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National Power and Local Politics in India: A Twenty-year Perspective

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I. Introduction

The study of federal political systems, particularly parliamentary or representative federal political systems, such as those in the United States, Canada, or India involves complexities that do not exist in unitary states such as Great Britain or France. In the first place, there are three or more institutional levels in such systems, each of which has its own arena in which political struggles take place. Second, the balance of power among the levels in federal systems varies in different systems and in the same system at different times. Third, the study of the extraparliamentary organizations, such as political parties, and of social movements, also becomes a more complex task since it cannot be assumed that a political party or social movement with the same name is the same sort of formation in New York and Mississippi or in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Moreover, in federal systems with a high degree of regional cultural diversity, each federal unit in the country may have a distinctive configuration of extraconstitutional political formations and social forces. This is certainly the case in India, the most

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culturally diverse of all existing federal parliamentary systems in the world today. Fourth, politics in federal systems takes place between levels as well as within levels, again in far more complex ways than in unitary systems.

The analysis of federal parliamentary systems such as India's is, therefore, an especially challenging task for political scientists or historians who wish somehow to convey either a whole view of the system at a particular point in time or in its historical development. Even if one aspires for less than a whole view, an initial question must be: at what level or entry point into the system can one learn most about the dynamic processes that are characteristic of the system as a whole? For many years after Independence, many political scientists thought Indian politics could not be understood at all except at the state and district level. This view was so widely held, in fact, that serious detailed political studies of many of India's most powerful central institutions have yet to be done. Others have argued that the society, in all its diversity, has been held together by one or another major national institution—the 'steel frame' of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) or the gelatinous mass of the Indian National Congress being two leading candidates. In recent years, particularly since the imposition by Mrs Gandhi of an authoritarian 'Emergency' regime from 1975 to 1977, it has been often argued that the Indian political system has become increasingly centralized and nationalized and that the essential characteristics of the Indian political system can now be read only through the study of executive power and particular central institutions.

Twenty years ago, when I did my initial field work at the district and state level, focusing on the Congress organization, I thought I had identified the critical levels of the Indian political system and the inner dynamics of its politics. It appeared to me then that there was a vast difference between the politics of national integration, of government and opposition, of planning, of secularism, and of rapid industrialization which Nehru symbolized and the politics of faction, caste, patronage, nepotism, communalism, and mixed subsistence and cash crop agriculture that operated at the state and district level. Moreover, I thought then that the latter patterns had a greater reality than the former and that the answer to the old question, 'After Nehru, what?' was the bubbling up to the national level of the politics of the state and localities.

Fortunately, I didn’t put my predictions into print, for that is not quite what happened. For a while after Nehru’s death, particularly in the period from 1967 to 1971, when there was persistent instability at the state level in most of the Indian states, and when Mrs Gandhi seemed unable to consolidate her power at the central level, it seemed that the tendencies were clearly in the direction of localization, factionalization, and ruralization. What neither I nor most other observers bargained for was the tenacity of Mrs Gandhi, her adherence to the basic elements of Nehru’s policies and strategies, and her willingness to assert ruthlessly the prerogatives of executive authority and the goals of national integration and rapid industrialization at the cost, if necessary, of state autonomy, opposition freedom, and individual civil liberties. Yet, equally surprisingly to many observers, Mrs Gandhi withdrew in 1977 the Emergency she imposed in 1975 and held free elections in which she and the Congress were thrown out of power in a stunning opposition victory. As the victorious Janata coalition disintegrated in internecine conflicts and personal squabbles during the next three years, it seemed at last that national, state, and local politics had become as one. However, again in 1980, Mrs Gandhi and the Congress returned to power with a two-thirds majority in Parliament and a renewed commitment to old policies.

It appears, then, that the system will not move decisively in one way or another, that the Centre and its goals will not prevail over state and local patterns and that, conversely, state and local politics will not percolate upwards and transform national politics. And that leads me to my theme and argument, namely, that there is a persistent tension and dynamic in the system between two sets of goals and two patterns of politics, that one set and one pattern will not prevail over the other, but that the system is characterized by interpenetration between the two and mutual dependence of one upon the other. This tension and dynamic takes place in a system in which national power is extremely difficult to build and maintain because of the enormous size, diversity, and fragmentation of the country, among other reasons.

Although I believe this dynamic interpenetration is essential to understanding the system and is a permanent aspect of it, its features are not themselves unchanging. The balance of power among levels has changed in the past 20 years and will, no doubt, change again. Some institutions have declined in importance while others have enhanced their power. Patterns of political mobilization also have changed. However, there are many continuities as well. I want to emphasize one of these continuities in this article, namely, the persistence of structures
of local power independent of party organization, but not independent of Government, which must be taken into account by any leader or party that seeks to build national power in India’s political system.

II. The Changing Context of Indian Politics

Four important political changes have affected the nature of the dynamic tensions in the Indian political system in the past twenty years. The first has been the disintegration of the Congress organization as an institutionalized force at the local level. The second has been the decline in power of independent state politicians, of powerful bosses with links to the district which sustained them in control of or in struggles for control of the provincial Congress organization and the state government. The third has been the nationalization of some issues that were less prominent twenty years ago or were considered local issues. These issues include the condition of India’s poor and landless, the treatment of minorities, particularly Muslims, alleged atrocities committed against Scheduled Castes\(^2\) by some of the landed castes, land reforms, and the general state of law and order. A fourth change has been a succession of attempts by national leaders, particularly Mrs Gandhi, to centralize power by ruling through ordinances, by frequent and arbitrary imposition of President’s Rule over the state governments, by direct control of local party decisions on such matters as distribution of tickets to contest elections for the state legislative assemblies as well as Parliament, by the creation of new centralized institutions of police and intelligence, and by other means.

The economic and social context in which politics takes place at the district level also has changed and continues to change, though not quite with revolutionary speed. The major changes, most of which cannot be discussed in this brief article, include the following: the so-called Green Revolution in Agriculture, renewed efforts in the 1970s to enforce land ceilings legislation, the increased political assertiveness at the local level of the middle peasant castes, the increased prominence of issues concerning the well-being of the Scheduled Castes, the poor, and the landless, the increased salience of issues of law and order, the increasing importance of issues concerning the well-being, safety, and cultural identity of the Muslim minority, increased problems of student unrest, and the expansion of government employment and the consequent

\(^2\) Scheduled Castes is the official term used for persons of low or ‘untouchable’ caste in India, who are also often referred to as Harijans.
increased importance of state employment and state employees as factors in the local political economy. It will be noticed that many of these issues were prominent twenty or more years ago and that I have used terms such as ‘increased prominence’ or ‘increased importance’ to refer to them. Even those terms may be an exaggeration for some of the issues and problems noted above. The point is that none of the changes taking place are revolutionary and most involve continuities with the past. Most important, there is great local variation in the speed and the impact of these changes.

The changes that are most relevant to the issues to be discussed in this article concern land ceilings and law and order. Insofar as land ceilings are concerned, pressure from the central government in the 1970s led to renewed efforts by the state governments to enforce more effectively land ceilings legislation and to reduce the permissible ceilings. This change has resulted in increasing the pressure on the descendants of the former great zamindars and talukdars who have managed to hold on to extensive landholdings during the post-zamindari abolition years. Like most such laws in India, land ceilings are selectively enforced and their enforcement leaves some remarkably big new fish out of their net, but it is a continuing factor in the local political context.

The second change relevant to this article concerns law and order. New problems of law and order have arisen partly out of the new tensions in the countryside between landowning cultivators and their labourers. They have also arisen because of the addition of a new dimension to an old problem, namely, the association of local politicians with criminals and dacoits and the entry of the latter directly into politics in some places. Another major new source of violence in the countryside has been the police themselves, who now and then wreak havoc in the villages for their own reasons. The result is that control over the local police has become a very critical matter for district politicians. These several changes in local patterns of law, order, and violence mean that district politics now cannot be properly understood unless one can unravel the interconnections among criminals, politicians, and the police.

The major changes that have taken place in the Congress and in its socio-economic environment in the past twenty years have affected the Congress support bases and local structures of power in important ways. First, electoral support for the Congress eroded in the 1960s to the point where its dominance and control over government were threatened. The Congress no longer has a monopoly over power at the higher levels of the Indian polity. Second, the internal struggle for control over the
Congress organization that led to the split in the Congress in 1969 and the rise of Mrs Gandhi to the position of preeminent leader of the Congress had severe consequences for the party organization, particularly in the north, but elsewhere in India as well. Insofar as the critical north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) is concerned, a weakened Congress organization became dependent increasingly on segments of the locally dominant landowning communities. A major new opposition force, the BKD of Charan Singh, emerged out of one of the former Congress groups, with a reliable base of support among the middle peasantry. In order to build sufficient electoral support, therefore, the Congress has had to try to combine elements from the top and the bottom of north Indian society, from the old landed groups and from the poor and the minorities. Finally, the old pattern of aggregating power from the bottom up, which enhanced the importance of state and local factions and leaders in the Congress, was replaced by a system of control from the top down. Mrs Gandhi, like her father, has intervened decisively in state and local politics from time to time. Unlike her father, however, she has intervened more frequently and with less effectiveness and has relied upon advisers who lack adequate knowledge of, and genuine authority in, local political arenas.

In the remainder of this article, I will illustrate the changes I have discussed above and the mutual dependence that has arisen as a consequence of them between national power and local politics. My illustrations will be drawn from two districts in U.P., in which I did field work in 1961–62 and to which I returned in October and November 1982. The two districts are Gonda in Oudh and Deoria in Eastern U.P. on the Nepal and Bihar border. They illustrate rather different aspects of the local political economy of the state of U.P. Gonda, as part of Oudh, was a district dominated by great landed estates before Independence. The great former talukdars have continued to play important roles in local politics. Deoria, in contrast, was never dominated by the great estates, though there were three important ones in the district. Rather, it has been a district that has been noted for its small landholdings and was, in 1962, one of the poorest and most agriculturally backward districts in the state with an agricultural economy based on intensive paddy cultivation, a large force of mostly landless agricultural labourers, and hardly any opportunities for off-farm employment outside of a declining sugar industry. In the past twenty years, however, Deoria has experienced a number of changes in its politics and political economy—considerable agricultural change, increased assertiveness of the backward or middle status agricultural castes, and the rise of the Lok
Dal, the latest incarnation of the agrarian political party of Chaudhuri Charan Singh. These two districts, therefore, provide a sufficient contrast, and one of them has undergone sufficient change, to make a comparison of structures of local power and politics in them of broad interest.

III. Structures of Local Power

Gonda: The Persistence of Local Power

In 1962, the most impressive structure of local power I found in my research in five districts of U.P. was that maintained by the ex-Raja of Mankapur in Gonda district. Although the Mankapur estate was only the fourth largest talukdari estate in the district in revenue payments and collected revenue only from 149 villages, it had become politically the most important estate in the district even before Independence. After Independence, despite the passage of legislation eliminating the tax-farming system that had sustained the economic and political power of the great landlord families of Oudh and other parts of U.P. during British rule, the heir of the Mankapur estate, Raghvendra Pratap Singh, succeeded in maintaining substantial economic resources and impressive political power in the district until his death in 1964. In fact, he dominated the Congress organization in the district after Independence until 1956, when he left it to go into opposition. His departure from the Congress at that time left the district organization in disarray, but left him still by far the most powerful political force in Gonda. Raghvendra Pratap was a Raja in the grand manner, not in the sense that he lived ostentatiously, but in his natural enjoyment and exercise of power and authority. Moreover, he revelled in politics, which he entered of his own volition during the nationalist movement.

His son and sole heir, Anand Singh, is of an entirely different temperament from his father. He dislikes politics, and does not enjoy in the obvious manner of his father the exercise of power over men. However, like his father, he does enjoy the life in Mankapur: the peace, tranquility, and security of the great palace; the loyalty of the local population who are eager to be of service to the scion of the Mankapur estate, whose protection they want; and the satisfactions of an agricultural life involving the control of land and the resources derived from the produce of the land. In order to maintain such a life style, however, it is not possible to remain aloof from politics.

In 1964, therefore, when his father died, Anand, who was then only in his mid-twenties, was in a difficult situation. His father had fought successfully against the Congress for eight years and had maintained his hold over the district in the face of several major campaigns involving the importation into the district of persons from outside with great financial or political resources to challenge him. Anand, in contrast to his father, preferred not to continue to fight in a perpetual state of siege against powerful outside forces, but to work within the existing structures of external power. Consequently, he joined the Congress and contested the legislative assembly elections successfully in 1967. Thereafter, for ten years, he consistently miscalculated the direction of the political currents and found himself and his estate under unrelenting pressure from external authorities. In 1969, when the Congress split, Anand chose to remain with the Congress (O). Although, in 1971, he succeeded in winning the parliamentary election on the Congress (O) ticket in the face of the massive victories of the Congress led by Mrs Gandhi nearly everywhere else in north India, he found himself politically isolated thereafter. The Congress returned to power in the state of U.P. and with a two-thirds majority at the Centre. The pressure by the state authorities against the former landlords increased with the passage of new land ceilings legislation in U.P. and the publication of a report by the State Government that identified various former zamindars and talukdars, including Anand Singh of Mankapur, as still in possession of vast illegal landholdings. In 1972, after the war with Bangladesh, when many non-Congress MPs and MLAs (Member, Legislative Assembly) decided to join the Congress (I), Anand also joined the ruling party. His decision to enter the Congress (I) did not protect him from further pressures from the state government when, during the Emergency, Mr H. N. Bahuguna became the Chief Minister of U.P. and made increased efforts to get the lands of former landlords, including those of Anand Singh in Mankapur, declared surplus under new land ceilings legislation. Anand himself lost an election for the first time in the great anti-Congress wave of 1977, and the Janata Party came to power in the state and country thereafter.

Remarkably enough, in the face of this series of political blunders and miscalculations, when I returned to Mankapur in 1978, in 1980, and for an extended period in 1982, I found Anand Singh as relaxed as always, the Mankapur palace in excellent condition, a considerable personal following at his command, and his political influence at a peak by 1982.4

4 The information in the rest of this section is drawn primarily from interviews conducted by me in Gonda district in November 1982.
Although the wealth and lands still under the control of Anand Singh cannot be identified precisely because they are under litigation, there is no doubt that he commands great economic resources. He maintains that he retains only that amount of land to which he is entitled under land ceilings legislation and that the rest has been given to educational trusts and to former tenants or has been sold off. Others say he continues to control directly or through trusts approximately 1500 acres of land, on which he grows foodgrains, sugar cane, mangoes, teak and other forest products, and various other cash crops such as citronella. Anand also maintains a variety of agro-based and agro-related enterprises, divided into 16 departments. His lands, trusts, and enterprises extend throughout the countryside around Mankapur, scattered here and there, in a radius of approximately 10 kilometres.

Anand has sufficient economic resources at his command to retain an extensive and loyal political following and to control the important political and economic institutions in the district—the cooperative banks, the land development committees, the cooperative cane unions, the block development committees. He also controls the police. Whenever Anand is in Mankapur, local people acknowledge his power by their visits to the palace to request his aid on every kind of matter, from providing emergency medical transportation to adjudication of local disputes over land to requests for intervention with the local administration for postings, permits, and redress of grievances of all sorts. Those who recognize the authority of Mankapur also can be assured of police protection when they need it and of freedom from police harassment.

In 1980, in her successful strategy to return to power, Mrs Gandhi chose to rely whenever possible on men like Anand Singh, who could be counted upon to deliver votes. Anand himself contested for parliament and won the Mankapur seat with a massive majority. In the distribution of tickets for the Congress in both the January 1980 parliamentary and the June 1980 legislative assembly elections, Anand was given control over all but two legislative assembly tickets. All but those two were won by the Congress in Gonda in its most impressive victory in that district since Independence.

In the normal course, a man who can deliver 9 out of 11 legislative assembly and 2 out of 2 parliamentary seats in a district could be expected to demand and receive an important ministry or two in the state and central governments for himself and/or his followers. However, Anand does not like state and national politics. He prefers to spend as much time as possible in Mankapur and begrudges the time he must
spend in Lucknow and Delhi. His main interest is in the survival of his
estate, his palace, and, therefore, his local political influence. Conse-
quently, Anand chose to ask for a factory for his backward and remote
district lacking in any industry rather than for a ministry for himself or
his closest supporters.

The story of how Anand Singh acquired a factory for his district
reveals how national policy and local politics are nowadays often
directly linked without intermediation through the state level. Some
time in 1981, the central government proposed to set up four fertilizer
gas plants in four districts of U.P., of which Gonda was to be one.
However, when the technical information concerning the appropriateness
of the four sites was fed into the computer, negative results were
received back on two sites—Amethi in Sultanpur district and Gonda.
Amethi being the constituency of Sanjay and later Rajiv Gandhi, the
computer ultimately corrected the results for Sultanpur district but not
for Gonda. Anand, therefore, went to see the Prime Minister once again
to remind her that he wanted a factory for his district, in response to
which Mrs Gandhi promised Anand a new telecommunications factory
to be built by the French at a cost of Rs 300 crores ($300 million; £193
million) to employ 5,000 persons. Once again, technical studies were
done concerning the feasibility of the proposed site for the factory and
were fed into the computer, which again gave negative results. At one
point, Anand suggested to the Industries minister that the computer
might be used to 'fetch the votes then next time.' He advised Mrs
Gandhi that the computers were giving negative results only because the
Indian administrative officers and technicians and the French collaborators
preferred a more attractive place such as Bangalore, which also
would have good educational facilities for their children, to a remote
and backward district such as Gonda. At this point, Mrs Gandhi
awarded the factory to Gonda district, basing her decision on its
backwardness and consequent need for new industry and employment.
By awarding the telecommunications factory to Gonda, the Centre also
was acknowledging the political value of Anand Singh and his capacity
to deliver votes.

Preliminary work is now going on at the site of the factory, which is to
be constructed only a couple of kilometres away from the palace at
Mankapur on barren land that was provided by Anand himself. In
bringing the first major modern industry to Gonda since Independence,
Anand has provided the possibility of considerable new employment for
some of his constituents and the prospect of generating extensive further
industrial, commercial, and employment opportunities that are
expected to be provided by the creation of some 30 to 40 ancillary industries. Anand himself is expected to set up one or two ancillary industries of his own, for which sites have already been selected.

This incident of the telephone factory brings out several important features of contemporary politics in India, some of which are different from the days of Nehru’s dominance. The first feature is the demonstrable high value of a persisting structure of local power such as that at Mankapur. The second is the necessity for anyone who wishes to maintain such a structure to go into politics at the local level and to develop external links at the important decision points outside the district. The third feature and one that is different from 20 years ago is the fact that the important external links are in Delhi, in fact in the office of the Prime Minister. The state government and politicians had nothing to do with this decision. Twenty years ago, the chief ministers would have vied with each other before Nehru to demand the siting of such a valuable project in their state. The fourth point follows from the third. Centralization of power in the hands of the Prime Minister in India’s political system in effect means that the Prime Minister is free only to decide whose local support is most critical for her own persistence in power. For the power of the Prime Minister and Congress power at the Centre are dependent upon those at the local level who can deliver votes and seats and who cannot be ignored. In north India, direct relations between powerful persons at the local level and those at the Centre, including the Prime Minister and her close advisers, have become common, although not always to mutual advantage and satisfaction, as the following contrasting case from Deoria district suggests.

Deoria: The Persistence of Division

In Deoria, as in Gonda district, the Congress under the leadership of Mrs Gandhi and her son, Sanjay, attempted to work through local structures of power to establish a stable support base in the countryside. However, in Deoria, there are no local structures of power comparable to Mankapur, the district has for long been a highly politicized one, and inter-party competition has been very keen. In 1962, the Congress in Deoria district was weak, fragmented, and factionalized. Inter-party competition between the Congress and the Socialist parties was intense. The politics of the district focused especially upon two issues: the problems of sugar, especially the issue of the cane price, and struggles centering around the increasing political assertiveness of the backward castes in a district whose politics and local institutions were then
dominated by the elite castes of Brahmans, Rajputs, and Bhumihiars. The district then was a symbol of extreme poverty and backwardness that provided a solid base for the Socialist parties.\footnote{See Brass, \textit{Factional Politics}, ch. vi.}

In 1982, as in 1962, inter-party competition in Deoria district was very keen. However, there was an outward change in its form. In the intervening years, the Socialist movement had disappeared. The more moderate leaders, many of them of elite caste status, had joined the Congress in the 1960s. The more radical leaders, some of elite caste status, but others of middle caste status, continued in opposition but joined with the agrarian, backward caste-oriented movement of Chaudhuri Charan Singh. The present political form of that movement in U.P. and in Deoria district is the party known as the Lok Dal. As a consequence of the disintegration of the Socialist movement and the rise of the Lok Dal as the principal opposition party in Deoria district, conflict between the elite and backward castes has become somewhat more sharply focused, though by no means as yet completely polarized.

As for the Congress in Deoria district in the intervening years, it acquired some new strength in the 1960s as a consequence of the incorporation of the moderate socialist leaders into it. Since the two most prominent moderate Socialist leaders were of Bhumihaar caste,\footnote{Genda Singh and Ramayan Rai.} the Congress also strengthened its support amongst this powerful local caste and its clients. However, the Congress remained throughout these years in Deoria district a highly fragmented party, with its leadership drawn principally from persons of elite caste status, especially Brahmans and Bhumihiars, and its support base mostly among those same castes along with some support from the lower castes and the Muslim minority. Moreover, in successive elections during the past twenty years, the backward castes have made their presence felt increasingly as voters and candidates, mostly in opposition to the Congress.

In 1980, in their search for allies in north India who could help to bring them back to power at the Centre, Mrs Gandhi and her son, Sanjay, found in Deoria district another member of a landed family who seemed well-suited to their needs. Although Deoria district was not, like Gonda district, dominated by great landed estates before Independence, there were three substantial estates in the district. Of the three, the best-endowed financially was Padrauna, which at one time owned three sugar mills as well as landed property. The Padrauna Rajas were Sainthwar by caste, a local backward caste considered by many people to be part of the Kurmi caste category. In 1980, Mr C. P. N. Singh of the
Padrauna estate was recruited by Sanjay Gandhi to contest for Parliament on the Congress (I) ticket and, having done so successfully, was made a minister of state in the Government of India. It is also generally believed in the district that he was given also the major say in the distribution of tickets for the June 1980 legislative assembly elections in Deoria district. In this way, it would seem, the Congress would have the double advantage of a base in a powerful and wealthy landed family in the district, through a person from a backward caste.

In contrast to Gonda district, however, the strategy of relying upon C. P. N. Singh to control the district failed. The Lok Dal won six of thirteen seats in the district and a candidate from another opposition party won a seventh, leaving the Congress with less than half the seats in the district. Moreover, in 1982, the Congress was bitterly divided in Deoria district and the leadership of Mr C. P. N. Singh was held in contempt by some of the strongest local leaders of the Congress.

Three reasons for the failure of the Congress in Deoria to acquire as much strength as in Gonda have been given already—the higher degree of politicization in the district, the greater traditional strength of the opposition, and the comparative weakness of the Padrauna estate in comparison to Mankapur. Still, on the face of it, the Congress leadership might have hoped for a more favourable result in electoral terms and, at the least, a much less badly divided party. Let us examine, therefore, in more detail the leadership of C. P. N. Singh, the manner in which he acquired it, and the way in which he has exercised it.  

First of all, it is felt by even the mildest of his critics in the Deoria Congress that C. P. N. Singh’s leadership was not earned independently. For example, one of the oldest and most faithful Congressmen of the district was asked about C. P. N. Singh and gave the following reply.

Respondent: He has no political ground.
PRB: How can that be?
Res: Background, he has nothing.
PRB: So how did he become a minister in the central government?
Res: Now the policy is quite different. . . . Previously, the main point of consideration used to be sacrifice and work. Now sacrifice and political-social work or public work [are] in the background.
PRB: And what is in the foreground? . . .

7 The information in the rest of this section, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn primarily from interviews conducted by me in Deoria district in October 1982.
Res.: Foreground, how far he has . . . got contacts with the leadership. . . .

PRB: Is it a fact that Mr C. P. N. Singh was simply an appointee of Sanjay Gandhi?
Res.: That is a fact. That is a fact.

A rather more embittered and hostile Congressman opposed to the leadership of C. P. N. Singh put the matter more strongly. He claimed that the father of C. P. N. Singh had been patronized by the British and had fought against the Congress and that the son himself had originally entered politics in 1969 in opposition to the Congress as a candidate of Charan Singh’s BKD, ‘though he was not political at any time . . . by thinking, by working, by any means.’ After the election he left the BKD and joined the Congress.

Resp: [In 1980, C. P. N. Singh] became M.P. and now he is Minister. He has no backing, he has no following, . . . no . . . political thinking.
PRB: But he is [the] only central minister in the Congress Government from Deoria district? How can this be?
Resp: Yes. I don’t know why . . . Ah, Mr Sanjay Gandhi is no more in the world . . .
PRB: So we can’t speak ill of him!
Resp: We can’t say about him. . . . [But,] perhaps Mr C. P. N. Singh is not [even a] member of [the] Congress Party . . . in Deoria district.
PRB: But he was a man of Sanjay Gandhi?
Resp: Undoubtedly. . . .

According to this view, the selection of C. P. N. Singh to be the leader of the Deoria district Congress had nothing to do with his political background or lack of it, his position in the Pandrauna estate, or his backward caste status, but was because of his personal and familial connections with Sanjay Gandhi. His wife is the cousin of the Punjabi industrialist Kuldeep Narang, who has had close connections with Maneka Gandhi, the wife of Sanjay Gandhi. Because of these connections, it is alleged, he was made minister of state for defence while Sanjay was alive and later was given the portfolio of technology.8 He was brought into the central government for the first time in March 1980.

8 In February 1983, in a cabinet reshuffle, Mr C. P. N. Singh lost the portfolio of Science and Technology, among others, and was left with only Non-Conventional Energy Sources: Hindu February 5, 1983. He resigned from the government a few days thereafter.
without having had any previous parliamentary or ministerial experience.

Those close to C. P. N. Singh reject these allegations. However, it is not disputed by anyone that, as one person put it, Mr C. P. N. Singh ‘was a great follower of [Sanjay Gandhi],’ that he had known him since 1971, that he ‘admired him,’ and he felt Sanjay Gandhi ‘was really what India needed.’ Moreover, insofar as the Emergency of 1975 to 1980 is concerned, with whose most unpopular measures Sanjay Gandhi was identified, C. P. N. Singh is known to feel that there was nothing ‘wrong with it.’

When his detractors say that C. P. N. Singh has no background, they mean that he has not been a loyal Congressman throughout, that he did not build his political career by establishing a local, grassroots following, and that he was not closely and steadily involved in district-level politics. However they are interpreted, the facts are that he entered politics in 1969 to fight against the Congress after a local Congress MLA interfered with his authority over his employees on his own farm. He was offered the BKD ticket after meeting with Charan Singh and won the election with a large majority. In 1970 he left Charan Singh and joined Mrs Gandhi. However, in 1974 he was denied the Congress ticket. He also did not contest in 1977. Then, in 1980, he was given the Congress ticket for Parliament. It is true, therefore, that C. P. N. Singh began his political career in opposition to the Congress, that he lacked sufficient influence in the party to obtain a ticket in either 1974 or 1977, and that he acquired his political influence in the district after receiving the ticket for Parliament in 1980 and a position in the Ministry thereafter. He won the Parliamentary seat itself partly because there were two strong non-Congress candidates against him who divided the opposition vote.

The primary reasons for C. P. N. Singh’s failure to lead effectively the Congress in Deoria district, however, are the inadequacies of his resource base in the north of the district and the antagonism he aroused among the important Brahman and the Bhumihar leaders in the southern part of the district. It is claimed that he was given control over the selection of candidates in 1980 by Sanjay Gandhi and that he was given such control more because of his personal and family connections than because of the strength of his political base in the district. Moreover, instead of seeking an alliance with the dominant Brahman and Bhumihar Congressmen in the southern part of the district, he is said to have simply cut them from the list of candidates, and that, too, at the last minute and in a humiliating manner. According to the account of the matter given by his rivals, they left Delhi by train on the day before
the final date for filing nomination papers, assured that they had the
nominations, only to learn from the newspapers upon their arrival in
Deoria that they had, in fact, not been allotted the tickets. Although
C. P. N. Singh claims he had absolutely nothing to do with the selection
of candidates for the Legislative Assembly, both those who did not
receive the tickets and those who did believe that C. P. N. Singh played a
critical role in the final decision. The way in which the list of candidates
was allegedly determined in 1980 is described by one of the local leaders
of the Deoria Congress who was cut from the list:

Resp: . . . the district leaders of the Congress were debarred from
the ticket. . . .
PRB: Because of Sanjay Gandhi, you mean. . . .
Resp: Due to C. P. N. Singh. Why, Sanjay Gandhi will not know
who is X, and who is this leader or that leader, [or anybody in] this district organization . . . He was completely in the
hand of Mr C. P. N. Singh . . . And this district was allotted
to C. P. N. Singh in the same way some districts were
allotted do Mr X, Mr Y, Mr Z, who were nearer to
Mr Sanjay Gandhi. And they allotted tickets to their
friends or their relations and the political rivals were
debanned. . . . And we are political rivals.

Although those close to C. P. N. Singh deny that he played any such
role in the distribution of Congress tickets in Deoria district, there is no
doubt that he had seen himself in the role of diminishing the influence of
the previously dominant leaders from the southern part of the district
and from the northern part as well. He claims, in fact, to have broken the
influence of such leaders, whom he considers ‘manipulators.’ The view
from the side of C. P. N. Singh is that his rivals ‘don’t matter,’ that, ‘if
they manage to get tickets, they will never win’ an election. Rather,
‘they are zero. They have done nothing except to manipulate things
from the top.’ It deserves to be noted that the criticisms that the two sides
in Deoria make of each other are identical, namely, that they have no
genuine local sources of influence and popularity based on work in the
district, but depend for their local position on influence with powerful
persons in the state capital or in Delhi.

A comparison of the local leadership of C. P. N. Singh in Deoria
district with that of Anand Singh in Gonda district will help to bring out
several features of the relationship between national power and local
politics in contemporary India. First, in both cases, it should be noted
that the Congress leadership in Delhi sought allies from the most
powerful local families with the greatest economic and/or political resources. The Congress operates more than ever before through existing structures of local power, which its economic policies are supposedly designed to eliminate.

Second, it is obvious that, if the national leadership is going to rely on one person primarily for local leadership, they are taking a considerable risk. In Gonda, they chose the scion of the most powerful local landed estate, a man in full control of that estate’s own resources and with extensive local influence beyond his own estate. In Deoria, they chose a man who was a member of an estate once the largest in the district. But that estate never occupied a comparable position in Deoria to that of Mankapur in Gonda; the present Padrauna estate is divided economically and politically into two main segments and several subsections, C. P. N. Singh does not control all its resources, and its political influence has not extended very far from its original domain.

This contrast brings out a significant difference between patterns of local control now and twenty years ago, namely, that the national leaders in Delhi lack the local knowledge that state leaders had then. Twenty years ago, candidate selection in the congress was a grand and complex struggle that took place at three levels primarily—the district, the state, and the centre. The state leadership played a pivotal role in the process, though the final decisions were often made in Delhi. The results often led to discontent at the local level and to disaffected Congressmen contesting against or sabotaging the election campaigns of the official candidates. But everyone knew who everyone else was. The state leaders knew their local allies and their allies’ enemies. They could go to Delhi and say to the national leaders that Mr X in constituency Y is an appropriate or inappropriate candidate because he has worked or not worked hard in that constituency for a long time, because his caste is such-and-such and the caste composition of the constituency is as follows and, for these reasons, he will or will not be a good candidate. The national leaders in Delhi nowadays do not have this kind of local knowledge. They do not wish to leave the decisions to state leaders or even allow them too big a role in the process, for then they become dependent on the state leaders. So, they take a chance and select, with partial knowledge, one local man to do the job for them. Sometimes, they choose sensibly, as in Gonda, sometimes they choose less sensibly, as in Deoria.

Finally, despite the differences between the local leadership of Anand Singh and C. P. N. Singh, their relationships with the national leadership bring out clearly the mutual dependence between the two.
Moreover, despite the apparent centralization of decision-making power in New Delhi, it is the national leadership that is more dependent on effective local leadership than vice-versa. Anand Singh needs the help and patronage of the central government to expand his economic resources and his political influence. But the structure of Mankapur’s local power has persisted through several generations in the face of considerable external opposition. In Deoria, C. P. N. Singh lacks a strong independent base such as that of Anand Singh. The national leaders lack local knowledge. Therefore, they remain dependent upon ineffective local leadership and do not know how do find an alternative.

IV. The Manipulation and Control of Incidents of Violence

It would be an extraordinarily difficult, in fact an impossible task, to build national power in India solely through the methods of material exchange that I have just described. To build power and broad support in any large-scale system, political leaders must be able to move large numbers of people, preferably whole blocs of voters, with appeals to their ideals, values and emotional needs. The primary emotional need for most people in all societies, as Thomas Hobbes pointed out vividly long ago, is for a sense of personal safety and security. In India, that primary need is often unsettled and replaced by fear of violence and sudden death or loss of property. Such fears exist particularly among Muslims in South Asia, the atrocities recently perpetrated in Assam being the worst examples of the legitimate bases for their fears since Independence. They also exist among many low caste people who fear the power of the landed men to beat them, kill them, or steal their lands. They exist generally among poor people who fear the local power of the police. They exist also among the rich and high caste people in large parts of north India, who fear the apparent decline in law and order generally, and who demonstrate their fear by going out with guns in the evenings and sleeping with guns close by their bedsides. Consequently, there is no issue more likely to make a broad emotional appeal to large numbers of people in India than issues of law and order and violence.

The manipulation of incidents of violence by political leaders to appeal to the emotional needs of whole categories of voters has been a central feature of Indian politics for a decade now. I want now to show how such incidents are used, with two examples, again, from Deoria and Gonda districts. In these examples, I will demonstrate that a critical element in the relationship between local and national leaders is the
ability of the former to control the local police to prevent local incidents of violence from occurring, if possible, and most important to prevent them from being used by the opposition as a symbolic issue against the government when they do occur.

Deoria: Local Violence as a National Symbolic Resource

In January 1980, an incident occurred in Narainpur village in Deoria district, which received national attention in the press, in Parliament, and in the state Legislative Assembly. An old woman of the village, grandmother and sole support of two young children whose parents were dead, was crushed to death by a passing bus. The villagers stopped the bus and demanded compensation for the woman's cremation expenses and for the maintenance of the two children left alone. After some time, the driver was allowed to leave with the understanding that the owner of the bus would be informed of the incident by him. Accounts of the incident differ from this point on. According to the villagers, the owner came to the village with a police party, a crowd collected, the police did not like the look of the crowd and began caning the people, and the people retaliated. Later, the villagers were taken to a nearby bus stand with the understanding that they would be given the desired compensation. In the presence of the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), the bus owner, and the police, it was decided that Rs 5,000 would be paid after two or three days to the villagers for the cremation of the old woman and the upbringing of the two children. However, after the bus owner and the MLA departed, the villagers allege that they were surrounded by the police, kept under surveillance for three hours and not permitted to leave until they signed or made their thumb impressions upon a document presented to them, after which they were beaten one-by-one, subjected to various indignities and injuries, and had their belongings stolen before they were released. Later in the night, a party of police and goondas (toughs) from the surrounding villages descended on Narainpur and beat the villagers again, after which a number of them were taken to the Captaianganj police station for further beatings, where the legs of some villagers were broken and where all were subjected again to indignities, after which they were taken to a jail in another town.

The account of the local police differs somewhat. According to one account, the villagers stopped another bus two or three days after the

9 Unless otherwise indicated, the information on the Narainpur incident in this section comes from my interviews in Deoria district in October 1982.
death of the grandmother, beat up the driver, and decided to detain the bus until compensation was paid to them. When the Captainganj station officers and the constables happened to pass by, they stopped, asked the people to release the bus, and promised them that compensation would be paid. However, someone in the crowd pointed towards the station officer and shouted that he had accepted a bribe from the bus owner, whereupon the people began beating the station officers and the constables. Later, a larger party of police came to the village, arrested the people who had beaten up the police personnel, and registered a case against them. According to another police account, the villagers were correct that the sub-inspector had been bribed and had given only a small proportion of the amount paid by the bus owner to the villagers. Consequently they were enraged on that account when they attacked the police party. According to this same account, when a larger police party returned, they beat up all the men mercilessly. A case was then filed by the villagers against the police.

The Narainpur incident took place on January 14, 1980, just after the parliamentary elections, which brought Mrs Gandhi and her Congress (I) back to power at the Centre, but before the state legislative assembly elections held in 10 states in June 1980, in which Mrs Gandhi extended her power to the state level by winning majorities in nearly all of them. The Narainpur incident was a major symbolic issue made use of by Mrs Gandhi and the Congress (I) to demonstrate the incompetence of the Janata government still ruling in U.P. and in other states and its alleged mistreatment of Muslims and Scheduled Castes and the consequent need for mid-term legislative assembly elections. It could be used to suggest mistreatment of both Muslims and Scheduled Castes because the village is predominantly Muslim and contains also a large population of Scheduled Castes.

The first headlines on the incident in the national press in January 29 referred to a ‘Mass Rape Incident’ and to ‘Mass Rape, Plunder by UP Cops’. Later news stories placed the Narainpur incident in the context of other ‘excesses committed [in the country] on its weakest sections’. There were reports that a Muslim man and a Harijan woman had been murdered. Three days after the first notice of the incident in the national press, Mr Sanjay Gandhi himself visited the village and said that what happened in Narainpur was unprecedented. There was not a single girl or woman in Narainpur who was not raped. Nor was there a

10 Indian Express and Times of India, January 29, 1980.
11 Leader, January 30, 1980.
12 Hindu, February 9, 1980.
single man who was not beaten up. To cap it all, there is not a single house which was not looted.\textsuperscript{13} He later said that the Narainpur incident was one of several ‘cases which showed that the state Government was encouraging disruptionists to spread terror,’ as a consequence of which ‘the people in the state were feeling insecure.’\textsuperscript{14} In an exchange of letters with the chief minister of the state, Mrs Gandhi said, ‘I doubt if there has been any other instance of such magnitude since independence.’ As for the police firings that took place during the Emergency, they were ‘negligible in comparison with what happened in the Pantnagar police firing or now in Narainpur.’\textsuperscript{15} On February 9, Mrs Gandhi herself, with a large entourage of Congress (I) political leaders and ministers, proceeded to Narainpur and, after meeting the villagers, reportedly said her visit had given her an ‘emotional moving feeling’ and made her ‘feel very angry with a system which allowed that sort of thing to happen.’ She said that ‘her government would try to give whatever relief was possible.’\textsuperscript{16}

However, Sanjay Gandhi and Mrs Gandhi did not visit Narainpur only to console the villagers and to promise them justice and relief. The incident occurred in a constituency long dominated by the opposition and held at the time by a Lok Dal representative. The state government was in the hands of the Janata party and the Lok Dal. The Congress (I) was seeking a pretext to dismiss the government of U.P., preferably in disgrace, to enhance its chances of winning a big majority in the state legislative assembly elections that would soon be called. Mr Sanjay Gandhi put the incident to such political use after his visit to Narainpur when he demanded that the U.P. government resign because of its failure to prevent or to respond effectively to the Narainpur incident.\textsuperscript{17} Mrs Gandhi also made similar use of her visit to Narainpur, after which she reportedly said that the ‘Banarasi Das government has no right to exist.’\textsuperscript{18} The Union Home Minister, who makes the legal case for dismissal of a state government in the Central Cabinet, said on February 11 that ‘the Union Government would invoke its constitutional powers if incidents like Narainpur happened in states.’\textsuperscript{19} On February 18, the President of India, acting on the advice of the cabinet, dismissed the

\textsuperscript{13} Leader, February 1, 1980.
\textsuperscript{14} Hindu, February 9, 1980.
\textsuperscript{16} Statesman, February 8, 1980.
\textsuperscript{17} Leader, February 1, 1980.
\textsuperscript{18} Leader, February 8, 1980.
\textsuperscript{19} Leader, February 11, 1980.
U.P. government and nine other state governments in India and ordered elections to be held in them in June 1980. Although the case for dismissing these governments was made on legal-constitutional grounds and had a precedent, the Narainpur incident was the principal symbolic pretext used to justify the dismissal before the public.

The leaders of the Janata and Lok Dal parties, of course, defended the U.P. government. The U.P. chief minister said that ‘The Narainpur incident had “been blown out of all proportion” and was being used “as a handle to malign the State Government.”’\(^{20}\) He accused Mrs Gandhi of ‘making political capital out of a human tragedy.’\(^{21}\)

As a consequence of the furore created over Narainpur, a commission of inquiry was appointed to examine the incident. The commission submitted its report to the state government of U.P. on July 3, 1981 when the Congress was back in power. The report dismissed as totally without foundation the charges of rape of any woman in Narainpur, although it did support the charge that there had been severe beatings and ‘wrongful confinement’ of villagers. The printing of the report was delayed for nearly a full year and was not placed before the House until June 22, 1982 and then only on the last day of the monsoon session, thereby preventing any debate on it.\(^{22}\)

It is not entirely clear how the Narainpur story broke onto the state and national stage. It appears, however, to have become magnified because of the failure of local politicians to control the police and because of internal rivalries between segments of the ruling coalition in the state government. The local MLA was a Lok Dal member. He attempted to intervene to pacify the villagers and prevent further incidents, but could not prevent the police from going back to the village to beat the villagers again. He, therefore, reported the incident to the chief minister. The chief minister, Mr Banarsi Das, was an appointee of the Lok Dal segment of the coalition and had been made chief minister against the wishes of the Janata segment in an earlier and uneasy compromise. Janata party workers also found out about the case and reported it to the chief minister, who then sent one of his ministers to Deoria district and to Narainpur to investigate. The minister came back to Lucknow with his report of mass rape, plunder, and ‘the death of two persons’ in the village and blamed it on ‘state government officials [who] wanted to destabilize the Lok Dal ministry’ at the bidding of the Congress (I). The Lok Dal MLA attributed the incident to upper caste police officers who wanted to ‘“punish” voters, mostly Muslims, who

\(^{20}\) *Leader*, February 12, 1980.
\(^{21}\) *Times of India*, February 9, 1980.
\(^{22}\) *Hindu*, September 11, 1982.
had supported him in the previous elections. It was after the Janata–Lok Dal state government itself revealed the incident that the Congress (I) leaders entered the scene.

Although accounts of the incidents at Narainpur continue to differ somewhat, the available evidence three years after the events suggests the following facts and elements in the situation. First, there is no evidence that Muslims were selected for harassment because they were Muslims or that Harijan women were raped. Nor were there any deaths except for the old woman killed by the bus. Second, the local judicial system was not brought into play and is, in fact, of no use whatever in such a situation, which is not uncommon in rural India. Consequently, justice must be worked out locally among the villagers, the guilty or responsible parties, the police, and the politicians. Third, in the absence again of effective local political control, such issues become confrontations between the local population and the local police. These confrontations are not ordinary or even extraordinary police actions involving maintaining law and order and crowd control. They are pitched battles, waged with venom and viciousness, in which the police may initially be understaffed and, therefore, may get beaten up themselves, but will certainly return with larger forces and superior power to take revenge. Fourth, if there is no stable structure of local power to handle such a situation effectively, it will go out of control and become magnified into a political issue in the larger arenas of state and national politics. Finally, once the issue is introduced into external arenas, it is shaped to fit larger purposes that have very little to do with the actual circumstances. In this case, the issues in the external arena included the following: the competence of the state government and its right to rule, the treatment of low caste people and Muslims by the Janata–Lok Dal government, the general state of law and order in the country in recent years and in the post-Independence period, and who was responsible for its alleged deterioration. Finally, it should be evident that these violent incidents are at once an enormous liability to any government under whose rule they occur and a great resource for the opposition. The stakes involved are the stability of the existing government and the outcome of the next election. In the immediate aftermath, such incidents may be used to embarrass an existing government and even may be used as a pretext to dismiss it. In the longer period after such an incident, in preparation for the next election, the purpose of the opposition will be to demonstrate that the incident in

\[23\] *Times of India*, January 29, 1980.
question is but a reflection of the broader inability of the government to protect, or even its deliberate policy to harass, certain 'sections' of the population, particularly Muslims and low castes. The danger for the ruling party, therefore, and the hope of the opposition is that a whole bloc or blocs of voters in the state or country will be turned in the next election through the manipulation of local violent incidents.

_Gonda: The Importance of Local Control of the Police_

That incidents of local violence need not be magnified, distorted, and manipulated for external use in wider political arenas can be demonstrated by comparing the Narainpur incident with a similar incident that occurred in the village of Kurman Purwa in Gonda district in July 1982. At this time, the Congress was in control of the district, the state, and the central government. As in the Narainpur incident, the principal events are not difficult to establish, but the details and the explanations vary.\(^{24}\)

Insofar as the events are concerned, it appears that a party of police and local toughs descended on the village inhabited entirely by persons of low and backward caste status on the night of July 13, 1982 and engaged in a brawl with the villagers, whose outcome was indecisive, that is to say, the villagers gave back as good as they received. However, a second and larger party returned that night and beat the villagers, and possibly dragged the women out of their houses, and did some damage and looting. On the 17th, the police returned with a decree of confiscation and allegedly removed grain and other property of the villagers. The villagers say that a number of their men also were taken to the police station that night and robbed there and that six of them were left in jail for nearly three months.

Between the 13th and the 17th, the local Congress MLA intervened and was promised by the police that no further retaliatory action would be taken against the villagers. As in the Narainpur incident, however, the local MLA was not able to control the police, who returned to the village on the 17th despite their promises not to do so. Anand Singh also intervened personally in an attempt to keep the situation under control. However, the local police apparently were not even restrained by his intervention.

Between July 13 and August 9, the Congress MLA from the adjacent constituency and the local opposition also became involved in the

\(^{24}\) All information in this section is derived from interviews conducted by me in Gonda district in November 1982.
incident. By most accounts, the police violence perpetrated at Kurman Purwa was carried out by the local police constables on their own, without the authority or support of the station officer. However, the Congress MLA from the adjacent constituency, Umeshwar Pratap Singh, wished to have the station officer transferred because the officer was not willing to accept his authority locally. Both the Superintendent of Police and Anand Singh wished to transfer the constables, but retain the local station officer, whom they both considered to be a good and loyal (to them) police officer. Umeshwar Pratap, therefore, joined with the opposition to protest against the police atrocities committed at Kurman Purwa. At this point, both Anand Singh and the Superintendent of Police considered it best to have all the local officers, including the station officer, transferred in order to defuse the situation. When the station officer was transferred, Umeshwar Pratap withdrew from the protest, which then became entirely an opposition affair.

Opposition involvement took two forms. The runner-up candidate for MLA in the constituency in which the incident occurred, an attorney and local leader of the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), rushed to the village and made inquiries on the spot. He also agreed to act as attorney on behalf of the villagers. Second, in cooperation with the local Communist party, he organized political protest meetings on July 27 and August 9, 1982. To these meetings, CPI and DSP leaders from all parts of the district and several state party leaders also came. The opposition leaders demanded that a judicial inquiry be held into the police atrocity at Kurman Purwa, that the cases pending against the innocent villagers of Kurman Purwa be withdrawn, and that the police personnel involved in the incidents be punished. None of the opposition demands were conceded.

Anand Singh did not intervene beyond seeing to the transfer of the officers. He clearly wanted the incident to be kept as quiet as possible. Although he was not able to keep it out of the hands of the opposition and the press entirely, it did not acquire anywhere near the publicity associated with the Narainpur incident.

There are three versions of the reasons for the police atrocities. One is that it arose out of a quarrel between a Kahar villager of Kurman Purwa and a Gosain of the neighbouring village in which the Gosain enlisted the aid of the police on the basis of friendship and/or bribery to retaliate against the Kahar. The second is that the kahar and other villagers of Kurman Purwa who deal in cattle had had a successful day at the Tuesday cattle market in Colonelnaj and that the police learned that they had made some money and went to the village to rob them. The
third version is that the police went to Kurman Purwa for some reason or other and were beaten by drunken villagers, after which the police returned with a larger party. In one variation on this version, both the villagers and the police were drunk.

Whichever account one accepts of the Kurman Purwa incident it is of a different type from the Narainpur incident. In Narainpur, an accident precipitated a quarrel between the villagers and the police in which it is not at all clear who struck first, though there is not much doubt that the police struck last and hardest. In Kurman Purwa, most accounts of the incident suggest an unprovoked attack by the local police on the villagers, precipitated in most versions by enmity between persons of neighbouring villages of different castes.

Here, then, were solid materials for a case to be made of police atrocities committed against persons of low and backward caste origins. However, such an issue can be expanded only through collaboration between locally knowledgeable politicians and interested outside leaders. Since the Congress controlled the constituency and the district, it was in the interests of the local MLA and Anand Singh to keep the issue quiet and to settle it peacefully, without further fuss. They were prevented from doing so by the activities of a renegade Congress MLA, whose sole interest in the matter was to get the local police officers who refused to obey him transferred, and by the local opposition politicians who naturally wished to capitalize on the issue. The Congress MLA’s activities were stopped by satisfying his demands. Anand Singh, at first reluctant to transfer the station officer, ultimately agreed to do so when it became clear that the local police were continuing to harass the villagers. The activities of the local opposition could not be stopped, but they were not deeply threatening because the opposition parties involved were the least effective ones in the politics of the district and the state. The two leading opposition parties in U.P., the Lok Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party, had no interest in becoming involved in an incident from which other parties stood to gain.

The central political significance of the Kurman Purwa incident is its clear demonstration of the national importance of effective local control over the police. Before and since the Kurman Purwa incident, the most powerful political leader of the district, Anand Singh, has had to face challenges to his and the SP’s control over the district police from a local Congress MLA who himself wishes to control the police in his area for his own purposes. In the Kurman Purwa incident, the police broke free of all political constraints, thereby providing the potential for a symbolic political issue of state and national importance focusing on police
atrocities and victimization of middle and low caste people. The incident probably had very little, if anything, to do with caste victimization. It does, however, reveal the local police in a characteristic mode—implicated directly in local conflicts, open to bribery, capable of loot and harassment of innocent persons, and a potential danger to the exercise of national power when they cannot be controlled effectively at the local level and cannot be used to restrain and conceal potentially embarrassing situations rather than creating them. Although the police in Gonda, as in Deoria district, thus provided the opposition with a symbolic issue to be used against the ruling party, they were prevented from doing so partly by circumstance and partly by quick action taken by Anand Singh to defuse the situation. The circumstances include the relative ineffectiveness of the local opposition, the non-involvement of major opposition leaders from outside the district, and the fact that the state Legislative Assembly was not in session at the time. However, Anand Singh’s role also was important in keeping the matter under control. In this way, he demonstrates his value to the leadership at the Centre through his ability to prevent the opposition from using a local incident as a symbolic resource in the national political arena as well as to deliver votes in the district.

V. Conclusion

The four brief case studies that I have presented from two districts in one state of north India cannot tell us everything that we want to know about the relationships between national power and local politics and the changes that have taken place in the relationships between the two during the past twenty years. However, I believe they illustrate some critical features of the ways in which the Indian system of federal politics works and the ways in which it has changed. The following features are fundamental to understanding both.

First, national power lacks a firm institutional base independent of government. Twenty years ago, there were two principal institutional avenues toward and sources of national power—the Indian National Congress and the Government. Moreover, they were interdependent. Politicians could move back and forth between the two and use one as a base for influence in the other. To ignore one and concentrate on the other, moreover, was the surest way to ensure that one’s tenure of power would be brief. Nowadays, the party organizational avenue to national power is closed.
Second, when the Congress was a major avenue to power in Indian politics, it was also in touch with the people in the districts and localities. It was an instrument of information and knowledge as well as of power. Or rather, it was powerful because its members and leaders had roots in the villages and towns throughout the countryside. As such, it was a formidable instrument for gathering votes. In north India at least, the Congress as such is no longer a significant electoral machine.

Yet Mrs Gandhi and the Congress continue to win elections, usually with greater pluralities than other parties in most states and in the country as a whole. How is it done? Two methods are now used. One is to attempt to nationalize issues and to appeal to blocs of voters through such issues. The second, which has been the principal method discussed in this article, is to work through local notables who are believed to maintain an extensive structure of local power or some other broad base of local influence that can be used to gather votes.

An example of the first method is Mrs Gandhi’s slogan of garibi hatao (abolish poverty), which has been part of her broad appeal to the poor and landless of the country and has involved the introduction of many government programmes for their benefit. Other examples include Congress and non-Congress slogans, appeals to, and programmes for, the benefit of backward classes, Muslims and other minorities, Scheduled Castes, and the middle peasantry. It is in this context that violence in the countryside is particularly relevant, for it provides a convenient basis for symbolizing the plight of certain categories of voters. Mrs Gandhi and other politicians do not visit these scenes of violence only to shed tears, but with very clear and specific political goals in mind.

The attempt to nationalize politics and create national constituencies of voters has been only partly successful: only certain categories of voters have been affected; even fewer have developed stable loyalties to the Congress or to non-Congress parties; and it has not displaced local considerations for most categories of voters. The attempt has, however, been successful enough to make the parliamentary and legislative assembly elections far more exciting than in Nehru’s day, for the results have, in the last decade, turned partly upon big swings in the voting patterns of large categories of voters, particularly in the North, leading to great electoral ‘waves’ such as the ‘Indira waves’ of 1971 and 1980 and the Janata wave of 1977. It is in the hope of precipitating such waves by moving blocs of voters that politicians in India manipulate and exploit such incidents of violence as that at Narainpur.

However, such shifts in voting patterns by large blocs of voters are only part of the story, especially in determining the results of state
legislative assembly elections. In the districts, structures of local power persist that are sometimes strong enough to stand up against a wave and are even more critical when there is no wave. These local structures of power are also critical in preventing local incidents of violence from being exploited in wider arenas to precipitate such waves, as in Kurman Purwa. Therefore, links must be established and maintained with persons who can still control or are perceived to control a local clientage, or a local bloc of votes.

My third point, therefore is that the continuing importance of the localities and districts of India and of local structures of power in a society so diverse and fragmented as India means that centralization of power cannot be truly effective in that country under a representative regime. I have tried in the examples given in this article to show that the system is, in fact, not really centralized but is based upon linkages of dependency among different levels and particularly between the Centre and the districts.

My fourth concluding point is that there are three main persisting sources of power in contemporary Indian politics outside the electoral process. The first is government, that is to say, government patronage and protection. Government is the source of valued goods and services in contemporary India, from seeds and fertilizers to government jobs to places in educational institutions to whole factories. Control of government is also the main source of protection: from harassment by its own officers, on such matters as enforcement of land ceilings, or from police violence. The second source of power is a persisting structure or network of influence such as arises from control over the land or prestige within a local caste group. The third source of power arises from networks of kin–clan–caste–personal ties in groups that interpenetrate party, bureaucracy, and educational institutions. It is through such a network, for example, that C. P. N. Singh became close to Sanjay Gandhi and rose to become a minister in the central government.

It should be noted, moreover, that all three of these sources of power are interdependent. Government patronage is meaningless without persons and groups to whom it is to be distributed. Local structures of power cannot persist without control over or influence in government institutions. Networks of group and personal influence are important most of all because they give access to government patronage by means other than party or a local structure of power. Such networks extend throughout north India. They are innumerable and pervasive. They are more important than party ties.

In such a system, which I have described elsewhere as highly
pluralized, decentralized, and fragmented, politicians may try to build national power in two ways. They may do so by careful, patient cultivation of linkages from top to bottom through bargaining, compromise, and exchange. They may also attempt to bypass the persisting structures of government, local, and group power through appeals to large categories of voters on transcendent or very dramatic issues.

The first pattern is a politics of patronage. In Nehru’s days, it involved building power from below, leaving satraps in command at the district and state levels, and leaving national policy making to the Cabinet, the Planning Commission, and the senior bureaucrats. The second pattern is a politics of crisis that plays upon or manufactures dramatic issues. It is a pattern that has been used often by Mrs Gandhi and distinguishes her political style significantly from that of her father. The second pattern, however, does not really transcend but only covers or attempts to hide a persistent politics of patronage that, as I have noted, involves linkages of mutual dependency between the Centre and the districts, with the Centre prepared to hand over whole districts to individuals, sometimes with advantageous sometimes with disadvantageous results. The system, therefore, shifts back and forth between jobbery and demagoguery and fails to confront effectively major issues concerning the economic future of India and the spread of lawlessness and violence in the countryside.