View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by Edinburgh Research Explorer

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Current

Citation for published version:
Cross, J 2017, 'Current' South Asia, vol 40, no. 2, pp. 291-293. DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2016.1238030

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1080/00856401.2016.1238030

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
South Asia

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 30. Jun. 2018

Current

Jamie Cross
Senior Lecturer, Social Anthropology
University of Edinburgh

Current nahi hai. No current.

In July 2012 four of north India's regional power grids failed leaving a vast swathe of the country without electricity. Two hundred kilometres from Delhi, in the village of Bhadwas, Uttar Pradesh, nobody noticed. 'We only came to know about it after reading the newspapers,' said Sushil Gupta, who runs a small store in the village when I visited later that week. 'Sometimes we have current. Mostly we have none.'

In electronics the word current is used to describe the flow of electricity or the movement of electrically charged particles around a circuit. Across much of India today current is a vernacular keyword for talking about the flow or movement of electricity from networks of pylons and wires into everyday life. Since early 19th century experiments with electricity in the princely state of Mysore to post-colonial investments in rural electrification, the flow of alternating current into the Indian body politic has been the lifeblood of modernization and development. As India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru once put it, 'the moment you take electricity, all kinds of things begin to move'.[1]

Yet in contemporary India the flow of current into and through everyday life has been uneven and erratic. Much of rural India has learned to live with an unpredictable and haphazard supply. In Bhadwas, for example, Sushi Gupta and his family of six, only expect to have power two nights out of seven. Meanwhile upwards of 300 million people in India live without any connection to a mains electricity grid

[1] Kale, Sunila. *Electrifying India: Regional Political Economies of Development.* (Stanford University Press, 2013), p1

at all, more than in any other country in the world.

In everyday conversation current has a physical quality that make it as material as wires and pylons, transformers and substations. Here current is infrastructure: a thing that creates the ground on which other things work; 'present to the senses' yet only 'visible in relationship to other things'[2] (Larkin 2013, p329). In much of India current is only visible in relation to bulbs, fans, fridges and pumps. In the north the word current is synonymous with and used interchangeably with *bijli*, the Hindi and Urdu word for light. Similarly, in the south: ask the residents of a village in Andhra Pradesh how they know when there is no current and your question will be ridiculed. 'If there is current there is light. If there is no current, there is dark.' Just as current illuminates so too it mediates. With current come radio, television and the mobile phone; flows of information and media forms: news, film, music, the SMS, the media SMS, weather updates, commodity prices and advertisements.

While the word current may be ubiquitous across north and south India its use is shaped by patterns of access to the grid. In un-electrified India the English word 'line' is sometimes a more prominent part of local vocabulary for talking about electricity. 'In town people say current,' I am told in the village of Gaudaguda, southern Odisha. 'But in the interior people say line.' Both words make electricity visible in its absence. In the region's market towns and district capitals there are lines but no current to flow through them. In the village there remain few lines at all. When the power goes off in Gaudaguda people say 'line, *nahi hai*,' and the local government electricity officer, known elsewhere as 'the electricity *sarkar'*, is here known colloquially as the 'lineman'.

---

[2] Larkin, Brian. The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure in *Annual Review of Anthropology,* Vol. 42 (2013) pp. 327-43.

Many people use the words reflexively, alert to their associations with colonial language and as a way of passing comment on the un-even distribution of electricity supply.

'Why do you speak of 'current'' I asked Mohan, as be drove his taxi between the towns of Kakariguma and Koraput in the southern highlands of Odisha, 'isn't that an English word?'

'The Britishers left their language behind,' he said, 'but they didn't leave the lines.'

Yet the British made virtually no investment in the distribution of electricity. Instead it was Nehru who married the expansion of a national electricity grid to a rationalizing, techno-scientific project. Reflecting on a project of rural electrification in Soviet Russia he wrote of a scheme that can 'prepare the way for industrialization' and 'produce an industrial mentality among the peasantry: 'lighted up by electricity,' he wrote, peasants 'begin to get out of the old ruts and superstitions and think on new lines'[3]. Over the course of the 20th century, however, some of India's most impoverished and marginalised communities have remained at the frontiers of rural electrification, even as their land has been acquired for hydro-electric dams and power plants.

To speak of current today, then, is to speak of the political economy of energy. Current connects. For people without electricity current holds out the promise of political recognition, of equal rights and entitlements as citizens. But current is also government. Programmes of rural electrification like those across along the India-Pakistan border or spaces of Naxalite insurgency explicitly extend the presence of the

---

[3] Nehru, Jawarharlal. *Glimpses of World History.* (Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund/ Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 848

state, just as politicians use the promise of free or subsidized electricity to extend their influence at election time (Gupta 2012)[4].

In much of rural India the distribution of electricity maps onto historic patterns of caste and class inequality and exclusion. From villages in western Uttar Pradesh to southern Orissa the homes of Dalits and Adivasis are less likely to have metered electricity connections than the homes of high caste farming and trading families. Little surprise that the disenfranchised experience the absence of current not as a blockage in the circuit but as an appropriation or re-direction. A sociology or anthropology of electrification in rural India is yet to be written but may well be called: 'To Whom the Current Flows.'

Of course, electric current doesn't ebb and flow. Like the line it can be cut. In Telugu, current can drop or fall. Blackouts are greeted with the phrase '*current poyindi*', literally 'the current fell', a phrase that summons images of dangling wires and cables. It is not an uncommon phenomenon. Illegally connected electricity cables' overloaded connections burn out and trip local grids, leaving wires hanging overhead. Electrocutions make news, providing provincial stringers with guaranteed column inches, and India's regional newspapers carry regular reports of deaths or injuries from hanging wires.

The phrase '*Chuna Muna Hai'* or 'Touching is Prohibited' appears on electricity transformers across India. Just as it warns people of the dangers of current it is also suggestive. Current in India is good to speak with, rich with allegorical or metaphorical possibility for talking not just of citizenship, modernity or development but also of life and death, kinship and fraternity, love and sexuality.

'She came and fell on me like an electric pole,' sang Amir Khan of Madhuri

---

[4] Gupta, Akhil. 2012. *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Dixit in the 1990 film film *Dil.* 'Swear on God:' he sang. '*Current kharki mazaa gaya.* It was fun getting electrocuted.'

The song's chorus line is so well known that it can connect men across language, caste and class. In the highlands of Odisha one night, passing lines of high voltage pylons that stood waiting for wires to be strung between them, I listened to a young energy policy researcher from Hyderabad sing in sync with Mohan the newly married taxi driver. Bound together for a moment by lascivious verse and male camaraderie the current surged from one to the other, and through them to me.

'Who's that standing there like a pole,' they sang. '*Chaar so challis volt hai, chuna hai muna*. Four forty volts, touching is prohibited!'

Current. In India today, you've either got it or you haven't.

References

Gupta, Akhil. 2012. *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kale, Sunila. 2013. *Electrifying India: Regional Political Economies of Development.* Stanford University Press

Larkin, Brian. 2013. The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42: 327-43

Nehru, Jawarharlal. *Glimpses of World History.* Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund / Oxford University Press