

CRIMINAL CAPITAL

Corruption among India's ruling elite has been headline news this year. For **Andrew Sanchez**, who has undertaken research into the "semi-criminal entrepreneurs" operating in the company town of Jamshedpur, it is a particularly complex issue. As the people he interviewed grew to trust him, he was offered deals – from UK visa fraud to the sale of tiger bones and gold. Here he reports on the challenges faced by ethnographers of crime.



Since the early 1990s, Indian economic liberalisation has had a profound effect on the nation's productive and commercial infrastructures. The relaxing of import tariffs and monopolies legislation has expanded domestic markets for commercial goods and allowed private foreign investment on a scale not seen for a century. One of the much-publicised effects of this process is the establishment of a large middle class employed in the technology and white collar service sectors. These global citizens consume status-conferring commodities, credit and higher education; they are the national champions of economic liberalisation and their existence suggests that India has finally completed the long and painful march out of colonialism.

However, as might be expected, the rewards of this transformation are in fact rather unevenly distributed among the Indian populace. The cracks in the neo-liberal edifice are displayed particularly clearly in the nation's heavy industrial areas, where a huge volume of South Asia's coal, steel and automobiles are produced. Apparent in these regions is a relationship between state corruption, organised crime and industrial capitalism that is integral to the functioning of the economy.

The incorporation of industrial Indian company towns into the global economy over the past 20 years has been characterised by increased competition for state and judicial influence, natural resources and market share. Many of the victors in this struggle are, logically enough, those who have the capacity to negotiate the vagaries of state bureaucracy, the mechanics of labour politics and the seamier side of credit markets.

In the eastern state of Jharkhand, where I presently conduct ethnographic research, the political economy of corruption and organised crime warrants a sustained and serious analysis. Understanding the ways in which these processes operate and how citizens conceptualise them has the capacity to shed light on the relationship between the formal and informal sectors, the role played by violence in certain forms of entrepreneurship, and the depth to which the Indian citizenry has faith in the democratic, political and legal structures of the state.

Recent popular movements against corruption in India demonstrate that a large proportion of Indian citizens regard corruption to be a ubiquitous feature of state and business negotiations, and that this tendency is the subject of a popular political critique. Mass support for Kisan "Anna" Hazare's anti-corruption hunger strike earlier this year was encouraging; however, international media portrayals of the problems against which Hazare campaigns are often overly simplistic. The implicit assumption that corruption operates parasitically at the margins of society is misleading. Rather than diverting wealth and political power from their intended paths, corruption and criminality are often integral, rather than incidental, to the functioning of capitalist economies.

While conducting research in the Indian company town of Jamshedpur during 2006 and 2007, I determined to give the question of criminal entrepreneurship a closer level of political attention than many anthropologists had previously accorded it. In an effort to trace the lines along which power and capital flowed in the city, for 15 months I built close relationships with semi-criminal

entrepreneurs of varying degrees of success. Trust, understanding and commitment are the foundations upon which the relationship between ethnographer and research participant is built, and this research method has served all fields of social anthropology well. However, the ethnography of corruption and criminality stretches the ethical and methodological underpinnings of the discipline almost to its limits. That the method does not quite collapse under such strain vindicates its utility, and I defend the use of ethnography to interrogate any subject so fraught with moral and legal complexity. It is only through patience and sensitivity that an accurate understanding of such a difficult subject may be broached; at the very least, ethnographers have these qualities in abundance. Nonetheless, conducting research of this kind is not without its problems.

After some months of carefully nurturing relationships with a number of actual and aspiring criminals in India, I found somewhat to my surprise that my own ethnographic patience had begun to reap rewards. My awkward and uncertain interactions blossomed into trusting friendships, and I was able to collect extensive data on areas of the city's economy upon which I had hitherto only speculated. I began to think more systematically about the city's consumer credit markets and traced important lines between liberalisation, consumerism, money-lending and debt collection. However, as any friend is apt to do, my research participants were inclined to consider what it was that our relationship could offer them. One research participant and his father saw me as the lynchpin in their

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plan to engage in UK visa fraud. They hoped that I would solicit British women to wed large numbers of Indian men in sham marriages for which they would act as commission agents. Another participant proposed that I smuggle readily available 9-carat gold from the UK to India, where we could use contacts among local jewellers to sell it fraudulently as 18-carat gold to consumers. Yet another individual asked that I approach Chinese organised criminals in London to broker the sale of a consignment of tiger bones, of which he anticipated receiving immediate delivery.

It was relatively easy to decline such proposals; however it was nigh on impossible to ensure that my research participants did not continue to make them. The ubiquity of these incidences raised a number of absolute ethical problems, and an even greater number of highly personal introspections. Operating on the implicit assumption that neo-liberal capitalism has a productive relationship with corruption and organised crime that disenfranchises the vast majority of people, I found it troubling to consider the possibility that I could have somehow fallen through the cracks into this economy. However, the fact that I, too, could become the villain in this drama was ultimately an important realisation that highlighted some key characteristics of the type of criminal enterprise that I was studying.

Ethnographic research can claim a number of excellent studies of criminality in which the cultural dimensions of crime are explored with sophistication and depth (I would recommend Philippe Bourgois' 2003 study of New York drug dealers, *In Search of Respect*:

selling crack in El Barrio). However, many of these works are best understood as ethnographies of "street" or gang cultures and therefore entail very different ethical quandaries to those raised when studying the political economy of crime. In contrast to the experiences of researchers in the often closed spheres of gang activity, I could be regarded as a potential interlocutor in eastern Indian criminal enterprise precisely because the crime in question was neither culturally defined nor culturally limited. Neither was my potential participation in criminality dependent upon a commitment to a given criminal organisation. On the contrary, such organisations did not truly exist in any substantive sense and certainly could not be joined. Organised crime in India's liberalised industrial belt is best understood as a series of ongoing business partnerships that not only transgress national, cultural and institutional boundaries but also exploit the spaces between them. Since such criminality is motivated by a tenaciously economic logic, participation within the enterprise is not culturally inaccessible to parties who may seem distant or distinct from any apparent "culture" of crime. This dynamic is especially pronounced in environments marked by rapid programmes of economic liberalisation; for an excellent discussion of such a context, see Vadim Volkov's 2002 study *Violent Entrepreneurs: the use of force in the making of Russian capitalism*.

For organised criminal entrepreneurs, the pursuit of economic goals increasingly involves exploiting relationships with a wide range of individuals of varying degrees of legitimacy. This observation raises important

methodological questions for researchers, but more importantly should invite a deconstruction of any easy distinctions that we may like to make between corruption, organised crime and capitalism. What my time among criminal entrepreneurs highlighted was that business proposals of the type made to me were also presented with considerable success to senior state politicians, trade unionists, industrial magnates, police officers, judges and a whole array of governmental bureaucrats. These business relationships suggest a co-dependence between corruption, organised crime and capitalism that it was disconcerting to have come so close to experiencing personally, yet the experience itself was fundamentally an enlightening one. Being asked to engage in acts of criminal entrepreneurship, such as the trafficking of tiger bones or the fraudulent sale of gold, brought with it an array of new research questions. As generations of ethnographers have doubtless concluded from methodological dilemmas of their own, some degree of critical self-evaluation is often integral to reaching the most significant of analytic insights. ■



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