More than any other general election before it, India’s 2014 contest was characterised by a politics of anti-corruption. The rising popular appeal of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the anti-corruption party under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwal partly reflected, and partly created, this trend. And the appeal of AAP has, in turn, built upon an apparently increasing sense in public life in India, that both the scale and importance of ‘corruption’ scandals relate back to a fundamental problem in the conduct of politics. The contemporary anti-corruption movement could therefore signal a change in the structure and practice of politics in India. Some observers have explored the agendas of both AAP and Narendra Modi, for example, in terms of a critique of ‘patronage politics’ (Jenkins 2014). Arguably too, these changes represent a new kind of politicisation of a hitherto apathetic urban middle class, for whom both the AAP and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have both traditionally had a strong appeal. These urban professional, small trader and white-collar constituents have formed the basis of the larger anti-corruption movement (from which AAP emerged in late 2012). For some, this even represents a new manifestation of Indian democracy, which is alternative to, and largely divorced from what Chatterjee has described as the ‘paralegal’ confrontations with the state by poor and marginalised communities (Chatterjee 2004: 60–78).

The rise of large-scale anti-corruption movements in India therefore reveals more than simply public dissatisfaction and vocal opposition to the rumour of apparently ever increasing corruption scandals. This chapter will argue that their reception in public debate is related to two long-term features of Indian political debate since the 1940s: first a long-standing popular critique of the (post)-colonial state which contains within it the idea of a lost moral politics of anti-colonialism; and second the survival of a practical politics of anti-corruption in the forms of patronage politics in Indian parties. Both features illustrate how corruption and anti-corruption in Indian politics has not been static. Changing conventions and languages of politics have moulded both phenomena in phases in which India’s political economy was ‘planned’, as well as since the early 1990s in the environment of liberalisation...
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and deregulation (Harriss-White 1996: 31–39). As Steven Pierce (2014) has argued, in his work on Nigeria, we might rather think of the morally complex fields of ‘corruption’ as a ‘complex’ that is contingent on situation, place, context and changing forms of jurisdiction. In this phenomenon, in any one particular place, there are a range of different kinds of linguistic dynamics, intellectual traditions encoded within the vocabulary that produce the idea of corruption. This is, at one level, spatially scaled. Local concerns interact with the national, with perceptions of what is happening in politics at the centre, affecting how Indians feel they can approach the state (Gupta 2012). Because this is also about shifting political perception, international considerations also have a role, as evidenced in the effects of Transparency International’s perception indexes, and the role of international sporting corruption (Majumdar and Mehta 2009).

But if the changing political complex of corruption and anti-corruption relate to how Indians engage with the state, then it is the specific experience and history of the colonial state that is here perhaps key to the particular characteristics of the role of corruption in Indian politics. Colonialism has brought specific temporalities to the politics of corruption and anti-corruption, which allow us to view it along two different scales. In terms of a long durée, it is ultimately a history of critiques of the colonialism system, whether from a position of larger critiques of western modernity, or from a direct reflection of the outcomes of autocracy. In this sense, corruption only becomes such in India, in relation to a larger sense of political integrity arising at certain temporal moments when forms of popular sovereignty and concepts of liberty were articulated such as the period surrounding independence in 1947 and the first democratic elections. The modern anti-colonial critique of corruption sets up the notion of the ‘ordinary’ citizen’s struggle against autocracy and the state, which has become a key feature of post-colonial anti-corruption movements. At another scale, anti-corruption movements appear to have arisen at moments when the political system is unable to contain the working of certain kinds of capital or resource accumulation. If we view corruption as an alternative political economy which maintains its own forms of social and administrative stability, once that stability is threatened, social and political competition produces anti-corruption protest. We will explore that briefly especially for the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s and the period since 2006.

This is not to argue that India is entirely unique in terms of the forms of corruption that have arisen within the state. But here we need to distinguish between large-scale scandals on the one hand and routine practices and perceptions of corruption on the other, although the two can and have been inter-related. The former are common to any and every political system. Non-routine scandals have been an important part of national and regional debate, and especially for the period from the 1980s. In general they involve large-scale (often international) bungs, kick-backs or rake-offs from contracts, and/or, misappropriation of public funds, sometimes at a systematic and totalising scale. The large-scale Bofors scandal of 1987 represented the quintessential example of international procurement corruption in India. In this, Rajiv Gandhi, India’s Prime Minister at the time, was implicated along with Swedish government ministers in the receipt of kick-backs from the deal between Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors and the Government of India (Sen Gupta 1989: 1615). Bofors effectively became a by-word for corruption in general – a signal to the population as a whole that the rot could, and often did, travel right to the top. More recently, we might include the huge scandal involving the mis-selling of telecommunications licences between 2008 and 2012, which according to The Economist allegedly led to the misappropriation of the equivalent of $40 billion dollars in revenue (Economist 2012). For the most part, such scandals are one off events, or relate to specific kinds of unique industrial rent-seeking opportunities.
The second, routine forms of corruption (sometimes linked to specific scandals) connect more clearly to internal structures of state expenditure and developmental finance and they appear and occur at a range of levels in the polity. Their routine nature is often derived from the ways in which they are hierarchically systematic. It is in this second group that some of the most clear links to longer term histories of corruption and anti-corruption are most pertinent. Many, for example, have reflected the opportunities presented by forms of public control of the supply and sale of goods, common to a range of command economies. In this sense they are linked, in various ways, to the phenomenon of ‘Licence Permit Raj’: We could trace this back, too, to the 1950s as we will see below, but more recently, it could be explored from the 1981 cement scam involving A.R. Antulay (SCI 1984), but more intensely to the mid-1990s Bihar food relief scam and fodder scam involving Laloo Prasad Yadav via the animal husbandry in which around 950 crore rupees were embezzled (Jenkins 2007: 55–69). Other cases can be found for different regions, for example, the Jharkand medical equipment scam (2008) (Prasad and Chauhan 2009), the Gujarat VDSGCU sugarcane scam, as reported in The Indian Express (2009), and the Orissa mining scam (2009) (Mishra 2010: 49–68). In the 2000s, perhaps the largest of all was the UP (Uttar Pradesh) Foodgrain scam that ran between 2002 and 2010, which involved misappropriation of the PDS (public distribution system) scheme to the estimated amount amount of Rs 35,000 crore (Madhavi 2013: 42–50). At another level, the stakes involved in the protection of such vast resources help to explain the connections between politicians and organised crime, which in some areas has connected to large-scale public works projects. In 2006 in UP, Mulayam Singh Yadav attempted to crack down on the road construction mafia in Rae Bareli, along the lines that ‘nobody should be spared, even if they are from the Samajwadi party’ (i.e. his party). At that time, it was estimated that there were 280 mafia groupings in UP, 120 land mafia, 44 contract mafia, 36 criminal and 31 liquor mafia. With huge financial resources and power, they entered politics to protect their interests (Mishra 2006). This involved what came to be known as the Satyendra Dubey case – a person who attempted to expose contract mafia involved in the gold quadrilateral project linking Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai and Chennai and who was murdered in 2003. However, the largest numbers affected by this situation are ordinary road users, particularly those using cheap or badly maintained vehicles.

Contained within these large-scale systematic scams are smaller, more localised versions of the same process, that in some cases feed into the larger-scale misappropriation, but in other cases are based on what had become a routine form of administration. One of the best documented examples of this is in the work of Robert Wade in the Irrigation department in Andhra Pradesh. Wade showed how Irrigation Executive engineers might pay up to ten times their annual salary for operating a canal system, which they will pay off by selling, in their turn, posts, getting payments from subordinates who get rake-offs from maintenance contracts. If the lower level officers fail to live up to this system, they too were subject to transfer. For Wade, similar patterns could be seen in any department that had regulatory functions, subsidised goods or public works contracts to allocate. In these departments, some posts are more valuable than others, and so open to price competition (Wade 1982: 287–328).

However, these events fully become part of the politics of corruption only at the moments at which they are public scandals and have an effect on the function of politics, or public political debate. In other words, their representation as ‘scandal’ or within another aspect of the terminology of corruption, relates to public and political tolerance – the moment at which the normal acquiescence in the functioning of their forms can no longer be sustained, and creates political instability and conflict. These moments also, fundamentally link to public notions of the state and how its agents ‘ought’ to operate or behave according to certain
Corruption and anti-corruption yardsticks of moral governance. In this sense, as I will argue throughout, they link strongly to debates about the nature of the Indian state, many of which relate back, fundamentally, to a critique of colonial power. Key in these historical transformations were three historical phases, the late 1930s to mid-1950s, the mid-1980s to mid-1990s and the period from 2006 to the present. Rob Jenkins (2007) identifies similar phases in charting specific grassroots/popular forms of anti-corruption movements. This chapter, however, attempts to link those moments, too, specifically to forms of political critique and social mobilisation that pre-date the movements themselves. The first phase was one in which a ‘modern’ notion of corruption and anti-corruption became particularly important – the phase of India’s decolonisation between the 1930s and 1950s. The appearance of anti-corruption as a form of political discourse in this period linked to various means of critiquing the colonial state and/or promoting a particular vision of the ‘modern’ state. In the form of corruption allegation, on the other hand, it sustained political competition around networks of patronage. These themes continued to be of importance through the changes of the 1980s–1990s but this time in the context of a changing political-administrative nexus, as the Congress declined in authority, and with the effects of economic liberalisation. Finally, from 2006, citizens’ movements, some of which were built on the Right to Information Movement, strengthened or proliferated as political-business links and crime in politics was exposed anew.

Corruption, anti-corruption mobilisation and critiques of the colonial state

In the last three years, possibly even since the passage of India’s Right to Information Act of 2005, anti-corruption has had an unrivalled appeal across the political spectrum, and nearly everyone has wanted a piece of it. AAP’s agenda on anti-corruption is multi-faceted, including the Jan Lokpal (Ombudsman) Bill itself, a citizen’s charter, women’s security, police reform, and a range of proposals associated with the catchy attack on the three ‘c’s of ‘corruption, communalism and crony capitalism’ (AAP 2014). AAP candidates have been selected, in many cases, with an eye to their association with grassroots anti-corruption movements and commitment to these specific agendas, or the absence of a criminal record (Times of India 2014a). The rise of the party has even been associated, some argue, with larger shifts in Indian political mobilisation, from older concerns of identity politics to those of everyday social entrepreneurialism (jugaad) and the ubiquitous use of electronic social media (Chopra 2014). It is also strongly linked to the projection of a politics of ‘ordinariness’ and the concerns of the basic citizen.

Other parties have also attempted to ride the wave of anti-corruption: Narendra Modi has adopted a markedly Thatcherite appeal of small government, efficiency, public spending cuts, deregulation and privatisation (Economic Times 2014), as a means of showing how he might rein in older forms of briefcase politics (Kochanek 1987: 1278–1301). These poses have often defined the lines of electoral debate too: Kejriwal has directly attacked Modi’s supposed ‘Gujarat development model’ by suggesting that it is a smokescreen to obscure economic and financial benefits for big business in Gujarat, in long standing connections between the BJP and larger business houses. These accusations of corporate cronism, printed in The Times of India have involved, for example, exposure of the Ambanis’ Krishna-Godavari (KG) gas deal, and questions about how the industrialist Gautam Adani could have increased his wealth 12-fold during Mr Modi’s tenure, bypassing environmental and industrial regulations (Times of India 2014c). He accused Mr Modi of transferring a free public hospital built after the 2001 earthquake to the Adani group, which has become a for-profit
Finally, the Congress-led regime, accused as it is for having failed to root out corruption, has attempted to shore up its anti-corruption credentials. In early 2014, Rahul Gandhi attempted to push through a Judicial Standards and Accountability Bill, the Whistleblowers Protection Bill, the Right of Citizens for the Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services, the Prevention of Bribery of Foreign Public Officials Bill and the Prevention of Corruption (Amendment) Bill. All were shelved for fear that the president might question their announcement as a clutch of Ordinances, creating embarrassment in the lead up to the elections (Times of India 2014b).

Although novel in scale and context in 2014, the politics of anti-corruption has a long political tradition, and all of its movements in that year link back to some of the abiding themes of a much earlier phase of anti-colonialism. India’s very first elections under universal suffrage in 1951–1952 were marked by an extensive and well-developed politics of anti-corruption mobilisation, not least within the Congress’s own processes of candidate selection. In the distribution of tickets for each constituency, eliminated candidates were able to send complaints to the Congress centre, many of which contained prolix accounts of links between the successful candidate, licence-permit control and local businesses. In these complaints, the term ‘corruption’ took on a new set of political meanings, noticed not least by the Prime Minister who commented in the lead up to the elections that ‘merely shouting from the rooftops that everyone is corrupt creates an atmosphere of corruption’ (Gould 2011: 77). As we will see in the second section, this process of corruption publicity underpinned forms of political competition within different constituencies.

However, the significance of this publicity lay in its connection of high-level bureaucratic misdemeanours with a notion of popular civic rights, and the claims of ordinary people against an outdated and essentially foreign administration. In the lead up to the 1951–1952 elections, newspapers were replete with reports about the relationship between the thriving politics of ‘blackmarketeers’ in the aftermath of war-time controls and the political market in licences and permits. These forms of corruption publicity had developed as a result of popular (urban) reactions to food and civil supply administration, a bureaucracy put in place as a means of administering war-time controls since 1942. It was therefore directly linked to ideas of failed liberation from the structures of colonial control, put in place in a phase of high political repression. As well as those seeking licences, urban workers were also affected by the controls via systems of rationing; this could also be represented as a ‘people’s’ struggle against colonial bureaucracy. As a result, both the vernacular and English language presses were replete with discussions about scandals involving the control of licences and permits by the powerful, including those in government. Moreover, these forms of publicity represented struggles against forms of business cronyism, since the system of licences and permits which underpinned the system of controlling sale and distribution of goods, had been used to favour certain commercial interests in some of the big cities.

The popular call to break the ‘nexus’ between business, administration and politics, as publicised by Kejriwal then, is derived from a much earlier phase of Indian electoral politics, and was well discussed in the 1940s and 1950s. It is worth considering the implications of this for how we might view 2014’s electoral race and the role of political corruption therein, in the longer term. First is the point that in the lead up to 1952, ‘corruption’ was viewed as a problem of political inheritance and specifically of the colonial bureaucracy. In this sense, anti-corruption since then has been based in a history of a particular popular view or critique of the Indian post-colonial state. This critique had some of its antecedents in the late 1930s Congress ministries that offered Indian political parties the first real opportunity to put their critique of ‘colonial corruption’ into effect. In UP and Bihar for example, formally appointed
anti-corruption committees exposed, perhaps for the first time from a position of power, the colonial conceit that India was ‘inherently corrupt’. Instead, they argued, the state itself directly promoted traditional patron-client relationships, turned a blind-eye to low-level forms of commission or customary payment, or even allowed the working of systematic forms of rent seeking as a means of assuaging local conflicts (Gould 2011: 106–109).4

These Congress-led anti-corruption reports argued that the colonial bureaucracy therefore had mapped onto a range of traditional relationships that failed to embrace the ‘modern’ principles of governance being espoused by the ruling regime. In other words, corruption was a symptom of anti-modernity. In the immediate post-colonial period, this had its effects on ideas of bureaucratic reform, despite, as David Potter argues, the strong continuities in administrative culture (Potter 1997). G.B. Pant’s main anti-corruption measure in UP in the late 1940s–1950s was the transferring/replacing of ‘inefficient’ colonial officers. The implication here was that the administration had not undergone sufficient change and needed to move away from older colonial cultures into a new atmosphere of public accountability.5 This idea was to continue to mark official views of corruption and the state well into the 1960s. The state as an active modernising force, which broke down or ameliorated the norms of traditional and medieval societies, also characterised the Santhanam Committee report on corruption in India in 1964 (Santhanam 1964: 101).

Alongside these ideas of the modernising state and failing political integrity, was another discourse of popular responsibility and oversight. In ideological terms, this strongly related to the institutional development of Indian political parties within the colonial system, which while rendered powerless by a restricted franchise and constitution, nevertheless formed civic institutions that both critiqued, but also mirrored the state. As a result, for many such organisations, change had to come from non-official bodies, since internal reform within the colonial system had proved impossible. It had to come from the political community itself. Responsibility for change therefore lay in the development of bodies and organisations of civic action, which would reflect public opinion, and expose public abuses. Subsequently, ‘citizens’ organisations sprung up across north India from 1948–1951, particularly in cities, with a view to exposing the illegitimate activities of individual officers. The precursor then, to the contemporary grassroots right to information (RTI) movements, particularly emerging from the 1980s,6 and even anti-globalisation lobbies such as the National Alliance of People’s Movements, are older movements of civic engagement. In their early phases of the late 1940s and 1950s, these involved self-styled ‘citizens’ organisations, many of which campaigned against specific ‘corrupt’ officers linked to food and civil supply controls (Gould 2011: 127).

These processes and principles have affected what anthropologists and political scientists were to find from the early to mid-1990s in India. Work on late twentieth-century ideas about ‘discourses’ of corruption in India have discussed a grand dichotomy between common acceptance of everyday and local means of ‘getting things done’ on the one hand, and loftier critiques of that same state, as larger political visions of ‘citizenship’ on the other. Jonathan Parry and Akhil Gupta have, in different ways, described this as acquiescence in day-to-day corruption, alongside a parallel internalisation of citizenship values, especially for the period of the early 1990s as India went through the changes of economic liberalisation. Parry, in his study of recruitment to the Bilai Steel Plant shows how the ‘idea’ of corruption has tended to inflate the notion of the phenomenon of corruption, thereby leading to forms of acquiescence in its day-to-day operation, as a kind of optical illusion. However, he concludes that the popular view of corruption as a ‘moral wrong’ is testimony to the increasing internalisation of citizenship values in the particular phase of his research from the 1980s–1990s (Parry 2000: 27–55). Gupta has shown, again for the mid-1990s, how the
popular politics of corruption throws up many visions of the state, sometimes mediated through experience, and sometimes through the media. In this way, the state has spatially interacting levels, representations and practices and as a result of corruption discourses, is constituted in multiple mediated ways (Gupta 1995: 375–402). This vision of what the state ‘ought’ to be doing at different levels, despite its older ‘colonial’ structures being intact, relates right back to the mid-century debates about state modernisation, since it is inherently moulded by older experiences of a colonial system.

This gulf between the experience of everyday corruption and the rights of citizens in a larger vision of the state is central to the politics of anti-corruption too in the last decade or so, and most recently in the politics of the AAP Kejriwal and a number of institutions like the AAP represent corruption as systematic failure of governance, which for some has quasi-feudalistic causes. Their remedies are based in an appeal to larger frameworks of civic values, outside the purview of the state itself, devolving power to ‘aam log’, via institutions such as Mohalla Sabhas. Their appeal is to the lofty ideal of ‘swaraj’, transparency in government, social justice for minorities in relation to the police, decentralisation via the empowerment of ‘gram sabhas’. Here again too then, is an implicit critique of the state, whose corruption can be best combated via a civic critique rather than either complete overhaul or internal reform of its structures. But this is articulated by highlighting the everyday-ness of the effects of corruption. More than any other party, the success of the AAP (the acronym of which means ‘you’ in Hindi), has been the performance of ‘ordinariness’. The party logo is a sweeper’s broom, Kejriwal, its leader, is commonly seen with a scarf over his head (a common worker’s mode of dress) and direct appeals to the electorate have been couched in terms of leaders being ‘the same’ ordinary people as the audience. This association of anti-corruption with a notion of the ‘everyday’ is significant too in the ways in which anti-corruption has directly entered both political mobilisation and inter-party competition, as we will see in the section below.

The concept of ‘integrity’ and the politics of patronage

In the early 1950s, often inherent in the critique of an incomplete ‘modernisation’ of the state and its colonial antecedents as a basis of corruption, was a second tendency connecting to it the idea of a failing tradition of political integrity or morality. At the end of Jawaharlal Nehru’s life, W. H. Morris-Jones noticed this phenomenon as a process in which ‘corruption is at once what one political language calls the other and what happens when one is displacing the other’ (Morris-Jones 1964). This was often articulated in the rhetoric of a lost tradition of ‘national service’, exemplified by some of the key figures of the ‘freedom struggle’ or cognate leaders of sectional/regional political groups. This political rhetoric has commonly appeared in electoral competitions through to the present, although it has shifted in context from its roots in India’s earliest democratic mobilisations. In the lead up to the first general elections in India, contemporary political scientists observed this as a phenomenon of a new generation of political publicists who had begun to displace or replace older leaders who were associated with a Gandhian moral politics (Brass 1965: 45). In competitions between this new breed of career politicians following independence, a series of provincial competitions commonly revolved around mutual accusations of corruption. For example, in UP scandals involving mud-slinging between the likes of P.D. Tandon and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai (around accusations that the latter had embezzled money from the Provincial Congress Committee), led Nehru to mourn the loss of an older idea of anti-colonial integrity (Hindustan Times 1949). Conflicts between the Congress Party and the Congress Socialist Party in the 1930s–1940s were based
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around ideas and interpretations of ‘corruption’, in which the Congress mainstream was
viewed as a preserve of bourgeois high caste professionals. This sentiment also had its own
hierarchical and popular element to it, which connected to the ideas of everyday visions of the
state. It was essentially part of a public outcry which had a wide social appeal: in the 1950s and
1960s, the assumed illicit profits of politicians in distributing licences and permits for trade,
in the civil supply bureaucracy outlined above, was also portrayed in the press as a betrayal of
an older moral politics championed by Mahatma and his followers (National Herald 1948: 9).

Such movements were not confined to the immediate aftermath of independence, or to
the ruling party. As in the 1950s calls to populism, the JP or Total Revolution movement of
Jayaprakash Narayan against the government of Bihar and Indira Gandhi at the centre in 1974,
was based in the dream of rebuilding a Gandhian utopia against contemporary corruption
(Wood 1975: 320–322). In the late 1980s and 1990s, this discourse of lost integrity was even
more squarely directed against the Congress Party as ‘regime’, but from a very different
direction. The increasingly successful (in the 1980s) Hindu right parties used a range of
authoritarian critiques of the ‘appeasement’ of sectional interests as a ‘corruption’ of the
national interest specifically in reactions to the implementation of the Mandal Commission,
which created further categories of caste reservations for ‘Other Backward Castes’.

The notion of corruption as a decline in political morality then, also appeals to parties
who have sought to revive the moral impulses of ‘national’ unity. When in October 2013,
Narendra Modi launched plans for a 182 metre statue of the iron man of India in Gujarat,
Vallabhai Patel, he made a clear bid to appropriate one of the main ‘heroes’ of the freedom
movement, representing again a rejuvenated politics of integrity (BBC News South Asia
2013). The gigantic Patel, which would be the largest in the world, is at once a challenge to
the Nehru dynasty (the alternative right-wing first PM), lip-service to Hindu nationalism
that grew out of the Congress, a celebration of a tough stance on separatism (Patel was
the great integrationist of Princely states) and on group concepts of citizenship rights
(Patel famously challenged Muslims to ‘prove’ their loyalty to India) (in Chopra 2004: 58).
Although Modi’s proposed necropolis is comparable to that of the Dalit leader, Mayawati,
who has constructed monuments to Ambedkar all over the state (Jaoul 2006: 175–207), the
BJP has traditionally been dominated by an anti-reservation ideology. In 2014, Modi himself
has shifted more towards a pro-Mandal stance. But his party and its affiliates (as well as his
largely urban supporters) have been quick in the past to juxtapose their supposed tough
stance on ‘corruption’ against a perceived growth in political corruption and criminalisation
attending, as they see it, the rise of caste based parties since the 1990s.

Since the mid-2000s, alongside these party political challenges, have been a range of
NGO and citizens’ organisations which often campaigned against large capital projects
with an environmental impact, or highlighted the high levels of criminalisation in India’s
formal political institutions (Minch 2013). This politics of integrity has been promoted
by more radical sections of those espousing a politics of anti-colonialism in a context of
market liberalisation, but this time from two related but quite different directions. On the
one side, the Right to Information Act of 2005 (which followed state acts implemented
since 1997), helped to galvanise a range of existing ‘peoples’ pressure groups (Webb 2010),
NGOs and grassroots movements engaged in campaigns opposing large-scale industrial,
commercial and capital projects affecting traditional environments. Movements such as the
National Alliance of People’s Movements (and its sub-organisations), the Narmada Bachao
Andolan, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, and Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra
were now able to uncover forms of political-business corruption in their campaigns more
effectively. On the other side, from 2011, a concerted political protest movement under the

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leadership of the Maharastrian leader Anna Hazare promoted the implementation of a Jan Lokpal (Ombudsman) Bill to specifically target political parties, leaders and government ministers. Hazare outwardly projects himself as a Gandhian. His Ralegaon Siddhi based movement in Maharashtra is evidently based on Gandhi’s Phoenix farm. He promotes many similar campaigns to Gandhi (on social reform and alcoholism) and he has taken on similar religious idioms (Sengupta 2012: 593–601). Arrayed behind Hazare were a range of interests, including groups who had been involved in ‘legal activism’ such as the People’s Union for Civil Liberties. However, the political meanings attributed to Hazare have been quite different from those associated with anti-corruption movements of most grassroots citizens’ organisations. In response to Anna Hazare’s 2011 movement, the Independent Left critiqued the Jan Lokpal Bill as a movement of the urban middle classes and legal activists with an interest in a strong state, with potentially authoritarian undertones (Sitapati 2011: 39–45).

Given the largely ubiquitous and appealing nature of these discourses of declining political integrity, not to mention their cross-sectional popular appeal, they have always played a role in the everyday conduct of party politics across India. Indeed, it might further be argued that since the profits of political corruption, especially those traditionally involving links with local/regional business interests described generally as ‘licence-permit quota raj’ have always been publicly (if not explicitly) acknowledged in India as a necessary feature of political success, an anti-corruption stance is also a key strategic dynamic of the politics of patronage. In Paul Brass’s recent study of the anti-corruption crusading politician of 1940s–1980s UP, Chaudhuri Charan Singh, this relationship between corruption and anti-corruption, is essentially a political game in the cut and thrust of political funding and vote banks, especially at the time of elections. For Brass, networks of political corruption link to administrative action, and are based on a dialectic between corruption and anti-corruption lobbying against rivals. The latter is never about rooting out corruption. It is about either irritation about not having successfully gained access to resources for your own party – not having successfully corrupted, or it is about schadenfreude as your political opponents experience miseries and accusations. Or finally, it is about the promotion of ethnic or caste particularism – the need to corrupt, to promote the interests of your community (Brass 2012).

In this context, appeals to a lost (often Gandhian) political morality were a very useful, if risky strategy, in which accusations of corruption could be connected to all manner of sectional abuses, including the cronism that grew from both casteism and communalism. This game of political recrimination quickly found its natural home in the politics of local electoral politics, particularly at the state level, and thrived on what Kochanek and Brass traditionally described as forms of clientelism. In this sense, a rooted politics of anti-corruption has always existed alongside or even within the very political structures that have arguably allowed what Kejriwal described as a political-business ‘nexus’ to survive – the old factories of ‘briefcase’ or pork-barrel politics which kept Congress’s (and other parties’) electoral options alive, factions tentatively united and alliances usefully fluid (Brass 1965). Although these forms of corruption allegation are difficult to uncover and connect to specific scandals for contemporary India, it is possible to find their early forms in detailed historical records surrounding the nomination of candidates for India’s first general elections.

Here it is worth remembering that although the internal factions of the Congress worked rather like opposition parties in many respects, the clear difference was the degree of ‘insider’ information rival candidates for selection to a particular seat might have about each other. This was a dynamic for creating a fluidity of alliances that could change over time (Kothari 1964), and which necessitated the control of financial resources and incentives to build networks of followers. But this system could not have been exposed and direct corruption allegations...
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made, without the internal political structures allowing a form of reporting to the central party machinery, as well as a sense of dissatisfaction or conflict between particular leaders. In the 1951 state elections, candidate selection was worked out in a process by which District Congress Committees (DCC) sent recommendations to the State Parliamentary Board. Members of the DCC would therefore need to mobilise networks of supporters to get their men or women selected. However, the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) allowed those unsuccessful in their selection to send in an appeal or representation against a rival candidate. These representations contained, in a large number of cases, accusations of corruption. In the normal everyday conduct of politics, the sorts of relationships between business interests and politicians, or nexuses between leaders and bureaucrats that these accusations exposed would have been tolerated, unworthy of comment. But in a context of lost electoral selection, specific competitors had a reason to expose them. In other words, the very production of information about corruption was linked to the process of political competition at an everyday level.

These internal corruption allegations, in turn, generated a larger publicity of corruption which could in some instances grow into the scale of a scandal, connecting internal information to newspaper coverage. This was particularly the case for the most prominent provincial leaders, against whom the most involved, complex and widespread accusations were generated by numerous rivals. But equally, the fact that such accusations were based on political competition made them difficult to verify, and made it relatively easy for the leaders themselves to be shielded by the involvement of subordinates, particularly those within the administration. Three such leaders in the state of UP, who were subject to widespread corruption allegations during the 1951 state elections were Chaudhuri Charan Singh, C.B. Gupta and Ram Ratan Gupta. Charan Singh was accused specifically of packing various Congress organisations with members of his own caste and of getting control, unfairly, of the Meerut DCC. Importantly though, he responded to such allegations with the claim that he was bound to be the subject of nefarious corruption allegations, precisely because he himself had gone out of his way to root it out in others (Brass 2012: 156). C.B. Gupta who was one of UP’s first Food and Civil Supply Ministers and who went on to be Chief Minister, was accused in a lengthy and detailed set of allegations penned by a rival, Balkrishna Sharma, of freezing the supply of sugar for large bribes and for systematically distributing licences and permits (in 21 separate instances) to specific followers. Linked to Gupta’s followers and therefore also within the sphere of these accusations against the minister, was the industrialist from Kanpur, Ram Ratan Gupta. He was represented as a key figure in the promotion of blackmarketing activity in the election files, and one of the central ‘business’ contacts to the Gupta group. Perhaps most importantly, the extent of ‘mud-slinging’ between political rivals was particularly intense in the city of Kanpur which meant that the allegations against Ram Ratan Gupta featured in the press. This was also connected to the sense in which popular protests against corruption regularly identified a political-business network, and such stories circulated well and sold copy.

Highly significant in these factional political corruption allegations then, was the position of the bureaucracy, and its erstwhile connection to an older ‘corrupt’ colonial administration. On the one hand, because the colonial administration was expected to have been ‘naturally’ corrupt, it was equally expected that political leaders would control it for their clients. When the AICC received the complaints a common response was that investigation/action was not necessary, not least because the disgruntled appellant would not in any case have had the ‘influence’ to win the election. Implicit in this kind of response was the point that patronage and perhaps even forms of illicit profit associated with it, were a necessary condition of electoral success. Oh the other hand, such connections both shielded the leader from direct popular accusations of corruption and added to the discourse of corruption being derived
from older colonial structures. In the allegations of S.K.D. Paliwal and Balkrishna Sharma against C.B. Gupta, the latter had maintained his networks of influence via the distribution of licences and permits. The key administrative figure in this process was the Town or District Rationing Officer – the highest level bureaucrat in the food and civil supply machinery. It was more often than not this figure who became the direct victim of popular protests, unravelling scandals and the like, when in most cases they were acting on behalf of Members of Legislative Assemblies (Gould in Sherman et al. 2014: 34–63).

These patterns of administrative-political interaction formed the basis for more developed networks of administration-derived rent seeking and political patronage later in the century. Just as changes around independence made their role the subject of renewed public scrutiny, so later in the century specific changes in the nature of political consensus and the working of the economy (especially between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s) brought renewed interest in, and exposure of these routine forms of malfeasance. In the 1960s and 1970s, political use of bureaucratic transfer (ostensibly set up to prevent corruption, but ultimately encouraging it) (de Zwart 1999), was of course routinely continued. One retired Central Bank of India (CBI) officer told us,

I remember when I was DIG … Mr Bahuguna,14 who is now dead, he spoke to me once. He said to me, such and such person, you have Yadav, you have transferred him… I said, he has done 6 years in the district and under the rules he has got to go. He said, administratively, you are perfectly right, but my problem is that the President of the UP Congress is a Yadav and this man is a Yadav… and it is important to me now to keep the president of the Congress on my side for political reasons.15

As the work of Akhil Gupta, Craig Jeffrey and Barbara Harriss-White suggests in different ways, changes in the economy, and weakening of the Congress consensus from the mid- to late 1980s, began to expose these nexuses between politician and bureaucrat more clearly as an unacceptable state of affairs in popular critiques of corruption. At one level, this came about via government initiatives. In 1986 a government commission was set up in UP to explore the working of district administration. In its interviews with members of ‘the public’, it found that increasingly in the last few years, people had looked up ‘to muscle power, political patronage and money power for protection and their well being, rather than to the observance of law and the normal administrative apparatus’ (CDLA 1986: 67). For the ordinary citizen, the report noted that ‘… government employees at all levels, and specially at the local levels do not assist an ordinary citizen even in routine matters unless he uses political influence or lobbying or jumps the queue through improper action.’ (CDLA 1986). At another level it was clear in everyday discussion of corruption. Akhil Gupta’s ethnographic work for the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated an increasing popular awareness of the need to ‘perform’ certain kinds of approaches to state officials, and how a sense of this performance related to larger-scale notions of corruption as a whole in India. This, he argued, was related to changes in the media in which large-scale scandals and the idea of corruption at the national level came to inform citizens’ views of themselves via the prism of corruption. This in turn reflected back on everyday practices of approaching the state (Gupta 1995: 390–400). Since the passage of the Right to Information Act in 2005, this sense of performance with the state, has been increasingly carried out by activists working on behalf of the poor and marginalised, in seeking out information about a range of government welfare projects and public works. And once again, as the work of Sandeep Pandey in UP has shown, this activity has been based on a renewed effort to expose older forms of political-bureaucratic patronage and systematic failures (Pandey 2011).
Conclusion

Where does this leave anti-corruption as a project in modern India, beyond that of political mobilisation or strategy? If twentieth-century forms of anti-corruption have only traditionally arisen at certain moments of political instability, change or opportunity as seems evident in our comparison between early post-independent and contemporary India, then for the rest of the time, populations would appear to acquiesce in its existence as a ‘normal’ function of the economy and politics. As far as modern parties are concerned, candidates are expected to have ‘local influence’ – this has remained a constant throughout India’s democratic existence – and as with bureaucratic recruitment, influence is outwardly connected to the distribution of state resources (RBCC 1955: 125–145). Certainly, the highly systematic forms of rent seeking described by the likes of Robert Wade (1982), Craig Jeffrey (2001) and Barbara Harriss-White would appear to show that processes of accumulation take place both in normal phases of bureaucrat control/planned economic development (Wade), and in phases of economic deregulation (Harriss-White 1996). In this sense, we might view corruption as an alternative political economy, which is more explicitly ‘exposed’ when the political and social interests that it serves are radically disturbed. Anti-corruption movements and public discussion about corruption, for example, are naturally more common around times of electoral contest. But on a longer historical scale they have also seemed to appear at moments of state transition, for example, as colonialism declined in the 1940s–1950s, as the old network of Congress power disintegrated and the economy liberalised in the early 1990s, and as coalition politics became the norm, electronic media exploded and RTI gave grassroots access to protests in the 2010s.

This begs the question, for whom does corruption (and anti-corruption) ultimately matter in modern India? Being represented mainly as a concern of the urban and erstwhile high caste voter, movements such as those of Anna Hazare (and to some extent even AAP), perhaps become relatively empty domains of the (hitherto apathetic) middle classes’ complaints about a state that no longer adequately serves its interests. Arguably, today, this is a constituency brought up on the promises of development and prosperity in the wake of ‘liberalisation’ and ‘deregulation’ – the consumers of, for example, the BJP’s ‘India Shining’ campaign of 2004, who target their occupational frustrations on an older Nehruvian bureaucracy and planned economy (Sitapati 2011: 43–44). Equally, corruption is represented as being everywhere, permeating nearly all forms of government and even represented as a social as well as a bureaucratic plague. As a result, it can be extended to cover all manner of agencies and potential abuses. Appealing to every party, anyone, or anything can essentially turn out to be ‘corrupt’ and its tentacles reach everywhere. At another level, the notion of a lost Gandhian political integrity, particularly in the work of Hazare and the Hindu right, in different ways, represents a specifically middle-class notion of political conduct. This is a morality that presupposes a social connection to political-administrative interaction and the ‘rule of law’, within which such classes have a specific stake, as the holders of office and wielders of legal citizenship rights. This, in turn leads us into relativist arguments from the position of privilege. Ashis Nandy’s remarks at the Jaipur literary festival in January 2013 were interpreted as a commentary on the natural propensity for corruption of low castes (Iqbal 2014). Partha Chatterjee’s concept of paralegal mobilisation within ‘political society’ for those living on the margins also presupposes that anti-corruption is a largely urban middle-class privilege, and perhaps renders the very notion of corruption/anti-corruption relatively meaningless to the poor (Chatterjee 2004).

However, despite the largely urban middle-class support for Anna Hazare in 2011, and the currently recorded urban support for AAP, it is dangerous to assume that in the longer term
anti-corruption has had little or no purchase for the poor, either in urban or rural constituencies. Equally, associating ‘absence’ of anti-corruption mobilisation among lower castes in India as lack of interest, sets up a false opposition between a politics of ‘community’ and another of citizenship, suggesting that the former experience a different moral universe. Yet all inhabitants of the land seek to get their work done, protect their families, find a livelihood and make sense of state rules. Bearing in mind the means by which cultures of anti-corruption can be located in an array of critiques of the (colonial/neo-colonial) state, we might better explore the many ways in which notions of ‘corruption’ for the poor are potentially alternative rather than absent. As a number of popular movements have suggested too, they are perfectly capable of mobilising comparable discourses of integrity in governance and a politics of civic rights. Since 1998, the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT) movement in India, for example, has repeatedly evoked the idea of a ‘loss’ of potential citizenship rights that needs to be recovered. This has taken place via forms of civic engagement and protest that specifically target and expose police corruption, and mobilise around a specific form of critique of colonial inheritance.16 Another relatively large movement promoting RTI in rural UP for example, Asha Parivar, under the leadership of Sandeep Pandey, has had extensive success in mobilising the rural poor of Lucknow, Hardoi and surrounding districts in anti-corruption movements.17

Ultimately, just as collecting data on the nature and extent of corruption is inherently difficult, so too is the project of uncovering the reasons for anti-corruption. Whatever the historian or political scientist can ascertain about political behaviour, even at times of elections in India, is based on data that is inherently urban-skewed. It is probably the case that the electoral polls for 2014 for example, as in previous elections, are not a particularly accurate measure of how the vast majority of the electorate will vote. This is not just because of the myriad of regional parties, whose forms of voter mobilisation complicate these predictions. It is also the fact that these polls largely fail to accurately capture the voting habits of rural populations. Therefore relatively little is known either about the views of rural constituencies or the politics of anti-corruption. Equally, we might ask what will become of the agendas of anti-corruption, once the real business of forming a coalition government across a range of regional parties begins to take effect. Whether or not it radically changes the practice of politics in India, given its historical trajectories, the appeal of anti-corruption is unlikely to diminish for the foreseeable future.

Notes
1 Vadodara District Sugarcane Grower’s Cooperative Union.
2 For example, see the humorous complaints about rationing and supply corruption in Pioneer, 22 June 1949.
3 For example, a series of such scandals were reported in the Citizen Weekly, 12 February 1949, and reported in Bombay 3 March 1949.
4 See ‘Report of the Anti-Corruption Committee’, General Administration Department (hereafter GAD), Box 594, File 70/1938.
5 Interview with R.K. Trivedi, 30 October 2005, Lucknow.
7 Jawaharlal Nehru to Purushottam Das Tandon, 18 February 1949, Sardar Patel’s Correspondence 1945–50, Vol. 8, pp. 289–289.
8 In August 1997, the Election Commissioner G.V.G. Krishnamurti revealed that 1,500 candidates contesting elections in the 1996 General Election to the Lok Sabha had criminal records for murder, dacoity, rape, theft or extortion. Nearly 700 members of the 4,722 members of the State Legislative Assemblies were involved in criminal trials and cases were pending against them.
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9 These complaints can be found in the AICC election files in the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (hereafter NMML).
10 ‘Allegation against the proposed candidature of C. Charan Singh from Bhagpat (West) of Meerut District’, AICC Papers, Election Files, File No. 4602, NMML.
11 ‘Appeal of Balkrishna Sharma’, in ‘Representations against Shri Chandra Bhan Gupta for selection to the State Assembly Elections’, AICC Papers, File no. 4709 1951, NMML.
12 ‘Representations against Ram Ratan Gupta for Hardoi District (North) in the State Assembly Elections’, AICC Papers, File No. 4674 1951, NMML.
13 Hindustan Times, 12 November 1951; Pioneer, 12 November 1951; Aaj, 13 November 1951.
14 Hemvati Vandan Bahuguna was Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh between 1973 and 1975.
16 See, for example, the DNT Rights Action Group publications under the editorship of Ganesh Devy from 1998.
17 Some of the RTI work of Asha Parivar can be found at http://ashaparivar.org/projects/jsk/ (accessed on 1 May 2014).

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