King's Research Portal

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wilson, J. E. (2017). China and South Asia in the 1970s. Contrasting Trajectories. In P. Roberts, & A. Westad (Eds.), *China, Hong Kong, and the Long 1970s in Global Perspective* Palgrave Macmillan.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

China and South Asia in the 1970s. Contrasting Trajectories¹

Jon Wilson

King's College London

In his 1953 presidential address to the Indian National Congress, India's Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru talked about the world's need to recognise the rise of both India and China. These two countries contained the world's 'largest aggregate of human population, peoples who were no longer quiescent, but demanding the good things of life'. For Nehru and many Indian commentators in the 1950s, India and China faced similar challenges and were potential allies. The emphatic point in Nehru's 1953 address was that the United Nations needed to recognise Communist China.

During the next nine years, Sino-Indian relations degenerated. Pan-Asian solidarity and possibly Nehru himself were killed by the 1962 war. Some have suggested that the shock of Indian defeat against China war precipitated Nehru's physical decline. Yet every when relations between the two countries were friendly, India's political leadership were also clear China and India would address their similar challenges in different ways. Early independent Indian politics were explicitly non-revolutionary; or at least, they intended to achieve rhetorically revolutionary change through consent rather than violence. National leaders aimed to stimulate rapid development by coordinating the voluntary actions of potentially antagonistic groups, rather than by escalating social conflict. India's big firms were treated as partners in the process of industrialisation. Property-owners were encouraged to voluntarily give up land to the poor. Many of these campaigns were led by disciples of M.K. Gandhi, and were efforts to introduce rapid social transformation by consent not coercive power, with an explicit contrast drawn with Chinese techniques of achieving social change.

The difference was drawn most clearly with land reform. The second resolution of the Indian National Congress's 1953 meeting urged Indian states to support a social movement rooted in Gandhian principles which attempted to persuade wealthy landholders to transfer land to the

¹ This paper is particularly indebted to conversations with my colleagues Sandipto Dasgupta and Jahnvi Phalkey, and to engagement with a group of King's College London PhD students working on post-imperial century South Asia, particularly Tirthankar Bandopadhyay, Daniel Kent Carruso, Bulbul Hasan, Kathryn Johnson and Kapil Subrahmanian.

poor, the Bhoodan and Gramdan campaign. These voluntary transfers existed alongside land reform measures passed by landlord-dominated state assemblies, and the effort create peasant cooperatives through consensus. All these measures were premised on the idea that change would occur through the widespread diffusion of moral leadership, not the transformative power of a violent, commanding state or revolutionary party. This idea relied on belief in the individuals' freedom to choose their way of life, but also faith in the leadership of a political elite to guide the national community along the best path, together with trust in political institutions' capacity to consensually mediate conflict between different interests for the greater good.² As Congress's 1947 land reform committee put it, '[t]he tiller of the soil would become its owner neither by organised violence nor by legislation but by a moral revolution; a revolution not of the peasants, but of the moral conscience of the landlords themselves'.³

Two years after the Bhoodan resolution, a fact-finding visit to China by members of India's Planning Commission made the contrast starkly. Visiting China's collectivised agriculture, the delegation was astonished by the speed of social change. They were particularly impressed by the role Chinese patriotism played in creating a new way of life around the village cooperative, emphasizing the significance of 'democratic estimation and decision through village peasants' meetings'. Yet, even the most radical, socialist members of the delegation were heavily critical of the culture of accusation, fear and violence they believed the Communist Party generated amongst peasants. '[S]hall we sacrifice some of our individual freedom in the interest of our economic development and the well-being of the nation?'. The delegation thought it should, but they argued sacrifice could only be a voluntary act. 'We are confident that a change from family farming to co-operative farming can be brought about in a peaceful and democratic manner'. Careful not to insult their hosts and potential allies, the more radical majority of the Planning Committee members attributed it instead to the country's different recent history. China's years under competing warlords had, they argued allowed big landlords to consolidate a system of violent, 'feudal exploitation', and undermined the rule of law. In India, the supposedly peaceful transfer of power from British rule allowed development to occur without the use of force. But even this degree of criticism was too light for some members of the delegation. A minority report was published

² Indian National Congress, 58th Session, Presidential Address, (1953)

³ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 34.

condemning not only the role of violence in China's agrarian revolution, but its violation of property rights.⁴

Like many other parts of the world, (China and the UK certainly), the period from roughly 1968 to 1981 was perceived by observers as a period of crisis in South Asia. This paper argues that it was this non-violent, consensual and accommodative style of politics which underwent crisis. The contrast drawn in the 1950s with China is instructive because it draws out important elements of the political system which collapsed during the 1970s.

My argument is that what collapsed was a style of rule I'd call accommodative elitism. The governments that succeeded to the British empire in the Indian subcontinent were strongly committed to the idea that economic development could occur by peacefully balancing interests and communities. In contrast both to China and some European states, South Asian politics heavily downplayed class antagonism. Leaders like Liaquat Ali or even Ayub Khan in Pakistan as well as Jawarharlal Nehru in India believed that a moral renewal, combination of shared national sentiment, institution-building and skilful political leadership would lead people to reconcile otherwise dangerous forms of antagonism. South Asia's institutions were ruled by accommodative elites: men from privileged social groups with a strong sense of their own virtue, but also with a belief in the practical incorporation of aspirant and discordant voices in the workings of power. As the most perceptive analyst of late twentieth century Indian politics Rajni Kothari put it, the system 'had an inclusive thrust'. 'While it harboured exploitative elements in its power structure and discriminated against certain strata, it did not define the latter out of its reach'. '[T]he doors were never closed in principle'.⁵

During the long 1970s, the near two decades between roughly 1966 and 1984, this form of politics collapsed completely. The most obvious signs of that collapse were Pakistan's civil war and dismemberment, as its eastern wing broke free to become Bangladesh in 1971, and the Indian emergency four years later, when Indira Gandhi temporarily suspended the Republic's constitution. Alongside these two big events, the period saw a longer term rise in

⁴ *Indian Delegation to China on Agrarian Cooperatives* (New Delhi: Government of India, Planning Commission, 1957).

⁵ Rajni Kothari, "Integration and Exclusion in Indian Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 43 (October 22, 1988): 2224; Rajni Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India," *Asian Survey* 4, no. 12 (December 1, 1964): 1161–73, doi:10.2307/2642550 is the best summary of the post-imperial system of politics described in this chapter.

political violence, book-ended by the emergence of the Naxalite movement from 1968 at one end, and the assassinations of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh and Indira Gandhi in India in 1981 and 1984 respectively. But these seismic events were under-laid by a broader political crisis, in which the dominant figures and assumptions of South Asian political life were transformed.

Most importantly, there was shift in the way ordinary South Asian citizens were talked about in politics, academia and the press. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the democratic subject of South Asian politics was described in two ways. First, they were seen as participants in a plethora of different institutions and organisations, as individuals with particular interests and members of particular communities: as peasants or workers, for example. Alternatively, they were perceived as part of the undifferentiated body of the nation, a member of a ‘population’ or ‘people’, whose interests leaders acted on behalf of. The 1970s saw the emergence of a new political figure, ‘the common man’ (in Hindi *aam aadmi*). This new figure had broken free of their membership both of particular institutions and the moral totality of the nation. No longer the participant of collective processes of development led by virtuous leaders, they were the victims of corruption and malign elite power. In a dominant idiom popular in political speeches, the press and film, ‘the common man’ needed to take power directly into their own hands to protect their dignity and livelihood.

The argument here is that this figure of the ‘common man’ was a political rather than economic category. The 1970s crisis was a crisis of politics far more than economics although, obviously, the two intersect. This interpretation contradicts the usual scholarly narrative of the decade: the 1970s is usually perceived as the period when people began to articulate their frustration at the failure of development since independence, as a period of hiatus before South Asia took a different, more prosperous tack with the green revolution and liberalisation. But one can, I think, turn the crisis argument on its head. More recently empirical and statistical research shows rising prosperity for many during the 1950s and 1960s. One can then see South Asia’s 1970s political crisis as a consequence of post-imperial regimes’ limited but real success in the 1950s, a result of the growth in incomes and expansion of institutions from the late 1940s. The crisis of the 1970s occurred as political systems and styles of rule built during the economic stasis of the late imperial period were stretched to breaking point by aspirations and conflicts driven by post-imperial imperial growth. The combination of political collapse and growing prosperity meant that ‘crisis’ was perceived only sporadically and intermittently, by some groups far more than others. It was

experienced most starkly by urban, middle class students and public sector employees, the groups with closest to academia; it probably made the least difference to the lives of relatively prosperous peasants.

II.

My unlikely suggestion that the 1970s saw a crisis of political power and legitimacy rather than economic well-being will, hopefully, become more intuitive through a brief discussion of one powerful form in which it was represented: film. The common man burst onto the Indian screen in the guise of the archetypal 'angry young man', now silver-haired star of whisky commercials, Amitabh Bachchan. In a spate of gangster films beginning with *Zanjeer* in 1973, Bachchan played a succession of moral outsiders. Sometimes criminals, sometimes law officers, these characters break out of existing political structures and use illegal violence to defeat evil. Like the hero in the spaghetti westerns many of them are modelled on, the Bachchan character is always an anti-system loner. But unlike the typical Sergio Leone film's Clint Eastwood character, Bachchan stands in for what the state should be but isn't; there is always a strong sense of a better moral order which has collapsed. Bachchan's character opposes a corrupt power elite represented at innumerable drinks parties, where gangsters hobnob with the representation of the fallen state, police chiefs and politicians. The hero usually stands alongside an elderly example of official virtue, a good police chief for example, representing a by-gone age before money and corruption corroded official virtue. These characters are good but are hamstrung by their failure to step outside structures and institutions, so get nothing done. In the present, good conduct has no connection to professionalism or office: criminals are as likely to be virtuous as police officers.

The Bachchan gangster films marked an important redefinition of Indian film-making. They shifted cinema-goers' attention away from romantic narratives about individual love or national self-realisation, reflecting a tragic sense of political breakdown and irresolvable crisis instead. Their advocacy of violence, and challenge to successful stories about nation-

building have frequently been noted. But this genre has a few other important characteristics which offer an important lens to examine the sense of crisis current in the 1970s.⁶

First, and compared to the films of the 1950s and 1960s, poverty has disappeared. Poverty and the fate of the poor dominated different strands of film-making in the 1950s and 1960s. As different as they otherwise are, *Mother India*, *Sree 420* and Satyajit Ray's *Pather Pachali* trilogy all have outsider heroes who face starvation, and end up being incorporated into a collective body at the end, whether the city, village or family. Darker films of this era, *Do Bigha Zamin* for example, have the same plot structure but a less happy ending. Each can be treated as a national allegory, with inclusive development as the good end point. But in the Bachchan gangster films it is morality not subsistence that is in crisis. The bad are venal and rich. But they cause suffering by killing and maiming the virtuous, not by making them poor.

Secondly, the ethic of these films is impatient and defensive. The idea that social conditions will be slowly improved by membership of collective institutions, whether the co-op or the nation, has collapsed. The films are pervaded by a general mistrust of institutions and a suspicion of progress. There is no patience in what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls 'the imaginary waiting room of history'. Action is not driven by the idea of a better future, but instead by the more immediate need to survive given the onslaught of powerful forces, who have often co-opted the institutions of the state on their side. Politics is driven by what Patrick Colm Hogan calls 'a militant ethics of defense'.⁷

Third, these films are individualistic, invoking only fissile and fleeting forms of collective organisation. The only forms of collective action contemplated exist outside existing structures; they are new, often temporary groupings which are generated on unlikely axes of alliance. The kind of change needed to defend what is good can take different forms on different scales, miniscule or massive, ranging from a single individual being brought to

⁶ My interpretation here is indebted to Siddhartha Basu, Sanjay Kak, and Pradip Krishen, "Cinema and Society: A Search for Meaning in a New Genre," *India International Centre Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 1981): 57–76; Akbar S. Ahmed, "Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (May 1, 1992): 289–320; Ashis Nandy, *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Priya Joshi, *Bollywood's India: A Public Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 8–9; Patrick Colm Hogan, *Understanding Indian Movies* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 86–90.

justice to a massive societal transformation. But in each case, the collective forms needed to achieve political action do not endure. Whereas national-romantic and realist films of the 1950s and 1960s allow one to imagine, kind of stable political community, the gangster films of the 1970s do not. The impatient and individualistic logic of their politics made it impossible for new political structures to endure in film, and the same seemed true in real life.

These 1970s films allow one to see the outsider rebel, the political leader who is and also stands up for the common man, as one of the decade's dominant political forms. That figure was able to play itself out in many different forms, and certainly doesn't align neatly on one side or another of South Asia's political divides. It was, I think, as likely to support authoritarian state violence carried out in the name of imposing order on social breakdown, as to advocate the use of revolutionary force. In fact, the state and its most fervent enemies were part of the same cycle, using the same set of techniques and political idioms. The 'Maoist' Naxalite revolutionary movement of the late 1960s grew in response to the dominance of rural society by apparently corrupt local elites. Yet, Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister from 1967, presented herself as an impatient force desperate to break the same power structures, offering immediate and un-mediated assistance to the common man in their place. Indira had as fissile an approach to political organisation as the revolutionary left, and was willing to create and discard parties as she deemed necessary. She had been expelled from Congress in 1967, creating her own alternative structure Congress (R). Seven years later, Indira suspended ordinary constitutional procedures and opposition politics, again in an impatient effort to act in the name of the common man. The filmmakers who crafted the 'angry young man' films of the 1970s took very different responses to Indira's unconstitutional acts in 1975. Some were critical, and had the release of their films delayed as a consequence. But others saw Indira's style of nationalist, personal authoritarianism as the only plausible response to the crisis their films depicted.

Where did this political sensibility come from? We need to start by looking at the processes of economic and institutional change in South Asia which occurred after 1947. The political and economic structures of post-imperial South Asia created social and political aspirations which could not be assimilated by the institutions of post-imperial democracy. The dominant style of accommodative elite leadership which ruled in the 1950s was able to soak up many the tensions produced by the economic depression, fifty years of declining living standards and the violent process by which the Indian subcontinent was partitioned. Cohesion in the

face of fractious social forces was at a premium. But, these conditions didn't last for long. South Asia's post-imperial institutions produced solid if not exceptional economic growth. These years saw the expansion particularly of the sectors and institution which sustained the urban middle class, who had aspirations which couldn't be housed in the structures of post-imperial democracy. These were also years which saw isolated instances of rural revolt against conditions in the poorest areas of the countryside, but these didn't drive crisis in the 1970s. It was the tension between economic growth, institutional expansion and political stasis which caused the crisis of the 1970s.⁸

II.

The standard academic story about South Asia after 1947 emphasizes the disappointing economic performance of the post-imperial nation state. It suggests that the crises of the 1970s developed as a backlash against the failure of governments to institute their promise of rapid economic development. More often than not, these criticisms have in mind an alternative, putatively better development model, usually either the violent dirigisme of the revolutionary state or the peaceful but no less disruptive force of rapid commodification and liberalisation. They reflect, in other words, the backward looking view of commentators committed to political positions harshly critical of the liberal elitism of the 1950s; and by perhaps as early as 1980 their accommodative style was so seriously out of favour there was no-one left to defend the politics of the first post-imperial general. Contemporary historical evidence rather than the harsh view of hindsight suggests their record was more complex and positive than many now suspect.⁹

⁸ This argument is made by drawing on the work of a number of historically-minded political scientists, particularly Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (H. Hamilton, 1997); Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*; Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004: The Gradual Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹ Francine R. Frankel, *Compulsion and Social Change: Is Authoritarianism the Solution to India's Economic Development Problems?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Atul Kohli, "Democracy, Economic Growth, and Inequality in India's Development," *World Politics* 32, no. 4 (July 1, 1980): 623–36, doi:10.2307/2010060; Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1968), 1197.

In fact, once the constraints that came from India's subordination to Britain's imperial system were lifted from 1947, the economies of South Asia's partitioned states grew steadily. India and Pakistan saw economic expansion between 1950-1964 of 4% per year, a figure that can be respectably compared to other societies recovering from war. These numbers certainly don't match Germany's 'miraculous' growth of 8%, but Germany's productive capacity had been more heavily reliant on capital-intensive industry, and was more starkly devastated than the subcontinent's economy, leaving more space for it to recover quickly to pre-war levels. 4% isn't much below France's 'miraculous' 4.6% expansion during the same period. It isn't so different from South Korea at the same time. With far greater aid and technical support from the US and broader international community than South Asian states, South Korea's economy grew at 4.2% in the decade after the Korean war, its 'take-off' beginning only from the mid 1960s.¹⁰

Underlying this rise was a slow but steady increase in agrarian output, from an average of 0% growth during the last four decades of the imperial regime to 3% in India and 2% throughout Pakistan in the period between 1950 and 1964. Scholars haven't seriously analysed the causes of this mid-twentieth century process of growth. We know that in India, the shift involved an increase in productivity as well as an expansion in the area cultivated, and that growth was quickest in the rice-growing areas of the south and east.¹¹ One can suggest – and there needs to be serious research here – that it was partly a product of the immediate post-imperial regime's strategy of consensual land reforms and Gandhian development. On a state by state basis, legislation was introduced which capped the size of landed estates and redistributed the excess with some degree of compensation, leading to 10-20% of the soil transferring hands in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But as importantly, the first Five Year Plan (1950-1954) saw investments in community development and agricultural extension. In theory these strategies were supposed to reinvent the village community as a dynamic source of bottom-up collective action, able to lead local agrarian change. In practice, they ended up having a more narrowly economic focus, with extension workers demonstrating seeds and fertilizers, and

¹⁰ Charles R. Frank, Kwang Suk Kim, and Larry E. Westphal, "Economic Growth in South Korea since World War II," in *Foreign Trade Regimes and Economic Development in South Korea* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1975), 6–24, <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c4063>.

¹¹ S Sivasubramanian, *National Income of India in the Twentieth Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), appendix 9(e) Economic data from India throughout the paper is from this work. Kapil Subramanian, "Revisiting the Green Revolution: Irrigation and Food Production in Twentieth-Century India" (PhD thesis, King's College London, 2015), chapter 3.

talking with cultivators about where best to sow their crops. Critics argued that these programmes were captured and blunted by local elites. But conceivably, growth occurred as outside educators and community development workers intersected with the leadership role of local hierarchies, and allowed some degree of agrarian growth without social upheaval. American social scientists who conducted detailed studies of agricultural decision-making in India found small landowners making decisions about what, how and where to sow in a highly calculated fashion. The overall effect probably increased both prosperity and inequality, with landless labourers and sharecroppers achieving little benefit, but farmers of middling prosperity doing well. Many of these were from traditionally low status castes.¹²

In Pakistan rural community development efforts were similarly central to the growth strategies of the 1950s. They resulted in the diffusion of US-trained demonstrators and development officers, similarly working in collaboration with landlords. ‘Village AID’, a nation-wide US-funded project was launched in 1956. The system of so-called ‘Basic Democracy’ that General Ayub Khan introduced to Pakistan after his popular 1958 military coup was an effort to subordinate the country’s parliamentary democracy to a community development strategy so schemes such as this would work. As in India, most observers thought the aspiration to create a system of participatory agrarian transformation had been a failure, but material benefits occurred nonetheless. According to John J Honigman, a Fulbright Scholar who spent three months in a Pakistani village in 1958, the dream of a rural moral transformation had turned into the reality of ‘renewed interest in raising vegetables’, the inoculation of cattle and building of roads alongside ‘apathy and antagonism in the village council’. Honnigman argued that wealthy farmers had done well but poorer and migrant cultivators been neglected, leading to resentment.¹³

Alongside rural growth, these were years of rapid urbanisation. Calcutta grew from 2.9 to 7 million inhabitants between 1951 and 1971; Delhi from 910,000 to 4.4 million, both increases fuelled by the arrival of largely middle class migrants from East and West Pakistan. Without these cross-border flows, most large cities doubled in size during these two decades, Gujarat’s capital of Ahmedabad from 780,000 to 1.95 million people. Manufacturing industry grew to fuel urbanisation during these years, but the service sector did far more so. Banking

¹² Frankel, *India’s Political Economy, 1947-2004*, 101–4; Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹³ John J. Honigmann, “A Case Study of Community Development in Pakistan,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 8, no. 3 (April 1, 1960): 288–303.

was by far the fastest growing economic sector in post-imperial India. After a 17.8% fall in banking output as British firms left in the immediate aftermath of 1947, banking and insurance grew by an average 9.2% between 1950 and 1964, with 1952 a peak year of 17%. This process of expansion led to the growth of an urban middle class in South Asia alongside the rise of socially-mixed rich peasants.¹⁴

Perhaps most important for our argument was the influx into the cities of relatively prosperous young people as students. The number of colleges educating the children of rich peasants and urban service workers increased exponentially. To take three significant regions of the subcontinent. Gujarat University in western India expanded from 16,800 to 162,000 students between 1950 and 1971. A collegiate institution on the model of the university of London, it grew from 31 to 235 colleges. The number of colleges expanded almost three-fold in the state of Bihar between 1951 and 1966. Dhaka University in East Pakistan (after 1971 Bangladesh) went from having less than 2,000 students in 1947 to 50,000 by 1968, 7,000 of whom resided on the university's campus.¹⁵

These economic and institutional changes created a series of moral and political aspirations amongst significant sections of the population that, to a greater or lesser degree in different places, South Asia's political institutions found difficult to manage and accommodate. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a process of political assertion by people whose lives had been quickly transformed, usually for the better - rich peasants to a degree, but particularly urban middle classes and students whose parents had often been rich peasants. Protest rapidly moved beyond existing institutions, as these rising groups found that their aspirations could not be comprehended within structures of political mediation. They began to practice a method of politics that echoed the forms of action narrated in the 'angry young man' films. Demands were immediate, and were made impatiently. They were made by people who had no faith in parliament, the law, or structures of corporate negotiation, but were asserted instead 'out of doors', on the street in particular. Beginning as often quite minor claims on

¹⁴ Sivasubramanian, *National Income of India in the Twentieth Century*, appendix 9(c).

¹⁵ Dawn E. Jones and Rodney W. Jones, "The Scholars' Rebellion: Educational Interests and Agitational Politics in Gujarat," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (May 1, 1977): 457–76, doi:10.2307/2054094; Ghansham Shah, "Revolution, Reform, or Protest? A Study of the Bihar Movement: I," *Economic and Political Weekly* 12, no. 15 (April 9, 1977): 605–14; Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 19.

public institutions, the language they used quickly expanded beyond particular interests and identities, and began to be made on behalf of a common, generic subject, the common man.

The crisis had different phases. The enraged sensibilities of these new social groups created a mood of crisis from the late 1960s, as attention to the pages of newspapers and journals quickly demonstrates. India's well-read broadly leftist weekly journal *Economic and Political Weekly* is a good barometer. The word 'crisis' appeared in an article on average on every 16 pages in 1968, and every 18 pages the following year, and was used to describe everything from geo-political events to film distribution to the textile industry. To begin with, the 'crisis' was understood simply as the failure of political leaders to accommodate different interests. So for example, an *EPW* article in April 1968 argued that Bombay's film houses remained closed in April 1968 because the government had failed to force the 'various parties' to compose their differences. Three months later, the sociologist and future Rajya Sabha (Upper House) member Rasheeduddin Khan attributed India's 'crisis of national interest' to a failure of India's political institutions to bring the disparate interests and identities of India together into a single 'national consensus'. In each case, there is a strong belief in the duty of political elites to forge consensus from plurality.¹⁶

But from the early 1970s, the mood of crisis deepened and intensified, as political authorities intensified tension by acting in what was perceived as a draconian fashion. The point here is protest was initially caused by the aspirations of new social groups, but then escalated in response to state violence against often fairly mild initial moments of resistance. Differences in the trajectory of crisis in different parts of the subcontinent were caused by the different ways political elites organised against forces they saw as a challenge in different places. 'Democratic' India and 'authoritarian' Pakistan took similar paths until the late 1960s, for example, with the only the differing scale of state violence in response to crisis pushing them along different paths afterwards.

We might trace these different but inter-connected processes by looking at the production of serious moments of political breakdown in three very different places: the Indian states of Gujarat and Bihar, and East Pakistan.

¹⁶ Rasheeduddin Khan, "Crisis of National Interest in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 3, no. 26/28 (July 1, 1968): 1095–1104.

Gujarat was one of post-imperial India's most dynamic and prosperous states. It was also the state where the political unrest that eventually resulted in Indira Gandhi's suspension of democracy began. Through the first twenty years after independence, the region (which became a state in 1960) was ruled by a gentlemanly, upper-caste (Brahmin, Bania and Patidar) ruling class. This accommodative elite managed to sustain peace and growth, one writer noting in the early 1970s that politics in the state was 'gentle and peaceful in tradition and commercial in style and technique'. From the late 1960s social groups who had benefited from post-imperial economic growth began to seek a political outlet elsewhere. But it was the failure of political structures to accommodate very rapid urban institutional growth that sparked serious unrest.

In the early months of 1974, the 'Nav Nirman' (reconstruction) movement brought urban Gujarat to a standstill, and forced the state's Chief Minister out of power. As the political scientists Dawn and Rodney Jones showed, the movement began as a 'scholar's rebellion', driven particularly by conflict within the governance of educational institutions. As the Jones' show, Gujarat's higher education system expanded quickly through the agency of private educational entrepreneurs, who opened state-supported colleges in the hope of profiting through a variety of means, from the provision of accommodation to the sale of textbooks. These leaders increasingly dominated Gujarat University's administrative structure, overthrowing the balance supposed to exist between politicians, principals and teachers supposed to run the state's federal university system. They became a major power-base for Chimanbhai Patel, the former academic who became state's Chief Minister, himself the son of peasants. The protest movement started after a battle, between teachers, students and the private college heads about who should be appointed as Vice Chancellor. Patel managed to get his nominee elected. To politicised teachers and students this moment demonstrated the failure of established institutions to accommodate their interests, and so they moved outdoors to the streets. The protests that followed did lead to Patel's resignation, but not before 42 people were killed in clashes and soldiers took to the streets of Ahmedabad. Overall, before and after his resignation, 103 people died and 8,237 were arrested.¹⁷

The movement coincided with a spike in inflation following the global oil crisis and the India-Pakistan war of 1971. A 20% increase in the cost of food in university hostels led to the first student riots in December 1973. But economic concerns intersected with a broader,

¹⁷ Praveen Seth, cited by Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, 244; Jones and Jones, "The Scholars' Rebellion."

middle class cynicism about the ability of political institutions to accommodate their interests, which accelerated as the state government responded to protest with violence. Initial protests against price rises were violent and disorganised but local; the price were dropped as an issue once the movement developed. But the seeming brutality of the police crackdown encouraged middle class public sector workers to join the protests, particularly nationalised bank workers and university teachers. In the early months of 1974 these groups led a general strike throughout urban Gujarat, shutting down the government and sparked the creation of the 'Nav Narmin Yuvak Samiti' (Regeneration Coordinating Committee), a body demanding radical cleansing of a society corrupted by political power.

The Nav Nirman movement expressed a Gandhian commitment to non-violence and moral transformation. But, it had no patience with the painstaking effort to reconcile different interests that underpinned Gandhian politics in practice. This was a movement that cultivated the politics of the spectacle and the street outside existing institutional forms rather than negotiation. So for example students decided to welcome soldiers onto the streets of Ahmedabad with garlands of flowers and sweets. The student union organised a funeral ceremony marking the end of Chimanbhai's period as Chief Minister. Thousands of people beating metal trays and lighting fireworks, in a massive display of 'coordinated spontaneity' throughout the state.

The Gujarat movement was emphatic in maintaining its distance from mainstream politics. Yet, in the months that followed Chimanbhai's resignation, a variety of political organisations and parties began to join the campaign and using the same kinds of tactics to achieve their objectives. 1974 marked the beginning (or, perhaps, the return) of political parties in South Asia adopting the style of 'movement politics', with their use of the street as the space for political theatre, their spectacular marches, their efforts to stage confrontations between politicians and 'the common people', their opening up of a space for organised political violence, all of which assumed that power lay with the multitude of people outside political institutions instead of the state. These tactics were efforts to break out of the structures of political negotiation. They challenged the the assumption that political change was always mediated by institutions where representatives of different interests met to forge a consensus, and instead to assert a direct connection with the common man.

Significant 'establishment' political careers have been based on skill in organising extra-parliamentary political action. One of the hardest working organisers in the campaign to de-

seat the Congress chief minister in Bihar was a 22-year old activist for the Hindu fundamentalist 'volunteer organisation', the RSS – Narendra Modi. In 1974 Modi had been deputed to work in the Hindu nationalist movement's student organisation, the Akhil Bharatoya Vidyarthi Prasad (ABVP). The current Indian Prime Minister's website now describes the movement as a response to 'disillusionment amongst the common man in Gujarat'. 'Narendra's first encounter with mass protest' is placed as a significant stage in Modi's rise.¹⁸

Modi's involvement in the Nav Nirman movement illustrates another point, that 'movement politics' was used by activists from across the political spectrum. We too easily associate student protest (for example) with the politics of the left. In Gujarat, the Nav Nirman movement created a repertoire of tactics that could be employed for different objectives. In Gujarat these tactics were used, for example, by upper caste medical students opposed to the early 1980s' Congress government's effort to reserve places for lower caste students. As in the Nav Nirman movement, the campaign against reservations began with an effort to mobilise constitutional structures, in a series of legal cases but ended in street protests and widespread rioting.

Economically, Bihar could not have been more different than Gujarat, the former chronically poor to the latter's advance. But both states followed a similar pattern; protests in both cases were driven by middle class city-dwellers more than villagers. In the late 1960s, Bihar had seen a significant upsurge in political agitation, particularly amongst government employees. In the four years before 1971, for example, there were, 179 agitations in Patna, 110 of which were by government employees. Again, a series of student protests about price rises sparked the movement itself, although again too protests escalated even though prices quickly fell.

The Bihar movement was led by J.P. Narayan, a political leader who had been India's most prominent non-Communist left leader before independence. In the 1950s he abandoned party politics, and led the Gandhian Bhoodan and Gramdan movements, which aimed to create a consensual moral transformation in rural India. JP, as he is known, was invited by a coalition of left and Hindu nationalist student activists to lead the campaign in late 1974. His involvement transformed a campaign for a disparate set of reforms in public institutions, into a movement for 'total revolution'. It also marked an important shift in JP's own political

¹⁸ www.narendramodi.in/navnirman-movement-1974-when-student-power-rattled-the-unhealthy-status-quo/
accessed 1 April 2015

style, reflecting a broader shift. Always an advocate of both revolutionary change and a moral as well as economic transformation, JP believed in the necessity of patient gradual work to reconcile different interests in the 1950s, but stressed the need for a rapid rupture in 1974.

His Bihar movement impatiently invoked an idea of ‘people’s politics’, *lok niti* in Hindi in contrast to power (or, literally, royal) politics, *raj niti*. JP called for a system of ‘party-less democracy’, urging the creation of a parallel government, with the formation of ‘village peace organisations’ in place of the police for example. The argument was that power could be exercised immediately and by the people themselves, unmediated by formal political institutions. In fact, peoples’ governments were only created in 18 out of Bihar’s 587 blocks (the smallest unit of administration).¹⁹

Both the Gujarati Nav Nirman campaign and Bihar movement both asserted ‘immediate democracy’ against the ‘disembodied power’ (as Jacques Ranciere calls it) of the dispersed agencies of the state. Each movement undermined existing political hierarchies, creating new forms of organisation and new leaders, but failed to institutionalise an alternative political order in its place. The Nav Nirman movement brought down Gujarat’s Chief Minister. In Bihar the Chief Minister hung on, but the movement contributed to Indira Gandhi declaring an emergency in June 1975, and was defeated at the polls by an anti-Congress alliance stitched together by J.P. Narayan two years later. Indira was back in 1980, after the opposition alliance failed to create a stable form of institutional power.

A similar process of political change occurred in Pakistan and then Bangladesh. Despite the absence of formal democratic institutions, the political structure of 1950s Pakistan was ruled by a form of ‘accommodative elitism’ too. The aim of Ayub Khan’s Basic Democracy scheme was to reconcile different interests under elite guidance. The system created a nested series of partly elected, partly appointed bodies, which ranged from circles of 1000 voters to a central council presided by the President himself. It was explicitly constructed to hold together a society wracked by ‘parochialism and linguistic differences’, through a combination of negotiation and strong central leadership. Particularly important was the institutionalisation of the negotiation between bureaucrats and political leaders, a phenomenon that opposition political leaders vigorously condemned. Unlike India’s Congress

¹⁹ Ghanshyam Shah, “Revolution, Reform, or Protest? A Study of the Bihar Movement: II,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 12, no. 16 (April 16, 1977): 649; Ranabir Samaddar, “Jayaprakash Narayan and the Problem of Representative Democracy,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 31 (August 2, 2008): 49–58.

regime, the Basic Democracy didn't require leaders to appeal to the sanction of the electorate. But like the Congress system, it was a system of mediating institutions designed to keep order by accommodating plural perspectives.²⁰

The system failed in part because Ayub consciously excluded the urban middle class. The growth of Pakistan's economy during the 1950s and early 1960s, together with the massive expansion of the universities created an economically prosperous but politically excluded urban population. Beginning with student protests in November 1968, members of these new social groups people took to the streets. As in Gujarat and Bihar, the protests began around petty institutional issues. Students campaigned against the government's control over university curricula, an increase the length of an undergraduate degree from two to three years, and reforms which made it easier to fail degrees. These issues were wrapped up in a broader critique of corruption. But it was the state's response that escalated the campaign. The killing of three students in Rawalpindi in November 1968 began an all-Pakistan student campaign to oust Ayub Khan.

As in India, state violence led more formally organised opposition organisations to adopt the same tactics. After the Rawalpindi shootings, extra-parliamentary politics became entangled in party politics when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Bengali-dominated opposition Awami League was accused of leading a conspiracy to split East Pakistan into an independent country. His arrest fuelled the momentum of the opposition with street protests and sporadic violence in both Pakistan's east and western wings. Military leaders tried to draw political leaders into negotiations, Ayub appealing to political parties 'to offer collective resistance to the forces of agitation and disruption'. But for them, street protests seemed a better way to raise the ante and impose their demands than conversations behind closed doors. The cycle of protest and repression widened, as the generals increasingly feared the total collapse of law and order. The result was the transfer of power to the Commander in Chief, General Yahya Khan, and a set of quick elections with no agreed constitution under the rule of an edgy military hierarchy. When the pro-autonomy Awami League won an absolute majority by winning every seat but one in East Pakistan but held mass meetings instead of negotiating on the military's terms. It was the army's brutal crackdown in the east

²⁰ Naveeda Khan, "Future Imbued Movement: Ayub Khan's Legacy for Pakistan (unpublished)," accessed April 4, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/4677610/Future_Imbued_Movement_Ayub_Khans_Legacy_for_Pakistan_unpublished_.

in March 1971 which precipitated a nine-month war and the eventual independence of Bangladesh.

The dominant narrative of the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 privileges a combination of irreconcilable cultural differences and economic crisis to argue that break-up was inevitable. What's missing from this explanation is an account of the failure of Pakistan's elites to accommodate differences. Earlier moments of crisis in the relationship between East Bengal and West Pakistan, the 1952 language movement for example, had led to moments of readjustment. But by the 1970s a new style of political agitation had emerged, which eschewed existing political structures and impatiently marshalled bodies in the streets to ensure its demands were met. The Awami League alternated between constitutionalist and extra-parliamentary language. Sheikh Mujib's famous 7 March 1971 speech, before a massive crowd at Dacca race course combined a painfully detailed discussion of political negotiations with an appeal to the embodied political action of individual subjects to resist the Pakistani military. There was no future-oriented call for the nation to realise itself, no explanation of the relationship between the political institutions and national self-determination. Instead, there was simply the insistence that individuals protect themselves from enslavement by their own actions. 'Build a fortress in each and every home', Mujib said. 'Since we have learnt die, no one can dominate us'.

Bangladesh's liberation war itself was characterised by this emphasis on impatient, individual action and a mistrust of institutions, particular those capable of mediating between smaller groups and the nation as a whole. Fighting was led a series of largely separate bands. In the end victory was precipitated by the intervention of the Indian army, as the Indian government was worried that an influx of refugees would cause disorder and social crisis along the border. After independence was won, the country was in precisely the state the generals had intervened to prevent; guns and armed gangs, some freedom fighters, some bandits were everywhere. Identities remained unstable and political organisations fissile, and the bare structures of law and parliament were a very thin institutional framework to accommodate the competing passions and interests of the new nation. To govern safely, Mujib decided to ban dissent and centralise power with the creation of a one-party state in 1974, justifying his actions by impatiently talking about the urgent need for development and the fear of power centres he could not control. Particularly dangerous was his decision to create his own paramilitary force under the command of the party, described as 'private army of storm troopers' by one journalist. The response came in 1975, when Mujib and most of his family

were assassinated by army officers claiming, once again, to protect the common man from a corrupt regime.²¹

III.

In 1966 the then 27 year-old Pranab Bardhan returned from completing a PhD in theoretical economics at Cambridge, England to his home city. In an article published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bardhan described Calcutta as a city of sleepwalkers. There was, he said, ‘an air of unreality everywhere’, with literature and film full of ‘stomach-turning sentimentalism’, of ‘nostalgia’ and ‘escapades into a personal world of nihilism’. There were plenty of people who criticised the state of the country and the world. There were countless coffee-house conversations between ‘young dishevelled intellectuals ‘whispering speculations about the unsuitability of the Gangetic plains as guerrilla terrain’ or dreaming that their friends were in fact CIA agents, but no action. Calcutta was ‘a city full of visionaries, incurably romantic and charmingly out of touch with reality’. The left, Bardhan complained, ‘could do with fewer intellectuals and more of practical, efficient organisation men’.²²

China was ever present in these discussions, as Bardhan noted. Like intellectuals in many other places, Bengali leftists and foreign journalists thought India was on the edge of violent confrontation similar to the upheaval which brought Mao to power. In these coffee-shop conversations frequent comparisons were drawn between India in the mid-1960s and China under the Kuomintang. The South African journalist Ronald Segal’s 1965 tirade *The Anguish of India*, likened Nehru to Chiang Kai-Chek (as well as Hamlet) for example. Bardhan unsentimentally dismissed the comparison. The KMT, he said, was a military ‘clique’ which presided over a country that had been split apart by ‘war, chaos and anarchy’. Congress was corrupt and mired in ‘faction fights’. But unlike its Chinese nationalist counterpart, Congress has an effective nation-wide organisation ‘with a countrywide rural base’ and a unified ‘administrative network’. A quick push from romantic leftists was not about to undermine such a stable and responsive system of power.

²¹ UK High Commissioner to Bangladesh to London, Dacca, 3 October 1975, TNA FCO 37/1564; *Holiday*, January 2, 1974

²² Pranab Bardhan, “A City of Sleepwalkers,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 1, no. 2 (August 27, 1966): 69–70.

Bardhan was of course right about the long-term survival of the Indian National Congress as an institution at the centre of Indian politics. Congress politicians ruled India's centre for all but four of the next 30 years, and 38 of the next 48. But the unreal atmosphere he diagnosed evaporated quickly. Romantic speculation about the possibility of change was replaced by different forms of practical (although not always efficient) action. In 1967, Congress rule in the state of West Bengal was replaced by rule by a Communist-led United Front regime, which stayed in power until it was dismissed and replaced in turn by direct rule from the centre in 1970. A few of Calcutta's more radical coffee-shop Marxists marched to Naxalbari in 1968 and other sites of Maoist insurgency the following year. Indira imposed her personal authority against the structures that Bardhan imagined would endure as 'a unified and consolidated administrative network', and Congress split between 'ruling' (R) and 'organisation' (O) factions. By 1975 she believed a functioning national state could only survive if she suspended democratic rights. By then soft focus romances had been replaced in the cinema by the hard, violent individualism of Amitabh Bachchan's angry young man. In Satyajit Ray's Bengali art cinema 'nostalgic' films set in the nineteenth century had been succeeded by edgy depictions of the alienated urban middle class and their dilemma about whether to resort to violence. Across the border in what was East Pakistan, systems of government intended to reconcile bureaucratic and political authority had split apart, Bangladesh had won independence and its polity was convulsed by waves of famine and violence which make the plot of an Amitabh Bachchan film look very mild.

In both India and Pakistan, these years saw the death of a style of leadership I've called 'accommodative elitism'. It was replaced by a very different form of politics. The post-imperial politics of gradual socio-economic development was replaced by an impatient, defensive, profoundly individualistic political idiom, which found it far easier than its predecessor to turn to the streets, to violence or to 'unconstitutional' forms of state power. Driving the new politics was a critique of the delayed gratification of the old nationalist politics of the 1950s and 1960s, articulated particularly by South Asia's middle classes. In place of the old structures of accommodation, political action claimed it could bring instant benefits now. Consensus was no longer a significant objective, and fidelity to long-standing institutional structures was abandoned. South Asia's politics in the 1970s seems 'nonlinear' in character; events had seemingly disproportionate effects. The consequence was a fissile process of action and response, where a succession of crises rapidly multiplied new forms of organisation and action whose boundaries were hard to establish and maintain. This was the

period in which new political parties quickly emerged, as quickly merged with each other then died. It also saw 'politics' merge with extra-parliamentary activities, to the point where it became impossible to tell the one and the other apart. During the 1970s, a significant path to mainstream political success lay in the spectacular renunciation of traditional political institutions. In a paradoxical fashion, politics was parasitical on the decade's impatient anti-political mood.

If much of this sounds eerily familiar, it is because the 'crisis' years created a form of politics that has endured in modern South Asia since the 1970s. Since then, politics has been dominated by differing forms of impatient and individualistic populism. A continual opposition has occurred between rule by authoritarian leaders on the one hand, and parties claiming they channel the voice of South Asia's multitudes in an unmediated fashion on the other. In the absence of institutions able to accommodate differences through a form of leadership which is widely trusted, the reconciliation of individual autonomy with a shared sense of purpose has proved impossible. As a result, South Asia has oscillated between authoritarianism and people power, each claiming to directly represent the common man. When India's post-emergency Janata government was incapable of holding together, voters felt they had no option but to return Indira to power in 1980, but the landslide did not reflect any real sense of enthusiasm. Similarly, Narendra Modi's victory in 2014 was driven by a belief in the need for instant action in the face of the weakness and corruption of the Congress regime that had ruled India since 2002. But the Aam Aadmi ('common man') party won an overwhelming victory in the Delhi state elections only four months after Modi's national victory, its chaotic style of popular democracy seen as a necessary counter to Modi's efficient, centralised style.

Of course the world we live in now was not created in the 1970s, either in South Asia or anywhere else. Two forces dominated the politics of the 1980s and 1990s, which could not have been predicted during the previous decade: the rise of religious nationalism in both India and Pakistan, and both country's greater embrace of liberalisation and free markets. Yet, with emphasis on individual action, its impatience and its mistrust of the slow work of institutions capable of reconciling difference to improve society, South Asian politics speaks an idiom which was first produced in response to the political crises of the 1970s. Perhaps it isn't a coincidence that the Prime Ministers of the three states which inherited the territory of British India had their earliest political education within the fissile violence of the early 1970s. Sheikh Hasina, Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif were born within three years of each other

between 1947 and 1950, and were in their early twenties during the crisis of the early 1970s. Modi began his political life during the Nav Nirman uprising as an activist for the RSS and AVBP, two wings of a Hindu nationalist movement whose objective is social transformation as much as political power. Sheikh Hasina's entry into politics came through her solitary survival of the massacre of her father and his family in 1975. Born the son of a prominent industrialist, Nawaz Sharif came into politics as a 27 year old in 1976, to fight Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's violent seizure of the family business, quickly becoming a key ally of General Zia-ul-Haq. In each case politics began outside traditional political institutions. Perhaps the greatest legacy of the 1970s in South Asia is the continuing fusion of mainstream politics with extra-parliamentary, perhaps one might even say anti-political forms of action.