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Territorialising control in urban West Bengal: social clubs and everyday governance in the spaces between state and party

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Abstract

Analysis of politics in urban West Bengal has focussed on the near hegemonic control of political parties and the state on daily life – overlooking or under-accounting for the complex institutional assemblages that shape spaces of the political in daily life. Addressing this empirical gap, this paper examines the role of social clubs, who discursively imagine themselves to be not political in governing the city. Drawing on De Certeau's (1984) theory of practice, I demonstrate the ways that clubs, as a particular socio-cultural institution, territorialise power in order to produce governable space and in turn act as both alternative to the state and party and intermediaries with them. Mobilising evidence from extensive qualitative research on governance in two small cities I seek to complicate and nuance existing narratives on everyday politics, the party and the role of clubs in West Bengal. In doing so offer theoretical contributions to the ways we understand political subjects and the social production of the heterogeneous overlapping territories of governance that characterise postcolonial cities.

Key Words: West Bengal, De Certeau, Everyday Governance, Urban Politics, India, political subjects

Introduction

While the state remains an important object of study, research on urban governance has increasingly recognised that much of urban life is governed beyond the state (c.f. Lund 2006, Lindell 2008, Schindler 2014). Urban and political geographers in particular have given increased attention to the multiple configurations of power and overlapping spaces of governance that characterise postcolonial cities (though not only them) (Schindler 2014, Şenol 2013, Truelove 2019). In doing so they have begun to problematize assumptions about who qualifies as a political agent (Kuus 2019), to carefully examine

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“how rule [is] practiced and experienced” (Williams and Nandigama 2018:9) and to recognise institutional complexity, highlighting that social institutions which may self-identify as non-political may still exercise power and wield public authority (Lund 2006). In this paper I follow and extend these arguments, analytically drawing on de Certeau’s (1984) Theory of Practice, to demonstrate how social institutions may draw on material and social practices that contribute to subject formation and the reproduction of territorialised authority. And in doing so may create the scope to operate in the liminal spaces between hegemonic authorities as alternatives to and intermediaries with more powerful institutions. My analysis is empirical situated in the case of *para* (neighbourhood) based clubs in urban West Bengal. Drawing on 10 months of qualitative fieldwork in Bardhaman and Medinipur, I will examine the range of practices clubs use to territorialise cities, creating spaces of governance and reproducing forms of disciplinary control. In doing so I nuance common assertions of the hegemony of the “party” as a socio-political institution in West Bengal (Bhattacharyya, 2009; Chatterjee, 2009; Roy, 2002),¹ to demonstrate that clubs are able to use their authority to operate in the liminal spaces between state and party control, acting as both intermediaries with and alternatives to both institutions. While deeply situated in unique social and political configurations of West Bengal, the findings from this paper respond to calls to pay closer attention to specificities of political subjectivity (Kuus 2019) and to the contested social production of territories of governance (Amin 2002).

In West Bengal’s small cities, such as Bardhaman and Medinipur, you encounter two built representations of control, the party office and the *para* club. The party office, tucked into a road side spot, and almost invariably on public land, will fly a flag of the (ruling) party; or be otherwise decorated to pay homage to the party and its leaders. Men and women appear at the office through-out the day, to speak with the local party worker or councillor. Young men are often hanging around, waiting to be put to tasks by the leadership. The *para* (neighbourhood) club building is different. These buildings may be set on a plot of land with a sports field in more well-off areas, or be perched precariously on the shoulder of the road or built over a ditch in poorer areas. They rarely display political paraphernalia, though photos of West Bengal’s freedom fighters and folk heroes are common. Often quiet during the day, in the evening the *para* club building comes alive, as an almost exclusively male space where members gather to engage in *adda*², play games or sport. These clubs have an outward purpose of recreation and “social work”³, however their local influence is much greater. Both the party

¹ This research is primarily focussed on the 34 years of Communist Party India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) rule, however similar patterns continue under the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) who came to power in 2011.

² *Adda* is the tradition of leisurely but political or intellectual conversation (Sen 2011).

³ The expression social work/service is not neutral. While framed as selfless service and often discursively connected to Hindu practices of service, these expressions often refer to inherently political and/or party-

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offices and the clubs represent nodes in governance networks that shape everyday life in urban West Bengal and in many ways their complex roles are inter-related and interdependent. While significant attention has been paid to the outsized influence of the “party” as a particular socio-political institution, little empirical attention has been given to the club (Harrison, 2012; Roy, 2002,). In this article I explore the ways that clubs mobilise practices that territorialise power to produce the *para* as a distinct socio-political structure and reproduce ‘*para* subjects’. In doing so I examine the complexity of everyday governance in urban West Bengal as it extends beyond both the party and the formal state, and demonstrate how clubs serve in complex ways as both alternatives to and intermediaries with the state, coexisting with and at times codependent on the party.

Para, clubs and politics in urban West Bengal

The Bengali term *para* is often insufficiently translated as ‘neighbourhood’, however *para* more accurately indicates both an urban neighbourhood and moral community; a spatial entity and a social one. The *para* is a locale, a place “where both the individual and social identities are reproduced through shared ritual activity, economic co-operation and political mobilisation” (Donner and De Neve, 2006b: 10 - 11), to which members are loyal (Author et al 2016). The *para* club as an institution has its roots in the exclusive clubs established during colonial rule. Non-elite clubs emerged later as a “vibrant part of middle and lower-middle class social life” (Sen, 2011: 525). According to Chatterjee (2004: 132) in the years following independence, the middle-classes in Kolkata’s then class and caste⁴ heterogeneous settlements sought to create a sense of community⁵, of *para*, in response to an urban milieu viewed as morally dangerous. Strategies of social and territorial control, largely through logics of loyalty and patronage were enacted through associational life. While the broad settlement pattern in Bardhaman and Midnapore are heterogeneous⁶, their *para*’s, as self-defined and spatialized communities, are largely homogenous in terms of religion and broad class group, with some *paras* being self-defined on the basis of shared place of origin or language⁷.

political practices that have as a goal the (re)production of networks of patronage. “Social work” is a key gateway into political careers for many (Ciotti, 2012).

⁴ Caste has had less salience in party-political struggles and organisation in West Bengal than in other states (Bhattacharyya 2009). Moreover, caste very rarely entered the conversation with respondents; as such it is not addressed herein.

⁵ In the Indian context “community” is often used as thinly veiled code for religion. Here, it is used in a broader sense commonality and cohesion, not religion.

⁶ Both cities are dominantly Hindu, Muslim’s account for approximately 8% of the population in both vs the state urban average of 19% (Census 2011). The local elite in each city is small.

⁷ Informal participatory mapping and transect walks were done with a portion of respondents to establish the self-defined boundaries and definition of their *paras*.

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The politics of patronage in (urban) West Bengal shifted in the later part of the 20th century. Beginning in the Emergency period⁸ the Congress party and later the CPI(M) put in place structures at the local level that created new networks of patronage and associational life (Chakrabarti, 2006; Chatterjee, 2004). The CPI(M)'s neighbourhood committees and local party offices were able to extend the enacted power and influence of the party to become a key node in local governance networks. These committees alerted elected councillors to local problems, but also "advanced warning of threats, dissent and opposition to the party's hegemony" (Chakrabarti, 2006: 81 - 82). A number of my respondents saw the extension of party offices under the CPI(M) as an only partially successful way to suppress the importance of the clubs.

In West Bengal, the party acts as both a democratic-electoral institution and a social one. The influence of the party in everyday life is often understood through the conceptual lens of "political society" as developed by Partha Chatterjee (2004, 2011). Chatterjee (2011) argues that political modernity in India is marked by a split *civil society*, a narrow domain where people (dominantly the urban middle class) operate as citizens with legally enforceable rights and a broader inherently contingent and contextual *political society* where the majority of people as populations connect to and negotiate with governmental agencies in the pursuit of security.⁹ In West Bengal a number of scholars have argued that the CPI(M) purposefully undermined the scope for civil society in any form, including universities, clubs and associations to act independently of the party as a key mediator of political society (Mukherjee 2007, Chatterjee 2009, Bhattacharyya 2016). The socio-political structures of party and party office continues as a key space of local politics under the now ruling TMC (Bhattacharyya 2016).

Until now there has been extremely limited empirical engagement with the contemporary roll of clubs as institutions in urban West Bengal. To my knowledge confined to the research of Harrison (2012) on club and NGO integration, and Roy's (2002) seminal research on urban politics in Kolkata's informal settlements. The latter is particularly relevant to the argument herein. Roy (2002) finds the *para* club in her field-site to act essentially as an extension of the party and a source of young men who served as errands boys for party cadre. The views of her respondents on clubs are broadly similar to mine; for example, her respondents liken the club to rural *panchayats* and see it as an important component in their struggles to maintain the right to the space they inhabit. In both studies, we find that dues are payable to the local club in order to gain a foothold in the area and the club is recognised as a

⁸ The Emergency refers to the 21 month period from 1975 – 1977 where civil liberties were curtailed after the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a nationwide state of emergency.

⁹ Chatterjee's theoretical contribution has had significant analytical purchase in studies of Indian politics and governance, and significant critique for being overly prescriptive. A number of scholars have demonstrated the blurry boundary between practices of civil and political society (e.g. Routray 2014, Kalaiyaran 2017).

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disciplinary power. However, we diverge in our interpretation of our findings. Roy (2002) suggests that the club in fact has little real power to assist members in accessing state benefits (i.e. birth certificates or access to development funds) or in their struggles for recognition, and for this reason suggests that clubs' power is largely restricted to that of a disciplinary force.

In this paper I will demonstrate that while clubs may use political connections for a degree of their influence despite understanding themselves as 'non-political'¹⁰, it is an insufficiently nuanced interpretation to see them as wholly subordinate to the party. Clubs operate through spatialised practices of power in the everyday and these practices shape regimes of governance and everyday politics in the city. Clubs are able to exert influence as an institutional voice, drawing on complex identities and affiliations as being institutionally removed from an alternative to the party, but with members mobilising personal connections to political parties as and when necessary. Clubs in both low and middle income areas are a key institution in local politics who act as important intermediaries and alternatives to the both state, as represented by both formalised institutions of government (i.e.: municipality, police etc.), and the party as a socio-political institution.

Methods

This research draws on data collected during 10 months of fieldwork in 2013-2014 as part of a broader study on everyday politics and urban governance. The topic of clubs emerged first in reference to the control of water bodies (author et al 2016) and was later investigated in more focused way. I draw explicitly on 50 unstructured, group (~2-5 people) interviews, conducted in Bengali (with a translator) or English, and recorded as field notes containing direct quotations. These interviews examined club activities, local politics and other topics with club members representing 21 different clubs, as well as local women (4), elected councillors (7), and local academics (2). The majority this research was conducted in Bardhaman (16 clubs, 34 interviews), the primary site for the broader research project; the Midnapore data set is too small to draw robust conclusions about any local differences. Clubs were sampled to include: well-established and newer parts of both cities; Hindu and Muslim dominated clubs; and middle income (11) and economically weaker/informal (10) areas. Where clear differences are apparent between middle and low income clubs they have been indicated in the analysis. The case studies presented in this paper illustrate dominant themes that emerged from this data set. Knowledge gained from living in Bardhaman for 7.5 months and moving through these towns contributes to my understanding. However, club buildings and activities are male spaces, as such the

¹⁰ See Harrison 2017 for a similar argument about NGOs.

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female researchers¹¹ were unable to conduct extensive participant observations. Respondents were given assurances of anonymity; identifying details have been removed and pseudonyms assigned to both the clubs and respondents.

Clubs in Midnapore and Bardhaman

Club buildings, proudly displaying signs such as “New Friends Sporting Society, est 1962” or “Bijay Chanda Sangha, registration no. S127890, ESTD 1995” are often the only visible sign that you have entered a different *para*. The membership of *para*-based clubs is over-whelming male and localised. Membership is generally contingent on residing in or having a connection to the *para* and being able to pay monthly (averaging INR 10-20)¹² or yearly dues (INR 120-1200), the amount of which does not correlate easily with the wealth of *para* residents. While few clubs allow female members most rely on female reproductive labour for events. Clubs are voluntary organisations; however, the ubiquity of membership broadly correlates with economic status. In low-income *paras*, club membership is near universal and respondents suggest non-negotiable, whilst in middle-income *para* the density of membership varies significantly. This difference may speak to other sources of privilege and social support rendering active participation in localised associational life less necessary. However, there remains a moral and cultural imperative to clubs across income groups; to explain why some people choose to not join the club one upper-middle-income respondent stated, “Frankly speaking, they [other people] are Bombay culture” as in West Bengal, according to him, it is family and *para* first. Most clubs have adopted a nominally democratic structure with an elected or nominated club board (president, secretary, etc.) that governs the club internally and serves as representatives to non-members, other clubs and state officials.

Clubs may gain government recognition via registration under the *West Bengal Registration Act, 1961*. Being a registered club is a criterion for access to government funding¹³ or incorporation into social protection schemes (i.e. rent for the use of the club building as a preschool or for vaccination programmes). However, registration, requires significant paperwork and fees so clubs may forgo it.

Club activities are diverse. The clubroom is a place of leisure for members, but most clubs also arrange events labelled as “social work” including blood donation drives, health camps or clothes distributions.

¹¹ My primary research assistants were also female.

¹² Then INR 10 = USD 0.16.

¹³ Funding is available for a range of activities including the establishment of sports-centres, tournaments or multi-gyms. Discussing the politics of this funding is unfortunately outside of the scope of this paper, however for a discussion of similar streams of funding and the scope of patronage to NGOs see Harrison 2017.

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Further, as will be detailed in this paper, clubs engage in a range of spatial and deliberative practices that serve to territorialise and reproduce the *para* as governable space, one that relies on the construction of particular subject positions – that of '*para subject*'. These activities include the hosting of *pujas* and other socio-cultural performances, restricting and mediating entrance into the *para*, and the control of environmental resources. It is primarily these territorial practices that position clubs as embedded institutions with authority. In turn this allows them to act in a deliberative capacity as alternatives to the state (particularly the police and courts), while also mediating with the local state and party to lobby for strategic inclusion in networks of patronage and for access to state benefits (i.e. basic services).

Understanding everyday governance

I understand governance to encompass the actual and multiple processes, occurring in multiple spheres, through which societies are steered toward particular goals and the on-going negotiations within these processes (Keil, 2006; Zimmer, 2012). Defining governance in this way requires a recognition of both formalised state-led policy, and the everyday practices of local governance actors which result in relatively stabilised regulations and produce order (Blundo and Le Meur, 2009). Further, it allows for a recognition of the role of informal institutions in producing governable domains (Lund 2006). Governance practices, by individual actors and institutions conform to a variety of logics and motives that may reflect the intersectional nature of power in the everyday (Bjerkli, 2013; Schindler, 2014, Truelove 2019). Understood in this way governance is not a top down hierarchical process led only by the state, but rather a more fluid process that occurs across and between multi-spheres where actors may have "near hegemonic competence" and authority in one domain, while in another have their influence contested or side-lined (Lund 2006:686). This understanding of governance recognises the mundane spheres of the everyday, such as the *para*, as legitimate and real spaces of governance subject to regular negotiations between actors.

Studies of governance in India have given primacy to the role of state actors, particular through the rich body of research on the 'everyday state' that has examined the practices of lower level bureaucrats and politicians (Corbridge et al., 2005; Fuller and Benei, 2000; Mosse, 2000; Ruud, 2000; Tarlo, 2000). These case studies have shown that even within formal spheres informality occurs in the regular disparity between the official model and actual behaviour (Corbridge et al., 2005; Tarlo, 2000). Further, this literature has aptly demonstrated the multiple, complex relationships, built upon the multiple identities and affiliations that shape governance practices by both state and non-state actors.

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These practices render the boundary between the state and society unclear and porous (Corbridge et al., 2005; Mosse, 2000). This research implicitly challenges researchers to engage with the multiplicity of groups that intervene in and shape governance and to consider their source(s) of legitimacy and authority. In turn, to recognise the importance of locality, and of spatial practices that produces disciplinary space within Indian cities (Donner and De Neve, 2006a; Hagn, 2016). This research has demonstrated the importance of capturing the contingent and variable nature of governance networks in order to construct a nuanced analysis of governmental power in the everyday. To some extent this challenge has been taken up by researchers who have explored the influence of state-created/supported groups such as Residents Welfare Associations (i.e.: Ghertner, 2012), however there has been extremely limited engagement with the roll of clubs that takes seriously their role as governance actors.

While these bodies of research have contributed to a richer understanding of the temporalities and nuances of governance-in-practice it has offered few analytical cues for understanding the reproduction of power and control in the everyday or the inherently political nature of practice. To address this I turn to De Certeau's (1984) Theory of Practice to conceptualise the political nature of the everyday and the ways that club's practices can be understood as "enunciative" of a system of governance and everyday politics.

De Certeau's (1984) Theory of Practice offers a way to understand the everyday as inherently political and to conceptualise the role of everyday practices in shaping urban life and urban place. In turn, this allows us to understand the city as a set of complex, overlapping and differentiated places governed by a network of actors. For de Certeau, the everyday is different from the official and he seeks to show the value of everyday life that occurs within the "gaps of larger power structures" (During, 1999:126). In doing this orients researchers to pay attention to the ways that actors may re-appropriate the in-between spaces of larger hegemonic forces whilst still recognising that there are "emergent structural properties to power relations that constrain the field of discursive practices and struggles" (Jessop, 2006). Thus, one can understand power to be dispersed (as with Foucault) but also tactical through practices of resistance and subversion (Jessop, 2006). It allows us to recognise the ways that everyday practices "are part of a process of appropriation and territorialisation" (Fenster, 2005: 222). This is important as it forces us to take seriously everyday practices of power and explore how they may shape daily life and the city as practiced place. Doing so moves the analysis of clubs beyond that offered by Roy (2002) which focusses on how they may be subordinate to the party and instead to recognise that club's practices are representative of the dispersed power that territorialises the city and contributes to the reproduction of the notion of *para* as a particular governable domain.

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From an analytical perspective De Certeau's (1984: 98) understanding of practices having an "enunciative function" is useful. He identifies four such functions. Firstly, practices operate within a system and in doing so announce it. Secondly, the performance allows a process of (re)appropriation of the system. In doing so, space is created within the field for the actor to use it to their advantage. Thirdly, a practice enunciates a spatial or temporal present. Fourthly, practices establish a "pragmatic contract" with interlocutors (De Certeau, 1984:98). Focussing on practices as enunciative allows us to examine the ways that everyday practices of clubs "corresponds... [to] apparatuses that produce a disciplinary space" (De Certeau, 1984:96) , namely that of the *para* and in doing so reproduces the role of clubs as institution and the subject position of residents as *para* public. Bringing these analytical tools into conversation with the empirical material allows for an understanding of the political nature of practices and the production of authority.

Practices of territoriality

In order to understand the ways that clubs are enmeshed in governance networks and the everyday politics of urban West Bengal one must examine the practices of territoriality that reproduce club authority. In unpacking their role, we begin to complicate the dominant narratives of subservience to the party and expose the spaces of the political in daily life. Through practices of territoriality, clubs as socio-political institutions, both assert their control over urban space, while also (re)producing their role as a disciplinary authority acts which produce the *para* subject as a governable population. Herein we focus three inter-related practices: claims on/production of urban space through socio-cultural/religious practices, practices of inclusion/exclusion through migrant chanda, and the control of natural resources.

Socio-cultural practices

Clubs are rendered as institutions and co-produce the *para* as a territorialised moral community in part through their involvement in socio-cultural and religious practices –the organisation of *pujas* and the provision of religious infrastructures. The Hindu Bengali calendar in particular is marked by a significant number of festivals celebrated at the neighbourhood-level¹⁴, the most significant of which is Durga *puja*. This festival is marked through the construction of elaborate *pandals* (temporary

¹⁴ Muslim dominated clubs were also involved in organising religious celebrations. For a discussion of the political history of neighbourhood *puja*'s see Ghosh 2000.

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temples), often on club grounds, and the hosting of *melas* (fairs) and community meals. Citywide competitions for best *pandal* contribute an element of performativity and competition.

Para households and business fund these type of festivities via *puja chanda* – voluntary but expected donations/dues. *Puja chanda* is used by clubs¹⁵ to raise *pandals*, host *para*-wide festive meals, and perform charitable works for the poor. While some clubs rely on door-to-door canvassing, others use more coercive means. For example, “club boys” may set up road blocks to stop passing vehicles, approaching each armed with a formal receipt book, often already filled out with the amount you are “volunteering” to donate. According to respondents, opting out of *puja chanda* in the *para* you are resident in or where you operate a small business is un-acceptable. The territoriality of paying *chanda* is important, if asked by the club or *puja* committee one must donate, but in doing so you also (re)confirm your position in your *para*. By paying *chanda*, people acquiesce to a system where the club is a key producer of spatialised moral community acting as an embedded institution. The unchallenged practice of demanding *chanda* serves to enunciate a spatial and temporal present (De Certeau, 1984). Through *puja chanda* and socio-religious performance like *Durga puja* clubs produce space as locale, as a *para*, serving to reassert the boundaries of this spatialized community, while also attaching themselves as to a particular temporal moment, one marked by strong feelings of community and cohesion.

Practices of exclusion/inclusion – Migrant Chanda

Through other practices, clubs control both physical and social entry into the *para* as a spatialised community. *Migrant chanda*, a voluntary but *de facto* obligatory payment made to the club by newcomers to the *para*, is a controversial and thus difficult to research way that (some) clubs territorialise their influence (see also Roy, 2002), and through exclusion produce communal, *para* identities (Donner, 2006). Interviews with key informants’ highlighted migrant *chanda* as a part of what one respondent characterised as the “rough” everyday politics of West Bengal. All but one club denied that payments are mandatory, at least in “their *para*,” though they acknowledged the practice occurs and only one club member explicitly condemned it, suggesting a level of social acceptance if not acceptability. The majority of clubs frame migrant *chanda* as a voluntary donation by new residents of the *para* who want to support their work or who wish to join the club. Other clubs construct migrant *chanda* as a payment for the service of a club’s support. Members of middle-income

¹⁵ Not all *puja*’s are club organised, some are organised by independent *puja* committees, though many of these *pujas* are still held on the club grounds.

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Netaji Sangha reported that they accept migrant *chanda* from new residents in whatever amount they are able and willing to pay in return for “guarding” the families new house/building site against theft. This guarding is not an overt physical act but a discursive one, relying on people being “afraid” of the club. Club members broadly assert that these payments are in line with what a household can afford. However, a respondent from a lower middle-income settlement recounted how in 2011 the club demanded INR 14,000 when her family moved in, they eventually acquiesced to paying INR 7,000¹⁶; a decision influenced by the fact that her brother and father worked away from the house for days at a time leaving the women alone and vulnerable to harassment. In spite of paying migrant *chanda*, she reports that they still face regular harassment from “club boys” particularly for *puja chanda*. Migrant *chanda* represents a real and significant cost for those forced to pay it. In both the implication of the need for guarding and in the pressure faced by migrants to pay *chanda* there is an implicit threat of violence. Regardless of if the *chanda* is truly voluntary or *de facto* obligatory as a practice – both in paying and receiving – it establishes a “pragmatic contract” (De Certeau, 1984) between the interlocutors.¹⁷ If we accept that power exists only in practice (Foucault, 1982) then this pragmatic contract, established through the payment of *chanda*, establishes not only a locale to which members belong and identify with, it also helps reinforce the claims to legitimacy by the club as institution (Lund 2006). These acts of territorialisation serve to reproduce the city as a landscape of power that is governed at/in multiple scales/sites by a multiplicity of actors.

Practices of authority over environmental resources

Practices of territoriality extend to the material practice of capturing environmental resources, such as ponds –which are used to earn income through pisci-culture (see Author et al 2016 for further discussion). These practices are largely unchallenged, as they capture resources which are not formally claimed or/and because opposing them is seen as “political.” When used by local respondents “political”, a term regularly expressed in English regardless of the language of the interview, does not refer only to the state or to party politics but rather captures the micro-politics of the everyday; the daily, often unstable and multiple negotiations of power amongst differently positioned actors. For example a local pond owner discussed his choice to not oppose the clubs capture of his pond by explaining he was not “political”, when asked to explain what this meant he elaborated that he did not want “trouble” from the club, his relatives lived in this house and the “social problems” of this

¹⁶ INR 7,000 is equal to at least two months’ rent in this part of the city.

¹⁷ One could interpret the payment of migrant and *puja chanda* as thuggish extortion on the part of (young) men seeking to exert what little power they have (Roy, 2002). This interpretation is unsatisfactory as it fails to account for agency on both sides and the ways that social structures rely on people accepting (under duress or not) the system and reproducing it through everyday practices.

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area were a risk to them if the club was angry with him. Elsewhere, when discussing local disputes a club secretary stated “we do not get involved in this”, they do not he insisted involve themselves in political things. Here, as in other examples, politics is thus not directly or exclusively about the party but rather about the everyday exercise of power. Thus, politics here should be seen “not [just] as a mechanism of state power and governmentality, but as constituting and being constituted through a multitude of social relationships” (Donner, 2013:319). Suggesting then that one is not political is a way to exit the obligations and risks inherent in that relationship. As a discourse and practice declaring oneself to be “non-political” acts as a form of resistance, a way to evade and negotiate a particular system of power (De Certeau, 1984).

Clubs also capture and control urban land. In built up low-income *paras*, clubs this might only be the shoulder of an intersection, or a space beside a drain. These clubs control land through virtue of occupation as a practice. By staking claims to space through the development of a building, even a temporary one, clubs announce their presence. At the same time, their importance as institutions legitimise their claims and guard against removal – an act that is not politically expedient in a system that relies on networks of patronage (Chakrabarti, 2006). These illegal club buildings represent a claim on urban space and find a mirror in the practices of political parties who establish party offices in the same way – occupying surplus public spaces with a material representation of their power.

In higher income, more recently developed areas of the city, clubs often control significant amounts of land that contain a club building, sport fields and at times revenue generating rental buildings. This land is variably purchased via *chanda*, has been gifted by (former) members, or obtained through networks of patronage. For example the Tagore Club, in an upper-middle income *para*, control three large open plots of land that were used for *pujas*, sports activities, and their club building. The title for this formerly-municipal land was transferred to the club, which they report was a recognition of their “good works” in the neighbourhood. In subsequent years, the club developed religious infrastructure (a small Durga *mandar*), sports infrastructure, and benches. Places such as these become key locales for convivial relations within the *para*, one that clearly demarcates and announces the clubs influence and through the everyday practices of residents serves to reproduce the role of the club in producing the *para* as socio-spatial entity.

Producing para subjects

Through practices of territoriality including the provision of puja infrastructures, migrant *chanda*, and the capture of local environmental resources, clubs are integral to the reproduction of the *para* as a spatialised moral community, loyalty to which is a social norm that structures the micropolitics of

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urban life. The ability of clubs as political and governance actors relies on residents recognising themselves as subject to the club, identifying with it alongside of their other, multiple subject positions – as captured in part by the respondent who stated that in West Bengal it is family and *para* first. For this reason it is impossible to separate the idea of the *para* as territory from the public authority¹⁸ exercised by the club over members and non-members alike. Thus while loyalty to the club may be stronger in areas where membership is non-voluntary, even in middle-class areas residents accede to practices, such as the payment of *chanda* that serve to announce their positions in this system. In the remainder of this paper, I argue that it through these multiple subject positions and the existence of contingent and variable sources of authority that clubs are able to act as both an alternative to the state and a key intermediary with it, operating alongside of political parties in shaping the everyday politics in the city.

Alternative and intermediary: governing in and through liminal spaces

If we understand governance to be inherently political and to occur in multiple spheres, then the ways that clubs can operate in the blurry intersections between state, party-politics, and society, points to why understanding their role in the city is essential in developing a nuanced understanding of everyday politics. Clubs not only form a public who may be potential recipients of patronage and subjects, they also influence interactions with the state: providing an alternative when needed, while also serving as an intermediary with the state, often through the party office, in the quest for access to state benefits. These different space and channels to and from the state serve to shape complex and overlapping governance spaces that are negotiated in and through the practices of various actors. Understanding the governance practices of clubs serves to complicate and nuance the narratives of party dominance in West Bengal, demonstrating the multiplicity of actors and spaces that intersect in the city and in doing so allow for a richer analysis of the power and politics of everyday practices.

Alternatives to the state

In order to understand the influence of clubs and their role within networks of governance one must consider how residents rely on clubs as a strategy to distance themselves from the state, particular in reflection of the “political situation” of West Bengal and yet simultaneously can rely on the club to act as intermediaries with the state (as addressed later). Ruud (2000:133) has noted that party and state political activity in West Bengal is often seen to be in conflict “with moral ideals governing social

¹⁸ Understood following Lund’s 2006 conceptualisation of public authority from below.

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conduct ... [so] [p]eople seek to keep their distance from such a morally dubious activity, yet they find it compelling ... because politics is about power and the material aspects of life and society, on which most people depend". Involvement is necessary but troublesome. In contrast, the club is still largely framed as non-political, moral and concerned with "social work." As such, the club may allow people to mediate this paradox by providing an alternative way to interact with party-political actors while being less individual and thus a morally acceptable way to negotiate with the state as entity.

In explaining club culture, over half of respondents attributed the development and importance of clubs to a need for an alternative to the state and its institutions (police, courts) or to party politics. According to respondents the presence of clubs was either due to the "political scenario" of West Bengal, characterised as "rough", violent and/or involving heavy party influence in social and domestic matters or emerging from the condition of the state. Both the state and political parties were framed as inherently biased and best avoided whenever possible. It was the responsibility of the club to "maintain their own areas", and in doing so they provide a way to evade a governance regime (the state and party) seen as distasteful, even if clubs replicate their institutional actions/functions. For example, when faced with a dispute over property, inheritance or domestic issues people will often choose to avoid the involvement of both party offices and the police or courts and instead turn to clubs for adjudication. These issues are often handled in a formalised way: a written application is submitted to the club secretary, all parties meet with the club leadership to discuss the issue and present their case –outside experts (i.e. land surveyors) may be called in if needed. If the dispute involved parties from different *para*, they would be represented by their own clubs and a solution negotiated. According to respondents involving the clubs in adjudicating disputes allows you avoid the (distasteful) "political scenario" of West Bengal, while obtaining a decision that is regarded as fair, non-biased, and time efficient. Some respondents highlighted that while club decisions were largely accepted, both parties still had recourse with the courts if they were unsatisfied.

Numerous respondents focussed on the club as a structure of self-help that arose due to difficulties of accessing the state – particularly in poorer or lower middle-income areas. In these discussions the state was distant – either physically or socio-economically and ideologically – and thus the club represented a needed alternative to the state. For example, the club secretary in a now middle-income area explained that when the area was settled in 1954, people were poor and they were far from the centre of the city. The municipality "was not here" and they did not feel they could get help from police – they could only rely on themselves. The club emerged as a "shelter" for local people and was a structure people could rely on. Elsewhere, members of a club in an informal city centre *para* explained that they are "BPL" (below poverty line) families who get little benefit from the government

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and few outsiders are willing to help them with their problems and disputes. As such, the club emerged so they could “develop themselves” and resolve disputes on their own. In doing so respondents mobilise notions of self-reliance and the collective. The practice of turning to the club for dispute resolution and accepting their decisions is an enuciative practices (De Certeau, 1984); it reproduces both the clubs authority and the position of *para* members as subject to their authority. This authority is however porous as people retain the ability to turn elsewhere for recourse, though some noted that doing so would result in social sanctions and no further access to club assistance.

Interlinked with ideas of self-reliance and the collective were discourses of responsibility, social hierarchy and order. For some respondents in both poor and better-off *para* the club represents a supra-authority within a hierarchy where the family is responsible for what occurs within the home and the club mediates social order in the neighbourhood. This framing is particularly evident in discussions on the role of clubs in social life and social control, extending from dispute resolution, to a wider role in moderating the behaviour of young women and the interactions with boys from other *para*. Club members for example highlight warning off boys fraternising with local girls or highlight their role in preventing the “eve-teasing” (sexual harassment). In a less paternalistic framing, other respondents explained that the club was the urban equivalent of traditional panchayats¹⁹ in villages (c.f. Roy, 2002). Pointing to the embedded-ness of clubs as local authorities, one respondent expressed confusion about how adults solved problems in her natal village in Bihar. The framing of the club as supra-authority, particularly in the maintenance of social order (including dispute resolutions) was present across income groups, though the discussion of social sanctions for acting outside of the club authority was only raised in poor *paras*. These notions of club as supra-authority clearly point to the construction of the *para* as a disciplinary space (De Certeau, 1984, see also Lund 2006 a similar argument about public authority excercised by local institutions), one governed (in part) by the club.

In these explanations, there is resonance with phenomena that underpin Chatterjee’s (2011:17-18) ideas about political society, namely the limited ability of the poor to interact with the state. According to him, the poor view the police and courts as “slow, opaque, and frequently corrupt,” and represent institutions that “only the wealthy can manipulate to their advantage.” Chatterjee (2011:68) further argues that urban poor see the state as distant. These are seen as both symptoms and enabling conditions for the development of political society in the post-colonial period where increasing the

¹⁹ By traditional they refer not to the formalised and democratically elected village panchayats created following the 73rd constitutional amendment but rather to the traditional village councils. The 74th constitutional amendment that facilitates decentralised governance in cities is on paper well implemented in West Bengal. However, in both cities clubs have not been displaced by ward committees, resident’s welfare associations or other formalised mechanisms of decentralised governance.

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developmental state interacted with people as populations rather than citizens. The findings in this study complicate any presumed dichotomy between income groups, while poor *paras* are more reliant on clubs, the phenomena was still present in better-off *paras*. It also nuances of Roy's (2002:116) reading of clubs as primarily being spaces in which poor men can transform their once subordinate roles and "claim a semblance of power", in turn evading the oppressive force of the state apparatus. Rather, I suggest that the desire to evade the state in the everyday is present across class groups and while it may carry greater importance in poorer *para* where people are less equipped with the social and political connections needed to negotiate within state spheres, understanding the ways that clubs may act in the in-between spaces to evade the hegemonic role of both state and political party in order to create an alternative to these structures (During, 1999; Jessop, 2006) offers a more nuanced understanding of micro-politics of urban governance. It also constitutes a key theoretical implication of this research, which is the need to recognise the politically generative nature of spaces between hegemonic powers and the fluid ways that local institutions can strategically use their spaces in exercise of power. The next section extends this finding further and complicates simplistic readings of party hegemony or of club influence however are the practices by which clubs may strategically insert themselves within governance networks in order to act as intermediaries with the party and the state, as is detailed in the following section.

As intermediaries

In understanding how clubs position themselves as intermediaries with the state, it is important to reiterate that clubs largely define themselves as non-political and not party affiliated (c.f. Roy, 2002), asserting that this non-partisan status accounts for a degree of their importance. This discourse is supported by the appearance of club buildings, none that I entered displayed party regalia or photos of the Chief Minister (as is common in public buildings), though photos of folk heroes or freedom fighters were common. Yet to refer the clubs as non-political or even removed from party-politics would be inaccurate. While all but one club denied direct party affiliation, most acknowledged the multiple-identities and loyalties of their members and accepted that members may use their party-affiliations to facilitate the work of the club.²⁰ In contrast some respondents explained that club members' lack of strong personal connections with the ruling party has resulted in them being unable to secure registration or access the state funds that are available to them.²¹ This brings to the fore

²⁰ Harrison (2017) encounters similar claims from NGOs in West Bengal.

²¹ Through the West Bengal Department of Youth Services and Sport, the government provides funding to clubs for sports facilities and other activities.

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questions of networks of power – can someone's identity and position within a highly politicised environment (as West Bengal is) be set aside in certain situations? Can the personal and the social be separated from the political? Absolutes of identity may allow for idealised theorising of social relations and the politics of daily life, but it is not reflective of reality which is much messier than that.

While the clubs may not be overtly partisan, they are an important intermediary between residents, the party and the state. According to respondents' clubs represent them as a single institutional voice, one that they believe is more effective and influential when making claims than those coming from individual residents. Respondents repeatedly described going to the club (often via the secretary) as part of their problem solving strategies, giving credence to the assertion that clubs serve as node in local governance networks. In places of contentious politics the club may serve as an additional layer of mediation between the state and residents. An elected councillor (and party member) in a politically-divided middle-income ward explained that some as *paras* were supporters of the opposition party their residents were reluctant to speak with him or be seen in his office, similarly it was difficult for him to work in that *para*. To address this impasse communication between *para* members and the councillor ran through the club. The club, as institution could, at least in theory, liaise with the councillor as a neutral party.

In acting as a supposed non-partisan force and an institutional voice, while also relying on personalised political connections in order to obtain benefits for the *para*, clubs become enrolled in the networks of patronage that shape access to the state in West Bengal (Williams and Nandigama 2018). Some of the influence of clubs as authorities and intermediaries rests on their potential to act as vote banks. As plainly stated by one councillor, they want the support of clubs and the clubs want the support of councillors, a sentiment reconfirmed by numerous respondents. However, I argue that in seeing clubs as primarily an instrument for patronage, as associational forms through which the residents as *populations* (as in Chatterjee's formulation of political society) assert demands, we miss the ways that clubs may enable complex interactions with the party structure in West Bengal. They ways they make take advantage of networks of (state/Political) patronage, often through the personal connections of members when convenient or necessary, but also subverting the broader system of control by creating the opportunity to opt out, to occupy a political and disciplinary space distant and alternative to the disciplinary force of the party and the state more broadly. Put more simply the argument here is that clubs is linked to the party and the state in complex ways but they are not wholly subordinate to them.

Discussion and Conclusion

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In this paper, I have sought to make a set of three empirically and theoretically interlinked contributions to the study of postcolonial cities, urban politics and governance. Firstly, the case study presented herein contributes to nuancing our understanding of urban politics in West Bengal, where analysis has been hereto dominated by the influence of political parties. To do this I have demonstrated the multiple, often inherently spatial and territorialised practices through which clubs as institutions, and residents as "*para* subjects" enunciate, appropriate, and reproduce a particular system of control. Doing this exposes the complex ways in which the city becomes territorialised through dispersed practices of power and acknowledges the spaces of the political in daily life. Arguably, one of De Certeau's key methodological arguments was the need to "concentrate on everyday life, as opposed to an abstract visualization of the city" (Andres, 2013:762). I would extend this argument further to assert that we must focus on the enacted politics of everyday life in the city and not just abstract visualisations and theories of the political. If we follow Foucault's (2002) assertion that space is fundamental to any exercise of power, then reading the spatial practices of clubs through De Certeau's (1984) theory of practice established a basis on which to understand club's power and their ability to act as governance actors. Doing this leads to a key theoretical contribution of these findings, namely a recognition of the complex ways that institutions produce governable territories, which are governable even when it overlaps with the domains of other, potentially more powerful actors. This forces us to recognise the multi-layered and fluid nature of governable domains in the city.

Secondly, and interlinked to the prior finding on territorialisation is a response to the call to understand political action(s) through the specificities of agency and subjectivity (Kuus 2019), through the conceptualisation of the *para* subject. Clubs use spatial practices, including the provisioning of socio-religious infrastructures, the control of environmental resources and territorialised practices of exclusion and inclusion, to create a disciplinary and governable space, that of *para*. The *para* in West Bengal is a distinct site of "sociality and subject formation" (Donner, 2013:1317), where the micro-politics of daily life are negotiated, the state is enacted and where alternative structures of governance and disciplinary forces are forged. Clubs are able to act both as an alternative to the state and as an intermediary with it only because the residents of these cities understand themselves as subject to the club, the position of "*para* subject" then becomes one of their multiple subject positions, an identity and affiliation to be negotiate alongside of others (Mosse, 2000), including by not necessarily trumped by affiliations to the party. This concept of *para* subject while tied by lexicon to West Bengal, has wider resonance in that it allows us to conceptualise the one of the ways that disciplinary force

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works, territory is maintained and ties of loyalty constructed in order to better understand the logics of rule and the production of legitimacy by those who exercise authority in the everyday.

Third and finally, the argument made in this paper that clubs serve as both alternatives to and intermediaries with the state and party represents an important contribution. Clubs occupy a variable and contingent position in the institutional landscape that characterises cities in West Bengal, a position that defies any dichotomies between state/party and society, or assumptions of opposition or antagonism between the two. Rather, they contribute to what Truelove (2019:5) characterises as the “the formation of political assemblages that defy dualisms such as formal—informal or public—private” that characterise governance in postcolonial cities. Dualisms which in West Bengal includes party-political—non-political. Recognising these political assemblages begins to reveal the decentralised nature of nodes of power within complex governance networks that extend beyond dominant or hegemonic power holders and recognises the shifting ways that institutions may operate within the liminal spaces between such authorities. It leaves open questions about how individuals themselves navigate such complex assemblages and systems of power. Understanding how ordinary residents navigate their multiple subject positions and the networks of actors and governed spaces in the city and what this means for the (re)production of urban politics is a potentially rich area of future research.

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