The objective of this paper is quite straightforward and modest: the paper tries to understand 'politics', or rather the 'political role' of intellectuals, in a postcolonial society. Discussing two short stories written by Manto, 'Naya Qanoon' and '1919 ki Ek Baat', the paper revisits a particular historical moment (late 1940s and early 1950s) to understand various shades, forms, continuities and discontinuities of intellectual engagements with the idea of politics in North India (or the Northern part of South Asia!). In this sense, the paper makes an attempt to explore an extremely influential tradition of writing which not merely produced a critique of modern political ideas, institutions and processes, but also made a serious endeavour to search for possible forms of critical engagements with the world of politics. Manto's stories, the paper suggests, offer us an important reference point in this regard.

The relationship between intellectual work and politics is often seen in two interesting ways. There is a strong submission that there should be a dividing line between politics – a dirty game of power-play – and scholarly engagements. Intellectual work, in this framework, is understood as fundamentally noble and essentially an ethical affair. The vocabulary of this claim has changed quite significantly in recent years. No one talks about the nobility of intellectualism these days. However, the distinction between politics and the so-called purity of intellectual activities is underlined by evoking the notion of 'academic professionalism'. It is argued that intellectual activities need to follow certain professional procedures to make a serious contribution, which might arguably be called 'academic'.

There is another position on the relationship between politics and intellectualism. It is suggested that the prime objective of intellectual work is to play a specific political role. Intellectual work is understood as a mode of intervention in the political sphere for achieving some wider objectives: revolutionary transformation, democratisation, social inclusion and so on. This tradition goes back to colonial times when political elites not merely acted as politicians in the conventional sense of the term, but also functioned as intellectuals – not merely to produce politically logical and intellectually persuasive arguments, but also to mobilise the masses. This tradition took various forms in postcolonial India. Political ideologies – Marxism, socialism, Gandhism, Ambedkarism – find very clear reflections in aca-
demic writings. The dālī discourse, Indian feminism and the debate on secularism further contribute to this tradition.¹

These arguments are often stretched and exaggerated. Either we are forced to give up 'politics' of all kinds in the name of objectivity or, alternatively, we are given 'ideological prisms' to develop favourable explanatory recipes. I do not wish to reject the analytical worth of these two positions. In my view, the relationship between politics and intellectualism need not be seen in a paradoxical way. The purity of the intellectualism argument introduces us to the specificities of a complex domain where intellectual work is produced and subsequently institutionalised. At the same time, the politics of the intellectualism argument reminds us that the intellectual phenomenon cannot be analysed without giving adequate attention to political institutions, processes and events. Manto, in this sense, is an interlocutor. He continues to take a political position in his stories without giving any fixed ideological tag to it; at the same time, he does not compromise with the craft of short story writing, and pays equally close attention to the content and flow of the narrative.

I have selected two stories: 'Naya Qanoon' and '1919 ki Ek Baat'. 'Naya Qanoon' is a story about a coachman, Mangu, who has a sincere interest in making sense of things around him. He comes to know about a new law (the enactment of the 1935 Government of India Act) and starts imagining a completely new life under the new regime. His dreams shatter when he realises that nothing has changed under the new law. The other story, '1919 ki Ek Baat', is about a bad guy, Thaila Kanjar, who attacks some British soldiers in Amritsar in April 1919, and is shot dead by them. This story is narrated by one passenger to another during a train journey. Both are very well-known stories. However, I have selected them to discuss a few serious questions. First, I am interested to know the logic of representation in the internal fabric of the two stories. How is the interaction between the governing principles of political institutions and popular ideas such as 'independence', 'self-rule', etc., imagined? What are the layers of this discourse? What are the identified limits of ideas and how do they affect the proposed arguments in the narrative? The second set of questions is about the form and style. I try to look at the modes by which events and characters are narrated. In this sense, the contextual background, the inner connectivity of various explanatory 'moments' and shifts, and, above all, silences of the narrative, become relevant traces by which certain arguments can be excavated.

I would also like to make two clarifications. The first is about the much-debated term politics. I do not wish to 'define' the term politics in this paper; rather, I am interested in unpacking those internal nuances of these two stories which are indicated by Manto as 'political' and appreciated by us—the readers—as politics. This openness, I believe, takes us away from the given and somewhat fixed meanings of politics. The paper, in this sense, pays no attention to the long and unfinished debate about the political ideology of Manto; instead, I make an attempt to find out Manto's take on the intellectual—politics relationship.

The second clarification is about language and translation. It would be completely inappropriate to think of translation simply as a change of language. It is a highly sensitive affair that is directly linked to the production, reproduction and even appropriation of knowledge.² The growing interest in Manto's stories and personality—partly because of the rise of Partition studies and partly because of the influence of the debate on post-colonial intellectual responses to modernity—has paved the way for a number of translations of Manto's work in different languages. This proliferation of Manto's work in non-Urdu/Hindustani makes the question of translation a conceptually debatable issue. M. Asaduddin, for instance, shows that many English translations of Manto's stories are problematic not because of any language-related limitations, but because of the way in which one cultural milieu is understood in a different linguistic framework.³ I am keen to avoid this problem. Therefore, I do not use any translation. As a substitute, I try to capture the main thrust of the relevant passage(s) of the story and to put it in my own words in the main text of the paper. However, to maintain the uniqueness of evidence, the original Hindustani text is given in the footnotes.

II

Let me begin with 'Naya Qanoon'. There are three important moments in the story which can help us in addressing the complex interaction between the governing principles of political institutions and popular ideas. The first moment is when the main character, Mangu, is introduced to us. Mangu knows that a 'new law' is going to be implemented very soon. Although we are not told about Mangu's understanding of the 'old law' that seems to govern political institutions at that time, the nuances of Mangu's everyday life are elaborated to explain his existential issues, grievances and imagination of a good life. Mangu does not like the British. They often behave badly with him and treat him like an animal. Mangu has another reason also to hate the British. He believes that Emperor Akbar once insulted a darvesh (holy man) in the past. The humiliated darvesh cursed Akbar that his country (Hindustan) would always be ruled by foreign powers. Mangu feels that the impact of that curse still continues, and this is the reason why Hindus and Muslims cannot live together peacefully. Mangu, therefore, does not have hope for any major change.

Analytically speaking, Mangu's interpretation of his own world is constituted by a set of myths, beliefs and even official history. Akbar does not come as a foreign ruler; Hindu-Muslim conflicts become an outcome of a curse; and, above all, British rule is understood as an inevitable phenomenon. Although the complex institutional setting of the colonial regime is far away from these popular convictions, Mangu seems to reconstitute an
unexpected enthusiasm. He thinks that he is eventually going to witness 'naya qanoon'. He comes out in his tanga and passes through the known roads and lanes of the city to look for any sort of freshness. However, he does not find any change in the city, except the head-attire, a fur kalgi, of his horse which he had purchased from Chaudhari Khudabaksh on 31 March to celebrate the naya qanoon. Despite this virtually static state of affairs in the town, Mangu does not give up hope.

Although we are told that Mangu is not disappointed, the difference between his expectations and actuality is marked to underline the fact that the modern world of politics does not allow us to live with our own settled meanings. While searching for the newness of the new law in the city, Mangu encounters a young Britisher. The presence of the British turns out to be the most undesirable marker of the old law for Mangu. His tolerance disappears. He strongly feels that Indians have become the rulers of the country with the enactment of the new law. The British, therefore, cannot behave badly with Mangu any more. Excitement about the new law, the lack of any change in the everyday life of the people, and finally the encounter with a Britisher encourage Mangu to react. He behaves badly with the white man and it leads to a fight between the two. As a result, the police come and arrest Mangu.

Interestingly, throughout this episode, Mangu continues to justify his act in the name of the new law. Finally his (mis)conception of the new law disappears when he is put in jail by the police officer, who categorically informs him that no law has been changed at all.

III

Let us now move to the second story, '1919 ki Ek Baat'. Alok Bhalla has already produced a remarkably critical reading of this story. Bhalla evokes the contextual aspects of this story, especially the political context of post-Partition, while unpacking the relationship between text, author and reader. My reading of this story is an extension of Bhalla’s argument, though I am interested in the internal fabric of the text of the story so as to look at construction of politics in terms of form and style. The story is narrated by a passenger to another passenger during a train journey. In the conventional sense, there is a speaker and a listener. However, their common universe is discursively constituted – actually as well metaphorically. From our point of view, there can be two important moments in the narrative.

The description of Amritsar in 1919 – political agitations, the role of political leaders and the impact of mass mobilisation – is the first relevant moment in this regard. The speaker tells the listener that in 1919 Amritsar was a hub of political activism. As a result, the provincial government becomes quite authoritarian: Gandhi’s entry is banned, religious gatherings are prohibited and people are forced to keep away from all activities that are considered to be anti-British. In such a scenario, one peaceful public gathering is forcibly dispersed. In retaliation, the crowd also becomes aggressive,
and it leads to a violent conflict between the British and the Indians.

This long, introductory account serves not merely as a backgrounder to the main story, but also tells us about the manner in which political acts are commemorated as memories. Like all acts of commemoration, the speaker also reconstructs the past from the viewpoint of his own present. However, interestingly, Manto does not give us a clue to his present; rather the immediate context of a moving train underlines a highly unsettling present to revisit an equally unsettling past.

At this point we are also introduced to our main character: Thaila Kanjir. According to the speaker, although the real name of this person is Muhammad Tufail, the name 'Thaila Kanjir' has been given to him by others. Thaila is the brother of two celebrated prostitutes of the city—Shamshad and Almas. He is known as a bad guy: he gets into 'wine and gambling' very early in his life. Even his prostitute sisters are annoyed and disown him as a brother. But Thaila knows how to get things done and often manages to get money from his sisters for his needs. Despite these habitual weaknesses, Thaila is a good-looking young man; he is decent and sophisticated, and has a good sense of humor.12

In the violent encounter with the British soldiers, Thaila leads a group of youngsters to fight back. Although his momentary radicalism encourages others to give a fighting reply to the British, he is killed in this highly one-sided battle. The assassination of Thaila makes him a symbol of protest for the city. The speaker himself is very impressed with his brave act, though he is disappointed with the fact that Thaila's name is not going to be included in the list of future revolutionaries.13

This part of story could also be read as a standard nationalist saga of unknown sacrifices. However, exactly at this point, the second crucial moment begins. The speaker tells the listener that in this atmosphere of mourning, Thaila's sisters are asked to perform a mujra to entertain the British officials. According to the speaker, this invitation is sent intentionally to humiliate the women as well as the people of the city. They go and perform. While participating in the triumph of the British, the speaker relates with pride, they remove their clothes and ask the British to kill them. The speaker becomes more sombre and informs the listener that finally Thaila's sisters are also killed.14

The listener is not fully comfortable with this conclusion. He provokes the speaker for the first time and asks him to tell the truth. The speaker becomes serious. He tells the listener, with gestures, silences and broken sentences, that he is absolutely right. Thaila's sisters do not show any resistance to the British! For the speaker, this is an act of extreme betrayal.15

IV

These two stories might be read in various ways. One could celebrate Mangu and Thaila as 'ideological heroes' who transform a momentary political sensitivity into political consciousness of some kind; at the same time, Mangu's shattered dreams and the virtual surrender of Thaila's sisters can also be interpreted as examples of 'realism' simply to conclude that revolutionary zeal is actually a myth. And, it is also possible to describe the silence of Thaila's sisters as the quietness of a subaltern subject, because subalterns cannot 'speak'! These possible interpretations, I suggest, are valid - not merely because these stories are open to multiple interpretations as texts, but also because the internal weaving of politics in these narratives make them an open-ended comment. Jacques Rancier's argument in relation to the politics of literature is one possible way of appreciating this kind of engagement. Rancier says:

Literature as such displays a two-fold politics, a two-fold manner of reconfiguring sensitive data. On the one hand, it displays the power of literariness, the power of the 'mute' letter that upsets not only the hierarchies of the representational system but also any principle of adequation between a way of being and a way of speaking. On the other hand, it sets in motion another politics of the mute letter: the side-politics or metapolitics that substitutes the deciphering of the mute meaning written on the body of things for the democratic challenging of the letter.16

We may find traces of this take in the manner in which these two stories are written. However, I do not think we can reduce the nuances of Manto's writing simply to reproduce this argument in our own context. No doubt there are mute letters in these stories that function quite independently. But there is a praxis which leads us to travel the inner as well as outer worlds of these narratives.

Instead of a conclusion, I suggest that Manto is relevant for making sense of the politics-intellectual relationship for two very different reasons. His stories underline an important form of intellectual engagement with the world of politics. Manto, it seems, tries to make political comments of a theoretical kind by constructing a narrative around a few events and persons. In this sense, Manto's political comments could help us in interpreting the complex relationship between the social-cultural milieu of late colonialism and the expression of political ideas. It would be too early to call these experiments a social theory of some kind; however, we find very clear attempts to generalise, articulate and present very persuasive, yet fluid arguments in Manto's short stories.17

There is another aspect of Manto's short stories. He goes beyond the literary idealism of his time to unpack the layers of direct and indirect social violence. He, however, does not merely work as an 'indifferent scribe'; instead, one finds a very sharp explanation of politics and society, and an implicit adherence to politics of values and egalitarianism in his fiction. This intellectual activism, I try to suggest, underlines a specific kind of praxis that has not been systematically analysed.
This makes Manto our ‘contemporary’ because he is not only interested in the light of the era in which he lived, but also in the darkness—a time of the present which is unlined. ‘This intellectual consciousness, I feel, needs to be explored more closely, critically and, above all, politically.

Notes
All references for original Hindustani texts are taken from Saadat Hasan Manto Danzare, Vols. 1 and 5, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 1993.

1 This paper grew out of my ongoing engagement with intellectual politics in post-colonial India. The argument presented here is simply an outline of a much larger exploration. I am thankful to Rakesh Pandey, Abhay Kumar Dubey, Ravikant, Aditya Nigam, Nivedita Menon, Vineeta Naveen and Rakhshanda Jalil, for their comments and criticisms on various drafts of this paper.

2 It is important to clarify that the term postcolonial society is used here quite intentionally to mark the continuity and discontinuities of various social and political projects that were initiated in the pre-1947 era which have been influencing our social and intellectual worlds. Manto is an important writer/thinker in this regard because he seems to pay close attention to various facets of the ‘transition’ that took place during and after the Partition of British India. In this sense, Manto can also be taken as a point of departure to study the different ways in which the ‘postcolonial’ is experienced in India (and more broadly in South Asia). For an interesting literary evaluation of this aspect, see Abdul Bari, A Reading of ‘Pandit’ Manto’s Letters to Pandit Nehru’, in Ashis Nandy, Life and Works of Saadat Hasan Manto, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1997.

3 Although the debate on academic professionalism, at least in South Asia, is not very influential, the distinction between academic work and intellectual work is getting sharper in the post-globalised world. Elaborating this crucial distinction between professionalism and intellectual analysis, Ashis Nandy says: 'academic work is professionalised and is, to some extent, more dispassionate. Intellectual work is a love affair that swallows you up and forces you to operate at the margins of sanity.‘ See, Halil Ahmed and Priyadarsini Vijayar, ‘A past without history: In conversation with Ashis Nandy’, Seminar, 639, November 2012.

4 Taking political positions is intrinsic to the Indian intellectual tradition. Ranbir Singh’s introduction to his book Reason, Revolution and Political Theory is an excellent example in this regard. Singh questions the ways in which intellectual ‘neutrality’ is proposed and tries to offer arguments to justify his adherence to Marxism as a political position. (See Ranbir Singh, Reason, Revolution and Political Theory: Notes on Oakeshott’s Rationalism in Politics, People’s Publishing House, New Delhi, 1967, Chapter 1). We also find an elaborate discussion on the political role of intellectuals in the writings of Rajni Kothari and D.L. Sheth. In a recent interview, Kothari elaborates this aspect: He says, ‘The world of ideas and world of politics are related and influence each other. Intellectuals must recognise the significance of political processes in developing their understanding and critique of the existing social-political order. At the least, those who play an active role in the domain of politics, at least in the formal sense of the term, must also value the importance of ideas. In this interactive process, I believe, it is not just political thought—the contributions of great thinkers of politics such as Hobbes, Locke, Mill and Marx—that becomes relevant, but equally the question of ideology emerges as an important reference point. However, in my view, the task of intellectuals is not limited to the study of the critical role played by politics at various levels; they also have to develop various critiques of existing politics. I also suggest that intellectuals must intervene in the political process by linking critical ideas to political debates. In this framework, intellectual intervention finds a legitimate space. I also believe that there should be a space for criticism and self-criticism in our thinking. If we close the possibility of criticism, the gap between ideas and processes will increase. It will restrict our role as intellectuals in society.’ See Halil Ahmed, Priyadarsini Vijayar and Abhay Kumar Dubey, ‘The Centre and Indian Realities: Interview with Rajni Kothari’, Seminar, 639, November 2012.

5 Nivedita Menon argues: ‘Translation as paradigmatic of any conversation, and every act of translation as shot through with power relations—this understanding is now very much part of a certain common sense arising from a formidable body of scholarship. One point of departure from here is in the direction of seeing translation as a hermeneutic project of understanding, as an ethical project of destabilising the Self through engagement with the Other; another is in the direction of recognising the constitutive misreading underlying any project of translation.’ (Nivedita Menon, ‘Escaping Intellectualism: Translation and Politics of Knowledge’, http://citizenscounters.wordpress.com, accessed on 13 November 2012.)


7 ‘Sham ko jab wo adda ko bato to khulasamul adda wahan apne jamphele ka koi aadmi na mil saka. Uske seene ma ek aqeb-e-ghar-e tufan hara ho gaya. Woh ek badi khubar desto ko surmate wala tha—bhaat badi khubar aur to khabar ke wo apne aqeb se bheech na ho jake sukhay ho raha tha, lekin adde ko koi thaa hi nahi.’

8 ‘Ek rok uss tange me de barrister bethane man par bari zer se tummaq ke raha the aur wo khamoshi se uske bateen sashaa raha the. Ek barrister duare barrister se kah thaa raha, “jaded aamn ka durna hossa federation hat. Hissi federation duniya ki kah aai me aaj tak na surai gayi hai aur na dekha gayi hai... stai aamanthe kai ek he sisi yeh federation bhar thi phaal hai, baki yeh kehna chaahiye ky yeh federation hai hi nahi.” Uske baad us barristeron ke darmiyarn jo gugarge hai uske bechara aaz aareg a ke the, ishiye usad Mangu kuch kah na samajhe saka; uske khayal ki woh log Hindustan me neye qanun ki aamnaam ke buna samajhe ke hir na hichi kehna ki wahan aazad hoo, hi khisal ke perse auru na khe martura un dino barristeron ke himar ki saaz se dekha aur apne dal li dil me kaha ‘dabi bacheelu.’

9 Pehli Aapre ka sabah sawere usad Mangu utti auru asthi me jakar suke tange me ghode ko jata aur bacher uttak gaya. Uski tabiay ghain manalu taur par maara thi—wo neye qanun ko dekhe wale tha. Usne sahil ke sard ahsan halke me kai tang aur khule basaren ka chakkar lagaya, mugaar use chet pharis naaz nahi par. Asman ki tarah paradi—wo skati ghane kah taur na neyte ranga dekha hua chowat thi mugg har aaye ke kalgy ke jang-birang ke parena se bari thaa aur aqeb ghode ke Sir par yami hai thi, auri sab chetn phiran naaz na aadhi thi, wo neyte ka maja woh neyte qanun ki khushi me 31 March ko Chaudhari Khubahabir se sadhe chahatane aane main khareedhi thi. Gose ke tapan ko astaa, kaxa sadak, thode-thode faston par kadhre bighi ke khamb, dukhaton ke board, uske ghode ke gale main pade huye gurghumren ko shukriyabhat, baazaror main chahta phirte log, inane ke kausou chee neyte hii, abit hii ho koi bhi nahi, lekin usatad Mangu maise nahi the.

10 ‘Usatad Mangu do pushpikaven ke darmiyaan kaadha the, uske chahat chaat, phir na haa aaron ko vishav se upar neechhe ko raha the, mukh se jhiek beeh raha the, wo apne gheli hai anohnipn se haatut zadshahhi ko tarf dekhe hua haisa astaaste awaan mein keh raha the.‘ ‘Woh din kameen gay jah Khatel khan faasik se nataa karte the, Ab neyte qanun hoo miya na heena.’ Aur bechara gara apne bigmalıdır chherki ke saas kahavonwai ke
political intervention. But, the question of political sensitivity is central to all intellectual engagements. (See Ahmed and Vissuri, 'A past without history.')

16 Giorgio Agamben says: 'contemporaneity is ... a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism ... The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness' (Giorgio Agamben, What is Apparatus and Other Essays, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 44).

Broadspeaking, Manto’s stories not merely capture the light of the time when he was actively involved in his intellectual work, but also the internal configuration of the narratives presented in these stories also underline the darkness of this context.

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