

Recognizing the relational logic of the political elite's point of view: insights from the puzzling case of Nehru's shifting point of view on land reforms in India

Abstract: In this article, I claim that the prevalence of essentialism and structural determinism in the political elite scholarship prevents us from recognizing chronological shifts in the political elite's point of view. We can overcome this problem by introducing relational logic to study the relationship between the political elite's point of view and their structural position. In this article, I adopt Bourdieu's insights into the relational logic of habitus to empirically study and explain shifts in Nehru's point of view on land reforms in India. Using qualitative data, I claim that Nehru's political trajectory during the colonial period shaped his political habitus to view populist political practices as meaningful when in a relationally dominated position and networking political practices as meaningful when in a relationally dominant position. Hence, Nehru simultaneously championed land reforms and enabled the formation of the *Congress party system*, which became the main reason for the failure of land reforms. My study shows that the political elite's practices, including those related to land reforms but not limited to it, must be studied as a historically specific phenomenon within the temporal flow of the changing relational structure of politics.

Keywords: Political Elite, Political habitus, Relational logic, Nehru, India, and Land reforms

From the days of Hobbes and Machiavelli, elite scholars have long believed that the destiny of a nation-state is intertwined with the inherent traits of the ruling elite (Livingston 1997, 51; Kolegar 1967). With the right attributes, such as courage, cunning, and foresight, the ruling elite could guide their nation to prosperity and ensure the freedom and happiness of individuals. A lack of these qualities could lead even a prosperous nation to ruin. The emergence of Marxian scholarship during the post-war period shifted our focus from the ruling elite to the class conditions that enabled the ruling elite to wield their authority. Those who continued to follow the political elite scholarship departed from the classical tradition of concentrating on the internal world of the elite. Instead, they focused on the external structural conditions that influence elite actions. This shift in political elite scholarship led to extensive research on elite networks (cf. Adams 1994; Mclean 2007; Padgett and Ansell 1993; Lachman 2000).

In this article, I aim to contribute to the political elite scholarship by claiming that their explanatory power is severely limited by their assumption that the political elite's inner essence and the structural conditions of their world are two separate ontological objects. Due to this assumption, scholars examining the internal world of the political elite face the threat of unwittingly importing the pernicious problem of *essentialism* into their studies. The elite network scholarship tried to overcome this problem by adopting a relational perspective: elite behavior is shaped more by their relationship than by their inner essence. However, the political elite network scholarship faces the problem of *structural determinism* within their analysis. I highlight these limitations and find their solution to further develop the analytical power of the political elite scholarship by examining the role of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister (1947-64), in simultaneously creating conditions for the success and failure of the land reforms in India.

It is well known that Nehru mobilized the rural poor of India since colonial times by promising them land reforms. During the postcolonial elections, he continued using the populist slogan of land reform to mobilize the rural poor masses electorally. The Nehru-led Congress party won all three parliamentary elections – 1952, 57, and 62 – with a decisive majority, and Nehru remained the country's undisputed leader for almost two decades (1947-64). He played a pivotal role in enacting specific policies to achieve land reforms in the country. However, at the same time, he facilitated the formation of the *Congress party system*, an intricate system of inter- and intra-party networks supported by the landed-caste groups (cf. Bayly 1975; Bose and Jalal 1998). The Congress party system proved to be the main impediment to implementing land reform policies. Thus, the puzzling feature of Nehru's land reform practices was that while he was passionate about ushering land reforms in India and actively developed the relevant policies,

he simultaneously facilitated the formation of a political structure that blocked the effective implementation of land reform policies.

The available studies on land reforms in India focus mainly on the role of ties between landed caste groups, state bureaucrats, and regional Congress party elite (cf. Joshi 1974; Thorner 1956; Eashvaraiah 1989). They claim that the local landed caste elite and regional state actors came from the same background and had close ties with each other. Hence, ties among the dominant social and regional state actors did not allow for the successful implementation of land reform. Interestingly, none of these studies give any attention to Nehru's role in facilitating such ties. This feature of the current scholarship on the failure of land reforms in India stands in sharp contrast to the available studies on the success of land reforms in other parts of the world. Mexico (Sanderson 2013), Taiwan (Tai 2023), and Iran (Amid 2009) are exemplary cases of successful land reforms. Almost all studies on these countries have revealed the critical role played by the ruling elite at the time of land reforms. Thus, it is not easy to let go of Nehru's role in the failure of land reforms in India.

The advantage of adopting the elite scholarship to the Indian case of failed land reforms is that it prompts us to directly focus on Nehru's role in shaping the institutional mechanisms responsible for land reforms. However, I argue that while the elite scholarship focusing on the inner essence can explain Nehru's *populism* and *political networking* characteristics, they cannot explain the shift between these political practices. Those following political elite network insights can explain Nehru's networking practices that led to the formation of the Congress party system. However, they cannot use the same network analysis to explain his enthusiasm for land reforms that were directly antithetical to the interests of the landed caste groups at the foundation of the Congress party system.

I argue that the current elite scholarship cannot explain these contradictory features of Nehru's political practices as they assume that the political elite's structural conditions and inner essence are two separate ontological objects. In contrast, Bourdieu adopts relational logic to claim that social actors' subjectivity and structural conditions are one ontological unit. The relation between the two is formed during competitive interactions among actors within a particular domain of professional activity for amassing the relevant capital or challenging the symbolic value of existing capital in their field. As social actors use their resources in the contests, experience success and failure, and accordingly experience upward or downward mobility, they begin to comprehend and embody the structural conditions of the field of their activities. Thus, as they mature within their field of activity, they learn to perceive the consequences of their current practices for the future of their current positions through the lenses of their past experiences.

Following this insight, I have studied qualitative data on Nehru's interactions with his closest allies and rivals within the evolving *field of Indian politics* during the colonial period to explain contradictory features of his land reform practices during the postcolonial period. My study shows Nehru's experiences of success and failure during his competitive interactions with his peers within the colonial period in the political field led to the formation of his peculiar political disposition to view networking politics as a meaningful political practice when in a relationally dominant position with respect to his rivals and to view populist politics as meaningful when in a relationally dominated position with respect to his rivals. For this reason, when Nehru was (or anticipated being) in the dominated field position, he exhibited his passion for land reforms. Conversely, when he was in (or anticipated reaching) the dominant political

field position, he enabled the ruling party leaders' ties among the members of the landed caste communities, the foundation of the Congress party system.

The main theoretical contribution of my study to the current developments in elite scholarship is that it shifts epistemological attention from the elite's internal and external world to the *relation* between the two worlds. My study shows that the structurally mediated interactions among the political elite during their early years of training lead to the formation of intricate relations between their subjective point of view and their external circumstances. Thus, they produce multiple types of practices, even contradictory ones, that ensure the production of their anticipated position within the field structure as they perceive their current circumstances using lenses of their past experiences. Hence, those interested in studying the role of the political elite in land reforms in other parts of the world will gain an immense analytical advantage if they examine the relevant political elite's trajectory that led to their current relational position within the political field from where they formulate land reform policies or any other state policy.

The remainder of this article is divided into five parts. First, I critically discuss the elite scholarship in the context of Nehru's land reform practices. Second, I discuss Bourdieu's insights into the relationship between political elite subjectivity and the relational structure of the political field. Third, I discuss the data and method used to examine shifts in Nehru's political point of view and the historically specific structure of the Indian political field. Fourth, I present empirical evidence of Nehru's competitive interactions with his peers during the 1919-64 period. Finally, in conclusion, I summarize the main findings of this article and their theoretical relevance for comprehending the political elite's practices.

Political elite scholarship and the puzzling case of Nehru's land reform practices

Problem of essentialism

The classical elite theories were driven by the essentialist assumption that the internal essence of the being shapes their actions. Furthermore, it is assumed that this stable core of their self remains independent of the spatial and temporal circumstances within which it generates various practices. In everyday language, we use essentialist assumptions about human behavior whenever we utter sentences like, he is a 'serious' person, or he is a 'smart' person, and so on. Through these utterances, we communicate that a serious or smart person will always remain serious or smart, irrespective of the context. Continuing with the commonsensical knowledge of essentialist understanding of human behavior, political elite scholars believe we need to identify the essence of the relevant political elite to explain their behavior. Furthermore, once they identify the relation between a type of essence and a type of practice, they use it to identify the essence of other unknown political elites by studying only their practices.

Thus, classical elite scholars such as Mosca claimed that the peculiar features of the feudal societies resulted from the elite being driven by their belief in hereditarily inherited leadership qualities and military valor (Livingston 1997, 51). Pareto followed a similar line of reasoning and focused on categories of political elites; he claimed that the Byzantine elites shaped the strongly centralized and militaristic regimes in pre-modern societies (Kolegar 1967). In contrast, the modern parliamentary regimes were structured by a 'demagogic-plutocratic' cartel of elites, facilitating collusion between the business elite, trade union leaders, and other popular forces to advance their interests.

The latter political elite scholars also continued with the essentialist assumptions of classical studies. For example, Raymond Aron (1950) explained the political characteristics of

Cold War period regimes by creating conceptual categories of ‘Western’ and ‘Soviet’ elites. Ralf Dahrendorf (1967, 217–269) developed conceptual categories of the authoritarian, totalitarian, cartel, and liberal elites to explain the main features of political systems led by these categories of elites. Robert D. Putnam’s (1976, 115–121) comparative study of the political elite in various countries led him to develop categories of consensual, competitive, and coalescent types (‘patterns’) of elites who were responsible for communist, stable democratic, and multi-ethnic or consociational democratic regimes.

Suppose we adopt the classical political elite scholarships’ essentialist approach to study Nehru’s point of view. In that case, we can move in either direction, depending on the phase of Nehru’s political life we choose to focus on. If we focus only on the formative period of Nehru’s political career during the colonial period, we could classify him as a populist leader. Hence, we could claim that he continued to call for land reforms in the postcolonial period. Conversely, suppose we focus only on Nehru’s later political life in postcolonial India, especially the workings of his regime after the 1952 elections. In that case, we could classify him as a networking politician who knew how to manipulate the political elite networks of the ruling party to stabilize his political authority.

However, using either of the two categories to identify Nehru becomes problematic if we were to examine Nehru’s postcolonial political practices chronologically. A skeptic could ask: If Nehru was a populist, why did he facilitate the rise of the known networking leaders of the ruling party? On the other hand, if Nehru was a networking politician, why did he use populist slogans of land reforms to mobilize the masses electorally? We could solve this dilemma by using another classification, that of an opportunist political leader. Following this category, we could claim that Nehru was an opportunist politician who used his political rhetoric of land reforms to

mobilize the rural peasantry to win elections. After winning elections, he enabled networking leaders of the ruling party, tied with the socio-economically dominant landed castes, to stabilize his electorally gained political authority.

While the classification of opportunist politicians can explain the shift in Nehru's political practices, it cannot explain the direction of the shifts in his political tendencies. Why did Nehru use populism to mobilize the masses when he could have used political networking to do the same, as a typical Congress party leader used to do? Why did he feel the need to oblige the networking party leaders after elections when he could have easily used a strong mandate from the masses to diminish their political influence? Even if we ignore these questions and claim that Nehru was indeed an opportunist leader, we still face the question of explaining the peculiarity of his opportunism. After all, if political actors are universally opportunist, then one could ask why his rivals, also opportunist actors, did not use the same tactic to capture power as Nehru did. In other words, even if we accept that Nehru was an opportunist political elite, the question of how his peculiar subjectivity for practicing this particular type of opportunism was conditioned remains to be answered.

The problem of structural determinism

More recently, a pioneering elite scholarship has proposed a novel approach. It argues that delving into the external structural conditions of the elite's collective world provides a more insightful explanation of their behavior than focusing on their internal world. This innovative strand of elite scholarship typically views the structural conditions of the elite's world in network terms. Elites are portrayed as part of intricate and dynamic "power networks" whose core components usually include crucial political and administrative actors. The configuration of

political elite networks and their positions within them are presumed to impact political institutions' functioning profoundly. The Nehruvian period in Indian democracy has been the litmus test for political sociologists and scientists interested in understanding the role of political elite networks in shaping political systems, adding a new dimension to our understanding of political behavior.

At the time of independence (1947), while the Nehru-led political elite adopted principles of liberal democracy for the governance structure, India was economically underdeveloped and was socially highly heterogeneous. During those days, it was widely believed by democracy consolidation scholars that high economic development and low social heterogeneity formed the foundation of successful democracies (Lipset 1959). Under the lack of such circumstances, intense elite conflicts over control of the state were expected, which eventually led to the demise of democracy (Higley and Burton 2006). Thus, in the case of India, it was expected that elite conflict would eventually lead to the end of democracy, an unfortunate fate that was met by all of India's South Asian neighbors.

However, Nehru, during his first term as prime minister (1947-1952), played a pivotal role in resolving the problem of elite conflict. He appointed political leaders known as their respective communities' leaders. In terms of social network analysis, these were the leaders known for their dense clientelistic ties with the members of their community. Members of the opposition parties, who belonged to the same communities as the appointed Congress party elite, used their ties with the latter to access state office resources. Thus, a political system emerged in India where a strong party, the Congress party, acted as a pivot for multiple inter- and intra-party ties among the political elite. This unique one-party system, known among the experts of early postcolonial Indian politics as the Congress party system, was instrumental in stabilizing Indian

democracy during its early years (Kothari 1964; Hewitt 1989; Rai 2023; Kumar 2024). Hence, using the Indian case, democracy consolidation scholars now believe that countries that lack socio-economic conditions for democracy can still have democratic political institutions if their political elite has cohesive ties with each other (Lijphart 1996; Wilkinson 2000; Adeney and Swenden 2019).

In other words, the available democracy consolidation scholarship highlights Nehru's penchant for using networking politics to stabilize the Indian political system. However, they cannot use the same network analysis to account for the fact that Nehru was also known to be a bitter critic of clientelistic politics in India. Notably, while he facilitated the entry of networking leaders into critical political offices, he never used political ties to mobilize the rural poor, his most prominent supporters within rural India. Instead, he directly connected with the rural poor through his promise of land reforms, a promise that threatened the status of the landed caste members at the foundation of the Congress party system.

Thus, the political elite network scholarship examining the Nehruvian period Indian politics faces the same issue as those faced by political elite scholars interested in the internal world of the political elite: they cannot explain shifts in Nehru's political practices from populism to networking. I claim that this weakness of the elite scholarship stems from their assumption of subjectivity/structure duality. Those scholars who focus on the elite's inner world assume that human behavior is driven by their inner character irrespective of external circumstances or essentialism. Those who focus on their external world assume that structures determine the political elite's practices. In the next section, I will discuss how relational sociology provides us with conceptual tools to overcome the problem of essentialism and structural determinism in the political elite scholarship.

Relational sociology: solving the problem of political elite scholarship

According to relational sociology, the structure of relations among social actors better explains their practices rather than their respective inner essences (Emirbayer 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 15-19; Depelteau and Powell 2013). Thus, the primary focus of any sociological study should be on relations among social actors, not their essence. Furthermore, it means that as the position of a social actor changes within the relational structure, his practices will accordingly change, too. Thus, relational sociology avoids the issue of context within the essentialist understanding of human behavior.

Relational sociology also avoids the pitfall of structural determinism by recognizing that the relational structures depend on social actors' practices. Thus, it entails that if social actors change their interactional practices, there is also the possibility of changing the relational structure. In other words, relational sociology recognizes the *appearance* of relational structures as objective structures and, at the same time, recognizes them as socially constructed realities. Hence, adopting relational sociology in the study of political elites like Nehru allows us to explain shifts in their point of view by studying corresponding shifts in their position within the relational world of politics without falling into the pitfall of essentialism or structural determinism.

There are multiple schools of thought on applying relational logic within sociological analysis. Social network analysis has been the most popular among them, especially in studying the political elite. However, as discussed above, most political elite network studies present networks as objective structures external to the political elite. Despite the promise of relational sociology to consider the role of subjectivity in the production, reproduction, and transformation of the relational structure, network analysts have not developed a robust model of

the relationship between social actors' subjectivity and their relational conditions of interactions. Thus, they assume that in the final analysis, the political elite's practices are structurally determined by their position in the specific configuration of the political elite network. On the other hand, Bourdieu's field theory, a lesser-known application of relational logic in sociological analysis, is driven by a clear theorization of the relation between social actors' subjectivity and their relational conditions. In the following section, I discuss the relational logic of Bourdieu's field theory and develop a preliminary theoretical outline for empirically explaining the shift in Nehru's point of view on politics.

Conceptualizing the relational logic of Nehru's point of view

Bourdieu claims that the relational structure of the various social domains (arts, science, politics, and so on) or fields is shaped by the unequal distribution of social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 15-19). A field actor's social capital refers to his ties among other field actors – a kind of network of ties studied by social network analysts – whose resources he could access when needed. Economic capital refers to various movable and immovable assets. Cultural capital refers to his know-how to survive as an actor within a particular field. Each of these three generic capitals can have a specific form in a specific field and, from the field actors' point of view, can have a specific degree of legitimacy or symbolic value. The positions in a field are organized in hierarchical relations. One can be dominant, dominated, or equal in relation to other field actors depending on the configuration of various capitals in their respective field positions and symbolic value. Thus, within field theory, unlike social network analysis, the relational position is determined by one's position in at least three dimensions of relations.

However, the field relational structure evolves due to a perpetual *contest* among field actors over the meaning of their relationship with each other. As field actors participate in these contests, experience success and failure, and recognize the symbolic order of the field and the value of their capitals in the field, they develop their field-specific subjectivity or habitus. A field actor's habitus pre-discursively generates practices by considering his current and anticipated position within the relational structure of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127). Thus, the same field actor can exhibit multiple points of view depending on his current and anticipated position in relation to other field actors. While highlighting the relational logic of habitus, Bourdieu claimed:

Habitus reveals itself – remember that it consists of a system of dispositions, that is, virtualities, potentialities, eventualities – only about a definite situation. It is only *in the relation to* certain structures that habitus produces given discourses or practices...we must think of it as a sort of spring that needs a trigger and, depending upon the stimuli and structure of the field, the very same habitus will generate different, even opposite, outcomes (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 135).

In the case of the study of the political elite, we can note that when we rely on an essentialist explanation of politicians' practices, one can use one of the two categories of politicians – populist or networking – to explain their political practices. However, the relational logic of habitus allows us to see that the same politician can generate both networking and populist political practices, depending on how changes in the relational structure of the political field trigger his political habitus. If an elite anticipates reaping symbolic profits by using networking politics within the political field's changing relational structure, he will generate

networking political practices; conversely, if the same elite anticipates reaping symbolic profits using populist politics, he will generate populist political practices.

According to Bourdieu (1991), the relational structure of the political field is shaped by the differential distribution of various forms of political capital, which is the capital of recognition by the masses (cf. Davis 2010; Kauppi 2003). Political capital can exist in the form of personal popularity among the masses or ties among political actors at various levels of politics. Bourdieu argues that not every political capital in the field is equally legitimate from the point of view of political actors; from their perspective, some types of political capital have relatively higher symbolic value than others. Those with a higher volume of symbolically higher political capital will be in a dominant political field position in relation to those with a lower volume of symbolically higher political capital. However, the relational structure of the political field is historically evolving, as the political field is always in a state of contest among political actors interested in preserving the existing norms of legitimate domination and political actors bent on changing them (Bourdieu 1991, 168-170). These contests are decided by political actors' ability to mobilize their political capital to win various offices within the political field.

The politician's habitus embodies specific political knowledge about various ideologies, historical interpretations, economic data, and so on produced by political actors from the past or currently active (Bourdieu 1991, 176). A critical component of this process is developing skills to be an effective orator in relation to both non-professionals and peers. As a compelling orator, one must be able to use speech to connect with the masses. Concerning peers, a political actor must display practical debating skills, especially during crucial legislative assembly sessions. This entire process of embodying the history of the political field is mediated by the relevant

actor's participation in the contest over the meaning of being a political actor taking place within the historically specific form of the political field.

Theoretically, the political habitus formation process can be described in the following manner. First, a neophyte enters the political field with a certain kind of capital and uses it to maneuver through different field positions. However, his success in controlling his field trajectory depends on his capital's symbolic value (i.e., the legitimate value of capital from the field actors' point of view). As he competes with other field actors to gain upward mobility, he begins to develop a pre-discursive comprehension of when, where, and how his capital can ensure his triumph or defeat in various competitions within the field. Thus, the ability of political actors' habitus to anticipate their future field position from their current position results from their prolonged affective experiences of success and defeat in reproducing or improving their relational position using their primary capital within competitive interactions over various offices in the political field. Following these insights, I have examined Nehru's political trajectory during the colonial period to explain his contradictory land reform practices in the postcolonial period.

Data and method

The main empirical objective is to analyze data on how Nehru perceived the relational structure of the Indian political field, institutional mechanisms for comprehending changes, the types of resources or capital used to gain upward mobility, their respective symbolic value, and the significance of land reforms in politics. I have broadly divided the data collection exercise into two parts. In the first part, I have focused on documenting his point of view as he moved from one position to another within the political field of the colonial period. In the second part, I

have repeated the same exercise within the postcolonial political field. By comparing patterns of changes in his point of view before and after changes in his field position during the colonial and postcolonial periods, I have demonstrated the relational logic of Nehru's political habitus that generated contradictory land reform practices.

My primary data sources for studying Nehru's point of view are his and his political peers' writings. Nehru was a prolific writer who authored numerous books and articles, including an autobiography. He also left behind many letters written to friends, family members, and national and international leaders, which have been published in the book format. There are multiple volumes of his speeches to the Parliament of India. He also regularly contributed to the Congress party's weekly news bulletin, discussing the latest domestic and international political issues. In addition, he conducted numerous interviews with both national and international journalists. Many of these journalists and his close associates also wrote his biography. Alternatively, the autobiographies of his peers, whether allies or rivals have copious details of his political life.

Nehru's political interactions during the colonial period often revolved around the meaning of freedom, the relevance of social reforms for the country's future, ways and means for achieving them, and so on. I have especially documented his engagement with the three ideological positions available to the political actors at the time – nationalist, Marxist, and socialist – and related conclusions about the necessity of state-sponsored land reforms in postcolonial India. In addition, I have also documented how Nehru's staunch supporters and his rivals in the Congress party, located in various political field positions, perceived his stand on the necessity of land reforms as the single most crucial agenda for the future of India.

These interactions often became foundations for mobilizing masses and political peers during crucial contests over political offices, whether in the state or the party. I have treated contests over these offices and their outcomes as a manifestation of the political field and institutionalized forms of positions within it. In his memoirs, Nehru carefully documented his internal experiences preparing for such contests, what happened during those contests, his feelings about the outcome, and how he used his office to further his land reform agenda. I focused on qualitative features of his interactions with his political peers, rivals, and allies as he struggled to move from one position to another in the political field. Moreover, I have examined the kinds of capital he used to win offices, their success with other kinds of capital, and his strategies to reproduce his political position.

These contests were mainly over the Congress party offices during the colonial period. I have especially paid close attention to Nehru's first contest to win the president's office of the Congress party. I have studied Nehru's experience of power during his tenure as the Congress party president and how he used the president's office to translate his point of view on land reforms into the formal agenda for the party. I have also examined records of his allies' support, his rival's reactions to his agenda of land reforms, and how Nehru navigated them to ensure his political survival at the echelon of Indian politics.

In postcolonial India, Nehru's contests with his rivals were decided by the timely held, accessible, and fair parliamentary elections during the postcolonial period. However, the next round of parliamentary elections created a high uncertainty regarding whether the participants' political field positions would remain the same or change after the elections. Nehru and ruling parliamentarians had to participate in these elections to reclaim state offices. The relationally dominant political actors would likely worry that their position would worsen, while the

dominated elite would likely hope their position would improve. Complete expulsion from the field was also possible if a politician failed to be elected to the parliament. Thus, I argue that the periods before and after the elections for Nehru were comparable to his colonial period contests over Congress party offices.

I have supplemented my primary data on Nehru's point of view on the elite sector of the political field with secondary data from various studies on the grassroots, middle, and top levels of Indian politics. Political anthropologists have been at the forefront of studying the socio-economic foundations of grassroots Indian politics during the late colonial and early postcolonial periods (cf. Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Srinivas 1959). These studies document how ritualistic caste relations were deeply intertwined with various caste groups' relationship with agricultural land, that is, who owned and worked on the land. Many of these studies noted the significance of understanding the presence of multiple competing landed caste members and their faction of clients at the village level to comprehend the mass mobilization strategies of the Congress party leaders (cf. Baker 1976; Bayly 1975; Talbot 1986; Reeves 1971).

These anthropological studies on the grassroots politics of India supplement the available studies on the middle rung of Indian politics, well documented by scholars studying regional politics (cf. Tomlinson 1976; Low 2006). These studies conceptualize regional Indian politics as the Congress party system: a system of cohesive intra- and inter-party networks that allowed opposition parties' leaders of various ideological leaning to access the state resources (cf. Kothari 1964; Hewitt 1989). Congress party leaders' tight clientelistic relations with the landed caste leaders were at the foundation of the Congress party system. These leaders relied on their ties with the factions of landed caste members to mobilize the rural poor. After winning elections, they provided easy access to their landed caste allies with various kinds of state

resources such as cheap fertilizers, low-interest loans, and administrative support during their competition with other factions in the village.

Studies at the top levels of Indian politics were mainly conducted by comparative political scientists interested in the puzzling success of the Indian democracy. These studies provide an essential insight into Nehru's most crucial decisions shaping the institutional structure of Indian politics during the post-election period, the ministerial selection process. Their main point is that Indian democracy survived despite poverty and high social heterogeneity because Nehru appointed communal elites who were well embedded within their respective religious and/or caste community network into his ministerial offices. In turn, such elites facilitated a cohesive inter- and intraparty network among the Congress party elite that prevented the debilitating effects of elite conflicts on the nascent Indian democracy and stabilized it.

These anthropological and political science studies reveal the strains of the grassroots, middle, and top levels of Indian politics that formed the structural background for Nehru's political interactions with his allies and rivals during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Thus, using secondary data from these studies, along with primary data on Nehru's point of view on the relational structure of Indian politics, I have explained the relational logic of Nehru's political habitus that led to his contradictory approach towards land reforms in India: using land reforms rhetoric to mobilize the rural poor before elections and enabling the landed caste leaders within the Congress party system after elections.

The colonial period political field

The emergence of the British colonial state in India after the 1857 mutiny against the East India Company loosely centralized what was otherwise a highly divided Indian polity (Bellenoit

2017). The centralized colonial state was a unique phenomenon, as it was simultaneously autonomous from the Indian social space and driven by the civilizing mission that prompted it to interfere in the social affairs of the masses (Nandy 1982; Chatterjee 1989). As a part of its civilizing mission, the colonial state established Western school systems at every level of education. Perhaps for the first time, the imagination of a responsive state began to gain ground among the Indian people, especially among the newly emerging Westernized professional classes (doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and so on).

However, the Westernized elite were a minority living mostly in the cities. Most of the population lived in rural India. Contrary to Dumont's (1970) famous depiction of the Indian caste system – *Brahmins* (priests) at the top, *Shudras* (peasants) at the bottom, and *Kshatriyas* (warriors) and *Vaishyas* (merchants) in between – the social structure of rural India was driven by a land-based patronage system, known as the *Zamindari* system. The colonial state used British landlordism as a reference to re-configure the Zamindari system for their purposes. The Zamindar was a tax-collecting but non-cultivating intermediary between the state and the tiller of the soil. They leased their lands to tenants and could collect whatever rent they determined.¹ The Zamindars' families within a village community were classified as members of the landed caste, and they held the most significant position in a village community in rural India (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984, 150-151; Srinivas 1959).

¹ There were also the *ryotwari* tenures, modeled after the French proprietorship. The ryotwari system recognized no intermediaries and conferred hereditary property rights on cultivators. However, the colonial regime retained complete power over land and determined the assessment of land payable to the state. In the ryotwari estates, the heavy pressure of oppressive revenue demands pauperized the ryot, and his eventual inability to meet the demand for revenue payment resulted in the transfer of his land to a money lender. Thus, intermediaries claiming a share in the gross produce and leaving the cultivators with bare sustenance drove the cultivator into the clutches of perpetual debt (Sareen and Malik 2021).

Here, it is essential to note that any ritually classified caste group members can be classified as members of the landed caste group if they own large tracts of land in a region. Members of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya caste groups formed a significant portion of the landed caste groups in the northern parts of India. In contrast, members of the Shudra caste groups formed a significant chunk of the landed caste groups in the southern parts of India (Frankel 1978; Bayly 2001; Jaffrelot 2003). These geographically contextualized economic and ritualized relations among the caste groups began to emerge in the Indian social space during the late periods of the Mughal Empire (1500-1857) and were ossified during the colonial period in India (1857-1947) (Frankel 1978; Bayly 2001 [1999]; Jaffrelot 2003; Richards 2004 [1993]). Overall, peasants in rural India, who accounted for nearly eighty percent of the total population, depended upon the landed caste group members who controlled almost eighty percent of the country's agricultural land (Frankel 1978). This socio-economic structure of rural India formed the foundation of the political field of the colonial period.

A retired British colonial officer, A.O. Hume, established the Congress Party in 1885 primarily to enable the newly westernized and educated social elite to express their grievances against colonial rule through legitimate channels (Chandra et al. 2016, 45-56). The early Congress party leaders largely accepted the legitimacy of the colonial state and expected it to fulfill its civilizing mission in India. Thus, most of the commentators of the early colonial period Indian politics viewed the Congress party merely as a social elite's debating club that regularly petitioned the colonial state for further social reforms. However, the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi to Indian politics in 1919 changed the Congress party from an elite debating club to a mass-based nationalist movement (Chandra et al. 2016, 20).

Gandhi brought to the Congress party leaders' attention the pain and suffering of rural India's vast, toiling peasants. He claimed that according to Indian traditions, the Zamindars were the guardians of the rural poor. However, the colonial state had corrupted Zamindars' traditional relationship with the rural poor from being their protectors to their exploiters. He believed that the re-education of the Zamindars about their traditional role would have corrected the Indian rural social system. Thus, he traveled all over India and engaged with the landed caste leaders at every level to remind them of their role as peasants' guardians.

Gandhi's approach towards the Zamindari system made him popular among the rural poor and the landed caste members. The organizational leaders of the Congress party, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and his close collaborators, tapped into Gandhi's popularity among peasants and landed caste groups to rapidly spread the Congress party offices in every corner of the rural countryside. Their approach was to absorb members of the landed caste groups into the Congress party offices. The party office-bearers used their financial strength to manage the party affairs and influence the political charge of the rural poor at the grassroots level. Soon, the Congress party organization started to reflect the social structure of rural India; landed caste members were the officer bearers, while the peasants were the party's rank-and-file members (Bayly 1975; Bose and Jalal 1998).

As the Gandhi-led nationalist movement spread across the country, the British colonial state started introducing institutions of parliamentary democracy into colonial India (Chiriyankandath 2001). There were elections for the legislative assembly, and the legislative members of the winning party were eligible to become ministers. However, the ultimate control over the state resources remained firmly in the hands of the colonial state officers, not elected representatives. Furthermore, the electoral franchise was extended only to the social and

economic elite of Indian society, among whom the most prominent section was that of the landed caste.

The Congress Party did not participate in the 1920 election. In the 1934 and 1946 elections, they used their close ties with the landed caste groups to emerge as the largest party within the National Assembly, the colonial-period legislative body (Misra 1999; Chiriyankandath 2001). Thus, within the historically unique conditions of colonialism, the field of Indian politics formally began to open to the participation of the elites of the Indian social space. However, it remained closed to participation from the rural poor masses, who constituted the most significant section of the Indian population. In other words, the Indian political field during the late colonial period was split into two contradictory parts: the institutional part, where the social capital among the landed caste groups was the symbolic capital, and the nationalist movement opposed the colonial state institutions, where the capital of popularity among the mass was the symbolic capital.

Nehru entered Indian politics when the Congress party dominated the entire field of politics as the largest party in the legislative assembly and the leading party of the nationalist movement. Central to the success of the Congress Party in these two opposing spheres of colonial-period politics was the presence of Mahatma Gandhi, a charismatic leader with immense popularity among all sections of the masses, and Vallabh Bhai Patel, known to be the architect of Congress Party leaders' clientelistic networks among the landed caste groups. Following field theory insights on the relation between subjectivity and field structure, I have closely examined Nehru's interactions with Mahatma Gandhi and Vallabh Bhai Patel – mediated by the colonial period political field – to document his unique political habitus formation.

Nehru's political habitus formation

Early years

Jawaharlal Nehru was born on November 14, 1889, into a Kashmiri Brahman family (Brown 2003). His father, Motilal Nehru, was one of northern India's most prosperous lawyers. Nehru family's dominant position within the elite sector of the Indian social space brought many privileges to young Nehru (Nehru 1942, 39). He was educated at home by British tutors and governesses and later went to London to complete his higher education. He first attended Harrow and then Cambridge University. He eventually decided to train as a lawyer at Inner Temple, one of London's four professional associations of lawyers.

After seven years in London, Nehru returned to India and tried his hand as a lawyer under the guidance of his father. However, he soon grew tired of the regional judicial system's procedural humdrum and became increasingly engulfed in the rapidly brewing nationalist movement (Brecher 1959, 32-84; Brown 2003, 30-50, 65-81). His father was one of the most prominent members of the northern Indian branch of the Congress party. Among other prominent Congress party leaders, Mahatma Gandhi regularly visited Motilal's house for political discussions. The young Nehru began developing his perception of the Indian politics of the time by actively engaging in ideological discussions in his home with the senior Congress party leaders.

Nehru viewed nationalism and Marxism as the two main ideological poles of Indian politics. He believed that Congress party leaders thought mainly of the narrowest nationalism. Their views about the nationalist movement were shaped by their romantic understanding of India's past: it was once a culturally prosperous civilization, and now it was in ruins because of foreign rule. The main objective of the nationalist movement was to gain political freedom

and resurrect India's past cultural heritage. Nehru claimed that his peers' nationalist speeches emotionally moved him. However, he was not entirely swayed by nationalists' ideas about the purpose of political freedom. While reflecting on his engagement with nationalist rhetoric, Nehru made the following notes:

They were familiar themes which found an echo in every Indian heart, and the nationalist in me responded to them as was moved by them (though I was never a blind admirer of ancient times in India or elsewhere). But, though the truth in them remained, they seemed to grow a little thin and threadbare with constant use, and their ceaseless repetition prevented the consideration of other problems and vital aspects of our struggle. They only fostered emotions and did not encourage thought (Nehru 1942, 138-139).

In contrast to the nationalist leaders' tendencies, enamored by their skewed understanding of the glorious past, the Marxian ideology highlighted past miseries and presented the possibility of a radical progressive change in the future. Nehru believed that the Marxian insights into the revolutionary potential of the proletariats for ushering in the age of communism were vital for charting the future of a country like India. However, he was skeptical about the full applicability of the Marxian ideas to the Indian case, as the Indian social system had yet to go through a complete industrial revolution. In terms of sheer numbers, peasants comprised a much larger group in India than the small minority of industrial workers concentrated in towns and cities. He made the following note while reflecting on the significance of the communist party leaders' role in the nationalist movement:

Communists in India have associated with the industrial workers of the big towns. They have little knowledge of, or contact with, the rural areas. The industrial

workers, important as they are, and likely to be more so in the future, must take second place before the peasants, for the problem of today in India is the problem of the peasantry (Nehru 1942, 235).

Nehru, like Gandhi, believed that the existing land tenure system, favoring the landed caste and highly exploitative towards the peasants, was the main roadblock to the future of a prosperous India (Nehru 1942, 61). However, he disagreed with Gandhi's approach towards solving the peasant problems. Notably, Gandhi envisioned a future where the members of the landed caste groups would act as the responsible guardians of the poor peasantry (Mukherjee 2010, 215-221). Nehru, in contrast, did not believe that the landed caste members could play a positive role in transforming the fate of the Indian peasants. He held a very low opinion of the landed caste's significance in Indian society, as is evident from the following quote:

The *Talukdars* and the big *Zamindars*, the lords of the land, the "natural leaders of the people," as they are proud of calling themselves, are the spoiled children of the British government; but that government had succeeded, by the special education and upbringing it provided or failed to provide them, in reducing them as a class, to a state of complete intellectual impotence. They do nothing at all for their tenantry and are complete parasites on the land and the people (Nehru 1942, 61).

Nehru developed a socialist ideology that amalgamated nationalism and Marxism. He defined socialism as "equality of opportunity and the possibility for everyone to live a good life" (Char 1961, 145). Like the nationalists, Nehru believed political freedom was necessary for the country's future. However, unlike the nationalist's romantic understanding of the past, he believed social change was necessary for the country's future. Thus, he leaned towards the

Marxian understanding of social progress. However, he also believed the Indian social system was still primarily based on an agricultural economy. Hence, social change could not be triggered by focusing only on the industrial classes. Instead, peasants and their oppressed structural position must become the starting point for the Indian state to initiate social reforms in postcolonial India.

The rank-and-file Congress party members began recognizing Nehru's political conviction about peasant problems as his political capital. However, in their eyes, Nehru's popularity among the peasants did not count for much. After all, during the colonial period elections, Congress party leaders needed only the support of the landed caste members, not the peasants. Thus, while Nehru was emerging as an influential leader within the political field sector of the nationalist movement, within the institutional sector, his popularity among the rural poor had lower symbolic value. He began to recognize differences in the symbolic value of his political capital in relation to that of the conservative leaders when he started competing for party offices.

Political trajectory during the colonial period

Nehru first experienced the bittersweet taste of his capital of popularity among the rural masses when he competed for the post of party president in 1929 (Brecher 1959, 137-138). He firmly believed that his political point of view was the only one that could be taken seriously by the party's rank-and-file members. As a result, he was shocked to learn that most of the leaders had voted for Patel. Gandhi intervened in the contest and expressed his desire to have Nehru as the party's new president before the results were announced. He was keen on having Nehru as the public face of the Congress party, as his popularity among the masses was essential to keep up

the mass momentum of the nationalist movement. At the same time, Gandhi convinced Patel, who was highly popular among his colleagues but relatively unknown among the masses, that Nehru's engagement with organizational affairs would at least blunt, if not extinguish, Nehru's socialist convictions. Patel withdrew from the contest and allowed Nehru to become, for the first time, the president of the Congress party.

Nehru had mixed feelings about becoming the Congress party president for the first time. He wrote in his biography that he felt "annoyed and humiliated" upon realizing he was elected not because the Congress party leaders recognized the importance of his political beliefs but because Patel, his party arch-rival, had given him the opportunity (Nehru 1942, 145). Nehru's annoyance was a sign of his recognition of the relatively lower symbolic value of his capital of popularity among the peasants than the symbolic value of the social capital among the landed caste members.

However, Nehru remained enthusiastic about his popularity among the masses as the symbolic source of his political authority. He continued testing its symbolic power in contrast to the social capital in politics. We can glimpse this crucial feature of his colonial-period political experiences that shaped his political habitus when we look at his final push for socialism as the Congress party's main political agenda in 1936. In his presidential speech to the Congress party leaders, he said:

There is no way to end the poverty and subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. Socialism entails vast and revolutionary changes in political and social structure, the ending of vested interests in land and industry, and the feudal and autocratic Indian states system. That means the ending of private property, except in a restricted sense, and the replacement of the present profit

system by a higher ideal of cooperative service. It means ultimately a change in our instincts and habits and desires. In short it means a new civilization, radically different from the present capitalist order (Nehru 1975, 181).

On the one hand, Nehru's presidential speech calling for socialist revolution thrilled members of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), a faction within the Congress party formed in 1934 by three socialist-leaning members: Jayaprakash Narayan, Narendra Deva, and Achyut Patwardhan. On the other hand, the conservative Congress party leaders felt that a call for socialism, especially in the upcoming elections, would harm the Congress party's prospects, as the members of the landed caste groups, and not the rural poor, were enfranchised. In protest, several prominent members of the Congress Working Committee (the highest Congress party body authorized to decide its long-term policy matters), including Vallabh Bhai Patel, C. Rajagopalachari, and Rajendra Prasad, sent their resignations to Nehru.

Gandhi, recognizing the gravity of the situation, swiftly stepped in. He urged Nehru to refrain from criticizing his conservative colleagues and persuaded Patel to acknowledge Nehru as the party leader. More significantly, he tacitly endorsed the conservative leaders' belief that the political goal of freedom should take precedence over the socialist agenda of the nationalist movement. Gandhi's intervention was pivotal in resolving the crisis. The conservative leaders retracted their resignations, and Nehru, albeit reluctantly, conceded that the Congress party's immediate focus should be achieving complete freedom from the colonial state. He agreed that the socialist agenda could be pursued post-independence (Nehru 1975, 373).

The 1936 crisis of the Congress party was thus resolved. However, it had a chastening effect on him (Nanda 1995, 188). During his early years in colonial period politics, Nehru confidently displayed his conviction of the significance of socialism for the future of India in the

presence of the rural masses and his colleagues in the party. During the later years, Nehru continued to display his conviction about socialism to the masses, but in the presence of his colleagues, he changed his political tune. This was evident in a 1941 speech to the Congress party leaders on socialism, in contrast to his fiery 1936 presidential speech calling for a socialist revolution:

In the context of democratic freedom and with a considerable measure of cooperation of some at least of the groups who were normally opposed to socialist doctrine...if [class] conflict was inevitable, it had to be faced; but if it could be avoided or minimized that was an obvious gain (Nehru 1946, 480).

Thus, Nehru, who never shied from confronting the Congress party leaders over his views on socialism, started talking about gains from avoiding conflicts over socialism near the end of the colonial period. These visceral experiences of success and failure during his competitive interactions with his peers within the colonial period in the political field led to his peculiar political disposition to view populist politics as meaningful when in (or anticipated reaching) a relationally dominated position with respect to his rivals. Conversely, when he was in (or anticipated reaching) the dominant political field position, he enabled the authority of the ruling party leaders known for their ties among the members of the landed caste communities. These peculiar features of Nehru's political habitus became the foundation of his two contradictory political practices in postcolonial India: crafting land reform policies and the Congress party system.

Postcolonial period: Congress party system and land reforms

Since Nehru was the Congress party president during the last days of the colonial period, in 1947, the departing colonial administration invited the Nehru-led Congress party to form the interim government before the first parliamentary election of postcolonial India in 1952. The two main limiting political features of the colonial period – franchise only for the members of the socially dominant group and colonial bureaucrats' control over state offices – were removed with the departure of the colonial state. Now, the franchise was extended to all citizens of the country who were 18 or older. Thus, for the first time, the rural poor, representing nearly eighty percent of India's population, would have been able to freely vote and participate in the election of members of legislative bodies. Ministers were to be selected from the elected members of legislative bodies, and they, not the bureaucrats, would have had the final say in state policies.

Here, it is essential to recall that the need to maintain a united front with the conservative leaders against the colonial state constantly constrained Nehru's socialist zeal before 1947. Thus, after being appointed as the prime minister of free India in 1947, Nehru wholeheartedly started preparing the postcolonial Indian state for land reforms in the country. During the 1947-49 period, he chaired and directed the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee (CARC), which recommended limiting the size of agricultural property and abolishing intermediaries between the state and cultivators (Eashvaraiah 1989; Ghose, Dhavan and Paul 1992; Joshi 1974). In 1950, he ensured that the *Zamindari* Abolition Act, which included almost all recommendations of the CARC, was passed in parliament and all regional assemblies. Thus, during his first tenure as prime minister (1947-52), Nehru appeared to be moving at full speed to prepare formal mechanisms of the state for land reforms.

However, the implementation part entailed the usage of the informal mechanism of the Congress party. Notably, the colonial state had a very shallow presence at the grassroots level (Singh 2003; Bose and Jalal 2022). Without the grassroots state offices, political parties engaged with the nationalist movement were the only institutional mechanism for representing the voices of the rural poor. While there were multiple political parties in India, none could match the depth and breadth of the Congress party's influence at the grassroots level (Tomlinson 1982; Vanderbok et al. 1988; Sisson and Wolpert 1988). Thus, the Congress party organization would have played a pivotal role in educating the rural poor about their enshrined rights, providing them with the resources to access state offices, and effectively controlling the landed caste elite's efforts to block the new laws.

After independence, Nehru assumed that since the Congress party's agenda for complete freedom had been achieved, he was now in complete control of the party. However, he faced stiff resistance from the Congress party leaders on policy-making issues, including but not limited to his land reform policies. Thus, when the Congress party leader Jayaprakash Narayan, a staunch believer in land reforms and one of the most prominent members of the CSP, asked Nehru what was stopping him now from implementing his socialist vision, Nehru became agitated and said:

I cannot by sheer force of circumstances do everything that I would like to do. We are in some measure prisoners of fate and circumstances. But I am as keen as ever to go in a particular [socialist] direction and carry the country with me (Nanda 1995, 190).

What kind of "prisoner" could Nehru have been, despite being the prime minister of India? To answer this question, we need to examine the effect of independence on the symbolic order of the Indian political field. Note that during the late colonial period, Congress party

leaders' political networks with the members of the landed caste represented the symbolic capital of Indian politics. Congress party leaders known for their political networks assumed that their capital was still the symbolic capital of Indian politics in postcolonial India. Hence, they had no hesitation in disapproving of Nehru's attempts to translate his socialist ideology into state policy. On the other hand, Nehru believed his popularity among the masses was good enough for his political authority. However, he had not yet proven the mass mobilization ability of his capital of popularity among the masses.

Nehru's and his rivals' claim about the symbolic value of their respective politics-specific capitals rested on their claims that they represented the masses' point of view. They started preparing for their first contest during the first parliamentary election of postcolonial India, which was to be held in 1952. The Congress party elites successfully used their deep networks to ensure their chosen candidates were nominated, and Nehru became the star campaigner for the Congress party nominees (Brecher 1959, 437). During his campaign, especially in the countryside, he reiterated his socialist vision of equitable division of landholding in rural India (Guha 2002). He was publicly critical of some of the Congress party candidates, who he believed would be detrimental to his efforts to enforce the land-redistribution policy (Brown 2003, 197-198; Brecher 1959, 440-441; Gopal 2015, 161-162). Election results showed that under Nehru's leadership, the Congress party had decisively dwarfed all other parties in the first parliament of postcolonial India. The Congress party won 364 out of a total of 489 parliamentary seats. (see Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Party Leaders in 1952, '57, and '62 Parliamentary Sessions

Year	Total Seats	CP	COPI	SOC	PSP/KMPP	SWA	BJS	Other Parties	Ind
1952	489	364	16	12	9	0	3	27	38
1957	494	371	27	0	19	0	4	31	42
1962	494	361	29	6	12	18	14	34	20

CP = Congress Party	KMPP = Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party
COPI = Communist Party of India	SWA = Swatantra Party
SOC = Socialist Party	BJS = Bhartiya Jana Sangh
PSP = Praja Socialist Party	Ind = Independent

Party leaders were highly enthusiastic about the results. However, Nehru made it amply clear that neither the organizational strength of the Congress party nor the political quality of Congress party nominees was responsible for their electoral performance. In a piece written for Congress Bulletin, he observed that:

It is true to say that the Congress organization has not usually played a satisfactory part in many states... where we have won, this was not always due to the Congress organization. Indeed, the Congress organization, as a whole, rather failed in this test.... our choice (of candidates) sometimes was not good. There was almost utter lack of discipline, both among Congress candidates and among Congressmen (Congress Bulletin 1952, 11-16).

Unlike during the colonial period, there was not a single voice of protest from the Congress party leaders against Nehru's criticism of the party. Thus, after the 1952 elections, it appeared that he had unambiguously established his political capital of popularity among the rural poor as the symbolic capital of the Indian political field. He could now use his newly gained political authority to remold the party to prepare it for implementing his ambitious land reform policies. He could have started by nominating his most vocal supporters within the Congress party, the CSP leaders, to the top posts in the party. However, he did not facilitate any CSP leaders' ascension within the Congress party. He allowed the party to continue functioning as it did during the colonial period. Regular elections were held within the party to elect party office bearers, and he never opposed party leaders' suggestions for Congress party nominees for various elections.

Furthermore, having gained dominance over the political field, one would have expected an increase in Nehru's activities for the land reform movement. Instead, once the 1952 elections were over, there was a lull in Nehru's enthusiasm for the land reforms. He was increasingly directing his attention toward establishing heavy industries – for example, hydroelectric dams and steel production industries – as a part of his government's development plan (Nayar 1997; Balakrishnan 2007; Tyabji 2015). When a concerned journalist asked about his waning commitment to land reforms, he said that a socialist utopia could not be achieved by simply dividing the existing wealth, “for in India there is no existing wealth for you to divide; there is only poverty to divide (Nehru 1958, 17).” This statement is quite surprising, as Nehru, in his electoral rhetoric, gave the impression that he viewed land as the fundamental source of wealth and social status in India; the land was already available, and it simply had to be divided to simultaneously solve the urgent problems of rural poverty and dehumanizing caste relations.

In the post-election period, Nehru's approach towards the Congress party leaders enabled the reproduction of the Congress party's colonial period foundation of clientelistic ties among the landed caste. In addition, Nehru facilitated a deep embedding of the Congress party within the postcolonial state structure by appointing elites of various communities into his ministerial team. Interestingly, Nehru did not appoint any of his CSP allies to any of the ministerial offices. Notably, CSP leaders were well known for their popularity among the rural poor but were not embedded within the Congress party elite networks.

Democracy consolidation scholars have claimed that Nehru's choice of communal elites as ministers became the main reason for the stabilization of Indian democracy during the crucial first few decades of the postcolonial period (Lijphart 1996; Wilkinson 2000; Adeney and Swenden 2019). This consociational form of democracy further facilitated the rise of the political leaders known for their political networks at the top-ranking state and the ruling party offices. They became so prominent that opposition party leaders from the same community sought out the Congress party elite to gain access to state resources. Thus, a Congress party system emerged, in which opposition parties worked more as pressure groups in relation to the ruling Congress party rather than presenting themselves as an alternative to the Congress party (Kothari 1964; Hewitt 1989; Rai 2023; Kumar 2024).

Change in Nehru's political practices before and after the first parliamentary elections of postcolonial India reveals his colonial period proclivity to passionately pursue populist mass mobilization agenda such as socialism when he was in a dominated position and indulge in networking politics when in a dominant position in relation to his rivals. The only difference now was that Nehru gauged his relational position in elections held for the Congress party offices during the colonial period. In the postcolonial period, Nehru gauged his relational position within

parliamentary elections. This pattern of shifts in Nehru's political practices – populist before and networking after the parliamentary elections – was evident in the two successive election cycles, 1957 and 1962.

When his first term as democratically elected prime minister neared its end in 1957, he again began to show excitement for land reforms. In 1955, under Nehru's guidance, the Congress Party finally adopted the socialist vision as its core agenda. At about the same time, an Indian delegation visited China to study cooperative farming, giving a favorable report in 1957 (Joshi 1974). Thus, after a lull in his enthusiasm for socialism, Nehru successfully used his socialist rhetoric to lead the Congress party leaders to victory in the 1957 elections (see Table 1). There was, as usual, a lull in Nehru's enthusiasm for land reforms after his electoral victory and a subsequent spike in his excitement about them as his tenure as prime minister ended in 1962. In 1959, Nehru directed the Congress party leaders to declare that the future agrarian pattern should be cooperative farming (Tai 1974, 237). Under this program, the village *panchayats* (village governing councils) were to operate joint farming cooperatives. All farmers in the Indian villages were to pool their land under joint management but retain their ownership. They were supposed to get dividends in addition to remuneration for work done. The newly adopted cooperative programs were to start at all Indian levels after the land redistribution program was wholly implemented. Nehru again successfully used his socialist rhetoric to lead the Congress party leaders to victory in the 1962 elections (see Table 1). Nehru passed away in 1964; neither land redistribution nor the cooperative program was achieved.

It is true that the relational logic of Nehru's political habitus – populist during elections and networking after elections – stabilized Indian democracy. Nevertheless, it is also true that it became the main roadblock to successfully implementing the land reforms in India. Note that

according to the *Zamindari* abolition, members of the landed caste groups were expected to distribute their land among their tenants. The overall approach of the landed caste members to escape the consequences of the Zamindari Abolition Act was to show in the state documents that they cultivated their land (Joshi 1974; Thorner 1956; Eashvaraiah 1989). Since they had no tenants, they did not need to distribute their land among the latter. To prove their role in personally cultivating their land, the Zamindars expelled peasants working as tenants on their land. Thus, peasants lost whatever little land they had for their subsistence farming.

The regional governments and local-level tribunals were responsible for verifying documents for land redistribution. These tribunals became tools for the landed caste members and their political benefactors among the regional ministers to either hide their surplus land or discredit peasants' claims on their land (Eashvaraiah 1989; Nadkarni 2002; Jaffrelot 2003). Furthermore, peasants typically lacked official papers to prove they were the land's tenants. Moreover, even if they did or could procure some evidence, it was next to impossible for them to prove the validity of their papers to the local arbitrary authorities. There was no higher appeal as the Congress party system ensured deep embedding of the landed caste members at every level of governance. Furthermore, there was no hope for political opposition as the Congress party system had coopted all possible political opposition.

The contradiction between Nehru's passion for land reforms and the formation of the Congress party system emerged soon after his passing away in 1964. The most miserable failure of the land reforms occurred in all Congress party-ruled regions (Joshi 1970; Nadkarni 2002; Eashvaraiah 1989). However, it succeeded in all those regions where the opposition parties controlled the state apparatus. West Bengal (Hanstad and Brown 2001; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2010), Kerala (Radhakrishnan 1981; Mannathukkaren 2011), and Kashmir (Prasad 2014; Aslam

1977) exemplify the successful implementation of land reforms in India. The elected communist party government ruled West Bengal and Kerela when the land reforms were successfully implemented in these two regions. A regional party, Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, ruled over Kashmir when land reforms were implemented in Kashmir. Thus, an elementary rule of thumb to comprehend the fate of land reforms was that regions with robust Congress party systems did not have land reforms, and regions without the Congress party systems had land reforms.

Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated the case of failed land reforms in India during the Nehruvian period of politics to develop the explanatory power of the political elite scholarship. Notably, the available studies on land reforms in India claim that the poor institutional structure of politics caused the failure of land reforms (Joshi 1974; Thorner 1956; Eashvaraiah 1989). They ignore the political elite who played a pivotal role in shaping those very institutional structures. This feature of studies on the failure of the land reforms in India contrasts with the studies on the cases of success of land reforms in the well-known cases of Mexico, Taiwan, and Iran that highlighted the crucial role of the political elite in implementing land reforms (cf. Sanderson 2013; Tai 2023; Amid 2009).

Political elite scholarship directs our attention to the Indian political elite's role in forming the land reform policy. Thus, following their insights, I bring to attention Nehru's role in shaping the fate of land reforms in India. Upon closely examining Nehru's approach to land reforms, we realize that he produced populist political practices to facilitate them while competing with rivals for high political office and networking political practices that blocked

them after winning the relevant office. However, political elite scholarship cannot explain shifts in Nehru's political practices. I claim that elite scholarship's explanatory power is severely limited by their assumption that the political elite's inner essence and the structural conditions of their world are two separate ontological objects. In this article, I adopted the primary point of political elite scholarship that elites are central to producing state practices within Bourdieu's field theory framework – a framework that explicitly theorizes the relation between subjectivity and social structures – to explain shifts in Nehru's point of view.

Briefly, Bourdieu claims that social actors' subjectivity and structural conditions are one ontological unit. The relation between the two is formed during competitive interactions among actors within a particular domain of professional activity for amassing the relevant capital or challenging the symbolic value of existing capital in their field. As social actors use their resources in the contests, experience success and failure, and accordingly experience upward or downward mobility, they begin to comprehend and embody the structural conditions of the field of their activities. Thus, as they mature within their field of activity, they develop *field eyes*; that is, they learn to perceive their current positions through the lenses of past experiences and accordingly shape their current practices.

When we adopt this view in the case of Nehru, we can observe that Nehru's movement from a relationally dominated to a dominant position was always driven by a shift in his political practices from populism to political networking. He learned to make this shift due to his political experiences in the colonial-period political field when he competed for high offices in the Congress party. He championed his land reform agenda before elections to the party offices. However, once he was in office, he realized that continuing his socialist agenda would jeopardize his political authority from the party's high offices. Instead of resigning from office, he

backtracked from his socialist agenda in exchange for the support of his conservative rivals who dominated the Congress party structure.

In the postcolonial period, Nehru's colonial period sensibilities were triggered during the parliamentary election cycles. The prime minister's office was at stake, and his fate rested on whether he could successfully mobilize the masses on behalf of the entire party. He successfully demonstrated his mass mobilization skills in the 1952 elections. He now had the political authority to remold the Congress party to prepare it for his radical land reform agenda. However, he allowed the existing conservative leaders of the party to continue with their role in the party. Furthermore, he appointed similar elites to his ministerial offices. This pattern of shifts in Nehru's political practices continued during the two successive election cycles of his tenure in office. Thus, Nehru's embodied colonial period sensibilities in the postcolonial period political field led to the simultaneous production of formal mechanisms for implementing land reform and the informal mechanism to ensure its failure, the Congress party system.

The main theoretical lesson from Nehru's case is that political elite scholarship must investigate the formation of a relation between the elite's political characteristics and their position within the relational structure to explain their political practices, whether related to landforms or other policies. The main methodological lesson is that the relationship between the political elite's internal and external world must be studied by documenting their trajectory within the political field. However, one cannot assume that the political elite's trajectory occurs in a static political structure. Instead, one must trace the political trajectory by considering the contests among political actors over the meaning of politics. Furthermore, the relevant political elite also participate in those contests as they move up or down within the political field. These theoretical and methodological insights help us avoid the pitfalls of essentialism and structural

determinism in the current elite scholarship by showing that the same political elite could generate multiple political practices, including those that contradict each other.

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