Internet X-Ray: E-Governance, Transparency, and the Politics of Immediation in India

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Sting

Is it possible to cause a sensation by revealing something that everybody already knows? Certainly that is what seems to have happened in March 2001, when an up-and-coming Delhi-based Internet news Web site, Tehelka.com, broadcast videotaped evidence of corruption at the highest levels of the Indian polity. The tapes showed prominent members of the New Delhi power elite, some of them elected politicians, either discussing or actually receiving bribes from Tehelka journalists pretending to be dealers of military equipment. Tehelka, named for the kind of tumult that a sensation or scandal might produce, had already made waves the year before when it broke a story about match fixing in that holiest of Indian holies, cricket (Bahal [2000] 2003). Its target this time, the defense establishment, was only marginally less sacred—particularly in the wake of the patriotic frenzy that had swept the mainstream media during the Kargil border war with Pakistan in the summer of 1999.

In retrospect, it is easy to be cynical about the importance of Tehelka's sting, code named Operation West End. For a short while it looked like the government might collapse, as several key players—Defense Minister George Fernandes, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president Bangaru Laxman, and Samata Party chief Jaya Jaitley—tendered their resignations. But soon it was back to business as usual. Fernandes was reinstated (he had in any case never been caught on video) and the commission instituted to investigate the sting dragged on and on, to waning public attention. Overnight media darlings, the team at Tehelka soon found their fortunes reversed as they were subjected to a labyrinth of legal and paralegal harassment.

The government, having recovered its footing, quickly exhumed the trustiest of Indira Gandhi–era bogeys, the foreign hand. Rumors were planted: Operation West End had been masterminded by the Pakistani secret service, the ISI; Tehelka was being directly bankrolled by the notorious Dubai-based gang lord, Dawood Ibrahim; Operation West End was part of a stock manipulation scam by a concern called First Global, which owned a chunk of Tehelka shares and which was, some claimed, a front organization for the Congress Party, then in opposition. Uncovering an apparent assassination plot against Tehelka's editor-in-chief Tarun Tejpal allowed the Delhi police to put him under maximum security. The plot itself was read as a stratagem on the part of the ISI to discredit the Indian government. Tejpal, Mathew Samuel, and Aniruddha Bahal all received death threats in the months after the story broke, and the Tehelka offices were subjected to a dizzying good cop/bad cop oscillation of protection and raids. Writing approximately a year after Tehelka went public with Operation West End, Aman Singh (2002) estimated that the Web site had already been subjected to something like two hundred legal summonses and twenty-five police raids.

So, given that the mere revelation of corruption in India is hardly big news, how can we begin to explain both the extraordinary attention that the sting initially attracted and the intensity of Tehelka's subsequent persecution? The public life of Operation West End generated and absorbed an extremely diverse set of narratives and commentaries. Some were ostensibly neutral and descriptive, such as this journalistic summary published the year after the March 2001 exposé:

> Two journalists, Aniruddha Bahal and Mathew Samuel, posed as agents from a fictitious arms company called West End. They hawked a non-existent product—hand-held thermal cameras—to the Defence Ministry, and paid money to the president of the [then ruling] BJP, bureaucrats and army men to push the deal through. They . . . captured all transactions on

spycam and exhibited the footage at a press conference. They had almost sold a product they didn't have to the Government of India. (N. Singh 2002)

I have already indicated the paranoid profusion of defensive interpretations that the sting generated within the government and its informational subcontractors. But Operation West End's perpetrators, allies, and sympathizers were also busy telling stories. As we shall see, these ranged from dourly predictable proclamations about the moral responsibilities of the fourth estate vis-à-vis degenerate politicians to mischievous village projections of the Internet as a corruption-exposing X-ray machine that was striking fear into the hearts of national leaders.

My approach in this essay will be to push the analysis of Operation West End beyond the normatively staged confrontations between corruption and probity and between concealment and transparency. My aim is to explore how these binaries may be read as conventionalized symptoms of an underlying series of contradictions. These contradictions were, in turn, constitutive of an ideological formation that was coming into focus at the time of Operation West End and was known as e-governance. The discourse of e-governance (I will return to this theme in greater detail below) crystallized out of the 1990s global wave of high-tech euphoria. During this period, successive Indian governments had seized upon the relative success of Indian software services and Internet-enabled business-process outsourcing as India's ticket to prominence in the global economy of the twenty-first century (Singhal and Rogers 2001; Vittal and Mahalingam 2001). With the dizzying infotech crash that followed the turn of the millennium, high-tech corporations found it increasingly attractive to hard sell national and provincial governments on the promises and benefits of e-governance—that is, the deployment of Internet-powered computing to bring about, in one fell swoop, more efficient administration and more directly democratic forms of public life.

An important part of the attraction of e-governance in India was that it promised to reconcile the central contradiction, produced by the move toward a more neoliberal consumerist order in the early 1990s, between the inclusive, populist ideal of national social development, on the one hand, and the invidiously exclusive lure of mass consumerism, on the other (Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Rajagopal 2001). To this end, e-governance had to be framed, first and foremost, as a boon to the disconnected and the unwired. In part, this meant redefining the hoary developmentalist category of "appropriate technologies" so as to accommodate high-tech innovations that were generally dismissed as inessential playthings of the rich. Here the notion of information as a kind of universal human right, and

therefore also a necessary component of socioeconomic progress, was indispensable. On an ideological level, e-governance attempted to synthesize a political language of transparency with a corporate managerial vision. I will suggest that Operation West End, a sting that was ostensibly about a rather shopworn theme, corruption at the top, was in truth scandalous because this manifest narrative of corruption gave symptomatic expression to a series of constitutive contradictions in the project of e-governance.

To do this, I will consider several dimensions of the scandal: the narratives and images that comprised the sting itself, the discourses that refracted its passages through the public nervous system, its aesthetics, its ideological complicities, and its complications. On one level, I will be grappling with the problems besetting a politics of transparency in the public project of state legitimation — not least the paradoxical tendency of transparency measures to yield, in practice, new opacities. But ultimately this is an argument about the centrality of mediation to social and political life and, conversely, the seductions and short circuits of the great utopian figure of immediacy. E-governance is, it seems to me, one important avatar of a more general desire for what I am calling a politics of immediation — that is to say, a political practice that, in the name of immediacy and transparency, occludes the potentialities and contingencies embedded in the mediations that comprise and enable social life.

By *mediation*, I do not mean simply the conveyance of a datum from one domain or location to another. Still less am I referring to any harmonization of divergent interests or tendencies. Rather, I understand mediation as the ambiguous foundation of all social life (Mazzarella 2004). Mediation involves the conceptual, technical, and linguistic practices by which the actually irreducible particularities of our experience are, apparently, reduced: in other words, rendered provisionally commensurable and thus recognizable and communicable in general terms. Needless to say, these processes are necessarily ideological. Social practices of mediation, often initially quite contested, are formalized as mechanisms, externalized as technologies, and naturalized as social orders. These are not simply impersonal, objective processes. Rather, mediation is (as Hegel knew) also the basis of self-consciousness and therefore of affect and desire. The gap between the concreteness of experience and materiality, on the one hand, and the conceptual generalization that social life requires, on the other, is the terrain on which we re-cognize ourselves in the paradoxical form of something outside ourselves. That this is a relation characterized by an anxious oscillation between identification and alienation is both crucial to acknowledge and so general a statement as to be almost empty of content.

My project in this essay, then, is to explore some of the contemporary political implications of this dynamic by interpretively linking three levels of analysis. At the most general level, I am postulating the kind of mediatory dynamics that I just previewed. At an intermediate level, I want to explore the ways that an ideological formation like e-governance activated these dynamics in often paradoxical ways through figures of immediacy, transparency, and even democracy. At the most particular level, I want to show how a publicly explosive event like Operation West End had, in some ways despite itself, the power to reveal the contradictions that structure such ideological formations.

The Indian incarnation of the information society did not just invoke both a new commodity fetish (sleek consumer computing) and a new human right (the right to information). Computers networked by means of the Internet or other-wise also appeared to offer a new weapon against that most ingrained of official infirmities: corruption. Beyond the way that interconnection implied access and visibility, the attraction was rooted in a naive notion of the inherent incorrupt-ibility of digitized information, as opposed to the surreptitious modifications to which handwritten ledger entries were so manifestly subject. Thus far, Operation West End was largely complicit with the ideological assumptions of the govern-ment that it was ostensibly exposing. But the very closeness of this complicity was perhaps also the condition of its own reversal. I suggest that an important compo-nent of the scandal of Operation West End was that it used the very technologies upon which the new order of e-governance was going to be based—this polity without politics, these media without mediation—to show that, when it came to politics, opacity and transparency were more mutually enabling conditions than polar opposites.

One might say that Tehelka quickly became a victim of its own success. Bahal and Samuel's hitherto impeccable investigative credentials suddenly started look-ing a little too gritty when it was revealed, in August 2001, that they had used prostitutes—also known as honey traps—to lubricate their transactions with the "suitcase men"[1] who took the bribes. Critics, both frankly partisan and avowedly neutral, were beginning to suggest that the adulatory plaudits that rained down on Tehelka in its heyday were offered more in recognition of virtuosic self-promotion than for any contributions to public enlightenment.[2] And by early 2003,

1. The term *suitcase men* was used quite frequently in the English-language Indian media around the time of Operation West End. It described the intermediaries, both bribe takers and bribe payers, who constituted the great chain of corruption.

2. These awards included two at the 2001 Advertising Brief Media Awards, where Operation West End was named Investigative Story of the Year and Tehelka was recognized as Media Brand of

having cut its staff from 120 to 4, Tehelka had been reduced to such a miserable state of abjection that its very humiliation became fodder for publicity. Effectively closed for business, the site now consisted of an assemblage of case coverage and testimonials. Elsewhere, melancholy accounts of Tejpal's predicament prevailed: "Tarun Tejpal is sitting amid the ruins of his office. There is not much left — a few dusty chairs, three computers and a forlorn air-conditioning unit. 'We have sold virtually everything. I've even flogged the air conditioner,' he says dolefully" (Harding 2003).[3]

Internet Scandal

To understand the impact of Operation West End, we might start by considering it as an Internet event. This is not an entirely uncontroversial proposition, since the scandalous but grainy footage of highly placed politicians and military officials discussing (and in some cases accepting) bribes was, after all, primarily disseminated on cable television. So in what sense was this *tamasha* (spectacle) specifically an Internet event?

To begin with, there was the particularity of the Internet as a medium of news assemblage and dissemination. Operation West End was more or less instantaneously a *global* media scandal, not only because the news traveled swiftly through conventional international channels but also because of the widely reported fact that it was the news team of a Web site that had pursued and publicized the story. The number of hits to the Tehelka Web site (www.tehelka.com), from far and wide, skyrocketed as the story broke. But the sense of high-tech orientalism that derived from being tagged as an Indian Web site also added an important symbolic frisson to its transnational news value.

Indian commentary on the scandal was, from the start, cognizant of the complex and ambivalent implications of this global dissemination. On the one hand, there was some embarrassment about how these dingy images of dingy leaders would perpetuate all the stereotypes that foreigners held about the corruption and cravenness of Indian public life. On the other hand, some celebrated the story as

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the Year (ranking, as it was noted in the press, ahead of MTV). Tehelka's celebrity and with-it image was further enhanced when a group of Bombay youngsters decided to style their hair in the shape and color of the Tehelka logo: a red chili.

3. In August 2003, Tejpal announced that he was attempting to relaunch Tehelka, this time as a "weekend newspaper" that would be targeted, in part, at nonresident Indians, or NRIs (Yahoo! News India 2003). A personal acquaintance of mine recounted visiting the Tehelka office in Delhi around this time and encountering something like a fortified bunker.

a worldwide demonstration of India's commitment both to cutting-edge technologies and to international standards of transparency. Notably, some Indian media professionals evidently felt that the aesthetic price of laborious transparency — hours upon hours of shaky, low-grade video — may have come into conflict with international standards of publicity. A user of www.agencyfaqs.com, a Web site for the Indian ad business, posted a message complaining of Operation West End's yawn-inducing format: "Tehelka does need a marketing manager, a good one, cos u would agree how a brilliant concept like Tehelka got F$%^&@ by running unedited versions through various ZEE Channels . . . boring viewers all around" (Agencyfaqs 2001). Chakravarty (2001) quoted an advertising executive at the Indian agency Mudra to similar effect: "Why should I waste my clients' money on a program which has no mass appeal? I would rather put that money in the India-Australia [cricket] series." From both political and commercial standpoints, India's appearance on the global media stage, courtesy of Tehelka, carried all the ambiguity of a global politics of recognition: in effect, India yet again acceded to the worldwide ecumene of public visibility and excellence precisely by conceding to what foreigners supposedly knew about it all along.

On one level, in India the corruption element of the story was interpreted as a symptom of an imperfect modernity, an arrested rationalization, and a national developmental involution. On another level, the technology and the mindset that made Operation West End possible pointed to a cosmopolitan future. It was only the old-style left wing, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), that actually linked the corruption to globalization, and then only in the mode of a generalized polemic against unfettered markets. A party communiqué identified corruption as a sign of a larger "fast-buck epidemic, the cultural logic of globalization" (Communist Party of India [Marxist-Leninist] 2001).

Operation West End was also distinctively an Internet event in terms of its intervention into the existing field of Indian publicity. On one side of this field were the vernacular-language newspapers that were known to engage in bold, investigative stories partly because they were less beholden to powerful material interests and partly because — as the vernacular press is fond of saying — they were "closer to the ground" than their English-language counterparts (Jeffrey 2000; Ståhlberg 2002). On the other side were the established, upscale, national media channels in English and Hindi, where anxieties about biting nourishing hands too hard were likely to forestall any such investigative initiatives. Tarun Tejpal and his colleagues at Tehelka enjoyed the best of both worlds: the influence, prestige, and language of the metropolitan media elite but also the relative independence of a new, entrepreneurial news medium. With a résumé boasting stints at several

major Indian current-affairs publications, including *India Today* and *Outlook*, Tejpal was himself quite deliberate about framing Tehelka as an Internet-enabled return to the scrappy, adversarial mode of investigative journalism that had flourished in the 1980s, between the overt censorship of Indira Gandhi's Emergency in 1975–77 and the consolidation of a subtler, more marketing-driven mode of editorial regulation in the 1990s. In Tejpal's vivid description:

> All good editors know that guerrilla stories, investigative skirmishes, are easy to commission and handle: you nip at one flank while warmly stroking the other. The behemoth tolerates the pinpricks and laps up the caresses in some cozy understanding of occupational necessities. The watchdog and the monster go dancing into the twilight, making just enough yipping sounds to confuse the onlooker. (Tejpal 2002a)

A third set of considerations—perhaps ultimately more interesting—revolved around the various public images of the Internet in India during this time and the extent to which Tehelka, as an Internet event, intervened in them or unsettled them. By March 2001, when the story broke, the dot-com boom had, in India as elsewhere, turned resolutely into dot-bomb gloom. The boom-and-bust cycle, which in the United States had played itself out across a good part of the 1990s, was in India compressed into little more than a year. The affective extremes of its short career were consequently also enhanced. Amid tech hangovers and startup shutdowns, Tehelka was ostentatiously a dot-com venture that was still making waves, if not a great deal of money. As such, it was part of the same larger technocultural formation that had given birth to the dream of e-governance. In order to better understand Operation West End's specific intervention into this field, the manner in which it was at once complicit with and critical of its key assumptions, I will sketch the norms and forms of this glossy new governmentality.

Laptop Politician

In its most expansive moments, the vision that was e-governance appeared to resolve the tension between what Jodi Dean (2002) has called "technocracy" and "technoculture." In her narrative, technoculture, the distributed cultural logic of the Internet era, follows historically upon technocracy, the older top-down idiom of the age of the mainframe. She reads both, however, as depoliticizing deployments of information technology: "If technocracy aimed to eliminate politics in the name of efficient administration, technoculture forecloses politics in the name of communication" (112–13). The Indian discourse of e-governance suggests less

a historical shift between two paradigms than an ongoing attempt to bring old-fashioned centralized power into alignment with a decentralized consumerist-populist notion of empowerment. Indeed, the mark of e-governance was precisely this juxtaposition of a fetishized systems rationality with an affectively charged ideal of communicative immediacy.

Even in its most functional expressions, the predominant narrative of rationalization was never entirely separable from an invocation of intimacy. Thus, according to one description, "Computerization of government offices, linking up the districts with the state capital, preparation of databases for more efficient functioning of the system, faster movement of files, easier methods of payment of utilities bills and so on are in the pipeline. [All this] will in the long run cut red tape, make the government-citizen relationship more friendly, and ultimately reduce the corruption that has eaten into the vitals of the country" (Akhileshwari 1999).

The comment of one participant on a Yahoo! discussion group devoted to India and e-governance usefully exemplified how a viral metaphor in the discourse on corruption became overdetermined by its earlier extension into the domain of networked computers:

> Corruption always starts from the top and trickles down to the bottom. Because of its high mixing capability it mixes up with every organ of the organization. Again because it is contagious in nature, it spreads into the neighbouring organization and ultimately it contaminates [the] entire society. As this corruption has smart networking capability and self healing capacity, even if some piecemeal efforts are taken to eradicate it, it regains its status very soon. Since there is no willingness at the apex level to eradicate it, we start assuming that it is incurable. Finally we accept corruption as it is. (Bhushan 2003)

Taking the understanding of corruption as a kind of ethical virus, then, the discourse of e-governance made it amenable to technical solutions. Governance, a term appropriated and globally disseminated by entities like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, meant government understood primarily as administration. On that principle, corruption, in its turn, was essentially a matter of systemic malfunction, of suboptimal performance. From there, the solution was obvious: fewer intermediaries, fewer moving parts—a solid-state state, as it were. And the vision came with a whole new expert vocabulary: automating "citizen services" would bring about the required "disintermediation." To be sure, anyone who has ever fumbled with the performative uncertainties of a

bribe, suffered under the crushing weight of extortionate informal interest rates, or walked thirty kilometers in the blistering sun to petition a local official who turns out to be "out of station" might be expected to welcome such rationalization. But while much of the rhetorical content of e-governance consisted of practical solutions to practical problems, its ideological force rested in no small part on the manner in which public life was increasingly represented as the retail or consumer end of the systems-management project of governance.

A new kind of Indian leader brought the formation into charismatic focus, most prominently the then chief minister of Andhra Pradesh and soi-disant laptop politician, Chandrababu Naidu (the phrase "a laptop politician" was, in 2001, part of the opening flash-animation sequence on Naidu's Web site, www.chandraba bunaidu.com). In some ways, Naidu was building on a foundation laid down in the 1980s by then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, known to some of his associates, with anxious affection, as Computerji. As R. D. Pradhan, home minister under Rajiv Gandhi, remembered in his memoirs,

> What [Rajiv Gandhi] found most enjoyable and fruitful were the one-to-one talks, or small meetings. As soon as one started briefing, he would open his lap-top PC, and start punching keys. For me it was somewhat distracting. I would stop in mid-sentence and wait for him to finish looking for whatever it was that he was searching. For him the greatest joy was to find that the lap-top was correct and what you had told him was not there or that it was wrong. Then one had a lot of explaining to do. Rajiv Gandhi loved his PC. For him it was the most reliable tool. Until the right floppy was in he would refuse to start discussion. I soon found that when I was reporting to Rajiv Gandhi, I was actually reporting to his PC. He was punching everything in. Sometimes I had to tell him, "I can face you but I am afraid of facing your PC. While I can explain to you, how can I do it to your PC? It is not capable of comprehending any explanation!" (R. D. Pradhan 1995: 187)

Already here we see, at the apex of the Indian polity, the beginning of the adaptation of the habitus of corporate man, complete with the managerial technophilia that rubbed so uneasily up against time-tested forms of decision making. But Rajiv's laptop, for all the exemplary status that he may have attributed to it, stood sublimely alone in a world of binders and favors. Naidu, conversely, attempted to rework the entire public field according to a corporate formula that was equal parts McKinsey management discourse and advertising spectacle.

From the standpoint of this formula, politics was the name given to a pathologized understanding of mediation. Naidu dismissed politics as a necessary evil

and, in so doing, actively courted the very accusation that used to be flung at political opportunists, declaring, "These days I never talk politics except during election time" (Sudhir 1998). Politics here meant vested interests and blockages, blemishes on the frictionless economy, now reborn as the frictionless state. The noiseless, odorless byte, traveling at the speed of light, replaced the dusty binders of a thousand provincial desks. In the words of one commentator, the aim was "to create an era where online decisions replace the file culture of *babu*dom [clerkdom]" (Kumar 2000). The biggest political stars of this brave new world positively encouraged the press to identify them not with the political, historical, or mythological heroes of the national imaginary but, rather, with contemporary corporate colossi. So it was, for instance, that Chandrababu Naidu morphed during the late 1990s from "CEO, Andhra Pradesh, Inc." to "e-CM [e-Chief Minister] of India."[4]

The greater affective intimacy attributed to the 1990s incarnation of computerized administration can be seen even in the shift in system nomenclatures between the 1970s and the 1990s. Compared with the stern acronyms given to Indian government information systems in the 1970s and 1980s (DISNIC, GISTNIC, MEDLARS), the millennial mnemonics manifested all the diminutive endearment of cyberpunk convention: Andhra Pradesh's SMART (Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsible, Transparent) and Kerala's FRIENDS (Fast, Reliable, Efficient Network for Disbursement of Services).

The corporate world had even endowed the frictionless state with a celebratory world-historical genealogy. In a statement called a Vision Paper and circulated to the world's press, IBM offered a narrative of the rise of modern states and bureaucracies as a story of vertical integration—that is to say, the growth of a series of parallel systems, each devoted to the management of a specialized domain of social life. What such a structure gained in precision it lost in redundancy, as each vertical segment duplicated much of the work of its adjacent divisions. The systems convergence made possible by the rise of digital computing and the translation of all administrative challenges into information-management problems now pointed, IBM's essay claimed, to the possibility of a much more efficient "horizontal integration" (quoted in Kurup 2001).

4. In this, Naidu was certainly not alone, although he remained the most paradigmatic example. The late 1990s saw the outbreak of a heated contest between the states of South India—primarily Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, but also to some extent Kerala—for transnational infotech investment. Naidu's celebrity helped to tarnish the gleam that Karnataka had achieved as a result of Bangalore's early ascendance. In return, many felt, Karnataka's Congress chief minister, S. M. Krishna, had been picked and groomed explicitly as a Naidu clone.

The Vision Paper argued that the private sector had pioneered such conver-
gence because of its concern with customer satisfaction. But in this way a yard-
stick for government services had also been established: "In acting on the belief
that 'the customer is king,' the private sector has, in effect, set the benchmark
that citizens use to evaluate government services. Daily, people see examples in
the commercial world of fast, accurate, courteous service. They know that better
service is possible, and they wonder why the government can't seem to deliver
it." At the same time, it was as if government as a facilitator of entrepreneurship
had only become fully possible now that business itself had supposedly become
a matter of managing intangibles: "The pursuit of wealth has become the pursuit
and packaging of information, and the successful government will be that which
enables its business community to most effectively obtain the best information
and apply it in a timely manner to the production or sale of goods and services"
(quoted in Kurup 2001).

The consumer-citizen was the anthropoid pendant to the corporation-state.
The government's legitimacy would consequently depend on the zeal with which
it pursued the affective engagement and commitment of its "customers." Speaking
at an international conference arranged in New Delhi by the National Association
of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) in December 2001, a senior
executive from Cisco Systems India quoted a Harvard Business School study on
customer satisfaction to suggest that the government, like any other branded ser-
vice provider, should be pursuing "citizen mindshare." Consumer branding seeks
to manifest the semiotic message of brands as inhabitable spaces, often quite
literally in the form of multisensorial physical retail and promotional environ-
ments (Haug 1987; Schmitt 1999; Schmitt and Simonson 1997). Likewise, the
Cisco executive was suggesting, governments could use networked information
technologies to construct an intimate virtual national enclosure, a zone of mutu-
ally responsive cohabitation for themselves and their citizens.[5]

In the new lexicon, "convergence" was the precondition for "disintermedia-
tion," for this immaculate, efficient, and intimate copresence. On one level, then,
the dream of e-governance appropriated the steely, self-consciously affectless

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5. Just how close this dream of radicalized e-civility might be to the imperatives of command
and control was illustrated by the Cisco executive's choice of Singapore as an example of this vir-
tual cohabitation. Here, the government had not only established high-speed Internet connections to
every home but also assigned each citizen his or her own homepage. This enabled the administration
to "push" relevant information to each citizen. The speaker alluded, without further specification, to
the tracking, data mining, and other surveillance possibilities built into the network.

idiom of global technocracy, all laptops and info-grids, a systems rationality that was by definition apolitical. As such, e-governance appeared as a cool corrective to the overheated affect-intensive politics of communal identification and bodily self-assertion. On another level, Indian e-governance was profoundly immersed in an affective politics, both in terms of its auratic mobilization of individual leaders and in its claim to represent a more caring and more locally embedded principle of social inclusion. Breaking into Hindi for added emotive effect during an August 2002 press conference, then national IT minister Pramod Mahajan explained that the government's program of village computerization was *dil se*, not *Dilli se* — from the heart, not from Delhi, as much about affective linkages as about bureaucratic efficiency.

No longer would citizens' needs be frustrated by the gratuitous opacities of the baroquecracy;[6] no longer would politicians be forbidding and unaccountable figureheads, surrounded and protected by brokers and fixers. In the e-polity, government and citizen would be immediately present to each other, would respond — with minimal mediation and exquisite sensitivity — to each other's needs. Rather than fruitlessly and humiliatingly petitioning some provincial tyrant for routine administrative favors, villagers would now go to the local Community Information Centre and download driving licenses and tax or land records; information that, because it was computerized, carried the stamp of incorruptibility. Conversely, by the magic of call-in television shows and, above all, videoconferencing, the humblest of constituents would now be able to interact in real time with their elected representatives. As Naidu proclaimed, "It is my intention that the common man even in the remotest village should be able to interact with me directly in case of a problem" (Srinivasan 1998).[7]

The interests of the common man were, with righteous realism, taken to be preeminently practical. In addition to the aforementioned records, the rural beneficiaries of e-governance were targeted with crop prices, information on new seeds and fertilizers, and so forth. Obviously, such pragmatic knowledge and

6. The neologism is inspired by Shiv Visvanathan: "The corkscrew is the shortest distance between two points in a baroque state. As a result more invention goes into confronting the complications than in institutionalizing norms" (Visvanathan 1998a: 8).

7. Just as Naidu in some respects extended Rajiv Gandhi's early forays into technophilia, so Rajiv had, in the mid-1980s, been an enthusiastic proponent of a television show called *Janavani* (*Voice of the People*), on which ministers were supposed to come face-to-face with the common man. Mattelart (1996) notes that the dream of immediate presence through improved communications has been part of political discourse at least since Saint-Simon. Robins and Webster (1999) also discuss the centrality of the cult of immediacy to technocultural politics in the age of the Internet.

documentation is essential to anyone in any walk of life; my point here is merely that its foregrounding helped perpetually to defer the dimension of e-governance that went by the name of e-democracy: that is, the possibility of constituting e-publics that might reflexively rethink and rework both the form and the content of existing social relations.

The provision of a channel of expression, irrespective of actual government response or action, was in itself a therapeutic gesture. The indulgent offer of the administration's e-mediated ear resembled nothing so much as the promise of quality time from a negligent parent. After a high-modern interregnum of impersonal and alienating bureaucratic institutions, e-governance heralded the return — now on a national scale — of the face-to-face polis. On the one hand, the kind of hypermediated effacement of mediation characteristic of e-mail-based complaint systems and videoconferencing suggested interactional intimacy; on the other, the simultaneous fetishization of computer surfaces and figures of Internet infinity served to remind the consumer-citizen that this was, after all, no longer simply the village *panchayat* (council). Through a grand dialectical sublation, the competing postcolonial visions of centralized Nehruvian Big Science and the concentric Gandhian ripple of villages could now be united at a higher level.[8]

Videoconferencing became as de rigueur an accessory of the tech-savvy politician as monumental info-towers and tech parks, even — or perhaps particularly — in states where there was little prospect of attracting substantial investment. Judging by available reports, however, these exercises in direct democracy tended to elicit, from the common man, either critique-squashing humility or impatient irritation. In January 2003, then Karnataka chief minister S. M. Krishna "reached out" to Genikihal village, four hundred kilometers from Bangalore. "Sitting in his home office with a battery of heads of departments, including an additional chief secretary, district ministers and MPs, Krishna heard out the rather polite grievances that were read out from a piece of paper. In response, he gave readymade [*sic*] replies to questions from people in the village, in almost the same manner as replying to questions in the state legislature" (Qureshi 2003). Some three years earlier, then prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee treated the assembled media to a videoconference with twenty-five *gram pradhan*s (village headmen) near Lucknow, the state capital of Uttar Pradesh. "The public representatives came up

8. The continuity between millennial e-governance projects and Nehruvian Big Science is obviously not hard to establish. But the Gandhian connection was made explicit too, for instance, in the promotional materials of Media Lab Asia, the short-lived but much-hyped MIT-led attempt to bring transnational infotech know-how into dialogue with Indian social development.

with specific grievances and the PM reassured them that he would look into their problems. . . . Mr. Vajpayee's reference to the nation's technological advancement, which had made it possible to reach out to the masses, failed to evoke the expected applause. Far from that, as one participant, Viresh Pal Yadav, asked him, 'Why don't you actually come down to our village and take a look for yourself?' " (S. Pradhan 2000).

Indeed, virtual access seemed to be increasing in direct proportion to the security surrounding the physical bodies of India's e-*neta*s (e-leaders). In August 2002, I visited Kuppam, Chandrababu Naidu's own constituency in southwestern Andhra Pradesh, and discovered that this flagship of rural investment in information flow was nevertheless tightly sealed off with police checkpoints whenever the chief minister came to town, for fear of assassination attempts by Maoist guerrillas. In other words, whatever might be said by state ideologists or, indeed, media theorists about a new intimacy or a new tactility (Maffesoli 1996; McLuhan [1964] 1994), the tactical limitations of primarily optical interactivity still proved a prudent safeguard against a touch too much.

In some ways, the entire project of e-governance required that the apparent temporal and developmental incongruity of computers in villages be overcome. Yet, at the same time, the appeal of its advertising rested strongly on precisely this allochrony, on a continued visual exploitation of historicist paradox: the calculatedly incongruous, and for that reason charming, juxtaposition of the cutting edge and the backward. This was the routinized surrealism of a thousand magazine covers: the computer monitor sitting inscrutably, like Kubrick's monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, amid delightedly perplexed villagers, preferably decked out in the exuberant iconic shorthand for traditional India, Rajasthani textiles.

Just as the digital network, suitably deployed, promised to leapfrog the developmental distance between the forward and the backward—thus solidly locating India's great economic hope within the scope of the public interest—so the longed-for convergence of business and government produced its own visual repertoire to complement these village computer tableaux. The Cisco executive at the NASSCOM conference concluded his presentation with a slide show illustrating his recent visit to one of the eSeva (e-service) centers that Cisco had helped the Naidu administration establish in Hyderabad. His satisfaction with the images appeared to emanate not least from the fact that a casual observer might easily have mistaken these government-citizen interfaces for airline ticketing counters. This was, in a sense, the aesthetic expression of the ideological message of the information society: a utopian overcoming of the long-entrenched social cleavages of modern India. The middle classes and the poorest of the poor, the met-

ropolitans and the villagers, could now put forward a common claim to human dignity in the name of the right to information. And no Indian citizen would have to tolerate anything less than the same world-class service enjoyed by the denizens of the developed world.

Internet X-Ray

Tarun Tejpal, too, was keen to show that the significance of an exposé like Operation West End resonated even with that humble fundament of the public interest, the common man.[9] Concluding one in a long series of television interviews, Tejpal fell into conversation with a cameraman who had just returned from his natal village. In the village, Operation West End had been an object of much conjecture and some excitement. Tejpal related:

> There in the crevices of eastern UP [Uttar Pradesh], the denizens had no understanding of the medium the exposé had taken place in. They had seen it on TV; they had read it up in the papers. . . . They knew there was a new kind of entity that was responsible for the story. [But] they were clueless about it, clueless about the dot com and the World Wide Web. There was absolutely nothing in their imagination that could help them make any sense of a website or the Internet. So they had conjured up a construct. Tehelka, for them, was a device in which *subka brashtachaar nanga ho jaata hai*. [In other words,] a kind of x-ray machine, which exposed naked anyone's corruption the moment they came in front of it. The talk

9. Indeed, the question of the relevance of an exposé like Operation West End to the public, variously understood as the common man, the masses, and so forth, was a major preoccupation in the commentaries and public interventions that followed the announcement of the sting. Tehelka's Aniruddha Bahal was keen to stress the fervently spontaneous gratitude with which ordinary people had taken to greeting him on the street: "Bahal was mobbed by admirers on the streets of Delhi. . . . Two grown men grabbed and kissed him" (Rahman and Fathers 2001). The BJP-led government, for its part, was quick to orchestrate equally would-be spontaneous manifestations of public opinion, by bringing truckloads of villagers into party rallies in the capital, where they had evidently been coached to offer the assembled press lines like "What is a web site? I don't know any web site, we are here to protect our [Prime Minister] Vajpayee from foreign forces" (Sengupta 2001).

But perhaps the most piquant "popular" outburst of all was a public demonstration staged by an association claiming to represent the prostitutes of Delhi's red light area, G. B. Road. At issue was the public defamation of self-proclaimed honest, straight-dealing, and uneducated sex workers by association with the "highly qualified and professional"—and therefore decadent—likes of the call girls procured by Samuel and Bahal. By contrast, the associational spokesperson protested on behalf of her sisters, "We are illiterate and do not know how to talk to army officials and senior politicians." The association proceeded to appeal to the government to stop these damaging assaults by the middle-class media (United News of India 2001).

there, said the cameraman from Jaunpur, was that this, the threat of the corruption-exposing machine, was the reason the Prime Minister had not appeared in public for the first few days after the scam broke. (Tejpal 2001)

This figure of a rurally imagined transparency machine is not unique. Michael Taussig points to the words of one of Manuel Cortes's informants in 1969, a woman describing the totalitarian terror of the Franco regime. The image here is strikingly similar to that conveyed by the Jaunpuri cameraman, but because the mechanism of transparency is in this case controlled by the state, it contains no gleeful reversal: "I lived in fear all the time. . . . The people in the village went round saying that the *Guardia Civil* had some sort of machine with which they could find anything that was hidden" (quoted in Taussig 1999: 70). The politics of transparency, then, are highly positional. Opacity at the center is indispensable to the functioning of tyranny. From the margins, however, it becomes a potential challenge to official panopsis.

What one begins to see here in these figures of visibility and occlusion are mutations—some parodic, some panicked—of the modernist commandment of transparency.[10] Transparency is the optical counterpart to the functional ideal of disintermediation. The politics of immediation—manifested, for example, in the discourse of e-governance—are in one sense merely an intensification of the kind of bureaucratic ethos that Max Weber identified with such precision a hundred years before (Gerth and Mills 1946: 196–244). But as we shall see, its millennial manifestation also grappled with the consequences of trying to wed affective immediacy to functional optimization. This kind of formula is, at first sight, perhaps reminiscent of populist dictatorship; the key difference here is that the immediation invoked by the votaries of e-governance and the new transparency relied on an appeal to deep democracy (Appadurai 2002).

The discourse of transparency in turn-of-the-millennium India was crucial to the multilateral marriage of an antipolitical politics, management theory, and corporate infotech. Much beloved by the NGO business and other transnational growers of civil society, the term ostensibly suggested public accountability in political processes. At the most elementary level, transparency was about the so-called right to information and involved the quantitative claim that more information was good and less information was bad. Indeed, at its bluntest, transparency

10. See the essays contained in Sanders and West 2003 for a series of reflections on the dialectics of visibility and concealment that structure understandings of political transparency in a diversity of settings.

rhetoric conflated information with knowledge and, in its e-governance avatar, credited digital technologies with bringing it to the previously deprived majority: "In the past, only Brahmins had access to knowledge and the rest of the population, who constituted 90 percent, were denied the opportunity" (*Deccan Herald* 1997). But quantitative measures quickly took on qualitative connotations. Politicians and journalists routinely accused each other of proliferating bad information — propaganda, baseless rumor, or bazaar gossip — by means of professionally biased selectivity (censorship on the part of the government, sensationalism on the part of the media).[11]

An insistence upon the right to information presupposes a modernist, impersonal ethics of administration where, in principle, the same rules apply to all and there are no hidden or privileged loci of power or authority. This is a social order in which, again echoing Weber, efficacy is detached from interest, process from politics. And it was as a disinterested custodian of these ideals that Tehelka positioned itself after breaking Operation West End. Claimed Tejpal, "The story is about one and only one thing: rampant and endemic corruption in governance" (2002a). For him, the aftermath of the story only confirmed his diagnosis. Once the story had been publicized, it ended up being hijacked by — precisely — politics: "We may have done a purely journalistic story, but other vested interests have used it as they will" (Tejpal 2002b). This simple image of a heroic confrontation between the forces of disclosure and the powers of darkness quite obviously tells us very little about the importance of Operation West End. But what would a more nuanced understanding of the relation between transparency and opacity in these events look like?

A first approach, still well within the mainstream of public discourse, would be to argue that a sting such as Operation West End, while clearly embarrassing to the government, nevertheless served as a kind of tabloid entertainment that helped to divert public attention away from more profoundly disturbing arenas and events. Certainly the politics of transparency in India did involve a contradiction between loud official claims about the increasingly frictionless circulation of useful information and the increasingly harsh suppression of politically sensitive information. Indeed, Andhra Pradesh under Chandrababu Naidu was something of a locus classicus for this dynamic. As Akhileshwari (1999) points out, villag-

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11. As C. A. Bayly (1996) notes, *bazaar gossip* was precisely the term invoked in the nineteenth century by the colonial government in India to denote channels and types of information that it neither controlled nor understood. In the wake of Tehelka, defense minister George Fernandes invoked it to dismiss the sting.

ers and townsmen in rural corners of the state could now download tax records, driving licenses, and land deeds. But "the government will not make public the number of tribals who died in the malaria epidemic in Adilabad district last year, or the conditions of endemic drought in Mahbubnagar which forces the migration of about 10 lakh [1 million] people every year in search of a livelihood. Or the facts of the three so-called 'encounter' deaths of three top PWG [People's War Group] leaders in Karimnagar district" (Akhileshwari 1999). But something more complex than mere selective reporting was also going on. Elias Canetti notes that "the peculiarity of treasure lies in the tension between the splendour it should radiate and the secrecy which is its protection" (1962: 89). And one sees something of this curious doubling in the fact that, in India, it was often the very same objects that were frequently subject both to intensive official scrutiny and to rigorously guarded secrecy. For example, the nuclear weapons program had been subject, since the Atomic Energy Act of 1962, to almost total secrecy, while its products—its spectacular indices—had nevertheless become absolutely crucial elements of public state ritual, particularly in the wake of the Pokhran missile tests of May 1998 (see Kaur 2002). A similar dialectic of hiding and showing seemed to animate the contemporary incarnations of Nehru's famous temples of modern India, the massive and increasingly contentious hydroelectric dam projects.[12] Plans for the Narmada Valley dam were and continue to be closely guarded by the state governments of Maharashtra and Gujarat, even as the project itself remains crucial to a time-tested dramaturgy of developmentalist state efficacy. Likewise, twelve villages selected for resettlement during the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam were declared "prohibited places" in an effort to minimize reporting on the vigorous local antidam agitations.

Something of this ambivalence around the most central devices of state legitimation—devices that are at once intimate to power and fully spectacular—flared up in response to Operation West End. The ethics of professional conduct, apparently straightforward, actually disclosed a much more ambiguous ethics of exchange. Ostensibly (and leaving aside for the moment all the accusations of self-promotion) the Tehelka team seemed to be following the modern recipe for probity to the letter—fulfilling their professional duty as reporters the better to serve the public interest, which in turn apparently meant opening up nefariously

12. Prem Chowdhry (2000), in her discussion of late-colonial-period empire cinema, alerts us to an earlier manifestation of the dynamic: in these films, settings like the North-West Frontier Province were at once designated as politically sensitive (and therefore restricted) and provided the quintessential filmic stage for imperial propaganda.

veiled areas of administration to public view. But the Congress Party, then in parliamentary opposition, reacted to the sting by seizing upon this very notion of the public interest and aligning it with an indignant argument for the ethical necessity of, precisely, upholding a boundary between the profane open sphere of the market on the one hand and the sacred closed space of national integrity on the other. Sonia Gandhi, leader of Congress, argued that the ruling alliance was guilty of "commerce of national security" (Parsa 2001). Defense Minister George Fernandes, who was implicated in the scandal, had, in the early 1990s, emotively harangued Ramesh Chauhan, owner of the Indian soft drink company Parle, for selling out India when he sold out to Coca-Cola. Now Fernandes himself stood accused as "a thief selling the nation's interest to arms dealers" (John 2001: 3). The scandal of corruption was not, then, just a failure to keep personal interest separate from public duty. Rather, it also seemed to threaten a dilution of the auratic authority of the state by means of a demystifying dispersal of the *arcanum imperii.*

Here, then, we already have a tension between an abstract normative ideal of transparency, in which all is wide open, and a pragmatic political appeal (made, nonetheless, in the name of both the public and the nation) to the necessity of separating and protecting the family jewels. Further, this is something more than a contradiction internal to political legitimation, since in practice it implicates the valiant discloser just as much as the corrupt official. For Tehelka, the problem quickly became manifest. Its defense of Operation West End rested on the proposition that the uncovering of these transactional irregularities at the core of the government was in the public interest. Yet even many of Tehelka's supporters balked at the logical conclusion that in order to observe and thus document this unethical economy, journalists would, to some extent, have to participate in it. Although early criticism of the use of covert spycams was relatively easily brushed aside, support for the sting really started to waver, even in the most liberal sectors of the media establishment, when the investigative commission set up to untangle the operation revealed the Tehelka team's deployment of prostitutes. As one commentator put it, "Can one pimp in the public interest? Did not Mahatma Gandhi emphasize that the means is as important as the ends?" (Swamy 2001).

We have already seen that the scandal of corruption seemed, in some sense, to involve an anxiety about a sacred substance of state becoming profaned by being allowed, through self-interested transactions, to leak out into the quotidian domain. But this sacred substance could also, from another standpoint, be seen as a kind of virulent toxin from which society at large had to be insulated. The work of investigative journalism, superficially legitimated (let us remind ourselves

once again) by means of an appeal to simple disclosure, now appeared in all its moral ambiguity. One might argue that the outrage over Tehelka's "honey traps" in effect implied that the public interest could truly be served only if the media (as the public's prosthetic organs of inquiry) conformed to a higher transactional standard than their objects, even if those objects turned out to be the elected representatives of the public interest. In the wake of Operation West End, one could legitimately ask whether the corruption that infested power-broking in the nation's capital was so virulent that documenting and disseminating the evidence might itself constitute a threat to public health. The actual modus operandi of the state had, in other words, moved close to being considered a kind of obscenity: an object and image unfit for public circulation, whose form and approximate content are nevertheless widely, if not universally, known.

At this point we might conclude that the utopian rhetoric of transparency will always come up against the pragmatic requirement of concealment and that even the most open of democratic polities continue to rely on the fantasy of an auratic center of mysterious efficacy. Thomas Blom Hansen captures something of this relation in his distinction between what he calls the "profane" and the "sublime" dimensions of a polity. On the one hand, he suggests, there is

> the incoherence, brutality, partiality, and banality of the technical sides of
> governance, as well as the rough and tumble of negotiation, compromise,
> and naked self-interest displayed in local politics. These features stand
> opposed to sublime qualities imputed to a more distant state, that is, the
> opacity of the secrets and knowledge of the higher echelons of the state,
> its hidden resources, designs and immense power, as well as the illusions
> of higher forms of rationality or justice believed to prevail there. (Hansen
> 2001: 130)

On one level, this division produces an obsessive desire for complete transparency, for the total uncovering of all that remains hidden. Jodi Dean posits the desire behind the right to information as a kind of *perpetuum mobile* driven by the persistent suspicion of a big secret, a crucial piece of information not yet divulged, a perennially veiled and perpetually receding horizon. "Something or someone stands right outside us, our knowledge and our visibility, withholding our legitimacy from us, preventing us from realizing the rightness that we claim, that should be ours. Include just a few more people, a few more facts; uncover those denied details, those repressed desires; do this and there will be justice" (Dean 2002: 44).

The tension between the profane and the sublime dimensions of the polity

gives rise to a routinized fascination, what Hansen (2001: 115–16) calls a "*jouis-sance* of politics," a pleasurably repetitive game of revealing the profanity behind the pious mask of political probity. As Jean and John Comaroff (2003: 288) have remarked, "It is precisely the *relation* between the manifest and the inscrutable . . . that undergirds the enduring fascination evinced by human beings almost every-where with the properties of power." But further, Hansen (2001) argues, the game of revelation, while played in the name of the public's right to know, actually in practice reinstates the constitutive mystique of the state at a higher level.

In the following section I will explore these propositions by dealing more directly with the aesthetic dimensions of Operation West End, with the compo-nents of the sting that most directly literalized the scopic fixation embedded in the will to transparency. We will see how one of the most appalling aspects of the scandal was the revelation of just how intensely banal the inner sanctum of power turned out to be. But we are already in a position to note that the ethi-cal commandment of investigative journalism—to render visible that which would prefer to remain hidden—easily doubles back upon itself once confronted with the sacred and polluting substance of state. The ironic upshot of the ethical furor around Operation West End's methods was that applying rigorous scruples to journalistic practice might, in fact, end up nourishing the opacity protecting unethical dealings at the core of the state so as not to infect the public with the contagion of corruption.

Blue Label

What, after all, did the Operation West End tapes show? And why did people get so agitated about them? Ostensibly, and in line with the mainstream discourse on transparency, Operation West End rendered visible and tangible what had previ-ously only been surmised. As Tarun Das, the director-general of the Confed-eration of Indian Industry, put it, "Corruption is not a new phenomenon. It has been there in the system for many, many years. The difference this time is the visual impact of the videotapes" (Das 2001). Krishna Prasad, a Tehelka journal-ist, argued that precisely the visuality of the evidence made it accessible to a vastly expanded public. "If the corrupt and the criminal have been repeatedly voted back into power, it is because 60 percent of this country is illiterate. They couldn't read all the tomes we wrote. But now they can see what is being done to them by their leaders. That can result in a huge tectonic shift in perception" (N. Singh 2002).

It would of course be nonsensical to claim that Indians, of whatever class,

had not *seen* corruption before. As Akhil Gupta (1995) argues, there is nothing clandestine or obscure about the quotidian workings of graft. And high-level corruption had been widely assumed for a long time, from Indira Gandhi's electoral manipulations in the early 1970s, through her younger son Sanjay's shady business dealings during the Emergency later that decade, to her older son Rajiv's entanglement in the Bofors arms deal kickback scandal of the mid-1980s.

The Tehelka tapes did not simply provide a window into the supposedly opaque zone at the heart of the state. Even more damagingly, they revealed that the terms of transaction were no more sublime there than in the domain of the humblest provincial official. Deploying the discourse of transparency against its official custodians, Operation West End highlighted not the magic but rather the quotidian conventionality at the heart of the state. Certainly the sight of prominent public figures casually trucking in bribes held a certain quasi-pornographic fascination when it flashed simultaneously across fourteen cable channels. But perhaps the real obscenity had to do with the banality of the habitus of these transactions, how precisely it conformed to the dramaturgical requirements of Bollywood gangsterism. Set against the gleaming, sheer surfaces of the affect-intensive image of the laptop politician, Operation West End was in effect nothing less than an act of aesthetic sabotage that managed to be at once shocking and utterly predictable.

In the wake of Watergate, one commentator memorably imagined Richard Nixon's conversations with his aides taking place in "the back room of a second-rate advertising agency in a suburb of hell" (Joseph Alsop, in Thompson 2000: 207). This time, in the grand tradition of Bollywood adaptation, Tehelka brought it all home masala-style: pot-bellied, chain-smoking power mongers, "paid ladies," and bottles of Johnnie Walker Blue Label. In the *Guardian*, Ian Buruma opined that the sight of party leaders, the defense officials and fixers going for the cash, the Scotch, and the call girls was "hotter than any Hindi gangster picture" (Buruma 2002). But in fact it was not; it was the precise correspondence that was so arresting.[13]

The management of transparency as a front-stage/backstage dialectic may be understood in terms of what I have elsewhere called "close distance" (Mazzarella 2003). I argue that the work of publicity relies upon the careful orchestration of a volatile tension between tactile presence and auratic distance. By the same token, just as the legitimacy of a polity contains what Hansen calls profane and

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13. As Bodhisatva Ganguli observes, "The figure of the Gandhi-cap-wearing politician mouthing platitudes in public while accepting suitcases stuffed with cash in the privacy of his home, is a stock image in Hindi films" (1998: 195).

sublime dimensions (2001), the authority of modern public figures depends on a carefully calibrated blend of the approachable and the awe-inspiring. Recall Roland Barthes's dissection of tabloid reports on holidaying royalty, in which it is precisely the astonishing everydayness of a prince's pursuits that further enhances his mystique qua prince (Barthes [1957] 1972). The quotidian life uncovered by the Tehelka tapes, on the other hand, was anything but auratic.

Here, in addition to the generic adherence to Hindi film convention, was a transactional economy that was also, in its highly specific formulas, all too familiar. Deepak Gupta, a would-be fixer, could be seen giving the Tehelka team, posing as arms dealers, an on-the-fly estimate: "You see . . . if you want political interference, politicians take four-five per cent, bureaucracy takes two per cent, user takes only one per cent. Eight per cent. Maybe one or two per cent expenses" (Bahal and Samuel 2001). Major-General Manjit Singh Ahluwalia bluntly clarified the going rates in concrete terms: "Saala [bastard], if you come to my house to meet me on Diwali, you can't talk without bringing Blue Label. If you are talking of bloody making a couple of crores of rupees [20 million rupees], you can't give me bloody Black Label, isn't it? . . . If you're going to talk about a couple of crores, even to say 'good evening' you have to present that bloody 'good evening' properly" (Bahal and Samuel 2001). Indeed, Shiv Visvanathan (writing well before Operation West End) observes that "the bribe banalizes evil, allows a man to sell his country for four whisky bottles." And yet the bribe is not impersonal or in itself banal. Rather, it facilitates and makes visible a concrete economy; its operation is entrepreneurially synaptic and in that sense both diagnostic and productive: "It is an invitation, a seduction, a covenant" (Visvanathan 1998c: 118).

If the habitus disclosed by the tapes was obscene in its familiarity, then these informational physics were also in every respect the inverse of the frictionless ideal of disintermediation that animated the dream of e-governance. Following Bruno Latour, one might say that the tapes were truly radical in that they enabled an "irreduction" — or a rendering visible of those nodes and terms of mediation and translation upon whose invisibility any dispensation depends (Latour [1984] 1988). And yet even here, in this zone where the real economy of political action had apparently been revealed, each concrete calculation pointed toward larger areas of uncertainty and opacity. Forget bit streams and digital flows; bribes might rather establish more-or-less lasting linkages across which files and papers might move. Compared with the strident self-determination of the consumer-citizen, petitioners in this information matrix were required to be expertly attentive and yet at the same time necessarily ignorant of the inner conjunctures of the apparatus they confronted. Individual files might leave a supplicant's hands and

move into the distance only to rematerialize after an interval determined as much by the semilegible requirements of bureaucratic mystification as by the judicious greasing of palms. So it was, for example, that files might suddenly be announced to have moved up or down, as in "Yes, Mr. Jain, the file has come down." Some gatekeepers required payments to open channels or linkages, others to not block those that had previously been opened.

I have suggested that Operation West End alerts us to an important ambivalence in the performance of state legitimacy in which two apparently incompatible figures coincide. On the one hand is the transparent state, in which all views are open and operational principles are universal; on the other hand is the magical and toxic state, powered by a secret substance at once awesome and obscene. The Tehelka tapes showed this ambivalence in operation at close quarters, at the humdrum level of getting things done. If the invocation of state legitimacy relied on a magical and obscene supplement to the kind of bureaucratic rationality that transparency discourse assumes, then the actual informational physics that I have begun to sketch here were as much a matter of affective surges as of carefully calibrated canalization fees.

Brigadier Iqbal Singh, giving evidence to the commission investigating the sting, later measured his own rectitude directly against the libidinal haze that the Tehelka team had conjured around him: "If I had any desire to enjoy the call girl, I could have gone ahead as a pretty young girl had already been pre-positioned by Mathew Samuel as a bait and Fashion TV had been turned on to induce me" (John 2001: 59).[14] But more often, both the military officers accused of accepting sexual favors and the Tehelka journalists who allegedly procured them tended to portray themselves as helpless victims of overpowering and, as it were, impersonal libidinal forces. Here was a transactional logic that could not have been more different from the cool calculus of bureaucratic legitimacy and that appeared, tellingly, as both natural and unreasonable. Speaking in defense of the officers, a cabinet minister went on record asking, "If a woman keeps offering sexual favours to a man and if a man finally succumbs, then who is morally superior, the woman or the man?" (Sanghvi 2002). Tehelka's Bahal, for his part, explained, "When the demand came from the armymen to have prostitutes, we were foxed. We resisted it. We were baffled. But the demand was so forceful we could not proceed further without catering to their demand" (Bhatt 2001).

14. In one segment of the tapes, *Kaun Banega Crorepati?* (the massively successful Indian version of the American game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*) can be seen revving up the hotel-room atmosphere. The host of that show was Bollywood legend Amitabh Bachchan, who was himself, at the time, on the board of Buffalo Networks, Tehelka's holding company.

It would be easy simply to bemoan the dismal whisky-and-soda trappings of the tapes as, in the words of one retired but publicly disgusted general, "unnecessary bragging and self-importance under the influence of liquor and yuppie culture" (Malik 2001).[15] Certainly, the mortification of the military was an important element in the public career of Operation West End. The Indian armed forces continue to function as a privileged semiotic locus of national fortitude and austere resilience, blending one part wax-tipped, stiff-lipped colonial rectitude with one part nuclear-age techno-masculinity. But I think we are now in a position to see that something rather more complex was going on.

On one level, the illicit blandishments staged by Tehelka for the pleasure of their military contacts appeared as a dangerous threat to the principled and seemingly rather brittle core of official integrity and, as such, something that had to be resisted. Here it looks as if the threat to the state is external to its operation; as such, this figure appears opposed to an understanding of the state as actually containing, at its core, a volatile substance that is efficacious when ritually managed but lethal in unauthorized circulation.[16] And yet at another level, might we not reconsider this relationship as one of uncanny continuity? Awash in the lubricious ambience of sex, Scotch, and glamorous television programming, the mise-en-scène in which the army officers encountered the call girls would then appear as a burlesque of the auratic nimbus of the spectacular state.

Be that as it may, the too-easy dismissal of these dynamics as consumerist decadence found its most ironic denouement in the form of a spoof competition announced by the Bombay ad-business rag *Advertising Brief* in April 2001. The contest called for contestants to create an ad campaign to legalize corruption. In an inspired reversal of all the right-to-information homilies, the *Brief* requested entries designed to "persuade the government of India and the Supreme Court to pass an act to make corruption a fundamental right for every citizen" (Yahoo!

15. A recurrent theme in discussions of Indian corruption is a certain wonder — not unalloyed with a sense of endearment — at the tawdriness of its props. Shiv Visvanathan, for instance, contrasts Mrs. Gandhi's inner circle during the years of the Emergency — men like V. C. Shukla and Bansi Lal — with the spectacular kleptocracies of their contemporaries: "We realize that here was a group that had privatized the state and turned the lower bureaucracy into a supine instrument of its whims. And yet, quaintly enough, it had the mindset of a *patidar*, a framework of the local and parochial. Instead of looting the nation *à la* Marcos or his African siblings, our friends were quite content with the goods of the supermarket" (Visvanathan 1998b: 54).

16. Obviously, my argument here owes a great deal to Emile Durkheim's ruminations ([1912] 1915) on the "contagiousness" of the sacred and the delicate relationship between "positive" and "negative" rites. See Boyer 2003 for a discussion that connects the contagiousness of the sacred with the work of modern censorship.

News UK 2001). Shiv Visvanathan has suggested that the bribe is the inaugural act of citizenship in modern India (Visvanathan 1998a). And indeed, to facilitate the *Advertising Briefs'* satirically humanitarian appeal, the budget for the mock campaign would consist of 5 million rupees, including a million rupees set aside for bribes (Yahoo! News UK 2001).

Immediation

Bruno Latour suggests that politicians tend to become the public embodiments of everything that we cannot face in ourselves. In particular, they become the reified embodiments of what Latour ([1984] 1988) calls "trials of strength"—that is to say, the translations and mediations that go into producing and reproducing a set of social relations: "Politicians are the scapegoats, the sacrificial lambs. We deride, despise, and hate them. We compete to denounce their venality and incompetence, their blinkered vision, their schemes and compromises, their failures, their pragmatism or lack of realism, their demagogy. Only in politics are trials of strength thought to define the shape of things. It is only politicians who are thought to be dishonest, who are held to grope in the dark" (Latour [1984] 1988: 210). A figure like Chandrababu Naidu, an ostensibly apolitical politician, became credible precisely as a riposte, a reaction to this sense of pollution—he appeared to clear the air of politics in the name of immediation.

At its best, the activist discourse of transparency promises to resist a politics of immediation by reopening all the contested points of mediation that constitute the apparently seamless systems that we inhabit. But in alliance with the kind of market-molded managerial ethos that the dream of e-governance enshrines, the figure of transparency easily undergoes an intensification that is at the same time an inversion. Transparency pushed to its limit presumably means perfect perspicacity, or, in other words, invisibility. And precisely this is the formula for the fantasy of immediation, of frictionless social mechanisms where the term *politics* comes to stand pejoratively for the imperfections and impurities that mediation necessarily involves.

Operation West End *was* scandalous, then, because it brought the shiny surfaces of immediation face-to-face with the persistence, at the heart of the state, of a highly concrete transactional economy. But the discourse around the sting, both that of Tehelka itself and of many self-styled liberal commentators, actually tended to undercut the political potential of the sting. On a number of levels, those who raised their voices in indignation at the predictably reconfirmed venality of elected officials and civil servants often also unwittingly reproduced assumptions

and aspirations that rendered them complicit with the dream of immediation. For example, the range of visceral responses occasioned by the images themselves tended to position this evidence of a febrile informal economy in the corridors of power as both historically and aesthetically regressive. To that extent, in its longing for a cleaner, more modern political dramaturgy — something along the lines of the Cisco executive's eSeva counters — the critical gaze was quickly and fastidiously averted from the substance and terms of the scene of transaction. Similarly, as long as the critical discourse on Operation West End continued to conceive of corruption in essentially negative terms, as cancerous mutation or systemic blockage, then the debate could only reproduce the state- and corporate-approved fantasy of immediation, where the answer to both normative and practical challenges is a condition of frictionless flow.

Throughout this essay I have pursued a double path. I have tried to show how both the functional and the affective faces of the desire for immediacy have become embedded in contemporary hypermediated governmentality. I have suggested that the will to transparency has a tendency to reproduce opacity. But, by the same token, the pursuit of immediation also has the potential to render visible its own conditions of possibility — the tremendously complex and always contestable terms of mediation upon which contemporary polities and informational networks rely. One of the great structuring ironies of our age is the tendency for increasingly elaborate systems of mediation to be deployed in the pursuit of immediation. Again and again we are told by visionaries of every stripe that we have overcome the alienating and alienated reifications of high modernity, with its impersonal institutions, its distances, and its either/or imperatives. Hierarchy, the story goes, is giving way to convergence, abstraction to immersion, alienation to engagement.

In this regard, Operation West End occupied an ambivalent position. On one level, it was offered to the public in conventional terms: uncovering corruption would lead to a flushing out of a political system that had become polluted and that was riddled with bugs. But on another level, its very content militated against such a conclusion, insofar as it reminded those who were paying attention that every sheer surface of immediation is comprised of a naturalized and therefore invisible social terrain of mediation: the myriad nodes, present at every quotidian turn, at which value and meaning are contested, at which scales are connected, and at which equivalence must — provisionally — be achieved.

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