

Introduction

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A scandal in Jodhpur

In the summer of 2007 a curious incident occurred in the city of Jodhpur in the north Indian state of Rajasthan.¹ The wife of a Member of the State Legislative Assembly lodged a complaint with the police, accusing a local temple priest of ‘hurting the religious sentiments of the people’. The cause of offence was a poster designed by the priest which depicted Rajasthan’s then Chief Minister, Vasundhara Raje, as the bread-giving goddess Annapurna. On the poster the crowned Miss Raje appeared mounted on a lotus throne, from which she showered an assembly of parliamentarians, legislators and ministers gathered below with golden coins and rays of light (see Figure 1). Either side of her were a pair of guardian lions and two cabinet ministers, portrayed as the ancient Hindu gods Kuber and Indra. Floating just above were the leaders of Raje’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), depicted as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the gods of the Hindu trinity. The incident sent ripples of amusement through the Anglophone press, but in the landscape of South Asian politics this was neither a singular occurrence nor a laughing matter. A host of leading politicians—including President of the Congress Party Sonia Gandhi, head of the People’s Party in Uttar Pradesh (UP) Mayawati, the Chief Minister of Bengal Mamata Banerjee and the former Tamil Chief Minister Jayalalitha—have all received colourful popular veneration.

¹ The ideas in this volume and introductory essay have been long in the making. I owe a great debt to Paul Dresch, David Gellner and Jonathan Norton, who in their different ways were there for me when I was first working them out as a doctoral student. I am grateful to Naor Ben-Yehoyada, Lucia Michelutti, Mattison Mines and Pamela Price for their comments, and especially to Piers Vitebsky and John Dunn for braving multiple drafts and for all our conversations. As ever, my greatest debt is to my many hosts and interlocutors in India, and especially to Suresh and Indra Chhatrapal, Ramesh and Kalla Kanjar, and Arvind and Shweta Singh for their tireless generosity, patience and help.

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Figure 1 Vasundhara Raje depicted as goddess Annapurna. Courtesy of Pandit Hemant Bohra.

To most readers of this book, a picture of voters prostrated before a politician (like the one that appears on the cover of this book) will look not just ridiculous or bizarre, it will appear positively obscene: a perversion of every political virtue. This image projects inequality in place of equality, personal bonds where detached judgement should be and subjugation where the free will of individual citizens ought to reign. It makes a mockery of the very idea of representative democracy, a government by people elected to act on behalf of the citizens, not to rule over them as kings or gods. The shock of this vision reverberates far beyond politics. It shakes the foundations of what liberal cosmopolitans believe human beings to be and the society which they live in to be really made of—innately equal and independently judging individuals—the beliefs enshrined in the modern political theology of democracy and the universal ritual of each adult citizen casting a single vote in the isolation of a polling booth.²

² On the development of this ritual, see Crook and Crook (2007), Crook (2011) and Gilmartin (2012).

One look at South Asian popular politics topples all this. In cities and villages across the subcontinent voters adorn political leaders with crowns, garlands, turbans and swords, recite for them praise verses, and fall at their feet in adulation. Time and again, newspapers seem to confirm just how dissolute South Asian politics really is. Votes are cast not by autonomous citizens concerned with their countries' long-term general good, but by interest groups, or 'vote banks', which elect one of their own to provide for them. Parties and politicians do not convince their electors with ideological platforms. They buy votes with short-term benefits. Endemic poverty and governmental dysfunction obliterate free, reasoned and responsible judgement and drive people to exchange their votes for bureaucratic favours, clutches of cash and bottles of hooch. Politicians run the show like royal sovereigns, often at the expense of law. Rates of corruption registered by Transparency International in the region hover at Sub-Saharan levels (www.transparency.org). Nepotism, political backwardness and decadence fill news reports, which often attribute this political bedlam on the subcontinent to the prevalence of 'patronage' or 'clientelism', the common glosses for 'corruption'. It is seldom clear what exactly these words describe, but what they indicate is never obscure: a perverse and backward political practice, which prevails only where modern states fail.

Yet South Asia is not a site of state failure. Far from it. Since the retreat of colonial powers from the subcontinent, it has been one of political modernity's busiest laboratories, and it has turned out some very striking results. While in many parts of Europe electoral participation has flagged, in most of South Asia it has been steadily on the rise.³ The region is now home to the world's most populous democracy and one of its most vigorous. The sheer scale of India's general elections is mindboggling: a population of more than a billion, eager to cast their votes, makes this the single-largest social event in the world. India's general elections regularly involve over 60% of voters, often substantially exceeding American presidential elections, and local elections often rise to 100% turnout. In 2008 the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal became a Democratic Republic, electing its first (Communist) government with more than 74% of its electors' votes. In Pakistan, in the spring of 2013 voter participation rose from 40% (in 2008) to a spirited 60%, with people voting in face of great threat.

³ For country-by-country voter turnout data, see the database of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance at www.idea.int.

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Yet these political achievements have not stamped out patronage, which continues to thrive not despite democratic statehood, but alongside and indeed often through it. Clearly, we face not a feudal residue, but a current political form vital in its own right.

In this volume we do not treat ‘patronage’ as a term of art and we offer no definitions. Nor do we see it as an unchanging, timeless ‘phenomenon’, a transactional arrangement with a fixed and pre-determined content. Rather, we see it as a living *moral idiom* that carries much of the life of South Asian politics, and society at large. Here ‘patronage’ is an imperfect gloss for a widespread moral formulation which helps us escape the gridlock of liberal political heuristics and see the local actors’ own normative imagination. Collectively, we try to think our way into the region’s own political sense and into the ways in which political communities and attachments, modes of leadership and ways of following shape the hopes and disappointments which political engagement necessarily brings. At the centre of our analysis are the relations which constitute South Asian politics. By working out the ways in which South Asian citizens relate, and think they ought to relate, to one another, we address some central conundrums of political modernity in the region: how people live and think about democracy and the state, what they make of ‘political representation’ and how to understand why the region appears at once so politically engaged and in many ways successful, and so drastically ‘corrupt’ and ‘criminalised’. We hope that those who do not know much about South Asia and those who know a great deal will find this book equally thought-provoking. We also hope that our readers find the accounts collected here, and their implications, helpful for thinking not only about South Asia, but also about politics in other places, including those which they call their home.

What happened to patronage?

In the social sciences patronage has had its day. Whilst debates on nationhood, sovereignty, governance, democracy and the state nowadays fill the journals, patronage barely figures. If three decades back academics as distinguished as Ernest Gellner, Shmuel Eisenstadt and James Scott published thick volumes on the subject,⁴ today few dare to put the words ‘patron’ or ‘patronage’ on the cover of

⁴ For helpful overviews of this literature, see Scott (1977b), Eisenstadt and Roniger (1981) and Roniger (1981; 2004).

their books. This avoidance is in part a reaction to the concept's career in earlier decades (mainly in the 1960s–1970s) when its analysis, even as the brightest minds applied themselves to it, generated a literature that was overwhelmingly dull. Endless case studies and descriptions of patronage observed around the world yielded little comparative framework or analytical continuity to sustain debate.⁵ We agreed in 1960 that 'patronage' had something to do with asymmetry of status and power, that it involved reciprocity, and that it relied on particular, intimate, face-to-face relations (Powell 1960). More than five decades on we have not moved far beyond this basic picture, but we no longer care to explore it further.

The problem runs deeper than the concept's dispiriting recent career. It issues from deep-seated prejudices and from two beliefs about patronage to which we hold fast, if often unwittingly. We believe that we already know what patronage is, and we believe that it must be a bad thing. At a bare minimum, we think of patronage as a relation between two unequal persons, one of whom holds the upper hand. Patrons are wealthier, politically more potent or otherwise privileged, and they control what others need or want, making their clients at best dependent and at worst oppressed. Call up some images which the phrase 'political patronage' brings to mind: a Sicilian peasant kissing the hand of a Mafioso, Vladimir Putin appointing governors to the Russian provinces, pharmaceutical lobbyists at work in DC. The slide show can go on with countless snapshots of political deformity, each capturing a disfigurement of what modern politics should be: equal, disinterested and impersonal. Over the decades, deeply ingrained moral aversion to patronage has frustrated the task of understanding it; description slips inadvertently into evaluation, which in turn poses as analysis. Time and again patronage appears as the cause or symptom of political infirmity. Time and again it is portrayed as a retrograde, oppressive or at best ancillary, institution destined to vanish the moment modern, democratic states take proper hold of the world.⁶ Time and again analysts forecast its disappearance, time and again lamenting its refusal to go away.⁷

⁵ For a sense of the sprawling vastness of this literature, see Eisenstadt and Roniger's (1980) summative article, in which footnotes listing case studies occupy several full pages of text.

⁶ For example, Geertz (1960), Eisenstadt (1973, 60), Blok (1974), Boissevain (1974, 147–148) and Eisenstadt and Lemarchand (1981).

⁷ Gellner's prediction is typical: 'where power is effectively centralized ... patronage is correspondingly less common' (1977, 4).

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Patronage first came to the fore of the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly in Mediterranean and Latin American peasant studies. These writings had a broadly Marxist overtone and they dismissed patronage as a sentimentalisation of class inequality (e.g., Leeds 1964; Galjart 1965; Alavi 1973). For them, patronage was a ‘myth’ or the ‘ideology’ of the elites, endorsed by those social analysts who dared to present it as anything but power struggle.⁸ The language of kinship, friendship and sympathy, they claimed, concealed behind it the brutal mechanisms of dependence and exploitation.⁹ Sociologist Anthony Hall, for example, wrote that however one may approach patronage, ‘the important fact is the inherently *coercive* nature of patron-clientage’ (1977, 511, emphasis in original). One could view this struggle from different angles and ask: How do the powerful access, create and misuse their subjects? What degree of control do they have? How do the powerless get access to resources, resist oppression or negotiate for themselves better deals? Yet whichever way analysts turned their viewfinders, the scene in focus remained a site of oppression, submission, resistance and domination.

A second academic camp developed a more forgiving view. They suggested that patronage was not everywhere plainly bad news. Patron-client relations, they insisted, did not necessarily propagate inequality or sent modern politics back into feudal darkness, but often achieved the obverse: social mobility and political participation.¹⁰ Ties of patronage might assist the poor to wrest resources from the elites or help immigrants access state services. Some reported that patronage and electoral politics often went hand in hand; patronage promoted electoral participation, which in its turn generated fresh patronage bonds. Patron–client relations formed the backbone of ‘traditional’ politics and were the main political tool of tribals, peasants and the urban poor. As modern politics spread into far corners of society and the globe, patronage became a link between

⁸ For example, Silverman (1977), Lemarchand and Legg (1972), Flinn (1974), Scott (1975) and several essays in Gellner and Waterbury (1977), especially those by Silverman, Gilson, Weingrod and Scott.

⁹ Characteristically, Flinn (1974), Scott (1976), Schmidt et al. (1977) and Malloy (1977); and slightly more recently Bodeman (1990), Knoke (1990), Breman (1993) and Fox (1994). One representative study in this mode appears in this volume (Martin, Chapter 14).

¹⁰ On clientelism as the vehicle for peasant movements, see for instance, Landsberger (1969) and Scott (1977a; 1985). On the symbiosis of patronage and democracy, see Gwyn (1962), Chambers et al. (1967), Powell (1971) and Fagen and Tuohy (1972).

governments and ‘social peripheries’ culturally unfit for or otherwise excluded from direct engagement with the state.¹¹ Because patronage connected bureaucracies to traditional politics, cities to villages and governments to citizens through patron-politicians and broker-bureaucrats, it could paradoxically modernise ‘developing’ states (e.g., Schmidt 1974). Between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, studies of political patronage focused almost exclusively on the ‘developing world’ and its political ‘systems in transition’ (Martz 1997, 14). Insofar as patronage ‘at all interested political scientists, it did so principally as intermediary between the centre and the periphery’ (Dogan and Pleassy 1984, 76; also Eisenstadt 1973, 60; Boissevain 1974, 147–148).

If in anthropology patronage has lost its currency, in political science it is still ready money. Political scientists have long agreed the meaning of ‘clientelism’, as they usually term patronage. For them it is an exchange of goods and services for political support. This system of political barter, a ‘distributive’ politics of ‘take there, give here’ (Graham 1990), turns elections into auctions and political choices into calculations of profit.¹² Politicians use goods and favours to buy their positions and their electors employ such means as they have at their disposal to wrest resources back from politicians and the state. ‘Machine politics’ could grease the wheels of electoral systems. It might boost political party membership and electoral participation, and even occasionally benefit the poor (e.g., Banfield 1969). But in doing so it depletes democracy of its point and meaning. This politics of purposeful mutual exploitation substitutes moral, responsible judgement and the concern for greater good with the pursuit of selfish, short-term advantage—what political scientist Edward Banfield once called *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958). Clientelism is the politics of dire poverty, which turns democracy into a spectacle of desperation and greed.

In the past two decades political scientists have slowly recognised that patronage has not slunk away in the face of modernity and democratisation, as their predecessors had hoped, but instead carries on stridently in fully developed, rich countries like Austria,

¹¹ For example, Geertz (1960), Leeds (1964), Wolf (1966), Powell (1970), Lemarchand and Legg (1972) and Boissevain (1974).

¹² This approach is ubiquitous. Representative recent examples include Rose-Ackerman (1999), Chandra (2004), Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) and Stokes et al. (2012). See also essays by Wilkinson (Chapter 11) and Martin (Chapter 14) in this volume.

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Japan and the United States.¹³ These striking revelations make continued analytical resistance to patronage appear increasingly strange. And yet the resistance persists. Workshops and conference panels on clientelism organised around the world at the millennium's turn, for instance, reached long-familiar conclusions: patronage was a regressive force inimical to democracy, civil society and the market's free flow (Roniger 2004, 372). Most recent studies are still framed by old questions: Why doesn't patronage disappear? When may it do so? What might bring about its demise (see Wilkinson, Chapter 11 in this volume)? Over the years, whatever role patronage has played in the literature—as a means of exploitation, a vestige of feudalism, a governmental pathology, a politics of the poor or an ancillary institution—it has never been a site of positive value in its own right. There is no better expression of this attitude than Ernest Gellner's definition of patronage as 'not bureaucracy', 'not kinship', 'not feudalism', 'not the market', 'not the state' (1977). But what is it?

More than two decades earlier anthropologists had shown that relations between 'patrons' and 'clients' could be sympathetic and even intimate, based on mutual esteem and affection, like the bonds between kith and kin. In southern Spain Julian Pitt-Rivers (1954) wrote that patronage formed the backbone of politics and social relations, as they were lived and understood. Relations between patrons and clients were best seen as a kind of friendship. Other anthropologists showed that patronage was woven tightly into the fabric of many societies, where people did not see the institution itself as problematic, however dissatisfied they might feel with particular persons involved.¹⁴ But this literature left little legacy.¹⁵ Campbell's (1964) superb, intimate study of patron–client relations in rural Greece, for instance, is hardly ever cited today.

Resistance to patronage proved so strong that even as fine an anthropologist as Pitt-Rivers found it difficult to take his informants seriously. In his analysis he demurred: if patronage was a kind of friendship, he said, the friendship was necessarily 'lop-sided'.

¹³ Roniger and Gunes-Ayata (1994), Briquet and Sawicki (1998), Piattoni (2001) and Kitchelt and Wilkinson (2007).

¹⁴ For example, Mintz and Wolf (1950), Pitt-Rivers (1954), Campbell (1964), Foster (1967), Weingrod (1969) and Powell (1970).

¹⁵ Exceptions include Martz (1997), Auyero (1999; 2001), Mitchell (2002) and Lazar (2004).

He wrote that ‘while friendship is in the first place a *free association between equals*, it becomes in a relationship of economic inequality the foundation of the system of patronage ... used to cloak a *purely venal arrangement*, a rich man using his money to attain his ends’ (1954, 140, emphasis mine). Patronage, in other words, was spoiled friendship. Where relations were unequal, they could not be right. Inequality was inherently oppressive. No one could sanely choose to be someone else’s client, and those who did must have acted under duress.

Patronage in South Asianist scholarship

South Asianists have been of a different mind, at least until recently. Once upon a time in South Asianist scholarship patronage was the hub of key debates on status and power, personhood, sociality, economic exchange and polity. Studies of kingship, the history of colonial relations, ethnographies of village exchange and ‘big-men’ in urban centres, and the more recent work on fixers have all focused centrally on patronage. For a long time for historians patronage was the centre of debates about kingship, which cast much light on lasting local conventions of ruler–subject bonds. Historians showed that for as far back as history stretched on the subcontinent, kingly rule relied on the distribution of gifts.¹⁶ The king’s defining duty was to provide for (and protect) his subjects. The act of giving linked rulers to their subjects (and their subjects in turn to their subjects), creating chains of gift and receipt that defined kingly realms. Historians showed that giving and receiving were not just economic transactions, but socially and politically constitutive acts which authorised kingly rule and defined political communities. Giving was an expression of generosity, the cornerstone-value of South Asia’s political life. And as such it had to be performed. Whether or not the kings had the wealth to give, they staged their capacity to do so with extreme flamboyance. Royal courts were dazzling spectacles of munificence where kings often gave away much more than they could afford at extravagant feasts and gifting ceremonies. Kingly realms constantly stretched and shrunk with the subjects’ ever-fickle loyalties. As Sumit Guha shows (Chapter 4 in this volume), in 18th-century Maratha polities kingly

¹⁶ For example, Dirks (1979; 1987), Stein (1980) and Peabody (1991; 2003).

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rule was sustained by constant personal engagement, and collapsed when the regime of favours ossified into a regimented system of formal entitlements. This structure of loyalty was replicated on every level—from grand maharajas to ‘little kings’, vassals and vassals of vassals, all the way down to village landlords, producing the series of concentric and identically structured sovereignties which Stanley Tambiah termed ‘galactic polity’ (1977). In this tight structure of mutuality donor-kings depended on the gifts’ recipients no less than recipients depended on kings. Recipients of royal gifts provided not just tax money or manpower in times of war. They—paradigmatically the Brahmin donees—were the source of kingly authority.¹⁷

Another camp of historians, the Cambridge School, produced meticulous accounts of local political economies and how these were embedded in networks of patron–client ties, mostly in British India.¹⁸ By the middle of the 19th century, India’s ruling class were severely disenfranchised, and colonial administrators took over as the premier patrons. In this political ecology, Indian merchants and bankers emerged as the new class of indigenous patrons who, Chris Bayly argued, came to steer a great deal of politics and much else that happened in India at the time. Many merchants patronised political, and often progressive, activities: new religious movements (including the more ‘Protestant’ Hindu sects), Hindu revivalist campaigns (like the cow-protection movement), new cultural organisations, literary and political publications and the founding of the new Congress Party (Bayly 1973; 1983).

Bayly argued that in high colonial India patronage had two sides—a moral and an instrumental—and that these were perennially at odds. All patrons engaged in two types of relations: the essentially commercial *vakil* patronage meant to maximise profit, and the moral or *dharmic* patronage of religious and community institutions which enhanced patrons’ standing (1973, 367ff). He suggested that amidst vast shifts in political and economic infrastructures new figures of

¹⁷ The paradigmatic donees were the Brahmins, the ultimate providers of kingly authority. To get a sense of debates which once raged around problems of kingly sovereignty and Brahmanical legitimation, see Peabody, Fuller and Mayer (1991). On the classic model of the donor–donee relationship between rulers and their spiritual preceptors, see Ruegg (Chapter 2).

¹⁸ Some representative essays can be found in Gallagher, Johnson and Seal (1973). See also Low (1968), Broomfield (1968), Seal (1968) and Bayly (1983).