Public Action and its Limits: Authority’s Response to Critical Questioning

This study began with the question, ‘what sort of politics is best suited to protecting the security and well-being of the associates’? It has suggested that the foundations of security and well-being are established through a system of obligations and correlative claims held by political associates within the polity. These goals are closely bound up with the legitimate and socially regulated exercise and renewal of authority: with a mode of justified authority that implies that possibilities for discursive challenge exist and are sometimes exercised, but are not brought to bear on every authoritative decision. Instead, these political conditions allow a limited suspension of judgement on the part of citizens because the institutionalised possibility of challenge exists when they need it; and authority holders act in the knowledge that they can justify their policy choices, even if they are not required to do so on every occasion.

When public needs are not met, however, we can expect these institutionalised possibilities for critical challenge to be exercised more frequently; and this has been very much the case in recent decades in Nawapada and Kalahandi. Critical challenges to political authority have become an ever more frequent occurrence during the 1980s and 1990s in connection with the extreme need of its citizens and alleged ‘failures’ of public policy administered by government. As Rone Tempest argues in the *Los Angeles Times*, Kalahandi’s cases of extreme need have become the subject of countless journalistic exposes, investigations by national and local parliaments and human rights commissions, and have figured in important lawsuits. However despite the spotlight, little seems to improve. ‘The district exists in a state of near-permanent famine. If
anything, things appear to be getting worse'.

The question that we face in the last two chapters is, why is this so?

**Public policy and critical publics: introductory comments**

Although critical deliberation of public policy in Nawapada and Kalahandi has become more prominent since the mid-1980s – particularly through the legal cases, journalistic exposes and inquiry commission visits mentioned above – this critical reportage is not an entirely recent development. Indeed, the *Guardian* (London) reports in August 1974 on the disruptive effect that irregular rain and exploitative social relations were having on the local population:

> Officially this is called a drought. To argue that ‘scarcity’ is the right term is a mere semantic exercise, like deciding whether famine is famine or undernourishment. The important fact is that for a state that depends heavily on its rice, the poor rainfall is as much a disaster as if there was none at all ....

Orissa’s Chief Minister, Nandini Satpathy, admitted to the same correspondent that western Orissa’s cases of extreme need were not only the product of climatic instability linked with drought, but also the result of a style of centre-state politics that generated too many administrative bottlenecks and too many politicians trying to make political capital out of local suffering:

> An impatient Chief Minister, Mrs Nandini Satpathy, says: ‘There is too much politics here, and too much feudalism’. Exasperating delays make her wish for simpler procedures, more flexibility in dealing with regional problems. But Delhi is so far away (it is not only Orissa that feels this distance) and officialdom is what it has always been – thick-headed and mulish.

In response to these public concerns, government had already committed itself by the late 1970s to a plenitude of new welfare and development programmes and to substantially increasing financial allocations to the western Orissa region. The *Economic Times* (New Delhi) reports in July 1980 that the Government of Orissa initiated a massive five-year programme for economic rehabilitation for the five lakh poorest families of the state. On announcing this programme, Kahnu Charan Lenka, Minister for Revenue and Excise, pledged a total outlay