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Brindaban in the sixteenth century. The spirit of this analysis is carried on in the next three chapters dealing with the four famous traditions, the *rampradāyas*. Nābhādā, who was one of the first to formulate the idea, lived in a community that would later be called the Rāmānandīs, who were patronized by the Kachvaha kings. When Aurangzeb died, the Kachvaha king Rāja Jaysingh II (1699–1743) envisioned a new imperium and gave state sponsorship to the idea of bhakti as exclusively Vaishnav (p. 196). Twentieth-century Indian intellectuals, particularly Tagore and his circle at Shantiniketan, inherited this formulation of the bhakti tradition. In contemporary times, bhakti has become a political narrative that can be used to construct India in a way that excludes Muslims and Dalits.

Hawley’s intervention shows that one cannot simply trust the view of the unproblematic movement of bhakti from southern Tamil sources to the north. It argues that the history of the bhakti movement cannot be separated from the history of political institutions and royal patronage. There is no pure history of ideas here, but rather a turn to “real world” historical realities within which ideas and practices were formed. This is an important perspective that is convincing but not without caveat. I point this out because one can read Hawley’s book as making a causal claim about historical, political processes giving rise to ideas and practices that reinforce those processes. But with religious ideologies and practices, such as the storm of songs, one needs to be cautious in the specification of constraints that have—to use Bowker’s terminology—controlled an event into its outcome. Political process, especially in the context of the Kachvaha kings, is an extremely important constraint upon the formation of the bhakti narrative and whom it excludes, as Hawley shows. But one is still left with philosophical and theological questions about human experience and the enthusiasm, or what one might call bhakti subjectivity, that the songs themselves express. This aside, *A Storm of Songs* lays to rest any unproblematic, straightforward historical narrative of the bhakti movement. Hawley’s book has rethought bhakti from a historical perspective in a deeply engaging way; anyone with an interest in Hinduism and contemporary India should read this important book.

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The very first sentence of the introduction spells out the research question of *Elite Parties, Poor Voters*: “Why do poor people often support political parties that do not champion their material interests?” (p. 1). The excellent response that Tariq Thachil offers in the following 330 pages, based on mixed methods, is very sophisticated and nuanced. It is documented by the attractiveness, for some of the poor of India, of the country’s main Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), indeed known as an upper-caste and upper-class-dominated party. After dismissing the commonplace interpretations that do not work fully—including clientelism and the instrumentalization of religion—Thachil presents his own thesis and “argues that the expansion of private
welfare played a key role in explaining the unlikely success of an elite party within the world's biggest democracy” (p. 16).

This assessment mostly derives from his main case study: the role of nonpartisan, Hindu nationalist organizations—including the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA)—among tribals in the state of Chhattisgarh. The case study is superb, combining conversations with leaders, semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries of the VKA’s social work, and ad hoc surveys that supplement the available data. The correlation between the impact of the VKA—whose educational activities are particularly appreciated by the tribals—and the BJP’s performance in the localities where the VKA has been the strongest is clear. The VKA’s role in the recruitment and training of local Adivasi leaders is also pertinently emphasized, the nonpolitical agenda of a service-oriented organization like the VKA making the recruitment work of the Sangh Parivar easier.

Besides, Thachil makes an effort to contextualize the BJP’s achievement in Chhattisgarh by comparing its trajectory in this state with its limitations elsewhere. The BJP could not implement the same strategy in Kerala because the state more effectively takes care of the education and health of the people. The BJP could not make inroads in Uttar Pradesh either until recently because other political forces, including the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), were catering to the interests of the poor there, among Dalits especially.

Thachil’s impeccable demonstration needs to be marginally qualified regarding a few points. First, the elite character of the Hindu nationalist parties has been mitigated for decades, before nonpartisan, service-oriented Sangh Parivar movements made any substantial impact. Some of the early signs of the plebeianization of the Jana Sangh (the ancestor of the BJP) found expression in Chhattisgarh, precisely, when upper-caste leaders defended the interests of the Adivasis vis-à-vis the state, and in particular the government of D. P. Mishra, who was widely held responsible for the murder of the Bastar Maharajah, a man highly respected by the local tribals in 1966. Jan Sanghis from nearby towns went to villages in the course of protest movements against the nationalization of forest production in the early 1970s. And the party trained his own tribal Members of Legislative Assembly, including Larang Sai and Baliram Kashyap. As a result of this and of the support of local notables, including the Jashpur Maharajah, the party won five of the eleven Assembly seats reserved to Adivasis in the Raigarh and Surguja districts in 1972. At the same time, the Jana Sangh—and then the BJP—remained an urban, upper-caste-dominated party in the region and could not appear to speak for the Adivasis (one-third of the state population).

Secondly, the poor do not form a homogenous category, as evident from the fact that when Tariq Thachil studies Uttar Pradesh he focuses on the Dalits, and not on the tribals anymore. This shift has to be acknowledged for the comparison between Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh to make sense. Dalits of Uttar Pradesh do not resist the attractiveness of the Sangh Parivar only because of the presence of the BSP. For some of them, Ambedkarism—a historical anchorage point the tribals miss—acts as an antidote to Hindu nationalism. Here, however, one needs to disaggregate further and look at jatis. While Jatavs have been imbued with Ambedkarism and tend to support the BSP, Valmikis appreciate the social work of Sangh Parivar affiliates (including Sewa Bharti) and vote more for the BJP. These patterns reflect not only socioeconomic considerations, but also subcultures, Valmikis being more susceptible of Sanskritization than Jatavs.

Last but not least, the post-2014 National Electoral Survey shows that, among the four social classes identified by the Lokniti-CSDS, the poor are still the least favorably inclined towards the BJP, in spite of the Sangh Parivar social work and the “Modi
wave.” Besides, Dalits have been much less seduced by Narendra Modi than any other caste group, nearly whatever their social class.

These minor caveats do not diminish the merits of Thachil’s remarkable book, the first attempt to analyze in detail how the BJP can derive some electoral dividends from social work in local pockets.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA
SINGLE-BOOK ESSAYS

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The country of Laos has not had much success in the world of competitive sports—zero Olympic medals; zero World Cup appearances; very few games, matches, or races won in the Southeast Asian Games; and virtually no chance of ever hosting any major international sporting event. There is a distinct lack of facilities, resources, and experienced international advisors and coaches. Therefore, a book on the history of sports in Laos seems more like a joke told by acquisitions editors at happy hour than an actual publication. Simon Creak is certainly bold, because he actually did decide to write and submit this book to a prestigious university press. We are all the better for his decision to take this chance. It turns out that focusing on sports, masculinity, and physical culture (or perhaps physique-culture) tells us more about the rise of Marxist socialism, international relations, dictatorship, and nationalism in Laos than nearly any other study in the past three decades.

This is one of the most fascinating books I have read in years. While there are certain questions and bodies of research that could have been explored further, this is a highly readable and entertaining book, as well as a theoretically provocative study. Let me just highlight a few reasons students of Laos and Southeast Asia more broadly should read Embodied Nation. First, from the very beginning, Creak focuses on the 1946–90 period that has been largely ignored in Lao studies. Most research focuses on modern development studies or pre–World War II history. Studies of Marxism and socialism in Laos tend to focus on 1975–91, but by looking at sports culture and politics before and after 1975, we see both changes and continuities. The lack of focus on the 1950s and 1960s is primarily because access to the archival material for this period is difficult. Creak pored over material from government archives (a challenge in itself), popular magazines, travelers’ reports, photographs, physical education handbooks and curricular material, and pre- and post-colonial French archival materials. For example, his inclusion of