

**REGIONAL REFLECTIONS**  
COMPARING POLITICS ACROSS INDIA'S STATES

*edited by*  
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**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## *Acknowledgements*

The contributions to this volume were first presented at a workshop held in May 2000. That meeting was hosted by the School of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck College, University of London, and took place in the College's Keynes Library in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury. Thanks must go to the administrative staff for helping to make the logistical arrangements. We are also indebted to discussants and other participants at that meeting, including Ian Duncan and Sunil Khilnani.

As editor, I benefited from the thoughts of Geoffrey Hawthorn, who read most of the chapters, and the advice of many other colleagues with whom I discussed the idea for the book. The team at Oxford University Press have been efficient and insightful. Anonymous referees provided helpful additional comments. I also owe a debt to Anne Marie Goetz, who has been supportive, as ever, and with whom I jointly conducted the research on which my own chapter is based.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the volume's contributors, who have put up with a lengthy delay in getting the volume into press, not to mention endless editorial interventions. Having such cooperative colleagues is an invaluable asset, for which I am thankful indeed.

Brighton, UK  
January 2004

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local-level mechanisms of peace and violence, supplemented by state-level factors, makes the greatest sense. Hindu-Muslim violence in India tends not to be spread evenly throughout the length and breadth of a given state. Even the most violent states have more towns and cities that are peaceful than are violent. Moreover, villages on the whole have very few Hindu-Muslim riots. Riots are heavily concentrated in some cities and towns, and the best insights are gained by focusing on the local-level mechanisms than on macro-level causes. The latter are not irrelevant. But the existing literature's overwhelming preoccupation with them has left an important puzzle unresolved: why do some towns and cities repeatedly have riots, whereas other do not? This question is unanswerable if we concentrate on state-level factors alone.

My second argument is substantive. Once we concentrate on the city-level mechanisms, we find that state politics can best be conceptualized as a 'spark', which activates the local mechanisms of peace and violence. Peaceful cities have institutionalized peace systems working through *inter-communal* civic engagement—especially in formal associations, but in everyday forms of engagement as well. Riot-prone cities have primarily *intra-Hindu* or *intra-Muslim* civic engagement, which undermines peace and transforms rumours and tensions into violence and riots. These networks thus perform very different roles, even when confronted with the same spark, trigger, shock or jolt. Differences in state politics, history, and administration often determine what these shocks and jolts will be, how often they will be supplied and, most importantly, with what intensity. An integrated civil society can take a lot of such shocks, but not in unlimited quantities. The intensity of the shock matters. So, therefore, does state politics.

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*In Varying States of Decay*

## Anti-Corruption Politics in Maharashtra and Rajasthan

Rob Jenkins<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines India's two most influential anti-corruption movements—one based in the state of Rajasthan, the other in Maharashtra. Both groups have received an unusually large amount of attention from journalists, academics, government agencies, advocacy organizations and international development institutions. Throughout most of the 1990s, the two movements shared a remarkable number of traits, displaying similarities in terms of organizational form, operational method, approach to institutionalization, and political style. It is the existence of these similarities, as much as the successes that each movement has achieved, that has caused them to be bracketed together in public discussions about corruption and the means by which it can best be combated.

1. The field research on which this article is based was conducted jointly with Anne Marie Goetz. In addition to this obvious debt, I would like to thank Jean Dreze, Sunil Hilnani, James Manor and Ashutosh Varshney for helpful suggestions on earlier incarnations of this article. For help in contributing to and facilitating the field research, I am grateful to Mayank Bhatt, Nilu Damle, Nikhil Dey, Anna Hazare, Sanjay Lodha, Neelabh Mishra, Aruna Roy, A. Sabban, Sunny Sebastian and Kavita Srivastava. Any errors of fact or interpretation are my own responsibility.

After introducing the movements, and outlining their common characteristics, this chapter pursues two questions. The first is whether the emergence of these strikingly similar movements in Rajasthan and Maharashtra (and nowhere else in India) might be due to structural similarities in the social, economic or political life of these two states. The answer, in brief, is no. Maharashtra and Rajasthan are in fact poles apart along several key dimensions. State-wide variables cannot account for the distinctive organizational profile shared by the two movements: they have taken root in Rajasthan and Maharashtra despite, rather than because of, the characteristics displayed by these two states. To the degree that the similarities between the two movements were at all influenced by their respective settings, it was supra-local rather than state-level factors that played a role.

The second question stems from indications that the two movements began to pursue somewhat different paths as the new millennium got underway. Could the differences between the two states alluded to earlier account for these divergent trajectories? This question involves an assessment of the outcomes achieved by the two movements. Neither movement has been either a complete success or a complete failure, but the *pattern* of success and failure has varied across the two movements. This is at least partly due to the contrasting state contexts in which they have had to operate. Reacting to these divergent outcome patterns, and taking stock of the opportunities and constraints posed by the political environments in their respective states, the two movements have taken different directions of late. The paper concludes by summarizing the main argument, and highlighting two examples of how the comparative method helps to generate insights of relevance to theory building in the study of corruption and social movements.

### THE MOVEMENTS AND THEIR SIMILARITIES

The two anti-corruption movements examined in this chapter are the Maharashtra-based *Brashtachar Virodhi Jan Andolan (BVJA)*, or People's Movement Against Corruption, and the Rajasthan-based *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)*, or Workers and Farmers Power Organization. Each group consists of a core of workers who are active on a range of issues besides corruption, though it is their struggles against corruption that have brought them the most attention.

The work undertaken by the MKSS and by the veteran social worker Mr Anna Hazare—the leading light of the BVJA—are often bracketed together, both in academic writings and in statements by officials and practitioners. The economists Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen cited the MKSS and the struggles 'initiated by Anna Hazare in Maharashtra' as 'pioneering movements' in the fight against corruption. Both of these movements had accomplished the extremely rare feat of combining a focus on government transparency with a commitment to sustained collective action. They had, in the process, stimulated 'many new offshoots'.<sup>2</sup> India's Central Vigilance Commissioner, the country's most senior official responsible for investigating corruption, has also cited both groups as 'rays of hope' in an otherwise bleak nation-wide scenario.<sup>3</sup> Both Anna and the MKSS's leading figure, Aruna Roy, have received recognition from international development agencies for their path-breaking work. Both have been recipients of the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award, sometimes known as 'the alternative Nobel Prize'.

The MKSS and the BVJA are far from identical, but the range of characteristics these two movements have in common justifies their frequent pairing. The two movements—which both fit the description of a 'non-party political formation',<sup>4</sup> and can usefully be described as 'movement groups'<sup>5</sup>—are best introduced through an examination of five such commonalities.

First, both movements present their respective anti-corruption efforts as just one aspect of a larger project of democratic development, in which non-elite groups are mobilized to participate in the

2. See Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 367.

3. N. Vittal, 'Fight Against Corruption', address delivered at the Forum of Anti-Corruption, Visakhapatnam, 12 April 2002, <http://cvc.nic.in/vscvc/cvcspeeches/sp3apr02.pdf>.

4. In using this descriptor, the MKSS follows a stream of thinking on the role of voluntary organizations in Indian politics which can be traced to the theorizing of Rajni Kothari, who coined the term in the mid-1980s. See Rajni Kothari, 'The Non-Party Political Process', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 February 1984.

5. This is the nomenclature adopted in one of the most perceptive analyses of the significance of recent grassroots political activity in India. D. L. Sheth, 'Globalizing Democracy versus Deepening Democracy: The Post-Cold War Discourse', paper presented at the Lokayan Seminar on 'Globalization and South Asia', Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, 29–31 August 2001.

reinvention of local politics. The BVJA emerged in the early 1990s as an outgrowth of the village-development work undertaken by Anna, whose efforts to rebuild the social, economic and political life of his native village of Ralegan Siddhi brought him international acclaim.<sup>6</sup> The MKSS, based in the district of Rajsamand, in central Rajasthan, also began life as something other than an anti-corruption movement. The MKSS emerged from a small group of committed activists who sought to organize villagers to resist encroachments on common lands by powerful local elites. Responding to what it saw as the priorities of marginalized groups, the MKSS followed up its land campaign with efforts to assist workers on government employment-generation programmes to obtain unpaid wages. This, in turn, led it to focus on the reasons why the wages were not being paid. Theft by local notables, acting in collusion with officials at various levels of the administrative hierarchy, was identified as the major cause.

The BVJA began its work on corruption from a similar starting point: the belief of its founders was not simply that corruption was wrong, but that it was impeding the local community's longstanding objective of transforming the area's wasteland through minor irrigation works. The diversion of resources that should have been available for irrigating land—thanks to a notoriously corrupt irrigation bureaucracy in the group's home district of Ahmednagar—led to the conclusion that a frontal assault on public graft was necessary. Thus the MKSS and the BVJA came to the issue of corruption from the experience of mobilising and listening to the priorities of the poor. Combating corruption was part and parcel of the effort to construct an alternative model of grassroots democracy—one in which the active participation of ordinary people in their own development was a central feature.

Second, both the MKSS and the BVJA concluded that any successful campaign against corruption would require access to official documents, particularly detailed, disaggregated records of expenditure on public works programmes. While a number of movements in India could be said to share the first characteristic outlined above—the concern with situating a fight against corruption within a larger project of grassroots mobilization—it is this second feature that narrows the

6. Anna's account of his experience is collected in Anna Hazare, *Ralegan Siddhi: A Veritable Transformation* (Gutekdi: Ralegan Siddhi Pariwar, 1997).

field considerably. The information sought by both movements was local in nature, relating to government-funded construction projects undertaken within their vicinities. This was in accordance with their shared principle of facilitating local action. Even before launching the BVJA as a separate organization in 1991, Anna had used the expanding range of connections that had accompanied his growing reputation as a social worker to obtain government documents. These provided detailed information on the purchases of equipment by government agencies responsible for coordinating social forestry projects in the area. Anna 'found that some items of equipment were purchased even though they had no practical utility in the field'—for instance, 'a three inch augur to drill a narrow bore' and 'a three stage plant carrier which could not be lifted... up the hill slopes' on which it was to be used ('even by four men'). His conclusion was that the discrepancies were the result of graft, perpetrated by a nexus between the village elites who provided local backing for the projects, the government officials who approved the equipment purchases and the private-sector contractors who supplied the goods. Anna's investigations also revealed that the prices for these publicly procured items were inflated in order to increase the yield of illicit funds: 'I called for the rates at which these items were purchased and when I compared these with the six or seven quotations I got from fabricators at Ahmednagar [the town for which the district was named], I found that the purchases had been made at triple or quadruple price levels'.<sup>7</sup> This revelation led to further inquiries, and the systematic pursuit of information from government agencies at the block, district and state level by teams of volunteers drawn together under the BVJA banner.

The MKSS was all the while involved in similar activities. Its focus has been on public-works projects undertaken under Rajasthan's annual famine-relief programme. Teams of MKSS volunteers sought—and in some cases obtained—financial and technical records pertaining to these local construction projects. A key document they sought was the 'muster roll', an employment register that lists the names of people employed at each site, as well as the days on which they worked and the amount paid to each labourer. The information contained within the muster rolls was then systematically cross-checked by MKSS volunteers. They interviewed people whose names were listed as recipients of payments to find out if indeed they had been paid.

7. Hazare, *Ralegan Siddhi*, pp. 106–7.

Many of the workers to whom the muster rolls were shown stated that they had been listed as having been paid far more than they had actually received. Doctoring the records in this way turned out to be one of the main methods by which local elites and their accomplices in the government administration illicitly siphoned money from the schemes. In other cases labourers interviewed by MKSS volunteers verified that they had in fact been paid the amounts listed on the muster roll, but complained that the number of work days listed was less than they had actually performed, with the payment reduced accordingly.

These workers, because they had been at the work sites on the days in question, were able to identify which of the names listed on the muster roll were 'bogus.' There were usually two main categories of bogus employees listed. The first consisted of the village sarpanch's cronies, who were paid despite not turning up to work. This was a way of rewarding them for their loyalty, which was useful in building up a base of support to allow other forms of corruption to persist with impunity. The second category of bogus employees included people who had either left the village long ago, who were far too infirm to engage in such demanding manual labour, or who were deceased. It was by understating the work performed (and therefore payment due) to the genuine workers that a surplus was created from which these bogus workers could be paid. Like the BVJA, the MKSS obtained government documents mainly by appealing to the virtue of sympathetic bureaucrats, or through public protest action aimed at those with less active consciences.

The third point of similarity between the MKSS and the BVJA concerns the strategic direction in which this type of painstaking investigatory work was taken: in both cases, informal and ad hoc *access* to information bred campaigns demanding that their respective state governments enact legislation to recognize the citizen's *right* to information. Both the BVJA and MKSS were instrumental in launching these state-level campaigns, and the Maharashtra and Rajasthan assemblies ultimately passed relevant legislation. And yet both movements were driven by more than a theoretical belief in the idea of transparency; many organizations had long campaigned for abolition of India's colonial-era Official Secrets Act, and its replacement by something resembling the US's Freedom of Information Act. These two movements, however, more so than any of the other advocates for legislative reform, were driven by their direct experience of

operationalizing transparency in the context of participatory democracy. The BVJA and the MKSS saw the practical merit of allowing ordinary people to gain first-hand experience of the means by which state agencies use documentary evidence to create an official, legally admissible, narrative of events, while at the same time providing them an opportunity to offer testimony contradicting these official accounts. The MKSS's own reflection on this process put it this way: 'When privileged information has been placed before the people... it has also given the poor and the oppressed a chance to expose the methods of exploitation based on their ground reality'.<sup>8</sup>

But this kind of political effect had demonstrated its self-imposed limits: without a legal regime for permitting access to government documents, both movements were finding it increasingly difficult to pry information out of reluctant local and district officials, who had begun to recognize both the value of government documents to activists committed to investigating discrepancies and the effect that documented irregularities could have on local public opinion. It is one thing to suspect generalized corruption, but quite another to have the specifics laid bare—the mechanisms of theft, the brazenness with which they are exploited, the names named, along with detailed information on those who had been cheated of their rightful benefits, including widows, Dalits, migrant labourers and the physically handicapped. The BVJA and the MKSS had demonstrated the power of information, but also the difficulty of gaining access to it: hence the turn to demanding the enactment of a legal right to information, the idea of which, however, would likely have seemed abstract and irrelevant to the supporters of these groups had they not gained practical experience of using access to official records to demystify the state and to 'expose the lies, the contradictions, the double speak, and the hollowness' of those who control it.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth commonality between the BVJA and the MKSS is how they relate with other elements in civil society: while operating as movements, divorced from both conventional party politics and the mainstream development agenda, both groups are also directly linked through their respective leaderships to organizations which pursue more traditional NGO activities, such as literacy promotion, health

8. MKSS, 'Beyond Information: Breaching the Wall of State Inaction' (typescript, 1999), p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*

programmes, and livelihood diversification. The BVJA, though an independent voluntary organization, is propelled by the energy and vision of Anna Hazare, who is also the driving force behind the projects undertaken by the Hind Swaraj Trust. The HST is the coordinating agency and the source of much (though not all) of the funding behind the village development works that have made Ralegan Siddhi such an inspiration for so many other activist groups. Many of the workers trained through Anna's watershed development schemes have gone on to be active in the BVJA, collecting allegations of corruption from members of the public, seeking official information that could verify or falsify these claims, and pressing the district administration (and in some cases the state government) to take appropriate action against those alleged to have engaged in fraud.

The MKSS is in a similar position: it too is an independent group, pursuing its own form of activism and its own advocacy agenda, based on an assessment of local conditions and the desires of its constituents. But, at the same time, it is clearly and visibly linked to the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), one of Rajasthan's—indeed India's—most well-known NGOs. The MKSS's most high-profile leader—the movement shuns titles or formal hierarchies—is Ms Aruna Roy, whose husband, Mr Bunker Roy, is the founder of the SWRC. Ms Roy at one time worked for SWRC, after having become disillusioned with her career in the elite Indian Administrative Service. While not formally a recipient of funds from the SWRC, certain of the resources of the NGO are on occasion informally placed at the disposal of the MKSS in support of specific activities: vehicles, public address systems, even members of staff. Bunker Roy has written highly favourable opinion pieces about the MKSS in major national newspapers and magazines, which would have stood much less chance of being published had he not been heading one of the country's most successful NGOs. There is no suggestion of impropriety in any of this, for the SWRC workers who take part in the MKSS's activities share the ideals and commitment of the MKSS. But there is no denying the existence of a mutually supportive relationship between the MKSS and the SWRC, just as it is impossible to conceive of the BVJA in isolation from the NGO activities pursued under the auspices of the HST.

Both the BVJA and the MKSS have, moreover, found that these close links with the NGO sector can have negative as well as positive implications. The MKSS has been accused of targeting (with charges

of corruption) officials that have 'stood up to the might of SWRC'. And the SWRC has been similarly vulnerable: government officials at one point attempted to smear the organization, stating that the SWRC supported demands for greater government transparency while remaining secretive about its own sources of funding. Other forms of criticism could be more subtle. One senior IAS officer, while not doubting the integrity of the MKSS, stated that 'Aruna [Roy] was better off when she was still with Tilonia [SWRC] doing *constructive work with the handicrafts*,<sup>10</sup> one of the specialities for which the SWRC is known. The implication was that the MKSS had begun to engage in mindless oppositionalism—'always tearing down rather than building up'.<sup>11</sup> The BVJA has also been accused of using its anti-corruption work to further the political agenda of corporate groups that have provided funding for the HST. And because of his association with an NGO that received funding under Maharashtra's Congress-run government in the early 1990s, in the latter part of the decade 'a vicious campaign' was 'launched by the Shiv Sena to denigrate Mr Hazare and to question his personal integrity and character'.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, both movements operate in what W. H. Morris-Jones has called the 'idiom of saintly politics'.<sup>13</sup> By this, Morris-Jones intended to identify a style of politics that could be distinguished from two other, more familiar, idioms: the modern and the traditional, the former representing the world of parties, parliaments, and plans; the latter the 'feudal' politics of patron-client relationships built (primarily) around caste, clan, and community. Morris-Jones's introduction of a third category—that of saintly politics—ruptured this conventional dichotomy, which has been expressed over the years, with differences of emphasis, by several students of Indian politics. In 1963, the same year in which Morris-Jones published his piece on India's three political idioms, Myron Weiner noted the gap between India's

10. Interview, 3 March 2003, Jaipur.

11. *Ibid.*

12. The charges against Anna were characterized in this way even by one of his critics, a former Union Home Secretary. See Madhav Godbole, 'War Against Corruption', *The Hindu*, 19 May 1997.

13. W. H. Morris-Jones, 'India's Political Idioms', in C. H. Philips (ed.), *Politics and Society in India* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), pp. 133–54, reprinted in Thomas R. Metcalf (ed.), *Modern India: An Interpretive Anthology* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers 1990), pp. 273–91.



two 'political cultures'—one prevalent in the states and districts, the other in the upper echelons of the political leadership in Delhi. Almost thirty years later Sudipta Kaviraj referred to an 'upper discourse' in Indian politics, espoused by 'the ruling modernist elites', and an indigenous 'lower discourse'.<sup>14</sup> Morris-Jones's approach transcended this dichotomy, while recognizing the different scales involved, emphasizing that the 'language of saintly politics is to be found "at the margin" of Indian politics'. He was, however, equally clear that it was no less important for that reason, equating its significance to that

given to that term [marginal] in economics: there may be few or none actually at the margin but the location of the point has an effect on all operators as a kind of reference mark. In other words, saintly politics is important as a language of comment rather than of description or practical behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

Morris-Jones was aware that very few people 'engaged in political activity within the other two idioms are striving to be saintly. Its influence is rather on the standards habitually used by the people at large for judging the performance of politicians'.<sup>16</sup> In India, he argues, there is 'an ideal of disinterested selflessness by contrast with which almost all normal conduct can seem very shabby'.<sup>17</sup> While not applied 'to the exclusion of other standards', it nevertheless 'contributes powerfully to several very prevalent attitudes to be found in Indian political life', among which is 'a certain withholding of full approval from even the most popular leaders', and to feelings of 'distrust of and disgust with persons and institutions of authority'.<sup>18</sup> The important point is that the idiom of saintly politics is not just another guise for traditionalism; it represents a mode through which political activity can promote a healthy scepticism of power and those who wield it, in a form that can impress itself upon villager and city dweller alike.

14. See Myron Weiner, 'India's Two Political Cultures', in Myron Weiner, *Political Change in South Asia* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963); and Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On State, Society and Discourse', in James Manor (ed.), *Rethinking Third World Politics* (London: Longman, 1991). My attention was brought to the persistence of this analytical construct in the study of Indian politics—through citations of these and other works—by Paul Brass, 'India, Myron Weiner and the Political Science of Development', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 July 2002, pp. 3026–40.

15. Morris-Jones, 'India's Political Idioms', p. 279.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

Applying the term saintly politics to the work of the BVJA and the MKSS is much less of a stretch than it would be for many other Indian activists, who though possessing the same streak of ethical behaviour and moral commitment, would not necessarily be accorded the term 'saintly'. For Anna, who makes his home in a bare corner room of the village temple, the descriptor takes on an almost literal quality. The Indian news website *tehelka.com*, which made its name by exposing alleged cases of high-level corruption (with, in some cases, video-taped evidence of cash exchanging hands), described Anna Hazare not only as 'a saintly person', but also as someone who has 'carried the fight against corruption from the socio-political domain to a spiritual plane' by using 'peaceful methods to bring about moral pressure on people'.<sup>19</sup> This and other sources, including Anna himself, mention the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave<sup>20</sup> and Swami Vivekananda—three of the figures cited by Morris-Jones as archetypes of this idiom. Part of this association comes from the fact that Anna habitually refers not only to earlier practitioners of saintly politics, but also to the saints themselves. Announcing his intention to undertake an eleven-day fast to publicize his allegations of corruption against a judge,<sup>21</sup> Anna declared that he was 'not making any demand for an inquiry, but would search for answers at the feet of Sant Dyaneshwar... to questions lingering inside me'.<sup>22</sup>

The leaders of the MKSS can also be said to operate in the idiom of saintly politics, though their egalitarian instincts would likely cause them to recoil at the connotations of the label. The saintly dimension of their political style is revealed in the efforts taken to embody the values for which the movement stands by 'living simply'. This does not mean merely residing in the village where the movement is based

19. See [www.tehelka.com/channels/ecology/2000/july/14/eh071400trail.htm](http://www.tehelka.com/channels/ecology/2000/july/14/eh071400trail.htm), accessed on 20 June 2002.

20. It is also worth noting that Hazare has been compared with Bhave in a negative sense as well, both having been allegedly coopted by illiberal governments—Bhave by Mrs Gandhi during the Emergency, and Hazare by the Shiv Sena government in the period directly after it took power in Maharashtra in 1995. This made them 'Sarkari Sants' (government saints). See Madhav Godbole, 'War Against Corruption', *The Hindu*, 19 May 1997.

21. This judge had sentenced Anna to prison for allegedly having libelled a politician by accusing him of financial irregularities.

22. 'Anna Casts Aspersions on Mumbai Judge', *Indian Express* (Mumbai), 10 August 1999.

(Dev Dugri), as opposed to operating from the state or even district capital. It also involves a conscious commitment on the part of all members of the movement to subsist on the government-stipulated minimum wage, the demand for payment of which was one of the issues that brought the MKSS to prominence. The conviction expressed by the movement's two main 'outsider' leadership figures, Ms Aruna Roy and Mr Nikhil Dey, is that pursuing a struggle on behalf of ordinary people requires them to live in the same physical conditions as their comrades. Hailing from urban centres, and readily distinguished by their education and ease within official circles, these two outsiders, as well as those others from beyond the area who come to work with the movement—for greater or lesser periods of time—have articulated this belief in living simply not as a vow of penance, or a symbol of their own saintliness, but as necessary to maximize understanding and to build solidarity.

But the message of sacrifice<sup>23</sup> is not far from the surface—and at the very least is perceived as such. Accounts of how Ms Roy and Mr Dey ended up in Dev Dugri, fighting alongside the marginalized, usually emphasize their renunciation of privilege: Ms Roy 'left behind' her career in the IAS; Mr Dey 'gave up' his studies in the US, both in order to engage in *sewa*, or service.<sup>24</sup> The sacrifice is embodied, as it were, in the contrast between the humble surroundings in which they live and work, and the other urban, modern, elitist world to which they must return regularly to submit demands to, negotiate with, and even seek individual donations from the holders of power. Combined with extreme courage in the face of intimidation, including threats of physical harm (which have been carried out in some cases), the image left is one that has invited comparisons with such saintly figures as Gandhi, and even the divine. In one public hearing, a participant referred to Ms Roy as the *nyaya ki devi*, or the goddess of justice. At the very least, the language of sacrifice and the physical proximity with the downtrodden convey an 'ideal of disinterested selflessness', to recall Morris-Jones's phrase. And it is indeed

23. The idea of 'demonstrated sacrifice' as a necessary element in successful grassroots movements in India was put forward by Jamuna Rao, a Bangalore-based political analyst, at a seminar on 'Anti-Corruption Movements and the Right to Information in India', held at the International Centre, Goa, 20–1 April 2000.

24. See the chapter on the MKSS ('Devdoongri: Life Along the Black Tarred Road') in Rajni Bakshi, *Bapu Kuti: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998), pp. 23–87.

part of the movement's appeal that, by contrast, 'almost all normal conduct can seem very shabby'. By operating 'at the margin' of Indian politics—literally with and alongside the marginalized—the MKSS is able to embody the ethical dimension of politics,<sup>25</sup> and to provide a point of reference that could draw out the suspicion of authority to which Morris-Jones referred.

#### STATE AND LOCAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SHAPE OF THE MOVEMENTS

In one of the more perceptive analyses of India's social movements, Katzenstein, Kothari, and Mehta argued that 'issue-based Indian social movements have remained substantially limited to the regions within which they operate... even when the issues and interests they represent are national in their relevance'.<sup>26</sup> While this is a useful observation, it describes a feature of the activist landscape rather than proposing a causal relationship. It does not indicate the extent to which the philosophies, mobilizational strategies, and organizational forms of these movements are shaped by the peculiarities of their respective regions.

The MKSS and the BVJA are probably the only two movements in India to share the full range of features outlined in the previous section. Many others might display one or two of the characteristics discussed. Like a number of other activists, the Narmada Bachao Andolan's Medha Patkar arguably operates within the domain of saintly politics, but while her organization has sought official information—through legal proceedings—Patkar herself has been extremely critical of the right to information movement itself, at times dismissing it as a distraction from the more serious business of issue-oriented struggle.<sup>27</sup> Tamil Nadu's Catalyst Trust, to take another

25. For one of the more explicit statements of the MKSS's view of democratic ethics, see Aruna Roy, 'Information, Democracy and Ethics', Twelfth Shri B. V. Narayan Reddy Memorial Lecture, Indian Institute of World Culture, Bangalore, 1 February 2000.

26. Mary Katzenstein, Smitu Kothari and Uday Mehta, 'Social Movement Politics in India: Institutions, Interests and Identities', in Atul Kohli (ed.), *The Success of India's Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 245.

27. This view was stated forcefully at a public meeting Patkar addressed at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 26 November 1999.

example, has not only analysed government-supplied information in order to expose corruption, but has also used its findings as a means through which to demand freedom of information legislation; it does not, however, project or embody a vision of grassroots democratic transformation, and could in fact be accused of elite bias in its choice of issues. More than one movement group has found it convenient to pursue its social activism while maintaining a parallel non-governmental development organization: S. R. Hiremath's Samaj Parivartana Samudaya in Karnataka has achieved this feat of double identity, but its contribution to the theory or practice of using access to information to sustain a people's movement is lacking. In other words, despite efforts by many groups to emulate what they saw as the secrets of their success, the MKSS and the BVJA have stood in a class of their own.

But to what extent were the similarities displayed by these two movements a reflection of the regional contexts within which they operated? This is not as straightforward a question to answer—or even to ask—as it might appear at first glance. Examining the characteristics of the two states to identify similarities is a necessary though not sufficient element in the process of providing an adequate response. It must also be shown that these characteristics contributed to the emergence of these two groups, while their absence in other states would account for the failure of such movements to take root there.

The fact is that these two states share very little in common—economically, socially, and politically. Maharashtra is among India's most developed states. Its diversified economy includes not only a strong industrial base, and a growing service sector, but also a sizable degree of cash-crop agriculture, in many cases linked to value-added processing activities. Maharashtra is heavily oriented towards the outside world: it is a major recipient of foreign investment; its capital (Mumbai) hosts India's main capital markets; and it is the base for a large number of export industries—all of which rely, to a greater or lesser extent, upon the highly educated workforce to be found in the state's principal cities (which boast several key centres of higher learning). Landlocked Rajasthan, on the other hand, is mostly desert, and is one of India's least industrialized states, though inward investment (from India as well as from abroad) has picked up in recent years. Neither does its agricultural sector possess anything like the degree of diversification found in Maharashtra. This has led both to a great degree of out-migration, especially among men who end up

working in Delhi, Ahmedabad and, indeed, Mumbai, and to a general lack of dynamism in the state's economy. While there are similarities between Rajasthan and Maharashtra in *some* aspects of economic structure—such as the salience of state-financed employment-generation programmes—these are not peculiar to this twosome.

These economic differences are matched by, and indeed partly a reflection of, deeper differences in the societies of Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Perhaps most notably, Maharashtra experienced during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century a number of social reform movements that transformed the nature of its caste system. A strong non-Brahmin movement, with many streams, ultimately led to the consolidation of political dominance around the Maratha caste cluster. This movement took a different form from the earlier wave of lower-caste political assertion in the south Indian states—the emphasis on reservations in state institutions, for one thing, was not as pronounced—but the dynamics it unleashed were far-reaching, affecting the development of a range of institutions, social and political, that have come to shape Maharashtra's political landscape. While some north Indian states (notably Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) have experienced similar forms of social change during the 1990s, these trends have largely bypassed Rajasthan, though Rajasthan's caste and community profile is more typical of other north Indian states than is Maharashtra's.

Linguistically, Rajasthan and Maharashtra not only do not share a language, but they fall into two different categories where the relationship between language and state formation is concerned. Rajasthan shares a language (Hindi) with a number of states, such as Delhi, UP, MP, Bihar, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, though a range of dialects (and often more than one) are found in these states. Maharashtra falls into the category of states in which the main official language is relatively unique to that state. Just as Karnataka is the only primarily Kannada-speaking state and Andhra Pradesh the only primarily Telugu-speaking state, Maharashtra is the only primarily Marathi-speaking state. Other languages are spoken in Maharashtra, and there are Marathi-speaking minorities in neighbouring states, notably Karnataka. But it is a far cry from Rajasthan, which is part of the 'Hindi-belt'.

In terms of party and electoral politics—the discussion of society in the previous paragraph having touched on a number of other aspects of politics—Maharashtra and Rajasthan are not polar opposites, but

they are not an obvious pair either. Most notably, the two states differ in terms of the number of serious contenders in their elections. During most of the 1990s, there have been just two main parties in Rajasthan, a rarity among Indian states. Maharashtra, while not having reached the extreme party fragmentation of some other states, presents a far more complex party-political map. The Hindu nationalist camp has long been divided between the all-India Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the mainly regional (and indeed regionalist) Shiv Sena. In the latter part of the 1990s, a faction of Maharashtra's Congress party broke away to form its own political outfit. Also on the scene is an array of Dalit-oriented parties, most notably the Republican Party of India—and its many splinter groups—but also at times a number of other parties built around bahun identity. Parties primarily based in other states, such as the Samajwadi Party (a mainly UP outfit), have from time to time played a role in both state assembly and national parliamentary elections, as have smaller outfits, such as the farmers' organization the Shetkari Sanghatana, which have put up candidates in selected regions of Maharashtra.

Rajasthan, in contrast, has been almost a purely two-party affair: a pretty straight fight between the Congress and the BJP. By 1992 the centre-left Janata Dal had been all but decimated in Rajasthan politics, its offshoots—such as the Janata Dal(D)—having largely been absorbed into the BJP, which controlled the state government from 1990–8. As in many other states, Congress underwent minor splits at various times, most notably at the time of the 1996 parliamentary elections, when a number of well-known leaders from the Jat community in particular formed a breakaway party. This was a much less significant development than was the later division in the Maharashtra Congress, which was formally a 'national' split in the Congress, but which had its major impact mainly in Maharashtra. Like most other state-level Congress units, the Rajasthan Congress was barely affected. Communists of various hues have occasionally found seats in the Rajasthan assembly, as have independents (most notably in the assembly elected in 1993), but the degree of fragmentation in Rajasthan's party system is nowhere near that found in Maharashtra. This is mirrored in the two states' respective patterns of party control: in Maharashtra the governments elected in 1995 and 1999 were both coalition governments, whereas in Rajasthan the governments elected in 1993 and 1998 were both ruled by a single party (though with ad hoc support from independents in the case of the 1993 government).

While the social, political, and economic profiles of Maharashtra and Rajasthan are different enough to discount the possibility that state-level contexts could adequately account for the emergence of two such similar movements within their borders, a slightly different picture emerges at the level of the regions *within* these states where these movements were based. Arguably, locality-specific factors were far more important than state-level factors in nurturing and shaping these movements. While very different from one another in many respects, the areas adjoining Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district, where the BVJA is most active, and the general vicinity of Rajasthan's Rajsamand district, where the MKSS has its base, have at least two relevant traits in common.

The first is the caste profile of these two regions—in particular the existence of an especially numerous 'dominant caste'. The MKSS, though it lobbies the state government and has initiated work and forged alliances with like-minded groups in all major regions of Rajasthan, has concentrated most of its activities in an area adjoining Rajsamand district. These also happen to be the districts in which the Rawat community is located. Based on official and other sources, the historian and anthropologist Shail Mayaram, who has conducted research on Rawats (as well as other liminal groups that blur the Hindu-Muslim categorical divide), has estimated their population at 1.5 million. Rawats reside 'primarily in the villages of the central Rajasthan districts of Pali, Rajsamand, Ajmer and Bhilwara.'<sup>28</sup> MKSS members have themselves reflected on this. One of their documents states that the movement's 'working area covers about 60,000 square kilometres which forms parts of Ajmer, Rajsamand, Bhilwara and Pali Districts. These are traditionally drought prone areas, and are primarily inhabited by the Rawats, who form 80 per cent of the population'. The MKSS estimates that 'the percentage of Rawats in the Sangathan would be over 70 per cent'.<sup>29</sup>

Like the MKSS, the BVJA also considers itself a state-wide movement, but is aware that its strength is concentrated in Ahmednagar and the surrounding districts. This is the heartland of the Maratha

28. Shail Mayaram, 'Canonizing Hinduism: The Politics of Vishva Hindu Parishad Conversion', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Network on South Asian Politics and Political Economy (NETSAPPE), Bangalore, 30 June–2 July 2003.

29. MKSS, 'From Information to Accountability', unpublished paper, January 2001, p. 26.

caste. The Marathas share two key characteristics with the Rawats that are relevant to the discussion of the relationship between a region's social profile and the ability of certain types of movements to take root within it. The first is numerical preponderance. Marathas constitute some 35–40 per cent of Maharashtra's population, an exceptionally high figure when compared to the social demography of almost any other Indian state. In the parts of 'western Maharashtra' adjoining Ahmednagar, where the BVJA is most active, the percentage is even higher—perhaps not to the level of Rawats in the region where the MKSS operates, but significantly higher than is the norm in India.

Why might this matter to the functioning of an anti-corruption movement? One explanation that has been offered by observers in both Rajasthan and Maharashtra is that, at local levels, caste associations can serve as mediating institutions, helping to defuse the tensions between accuser and accused that arise in the sort of non-formal anti-corruption proceedings that the BVJA and the MKSS have both experimented with—tensions that might otherwise spin out of control and make a continuation of these methods untenable. This, of course, has its flip side: members of a caste group may be less likely to level charges of corruption against others of their brethren. But when a movement has developed a reputation for innovation, dedication to the local community and an ideology that de-emphasizes ascriptive difference, this problem is mitigated. Moreover, the fact that the worst case of backlash faced by the MKSS came in a more socially fragmented and economically unequal region of Rajasthan reinforces the impression that the relative social homogeneity of its home region played at least some part in making possible its experiments with people-led anti-corruption investigations.<sup>30</sup>

The second key characteristic shared by the Rawats and the Marathas is their split personality. The Maratha community consists of several smaller sub-groups—a trait which has led to it sometimes being referred to as a 'caste-cluster.' One of the key dividing lines within the community—in addition, that is, to the salient divisions between Marathas hailing from different regions within the state—is between an elite grouping claiming twice-born Kshatriya status, and the far larger segment that falls more comfortably into the Kunbi peasantry,

30. See 'The Seal of the Sarpanch', in Harsh Mander, *Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten Lives* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2001), pp. 137–48.

for whom such claims are more tenuous.<sup>31</sup> The boundary between the two is often rather fuzzy, not least because of the tendency for virtually all lineage groups to claim higher status than genealogical analysis might support, but also because of controversy surrounding the figure of Shivaji, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Maratha warrior-prince who was to become the community's icon. It is doubtful that Shivaji was of Kshatriya stock, though it is almost impossible to make this statement publicly in Maharashtra without inviting vociferous contradiction. The counterpart caste in central Rajasthan, the Rawats, also manifest this high-low status ambiguity. As the MKSS itself puts it, Rawats are divided on the basis of status claims, 'with some calling themselves Rajputs [the archetypal Kshatriya community], and others feeling the need to call themselves "Other Backward Communities" (OBCs) to get the benefits of reservation quotas' in public-sector employment.<sup>32</sup> The claiming of Rajput status is a pattern of social mobility in Rajasthan that has been termed 'Kshatriyanization,' and a reflection of the region's practice of 'Rajput Hinduism.'<sup>33</sup>

The reason why this point of similarity is important from the perspective of building and sustaining an anti-corruption movement is that poor and disadvantaged people from such hybrid-status communities are often less reluctant to engage in political activity than are people from castes that are almost universally regarded as of inferior social status. They are also less likely to be viewed by economic elites as a threat to the established socio-political order. Their complex and ambiguous status profile, according to the MKSS, means that 'the Rawats do not have a tradition of obeisance or a sense of inferiority despite their economic poverty'.<sup>34</sup> While the case of economically depressed Marathas is different for a variety of reasons (not least the fact that, unlike the Rawats, Marathas are the dominant caste politically in most of rural Maharashtra, having produced a

31. On the significance of these elite-mass divisions, and the relevance of regional differences, see Jayant Lele, 'Caste, Class and Dominance: Political Mobilization in Maharashtra', in Francine R. Frankel and M. S. A. Rao (eds), *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, vol. II (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 115–211.

32. *Ibid.*

33. See Iqbal Narain and P. C. Mathur, 'The Thousand Year Raj: Regional Isolation and Rajput Hinduism in Rajasthan before and after 1947', in Francine Frankel and Rao (eds), *Dominance and State Power*, vol. II, pp. 1–58.

34. *Ibid.*

number of chief ministers), on this question of assertiveness there is an important degree of convergence.

The 'catchment areas' of the MKSS and BVJA have a second trait in common: the form taken by corruption in these two areas. There are many systems for classifying different types of corruption. One distinction that is often invoked is between petty and grand corruption, the former consisting of the small-time bribes exacted by clerks and other minor officials, the latter signifying the commissions paid to high-level decision-makers who award, for instance, defense contracts. Another commonly cited analytical approach distinguishes between, on the one hand, systemic corruption, in which improper behaviour is all but built into official roles (in the sense that illicit income is 'required' by officials in order to earn back the amounts expended to get themselves appointed to such lucrative posts), and on the other, personalized corruption, in which a rogue official exploits a one-off opportunity for illicit gain.<sup>35</sup> One can also distinguish, theoretically speaking, between positive corruption, where an official actively seeks personal gain from his public position, and negative corruption, where an official takes biased decisions in order to avoid incurring the wrath of a powerful actor, whether a politician or official higher up the chain of command, or a private businessman with connections sufficient to get the official transferred, reprimanded or even charged with a crime were he to resist the demands made upon him.<sup>36</sup>

Based on these distinctions, it can be said that in the regions of Maharashtra and Rajasthan where the BVJA and the MKSS, respectively, operate corruption is a hybrid between grand and petty, and is predominantly systemic and positive in nature. This, however, can be said about most districts in India. It does not mark out the environs of Ahmednagar or Rajsamand as special in any particular respect. On another analytical indicator related to corruption, however, these two regions are *both* at variance with what might fairly be asserted as the norm. This concerns the extent to which corruption that afflicts poor

35. See Robert Wade, 'The Market for Public Office: Why the Indian State Is Not Better at Development', *World Development*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1985), pp. 467-97.

36. This distinction between positive and negative corruption is drawn from a forthcoming book which looks at different forms of accountability failure. See Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins, *Reinventing Accountability: Making Democracy Work for the Poor* (Palgrave, forthcoming).

or ordinary citizens expresses itself in an 'accommodative' or an 'exclusionary' form.

This is not a distinction found in the existing literature, and was developed as a result of discussions with people associated with both movements, as well as other political observers in these two states. This distinction is similar to (and yet not quite precisely the same as) the distinction introduced by Shleifer and Vishny, who differentiate between what they call 'corruption with theft' and its opposite, 'corruption without theft'.<sup>37</sup> The basis of this distinction is whether *the nature* of a corrupt transaction imposes a loss on the public at large ('with theft') or whether the illicit funds are taken directly from a specific individual or firm ('without theft'), such that the general public is no worse off. The terminology is rather confusing (since both are forms of theft, and indeed we tend to regard theft as something directed at individuals rather than at society as a whole), and the two types might better be distinguished as 'diffuse' versus 'targeted' impact. Either way, it is a useful distinction.

The distinction between 'accommodative' and 'exclusionary' forms of corruption is slightly different in that, unlike the with-theft/without-theft dichotomy, it does not view any given corrupt transaction as *inherently* of one or another type. How a transaction is classified is not based on any essential characteristics of the situation, but rather by the behaviour of the officials themselves. The distinction between 'accommodative' and 'exclusionary' forms of corruption recognizes that in certain (though not all) cases the behaviour of officials is not preordained by the structural characteristics of the economic activities involved—and not only in the sense that officials have a choice of whether to be corrupt or not, the constraints imposed by 'systemic' (investment-recouping) and 'negative' (punishment-avoiding) corruption notwithstanding. Instead, officials at many levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy, but particularly those at the lowest level—those at the point of interface with poor people—are presented with *choices*. Officials must decide whether to obtain their illicit rents directly from the poor (corruption without theft), or whether to, in effect, shift the burden to the larger tax-paying, service-receiving public (corruption with theft). If they demonstrate a bias towards obtaining illegal income directly from individual citizens *even when*

37. See A. Shleifer and R. Vishny, 'Corruption', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 108 (1993), pp. 599-612.

*it is not the only option*, then they can be said to be engaging in an 'exclusionary' form of corruption—cutting out the ordinary citizen from a share of their ill-gotten gains. Officials who obtain their illegal income at the expense of the public at large, even when other options are available, are engaged in an 'accommodative' form of corruption, arriving at an accommodation with the disadvantaged people with whom their work has brought them into contact.

The employment-generating public-works schemes that both the BVJA and the MKSS target in their anti-corruption investigations are revealing about the degree to which accommodative or exclusionary forms of corruption are prevalent in the regions in which they work. This is because the structure of these schemes offers junior officials a choice of methods for obtaining illegal income. Whether this will take the form of corruption with theft or corruption without theft is not predetermined. As we learned in the discussion of the MKSS's methods for using government records to cross-check official accounts of how funds were expended, officials routinely doctor the paperwork in order to conceal illegal appropriation of funds. The important point, from the perspective of this comparative study of the local contexts in which the MKSS and the BVJA emerged, is that in the regions in which both movements operate the means by which funds are siphoned into the pockets of those who administer these schemes follows a similar pattern. In both regions there is a tendency towards exclusionary, as opposed to accommodative, forms of corruption.

In government-run works schemes that use daily-wage labour, the use of bogus names to fill bloated daily employment registers is standard practice. There are other ways, of course, for contractors, officials, and politicians to make money, but this one is almost always present, whereas big kickbacks for material are not always possible, especially given the fixed ratio between labour and material costs stipulated by government regulations. Though adding bogus names to the list of workers is the standard *vehicle* for extracting funds, there are, broadly speaking, two *sources* from which the funds extracted through this route can be drawn.

The first is to dip into the amount due to the 'genuine' workers, those that actually break rocks, dig ditches or move earth for eight hours a day. There is a daily work-rate in effect on these schemes, which means that if the work done by ten genuine labourers must be divided among these ten genuine workers, plus five bogus names (the payments for whom will be divided up among the colluding

officials and politically connected local notables), then the genuine workers will have their pay cut by a third. This is the standard practice in both the Rajsamand region of Rajasthan and the Ahmednagar region of Maharashtra. But interviews with knowledgeable observers in other regions of each of these two states—the Bikaner region of northern Rajasthan and the Konkan coast of Maharashtra—indicates that alternative methods are sometimes used, as they are in other parts of India.

The alternative method is for the bureaucratic and political controllers of these systems to derive their rents not at the expense (or disproportionate expense) of poor labourers, but rather to pursue illicit rents at the expense of the larger government budget. That is, rather than dividing the daily work-achievement measurement by a larger number of workers than actually worked (to accommodate the bogus names), which requires the expropriation of part of the genuine workers' wages, officials may instead revert to *over-measurement* of the works themselves in order to inflate the wage bill such that employees could still be paid almost all of what they were due, even while a surplus is created to feed the officials and political notables. I say 'almost' because the choice of this accommodative method implies an additional cost in the form of top-up payments made to buy the acquiescence of the junior engineers who must fraudulently measure the works.

That the MKSS and the BVJA both operate in regional environments in which the standard practice of officials and their political accomplices is to opt for exclusionary forms of corruption that harm poor workers rather than accommodative forms that rob the public at large—that is, they choose 'corruption without theft'—even when an accommodative approach is available, and is indeed practiced widely in other regions of these same states, is relevant to the question of how local contexts affect the prospects for anti-corruption movements to take root. It is not difficult to imagine that where accommodative forms of corruption are in effect, it is all the more difficult for activists to mobilize poor people to take on powerful interests who control these systems of institutionalized fraud. These cases do not provide a basis for concluding that the existence of exclusionary forms of corruption is a sufficient (or even a necessary) condition for the emergence of a grassroots movement against corruption. But it is not unreasonable to consider it a contributing factor that might help to account for the emergence of these movements in some places



and not others. Combined with a conducive caste environment, which reduces the potential for accusations of corruption to stoke inter-caste conflict, they provide at least some grounds for shifting some of our attention to local and district levels, rather than relying on an assessment of variables associated with state-wide political systems.

### THE IMPACT OF STATE-LEVEL VARIABLES ON THE MOVEMENTS' DIVERGENT TRAJECTORIES

As we have seen, variables aggregated to the state level have been relatively unimportant in explaining why India's two most influential anti-corruption movements (which share such a striking range of similarities) arose in Maharashtra and Rajasthan during the 1990s. Nevertheless, key differences between these two states may help to account for the subsequent divergence between the two movements, which manifested itself as the twentieth century came to a close.

This divergence has not seen the two movements shed any of the common characteristics outlined earlier. These similarities remain largely intact. Rather, the divergence is in terms of the strategic emphasis the two movements have adopted since roughly 1999. These responses have, in turn, been generated by the differing ways in which the governments of these two states have tended to respond to the advocacy work pursued by the MKSS and the BVJA.

In Rajasthan, the culmination of the MKSS's agitations for access to information was not merely the passage of a state-level Right to Information Act, though this was achieved in 2000. Nor was it the enactment of national legislation, the campaign for which involved the MKSS in a major role. More important was the MKSS's ability to see its vision of participatory governance—or at least something approaching this ideal—*institutionalized* into the system of law administered by the Rajasthan government. In contrast, the similar approach advocated by Anna Hazare has *not* been replicated state-wide in the way that once seemed virtually assured by the Maharashtra government's early support for Hazare's 'model village programme'. This had used as its model the institutional arrangements—including transparency provisions surrounding the execution of public works and direct involvement of ordinary citizens in development planning and implementation—pioneered by Anna in Ralegan Siddhi.

It is puzzling that the MKSS's attempts to 'institutionalize transparency'—that is, to lobby for the inclusion of 'social audit' provisions in Rajasthan's panchayati raj legislation—should have succeeded, where similar efforts undertaken by Anna in Maharashtra failed. Maharashtra should in theory have provided a more conducive setting for institutionalization than Rajasthan provided for the MKSS—not least because Maharashtra's civil society is far more vibrant and diversified than Rajasthan's. The range of non-governmental organizations working to promote participatory development, the density of civil society networks, and the tradition of social activism—all are substantially greater in Maharashtra.

There are two main reasons why these advantages could not translate into the degree of policy influence necessary to propel the BVJA's proposals for institutional reform into law.

The first concerns the nature of civil society itself. While in theory the density of associational life in Maharashtra is an asset to campaigners against corruption, in practice the picture is more ambiguous. A good number of the state's 'people's organizations', non-governmental development groups, and single-issue campaigning networks have been at odds with Anna and the BVJA. This has sometimes reflected differences in political style or even ideology, such as the extent to which opposition to communal politics is seen to be compromised by Anna's willingness to work alongside individuals and organizations associated with one or another strand of the Hindu nationalist movement. The willingness of Anna to join forces, at one point, with a former IAS officer who was known to be not only extremely ambitious politically, but also close to the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent organization of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), caused great consternation among activist groups seeking to promote a secular form of politics. And when a BJP politician took the unusual step of tabling a Private Member's bill in the Maharashtra assembly, which would have codified citizens' rights to government-held information, conflicts within the coalition of organizations that had formed around Anna's call for a Freedom of Information Bill prevented the movement from providing even tactical support to what might have been an important political opening. A diversified civil society can furnish the raw material with which to press governments for change, but the divisions in its ranks can also act on an obstacle to coherent collective action. The MKSS could count on fewer staunch allies, given Rajasthan's far less diversified



civil society. Indeed, the MKSS's stance on issues—including its proposals for reforming the state's panchayati raj institutions—were often subjected to withering criticism by other non-governmental groups. But what the MKSS lacked by way of an extensive civil society network it more than made up for by the compactness of its close-knit coalition of activists.

Civil society in Maharashtra also displayed another characteristic that reduced its ability to contribute to the kind of campaign for institutional reform that was possible in Rajasthan, but which the BVJA was unable to mount successfully. This was the degree to which groups that made up civic life in Maharashtra were compromised by their relationships with the state. Trade unions are a particularly vivid example. In many Indian states, labour organizations are enmeshed in cosy relationships with holders of state power, as well as with other unsavoury elements in local society—corrupt businessmen, the criminal underworld, violent police forces. But the extent of such unholy entanglements is far greater in Maharashtra than in Rajasthan, though it is perhaps not the most egregious case among *all* Indian states. The Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS), which represents (as a result of state-level legislation) workers in the textile industry, has on several occasions fallen under the direct control of organized crime. That it would prove an unreliable ally in struggles to make the state government more transparent and accountable is not particularly surprising to most observers in Maharashtra. Indeed, the alleged role of the RMMS in allowing many of its own workers to be defrauded by their employers, who are widely reported to have violated the terms of their restructuring agreements with government agencies, has made it a party to corruption.

One of the other key actors in Maharashtra's civil society—the state's agricultural cooperatives—has also become (despite the intentions of the cooperatives' founders) intensely intertwined with the operations of the state government, and indeed a key arena of partisan competition itself. These kinds of problems—of both corruption and co-optation, and of the blurring of boundaries between state and civil society—are not unknown in Rajasthan. Nor, for that matter, are 'briefcase NGOs', a form of 'civil society' that exists in both states as a vehicle for the enrichment of former bureaucrats and other well-connected elites. Their standard operating procedure is to cream resources from government- and donor-funded programmes before folding up shop, never to be heard from again. But while they exist

in both states, these and other types of 'compromising' activities take place on a much smaller scale in Rajasthan than in Maharashtra.<sup>38</sup>

The second reason why the MKSS's lobbying to institutionalize transparency worked in Rajasthan, while the BVJA's parallel efforts in Maharashtra fell on deaf ears, concerns the relative receptiveness of these two states' political cultures to the kinds of pressure that can be exerted by 'saintly politics'. During the 1960s, at the time Morris-Jones highlighted the power of this idiom, saintly politics could be practised more or less throughout India—albeit as a marginal style. But by the 1990s, there were regions in India where it became all but impossible for saintly politics to perform its function as a standard against which immoral public conduct could be shown up. By the mid-1990s Maharashtra was arguably among these regions.

To put it somewhat crudely, the power of shame is reduced in environments pervaded by shameless political behaviour. Maharashtra, while not as normless as, say, Bihar, began increasingly to abandon the civility that had characterized its politics in earlier eras. The tendency had been growing over the previous two decades, corresponding roughly (and not coincidentally) with the period during which the rabidly Hindu chauvinist Shiv Sena became a serious force in the state's politics. Rajasthan, for all its problems, is not afflicted by this syndrome to anywhere near the same extent. Rajasthan has seen state-abetted communal rioting—most notably in Jaipur during 1990 and 1992—and any number of abuses of public power. But a modicum of political and bureaucratic decorum continues to prevail in Rajasthan.

An example related to the politics of corruption that demonstrates the depths to which Maharashtra's political culture had descended concerns the state's Public Distribution System (PDS). The PDS supplies subsidized foodgrains and other essential commodities through a nationwide network of 'ration shops'. It suffers from chronic mismanagement. Problems include poor forecasting capacity, antiquated logistical systems to support storage and delivery functions, cost inefficiencies, poor-quality food grain, harassment of consumers at the point of client interface, and exclusion of large numbers of the

38. For further details on the degree to which Maharashtra's civil society is corrupted, see Rob Jenkins and Anne Marie Goetz, 'Constraints on Civil Society's Capacity to Curb Corruption: Lessons from the Indian Experience', *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 4 (October 1999).

poor from the system entirely, either through incapacity to process their claims or outright disqualification despite clear evidence of need. Many (though not all) of these problems stem from systemic corruption, which infects virtually every component of the bureaucratic machinery responsible for operating the PDS. India's Central Vigilance Commissioner supports his assertion that in India '[c]orruption is anti poor' by stating that '31 per cent of the food grains and 36 per cent of the sugar meant for the [PDS], which is designed to provide food security to the people below the poverty line, gets diverted to the black market'.<sup>39</sup> Corruption also plagues the process of issuing 'ration cards', which households require in order to purchase stipulated quantities of various commodities at government-determined prices.

These problems are not unique to Maharashtra. They can be found in any Indian state. But certain local political factors have exacerbated the situation in Maharashtra. The level of bribe payable in order to obtain a ration card should, in theory, be moderated by the very leakiness of the system. Poor people, in other words, will refuse to pay large sums of cash for a card that buys them very few *de facto* benefits. And yet in Maharashtra's capital of Mumbai, people are willing to pay the going rate of about \$ 100 for a ration card because it can purchase, in addition to diluted kerosene and grains that in some instances have been declared unfit for human consumption, basic citizenship rights. Not only does possession of a ration card help people gain access to many public and private services that would otherwise remain beyond their reach—this is the case in many other states as well—the ration card in Mumbai functions as a *de facto* identity card, and obtaining one is a major preoccupation of many poor families, especially those from minority communities.

During the late 1990s, this preoccupation increased dramatically for Muslim slum-dwellers in Mumbai, and so (naturally) did the price they were willing to pay for one, even as the level of effective benefit provided was being (officially) curtailed. This was because the coalition government that ruled the state from 1995 to 1999—which included the Shiv Sena party—had begun an often violent drive to rid Mumbai of what it considered 'illegal' migrants from Bangladesh.

39. N. Vittal, Central Vigilance Commissioner, Government of India, 'Corruption in Public Life: Steps to Improve India's Image', public address, Mumbai, 14 February 2002, <http://cvc.nic.in/usvc/cvcspeeches/sp5feb02.pdf>.

Muslim residents were required to prove their nationality (not just their municipal residency), and the ration card was the standard means for doing so, though even this was often considered insufficient evidence. The ration card became, for Muslims, a means not just for food security, but for physical security as well. The resulting increase in demand for ration cards meant that the 'commission' payable to obtain one went up—for Hindus as well as Muslims.

Peoples' organizations that had worked with the BVJA both to seek increased transparency in government and to fight corruption (particularly with respect to the PDS) employed a range of Gandhian tactics to exert moral pressure on Maharashtra's politicians and officials to end the use of ration cards as part of what one organization called 'ethnic cleansing'. But street protests, sit-ins, and other forms of non-violent action, of a sort which had become part of the political repertoire deployed by Anna Hazare and other Maharashtrian social activists, achieved almost no concrete results. Efforts by NGOs to shame the government into funding programmes for which it claimed to have no resources—in one case by sending young people into the streets with buckets and signs claiming that they were there to 'beg for alms for the chief minister'—could not budge the administration. On more than one occasion Anna called off a hunger strike—the ultimate form of sacrificial politics—when the state government refused even to take official notice of his actions. Such disregard for selfless protest would once have been unthinkable. An official representative, if not a high-level politician himself, would have been required to at least visit the hunger-striker, particularly one of Anna's renown, and to be seen bowing before the symbols of moral authority. But in a debased atmosphere of greed, intolerance and political impunity the idiom of saintly politics, while not completely exhausted, was no match for a state determined to have its way. And lest it seem that the Shiv Sena-BJP government was an aberration in this respect, it should be noted that its Congress predecessor displayed similar tendencies—the police shooting of a group of tribal protestors in 1994 being just the most politically noteworthy example.<sup>40</sup>

Saintly politics is stripped of its power in contexts where the political culture has been degraded by communalism, criminalization

40. The case of the PDS is discussed in greater detail in Rob Jenkins and Anne Marie Goetz, 'Civil Society, Food Security and Accountability', Background Paper prepared for a workshop on the World Bank's *World Development Report 2004*, Eynsham Hall, Oxfordshire, 4–5 November 2002.

and the decimation of norms of civil behaviour between bureaucrats and elected leaders, and between these officials and ordinary citizens or their associations. Rajasthan has not been reduced to this state of affairs. The repertoire of protest politics—even when enacted on a much smaller scale than what one typically finds in Maharashtra—has been sufficient to prod the state government into not just gestures of concern, but clear policy promises. An extended sit-in protest in a small market town in central Rajasthan in 1996 prompted Rajasthan's BJP chief minister to agree—on the floor of the state assembly, no less—to implement the right to information provisions demanded by the MKSS. This paved the way for more direct forms of communication between the MKSS and the Congress state government that succeeded the BJP on the social audit provisions the activists had proposed as amendments to draft panchayati raj legislation. The face-to-face communication was not lacking in the normal hardball negotiating tactics and duplicitous public-relations diplomacy that one expects of seasoned politicians and bureaucrats. But there was a level of civility beneath which the state's almost courtly political culture would not allow the proceedings to sink.

Senior bureaucrats in Rajasthan were able to enter into discussions with social activist groups like the MKSS, and to respond to the moral pressure of saintly politics (as well as to the political calculations of the more dominant traditional and modern idioms, it must be added) in a way that would not have been possible for their counterparts in Maharashtra, many of whom during the late-1990s lived in fear of the ministers they served. A very senior IAS officer in Maharashtra, when verbally abused and manhandled by a minister, was reprimanded by the chief minister for showing insufficient 'loyalty' to 'the people's elected representatives' and ultimately transferred to another post. In Rajasthan, at roughly the same time, a minister who slapped the face of the highest-ranking civil servant in his department was thrown out of the cabinet by the chief minister before the day was out. These are anecdotes, but they indicate something of the tenor of elite-level politics in the two states; and despite the grassroots base of the individuals which this chapter claims as exemplars of saintly politics, it is through inter-elite negotiations that their proposals for reform are brought to fruition. This milieu has become seriously degraded in Maharashtra, whereas a sort of courtly demeanour has managed to survive in Rajasthan. This political space, an essential complement to the ability to appeal to accepted moral standards in public life,

has allowed the MKSS to prod a reluctant-but-responsive state government to institutionalize, in substantial measure, its vision of participatory democracy. The BVJA, on the other hand, found its proposals stalled by a succession of state governments, including the coalition of Congress parties which in late 1999 replaced the Shiv Sena-BJP combine. Whether the MKSS's hard-won reforms are exploited by Rajasthan's people, and the civil society organizations working on their behalf, is of course another matter entirely.

To recapitulate, this pattern—of state responsiveness to civil society-sponsored governance reform in Rajasthan, and fairly hostile government resistance in Maharashtra—has been largely the result of two factors: the highly compromised nature of civil society in Maharashtra (which deprived the BVJA of effective allies), and the ability of saintly politics (of the sort that has been practiced by *both* the MKSS and the BVJA) to influence the policy process in Rajasthan, but not in Maharashtra. But the story does not end there. The different fates of transparency reform efforts in these two states generated, in turn, a notable divergence between the agendas of the two movements.

The BVJA continues to investigate and follow-up cases of local corruption, and to press the Maharashtra government for a more transparent method of implementing the watershed development schemes that by now have become a part of the anti-poverty landscape in most Indian states. But with little hope of substantive institutional reform in the political environment that now prevails in Maharashtra, the BVJA has begun to rely more than ever on public relations gimmicks, and the tendency for Anna to befuddle his followers with erratic decision-making has if anything increased. In other words, the state's political pathologies have begun to shape the direction of the movement by informing the expectations of its leaders. Though state-level variables were *not*, it may be recalled from the earlier discussion, a major influence on either movement's profile during most of the 1990s, the critical variable of state responsiveness had begun to affect the rather different directions taken by the two movements by the end of the decade.

The MKSS, like the BVJA, has continued with many of its earlier activities, such as organizing public hearings into local-level corruption and taking up local issues as they arise. It has also tried to build on its institutional reform successes by supporting local experiments in various parts of Rajasthan that seek to make use of the transparency

provisions added to Rajasthan's panchayati raj legislation in 2000. But the MKSS has also embarked on a major new direction: intensive participation in the national Right to Food campaign.<sup>41</sup> This campaign involves a range of activities, but has as its focal point the public interest litigation filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties in protest against the failure of the Indian state to provide effective food security for poor and marginalized people. The Supreme Court's interim order directed a number of state governments to take immediate steps to ensure that foodgrains stocked in government warehouses—a key part of the PDS—were distributed to people in need. The court also took the somewhat unusual step of appointing commissioners for various states to report on the implementation of this order. The MKSS was active both in the national campaign and in successfully pressing the Rajasthan government of Congress Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot to increase delivery to the poor. This involved a great deal of public protest—in many cases shaming district authorities into action—as well as negotiation with senior officials, all the way up to Rajasthan's chief minister. The proposals made by the MKSS, working with other groups in the state, have included demands for an employment guarantee scheme that would provide a direct link between the right to food and the right to work, another demand articulated by Rajasthan's increasingly active civil society.

The BVJA, while supportive of the idea of the right to food in general, has been much less active on this campaign in Maharashtra—voicing general support, but doing little concrete work to advance the cause. One potential explanation for this is that the BVJA has less need to take up this issue because Maharashtra has *not* suffered starvation deaths of the sort which earned Rajasthan's government such notoriety during 2002–03. Moreover, Maharashtra has had its own employment guarantee scheme since 1973, so its activists need not demand one. On closer examination, however, this explanation holds little weight. Maharashtra is among the states to which the Supreme Court assigned a commissioner, precisely because the state government had demonstrated its unwillingness to implement fully the court's orders on food security. As the Right to Food campaign has made clear, it is the role of civil society groups concerned with accountability in each state—of which the BVJA should in theory

41. For detailed information on the course of this campaign, see [www.righttofood.com](http://www.righttofood.com).

be a leading member in Maharashtra—to use the mechanism of the commissioner system to ensure that state governments take the necessary action to alleviate the needless suffering of the poor, who as we saw from the earlier discussion of the PDS, are deprived access to subsidized food largely as a result of corruption. And while Maharashtra may have its own Employment Guarantee Scheme, which is indeed the model to which the Rajasthan campaigners aspire, its functioning has been disastrous in recent years. Both in terms of government funding and the systems for ensuring implementation, the Maharashtra EGS is in a dire condition.<sup>42</sup> The point is that Maharashtra's prevailing political culture has proven itself so unresponsive to serious reform initiatives—the result of a compromised civil society, a demoralized bureaucracy and a disregard for norms of political civility—that the BVJA has become less willing to engage in the kind of protest-cum-negotiation strategy that underlies the MKSS's approach to the Right to Food campaign in Rajasthan. State-level variables have, in other words, begun to shape the nature of civil society activism on issues of corruption and accountability.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that state-level factors have been relatively unimportant in explaining why Rajasthan and Maharashtra became the host states for India's two most influential anti-corruption movements. While these movements share several unusual features, the combination of which sets them apart from India's many other anti-corruption groups, there is little reason why the MKSS and the BVJA should have been located in these two states in particular.

However, the regions *within* Maharashtra and Rajasthan where the BVJA and MKSS, respectively, are based *do* have certain characteristics in common that have been helpful (though perhaps not determinative) in facilitating the emergence of these movements. It is worth noting that the identification of one of these features would not have been possible without the aid of comparative analysis between the prevailing practices of corruption in different locations, though the relevant unit of analysis turned out not to be the state level. It was only when different locations within each state were examined that it became possible to recognize variation in the structure of corrupt

42. Lyla Badavam, 'Undermining a Scheme', *Frontline*, 2–15 August 2003.

transactions. This variation, in turn, helps us to arrive at an important theoretical insight: contrary to the existing literature's tendency to classify varieties of corruption on the basis of what are presumed to be a transaction's inherent structural features, the comparative analysis developed in this chapter revealed that officials seeking illicit gains face choices as to how to obtain them. Because these choices can affect who bears the cost of corruption—individuals or the public at large—there are further implications for the environment within which activist groups mobilize people to combat corruption.

The other finding of theoretical interest that emerges as a result of the comparative case-study method is that, to the extent that they affect the initial outcomes achieved by activist movements, regional political cultures also shape the direction of movements themselves. Movements respond to the pattern of success and failure that results from their work. Their perceptions of what is possible, and what is beyond the feasible limits of their capacities, is shaped by their direct experience of the responsiveness of the states with which they interact. Where these states have coopted key sectors of civil society, where protest action based on appeals to norms of public morality is unviable, or where the relationship between politicians and senior bureaucrats disempowers those officials who might otherwise be inclined to use negotiation with movements as a means of defusing social conflict and adjusting institutions to meet new needs—in these circumstances, the options facing movements are seriously curtailed, and the strategic direction towards which they channel their energies is affected accordingly. This is a partial refinement of theories of civil society and movement politics that have gained currency in contemporary academic and policy debates.<sup>43</sup> Without a comparative approach (in this case one reliant on a unit of analysis below that of the nation-state) and an appreciation of politics that moves beyond interest-based institutional analysis to encompass issues such as regional political cultures, the ability of research to generate insights capable of deepening existing theory will be severely constrained.

43. See, for instance, Peter P. Houtzager and Jonathan Pattenden, 'Finding the Shape of the Mountain: When "the Poor" Set the National Agenda', Paper prepared for 'Responsiveness of Political Systems to Poverty Reduction', a research project commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (1999).

## Part IV

### *Political Leadership*