

The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India

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1 The study and its perspectives

I

The simultaneous and unprecedented expansion of the politics of class, community and nationalism marked a decisive transition in the history of the Indian subcontinent in the years between the two world wars. At the heart of this political transformation lay the emergence of 'mass' movements and widespread popular political action, the nature and terms of which form the central theme of this book. It illuminates how the popular classes inscribed their own space in, and thus also determined the direction of, caste, communal and nationalist movements. The focus is on the poor in towns, who have received little attention from historians compared with their rural counterparts. Yet, in the interwar years, various parts of the subcontinent underwent extensive urbanisation and urban demographic expansion,¹ and towns became central to political developments in the country, with the poor coming to play a pivotal role. Arguably, the urban poor contributed substantially to the transformation of Indian politics in this period, and our understanding of the nature of mass politics and political conflict in late-colonial India might be significantly modified by approaching the subject from this perspective.

The politics of the urban working classes have not, of course, been entirely ignored in Indian historiography.² Most works, however, give

¹ For patterns of interwar urbanisation in southern India, see C. J. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy, 1880–1955: The Tamilnad Countryside*, Oxford, 1984.

² For example, M. D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947*, Berkeley, 1965; V. B. Karnik, *Indian Trade Unions: A Survey*, Bombay, 1966; V. B. Karnik, *Strikes in India*, Bombay, 1967; S. M. Pandey, *As Labour Organises: A Study of Unionism in the Kanpur Cotton Textile Industry*, Delhi, 1970; R. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918–29: A Study of Organisation in the Cotton Mills*, Canberra, 1981; M. Holmstrom, *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour*, Cambridge, 1984; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940*, Princeton, 1989; R. S. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*, Cambridge, 1994; Subho Basu, 'Workers Politics in Bengal, 1890–1929: Mill Towns, Strikes and Nationalist Agitations' Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1994.

only a partial picture. Studies usually concentrate on factory workers, and they deal largely with politics arising from the experience of work or workplace relations. However, urban workforces are not clearly differentiated between formal or organised sector factory-hands and the rest: casual, unorganised labour in the informal sector.³ Workers move from one kind of work to another, and straddle both the so-called informal and formal sectors, as well as industry, trade, transport and construction. The various sectors are, thus, not rigidly compartmentalised, and the labour market is characterised by interchangeability and mobility of workers between sectors. Scholars have also realised that it is historically inaccurate to assume that the informal sector is merely a transitional stage for new urban migrant labour biding its time to graduate to skilled employment in the formal manufacturing sector. Instead, the informal sector has proved to be the overwhelming and enduring reality of Indian urban economies, both past and present.⁴ In such a context, only a restricted vignette of the politics of the urban labouring poor is revealed when the politics of factory labour in the formal sector are isolated for analysis. This approach is even less adequate when workers' politics are considered to emanate largely, if not wholly, from the imperatives of workplace relations. This remains a problem even if studies of workers' political action is not confined to 'labour' unrest or trade unionism alone, but includes nationalist or caste and religious movements. Some recent studies have sought to surmount these lacunae by emphasising the need to step outside the workplace to understand working-class politics. These have drawn attention variously to the importance of the state, the social organisation of urban neighbourhoods, and a range of non-economic relations in shaping working-class politics. They have also pointed to forms of political action other than workplace-based politics.⁵

In tune with this emerging body of work, this book sketches urban popular politics on a broad canvas. It does not concentrate on labour in factories, but draws in manual workers in the *bazars* (market areas) and in a whole host of small-scale manufacturing units; artisans and crafts-

³ Jan Breman, 'A Dualistic Labour System? A Critique of the "Informal Sector" Concept', *EPW*, Part I: XI, 48, 27 November 1976, pp. 1870–6; Part II: XI, 49, 4 December 1976, pp. 1905–8; Part III: XI, 50, 11 December 1976, pp. 1939–44; Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, pp. 72–123; Holmstrom, *Industry and Inequality*, pp. 76–9, 319–21.

⁴ Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 5–7.

⁵ Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*. For working-class politics elsewhere, see G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982*, Cambridge, 1983; P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914*, Cambridge, 1991.

people; transport and construction workers; hawkers, street-vendors and pedlars; and service groups such as sweepers and municipal workers. These groups constituted the bulk of the urban labour force in most Indian towns, especially in those with few or no large industries, as was, and still is, often the case. The labouring population in these towns also clearly included occupational groups who were not permanently engaged in wage labour, for they were often involved in petty trade and service occupations. For many workers, wage labour thus coexisted with 'self-employment'. The appellation 'poor', rather than the 'working classes' or 'labour', is used to refer to all these groups, for the latter terms have connotations mainly of organised, formal sector industrial workers. The epithet 'poor' also avoids the suggestion of the existence of urban workers or labour as a distinct social class arising from a particular set of production relations, as the term 'working class' often implies. 'Poor' here also does not refer to any particular economic measure of poverty nor does it denote only the 'casual poor' or a residual under-class, supposedly existing on the margins of the industrial labour force, which has been the common use of the term in many other contexts, especially when discussing Victorian Britain. The term 'poor' then is deployed in a largely descriptive sense to encompass various urban occupational groups and to highlight the diversity and plurality of their employment relations and working conditions. The use of the term, however, does not arise from any assumption that the diverse groups of the poor were conscious of being a cohesive class with shared interests and plight. Indeed, this study makes the construction of their complex social identities the very subject of enquiry. Furthermore, by referring to the 'poor' instead of the 'working classes', this book seeks to draw attention to vital aspects of urban experience, other than work, that determined the nature of politics. Economic relations, conditions of labour or experience at the workplace alone did not constitute the entire universe of the urban poor. Non-economic modes of domination, exclusion and oppression, based on caste or religion for instance, contributed to the nature and forms of poverty. Municipal government and the regime of law and discipline were equally important in moulding the politics of the poor, as were the initiatives of urban elites to reform, improve and control them, or to harness them to projects of nation-building or construction of caste and religious community.

The term 'poor' is invoked in this book as an analytical category for another significant reason, which has to do with the emerging discursive practices and political rhetoric of the time. Administrative or state policies and middle-class perceptions in the interwar period increasingly tended to identify the labouring classes of the towns as a homogenised

category of the 'poor'. In contrast to the rural masses, the urban poor were often seen as a distinct social segment, sharing undesirable traits and posing a threat to moral and social order, public health and political stability. At the same time, the expansion of representative and mass politics after the First World War encouraged a rhetorical reference to the 'poor' as the wider normative political constituency whom all parties or political formations claimed to represent. The development of the concept 'poor' as an elite construct lends further relevance to the use of this term in analysing urban social contradictions in the interwar period.

Central to this study is the nature of the political consciousness and identity of the labouring poor. It is now widely accepted that, among the labouring classes, the development of class consciousness, narrowly conceived in terms of material relations or economic exploitation alone, is not inevitable. Nor is it the only or primary form of political identity of the working classes. Class, in this limited sense, is only one of the many ways in which the social order is understood and interpreted.⁶ Instead, the labouring classes variously interrogate or seek to subvert the relations of power as well as contend with rivalries within their own ranks, through a range of political action, organisation, ideologies and identities, including nationalism or ethnicity. The prevalence of non-economic forms of domination also ensures that political identity does not take the form of class consciousness based only on economic relations. It is evident from recent studies that class awareness is expressed in languages other than that of economic antagonism. Conceptions of class refer, for instance, to political exclusion or to a social identity defined as 'the people' against unrepresentative and corrupt systems.⁷ Moreover, it has been recognised that classes develop by inflecting other languages of politics, such as nationalism or ethnicity, with their own meaning. It has also been argued, based on Bakhtin's dialogic analysis of language, that 'class is revealed [in] . . . the ways in which working people seek to create an oppositional vocabulary within

⁶ For discussions on 'class' as an analytical category, see P. Joyce (ed.), *Class: Oxford Reader*, Oxford, 1995. For recent debates on the question of class, see L. R. Berlanstein (ed.), *Rethinking Labour History*, Urbana, 1993; H. J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, Cambridge, 1990. For a critique of the narrow conceptualisation of class formation in the African context, see Frederick Cooper, 'Work, Class and Empire: An African Historian's Retrospective on E. P. Thompson', *Social History*, 20, 2, 1995, pp. 235–41.

⁷ Joyce, *Visions*; Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*; W. H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labour from the Old Regime to 1848*, Cambridge, 1980; R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950*, Oxford, 1990; C. Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution*, Oxford, 1982; Paul Lubeck, *Islam and Urban Labor in Northern Nigeria: The Making of a Muslim Working Class*, Cambridge, 1986.

the language of their oppressors'.⁸ In other words, class struggle is understood to be conducted between opposing or contested visions and discourses *within* a shared political code.⁹ Drawing upon these various analytical perspectives, this study examines the interaction and overlap of diverse forms of political action and social identities of the poor based on class, labour, caste, religion or nation. It concentrates, in particular, on the alternative or contested interpretations by the poor of the wider, elite-generated political ideologies and movements of nationalism, caste and religion.

Popular or subaltern politics in India have usually been approached in terms of the history of particular kinds of political movements, whether in the name of nation, caste or communalism. This in itself is not a problem, but becomes so when the emphasis on one kind of politics conveys the impression that a particular variety of politics and identity was paramount for the poor. A recent study of communalism, for instance, imparts a particular trajectory to popular politics, which appear inexorably to develop towards communal or religious consciousness. The study ultimately gives the impression that the social identity of the north Indian popular classes in the early twentieth century came to be overdetermined by conceptions of religious community.¹⁰ Not only do such approaches subsume the history of the poor under histories of nationalism or communalism, they also obscure the interconnections between various forms of politics and identities of the poor by privileging only one form, and therefore produce a partial picture of popular politics. In contrast, this book simultaneously engages with various kinds of politics of the poor and highlights their interplay, in order to draw out the frequently acknowledged, but rarely investigated, point that no single identity is salient, that identities are multiple and inter-linked, and that the politics of the poor, as indeed of other social groups, take varied and diverse, but overlapping and interconnected forms.

Four of the largest towns in the United Provinces (UP) – Allahabad, Benares, Kanpur and Lucknow – are covered in the discussions. These towns were the sites of concerted and pervasive political agitation and conflict in the interwar period. Widespread mass support for the nationalist movement in these towns made them the strongholds of the Congress. Some of the most ferocious communal riots occurred here and political, religious and social reform movements intensified among

⁸ Marc W. Steinberg, 'Culturally Speaking: Finding a Commons between Post-structuralism and the Thompsonian Perspective', *Social History*, 21, 2, 1996, p. 206.

⁹ Joyce, *Visions*, pp. 332–3.

¹⁰ S. B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, Berkeley, 1989.

low caste groups in these towns in the 1920s and 1930s. The political ferment in UP towns makes them an ideal focus for the study of popular politics and for the exploration of interconnections between various political movements. In addition, it was from this period onwards that political developments in UP gradually came to exercise a decisive influence in all-India politics – an influence that continues to this day.

II

The growing importance of urban mass politics in interwar north India as well as the central role of the poor in urban politics were underpinned by momentous changes in the towns themselves. The interwar years were significant for extensive urbanisation, with towns developing rapidly in north India, away from the colonial, industrial port cities or the presidency towns of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, which had experienced earlier growth spurts from the later nineteenth century. Urban development in the two decades after the First World War was stimulated by growth in manufacturing industries and the substantial migration from rural areas that took place as a result of both increasing demographic pressures in the countryside from the 1920s onwards and agrarian depression in the 1930s. Migration radically altered the demographic profile of the towns, with a large expansion in the ranks of the poor and their consequent emergence as a crucial social force. Their growing importance in urban society and polity, however, did not arise only from their more numerous presence in the towns. This was also a consequence of the transformation of the economy and shifts in the matrix of social relations in the towns after the First World War and during the depression, which, together, gave rise to an intensification of social conflict involving the poor. The organisation of production, the investment preferences of the commercial and mercantile classes, and the nature of trade, manufacturing, and employment patterns, all underwent substantial change and adjustment, and all had implications for the network of social and economic relations of the growing numbers of the urban poor. They faced new insecurities and vulnerabilities in employment and everyday urban life, but without the mitigation of patronage reciprocities in social relations, for these could not be sustained or instituted under the scale of the demographic pressure and the migration that was taking place. Most importantly, the development of urban trade and industry in the interwar period was characterised by the primacy of small-scale enterprise, which was to generate a fluid, shifting and fiercely (often violently) competitive labour market with high turnover and the proliferation of casual, and usually unskilled, work.

This largely explains why the urban poor would be perceived by the propertied and middle classes as a footloose and volatile mass, threatening the moral and social well-being of 'respectable' people and undermining political progress. To contend with this perceived problem, numerous policy and administrative measures were adopted in the towns variously by the government, local authorities and the police. The policy-makers dealt with scarce municipal resources and infrastructure, public health, housing, law and order, and crime control – all of which were seen to be jeopardised by population growth in general, and more particularly by the increasingly prominent 'floating' population of the poor. The consequent administrative measures made the poor the major targets of governance and ensured a far greater presence of an interventionist state and local authorities in the lives of the poor than ever before. State and local policies further aggravated social conflict in the towns, sharpened class tensions, generated antagonisms among the poor against the state and local institutions, and deepened or created extensive divisions and rivalries among various groups of the poor themselves. Some of these rivalries overlapped with, reinforced or even precipitated caste or religious differences among the poor and gave such divisions new contextual significance and immediacy, further expanding the arena and forms of conflict and political action. The urban poor in the interwar period, therefore, came to inhabit a more bitterly divided and conflictual world; there were now larger numbers of them in the towns and under greater pressure than ever before. Ironically, the administrative policies and forms of political control employed, while generating internal rifts among the poor, at the same time discursively created a homogenised category of the 'poor', laden with negative connotations. It was in response to both the conflict-ridden urban milieu and the negative characterisation faced by the poor that their political initiatives were to emerge. All these developments formed the background and the material context of popular politics in the interwar period, and underpinned the emergence of urban mass politics, helping to fuel caste, religious and nationalist movements. The overtly conflictual world in which the poor found themselves also often drove them towards fierce strife, thus precipitating urban mass violence.

The fact of the emergence of the urban poor as a major social force and their deepening experience of deprivation, conflict or fragmentation did not, however, automatically catapult them into political action. The context for their political action was also crucially set, first of all, by the significant reconfiguration of the institutions and organisations of politics in the interwar period, and, secondly, by the development or further elaboration of a multiplicity of political 'languages' and ideologies,

referring variously to nation, class or community. The First World War was a landmark in Indian politics.¹¹ Although the British government had gradually devolved power from the 1880s, decisive steps in this direction were taken during and after the war. The consequent expansion of representative politics and its flip-side, the need for popular political mobilisation, changed the entire nature of Indian politics.¹² This is a familiar story and the implications of these developments for the elite – who had access to political institutions and a stake in constitutional negotiations – have been amply documented. This well-known story, however, requires recapitulation here in order to highlight the fact that the significant reconfiguration of politics in this period not only transformed elite politics, but also had considerable significance for popular politics. The imperatives of representative politics necessitated effective mass mobilisation, which, in turn, meant that ‘politics’ penetrated the lives of far wider social groups than ever before. As the elites galvanised themselves into action to compete for office and influence, they needed to make those whom they sought to represent a part of the political process. This, in turn, spurred on the formation of new organisations and the evolution of new modes of political action and discourse. It led to the expansion of the ‘public sphere’ and the innovation of political rituals and practices to forge political collectivities.¹³ All these trends had already begun to emerge in the closing years of the nineteenth century, but their scale and pace accelerated immeasurably in the interwar years, and inevitably informed the development of the politics of the poor. The latter found new arenas and forms of action which they could inflect with their own political meaning and purpose. This is not to say that the ‘passive’ poor were ‘mobilised’ at the behest of the elites, but rather that the emerging forms of action and organisation opened up vast new avenues and terrain for the politics of the poor. In the process, the ‘public sphere’ itself became an increasingly contested domain, with the popular classes seeking either to appropriate it or to

¹¹ B. R. Tomlinson, *The Indian National Congress and the Raj, 1929–1942: The Penultimate Phase*, London, 1976, pp. 9–15; J. M. Brown, ‘War and the Colonial Relationship: Britain, India and the War of 1914–18’, in M. R. D. Foot (ed.), *War and Society: Historical Essays in Honour and Memory of J. R. Western, 1928–71*, London, 1973, pp. 85–106.

¹² A. Seal, ‘Imperialism and Nationalism in India’, in J. Gallagher, G. Johnson and A. Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870–1940*, Cambridge, 1973, pp. 1–27, reprinted from *MAS*, 7, 3, 1973.

¹³ On the ‘public sphere’ and aspects of the ‘public’ in colonial India, see *South Asia*, 14, 1, 1991: Special Issue edited by S. B. Freitag. See also, D. Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852–1928*, Delhi, 1992; first published Berkeley, 1991.

develop alternative or oppositional arenas.¹⁴ Insight into these processes of contestation lies at the heart of this book.

The wider institutional context of politics had another crucial implication for popular politics. While the colonial government extended representation and devolved power in the interwar period, it was also concerned to tighten the reins of state control through other means, especially through policing and the repression of collective political action. These attempts at political control were further elaborated as the colonial state increasingly faced a crisis of legitimacy and authority, with the growth of nationalism and other forms of political protest from the 1920s onwards.¹⁵ The extensive measures for control, discipline and repression affected the poorer sections of society more directly than ever before. They became the focus of policing as their increasing prominence in urban society unleashed fears of public disorder and social anomie, and because they were imagined to be ideal raw material for crafting into explosive political actors by rabble-rousers. All this made the state a more concrete and intrusive presence in the everyday lives of the poor. Inevitably, this shaped their perceptions of the state and conditioned their political ideas and agenda.¹⁶

The historians of the 'Subaltern' school, in their efforts to rescue the autonomy of the subaltern classes, have often tended to underplay, although not altogether deny, the analytical significance of these wider developments in the realm of state institutions and elite practices in informing popular politics or imparting particular directions and forms.¹⁷ The present study takes the view that subaltern autonomy, self-determination and agency are not completely isolated or independent from elite politics or state structures, or untainted by supposedly 'bourgeois' ideologies of democracy, citizenship or individualism. Subaltern politics do not spring entirely from their own 'pure' culture and subjectivity. This book interprets the autonomy of subaltern politics in terms of their 'distinctiveness of practice',¹⁸ that is, their ability to appropriate, refashion and mould, for their own purpose, the organisations, institutions and ideologies of elite politics. It deals with this interface between the emerging forms of elite institutional and

¹⁴ For the 'proletarian public sphere' in the European context, see Geoff Eley, 'Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture: The Making of a Working-class Public, 1780–1850', in Kaye and McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson*, pp. 12–49.

¹⁵ G. Kudaisya, 'State Power and the Erosion of Colonial Authority in Uttar Pradesh, India, 1930–42', Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1992.

¹⁶ Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, pp. 410–11.

¹⁷ For the writings of the 'Subaltern' historians, see the various volumes of essays entitled, *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*.

¹⁸ R. O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and the histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', *MAS*, 22, 1, 1988, p. 197.

organisational politics, on the one hand, and the initiatives of the poor on the other, and concentrates on their differential perceptions, oppositional practices and contested self-constructions.

The transformation of political institutions and organisations in the interwar period was not the only wider development that influenced the politics of the poor. Equally crucial were a vast range of political ideologies and new political 'vocabularies' that emerged out of the imperatives of representative and mobilisational politics early in the twentieth century. These too proved to be highly significant in popular politics. Manifestly, social experience does not directly translate into political action, but the nature and forms of the latter are mediated through various ideologies and 'languages' or 'discourses' of politics which help to order, interrogate and understand social experiences. Prevalent discursive practices thus influence the nature of engagement in political action, as stressed in recent historiography. The poor hardly ever adopt the political discourses of the elite without modification; they interpret and deploy them in the light of their own social contexts, traditions and histories. This study emphasises the plural interpretations and contested meanings given by the poor to the political discourses which they shared with, or even derived from, the elites. It should be clarified here that political discourses and 'languages' in this book are seen to be embedded in social structures and power relations. The 'linguistic turn' in social history has stressed the valid point that social identities cannot be reduced to material contexts and should not be taken to derive directly from the structural position of individuals or groups in the economy and society. There has, however, been an accompanying tendency to interpret the construction of social identities *entirely* in terms of discursive practices or the 'social imaginary', leading to an overwhelming emphasis on 'self-constitution, randomness and the reflexivity of subjects'.¹⁹ Identities are considered to have little or no external social referent, and to be subjective products of discursive and linguistic constructions. This perspective fails to explain why a particular identity or ideology becomes important out of a range of discursive formations available at any particular time, unless it is acknowledged that the dominant form has some bearing on reality. The social context is thus not only relevant, but also crucially influences the adoption or popularity of particular discourses. This study is informed by a recognition of the 'reciprocal relations of conceptual systems and social relations in a given historical moment'.²⁰

In interwar north India, a range of ideologies and languages of politics

¹⁹ P. Joyce, 'The End of Social History?', *Social History*, 20, 1, 1995, p. 90.

²⁰ R. Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, Oxford, 1988, p. 45.

arose out of various forms of elite politics – caste, nationalist and religious. These were available to the poor to draw upon, to engage with and to elaborate. The politics of representation and mobilisation precipitated political rhetoric of at least two kinds that were relevant for popular politics: one set arose from the need of elite politicians and leaders to negotiate with the British government for political representation or the allocation of jobs and resources; the other related to the imperatives of mass mobilisation, but the two overlapped. Although these interconnected political discourses were not always immediately concerned with the poor, the political vocabulary and ideas were relevant to them. Underpinning much of this political rhetoric was a notion of deprivation, not just or even primarily in its material sense of economic impoverishment, but also encapsulating the lack of social or political power and rights. Thus, in demanding special representation or privileged access to jobs and resources from the government, be it for lower-caste groups or for religious minorities like the Muslims, the political leaders and propagandists invoked arguments about the historical deprivation of their communities, although they identified the sources and nature of deprivation in different ways. The Congress too, with its pan-Indian nationalism, both in seeking a place in the government of the country and in its subsequent quest for full independence, referred to the lack of power and rights of Indians as well as to the economic degradation of the country. Moreover, to shore up and bolster their legitimacy to represent the constituencies they claimed, whether the entire Indian people or particular caste or religious communities, the leaders and publicists took refuge in a vocabulary that could reach out to those beyond their own ranks and help to forge wider political collectivities. This they did by invoking the deprived and the poor of their communities: the ‘poor common people’, referred to increasingly in Hindi as *garib janata* – a ‘populist’ metaphor which continues to dominate Indian politics today. These two different but overlapping vocabularies of deprivation and of the ‘common people’ had the great potential of being appropriated by the poor. The poor could inflect with their own meaning these discourses, which they came to share with the political elites. This study is concerned precisely with this interface. It examines how the poor understood these emerging languages of politics, and how and to what extent they imparted to them new meaning and significance in order to forge their own political initiatives. It is also necessary to discern whether or how far these discourses placed limits on the politics of the poor.

There was another related set of political discourses in the interwar period that affected the urban poor, not so much for the possibility of creative appropriation, as from the urgency to contest the negative

stereotypes of the poor envisioned and projected through these discourses. These dealt with the urban poor directly, rather than metaphorically raising the issue of deprivation. Foremost amongst these was the discourse of local administration and state policy. The emergence of a seemingly ‘floating’ population of the urban poor as a significant presence triggered fears over the possible adverse political and social outcome. In administrative and political circles – including British officials and Indian personnel, provincial legislators or local councillors – the urban poor, far more than the rural poor, came to be viewed as a potential threat to political order and stability, as well as to public health and to the social or moral fabric of ‘respectable’ urban society. The genealogy of such ideas about the urban poor, prevalent in British official circles, may be traced partly to the history of the ideological and intellectual transformation of nineteenth-century Europe, where the emerging liberal projects of property, wealth, citizenship and political rights found poverty to be a social problem and sought to institute ‘a disciplinary pedagogy’ for the poor and a programme of behavioural reform through the promotion of ‘association, education, savings, mutualism and hygiene’.²¹ The official perception of the poor in Indian towns as a social threat came more directly from Victorian Britain. Here, a moral imagination had underpinned ideological constructions of poverty and the urban casual poor or a residual underclass had come to be seen as the repository of a deviant culture needing moral and behavioural transformation, either by philanthropic persuasion or, if necessary, by administrative fiat or state coercion.²² These various ideas found a specific orientation and configuration in interwar north India, with the moralising impulse and disciplining urge riveted increasingly on the burgeoning and seemingly threatening body of the poor, specifically in the towns and not in the countryside.

Negative images of the urban poor were reinforced by the growing political disturbances of the interwar years, when nationalist agitation and communal riots both escalated, and labour unrest became prominent in towns and cities of India, especially from the war years. The consequent fear of political disorder and riots emanating from the lower orders fixed the administrative gaze on the entire mass of the urban poor, without distinguishing between the casual and the respectable poor, as was the case in Victorian England. It was not the ‘respectable’

²¹ G. Proccaci, ‘Governing Poverty: Sources of the Social Question in Nineteenth-century France’, in Jan Goldstein (ed.), *Foucault and the Writing of History*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 206–19.

²² For Victorian ideas of poverty, see G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, Oxford, 1971; G. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, London, 1984.

or 'industrious' working classes of Manchester, Lancashire or the West Riding but the threatening underclass of 'outcast London' that provided the image in which the north Indian urban poor came to be conceived. In Britain, the tendency to isolate the casual poor of London as the main source of social malaise or political tumult had emanated from the fear that they could hinder industrial and social development and impair national efficiency. It was also anticipated that they might corrupt and contaminate the 'industrious' and productive working classes, in whom liberal middle-class Britain placed its faith in achieving industrial development and 'rational' modernisation.²³ The absence in India of a similar project of industrial modernisation by the colonial state, as well as the blurring of the social lines between an industrial workforce and a casual residuum, may explain why all sections of the labouring poor were tarred with the same brush. Moreover, the policy emphasis to deal with the supposed problem of the seemingly undifferentiated mass of the poor was on punitive measures and on their segregation. Interestingly, in Britain, by the early twentieth century, the solution to poverty was sought through an emerging state welfare regime and the middle classes gradually incorporated working classes in institutional and representative politics. Only an indigent fringe, seen to be suffering from a 'culture of poverty' and resisting the ministrations of the welfare state, continued to be the target of punitive and segregative measures, often informed by Social Darwinist views.²⁴ In India, however, a welfarist approach was entirely absent under a colonial government, which not only faced ever-increasing financial constraints in the early twentieth century, but was also, in any case, scarcely interested in wooing the poor as collaborators of the Raj. The policy measures, therefore, remained oriented largely towards discipline, regulation and segregation, often in alliance with Indian elites. These tendencies were most clearly reflected in local policies and policing, which encompassed attempts to control the behaviour of the poor, clear their slum settlements and regulate their collective activities. These policies were based on the assumption that the undisciplined poor were impediments to order and stability. The impact of these various developments was contradictory, as the first part of this book will show. On the one hand, the various measures to control and discipline the poor deepened scarcity and thus served to divide the poor and caused conflict among them. On the other hand, these policy measures discursively homogenised the poor as a uniform social category sharing undesirable and dangerous traits, and thus, at times, opened up the possibility of political unity among the poor against the

²³ Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 7–16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 322–36; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, pp. 531–2.

government and the state. The policy discourses, moreover, crucially influenced the politics of the poor as they sought to contest adverse characterisations or strove to establish their own respectability.

Another cognate and overlapping corpus of ideas – mainly the province of Indian reformers and politicians – harboured similar stereotypes of the urban poor as volatile and violent or prone to undesirable practices and habits. As will be seen in chapter 3, the urban poor were frequently seen as erstwhile rural folk uprooted from their simple, ‘traditional’ country life – their supposed natural habitat – and succumbing to moral and material degeneration in the towns. Moreover, the casual and impermanent nature of jobs available to the poor in the towns and the consequent ‘floating’ nature of their work enhanced the image of instability, volatility and rootlessness, which was, in turn, seen to be the primary source of urban moral decay, social anomie and political disorder. Thus, unlike the rural poor, who were often idealised and romanticised, especially under a Gandhian influence, their urban counterparts were regarded as corrupted misfits in the towns, culpable for thwarting progress, development or national regeneration. The solution to these putative problems posed by the urban poor was sought not simply through control or repression, as in the case of the colonial state, but also through the uplift and improvement of the lower classes. Indeed, the mission of social and moral reform was a central element in the relation of the Indian elites to those whom they identified as the poor and the lower classes. The targets of reform and uplift were those suffering from poverty, ignorance and moral deficit, who were identified in terms of both economic deprivation and social backwardness, the two being seen to be integrally related. Nineteenth-century ideologies of social reform, religious revival and moral discourses of improvement were the background to the development of these ideas, which were directed at a range of groups, including the lower castes, who were seen to be underprivileged and backward. These reform movements had developed as a form of expression of power and as an aspect of self-definition of the ascendant commercial classes and their allies in the professions and government services – the newly emerging middle classes of north India. For the commercial communities in particular, piety, patronage of religion, charity, philanthropy and promotion of reform were important constituents of their identity and markers of their newly found social prominence in the towns.²⁵ Ranajit Guha has

²⁵ C. A. Bayly, ‘Patrons and Politics in Northern India’, *MAS*, 7, 3, 1973, 349–388; C. A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad 1880–1920*, Oxford, 1975, pp. 104–17; Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 50–145.

argued that the ‘urge for improvement’ originated in Britain as the ‘big thrust of an optimistic and ascendant bourgeoisie to prove itself adequate to its own historic project’.²⁶ The mission of improvement was then deployed in India by the Raj as a strategy ‘of persuasion to make imperial dominance acceptable, even desirable, to Indians’.²⁷ Indian nationalists soon adopted this project of improvement for themselves and further fleshed it out with the Hindu conception of duty and ‘obligation to protect, foster, support and promote the subordinate’, in order to elicit the obedience of the lower orders and to earn the right to rule.²⁸ In this way, ‘improvement’ and reformism developed as a potent and key ideology of both the state and the indigenous elites.

In the interwar period, the reformist and ‘improvement’ ideas, as directed towards the lower classes and castes, gained a new and vigorous lease of life and reinforcement from a range of emerging forces, especially in the urban milieu. The expansion of the arena of representative politics and the consequent need for effective mass mobilisation had several significant implications. First, political publicists, ideologues and leaders elaborated visions of ideal community and the nation in a variety of ways with greater vigour. Ideas about national character and notions of development for a future democratic polity were all articulated. In these concepts of the nation and national community, considerations of the role of the vast mass of the Indian people – rhetorically the poor common people – inevitably came to occupy a significant place. Secondly, the devolution of power in this period, most importantly, took the form of the expansion of the franchise to incorporate a far larger section of local propertied classes and middle-class rate-payers in institutions of municipal government. These local institutions were also accorded greater autonomy and powers than in the past. Within this context, an urban-based civic vision developed among the newly enfranchised middle classes, in which they saw urban local institutions and towns as centres of modernisation and progress.²⁹ The blossoming of civic ideals, coupled with the elaboration of visions of community and nation, inevitably put the spotlight on the poor in the towns, who had to be moulded as fit and proper members of the community and made to conform to projects of civic development and nationalism, or else simply marginalised and excluded. Moreover, industrialisation was assuming

²⁶ R. Guha, ‘Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography’, in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1989, pp. 240–1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 242–3. ²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See chapter 3 below. For the evolution of civic ideals from an earlier period in Gujarat, see Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual*, pp. 108–44; for the centrality of cities in the conception of nationalist modernisation, see Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, London, 1997, pp. 107–49.

ever greater significance as an issue in nationalist politics and in conceptions of national development.³⁰ It is probable that this concern served to focus further attention on reforming and controlling the urban labouring classes for national development, efficiency and production.

The focus on the poor in the interwar years and a reformist interest in them also came from the accelerating caste uplift movements, militant religious politics and the emerging nationalist discourse of moral and social regeneration. Central to these was the growing need for both ideological construction and political mobilisation of communities. Religious and social reformers tried to moralise and uplift the lower castes and classes by purging their supposed aberrant practices or behavioural defects and purifying their habits. Such rescue attempts were geared, in no small measure, to making the lower orders better and fit members of the religious, caste or national community, which they were now called upon to join. This attitude towards the poor was shared by Hindu and Islamic reformers alike. Carey Watt has recently shown that, in the decades immediately before the First World War, a movement for national efficiency and constructive nationalism gradually gathered momentum in north India; it aimed to enhance the material, physical and intellectual efficiency of the Hindu community.³¹ The urge for national efficiency was partially influenced by international cross-currents of racial competition and eugenics, which motivated Hindu nationalist leaders to achieve a leading place for India in the hierarchy of races and nations.³² The movement was also partly a product of representative politics and the need to consolidate and augment the number of Hindus.³³ Watt shows that education and social reform were the central pillars of the movement, and were particularly directed at the 'depressed classes' and poorer sections among the Hindus, upon whom social anxiety came to focus, both to maintain the numerical strength of the community and to make them more productive and efficient. As Watt comments: 'It was not all a matter of charity and pity for destitute and marginalized Hindus since the ideology of national efficiency promoted an organically-ordered society in which every component played a productive part.'³⁴

The ideology of reform of the poor was also effectively expanded from the 1920s by the emerging Gandhian nationalist rhetoric. Ranajit Guha has argued that, in seeking to achieve mass mobilisation and political

³⁰ D. Rothermund, *An Economic History of India: From Pre-colonial Times to 1991*, London, 1988; 2nd edn, 1993, pp. 91–3; S. Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 170–8.

³¹ Carey A. Watt, 'Education for National Efficiency: Constructive Nationalism in North India, 1909–16', *MAS*, 31, 2, 1997, pp. 339–74.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 340–1. ³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 364–5. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

hegemony for the Congress from the 1920s, Gandhi had had recourse to persuasion and the projection of the moral legitimacy of the party to lead Indian politics, in conscious opposition to the coercive practices of the colonial state. Reformism played an important role in emphasising the moral superiority and legitimacy of the Congress. Reformism was also expected to help in the self-representation of a middle-class nationalist leadership in its quest for acceptance by the mass of its targeted constituents. Guha further argues that this strategy was not entirely successful and the Congress increasingly turned to 'disciplining' the masses in its mobilisational drives.³⁵ Thus, in Gandhian nationalist ideology, the lower classes were seen as insufficiently enlightened to grasp the noble concepts of self-restraint, self-sacrifice and self-discipline – the pivots of the Gandhian philosophy of political and social transformation. In this view, the poor were either childlike, needing reform and moral and spiritual guidance, or misguided and violent, needing discipline and a strong, paternalistic, even coercive, hand of control and direction. These various discourses of reform, religious revival and nationalism were ambivalent, and ran in two registers. On the one hand, they attempted the acculturation and incorporation of the 'reformed' poor in the new purified communities defined by religion, caste or nation. On the other hand, they were dismissive of, even opposed to, the popular classes and their culture; they excluded and censured the poor as being unworthy elements of a community, unless improved or properly 'reformed'. The consequent exclusion and distancing of the poor, *inter alia*, took the form of a withdrawal of elite patronage from various forms of urban popular culture and attempts to purify these.³⁶

Reformism in public life and vigorous activism to uplift the lower orders, which accelerated in the interwar years, were thus undoubtedly grounded both in nationalist efforts to mould worthy and upright citizens and in religious and social movements to forge unified communities of either Hindus or Muslims. Yet, arguably, the timing of the intensification of reformism, spearheaded largely by an urban-based middle-class leadership, suggests that it had more than a little to do with the perceived threat from an urban 'underclass' during a period of mounting social tensions and the emergence of the poor as a prominent urban social presence. If reformism was about sculpting the nation and religious communities, it equally well met the need to impose order,

³⁵ R. Guha, 'Discipline and Mobilize', in P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey (eds.), *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 69–120.

³⁶ For a discussion on this theme, see, for example, N. Kumar, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880–1986*, Princeton, 1988, pp. 190–5.

discipline and social conformity in the towns, and to establish the cultural and moral superiority and authority of the middle classes. Reformism harboured the urge to affirm power over the conduct and behaviour of the poor. It encompassed efforts to contain potential social threats from the lower classes and castes, as evident from nationalist preoccupations with caste uplift in the early twentieth century.³⁷ More overt expressions of these imperatives to establish order and stability lay in the changing patterns of urban policing as well as in the extensive measures taken to sanitise the poor and to promote their hygiene through public health measures and town planning or urban improvement projects. The coincidence of timing and context of all these interrelated endeavours in the interwar period strongly suggests that they sprang, in no small measure, from the growing urban class distinctions and the urgency of the middle classes to achieve social control over the burgeoning numbers of the poor. The unifying motif underpinning all these diverse, even conflicting, endeavours to reform or control the swelling ranks of the urban poor was, of course, a negative conception of their character and a conviction of their culpability in undermining social development and political stability. These negative discourses about the poor, as well as the class tensions and social distinctions on which they were grounded, came to assume central importance in the evolving politics of the poor in the interwar period. It was largely with reference to and in dialogue with these discourses that the poor forged their political practices and social identities through contested self-constructions.

III

Part I of this book examines the changing conditions and experiences of the poor in the interwar period: the social and economic relations in which they were involved; their changing experience of power, subordination, dominance and social control; and their experience of the state and governance. Central themes include the stereotypical negative characterisations that the poor faced as well as their relations with each other and divisions within their own ranks, arising both from the social organisation of work or labour processes and from the nature of local and state policies. In Part II, the discussion moves on to an exploration of the political identities and action of the poor as part of the process of their rapidly changing experiences in the early twentieth century. Each chapter explores the interplay of diverse forms of emerging identities of

³⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Delhi, 1998, ch. 9.

the poor based variously on caste, class, religion, nation or labour, bearing in mind the fluidity and plasticity of these identities. The chapters examine how social identities were constituted through political practice. Such identities are not assumed to be pre-existing and prior to politics, emerging directly from experience; they are understood to be shaped by and forged through the very processes of political action and 'power plays'. Moreover, politics are not conceived in narrow terms, limited either to institutions, organisations and state structures or to overt 'political' acts and agitations, but are taken to include cultural, ritual and religious innovations.

An analytical concern here is to avoid essentialising the nature of the political consciousness of the poor. Some Subaltern historians, for instance, tend to ascribe an inherently oppositional and resistant, even insurgent, mentality or consciousness to the subaltern classes.³⁸ This oppositional mentality is assumed to flow naturally and inevitably from their social situation and experience of 'subalternity', subordination and domination, which often unite the subaltern classes politically. Although this study does not proceed with the liberal political assumption of plurality in social structures or of functional consensus in shared cultures, and does accord analytical centrality to relations of power and domination in the experience of the subaltern classes, it is, none the less, sceptical of the proposition that resistance and protest form the cornerstone of the politics of the poor. Resistance – collective, everyday forms or any other – is considered to be just one aspect, albeit an important one, of the political response of the subaltern classes to their social conditions.³⁹ Their vast armoury of responses also includes attempts at self-expression and cultural assertion, or negotiation and contestation of power through other means such as ritual and symbolic struggles, as well as directing their wrath towards each other. The politics of the poor, even when they seek to assert themselves or to contest power, may ultimately produce ambiguous outcomes and undermine their emancipatory or radical possibilities. An apt example would be the subalterns' emulation or appropriation of symbols of power and dominance, such as their claims to higher ritual status or adoption of the 'respectable' social

³⁸ For a critique of this perspective, see O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject', pp. 189–224.

³⁹ For arguments along these lines, see, for instance, Sumit Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, c. 1905–22', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1984, p. 274; D. Haynes and G. Prakash, 'Introduction: The Entanglement of Power and Resistance', in D. Haynes and G. Prakash (eds.), *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Oxford, 1991; 1st edn of the University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, pp. 1–22.

and cultural practices of the upper castes and classes. These inclinations, however, do not necessarily betoken their submission to or acceptance of the existing social order. Still, these leanings may well circumscribe their political action and set the terms and boundaries of possible aspirations. The subalterns may thus also become implicated in hegemonic projects of others to buttress the social status quo by perpetuating the importance of the symbols of power and thereby prove themselves incapable of evolving alternative conceptions of the social order. It is, therefore, necessary to probe the limits of their politics, rather than drawing attention solely to resistance. The crucial point is not radical resistance, but the repertoire of action and ideas of diverse kinds through which the poor negotiate their condition.

The implicit or explicit assumption of an oppositional and resistant subaltern consciousness has another problem which this study seeks to avoid. Many studies of popular politics focus on outstanding, even tumultuous, events, chiefly because that is when the popular classes become 'visible' in historical documents. While this is undoubtedly a useful ploy to capture the history of the popular classes, it also has its problems.⁴⁰ Concentration on one particular event, and the nexus of developments around that moment, tends to reveal one type of consciousness or identity, usually a particularly militant, radical or insurgent one. The attempts to rectify the problem of the absence of subaltern classes from history-writing thus unwittingly conjure up much too forceful and unidimensional a presence. This approach also fails to capture more sustained and abiding forms of popular politics and culture, and the varied and complex processes of construction of identities.⁴¹ In view of these problems, this book eschews an event-based approach and, on the whole, does not engage in detailed analyses of riots or nationalist events, which might privilege either an insurgent or a community consciousness, and reify them. The subaltern classes are neither insurgent nor conservative nor religious *inherently or in essence*; it is the politics and the contingencies of the context that make them one or the other or a mixture of some of these. Because this book focuses on the multiplicity of identities and their interlacing, a less episodic account has been preferred, relying less on events and more significantly on forms of change of social and cultural practices. Thus, the book engages in analysing, in varying degrees, the public rituals, religious ideas and practices of the poor, their dramatic or musical culture and performative traditions, their myths, folklore, iconography

⁴⁰ O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject', pp. 189–224.

⁴¹ For similar arguments, see O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject'; Haynes and Prakash, 'Introduction: The Entanglement of Power and Resistance', pp. 1–22.