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Across the Stolen Ponds: The Political Geography of Social Welfare in Rural Eastern India

--Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	<p>Despite a strong state and a slew of poverty reduction/welfare programmes, the provision of basic services to the rural poor in India remains puzzlingly inadequate. Moving away from the usual trend of aggregate welfare impact analysis that characterises most studies on this theme, we explore the on-ground distributive politics around the implementation of India's flagship social welfare programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Based on a mixed-method study in the state of West Bengal, using observational primary data and ethnographic material across 46 sample village councils (gram panchayats) from 2013 to 2018, we draw attention to the non-homogeneity in the way political incentives of welfare provision are orientated towards different parties and individual stakeholders. In doing so, we traverse across multiple domains of political economic concepts, particularly that of partisan alignment, clientelism and patronage, and unpack the differentiated constellation of localised political incentives founded on a unique form of transactional paradigm called settings. We show how these on-ground transactions provide a multitude of political incentives for ruling/opposition political parties and panchayat functionaries, often going beyond conventional ethno-favouritism ideas of patronage and assuming a more personalised context. In turn, we also argue that the idea of settings is useful in providing a deeper understanding of local state-society relations and the political geography of welfare provisions in rural eastern India.</p>

Cover Letter

Please find our paper, titled: **Across the Stolen Ponds: The Political Geography of Social Welfare in Rural Eastern India** attached herewith.

We wish to confirm that this is an original paper, not submitted elsewhere, and there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication. Funding for this research was provided by the University of Portsmouth, which has been indicated in the relevant section of the submission platform.

We understand that the Corresponding Author is the sole contact for the editorial process. We confirm that we have provided a current, correct email address which is accessible by the Corresponding Author.

We hope this paper meets the standards of your esteemed journal.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Signed:

Ritanjan Das*, **Subhasish Dey****, and **Ranjita Neogi*****

02.09.2020

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Across the Stolen Ponds: The Political Geography of Social Welfare in Rural Eastern India

Abstract

Despite a strong state and a slew of poverty reduction/welfare programmes, the provision of basic services to the rural poor in India remains puzzlingly inadequate. Moving away from the usual trend of aggregate welfare impact analysis that characterises most studies on this theme, we explore the on-ground distributive politics around the implementation of India's flagship social welfare programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Based on a mixed-method study in the state of West Bengal, using observational primary data and ethnographic material across 46 sample village councils (*gram panchayats*) from 2013 to 2018, we draw attention to the non-homogeneity in the way political incentives of welfare provision are orientated towards different parties and individual stakeholders. In doing so, we traverse across multiple domains of political economic concepts, particularly that of *partisan alignment*, *clientelism* and *patronage*, and unpack the differentiated constellation of localised political incentives founded on a unique form of transactional paradigm called *settings*. We show how these on-ground transactions provide a multitude of political incentives for ruling/opposition political parties and panchayat functionaries, often going beyond conventional ethno-favouritism ideas of patronage and assuming a more personalised context. In turn, we also argue that the idea of *settings* is useful in providing a deeper understanding of local state-society relations and the political geography of welfare provisions in rural eastern India.

Keywords: NREGS, *settings*, *partisan alignment*, *clientelism*, *panchayat*, *West Bengal*

Response to reviewer's comments

We thank both the reviewers for providing valuable insights and encouraging comments about our study. We have provided detailed responses to all the comments below (in blue), indicating page numbers, section numbers and paragraphs wherever necessary. All changes in the manuscript has also been made in a blue font.

Reviewer #1:

Review comments for the paper entitled "Across the Stolen Ponds: The Political Geography of Social Welfare in Rural Eastern India". I find the paper address a very important and relevant topic for the current development perspective in India. It reads very well and presents a grassroots level work.

Authors' Response: We thank the reviewer for the positive and encouraging comment

However, the following comments can improve the quality of the paper;

First, the paper shows the reason behind the stolen ponds in West Bengal. It finds that shifting political agendas can be decisive in the ever-changing rural political landscapes. Rising political competition is being significantly correlated with better NREGS performance. It also describes many real stories from the survey data. But my question is that in West Bengal there is a tendency to have the dominant part for a long time. Earlier were the Communist Party and now Trinamool Congress (TMC). The paper would have been more innovative if it would have been discussed along with this scenario, how NREGS performance can be improved. How we can reduce corruption which is attached with NREAGS. What could be solutions? Whether local people are not aware of that? If they aware then why so much corruption? Does decentralization has failed to achieve its significant role? Does there is a failure link between state-level and gram panchayats level political power? My point is that we need to have more fruitful real policy implications which are missing currently.

Authors' Response: This is a relevant observation, and could have potentially been the central focus of a similar (but larger) study. Following the reviewer's suggestion, we have now indicated some possible directions of future debates around policy solutions in the conclusion (page 31-32), including a reference to the ambiguous relation between democratic decentralisation and corruption.

It was, however, not our purpose to focus on policy implications in this research. Instead, our objective was to problematise the notion of partisan alignment and localised state-society relations in the context of a specific regional case study. At the same time, we would also like to point out that the study does offer some insights to all the questions the reviewer raises, as discussed below.

On the question of what can be done to reduce corruption in NREGS implementation, we have pointed out some of the academic literature and media reports that dwell on this issue, while also emphasising the fact that the instances of corruption/leakages do not take away from the fact that NREGS is indeed reaching the poorest and marginalised communities and creating useful assets in the rural economy (page 16). Alongside, we have argued that it is not the issue of corruption itself, but its discursive framing (the paradigm of settings) that we find analytically relevant and explore in this study (page 17-18).

On the question of local peoples' awareness (or lack of awareness) of corruption, sections 4.1 and 4.3 squarely focus on this issue. In developing the idea of *settings* in section 4.1 we argue that it undergirds most practices of corruption, and we also show how it is an all pervasive phenomenon in which people from rural communities (such as the supervisor, the VLE, GRS etc. – they belong to and are embedded in those very societies) proactively partake, and their motivations for doing so. Section 4.3 explores the symbiotic relationship between the people and the NREGS functionaries, and shows how the former is not only aware of, but draws benefits out of the *settings* arrangements. Even section 4.2, in discussing the alignment patterns, points out the attraction for the village youth towards a certain upward mobility that makes them willing to partake in such arrangements (the reference to bicycles vs. motorbikes).

Finally, our response to the last two questions about the problems of decentralisation is hinted at in the conclusion, but we have purposefully kept it subdued. We want to retain the focus on developing a deeper understanding of the layered nature of the local state society relations that take shape *in relation to* the existing decentralised structure, and not a critique of the latter. The scope of our study also does not permit venturing a claim about 'failures of decentralisation'; in fact, we have indicated the opposite in the third paragraph of the conclusion, much in the same vein as Corbridge and Srivastava (2013). However, drawing from Vèron *et al* (2006), we have now also alluded to the fact that the kind of underlying social structures described in this study can potentially inhibit the effectiveness of a conventional decentralisation agenda.

Second: the introduction part is very wordy. There is no clear information about the count of rural poor and the number of people who benefited from the NREGS of the selected study areas. Therefore, the importance of the study is not clear from the introduction part.

Authors' Response: The introduction has now been edited down. And without adding further details to the introduction, the rural poverty levels in the two chosen districts have now been incorporated in Section 3.1 that elaborates the sampling strategy (page 9-10). This was an omission on our part, and we thank the reviewer for pointing it out.

Detailed breakdown of NREGS registration, including total number of registered families and individuals, registered SC/ST families and individuals, and male/female registrations in the selected sites were already included in Table C-1 (Appendix C). We have also alluded to this data in the first paragraph of Section 3.2 (Exploratory Analysis).

1 Third, there is no explanation about the study period 2013-18. The sample is representative of the
2 alignment patterns and reflective of the post-2011 political transition. NREGS was launched in
3 2006. The Left Front coalition government won seven consecutive elections (1977-2006),
4 eventually relinquishing office to its main opposition party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), in
5 2011. So it could have been better to compare before 2011 and after 2011 scenarios than only
6 considering after 2011.
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10 *Authors' Response:* A number of reasons prompted our choice of the period. First, while 2011 saw
11 a change in guard in the state government, the alignment patterns that we examine at the GP and
12 PS levels mostly took shape after the 2013 *panchayat* elections, with the TMC making significant
13 inroads in all the three-tiers of the *panchayat* system. This has been further explained in the
14 introduction now (page 4). The reference to 'post-2011 political transition' (page 10) has now been
15 changed to 'post-2011 political environment in the state' to avoid any confusion.
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20 To clarify further, as *panchayat* elections are conducted separately from state elections, the 2011
21 elections did not have any impact on the *panchayats*' political composition. Therefore, had we opted
22 for the previous *panchayat* period (2008-2013), the proportion of the unaligned component in our
23 pooled sample (i.e. different parties controlling GP and PS) would have been significantly lower
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27 Second, as pointed out in the introduction (page 4), there is extensive literature on the clientelist
28 practices of the Left Front, but not so much in case of the TMC, and next to nothing in the context
29 of NREGS. This is an important gap that we are trying to address in this study.
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33 Third, while the reviewer is correct in pointing out that NREGS commenced in 2006, digitisation
34 of all records began sporadically from 2008-2009 (see Dey and Bedi, 2010. 'The NREGS in
35 Birbhum', *Economic and Political Weekly* (45:41), 19-25), and thus data for only a couple of years would
36 have been available at best had we focused on the pre-2011 period.
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40 Finally, in the NREGS public data portal
41 (https://nregarep2.nic.in/netnrega/dynamic2/dynamicreport_new4.aspx), GP level breakup of
42 data is available only from 2011-12 onwards. Pre-2011 data is accessible from the archive section,
43 but only up to the district level. Additionally, NREGS social audit register website
44 (https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/SocialAuditFindings/SA_home.aspx) provides data only for the
45 previous five years at any point (for e.g. the earliest period for which data is currently available is
46 2016-17).
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52 Fourth, though the paper has very strong theoretical arguments, the empirical strategy is very poor.
53 Regression models used a simple OLS estimation. Therefore, advanced level regression models
54 such as Multinomial Logit Model can be used to have robust results.
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58 *Authors' Response:* Our main dependent variable (Y variable in the regression analysis) in the
59 confirmatory study is 'GP level annual unskilled wage payment under NREGS', which is a
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continuous variable. Hence we chose to use OLS specification. For a multinomial logit regression the Y-variable in the regression specification has to be a categorical variable, which ours is not.

However, we welcomed this suggestion and created a new dependent variable called *performance* which is a categorical variable. This categorical variable takes the value 1 if the GP is a *high* performing GP in respect of NREGS performance (that is if GP's annual total unskilled NREGS wage payment is higher than 10 million INR), 2 if GP is a *high-medium* performing GP (that is if GP's annual total unskilled NREGS wage payment is between 7.5 and 10 million INR), 3 if *low-medium* performing GP (that is if GP's annual total unskilled NREGS wage payment is between 5 and 7.5 million INR) and 4 if *low* performing GP (that is if GP's annual total unskilled NREGS wage payment is below 5 million INR). After this categorisation of GPs based on NREGS performance, we have 34.69% GPs are category 1 or *high* performing GP, 22.45% are category 2 or *high-medium* performing GP, 18.37% are category 3 or *low-medium* performing GP and 24.49% are category 4 or *low* performing GP. Eventually we run the multinomial logit regression with this categorical Y-variable. Results from the multinomial logit regression are reported in Table D-1, 3, and 4. We have also reported the discussion based on these new tables.

Fifth: section 4: The Political Geography of NREGS is too lengthy. It should be reduced by highlighting only the main points.

Authors' Response: We have streamlined the 'Political Geography of NREGS' section keeping the comments of both reviewers in mind. We hope that the revised version will meet the reviewer's expectations.

We would also like to point out given the mixed-method design of the study, this section relies on thick descriptions to develop a rich picture. Therefore, reducing it just to the highlights would lose some of the nuances – especially around the use of language/expressions and social disposition – that we have tried to explore.

Reviewer #2:

The manuscript analyzes the implementation of one of the world's largest poverty-alleviation schemes in the world, India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). The scheme is relatively innovative as it is designed to be "demand oriented" and underpinned by a legal rights for the rural poor to access at least 100 days of work per year. Given NREGS's size and its innovative aspects, it is very relevant to critically analyze its politicized implementation on the ground along party and personal alignments. The manuscript does this in the case of West Bengal, through a sizeable study in two selected districts based on statistical analyses of official NREGS expenditure figures and "35-40" in-depth interviews with local politicians, panchayat personnel, residents, etc.

The study concludes that it is questionable whether NREGS, despite being conceived as a right-based contract between the rural poor and the central state, "challenges the social relations

underpinning poverty enough ... in light of the arrangements (of clientelism observed in the case studies)." This general finding will have resonance beyond India; publication of this study in World Development therefore seems appropriate.

At the smaller scale of West Bengal, the study points to a change in the local (rural) political geography post-2011, when the TMC replaced the more than 30-year-old Left Front hegemony. Studies related to this period remain relatively rare and the manuscript make an important empirical contribution here.

Apart from its relevance, the manuscript is well written and well structured. The arguments are well presented (although the Highlights should be revised). The mixed-methodology approach appears sound and the sample size (particularly for the quantitative analysis) is large enough to draw some conclusions. The qualitative material is very well presented through thick descriptions and interesting quotes from local stakeholders. There are some original findings, for example, the widespread practice of "poaching" elected panchayat members from opposition parties after the election. Or the scrutiny applied to the workings of CPM members.

Authors' Response: We thank the reviewer for the positive and supportive comments. The observation about number of interviews is well taken, and it has now been changed. The Highlights have also been revised.

Despite methodological soundness and originality, the manuscript has a few shortcomings. Perhaps most importantly, the literature reviews are not comprehensive enough to bring out the potentially wider theoretical and empirical contributions of the study.

First, the literature on NREGS - and similar schemes elsewhere - is not reviewed in depth; instead, references are just listed. A proper engagement with this literature has the potential to render the article more relevant and meaningful for academics and policymakers beyond India. Based on this study, one really wonders whether rights-based employment schemes have any advantages over unconditional cash transfers, for example.

Authors' Response: We have now included an elaborated note (xiii) on the NREGS literature as well as other similar schemes in the past in section 2.2, and also briefly in the introduction (note i).

Second, the theoretical literature on clientelism and patronage democracy beyond India is not explored (again apart from listing references without engaging with them) - an additional important reference may be Berenschot & Aspinall (2020). On the other hand, the extensively cited work by Chandan on ethno-favoritism relates to UP (and the BSP) and is not specific enough, and not appropriate, for the case of West Bengal where caste/community relations are of a different nature. However, the emic concept of "settings" to describe layered relations of corruption (somewhere between principal-agent relations and corruption networks) is very appropriate. Would it be possible to further theorize this?

1 *Authors' Response:* The theoretical literature has now been further developed in Section 2.1 (page
2 5-6, and also note vi). We thank the reviewer for pointing out the Berenschot & Aspinall (2020)
3 article, which has now been cited in the text (page 6). The reference to Chandra (2004) has been
4 reduced. We have also tried to briefly expand the conceptual framing of *settings* in the context of
5 the wider literature in the conclusion.
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10 Third, if the authors want to highlight a turning point in the local political geography and
11 anthropology of West Bengal post-2011, a more comprehensive literature review of rural politics,
12 political society and poverty-alleviation schemes would lead to more nuanced insights and an
13 improved temporal comparison. I could think of the works of Lieten, Mallick, Ruud, Rogaly, etc.
14 and the various publications from the research project by Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava and
15 Véron that also discussed the preceding scheme of NREGS, the EAS. Véron et al. 2006 on
16 decentralized corruption, for instance, points to the emergence of political entrepreneurs in the
17 late 1990s, or career panchayat members, as the authors put it. The transition to more
18 personalized clientelism in West Bengal may have been more gradual than the manuscript
19 suggests. For this reason, I think the following statement on p. 30 goes too far : p. 30: goes too
20 far "the settings and the cut-money saga under TMC-rule hint at a semi- legitimisation of
21 personalised incentive structures animating GP-level dynamics, trumping political/party
22 motivation for the first time" (own emphasis).
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28 *Authors' Response:* We agree that making a strong claim about pre and post-2011 scenarios require
29 a more comprehensive review of the Left Front era and earlier poverty alleviation schemes.
30 However, that would significantly reorient the focus of the paper and take it to a different direction.
31 Therefore, we have now toned down our claim about a decisive 'turning point', arguing that the
32 developments described in the study indicate a 'gradual transition' in political practices instead.
33 For the same reason, and also due to space restrictions, we haven't gone into a detailed review of
34 the wider political economic studies debating the earlier years of the Left Front (Lieten, Mallick,
35 Rogaly, etc.), but have alluded to this literature in a detailed note (iii) as part of the introduction.
36 The statement that the referee has highlighted has also been edited accordingly. We have also made
37 reference to the EAS programme in Section 4.3 (page 29) as well as note xiii.
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43 We also thank the reviewer for reminding us of the Véron, Williams *et al* study, which was a crucial
44 omission on our part. We have now included insights from this study in several parts of the paper.
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49 This brings us to empirical part of the manuscript. It convincingly shows how the panchayats have
50 been significantly strengthened through NREGS, resulting in some reconfiguration of the local
51 political geography and anthropology. However, the role of the bureaucracy, particularly that of
52 the BDO, is not assessed. Does the executive officer at the block level not play any (important)
53 role in supervising the implementation of NREGS schemes and the related corruption? Are they
54 forming another setting together with the Pradhans? More information on the role of the
55 bureaucracy would be useful - but the remark that since computerization spot checks in the field
56 have become rarer has not gone amiss; it perhaps needs to be more highlighted.
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1 *Authors' Response:* Limited evidence was found about involvement of the BDO/higher PS level
2 bureaucracy beyond what has been discussed in Section 4.2 about GP-PS alignment. However, we
3 have now elaborated this further in note lii. Some additional evidence has also been provided about
4 computerisation leading to decreased transparency (note xxxiii).
5

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7 Furthermore, more information on the villagers' view of corruption would be useful. How is it
8 possible for the political parties, particularly the TMC, to get away with, and stay in power
9 despite, systemic corruption, all the 'stolen ponds'? The manuscript seems to hint that this
10 cannot be reduced to different party ideologies and functionings ('programmatic' CPI-M vs.
11 'clientelist' or perhaps rather 'populist' TMC). I would agree with this view. Earlier, the CPI-M
12 controlled their panchayat members very effectively against individualized corruption with the
13 aim not to lose votes; Mamanta-di's rhetorical efforts that are described in the manuscript look
14 rather pale in comparison - and they don't seem to be reinforced and enacted upon by local
15 cadres and party committees. Ironically, it seems that TMC cadres now control and hinder the
16 individualized corruption of CPM members...Anyways, has popular opposition to the multiple
17 "settings" become weaker because of a general alienation from politics, because of generally
18 reduces poverty levels and increased out-migration, or because of an increased amount of funds
19 available in rural West Bengal. The data presented seems to point to the latter; I found one quote
20 by Ganguly particularly insightful: "Such settings are not new in West Bengal, but the
21 proliferation of money through NREGS has opened the doors wider than ever". Is the
22 abundance of funds from the central state keeping everybody quiet and happy? It may be
23 necessary to elaborate on this point to solve the puzzle.
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31 *Authors' Response:* We had kept our emphasis on this point limited, as we think more evidence is
32 necessary before making a claim in this regard. However, we have now briefly elaborated this point
33 in the concluding parts of Section 4.3 (page 30).
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37 Some smaller points are written directly in the manuscript (see attachment).
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41 *Authors' Response:* All of these points have now been addressed. We thank the reviewer for going
42 through the manuscript so closely.
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Highlights

- Non-homogeneous political incentives are found to determine social welfare provisions in rural India.
- On ground distributive politics around welfare provision is shaped by innovative forms of clientelist transactions.
- Political alignment patterns within local governments are decisive in shaping distributive outcomes.
- Underlying social structures and practices can inhibit democratic decentralisation initiatives.

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Abstract

Despite a strong state and a slew of poverty reduction/welfare programmes, the provision of basic services to the rural poor in India remains puzzlingly inadequate. Moving away from the usual trend of aggregate welfare impact analysis that characterises most studies on this theme, we explore the on-ground distributive politics around the implementation of India's flagship social welfare programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Based on a mixed-method study in the state of West Bengal, using observational primary data and ethnographic material across 46 sample village councils (*gram panchayats*) from 2013 to 2018, we draw attention to the non-homogeneity in the way political incentives of welfare provision are orientated towards different parties and individual stakeholders. In doing so, we traverse across multiple domains of political economic concepts, particularly that of *partisan alignment*, *clientelism* and *patronage*, and unpack the differentiated constellation of localised political incentives founded on a unique form of transactional paradigm called *settings*. We show how these on-ground transactions provide a multitude of political incentives for ruling/opposition political parties and panchayat functionaries, often going beyond conventional ethno-favouritism ideas of patronage and assuming a more personalised context. In turn, we also argue that the idea of *settings* is useful in providing a deeper understanding of local state-society relations and the political geography of welfare provisions in rural eastern India.

Keywords: NREGS, settings, partisan alignment, clientelism, panchayat, West Bengal

1. Introduction

The peasant persists. Albeit predictions from across the political spectrum about the peasantry gradually withering away, they continue to remain an important ‘problematic’ in contemporary global South (Roy, 2014). In India, ever keen to signal the attempts at subaltern self-improvement, successive governments have long sought to provide the lowest constituent of peasantry - those alienated from the means of production - with assured employment and welfare measures (Corbridge and Srivastava, 2013). And yet, the rural poor remains exacerbated by institutionalised social discrimination, contemporary globalisation either bypassing them, or worsening their chronic crisis further (Tilly, 1999). In fact, India presents a perplexing picture, with a long history of poverty reduction programmes, many directly targeting the poorest of the poor, but with little to show for (Kapur, 2010). Over the last few decades, a wide array of political economic literature has grappled with this paradox. How is it, as Corbridge *et al* (2013) argue, that in one of the world’s most robust parliamentary democracies, the government is hardly adequately responsive in providing basic services, failing egregiously more often than not? The paradoxical oddity of a strong state with a distressing inability to deliver welfare programmes naturally raises many questions: what accounts for such state of affairs? And how do the lives and politics of the rural poor take shape when confronted by such structural inequalities?

Persuaded by this enduring oddity, this paper seeks to explore the on-ground distributive politics around social welfare programmes in rural India, drawing attention to the non-homogeneous orientation of political incentives for different parties and individual stakeholders. Based on an exploratory study in the state of West Bengal, we present a rich picture of the constellation of political competition and incentives coalescing around India’s flagship welfare programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Arguably the largest global public works scheme (Muralidharan *et al*, 2016), NREGS represents a constitutional commitment by the

1 Indian state to guarantee 100 days of annual employment to all rural households upon demanding
2 work. Between 2006 and 2016, the scheme provided 2.2 billion person-days of work to 45.5 million
3 rural households, with a total budget of \$7.5 billion, close to 1% of India's GDP (Marcesse, 2018).
4
5 As a state-owned, demand-driven and rights-based programme, NREGS represents a bold attempt
6
7 to initiate social protection for the rural poor (Roy, 2015; Drèze 2011).ⁱ Yet, an understanding of
8
9 the programme's beneficiaries and stakeholders' engagement with it, and the emanating political
10
11 practices, remain limited at best. Shifting focus from a literature dominated by aggregate welfare
12
13 impact studiesⁱⁱ to the everyday engagements can lead to a better understanding of local state-
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15 society relations, and more significantly, the political geography of welfare provisions in rural
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17 eastern India.
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26 Theoretically, we navigate across two broad categories. First, the influence of political institutions
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28 on economic redistribution, in particular the notion of *partisan alignment* (upper government-tiers
29
30 allocating disproportionately more funds to politically aligned lower-tiers). There is significant
31
32 evidence of alignment effects across India (Khemani, 2014), and worldwide (Asher and Novosad,
33
34 2015). However, the nature of alignment in rural constituents is often very different from upper-
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36 tiers, rendering an opacity to the distributive politics around it (Dey and Sen, 2016). This takes us
37
38 to the second category – the multifarious clientelist structures constituting these opaque processes.
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40 We acknowledge Chandra's conceptualisation of *patronage democracy* (2004), but go beyond it in
41
42 examining the incentive clusters that both coalesce and dissipate traditional alignment and
43
44 clientelist patterns. We are also mindful of Mitra's assertion, that there is limited attention to the
45
46 'political universe of local government in terms of real flesh-and-blood political actors, pursuing
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48 their interests drawing on all the resources at their command' (2001:109), and strive to address this
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50 gap somewhat.
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1 The political history of West Bengal brings a special flavour to this universe. The state was an
2 island of political stability for 34 years. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPIM)-led Left
3 Front coalition government won seven consecutive elections (1977-2006), eventually relinquishing
4 office to the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in 2011. The CPIM-Left Front introduced significant
5 land reforms, tenancy laws, and pursued what is often considered to be the most successful
6 democratic decentralisation initiative via the *panchayati-raj* (institutionalised form of rural local
7 government) (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006).ⁱⁱⁱ However, a series of studies – Bardhan *et al* (2014,
8 2009), Bardhan and Mookherjee (2012, 2010, 2006), Das (2015) - have provided strong evidence
9 of persistent clientelist structures in the state. At the same time, majority of the available literature
10 focuses on the Left era, with fairly limited exploration of clientelist transactions post-2011,
11 especially in the context of programmes such as NREGS. The shifting political landscape therefore
12 is an important backdrop against which the narratives unfold.

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31 Methodologically, we adopt a mixed-method approach, using observational primary data and
32 ethnographic material from 46 sample *gram panchayats* (village councils/GP) (see section 3.1 for a
33 discussion on sampling). The first part of the study draws from a simple econometric analysis using
34 184 data points (46 GPs over four consecutive years: 2014-15 to 2017-18), comprising GP-level
35 variables on election results, NREGS outcome and other GP-level controls. The second part is
36 based on 40 in-depth qualitative interviews with GP and NREGS functionaries, political leaders
37 and the rural poor, conducted over three months in 2018. The period under study is between 2013
38 and 2018 *panchayat* elections. It was a crucial time; the Left Front had relinquished office in 2011,
39 and TMC further solidified its hold on rural Bengal in the 2013 *panchayat* elections, capturing
40 several CPIM controlled GPs and district boards. Political churnings on the ground were thereby
41 intense, and exploring questions of alignment and patronage in such circumstances can provide
42 deeper insights. The paper is organised as follows: the next section reviews the cross-cutting
43 theoretical schema that gives this study its conceptual anchor. Sections three and four present the

quantitative and qualitative components respectively. The concluding section underlines the broader transformative trends in the political geography of social welfare around everyday rural governance.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 *Clientelism, Partisan Alignment and Patronage Democracy*

A long standing criticism of the traditional perspectives about political competition^{iv} has been their inability to capture the heterogeneous policy preferences of elected officials in determining redistributive outcomes, i.e. political distortions (like clientelism). Originally argued by Scott (1969), and extensively discussed by Bardhan and Mookherjee (2010, 2012, 2017), Bardhan *et al* (2009, 2014), etc., clientelism can be understood as strategic transfers made by political parties/governments to poor, disadvantaged groups as means of securing their votes. In spite of a superficial pro-poor image, such quid pro quo practices create biases towards private transfer programmes with temporary benefits. They are also inherently discretionary, benefitting narrow subsets of targeted beneficiaries, and a ‘potent tool used by incumbent governments to consolidate their grip on power’ (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2012:2). Clientelism has emerged as a strong explanation to the puzzle of democratically elected governments rarely acting in the interests of large sections of the population. For example, Stokes (2005) describes a ‘perverse accountability’ where parties threaten to punish electorates for voting for another party in Argentina; Rizzo (2015) observes the varying motivations behind strategic distribution of resources across electoral cycles in Mexico; in Paraguay, vote-buying is sustained by an internalised norm of reciprocity and obligation (Finan and Shechter, 2012); and in Chile, employment relationships are skewed towards employers controlling the workers' political behaviour (Baland and Robinson, 2008). In India, strong clientelist structures exist in several states (Anderson *et al*, 2012; Bjorkman, 2013).^v More recently, clientelistic vote mobilisation has emerged as a prominent electoral strategy in many

1 countries. As Berenschot and Aspinall (2020:1-2) observe in a comparative study of nine election
2 campaigns (Mexico, Ghana, Sudan, Turkey, Indonesia, Philippines, Caribbean Islands, and
3 Malaysia): ‘given the centrality of clientelist politics throughout the world...it could be argued that
4 [clientelist politics]....constitute the...most common form of democracy.’
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11 The clientelist hypothesis overlaps with a persuasive argument of fiscal federalism: politically
12 motivated intergovernmental transfers resulting in inefficient allocation and negative
13 consequences for the poor (Dixit and Londregan, 1995; Johansson 2003). Evidence exists across
14 the global South and North; from Philippines where investments in broad public services impacts
15 vote buying behaviour (Khemani, 2014), Ghana where formula indicators and weightings of
16 governmental grants were amended to produce politically desired transfers (Banful, 2011), to
17 politically motivated agricultural credit distribution by public banks in India (Cole, 2009). In the
18 US, such practices have been observed going as far back as Roosevelt’s New Deal (Anderson and
19 Tollison, 1991).^{vi} Now, a common finding in this diverse literature is a very specific type of
20 clientelist structure known as *partisan alignment*: upper government-tiers allocating more funds to
21 lower-tiers or constituencies which they control (politically aligned) than to those controlled by
22 the opposition (politically unaligned). Several studies have demonstrated partisan alignment to be
23 dominant in social welfare provisions, both in India (Dasgupta 2009; Asher and Novosad 2015;
24 Arulampalam *et al.*, 2009) and elsewhere.^{vii}
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47 The clientelist-partisan alignment hypothesis brings the focus squarely to the effects of political
48 incentives in intergovernmental transfers. However, it also presents an observational difficulty.
49 Poor governance may arise for several reasons, and omitted unobserved factors may lead both to
50 local elites running the political show and poor governance outcomes without a causal link
51 (Anderson *et al.*, 2012). Bardhan *et al.* (2014) thus rightly question the opaque process by which
52 resources percolate through multiple government tiers. Also, are the incentives purely political or
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could there be other forms? This limited understanding also stems from the fact that ‘not much effort is invested in treating *panchayati-raj*...in terms of the political perceptions and choices of the people who form the backdrop to these political processes’ (Mitra, 2001:109).

This leads us towards another important category of anthropological literature. A convincing argument explaining the strong state-poor services dichotomy comes from Chandra’s (2004) description of a *patronage democracy*, where the allocation of jobs, welfare services, and access to resources remain subject to the discretion of individual bureaucrats and politicians, thus opening up huge rent-seeking possibilities. For politicians, controlling benefits through patronage is a more reliable way of ensuring support and collecting rent than standing on public policy platforms (Corbridge *et al*, 2013). Chandra further argues that voters tend ‘to favour co-ethnics in the delivery of benefits and votes’ (2004:12), i.e., rather than the party or its leaders’ promises, it is *who* he/she is what matters most; the politics of such ethno-favouritism being constructed around caste, language, religion and other markers of identity. However, much of the opacity in *how* these structural relationships are incentivised on ground - or indeed whether there are other forms of clientelist structures – still remains unexplored.

2.2 *Panchayati-Raj and NREGS in West Bengal*

West Bengal was one of the forerunners in establishing the three-tier *panchayati-raj* system, consisting of *zilla parishad* (ZP: district level top-tier); *panchayat samiti* (PS: sub-district/block level intermediate-tier); and *gram panchayat* (GP: village level lowest-tier). Within each GP there are typically 15-20 wards or *gram sansad* (GS). In total, there are 22 ZPs, 341 PSs, 3342 GPs and 45552 GS/wards across the entire state.^{viii} GP elections take place every five years to elect one ward member per GS, and all elected ward members form the GP board. The party with majority members rules the board, with its leader serving as the *pradhan* (*panchayat* leader). Albeit multi-party

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affairs, in reality there were only two major contesting parties in GP elections, TMC and CPIM, with the Congress being a distant third apart from a few places.^{ix}

On average, 25 public work programmes are implemented by each GP, with NREGS receiving 85-90 percent of its annual expenditure of Rs. 25 to 30 million^x (Dey and Sen, 2016). NREGS devolves considerable power in planning and allocating resources to the GP, generating employment through schemes such as road construction, water conservation-harvestation, afforestation, construction of waterbodies, irrigation canals, etc. GPs have to issue job cards, and provide employment within 15 days of someone demanding work from a pre-sanctioned^{xi} shelf of projects.^{xii} Payments are directly transferred to bank/post office accounts. Every GP employs a number overseeing authorities, such as the NS (*nirman sahayak* – engineer-in-charge), VLE (village level entrepreneur - computer operators), STP (skilled technical person) and GRS (*gram rozgar sevak* or village employment helpers) providing technical/administrative assistance to the NS, on-field supervisors (usually one per 25 workers), etc.

Now, programmes like NREGS can easily incentivise politicians to create conditions for clientelist transactions (Zimmerman, 2015). Some authors have argued that NREGS is ‘post-clientelistic’, given the right for *everyone* to get work on demand, leaving local implementers with no power to select beneficiaries according their clientelistic considerations (Elliott, 2011). This is however doubtful, as work is ‘rationed’ and implementation faults limit the availability of work that can be distributed, which in turn ‘force’ local implementers to allocate work discretionally (Marcesse, 2018).^{xiii} In West Bengal, Dey and Sen (2016) have shown GP-ruling parties allocating significantly more funds to politically aligned GSs; Das (2015) has documented extensive political favouritism, with ruling party supporting households being more likely to receive benefits. In fact, matters appear even more complicated on a closer look. First, the issue of differentiated alignment impact within GPs themselves. Calling it a ‘final unresolved issue’, Dey and Sen (2016:3) point out that

Left and TMC-GPs distinctively differ in their partisan alignment practices, the trends being much sharper for TMC. But it is not clear why. Are the clientelist imperatives and strategies different across the spectrum of political competition in the GPs? If yes, why so, and how do these different strategies take root? Second, given the emphasis on multiple alignment levels in available literature, does higher level alignment, especially between GP and PS have any impact? Third, beyond party-lines, are there any wider patronage structures? It's through questions such as these, as Corbridge and Srivastava (2013) persuasively argue, that the political geography of social welfare calls into question aspects of a conventional decentralisation agenda, illuminating the workings of embedded power structures within systems of accountability and transparency. In developing the West Bengal story, we traverse these multiplicities in rural social order set amidst differential trajectories of political competition. But first, we further examine this differential impact by empirically assessing the effect of political competition within GPs and GP-PS alignment on NREGS performance.

3. Political Competition, Alignment and NREGS Performance

3.1 Data and Variables

Two questions underpin this section. One, how does political competition and alignment impact NREGS performance? Two, conditional on the nature of the impact, what type of heterogeneity exists between the ways it manifests between the two major parties? To assess this, we have used a pooled sample of 46 GPs over four years (2014-15 to 2017-18), looking at PS and GP level election data from the 2013 *panchayat* elections,^{xiv} and GP-wise demographic information and NREGS data.^{xv}

The sample is spread across four PSs in two districts: *Nakashipara* and *Chakedaha* in *Nadia* district, *Raninagar-I* and *Murshidabad-Jiaganj* in *Murshidabad* district. The districts were chosen as per moderate to severe poverty levels: the percentage of population living below the poverty line being

20-26 in *Nadia* and 31-38 in *Murshidabad*.^{xvi} The specific PSs are representative of the alignment patterns and reflective of the post-2011 political environment in the state. Both districts had Left^{xvii}-ruled ZPs, but the former became TMC-ruled in 2013, while the latter was won by Congress. Among the two PSs per district, one is ZP-aligned (*Chakdaha* and *Raninagar-I*), while the others are not (*Nakashipara* and *Murshidabad-Jiaganj*). The chosen PSs also ensure a balanced representation of TMC and Left-GPs alongside a few Congress ones, with 50 percent TMC-ruled and 50 percent non-TMC ruled GPs across the entire sample. A broad overview of the entire dataset is given in Tables A1-A3 (Appendix-A). Tables A-1 and A2 provide the political composition and demographic details. Table A-3 depicts the level of political competition, with TMC demonstrating a much stronger hold as a ruling party (average seat share of 64.79 percent) compared to the Lefts (54.82 percent) and Congress (50 percent). GP-ruling party's seat share has been taken as the proxy for political competition (i.e. higher seat share indicates less competition). The outcome variable taken as a proxy for NREGS performance is GP-wise annual unskilled wage expenditure.^{xviii} The analysis is divided into two subsections: exploratory and confirmatory. In the exploratory section we present basic descriptions of the data, two way presentation between dependent variables (NREGS outcomes) and independent variables (political competition and political alignment). In the confirmatory section we test our basic hypothesis in a multivariate settings using regression analysis.

3.2 Exploratory Analysis

First, we assess whether GP-PS alignment effect exists, by mapping the average value of NREGS outcome variable (unskilled wage payment) against alignment. In Table 1, we show whether an aligned-GP exhibits systematically better (or worse) performance compared to a nonaligned-GP under the same PS, checking Left, TMC and Congress ruled-GPs in Panel-A, B and C respectively. No systematic difference is visible here. Second, we also want to see whether GPs across different

1 ruling parties differ in terms of NREGS performance. Panel-D of Table 1 shows that across the
2 years, there is no systemic trend of one particular GP-ruling party consistently performing better
3 than others. Therefore, at least at this stage, without controlling for any other variables, we do not
4 find any overt GP-PS alignment effect. In Table C-1 (Appendix-C), we used a different outcome
5 variable (registered households) to test the same, but even there we do not find any clear alignment
6 effect.

15 <Insert Table 1>

18 Next, we explore the impact of political competition on NREGS performance via a bivariate
19 analysis using two-way plots. Figures 1-3 show the relation between ‘unskilled wage expenditure’
20 (Y-variable) and ‘GP-ruling party’s seat share’ (X-variable) for the entire sample, all Left-GPs and
21 all TMC-GPs respectively. A clear trend is visible across all three: as ruling party’s seat share
22 increases (i.e. political competition falls), wage expenditure falls (i.e. NREGS performance
23 deteriorates). At the same time, the clear linear negative trend in Left-GPs (Figure 2) contrasts
24 with a visibly non-linear negative trend in TMC-GPs (Figure 3). While the overall negative trend
25 and the divergence along party lines support the findings of Dey and Sen (2016), there is no clear
26 indication of what causes this heterogeneity. We will revisit this relation in the multivariate analysis
27 to see if it still persists.

43 <Insert Figures 1, 2 and 3>

46 In Figures 4 and 5, we estimate whether the above trends persist once GP-PS alignment is
47 accounted for, i.e. does aligned Left and TMC-GPs exhibit similar linear/non-linear negative
48 trends? Our bi-variate trends gets more pronounced in respective cases: a sharper linear negative
49 trend in Left-GPs (Figure 4) and a clearer bell-shaped negative relation in TMC-GPs (Figure 5).
50 For unaligned GPs, the overall negative trends hold, but the linear trend in Left-GPs changes to a
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sharp non-linear one, (Figure B-1, Appendix-B), while for TMC-GPs the direction of non-linearity gets reversed (Figure B-2, Appendix-B).

<Insert Figures 4 and 5>

However, it'd be erroneous to draw firm conclusions from these observations. Given the relatively modest sample, these trends cannot amount to any confirmatory findings beyond indicating that political competition plays an important role in determining NREGS outcomes. In the confirmatory analysis, we run multi-variate regressions with many covariates (as control variables like SC/ST, religion, gender, etc.) that can have an effect on 'unskilled wage expenditure' to see whether the trends are statistically significant. The results can be seen in Table 2 and Table D-1.

3.3 Confirmatory Analysis

In this section we run a multi-variate analysis using a couple of regression methods. First, we start with a simple OLS (Ordinary Least Square) estimation method using the following regression specification.

$$y_{dpg} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(rpss)_{dpg} + \beta_2(alin)_{dpg} + \beta_3(ruling)_{dpg} + \beta_4(member)_{dpg} + \beta_5(RegNREGShh)_{dpg} + \beta_6(Block)_{pg} + \beta_7(dist)_g + \epsilon_{dpg} \dots \dots \text{ (Equation 1)}$$

Here, $d = \text{district}$, $p = \text{PS (or panchayat samiti)}$, $g = \text{GP}$

$y = \text{NREGS Outcome variable (measured in terms of unskilled wage payment)}$,

$rpss = \text{ruling party seat share at the GP level}$,

$alin = \text{alignment dummy (if the GP is aligned} = 1, \text{otherwise } 0)$,

$ruling = \text{ruling party categorical variable}$,

$RegNREGShh = \text{no. of NREGS registered household}$,

member = member characteristics consolidated at GP level (*caste, religion, sex*),

Block = block fixed effect,

dist = district fixed effects

The main explanatory variables here are *rpss* and *alin*. While *rpss* captures GP level political competition, *alin* captures alignment effect. Here, we are interested to see the sign and statistical significance of β_1 and β_2 . We ran this regression equation with four variety of sample compositions spanning the entire period. First, with all pooled sample of GPs; second, with only TMC-GPs; third, with only non TMC-GPs; finally with only Left-GPs. The results are given in Table 2.

Now, further to the OLS specification, we also ran multinomial logit regression to test the robustness of our confirmatory results.^{xix} Here, the outcome variable y_{dpg} is considered as a categorical variable which takes value 1 if the GP is a *high* performing one (if the GP's annual total unskilled NREGS wage payment is higher than 10 million INR), value 2 if the GP is a *high-medium* performing one (between 7.5 and 10 million), value 3 is *low-medium* performing GP (between 5 and 7.5 million), and value 4 is *low* performing GP (below 5 million). Following this categorisation, we have 34.69% GPs in category 1 (*high* performing), 22.45% in category 2 (*high-medium*), 18.37% in category 3 (*low-medium*), and 24.49% in category 4 (*low*). With multinomial logit regression, first we will look at the sign and significance of the *odds ratios* of the independent variables and then at the specific marginal effects of *rpss* (*'ruling party seat share at the GP level'*) and *alin* (*alignment* variable on the categories of the outcome variables). Essentially, these marginal effects would capture the changes in probability of a particular category of outcome variable with respect to one of its reference or base category (category 1 or *high* performing). The key observations with regard to political competition and alignment impact based on both regressions are as follows.

First, the OLS results in Table 2. In column 1, ruling party's seat share and NREGS performance are significantly negatively related. Therefore, as political competition falls (i.e. ruling party's seat share increases), GP-ruling party tends to perform relatively worse. Alternatively, more the political competition, better is the performance (corroborating the observation in Figure 1). Referring to column 2, this trend is even stronger in the TMC-GPs (coefficient of -0.690 as against -0.519 in the pooled sample). However, while the negative relation still holds in non-TMC GPs, the results are not statistically significant (columns 3, 4). Next, GPs politically aligned with PS tend to perform better, spending Rs. 24.80K more on unskilled wage payment compared to unaligned GPs within the same PS. In fact, this trend is stronger in TMC-GPs (an aligned TMC-GP spends Rs. 78.39K more as compared to an unaligned TMC-GP). But such alignment effect does not exist in non-TMC-GPs. Finally, once controlled for all other factors, a Left-GP performs better than a TMC-GP, annually spending Rs. 9.517K more.

Next, the multinomial logit regression for robustness check of our OLS findings. Appendix D (Table D-1) reports the odds ratios, and Tables 3 and 4 report the marginal effects. From Table 3, we can see that for all pooled GPs, the probability of a PS-aligned GP to be a high performing one increases by 24.9%. For aligned TMC-GPs, the same increases by 56.1%, and that of being in high-medium and low-medium categories reduce by 30.4% and 34.7% respectively. The exact opposite scenario plays out for non-TMC GPs. For an aligned non-TMC GP, the likelihood of being a high performing one reduces by 7%, whereas there is a 32.1% increase in probability of being a high-medium category one. The results from Table 3, therefore, reinforce our OLS finding that an aligned GP has much higher chance of better NREGS performance than an unaligned one. But once we split the sample between TMC and non-TMC GPs, we can see that a strong positive alignment effect prevails only in the TMC-GPs.

Next, Table 4 captures the marginal effects after multinomial logit regression with respect to the variable *rps* ('ruling party seat share'). Here also the results suggest that as ruling party seat share increases (which we earlier referred to as 'less political competition') likelihood of a GP being a high performing one falls, and that fall is statistically significant for TMC-GPs. Results from Table 4 therefore also reinforce our OLS findings that with an increase in ruling party seat share (i.e. a reduction in GP level political competition) NREGS performance of the GP also falls, but there remains a clear heterogeneity between TMC and non-TMC GPs here as well.

Returning to the two questions raised at the beginning of this section (the impact of competition-alignment and the heterogeneity), we can now draw some preliminary conclusions. First, Figures 1-5, Table 2-column 1 and the marginal effects from Tables 3 and 4 suggest that within the pooled sample of all GPs there is a clear effect of political competition and alignment on NREGS performance. Second, our regression results in Table 2 (especially results under column 2-4) and marginal effects within TMC and non-TMC GPs in Tables 3 and 4 show a clear heterogeneity. The results show rising political competition being significantly correlated with better NREGS performance in TMC-GPs, but not so in non-TMC ones. Moreover, TMC-GPs that are politically aligned with the PS seems to perform better, but such effects do not appear significant in non-TMC GPs.

However, a crucial caveat is necessary here. The 'effects' discussed above are essentially correlation effects, and we do not claim any causation here. Given the fact that our study is an observational one, it is not possible to address any possible endogeneity issue associated with political competition or alignment due to unobserved heterogeneity. We are cautious not to attribute much generalisability to these trends either. All we indicate here is that there seems distinct and heterogeneous impact of political competition and alignment on NREGS performance

(pronounced effects in TMC-GPs but no so in non-TMC ones), which broadly supports the conclusions of Dey and Sen (2016). But this does not yet provide any meaningful insight on *why* such heterogeneity exists. Can it be attributable to the programmatic politics of Left as against the clientelistic politics of TMC, or are there other social factors? To answer these questions and to get a meaningful insight behind this apparent puzzle, we now turn the attention to the findings from our exploratory ethnographic study, with the hope that it brings some plausible insights into this heterogeneity.

<Insert Table 2>

<Insert Table 3>

<Insert Table 4>

4. The Political Geography of NREGS

The heterogeneous association between political competition, alignment and NREGS performance across TMC and Left/Congress-GPs is a useful entry point into the ‘political universe of local government’ (Mitra, 2001:109). We try to navigate this universe - one where a variety of stakeholders struggle to both interpret and command the multiple relativities that undergird its everyday reality – starting with the layers of corruption forming its transactional core. However, there already exists considerable proof of ‘leakages’ in NREGS (Aggarwal, 2017; Shankar and Gaiha, 2013; Ravallion, 2012; Adhikary and Bhatia, 2010).^{xx} And yet, there is also persuasive evidence of NREGS reaching the poorest and marginalised communities and creating useful assets in the rural economy (Drèze, 2011).^{xxi} Accordingly, we are not attaching much analytical weightage to the corruption itself, and want to draw attention to the multiple operational networks – or *settings* – behind the leakages instead. It is through these networks, we argue later, that differentiated political incentives take root.

1 4.1 *The Stolen Ponds and a World of ‘Settings’*^{xxii}

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4 *Ajjul Haque* was a NS in *Islampurhak* GP (*Murshidabad*) from 2012 to 2017. He takes us to an
5 empty land at the edge of *Nalbatta* village, 7.5kms from the GP office. He points to a dilapidated
6 board, which notifies the land as a pond excavation site under NREGS, and declares work to have
7 completed in November 2016. But all we notice is a small puddle, not more than a metre in
8 diameter. Standing next to it, *Haque* nonchalantly comments: ‘see this pond? It has been stolen.’
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12 Without much of an explanation, *Haque* walks over to a small tea shop on the other side. By the
13 time we catch up, he has lit a *beedi* (a thin, hand-rolled cigarette), and gestures us to sit on a wooden
14 bench. The owner brings us a few glasses of tea, and introduces himself as *Altaf*. As we ask *Haque*
15 for an explanation, *Altaf* interjects: ‘looking for the stolen ponds, are you? You won’t find them
16 here, look in the pockets of the *panchayat babus* instead’.
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20 *Stealing the pond* is a common expression in *Murshidabad* villages, referring to a semi-institutionalised
21 practice of corruption around NREGS. *Haque* eventually elaborates:
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25 If five lakh^{xxiii} rupees and 100 workers are sanctioned for a pond excavation scheme, only 20-30
26 will be actually employed, the rest of the money will be siphoned off. The pond that gets dug will
27 dry up within two summers. We call these ‘stolen ponds’. They are all over *Murshidabad*.^{xxiv}
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31 *Haque’s* observations are not one-off. *Mihir Das*, ex-Pradhan of *Tatla-II* GP (*Nadia*), gives a similar
32 estimate:
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36 NREGS money is as if it’s free for all. For almost every single project, at least 75 percent is
37 siphoned off by showing inflated demand.^{xxv}
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41 Far removed from the imagined bureaucratic order, we came across similar stories in all 46 GPs.
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43 However, notwithstanding the instances of corruption/leakages, it is the discursive framing that
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we find analytically critical. This framing is based on an idea of all-pervasive *settings*. Used in English and rarely translated, the word is frequently heard in conversations among both the village elites and the poorest and uneducated.^{xxvi} Loosely understood as ‘informal quid-pro-quo arrangements’, *settings* are multiple forms of clientelist practices that underpin all forms of service provisions. For NREGS, *settings* commence from the first point of contact for the workers: their supervisors. It needs to be understood that given the all-pervasive culture of political mediation in rural India (Witsoe, 2012; Gupta, 2012; Manor, 2000), the idea of demanding work as a ‘legal right’ also gets mediated. For a poor labourer, submitting a detailed written application is a daunting task. Instead, existing cultural norms dictate approaching the local political cadre/official in the village itself.^{xxvii} This person is the supervisor. Usually someone from the village neighbourhood, the supervisor is a familiar face with political connections (see section 4.3), and is the local coordinator for all NREGS activities. The workers rarely demand work, instead they are informed by their supervisor once work becomes available. In many villages, the supervisor is entrusted with the job cards as well. *Shubho Ranjan Byapari*, an ex-supervisor and CPIM member in *Bethuadahari-II GP (Nadia)*, gives a detailed account of these practices, and introduces us to the idea of *settings*:

Everyone in my village knows and trusts me since childhood. Once I became a supervisor in 2013, I collected all their job cards, and would inform them whenever work was available and payments were made. Such settings are common everywhere.^{xxviii}

A similar account was heard from a group of workers in *Chak Mirjapur* village (*Denli GP, Nadia*). Upon requesting to show their job cards, one of them ran back to the supervisor’s house. *Haridasi Bismas*, a lady who has been a NREGS beneficiary since 2006, explained in the meantime:

The supervisor has been looking after us for five years. Whenever work starts, he comes and tells us where to go and when. Our cards are with him. What’s the point in us keeping those?^{xxix}

1 What's in it for the supervisors? This is where the next cycle of *settings* - between the supervisors
2 and GP functionaries - kicks in. A practice of inflating project requirements and minimal scrutiny
3 is entrenched in most GPs. *Haque*, who introduced us to the stolen pond, elaborates:
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8 Most GPs carried out substantial works during 2008-2013. Much less work is available now. So
9 GPs inflate their schemes. For a project worth 500 workers at least 1000 will be estimated, a
10 pond/road will be planned as double the required size. The NS/assistants will maintain the records,
11 keep everything above board.^{xxx}
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15 The *settings* operate at multiple levels. First, the 'demand' and 'allocation' of work. If a project is
16 inflated to show more workers, then the VLEs/GRSs fill up as many application-allocation forms
17 as required, often putting their own thumbprints. A GRS, currently working in one of the *Nadia*
18 GPs, admits:
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26 There is pressure on GPs to perform. So the *pradhan*/NS *create* work [*kaj banay*], showing demand
27 through false applications. The VLE and I handle the paperwork...some days I just put my
28 thumbprints on forms. For most projects, at least half the demand is made up.^{xxxi}
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32 On ground, the onus is on supervisors to 'show' work. Muster rolls are kept at every job site
33 showing daily attendance and progress. It is quite common for these to be falsified. *Shubho Ranjan*
34 *Byapari*, quoted earlier, describes:
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41 *Aamra kaj dekhiye di* [we 'show' the work]. If 30 labourers are present, I will show 80. For
42 attendance, we either get multiple thumbprints from the same people, or just do it ourselves.^{xxxii}
43
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45 As the main signatory for releasing funds, GP *pradhans* are involved in these arrangements as well.
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47 *Abdul Ajj Molla*, the *pradhan* in *Birpur-II* GP (*Nadia*) between 2013 and 2017 (ousted by his own
48 party before the 2018 elections) openly admits:
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54 There was a road construction project for 200 workers, where even 20 didn't work. But the party
55 pressurised me to sanction funds for 200. Ever since computerisation, field visits have all but
56 ceased. The staff just stay at office and update the records.^{xxxiii} Recently, I saw the GRS submitting
57 claims for a scheme with 50 workers, but in reality not a single labourer has worked; machineries
58 were used instead. I said I would have never allowed this. He replied: 'that is why you couldn't
59 remain the *pradhan* either'.^{xxxiv}
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There is evidence that such falsification is rampant not only in West Bengal, but across the country.^{xxxv} The most innovative form of *settings*, however, is the way ‘profits’ are shared. With direct account transfer of wages, the village networks of kinship and familiarity come into play, leading to a sharing arrangement *after the money is withdrawn*. *Ismail Shiekh*, a supervisor in *Lochanpur* village (*Lochanpur* GP, *Murshidabad*) from 2010 to 2015, explains:

The arrangement is to enlist workers, but they are free to come and go, and don’t need to worry about attendance. Once payments are made, they pay 50% to their supervisor. It is a win-win situation.^{xxxvi}

This is the crux of the world of *settings*. There is a bottom-up distribution network of money: funds are withdrawn by legitimate workers/account holders, but is then shared with their supervisors, who in turn pass proportionate shares further up the chain. There are also instances of the supervisor/ward member in possession of ‘rented job cards’ issued in the name of workers who have migrated elsewhere, but continue getting enlisted for projects. *Haque* gives a detailed breakdown of such arrangements for the ‘stolen ponds’:

The usual proportions are: 15-20 percent for the *pradhan*, five percent for party funds, ten for local ward member, and 10-15% for supervisors and GP staff. For bigger projects, shares might even go up to the PS. Many workers might not turn up. Those who do might work sporadically and disappear once attendance has been taken. These practices peak during monsoon, when they can earn a lot more as agricultural labourers.^{xxxvii}

Recent newspaper reports corroborate these findings as state-wise trends:

For those who have job cards and do the actual work, the amount to be paid to the supervisor ranges from Rs. 20-40 per day of the Rs. 190 that reaches the beneficiary’s bank account...For those who have job cards but are engaged in other professions, or are migrant workers, their names are included in the muster roll. On paper, it is shown that they work every day. When they receive the payments, the supervisor takes 60 per cent...there is a chain system, and the party and the panchayat get their cuts too.^{xxxviii}

In Birbhum’s Sainthia block...Rs.20 lakh was shown to have been spent for building a road that is not there. After enquiry, it was found that job cards were issued and money was transferred to

about 400 accounts and the highest payment was Rs.8000-Rs. 10,000. Some account holders said that they got up to Rs.1,000 each and rest went to panchayat leaders...workers never saw their job cards and many gave access to their bank accounts to local (TMC) leaders.^{xxxix}

Drawing attention to these multiple cycles of settings (worker-supervisor understandings, ‘demand/allocation’ and ‘showing’ work, fund-sharing, etc.) serves two purposes. First, it shifts the focus from the ‘ghost of corruption’ (Drèze and Khera, 2011:64) itself to the innovative operational networks and constellation of actors that animate the everyday transactions around which local governance and rural political lives take shape. Second, when it comes to optimising the benefits from these arrangements, the larger political climate incentivises political parties differently, thereby allowing divergent alignment and patronage impacts. The next two sections elaborate on these ideas.

4.2 On Alignment: The Political Incentives of Settings

What is the nature of convergence between these transactional arrangements, political competition, and GP-PS alignment? We suggest that some answers can be found in the way these conditions help to sustain a differentiated constellation of political incentives around the entire paradigm of *settings*, i.e. the incentives to facilitate such arrangements are different for Left and TMC-GPs.

For Left-GPs, the near decimation of the Left Front in the 2011 state and 2013 *panchayat* elections^{xl} meant a constant threat of survival even if in power. Left-GPs are relatively fewer, and embedded within a wider TMC-dominated environment (for example, in *Chakedaba* PS – the largest in our sample – there is a solitary CPIM-GP, *Hingnara*). Additionally, the PS and/or ZP, the local MLA^{xli} and MP^{xlii} are all likely to be TMC members. Therefore, local TMC leaders – even if in opposition at GP-level – have significant political clout and connections. In terms of everyday village politics, this translates to TMC leaders maintaining a considerable sway over *panchayat* affairs, keeping ruling

Left leaders under close scrutiny, and a grip over the politics of *settings*. This was starkly evident in *Hingnara*, which had 14 CPIM and 6 TMC members. And yet, the *pradhan*, *Amulya Mandal*, reflects:

As a Left-GP, we were under constant scrutiny. The TMC members reported tiny discrepancies to the PS. If we marked 200 attendees for a project where 150 worked – a minor aberration – they would immediately flag it. We also kept them in good humour, prioritising their wards for projects while side-lining our members. At the start of every project, I used to warn the staff that the slightest mistake could go against us.^{xliii}

Anup Kumar Sarkar, the TMC opposition leader of *Hingnara*, corroborates:

We asked our party cadres to keep an eye on NREGS activities to reduce corruption. Had I wanted, we could have easily overturned the board. But I didn't do that out of respect for our *pradhan*.^{xliv}

The key factor here is the motivation to 'overturn'. Via intense scrutiny and pressurising tactics, TMC targets to 'poach' opposition members and overturn opposition GPs, a trend that has intensified across the state post-2011.^{xlv} This is also why political competition is critical. The closer TMC's seat share is to the ruling party, the easier it becomes to coax a handful of board members to switch sides. Amongst our 46 sample GPs, TMC had managed to overturn 14 – with a 100 percent success rate in *Murshidabad-Jiaganj* PS - while CPIM could overturn only one (Table 5). The *ex-pradhan* of another CPIM-GP in *Nadia*, comments:

Our majority was marginal. TMC coaxed away two members, enough to overturn the board. Our deputy-*pradhan* was very poor, TMC leaders donated funds for his daughter's wedding. Another member's father was implicated in false murder charges, abruptly withdrawn once he switched sides.^{xlvi}

On the other hand, the veneer of democratic accountability (as expressed by *Anup Kumar Sarkar*) is conspicuously absent in TMC-GPs. There are rarely any checks on projects being implemented in TMC-wards, while opposition board members are either sidelined or kept under close scrutiny. If TMC's majority in the GP-board is marginal, i.e. high political competition, similar pressures are applied to ensure defection until TMC has an absolute hold. In addition, TMC leaders can actively

discriminate opposition members by reducing allocation of projects to their wards, thereby further weakening the opposition support base. Two TMC board members of *Rantari GP (Nadia)* and *Hurshi GP (Murshidabad)* provide almost identical admissions:

We rule the GP, the MLA and PS is ours. Plus there are only three opposition members. They will soon join us. They have realised that there is no point in missing out all the benefits.^{xlvi}

We are the ruling party. It's natural we will handle all the settings. Didn't CPIM do the same before? Why should I allow them to benefit politically through NREGS? We give them a few token projects, but nothing substantial. CPIM members understand that it's better for them to be with us than miss out on everything.^{xlvi}

The allusion to 'missing out' is telling. Given the differentiated environment Left/Congress and TMC leaders operate under, the *settings* induced financial incentives are equally attractive for opposition members. Defection to TMC is therefore increasingly common. As we attended meetings in several GPs, an interesting difference became apparent as most TMC members arrived in motorbikes, whereas a larger proportion of opposition leaders were on bicycles. *Emamul Haque*, a veteran Congress member in *Bahadurpur GP (Murshidabad)*; one of the two Congress-GPs in our sample) reflects on the lure for bikes from bicycles as indicative of this defection:

The younger party members see how TMC leaders are amassing wealth, while we are in tatters. They are willing to defect to be a part of this payoff chain. How can I stop them for not wanting a motorbike?^{xli}

A third form of incentive also plays out among GP board members, irrespective of party-identities. This happens when the *pradhan* and other board members come to a mutual agreement on how the 'earnings' are to be shared. The incentive here is to maximise the payoffs, rather than political control. Such an arrangement is a win-win for TMC-GPs, whereas it provides the path of least resistance for CPIM/Congress-GPs. *Tanmay Ganguly*, a long-term CPIM leader and member of *Nakashipara PS (Nadia)*, gives an astute summary:

1 Rather than overturning GPs, a stronger impetus is to 'adjust'. Why go through all the infighting
2 when a lot can be gained via settings among themselves? In TMC-GPs, adjustment is much more
3 profitable for opposition leaders. But it is also the most sensible approach for Left/Congress-GPs,
4 as they can lose a lot more by confronting TMC politically. It's better to spend their tenure in peace
5 and make money. Such settings are not new in West Bengal, but the proliferation of money through
6 NREGS has opened the doors wider than ever.ⁱ

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9 There is also evidence of reluctant opposition leaders being coerced into such adjustments. *Shayaml*
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11 *Halidar*, ex-*pradhan* of *Birpur-I* GP, admits:

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15 As *pradhan*, I was not ready to do any settings. But I was implicated in a false embezzlement case,
16 got arrested and spent three months in jail. After that I gave up. And these practices are normal
17 everywhere. It is better to adjust than to make my family go through so much agony.ⁱⁱ

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21 Finally, what role does GP-PS alignment play? This is where the NREGS story stands distinctively
22 apart from conventional partisan alignment practices. Normally, the role of the bureaucratic
23 channels in matters of inter-governmental transfers is crucial, especially that of the BDO (block
24 development officer) at the PS level. But unlike most intra-government transfers, NREGS money
25 does not flow via intermediary levels, transferred directly to beneficiaries' accounts instead. This
26 makes the GP the focal point, with limited reliance on the PS/BDO. The impact of GP-PS
27 alignment is therefore also limited, although it can play a role in supporting the incentive structure
28 that has already taken shape within the GP.ⁱⁱⁱ For aligned TMC-GPs, incentive structures operate
29 unhindered, and there is anecdotal evidence that the share of profits go up to the PS level. For
30 unaligned TMC-GPs, it is less smooth, although the wider political environment can minimise the
31 effect of unalignment. For Left/Congress-GPs, on the other hand, the situation is quite different.
32 Irrespective of alignment, board members are under constant scrutiny, incentivised/coerced into
33 either defecting or coming to an arrangement. This is naturally exacerbated further if unaligned, as
34 was the case in *Hingnara*. For aligned opposition-GPs the situation is somewhat conducive, i.e. the
35 alignment can ameliorate the GP-level scrutiny to some extent, but then ZP level alignment and
36 wider forces can again come into play. For example, a TMC member from *Tentulia* GP (CPIM-

1 ruled) boasts of his connections to get schemes approved from the *Murshidabad-Jiaganj* PS, even
2 though the Left Front is in power there.
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5 I am a TMC member in a CPIM-GP and a Left Front-PS. But I have connections with the ZP
6 [overturned in favour of TMC from Congress in 2016], and the MLA. I know state leaders as well.
7 If I want a scheme in my area, I know *ways to get it done* (*emphasis added*).^{liii}
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11 *Anup Kumar Sarkar*, the opposition leader in *Hingnara*, provides a similar observation:
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16 My GP is ruled by CPIM, but in a TMC-PS, so I can use my connections. On the other hand, a
17 Left Front-PS stands to lose more if they discriminate, and TMC can actively strategise to take it
18 over. Only if it's a Left/Congress-GP in a Left/Congress PS, there might be some benefits.^{liv}
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22 Broadly speaking, unlike conventional notions about partisan alignment, alignment patterns
23 around NREGS is *bottom up*, i.e. it is GP-determined. Higher level alignment (GP-PS) takes shape
24 by providing either a conducive political environment for such bottom up trends to foster, or
25 impede it, but without dictating the imperatives. In most cases GP-level dynamics develop
26 independent of higher level alignments, dictated by the political incentives of the multifarious
27 *settings* between the ruling and opposition parties. *Tanmay Ganguly*, quoted earlier, gives a precise
28 description:
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40 *Rajneeti ekebare nicher tolay* [the politics is at the grassroots]. If TMC wants, the politics could be
41 conventional, ugly or violent, and they will not rest until they gain absolute control of the GP.^{lv}
42 But if they don't, the politics is only about settings.^{lvi}
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46 <Insert Table 5>
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50 51 4.3 A 'Beautiful' Relationship and 'Doing Panchayats': Beyond Ethno-Favouritism Ideas of Patronage 52 53

54 Could there be any other marker of these incentive structures manifesting in everyday village lives?
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56 One way is to look into the idea of the reinforcing equilibrium of ethnic favouritism embedded in
57 a patronage democracy; the matter of *who*, not the *what*. Recent works on distributive politics in
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1 rural India have taken this idea further, indicating various forms of post-clientelist structures
2 (Witsoe, 2012; Das and Maiorano, 2019). The premise of the political incentives of *settings* adds to
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4 this picture further by bringing a more personalised context to it.
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9 First, there is a party loyalty-based network translating the ‘demand’ for work into political support,
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11 with on-field supervisors at its focal point. Supervisor appointment is a political task, with
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13 individual ward members nominating their own party cadres for the job. It’s a lucrative position
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15 among young party workers, as not only does it give access to the profiteering arrangements, but
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17 there is also the promise of political ascendance. There could be several supervisors in a single
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19 village alone, and there is an implicit race of proving ‘one’s political worth’ by ensuring the
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21 maximum attendance in all party events from their localities. With declining levels of work under
22
23 NREGS,^{lvii} these supervisors are therefore in a position to allocate work to those who agree to be
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25 a part of political rallies and functions.^{lviii} *Fazal Ali*, a supervisor and TMC cadre in *Tenkaraipur*
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27 *Balumati* village (*Murshidabad*), explains:
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35 The previous panchayat candidate from our village had started as a supervisor. If I can gather
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37 enough people for party rallies, I will be noticed too. All the supervisors in our GP compete with
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39 each other; we all have our own networks of villagers. But I don’t pressurise them to join. I am
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41 their neighbour, they trust me and understand I can get them work.^{lix}
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43 A deeply incisive comment comes from *Sonamani Mullick*, a NREGS worker in *Pumlia* village:
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45 What can I say about how he [the supervisor] gives work? *Jake ‘shundor’ lage takei daye* [he gives work
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47 to whomsoever he finds ‘beautiful’].^{lx}
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49 This was a perplexing statement. Upon asking what ‘beautiful’ means, *Mullick* and a few other
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51 women explained:
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54 He gives work to those who hang around with him, listen to what he says, and always agree to go
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56 to party meetings. He even promises that our daily wages will be paid if we attend these meetings.
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58 He only likes those who follow him.^{lxi}
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3 *Altaf Hossain*, another worker in *Chak Gobindapur* village in *Patikabari GP (Nadia)* elaborates:

4 What's the harm in going to a few meetings? But they [the supervisors] also need us. Or else they
5 will lose their face. We understand this, and sometimes bargain with him for attendance even if we
6 haven't actually worked. We have known him and his father for years. Plus he will come to us for
7 the money [referring to the sharing arrangements]. It's in everyone's benefit.^{lxii}

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10 The supervisor-worker relationship is thus more complex than just a one way donor-recipient
11 arrangement. It's a symbiotic relation where both are dependent on each other, bound by
12 familiarity, kinship, financial benefits, trust, political support and accumulation of political capital.
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14 The reference to being 'beautiful'/'being liked' points at a recognition of this interdependence
15 among the workers. It is both personal and political at the same time. Traditional ethnic markers
16 of identity (caste, religion etc.) can facilitate this relationship, but contrary to the patronage
17 democracy thesis, these are not the defining criteria. The implicit acknowledgement of this
18 interdependency makes these relationships a more innovative/post-clientelist arrangement than
19 the dominantly unidirectional nature of the patronage hypothesis (also see Ruud, 2001).^{lxiii}

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22 The second, and quite radical departure in rural politics caused by the increased NREGS funds is
23 in the changing motivations behind the distributive networks, indicating an increasingly
24 personalised context. Recently, the various embezzlement tactics have drawn sharp media
25 attention as a state-wide practice of accumulating 'cut money' (illegal commission) by TMC
26 workers in return of ensuring welfare benefits.^{lxiv} In fact, it became the dominant issue during the
27 2018 *panchayat* elections and the 2019 national elections, prompting Mamata Banerjee (Chief
28 Minister of West Bengal and founder-chairperson of TMC) to publicly instruct her party workers
29 to return the extorted money.^{lxv} From NREGS to cooking gas provision, housing schemes, and
30 even funeral arrangements, 'each scheme has a rate, and a network of local political leaders and
31 panchayat members linked to the system'.^{lxvi} Following Banerjee's diktat, certain local leaders
32 started to return money to the villagers, the very first instance being Rs. 2.28 lakh given back to
33 141 NREGS beneficiaries.^{lxvii}

1 At a more fundamental level, these growing trends point to a gradual transformation in the very
2 nature of rural political geography. With increasing devolution of funds to the GP (for most
3 centrally-sponsored schemes) and opportunities to partake in various kinds of *settings*, any
4 association with the *panchayat* is seen as a profitable venture. Securing votes or contributing to party
5 funds aside, the motivation to maximise personal gains is paramount. This is not to claim that
6 personal gain wasn't a motivation before, but the key change is that now it tends to trump political
7 identity or party loyalty. This was indicated earlier: the scenario where ruling and opposition GP-
8 members come to a profit sharing agreement. In rural Bengal, getting elected to the GP is
9 increasingly seen less as a political move, but as a *career move*.^{lxviii} One of the most common
10 expressions heard in villages these days is telling in this regard. A reference to any GP member is
11 capped off with the observation:

22 *Ora dol kore na, Ora panchayat kore* [they don't do party work, they 'do panchayat'].

23 'Doing panchayat' is a key phrase. It refers to the agreement among different party members in a
24 GP-board – ruling and opposition – that they will put aside their political differences and focus
25 on an optimum profit sharing arrangement. *Tanmay Ganguly*, the *Nakashipara* PS member quoted
26 earlier, explains further:

27 *Panchayat* is a gravy train. Once elected, all fights cease. They can make their lives in those five years.
28 What's the point in wasting time?^{lxix}

29 Village level anecdotes about such practices are aplenty. The 2018 elections had just concluded
30 during the time of fieldwork, and new GP-boards were yet to be formed. Yet, in almost 70 percent
31 GPs in our sample alone, the newly elected *pradhans* were pointed out having bought brand new
32 SUVs. So much is the extent of personal profiteering at the GP level that TMC leaders had to
33 warn party workers of an *audit of extorted money*. On 18th July 2018, the India Today reported:

34 Speaking to party workers in Purulia, Trinamool Congress...MP Dola Sen said, "There will be an
35 audit of how much you have collected so far, how much you have deposited in banks and how

much have you taken back home. We shall take full note of the amount and deposit 75 per cent in the party fund keeping the rest with you."^{lxx}

These shifting incentive structures indicate both a continuation and a transition in rural political traditions in West Bengal. The political incentives, albeit innovative in their formation around social welfare, have a sense of historical continuity. The extensively documented socio-political hegemony of the Lefts over three decades had made the ‘party’ the foremost identity-marker in rural Bengal, and it continues to sustain deep-rooted patronage structures; close association with the ruling party is still decisive in village lives (Bhattacharyya, 2016). However, it’s in the personalised context we sense a gradual transition in this trend, not in the systemic rent-seeking itself, but in its rationale and style instead. During the Left regime, the *panchayats* were used as a tool for securing political control, with every level of the three-tier system being carefully monitored by a parallel party-political network (local, zonal and district committees at the GP, PS and ZP levels respectively; see Bhattacharyya, 2016; Bhattacharya, 1998). However, this strict party-grid – a hallmark of village life for over three decades – is slowly giving way to administrative institutions being used for personal and material gains by a handful of local leaders. It is a system that seems to have run unfettered of late, thus prompting the extraordinary rebukes to ‘return or audit extorted money’. A more systemic analysis of these practices is beyond the scope of this study (see Nath, 2017:22 for a theorisation of the TMC period as a distinctive ‘discipline of corruption’, having rendered the party-grid of the Lefts almost irrelevant). Accordingly, the argument pursued here is that the *settings* and the cut-money saga under TMC-rule hint at personalised incentive structures increasingly animating GP-level dynamics, gradually replacing wider political/party motivations. In a wider sense, such formations resonate earlier observations by Véron *et al* (2006:1924) about CPIM’s handling of the employment assurance scheme (EAS: see *endnote xii*), arguing that when embedded in persistent ‘corruption networks’, rent seeking ‘can lead to the building of social institutions that rely on and reinforce trust among their major participants.’ What’s new in the TMC era, as we argue here, are the motivations that both prompt and reinforce

1 this legitimisation, transitioning from the political to the personal. What also seems to have aided
2 the process, as pointed out by *Tanmay Ganguly* (quoted earlier), is the significantly increased levels
3 of devolution of funds via NREGS. Unlike the traditional top down systems of intergovernmental
4 transfers, the GPs gaining direct control of the funds have led to some factions within rural
5 communities becoming willing participants in the multifarious *settings* arrangements. As Véron *et al*
6 (ibid.) argue, the impact of participatory decentralisation on the levels of corruption remains
7 ambiguous.

18 5. Conclusion

21 The heterogeneous incentive structures that have taken shape around the implementation of
22 NREGS have infused the rural political landscape in West Bengal with new meanings. In its
23 multiplicities, this changing landscape is remindful of Kerkvliet's (2009:232) evocative description
24 of 'people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding
25 authority over, production of, or allocation of resources'. Traced through the juxtaposed ideas of
26 political competition, alignment and multiple forms of *settings*, we have tried to draw attention to
27 three interlinked, yet distinctive elements as constitutive of this change.

38 First, through a mixed-method approach, we have problematised the notions of partisan alignment
39 and patronage by drawing attention to the heterogeneity in the way these structures play out across
40 the political spectrum. In our quantitative section, we have demonstrated the possibility of political
41 competition and higher level alignments leading to diverse NREGS outcomes for the ruling and
42 opposition parties. Although mindful of not attributing any causation, we have explored how
43 political competition can create different incentives for different parties. We argue that these
44 heterogeneous incentive patterns can be located in a series of innovative forms of clientelist
45 arrangements or *settings*. Focusing on the 'world of *settings*', in turn, allowed us to explore the various
46 forms of transactional networks that have coalesced around NREGS, bringing some clarity to the

1 opacity of exchanges and constellation of political incentives animating ground level distributive
2 politics.
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7 Second, we find the idea of *settings* useful in providing a deeper understanding of local state-society
8 relations and the political geography of welfare provisions. This is not entirely a new observation.
9 As Véron *et al* has demonstrated in the pre-NREGS era, ‘key members of “village communities”
10 can be accomplices to, or prime agents of, local networks of corruption’ (2006:1923).^{lxxi} In our
11 framing of the emic concept of *settings*, we have tried to highlight the transactional practices that
12 remain outside such networks, and yet sustain a symbiotic relationship with it, traversing across
13 both political and personal spaces. We are aware that the political history of West Bengal makes
14 broad generalisations somewhat difficult, but also sense that such relationships – especially
15 coalesced around rights-based notions about social welfare - can indicate newer and innovative
16 forms of post-clientelism elsewhere in rural India as well. In case of West Bengal, on the one hand,
17 the quantum of funds available for NREGS and its direct devolution through the GP have led to
18 an implicit legitimisation of personalised incentives in rural politics. On the other, it has also
19 resulted in tactical manoeuvring to overturn electoral outcomes. Either way, it is somewhat a
20 depressing conclusion for decentralisation agenda proponents, though Corbridge and Srivastava
21 (2013) have argued that effective local political competition can counter such trends.^{lxxii} One
22 possible corollary of this is that such post-clientelist structures are commensurate with the
23 hegemonising trends in rural politics in other states/regions as well, especially those with
24 entrenched localised political roots. This observation opens the space for further debates on
25 political agency as well as possible policy implications. Evidently, as Véron *et al* (2006) argue,
26 democratic decentralisation is no panacea for reducing corruption, even when local communities
27 are formally included in implementing policies. The underlying social structures can still inhibit
28 participation of the poor and marginalised, thus rendering decentralisation initiatives and
29 community engagements less effective.
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2 Finally, we have tried to portray the realm of local government in terms of real flesh-and-blood
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4 political actors. The constellation of multiple stakeholders and incentives around the GP indicates
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6 its increasing centrality in rural political lives. This was most aptly expressed by *Anup Mandal*, a
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8 resident of *Narapati Para* village (*Simurali* GP, *Nadia*). We met Mandal at the GP entrance, waiting
9
10 to enquire about his delayed NREGS payments. Frustrated with endless visits to the GP, making
11
12 an eight kilometre journey on foot, Mandal lamented:
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17 You can see what our lives have become. *Oporo bhogoban, niche pradhan* [there is god above, and
18
19 *pradhan* below]^{lxxiii}
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22 A deeply incisive observation, Mandal was referring to the *pradhan* acquiring almost a divine status
23
24 in determining fortunes of the rural poor. Alongside NREGS, increasing decentralisation
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26 initiatives both by the centre and state governments have made the GP the focal power base in
27
28 the villages. We have observed how accession to the GP board has become a career-move, and
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30 the self-sustaining arrangements among board members becoming a dominant trend. This is not
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32 to deny the empowerment brought by decentralisation. However, such processes have serious
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34 consequence for redistributive politics in rural India. The incentives might be different elsewhere,
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36 but as the West Bengal story shows, shifting political agendas can be decisive in the ever changing
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38 rural political landscapes.
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ⁱ More critical observers, however, have raised suspicions about whether the programme merely palliates the condition of the rural proletariat who bear the brunt of the accumulation attempts by the Indian state (Vasavi, 2012).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Afridi, Iversen, & Sharan (2017), Dasgupta, Gawande, and Kapur (2017), Deininger and Liu (2013), Imbert and Papp (2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a substantial body of literature debating the image of rural prosperity and decentralised governance as presented in accounts sympathetic to the early years of the Left Front (Kohli, 1987; Nossiter, 1988; Lieten, 1996). The dominant discourse of ‘virtuous cycle of higher production ... [with] a decrease in poverty and polarization’ (Lieten, 1996:111) has been challenged by concerns about ‘how the Midas touch of growth and reforms might have left structures of poverty and marginalization untouched’ (Roy, 2002:28; also Rogaly, Harriss-White and Bose, 1995). The dissenters have long argued that not only is the agrarian structure in West Bengal both inequitable and inefficient (Boyce, 1987) but it has also persistently excluded the rural poor from the largesse of the state (Mallick, 1993). Authors such as Kohli, Nossiter and Lieten feel that such prosperity among certain sections of the rural poor is indicative of a shift to a more equitable agrarian structure, but others argue that this beneficiary class constitutes a new agrarian elite enjoying economic and political hegemony (Beck, 1994; Echeverri-Gent, 1992; Rogaly, 1994; Ruud, 1999; Webster, 1990). This idea of a dominant agrarian beneficiary class also forms the foundation to the subsequent characterisation of the Left hegemony over Bengali society as a ‘party society’ (Bhattacharyya, 2016). While it is beyond the scope of this study to engage with this literature, it is imperative to acknowledge it in discussing the transition to a post-2011 political environment under the TMC.

^{iv} The motivation of competing political parties or candidates - either purely electoral or ideological – have traditionally provided the basis for classification of political economic models into *Downsian* (Downs, 1957) and citizen-candidate perspectives (Osborne and Slivinski, 1996; Besley and Coate, 1997). Of late, focus has shifted to class-based inequalities translating into higher welfare weights for the wealthier, a phenomenon commonly known as *elite capture* (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2012; Mansuri and Rao, 2004, 2011; World Development Report, 2004).

^v See Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) for a broad review.

^{vi} Other notable examples include Argentina, where provinces overrepresented at the Congress received disproportionately higher resources from the national government (Porto and Sanguinetti, 2001); in Albania, income redistribution tended to be determined by the political agendas of central decision makers (Case, 2001). Tactical manipulation in municipal grants during early years of democracy in Portugal gave way to even wider political opportunism in intergovernmental grants (Veiga and Pinho, 2007); grants have been used by Australian politicians to enhance their chances of re-election (Worthington and Dollery, 1998); and in Sweden,

regions with swing voters were particularly targeted by governmental transfers (Dahlberg and Johansson, 2002).

^{vii} See Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro (2008) for a study on Spain.

^{viii} Source: <http://wbprd.gov.in/HtmlPage/dist.aspx>, accessed on 7th May 2020.

^{ix} The BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*), however, made significant inroads in the 2018 *panchayat* elections.

^x 1 rupee \approx 0.013 USD.

^{xi} All projects need approval from the block development officer (BDO), the official-in-charge of all block-level development work.

^{xii} See NREGA Operational Guidelines (2013) published by the Department of Rural Development, Government of India, available at https://nrega.nic.in/Circular_Archive/archive/Operational_guidelines_4thEdition_eng_2013.pdf; accessed on 10th May 2020.

^{xiii} Such ground level dynamics have been long observed in the context of a variety of public works programme that were a staple of poverty alleviation, NREGS being the latest in a long list that dates back to famine prevention in the colonial era (Mathur, 2016). Other notable programmes include the National Rural Employment Program and the various Employment Guarantee Schemes (launched in states like Maharashtra and West Bengal) during the 1980s (Joshi, 2010; Basu, 1981; Herring & Edwards, 1983); and the major antecedent to NREGS - the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) - the largest anti-poverty scheme in rural India from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s (Corbridge and Srivastava, 2013; Véron *et al*, 2006). What makes NREGS unique is that it guarantees the provision of public employment by state agencies, but it stops short of creating a universal entitlement since it 'explicitly targets rural households (and leaves out the urban poor), and its implementation remains contingent on the expression of a demand for benefits' (Marcesse, 2018:285-86). NREGS was expected to stay clear of the type of problems typically associated with its predecessors – such as being implemented at the entire discretion of local bureaucrats and elected officials or a reliance on explicit means-testing alone – given its emphasis on community participation, transparency and accountability (Deshingkar *et al*, 2005). And yet, the evidence is at best mixed. For example, Dutta *et al* (2014) has noted the significant supply side constraints of poor implementation capacity, weak financial management and monitoring systems in Bihar, estimating that a quarter of those demanding employment remains unsuccessful. The impact of block level political competition and elected officials in determining fund allocation has been

observed by Gupta and Mukhopadhyay (2014) in Rajasthan and Sheahan *et al* (2018) in Andhra Pradesh, albeit marginally in case of the latter. Carswell and De Neve (2014) has shown the limited impact of the scheme in creating durable assets and promoting grassroots democracy in Tamil Nadu (but it has indeed brought about transformative outcomes for low-caste rural labourers). In Andhra Pradesh, Maiorano (2014) observed a limited impact of the scheme in terms of guaranteeing the right to work and the right to obtain the unemployment allowance in case the former is denied.

^{xiv} Election data was collected from the website of the West Bengal State Election Commission (<http://www.wbsec.gov.in/>)

^{xv} Demographic details and NREGS data was collected from the NREGS public data portal (https://nregarep2.nic.in/netnrega/dynamic2/dynamicreport_new4.aspx) and the NREGS social audit register website (https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/SocialAuditFindings/SA_home.aspx)

^{xvi} Source: 'West Bengal: Poverty, Growth and Inequality', *World Bank Group*, 20th June 2017, available at <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/315791504252302097/pdf/119344-BRI-P157572-West-Bengal-Poverty.pdf>; accessed on 13th Feb 2021.

^{xvii} At the GP level, all parties fight individually, and Left is synonymous to CPIM in our sample. However, we prefer using the former because of the presence of some other Left parties (CPI – Communist Party of India; RSP – Revolutionary Socialist Party, etc.) whose members, if elected, usually support CPIM to form the GP-board. At higher levels – PS and ZP – all Left parties are united as the Left Front coalition.

^{xviii} Unskilled wage payments is the highest component of NREGS expenditure at the GP level.

^{xix} We thank the anonymous referee for suggesting the multinomial logit regression analysis along with OLS.

^{xx} Also see 'MGNREGA Activist Who Found Many Cases of Corruption Found Dead', *The Hindu*, 3rd March 2011; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/MGNREGA-activist-who-exposed-many-cases-of-corruption-found-dead/article14932814.ece>; accessed on 16th May 2020. 'Making a Mockery of MGNREGA', *The Hindu Business Line*, 17th December 2018; <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/specials/india-file/making-a-mockery-of-mgnrega/article25766079.ece>; accessed on 16th May 2020.

^{xxi} Also see for example, 'Strengthen NREGS to support the rural economy', *Hindustan Times*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/strengthen-nregs-to-support-the-rural-economy/story-uOIHMjpeqcpe6fVXWekeRI.html>; accessed on 16th May 2020; 'NREGA is in need of Reform', 12th November

2014, *The Economic Times*, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/interviews/nrega-is-in-need-of-reform-jean-dreze-economist-cum-activist/articleshow/45117070.cms?from=mdr>, accessed on 18th April 2020.

xxii Apart from elected officials, all names have been changed.

xxiii 1 lakh= 0.1 million.

xxiv Interview, 3rd September, *Islampurchak, Murshidabad*.

xxv Interview, 1st September, *Pumlia village, Tatla II GP, Nadia*.

xxvi Though the Bengali word *bojhapora* – meaning understanding – is sometimes used.

xxvii This fits with the trend Drèze had described almost a decade back: ‘the basic principle of ‘work of demand’ is yet to be put into practice, and meanwhile, employment generation continues to happen on a top-down basis’ (Drèze, 2011:18).

xxviii Interview, 3rd September, *Bethuadahari II, Nadia*.

xxix Interview, 14th September, *Chak Mirjapur village, Nadia*.

xxx Interview, 3rd September, *Islampurchak, Murshidabad*.

xxxi Interview, 10th September, *Darappur village, Nadia*.

xxxii Interview, 3rd September, *Bethuadahari II, Nadia*.

xxxiii There has been some discussion about how increased digitisation has in fact led to less transparency in maintaining NREGS records nationally. See ‘Digital India Actually Made MNREGA Less Transparent’ by Nikhil Shenoy, *The Wire*, 15th March 2018, <https://thewire.in/rights/digital-india-actually-made-mgnrega-less-transparent>; accessed on 15th Feb 2021.

xxxiv Interview, 4th September, *Birpur II, Nadia*.

xxxv See, for example, Adhikari and Bhatia (2010), Narayanan, Dhorajiwala *et al* (2019); ‘Fabrication and Falsification’, *The Hindu*, 21st January 2019; <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/fabrication-and-falsification/article26044272.ece>; accessed on 13th May 2020.

xxxvi Interview, 22nd September, *Lochanpur, Murshidabad*.

xxxvii Interview, 3rd September, *Islampurchak, Murshidabad*.

xxxviii ‘In West Bengal, TMC men’s cut money rate list’ *Indian Express*, 4th July 2019; <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/trinamool-congress-workers-mamata-banerjee-cut-money-last-rites-west-bengal-5811928/>; accessed on 15th May 2020.

xxxix “‘Cut money’ puts Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress on back foot’, *Hindustan Times*, 8th July 2019,

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengal-cut-money-corners-tmc/story->

[ytjskYsfBYLWGA0RcFbqEJ.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengal-cut-money-corners-tmc/story-ytjskYsfBYLWGA0RcFbqEJ.html); accessed on 15th May 2020.

xi In the 2011 state assembly elections, the TMC (and allies) won 227 seats out of a total of 294 seats, and the Left Front won in 62. In the 2013 *panchayat* elections, TMC won in 13 ZPs (out of 17), 214 PSs (out of 329), and 1783 GPs (out of 3215), while the Left parties’ cumulative share was 2 ZPs, 20 PSs and 708 GPs (*source: West Bengal State Election Commission*, <http://www.wbsec.gov.in/>).

xii Member of Legislative Assembly

xiii Member of Parliament

xliii Interview, 7th September, *Dorarpur* village, *Hingnara* GP, *Nadia*.

xliv Interview, 14th September, *Ballabhpur* village, *Hingnara* GP, *Nadia*.

xlv As widely reported in the media, defection of Left and Congress members to TMC from the state level down to every GP happened at an unprecedented rate post-2011. See, for example, ‘Defection-hit Cong, CPI(M) Face Uncertain Future in West Bengal’, *Financial Express*, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/defection-hit-cong-cpi-m-face-uncertain-future-in-west-bengal/402679/>; accessed on 17th May 2020. ‘As Trinamool gobbles up the opposition, is Bengal heading towards one-party rule?’, *Scroll.in*, <https://scroll.in/article/817389/the-trinamool-congress-is-gobbling-up-the-opposition-in-west-bengal>; accessed on 17th May 2020. ‘Cong, CPI(M) finding it difficult to keep flock together in WB’ *The Statesman*, <https://www.thestatesman.com/bengal/cong-cpi-m-finding-it-difficult-to-keep-flock-together-in-wb-160455.html>; accessed on 17th May 2020. ‘13 CPIM Panchayat Members Join TMC’, *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/13-cpi-m-panchayat-members-join-tmc/article7362660.ece>; accessed on 17th May 2020.

xlvi Interview, 17th September, *Krishnanagar*, *Nadia* district headquarters.

xlvii Interview, 22nd September, *Inayetpur* village, *Rautari* GP, *Nadia*.

xlviii Interview, 25th September, *Arazi Kanaipur* village, *Hurshi* GP, *Murshidabad*.

lix Interview, 27th September, *Bahadurpur* GP, *Murshidabad*.

i Interview, 4th September, *Nakashipara* PS, *Nadia*.

ii Interview, 3rd September, *Birpur I* GP, *Nadia*.

iii Two areas in which the BDO and higher bureaucratic channels can play a crucial role are (1) sanctioning of individual projects, and (2) allocation of projects that involve multiple GPs (such as road construction). In case

of the former, alignment seems to have a limited some impact. While BDOs rarely reject proposals from aligned GPs, occasional news surfaces about certain BDOs trying to keep unaligned GPs under a tighter control. However, given the pressure on PSs to demonstrate NREGS performance, this is not a widespread trend. In case of the latter, aligned GPs tend to have a preference, and there is also anecdotal evidence about *settings* between GP *pradhans* and BDO. However, this wasn't found to be a systemic trend in the context of this study.

lii Interview, 1st October, *Tentulia GP, Murshidabad*.

liv Interview, 14th September, *Ballabhpur village, Hingnara GP, Nadia*.

lv Although we are focused on the 2013-2018 period, the violence witnessed during the 2018 *panchayat* elections were unprecedented. All opposition parties, put together, could not field a candidate in more than a third of the 58,792 seats in the three tiers put together. For the first time since 1978, one-third of the seats was bagged by the ruling party without even a semblance of a fight. See 'Victory and Violence: On West Bengal Panchayat Elections', *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/victory-amid-violence/article23953475.ece>; accessed on 20th May 2020.

lvi Interview, 4th September, *Nakashipara PS, Nadia*.

lvii As per a 2019 report by the Centre for Policy Research, the average person days of work being generated under NREGS has been steadily declining in the last five years nationwide. Report available at: <https://www.cprindia.org/research/reports/budget-brief-2019-20-mahatma-gandhi-national-rural-employment-guarantee-scheme>. Also see: 'India's Rural Employment Programme is Dying a Death of Funding Cuts', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/feb/05/india-rural-employment-funding-cuts-mgnrega>; and 'Decline in number of workdays under MGNREGA', *The Economic Times*, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/decline-in-number-of-workdays-under-mgnrega-government/articleshow/47028370.cms?from=mdr>; both accessed on 21st May 2020.

lviii Shankar and Gaiha (2013) have shown similar practices in several other states.

lix Interview, 17th September, *Tenkaraipur Balumati village, Murshidabad*.

lx Interview, 14th September, *Pumlia village, Tatla II GP, Nadia*.

lxi Interview, 14th September, *Pumlia village, Tatla II GP, Nadia*.

lxii Interview; 27th September, *Chak Gobindapur village, Patikabari GP, Nadia*.

^{lxiii} This observation also adds to debates around reframing the ‘social contract’ extended to the poorest groups (Hulme, 2010). In traditional development thinking, social contracts are often understood as relocating social protection within a broader politics of rights and justice as opposed to patronage (as in the case of NREGS or conditional cash-transfers in general), via legitimate, peaceful and consensual forms of political authority (Hickey, 2011). But there is limited understanding of the broader politics that supports - both directly (for development agencies) and indirectly (via the symbiotic relations indicated here) - social contracts around social protection. As Hickey points out further, the politics of how social protection unfolds and is practiced in particular places can offer important insights into the centrality of state–society relations and whether such contracts are progressive or not. While the broader understanding of NREGS as a right-based contract is better suited to a progressive politics of social protection, whether it challenges the social relations underpinning poverty enough remains debatable in light of the arrangements described here.

^{lxiv} ‘What is cut-money’, *Financial Express*, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/what-is-cut-money-here-is-what-you-need-to-pay-to-avail-govt-benefits-in-mamata-banerjees-west-bengal/1626860/>; accessed on 22nd May 2020.

^{lxv} ‘Mamata Banerjee’s call to TMC leaders to return ‘cut money’ opens Pandora’s box’, *Hindustan Times*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mamata-banerjee-s-call-to-tmc-leaders-to-end-extortion-opens-pandora-s-box/story-Mv17NRKpu4M3NfsCJYhbXK.html>; accessed on 22nd May 2020.

^{lxvi} ‘In West Bengal, TMC men’s cut money rate list: Rs. 200 for last rites, Rs. 25,000 for house’, *Indian Express*; <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/trinamool-congress-workers-mamata-banerjee-cut-money-last-rites-west-bengal-5811928/>; accessed on 22nd May 2020.

^{lxvii} ‘‘Cut money’ puts Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress on back foot’, *Hindustan Times*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengal-cut-money-corners-tmc/story-ytjskYsfBYLWGA0RcFbqEJ.html>; accessed on 22nd May 2020.

^{lxviii} This is similar to the ‘political entrepreneurs’ described by Véron, Williams *et al* (2006:1937), perhaps more motivated by personal gains, but inhabiting the same blurry space between local political societies and local communities.

^{lxix} Interview, 4th September, *Nakashipara PS, Nadia*.

^{lxx} ‘Members told to give 75% protection money to party: TMC leaders confess on camera’, India Today,

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/members-told-to-give-75-protection-money-to-party-tmc-leaders-confess-on-camera-1289488-2018-07-18>; accessed on 22nd May 2020.

^{lxxi} This idea, in turn, is borrowed from Cartier-Bresson’s (1997) description of a collision of interests forming ‘corruption networks’ in France and Italy.

^{lxxii} We have also demonstrated rising political competition being significantly correlated with better NREGS performance, although official expenditures may not always be good performance indicators

^{lxxiii} Interview, 27th September, *Simurali GP, Nadia*.

Figures

Figure-1

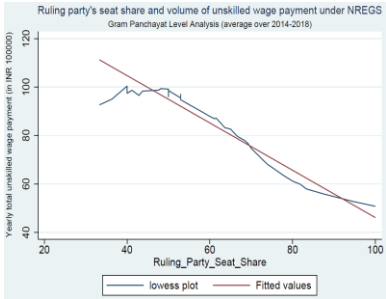


Figure-2

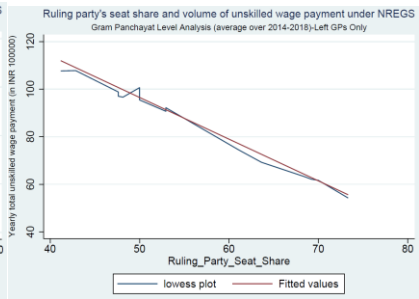


Figure-3

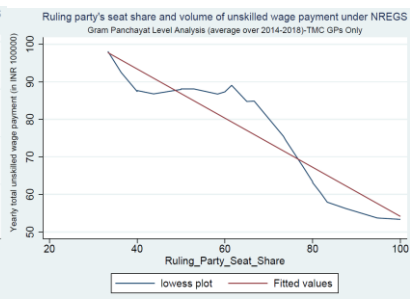


Figure 4

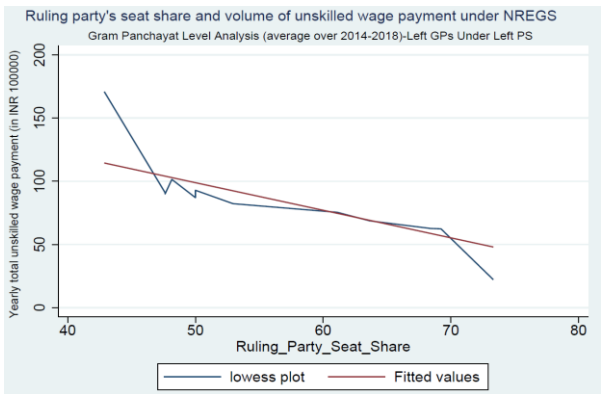
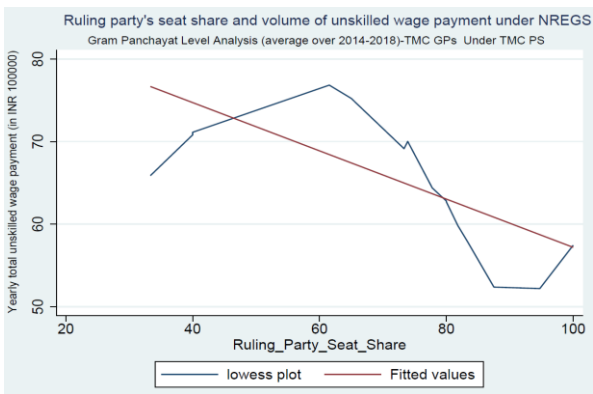


Figure 5



Tables

Table 1: Partisan Alignment and Unskilled Wage Payment Under NREGA				
<i>Panel-A (For TMC-Ruled GPs)</i>				
<i>Alignment/PS Ruling Party (No of GP)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2014-15)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2015-16)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2016-17)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2017-18)</i>
<i>Aligned/TMC (15)</i>	4912064	7584608	4543745	9168551
<i>Non-aligned/Left Front (8)</i>	7350912	12200000	7302926	12800000
<i>Panel-B (For Left-Ruled GPs)</i>				
<i>Alignment/PS Ruling Party (No of GP)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2014-15)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2015-16)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2016-17)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2017-18)</i>
<i>Non-aligned/TMC (2)</i>	6043095	6068005	11800000	12600000
<i>Aligned/Left Front (13)</i>	6557928	8493059	6366500	11300000
<i>Non-aligned/INC (4)</i>	1870368	4648639	13800000	17700000
<i>Panel-C (For Congress-Ruled GPs)</i>				
<i>Alignment/PS Ruling Party (No of GP)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2014-15)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2015-16)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2016-17)</i>	<i>Unskilled Wage Payment (2017-18)</i>
<i>Non-aligned/Left Front (2)</i>	1304681	2595256	7462707	7419182
<i>Aligned/INC (2)</i>	1016813	3854966	35800000	23600000
<i>Panel-D: NREGS unskilled wage payments (in INR 100000)</i>				
<i>GP-Ruling Party (GP No.)</i>	<i>2014-15</i>	<i>2015-16</i>	<i>2016-17</i>	<i>2017-18</i>
<i>TMC (23)</i>	57.60359	91.8499	55.0346	104.2443
<i>Left Parties (19)</i>	55.1688	73.69293	85.00356	128.1292
<i>Congress (4)</i>	11.60747	34.35062	216.4324	155.219

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 2: Effect of Political competition and Political alignment on NREGS performance

	(1) Pooled	(2) TMC	(3) Non-TMC	(4) Left
Ruling Party Seat Share	-0.519** [-2.24]	-0.690*** [-2.99]	-1.125 [-1.24]	-1.445 [-1.51]
Aligned-GP (ref as non-aligned)	24.80** [6.64]	78.39*** [4.61]	19.52 [0.98]	20.08 [0.87]
CPIM-GP (Ref as TMC-GP)	9.517*** [6.73]	No	No	No x
Congress-GP (Ref as TMC-GP)	-3.653 [-0.51]	No	No	No
SC/ST member Percentage	2251.800*** [7.22]	1424.636 [1.04]	3978.598*** [3.84]	3276.914** [2.03]
OBC Member Percentage	2252.823*** [7.22]	1424.577 [1.04]	3980.936*** [3.84]	3279.439** [2.03]
General Member Percentage	2252.205*** [7.22]	1424.492 [1.04]	3980.157*** [3.84]	3278.842** [2.03]
Male percentage	-5.818*** [-27.15]	-7.768*** [-5.13]	3.620** [2.28]	4.294** [2.52]
Hindu Percentage	-20372.2*** [-695.99]	28.579*** [5.13]	-41.896*** [-4.87]	1.273 [1.42]
Muslim Percentage	-20372.5*** [-689.90]	27.328*** [5.34]	-42.867*** [-4.75]	0.000 [.]
Reg HH NREGS	0.008 [4.27]	0.006** [2.41]	0.004 [0.75]	0.005 [0.74]
district==Murshidabad (with reference as Nadia)	-57.116*** [-7.31]	0.000 [.]	-46.698** [-1.95]	-40.920 [-1.44]
Constant	1812741.8*** [53.14]	-144392.9 [-1.05]	-393784.6*** [-3.79]	-327964.2** [-2.03]
Observations	184	92	92	76
R^2	0.795	0.836	0.867	0.765

t statistics in brackets

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table 3: Marginal Effects of 'Alignment' after Multinomial logit regression				
If GP is Aligned	GP Category as per NREGS Performance	Pooled Sample GPs	TMC GPs	Non-TMC GPs
Aligned GP (Non-aligned GP as Base category)	High	0.249**	0.561***	-0.070**
		(1.97)	(2.45)	(-1.99)
	High_Medium	-0.134	-0.304***	0.321*
		(-1.21)	(-3.21)	(1.71)
	Low_Medium	-0.051	-0.347**	0.070
		(-0.37)	(-2.10)	(1.53)
	Low	-0.065	-0.091	-0.321
		(-0.81)	(-0.91)	(-1.21)
	Total Observation	184	92	92

t-statistics in brackets

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table 4: Marginal Effects of 'Ruling Party Seat Share' after Multinomial logit regression				
Independent Variable	GP Category as per NREGS Performance	Pooled Sample GPs	TMC GPs	Non-TMC GPs
Ruling Party Seat Share	High	-0.003	-0.044*	-0.009
		(-0.61)	(-1.78)	(-0.42)
	High_Medium	-0.009*	-0.146**	-0.026
		(-1.69)	(-2.16)	(-0.65)
	Low_Medium	0.016***	0.181***	0.036
		(2.77)	(2.98)	(1.37)
	Low	-0.004	-0.006	0.000
		(-1.23)	(-0.98)	(0.09)
	Total Observation	184	92	92

t-statistics in brackets

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table 5: Overturned GPs					
District	PS	GP	GP Ruling Party after 2013 elections	GP board overturned?	If Yes, in favour of which party?
Murshidabad	Raninagar-I	<i>Herampur</i>	CPIM	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Hursbi</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Islampurchak</i>	Congress	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Lochanpur</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Pabarpur</i>	Congress	<i>Yes</i>	CPIM
		<i>Tenkaraipur Balumati</i>	CPIM	<i>No</i>	
	Murshidabad-Jiaganj	<i>Bahadurpur</i>	Congress	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Dahapara</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Dangapara</i>	Congress	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Kapasdanga</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Mukundabagh</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Natungram</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Prasadpur</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Tentulia</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
Nadia	Nakashipara	<i>Bethuadahari I</i>	TMC	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Bethuadahari II</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Bikerampur</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Bilkumari</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Billwagram</i>	TMC	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Birpur I</i>	CPIM	<i>Yes</i>	TMC
		<i>Birpur II</i>	TMC	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Dhananjaypur</i>	CPIM	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Dharmada</i>	CPIM	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Dogachbia</i>	TMC	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Haranagar</i>	CPIM	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Majbergram</i>	TMC	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Muragachha</i>	BJP	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Nakashipara</i>	TMC	<i>No</i>	
		<i>Patikabari</i>	TMC	<i>No</i>	
	Chakdaha	Out of 17 GPs, TMC controlled 16 and CPIM controlled one. There were no overturns			

Source: Authors' calculation

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Conflict of Interest Statement

There are no conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

Signed:

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Credit Author Statement

Ritanjan Das: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing- Original Draft, Writing- Review & Editing, Supervision, Funding Acquisition

Subhasish Dey: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing- Original Draft, Writing- Review & Editing

Ranjita Neogi: Resources, Data Curation, Writing- Original Draft, Writing- Review & Editing



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