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development research centre



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COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH STATES OF CRISIS IN SOUTH ASIA

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States of Crisis in India: Comparative research in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh

Introduction

The overarching aim of the research programme of the Crisis States DRC is 'to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. {Our aim is to} investigate why some political systems and communities have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not, and whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown'. In this broad context of enquiry we propose to undertake comparative research on the Indian states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. These are two big states that have significant features in common, but while the first of them is commonly considered to be a 'crisis state', the second now has a reputation for effective and progressive government. In the 1990s the annual rate of growth of gross state domestic product in Madhya Pradesh (henceforward MP) is estimated to have been 6.17%, the sixth highest amongst the 14 major states of India (compared with 2.69% in Bihar, and the combined SDP growth of the 14 states of 5.94% per annum)¹, and the state has undertaken a number of progressive initiatives, such as the Education Guarantee Scheme. Bihar, meanwhile has continued to lag behind all the other major states in terms of economic and of human development. 'Bihar leads India in backwardness', and is experiencing, it is said, 'continuing fragmentation into decentralised fiefdoms controlled by Bihar's own warlords'². These two states offer promising terrain, therefore, on which to pursue the central concerns of the research programme ('investigate why some political systems and communities have broken down to the point of violent conflict [Bihar] while others have not [MP]'). In the context of the economic reforms which India has pursued since 1991, and of governance reforms such as the (re-)introduction of democratic decentralisation, the two states offer the possibility of studying the extent to which processes of globalisation and institutional reform have or have not precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown. Comparison of the two states will also contribute substantially to the 'local' level of research which the DRC proposes, around understanding of 'why in similar economic and social conditions, in some regions violence has put down roots amongst the local people, while in others peace predominates', of 'the strategies poor people follow ... in constructing or reconstructing their livelihoods in situations of discord and upheaval', and of 'what happens to associational life, local politics and public action in situations of violent conflict'

The research team for this programme of work involves partnership between LSE/DESTIN (particularly John Harriss and Roli Asthana) and the Asia Development Research Institute (ADRI) based in Patna, the capital of Bihar, together with Dr Bela Bhatia of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, who recently completed an excellent Cambridge PhD on revolutionary left politics in central Bihar.³ ADRI was founded in 1991 by former

¹ These figures taken from Montek Ahluwalia, 'Economic Performance of States in Post-Reforms Period', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 May 2000, pp.1637-1648.

² These quotations from D. Bhattacharya, 'Bihar after bifurcation: a challenging future', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 October 2000.

³ Bela Bhatia, *The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2000.

staff of the A N Sinha Research Institute, which had been Bihar's premier social science research institute. Sadly the A N Sinha Institute is now hardly functioning and ADRI has largely taken over the role which it once had. The Director, Dr P P Ghosh is a statistician-econometrician from the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta; and the Member-Secretary is Dr Shaibal Gupta, who has a PhD in Economics, but whose research for many years has focussed on Bihar politics. Dr Gupta held a fellowship at IDS Sussex in 1998. There is no other active centre of social science research in Bihar (after the historic bifurcation of the state between plains Bihar and the forested, hilly, resource-rich Jharkhand state, late in 2000). Our enquiries in Bhopal (the capital of MP) in December 2000 confirmed that there is really no active social science research institute in the state (apart from Sandip Dixit's Sankhet, which is involved especially in the production of the Human Development Report for MP⁴); and it is widely recognised that the amount and level of social science research conducted in and on MP thus far, are weaker than for any other major state.⁵ It is also true that while some scholars have done comparative studies of development between various Indian states,⁶ there are no comparative studies of two states from within the Hindi heartland. We have decided that ADRI will organise research both in Bihar and in MP. ADRI has only a small staff and limited core funding, so that it will be necessary to make several new appointments to the Institute in order to carry out the proposed programme with the Crisis States DRC.

Background

Both Bihar and Madhya Pradesh are states of the so-called 'Hindi Heartland' of India, and they are also states in 'BIMARU', the name given some years ago to the epicentre of poverty in India, and in the world, in the four states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh (Orissa has sometimes been included as well). In fact the BIMARU states have become rather more differentiated over the last two decades, and Rajasthan has enjoyed high rates of growth of SDP over the last two decades, and now has a level of poverty (by the head count ratio) lower than the all-India average. But Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh continue to have higher levels of poverty than other states, well above the all-India average.

Bihar and MP are both states in which there has been little sense of sub-national identity, of the kind which has galvanised politics elsewhere in India (all across the South, in West Bengal, in Maharashtra and Gujarat, and in Punjab). MP has been described as a 'dustbin', in the sense that the state was formed from the erstwhile British territories of the Central Provinces and Berar, together with a number of former princely states, including in particular those of Bhopal, Indore and Gwalior (along with more than 50 smaller states). This has meant both that there is little sense of 'Madhya Pradesh' identity – one of the few studies of MP politics proposes that 'no state in India has fewer bonds underlying its unity'⁷ – and also that regional variations across the state are even more accentuated than is usually the case in India. This is partly because of the varying legacies of 'progressive' and non-progressive princely states. The state is subject to centripetal tendencies, too, different parts of it being oriented, variously, towards Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Some from amongst the

⁴ Anwar Jaffrey's NGO Eklavya has field research capacity.

⁵ It is striking, for example, that MP was the only major state not to have a chapter devoted to it in the important collection edited by Francine Frankel & M. S. A. Rao, *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*, 2 Vols, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989-90.

⁶ Probably the best known is Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, which compares West Bengal, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh.

⁷ Wayne Wilcox, 'Madhya Pradesh', in M. Weiner (ed.), *State Politics in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968, p.128.

former princes have continued to play dominating roles in the politics of the state. Meanwhile, the 'Bihari' identity has probably been less strong historically than those associated with the different linguistic traditions of plains Bihar (Maithili, Magahi and Bhojpuri), in addition to the division in the old, undivided Bihar between the plains and the Jharkhand region of 'tribal' dominance. (Jharkhand is now a separate state; as is the former Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh).

MP and Bihar are also states in which upper castes (*brahmans*, *rajputs*, *bhumihars*, and *kayasths* and *banias*) have historically enjoyed political dominance. Jaffrelot's research on politics in Madhya Pradesh, shows the continuing pre-eminence of brahmans, rajputs and banias in both the leading political parties (the BJP and the Congress) in the state, though it seems that part of the reason for the success of Congress in retaining office in MP, is that the party, under Digvijay Singh's leadership, has been successful in incorporating some from the lower castes, and members of the Scheduled Tribes (who make up one-fifth of the population of MP even after the creation of the new state of Chattisgarh)⁸. Bihar (and Uttar Pradesh) are the core states of the 'Hindi Heartland', where the upper castes were much more numerous than elsewhere. The Congress party in both states was dominated by members of these upper castes. From the outset the ruling party restricted the access of lower castes to positions in government, and successive Congress regimes were dominated by upper castes/classes. Zoya Hasan's remark that 'Upper caste domination provided the framework of political bonding in a fragmented society' applies as well to Bihar as to Uttar Pradesh.⁹ But 'middle' ranking 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) have become politically powerful in Bihar (as in UP); the Congress party has very substantially destroyed itself, after ruling for most of the time from independence up to 1989/1990, and it no longer has much of an electoral base; politics in Bihar are fragmented, and bitterly contested between formations which derive from the Lok Dal, in which OBCs are strong, the BJP, to which the upper castes have gravitated but which seeks, as elsewhere, to win support from lower castes as well, and what is left of the Congress. The rule of law has broken down to a greater extent in Bihar than elsewhere in India. As one writer has put it recently:

The laws of the market, celebrated by capitalism as the biggest force of integration, are constrained in Bihar by the state's enormous feudal baggage. And the interplay of this feudal baggage and the speculative logic of decadent capitalism is daily drawing the state into the vortex of growing chaos and anarchy. Presiding over the alarming descent is Bihar's own combination of a brutalised civil society and a ... criminalised ... state system. Anarchism of either militant or peaceful variety, practised through armed squads or reformist NGOs, is hardly able to make any difference to this larger picture of anarchy, disorder, loot and oppression.¹⁰

But there is another side to the Bihar story. It is a highly politicised society, and there are major mobilisations of the rural poor for land and liberty, for subsistence, social dignity and basic political rights, in a way that has not begun to happen in MP. These mobilisations are frequently dismissed (not least in the Indian press) as 'Naxalite' and therefore as reflecting

⁸ See Jaffrelot 'The Sangh Parivar Between Sanstrikization and Social Engineering', in T. B. Hansen & C. Affrelot (eds), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁹ Zoya Hasan, *Quest for Power: Oppositional Movements and Post-Congress Politics in UP*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹⁰ From Bhattacharya (2000).

ill-considered left wing adventurism. This mis-represents their sustained support by and for low caste, assetless rural people, and their positive programmes for their rights.¹¹

MP, unlike Bihar, has the reputation, now, of being a relatively well-administered state (reflected in part in its greatly improved record of growth in the 1990s), though it has a record from before the government of the present Chief Minister (which started in 1993) of violence against Dalits (members of Scheduled Castes) which compares with Bihar's.¹² Democratic decentralisation has been pushed further under the regime of Digvijay Singh in MP than in most other states, though one wonders at the extent to which this can possibly have been of much benefit to poorer and low caste people given that local bodies are likely to have been dominated by members of upper castes/classes. This possibility has been recognised, however, and moves are under way at present that are intended to counter the power of the old elites (in what is called 'gram raj' or 'village rule/government'). It seems possible, at least, that MP under Digvijay Singh has features in common with the state of Ceara in northeast Brazil which, as Tendler has shown, experienced considerable improvements in some areas of government in the 1980s as a result of the activities of two progressive governors, who pursued reforms in their struggle against the old 'barons' of the state.¹³

Comparison between Bihar and MP, therefore, holds out the prospect both of investigating the circumstances in which a crisis of governance developed (in Bihar) as against those which gave rise to relative political stability and progressive administration, and, at the 'local' level, poor people's responses to conflict. We do not want to over-emphasise the prospects for taking 'lessons' learnt in one state to another, but it is possible that some ideas might be exchanged - not just those about administration/projects which work in MP, but also about the implications of the politicisation of lower castes/classes (from Bihar). The research will allow us to draw conclusions concerning the implications and impacts of political and economic reform in India. What social and political effects have the economic reforms (promoting liberalisation) which have been pursued in India since 1991 had? Similarly what have been the effects of governance reforms? How have economic and political reforms influenced the distribution of political power, coalition formation, community organisation and social cohesion? What effects have they had on governance at the state level, and on state governments' abilities to contain and regulate social conflict?

Research Objectives

General

The Bihar-MP Research Project will focus upon the implementation of economic and governmental reforms in the two states (the latter include the recent bifurcation of the two

¹¹ See Bela Bhatia's account, based on a long period of intensive field research (Bhatia 2000). The late Arvind Das wrote: 'wherever these 'new Naxalites' have managed to acquire significant strength the incidence of day-to-day violence has gone down considerably. It is they, rather than the established police machinery, that best guarantee law and order in the complete sense of the term' (in his *The State of Bihar: an economic history without footnotes*. Amsterdam: VU University Press 1992, p.100).

¹² See Oliver Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: subordination, poverty and the state in modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 'The largest number of cases, both in absolute and per capita terms, is reported from UP, MP, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. In at least the first three States, land relations are at the heart of a large proportion of these clashes' (p.75).

¹³ The Ceara story is told in Judith Tendler's *Good Government in the Tropics*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

states), on their social and political implications, and the ways in which these in turn may influence conflict and the states' capacities to contain it - all in the context of an empirically and historically grounded analysis of political development. This will take account of social movements, civil society and the history of party politics and political competition in the two states, and of the responses of poor people to conflict.

We will study the ways in which reforms have influenced, and the ways in which they are influenced by the changing character of, and relationships amongst ruling elites, and their implications for civil and political society. We will study the discourses and practices associated with the establishment of ideological hegemony on the part of the ruling elites; and the character of political parties and their relationships in a competitive political system.

We will analyse the implications of economic reforms both for patterns of investment (which affect elite politics), and for critical policy instruments – such, notably, as subsidies and other transfer payments, and reservations policy, given their importance in the mediation of relationships between those who have benefited and those by-passed by development.

Specific Aims

1. From the national to the local

In the DRC research programme as a whole we aim to examine how forms of political organisation and institutions are related to the capacity to regulate and contain conflict, and deal with crises and whether some are more prone to breakdown than others.

What has been the relationship of different frameworks of political representation to the capacity or incapacity of political systems to contain and regulate conflict generated by economic and social change? Specifically, we are interested in examining the record of various types of “participationist” forms of political organisation (based on allegiance to populist leaders, organised around communal or ethnic identities, etc) versus the record of programmatic political parties.

In India we attempt this through comparison between Bihar and MP which have seen the evolution of very different party systems. The former has come to be characterised by ‘participationist’ parties, while the latter has a more stable party system in which the leading parties, Congress and the BJP, retain at least some semblance of being programmatic parties.

Have competitive political systems, usually considered as “formally democratic” exacerbated or reduced the possibilities of breakdown and under what conditions?

We will compare a relatively stable two-party pattern of political competition in MP with more fragmented but arguably much more democratic politics in Bihar.

What are the factors that have led to political fragmentation and the “criminalisation of politics” that are usually associated with breakdown and the increase of violent conflict? How important has the decline of ideologically inspired oppositional organisation been to the proliferation of the “criminalisation of politics” and the proliferation of “disordered violence”?

We will compare the history of the criminalisation of politics in Bihar with MP.

Second, we are concerned with how changes in patterns of economic organisation have affected political and social organisation in ways more or less conducive to breakdown. In most developing countries there has been a move away from statist forms of economic management that shaped patterns of class and group power and bred forms of social

organisation, mechanisms of bargaining between conflicting interests and patterns of conflict mediation. Increased informalisation of employment may have profound affects on the livelihood prospects of those without significant assets and their possibilities for organising.

How have changes in economic organisation changed patterns of class power and class coalitions, as well as the basis of group organisation and the manner in which social groups participate in politics? Specifically, have they given rise to new class alliances or the organisation of politics on the basis of other identities (caste, ethnicity, etc) at the expense of former ruling coalitions and how has this affected political order?

This is a central question in the proposed India research.

Has economic change led to an expansion of income earning opportunities or increased unemployment and the proliferation of destructive activities like the sex trade and crime, that could exacerbate other social problems like the AIDS crisis create unsustainable demands for increased public spending on law and order and social welfare?

We may be concerned in particular with the implications of economic reform for migration from the states we study, and the ways in which this may contribute to the exacerbation of some social problems as well as to the resolution of others.

Third, we are concerned with the impact of policies of liberalisation, privatisation and fiscal austerity (whether or not they have been promoted by international actors) on the capacity of state organisations and institutions to regulate and contain conflict and mediate between parties to conflict.

How have these changes in the role of the state affected patterns of patronage and the capacity to deliver social services that may have been the source of economic inefficiencies in past but also acted to contain and regulate conflict?

This question is centrally important in the India research, given that various forms of subsidies and transfer payments, and positive discrimination, have featured largely in the mediation of relationships between those benefited by and those by-passed by 'development'

Fourth, we are concerned with the impact of political reforms proposed within the 'governance agenda' of the international development organisations, including those related to democratisation, decentralisation, public-private partnership and the development of civil society on patterns of conflict, violence and crime and the possibilities for containing them, increasing cooperation and participation, and overcoming breakdown.

We propose to investigate the state of human rights in the two states, through both collection of published reports on the subject and direct fieldwork. This would involve issues such as land alienation, social oppression and police brutality, and a focus in particular on the everyday experience of human rights violations from the viewpoint of the underprivileged. There are important linkages between this work and that proposed under the following two points, in connection with which Bela Bhatia will be undertaking her further research on the 'Naxalite' movements in Bihar (and see footnote 11 on this linkage).

To what extent have decentralisation measures precipitated breakdown, offered the means to respond constructively to crisis, or made no meaningful impact and what are the conditions that lead to these alternative outcomes?

This question is highly relevant, given the current importance of decentralisation in India, through panchayati raj. MP has already gone some way with formal decentralisation; Bihar is about to hold panchayat elections (March 2001). Through the life of the research programme we aim to follow these experiments very closely, and to examine the financing of decentralised government, its responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, in relation to different social groups.

We will study the character of civil society in the two states and the role of voluntary associations, both formal and informal,¹⁴ in facilitating cooperation and participation, and in mediating conflict.

Key questions are:

To what extent does local government represent local civil society and its demands and needs, and then respond effectively to them?

What are the linkages between the inclusiveness of local politics, the effectiveness of local government, and civil violence and social breakdown?

How have measures of decentralisation affected (specifically) the local matrix of conflict and cooperation?

2. From the local to the national

Our comparative research in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh opens up the possibility of comparing one society, in Bihar, that is experiencing violent conflict and general malfunctioning of government, with another, in MP, with which it has important features in common, but in which the level of everyday violence is very much less. We will contribute in particular (through the field research of Bela Bhatia in Bihar and of John Harriss in MP) to the following, amongst the broad aims in this area of the research of the DRC:

Recognising that local arenas are crucial sites of struggle for social change, we want to understand the micro-politics of everyday life and the ways in which struggles become collective, publicly articulated and politically engaged at different times:

How is social and political life 're-normalised' in the context of violent conflict? (or in other words, how is violent conflict treated in local systems of morality?)

How far do local people and local initiatives build upon older principles of authority and hierarchy, or alternatively do they construct new institutional forms – like new cults, or vigilante groups and people's militia? Do these provide a basis for a central state to extend its legitimacy and operational capability, or, do they alternatively challenge state structures at the local level, either in overt defiance or by providing informal and relatively hidden structures for living?

¹⁴ Note that studies of 'civil society' in India have tended to be restricted to rather formal associations. It is a major limitation, for example, of the recent work by Pradeep Chibber (*Democracy Without Associations*, Sage 1999) that at no point does he consider associations such as puja and festival committees. And see the article by Susanne Hoeber Rudolph 'Civil Society and the Realm of Freedom', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 May 2000.

Why do impoverished and defenseless people at some times risk arrest, torture and even death to fight regimes they seemed to have little chance of defeating and why do protests occur in some areas and not in others? Under what conditions do people engage in collective and public action and what is the potential for the formation of social movements under conditions of conflict?

To what extent have processes of breakdown provoked extreme marginalisation? Has 'conflict management' at the local level systematically benefited some at the expense of others?

Research Activities

1. The Political History of Bihar and MP

A thorough review of existing sources, and of evidence on agrarian structures across the two states; and a compilation of election results; together with interviews with leading politicians and civil servants, aimed at developing propositions about the circumstances of 'crisis' in Bihar and of 'stability' in MP

(This work will be undertaken by Shaibal Gupts and John Harriss in the first year/eighteen months of the programme The results will inform subsequent political ethnography)

2. Study of the implementation of economic reforms in Bihar and MP

This study will have two components. First there will be the work of creating dossiers of policy innovations and changes both at the national level and in regard to each of the states. The former (national level) may be obtained from sources like the Centre for Monitoring of the Indian Economy. The latter will require the culling of information from government documents and from the press in Patna and Bhopal. The second component will involve interviews with bureaucrats, politicians, officers of chambers of commerce, the CII, and professional and trade associations, about reasons for and reactions to different aspects of reform policy [Rob Jenkins' recent study of the politics of the reform process mainly in Rajasthan and Maharashtra is of some assistance in providing leads for this part of the research¹⁵]

(This work is being initiated in the inception phase of the programme by Roli Asthana and colleagues in ADRI, and will be completed within the first year of the programme)

3. Implications of reforms for policy instruments and for government capacity

We will investigate the implications of reforms for government capacity by three means. First we will analyse public finance in the two states, focussing in particular upon patterns of subsidies and transfer payments and trends in them, and on investment. Second we propose comparative field investigation of the delivery of services, and of the impact of government activities on different social groups in blocks selected from areas (i) with relatively good and (ii) with relatively poor indications of performance. Third we will investigate the performance of decentralised local government in both states, using our survey villages and

¹⁵ Rob Jenkins, *Democratic Politics and Economic Reforms in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

urban areas as observation sites. We will study participation in local government institutions and their effectiveness and responsiveness to different social groups.

(The analysis of public finance is an on-going research activity in ADRI, to which Roli Asthana will contribute in the inception phase of the programme. The field investigation of service delivery and the impact of government activities will be undertaken in the second and third years of the programme; and investigation of the performance of panchayati raj institutions is an activity which will begin in the second year and be continued throughout).

4. Study of the economic effects of reform and their social and political implications

We will make use of all the secondary sources that we can find, including the results of NSS and NCAER studies, crop and season reports (etc), in order to ascertain the state of knowledge about the effects of price changes and policy changes in agriculture (on input use, cropping patterns, rates of return, employment and wages); in industry and service sectors, on patterns of investment and levels of living.

(This will be taken up in year One, and may be initiated by Roli Asthana even in the inception phase)

But we will also conduct sample survey investigations at village level, and in small towns and city wards. In Bihar we expect to draw on results of surveys conducted in twelve villages in 6 zones of (truncated) Bihar conducted earlier by Gerry Rodgers, A N Sharma, Shaibal Gupta, Pradhan Prasad and others, and the recent re-survey by A N Sharma. These surveys were focussed, however, upon poverty and employment and they will need to be extended to make it possible to study the economic effects of reforms. We will also use the twelve villages as sites for observation of the impact of panchayati raj (decentralisation) as it is re-introduced in Bihar from March 2001. The same villages may be used as sites for the study of local politics at a later stage in the programme (by Shaibal Gupta, J Harriss and others in the Fourth Year of the programme). In Madhya Pradesh, in the absence (so far as we have been able to establish) of any surveys at all comparable with those that exist for Bihar, it will be necessary to implement a fresh survey in all the several major regions of the state (the Malwa Plateau; the Narmada river valley and the adjacent uplands in Mahakoshal, and in Vindhya Pradesh: see our initial note for a short account of these regions). The survey in MP will also be designed so as to include investigation of the operation and impact of programmes initiated by the Government of MP such as the Education Guarantee Scheme, watershed management and democratic decentralisation. [This survey should be set up in Year One, with design of a sampling frame, sampling of villages, recruitment and training of investigators, with implementation of the survey in Year Two]

Comparable surveys of urban areas in both states may be designed for implementation in Year Three of the programme.

5. Patterns of Elite Formation

Shaibal Gupta has already done substantial research on the changing formation of the political and economic elites of Bihar. This work has to be finished and comparable studies undertaken in Madhya Pradesh. This involves study of the changing social and political composition of the legislative assemblies; of local government bodies; chambers of commerce and of trade, business and professional associations. Substantial survey

research/interviewing required, particularly in order to elucidate contemporary changes in the context of economic reform.

6. Study of the Character of Civil and Political Society

We will undertake a basic mapping of associational life through census survey in selected areas in the two states. We expect then to study the whole range of associations including professional bodies, ngos, recreational clubs, cooperative societies etc and also informal associations such as puja committees.¹⁶ We will examine their agendas, memberships, resource bases and interfaces with other organisations.

7. Study of Ideological Hegemony and Contestation

We will undertake studies of the content of local media and of different forms of popular culture, and cultural performance (including popular literature and local television and radio); of religious leaders and organisations; of caste organisations and of political leaders and parties, considering their stated ideologies, their organisation, their performances, and the ways in which these are received and understood by people [In these studies we will be concerned with identifying the dominant motifs and symbolic constructs in terms of which people understand their experience and their worlds]

Projects 5, 6 and 7 will all be supported by the conduct of political ethnographies in villages and urban areas in both states from the second year of the programme. A note about 'political ethnography' is appended.

8. Study of Political Movements in Bihar

Dr Bhatia will consolidate and extend her previous research on the Naxalite movement in Bihar, in three ways. She will extend the geographical focus from central Bihar; study a broader range of Naxalite factions; and include a stronger focus than hitherto on those areas where the movement is *not* active, and on villages where the movement was particularly active in the 1970s and 1980s but faded out in the 1990s.

Outline programme

In Year One of the programme we expect to carry out the following activities:

- * 'Office establishment', including some staff recruitment and the setting up of an office in Bhopal as a base for our work in Madhya Pradesh
- * Conduct Study 1 (Harriss in January 2001, and March-April 2002)
- * Conduct Study 2 (on the implementation of economic reforms) and the analysis of public finance proposed as part of Study 3; and report upon them
- * Completion of work on the political and economic elites of Bihar by Shaibal Gupta

¹⁶ See comment on the recent work on India by Pradeep Chibber (Chibber 1999).

* Design of Madhya Pradesh surveys, and Bihar re-surveys; and recruitment and training of field investigators

* Review of the results of the recent re-surveys of the Bihar villages

* Conduct Study 8

Year Two will be devoted principally to the conduct of the Bihar resurvey and Madhya Pradesh surveys (for Study 4); and of the comparative study of government performance, which is proposed as part of Study 3.

Capacity Building

In addition, as part of an ongoing programme of capacity building in the Asia Development Research Institute, and for younger scholars in Bihar and MP it is proposed that two or three week 'Summer/Winter Schools' be conducted by DESTIN DRC staff, with Shaibal Gupta and P P Ghosh, in Patna, covering areas of theory and method in development studies and applied social science. The first of these 'Summer/Winter Schools' is to be run by John Harriss and P P Ghosh in Patna in December 2001 (in other words it will be a 'Winter School'. Future workshops might be held in the summer and in Bhopal as well as in Patna).

On 'political ethnography'

Why study politics ethnographically?

What does it mean to study politics and political processes 'ethnographically'? Studying politics through the methods of an ethnographer i.e through observation and through detailed knowledge of people. As Geertz says somewhere, in survey research people are treated as 'respondents' or as 'data items', whereas when we do ethnographic research we aim to build up an holistic understanding of them as social actors, in their relationships with others, both 'emically' and 'etically'. In doing ethnographic research we sacrifice the possibility of making statistically exact statements about a population in favour of understanding of social (including political) action partly achieved through the possibility of making connections between family and kinship relations, neighbourhood relations, economic and political roles, and people's beliefs and ritual practices (which may include political rituals, or – for instance – the repertoires of protest that are described by James Scott or Sidney Tarrow). Understanding how other people think and the implications of their ideas and beliefs is only really possible through ethnographic research. The sorts of answers that people give to survey questions about attitudes and values may be interesting but there is very often a lot of doubt as to how 'respondents' have understood the questions which are posed to them, and how their answers are influenced by the context in which they are interviewed. It is not of course that ethnography is free from these sorts of problems either, but studying people ethnographically means that we have a much better chance of 'triangulating'. For example the ethnographer may have the chance both of hearing how someone responds to a direct question about a subject, and then how s/he talks about it with others in an informal setting. So the point of studying politics ethnographically is to understand political action and the ideas and beliefs that shape it. But it is important also that the ethnographer contextualises her observations. Even some of the greatest ethnography is not free from the criticism that the ethnographer ignored the wider historical context of his observations. Evans-Pritchard's work on 'The Nuer' is a case in point for it ignores altogether the possibility that Nuer society at the time at which E-P lived amongst them was undergoing a tremendous amount of change as a result of the circumstances created by colonial rule.

I am interested in studying the state and politics in different Indian states ethnographically, for several reasons. First, I think that how the political system as a whole works [and consequently the propensity for the development of conflict, or 'crisis' in the sense we are using this term] depends significantly on local politics. Are ordinary people, from lower castes/classes, active participants in politics? How do they participate? What are their relationships with members of other classes/castes? For example, if they participate as clients of powerful patrons then the political system as a whole will function very differently from circumstances in which they participate through mass organisations, or through a left wing party, or on the other hand as followers of a charismatic popular leader. Local politics and politics at higher levels are mutually determining. If one is interested in democratisation then the local level of politics is perhaps especially important. What are the spaces, or perhaps better, the 'opportunities' for political participation by different groups of people in the society? What the outcomes of this participation? This is really the subject of Atul Kohli's book *The State and Poverty in India*, which shows (controversially) that a political regime at the state level – like that in West Bengal – that is led by a left wing, programmatic party, coherent in itself, and both responsive to ordinary people locally whilst being capable of acting against local power holders, has been able to achieve better results in delivering poverty reduction than other types of regimes. Other states, too – such as Tamil Nadu – in

which though by different means, some poorer people have been directly involved in politics, have a better record than most others in regard to poverty reduction. The general question of how local politics work, and of the spaces/opportunities that exist or can be created for different groups of people has assumed even greater significance in a context in which there is a commitment at the national level to democratic decentralisation (through panchayati raj), and in which there is a wider recognition of the importance of what the development discourse calls 'empowerment'. Ethnographic studies of such local politics are not abundant. There has been relatively little work in the vein of Bailey's studies in the 1950s, Anthony Carter's in the 1960s, or of Marguerite Robinson and Paul Brass in the 1970s-1980s, though their studies are important contributions to Indian political studies.

Second, relatedly, there is a mounting body of theoretical and empirical work which shows how the performance of democratic regimes is strongly influenced by relationships between different levels of government and between 'state' and 'civil society' (see especially work by Peter Evans and by Judith Tandler). This includes of course, experiments in co-production of different sorts of services involving partnerships 'across the public-private divide'. Studies of local politics in different Indian states stand to contribute significantly to this area of research. In this there is perhaps room in particular for greater understanding of the actual and potential roles of political parties – which are neglected in recent official discourses about 'good government' (which is viewed technocratically).

Third, there remain important questions about political discourses in India. Sudipta Kaviraj, notably, maintains that there is a great deal of 'mutual incomprehension' between elites and masses whereas some others, like Akhil Gupta and Johnny Parry, believe that there is much more sharing. They suggest, for example, that discourses surrounding corruption in contemporary Indian society reflect a general sharing in ideas about rational-legality, even if the practices of many officials depart radically from the standards of the ideal Weberian state. How far, and in what ways are political beliefs and practices influenced by 'traditional' concepts of power and authority (as Anderson, outstandingly, shows that they are in Java)? How far do different groups of people – for example – share in the conception of the Hindu rashtra propagated by the organisations of the Sangh parivar? Or how far are left wing politics in West Bengal or Kerala influenced by 'traditional' notions of social dominance? What are implications of such beliefs and practices?

How to study politics ethnographically

In one sense the answer to this question is simple: observe and talk with people in the context of 'in-depth field research' or 'participant observation'. But what are the concepts and questions that will help to structure one's observing? I suggest that we may usefully think in terms of 'structures', 'discourses', 'institutions' and 'organisations', and take account of 'opportunities' which are historically contingent. By 'structures' I mean in particular class structure, both in the sense of the 'objective' structure of production relations and of the ways in which these relationships are understood by people themselves; and those structures which are associated with kinship and ethnicity (notably of course, caste). By 'discourses' I mean, for example, discourses about status and class relationships and about power and authority, and about the state. 'Institutions' refers to rule-enforcing mechanisms' both formal and informal. The former include the formal institutions of the law and the courts and of government, and the latter such practices as 'traditional' caste panchayats or village assemblies and water users' associations (like those Robert Wade found in Andhra Pradesh), and religious practices. By 'organisations' I refer to political parties, organised social movements (including religious ones) and the whole possible range of associations in 'civil

society'. In the context of all of these what are the spaces or opportunities for political action for different groups of actors and what are the strategies by means of which they explore them? [There are similarities between these suggestions and Sidney Tarrow's framework for the study of social movements, which includes 'opportunities'; 'repertoires' of political action ('going to the barricades', 'protest marches', 'sit ins', rasta-roko etc); the cultural frames in terms of which people make judgements and seek to act; and 'mobilisations' or the forms of organisation on which social movements draw. Similarities also with research by Webster and others on the political action of poor people which also sought to identify the spaces/opportunities for political action in relation to institutions, discourses (in this notably discourses about poverty) and the 'organising practices' of poor people themselves.

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The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

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Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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