The Oligarchisation of India's Democracy

Evidence from Andhra Pradesh and Odisha

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The intensifying fusion of political and economic power in India is discussed. Employing data on the wealth and background of politicians, it is shown that over the last 20 years, India's politicians have not only become much wealthier but also more commonly have a business background. The term "oligarchisation" is proposed for this trend and employing fieldwork on the 2024 assembly elections conducted in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh simultaneously with the parliamentary elections, two key drivers of this process are identified.

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When filing his election affidavit in the 2009 assembly elections, Nitin Anand (name changed) declared assets worth ₹5 lakh. Upon winning the elections to the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly, Anand was bestowed with prominent ministerial responsibilities in the then Congress ministry. This political prominence enabled him to engage in a range of business ventures. Anand started investing in real estate in his constituency Visakhapatnam, Hyderabad and Bengaluru. He established an education institute for vocational training. In subsequent years, he branched out to a range of other economic sectors: in his 2024 election affidavit, Anand and his wife declared to have business interests in the fields of alloy and metal, infrastructure, stone quarrying, education institutes, and a petrol filling station. In this affidavit, his declared wealth was close to ₹20 crore, which would mean an increase of a staggering 40,000% in just 15 years. Apparently, Anand successfully used his political clout—first as a member of the legislative assembly (MLA) and then as a high-profile minister in the state cabinet of Andhra Pradesh—to obtain business opportunities. This wealth, in turn, seemed to have sustained his political success: in 2024, he won an MLA seat for the fourth successive time.

The career of this politician from Andhra Pradesh illustrates in various ways the interdependencies between economic and political power in contemporary India. By winning an MLA seat, this politician gained access to lucrative economic opportunities, which he successfully employed to obtain substantial wealth. Conversely, this wealth served to finance an expensive, and ultimately successful, re-election campaign. This kind of fusion of political and economic power is a cause for concern because this fusion hampers governance and curtails democratic accountability. On the one hand, politicians weaken state institutions and the rule of law if they use their political power to arrange contracts and regulatory favours for allied business enterprises. On the other hand, the importance of financial wealth as a prerequisite for winning elections means that economic elites have a considerable electoral advantage over non-wealthy politicians.

This convergence of economic and political power in India is increasingly a common topic in both popular and academic discussions about India's democracy. Observers have noted that the increased number of businesspersons entering Parliament has generated a "symbiosis of business and politics" (Sinha and Wyatt 2019) and "a porous state" (Sinha 2019), while India's economy has increasingly acquired crony capitalist features

(Murali 2024; Gowda and Sharalaya 2016; Kamble 2023). The increased prominence of business actors in politics has been attributed to rising campaign costs (Kapur and Vaishnav 2018a; Kale 2016), which has not only made it easier for business actors to enter politics (Sircar 2018) but also fuelled the regular exchange of campaign funds for regulatory favours (Mitra and Pohlman 2021; Kapur and Vaishnav 2018b; Sinha and Wyatt 2019; Jaffrelot et al 2019).

In this paper, we address two challenges faced by this important discussion about the fusion of economic and political power in India. One challenge is conceptual, and concerns the challenge of labelling and analysing this trend. A range of slightly different terms—symbiosis, porous, crony capitalism, nexus—is being used to describe this fusion. The downside of these terms is, first, that they refer to a static situation rather than a gradual process of change—while, as we will show, a gradual evolution is apparent and begs for analysis. Second, it is useful to avail of (and distinguish between) different terms for describing how business–politics interaction shapes the economy ("crony-capitalist"), the state ("porous," "spectral"), and the character of democracy. In terms of the latter, we propose that the intensifying fusion of political and economic power can best be labelled a process of oligarchisation. While relatively uncommon in Indian debates, the term oligarchy is often used in countries as diverse as the US, Indonesia and the Philippines. While sometimes confusingly interpreted to refer to rule by a small or aristocratic elite, we use the term in its more common usage as referring to a polity where political power is largely concentrated in the hands of wealthy business elites (cf Winters 2011). We therefore employ the term "oligarchisation" to describe the gradual fusion of economic and political power, that is, the absorption of wealthy individuals into the political system facilitated by a self-reinforcing interaction between the accumulation of both wealth and political power. To assess whether and to what extent an oligarchisation process is actually taking place, we will employ two measurable indicators offered by this definition: oligarchisation involves an increase in the average wealth of politicians, and a growing share of politicians having a business background.

The second challenge facing discussions about the fusion of political and economic power is empirical. Since many dimensions of business–state interaction are secretive, we have limited on-the-ground accounts and, consequently, limited material to analyse what circumstances and practices might be driving this oligarchisation process. Are India's politicians indeed increasingly often also wealthy business elites, and if so, why? This article addresses these questions by, first, analysing the affidavits that both MLA and Lok Sabha candidates submit to the Election Commission of India. As the affidavit includes details of their assets, income tax returns, and professional background, we employ this material to assess the degree and intensity of oligarchisation. Second, we subsequently analyse these general trends by employing the fieldwork material gathered through a research collaboration that studied election campaigns between April and June 2024 in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha in the run up to India's parliamentary elections and assembly elections in these two states. Six researchers engaged for a period of 35 days in "candidate shadowing" (cf Bussell 2019) in three districts in Andhra Pradesh and three districts in Odisha.

In this period, researchers followed candidates on the campaign trail, attending as many campaign events as possible while also using interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations to collect information about the campaign spending and funding of their candidate. To facilitate this fieldwork and to ensure comparability, the researchers followed a detailed research template, discussed during two joint workshops. In this paper, we synthesise some elements of the research reports written after this fieldwork. As MLA candidates in these two states were the focus of our fieldwork, we focus in this article on Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, with limited attention to members of Parliament (MPs). To maintain the anonymity of our informants, we withhold the names of our six districts.

To briefly preface our findings, we find that quite an intense oligarchisation process is currently taking place, which we attribute to a combination of intensifying demands from voters and party workers, and the particular state-dependent character of local economies.

How Wealthy Have India's Politicians Become?

Having defined the oligarchisation of a democracy in terms of a growing average wealth of politicians and a higher ratio of politicians having a business background, we now turn to the data we compiled using the myneta.info website to see whether these two changes are indeed taking place. Myneta.info is a public resource website managed by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) which publishes the details of the affidavits that politicians submit when filing their candidatures.

We start with the self-declared assets of politicians. Table 1 provides an overview of the average wealth of elected MP's and MLA's in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. Starting with the members of parliament, the table shows not only that MPs are very wealthy, but also that their wealth has increased considerably over the last 15 years—5.4 times in Odisha and 5.8 times in Andhra Pradesh. The current MPs from these states now possess an average wealth of ₹16 and ₹95 crore respectively. The figures for Andhra Pradesh are calculated by omitting Andhra Pradesh's (and India's) richest MP, Pemmasani Chandra Sekhar, who, with declared assets of staggering ₹5,700 crore, is an outlier. The overall increase in the wealth of parliamentarians over the last 15 years corroborates a recent report from the ADR,

Table 1: Average Wealth of Elected MPs and MLAs in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha (₹ crore)

	Andhra Pradesh		Odisha	
	Members of Parliament	Members of Legislative Assembly	Members of Parliament	Members of Legislative Assembly
2009	16.36	3.25	3.02	1.75
2014	67.88	14.32	15.78	3.50
2019	64.22	29.27	10.72	4.03
2024	319.72 (95.33 without outlier)	60.74	16.17	6.14

Source: Myneta.info (candidate affidavits).

which found that the percentages of elected MPs owning assets worth ₹1 crore or more rose from 58% in 2009 to 93% in 2024. Virtually, every member of India's parliament is a crorepati now.[1]

Table 1 also reports the average declared wealth of winning MLA candidates in the states that were the object of our study, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. In Odisha, the average declared wealth of winning MLA candidates rose from ₹1.75 crore in 2009 to ₹6.14 crore in 2024—a relatively modest yet still sizeable 3.5-fold increase. In Andhra Pradesh, this average wealth increased a staggering 18 times, from ₹3.25 crore in 2009 to ₹60.7 crore in 2024. Such an increase in wealth far outpaced the average income growth in Andhra Pradesh (incomes grew 4.7 times in this period, see RBI 2023) but not in Odisha (where incomes grew 5.0 times). Yet, generally speaking, we can conclude that politicians were already well-off in 2004, but now they belong to the small strata of the super-rich. And for some politicians like Nitin, this growth has been exponential in nature.

Having found that politicians have become much richer over the last 20 years, we are compelled to wonder about the source of this wealth. Therefore we ask, are these politicians also more likely to have a business background?

Here again the available information (Table 2) from candidate affidavits suggests that an oligarchisation process is taking place. Over the last 10 years, the share of politicians having a business background rose from 34% to 39% in Andhra Pradesh's assembly, and from 23% to 34% in Odisha's assembly. This trend, while significant, might appear less pronounced compared to the increased wealth of politicians, but these numbers mask an important dimension of this oligarchisation process: since in these affidavits politicians indicate their profession before entering politics, these numbers do not reflect the number of politicians who, like Nitin Anand with whom we started this article, developed their business activities after they won an MLA seat. In other words, if we were able to count the number of politicians and their spouses owning sizeable businesses while being an MLA (rather than before becoming one), these percentages would be even higher. In the same vein, the low re-contesting rate of candidates exacerbates the masking of the dominance of business persons. Furthermore, it is quite likely that those politicians mentioning "social work" as their profession (the profession politicians most commonly mention in their affidavits) also have business activities on the side, often in the name of their spouse or other family members.

Given this increased involvement of business actors in politics, it is important to delve a bit further into the character of the business that these politicians mention in their affidavits.

Table 2: Share of Politicians Having Business Backgrounds

	Andhra Pradesh		Odisha	
	% Effective MLA Candidates Declaring Business Background	% Spouses Declaring Business Background	% Effective MLA Candidates Declaring Business Background	% Spouses Declaring Business Background
2014	34	19	23	15
2019	35	29	26	19
2024	39	30	34	24

Source: Myneta.info (candidate affidavits).

It is remarkable that these business-politicians are relatively often active in sectors where economic opportunities rely heavily on government permits or contracts, such as real estate, mining, power, media and (infrastructure) construction. After tracing the sectoral background of the businesses owned by politicians, we found that in Andhra Pradesh, almost 45% of the businesses owned by politicians are active in such "rent-thick" (Gandhi and Walton 2012) sectors. For Odisha, this percentage is close to 29%. Furthermore, if we narrow down our focus to a sector like construction and infrastructure business, which benefits a lot from proximity to political power, we find that almost 30% of businesspersons-politicians in Andhra Pradesh are involved in the construction sector, and similarly, in Odisha, almost 17% of the businessmen-politicians are involved in the business of construction and infrastructure. As these sectors are more vulnerable to rent-seeking practices from authorities, the pay-offs of cultivating political power for those active in these sectors are also greater—since political power could serve to gain access to such permits and contracts with greater ease and at discounted costs.

In short, the examination of both the declared wealth and declared profession of politicians in our two states suggests that, indeed, an oligarchisation process is taking place. Politicians in both Andhra Pradesh and Odisha are now much more commonly belonging to the small section of very rich business elites. These findings then raise the question of why this oligarchisation process is taking place. Relying on our fieldwork on election campaigns in six districts, we propose that India's oligarchisation needs to be understood in relation to two other key features of India's political economy: the monetary expectations of India's voters and the considerable state dependency of the economy. We will discuss their relation to India's oligarchisation process in turn.

Oligarchisation and Voter Expectations

A remarkable feature of our fieldwork on the 2024 election campaigns was the importance of money distribution in the campaign strategies of our candidates. As a politician in rural Andhra Pradesh said, "irrespective of whatever you do in the last five years, you also have to give money before the election day." In a nearby town of Andhra Pradesh, the MLA candidate told us frankly that, "We distributed money to 80% of the voters. My assessment is that the general voter turnout is around 70%, so we added an extra 10% as a buffer, targeting 80% of the voters." The wife of another MLA candidate in coastal Odisha was equally open about her strategising concerning the distribution of this money: "if the entire amount of money is given to [voters] in one-go, they start to expect more. One has to give money to them gradually (...) on the evening and night of [the two days before the election], one has to distribute the maximum amount of money." This candidate handed out ₹500 per voter, while in a rural district in Andhra Pradesh, the usual rate was ₹2,000.

Similarly striking was the organisation and dedication that went into distributing these sums of money to voters. The candidates we shadowed did not want to simply shower their

voters with money. They wanted to maximise the chances that the recipients of this money would feel obliged to reciprocate with their vote, so they preferred local agents to hand out the money. Yet such reliance on a wide network of neighbourhood-level agents comes with risks: they might run off with the money. As one such local leader nicely put it, "it is not only about the money distribution but also about who is distributing the money."

To confront these challenges, every studied candidate made considerable efforts to build and maintain large teams of grassroots workers. In most districts, these teams consisted of party workers, but candidates also drew on other networks. Ideally, a candidate sought workers who were both locally influential, while also somehow bound to the campaign so as to avoid theft and defections. A role that was earlier fulfilled by only party workers or full-time politicians has now been diversified and sometimes even outsourced. In the absence of strong grassroots networks, politicians tended to rely on a range of local influentials, from the sarpanch and other local government officials to leaders of local self-help groups. In Odisha, politicians from the BJD found such workers through the Sewa Shakti Mandals. These self-help groups set up by chief minister Patnaik functioned as effective networks of grassroot workers throughout the campaign.

As these descriptions and comments indicate, the distribution of money consumed a large share of the campaign budgets. In the week after the elections, we asked five campaign organisers per district in semi-structured interviews for an assessment of campaign expenditures. In our three districts in Andhra Pradesh, they estimated on average that candidates spend between 37% and 69% of their total campaign budget on the distribution of money and liquor. In Odisha, this share was still high but notably lower, ranging between 10% and 23%. These considerable expenses on money distribution translate into high campaign expenditures. Our informants assessed that our candidates in Odisha spend between ₹9 and ₹20 crore, while MLA candidates in Andhra Pradesh were estimated to have spent ₹32 crore in a peri-urban district, ₹25 crore in a reserved, rural constituency and a whopping ₹64 crore in a rural district involving a land-rich candidate. While there are thus considerable differences between Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, these assessments all point to the fact that the distribution of money is making election campaigns very expensive.

Why are politicians handing out so much money to voters? Our observations suggest that voter expectations are forcing candidates to hand out money. As a party leader told us, "the people are asking for money because the leaders have habituated them." So habituated, in fact, that we encountered quite a lot of voters who felt disrespected if a politician failed to give them money. As one such voter lamented to us: "they don't care for us, they don't have respect for us, they take us for granted because we vote anyway for this party (the TDP)." According to another voter in rural Andhra Pradesh, a failure to hand out money could cause serious reputational damage. "Money distribution is not that effective (...) however, if you [as an MLA candidate] do not distribute money, you will lose face. The people have gotten used to money."

Indeed, several local leaders we spoke to, across political parties, assert that although distributing money before election day may not guarantee votes, failing to do so is perceived as a sign of neglect or lack of commitment to the needs of voters (Björkman 2014). Ideological convictions or nice-sounding speeches are not going to be accepted if they are not accompanied by money. As a senior politician from TDP told us in Andhra Pradesh, "If a party or candidate does not distribute money or liquor while their opponent does, it can significantly impact their chances of winning." Our fieldwork suggests that this importance of money was at least partly attributable to the highly pragmatic attitude of voters towards politics in all our six districts. One example of such pragmatism is found in the words of this voter from coastal Odisha: "Like they (politicians) give money, voters also take money. Why shouldn't voters receive money? (...) because after the elections, the same voters will be extorted and exploited by the same politicians." Another voter expressed a similar sentiment when explaining why she took money for attending campaign rallies: "They are looting us, so why should we not be looting them?" Indeed, the enthusiasm of the crowds at the campaign rallies we attended hardly seemed authentic or organic as many attendees professed to being paid for their participation.

Such pragmatism is also driving up the costs of staffing a campaign team. In at least four of the six studied campaigns, a considerable share of the budget went into paying the local campaign workers. Whereas previously ideological convictions and enthusiasm about a candidate (and expectation of future rewards) might have convinced campaign workers to forgo such money, it seemed that during these election campaigns, these usual incentives were not enough. Being close witnesses to the kind of wealth that their candidates were amassing, it is actually not surprising that many campaign workers and campaign organisers expect such monetary compensation to get paid. In fact, several of the candidates we shadowed handed out money to local leaders on whom they depended for executing the money distribution, ranging from ₹1,000 for a female member of the above-mentioned Sewa Shakti, to ₹15,000 for a governmental fieldworker (anganwadi) as well as for a village samiti member, and ₹25,000 for the sarpanch. Such expenses are indications that party networks are no longer strong enough to execute such tasks. In the absence of a strong and committed grassroots party organisation, money is playing an important role in mobilising votes. Some of our informants, for instance, a journalist from Bhubaneswar, saw a direct connection: "there are no [grass root] cadre for BJD, so they depend on money more, and throw money at the people."

The money-oriented pragmatism of both voters and campaign workers is relevant to understanding the mechanisms driving up campaign costs. It seems that a growing awareness of the vast fortunes that politicians are amassing while in power (and the news reports about the associated corruption cases) is fuelling a demand for money. In this sense, India's oligarchisation process is self-reinforcing: seeing that many politicians engage in politics to further their business activities, voters are

demanding a share in the profit—further deepening the cynicism of voters: in order to meet the associated costs arising out of such voter demands, political parties are forced to give tickets to business candidates, who subsequently employ their political power to recover the considerable money they spend on money distribution, completing this cycle of oligarchisation. In fact, as we will discuss in the next section, the fact that such business-politicians are willing and capable of meeting these extravagant demands from voters should be interpreted in light of the importance of state power in providing or withholding access to economic opportunities.

Oligarchisation and State Dependency

Another explanation for the oligarchisation of India's democracy concerns the considerable regulatory control of the Indian state over key economic resources such as access to land, mining rights, infrastructure contracts, and business licences. While India's licence-permit raj has been largely dismantled (Murali 2024), its economy is still often termed "crony-capitalist" (Sinha 2019) because access to such economic resources still often requires cultivation of relationships with power holders as such connections are important to win government contracts and to navigate regulatory procedures. Such political connections are particularly important for state-dependent economic sectors like real estate, natural resource extraction, education, construction, etc. In these "rent-thick" sectors (see also Gandhi and Walton 2012) economic opportunities depend heavily on ensuring either contracts or regulatory approval from the state.

This state dependency of economic sectors is incentivising business actors not only to cultivate connections with politicians, but also to seek political office themselves. Political office is a conduit for securing access to economic opportunities. By becoming an MLA or, even better, a state minister, such a business actor could influence the awarding of government contracts, licences and permits to the benefit of their own, or allied companies. The benefits that can thus be obtained by manipulating such allocation of economic opportunities make the pursuit of a political career a lucrative investment opportunity for the business actors. In the previous section, we have already highlighted the extent or scale of such rent-thick sectors contributing to the nature of business and state interactions in the case of businesspersons-politicians in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. In this section, we will illustrate this phenomenon of interdependency between business persons-politicians and political power by highlighting a few case studies from our study in these two states.

Our fieldwork yielded a range of examples to illustrate how the particular state dependency on local economies is motivating business actors to enter politics. We limit ourselves to three examples of such business-politicians that were contesting the 2024 elections. Our first example concerns the career of Dhiraj Kumar (pseudonym), currently a BJD MLA in Odisha. Originally a successful builder, Kumar used his profits to finance a successful election campaign and subsequently used his MLA status to expand his business empire. He benefited greatly from a close personal connection with a key party leader, Shyam Dev (name changed), who provided him with access to government contracts and key infrastructure projects in the region. Kumar's political influence allowed him to bypass bureaucratic delays and secure permissions for large-scale construction projects, a privilege not easily available to his competitors. It seems that, in exchange, Kumar contributed to the party finances. Local sources highlighted Kumar's strategic role in handling party funds, which further solidified his standing within the party hierarchy. His ability to secure infrastructure contracts and manage the flow of party finances discreetly made him an indispensable figure in his region's political and economic landscape. Kumar's control over these sectors drew attention from competitors, many of whom alleged that his political position gave him an unfair advantage, allowing him to monopolise construction contracts across the region. Despite these accusations, Dhiraj managed to expand beyond his thriving construction business, having established several local media outlets—a venture which served his need to boost his public image. The declared assets of Kumar are now over ₹20 crore.

A second example is Rajesh Kumar (name changed), a businessman and first-time MLA candidate from the hinterland of Andhra Pradesh. Despite being relatively new to politics, our informants reported how Kumar's wealth and political clout have grown through his strategic engagement with influential figures in the Telugu Desam Party. Kumar has business interests in infrastructure and media, and he has been involved in various development projects in the region. According to our informants, he used his political influence to bypass bureaucratic barriers and secure major infrastructure contracts in the constituency. Kumar's business and political careers are closely intertwined, as his growing connections within the party have enabled him to secure favourable deals for his companies. His financial disclosures revealed the acquisition of a few buses in 2023, suggesting a strategic move to monopolise the local transport business in the remote region which is in dire need of better connectivity with nearby district towns and cities. Locals suspect that his rapid rise in both politics and business is not entirely self-funded, pointing to potential undisclosed financial backers. While many view his political ascent with suspicion, Kumar's connections to party leadership, particularly to influential figures like Arun Rao, have allowed him to maintain his dual roles as a businessman and a politician.

A third and particularly dramatic example concerns Vijay Mohanty (again name changed), a wealthy three-time MLA and former minister from Odisha. Our informants related how Mohanty amassed considerable wealth by leveraging his political power to extract resources from the mining industry in the area. His district Jharsuguda, rich in coal and bauxite deposits, hosts several mining companies that require strong political connections to navigate regulatory challenges. These companies are frequently accused of violating environmental regulations, and they also need political support for securing export permits and managing labour force issues and local grievances

related to pollution. According to our sources, Mohanty played a pivotal role in smoothing regulatory hurdles for the mining companies. He managed the labour force, ensured local protests against the mining operations were suppressed, and provided political protection for these industries. In return, Mohanty secured an exclusive contract for his family's transportation business to handle the transportation of bauxite and coal extracted from the mines. His dominance in the transportation sector, facilitated by these political connections, led to significant financial gain, which is said to have caused jealousy among competitors. Persistent, though unproven, rumours suggested that competition over access to the spoils of the mining industry might have contributed to Mohanty's murder by a police constable in 2023.

These three examples illustrate how the Indian state's regulatory control over economic activities incentivises business actors to seek political office as a means to advance their economic interests. Dhiraj, a builder, used his political position to bypass bureaucratic hurdles and reduce costs associated with securing permits. Kumar leveraged his political office to secure favourable deals and access state-controlled resources in infrastructure and transport, which greatly benefitted his businesses. Similarly, Mohanty demonstrated how political power can lead to economic gains by assisting allied businesses in overcoming regulatory challenges and securing exclusive contracts for his transportation company. Despite such varying types of benefits—whether reducing rent-seeking costs, securing contracts, or resolving regulatory challenges—the common thread is that political office provides business actors with a direct path to economic success.

The specific forms that this business-politics interaction takes might also help explain the considerable differences we found between Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. We noted above a remarkable disparity between the states in both the average wealth of politicians and the campaign expenditures. We found campaign expenditures are about three times higher, and the average wealth of politicians is between five times (for MPs) and 10 times (for MLAs) higher in Andhra Pradesh compared to Odisha. While a comprehensive explanation for these differences is beyond the scope of this analysis, it bears pointing out that they correspond with the economic distinctions between the two states. Andhra Pradesh has an income per capita approximately 40% higher than Odisha and features significantly larger economic sectors like construction and real estate, which are considered "rent-thick" sectors. Furthermore, Odisha's less diversified economy is more dependent on agriculture and natural resource extraction, whereas Andhra Pradesh's more developed economy includes larger real estate and services sectors. These contrasts suggest that differing levels of wealth and campaign expenditures in the two states relate to differing income-generating opportunities that local economies offer to politicians, a topic that warrants further research.

The overall conclusion, however, is that the dominant role of the Indian state in allocating and obstructing economic opportunities motivates many business actors to seek office. Political power is a tool to consolidate and expand their economic power. The tendency of business actors to use political power for economic gains not only blurs the lines between political and economic spheres but also raises concerns about the character of local governance. Our three examples suggest that business actors regularly use their growing political clout to influence whether and how local bureaucrats uphold state regulation. In this sense, the threat posed by oligarchisation is that it fosters a form of governance that prioritises (particularistic) business interests over other societal interests.

Conclusions

In 1964, the Indian government set up the Santhanam Committee out of concern that corruption and the undue influence of wealth were posing serious threats to the integrity of the country's democratic institutions. Since then, a range of reform measures have been implemented to address this long-standing menace of oligarchy (Eswaran and Vaishnav 2018; Mitra and Pohlmann 2021). Despite such efforts, it seems that—as evinced by our overview of the business background and growing wealth of elected politicians—the fusion of economic and political power is intensifying. We might speak of an oligarchisation of India's democracy.

We relied on our fieldwork in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha to interpret this salient trend. This oligarchisation process might be analysed in terms of both the reasons for political parties to pull business actors into politics, and the incentives for business actors to desire a political career. On the one hand, business actors are pulled into politics by the escalating costs of election campaigns. We observed in both states how increasingly pragmatic voters are expecting candidates to dole out large sums of money, a practice which seems to have become increasingly common and acceptable. In this sense, voters are forcing political parties to select wealthy candidates from business backgrounds since parties need such candidates to shoulder the costs of increasingly expensive election campaigns.

On the other hand, the state-dependent character of many economic sectors is generating incentives for business actors to enter politics. Because of the capacity of the state to allocate and withhold key economic opportunities, an expensive election campaign can be a worthwhile investment since elected politicians can use their control over the state to manipulate this access to opportunities. During our fieldwork, we encountered a number of businessperson-politicians who succeeded in leveraging the state apparatus to further enrich themselves, thereby perpetuating a cycle of wealth concentration along with political dominance. We note that these fieldwork-based conclusions are unavoidably somewhat anecdotal, and in that sense, we emphasise that our findings—for example, concerning the pervasiveness of money distribution and the economic benefits of political power—deserve more systematic assessments.

It is also important to emphasise that India is hardly the only country facing such challenges. Oligarchic tendencies can be observed in many countries—in fact compared to public debate in, say, the United States or Indonesia, the term "oligarchy" is still surprisingly uncommon in India. Similarly, many nations grapple with the challenge of maintaining electoral integrity and political equality in the face of runaway campaign expenditures. Yet, the fact that India shares this challenge with other countries does not detract from the seriousness of the problem. The rise of affluent business candidates, combined with soaring campaign expenses, poses a serious threat to the health of India's democracy. Without substantial reforms in campaign finance laws and enhanced transparency within the political system—as cautioned by the Santhanam Committee over half a century ago—the trend towards oligarchisation is poised to deepen. To safeguard its democratic ideals, India must address these challenges head-on, ensuring that political power is not merely a commodity accessible to the highest bidder but a platform for representing the diverse interests of its populace.

NOTE

1 See https://thewire.in/politics/93-of-18th-lok-sabha-mps-are-crorepatis-up-by-35-from-2009/?mid_related_new).

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