

Appendix 4

Digvijay Singh in Madhya Pradesh, India: Supplementing Political Institutions to Promote Inclusion

This chapter examines the record of a politician who pursued poverty reduction in a large state in India's federal system. After explaining the political, social and developmental context, it introduces the leader in question and then moves on to an analysis of his overall political strategy. It then considers several of the specific pro-poor initiatives which he developed -- and which required him to make tactical adjustments. It concludes with an assessment of the implications of all of this for the main concerns of our comparative study.

I. The Context

India has long been a consolidated democracy, in which Westminster-style parliamentary institutions operate at the national and the state levels in what is a federal system. The counterpart at the state level to Parliament in New Delhi is the state assembly, and the state-level counterpart to India's Prime Minister is called the Chief Minister. This study focuses on the Chief Minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh in north-central India – Digvijay Singh, who held that post from 1993 until 2003. It is a major state, with a population in 2001 of 60 million.

In a small number of mainly under-developed Indian states in north India, democratic norms and the integrity of a potentially strong bureaucracy have been severely eroded by political bullying, corruption and the criminalization of politics.¹ Madhya Pradesh is not entirely free of these problems, but it has largely escaped the excesses seen elsewhere. Civil servants have suffered little of the brow-beating from politicians that has crippled their effectiveness in some other states. Corruption is serious but not debilitating, and we encounter less of the close and extensive connections between criminals and politicians that exist in a few other states. Civil society is under-developed, but this is mainly the result of low levels of social and economic development, and not of harassment or repression from politicians. The press is less lively than in many other Indian states, but this again is mainly explained by under-development. It has suffered little intimidation by politicians – it is quite free. Democratic and parliamentary norms have been substantially observed here. Relations between governing and opposition parties have been reasonably civilised. Supposedly autonomous institutions such as the judiciary, the Comptroller and Auditor-

¹ J. Manor, "India: Changing State, Changing Society", *South Asia* (August 2002) pp. 231-56.

General's office, an ombudsman and the Election Commission are – in practice – substantially so.

Elections in Madhya Pradesh have always been overwhelmingly free and fair. The state, like India, conducts elections – at the state level and lower levels -- on a first-past-the-post basis within single-member constituencies. A proportion of seats at all levels has always been reserved for members of two disadvantaged groups -- the Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchables or *Dalits*) and Scheduled Tribes (*adivasis*). All voters living within those constituencies are permitted to vote, but only members of those groups are allowed to stand as candidates. Since 1994, at least one-third of the seats in all elected councils below the state level have also been reserved for women candidates.

The state of Madhya Pradesh did not come into being until 1956, nine years after India gained its independence. It was in that year that boundaries between states in the federal system were redrawn to conform roughly to the lines between linguistic regions. Madhya Pradesh was constructed from the Hindi-speaking areas in central India that were hived off from territories where other languages were spoken.

The various sub-regions that comprised the new state had previously had only tenuous links to one another. They had been separately governed for a century and a half by sundry rajas and regimes in areas where the British ruled directly. This meant that the state was the most loosely integrated in the country. That problem was compounded by severe under-development, which meant that it had weak transport and communication links. Some Indian observers refer to it as the 'remnant state' or, less kindly, the 'dustbin state' into which Hindi-speaking leftovers from other new states were dumped. These historic divisions and the problem of loose integration live on, and together with its size – it is India's largest state in area though not in population -- make this a particularly difficult state to govern or to develop.

Its political history since its creation falls into two phases. The first decade after it was created in 1956, was a period of Congress Party pre-eminence -- but it was apparent as early as the 1962 state election that Congress did not exercise the dominance here that it then did in nearly all other states. The struggle for independence which it had led had made a much greater impact in the more developed areas of India than here, so the party's hold over this region was more tenuous. At that election, it fell just short of a majority in the state legislature against a fragmented opposition and a large number of independents.

A second phase began in 1967, and was characterised by multi-party competition. Congress won a majority of seats in the election that year, but immediately yielded power to a cluster of other parties when a group of its legislators defected. It regained control two years later and governed until

1977, but it was then humiliated at the post-Emergency election by the Janata Party.

This confirmed that party competition here had acquired a bi-polar character which survives to this day. The only contestants for power since the late 1970s have been the Congress and the Hindu right. The latter dominated the Janata Party in Madhya Pradesh (as it seldom did elsewhere). Congress won election victories in 1980 and 1985, over the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP (which by then had separated from the Janata Party). But in 1990, the BJP won a solid majority and governed until 1993 when direct rule from New Delhi was imposed after Hindu extremists had destroyed the mosque at Ayodhya. At the 1993 state election, Congress returned to power and in 1998, it was re-elected – a rare achievement in India in the period since 1980. It remained in office until December 2003 when it lost to the BJP. It is this decade between 1993 and 2003 that is analysed here.

Digvijay Singh did not lead a sovereign national government as Museveni and Cardoso did. But he still exercised very formidable powers – especially in the making and implementation of policies that might benefit poor people, the sphere that interests us here. State governments have control of roughly 30% of the revenues from taxes collected by the national government, and they also collect substantial taxes on their own. Many development programmes originate at the national level, but state governments have substantial informal influence over how those programmes are actually implemented on the ground. And state governments have great latitude in initiating development programmes of their own – a core concern here.

The choice of an Indian state seems especially appropriate when we consider the issues of scale and complexity. Madhya Pradesh has a larger population than most countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It is larger than Uganda, though not Brazil. If we had taken India as our unit of analysis, we would have examined an entity with a population that exceeds that of the whole of Africa, and of the whole of South and North America. India is also an astonishingly complex country. There are marked differences between states – in terms of their levels of development, social composition, state-society relations, political traditions and much else. This -- and the fact that most of the actual governing in India occurs at and below the state level -- argue for a state-level study such as this.

Madhya Pradesh is seriously under-developed – by the standards of Indian states and of less developed countries more generally. There are pockets in the state where industrialisation has taken place – mainly round the cities of Indore and Bhopal. But for the most part, the state is dependent on subsistence agriculture which in most areas does not benefit from irrigation. Over 70% of the population resides in rural areas. Madhya Pradesh is also drought prone. It was severely short of rain for three of Singh's last four years in power. It

contains a number of 'backward' sub-regions where something like 'feudal' arrangements once prevailed and still have some force, although the old hierarchies are eroding. A very substantial portion of the population is 'poor' - - roughly 40% live below the poverty line, if we use the consumption of 2400 calories per day as our yardstick. 34.7% live on less than \$1 per day.² Human development indices are low, although dramatic gains were achieved under Singh in promoting literacy.

Madhya Pradesh has traditionally been seen as one of a cluster of north Indian states lagging badly behind the rest and holding back India's development. They are referred to as the 'BIMARU' states: an acronym for Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. This had always been a questionable grouping, since it omits Orissa which in many ways is more troubled than some in that list. And during the 1990s, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh made enough headway in certain key development sectors to make the list more dubious still. That Singh should have presided during that period is one justification for his inclusion here, in a study that focuses on enlightened leaders who sought to reduce poverty.

Since the early 1990s, all Indian states, and the central government, have faced severe fiscal constraints. Their combined fiscal deficit is over 11% of GDP. This is one of the highest in the world and is dangerous, but little has been done about it. Digvijay Singh's government took more steps to tackle this problem than have most other state governments. It took a loan from the Asian Development Bank in the late 1990s to cut the swollen public payroll -- as we shall see below. As a result, by the late 1990s, the government could undertake limited but not insignificant development spending in a few selected sectors. Things were tight, but not -- as in most other states -- crippling. Despite this, however, a recurring theme in Singh's efforts to undertake poverty reducing -- or any other -- development programmes was the need to find initiatives that would not be unduly expensive.

Finally, it is worth noting that neither the Indian nor the Madhya Pradesh state government is remotely dependent upon international aid.³ The state government has actively sought and has received substantial support from the Asian Development Bank and some donors, including DFID. Some (usually minor) adjustments were made in some of its policies in response the views of donors. But it spurned an offer from DFID of substantial budgetary support

² UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 198-99. The figures are from the period between 1990 and 2000.

³ Here are the figures on aid received in 2001, for India (within which Madhya Pradesh is a typical state in this respect), Brazil and Uganda. (Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003*, pp. 291-93.)

	Aid per capita (US\$)	As a % of GDP
India	1.7	0.4
Brazil	2.0	0.1
Uganda	32.3	13.8

when it found the manner in which it was extended to be objectionable,⁴ and nearly all of the key political decisions which preoccupy us here were taken independently of donor influence. That was true of the experiment with democratic decentralisation which was a central theme under Digvijay Singh, and of other undertakings including his two major pro-poor programmes analysed below – the Education Guarantee Scheme and the *Dalit* Agenda. A third, potentially major pro-poor policy in the health sector did not grow into a substantial initiative owing to the lack of donor support. So donors feature in this story, but they do not loom large.

II. The Leader

Digvijay Singh was born into the family of a minor raja. His forebears had ruled over a small princely state until independence in 1947. His upbringing was typical of young men from such backgrounds. His family – and he – enjoyed great deference from ordinary people within the area that they had once governed. And his favourite pursuit as an adolescent was just the sort of thing most raja's and their kin enjoyed -- *shikar*, the hunting of game. He shot his first panther at the age of 11, and his first tiger when he was 13.⁵

This was not the sort of thing to endear him to most people in Madhya Pradesh where many members of the vast Hindu majority find the killing of animals distasteful. Indeed, such hunting was banned when he was a young man, whereupon he abandoned it. But that is where he came from, and he freely acknowledges his enthusiasm for *shikar*. Nor – given the deference which his and other princely families had traditionally received – was it a background likely to give rise to a leader who was committed to maximising bottom-up participation in decisions about development. But that is what he became. His princely background helped to make that possible in one important way. It left him free of the social insecurities that cause many politicians to seek deference. He appears, quite genuinely, to find deference an inconvenience -- because it imposes barriers between him and others. Hence his well known willingness to engage with people of the lowest status with unfailing courtesy and on entirely equal terms. He surpasses most Indian politicians in his capacity to do this. Paradoxically, a princely upbringing has contributed to that.

His social confidence was reinforced during his student days spent at Daly College, an elite institution run on the lines of a British public school. It had been established before independence for the sons of princes, to provide a good western education but also social polish in the old fashioned British sense of

⁴ The state's officials took particular exception to unfavourable comparisons by DFID representatives, during discussions, with another state that had done far less to promote fiscal prudence and genuinely open, participatory governance than they had. This comment is based on interviews with four key state government officials and one DFID representative who were involved, and on an examination of the correspondence about the offer.

⁵ Interview with Digvijay Singh, New Delhi, 16 May 2004.

the term. Since 1947, it has remained an elite school for sons of the upper crust. It was there that he acquired an elegant command of English, to match his sophisticated grasp of his native Hindi.

At school and then at university in Madhya Pradesh where he studied engineering, Singh showed not the slightest interest in politics – as he cheerfully admits. It would have been possible there to immerse himself in student politics which was conducted fervently along party lines. Many students do little else. But he never even bothered to vote in student elections, and concentrated instead on sport – especially squash, but several other things too – and on his studies.⁶

His sporting activities brought him into contact with young men at his own and other public schools who would soon be playing important roles in politics and in India's elite civil service. A few of these people were eventually to achieve prominence in the emerging sphere of progressive civil society organisations -- notably Bunker Roy who has distinguished himself in that sector. Daly College also sought to inspire patriotism and an awareness of students' responsibilities to society and the nation. It introduced them – in however elitist a manner -- to the new democratic, republican India of Jawaharlal Nehru. He thus emerged from there well acquainted with the wider world of politics, but with a less-than-compelling interest in it. He returned to his family home an unlikely candidate for a political career.

Back home, however, his father was involved in politics. He had been elected the Congress Party mayor of his town – in an era when Congress was pre-eminent in the state, as yet relatively unchallenged by rival parties. But within a few years of the son's return, the father passed away. Digvijay Singh then came under pressure to fill his father's shoes, and he acquiesced. He was selected to succeed his father as mayor – by no means an uncommon occurrence in an area where elites from princely families loomed especially large in politics. But he was canny enough, and familiar enough with the logic of India's democratic order, to sense that it was insufficient to rely entirely or even mainly on deference and his Rajput (*kshatriya* or princely) caste status if politics was to become a career.

These perceptions gained greater weight as he was drawn into the state-level unit of the Congress Party. He was one of several bright young men who shared a British-style public school background with Rajiv Gandhi, who had become the national Congress leader and Prime Minister after his mother's murder in October, 1984. Singh was elected a Member of Parliament in New Delhi at the election held shortly after that assassination. He lost his seat at the next election in 1989, but he had caught Rajiv Gandhi's eye and the latter then elevated him to the presidency of the Madhya Pradesh unit of the Congress Party.

⁶ *Ibid.*

In this period, Singh also imbibed much of the new thinking about participation in development from the bottom up by ordinary people, which was beginning to emerge from the work of civil society activists like Bunker Roy, and of analysts in and around Indian research institutions. He quickly mastered their insights, so that by the early 1990s, he could articulate them – in the words of a one discerning observer who was difficult to impress -- “wonderfully well”.⁷

Singh could thus operate elegantly and with ease in three different political idioms. He understood the logic of a society that still offered no little deference to the former princely elite – although it was waning, which he also recognised. Second, he could operate in the westernised idiom that predominated within Rajiv Gandhi’s circle at the apex of the Congress Party, and in the English-language media – not least, television which was becoming increasingly important and on which he proved tellingly effective. And third, he could converse with authority in the new participation-oriented idiom that was emerging from civil society organisations, many of which were active at the grassroots. He was also perceptive enough to grasp that this new idiom resonated with a key strand in the Congress Party’s history – the Gandhian tradition.⁸ He saw that if handled sympathetically, it might enable the party to enhance its popularity by returning to its Gandhian roots.

To say this is not quite to say that Digvijay Singh carried ideological baggage. Like most Indian politicians -- and, more to the point, like almost all other Congress politicians and the party itself -- he was not overly preoccupied with ideology. The word 'pragmatist' fits both them and him best. But to say that of him is not to say enough. He was -- partly, but not entirely for pragmatic reasons -- a progressive, in that that he was serious about delivering real substance to ordinary rural folk, and not least to the poor. In this respect, he differed markedly from most other Indian and Congress Party leaders. He resembled instead certain distinguished 'pragmatic progressives' at the state level in the Congress during the 1970s.⁹ He was thus not just a centrist -- which Congress leaders were by habit, and which fiscal constraints required most leaders in less developed countries to be after 1990 -- but a centrist reformer.

But those earlier pragmatic progressives had paid no more than lip service to Gandhian approaches. By the time Singh took office, Gandhi had been out of fashion for over half a century -- even within the Congress which he had

⁷ Interview with Harsh Mander, New Delhi, 14 December 2003.

⁸ It is difficult to locate that tradition on the conventional left/right spectrum. It has more to do with bottom-up vs. top-down issues.

⁹ Foremost among them was the Congress Chief Minister of Karnataka between 1972 and 1980, D. Devaraj Urs. J. Manor, "Pragmatic Progressives in Regional Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly*, annual number, 1980 and reprinted in G. Shah (ed.) *Caste and Democratic Politics in India* (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002) pp. 271-94.

forged into a serious political force. But Singh had the imagination to see that in his time, Gandhian perspectives held real promise -- in pragmatic as well as inspirational terms -- for the party. This proclivity was more philosophical or strategic than ideological. But he did not take power -- as many, perhaps most Chief Ministers do -- after little serious contemplation of big ideas.

There was nothing odd about a hard-headed pragmatist thinking in Gandhian terms. Readers who consider this a contradiction in terms need to look again at Gandhi's own career. He was, among many other things, at all times a brilliant pragmatist.¹⁰ This is not intended as a criticism of Gandhi or of other pragmatists. As the great Indian social scientist M.N. Srinivas once said, "If a political leader is not pragmatic and manipulative, there is something seriously wrong with him".¹¹

We also need to ask whether altruism played any role in Singh's decision to pursue progressive policies. It is impossible to see far enough into his mind to give a firm answer to this question. But the evidence -- from long discussions with him and with people who observed him closely (some of whom are sharply critical on several issues) -- strongly suggests that altruism was not wholly absent. His articulation of the new thinking about bottom-up participation by ordinary people and about pro-poor policies was so persuasive to sceptical observers, that it seems unlikely that it just a pose to win admiration from those who wanted to hear these things. And on occasion, he took serious political risks in his pursuit of these ideas.

He was plainly aware that the appearance of altruism made good pragmatic sense -- both in the short term within his state, and for his long term career prospects in the politics of India and of the Congress Party. But the appearance of altruism is conveyed most convincingly when altruism is actually present. And Singh projected that appearance very convincingly indeed -- especially when he took those risks (a point to which we will return later).

In 1993, when the Congress Party swept to power at a state election in Madhya Pradesh, several of its long-standing, formidable leaders from the state aspired to the Chief Minister's office. Each of these 'big beasts' had his own power base in one region of the state.¹² The party's national leaders knew, however, that by choosing any one of them they would invite relentless factional challenges from the others in what was one of the most strife-prone state-level units of the Congress. They were acutely aware of an analogy that Rajiv Gandhi had used to describe how Indian politicians -- including those within his own Congress Party -- dealt with one another. He had spoken of

¹⁰ I am grateful to Ashis Nandy for deepening my understanding of this.

¹¹ He said this at a meeting at the University of Mysore, 9 August 1996.

¹² For a discussion of this, see *The Hindu*, 6 February 1990.

...a merchant who exported crabs packed in uncovered tins without any loss or damage, to the amazement of the importer. The Indian crabs, he explained, pulled one another down and prevented them from moving up!

The reporter who recalled this linked the analogy directly to faction fighting within Congress Party in Madhya Pradesh at that time.¹³

To tackle this problem, the party's national leaders thought it best to select Digvijay Singh who had a much more limited base within the state, but who might be seen as something of a neutral figure. His ability to operate so ably in several different political idioms, and his easy, accommodative manner made him appear a promising choice. With firm support from national leaders of the party, he might survive and flourish.

He thus began his decade in power as a man who owed his position to those national leaders. He fully understood that to survive in office, he needed to do two things address this problem. He had to carve out a positive image for himself as an adroit, imaginative leader. And he had to cultivate a popular base for himself – not just in one region of the state, but across most of it.

These were tough tasks, and to make matters still more taxing, he faced two further challenges which previous Congress Chief Ministers there had not encountered. An historic change had occurred in Indian politics in 1990. Two new themes were brought ferociously to the fore which carried huge implications for his party all across the country and for the politics of his state.¹⁴

First, a non-Congress, secular government in New Delhi committed itself to reserving a substantial proportion of places in educational institutions and government employment for members of the 'Other Backward Castes' or OBCs. They occupied the lower-middle stratum of the traditional caste hierarchy, and many of them were 'poor' or close to it. This commitment triggered both a significant popular response among those who stood to gain and angry, often violent opposition from those who did not. It also touched off competition for the votes of the large OBC bloc, in which the Congress Party would need to be involved.

Second, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP responded by launching an agitation for the destruction of a Muslim mosque at Ayodhya, allegedly built on the spot of the birth of the Hindu god Ram. This evoked another substantial popular response which cut across the caste-based appeal of the first issue, and made strident Hindu chauvinism a major force for the first time.

¹³ *The Hindu*, 15 February 1990.

¹⁴ For evidence of this, see for example *The Hindu*, 15 February 1990.

In Madhya Pradesh, Hindu nationalism had long had a potent presence. Then as now, the state had a two-party system in which the Congress faced the BJP. Congress leaders like Singh would now need to redouble their efforts to resist the BJP. Far less had been done by rival parties in the state to mobilise the OBCs or other numerically powerful groups of poor people. These latter groups were the *Dalits* or Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchables) who stood below the OBCs at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy, and the *adivasis* or Scheduled Tribes, impoverished groups who stood largely outside the Hindu social order. Singh recognised that his party would need to offer these groups many more tangible benefits if it was to prevent other parties from ending their traditional support for the Congress. The old reliance on the rural dominance of his Rajput caste and political bosses mainly from other high status groups would not suffice for long.¹⁵

This impelled him, when he became Chief Minister at the head of a Congress government in 1993, to give 'development' huge salience, as the core issue in the politics of Madhya Pradesh. Previously, it had – astonishingly – preoccupied politicians less had patronage distribution, faction fights and other mundane matters. By stressing 'development', he could respond to both of the twin challenges that had emerged without giving much ground to either.

He began by commissioning the first state-level *Human Development Report* produced anywhere in India.¹⁶ It was followed in later years by two further reports.¹⁷ His aim in issuing these was to call attention to the state's poor record at development. The reports offered frank admissions of the failures of previous (mostly Congress) governments to tackle this issue. Such honesty was unusual in the extreme in Indian politics. It was intended to persuade people that his intentions were genuine, and to demonstrate the determination of his own government to address development seriously for the first time. By focusing public attention in this way, he hoped to mobilise popular energies behind a drive for development. The reports provided statistics on under-development at the district level in order to generate pressure from below -- especially from deprived districts -- for greater development effort by the state government. This soon began to have some effect.

He then followed this up with specific programmes to promote 'development', which included – as we see below – several pro-poor initiatives. Here then was his strategy to respond to the twin threats of Hindu nationalism and caste-based appeals to disadvantaged groups. These actions marked him out as a new kind of Congress leader. This eventually led to his

¹⁵ Interview with Digvijay Singh, New Delhi, 16 May 2004.

¹⁶ *The Madhya Pradesh Human Development Report 1995* (Government of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal, 1995).

¹⁷ For an appreciative but not uncritical assessment of these reports, see *The Hindu*, 29 May 1999.

being identified in a national fortnightly magazine as one of two state Chief Ministers who were sufficiently imaginative and dynamic to qualify as “Wow Guys”.¹⁸ But in his first two years as Chief Minister, he had to tread cautiously since some of his ministers were clients of the 'big beasts' who still threatened him. He even held back in that early phase from dealing forcefully with some formidable bureaucrats. He would only become assertive when his effort to reorient public debate began to produce results.

Like almost all Indian politicians, he stops short of being ‘charismatic’. That word appears far too often in commentaries on Indian politics. Its use is justified in discussing only three or four politicians over the last quarter-century. But Singh is an enormously suave, disarming, persuasive figure on the public platform and in small group encounters to which he frequently resorted as Chief Minister. This writer has interviewed hundreds of Indian politicians, and he is one of the two or three most elegantly plausible, articulate and (again) persuasive of them.

Within three years of taking office, people in the state had begun to recognise that he was a different kind of Chief Minister, with a distinctive and promising agenda. He then began to act more aggressively -- and to demonstrate that he could be tough when the occasion demanded it. The first clear evidence of this was his determination to ram through legislation that provided substantial powers and resources to elected councils at district, sub-district and local levels -- against the wishes of most ministers and legislators (a topic discussed in detail below). He also began to tackle vested interests in the rural sector and the bureaucracy by forcing through policies to empower water users committees at the grassroots and to give poor people influence over woodlands in this heavily forested state. This won him praise even from intemperate environmental campaigners who usually held government programmes in contempt.¹⁹

This forcefulness was essential, given the political snakepit in which he had to operate. But he usually disguised these qualities quite effectively. And while his progressive attitudes on social programmes and bottom-up participation were genuine, they were coupled with somewhat illiberal views towards the role of the police.²⁰ This combination of attitudes mirrored the views of the majority of his constituents, and of Indians.

¹⁸ *Business World*, 7-21 March 1999, pp. 22-34.

¹⁹ A. Agarwal, "The House that Digvijay Built", *Down to Earth*, 31 December 1998, pp. 29-38.

²⁰ Singh's government passed a Police Act in 2001 which human rights activists saw as ambiguous. It incorporating certain liberal provisions recommended by the National Police Commission, but omitted others and gave the police substantial new powers which caused concern among those activists. See in this connection G.P. Joshi, *The Police Act of 1861, Model Police Bill of the National Police Commission, the Madhya Pradesh Police Vidheyak, 2001 and the Police Acts of Three Commonwealth Countries: A Comparative Profile* (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, New Delhi, 2001), and *Times of India*, 22 July 2001.

Broadening the Congress Party's Social Base

When Singh responded to the twin threats of Hindu chauvinism and caste-based politics by undertaking a drive for 'development', one of his main aims was to broaden the social base of his Congress Party. It had been contracting over the years since the 1960s when Congress enjoyed a pre-eminent position in Madhya Pradesh, as in most of the rest of India. That contraction was the result of two trends – a political awakening, and political decay -- to which he also felt compelled to respond.

The awakening had been occurring gradually, over many decades of democratic government in India, among ordinary people. They had become more aware of the logic of democratic politics, of their rights under law, and of the idea that their votes entitled them to expect tangible responses from politicians. This awakening was bound up with changes in social attitudes – as low status groups gradually shed much of their former deference to castes that stood higher in the traditional hierarchy, and as caste tended increasingly to denote not hierarchy but difference.²¹ The awakening made India a more genuine democracy, but also a more difficult country to govern.

And yet just as the awakening was placing increasing demands upon politicians, the instruments through which they might respond were undergoing decay. Both the formal institutions of state and, crucially, informal institutions like the Congress Party's once-vaunted organisation were losing substance, reach, autonomy and flexibility.²² The confluence of these two trends posed serious dangers to politicians, ruling parties and the democratic process. An imaginative response was required which would promote renewal and political regeneration.²³ That was what Digvijay Singh set out to provide.

He sought to construct a coalition of support from various social groups that can yield a majority of seats in elections to the state legislature. When he and others thought about society in this predominantly rural state, they thought not in terms of social classes, but of castes plus the Scheduled Tribes and the Muslim minority, both of which stand outside the Hindu caste system. This is sensible and realistic, since caste looms larger than class in people's self-identifications.

²¹ For a telling study of this process even in under-developed Madhya Pradesh, see A. Mayer, "Caste in an Indian Village: Change and Continuity, 1954-1992" in C.J. Fuller (ed.) *Caste Today* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997) pp. 32-64.

²² See for example, J. Manor, "The Electoral Process amid Awakening and Decay" in J. Manor and P. Lyon (eds.) *Transfer and Transformation: Political Institutions in the New Commonwealth* (Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1983).

²³ J. Manor, "Political Regeneration in India" in A. Nandy and D.L.Sheth (eds.) *The Multiverse of Democracy: Essays in Honour of Rajni Kothari* (Sage, London, New Delhi, and Newbury Park, CA, 1994) pp. 230-41.

This leads us into exotic territory, but here is a summary of the situation in plain language, which provides a somewhat over-simplified understanding of his effort to develop a social base. (It is over-simplified in part because each of the categories listed below contain sub-groups.) What follows is a rough picture of the traditional caste hierarchy (which has begun to break down), plus the Scheduled Tribes and Muslims. The groups whose names are underlined below are those which Singh made special efforts to cultivate.

Brahmins (5.66% of total population)
Rajputs and other higher castes (7.24%)
Intermediate castes (1.11%)
'Other Backward Castes' (41.44%) -- [Singh sought to cultivate some of the groups in this rather artificial category.]
Scheduled Castes -- ex-untouchables or Dalits (14.05%)

Scheduled Tribes (21.62%)

Muslims (3.85%)²⁴

Digvijay Singh is a Rajput (and for readers unfamiliar with India, he is also a member of the state's large Hindu majority). The 'Other Backward Castes' (OBCs) is a highly fragmented category. He knew this and has reached out to some of them, while ignoring others. His *Dalit* initiative, which sought to cultivate the Scheduled Castes (see below), alienated the Scheduled Tribes to some extent, but he took forceful steps to reassure them. Muslims were so alienated from the BJP, which has preached hate against them, that they could be depended upon to lend Singh and the Congress Party strong support.

There are social tensions between higher- and lower-status elements of this diverse coalition – between high castes and the rest, but also among (and even within) groups on the lower rungs of the old hierarchy. He knew that, but he believed that he could do enough to prevent that from wrecking his coalition.

It should be stressed that he might not have sought such a diverse coalition. He might have relied on the backing of his own high caste (and their leverage over the lower orders) to win re-election. So this strategy was elective in character. But despite the risks that came with it, he was correct in thinking that it made more sense to do it this way. Most of the time, he stressed 'development' over caste-specific appeals -- which was also shrewd, since it offered something for everyone and minimised divisions within the coalition. This approach also had the virtue of making him seem an enlightened leader who sought social justice. That would be helpful, over both the short and long terms, in establishing him as a national figure of promise. But it also reflected his own genuine conviction that disadvantaged groups deserve better treatment from government.

²⁴ These figures are based on calculations made available by Christophe Jaffrelot.

III. His Strategy at the Outset

When he became Chief Minister, Digvijay Singh's most urgent priority was to secure his position atop both his party and the government apparatus within his state. To achieve this, he had to carve out a distinctive image for himself and to begin to cultivate an independent social base – while broadening and solidifying support for his party. He also had either to undercut or to develop accommodations with four potent rivals in the faction-ridden Congress Party in Madhya Pradesh.

Over time, this latter task became somewhat easier. His most formidable rival was killed in an accident. A second suffered a loss of credibility when he finished a poor fourth in a contest for a parliamentary seat. And it became apparent that the power base of a third would be included in a new state called Chhattisgarh that would be created by separating a sub-region off from Madhya Pradesh. But in his early years in power, he needed to undertake initiatives that would make him appear imaginative, formidable, and perhaps even indispensable. Hence his drive for development.

Singh managed to dominate the policy process throughout his time in power. His main rivals within the Congress Party were left outside the cabinet during his first term in office (1993-1998), and they helpfully focused their intrigues mainly on things other than policy questions. During his second term (1998-2003), they were for the most part marginalised.

The talent within his cabinet was rather limited. He appointed most of his ministerial colleagues not for their policy skills but to reassure the social groups which they represented, or to placate potential rivals (and in some cases, on orders from the national leaders of the Congress Party). Some of his ministers engaged in attempts to undermine his position by organising factional squabbles within the state-level party, and by reaching out to national Congress leaders, but he dealt adroitly with these problems.

Some other ministers proved truculent, and occasionally offered sharp public criticisms of his leadership. But again, his power and finesse sufficed to make these difficulties manageable. For example, a Deputy Chief Minister from a Scheduled Tribe background repeatedly urged that a person from that background (logically, herself) should have the top job. Singh's response was characteristically relaxed and good humoured – as when he held a party to celebrate her contribution to the government and entertained those present by saying that “she boxes my ears” from time to time. His disarming manner, and his firm grip on the leadership, prevented these problems from becoming serious.

With a few exceptions, most of his ministers concentrated on two non-policy matters: solidifying their personal networks of support (none of which

were formidable enough to threaten Singh) and self-enrichment. The Chief Minister largely permitted them to pursue these things since they were distractions from policy questions, about which he cared most. This led to two problems which Singh apparently regarded as a price that had to be paid. First, it gave ministers such immense power within their bailiwicks that some of his programmes for more open government were damaged. Second, it opened the way to serious corruption within the government. The state's ombudsman or *Lokayukta*, a respected retired jurist, referred to this government as "Ali Baba and the forty thieves".²⁵ But Singh knew that the people of his state had seen plenty of corruption from previous governments -- so this problem would not mark him out as particularly objectionable.²⁶ And it left him free to dominate the policy process.

He developed many of his ideas on policy matters from his own reading and experience before becoming Chief Minister, but he also drew on several other promising sources. Since the mid-1980s, India's national government had developed a number of new initiatives that stressed participation from below and partnerships between higher levels of government and ordinary people at the grassroots. Most state-level leaders paid mere lip service to these principles in order to access the funds from New Delhi that came with such programmes. Singh differed from most of them by taking these things very seriously, and on occasion, by carrying them further than the national programmes had intended. The most important of these was the effort to strengthen elected councils at lower levels (discussed in detail below). But the Madhya Pradesh government also made much of Joint Forest Management which sought to draw local residents into decisions about wooded areas and to make forest products and income from their sale available to them. It was the second state government in India to transfer control of government irrigation canals to farmers' organisations -- which here entailed the release of 1.5 million hectares.²⁷ It sought to promote more open approaches to watershed development, although that initiative has drawn mixed reviews.²⁸

²⁵ See also, for example, *Hindustan Times*, 3 June 1999.

²⁶ His view on this was corroborated in S. Kela, "Madhya Pradesh: Towards Elections: Disaffection and Co-option", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 July 2003.

²⁷ A.C. Shah, "Fading Shine of Golden Decade: The Establishment Strikes Back", typescript, 2003.

²⁸ That sector is technologically complex, and where technological or technocratic complexities exist, governments and bureaucrats within them are especially reluctant to share power with ordinary folk. See Manor, "User Committees: A Potentially Damaging New Wave of Decentralisation?", *European Journal of Development Research* (Spring 2004) pp. 192-213.

One study of the watershed scheme by a leading non-governmental organisation offered an ambiguous picture. Damage was done by funding bottlenecks at the district level. Large and medium farmers gained more from the scheme than did marginal farmers, although the latter also benefited. But the programme enabled the preferences of ordinary people at the grassroots to influence development outputs, and women's concerns were sometimes mainstreamed in the process. It also facilitated the emergence of new leaders among ordinary village folk, and enabled them to develop political skills that will have a lasting effect. The rural poor gained increased and critically important opportunities for wage employment, and women received equal pay to men, often for the first time. Remote areas that had previously received little public investment were reached by the programme. TARU, "The Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Mission in Madhya Pradesh: An Assessment", typescript, 2002.

Singh also drew heavily upon a small circle of serving and retired civil servants -- all of whom who read widely and some of whom consulted widely with intellectuals (Indian and foreign) and with civil society leaders. Singh also consulted extensively with civil society leaders -- especially with those from outside the state, and with intellectuals again mainly from outside. (Both civil society organisations and the intelligentsia of Madhya Pradesh were rather under-developed.) He has also invited leading intellectuals and civil society leaders from outside -- including some of the most distinguished figures in the country -- to join 'task forces' to recommend policy innovations in specific areas. Members of these 'task forces' report that he took these exercises very seriously and lent them solid political backing.²⁹

Finally, he held discussions with representatives of groups at the grassroots within the state. These encounters never yielded big ideas for new programmes, but they helped Singh to see how such programmes were (or were not) working and how adjustments on matters of detail might improve them. For example, he attended conferences of members of local councils or user committees, and moved from table to table to conduct extended dialogues with small groups. His manner in all such contacts was quiet, open, and immensely courteous -- and he was and is adept at giving people the impression that he shares their concerns. He certainly listened carefully to what they had to say. He was one of the most accessible state-level leaders in the recent history of India.

He clearly wished to be seen to be doing all of this. But he often took up modest insights that emerged from these encounters and sought to implement them. The result was an unusually elaborate set of policy initiatives which tended to conform to much of the agenda of development specialists who stress participation from below and the devolution of significant powers and resources onto groups of elected representatives at the grassroots.

His dominance of policy making raises an important comparative point about the institutional context and the importance of interest groups within the political and policy processes. In most pluralist democracies -- and certainly in Brazil -- lobbies, elites, factions, forums, etc. exert influence on political leaders as they decide what action to take. But in Madhya Pradesh, the apex of the state's political system and thus Singh himself were comparatively well insulated from such influences -- because most lobbies, etc., were poorly organised and/or had little access. He was thus freer than Cardoso in Brazil, and roughly as free as Museveni in Uganda, to make decisions independently and to take risks. Madhya Pradesh and India have -- like Brazil -- a pluralist democracy. They differ in this respect from Uganda. It may be a democracy,

For a more critical assessment see A. Baviskar, "Between Micro-Politics and Administrative Imperatives: Decentralization and the Watershed Mission in Madhya Pradesh, India", *European Journal of Development Research* (Spring 2004) pp. 26-40.

²⁹ Interviews with two of these people, New Delhi, 15 and 16 December 2003.

but it is not pluralist. But despite this, Singh's freedom for manoeuvre was more akin to that of Museveni.

The Chief Minister also faced some reluctance from certain senior bureaucrats about his policy initiatives. He suspected that many line ministries were insufficiently dynamic, and in some cases downright unable, to carry out policy innovations.

He dealt with this in two ways. First, he gathered together a small circle of mainly young civil servants who shared his eagerness for policy innovations that would (i) create opportunities for ordinary people at the grassroots to participate in decisions about policies that affected their well being, and (ii) in some cases, assist poor and socially excluded groups. Second, he created a number of “Rajiv Gandhi Missions” – that is, special government programmes in specific sectors to be pursued by formidable administrative instruments that could by-pass the stodgy line ministries that he distrusted. These instruments provided him with considerable influence over these programmes. By naming them after Rajiv Gandhi, the former Prime Minister who had been assassinated in 1991 (and whom Singh admired), he shrewdly paid obeisance to the Gandhi family. These Missions were modelled on five similar special Missions which Rajiv Gandhi has himself created at the national level when he was Prime Minister. He inserted those youngish civil servants from his inner circle as the heads of these missions. So throughout his time in office, Singh not only dominated the formulation of policies, but exercised substantial influence (though not control) over their implementation.

A curious paradox stands at the core of this story. Policy-making at the apex of the political system was kept tightly closed, but the policies that emerged did much to open up the political and policy processes to bottom-up influence from ordinary people at the grassroots. This is worth exploring in a little more detail.

The changes that occurred at lower levels need explaining. When Singh took power in 1993, ordinary people and their elected representatives on councils at lower levels had almost no influence over the implementation of policies. He tried to create mechanisms that would include them to some degree. This was not easy to achieve, but he had considerable success. That was apparent from the effectiveness and responsiveness of the elected councils that he empowered, and from the huge demand from deprived villages for schools under the Education Guarantee Scheme, a poverty programme discussed later in this chapter.

This attempt to open government up at lower levels was in one way rather curious. All state governments in India had long struggled to cope with demand overload from below. Their failure to do so adequately provides much of the explanation for the failure of a large majority of incumbent state governments to be re-elected in the period since 1980. And yet despite this,

Singh took the risk of catalysing still greater demand. He did so mainly because he correctly believed that existing demands were coming disproportionately from prosperous groups. By stimulating demands from a wider array of groups – including many that were not prosperous and often downright poor – he could broaden his own appeal and the base of his Congress Party.

But he could only do that safely if he had some means of responding to those fresh demands. The Missions that he created helped to achieve that, but only up to a point. The participatory mechanisms that he established at lower levels in the system were at least as important in enabling many of the demands from previously excluded groups (and some long-standing demands from prosperous groups that had gone unmet) to receive responses. This occurred because his government empowered councils at low levels to act -- swiftly and more often -- to provide responses. Thus, the speed and quantity of responses increased -- and so did the quality, if we measure 'quality' by the degree to which responses conform to popular preferences.³⁰

He went further in empowering elected councils at lower levels than nearly all other politicians not just in India but in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And as we shall see, he reinforced this by creating an army of para-professionals working in several sectors at the grassroots -- who were often accountable to some degree to local residents, either directly or through their elected representatives on local councils.

Singh's decision to keep the policy-making process closed at the apex of the system in order to achieve progressive outcomes stands in sharp contrast to what happened in Brazil. Recent research on Brazil³¹ shows that progressive outcomes there are more likely if high-level policy-making is opened up to social forces active at that level. This is true because the poor, and interests sympathetic to the poor, are strong enough at those levels to drive policies leftwards when the processes are opened up. That would not have occurred in Madhya Pradesh -- or in most other Indian states. The influence of prosperous groups would have greatly outweighed that of the poor. As Singh fully understood, if policy-making had been opened up in Madhya Pradesh, policies would have been driven rightwards. This indicates that politicians who wish to develop pro-poor policies need to analyse the balance of social forces at high levels in their political systems very carefully -- and that they will not always reach similar conclusions.

³⁰ This is discussed in a little more detail in J. Manor, *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization* (World Bank, Washington, 1999).

³¹ This emerged from discussions with Aaron Schneider of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Singh's New Politics and the Old Politics of Patronage and Bosses

We need to consider how Singh's basic approach to governing and development impinged on pre-existing power structures in Madhya Pradesh. Those structures varied somewhat from region to region in the state, so that the picture presented here is something of an oversimplification. But it is accurate enough to convey the essential message.

Digvijay Singh imposed his basic strategy on a power structure that was populated by political bosses operating at district and sub-district levels. Most of these bosses were members of his own Congress Party. Most of them based their power on two things. The first was their hold on elected offices or their close ties to people who held them, and their influence with key bureaucrats at district and sub-district levels. The second was their membership in prosperous, high status caste groups, although they could only remain influential if they delivered tangible benefits to other groups -- or at least to elites within them. Since these bosses formed an important part of his party's base, Singh could not afford to alienate them. His new politics thus overlaid but did not replace the old.

There was, however, considerable dissonance between the old politics of channelling patronage -- goods, services and funds -- through these bosses and the Chief Minister's new politics of opening the political and policy processes up to representatives of grassroots groups through elected councils at lower levels and other participatory mechanisms. Much of the patronage that formerly flowed mainly through the bosses now by-passed them and went directly to bodies -- elected councils and user committees -- at very low levels.

The bosses could of course get themselves and their clients elected to some of these bodies, and many did so. But there were so many new seats on these bodies, and so many of them were filled by genuine representatives of village dwellers, that it proved impossible for the bosses to control the new channels through which goods, services and funds were flowing. The bosses could also have sought to cultivate alliances with members of these bodies. And again, some of those with more imagination did so because it provided an opportunity to extend and strengthen their political bases. But most failed to do so, for two main reasons. This was difficult logistically, and many of the bosses were disinclined to become more accommodative than in the past, as they had to do to take advantage of this opportunity.

As a result, there was significant dissonance between Singh's new politics and the structures that it called into being on the one hand, and the old power structures on the other. How often did this 'dissonance' become so marked that it produced outright 'contradictions' between the new and the old? It is surprising how seldom this occurred. To understand why, we need to consider three things.

Part of the explanation for this can be found in the immense power that the Chief Minister wielded once he had achieved his pre-eminence at the apex of the system. He wielded it both within the state's political system and within the ruling party. The bosses were powerful figures, but they depended mightily upon their leverage within both the state government and the party for their survival. Therefore, they needed Singh more than he needed them. Indeed, the creation and empowerment of so many new bodies at low levels reduced his dependence upon them -- as he had intended.

Second, even where the bosses did not cultivate ties to the emerging power holders in the new bodies at lower levels -- and most did not -- many of those power holders still operated within or on cordial terms with the same ruling party to which the bosses mostly belonged. They were thus -- up to a point -- allies of the bosses at (and to a lesser extent, between) elections. Nor did Singh or his new programmes strip the bosses of all of their former influence. To have done that would have been politically unwise because the bosses retained enough informal influence to damage the Chief Minister and to undermine many of his new initiatives. Both Singh and political inertia ensured that the bosses continued to enjoy considerable powers and control over substantial resources passing down to lower levels through many government programmes.

The third part of the explanation lies in the character of most of the initiatives that Singh undertook. When the government provided schools on demand for villages that had never had them under the Education Guarantee Scheme, bosses and ruling party legislators (overlapping categories) could claim credit for this, even though they had little to do with it. They could also claim credit -- however unjustifiably -- when the government worked through the bureaucracy and elected local councils to combat the drought by constructing or repairing small tanks or other containers to capture and retain water (under the *Pani Roko* programme). This eased water shortages and provided poor people with employment in constructing these facilities. Insofar as the Health Guarantee Scheme provided new or improved services to villagers, they could again claim credit. Claiming credit was not as satisfying as their former domination of the processes that delivered goods and services, but it provided enough compensation to prevent the bosses from becoming seriously alienated.

A small number of Singh's initiatives did trigger alienation, however. Two were particularly important. It took some time for it to become apparent that the chairpersons of elected councils at the local and especially at the district levels were becoming so assertive that they posed threats to the bosses' influence in their bailiwicks. But by 1999, five years after the empowerment of the councils, a powerful chorus of complaints was emerging from the bosses, from legislators and from bureaucrats at and below the district level. These

were taken up by several of Singh's ministerial colleagues. The following year, the Chief Minister gave way and imposed ministerial control of district-level councils, the most powerful agencies in the decentralised system. And after 2002, Singh's decision to pursue the *Dalit* Agenda which offered significant benefits to ex-untouchables (discussed in detail below) also triggered strong opposition from the bosses. It threatened their popularity among non-*Dalits*, and it collided with their own prejudices against *Dalits*. On that issue, the Chief Minister remained unyielding. This did not destroy Singh's links to the bosses, and to the old politics which lived on alongside the new. But it generated serious dissension within the ruling party's ranks.

The 'Presentation' of His Pro-Poor Policies

Digvijay Singh plainly pursued pro-poor policies -- indeed, he attempted more in this vein than senior politicians in most other Indian states and other less developed countries. And at least in the case of the Education Guarantee Scheme (discussed below), he also achieved more in this vein than most others did. But despite this, there were few references to 'poverty' in his public statements. This oddity needs to be explained.

We need, in other words, to examine how he dealt with the 'presentation' of pro-poor policies -- an important element of his strategy. His reticence -- indeed, his near silence -- owed something to the tendency of his most recent predecessor as Congress Chief Minister to speak often about poverty, but to do rather little about it. It may even have owed something to the legacy of Indira Gandhi who in 1971 won an election landslide with a promise to 'abolish poverty' ('*garibi hatao*'), but who did little thereafter to follow up with action. This is not the sort of thing that Congress Party leaders dare say, or perhaps even think. But the record of his state-level predecessor had plainly left many voters feeling sceptical of promises to tackle poverty, so Singh may have been wise not to use the word too much.

After he had left office, he mused that perhaps he should have given it more emphasis.³² He had, after all, done much to address poverty. And since a huge proportion of the population of Madhya Pradesh considered themselves (usually correctly) to be poor, it might not have been a particularly divisive thing to do. He was, however, concerned that the non-poor might take fright from too much talk of 'poverty' -- and there were important non-poor interests in the social base that he was trying to build. So the key theme that he stressed was 'development', not poverty. There was something for everyone in 'development'. He (and his publicity machine, which was modest but effective) also spoke of people's empowerment through decentralisation. That gets a little closer to 'poverty', but it is still some distance away from it.

Making His Influence Penetrate Downward into Society

³² Interview with Digvijay Singh, New Delhi, 16 May 2004.

Digvijay Singh had, broadly speaking, three strategies available to make his influence penetrate downward into society. They were not mutually exclusive – any two or all three might be combined. They were:

- ◆ to develop ties to civil society organisations;
- ◆ to enhance the penetrative capacity of his Congress Party organisation; and
- ◆ to extend the downward reach of the formal institutions and agencies of state.

Singh depended almost entirely on the last of these options. To understand why, let us consider each of these potential strategies in turn.

Developing ties to civil society organisations: Since a liberal political order has prevailed across Madhya Pradesh for over half a century, civil society organisations³³ have been fairly free to form and develop. (There are sub-regional exceptions to this generalization – the main one being the northeast of the state, where a ‘feudal’ socio-economic order survives and renders politics illiberal.) But because governments were preoccupied with state-led development, they did little to encourage civil society. And because most of the state is so under-developed, civil society organisations have emerged more slowly and gained less strength there than in most Indian states. Civil society is, however, probably stronger there than in most African countries.

Until the late 1980s, civil society was divided between urban associations which tended to be rather weak, and still more fragile peoples’ organisations at the grassroots in rural pockets. Many urban organisations were uninterested in development, rights or even public affairs, and most of those which had an interest in the political and policy processes existed to promote the interests of limited slices of society. The latter consisted mainly of professional associations, unions for the small labour aristocracy in the formal sector, plus religious and (most importantly) caste associations.

But from the mid-1980s onward, some development- and rights-oriented civil society organisations gained strength in the main urban centres, and a small number forged links to (or formed) similar organisations at intermediate levels. They have also established connections for local-level peoples’ organisations in some (but not most) of the rural areas in this state.

The 1990s also witnessed the emergence of two organisations that acquired sufficient substance to qualify as social movements -- or something very close

³³ The term ‘civil society’, as used here, is defined as ‘an intermediate realm situated between the state and the household, populated by organised groups or associations which are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relation to the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, values or identities’.

to this. The first of these, the *Ekta Parishad*, is a Gandhian organisation which works among disadvantaged groups and presses the government for action to deal with injustices, especially on land issues. It was often very critical of Singh and his government, but he eventually developed an understanding with it. The second, the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, has sought to resist the building of the Narmada complex of dams, and to represent the large numbers of overwhelmingly poor people who have been or will be displaced by it. This organisation has had considerable international support and media exposure. That persuaded the World Bank to withdraw funding for the project, but India's central government and several state governments involved in it (including that of Madhya Pradesh) have remained committed to it and are funding it themselves.

Digvijay Singh was the first Chief Minister of this state to reach out to civil society organisations to any meaningful extent. In his first term (1993-1998), he sought advice on policy issues from enlightened, development-oriented civic groups, and involved a small number of them as partners in development programmes. He also sought to develop an understanding with the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, through dialogue.

One early encounter with members of that organisation offers an insight into both his early attempts to develop accommodations with elements of civil society, and his style – throughout his time in power -- of personal engagement. A sizeable body of demonstrators from the *Andolan* once gathered outside his official residence. Instead of ignoring them – which would have been the response of most Chief Ministers – he invited them in. When it became apparent that there were too many of them to take seats even in his large reception room, he suggested that he and they sit together on the front steps and talk – and then he himself sat on one of the lower steps. He spoke to them – as he spoke to everyone – in a relaxed and thoroughly courteous manner, as if they were equals. This kind of behaviour is highly unusual in Indian politics, and many of those who encountered it on that and numerous other occasions were substantially disarmed by it.

Despite this, however, he found the *Andolan* unwilling to make any significant compromise. As he later put it, “they insisted on ‘no dam’, and it was beyond my power to deliver that”. What he could offer was money to enable displaced people to purchase new lands – his only option, since the state did not possess enough suitable and conveniently located land for redistribution among them. He also promised to encourage governments in neighbouring states to follow suit.³⁴ Their response was to sustain non-violent but quite energetic protests.

This persuaded some of Singh's cabinet colleagues that he had been naïve to assume that civil society organisations would make useful partners, and they

³⁴ Interview with Digvijay Singh, New Delhi, 16 May 2004.

put this view forcefully to him in private on several occasions. The point was reinforced by an adversarial encounter that he had with another organisation that was campaigning for the rights of poor fisherfolk. His growing impatience with such associations was evident on that occasion. He adopted a tough line more quickly, even though the group in question had a strong case. Gradually, his coolness towards civil society was extended -- unnecessarily and unwisely - - to many other organisations, which were not at all confrontational. The main exception was the Gandhian *Ekta Parishad*, which had a large following and with which he developed an understanding in 2000. Task forces composed of equal numbers of representatives from the government and the *Parishad* were set up which presided over the distribution of 383,000 hectares of surplus land to 180,000 *Dalit* tribal families, with a further 678,000 hectares identified for distribution. They also arranged for 550,000 legal cases against 'tribals' to be dropped, and for lands seized by landlords from 10,348 'tribal' families to be restored.³⁵ This led to an endorsement for Singh by the *Parishad* during the 2003 election campaign.³⁶

But this was very much an exceptional case. The Chief Minister dealt very differently with most other civil society organisations. He sought to undermine those that could cost him political support (and a small number that did not do so, but which were in some way inconvenient), and at most, offered others rather limited roles as implementers of government programmes.³⁷

As we note elsewhere, Singh's government encouraged the formation of self help groups at the local level, 250,000 of which existed by 2003 with a membership in excess of two million. This was an enlightened policy, and these groups were treated in a relatively liberal manner. The ruling party did not attempt to control them for partisan purposes as was common in some other Indian states. But it would be wrong to see these groups as civil society organisations since they did not enjoy significant autonomy from the government.

Building a penetrative party organisation: The most obvious approach to making his influence penetrate downward would have been to strengthen the Congress Party's organisation. He was no doubt aware of this option. It had been the key to the re-election of ruling parties in the states of West Bengal since 1977, and Andhra Pradesh in 1999. And the Congress itself had once had reasonably strong organisations in most Indian states. But from 1969 onwards, Indira Gandhi abandoned intra-party democracy, radically centralised power within it, systematically inspired factional conflict in all state-level party units, and ruthlessly cut down any state-level leader who appeared to gain significant strength. The legacy of those practices lives on in a somewhat milder form --

³⁵ Ekta Parishad, "Ekta Parishad -- Madhya Pradesh Land Rights Campaign" typescript, 2002.

³⁶ *The Hindu*, 15 September 2003.

³⁷ These comments are based on numerous interviews with leaders of several civil society organisations in Bhopal, December 2003 and May 2004.

and unflinching loyalty to Mrs. Gandhi's Italian-born daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi, has been demanded of Congress Chief Ministers since she assumed the party leadership in the late 1990s.

Singh had adroitly managed to overcome many once formidable rivals within the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, but if he sought to strengthen its organisation, he would run two risks. First, he would open up space for factional infighting (which was lurking under the surface) to break out. Second, he might have begun to look even more powerful than he already was, and that might have invited punitive intervention from Sonia Gandhi. So he systematically and wisely avoided party building – a sad, painful necessity.

Extending the downward reach of the formal institutions and agencies of state: This left Singh with an intimidating list of political disabilities: tight fiscal constraints, minimal prospects of growth, remoteness from civil society, a bar against organisation building – and all of this amid serious underdevelopment. How was he to achieve anything of substance in easing poverty? Or for that matter, how was he to remain popular, and get himself re-elected for a second time in late 2003 in a country where even one re-election victory is a rarity?

He had just one remaining option – to implement imaginative programmes through formal state institutions and agencies. It is remarkable that, in an era in which the state was supposed to be shrinking (and in which the Madhya Pradesh government was indeed cautiously downsizing³⁸) major progress should have been made under this Chief Minister in extending the downward reach of the state. But that is what happened. The means that he has employed are discussed in detail in the sections below.

During his first term in power (1993-1998) he concentrated on two main approaches which – taken together – were intended to improve the lives of ordinary people at the grassroots. First, he sought to enhance the capacity of state agencies to deliver goods and services downward. Second and more crucially, he sought to give villagers in this predominantly rural state new opportunities to exercise some influence from below over the political and policy processes.

To achieve the first goal, he constituted special administrative instruments or “Missions” that would partly by-pass the somewhat sclerotic ministries of state, while at the same time they partly drew upon and energised them. These were established to tackle illiteracy and universal primary education, watershed development, diarrhoeal diseases, iodine disorders, fisheries and rural industries. He gave control of these instruments to his most effective and

³⁸ A fiscal stabilisation programme, funded by the Asian Development Bank, partly entailed a reduction in the number of ‘Class IV’ government employees – that is, those performing largely menial, unskilled tasks.

enthusiastic civil servants, many of whom were younger than those who headed state government ministries. He then worked closely and constantly with these appointees, to ensure that his political backing cleared roadblocks from their path.

Some of the “Missions” also sought to promote his second aim by establishing committees of users or stakeholders at the local level which were – in contrast to many other parts of the less developed world -- genuinely intended to allow their preferences to shape the implementation of development policies.³⁹ But as the centrepiece of his effort to achieve that second goal, he generously empowered and funded elected councils at district, sub-district and local levels. He provided them with far more powers and resources than leaders in most other Indian states – and in most other less developed countries – have done. His aim was (as we see in greater detail below) to draw ordinary people into newly opened formal state institutions -- so that he was not just extending the downward reach of top-down administrative institutions, but prying them open at lower levels by encouraging popular engagement with them.

To what extent can these initiatives be described as 'pro-poor'? Some of his “Missions”, or at least important elements of them, had clear pro-poor content. A prime example was a major literacy drive which resulted in increasing the number of literates on a scale seldom seen in India or other less developed countries. This in turn gave rise to his most important and unambiguously pro-poor initiative, the Education Guarantee Scheme (discussed below). But what about his experiment with democratic decentralisation? This was important enough during his time in power to warrant a detailed discussion.

Democratic Decentralisation under Digvijay Singh

In 1993, two amendments to the Indian constitution came into force which required all state governments to create elected councils at three levels below the state level -- the large district level, the sub-district level, and the village level (and in urban centres as well). At its adoption in 1950, the constitution made decentralised government a "state subject" -- that is, state governments make the key decisions about this sector. The amendment therefore could not require state governments to empower and fund these councils generously. But it clearly urged and intended them to do so. Very few state governments complied with this. Ministers and state legislators -- like their counterparts in every other country -- opposed the loss of jealously guarded powers that this entailed.

³⁹ Unlike most leaders in other Indian states and less developed countries, Singh sought to give elected members of local councils substantial influence with these committees. For a discussion of the dangers posed by such committees in many places -- but not in Madhya Pradesh under Singh -- see J. Manor, "User Committees...."

Singh's was one of only a small handful of state governments to devolve very substantial powers and funds onto these councils or *panchayats*.⁴⁰ As a result, Madhya Pradesh created one of the six most successful experiments with democratic decentralisation in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The others can be found in three other Indian states and in Bolivia and the Philippines.⁴¹ This happened in 1994 because the Chief Minister, who dominated the policy process, was prepared to impose this change upon reluctant politicians in his own party. The explanation for this display of political will has several strands. He was simultaneously acting on certain convictions, and responding to several different incentives.

First, he had concluded even before taking office that development programmes yielded better results when ordinary people had some voice in decisions about them than when they did not. This conviction appears to have solidified further in his mind within his first two or so years in power. Democratic decentralisation was attractive in pragmatic terms – in two senses. Singh reckoned that greater participation from below would yield both improved developmental outcomes and political payoffs. As it turned out, he was correct in these calculations. The legitimacy and popularity of his government were both enhanced, and his party's social base was broadened. In 1998, these things helped him to become the only Congress Chief Minister in India since 1980 to be re-elected.

Second, empowering *panchayats* would earn him appreciation at the national level within his party. The then Congress Prime Minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao (who held office between 1991 and 1996) was a known enthusiast for democratic decentralisation. And since the initial proposal to bolster *panchayats* had come from the late Rajiv Gandhi, this initiative would also please his (then secluded) widow Sonia, who had her suspicions of Prime Minister Rao.

Finally, democratic decentralisation had been a major theme of Mahatma Gandhi. So by seizing on this, he was helping to return the Congress to its idealistic roots. This was a matter of conviction for Singh -- he found this idea personally inspiring. But it also had practical utility. It gave him an argument that would enhance his national image as a leader with the imagination to devise constructive policies which were at once innovative and a revival of the Gandhian approach. That also made his initiative harder for fellow Congress politicians in his state to oppose.

The empowerment of *panchayats* was attended by plenty of ambiguities, but it enhanced the transparency, accountability and responsiveness of government

⁴⁰ J. Manor, "Local Governance" in N.G. Jayal and P.B. Mehta (eds.) *The Oxford Companion to Indian Politics* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, forthcoming).

⁴¹ For a more detailed discussion, see J. Manor "Democratic Decentralisation in Two Indian States: Past and Present", *Indian Journal of Political Science* (March 2002) pp. 51-72.

for rural dwellers. It meant that the 'government' (in this case, official institutions of self-government) had a meaningful presence in every village during the rainy season when a huge number of villages were cut off for a long period from the outside world.⁴² It also promoted political renewal by giving opportunities to a massive number of people who aspired to play roles in politics. And crucially, it gave ordinary village folk the chance to influence decisions about development which impinged upon their vital interests.

The new system also enhanced the government's capacity to make a success of development programmes of benefit to villagers in general (poor and non-poor). This was crucial to, for example, the impressive response to the most dangerous emergency to arise in rural areas in his time in power -- the prolonged drought in his second term. Unusually by international standards⁴³ - democratic decentralisation here made it possible to mobilize massive resources from local communities, partly in the form of voluntary labour, to construct small tanks to capture rainwater in what was known as the '*Pani Roko*' campaign. Singh estimated that of the Rs.4.15 trillion (US\$88.3 million) used to cope with the drought in 2001, Rs.1 trillion (US\$21 million) worth of contributions came from local communities.⁴⁴ Even if this is an over-estimate (and there is no direct evidence to indicate that it was), the achievement was remarkable. The success of the '*Pani Roko*' campaign was evident at the state election in late 2003, when the opposition BJP gave up criticising Singh's government for poor performance in the water sector because opinion surveys showed that voters thought highly of the government's work in this sphere.⁴⁵

In an era of tight fiscal constraints, democratic decentralisation had the virtue of being quite inexpensive. It mainly entailed the transfer of control over funds from higher to lower levels, although there were some additional costs. The principal threat to the new system was not a shortage of resources but the opposition of legislators and ministers who resented the loss of power to elected bodies at lower levels. Singh's dominance of policymaking sufficed to sustain the system until 2000, but then (as we see just below) he gave ground to the opponents of decentralisation. That was the sole occasion during his time in power when he gave way to pressure on a major policy issue.

Singh's enthusiasm for bottom-up participation was evident on three other fronts. First, he introduced numerous single-sector 'user committees' in the education, water, forestry, etc. sectors, and (in contrast to many politicians elsewhere in Indian and other less developed countries) he usually gave elected members of multi-purpose councils or *panchayats* at lower levels significant influence over them. He calls this a policy of "convergence". Second, he encouraged the formation of self help groups among ordinary -- and especially

⁴² This is a point which Digvijay Singh stresses, and which academic studies of decentralisation have ignored. Interview, Digvijay Singh, New Delhi, 16 May 2004.

⁴³ Manor, *The Political Economy*....

⁴⁴ Interview with Digvijay Singh, *Frontline*, 17-30 August 2002.

⁴⁵ Manor, "The Congress Defeat in Madhya Pradesh", *Seminar* (February, 2004).

poor -- people in the villages, usually as part of micro-credit programmes.⁴⁶ By 2003, 250,000 of these existed -- 190,000 of which were for women -- with a membership of around 2 million. Finally, he furthered decentralisation by sending large numbers of para-professionals to work in education, health, agricultural extension, and engineering -- over whom (again) elected councillors at lower levels usually had some influence. This became one of his major themes, and is discussed in more detail below.

We saw above that Singh's initial display of 'political will' arose from a mixture of idealism, a genuine belief in the developmental efficacy of what he was doing, and hard-headed practical political calculations. Those three elements were present in his later thinking as he made tactical adjustments in his programmes. In that first instance, the three were not in conflict with one another. On one crucial occasion later, tension developed between the first and third of these. We need to identify which of them he stressed at that point.

By 2000, he was facing strong complaints from legislators and ministers that the heads of district councils had become too powerful. The latter had provided him with critically important support and political intelligence from below at the 1998 election. But two years later, Singh faced such intense pressure from legislators and ministers that he established 'district governments' which those people could dominate. He thus substantially disempowered elected district councils. This was presented as a step forward for decentralisation, but in reality, it was the opposite. It deprived him of the support and the political intelligence previously provided by the heads of those councils -- and that contributed mightily to his election defeat in late 2003.⁴⁷ On that occasion, his idealism gave way to hard-headed political calculations (which turned out to be misplaced and damaging).

Let us now return to the original point of this discussion. What can we say about the implications for poor people of democratic decentralisation here? It is clear from the literature that in many countries, it has not helped to reduce poverty.⁴⁸ In decentralised systems, elites often capture most of the resources devolved to lower levels, and that is compounded by other problems. However, in one crucial respect -- which is relevant in the case of Madhya

⁴⁶ Activists in reliable non-governmental organisations have stated that government micro-credit programmes often suffered from delay, red tape and malfeasance by low-level government employees. But these initiatives still yielded significant benefits for ordinary villagers, much of the time. Interview with Samarthan activists, Sehore District, 7 April 2002.

⁴⁷ This is discussed more fully in Manor, *The Congress Defeat...* In fairness, it should be noted that Digvijay Singh does not accept that District Councils were seriously disempowered. He argues that the main thing that council chairpersons lost was their control of the transfer of government employees within their districts. Interview, New Delhi, 5 May 2004.

⁴⁸ See for example, J. Manor, *The Political Economy...*, pp. 105-07; and R.C. Crook and A.S. Sverrisson, "Decentralisation and Poverty Alleviation in Developing Countries: A Comparative Analysis or, Is West Bengal Unique?", IDS Working Paper No. 130 (Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, 2001).

Pradesh, although not to most cases in less developed countries -- the literature (including one study by this writer) is a little too pessimistic.

When a large proportion of the population of a region or country is poor -- as is true in this state -- many of the considerable benefits of democratic decentralisation⁴⁹ tend to flow to poor people. This happens when decentralised bodies improve things for people in general (as they did here) -- because so many of those people are poor. It also happens because the numerical strength of the poor (i) tends to force local elites to compete for their support and (ii) thus tends to enable them to exercise considerable influence. Some of that happened in Madhya Pradesh. And his most successful poverty initiative, the Education Guarantee Scheme, was intimately linked to elected councils in predominantly poor villages. So Singh's emphasis on decentralisation yielded some benefits for the poor.

Despite this, however, he recognised that to reach poor people more fully, he also had to undertake programmes explicitly aimed at them. What were these?

IV. Pro-Poor Initiatives

Three main initiatives, which had clear pro-poor intent and content, need to be considered. They are as follows.

- The Education Guarantee Scheme
- The Health Guarantee Scheme
- The *Dalit* Agenda (a multi-faceted initiative for the Scheduled Castes or ex-untouchables)

We need to examine each of these in turn, and then to consider two other topics -- the government's widespread use of para-professionals to reach poor people, and the pursuit of pro-poor growth.

The Education Guarantee Scheme

This programme, which began in 1997, was preceded by and grew out of a major literacy campaign which Singh's government mounted in order to tackle one of the most severe problems affecting poor people. That campaign was pushed hard from the top by the Chief Minister. Members of elected councils at lower levels were consulted on the best way to operationalise it, and this yielded useful ideas and further pressure from them for results.⁵⁰ It mobilized a huge number of literates at the grassroots to teach others to read, and awarded them a 'bounty' for each person successfully taught -- a not-very-expensive

⁴⁹ Manor, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Interview with Amita Sharma, the civil servant who oversaw both the literacy drive and the Education Guarantee Scheme, Bhopal, 4 December 2003.

way to accomplish this. This helped to make it practicable since it meant that interests that might have preferred that funds be allocated elsewhere scarcely objected – and in any case funds from the World Bank's DPEP programme covered much of the cost. (As we shall see, Singh's government specialised in 'not-very-expensive' methods of making a developmental impact at the grassroots – which is useful in an era of tight fiscal constraints.)

This (together with the Education Guarantee Scheme after 1997) led to a spectacular increase in the official literacy rate between the censuses of 1991 and 2001 – of 22% among females, and 20% overall. Comparable gains have been achieved in only one other Indian state over recent decades. The figures appear to be somewhat inflated, but not excessively so.⁵¹ The literacy campaign had obvious pro-poor content because most illiterates were poor. It was immensely popular, and burnished Singh's image on the national scene as an enlightened and effective leader.

During the literacy drive, it had become apparent to Singh and two of the bright civil servants who worked closely with him that one reason for the state's low literacy was that thousands of remote villages did not possess primary schools. (It may seem surprising, but this ghastly fact has not fully registered with previous Chief Ministers.) Students had to walk long distances to reach the nearest school – and many did not do so. This led those two civil servants to ponder how schools might be provided to those villages.

They eventually hit upon an idea that formed the basis for the Education Guarantee Scheme. Any village with 40 children (25 in 'tribal' hamlets) without a nearby school would be given the right to demand one, and to hire a literate person (usually from within the village) to teach local students during the first five years of school.⁵² These new teachers were given three months of training and they were at first paid much less than teachers in conventional government schools. Later, their remuneration was increased substantially -- partly in response to demands by them, but mainly as a result of their positive performance in their new tasks.

This programme was an example of the government stimulating demand from below, even though demand overload was already a serious problem. It was nevertheless undertaken because Singh believed that insufficient demand had arisen from the state's poorest villages, and because he was (rightly) confident that the government would be able to respond adequately.

The scale of the demand was remarkable, and it surprised the architects of the scheme and Singh himself. Before several southeastern districts of the state were hived off into the new state of Chhattisgarh, 26,000 villages demanded

⁵¹ This comment is based on a detailed assessment of the methods used to estimate the rise in literacy, in discussions with two education specialists, Bhopal, 4 and 7 December 2004.

⁵² Interview with Digvijay Singh, *The Hindu*, 11 July 2003.

and got new schools where none had existed before. 21,000 of these were in districts that remained in Madhya Pradesh. After the bifurcation, the state added still more schools, bringing the total in late 2003 to 26,571. Fully 1,233,000 students were enrolled in them.⁵³ Of these, 90% were drawn from poorer groups -- the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs), Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Among these, the Scheduled Tribes -- who are among the state's poorest residents -- were the largest single group.⁵⁴

The state government disbursed the funds for this programme, but its day-to-day management was placed in the hands of elected village councils. This was crucial. Since the new teachers were accountable to the councils, and since local residents were quick to inform councillors of slack performance by teachers, absenteeism among them (a severe problem in other schools right across north India) was very low. Absenteeism also declined because the teachers in these schools lived locally -- they did not commute in from urban centres, as many teachers in conventional village schools did. During the rainy season, which lasts many weeks, those commuting teachers find it impossible to reach a huge number of villages where their schools are located, because roads are impassable. The new schools, like the village *panchayats*, were intended by Singh -- especially but not only during the rainy season -- to show villagers that a shift had occurred from *rajniti* (governance by the state) to *lokniti* (governance by the newly empowered people, and 'owned' by them). Or to put it slightly differently -- he wanted them to see that at the local level, the 'government' now consisted of the people themselves.⁵⁵

Who opposed the Education Guarantee Scheme? The Chief Minister himself says "no one",⁵⁶ and he is almost entirely correct. Legislators and ministers welcomed it because they could claim credit for the new schools, even though they had little to do with founding them. Interests who did not benefit offered little objection, because few funds were diverted to the programme which they might otherwise have captured. Nor did higher castes in rural areas oppose it, for two reasons. Many of them could pay the fees of private schools for their children and did so. That left them unconcerned with what was happening in the public sector. Many others who sent their children to conventional government schools were pleased because the programme

⁵³ Interview with Amita Sharma, the civil servant who headed the Education Guarantee Scheme, Bhopal, 4 December 2003.

⁵⁴ Interview with Amita Sharma, Bhopal, 4 December 2003; and R. Gopalakrishnan and A. Sharma, "Education Guarantee Scheme in Madhya Pradesh: Innovative Step to Universalise Education", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 September 1998. See also, A. Sharma and R. Gopalakrishnan "MP's EGS: What Does It Claim?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 March 1999.

⁵⁵ Interview with Digvijay Singh, New Delhi, 16 May 2004. For more evidence on the Scheme, see R. Srivastava, *Evaluation of Community Based Primary Schooling Initiatives in Madhya Pradesh: Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative Schools -- Bilaspur and Dhar* (Centre for Education Research and Development, New Delhi, 1998); S. Singh, K.S. Sridhar and S. Bhargava, *External Evaluation of DPEP-I States: Report on Madhya Pradesh* (Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow, 2002); and V. Vyasulu, "MP's EGS: What are the Issues?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 June 2000.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*.

meant that low caste or 'tribal' children who had previously (to their dismay) trekked long distances to sit beside their children now had schools of their own. The only group that felt unhappy with the new schools and teachers were the teachers in pre-existing government schools -- and they were neither sufficiently discontented (their lives changed little) nor powerful enough to make much impact.

Some others were understandably anxious about the quality of the education provided in the new schools. One response is to argue that schools of indifferent quality are an improvement on no schools at all. But the government did not content itself with this. It took steps to ensure as much quality as possible in the new schools. It injected considerable rigour and substance into the three-month training course provided to teachers in them, and then instituted a further nine-month correspondence course based on the Diploma of Education syllabus, through which roughly 21,000 passed over a two-year period. Once the scheme had been shown to be a success, the European Union and the World Bank agreed to provide funds for new school buildings and for the state government's efforts to ensure quality.

Fresh legislation -- which is harder to rescind than executive action -- was then passed requiring regular assessments of the quality of all types of schools in every constituency in the state to be conducted and placed before the legislature every six months. The aim of this was to embarrass legislators whose constituencies yielded low ratings into committing themselves to take action to improve matters. (The tactic worked -- for example, ministers whose constituencies showed poor results were quietly laughed at by their colleagues when reports were presented at cabinet meetings, and corrective action swiftly ensued.⁵⁷)

At one point, when reports indicated that students' marks had declined during the previous year, the Chief Minister asked why. He was told that it was because they had taken tougher action against cheating. This posed a test of his own commitment to quality because a state election was approaching, and declining marks were a sensitive political issue. But he ordered that the tough approach be maintained -- in the interests of quality. The government then decided to hire not one but two teachers for each new school, one of which had to be a woman -- partly to attract more female pupils, and partly to ease the burden on solo teachers.⁵⁸

These efforts had an impact. Comparisons of pass rates in examinations for fifth-year students in conventional schools and the new EGS schools tell their own story.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

<u>Year</u>	<u>Conventional schools</u>	<u>EGS schools</u>
2001-02	68.29%	72.38%
2002-03	71.50	72.60

This owed something to lower rates of teachers' absenteeism in EGS schools and lower drop-out rates among students in them, but other efforts to address quality also had an impact. We must also remember that students in EGS schools, unlike their counterparts in the other schools, were predominantly first generation learners.⁵⁹

This pro-poor programme was a patent success, despite inevitable ambiguities in its implementation in specific localities.⁶⁰ The national government (headed by a coalition hostile to Singh's Congress Party) began considering ways of replicating it in other states -- the ultimate compliment.

It is worth reconsidering some of the numbers noted above, since they tell us something important, both about underdevelopment in the state and about the impact of this Scheme. There were roughly 52,000 villages in undivided Madhya Pradesh, and this Scheme brought new schools to 26,000 of these before the state was bifurcated – and still more thereafter. This implies first that over half of the villages lacked schools, and second that the Education Guarantee Scheme provided them. These are both extraordinary numbers which indicate both how serious the neglect of rural development had been before Singh, and how much was achieved under him.

We also learn three other important things from all of this. First, although the grassroots suffered from severe underdevelopment, the state's pre-existing institutional structures were reasonably well developed. They possessed the capacity (i) to transmit the information downward to remote villages that they had the right to demand schools and (ii) to transmit demands for schools upward to relevant authorities. Second, over half a century, the democratic process had inspired a sufficient political awakening even among people from severely deprived social groups living in exceedingly poor villages to ensure that the demand for schools both existed and would be voiced. There was nothing half-hearted about the response to the Scheme – it was patently massive. Third, once that demand emerged, the constructive potential of India's state institutions became fully apparent. The Education Guarantee Scheme reoriented existing administrative institutions so that they responded to this democratic demand, and supplemented the efforts of those institutions by

⁵⁹ Communication from Amita Sharma to Tina Mathur, 21 November 2003.

⁶⁰ Interviews in 2002 and 2003 in the state with numerous well-informed observers indicated that while some bureaucrats in the education department at district and sub-district levels were enthusiastic and supportive of the Education Guarantee Scheme, others remained unimpressed and truculent. There were numerous instances of chairpersons of village councils abusing their powers, of *gram sabhas* (village-level mass meetings) not being told of their decision-making powers over schools and of not being permitted to make decisions as was intended, of poor performance in the construction of school buildings, etc. But the overall record of the Scheme was substantially positive.

incorporating new ones -- in the shape of elected local councils -- into the process.

The failure in the years before Digvijay Singh took power to provide schools to half of the state's villages indicates the failure of both the administrative structures and the democratic process to perform adequately. But the achievements of this Scheme demonstrate the immense promise of both.

The Health Guarantee Scheme

The gains from the EGS inspired Singh to seek to develop a similar initiative in the health sector. He had much less success here. The initiative started late. It is harder to make headway in the health sector – partly because it is more complex, and partly because it met with more resistance both from health ministry officials and from health professionals. It also cost a good deal of money, and it suffered from a refusal by one major donor to support it in the initial stages. This left the government dependent upon funds from other development agencies with distinctly limited resources.

Nonetheless, the Scheme is worth outlining. The main thrust was to provide training to two further sets of para-professionals. These are 'barefoot doctors' who are given very basic schooling in preventive but not curative techniques, and traditional birth attendants who may be able to lower the state's very high rates of maternal mortality. The aim was to train many thousands of people in both categories. It was hoped that one traditional birth attendant would be available for each of the state's 52,000 villages, many of which had little or no access to such personnel previously.

As a result of inadequate funding, progress was slow. The Chief Minister frankly admitted that its achievements -- with respect to infant and maternal mortality, for example -- failed to match those in education. But he pointed, with some justice, to the decline in population growth rates in Madhya Pradesh -- which were not matched in other under-developed states. He argued that these were partly explained by the increases in female literacy that had been achieved and by the empowerment of women through *panchayats*.⁶¹ It was eminently practicable in political terms since legislators and ministers could claim credit for it. But for the most part, it remains a disappointment.

The Dalit Agenda

As he considered the array of numerically powerful social groups across the state, Digvijay Singh had good reason to be especially concerned about the *Dalits* or Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchables). They constituted roughly 14% of the total population. This may appear to be a rather modest number, but

⁶¹ Interview with Digvijay Singh, *Frontline*, 17-30 August 2002.

their importance to Congress was greater than that figure suggests because they had long formed a reliable part of the Congress electoral base in nearly all Indian states. The Chief Minister had three reasons to be anxious about *Dalit* support, however.

First, *Dalits* in Madhya Pradesh had – especially in recent times – been less inclined than their counterparts in other states to vote for the Congress Party. It was not entirely clear why this is true, but there is no doubting that it was true. Clearly, a special effort was needed to attract greater support from them.

Second, no formidable *Dalit* leader had emerged within the Congress Party in the state to appeal to this bloc of voters. In most other states, the Congress had one or more such leaders who could rally *Dalits*, but not here. Singh could take some comfort from the absence of such leaders in other parties in the state as well. But it still left him with an acute problem, since it was his party that was supposed to have particular appeal to these people. The problem carried one further implication: any initiative to attract *Dalit* support would have to be spearheaded by a non-*Dalit* leader. In this case, that meant Singh himself – and he came from the *Rajput* caste which had long been part of the *Dalits*' problem.

Third, the relatively weak appeal of the Congress Party to *Dalits* in Madhya Pradesh had been further undermined in recent years by the efforts of an avowedly *Dalit* party to woo this group away. The party in question was the Bahujan Samaj Party that had a solid base in India's largest state which bordered Madhya Pradesh to the north – Uttar Pradesh. That party had made only limited inroads, mainly in one sub-region, bordering Uttar Pradesh. But it posed a potentially grave threat to what should have been a core element of the social base of Congress. If Singh ignored *Dalits*, the threat might cost him enough seats at a state election to deny him a majority if the outcome was close, and he expected the 2003 election to be close. So again, something had to be done to reach out to *Dalits*.

Two other considerations impelled the Chief Minister to offer *Dalits* tangible reasons to back him. First, he had increasingly become persuaded that social exclusion and injustice had to be tackled more vigorously. This idea was of course closely bound up with another – that it would enhance his long-term reputation as a progressive if he could be seen to be doing this. But that second notion does not imply that his interest in addressing injustice was less than genuine.

Singh saw that by reaching out to *Dalits*, he would be operating squarely within the Gandhian tradition. For Mahatma Gandhi, the struggle against untouchability had been a central concern. An overture to *Dalits* would – like support for *panchayats* (another of Gandhi's passions) – help to draw the Congress back to its Gandhian roots. For the Chief Minister, this idea had great appeal. He was rightly seen as a very 'modern' leader, inasmuch he

could operate elegantly and with ease in the westernised idiom, and in English. But by stressing Gandhian themes he could broaden and deepen his personal appeal in two ways. He would demonstrate (a) that he could operate in the Gandhian idiom as well, and (b) that it made good sense for a Congress leader to incorporate Gandhian elements into a ‘modern’ approach to politics. He rightly believed that this approach held immense promise for the rebuilding of the Congress base not just in his state, but in India generally. Few state-level leaders of the party had ideas of such great potential for it. (This was, as we shall see, one reason why Singh was perceived by some other Congress leaders – possibly including Sonia Gandhi – as a dangerous rival. It was a perception or misperception that would cost him dearly at the 2003 state election.)

As a result of all of this, Singh undertook a strenuous effort to improve the lives of *Dalits* than we have seen from any other leader in India – at either the state or national levels. Even before his main initiative in this vein got underway, the state government had taken one important action that indicated its sympathy for *Dalits*. A national law provides state governments with draconian powers to curb atrocities against *Dalits*. They can, for example, imprison persons indefinitely merely on the basis of allegations that they had taken abusive actions against *Dalits*. In most states, the authorities make little use of these powers. But in Madhya Pradesh throughout Singh’s time, this law had been very aggressively enforced – more aggressively than in almost anywhere. As a consequence, on a visit to rural areas in two parts of the state in early 2001, one of us discovered that non-*Dalits* from the most formidable sections of society were visibly frightened that they might fall foul of this law. *Dalits* with whom he met at some length, were plainly grateful for the restraint that resulted. This early policy, which was the Chief Minister’s doing, prefigured what then followed.

In late 2000, Singh organised a two-day conference in the state capital of *Dalit* intellectuals from all over India to discuss the problems which the group faced, and potential solutions to them. The conference was a result of long discussions that the Chief Minister had held with a small circle of *Dalit* intellectuals mainly in Delhi. Some were Congress Party loyalists, and others were politically independent. It is worth noting that none of the intellectuals with whom he held these talks, and very few of those who attended the conference in 2000, were from Madhya Pradesh.⁶² To say this is not to criticise Singh. There were within the state few *Dalit* leaders, intellectuals or civil society organisations of any standing. He had no option but to look further afield.

This inevitably meant that any initiative for *Dalits* would not be home-grown and would have to be implemented mainly through a top-down process, with very little bottom-up pressure from *Dalits* at the grassroots to reinforce it. Singh – as much as any leader in India -- was aware of the importance of such

⁶² Interview with one of the intellectuals involved at both stages, New Delhi, 13 December 2003.

reinforcement, and of the risks involved in proceeding without it. But he thought that a message needed to be sent – both to *Dalits* in Madhya Pradesh and to people across the country – that he and his Congress Party were prepared to go to great lengths to assist *Dalits*. As we shall see, the risks that he was taking were to prove all too real.

At the two-day conference, the Chief Minister sat and listened in the back of the hall throughout the discussions. By the end of the second day, a set of 21 recommendations or 'demands' for new policies emerged.⁶³ Some of them

⁶³ These were as follows.

1. Ensure that each Dalit family will own enough cultivable land for socio-economic well-being.
2. Enact legislation and enforce it stringently to enable Dalits to have an equitable share in the appropriation and use of the rural and urban common property resources.
3. Enact legislation and enforce the right of Dalit agricultural labourers to living wages, to gender parity in wages, to job security, to better working conditions and welfare measures, and ensure punitive measures against offenders.
4. Appoint Statutory Committees at the national and state level to identify within specified time-frame all the Depressed Class lands occupied by non-Dalits, to assess the quantum of compensation to be paid by non-Dalits for their illegal utilization of lands, to identify the original owners and their nearest kith and kin for restoring these lands back to them, to expedite legal proceedings in courts specially appointed for this purpose against the illegal occupants and to ensure punitive measures against them.
5. Ensure the restoration of the alienated lands to the tribals, restore their rights over forest and forest-produce, provide them with compensation and rehabilitation measures, extend resources and capacity building measures for gainful utilization of their lands and forests and make those Dalits displaced due to construction of dams/developmental projects shareholders of such enterprises.
6. Democratised the capital so as to ensure proportionate share for SCs and STs. Make budgetary allocation for SCs and STs to enable them to enter the market economy with adequate investment resources, and develop their capacities and skills for such market enterprises.
7. Enforce with stringent measures the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, and abolish forthwith child labour to ensure freedom with dignity for all the Dalits, and accordingly make suitable amendments in the appropriate legislations.
8. Amend Art. 21 of the Constitution of India: Fundamental Rights so as to include the following rights for all citizens, but with special emphasis for SCs and STs, and on the basis of two criteria, namely low economic income and without religious discrimination: the rights to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of women and men equally, including food, safe drinking water, clothing, housing, public health and medical care, social security and social services; the right to a living wage and the right to own 5 acres of cultivable land or to gainful employment.
9. Implement compulsory, free and high quality education for all Dalits immediately, make allocation of funds proportionate to the number and level of the illiterates, ensure compensation to those families which forfeit their income from child labour, increase the number and amount of scholarships, and provide better infrastructural facilities in SC and ST schools and offer market-oriented vocational and technical education.
10. Make the reservation quota applicable in all the public and private educational institutions from primary to technical and professional levels.
11. Recognize SC and ST women as a distinct category among women, and accordingly make segregated data on Dalit women available in census reports, action taken reports and progress reports, evolve national and state level perspective plan for mainstreaming SC and ST women in developmental programmes, market enterprises, financial allocation, reservation facilities in education, employment and health facilities, and mandate the National and State Commissions for SC and ST and for Women to study and report specifically the status of SC and ST women in their annual reports.
12. Implement effectively in letter and spirit the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 & Rules 1995, especially with regard to atrocities against Dalit women, and accordingly prosecute the dominant caste leaders and their minions who stoke the fire of caste clashes and the police officials acting in connivance with them. In cases of atrocities against SC/STs, a system of collective punishment has to be evolved as oppressors enjoy community support and protection and escape the law.

were quite radical. Many -- even some that were less than radical -- would be impossible to implement without alienating many people from other groups in rural areas whose overall numerical strength greatly outweighed that of *Dalits*.

As a reply from Singh was awaited by conference delegates, he held a brief, private discussion with the civil servant who was his main advisor on these issues. This man had worked far more intimately with the people at the conference than had the Chief Minister, and he had a shrewd sense of the mood at the meeting. He told Singh that any hesitations in his response would inspire dismay, and possibly do more harm than good. But he also felt that it was his duty to warn that if all of them were accepted, it might cost him victory at the next state election.

The Chief Minister -- who was, unusually, visibly emotional over the potentially historic nature of this decision -- paused to think for a moment and then quietly said that perhaps this was an issue on which it was worth losing an election.⁶⁴ He then walked to the podium and announced that he accepted all 21 recommendations.⁶⁵

He then set about implementing them. This was going to be far more difficult to achieve than his other pro-poor initiatives -- for several reasons.

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13. Ensure diversity of SC/STs' due representation in all public institutions of India, whether universities or academic or autonomous or registered bodies.
 14. Ensure that in all state and national budgets allocations are made as per the proportion of SC and ST population and penal action taken against non-utilisation or diversion of funds meant for these sections.
 15. Every government and private organization must implement Supplier Diversity from socially disadvantaged businesses and Dealership Diversity in all goods and services.
 16. The state must assume sole responsibility in protecting the SCs and STs. The State must identify those atrocity-prone areas and deploy forces. In addition, provide arms licences to the SCs & STs as stipulated in the Atrocities Act for self-defence purposes, make the setting up of Dalit self-defence groups from village onwards mandatory, and especially train Dalit women to handle weapons in self-defence against the perpetrators of crimes and atrocities.
 17. Eliminate the humiliating practice of manual scavenging on an urgent footing through effective rehabilitation, alternative and sustainable employment measures and developmental programmes, and prosecute violators of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, especially the gross violators Railways, Defence and Urban Local bodies.
 18. Make it statutory for Parliament and State Assemblies to debate on the Annual Reports of the National and State level Commissions for SC/ST and Safai Karamcharis within the following year, and ensure that these annual reports and the action-taken reports of the government are made public.
 19. Make reservation mandatory in the private and corporate sector in the same proportion as in the public sector and government institutions and develop the capacities and skills of Dalits to help them cope with the demands of these different sectors.
 20. Implement policy of reservation to SCs and STs at all levels of judiciary and defence forces. And make transparent appointment processes in Judiciary by doing away with the nomination system.
 21. Bring out a Truth Paper in two years on the status of reservation during the past 25 years and place it before Parliament and State Assemblies for debate, and on a war footing fill immediately all the backlog posts meant for Dalits and that, too, only with Dalit candidates.

⁶⁴ Interview with Dr. Amar Singh, the civil servant in question, Bhopal, 9 December 2004.

⁶⁵ They are set out in *The Task Force Report on Bhopal Declaration* (Government of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal, 2003). See also in this connection, D. Shyam Babu, "Dalits and the New Economic Order: Some Prognostications and Prescriptions from the Bhopal Conference", Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Affairs Working paper 44 (New Delhi, 2003).

First, he had little support from his colleagues in the cabinet and the legislature. Very few of them were *Dalits*, and those who were not were mostly unenthusiastic or hostile. They rightly feared a reaction against the initiative from many non-*Dalits* in rural areas, and many of them harboured prejudices against *Dalits* themselves. Most legislators, who cheerfully took credit for achievements under the Education Guarantee Scheme, were disinclined to associate themselves with what now came to be known as the *Dalit* Agenda.

This left the Chief Minister isolated as almost the sole champion of the new programme. By then, he had acquired the dominance within the government and the policy process to press ahead, but this carried great risks – both to him and to the Agenda. After he had left office, one of his most important advisors recalled how dangerous it had been to try to implement this programme entirely through the bureaucracy – without support from other Congress politicians, and with scarcely any bottom-up pressure from *Dalits*. Singh himself acknowledged that it would have been better if he had involved his party organisation in this effort.⁶⁶ But the party was so hesitant (or worse) – and in any case, the Chief Minister had done so little to strengthen the organisation (in the justified fear that this would trigger factional strife) -- that this was not a realistic option. So implementation proceeded almost entirely by way of administrative *fiat*.

Special emphasis was given to steps that would produce swift, tangible benefits to ordinary *Dalits*. Singh launched a drive to fill the portion of government posts which had been reserved for them, a task which had long been largely ignored. He required that 30% of government contracts be awarded to *Dalit* businesses. This was done in the full knowledge that some of these firms would be ‘*Dalit*’ merely on paper, with the real owners coming from other caste groups. But he reckoned that enough resources would reach *Dalits* to justify the attempt.

The most important element of this initiative, however, had to do with land distribution – an evocative topic in a country where land is scarce. In a great many villages, some land had long been reserved for common use. The government now attempted to distribute plots of common land to landless *Dalits*. This was far from easy, since it soon collided with a number of vexing complications.

Bureaucrats at lower levels -- who bore the main burden of identifying plots and potential beneficiaries, and of ceding plots to them – were often reluctant or hostile, given their caste backgrounds and their time honoured understanding with non-*Dalits* at the grassroots who opposed this. Confusion also arose because much of the common land had been illegally encroached upon by residents of the villages. The encroachers naturally resisted dispossession – and to make matters worse, in some cases, they were themselves *Dalits*. As if

⁶⁶ Interview with Digvijay Singh, New Delhi, 16 May 2004.

all of this was not enough, *Dalits* who acquired plots of land often found it difficult to make productive use of it – either because they lacked the capacity to succeed at farming, or because the land was unpromising.

The government pressed ahead nonetheless, and when he received reports of the problems noted just above, and of the fact that the provision of land only to landless *Dalits* was leaving out a great many who had only tiny plots, the Chief Minister made tactical adjustments in the policy. Instead of retreating, he upped the ante – several times. It was announced first that plots were to be provided to land-poor as well as landless *Dalits*. Then he increased the amounts of common land to be distributed – twice. When it became apparent that resistance to the implementation of the new policy was widespread, Singh threatened resistors with police action, and followed through on the threat in a number of cases. Then, after it was learned that some *Dalits* had suffered violent attacks in reaction to the policy, the Chief Minister astonished many observers by announcing that firearms would be provided to *Dalits* so that they could defend themselves – and he began to follow through on that promise. The need to do this is explicitly recognised in the national law to combat atrocities against *Dalits*, but it had almost never been done elsewhere and it was highly controversial.

This policy clearly qualified as a pro-poor programme that was remarkably bold – India had seen almost nothing like it – and it had the virtue of being far from expensive in budgetary terms. But its provisions sparked strong opposition from non-*Dalits* which made it both exceedingly difficult to implement and counterproductive in terms of cultivating popular support. One miscalculation by the Chief Minister was especially worrying. The government included within the category of '*Dalits*' not just the ex-untouchables or Scheduled Castes (to whom the label was usually applied) but also the *adivasis* or Scheduled Tribes -- a group that stood outside or at the margins of the traditional caste system and of Hindu society. The latter -- a large group that had long given strong support to the Congress Party -- recoiled against this, since they perceived themselves to be quite distinct from the Scheduled Castes. This facilitated what were already energetic efforts by Hindu extremists to wean voters from the Scheduled Tribes away from the Congress -- and cost Singh dearly at the 2003 state election.

The main instrument through which the *Dalit* Agenda had to be implemented, the bureaucracy, was unequal to the challenge. Some bottom-up pressure from *Dalits* was needed, and this was not forthcoming among people who were ill-organised and who had long suffered harassment from their neighbours. Indeed, at the 2003 election, they lent the Congress Party only tepid support while other groups -- not only the Scheduled Tribes, but many people from other Hindu castes -- voted against it. That does not entirely or even mainly explain Singh's election defeat, but it clearly contributed to it.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Manor, "The Congress Defeat...".

In many respects, the *Dalit* initiative must thus be judged a failure. The Chief Minister was particularly unwise to rely almost entirely on the bureaucracy to tackle such a sensitive, deep-seated issue. He, more than any political leader in India, had understood and demonstrated the importance of bottom-up participation and pressure from below to make programmes work. But in this case, inviting participation from below would have opened up space for castes opposed to the initiative to resist it – and would not have triggered much counter-pressure from *Dalits* because they were so poorly organised. The ruling party could provide no help – partly because Singh had (for good reasons) not strengthened it, and partly because many within opposed the *Dalit* Agenda.

In sharp contrast to the Education Guarantee Scheme, which was opposed by almost no one, the *Dalit* initiative (predictably) provoked resistance from many quarters and at all levels – especially at the grassroots. It was at that level that the administration, his sole instrument, had the least impact. The Chief Minister counted on his many other constructive development policies to prevent non-*Dalits* from becoming too alienated by this initiative. Opinion polls round the time of the 2003 election indicated that they did indeed remain appreciative of many of those other policies,⁶⁸ but it did not stop them from opposing the *Dalit* Agenda.

State-level politicians in India watch events in other states quite carefully, and many have concluded that initiatives like this one are politically unwise and likely to produce ambiguous benefits even for *Dalits*. So Singh's reputation over the short-term has not been enhanced by it. Its impact over time is also likely to be mixed. He will be seen as audacious and quite genuine in his willingness to take risks in the pursuit of social justice. He is much admired among perceptive *Dalits* analysts and leaders outside the state for reminding Indians of the difficulties that confront both *Dalits* and leaders who seek to help them. But this will also be seen as an episode in which his often subtle political judgement deserted him.

The Use of Para-professionals

A discussion of Singh's pro-poor policies would be incomplete without some comment on one further theme. It does not in itself constitute a pro-poor programme. Rather, it was a means to that end -- a device used in the implementation of some pro-poor (and some other) initiatives. It represents a distinct innovation within the Indian context, and his government pursued it much more extensively than in any other Indian state.

It made very extensive use of para-professionals -- people with rudimentary training, receiving modest pay -- to perform development tasks. In an era of

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

severe fiscal constraints, this option is especially attractive since it entails only limited outlays of public funds. But it has to be stressed that these para-professionals were not being employed to perform tasks that others had done at greater cost. It was no cost-cutting exercise. It entailed "additionalities" in expenditure.⁶⁹ These people were hired to do things which no one had done before -- to provide services that mostly (or in some cases entirely) went to poor people. It was not a neo-liberal exercise in rolling back the state, but rather an effort to extend the reach of the state to those who had previously been excluded.

The first serious effort in this vein occurred in the Education Guarantee Scheme, but it was soon extended more widely as the Chief Minister and senior bureaucrats who shared his inclinations saw its utility in other sectors. It was taken up in the attempt to mount a Health Guarantee Scheme. Then it was used in agricultural extension where new employees were taught basic skills in repairing pumps and agricultural implements, and in other areas of use to marginal farmers. And then it was extended to other development sectors -- it became something of a fashion among development-oriented departments of the state government. Many thousands of para-professionals were thus at work, reaching mainly poor sections of society that had had little or no assistance before.

It was easier to persuade para-professionals to work in remote, under-developed locations than it had been with the 'regular' employees of government departments. The latter tended to live in urban areas, and were supposed to travel often to deprived villages to provide services. The para-professionals were usually already resident in deprived villages. They did not have to be tempted or compelled to go there -- approaches that often failed to work with 'regular' employees who preferred to remain in more comfortable places. This helped the new strategy to have palpable pro-poor impact.

Its effect was greatest, and the system worked best when the para-professionals were accountable to poor local communities. This was true of the para-professional teachers in schools under the Education Guarantee Scheme. Because their employers were village *panchayats* in the localities in which they worked, they were under constant surveillance by local people to whom they owed their jobs. As a result, absenteeism among them -- the bane of 'regular' government schools -- was a rarity.⁷⁰

The employment of para-professionals was not entirely problem-free. These people inevitably began seeking to be 'regularised' -- to be given the

⁶⁹ Interview with the Secretary to (the state) Government, Finance, Bhopal, 8 December 2003.

⁷⁰ There are certain parallels between this use of para-professionals and the approach famously adopted in Ceara state, Brazil, and analysed by Judith Tandler. See her *Good Government in the Tropics* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998). But far less was done in Madhya Pradesh to publicise the good work of these employees -- in order both to raise their morale and to impose popular pressure on them to perform appropriately. Policy makers in Madhya Pradesh were unaware of the Ceara case.

same levels of pay, benefits and conditions of employment enjoyed by 'regular' government employees. The state government managed to placate them by raising their salaries and promising to consider further concessions, but the problem remained. Over the longer term, therefore, it may be difficult to sustain this approach to the provision of additional services at limited cost. But while Digvijay Singh held power, the system worked well.

Poverty-reducing Growth

We might ask whether Singh's government pursued pro-poor economic growth. The answer is that it certainly sought to achieve 'growth' -- and if it did not have specific policies for 'pro-poor' growth, it hoped (with good reason, on recent evidence) that if significant growth occurred, it would erode poverty. In this respect, it was no different from most other states. Very few had programmes explicitly designed to achieve growth that was 'pro-poor'.

His government made strenuous efforts to attract foreign direct investment. Action was taken to address the state's fiscal problems, imaginative approaches were adopted to get round the impediments that laws passed in New Delhi posed to private investment in the minerals sector,⁷¹ special economic zones were established, etc. The results were impressive for such an under-developed state. In Singh's time, it ranked seventh among the 28 states in overall inward investment, and seventh in foreign direct investment.⁷²

The attempt to ease fiscal constraints deserves a little more attention. A fiscal stabilisation package was negotiated -- long before 1998 when this became necessary and therefore common in other states⁷³ -- with the Asian Development Bank. The state government disbursed 38% of its total revenue on salaries, and a further 20% on pensions for retired employees. To address this problem, the agreement with the Bank entailed the non-replacement of retirees and a modest number of redundancies among the least skilled tier of public employees -- 80,000 such jobs were identified for this purpose.⁷⁴ It also involved the sale or closure of a number of loss-making state-owned enterprises. This was partly intended to appeal to investors by demonstrating the state government's willingness to take difficult decisions in the interests of fiscal prudence. But it was also done in order to liberate funds for investment in infrastructure and in social programmes to address the needs of poor people

⁷¹ Interview with Swaminathan Aiyar, New Delhi, 10 August 1997.

⁷² *The Hindu*, 11 July 2003.

⁷³ This occurred because in 1997, India's Fifth Pay Commission recommended significant increases in remuneration for central government employees. This was accepted by the New Delhi government, and state governments were more or less compelled to follow suit in their handling of pay for state-level employees. The result was that nearly all state governments then faced crippling wage bills.

⁷⁴ *The Hindu*, 11 July 2003.

which the private sector would leave unmet.⁷⁵ It was thus social democratic rather than neo-liberal in its intent.

The agreement with the Asian Development Bank was substantially, though not wholly implemented – substantially enough to improve the state's fiscal position significantly.⁷⁶ This was apparent, for example, from statistics set out by India's Planning Commission in 2004 on the "balance of current revenues". Most Indian state governments were in the red, some deeply so. But for the financial year ending 31 March 2003, Madhya Pradesh had a positive balance of Rs. 1.956 billion (\$52.8 million). For the following financial year, it was projected to be Rs. 7.986 billion (\$216 million). These are remarkably good figures in the Indian context. They would have left the state well placed financially, had India's Fifth Pay Commission (after the commencement of this state's fiscal stabilisation exercise) not raised pay for public employees to a degree that has been ruinous to many state governments, and difficult for others. Madhya Pradesh, thanks to its restructuring, was one of the 'others'.

Despite these efforts, however, Singh knew that his state's poor record on education over the years deprived it of the abundant human resources that have enabled certain states (especially in south India) to achieve significant growth thanks to booms in information technology and outsourcing. In his words, Madhya Pradesh lacked the "knowledge advantage" of those other states.⁷⁷ His realisation that growth could not be expected to make much impact on poverty impelled him to pursue the pro-poor policies discussed above.

V. Political Entrepreneurship and Poverty Reduction

To conclude, let us see what the Indian case tells us about the potential of what we have called the 'enlightened Machiavellian management' of politics in the pursuit of poverty reduction. We must consider both Digvijay Singh's political calculations and the actions that then ensued. Most but not all of the time, his calculations were perceptive and his actions were shrewd.

His hesitations about asserting himself during the first two of his ten years in office were well founded. Before he acted more forcefully, he needed to establish a firm grip upon his government amid challenges from factional rivals, and to develop a thorough understanding of the political landscape so that his subsequent actions would be appropriate.

His early decision to devolve substantial powers and resources onto elected councils at lower levels was presented -- and widely perceived -- as an attempt to give all members of rural communities (directly or through their elected

⁷⁵ Interview with Dr. Rajan Katoch, IAS – one of the key officials involved in economic policy making – Bhopal, 12 September 1998.

⁷⁶ This is apparent from Indian Planning Commission figures made available by Dr. Rajan Katoch, New Delhi, March 2003.

⁷⁷ Interview with Digvijay Singh, *Frontline*, 17-30 August 2002.

representatives) some influence over development policies that affected their vital interests. Many of them were able -- for the first time -- to inject their preferences into the policy process. This initiative called attention to the 'central-vs.-local' dichotomy, which appealed to all groups at the grassroots and distracted them from two other dichotomies proffered by rival parties: 'Hindus-vs.-others' and 'caste-vs.-caste'. And as we have seen, decentralisation had some pro-poor implications -- because such a large proportion of the state's population is poor.

He was also wise in stressing 'development' alongside decentralisation as a core theme. Once again, it undercut those two rival appeals. It also helped to establish his image -- which, crucially, was backed up by concrete action -- as a new and imaginative type of leader. He reinforced the message by commissioning a state *Human Development Report* that frankly acknowledged the long-standing shortfall in development, and mobilized sentiment at the district level in favour of programmes to tackle it.

Several of his initiatives to achieve that were intended to benefit every group at the grassroots. One outstanding example (apart from democratic decentralisation) was the *Pani Roko* campaign to create small tanks that would capture rainwater in a time of severe drought. This proved reasonably effective in terms of the tanks created -- and, not incidentally, in the opportunities that it provided to the poor to find paid employment while they constructed them. Indeed, it was effective enough to deprive the opposition party of 'water' as an issue at the 2003 election. Initiatives like this, which were of general benefit to rural communities, marked him out as a leader who would not be divisive by focusing only on the needs of poor or low caste groups.

But some programmes which could easily be seen as efforts to serve the general good were, in reality, heavily biased towards the poor. This was certainly true of the literacy campaign which received early emphasis -- since the non-poor were, for the most part, literate. But by offering literates 'bounties' to teach others to read, it provided something for the non-poor as well -- and built bridges between the non-poor and poor illiterates.

However, Singh also had the wit to see that to broaden his party's base, and to provide poor people with real substance, it was necessary to mount programmes that were more unambiguously pro-poor in both appearance and reality. This led him, eventually, to pursue several such initiatives: among them, the Education Guarantee Scheme, the Health Guarantee Scheme, and the *Dalit* Agenda. The last of these showed a clear bias towards one caste group, and thereby undercut his earlier efforts to appear non-divisive. He hoped that his earlier programmes to benefit diverse castes would prevent this from alienating other groups, but that is not how things turned out.

Should Singh have been more radical in his efforts to tackle poverty? There is no doubt that poor people needed more than he offered them. It is not entirely inappropriate to judge him against an ideal, radical vision of what might have been done, and some of those who do this are sharply critical of him.⁷⁸ But he had good reason for adopting this measured, moderate approach. The votes of the poor would not -- on their own -- have sufficed to re-elect him, and if he lost power, he could do nothing for them. This is a familiar argument that many will see as a tired excuse used by politicians who pretend to be friends of the poor. But in Singh's case, it was actually true -- and he was not pretending.

It is more appropriate to judge him against what had happened before in his state, and what was possible there. What was possible was badly affected not only by the state's legacy of serious under-development and inaction on poverty reduction, but also by the tight budget constraints that he and almost all other leaders in less developed countries faced after the early 1990s.

We live in an era of tight fiscal constraints, and this harsh fact goes a long way towards explaining why this is also an era of centrist political leaders and ruling parties.⁷⁹ The word 'centrist' here refers not to centralised governance -- far from it -- but to the centre of the right/left spectrum. This is an era in which radicals of the right and left are a rarity -- even in countries (and Indian states) where ruling parties describe themselves as leftist. Singh was by instinct and background a centrist reformer, but he also recognised that circumstances required him to play that role. Ascher's study of politicians who tackled poverty in the 1980s found that centrist reformers were more successful than radicals, in part because they triggered less aggressive opposition among the non-poor.⁸⁰ That logic applied again in Singh's case, and it gained still greater force from budgetary constraints which were far less of a problem for Ascher's reformers in an earlier era. Singh believed that change had to be incremental, but the kind of assertive incrementalism that he pursued could (and did) produce significant results.

He was also a progressive for pragmatic rather than for ideological reasons. He badly needed to reach out to poorer groups, to give himself a chance to be the first Congress Chief Minister since 1980 to be re-elected. He drew on the Gandhian tradition, partly because he was genuinely inspired by it, but also because he perceived that it had far more practical political and developmental utility than other Congress Party leaders understood. By seizing upon it, he

⁷⁸ I am grateful to Harsh Mander for stressing these during interviews in New Delhi in March and December 2003.

⁷⁹ These issues are discussed in greater detail in J. Manor, "Democratisation with Inclusion: Political Reforms and People's Empowerment at the Grassroots", *The Journal of Human Development* (March 2004) pp. 5-30.

⁸⁰ W. Ascher, *Scheming for the Poor: The Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1984).

was also making good pragmatic use of an approach that would demonstrate how perceptive and imaginative he could be.

He was also aware of the need to pursue things in their proper sequence. This is not a major theme in this story, but two examples are worth noting. He waited (as we have seen) until he had consolidated his power in the teeth of threats from rivals before becoming as assertive as he wished and needed to be. And he delayed the introduction of several grassroots development programmes -- including some that addressed poverty -- until he had empowered elected councils at lower levels. That was a canny decision, because those councils proved essential to the implementation of several programmes -- not least the Education Guarantee Scheme which hinged on the accountability of newly appointed teachers to village councils.

But Singh was not infallibly adroit. He now acknowledges that he should have spoken more often and more explicitly about 'poverty'? It is worth remembering that in 1971, Indira Gandhi won a landslide victory in a national election by making 'poverty' her main theme. It had potent appeal even among people who were not particularly poor -- it was not especially divisive. Many things had changed by the time that Singh came to power, but so many residents of Madhya Pradesh were still demonstrably 'poor' that the theme would have yielded benefits. It is true that Mrs. Gandhi had not followed through with much action to deliver on that slogan, and that this had partly discredited it. But Singh had done a great deal in this vein. He missed an opportunity here.

He was also probably too hasty in turning away from all but a tiny number of civil society organisations. Most of his ministerial colleagues and at least one of the civil servants who worked closely with him developed strong allergies to civil society. Singh himself became exasperated with the unyielding attitude of the *Narada Bachao Andolan*. And civil society in this state was less developed than in most of the rest of India, and some important elements within it were reactionary. But a significant number of such organisations were genuinely supportive of poverty initiatives and the deepening of democracy through decentralisation. Most of them operated within sub-regions of the state, or within very small arenas at the grassroots. But many of these were remarkably well integrated by at least one enlightened and effective organisation. Most of these civil society organisations were wary of becoming too closely associated with any political party. But had Singh reached out to them in ways that did not compromise their autonomy, they could have provided valuable support for his progressive initiatives. Indeed, some of them did that anyway -- but they had to operate without much encouragement from government actors.⁸¹

⁸¹ These comments are based on this writer's extensive exposure to the work of the most impressive of the state-level organisation, Samarthan, in April of 2001.

It is surprising that he did not reach out more whole-heartedly to these enlightened organisations, since he clearly understood that pressure from below provided crucial reinforcement to administrative and political pressure from above in the pursuit of poverty reduction. That was apparent from his efforts to catalyse pressure from below by way of user committees and elected councils at lower levels. If enlightened civic organisations had been mobilized, they could have contributed to such bottom-up pressures. But he largely held back from this. Civil society organisations which worked among *Dalits* -- and there were some that did so -- might have provided valuable support to the *Dalit* Agenda which received precious little backing from elected councils. His reticence on this front was another example of a missed opportunity.

On a small number of occasions, Singh was either insufficiently or excessively assertive. His decision to take back many of the powers of elected district councils provides the main example -- indeed, the only significant example -- of the first problem. By granting these councils substantial powers in 1994, he earned himself strong political support from the members and chairpersons of these bodies. They were a crucial element of the new political base that he was constructing. They also provided him with badly needed political intelligence on events at and below the district level. Through them, he learned when certain policies were not being properly implemented. And since they had leverage at those levels, they could help him to address such problems when they arose.

Before long, however, the Chief Minister faced loud complaints from fellow ministers and legislators about the misbehaviour of councillors and, especially, council chairpersons. Some of these complaints had substance, but they also reflected the jealousy which high-level politicians everywhere feel when democratic decentralisation occurs. In 2000, Singh unwisely gave way to ministers and legislators and substantially disempowered the district councils. This had a deeply damaging impact upon him. He lost not just the support of councillors, but also the intelligence that they had provided and their assistance in tackling problems at lower levels. And those problems then grew worse because ministers, legislators and district-level bureaucrats formed a nexus and often governed badly. The government grew unpopular as a result. Singh was insufficiently assertive in this instance, and he and his party paid a heavy price for this at the state election in late 2003.⁸²

By contrast, the Chief Minister was arguably excessively assertive in his pursuit of the *Dalit* Agenda. He well understood that this would be unwelcome to most rural dwellers. *Dalits* at the grassroots (and even at higher levels) in this state were very poorly organised, so that they could not be expected to muster much pressure from below in support of the Agenda. Singh had distanced himself from certain enlightened civil society organisations that might have reinforced his top-down efforts. And although he now believes that

⁸² This is examined in more detail in Manor, "The Congress Defeat...".

he should have sought help from his party organisation, this also held little promise because most of his party colleagues were lukewarm at best to this initiative.

This meant that the bureaucracy was essentially his only instrument for the implementation of the Agenda, and many bureaucrats were themselves lukewarm. This imposed serious limitations on the extent to which the programme could succeed, and where it did succeed, it inspired resentments from far more people than it helped. So in electoral terms, it was damaging.

To say this is not to claim that Singh's efforts on behalf of *Dalits* were entirely misplaced. He reminded Indians of the plight of this much abused group, and called attention to the measures that were required to tackle the injustices that they suffered. Some of the policies that he adopted to help them will live on in Madhya Pradesh, and other governments across India are now under greater pressure to take at least some similar actions. His pursuit of the Agenda also marked him out as a serious progressive, and redefined what it means to be a 'progressive' these days. Those things may redound to his credit over the longer term. But in many ways, this was an example of excessively assertive action.