembly elections a visit to Madanpur and Chishti revealed that the next 'Comrade' was being groomed. A young man, Shontosh Dom, had been identified as the ideal heir to the mantle and indeed his biography seemed well suited to the job. A young man, in his early twenties, he had just completed an undergraduate degree from the local college. Like his contemporaries in the region, he was unlikely to find a white-collar job and so had returned to working on his family's modest lands and as a *bargadar* on someone else's. He came from a small close-knit family of two brothers and a sister who shared the farming responsibilities with the father and a mother who helped out during the harvest. The atmosphere within their dark and ramshackle hut was one of easy harmony, dominated equally by the mother's good humour and pride in her children and the father's ethic of hard work and honesty. They seemed to take collective pride in Shontosh's new role as a comrade and took it in turns to outline for me how he spent his day. The sister, who was visiting from her in-laws, conveyed genuine enthusiasm and possibly a touch of wistfulness, for the political work her brother now did. She too had decided to make the most of her own education by running a little school for the children in the village where she now lived. Shontosh himself spent most of the time watching them with a

shy smile on his lips and added a quiet word from time to time. But this demeanour clearly belied a fiery disposition for politics. At college he had got involved in student politics and it was his role in SFI-led agitations against the Congress led union that had gotten him noticed by the Party. In the induction process into his new job, he had been entrusted with the responsibility of helping people get their voter identification cards made for the forthcoming elections. This involved accompanying them to the local BDO's office, filling out forms, checking their accuracy and generally helping them deal with paper work and a literate world. In his opinion this had been a very worthwhile experience as it enabled him to meet people, learn about their insecurities, demands and desires and this had allowed him to develop a bond of trust with them. He was also expected to travel widely to the surrounding villages, making a note for the Party what the government was doing and not managing to achieve in his area. In this, the two monthly meetings with more senior Comrades had been invaluable. From them he had started to learn the art of rhetoric, the interpretation of the Party's ideology and techniques for its dissemination and was given basic lessons in 'how to behave with people'. In the grooming process of this new 'Comrade', the elements of political work discussed in this paper, could be observed clearly.

By the elections of 2009, he was already more confident in himself, though a bit defensive on behalf of his party. A rival political faction, supporting Trinamul Congress had finally taken root, and for the first time since the 1960s Congress supporters openly expressed their preference and volubly campaigned for the Lok Sabha elections. The secret resentment against the Comrade's interference in their lives had begun to be publicly expressed once the Left Front itself had been held accountable on the national stage because of its actions against the Singur and Nandigram agitations. As a result, one of the Comrade's own penumbra had stood *against* the LF candidate in the 2008 Panchayat elections, and had registered a respectable defeat. The young Syed man, whom the Comrade had humiliated in front of others many years ago, had persisted in his political ambitions and now had a strong and visible following and they were actively campaigning for the forthcoming elections. Initial forecasts had projected a drubbing for the Left Front in 2009. The scenario for the budding Comrade was not therefore entirely dissimilar to the one that the older Comrade had had to face at the start of his political career. But unlike his predecessor, he might not have the luxury of a strong and ascendant political party

behind him. The results of the national elections revealed a severe loss of LF seats in the national parliament from West Bengal and the LF candidate from the parliamentary constituency containing Madanpur and Chishti also lost to the Trinamul Congress candidate. It will be thus be interesting to watch this young man's career grow in coming years and to observe whether he chooses to or need to redefine the nature of his political work, of how he 'does Party'. Will he continue to follow the divide and rule policy? How long will he continue to borrow his father's cycle to make his journeys to do his political work? How long will it be before he acquires his own cycle? Or motorcycle? Or even a Tata Nano?<sup>10</sup> Will his brother have to gradually take over all of the family's farming responsibilities? Will he continue to assert that the Party paid him nothing, that he had to work hard for what he got? Or will he continue to insist that he wants to work selflessly? Will his work too slowly become invisible? We will have to wait and see.

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<sup>10</sup> This is the Rs. 100,000 affordable 'people's' car that Tata Motors built in 2009 for the growing Indian market. Ironically, this is the car plant that had to be moved out of Singur, West Bengal, because of the way in which the LF government had handled the acquisition for the land for the factory and the protests that followed. The plant had to be relocated to Gujarat.

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