

The Indian 'Faction': A Political Theory Examined

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For many scholars, the concept of 'faction' has provided a key to the understanding of Indian politics. Factions, it is believed, link the lowest in the land to the highest: the humble sharecropper is a member of his landlord's faction; the landlord is in one of the district-level factions; the district boss is a key member of one of the factions in the provincial legislative assembly; the provincial minister is a member of one of the all-India factions which go by such names as Congress (A), Congress (B), Congress (C), Janata (X), Janata (Y), Janata (Z). In this manner, factional networks are supposed to encompass the nation, linking the peasant masses to their rulers.

Paul Brass, in discussing the subject of Congress politics in post-independence Uttar Pradesh, writes:

... factional loyalties provide the link between the parochial units of Indian society—family, village, caste—and the political parties. Factional loyalty in the Uttar Pradesh Congress replaces party loyalty. Factional loyalty is an intermediate, perhaps a transitional, form of politics. It is something 'more' than parochial politics—a politics based on language, caste, tribe, or religion—and something 'less' than party politics in the European and American sense, involving an impersonal allegiance to a party as an institution or as an ideology.¹

Historians have taken up this theme, seeking to project it back into the pre-independence period. B.R. Tomlinson, in his study of the

This essay has grown out of a long-standing discussion with Ranajit Guha, Gyan Pandey, David Arnold and Shahid Amin. Many of the ideas expressed here are as much theirs as mine, although I am of course responsible for the form in which they are expressed. In addition, Frank Perlin made some valuable suggestions for improving the argument.

¹Paul Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh* (California, 1965), p. 114.

Congress Party in the 1930s, after summarizing the theories of Paul Brass, states that he is '... trying to push some of the analysis of the political scientists back into the period before 1947'.² Another historian who has done this is S.N. Mukherjee in a study of the politics of early nineteenth-century Calcutta. In this study he places much emphasis on the importance of factions (*dals*) and faction leaders (*dalapatis*). In his words: 'The *dalapatis* also used the *dals* for modern politics, for both horizontal and vertical mobilization, to establish contacts in the *mofussil* areas and to exert pressure on their followers for agitation'.³ According to Mukherjee, cosmopolitan faction leaders mobilized the support of their country clients, who, as members of the local rural élite and as faction leaders in their own localities, could in turn mobilize their own clients, the peasants. We are thus provided with an explanation as to how the élites mobilize the peasantry politically.

David Washbrook has developed this argument by seeking to explain how, over time, local-level factions became linked to provincial-level factions. In a book and a series of articles on the politics of Madras Presidency in the years between 1870 and 1920, he has argued that during the nineteenth century the rural élites—what he calls the rural-local bosses—had almost complete political power at the local level.⁴ Each rural-local boss controlled a network of clients, such as tenants, employees and debtors, who were dependent on him in one way or another. These networks cut across caste and class. 'The political leader, who controlled a cross-communal network through terror, credit and administrative manipulation, remained far more powerful than the leader who relied for his position on the dictates of caste conscience or even on the formal writ of the boards and councils'.⁵ The most important form of political activity at the local level was the factional conflict between such networks. 'The operational category of politics was the faction in which members, drawn from

²B.R. Tomlinson, *The Indian National Congress and the Raj 1929-1942* (London, 1976), n. 72.

³S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), 'Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-38', in Edmund Leach and S.N. Mukherjee, *Elites in South Asia* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 78.

⁴David Washbrook, 'Country Politics: Madras 1880 to 1930', in J. Gallagher, G. Johnston and A. Seal, *Locality, Province and Nation* (Cambridge, 1973); C.J. Baker and D.A. Washbrook, *South India* (Delhi, 1975); D.A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1976), in particular, see *The Emergence of Provincial Politics*, pp. 40-50.

⁵Baker and Washbrook, *South India*, pp. 171-2.

different castes, were held by transactional ties to a leader, and by which castes were divided.⁸

Washbrook argues that the power of the rural-local bosses was limited to a very local area until around 1910. It was only after this date, when important powers were granted to Indians on district local boards, that the rural-local bosses were forced to compete for power at the district level. 'Quite suddenly, rural-local bosses found themselves provided with a machine of tremendous power, which they could use to develop their support and crush their enemies: through control of taxation, contracts and services in the district they were given the means of extending their empires.'⁹ As in conflicts at the local level, district-level conflicts were between competing factions. After 1920, with the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, the rural-local bosses extended their factional conflicts to the provincial level. Therefore, modern Indian politics came to be characterized by conflicts along factional lines between rural-local bosses. The extension of such conflict to the district and provincial level had been brought about to a large extent by the constitutional reforms of the British.

The theory is a neat one; and, for a number of reasons, it has proved attractive to scholars. I do not, however, believe it to be correct. In this essay, I shall start by discussing my own reasons for rejecting it. I shall then go on to discuss the theory at a more general level, examining first how different scholars have used the concept of faction, and secondly asking why the concept has enjoyed such popularity.

II

In the period between 1971 and 1977, I carried out detailed research into the history of the Indian nationalist movement in one Indian district, that of Kheda in Gujarat. In this area, the movement was at its height in the years 1917-34. Besides working in archives and local records offices, I carried out extensive interviews with many people who participated in the movement. In addition, I lived for some months in a single village for a better understanding of the movement at the village level. The findings

⁸Loc. cit. Also see *Locality, Province and Nation*, p. 178.
⁹*The Emergence of Provincial Politics*, p. 169.

have been published recently in book form.¹⁰ During the course of the research, one of my chief concerns was to trace the local political networks and alliances which revealed themselves during the course of the nationalist movement. One of the questions that had to be asked was whether these took a 'factional' form.

Historians have generally agreed that the nationalist movement in Kheda District was supported most strongly by a community known as the Patidars.¹¹ The Patidars were the dominant caste of the area, owning much land and exercising a firm control over other agrarian resources. In class terms, some of the Patidars were large landlords, but the great majority were substantial peasant cultivators. It is thus possible to describe the Patidar peasants (in contrast to the large Patidar landlords) as a class in certain respects.¹² Because the Patidars were in such a strong economic position in rural Kheda, it was reasonable to assume that the important factions of the district would have been factions *within* the dominant caste, for factions formed from other peasant castes would have lacked political weight. At the outset, this hypothesis appeared plausible, for only a minority of Patidar peasants participated actively in the movement.¹³ The problem was therefore to discover patron-client networks and conflict groups within the Patidar caste, and to reveal how these operated within the context of the nationalist movement.

At the district level there were powerful political leaders, some of whom were Patidars, some of whom were Brahmans and Vaniyas. These men were large landlords, money-lenders and entrepreneurs, as well as being caste leaders. Most powerful of all was the Desai family of Nadiad town, which was Patidar by caste. This family dominated the Nadiad town municipality, exercised considerable power within the Kheda District local board, and its members often represented Kheda District in the Bombay Legislative Council. Although the family owned large estates in the district, their political power rested not so much on their direct

¹⁰David Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District 1917-1934* (Delhi, 1981).

¹¹See, for instance, Judith Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 81-11; D.N. Dhanagare, *Agrarian Movements and Gandhian Politics* (Agra, 1975), pp. 35-45.

¹²This question is discussed at length in *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat*, ch. 3, sec. 1, 'Caste and Class', pp. 31-6.

¹³As an example, in 1930-1, about 15,000 peasants migrated from their villages as a protest against the British. 87 per cent were Patidar by caste. The total Patidar population of Kheda District was seen over 100,000. 1930-1 figures *Income Census of India 1931*, pt. 1, Bombay (Bombay, 1933), pp. 482-93.

control over an army of tenants, but on their position as caste leaders of the Patidars. Their position was maintained through a system of hypergamy, which operated as follows.

Different Patidar lineages were ranked on a scale which reflected their wealth and standing within the caste. The Desai lineage of Nadiad was considered to stand at the top of this hierarchy. The rule of hypergamy was that a daughter should be married on payment of a dowry into a 'superior' lineage. In this manner, Patidars of 'inferior' lineages were able to forge alliances with Patidars of 'superior' lineages. Such alliances were considered prestigious for 'inferior' Patidars and, in theory, advantages could be gained, such as patronage from the 'superior' Patidar family into which a daughter was married. In practice, the 'superior' Patidars took far more than they gave.

The political implication of this system was that many 'inferior' Patidars were dependent on the goodwill of 'superior' Patidars. The 'lesser' Patidar father who married his daughter to the son of a 'superior' Patidar dared not offend the family of the latter lest his daughter be victimized. 'Lesser' Patidars were often manipulated in a most cynical manner. It was not uncommon for a 'superior' Patidar to spend his dowry money and return his wife to her father so that he could marry for a new dowry. Amongst Patidars, it was considered very shameful to have to take back a daughter, and Patidars would do almost anything to avoid such a disgrace. As the 'lesser' Patidars who married their daughters into 'superior' lineages were often the richer and more powerful Patidars of their villages, this meant that the 'superior' Patidars possessed many influential allies in villages throughout the district. In this manner, we can see how big Patidar landlords, such as the Nadiad Desais, maintained political control over the Patidar leaders at the village level. According to the anthropologist, David Pocock, who carried out his field-work amongst the Patidars of Kheda, it is possible to describe these links through hypergamous marriage as factional.¹²

At the village level, the dominant Patidars were in many cases divided into minor lineages, known as *khadki*. As a rule, there were between two and about eight *khadkis* in each village. By tradition, each *khadki* inhabited a different street (*phaliya*), and as this was

still the practice in many Patidar villages in the early twentieth century, the different Patidar groups in a village could often be distinguished by the section of the village in which they lived as well as by their ancestry. Each *khadki* was led by one or two elders (*matadars*). In a dispute between Patidars of different *khadkis*, Patidars were expected to side with members of their own *khadki*. In this, the *khadki* appears to have been similar to the *thok* of the Jats of Western Uttar Pradesh, as described by M.C. Pradhan.¹³

Each *khadki* had its own low-caste clients, such as tenants of the members, and craftsmen, artisans and sweepers, who were attached to a particular *khadki*. Thus, in the words of David Pocock, each Patidar lineage commanded a number of low-caste followers.¹⁴

Pocock does not regard the *khadki* as the only type of faction found in the Patidar villages of Kheda. In many disputes, alliances were formed on an economic rather than on an ancestral basis. Pocock cites a strong village faction which was formed around a group of Patidars who ran a company which owned several water-pumps in the area. Many peasants were dependent on them for their supply of irrigation water, and as a result they were able to act as a core-group in village disputes.¹⁵

A hypothetical factional network of Kheda District can thus be set out. At the top, exercising the levers of power, we can place the big patrons: the most powerful of whom were the Patidar Desais of Nadiad. Their clients were, we may say, in part the *khadki* leaders (*matadars*) of each village, and in part the powerful village landlords, money-lenders or entrepreneurs who commanded their own networks of clients. These village bosses, we may assume, controlled the mass of the village population: in part along lines of caste, but also through economic ties. In this manner we can link the district-level bosses to the peasant masses. The next task was therefore to discover whether these networks played a critical role in the politics of Kheda District during the period of the nationalist movement.

On the surface, there were grounds for thinking that factions were important. The leaders of the Gandhian movement in Kheda District were Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Darbar Gopaldas, both Patidars. Vallabhbhai Patel was a Patidar from one of the

¹²D.F. Pocock, 'The Bases of Faction in Gujarat', in *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol.8, 1957, p. 360.

¹³M.C. Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India* (Bombay, 1966), p. 124-5.

¹⁴Pocock, *op. cit.*, p.299. ¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp.302-3.

most prestigious lineages of the district, though his father was only a petty landlord. Darbar Gopaldas was the leading Patidar of Vaso village, and his lineage was considered to stand second only to the Desais of Nadiad in the Patidar hierarchy. He was a big landlord, with 200 acres of land in Vaso, small plots of land scattered around other villages of the area, and in addition he had two talukdari villages and a small princely state in Saurashtra (worth Rs 50,000 a year) to his name.

The Desais of Nadiad were, for the most part, opposed to the nationalist movement led by Vallabhbhai Patel and Darbar Gopaldas. In 1918, they demanded that the Kheda Satyagraha be called off, in 1920 they refused to boycott the legislative councils, and in 1930 they opposed the Civil Disobedience movement. Here, it may be thought, was a clear case of factionalism. Darbar Gopaldas, it can be argued, had set himself up as a 'Gandhian nationalist' so as to undermine the power of his old rivals, the Nadiad Desais. Vallabhbhai Patel, a member of an impoverished 'superior' Patidar family, can likewise be seen as venting his injured pride on the prestigious Nadiad Desais by establishing his own more powerful factional networks based on nationalist agitation. Kheda can thus be seen as conforming to David Washbrook's picture of the Andhra region of the Madras Presidency during the same period. 'In the Andhra deltas', Washbrook writes, 'men who lost out in the district boards or in the division of spoils by the administration were able to manufacture their own rival political systems based on agitation, protest and publicity.'¹⁶

Ultimately, it can be argued, the leaders of the nationalist faction succeeded in their designs. In 1925, the Congress Party won control over the Kheda District local board, and Darbar Gopaldas replaced the Nadiad Desai, Dadubhai, as president. Vallabhbhai Patel, for his part, had by the 1930s far greater political power than any Nadiad Desai. For instance, he exercised almost complete control over the nomination of Congress candidates for Gujarat seats in the 1937 elections. In this year, the Congress swept the polls. The minor faction of the 1920s had thus become the major faction of the 1930s.

On the surface, this interpretation of the politics of Kheda may appear plausible. The problems arise when we start to examine the history of the movement in detail. The first difficulty with the

'factional' interpretation was that during these years Vallabhbhai Patel acted as an agitator rather than as a faction leader. Coming from a poor family, he had, during his early years, few powers of patronage at his command on which to build a political base of the factional type. He became the leader of the Patidar peasants because he was prepared to support and lead their no-revenue campaigns against the British revenue authorities. These agitations were, in all cases, initiated by the peasants themselves, so that Vallabhbhai Patel did not need to manipulate patron-client networks in order to be able to act as the leader of the peasants.¹⁷

Even when Vallabhbhai Patel had achieved a position of power, he did not use it to extend his influence in the normally accepted factional manner. The Indian faction leader is supposed to be driven by the desire to win seats for members of his faction in the legislatures, for with these at his command he can extend his powers of patronage. Vallabhbhai Patel, however, showed a marked antipathy to legislative councils. He boycotted all except one of the elections held under the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, and before 1945 he himself refused even to sit in the legislatures. He did this because he believed that these elitist bodies could be of little service to the mass of the people while India remained under British rule. There is no doubt that he could have won a seat from Gujarat had he so wished.

The second difficulty with the 'factional' interpretation was that Darbar Gopaldas, likewise, failed to conform to the 'faction leader' stereotype. Again, his prime interest was agitation rather than the building of patron-client networks. Although he became president of the Kheda District local board in 1925, he only took the post because the nationalist movement was at a particularly low ebb at that juncture. As soon as the peasants became militant once more, he gave up the post (in 1928) to devote himself to agitation. Also, although he was a large landlord and influential 'superior' Patidar, he was not in a position to manipulate his peasant followers in the manner expected of faction leaders. As an example, let us take a case in which there was an unambiguous clash of wills between Darbar Gopaldas and a group of 'lesser' Patidar peasants.

In 1930, during the Civil Disobedience movement, various

¹⁶Washbrook, 'Country Politics: Madras 1880 to 1930', p. 210.

¹⁷For details, see the sections in *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat* on the early mass of the Kheda Satyagraha (1918), Borsad Satyagraha (1923) and Civil Disobedience (1930).

Patidars paid their land revenue to the British in defiance of caste council resolutions that they should not. In 1931, one of these caste councils decided to fine those who had broken the resolution. This fine, which was levied after the movement was called off, was seen by the British as a violation of the Gandhi-Irwin pact of March 1931, and because of this the local authorities demanded that the fines be repaid. Darbar Gopaldas tried to ensure that this was done, but all his powers of persuasion were insufficient to bring the return of a single pie. In the end, he was forced to repay the fines from Congress funds.¹⁸ Thus, in a straight clash of authority between a much-respected 'superior' Patidar leader and a 'lesser' Patidar caste council, it was the 'lesser' Patidars who came out winners. It is, therefore, unconvincing to argue that the 'lesser' Patidar peasants were open to manipulation by district-level landlords and caste leaders such as Darbar Gopaldas.

The example is interesting because it reveals an important form of Patidar organization: the caste council or *gol*. *Gols* were formed through a voluntary agreement by the Patidars of a number of villages. During this period there were in Kheda *gols* of nine villages, fourteen villages, twenty-one villages and twenty-seven villages, amongst others.¹⁹ The Patidars of each *gol* were considered to be of roughly equal status. *Gols* were formed to prevent ruinous hypergamous marriages with 'superior' Patidar lineages. The Patidars of each *gol* made a voluntary agreement to marry only within the *gol*, so that it became, in theory, an endogamous unit. Patidars who married outside their *gol* were fined or boycotted by other members of the *gol*. In protecting the 'lesser' Patidars against the 'superior' Patidars, the *gol* system helped to check the economic and political power of the great Patidar landlords. It provided only a check, not an impassable barrier, for many ambitious Patidars of 'lesser' villages were still prepared to break *gol* discipline by marrying their daughters into 'superior' lineages. But, on the whole, the large majority of Patidars conformed to *gol* discipline and married within their *gols*.

Here, therefore, we discover a strong form of subaltern organization within the Patidar caste which provided a check on the powers of the Patidar elite. We can see how this operated in

another example from 1930-31. In June 1930, the Patidar *gol* of twenty-one villages met together and resolved to support the no-revenue campaign then being launched in support of the Civil Disobedience movement. Any Patidar of the *gol* who paid his land revenue was to be disciplined. One of the members was a powerful and ambitious landlord called Dhanabhai Patel. He had represented Kheda District in the Bombay Legislative Council from 1923 to 1926 as a Swarajist. He refused to accept the authority of the *gol* and paid his land revenue. In November 1930, the *gol* met once more, this time to discipline those members who had paid their revenue. Amongst those punished was Dhanabhai Patel, who was to be 'ostracized for life'. In May 1931, after Civil Disobedience had been called off, Dhanabhai Patel went to Gandhi and complained that he was still being subjected to caste boycott. Gandhi tried to arrange a compromise, but he was told by the leaders of the *gol* that Dhanabhai deserved to suffer. Thus, even Mahatma Gandhi was unable to break the solidarity of the Patidar *gol* of twenty-one villages.

This case serves to show that Patidar politics at the district level could not be understood in terms of patron-client networks and the machinations of manipulative elites. The Patidar peasants had their own organizations which could resist power-hungry landlords with great effect. In this respect, the solidarity of the *gol* was a form of class solidarity. Because of this, the nationalist movement in Kheda is best understood as a class-based movement rather than as a factional movement.

Factional analysis does not, therefore, help us to understand the nationalist movement at the district level. Perhaps, the reader may assume, it comes into its own when we look at the movement at the village level. Here, it may be supposed, we are likely to find a relationship between existing factional rivalries and the groups which either supported or opposed the movement.

To discover whether or not this was true, I had to examine the role played in the movement by two types of village conflict groups: first, the Patidar minimal lineage groups (*khadki*), and second, groups formed around political rivalries which cut across lines of the *khadki*. To examine the effect of *khadki* membership on support for the movement, I took the village in which I lived, Virsad, as an example. In Virsad, there were seven Patidar *tha'ki*. As a result of interviews, I managed to discover the *khadki* of

¹⁸Maharashtra State Archives, Home Dept. Special, 1931, File 750, pt 93.

¹⁹For full details see *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat*, app. IV, 'Patidar Marriage Circles (Gol)', pp. 273-9.

thirty-five of the forty-seven Patidar families who refused their land revenue in 1930 and migrated from the village as a protest against British rule. These thirty-five came from the seven *khadki* as follows: *khadki* A—12; *khadki* B—9; *khadki* C—4; *khadki* D—4; *khadki* E—2; *khadki* F—2; *khadki* G—2. *Khadki* A, B and C were the largest in the village and on numerical grounds alone could have been expected to have had the most activists. Likewise, those in Virsad who did not participate actively in the movement came from all seven *khadki*. I was forced, therefore, to conclude that *khadki* membership bore no relationship to participation in the movement.

There were, however, cases in which individual Patidars took advantage of the nationalist agitation to do down old rivals. Thus in Virsad the village headman, who remained loyal to the British, arrested one of his old rivals, a prominent Patidar landlord, and had him thrown into jail. In several villages (not Virsad, however) the British confiscated land as a punishment for revenue refusal and put it up for sale at very low rates. In a few cases, Patidars bought land confiscated from old rivals. This, however, was considered by the majority of Patidars to be a most shameful act. Amongst Patidars, there was a strong convention that personal rivalries should not be allowed to conflict with the interests of the Patidar community as a whole. As in 1930-31, most Patidars believed the Congress movement to be in the interests of their community, it was considered particularly reprehensible for a Patidar to take advantage of the no-revenue campaign to get even with personal enemies within the caste. Those who did invariably faced caste boycott. As a result, long-standing rivalries amongst Patidars played a marginal rather than structural role in the no-revenue campaign.

Factions, in addition to cutting through castes, are, in theory, supposed to link high-caste patrons to low-caste clients. If this was the case during the nationalist movement, we should expect to find that the lower castes of Kheda were brought into the movement by their patrons, the landowning Patidars. This again proved not to have been the case. In 1930-31, of the 15,424 people who refused to pay their land revenue and migrated from their villages, 87 per cent were Patidars. It might be argued that the lower castes owned very little land and were not therefore in a position to refuse their land revenue. This is only partly true, for many low-caste peasants

owned small plots of land the revenue of which they could have withheld if they had wanted to show solidarity with the cause. Very few, however, did so. Even more telling was the fact that in many villages the low-caste peasant actively opposed the no-revenue campaign. In late 1930 and early 1931 there was a spate of arson in Kheda in which low-caste peasants (often in league with the local police) burnt down the empty houses of Patidars who had refused their revenue and migrated from their villages. Even in villages in which no houses were burnt, the low castes took advantage of the absence of the dominant caste by breaking into and looting Patidar houses. These examples reveal that the Patidars had little control over the political allegiance of the low caste peasants of their villages, even though the low caste peasants were in many cases their tenants, debtors, and agricultural labourers. Once again, we discover that the vertical networks of patrons and clients were less important during the course of the nationalist movement than horizontal solidarities of an essentially class nature.

It is for all these reasons that one may feel justified in rejecting any factional explanation for the nationalist movement in Kheda District in favour of an explanation based on class analysis. Perhaps it will be argued that these findings apply only to nationalist agitations and that an agitational movement is a bad example to take as an illustration of factional politics (although this consideration has not prevented several historians from putting forward the view that nationalist agitations in India were essentially 'factional').²⁰ Let us therefore turn to the literature on factions in Indian politics to try to discover where and when the concept could be used.

III

Difficulties emerge as soon as one tries to discover exactly what a faction is meant to be, for different scholars have used the term in quite different ways. Some define the faction as a group of people gathered around a core or a leader without whom the faction cannot exist.²¹ This concept has been well expressed by a

²⁰In addition to the historians already cited, see Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1973).

²¹F. G. Bailey, *Stratagems and Speech* (Oxford, 1970), p. 52.

writer in *The Statesman*: 'A faction is like a cluster of bees round a queen bee. If the queen is damaged they quickly find another to cluster round'.²²

A rather different type of usage contrasts factional conflict with class conflict. As factions consist of patron-leaders and client-followers, factions cut across class lines. In this case, the faction is seen as a form of 'vertical' political alliance,²³ in contrast to the class, which can be seen as a 'horizontal' type of political alliance. This usage is often taken a stage further. Factions are seen as a form of 'traditional' politics, based on patron-client relationships of a 'traditional' type, in contrast to 'modern' class-based politics. It is with this idea in mind that Myron Weiner has regarded factionalism as a kind of village disease which has infected the body-politic of India.²⁴

Linked to both of these usages is the concept that factional conflicts are not ideological conflicts. Faction leaders tend to come from an elite background and tend to have common class interests. They compete amongst themselves for personal power, not because they wish to change the world.²⁵ Even though they mouth populist slogans with abandon, they have no serious intention of carrying through popular reforms.

The first type of usage—that of factions as political cliques—is both straightforward and rather limited, for it does no more than give a label to the chronic state of conflict between leading Indian politicians. The second type of usage is far more ambitious: no longer is the faction a small clique, but a vast patron-client network. The colony of buzzing bees has turned into what we may call the 'Great Indian Faction'. In this guise, the faction has two main features. First, the faction is held to be a vertical organization; through it the lowest in the land is linked to the highest. Second, such factions are supposed to cut across horizontal social organizations such as classes and castes (in cases where castes constitute class-like structures). If it can be shown that factions of

²²*The Statesman*, 14 April 1958. Quoted in B.D. Graham, 'The Succession of Factional Systems in the Uttar Pradesh Congress Party 1937-66', in M.J. Swartz, *Local-Level Politics* (London, 1969), p. 356.

²³Ralph Nicholas, 'Structure of Politics in the Villages of South Asia', in Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn, *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Chicago, 1968), p. 264.

²⁴'... the Congress party ... has become a vehicle for village factional disputes', Myron Weiner, *Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress* (Chicago, 1967), p. 87.

²⁵Bailey, *Stratagems and Spoils*, p. 52.

this type dominate the politics of rural India, then it follows that class and caste are unimportant in rural politics.

Theories as important as this cannot exist only at the level of abstraction, they have to have some empirical justification. At this stage we must, therefore, examine the empirical studies which underpin the theory. At the village level, this is found chiefly in the work of a large number of social anthropologists. Of these, the most influential theoreticians have been Oscar Lewis, F.G. Bailey and Ralph Nicholas. These three scholars carried out their fieldwork in villages in different parts of India during the 1950s.

The pioneering study of factions was made by Oscar Lewis in a Jat-dominated village to the south of Delhi. Lewis noted the following characteristics of the village faction:²⁶

- 1) Factions are vertical groupings within castes.
- 2) Such groups are created by quarrels in the past, usually, according to a popular saying, over wealth, women or land. The insecurity of village life produces mutual interest groups. Increased competition for resources in the twentieth century has probably led to more intense factionalism than in the past.
- 3) Factions tend to follow lines of kinship: '... in view of a common misconception, it is important to note that they (factions) are not political groupings, or temporary alliances of individuals to fight court cases, although some of them do take on political functions and become involved in power politics. Rather, they are primarily kinship groupings which carry on important social, economic, and ceremonial functions in addition to their factional struggles against one another. It is these positive functions which account for the remarkable stability of these groups over the years'.²⁷
- 4) The main factions of a village are the factions of a dominant caste (Jats in Lewis's village). This is because the dominant caste has political power and is in the strongest position to provide patron figures in the faction. Other castes can have factions, but this is rare, and there are unlikely to be more than two factions in such a caste.

- 5) Faction leaders tend to be wealthy and respected men within the village. The wealthy leaders act as patrons, they rent out land

²⁶This is my own summary of the findings of Chapter Four of Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India* (Urbana, 1958), pp. 113-54.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 147.

and lend money to the poorer members of the faction. Leaders tend to act as the spokesmen for the faction rather than as dynamic leader-figures, and leadership tends to be oligarchical.

6) There is a tradition of presenting an appearance of village unity to the outside world which makes it hard for the outsider to discern factions within a village. Factions will unite for the good of the village.

In Lewis's work there is little suggestion of the Great Indian Faction. He has merely observed, with considerable insight, the operation of Jat kinship networks within one village and has labelled this phenomenon 'faction'. His sixth point obviously contradicts the notion that factions are vertical organizations which unite district leaders, village bosses and peasant clients, for if there is a tendency for the factions of a village to unite against outsiders, then the district leaders will be unable to recruit support from villagers along factional lines.

This conclusion has been supported by other anthropologists. Adrian Mayer, in his study of a village in Malwa, reports that it was considered not only unlikely, but impossible, for a party within the village to extend its conflicts to levels above that of the village.²⁸ F.G. Bailey, in his studies of several villages in Orissa, has likewise reported on this tendency for villagers to stick together in their dealings with outsiders.²⁹ In the same breath, however, he makes the theoretical point that there is a tendency for factions within villages to link up with political parties outside the village.³⁰ In this case, he fails to provide any empirical evidence to justify his assertion. In fact, the material which he cites shows that the exact opposite occurred.³¹ Therefore we can say that, whether they like it or not, anthropologists in general have endorsed Lewis's sixth point. It appears unlikely that faction within a village will undermine village solidarity by extending its support as a faction to district or regional-level political groups. From this it

²⁸ Adrian Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India* (California, 1973), p. 253.

²⁹ F.G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier* (Manchester, 1957), pp. 193-4; F.G. Bailey, *Politics and Social Change: Orissa in 1959* (California, 1963), p. 99.

³⁰ Bailey, *Politics and Social Change*, pp. 95-6.

³¹ In the village which Bailey studied, the traditional village council met together and chose the men who were to represent the village in the local panchayat. As nobody opposed this, the men were returned without election. Bailey reports that there was a general desire in the village to keep out of party politics. As a result he concludes that 'the electoral campaign did not develop along the lines of internal cleavage in the village' *Ibid.*, pp. 96-9.

follows that there is no structural connection between village-level faction conflicts and district and regional-level factional conflicts. The Great Indian Faction, it appears, has a rather broken chain of command.

After Lewis, the most influential anthropological work on factions was that carried out by Ralph Nicholas in West Bengal. His important paper 'Factions: a Comparative Analysis' was based on a six-month stay in 1959 in the village of Govindapura in Midnapore District.³² He arrived in the village soon after a gram panchayat election, and much of his time was spent in finding out how and why the people of the village voted as they did. The population of the village was 677, divided by caste as follows: Mahisyas 423, Potters 86, Herdsmen 32, Brahmans 30, other castes 106. The Mahisyas, who therefore made up two-thirds of the village population, were the dominant caste.

As a result of his study, Nicholas concluded that factional conflicts in Govindapura cut across caste lines. Thus, conflicts in the village were not between Mahisyas and Potters or other castes as a whole, but between two factions of the Mahisyas. At one level, this finding was predictable. The Mahisyas were so powerful in the village, both in terms of numbers and economic strength, that it would have been remarkable if conflict had not taken place along such lines. However, if Nicholas was to prove his case, he had to show that subordinate castes, such as the Potters and Herdsmen, were divided in their support for each of the Mahisya factions. He had, in other words, to show that while a significant number of Potters and Herdsmen supported Mahisya faction A, an equally significant number supported Mahisya faction B. Although Nicholas states that this was the case, he fails to demonstrate it with his evidence. In fact, if we look closely at his data, we discover that the reverse held true. We are told at one point that during the 1959 election the leader of the Potters threw his support behind one particular Mahisya leader. In the past, we are told, the leader of the Potters and the vast majority of Potters had remained neutral. What we observe, in other words, are the Potters voting as a bloc, giving their support *en masse* to different politicians, or withholding it, at different times.³³ Nicholas's data suggests,

³² Ralph Nicholas, 'Factions: a Comparative Analysis', in Michael Banton, (ed.), *Political Systems and the Distribution of Power* (London, 1965).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

therefore, a distinct disjunction between the conflicts within the dominant caste and the political organization of the leading subordinate caste.

In addition, Nicholas argues that the 'modern' politics of Govindapura are merely a disguised version of old factional conflicts. Thus he argues that in the gram panchayat election of 1959 the 'Congress' and 'Communist' parties which opposed each other were in fact two traditional village factions whose conflicts he was able to trace back as far as 1910. The 'Congress' revolved around the family of the village headman, a Mahisya (faction A). This was the most powerful faction, as the headman owned more land than anyone else. The 'Communists' were in fact the rival Mahisya faction B. Nicholas attempts to trace the continuity of conflict between faction A and faction B. This exercise soon becomes extremely tortuous, as leading members of each faction crossed over from one side to the other during the period. Things become even more complicated when we find that the leader of the 'Communist faction' in the 1959 election was not a member of family B. Nicholas was informed that family B voted for the Communists, but that they had never given any active support. Even more significant, when the village headman (leader of faction A) put himself up for election to the *anchal* panchayat (a panchayat covering 15 to 20 villages), it was agreed after a little nominal opposition '... that it would not be proper for the village to send someone other than the headman to the *anchal* panchayat'.³⁴ In the final analysis, therefore, there was a consensus amongst the Mahisyas that the village headman should represent the village in the outside world. Mahisya factionalism was being kept entirely within the Mahisya caste of the village.

Nicholas's description of the Congress and Communist 'factions' merely demonstrates the well-known fact that Indian villages tend to be dominated by powerful families. As the power of these families continues over the generations, it would be surprising if there was not some continuity of conflict between them. As it was, the conflict in Govindapura was rather muted and, as would be expected, when dealing with the outside world or with lower castes these leading families pulled together despite their differences. Nicholas has not told us anything new about village politics in India. One thing he has certainly not proved is that

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 41.

because family B happened to vote Communist in a village election in 1959, the Communist Party of India was merely a faction in a red cap.

Nicholas's case therefore looks rather thin. Yet, on the basis of his research and on his reading of nineteen other village studies, he feels confident enough to formulate the 'rule' that: 'The dominant mode of political conflict in Indian villages is between factions.'³⁵ This statement can be interpreted in two ways. First, it may be taken as meaning that the dominant conflicts in Indian villages are between groups united by vertical rather than horizontal (or class) ties. Although Nicholas's 'rule' has been accepted in this form by many historians and political scientists, the actual field-data provided by him, and indeed by other anthropologists such as Bailey, does not give us cause to endorse it. Secondly, the 'rule' may be interpreted as saying that the dominant conflicts in Indian villages are between factions rather than between other types of groups bound together by vertical ties. In this case, we must try to discover exactly what 'a faction' is, so that we can distinguish it from these other groups. Nicholas appears to have had both of these interpretations in mind when he formulated his 'rule'. In his essays, however, he has been concerned largely with clarifying the second aspect. He has, in other words, tried to discover the essence of the faction.

Many anthropologists have engaged in this quest. Oscar Lewis, as will be recalled, stated that village factions were kinship groups rather than political groups. Ralph Nicholas denied this: in his opinion factions are political groupings which cut across lines of caste and kinship.³⁶ In his village study he discovered that the neighbourhood rather than kinship group or lineage was the most important unit of political allegiance.³⁷ To some extent the differences here would appear to be regional ones. The Jat lineages of northern India (the subject of Lewis's study) appear to possess an unusual degree of solidarity.³⁸ In the Patidar villages of Kheria District, the lineage (*khadi*) and street of residence (*phaliya*) were, as I have mentioned, often one and the same. So perhaps there is less contradiction here than there might seem. Adrian Mayer, in his

³⁵Nicholas, 'Structure of Politics in the Villages of South Asia', p. 278.

³⁶Nicholas, 'Factions: a Comparative Analysis', pp. 23, 59.

³⁷Nicholas, 'Structure of Politics in the Villages of South Asia', pp. 252-4.

³⁸See M.C. Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India*, pp. 213-14.

work, prefers to see a multiplicity of types of faction in the village which he studied. There were Rajput lineage factions (*thar*), political factions which cut across castes (*patti*—after the English word 'party'), and family factions arising out of disputes over the inheritance of property.³⁸

David Pocock has adopted a less positivistic approach to this problem by pointing out the drawbacks of trying to pin down factions in these sorts of ways. Rather than starting by trying to discover the essence of the faction from its list of members, Pocock prefers to pose the question: 'What is the conflict?'³⁹ In a dispute over the inheritance of property we would expect brother to fight with brother, just as in a conflict to control the village panchayat we would expect to find two powerful landowners mobilizing people through all sorts of economic ties and kinship links in order to win the election. When we adopt this approach, we find that Nicholas's 'rule' in the second form in which I have interpreted it is tautological, stating merely that as the faction is a political group, political conflict is factional. In examining village factions we must therefore change our question from: 'What is the predominant mode of political conflict in the Indian village?' to the question: 'What are the predominant political alliances which are formed in different types of conflict within Indian villages?'

Let us now turn from the village to the district, which means in effect from the social anthropologist to the political scientist. Whereas anthropologists have tended to make the village their level for analysis, political scientists have often concentrated on the district, an administrative unit which can encompass more than a thousand villages and over a million people. This aspect, in itself, is often ignored when grand theories are set forth about the penetration of villages by district-level factions.

The most influential study of politics at this level has been Paul Brass's *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh*. It has been highly regarded as a work of political analysis not only amongst academics but also, it is said, amongst Indian politicians who have used the work as a political primer. The empirical base to this book consists of a series of district studies, each of which takes up one chapter. Thus we have chapters entitled: 'Gonda: Party Rebellion', 'Aligarh: Organisational

³⁸Mayer, op. cit., pp. 239-41, 262.

³⁹Pocock, op. cit., pp. 299-300.

Self-Destruction', 'Deoria: The Politics of Sugar', 'Meerut: Caste and the Congress'.

Brass concentrates his attention on the district-level political boss. The chief reason for this would appear to be that political alliances at this level changed so rapidly that these individuals provided Brass with his only stable point of reference. As a result, he places great emphasis on the personal nature of factions:

The first and most obvious characteristic of contemporary factional politics in the Uttar Pradesh Congress is the predominantly personal nature of factional groups. Although the language of conflict is often phrased in terms of important principles and although a policy issue may sometimes be seized upon as a pretext for factional struggles, factions and factional conflict are organized completely around personalities and around personal enmities among party leaders.⁴¹

Although Brass's colourful descriptions of these district bosses makes good reading, it seems that he has overemphasized their importance. In practice, many of the men whom he labels 'district bosses' appear to have had rather localized power bases, such as a town or landed estate covering a few villages, and as a result the Congress Party at the district level often consisted of constantly changing coalitions of these small local bosses.⁴²

The major weakness of the book, however, lies in Brass's use of the term 'faction'. The term is used very loosely. At one point he considers factions to be a traditional form of political organization:

... factions and factional conflict in India are part of the indigenous social and political order. The leader-follower relationship is a characteristic form of social and political organization in India. Loyalty to a faction is one form of loyalty which is politically important in the traditional order, like loyalty to a lineage group, to a caste, to a village, or a region.⁴³

At another point, however, Brass defines factions in a far narrower way, for he makes a distinction between conflict within a party, which is 'factional', and conflict between parties, which is not. Thus in his chapter on Gonda District, he tells us that the Raja of

⁴¹Brass, op. cit., p. 54.

⁴²Of the four districts looked at by Brass, Deoria very obviously conformed to this pattern. Here, Brass says: 'Leaders of strictly local influence and with very small followings join together in loose ad hoc alliances.' Ibid., p. 235.

⁴³Ibid., p. 234.

of Mankapur led a powerful 'faction' within the District Congress Party. In 1955, the Raja was expelled from the Congress Party for indiscipline and he subsequently joined the Swatantra Party. Brass defines this process as 'the development of the Raja's faction into a locally powerful opposition political party'.⁴⁴ Here we have a remarkable case of instant transformation of 'traditional' factional politics into 'modern' party politics. Later in the book, however, Brass tells us that it is not likely 'that party sentiment or ideology will play much of a role in local politics in India for some time to come, if ever'.⁴⁵ Thus we are back to the idea that factions are an irresistible force in Indian politics. Should we not be left baffled by these semantic leaps?

Brass also has the disconcerting habit of labelling almost any conflict (except ones between parties) as 'factional conflict'. Most scholars have distinguished between vertical 'factional' conflicts and horizontal class conflicts. Not so Brass. In the chapter on Deoria District he says that 'factions in Deoria villages tend to follow economic divisions'.⁴⁶ Most scholars would consider 'economic' divisions to be class divisions. Brass's narrative shows that this was certainly the case in Deoria District. The District Congress Party was associated with the dominant elements in the villages and the village headmen and village leaders tended to be Congressmen. The opposing socialists, on the other hand, sought their support from the poorer peasants. Brass quotes a local socialist politician: 'The traditional vested interests in the villages exploit the landless labourers and the common villagers. If the *chaudhuri* is a good man, we become weak. If he is a bad man, we thrive because of his evil and generally they are bad men'.⁴⁷ And yet Brass describes the socialists as a 'faction'. He thus appears quite happy to label as 'factional' what is essentially class conflict.

From this we must conclude that, as a study of factions, Brass's book has grave limitations. Its strength lies in its vivid sketches of the political bosses. With great clarity, Brass shows us how they maintain their personal standing through the skilful and unscrupulous manipulation of their resources and powers of patronage. The weakness of the book lies in its failure to shed any light on the relationship between district-level politics and village-level politics. As it is, Brass's understanding of village politics appears to have been based largely on the work of Ralph

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 72.⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 164.⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 131.⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 132.

Nicholas.⁴⁸ Although he asserts that factions provide the link between the villages and the district, he fails to show how this process operates. To find out more about this we therefore have to turn to other studies. Of these, by far the best is Anthony Carter's *Elite Politics in Rural India: Political Stratification and Political Alliances in Western Maharashtra*.⁴⁹

Carter argues that there is a 'political class' in India. This consists of men with local influence and powers of patronage, such as the leaders of a dominant caste in a village, big landlords, and in the towns the money-lenders and capitalists. Most political conflicts in India represent shifts in horizontal alliances between members of this class. If possible, the 'political class' avoids having to fight elections, for in elections they have to forge vertical alliances to win votes. Elections can be avoided without difficulty in conflicts for the presidentship of local panchayats, co-operative societies and other such bodies, for no direct appeal to the electorate is required by law. But even when elections are required, the 'political class' often avoids an election by settling conflicts beforehand in private. For instance, in a taluka (a district sub-division) of Maharashtra studied by Carter in 1966 there were 51 village panchayat elections, of which only 24 were actually contested.

At times, however, elections have to be fought. When this happens, each politician within a political alliance uses his personal powers of patronage to win votes. Carter writes:

... when a politician does require popular support, most commonly in a contested direct election, he does not recruit it by entering into direct vertical alliances, whether based on issues or patronage, with voters throughout a large political area such as an assembly constituency. Direct vertical alliances occur most frequently within single villages. When a politician needs popular support he recruits it by forming horizontal political alliances, single or multiple, with other elite leaders who can deliver the votes of their own villages.⁵⁰

No one man is likely to have unchallenged power in such a situation, and in practice there are constant changes in leadership on all rungs of the political ladder. This is how Carter explains the

⁴⁸See *ibid.*, p. 234.⁴⁹Anthony Carter, *Elite Politics in Rural India: Political Stratification and Political Alliances in Western Maharashtra* (Cambridge, 1974).⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 100.

'instability' of Indian politics. He points out that this instability is a veneer; the domination of the élites over society as a whole is highly stable.

Carter therefore prefers to talk of alliances between élite politicians rather than of factional conflicts. For him, Indian politics is typified by the conflict within an oligarchy rather than between vertical political groups which are mobilized only on rare and exceptional occasions, namely during elections. Therefore, once again we find that it is a particular event, an election, which produces the type of vertical mobilization which is often described as factional. And even elections differ in type. When the issues have mattered to the people, as they did during the agitation for a Maharashtra State in 1957, the élite politicians have had to abandon their vertical networks and jump onto the popular bandwagon.

Carter refers to this example only in passing, for his book is concerned chiefly with the analysis of institutionalized politics. In this latter respect, his work is of great value, for he has refused to allow preconceived concepts of 'factional politics' to colour his findings. Unlike some of the other authors we have examined, Carter takes account of the great complexity of rural politics in India. Bearing in mind this complexity, let us end this section of the essay by drawing some conclusions from this review of the empirical work on factions.

First, we have found that it is fruitless to try to discover the 'essence' of the faction. We must look at issues and events rather than at lists of faction members. Using this approach, we can put these studies in better perspective. Much of the analysis of 'factionalism' in rural India has been carried out in terms of election studies. In these elections, the majority of villagers are seen to be voting according to the wishes of their patrons or their caste leaders. The assumption is then made that most political activity in Indian villages follows such lines.⁵¹ But let us ask the question: 'What sort of political conflict takes place in most Indian elections?' These same authors report consistently that Indian peasants have little faith in the electoral process. Politicians are regarded by the peasants as self-seekers out only to feather their

⁵¹Nicholas, 'Structure of Politics in the Villages of South Asia', p. 278; Hamza Alavi, 'The Politics of Dependence: A Village in West Punjab', *South Asian Review*, 4.2 (Jan. 1971), p. 132.

own nests, and it is popularly believed that whichever government is in power, the condition of the mass of peasants will remain unchanged.⁵² If, therefore, it is possible for a peasant to do somebody a favour, keep in with a patron, or earn a little money on the side by voting in a particular way, then he will vote accordingly.⁵³ It is only on the exceptional occasions, such as during the election of March 1977 which brought an end to the Emergency, that the peasants express their feelings in a strong and united way through the ballot box. In this light, we see that most Indian elections are élite contests in which the majority of peasants have little interest. The elections observed by Bailey, Nicholas and Brass fall into this category, and, consequently, voting has tended to follow the directives of patrons and caste leaders. From such studies we cannot draw any profound conclusions about the nature of political alliances and solidarities in rural India.

Secondly, we discover that the Great Indian Faction is more of a myth than a reality. We find that much of the political conflict described as 'factional' at both district and village level is in fact conflict within an oligarchy. The majority of these contests are resolved without either party having to mobilize support from their clients. In such conflicts, vertical mobilization is therefore the exception rather than the rule. In addition, there is a sharp disjuncture between district-level conflicts and village-level conflicts. Even within the village, conflicts tend to be kept within castes.

Thirdly, we can say that the distinction between factionalism as 'traditional' and class conflict as 'modern' is meaningless. F.G. Bailey has set much store by this idea, arguing that horizontal mobilization could not occur in the traditional Indian village.⁵⁴ Bailey's own empirical work, based on an Orissa village, belies this conclusion. In *Tribe, Caste and Nation* he describes fierce clashes which took place in this village during the nineteenth century between the dominant caste and the untouchables, clashes which led to half of it being burnt to the ground.⁵⁵ It is of course true that class consciousness is greater today than it was in the past, but it is

⁵²Bailey, *Politics and Social Change*, pp. 35-6; Paul Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State*, p. 135.

⁵³Bailey, *Politics and Social Change*, pp. 32-3.

⁵⁴Bailey, 'Closed Social Stratification in India', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, IV, 1963, p. 118.

⁵⁵Bailey, *Tribe, Caste and Nation: A Study of Political Activity and Political Change in Highland Orissa* (Manchester, 1960), p. 140.

absurd to extend this observation into a denial of the very existence of horizontal mobilization in the past. Once again, we must stress that it is the issue or event which creates particular political alliances and networks rather than 'modernity' or 'tradition'. Thus, if we take the issue of usury in nineteenth century Maharashtra we find that it provoked a strong class reaction against Marwari money-lenders. To try to classify this as 'modern' or 'traditional' does not help us to understand any better the history of the Deccan riots of 1875.

The concept is further undermined by Adrian Mayer's observation that political factions in the villages which he studied were called *patti* after the English word 'party'. This appears to be a common practice. Scarlett Epstein, in a study of a village in South India, notes that the peasants used the English word 'party' to describe village factions.⁵⁰ In these cases, the political networks formed primarily to win support in elections were a novel type of formation which differed both in composition and quality from the older networks based on family and lineage. Thus, rather than being a traditional element in village society, the political factions formed during elections were, in these cases, a product of the twentieth century. They were, in other words, modern political formations.

IV

We find, therefore, that there are many problems with the concept of the faction. In particular, the Great Indian Faction appears to be more of a myth than a reality. Why, therefore, has the concept proved so popular among scholars? Is it merely a product of bad scholarship, or are there more profound reasons for its attraction? In this section of the essay I shall argue that the concept of the faction is determined in part by the intellectual framework within which the majority of western scholars operate and then go on to show that the concept of the Indian faction has proved popular above all because it has accorded with the occidental belief that India is a factious society.

In recent years, the study of factions has been conducted through the language and concepts of social science. This system

⁵⁰T. Scarlett Epstein, *South India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Mysore Villages Revisited* (London, 1973), p. 179.

of thought, as it has evolved in Britain and the United States, is rooted in European liberal thought with its tradition of positivist philosophy. Many of the studies of factions are in consequence positivist in approach. Factions are regarded as solid political organizations endowed with particular qualities which can be discovered, it is believed, through research. This quest for the essence of the faction is, as shown above, a futile one, for factions are neither solid nor endowed with any particular essence. In spite of this, the search goes on, with various conflicting definitions and explanations being put forward. These can be fitted into two broad categories: the structural functionalist and the behaviourist.

Structural functionalism has been one of the most important offshoots of positivist philosophy.⁵¹ This school of thought has been associated in particular with British social anthropology and, since the second World War, with American political science. The structural-functionalist views society as an ordered whole. Each person in a society plays a particular role: these roles, taken together, ensure the cohesion and stability of the society. Thus, in the case of India, the landlord provides land for his tenant, the tenant reciprocates with a share of his produce and, at election time, with his vote. There is an assumption here that everyone is benefiting from the system according to what he puts into it. 'Factions' are seen as a necessary part of this structure, for they provide an outlet for social conflict. Conflict is thus kept within limits: it need never threaten the stability of society. Of the authors examined in this essay, Oscar Lewis and Paul Brass fall most clearly into the category of structural-functionalists, both believing that factions play a constructive as well as destructive role in Indian society.

This rather complacent, albeit popular, view of Indian politics has been challenged by the 'harder' arguments of the behaviourists. The behaviourist starts from the assumption that man is a rational being who takes political decisions on rational grounds. By 'rational' is meant the satisfaction of narrow economic interests and the immediate short-term desire for power. Although this strongly materialistic view of political behaviour has proved popular with some so-called Marxists, it is a form of analysis more

⁵¹For a full discussion of this theme, see Anthony Giddens, 'Positivism and its Critics', in Tom Bottomore and Robert Nisbet (eds.), *A History of Sociological Analysis* (London, 1979).

suited to a positivist approach. Behaviourists who are in the positivist tradition tend to start from the assumption that their task is to study 'solid' political networks engaged in formal political conflict. These networks must be shown to be bound together by strong and unambiguous politico-economic ties. This approach, taken to its logical extreme, leads political scientists towards the quantification of such ties, and as W. J. M. Mackenzie observes: '... the related observational techniques can cope rigorously only with voting situations, and not with all of these'.⁵⁸ In the West, behaviourists study parties engaged in elections. In India they study factions.⁵⁹

This approach is taken to its limits in a study of factions in Maharashtra by Mary Carras.⁶⁰ The problem which she set herself was to explain political alignments in India: were they made on the basis of loyalty to caste and community, of loyalty to a charismatic leader, or were they made on 'rational' grounds? To find this out, she analysed the election of the presidents of four Jhilla Parishads (District Councils) in Maharashtra in 1962. The presidents were elected by the members of the Jhilla Parishad, so that, for Carras's purpose, the electorate was conveniently circumscribed. She drew up lists of all the councillors, compiled mountains of data on their socio-economic backgrounds, and allocated them to a 'faction' according to how they voted in each election. After a daunting exercise in quantitative analysis which produced a 49-page appendix of statistics and a 29-page 'note on methodology', she reached her conclusion as follows:

Evidence has been advanced to show that the 'factional' behaviour of political actors corresponds, on the whole, with rational (or calculable) economic interests; that it is not determined by 'irrational' (that is, emotional) and often unpredictable personal loyalties which may be based almost exclusively on feelings of awe, respect or devotion to a leader because of his charismatic qualities, or on feelings of loyalty evoked by caste or community ties or by family links.⁶¹

This conclusion would have been valuable if it had not been such a foregone conclusion, for Carras has already ensured these results

⁵⁸W. J. M. Mackenzie, *Politics and Social Science* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 137.

⁵⁹It may be noted that the behaviourist school of modern Indian History, as represented by Baker, Washbrook and others, does not go in for rigorous quantification in their study of factions. The historical data available to them is obviously unsuitable for such exercises.

⁶⁰Mary C. Carras, *The Dynamics of Indian Political Factions: A Study of District Councils in the State of Maharashtra* (Cambridge, 1972).

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 194.

when, right at the start of the book, she says that all loyalties to leaders, castes and communities are irrational or mystical bonds which cannot be used as a basis for her rigorous analysis.⁶² By this, she means that they cannot be quantified. She thus throws out the baby with the bathwater. The other mistaken assumption which runs through the book is the idea that political alignments within a District Council shed light on Indian political behaviour as a whole. All in all, therefore, the behaviourist study of factions has produced results no more satisfactory than the structural-functionalists.

Despite their differences these various schools of thought can be seen to share a common assumption: that Indian politics are factional because India is, by tradition, a factious society. Although there is ceaseless debate about the essence of factionalism, little attempt is made to query this basic assumption. The notion is accepted because it is an old one, with, it seems, firm intellectual roots. It is, however, highly questionable.

We can see this view emerging in the reminiscences of the British Collector, R. Carstairs,⁶³ who served in Bengal in the late nineteenth century. Describing his tour of Tipperah District of East Bengal he wrote:

... in every village there were generally faction feuds raging. Active minds were busy ... devising plans for dishing the other side, detaching members from it, and generally putting their own side ahead.⁶⁴

On his experiences in Serampore he wrote:

It was a common official complaint that there was no public spirit in the land. The people were all, high and low, given up to 'doladoli' [factionalism], and any public body that could be set up in the villages would be captured by, and become a prey to this fell demon.⁶⁵

Factionousness is depicted by Carstairs as a positive demonic force which haunts Indian society, wrecking the attempts made by the British to establish modern democratic institutions. Indian politicians are seen to be incapable of working together for the good of their country. From this standpoint, India is condemned by her history and culture to a state of perpetual, crippling conflict.

⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁶³R. Carstairs, *The Little World of an Indian District Officer* (London, 1912).

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 174.

This pessimistic view is as popular today as ever. Paul Brass writes:

Nor is it likely that party sentiment or ideology will play much of a role in local politics in India for some time to come, if ever. However, it is quite likely that factionalism will play a continuously increasing role in Indian elections, just as it has already come to dominate party politics not only in Uttar Pradesh, but in other Indian states as well.⁶⁶

Like Carstairs, Brass depicts factionalism as a positive force, a cancer which spreads irresistibly through India's political institutions. India thus stands cursed and condemned by the fact that her politicians have been, and always will be, ruled by powers beyond their control.

Views such as these are by no means eccentric or peculiar to Indian Studies. As Edward Said has shown in his book *Orientalism*, such assertions have been the common stock of western studies of eastern societies for over two centuries.⁶⁷ Orientalism of this type is characterized by stereotyped views of the East and Eastern peoples. Although these views take many forms, often contradictory, one which we find appearing time and time again in the study of factions is the belief that Asiatic people spend their lives fighting amongst themselves in an irrational manner. As an example of this view, let us examine some statements made by the American scholar Harold W. Glidden in an essay of 1972 called 'The Arab World'. Glidden claims to understand what he called 'the inner workings of Arab behaviour'. He writes (as summarized by Edward Said):

... it is a notable fact that while the Arab value system demands absolute solidarity within the group, it at the same time encourages among its members a kind of rivalry that is destructive of that very solidarity; in Arab society only 'success counts' and 'the end justifies the means'; Arabs live 'naturally' in a world 'characterized by anxiety expressed in generalized suspicion and distrust, which has been labelled free-floating hostility'; 'the art of subterfuge is highly developed in Arab life, as well as in Islam itself'; the Arab need for vengeance overrides everything, otherwise the Arab would feel 'ego-destroying' shame.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Brass, op. cit., p. 164.

⁶⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1980). See in particular pp. 293-305.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 48-9.

Glidden is arguing that individual Arabs have an almost psychopathic regard for their personal prestige. As a result, they are condemned by their culture to live in a state of perpetual factionousness. They are therefore unable to function in a 'modern' political manner.

Returning to India, we discover that Paul Brass holds similar views:

Factional conflicts in traditional societies are personal politics and status politics. Conflicts of prestige between faction leaders lead to intense factional disputes which are often in their very nature insoluble. When prestige or honour become of primary importance in politics, the possibilities of resolving conflicts are reduced, for honour cannot be shared.⁶⁹

Brass is more moderate in tone than Glidden, but his Orientalist psychologizing is of a similar quality. Indian politics, like Arab politics, are understood in terms of personal vendettas. Indian politicians, too, appear to live their lives ruled by irrational passions. They hold Kiplingesque beliefs, such as that 'honour cannot be shared'. They are, in all, true Orientals. Let us examine another passage from Brass:

The inner core of a faction, which is usually very small, is bound together by a relationship which is in many ways similar to the guru-disciple relationship in education and religion—a relationship which is cemented by the warmest personal ties of affection and loyalty between master and disciple, leader and follower. It is the closeness of the ties among the members of the inner circle which often makes for the most intense hatred of those outside the faction. The faction leader is literally a potentate for a small circle of followers, for whom he holds a nightly *darbar* and from whom he expects unswerving and unquestioning loyalty. Men who are used to such esteem as part of their daily lives are quick to take offense when those outside the circle do not offer them sufficient respect. Trivial misunderstandings between faction leaders can lead to a lifelong enmity. As a result, an atmosphere of bitterness pervades contemporary politics in the Uttar Pradesh Congress.⁷⁰

The statement in this paragraph is contradictory, though full of meaning. On the one hand, the faction leader is depicted as an inscrutable Oriental mystic—the 'guru' figure—on the other hand, he is seen as a 'potentate' (such an emotive term, so strange-

⁶⁹Brass, op. cit., p. 240.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 55.

tive of Arabian fairy tales!); in other words an 'Oriental Despot' rooted in hoary tradition. Being an Oriental, the Indian politician is, in contrast we must assume with western politicians, 'quick to take offense' when he is not offered 'sufficient respect', and he harbours 'lifelong enmities' of an irrational type. Thus, although the argument is lax, there is no doubt about the meaning which Brass seeks to convey.⁷¹

Not all the writers on Indian factions accept that Indians are irrational. The behaviourists, as we have seen, believe that there are normally rational economic explanations for political actions. Despite this, most agree with the general concept that India is a factional society. It is only the *causes* of factionalism which they dispute. This general consensus on the 'factionousness of the Indian' (whether rational or irrational) rests on another Orientalist assumption: that Asiatic society is a rather simple type of social formation, characterized by a strongly autocratic ruling class placed over a huge undifferentiated mass of subjects who are incapable of forming their own political organizations. These masses can only participate in politics as the malleable clients of elite politicians, and, in dealing with 'mass politics', we are, it is believed, dealing with patron-client networks or, to use a variation of the concept, factions.⁷² According to such a vision, all we need to do to understand Oriental politics is to study the elites and assume that the masses will follow them in an unquestioning manner. This, clearly, has been Brass's approach: his study concentrates on the party bosses to the almost complete exclusion of the subaltern classes. Despite this, he feels qualified to assert that 'factional loyalties provide the link between the parochial units of Indian society—family, village, caste—and the political parties'.⁷³

Why do modern scholars accept these views so uncritically? It is easy enough to see why European colonial officials believed in such theories: they had a vested interest in denying freedom to their colonial subjects. But why should modern Americans go

⁷¹For similar assumptions from a historian see Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 50: 'The pattern of all-India politics were made by a handful of men in constant tension with one another, and the continual struggle for recognition and for the maintenance of prestige and position in national affairs was conducted within a small arena.'

⁷²For a statement of these views by a scholar who accepts them, see B. R. Tomlinson, *The Indian National Congress and the Raj 1929-1942*, *op. cit.*, p. 75. These sentiments are held by many Indian scholars also. Tomlinson quotes Rajni Kothari's view that the Indian electorate is 'politically speaking... an amorphous mass, unorganized and undifferentiated'.

⁷³Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

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along with these doctrines? How can they ignore the strong evidence of political assertion by peasants in twentieth-century China, Vietnam and even India? The answer is that Orientalism fulfils ideological and intellectual needs. Ideologically, it serves imperialist and neo-colonialist interests by denying that revolutionary peasants are their own masters. Intellectually, it provides one of the chief props for the modern study of the 'developing nations'. In these writings, the globe is divided into the new version of East and West, the 'developing' and the 'developed' regions. 'Developed' societies, such as Britain and the United States, are compared with a huge mass of 'developing' societies, which are distinguished one from the other in a most crude and sketchy manner.⁷⁴

The new Orientalism, like the old, is based on the premise that there are fundamental differences between East and West. Political practices which would not be tolerated in the west are found acceptable in 'developing' nations, for it is supposed that they serve a necessary functional purpose. It is believed that these so-called 'traditional' practices can somehow provide the building blocks for 'modern' and 'integrated' political systems. Revolution can thereby be avoided. Patron-client networks are considered to be one such traditional institution. In the words of Donal Cruise O'Brien:

The fragile connection of local and central institutions [in the developing nations] has recently led some political scientists and anthropologists to an almost obsessive concern with the informal 'patron-client' or 'brokerage' structures which at least ensure some communication between centre and periphery through a chain of dyadic links.⁷⁵

In the case of India, factions were discovered and found to be good. Oscar Lewis stressed that the outside reformer had only to convert the 'faction-leader' and he had a large chunk of the village on his side.⁷⁶ Myron Weiner believed that faction leaders were needed to cut through the red tape of a sluggish bureaucracy to 'get things done'.⁷⁷ Paul Brass saw factionalism as a transitional stage in the growth of democracy in India.⁷⁸ We are thus left with the in-pr-

⁷⁴For an example of such an exercise see Gabriel Almond and James Coleman (eds.), *The Politics of the Developing Area* (Princeton, 1960).

⁷⁵Donal Cruise O'Brien, 'Modernisation, Order, and the Erosion of a Democratic Ideal: American Political Science 1960-70', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 8.4 (July 1972), p. 367.

⁷⁶Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁷⁷Weiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 967-8.

⁷⁸Brass, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

sion that Indian factionalism is, despite its malaise, a force for progress.

In this manner, many western social scientists and historians continue to regard India through Orientalist eyes. This underlying structure to their thought is often ignored because of their use of modern 'scientific' language and sophisticated forms of analysis. These have indeed been so persuasive that even Marxist writers, such as Hamza Alavi, have felt a need to emphasize the role of factions in their studies of rural politics.²⁹ However, once we expose the premises on which these writings are based they lose much of their validity, for, as this essay has attempted to show, there are no real grounds for believing factionalism to be more central to Indian political life than conflict between classes.

V

The concept of 'the Indian faction' thus appears somewhat vacuous. But is it without any value at all? Assuming that the term is used with precision, can we not find a place for it in the study of Indian politics and history? Yes, if we restrict the term to mean those political cliques which struggle amongst themselves for power and whose members hold broadly similar class interests.

We must however be careful to stress that there is no direct linear connection or structural identity between such political cliques at the all-India and provincial levels and the conflict groups at village level. When dealing with conflicts at the village level, it is wisest to follow the practice of Adrian Mayer and specify each type of conflict group and, if possible, give it a separate name. This method provides the best safeguard against sloppy scholarship.

There is therefore room for the queen bee and her colony. But the concept of the Great Indian Faction should be rejected. Not only is it wrong, but it bears the stigma of being used as a tool of analysis by those who have sought to exercise control over India and limit the freedom of the Indian people. The concept is inseparable from the colonial and neo-colonial domination of India by western powers.

There is, in addition, nothing in the idea which cannot be

explained better through the concept of class. The theory of the Great Indian Faction is supposed to explain the political mobilization of the subaltern classes by the elites. All it does in fact is to pinpoint certain aspects of class collaboration. Class collaboration occurs when members of subaltern classes believe that it is in their best interests to collaborate with members of higher classes. This may be because of economic ties, or perhaps because of ties of caste and kinship which require 'brothers' to stick together. Class collaboration may be achieved through the threat of force—by, for instance, the landlord's henchmen ready to beat up the poor peasant who refuses political support. Whatever stability Indian society has had has depended to a large extent on the operation of such processes. Our task in studying the relationship between the subaltern classes and the elites should not be to trace so-called 'factional networks', but to ask why class collaboration has predominated at particular historical junctures. An election, a labour dispute, a land redistribution by law, a mass agitation, a peasant insurrection, all produce their own patterns of class collaboration and class solidarity, patterns which change day by day. Although these ever-moving configurations are hard to trace, the student of Indian politics and history should not be content to lump his prejudice and ignorance under the catch-phrase 'faction'. Rather, he must face his responsibility and make every effort to understand each particular pattern as best he can.

²⁹Hamza Alavi, 'The Politics of Dependence: A Village in West Punjab', p. 112; Hamza Alavi, 'Peasant Classes and Primordial Loyalties', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 3:1 (Oct. 1973), pp. 43-9.