# PATRONAGE as POLITICS in South Asia

Edited by

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*For my father*

*That which you call corruption I call influence.*

John Mortlock (1755–1816)
British banker, woollen draper, Member of Parliament,
and thirteen times Mayor and 'Master of the Town of Cambridge'

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# Foreword

John Dunn

Every human society conceives and seeks to apprehend its political life and character in two sharply discrepant ways. It does so through its conceptions of what is valuable and how what it deems valuable can be realised through action, and it does so through its assessment of the impact of power on how and how far these values are realised in the material consequences they have for its human denizens. Neither of these ways can be a surrogate for the other, and they never articulate stably or clearly with one another. But every society faces a standing temptation, intellectual as much as political, to reduce or subordinate one to the other. The modern social sciences privilege assessments of material outcomes; and as soon as they attempt to shape themselves any other way their current renderings rapidly dissolve into complete incoherence. Indigenist politicians and populist intellectuals, by contrast, defend the primacy of their society's own conceptions of itself and the goods it aspires or hopes to secure.

In the vocabulary and political consciousness of the modern West, patronage is a residual element in the acceptable structuring of social, political and economic outcomes, thrust back increasingly into aesthetic domains or the normatively contingent practical privileges open to occupants of particular roles. The official normative ordering of western societies today is systematically egalitarian. Within them, every departure from it is increasingly stigmatised and must be rationalised, if it is to be recuperated at all, through contributions it makes to enhancing equality in some other domain. The result is a society deeply uneasy at its own reality, in endless denial of itself as a structure of power, incapable of recognising its own political substance, or of thinking clearly about the ways in which it is in fact led, or fails to be led, and about the causal relations between political and legal subjection within it and the economic destinies across the ranks of its notionally equal citizens.

*Patronage as Politics in South Asia* presents a very different conception of society, distributed across the Indian subcontinent over a time span far lengthier than the epoch in which the normative order of the modern West took its present shape and established its queasy hegemony. It is an integrally hierarchical order of value, location and responsibility that gives much of their sense to the ways in which its inhabitants live out their lives and structure, experience and judge interactions with one another. (The uncaptured residue is more a matter for novels or poems than for would-be systematic social theory, let alone social science.) Because it covers such vast stretches of time and space and such heterogeneous practices, it makes no attempt to present the order it discloses as a systematic ideology or social totality, as Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* for example appeared to, at least to some of its readers. What it does show from a startling range of angles is how comprehensively the modern social sciences have disabled themselves to take in the reality of most societies in the world, and even of those that generated them, incorporating these misapprehensions ever more deeply into their faltering efforts at self-understanding. It shows how impotent any economistic rendering is to capture the political or social reality of most of the humanly inhabited world, and how impertinent and external a picture it offers even of the structuring of economic outcomes in much of that world.

*Patronage as Politics in South Asia* holds deep lessons for too wide a range of potential readers to list them all. But several points are worth insisting on from the outset. In the first place, it shows how indispensable the focus on social order is to capture the lived political reality of any human society: a task beyond the reach of any paradigm of rational choice. It shows the profoundly crippling cognitive impact of the egalitarian protocol for political, economic and social practices on the comprehension of societies not merely with quite different normative visions but even of the very societies from which that protocol first emerged. It shows the extreme plasticity and the permanent potential efficacy of patronage in settings from political and religious construction in classical Tibet to the exigencies of survival in the slums of Mumbai and the structuring of labour migration from Kerala to the Gulf. It shows that they still shape and inspire potent communities in the sub-continent's great cities. It shows that they frame and dynamise the intense political life of far the largest democracy in human history, and fit as effortlessly into a political system articulated through

legal equality as they did into classical Tibet, Hindu Kingdoms or the Mogul empire. It shows that there is nothing superannuated about the causal presence and weight of such practices across the world, and that they travel as readily beyond the sub-continent as they do within it and are adopted indefatigably precisely because they hold far more utility for those who choose them over competing bureaucratic structures or transnational meliorist facilities. It shows how far even the most penetrating and sensitive of social anthropology has been handicapped by its misgivings and discomfiture at patronage's frank embrace of inequality, in a setting where even the cultivated and self-conscious heirs of ancient Rome find the idea that friendship can be lop-sided (as most friendship rather evidently is) and be so without jeopardising its reality as friendship, too disconcerting to endorse openly and explicitly.

This book shows how easy it remains to take in and comprehend how a society is led and follows or refuses to follow, or how it chooses to act politically through its own structuring of power, by viewing patronage as a huge array of practices incessantly at work, doing good or ill to all they affect. It shows how India's huge and frenziedly animated democracy could learn to understand itself just the way it is and suggests how far it already does, quietly, on its own and within the relative privacy of its own languages, even if it is still as nonplussed as its western counterparts at combining that quiet self-understanding with the official normative rubric of India's own Constitution. Very strikingly, too, it suggests a political verdict to which the rest of the world needs to attend every bit as much as India itself. India's democracy, it intimates, however its material consequences come out in a metric of relative subjugation (where every existing human society comes out pretty mercilessly), is a profoundly democratic outcome, achieved through means that are in essence clearly democratic. As a structuring of material inequality, much of it is still remarkably grim; and that grimness is as unmistakably a product of power as it has ever been. (What, do you imagine, has generated the present class structure of the United States of America: Democracy's finest and oldest fruit?) Insofar as the material outcome of India's democracy is recognised, sustained, modified or enforced through public law and the coercive capacities of the state, that law and those coercive capacities act in the end, not just at the alleged behest and on the alleged behalf of all India's legally equal citizens, but causally and as appropriately as almost

anywhere else in the world, at the direction of India's own demos, acting at regular intervals for and as itself, at its own iteratively sovereign moments. That just is democracy, and every bit as much so as any specifiable passage in the history of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, classical Athens or any other presumptively democratic exemplar. What democracy means is just that everywhere that has it judges, chooses and acts as and for itself. That is how India judges, chooses and acts. More precariously and hence less resolutely, it is also the way that Pakistan and Bangladesh judge, choose and act on the more intermittent occasions when their armed forces let them.

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A.P.
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