

Everyday Corruption and the Political Mediation of the Indian State

An Ethnographic Exploration of Brokers in Bihar

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This analysis examines what the ubiquitous presence of political “brokers” who mediate many people’s access to state institutions reveals about the Indian state and the complex causes of corruption in Indian public life.

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bihar since 2002, it reveals the role of brokers within both village power relations and the larger political system. This analysis implies that, in addition to the institutional reforms that are currently at the centre of public debate, tackling corruption in everyday state administration would require wide-reaching sociopolitical transformations and massive investments in basic state capacity.

For India’s expanding, urban middle class, perhaps no issue today is more important than addressing corruption in public life that most perceive to be pervasive and debilitating. It could even be said that for this post-liberalisation generation, corruption, and the fight against corruption, has become the predominant theme of the second decade of the 21st century. On the one hand, rapid economic growth is creating unprecedented opportunities for generating illicit income, reflected in the sheer scale of recent corruption scandals. But, on the other hand, this popular obsession with corruption may also reflect changing popular conceptions of the state. As anthropologists have noted, the emergence of the theme of corruption can reflect a widening popular embrace of the idea of an uncorrupt, rule-bound state that can be contrasted with the realities of how the Indian state actually operates (Gupta 1995; Parry 2000: 27-55). The spread of this concept – what Philip Abrams (1988: 58-69) termed the “state idea” – has resulted from a decline in the importance and prestige for the middle class of a public sector that often requires bribes to attain employment and key postings, and from which corruption is a major source of income. In contrast, people with private sector jobs receive much less personal benefit from corrupt practices, and unlike landed elites, no longer need influence over local state institutions in order to protect their interests.

This could also be interpreted as a reaction against the post-Mandal lower-caste political upsurge and the caste-based reservations that has changed the social profile of many of the people benefiting from corruption (Witsoe 2011: 73-85) – there was a lot less noise about corruption when a majority of the politicians and bureaucrats who benefited were from upper caste, landed families and from the predominantly upper caste, urban middle class. This is perhaps why politicians are often seen as the source of corruption in the middle class popular imagination.

But what exactly is the role of politics and politicians in the everyday functioning of the Indian state and how does this relate to what is commonly called “corruption”. This article will examine the role of politically-connected brokers in mediating many people’s access to state institutions and in shaping everyday administration – what I term the political mediation of the Indian state. I focus on brokers as a window into political mediation because they are the visible face of this process – it can be much harder, for instance, to see behind-the-scenes

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control of the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). I argue that taking brokers seriously changes the ways in which we think about the Indian state and reveals some of the complex causes of corruption in Indian public life.

1 Understanding Brokerage

I argue that we need to examine political mediation as it occurs at two distinct, although interrelated, levels. The first is related to the influence of politicians in the everyday functioning of state institutions. Instead of merely influencing the functioning of the state through legislation or policy formulation that is then implemented by an impartial bureaucracy, elected representatives may directly influence the everyday functioning of the state for two reasons – to distribute patronage to supporters and to generate campaign finance (or personal wealth). Kanchan Chandra's (2004) work on "ethnic politics", for instance, argues that India is a "patronage democracy", a democracy in which the state enjoys a monopoly over scarce economic resources and elected representatives have considerable discretion in the distribution of these resources. Voters seek to elect representatives who can provide them with access to state resources such as government jobs, access to government credit, and other development resources, resulting in a "black market", wherein state resources are bartered for votes. Robert Wade (1985: 287-328), in his classic study of corruption in the irrigation department in "a state in south India", describes a "transfer-model of corruption", "with systematic linkage between top-level and bottom-level corruption and between administrative and political corruption" that he suggests is ultimately driven by the need to generate campaign finance. But while the role of politicians is the element that has received the most popular attention – the so-called "politicisation of the state" – I suggest that focusing in this factor in isolation produces a skewed perspective.

Anthropologists have interpreted the role of brokers – in India and elsewhere – as reflecting the ways in which the boundaries between "state" and "society" are hopelessly blurred within everyday state practice (Fuller and Benei 2001; Gupta 1995: 375-402). There are numerous ethnographic accounts describing what F G Bailey (1960) termed the "broker", whom he described as a new class of individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to allow villagers to interact with a newly independent Indian state. Subsequent ethnographic studies described the development of this class of brokers and their importance in reproducing the local dominance of landowning castes (Gupta 1998; Jeffrey 2002: 21-41). When viewed "from below", then, brokers are an essential part of the ways in which many people experience the state. Recognising this demands that we suspend our notion of the formal boundaries between state and society, allowing us to examine the networks that cut across formal institutional boundaries.

The point that lower level state institutions are embedded within structures of local power, that, as Kaviraj (1988) put it, "the Indian state has feet of vernacular clay" – has often been used to explain the repeated failures of top-down, planned development since independence. According to this explanation,

the national political leadership and the highest levels of administration formulate progressive, well-thought-out policies that are hopelessly undermined by "elite capture" at the lower levels and by a stark cultural divide between higher and lower levels of administration.

I suggest that we view the aspects of brokerage sketched above holistically – the broker as affecting the elite capture or "vernacularisation" of the Indian state at lower levels, the broker as the front line distributor of political patronage, and the broker as key for generating and channelling campaign finance – and this is what I am trying to get at by the broad phrase "the political mediation of the Indian state". By this phrase I mean that an interaction with state institutions is mediated both by the larger political system and by the structuring of local power. If we consider brokers to be part of "the state", how does this change the ways in which the India state is theorised and what does this mean for understanding corruption?

The role of brokers in linking state institutions with local power means that we cannot reduce everything to competition for state patronage. It is telling that Chandra (2004) does not really deal with brokers themselves – in positing a direct link, a market, between politicians competing for office and individual voters – brokers, and the vital roles that they perform, vanish from view. So do the relationships between state institutions, the political system and local power that are central to my analysis. Political mediation is not just about "looting the state", about patronage for its own sake, or about entrepreneurial politicians taking advantage of their ability to allocate state resources at their discretion (although it is all of these things), but also about struggles over dominance and subordination within local sites.

In the following sections, I examine the changing role brokers in block and village-level administration in Bhojpur district in Bihar, a place where I have been engaged in field research for nearly 10 years. I draw from material that I gathered while living full-time in Rajnagar – a large village with a population of 5,086 (according to the Census of India 2001) – in 2002 and 2003 (returning for shorter periods in 2004, 2007, 2010 and 2011), from interviews conducted with numerous brokers, local politicians, government officials and villagers over the years and from surveys conducted in Rajnagar and three nearby villages in 2007, 2010 and 2011.¹ This study is necessarily drawn from one location, and differences between regions in terms of the legacies of colonial systems of governance, postcolonial political history, the structuring of agrarian power relations and the degree of mass literacy and participation in local governance, among other factors, inevitably results in differing patterns of brokerage.² But the specificities and complex interactions between these factors mean that there is no substitute for in-depth regional studies. While Bihar likely represents a somewhat extreme case of governance through brokers, few would deny that brokerage exists in varying degrees across India. After introducing the world of brokerage, I turn to how political mediation operates within specific government schemes and then to how it has changed over time.

2 The Uses of Brokers

While doing fieldwork in Bhojpur district, I constantly encountered individuals whose livelihoods seemed to depend on governmental activities, but who did not hold any official post. Most of these people were easily identifiable by their distinctive white khadi kurta pyjamas, identifying them as *netas*, as local political leaders. When I asked these people questions about their occupation, they would usually describe themselves as *netas* or as *thekedars* (contractors) although I am here describing thekedars who hold no formal contract. Other people would sometimes refer to them as *vichawlia* (middle-men) or would occasionally use the more derogatory term *dalal*, usually translated as “broker”. I use the term broker to refer to this class of mediators in the broadest sense, referring to anyone who facilitates, or controls, other people’s access to state institutions. Brokers were almost always visible in government offices in the district headquarters and were ubiquitous in the block offices. In fact, many brokers acted as if they were block employees, and had they not been wearing distinctive dress, it would have been easy to mistake them as such. Brokers were also present in almost every police station that I visited, and a man who described himself as the “representative” of Lalu Prasad Yadav – the *de facto* chief minister at the time – was even present on the occasions when I met with the Director General of Police in his office in Patna.

In Rajnagar, brokers and *netas* seemed to be everywhere. As one villager put it, “In this village even children are politicians (*bache log bhi नेता hai*). There is only politics here, nothing else” (Witsoe 2011). When many, if not most people, interacted with state institutions, it was not with bureaucrats located in government offices but with brokers and local leaders. The block office is located outside the village, and block staff enter the village as outsiders. The broker, in contrast, lives next door, and is embedded in local histories, local power relations and social networks. In short, brokers are central to the everyday functioning of the Indian state.

This was made clear to me one winter night, when I was sitting by candlelight and drinking tea with, Sanjay, a block development officer (BDO) in his official residence behind the block offices a few miles from where I was living in Rajnagar. The BDO is the most important official in the block offices which serve as the local nexus for many government departments. Sanjay was complaining, as he often did, about the unprincipled brokers with whom he had to constantly interact. I asked Sanjay why, if he feels this way, he works through brokers – why even deal with this entire cast of often unsavory characters? He insisted that he could not do his job without them. Sanjay claimed that he did not have adequate staff to cover the population that he was expected to serve – at that time, there were severe staff shortages in most block offices in Bihar and the ubiquity of brokers reflected a basic lack of state capacity at lower levels. Perhaps more importantly, Sanjay did not have the connections required to manoeuvre within the often politically – charged context of the village. According to Sanjay, brokers were necessary for the block administration to function effectively within the village, and they

therefore, could be seen as bridging a gap between the state and the village.³

What Sanjay did not say was that these brokers were also required for him to collect his “commission”. The standard commissions of most state functionaries were publicly known and generally accepted as an inevitable cost of doing business with government. Brokers were the ones who handled most payments in order to protect those with official positions, and they served as the go-between with various officials and politicians who may not be on good terms but who had to cooperate in order to efficiently divert funds. Brokers, therefore, allow work to be done without legal responsibility – the broker does not have any written proof of having been involved so it is difficult to pursue legal action against him. And especially, if a BDO is required to make a payment to superiors in order to receive a posting, they have little choice but to recoup this “investment” (with interest, of course). In order to do this they inevitably have to work with a whole range of actors (*mukhias*, block staff, engineers, and, of course, brokers) who also demand payment. So for every rupee that travels “upwards”, possibly hundreds are diverted as the system of brokerage is set in motion.

Sanjay also did not mention that working with the right set of brokers allowed him to maintain the support of the powerful local MLA who, being a minister in the state government, could effortlessly arrange for him to be transferred to a far less desirable posting. Brokers allowed political control over development works and could be thought of as integrating day-to-day state activities with the political system. I was frequently reminded of the importance of the MLA in relation to the BDO by Nirangan, who was previously an important broker in Rajnagar and whom I got to know quite well. Nirangan had been close to the MLA and managed much of the development works in the village but later fell out of favour with him. Although he still had a close relationship with the BDO, he often complained to me that he could no longer get work; his political influence and finances were clearly diminishing and he complained that he could not even afford a motorcycle (a fitting symbol of being a successful broker since it not only reflects wealth but facilitates physical mobility). He would often point to a gold watch on his wrist, saying “this is from before, now I get nothing”.

Brokers also enable a projection of personal power that allows actors to avoid work considered demeaning, without a delegation of authority that could compromise their power. For instance, by working through brokers *mukhias* can effectively be in many places at the same time, thereby maintaining status by not being seen running around convincing labourers to work and negotiating with low level government workers.⁴

Sanjay did not mention that he may have felt compelled to deal with brokers because many, but not all, had links to criminal networks. In Rajnagar and surrounding villages, for instance, many brokers had links with a group known locally as the “sand mafia” that controlled the mining of sand from the Sone River, a group within which the MLA was an important player, as was a feared brother of the chief minister. Being connected to the sand mafia allowed brokers to exert both

political pressure and a very real threat of violence (there had been a number of murders related to this group in previous years). Other brokers had links with another MLA whose brother was the biggest arms dealer in this region and who maintained a very well-armed criminal gang. This not only helped them in dealing with bureaucrats, but also with villagers – if someone promised the delivery of votes, or a percentage of a future payment from a government scheme, these criminal connections facilitated the collection process. It is important to emphasise the ways in which brokers connected diverse spheres – state institutions, village realities, higher-level politicians and criminal networks.

3 Examples of Brokerage

The role of brokers differs considerably depending on what schemes and state institutions are involved. For instance, I found little influence of brokers in the collection of old-age pension payments, although many villagers alleged that initially getting registered for the scheme was often based on political considerations, with supporters of the mukhia being privileged (especially those who were undeserving). In many cases, brokers can be seen as compensating for many poor people's lack of literacy and awareness about their entitlements. A broker who helped someone get registered and open a bank account for an old-age pension in return for a reasonable "commission" to cover related expenses and time spent could reasonably be seen as performing a necessary social function. But I also came across cases where the poor were not even aware of the amount that they were entitled to under a given scheme, with brokers pocketing as much as half of the entitlement. And even in schemes where brokers play a central role, such as the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) that provides basic housing for people categorised as below the poverty line and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) that entitles every household to 100 days of manual labour at the minimum wage, this role varies considerably.⁵

The role of brokers in the IAY, where almost all of the more than 100 people interviewed in 2010 reported accessing funds only after paying an upfront bribe to a broker, was purely oppressive and extractive. The process of selecting beneficiaries of IAY was formulated by the rural development department in order to remove the discretion of lower level officials, with the belief that the end of discretion would eliminate corruption. Names of beneficiaries were to be chosen in order starting from the lowest score on the list of households below the poverty line (although this list is far from accurate), the names painted on the sides of schools and bank accounts opened for each beneficiary wherein funds would be directly deposited. But interviews revealed that nearly every beneficiary had been approached by a broker who demanded an upfront payment of around Rs 5,000 in order to "open the bank account". People who could not, or chose not, to pay the broker were skipped under a false pretense (on the grounds that they had already received IAY, even if they had not, or a false claim that they were living outside the state) or their bank accounts were never opened or never received the full funds. The effect was

not just a siphoning off of funds meant for the poor, but the exclusion of many of the poorest households who lacked the liquidity necessary for the advance payment. In addition, people considered to be enemies of the mukhia were often automatically excluded and allies of the mukhia were given preferential treatment. Brokers enabled all concerned actors to extract commissions – percentages were given to the block staff and the mukhia based on more or less fixed rates – and shaped the distribution of an important resource according to local political considerations even though it was an officially non-discretionary transfer. In the process, the impartiality, autonomy and effectiveness of the state in achieving its stated outcomes were all compromised.

NREGA is a very different case than IAY, even if brokers were even more ubiquitous. Like in IAY, brokers ensured that the scheme operated according to local political realities. For instance, Mitilesh, a broker whom I interviewed at length about his activities, was from a landed family and represented his family's interests. This meant employing labourers with whom he had long-standing relationships, reinforcing very old patterns of patronage and control. Also as with IAY, brokers in NREGA enabled everyone to take their cut, in this case from routine overestimating of work and overbilling of days (with labourers often willing to cooperate for a trivial amount of the proceeds). But a survey that I conducted of NREGA in four panchayats in 2011 revealed that brokers were basically running the scheme. It was brokers who recruited and managed the labourers, dealt with the engineers (who reportedly refused to even do an accurate estimate without receiving payment) and block staff, and also often worked to appease potentially troublesome landowners who repeatedly told me that they saw NREGA as a threat to their agricultural operations.

Brokers also often compensated for inefficiencies in the scheme's implementation. Mitilesh, for instance, told me that at the time of the interview he had given Rs 70,000 to labourers who otherwise may have had to wait months to receive payment (even though payment is technically mandated within two weeks). While walking with him in the village, my survey team frequently witnessed labourers approach him for payment while he skilfully managed their demands but still remained careful to maintain the relationship. In fact, when I asked Mitilesh what he considered to be the major constraint on NREGA expenditure (of which Bihar has the lowest among states), he bluntly stated: "there are not enough contractors". NREGA brokers had to be trusted allies of the mukhia (or else the mukhia would be unwilling to delegate so much power to them), had to have experience working with the block staff and bank manager, had to be able to recruit and manage labourers, while also "managing" landowners, and had to have the liquidity and drive to "invest" in a potentially rewarding but also somewhat risky enterprise. People with such a specialised skill set were in short supply. Given the complexities of implementing NREGA, and the realities of weak state capacity at the local level, without brokers, the project would likely not have functioned at all.

These cases reveal that corruption is not monolithic – there are diverse causes and very different types of corruption, just

as the role of brokers varies. While providing education to the poor is surely an important tool in reducing many forms of brokerage, it is important to note that in the cases of NREGA and IAY examined above an educated beneficiary was as dependent as anyone else on brokers if they wanted to participate.⁶ But as these case studies suggest, it would be much easier to remove the influence of brokers from IAY – where their role was primarily extractive – than from NREGA, where brokers compensated from a lack of state capacity and mediated contradictory political alliances.

While this section and the preceding one drew from fieldwork conducted at different times in order to examine key aspects of brokerage, patterns of brokerage change over time. In fact, an entire political history could be told by examining the changing role of brokers, and the ways in which this reflects transformations in the relationships between state institutions and the structuring of local power. I now turn to a necessarily brief sketch of such a history by examining the role of political mediation in different time periods from the vantage point of Rajnagar. Instead of focusing on the role of brokers in a particular programme or institution, I want to sketch a broad, and necessarily simplified, history in an attempt to examine some of the longer term changes in political mediation, and their overall impact on the village.

4 Histories of Brokerage

In Rajnagar's colonial past, Rajput *tola*, the residential area of the Rajput zamindars, occupied the political, social and ritual centre of the village. Rajput zamindars enjoyed revenue-collection rights over most of Rajnagar as well as sizeable land in nearby villages – despite their relatively small numbers – around 15% – they exercised complete dominance. When colonial officials visited Rajnagar, they stayed in Rajput tola, reinforcing the perception of the landlord as “the state”. The figure of the broker can, in some ways, be seen as reflecting a continuation of this earlier history rule through intermediaries – it is important to remember that corruption, and the illegitimacy of political mediation, only became meaningful concepts on paper with independence and the abolition of the zamindari system. Before this, the state was explicitly politically-mediated. In this sense, political mediation can be thought of as being a distinctly postcolonial phenomenon, reflecting the fact that the basic architecture of the Indian state was largely put in place through the colonial project, based on a “limited Raj” (Yang 1989) and alliances between the state and local elites. And it was often the same families who had acted as intermediaries within the zamindari system who became brokers of the postcolonial developmental state.⁷ This reminds us that the Indian state has always been – to various degrees – politically mediated and thinking in terms of the “politicisation” of the state after independence requires invoking a “state idea” that has always been more idea than reality.

In Rajnagar and surrounding villages, once the zamindari system began to decline in the 1930s, and even more so after its formal abolition, connections with bureaucrats and the police were crucial to the maintenance of caste dominance,

either by having a relative working in government (for instance, a high court judge from a Rajput estate in the neighbouring village), or through the services of brokers. Prior to the 1990s, brokers, usually only one or two from a village, were mostly members of the locally dominant landlord caste. While they were from a single caste, they served as the broker for the entire village, reinforcing patronage links between landlords and their tenants and labourers. At the same time, these brokers were members of the Congress Party, a party that claimed to represent the nation, and especially the lower caste poor, even as its own political structure perpetuated the dominance of a small minority of upper caste elites. Congress one-party rule was replicated, then, at the village level with one caste of dominant landlords effectively mediating access to the state, and with development resources flowing according to long established patron-client relations in the village. This political mediation allowed patron-client relations to persist despite the commercialisation of agricultural labour markets in the wake of the green revolution. This also allowed landowning castes to maintain their dominance, not only despite Indira Gandhi's populism, but through control of the very welfare schemes that were meant to end rural poverty. In the process, of course, the Congress was also able to maintain its political dominance, cementing an alliance between upper castes and the rural poor that kept the status quo largely intact.

Gradual changes within the agrarian economy, however, set the stage for later political transformation in Bihar and other areas of north India. Much of the land that former zamindars were forced to relinquish came into the hands of their former tenants, many of whom came from Other Backward Classes (OBC) backgrounds, especially Yadav, Kurmi and Koeri castes. In Rajnagar a class of Yadav medium-sized farmers emerged. From the mid-1970s in Rajnagar, these people participated in the emergence of an alternate centre of power that was associated with the movement developed by Jayprakash Narayan (JP movement), (although it was marginalised after the return to power of the Congress in 1980). In 1977, Rajnagar elected its first dalit mukhia, who served to cement an alliance between Rajput landlords (who supported him) and poor labourers from his section of the village. But although there was now a dalit mukhia, the two brokers with whom he worked were both Rajput members of the Congress Party, allowing a continuation of landlord influence over state institutions in the face of apparent political change.

5 The Village after Mandal

By the mid-1990s, OBC politicians dominated the state assemblies in north India, especially in the two most populous north Indian states, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Jaffrelot 2003; Hassan 2000). The increasing number of MLAs from the OBC backgrounds was accompanied by the formation of state governments in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh led by regional parties claiming to represent “backward caste” interests. Such a party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)-led by Lalu Prasad Yadav, was the governing party in Bihar from 1990 until 2005. In the space of just a decade from 1985 to 1995 the number of OBC

candidates elected to the assembly more than doubled to 50%, while the number of upper caste candidates more than halved to 17%, indicating a profound transformation of political representation in the state. How did this play out at the village level?

During this period, a “democratisation” of political mediation occurred in Rajnagar and surrounding villages. Every village now had numerous brokers – there were five village-wide brokers in Rajnagar – and dozens of smaller brokers representing the interests of caste communities from various areas of the village. In effect, the transition at the national level from one-party rule to a coalition politics with a dizzying array of regional and caste-based parties was replicated at the village level with a shift from one or two brokers who served the interests of both the dominant caste and the Congress Party to a proliferation of brokers.

The changes in power that occurred during RJD-rule did not occur so much from lower castes “capturing” state institutions, but from a systematic weakening of institutions wherein upper castes exercised influence, such as the bureaucracy and police (Mathew and Moore 2011). The more integrated caste networks of the Congress period, when bureaucrats, politicians, landed elites and brokers all tended to be from upper caste backgrounds were to a large extent dismantled, resulting in an often stark disjuncture between an overwhelmingly lower caste political class and a bureaucracy that still remained largely upper caste. The RJD responded by dramatically increasing politicians’ and brokers’ influence within state institutions – greatly empowering this political class who claimed to represent the lower caste majority. Political mediation, which had long enabled state institutions to reinforce upper caste dominance, was actually intensified, now used as a tool to displace this dominance.

This had a dramatic impact. Under RJD-rule, the Rajput ex-zamindars in Rajnagar found themselves without access

to subsidised credit from cooperative banks (most of which became effectively insolvent), cut-off from sources of patronage and “commissions” that they had long enjoyed through the control of development funds and, above all, deprived of the connections with politicians and the police (the later seriously weakened) that had enabled them to effectively control labour, protect standing crops from theft and enforce exploitative sharecropping arrangements. In addition, many lower caste villagers now had their own connections to a new class of lower caste brokers, as well as to the criminal networks with which these brokers were affiliated. Not only did the Rajput landlords lose many of their sources of influence outside the village, but lower castes gained their own. The result was that the Rajput ex-zamindars were marginalised from the political and even economic life of the village, replaced by the emergence of multiple power centres with the most populous caste in Rajnagar, Yadavs, emerging as a new dominant caste.

This increase in the number of brokers resulted in many people feeling an increase of voice and participation in local administration. Many lower caste people felt that, for the first time, their vote mattered. And while corruption became more visible as more people were now participating, this was a reaction to much older forms of corruption that had long allowed dominant groups to disproportionately benefit from governmental institutions, reflecting what could be termed a “democratisation” of corruption.

6 Limitations of Political Mediation as a Means of Empowerment

While it is important to recognise that democratising political mediation of the state did facilitate dramatic transfers of power with wide-ranging effects, it is equally vital to keep in mind the limitations of this project. This democratic empowerment was dependant on political leaders whose functioning

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was markedly undemocratic. It created a new class of politicians and brokers, more numerous and from different caste backgrounds than their predecessors, but who continued to effectively mediate ordinary people's access to government. The empowerment of lower castes in Bihar during this period was a "mediated empowerment", an empowerment dependant on the authority of this new class of brokers. With a criminally-connected political class empowered, and the police force seriously weakened, it is not surprising that criminality exploded – including a large kidnapping for ransom industry. In addition, the weakening of state institutions devastated public education and health, with long-term human capital costs.

Perhaps most importantly, within a context of weakened state institutions and the increased importance of brokers and political networks, Yadavs and other populous and politically organised castes enjoyed a distinct advantage and many lower castes groups were left behind. This was especially the case for castes officially classified as "Annexure One" within Bihar's unique system of reservations (which divides the OBC category into two annexes). In Rajnagar, for instance, while there were many Yadav brokers and brokers from most other populous, politically organised castes (Koeris, Paswan, Chamar, Rajput), there were no Annexure One brokers at all – they were forced to depend on others for political mediation.

In the November 2005 assembly elections, Annexure One castes consolidated their votes for the first time in alliance with lower caste Muslims (the first time the Muslim vote had split) and upper castes trying to regain lost influence and voted for the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Nitish Kumar who was contesting on a pro-development platform. Nitish Kumar won a decisive victory, ending the long period of RJD rule. This was followed by an even bigger win in 2010. According to my survey, there was a corresponding dramatic shift of votes in Rajnagar. This represented a movement of political power "downward" to non-dominant groups, although with a return of upper castes in the passenger seat. Most of the supporters of the new government, being non-dominant castes, demanded neither a return to Congress-era patronage, nor a proliferation of brokers since geographically dispersed castes will never be in a position to benefit from political mediation, but an end to political mediation altogether. And this did result in a state government that quickly weakened the political class and strengthened the bureaucracy, issuing circulars for bureaucrats and police to ignore requests by politicians, even from the ruling party.

The central feature of Nitish Kumar's political project – the unprecedented emergence of non-dominant castes as a political force – did progressively weaken political mediation to some extent. In 2011, for instance, a survey examining the reform of IAY by the department of rural development that I conducted in Rajnagar and surrounding villages found that, at least for that year, brokers had been largely cut out of the system. In the public distribution system (PDS), the discretion of the powerful dealers and corrupt officials was similarly curtailed. While in 2010, 75% of the poor reported receiving subsidised foodgrains for at best one or two months per year, just a year

later every respondent reported receiving regular rations. While this may not apply to the entire state – Bihar still ranks at the bottom of PDS performance – there does appear to be some improvement (Khera 2011: 44-45). Nitish Kumar told me that "food security" was one of his three priorities for his second term, something he had emphasised repeatedly during his campaign.⁸ This shift required appointing a competent minister who was willing to take on powerful interests – especially, the village-level dealers (although the fact that many had received their licence under the previous government made this easier) – in the hope of consolidating a more important constituency among the poor.⁹

But the need to rely on upper caste electoral support is reflected in Nitish Kumar's continued alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party, which in Bihar is above all a party representing the upper castes. Continuing the legacy of Mandal, Nitish Kumar utilised reservations at the panchayat level for Annexure One castes as a tool for political change and to consolidate this new political force. But brokers – who catalysed change during the period of Lalu Prasad Yadav – once again became an obstacle. For instance, a mukhia elected under the Annexure One reservation in a village next to Rajnagar was forced to work through Rajput brokers, reducing his status considerably, and this could be seen as reflecting the contradictions within the NDA – the fact that Nitish still has to rely on upper caste support and that of other dominant groups. For instance, when I asked a member of Nitish Kumar's inner circle why the chief minister did not use his considerable political capital to eliminate the MLA's ability to influence block-level postings, he responded: "he has to give them (MLAs) something".

In addition, as the material presented above makes clear, eliminating the influence of larger level politicians is not sufficient to end brokerage and corruption. In fact, with the political class weakened, it is possible that administration becomes less accountable, now not even concerned with distributing political patronage. And the realities of local power and of panchayat politics continue. So while brokers as a class were weakened, they certainly did not disappear.

Returning to the block offices near Rajnagar in the summer of 2010, it looked at first as though no brokers were present at all, until I began to recognise that many of the same people who had operated there before had simply exchanged their khadi for slacks or jeans. My old friend Nirangan was also back in business and had just purchased a new motorcycle.

7 Conclusions

Examining the changing role of brokers provides a perspective on the Indian state "from the margins" – revealing the complex relationships between state institutions, the political system, informal networks and the structuring of power relations within local sites. The broker, whose everyday activities tie these diverse spheres together, is therefore, crucial for understanding the ways in which most people experience the Indian state. One result of the political mediation of the state is that, as Chatterjee (2004: 38) starkly puts it, "most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously and only then ambiguously and contextually,

rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution". Liberal citizenship requires impartial and autonomous state institutions, a bureaucracy that treats the people with whom it interacts as essentially generic, interchangeable individuals – what the anthropologist Michael Hertzfeld (1993) termed the "social production of indifference". Political mediation, however, undermines both the impartiality and the autonomy of the state. Not only are resources distributed according to political calculations, the strength of social networks or the ability to pay, but access to state institutions is mediated by local power. A villager approaches the state through the landlord, mediated by the dominant caste, or, conversely, through a politician who may be part of a political struggle against the landlord. In either case, the state is approached in a way that is shaped by local power, not individual citizenship.

The history of brokerage examined above also reveals the ways in which democratic change can alter the experience the state within everyday village life. The role of the local block offices within village life in Rajnagar has gone through tumultuous change that has had little to do with formal institutional reform. From a bastion of the Rajput ex-zamindars and the Congress Party, the block became an institution subordinated to the political project of the RJD which effectively ended

Rajput dominance, later becoming a key site supporting Nitish Kumar's development agenda and the growing political strength of non-dominant castes. This history shows that the functioning of state institutions has to be viewed within the context of regionally-articulated processes of democratisation. For instance, the strengthening of state institutions that is occurring in Bihar today is only possible because the networks of patronage that had long placed state institutions under the control of upper caste landed elites had been progressively weakened by three decades of lower caste politics. These changes would not be easily seen in the functioning of the block itself, but was very visible when examining brokers.

The prevalence of political mediation results in a state that, while being seemingly impervious to fundamental institutional reform, can also be surprisingly responsive to democratic change. But the above analysis also makes clear that as long as local dominance remains pervasive, the capacity of local public institutions is so limited and the resources of the average citizen scarce, political mediation will continue to exist. Eliminating corruption, therefore, would require not only institutional reform "from above", but massive investments in basic state capacity combined with wide-reaching sociopolitical transformations.

NOTES

- 1 For obvious reasons given my topic, the name of my research village, and the names of individuals have been changed.
- 2 Corbridge et al (2005), for instance, describe how different configurations of political mediation impact of the employment assurance scheme in villages in five districts of Bihar and West Bengal – with very different outcomes.
- 3 It is in this sense that Krishna (2002) identifies a new generation of *naya netas* (new leaders) – who would certainly fall within our definition of brokers – as a positive force of change in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.
- 4 In an ironic example of this, when I arranged for the rural development department to request a list of IAY beneficiaries from the block office that I needed for research on the department's efforts in 2011 to eliminate brokers from the scheme, the BDO (no longer Sanjay) sent a broker to deliver it! When I met the broker afterward, he said this was done by the BDO to avoid his subordinates gaining direct access to the state secretariat which could possibly undermine his authority. But this may have also been because of a lack of resources – the broker was the only one who could be asked to make such a trip on short notice without any travel allowance.
- 5 In addition, as Philip Oldenburg (1987) shows to be the case in a Land Consolidation programme in Uttar Pradesh, even in the programmes with little administrative corruption, brokers may play still manage to convince people to go through them (paying for the privilege, of course).
- 6 Krishna (2002) similarly shows that mediators remained essential even with unprecedented levels of basic education. But it may well be the case that a more educated population alters patterns of mediation, perhaps explaining why he sees brokers to be a far more positive force in his survey villages than they were in Rajnagar and surrounding villagers.
- 7 In fact, the term thekedar (contractor) – the most common self-referent for brokers – was

originally used to refer to intermediary revenue collectors for zamindars (Yang 1989: 161).

- 8 Interview with Nitish Kumar at his official residence in Patna, 9 August 2011.
- 9 This is a strategy that its effectiveness has been demonstrated in a number of states, especially Chhattisgarh. See Khera (2011) and Dreze (2010).

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