THEORIES OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Oral Democracy

PAROMITA SANYAL
and VIJAYENDRA RAO

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Oral Democracy

Oral Democracy studies citizens' voices in civic and political deliberations in India's *gram sabhas* (village assemblies), the largest deliberative institution in human history. It analyzes nearly 300 transcripts of *gram sabhas*, sampled within the framework of a natural experiment, allowing the authors to study how state policy affects the quality of discourse, citizens' discursive performances, and state enactments embodied by elected leaders and public officials. By drawing out the varieties of speech apparent in citizen and state interactions, their analysis shows that citizens' oral participation in development and governance can be improved by strengthening deliberative spaces through policy. Even in conditions of high inequality and illiteracy, *gram sabhas* can create discursive equality by developing the "oral competence" of citizens and establishing a space in which they can articulate their interests. The authors develop the concept of "oral democracy" to aid the understanding of deliberative systems in non-Western and developing countries. This title is also available as Open Access.

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Theories of Institutional Design

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Oral Democracy

Deliberation in Indian Village Assemblies

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[1] Debraj Ray and Arthur Robson, "Certified Random: A New Order for Co-Authorship," *American Economic Review* Vol. 108, No. 2, February 2018, pp. 489–520.

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1 *Introduction*

Gram sabhas are open assemblies that constitute an integral part of a system of decentralized participatory local government in India. These talk-based, discursive public meetings are constitutionally mandated and have brought a form of direct democracy to Indian villages. They bear on the lives of 800 million people living in two million villages and are, in effect, the largest deliberative institution in human history. This book is a scholarly investigation into the *gram sabhas'* potential for enhancing the capacity of ordinary citizens to engage with democracy under the enormously wide-ranging conditions and constraints that shape life in rural India. Our data are transcripts from 298 village assemblies from four neighboring South Indian states that were sampled and recorded within the framework of a natural experiment. And we use discourse analysis on this corpus of transcript data to gain insights into how India's rural citizens engage with this form of direct democracy.

The 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution gives *gram sabhas* the power to discuss and legislatively intervene in many important decisions within the ambit of the *gram panchayat,* or village local government.[1] Within *gram sabhas'* purview come such issues as the selection of beneficiaries for public programs, the allocation and monitoring of village budgets, and the selection of public goods such as roads, drains, and common property resources. Higher-level governments make use of them as a forum to announce new policy initiatives and public health alerts. Open to the public and focused on village development and governance, these meetings allow citizens to bring up a wide range of concerns from garbage collection to corruption. They

[1] Note that the *gram panchayat,* which is the lowest level of formal government in rural India, should not be confused with the informally organized traditional *panchayat*, called the *khap panchayat* in some parts of North India, which plays a role in social and religious decisions.

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provide a significant participatory space for community action and for political posturing and campaigning.

Rural India is far from an ideal site for deliberation. There are persistent economic inequalities and deep social cleavages linked to a highly stratified caste-based social structure. Acute gender inequality exists amidst high levels of poverty. Stark deprivations prevent the fulfillment of basic needs. These deficits are accompanied and aggravated by the problem of illiteracy. All these problems have made Indian democracy seem a puzzle to many observers. Unsurprisingly, a large body of literature has sought to understand why electoral democracy has thrived in India (e.g. Khilnani 1999; Kaviraj 2011; Keane 2009; Chatterjee and Katznelson 2012). Our book attempts to understand how this context shapes the deliberative, talk-based form of direct democracy in village assemblies.

Electoral democracy is based on the simple but elegant notion that tallying votes aggregates preferences. It is assumed that the political candidate elected by popular vote to represent a diverse set of citizens will also give representation to their collective interests. The limitations of this mechanism as a way of governing large, complex societies have increasingly become apparent throughout the world with challenges that range from elite capture (e.g. Hacker and Pierson 2010), clientelism (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2016), and legitimation (e.g. Keane 2009). This has led to a revival of the very old idea of direct democracy – that interests of diverse citizens can be represented by a process of discussion, debate, and dialogue that builds consensus. This form of deliberative democracy derives from the premise that "democracy revolves around transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences" (Elster 1998).

As several scholars have pointed out (e.g. Mansuri and Rao 2012), deliberation is not just a Western idea. It has formed the basis of decision-making throughout history in many different times and cultures. Recent discussions of democratic political deliberation, drawing largely on John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, see it as ideally rooted in equality, rationality, and the free exchange of thoughtful argumentation of ideas. Deliberation, according to this understanding, is a mechanism for resolving reasonable differences within a pluralistic society. These theories assume three necessary preconditions for deliberation: first, parties in deliberation are formally and substantively equal; second, deliberation is based on reason rather than coercion,

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such that "no force except that of the better argument is exercised" (Habermas 1975, p. 108); third, the focus of deliberation should be the common good rather than the pursuit of individual interests. Public concerns, in other words, should prevail over private interests.

These stringent formal requirements have been questioned, refined, and extended in a variety of ways in the recent surge of scholarly interest in deliberative democracy. This literature has been primarily normative, with an emphasis on theory-building and institutional design (e.g. Bohman and Rehg 1997; Dryzek 2002; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Goodin 2003; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). It tends to focus on specifying the conditions under which deliberative democracy is likely to function, outlining variations in deliberative modalities, and emphasizing its many positive consequences for participants.

There are a few detailed empirical studies of deliberative democracy drawing on examples from Western democracies. These studies include Mansbridge's (1980) on town meetings in New England, Fung's (2004) on neighborhood governance in Chicago's South Side, Polletta's (2004 and 2006) on deliberative spaces in the United States (including online forums), and Steiner et al.'s (2005) quantitative examination of parliamentary deliberation. There is also a growing empirical literature on deliberation in the developing world (Heller and Rao 2015). There is work on *gram sabhas,* which we review later in this chapter, and extensive research on participatory budgeting.[2] Of particular relevance to this book is Baiochhi, Heller, and Silva's (2011) work using a similar sample-matching methodology that examines the impact of participatory budgeting in eight Brazilian cities. There is also Barron, Diprose, and Woolcock's (2011) book on an Indonesian project that used deliberative forums to resolve conflicts and build the "capacity to engage." Apart from these studies, this literature is largely focused on ad hoc groups and meetings that are not institutionalized (Mansuri and Rao 2012).

Our book analyzes discourses in the *gram sabha,* focusing on discussions, dialogues, and speeches. It provides insight into how the imbricated inequalities that mark everyday life shape the reach and contribution made by this deliberative form of direct democracy in rural India. Discourse analysis of the *gram sabha* allows us to revisit

[2] See Williams et al. (2017) for a recent review.

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the normative claims underlying studies of deliberative democracy in a radically different context. This raises several important questions, including the role that political models based on deliberative democracy can play in social and communicative contexts of contemporary India, and in other non-Western contexts, that vary so greatly from those assumed by normative theorists of deliberative democracy.

How are we to understand the empirical reality of *gram sabhas*? Is equality a necessary precondition for deliberation? Can deliberation help nudge communities toward becoming better collective actors and encourage discursive equality? Can the existence of regularly scheduled and constitutionally empowered public forums create an effective public sphere? What role should the state play in influencing and facilitating these forums? What do villagers talk about and what impact does that talk have on turning villagers into citizens of a democratic polity? How are we to understand public discussions of governance and development engaged in by citizens who cannot read or write? What difference does literacy make for democratic deliberation? Does deliberation in non-Western contexts require a rethinking of democratic theory? How should we characterize the interaction between political and civil society in non-Western and poorer democracies, such as India?

Partha Chatterjee has influentially argued that the mass of India is better conceptualized as "political society" rather than "civil society." Political society is seen (following Foucault) as a governed "population" – "differentiated but classifiable, describable, and enumerable." Politics are seen as "a set of rationally manipulable instruments" for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as the "targets of policy" (2001,173).[3] And although political society has voting rights and relishes and exercises those rights in high proportions, nevertheless, voting is viewed as the exercise of agency within a context of political manipulation and constrained choices. Civil society, on the other hand, according to Chatterjee, is reserved for a more privileged set of rights and freedoms and implies an active associational life in which free and equal citizens participate and deliberate at will. He argues that in India, unlike the West, "this is restricted to a fairly small section of 'citizens' – urban, educated, elites" (Chatterjee 2001, 172).

[3] Chatterjee (2004) has extended and clarified this argument in a variety of ways without altering the basic construct.

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The *gram sabha* does not fit easily within this binary classification as either an instrument for administering a mass, "manipulable," poor, political society or as an associational institution expressing the will of autonomous, formally equal citizens exercising rights within a robust civil society. At one level the *gram sabha* is an archetypical extension of political society. Benefits granted by the state are doled out via processes of Cartesian commensuration to people it categorizes as below the poverty line (BPL). This status is determined by strict quantitative measurement and targeting. Nevertheless, by creating a space for the rural poor to speak within a relatively equal discursive playing field, the *gram sabha* allows people to question and critique political elites on issues ranging from policy choices to policy implementation and corruption. It allows villagers to critique the rules of commensuration used by the state to define a deserving beneficiary, to make dignity claims, and to forge and carry out concrete democratic civic actions.

In this sense then, *gram sabhas* are an example of state engineering by the federal government to create the infrastructure of democracy through which to facilitate "induced participation" (Mansuri and Rao 2012). The effect however approximates some of the features and benefits associated with civil society. *Gram sabhas* are an attempt to create "invited spaces" (Brock et al. 2001) for deliberative participation within a formal, constitutionalized system of local government. They do not fit well within Chatterjee's vision of India as a polity sharply split between political and civil society.

Deliberative institutions, like the *gram sabha*, are becoming increasingly important in the world as forums to allocate resources to the poor (Mansuri and Rao, 2012). By moving decision-making power from government bureaucracies to villages and neighborhoods, these institutions have been viewed as a way to wrest power from elites. They are ways of making the implementation of development interventions more efficient and improving the equity and transparency of allocations. "Citizen engagement" of this kind is seen as the key to accountability. This has led to a vast literature scrutinizing government accountability. Scaling up such deliberative systems effectively remains a challenge however (Fox 2016). Systems that work in a few villages or neighborhoods often do not work as hoped when they are expanded to entire countries (Hirschman 1967; Andrews et al. 2013; Majumdar et al. 2017). *Gram sabhas*, because they are mandated by the constitution and are institutionalized, already function at a huge scale. They

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provide an ideal ground for understanding the challenges of setting up systems of citizen engagement across entire societies and countries.

In this book we study the quality of discourse and not the impact of deliberative processes on "hard outcomes," such as better quality or delivery of public goods or lowering corruption. It is important to note that there is a growing body of evidence that shows that when institutions for "social accountability" and citizen engagement are effectively developed and nurtured with government commitment, they can have tangible effects on hard outcomes (Mansuri and Rao 2012; Fox 2015). This is also true of the villages analyzed in this book. In an econometric analysis of 5,180 randomly chosen households from a subset of the same villages we analyze, Besley, Pande, and Rao (2005) find that when *gram sabhas* are held governance sharply improves. Focusing on a specific policy administered at the local level (access to a BPL card, which provides an array of public benefits), they find that policies were more effectively targeted to landless and illiterate individuals when a *gram sabha* was held. Effects were large, raising the probability of receiving a BPL card by 25 percent. The reason *gram sabhas* result in better identification of poor families is related to one of their primary roles in village government. BPL lists are first determined on the basis of a survey conducted by the government that identifies poor households using a given set of criteria. In many states, however, the lists of beneficiaries identified as meeting these criteria have to be ratified by the *gram sabha*. This allows for public verification of the people included on the list. It also provides villagers an opportunity to point out wrongful inclusions and unjust exclusions as well as scope for questioning and critiquing the government's definition of poverty.

Valuing such systems of democratic engagement and participation accords with the holistic view of "development as freedom" championed by Amartya Sen (1999). His vision marks a shift from a traditional preoccupation with economic growth, outcomes, and instrumental ends and calls for an increased sensitivity to human agency, capabilities, and associational freedoms (Heller and Rao 2015). For all these reasons, it is important to train our lens on the discursive landscape of *gram sabhas*. In this book, accordingly, we engage in a talk-centered analysis aimed at understanding how ordinary citizens and villagers interact and engage with the state, focusing on what is discussed in these assemblies, what ordinary citizens say, and

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how they say it. We also analyze how state actions influence the discursive vitality and scope of *gram sabhas*.

A Brief History of the *Gram Sabha*[4]

Early History

While Indian electoral democracy was only instituted in the first half of the twentieth century, the practice of public reasoning and deliberation is a much older phenomenon, dating back to Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions from as early as the fifth century BCE. Religious councils hosted by early Indian Buddhists, for example, often focused on resolving debates within and across religious traditions. Importantly, they "also addressed the demands of social and civic duties, and furthermore helped, in a general way, to consolidate and promote the tradition of open discussion on contentious issues" (Sen 2005, p. 15). In the third century BCE, such practices became celebrated under the reign of Ashoka, who sought to codify rules for public discussion that emphasized mutual respect and honor (Lahiri 2015). By the sixteenth century, under the reign of Akbar, interfaith dialogues were explicitly aimed at the pursuit of reason rather than reliance on tradition. The priority given to equality and reason in deliberation echoes standards in contemporary deliberative theory. Perhaps even more significantly, their explicit sponsorship by the state reveals the extent of such deliberative councils' structural importance in ancient and medieval India.

Even in this early period, participants in such public debates extended beyond the intellectual, political, and religious elites. Early debates – in *sabhas, panchayats,* and *samajs* – often included both notable big men and peasants, in contestation with each other and in opposition to the state. Indeed, "the term *sabha* (association) itself originally indicated a meeting in which different qualities of people and opinions were tested, rather than the scene of a pronunciamento by caste elders" (Bayly 1996, p. 187). Of course, the inclusiveness and accessibility of such public debates should not be overstated. Like other emergent public spheres, India's growing deliberative institutions were uneven in their reach and were still predominantly the province of the educated. Despite their limited scope, however, the presence of

[4] This section borrows heavily from Parthasarathy and Rao (2018).

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a bounded, but critical public sphere suggests an important foundation for future participatory and democratic politics.

By the late nineteenth century, Western liberal philosophers had begun to articulate a vision of participatory democracy in which equal citizens could collectively make decisions in a deliberative and rational manner. These ideas would profoundly shape, and be shaped by, the British presence in India. Of particular relevance for the trajectory of Indian deliberation was Henry Maine, who was sent to India in the 1860s to advise the British government on legal matters. While serving in the subcontinent, he came across several accounts by British administrators of thriving indigenous systems of autonomous village governments, whose structure and practice shared many characteristics of participatory democracy (Maine 1876). Maine had been influenced by J. S. Mill, who argued that universal suffrage and participation in a democratic nation would greatly benefit from the experience of such participation at the local level (Mill 1860). Observing Indian village governments, Maine came to articulate a theory of the village community as an alternative to the centralized state. These village communities, led by a council of elders, were not subject to a set of laws articulated from above, but had more fluid legal and governance structures that adapted to changing conditions, while maintaining strict adherence to traditional customs (Mantena 2010).

This argument had an impact on colonial administration. As India became fertile territory for experiments in governance, the liberal British Viceroy Lord Ripon instituted local government reforms in 1882 for the primary purpose of providing "political education," and reviving and extending India's indigenous system of government (Tinker 1954). The implementation of these reforms followed an erratic path, but an Act passed in 1920 set up the first formal, democratically elected village councils, with provinces varying widely in how councils were constituted, in the extent of their jurisdiction, and in how elections were held (Tinker 1954).

Beyond influencing colonial policy, Maine's description of self-reliant Indian village communities came to shape the thinking of Mohandas Gandhi, who made it a central tenet of his vision for an independent India (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006; Mantena 2012). Gandhi's philosophy of decentralized economic and political power, as articulated in his book *Village Swaraj*, viewed the self-reliant village as emblematic of a "perfect democracy," ensuring equality across

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castes and religions and self-sufficiency in all needs. These villages would come to form "an alternative *panchayat raj*, understood as a nonhierarchical, decentralized polity of loosely federated village associations and powers" (Mantena 2012, p. 536). Stressing nonviolence and cooperation, this Gandhian ideal elevated local participation to being not just for the sake of the political education of India's new citizens but a general form of democratic self-governance.

Gandhi's proposal, however, was defeated during the Constituent Assembly Debates. B. R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the constitution and a fierce advocate for the rights of Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables" and classified by the government as Scheduled Castes), was deeply skeptical of village democracy. Arguing against it he proposed, "What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?" (Immerwahr 2015, p. 86). Ambedkar's insistence on recognizing the realities of entrenched social and economic inequality severely limited his belief in the possibility of a robust, participatory democracy in India. He suggested that India would enter democracy as a "life of contradictions," in which political equality would be in continuous conflict with persistent social and economic inequality. This animated his principled arguments that the constitution should guarantee more than just formal equality through the vote. He demanded that the constitution play a major role in the nation's development by including the guarantee of education and employment, the abolition of caste and other social ills, and the provision of certain forms of group representation.

Village democracy did not entirely disappear from the Indian constitution, however. Article 40 stated that "the State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government." Though this article was a mere "directive principle," or non-judiciable guidepost for policy, some state governments did set up formally constituted village democracies. In 1947, India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, pioneered the approach of instituting a deliberative body that it called a *gaon sabha,* which met twice a year to discuss and prioritize the concerns of the village (Retzlaff 1962.

By the 1950s a confluence of domestic and international factors led to a renewal of calls for citizens having greater voice in their

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communities' development (Immerwahr 2015). India became a particularly fertile ground for such policies, which led a renewed call to strengthen village democracy. A government committee, led by a senior politician, Balwantray Mehta, was formed to spearhead the initiative. It released a report in 1957 that set the foundation of *Panchayati Raj*, a government-led plan to decentralize democracy into three tiers of local government empowered to direct the local development agenda (Mehta 1957).

Deliberation under *Panchayati Raj*

As states came to adopt the *panchayati* structure, most were far from realizing the Gandhian ideal of egalitarian self-governance. Deliberation and participation under this new structure was meant to elicit the "felt needs" of the village, which depended on the ability of the village to be a cohesive body that was capable of articulating a general will. In practice "the tendency of the spokesmen for the village to come from the powerful, landed classes within rural life was widely acknowledged," and any "actual felt needs that threatened village solidarity – such as a desire for land reform, the abolition of caste hierarchies, or sexual equality – were quickly ruled out" (Immerwahr 2015, p. 92). Even S. K. Dey, the first Union Cabinet Minister for Cooperation and *Panchayati Raj*, admitted that many villages had nominal success, with paper forms completed but no actual programs implemented (Immerwahr 2015, p. 94). The gradual adoption of *panchayat* implementation proceeded unevenly across the country, with more success in some states than others.

The modern *gram sabha* was pioneered by the government of Karnataka, which passed an act in 1985 establishing democratically elected *mandal panchayats* (a mandal consisted of several villages), with clearly delineated functions and appropriate budgets. *Gram sabhas* played a central role in the Karnataka *mandal panchayat* system. All eligible voters in a mandal were members of the *sabha,* which would be held twice a year. The *sabhas* were tasked with discussing and reviewing all development problems and programs in the village, selecting beneficiaries for anti-poverty programs, and developing annual plans for the village (Aziz 2007). In practice, the *sabhas* were resented by village councilors because they were subject to queries and demands for explanations from citizens. Their answers often elicited heated

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reactions. *Gram sabhas* were largely abandoned after the first year of the implementation of the 1985 act. If the meetings were held, they were conducted without prior announcement or were held in the mandal office, which could not accommodate more than a few people (Crook and Manor 1998).

Despite this, the Karnataka reforms were seen as an important innovation in village government and received wide support across the political spectrum. A movement to amend the Indian constitution to strengthen Article 40 with tenets drawn from the Karnataka Act gained momentum. This resulted, in 1992, in the passage of the 73rd constitutional amendment, which gave several important powers and functions to village governments. The three-tier system of decentralization and its accompanying forum for deliberation, the *gram sabha*, were formally codified. It mandated that all Indian villages would be governed by an "executive" elected village council, the *gram panchayat,*[5] and there would be a "legislature" formed by the *gram sabha*, an assembly of all citizens of the village, that would hold public meetings at least two times a year. Lastly, the amendment required that at least 33 percent of seats in village councils would be reserved for women, and seats would also be reserved for disadvantaged castes by a number proportionate to their population in the village.

Following the passage of this amendment, Kerala, India's most literate state, which had a long history of progressive politics, initiated a radical program of participatory decentralization (Isaac and Franke 2002), where the *gram sabha* played a central role. The program rested on three pillars. It devolved 40 percent of the state's development budget to village *panchayats*, gave substantial powers to these councils, and instituted a People's Campaign. This was a grassroots program to raise awareness, train citizens to exercise their rights, and help them become active participants in the *panchayat* process. The latter goal was to be achieved primarily by participating in *gram sabhas*.

Gram sabhas have become central to Kerala's village planning process, which is based on a set of nested piecemeal stages (Isaac and Heller 2003). Working committees and "development seminars" are held in conjunction with *gram sabhas* to make them practical spaces of deliberative decision-making and planning. Instead of open deliberation, attendees

[5] A *gram sabha* is held at the *gram panchayat* level. A *gram panchayat* consists of one to six villages. Its size mainly depends on state government policy.

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are divided into resource-themed groups or committees. The discussions within each group yield consensual decisions regarding the designated resource. This structure is geared toward increasing the efficiency of consensual decision-making. And it is facilitated by various training programs to instruct citizens on deliberative planning as well as local bureaucrats on methods for turning plans into effective public action.

Heller, Harilal, and Chaudhuri (2007) have studied the impact of the People's Campaign in Kerala with qualitative and quantitative data from 72 *gram sabhas*. They have found that the campaign has been effective, with positive effects on the social inclusion of lower-caste groups and women in decision-making. Gibson (2012), examining the same data, has argued that the key explanation for the effectiveness of *gram sabhas* in Kerala is the high level of participation by women. Over the last two decades all other Indian states have implemented the various tenets of the 73rd amendment. They have done so with varying levels of intensity and commitment. None has done so as effectively as Kerala.

Gram sabhas are thus deliberative forums embedded within an electoral system. The *gram panchayat* or village council and its leadership is elected every six years and *gram sabhas* are held either two or four times a year, depending on the state. In these forums citizens engage with elected officials and local bureaucrats. The politicians who participate are acutely aware that they are interacting with potential voters who have the power to reelect them or vote them out of office. This creates a relatively egalitarian discursive space (Rao and Sanyal 2010). Low-caste citizens, who may hesitate to say some things in social settings, are less hesitant to say them in the *gram sabha* knowing that they are engaging in a kind of political performance. Politicians, in their turn, engage in a different kind of political performance in which they try to appear to be responsive to citizens, and try to avoid expressing the kind of quotidian prejudice that would turn away potential voters. *Gram sabhas* are now a permanent feature of the political landscape. The crucial question remains whether these egalitarian performances will become normalized over time to create an effective democratic space for deliberation and accountability.

Scholarly Work on the *Gram Sabha*

The effects of several aspects of the decentralization amendment (including the strength of electoral democracy, the impact of quotas

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for women and lower castes, and the implications of elections for distributive politics and clientelism) have been the subject of a large body of research (e.g. Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Besley et al. 2004, 2005; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Beaman et al. 2009; Ban and Rao 2008; Chauchard 2017). A small and growing body of scholarship has examined the *sabha* itself, and whether it serves as a mere "talking shop," or constitutes a true deliberative forum in which citizens are able to raise and resolve issues of public relevance.

In previous work (Rao and Sanyal 2010), using the same transcripts that we use in this book, we have found that participation in the *gram sabhas* acts as a vehicle for creating a shared, intersubjective understanding of what it means to be poor. We highlighted how lower-caste villagers use the discursive space of the *gram sabha* to transgress social norms and make claims for dignity. We showed how marginal groups use the *gram sabha to* voice their concerns, and how, through them, previously "hidden transcripts" became public and forced public discussion to take place on sensitive social issues that many would rather have avoided.

Our and others' research has also shown that *gram sabha* deliberations often deviate from the ideal of rational argumentation. Sanyal's (2015) work has highlighted citizens' displays of emotions in *gram sabha* discussions and pointed to the mixed role of emotions – their constructive role as enforcers of accountability and justice and their negative role as cognitive impediments that can disrupt *gram sabhas* and hamper their ability to arrive at rationally actionable collective decisions.

Public discussions of common issues at the *gram sabha* are most effective when citizens are well informed and can demand accountability from public officials. Limited information and media coverage, however, often leave citizens at a "disadvantage when negotiating with local governments" (Bhattacharjee and Chattopadhyay 2011, p. 46). Analyzing transcripts from *gram sabhas* in West Bengal, Bhattacharjee and Chattopadhyay find that villagers try to use information from media to negotiate with elected officials and inquire about entitlements. These requests, however, are easily ignored or dismissed by *gram panchayat* members, who can evade requests by claiming that the media is misleading audiences or is uninformed. The authors attribute this to the "thinness" of news coverage, which does little to empower citizens to confront officials. Despite this troubling picture,

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the authors acknowledge that the very act of demanding entitlements, even seemingly small and selfish claims for rice or pensions, reflects citizens' "capacity to aspire" for a better life (Appadurai 2004).

The low-literacy and high-inequality contexts in which deliberation within *gram sabhas* usually takes place raise the possibility that they are simply "talking shops" that bear no relationship to democratic dialogue. This hypothesis is explicitly tested by Ban, Jha, and Rao's (2012) quantitative analysis of coded versions of the same *gram sabha* transcripts studied here. Deriving hypotheses from rational choice models of group decision-making under uncertainty, that work analyzed the transcript data to test three competing hypotheses concerning the types of equilibrium that characterize *gram sabha* interactions: (a) "cheap talk," in which discussions are not substantive even though they may appear equitable; (b) elite capture, in which discussion is dominated by the interests of landowning and wealthy citizens; and (c) "efficient democracy," in which meetings follow patterns of good democratic practice. This study found that in villages with more diversity in caste groups, and less village-wide agreement on policy priorities, the topics discussed track those of interest to the median household. In villages with less caste heterogeneity, the priorities of landowners are more likely to dominate the discourse (consistent with elite domination). The study concluded that *gram sabhas* are much more than mere opportunities for cheap talk. Rather, they closely follow patterns observed in a well-functioning "efficient" democracy.

Scholars have begun to examine whether deliberation in *gram sabhas* is gendered in nature, and how policies aimed at inclusion might mitigate gender biases. Sanyal, Rao, and Prabhakar (2015) examine the differences in speech employed in the *gram sabha* by women who identify as belonging to self-help groups (SHGs) and women who do not (and likely do not belong to SHGs). They have found that women SHG members possess more "oratory competency." This question is further explored in two recent working papers by Parthasarathy et al. (2017) and Palaniswamy et al. (2017). These authors use text-as-data methods on an original sample of transcripts from Tamil Nadu to evaluate whether and how women participate in village assemblies. They have found that despite the relatively high rates of attendance, women speak much less than men. They also show that a state intervention that builds women's networks and trains them to engage with village government dramatically increases both women's presence and

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frequency of speech at the *sabha*. Though the authors are optimistic about the potential of such policies to make deliberative spaces more inclusive, they also caution that the intervention shifts the topic of conversation toward the program itself, potentially crowding out organic demands and requests.

This book contributes to the literature by conducting a large-N discourse analysis of 298 transcripts of village assemblies from four neighboring states in Southern India recorded between 2003–2004: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. It studies the nature of speech, how "voice" and collective discussions are expressed, the uses to which citizens put the *gram sabha*, and how agents of the state react to the concerns expressed in these village assemblies. It also employs a unique natural experiment to determine if deliberative spaces can be influenced and structured by state policy. Finally, it asks the crucial questions of how illiteracy affects the quality of deliberation and whether literacy is a precondition for effective deliberation.

Methodology

The Natural Experiment

Our choice of villages where we recorded the *gram sabhas* was guided by a natural experiment. We discuss the findings from this in Chapters 3 and 4. The experiment was to match similar villages on either side of modern state borders that share administrative histories, speak a common mother tongue, and have similar social structures. We assumed that given these shared sociolinguistic characteristics, discourse within them would be less affected by linguistic differences or differences in social structure and culture than by state policy and the underlying political economy of the state. Our sampling design of matching similar villages occupying different sides of state borders, therefore, allowed us to investigate and highlight the extent to which state policy can shape the nature of discourse in deliberative forums.

Method of Matching on Administrative History and Common Language

The map of British India was stitched together from the remnants of the Mughal Empire. After Mughal dominance over the subcontinent

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disintegrated over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hindu and Muslim generals, courtiers, local chieftains, and sundry other powerful figures started exercising dominance over territory. Gradually these actors carved out autonomous kingdoms. The British East India Company entered India in the sixteenth century initially for the purpose of trade. In the process of establishing trade routes and consolidating trade monopolies, they gradually began to extend control over territory through treaties and armed force. Depending upon the relations of power and the local political situation in various places, territory came to be directly governed by the Crown, gradually extending to large states that were known as "presidencies." In other places, indigenous rulers were installed and endowed with large incomes and some local autonomy. These "princely states" were indirectly controlled by British "residents."

The shape of these territories closely reflected their historical antecedents. In Southern India, the state of Hyderabad was ruled by a Nizam, the first of whom was a Mughal governor who had seized control from its erstwhile suzerains over a large portion of the empire's territory in the Deccan plateau. The state of Mysore was constructed in the early nineteenth century from the remnants of the kingdom of Tipu Sultan. Tipu's reign was characterized by creative and successful resistance to British rule until successive defeats in the Third (1792) and Fourth Mysore Wars (1799). These were among the most decisive battles in the history of British colonial expansion. Part of Tipu's empire was carved into Mysore state, and a member of the Wodeyar family (considered to be descended from the original Hindu rulers of the state) was installed on the throne. Much of the rest of South India became the Madras "presidency" under direct British rule. It was cobbled together by gradual expansion from its capital, the port city, from which the region then took its name.

Indian independence in 1947 brought with it a number of social movements that promoted unified linguistic identities for states. And a number of leading Indian politicians and intellectuals were advocating that Indian states be reorganized along linguistic lines in the belief that they could then be more rationally governed. A commission was instituted to undertake the painstaking process of meticulously examining historical antecedents and census data. The task was to solve the jigsaw puzzle of putting together new, linguistically unified states by merging districts that had the same majority language. The commission's report

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was published in 1955 and its recommendations implemented in 1956. In the South, this led to the creation of four states – Andhra Pradesh (AP), largely Telugu speaking; Tamil Nadu (TN), Tamil speaking; Karnataka (KA), Kannada speaking; and Kerala (KE), Malayalam speaking. AP was pieced together from Hyderabad and the Telugu speaking parts of the Madras presidency.[6] Karnataka was carved out by merging the erstwhile princely state of Mysore with Kannada speaking parts of Hyderabad, and the Madras and Bombay presidencies. Kerala was formed by merging the princely states of Travancore and Cochin with parts of the Madras presidency. The rest of the Tamil speaking areas of Madras presidency became Tamil Nadu.

The States Reorganization Commission's report (Govt. of India, 1955) details the process by which decisions were made to assign particular districts to particular states. The primary consideration was the language spoken by a majority of its residents. But this was coupled with sensitivity to fair assignments of economically valuable cities and ports, and with some sense of whether the merger made historical and cultural sense. The imperfections in this process are particularly apparent along the borders of the new states that were invariably multilingual, often with a mixed linguistic culture or identity. It is in the midst of these inevitable "mistakes" to be found on either side of the borders of the modern South Indian states where we focus our attention.

The way the borders of the modern South Indian states were overlaid upon the old political configurations can be seen in Map 1. Along the redrawn state borders there are districts that belonged to the same political entity prior to 1956 but were assigned by the Commission to different states. The villages along the modern border share a common history, having been part of the same political and administrative entity for over two hundred years. Following Bayly (1999) and Dirks (2002), we argue that shared administrative and political histories should have caused the social structures of these divided districts to be similar. After all, until 1956, the villages had shared a common history of land tenure

[6] In June 2014 the state of Andhra Pradesh was split into two states. Telangana, which belonged to the erstwhile Hyderabad portion of the state (where Medak district from our sample is located), became a separate state. And the new Andhra Pradesh was left with parts from the erstwhile Madras presidency portion (where Chittoor district from our sample is located).

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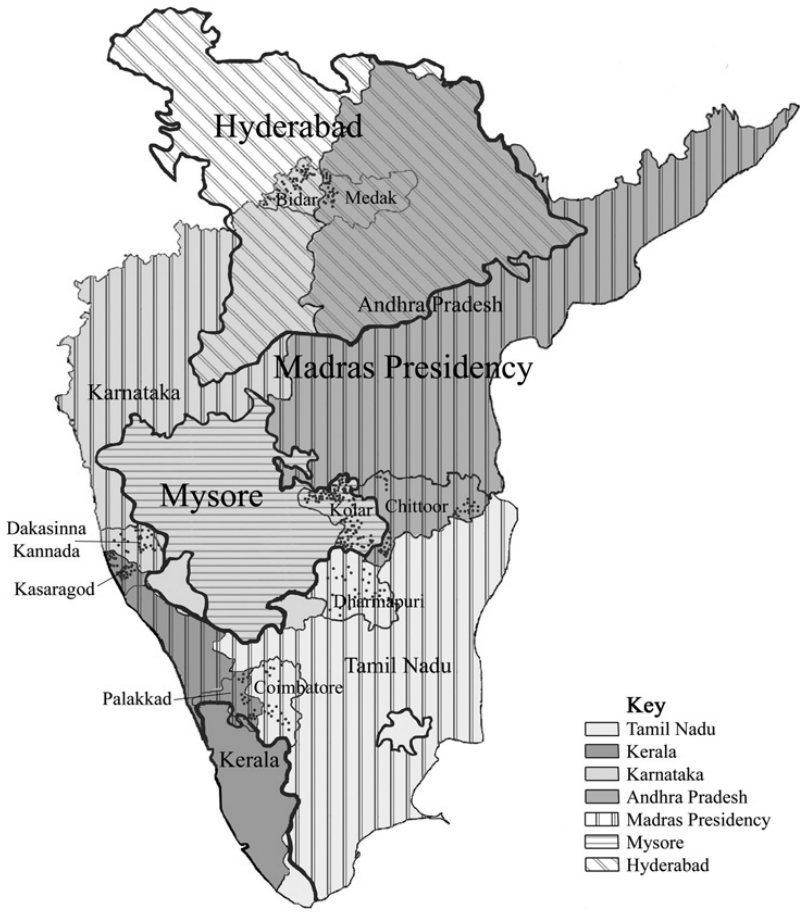

MAP 1

(closely related to caste (Kumar 1962, 1992)), administration, and reform, dating as far back as the Mughal period at least.

The villages in our sample are located on the borders of linguistically defined states. There is therefore considerable overlap among the languages spoken in villages along the border areas of these states. We selected blocks (subdistrict-level entities that are approximately equivalent to counties) on either side of the border matched by the mother tongue of the majority of people in each block. Within these matched blocks, we compared differences among villages across the border.

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The core idea behind the natural experiment is made immediately evident by looking at Map 1. The Madras presidency and Hyderabad state are the two old administrative units that are relevant for our analysis. Within these old states we picked eight matched districts that were later split into different states after the reorganization. These four pairs are Bidar and Medak in Hyderabad, Dharmapuri and Chittoor, Kasaragod and Dakshina Kanada, and Coimbatore and Pallakad in different parts of the Madras presidency. Bidar and Dakshina Kanada are now in the state of Karnataka. Medak and Chittoor were in erstwhile AP. Dharmapuri and Coimbatore are in Tamil Nadu. And Pallakad and Kasaragod are in Kerala.

Within these districts we picked a set of blocks using the language matching strategy, and then a set of villages, randomly selected within each block, which were also matched by language. Details about the sampling and matching process follow. Our sampling was designed so that we could reasonably expect that discourse would be similar unless it has been shaped by state policy.

Sampling

In order to select the blocks within these districts that were best matched on language, we computed the linguistic distance[7] for all combinations of blocks in each district pair. To choose the best matched block pairs we ranked all the pairs and selected the top ranked pairs, stopping when we found three (two for the Kerala–Tamil Nadu border) unique block pairs for each district pair.

The blocks were divided into several *gram panchayats* (GPs), each of which consisted of between 1 and 6 villages depending on the state. From each sampled block, in the states of AP, KA, and TN, we randomly sampled 6 GPs in every block. In Kerala the population per GP is

[7] The linguistic distance is the weighted sum of absolute differences in proportions of the languages spoken, as mother tongues, in the block. The weights are the proportion of the language spoken in both blocks taken as a whole. The values for this measure range from 0 to 1, with zero being the best match possible. Algebraically, let l_{i1}, l_{i2}, be the proportion language i is spoken, as mother tongue, in block 1, and respectively 2. Let p_1 and p_2 be the population in block 1, 2. Then:

$$L(v_1, v_2) = \sum_i |l_{i1} - l_{i2}| \frac{l_{i1}p_1 + l_{i2}p_2}{p_1 + p_2}$$

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Table 1.1: Gram Sabha *Sample*

State	Number of Districts Sampled	Number of Blocks Sampled	Number of GPs Sampled	*Gram Sabha* Recordings
Andhra Pradesh	2	9	54	2004 round: 54
Karnataka	2	8	48	2003 round: 48 2004 round: 48
Kerala	2	7	21	2003 round: 21 2004 round: 21
Tamil Nadu	2	13	53	2003 round: 53 2004 round: 53
Total	8	37	173	298

roughly double that in the other three states. For this reason, in Kerala, we sampled 3 GPs in every block. This procedure gave us a total of 201 GPs. The complete sample has been used for other analyses (e.g. Besley et al. 2004), but for the purposes of this study we removed Kolar district because it was not matched historically to any of our other districts.

The blocks were divided into several GPs, each of which consisted of between 1 and 6 villages depending on the state. We conducted *gram sabha* recordings over two rounds in 2003 and 2004. Due to budgetary limitations we omitted recording *gram sabhas* in Andhra Pradesh in round 1. In round 1, in the other three states, we randomly selected 48 GPs from Karnataka, 21 wards from Kerala, and 53 GPs from Tamil Nadu, resulting in a total *gram sabha* sample from these three states of 122. In round 2 we expanded the sample to include the state of Andhra Pradesh, where we visited 54 randomly chosen GPs in 9 blocks. Table 1.1 provides a breakdown of the *gram sabha* sample by state, district block, and round, showing that in total we have 298 *gram sabhas* in the sample.

Data Collection and Some Summary Findings

Data for this study are drawn from tape recordings of 298 *gram sabhas* in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. We hired field

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investigators conversant in the local languages and in English. They were tasked with tape recording the *gram sabhas,* transcribing them, and translating them into English. One or two field investigators visited each of the *gram sabhas* in our sample to record the meetings after obtaining permission from the *gram panchayat* president. They were also asked to dress in a simple manner and to locate themselves in an unobtrusive spot at these meetings in order not to be noticeable or influence the meeting in any way. In our large sample, there were only two or three meetings where the field investigators ended up influencing the proceedings. Our methodology worked well in capturing the discussions that took place in these meetings. The recordings were transcribed into the speakers' respective local language and then translated into English by the same field investigators. Each transcript was also accompanied by detailed corresponding information on attendance at the particular *gram sabha* – the numbers of men and women attending, a rough estimate of attendance by caste, the gender and caste identity of speakers, and their official designation or social position (e.g. school principal, self-help group leader or member, club leaders, villager, etc.). Similar information was also noted for speakers who represented the state, such as political leaders, *panchayat* functionaries, and government bureaucrats. We also collected data on how long the meetings went on, whether they were announced beforehand, and the physical conditions under which they were held.

Table 1.2 provides summary information from the transcript data. The average *gram sabha* lasted about 84 minutes and was convened about an hour after the scheduled time (which is not atypical for public functions in India). Each transcript is therefore several pages long. About 83 people attended on average, a tiny fraction of the village population, which ranges from 2,000 to 10,000 depending on the state. Besley, Pande, and Rao (2005) report results from a regression analysis of household survey data from the same sample and show that, after controlling for household characteristics and village fixed effects, illiterate individuals, dalits, the landless, and the less wealthy are more likely to attend the *gram sabha*, while women are less likely to attend them. This is primarily because of the *gram sabha's* role in selecting BPL beneficiaries, which is likely to include economically disadvantaged families. However, Besley, Pande, and Rao (2005) also show that this extreme form of selection is less acute in villages with higher

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Table 1.2: ***Summary Information from Transcript Data***

Gram Sabha Characteristics	Average	N
Duration (hours)	1.41	287
Delay (hours)	1.03	186
Attendance	83.28	288
Fraction women in attendance	0.33	287
Women talk indicator	0.68	288
Women talk intensity	0.09	288
Fraction Scheduled Caste/Tribe (SC/ST) in attendance	0.37	284
SC/ST talk indicator	0.60	184
SC/ST talk intensity	0.11	184

literacy levels, where *gram sabhas* have more representative participation.

Table 1.2 shows that a third of the attendees, on average, are women and 37 percent are dalits. Women and dalits do not speak much at the meeting. The "indicator" variable has a value of 1 when any person in a category speaks in a *gram sabha*, while the "intensity" variable is the time that any person in that category speaks as a proportion of the total length of the *gram sabha*.[8] With this metric we see that 68 percent of *gram sabhas* had at least one woman speak, but women spoke on average for 9 percent of the *gram sabha's* length. Sixty percent of *gram sabhas* had at least one dalit person speak, but they spoke, on average, for 11 percent of the time.[9]

The typical *gram sabha* meeting begins with a presentation by the president or the secretary of the *gram panchayat* (henceforth GP). This is followed by a public discussion open to all participants during which, typically, villagers mention their demands and grievances, and the secretary or a member of the GP responds to them. These discussions generally center on routine problems (insufficient water supply, lack of roads, nonfunctioning streetlights, and other important

[8] Strictly speaking, it is the proportion of the number of lines in the transcript spoken by the category divided by the total number of lines in the *gram sabha* transcript.

[9] The dalit data are imperfect because we were able to identify dalit speakers in only about a third of the sample of villages – which may result in some bias.

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Table 1.3

Topics	Proportion	N
Drinking Water		
Indicator	0.98	290
Intensity	0.28	290
Roads		
Indicator	0.93	290
Intensity	0.21	290
Education		
Indicator	0.81	290
Intensity	0.13	290
Electricity		
Indicator	0.68	290
Intensity	0.07	290
Housing		
Indicator	0.70	290
Intensity	0.08	290
Health		
Indicator	0.69	290
Intensity	0.09	290
Employment		
Indicator	0.18	290
Intensity	0.02	290
Agriculture		
Indicator	0.18	290
Intensity	0.01	290

infrastructure). Table 1.3 summarizes the topics discussed in the *gram sabha* using broad categories. We found that the discussions were dominated by issues related to drinking water and village roads, followed by education, electricity, housing, and health. Concerns about employment and agriculture featured less prominently. Discussions also addressed such complex problems as the legitimacy of having to pay taxes when obligated funds failed to arrive, and the fairness of caste-based affirmative action as a principle of resource allocation.

Analysis of Transcripts

After identifying topics discussed and the identity of speakers, we were in a position to pursue our main goal. This was to undertake a talk-

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centered analysis (Eliasoph 1996; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) to understand the nature and quality of deliberation within a comparative framework – between-state comparisons of bordering villages and within-state comparisons analyzed with attention to village literacy levels. We did this by using NVivo to categorize our transcripts by district and literacy levels. We started by using NVivo for coding things like public demands versus private demands and other inductive codes. These included the types of speeches used by citizens. We categorized these as complaint, accusation, negotiation, demand, request, and pleas.

Using NVivo became increasingly difficult and problematic as we got deeper into the analysis. This was because of the nature of the data. Unlike interview scenarios where interviewee responses to questions can be conveniently coded thematically or conceptually using software-based tools, it proved difficult to code large chunks of conversation that continued on for many pages. Discussion on any given topic could continue at great length with multiple people participating and with *panchayat* officials responsively intervening in-between. Software-based coding techniques could not effectively or efficiently capture the differentiated qualities and content of the discourse taking place in the *gram sabhas* that we wanted to study.

We therefore moved to an older analytic strategy. We painstakingly identified patterns through repeated readings of the transcripts and noted down our observations regarding the content, framing, and emotional character of speeches by citizens, political leaders, and bureaucrats. Our method allowed us to explore in a fuller and deeper way the crucial, even intimate, interplay between oral democracy coming to life through *gram sabhas* at the grassroots of rural life in India and the role of the state.

At the initial stages of the analysis, we had frequent conversations to share and discuss our independent readings of the transcripts and observations regarding emergent patterns. Through this deliberative process and using an inductive logic, we developed a list of master themes to guide the systematic comparisons that followed. These included identifying different forms of citizenship performances by focusing on what villagers said and how they said it, how they spoke to the agents of the state, and the depth to which particular issues were discussed. We were also able to classify different types of state enactments through focusing on different facilitation regimes enacted by

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panchayat leaders and bureaucrats and being attentive to emphases placed in the speeches by state officials.

Our comparative analysis of *gram sabha* deliberations was undertaken by identifying and categorizing our observations on emerging patterns and documenting them by copying the relevant sections of the transcripts that corroborated each pattern. Eventually we developed sets of extensive notes and primary data on our pair-wise comparisons by state and literacy. At the end of this analytical exercise we developed the conceptual labeling of different kinds of talk and citizen performances and state enactments that are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

For the comparison by literacy, we focused on the ways in which demands were articulated and the specificity and detail of information contained in the demands made by villagers and on their efforts to seek accountability from public officials and *panchayat* leaders. We paid particular attention to numerical information contained in speech concerning budgets, for instance. We also paid attention to whether or not villagers voiced critiques of the *panchayat* and state action. We carefully tracked the intensity and style of speech in which such criticism was expressed. This book, in other words, is a product of years of immersion in the data. Although software-based quick coding helped in the initial stages of the analysis, the bulk of the analysis presented in the book was generated by traditional comparative method.

Advantages and Limitations

Our method allowed a detailed examination of a large sample of transcripts that combined the interpretative advantages of qualitative textual analysis with causal analysis derived from large-N quantitative work. Nevertheless, there were certain disadvantages to the method that we want the reader to keep in mind throughout the reading of this book.

First, unlike an ethnography such as Mansbridge's (1980) classic study of deliberation in Vermont or Baiocchi's (2005) in-depth work on participatory budgeting in Porto Allegre, we were unable to make extended visits to each one of the 173 *gram panchayats*[10] in our sample. We were therefore not in a position to understand or comment upon

[10] One of us has visited about 30 of the *gram panchayats* in this sample spread across all the four states.

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the hyper-local context from which the *gram sabhas* we observed were produced. We did not have direct access, in other words, to the complex social and political dynamics underlying the discussions we recorded. Second, we do not know whether the promises made in the course of the discussions we heard were realized. We cannot say whether the promised road was constructed or whether citizens who were promised subsidized houses received them. Third, the data are, at the time of this writing, thirteen to fourteen years old and rural India has seen many changes during the intervening period.

There is related work that one of us has conducted in one of the states in our sample, Karnataka. That work reports on changes in how citizens engaged in village government over the period 2007–2011 (Rao et al. 2017). Similarly, there is work in Andhra Pradesh by Veeraraghavan (2017) that describes the nature of village government systems using more recent data. There is also recent work on *gram sabhas* that one of us has been involved with in Tamil Nadu that uses data from 2015 (Parthasarathy, Rao, and Palaniswamy 2017; Palaniswamy, Parthasarathy, and Rao 2017). In the concluding chapter we place our findings based on our older transcripts within the context of this work to offer our thoughts about how much has changed and not changed since the time our data was collected. We believe that despite the changes that have taken place over the last fourteen years, most of our analysis remains relevant.

Our analysis was conducted in English. All the transcripts were translated from their respective languages – Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam – into English. The translations were not of uniform quality in the accuracy of their English. This is evident in some of the passages from the transcripts that we include in the text. We decided early on not to edit the English given to us by the translators except to correct obvious grammatical and spelling mistakes. We wished to preserve as much as possible the flavor of the original discussions.

Despite these limitations, our data has one key advantage. It allows us to make significant contributions to the literature on deliberation and civic life in non-Western contexts, particularly in settings marked by extreme poverty and disadvantage. Our data reflects the very large number of people living below $1 a day and who actively participate in democratic discourse despite high levels of illiteracy. The large number of sampled *gram sabhas* in diverse settings allows us to conduct a comparative analysis of discourse across multiple political and social

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contexts and levels of literacy. The density of our data is enough to study the variations between *gram sabhas* and the associated effects. This allows us to inductively tease out commonalities and differences in the discourse within *gram sabhas* as they vary across contexts.

In analyzing the data in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, we are guided by Mansbridge's "minimalist" definition of deliberation (adapted from Dryzek 2000), and we critically revisit its relevance for our data in the concluding chapter. Mansbridge defines deliberation as "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Mansbridge 2015, p. 27). Of the wide variations in discursive styles that we observe, more fall into this frame than any other definition of deliberation that we are aware of. They range from chaotic and disruptive forms of communication in northern Karnataka to extremely practical discussions on budgets and resource allocation in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. We argue, orally "weighing" in public such concrete things as money and construction projects works toward equalizing voice and agency. So too does orally performing the subtler attributes and aspects of democratic citizenship through the embodied assertion of dignity and the capacity and right to speak and be heard. Taking into account the acute epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007) that prevail in India's rural societies, discourse within the *gram sabha* that creates democratic voice is as important as its effect on development outcomes. The change in direct deliberative voice in village assemblies ought to be seen as part of a process of creating a civic space where citizens can engage with elites, and with the government, in a manner that helps develop a more equal public sphere.

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2 *Discursive Political Culture*

In rural India, the *gram sabha* is the main forum in which citizens and the state directly engage with each other through the medium of talk. There are other sites where the state bureaucracy and citizens have intense encounters. These include the various village and district-level government offices where requests and complaints regarding public services are made and where bribes are negotiated.

But there are crucial differences that distinguish these bureaucratic sites of encounter from the *gram sabha*. First, the latter is meant to be a site for communicative engagement. In the *gram sabha*, the state reaches out and physically solicits citizens' participation where they live, organizing the forum in a village under the jurisdiction of the *gram panchayat* (GP). This is different from citizens being obliged to travel to government offices to get their bureaucratic needs met. In contrast to the *distant state* that is physically and symbolically removed from the villagers' settings, the *gram sabha* constitutes a public arena to which the *proximate state* has traveled to engage villagers on their own ground.

Second, the *gram sabha* is conceived as a participatory institution aimed at facilitating public dialogue in governance and development planning. Citizens and state agents meet there in a *conversational mode*. This is vastly different from other sites where state agents and citizens encounter each other in a *noncommunicative bureaucratic mode* aimed at accomplishing specific administrative tasks.

Third, the *gram sabha*, though it seeks mass participation, creates space for *deliberation*, both among citizens and between citizens and the state. Other political events such as elections and state-sponsored events of mass participation (health camps, for example) exclusively seek *nondeliberative* participation. By contrast, in the *gram sabha* citizens engage discursively with the proximate state with substantial resources to distribute. Through participation citizens have a significant say in redistributive decisions.

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Fourth, the discursive space of the *gram sabha* helps to create relative communicative equality among objectively and symbolically unequal groups. This is a marked difference compared to other spaces in rural societies in India. Two factors that interact to contribute to this are the embeddedness of the *gram sabha* within the electoral system and the predominance of vote-bank politics in India. Class- and caste-based groups morph into clientelist groups that have electoral power over political parties and therefore over the state. How citizens get treated in the *gram sabha* can have electoral consequences. It can influence individual villagers' voting behavior and electoral choices when they cast a vote in *panchayat* elections through which local government members are elected. Therefore, disadvantaged groups are likely to be treated more equally in *gram sabhas*. The *gram sabha* then is a momentarily egalitarian discursive space where all citizens are nominally equal in the eyes of the state. These four features of the *gram sabha* create the structural foundation for the discursive political culture arising from its presence in the lives of villagers.

The Politics of Redistribution

The nominally equal discursive space of the *gram sabha* overlays a harsh terrain of intense economic and social inequality. Caste-based inequality has deep historic and cultural roots and forms the basis for identity politics. Economic inequality and poverty have been persistent even in the face of dynamic growth and development. In rural India, economic and caste-based inequalities are interlinked. Caste identity has been the moving force behind collective action, public mobilization, and group-based competition. The federal government's caste-based affirmative action policy for the distribution of public resources and reservation of seats in local governments has invigorated caste competition. In the *gram sabha*, the core political task of redistributing public monies to social welfare needs of disadvantaged groups has opened up the discursive space to vigorous competition between castes.

Using caste as an identifying marker of the poor can be imperfect. To amend this, India's central government has adopted a quantifiable, poverty-based measure to achieve distributive equality. Rules of commensuration laid down by the government are used to convert selected criteria of household disadvantage and destitution (these

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include possessions and type of housing) into designations of "above poverty line" (APL) and "below poverty line" (BPL). These rules have added a new definitional dimension to the struggle for government benefits. In the *gram sabha*, elected *gram panchayat* representatives and the public make a joint effort to understand the definition of poverty and the state-constructed category of the "BPL beneficiary." State agents and bureaucrats use the *gram sabha* to keep the public abreast of the state's efforts to fix poverty by pegging it to certain objective criteria. They use the *gram sabha* to explain their translation of poverty into a common metric of numerical scores through human and mechanized technologies such as population surveys, computerized data, and color-coded cards. This complicated process of commensuration determines who gets counted as poor, how different degrees of deprivation are ranked, and who gets excluded from receiving government benefits. Public responses range from contesting the selection of particular beneficiaries to critiquing the calibration of the official poverty line.

A large part of the discursive exchanges in the *gram sabha* concerns the politics of redistribution of public and personal goods. Villagers engage in two fundamental types of talk – *agonistic talk* and *personal talk*. Agonistic talk is infused with spirited competitiveness over public goods for the neighborhood and village and personal goods for the family. Personal talk is focused on portraying domestic deprivations and seeking benefits for one's household. The competition for public goods and personal benefits in the arena of the *gram sabha* should be seen as part of the political fight for dignified living for a rural population that continues to struggle to gain and maintain reliable access to many basic amenities of life. This is constitutive of the politics of recognition – the performance of defining and identifying oneself as a deserving citizen and having dignity. These are crucial dimensions of democratic participation given the context of caste discrimination and marginalization stemming from the intersectionality of caste and poverty.

Competition over Public Goods

Competition for public goods is a continuous, predictable occurrence in all *gram sabhas*. Sometimes that competition is pervaded by caste. In rural societies, neighborhoods are marked by residential concentration and segregation by caste. Public goods allocated for one

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neighborhood therefore may be benefiting one caste group but not others. This can generate competing demands for public goods among villagers living in neighborhoods inhabited by other caste groups. An example of explicit competition is the following excerpt from a *gram sabha* in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. Here a general caste (GC) person[1] assertively vocalizes his demand for a cemented road and aggressively talks back to the state agent when his demand is denied. His demand is promptly followed by a competing demand from a scheduled caste (SC) villager.

Villager [male, GC]: We need C.C. [concrete] roads in Brahmana Veedhi [upper-caste neighborhood]. We don't care about the expenses incurred by the *panchayat*. Our problem must be addressed.

GP Secretary: There is no money with the *panchayat*. The cost of constructing our *panchayat* building was nearly Rs. 3 lakhs. So, for this, you have to come forward with your voluntary contributions. If the villagers give half the money, the government will provide the rest.

. . .

Villager [male, GC]: We need C.C. roads in our village. We're least bothered about other development activities. First of all, we need C.C. roads. That's it!

GP Secretary: We have that in view, and we're planning to lay roads one after another slowly.

Villager [male, GC]: You have to lay C.C. roads in Brahmana Veedhi.

Villager [male, SC]: We need a C.C. road to Dalithawada Colony [lower-caste neighborhood].

GP Secretary: If villagers contribute Rs. 40,000, then the government spends Rs. 60, 000. This is how C.C. roads can be laid.

(Mudipalli, Nagari, Chittoor, AP)

Another instance of intense competition bubbles to the surface when a ward member in Tamil Nadu asks for an electricity line for his tribal community that lives on a forested hilly tract. He complains about government inaction and discrimination, stating that other communities have been provided with electricity lines and water supply while his tribal community has been neglected. In his emotionally charged complaint, he makes a reference to Veerappan, an infamous fugitive bandit, who symbolizes the disaffection tribal and poor rural people feel for the government. By making this reference he

[1] That is not from an identified lower-caste group like scheduled caste.

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reminds the local government leaders of the potentially deadly consequences of pent-up feelings of collective frustration and anger over state negligence. At the climax of his passionate remonstrance, he compares the force of the tribal community's outrage with the ravaging force of a tsunami:

Mr. Ranga Sami [Ward member, Scheduled Tribe (ST)]: You are saying solar, solar and putting solar lights for streets and houses. Keep one EB [Electricity Board] line exclusively for us [tribal families living in hilly forest tract]. You are saying only solar light. For us, we also want current bulbs. "EB line cannot be put in upper area like hills"? [Speaks in anger] How can you say that?! You installed electricity line for Karamadai to Badrakaliamman temple and beyond Bavani River. So why not in our area? If you make an effort, you can do it. The law is the same for all! How can you say it is not possible?!

President: After the EB people visit and make a survey of your area, they will decide. It is possible only after taking license from the forest officials. There's a lot to clarify.

Mr. Ranga Sami: You always talk about solar, but when will we get an electricity line? What help do you want from the public? You tell me. Only if we try it is possible, boss. [Emotionally charged]

President: You take a step towards MLA [Member of Legislative Assembly], MP [Member of Parliament], and EB officials by yourself. Tell them that you want household EB line. Also ask them about housing to be constructed and what can be done. If you come out of the forest areas, the forest will dry up. You are the ones protecting the forest, the tribals. Even though the officials are there, they reside for a while and then get transferred. You are the only ones permanently residing there and protecting the forest, and so you have the right to ask for your needs.

Mr. Ranga Sami: [Otherwise] like how things happened with Veerappan, it will happen. Law is the same for all. When one village is getting EB line in the upper area, why not our village? Our children should get that facility. We are not educated, but for our children to be educated they need electricity light. We are able to give them education only up to the tenth standard, so surely we need electricity line for us.

President: If this becomes a court issue, only then I can do something. Until then I cannot interfere in this matter. For Mannar area, there was solution from the court and, even then, no water is coming there.

Mr. Ranga Sami: For Mannar area alone there is water supply from the national Rajiv Gandhi drinking water scheme. But for Koraipathi area there is no water supply! Where is the justice? Like that, don't repeat the same thing with the solar light scheme and keep us in the dark. . . . If you want

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bribe, then also it will be given. Don't think we are naive. The speed in us is like the tsunami. . . . If our anger surges like the tsunami, that won't be tolerable.

President: Everything is happening according to the rules and law only. Just a while ago, a sand-loaded lorry was caught by the forest ranger (as a deflection mechanism referring to illegal sand mining and insinuating that the tribal community might have a hand in it).

Mr. Ranga Sami: They [forest rangers] are the ones who collect money from them [sand miners] and let them go. This is not quarrel leader. But we need electricity line for us. That will do.

President: Pillur Tam is one kilometer inside (the forest), so I cannot bring electricity connection till there. All of you join together and give a letter, then we will meet the collector. Even before, only after seeing the tribal people they gave solar lines.

Mr. Ranga Sami: For Koraipathi, SI forest, Veerakal and all you have put, isn't it?

President: In SC area I went and inspected directly. They said there is no EB connection. They don't even know that they have nearby EB line. So I have identified that and after spending Rs. 25 lakhs, I brought lights for them. In Mannar area, all the places are good and correct with no need of cutting trees. So I tried to bring the EB line. I will go and see the EB officers.

Mr. Ranga Sami: If you take action and go and see the EB official that will do leader.

(Nellithurai, Karamadai, Coimbatore, TN)

This competition over public goods captures the agonistics between adversaries defined as legitimate enemies sharing adherence to the principles of democracy but disagreeing over its meaning and implementation (Mouffe 1999). We call this type of talk *agonistic talk*. According to some scholars, "far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is, in fact, its very condition of existence" (Mouffe 1999, 755–756). The aim of democratic politics is "domesticating hostility," thereby transforming antagonism (enmity) into agonism. Using this framework to understand agonistic talk among citizens and between citizens and representatives of the state helps explain the potentially positive aspects of discursive conflict initiated by the competition over public goods.

These competitions can have heightened significance when they reflect broader conflicts over discriminatory treatment in village life or the reduction of traditional privileges of certain groups because of new principles of distribution of public goods. The *gram sabha* now

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creates space for objective inequalities in the distribution of public goods to come out and for the attendant strong feelings to be expressed publicly. This is a significant social and political change. Even if a positive resolution is not immediately forthcoming, *voice* to a large extent has been equalized. Upper caste, scheduled caste, and tribal groups all have to demand and publicly argue the merits of their need for neighborhood-level public goods within the same forum.

Competition over Personal Goods

The government gives a host of subsidies meant to benefit individual households. We call these personal goods since their use and benefits are specifically assigned to persons living within a household unit. The allocation of these personal goods is determined by governmental rules of commensuration and redistribution. These rules give priority to SC[2] groups and households designated as BPL for receiving certain household benefits. Subsidies for constructing houses and toilets and small plots of land from common property resources, for example, are often exclusively reserved for SCs. Several other benefits, including subsidized food and fuel, jobs, cheap credit, and scholarships, are allocated to people falling into the BPL category.[3] Allocations are made according to a technocratic process using village survey–based lists of SC and BPL families.

BPL lists represent the government's attempt to establish a process of commensuration by which different qualities (such as landlessness, unemployment, and quality of housing for instance)[4] are made

[2] State governments, at their discretion, also allocate some benefits to other groups defined as "Most Backward Caste" (MBC), "Extremely Backward Caste" (EBC), and "Other Backward Caste" (OBC).

[3] A few examples: women over 18 years of age in BPL households are given Rs. 500 to cover the delivery costs of up to two childbirths; 450 grams of food are given to each house having a child under 1-to-3 years of age; subsidized housing; subsidized electricity hook-up.

[4] There are several criteria specified and used by the government to identify households falling below the poverty line. Some of these criteria, like annual household income below Rs. 11,500, are applicable nationwide, while others are state-specific. For example, in Kerala the criteria are as follows: (i) families that do not have shelter and have less than ten cents of land, (ii) those who do not have houses, (iii) income below Rs. 300, (iv) those without access to sanitation facilities, (v) the unemployed and those having jobs for less than ten months in a year, (vi) female-headed household, (vii) households with mentally or

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mutually convertible according to a standard metric of poverty and assigned values (Espeland and Stevens 1998). This policy response to the complex task of measuring deprivation is designed to redistribute resources according to economic criteria rather than caste identity. This technocratic process has decisive influence on inclusion and exclusion from the government beneficiary list. In order to check and counterbalance the *gram panchayat*'s power over this process, most states require the BPL lists to be ratified publicly in the *gram sabha*. Competition for personal goods in the *gram sabha* thereby often gets expressed as caste rivalry or as dissatisfaction with officially decided BPL criteria.

Villagers see the *gram sabha* as more than a space for weighing solutions to public problems and rethinking their preferences (Mansbridge 2015). They regard it as a space where they can also beseech the state for household benefits, demand what they view as their entitlements, and stake their personal claims to government resources. Through the *gram sabha* the competition for personal goods can be explicitly expressed in adversarial language or cloaked in complaint-like language.

The following excerpt from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, records a general caste man expressing his dissatisfaction at being left behind by existing redistributive policies, which he sees as unfairly favoring other castes in allocating housing subsidies:

> *Villager [male, GC]:* There are *harijan* people [SCs, or *dalits*] here who don't have homes. They work as coolies [daily wage laborers] along with other people (of other castes) who also have no other option than to work as coolies. However, whereas all the *harijans* get their dues and facilities, the others who do the same job do not get the same reward as his fellow worker. The government does not give any sort of concessions to these poor coolies, whereas the *harijans* get all sorts of concessions from the government.
>
> (Jellopanayakanpalayam, Udumalaipettai, Coimbatore, TN)

The same complaint surfaced after two years in the *gram sabha* in the same village. This time the complaint was vocalized by an OBC man. This indignant villager aired his frustration over the perceived preferential treatment of SCs in housing subsidies:

> physically handicapped members, (viii) SC and ST households, and (ix) illiterate. Families having any two characteristics from vi, vii, and viii qualify as BPL.

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Velusamy Nayakkar [male, OBC]: I have been residing in Jellopanayakanpalayam for several generations, and I've been asking for a house to live in. They say, "today, tomorrow," but so far nothing has been done. They have built for all the others. They have built for those in Balapuram, but didn't yet build for me residing in Jellopanayakanpalayam. Everybody knows that. No one thinks about it. I am sitting here at the mercy of my fate. President says it will be done anytime soon. But it has been a long period. I am living in a hut. I request the president to remove that hut and to build me a garden-house [cottage].

. . .

Clerk: Houses have been allotted only for SCs till now. That's why only they have built houses in the Balapuram area. It hasn't come for OBCs. We will give if it comes for OBCs this year.

Velusamy Nayakkar: They say that it has come only for the SCs, only for them! Is it that only they are humans? Are we people not human beings? How can you say such a thing! What kind of a *panchayat* is this!

(Jellopanayakanpalayam, Udumalaipettai, Coimbatore, TN)

In another *gram sabha*, we see implicit competition over the same issue, where adversarial language is replaced by pleading. In the following excerpt, a group of OBC villagers plead with the president, a fellow OBC, to address their housing needs, arguing that their situation has fallen behind that of SCs and STs, who have been prioritized in the government's housing subsidy schemes:

Mr. Kumaravel [Ward member]: The government is giving all facilities to SC/ST, including houses etc. But they are not giving anything to us Vanniars [OBCs]. If we discuss about this in the village *panchayat* meeting and give a petition to the government, will they do something?

President: They are building more "kaccha" ["raw," i.e. not made of brick or concrete] houses for SC/ST and only one for us. If they bring about a plan for this in the government, we can do something. We can even talk to the minister about this . . .

Villager [OBC]: Even the most backward people have converted their huts into tiled houses. But we Vanniars are still in the most backward position. So I request you to kindly take some action and do the needful for us.

President: As I told you earlier, they are giving "kaccha" houses only to the most backward people and not for us. Maybe if we give an application

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through the collector to the minister, the government may do something. We can try to do something regarding this in future.

Villager: Lots of funds are being given to only SC and ST. But we Vanniars are living in huts, and many do not have a house at all and sleep on the roads, and many meet with accidents and get hit by vehicles. If you can do something to get funds for Vanniars, all of us will benefit greatly.

(Adilam, Karimangalam, Dharmapuri, TN)

Personal Claims Made by BPL/APL Status

A substantial number of personal goods are allocated for alleviating the domestic hardships and destitution of families falling below the poverty line. A more limited subset of benefits is also given to APL families. The *gram sabha* therefore becomes a site where individuals engage in *personal talk*. That is, it becomes a forum in which villagers make public portrayals of their private troubles as a way of seeking benefits from the state. In the following excerpt, villagers talk about their personal hardships, asking for ration cards, land, and housing:

Ms. Nagamma [female]: My name is Nagamma. We don't have ration cards. We don't have lands. We have to work as laborers. My husband has passed away. I have two children. I have built my house on my own. I need ration card.

. . .

Ms. Meena [female]: We are from Bathra Alli village. We need *patta* [land with ownership document]. I have four children. There is no house for them to study in. We need *patta*, house, and other things. Need house and roads.

. . .

Ms. Chitra [female]: I am from Bathra Alli. We are living in my mother's house for several years. We don't have a house. It would be good if you do something for us.

(Bathra Alli, Pennagaram, Dharmapuri, TN)

Since the BPL list determines inclusion or exclusion and is hardly error free, public challenges to the list are common in the *gram sabha*. *Gram sabhas* can sometimes be characterized by villagers fighting over who is wrongfully on the list and who rightfully should be added to it. The next excerpt records villagers challenging the BPL list produced by official government survey:

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Clerk: Subject 17: We have to get approval for the list of families living below the poverty line according to the census taken in the year 2002.

Villager ["Backward" Caste (BC)]: Our calculation is correct. The village people took that [census]. But the census taken by the government is not proper. It differs. So the ward members should look into it and add the beneficiaries.

. . .

Clerk: Subject 19: We have to select the list of beneficiaries who would get 35 kgs of rice under the Annaiar dhinam scheme and to submit that list in the *gram sabha* meeting. Already they are giving 20 kgs of rice. Now they are giving an extra 15 kgs of rice.

Villager: Is it at the rate of Rs. 3?

Clerk: Yes, at Rs. 3. Now we are going to discuss about it. The subsidized rice would be given to those above sixty years of age, poor people, handicapped people, old age people, those who don't have permanent jobs, to families which are led by widows, families affected by illness, and families living under the poverty line.

. . .

Villager [SC]: This Palani [name of a villager] is rich. But he has been added in the BPL list. How is this possible? This BPL list is wrong!

(Kalappampadi, Pennagaram, Dharmapuri, TN)

In politically mature contexts, state agents often explain the rationale behind the construction of the BPL list and justify its superiority to reliance on "local knowledge." In the following excerpt from Palakkad, Kerala, the chairman explains the shift from determination of beneficiaries by local knowledge and personal preferences of leaders to impersonal, objective criteria quantitatively expressed. These exchanges show the *gram sabha* has become a site for creating a shared understanding of what it takes to be officially classified as "poor":

Standing Committee Chairman: Now, marks are allotted to each applicant. Previously, when Vasu and Chaclo Chetan were presidents, we used to give benefits according to our wish. We knew who the poor people were, and we used to give them the benefits. But now the government has made some rules and regulations based on which marks are allotted to applicants. It is not like [school] teachers giving extra marks to children they like. Here there are rules, and only based on that marks are allotted for each benefit. We will read (aloud) the marks allotted. If you have any doubts with the marks allotted to you and others, then we can certainly check it out. If you have made any mistakes in filling the form when you submitted it, you can correct it now. If you haven't submitted any certificate

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that you have now, then you can submit it today. I request you to co-operate in making this gram sabha a success. I now invite our VEO who happens to be the implementing officer of these schemes to read the list of applicants and the marks obtained by them.

(Muthalamada, Kollengode, Palakkad, KL)

In Dakshin Kannada, Karnataka, a food inspector launched into a lengthy speech explaining and justifying the rationale behind the government's rules of commensuration. He explained how the metrics were meticulously designed to identify different levels of deprivation so that households with differing economic means could be benefited appropriately. Here are his words:

Government Food Inspector: As you know, from 1975 we are giving green cards to BPL. In 1997–98, from rural development department, we prepared a list of households that were BPL. A survey was introduced for the first time. Before that we had two types of card, one green and the other yellow. One who has Rs. 6500 per month gets green card. This was the system. That we recognized as BPL. When Panchayati Raj was introduced in 1997–98, this list was prepared. On the basis of that list, we issued BPL ration card in 2001–02. In that list, in your village, there are about fifty people.

But the list was not correct and there were so many noneligible names and missing eligible families. Problem started there. To take stock of the situation, in 2001–02, all officials joined and did a house-by-house survey as mandated by a new government order. The ration cards and the BPL cards were issued through that process. Now we have computerized everything. You know about it well, we have computerized card. Even then the survey is not satisfactory. So many houses have been left out. So many BPL families were not included in that list. There are noneligible people in that list. We received so many complaints. Then the revenue officer issued an order to give temporary ration cards.

The government has laid out guidelines on the scale to be used for identifying BPL families. Generally, at the village level, the family income from all sources should be Rs. 12,000. These families can be declared as BPL. How to check their financial status? We cannot check this as accurately as doing a mathematics sum. Now, what is the definition of a family? Generally, it includes a husband, wife, and two children. If the family does not eat posh food everyday, but has "ganji" [rice gruel] for breakfast, then they have to spend Rs. 25–30. Some people have unnecessary habits, like drinking tea. Taking all of this together, a family of four needs at least Rs. 60–70 [per day]. If they spend only Rs. 50 per day, even then it comes to more than Rs. 12,000. You can find only about

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thirty-five to forty such families in our village who don't even have Rs. 12,000 in family income. This is the guideline that we've been given. We also have the details of households having telephone connections or mobile phones and cell phone cards. Those who have these cannot be considered as BPL. It might be that a government department could have gifted a phone to an aged man, so, looking at this phone you cannot declare that he is well to do.

Well to do are getting rich, getting more benefits. So the government has introduced the mixed village distribution plan. They have issued a circular regarding this. They call it Total Village distribution project. In Kadirudevara village there are about five hundred families that require some card going by their household condition … But poor people also have phone connections. For such families the government is bringing another project. As of now, we are giving 20 kgs rice for one month for Rs. 60 only. That means Rs. 800 per year. If you are financially poor but you pay Rs. 700–800 for phone bill, then with one of your phone bills you can pay for one year's worth of food expenditure. So those who have phone connection are not eligible for this scheme. Secondly, there are those who have vehicles. But beneficiaries should not have any type of vehicle that runs on diesel or petrol. Let us say I have one M-80 [motorcycle]. One who has an M-80 is a rich fellow. To go in M-80 I have to spend Rs. 50–60 minimum for two days. So, the government says you can live for two years with petrol money. Even a government servant who gets Rs. 1000 per month is not eligible for this scheme. This is the guideline the government has given. Workers in PWD or KEB cannot be considered. According to government guidelines, we should not have phone, vehicle, and no monthly salary. Regarding land, you can have five acres of land. But here nobody has five acres of land. But they have not said five acres of agricultural lands. Land act says 1.3 acres of irrigated land is equal to 5 acres of dry land.

(Mittabagilu, Beltangadi, Dakshin Kannada, KA)

The *gram sabha* is a discursive space of particular attraction for villagers who are poor and suffer material deprivations because it permits and encourages claims and competition for personal material benefits. Previous research analyzing *gram sabha* participation patterns has found that, above a certain village-level literacy threshold, SC/ST and landless households are more likely than others to attend *gram sabha* meetings. This suggests that *gram sabhas* are attended and used by some of the most disadvantaged rural groups in South Indian states (Besley et al. 2005, 2007). Villagers arrive with preformed household-

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based material interests that are not amenable to reflective consideration or preference-altering changes. There are very few reflective moments in which the government's rules of commensuration and redistribution that determine the boundaries of the competition are discussed.

In reality, *panchayat* leaders have no power to influence federal rules of redistribution. Typically they respond by pacifying and promising future action. Nonetheless villagers now have the capacity to expose flaws in these all-important lists and to publicly challenge nepotism and errors in the selection of beneficiaries. Persistent protests and loud opposition can over time lead to reexamination of these lists. These can result in corrective measures such as the inclusion of villagers deemed deserving by governmental criteria. More importantly, perhaps, the exercise of debating definitions with state agents and vocalizing flaws in government policy can provide civic training for villagers. Such discursive participation is a crucial initial step in mastering the art of rational and critical argumentation essential for democratic political deliberation.

The Politics of Recognition: Dignity Through Discourse

Caste competition in India has both material and nonmaterial dimensions. Struggles for material equity and dignity have repercussions and resonances in nonmaterial spheres. The *gram sabha* is a space where the multiple dimensions of competition among caste groups surface. SC groups complain of discriminatory treatment in the allocation of resources while dominant caste individuals complain of being ignored in favor of lower caste groups. The task of transforming individuals with private interests into citizens with public interests articulated in the sphere of local governance is carried out by the state on the terrain of caste-based concessions and contestations. It is important to recognize that the *gram sabha* represents an important arena in which the struggle for dignity as well as material benefits is played out. Following is a suggestive example of this that comes from a *gram sabha* in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu. In this excerpt SC community leaders vigorously allege caste-based discrimination in water allocation. The allegation provides a window into deeper caste rivalries in the village and reveals informal practices of social exclusion. Cloaked

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within the demand for material equity there is a broader quest for dignity – for being treated with the social respect due to equals:

Muniraj [male, SC]: In my place there are a lot of physically handicapped people. To help them out I've requested the Collector to give them some assistance. To this day nothing has been done. In order to solve the water problem, I've applied for a loan. To this day it has not been sanctioned. We have requested the government to build a road to our place since we have to go through the graveyard.

. . .

President husband[5] *[MBC]:* If there are 20–25 houses [in an area], a ward member should be appointed [to represent the area]. That ward member should listen to our problems and must do something to help us. If he is not willing, we can't do anything.

Muniraj: That way [if they have a ward member] we will have the guts to enter this room [where the meeting is taking place]. If the required ward members are not with us, to whom can we voice our woes? Who will represent us? This *panchayat* should do something about this. You are not doing anything and even the government is not willing to help us. They go by community basis. If the ward member belongs to another community, he won't even listen to our problems. Earlier there was a time when a backward caste person was not even allowed to sit in the same area with others!

The officers and leaders who come here [to the *gram sabha*] already have a preset plan about what to do and say. You come, sit on the chair, say something, decide among yourselves, and go away. What's there for us to do?! You've enjoyed power for all these years. Why don't you let us have a turn? . . . We don't want any problem at the communal level. For us, whether Subban comes or Kuppan comes [common names], it's the same. We vote, but what happens later? Whereas other people get water even before they ask for it, we have to ask endlessly, and even so, our demand is not fulfilled . . . We don't want to fight with anyone. But at least there should be someone to listen to our problems. We've been without water supply for the past one month. Even the president knows it. He has promised to send

[5] Sometimes, in village *panchayats* where the president's seat is reserved for female candidates, the president's husband (as in this case) officiates the *gram sabha* meeting and conducts the affairs of the *panchayat* in place of the nonactive female president. In some cases, these husbands may have been the elected leaders before the seat became reserved for women. The reservation of *panchayat* seats for women is part of gender-based affirmative action in politics in India, which was introduced in an effort to make politics and local governance more inclusive of women.

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water. But the ward member is not allowing us to take water. The water is sent to all his relatives. We cannot do anything to stop it . . .

President husband: You mean to say you still don't get water?

Muniraj: At present we get water supply, but the water is muddy.

President husband: That is because it is a new bore pump. For forty families five pumps in public places should suffice. But you dig pits and mud gets mixed with water supply. So, in order to help you, a pump shall be installed at the center at the cost of Rs. 10,000. It will solve your present water problem. You talk a lot about community problems and misunderstandings. But water is a common problem for one and all. Just take care of the pipe when not in use.

Muniraj: How do you know that we don't do it? If you come and see and find that we are neglecting it then you can say.

President husband: In any competition it's a rule that one should win and the other should lose. There's no community-based discrimination or problem. If all of you in booth no. 1 join and vote for me, I become the president. On the other hand, if everyone in the other booths votes for another person, then he'll become the president. And then what'll matter is what he can do for those booths that voted for him. Today, among youngsters, the level of public awareness is very high. Anyone can become a leader.

Muniraj: We are not even allowed to stand for ward member elections. Where to go for *panchayat* leader!

President husband: It depends on how you approach people. If you become a ward member depending on those forty-five (SC) families alone, find out why others are not voting for you. Change your approach. Why do they threaten you? Because you give in and you allow them to do it.

Muniraj: When we are not even allowed to open our mouths, what can we do?

President husband: You are afraid. You are scared to open up with them. I am asking you to be patient and not to increase the problem. You have told me what you want, and I will do it in the proper way.

Muniraj: OK. There should not be any caste discrimination. That is our request.

President husband: In most of the cases I cannot take decisions on my own. The Thasildar has to approve it. If he signs it, I can do it. What can I do on my own for water problem and things like that! . . . As a leader I know I have to meet people everyday. Even though there is problem between you two groups, I try to mediate. I don't encourage communal riots . . .

. . .

Muniraj: Everyone should be treated equally. No one should be treated as inferior to others. We too should be given a chance to sit on the dais. Why

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should we be denied that right? Just because I talk like this, it doesn't mean that I fight with you or disrespect it. I am simply voicing my feeling.

(Elumicha Alli, Karimangalam, Dharmapuri, TN)

Gram sabhas in India function as Durkheimian "sacred spheres" marking the conjunction of civil society and the state. The ritualized interactions between citizens and the state in this sphere give rise to a community of citizens and a brief moment of "collective effervescence" when individuals momentarily embody their identity as citizens, equal in the eyes of the seeing and listening state. Because of this, exchanges in the *gram sabha* have the potential of challenging entrenched social relations. The preceding examples show how the "weapons of the weak" are no longer confined to covert action but find expression in overt challenges that expose "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990), such as the physical segregation of lower castes and systemic discriminations in village life and politics.

Making claims and complaints in the *gram sabha* may seem ordinary and mundane on the surface. But they acquire deeper significance when understood as vehicles through which marginalized individuals internalize a sense of citizenship and exercise their entitlements as citizens. Making claims and vocalizing challenges to hierarchical social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Fournier 1992) in the *gram sabha* can be understood as practicing the "politics of dignity" (Varshney 2000), which characterizes so much of Indian political life.

Poverty – suffused with material and symbolic inequality – undermines the idealized neutrality and public-mindedness of discussions at the *gram sabha* and profoundly shapes the culture of deliberation. A large part of what villagers talk about in the *gram sabha* concerns the politics of redistribution and recognition. Vernacular styles of verbal negotiation have emerged as citizens compete for resources, challenge social boundaries, and critique principles of affirmative action and distributional equity. Even though the *agonistic talk* and *personal talk* presented previously depart greatly from standard idealized notions of deliberative democracy, it is crucial to recognize that the discursive engagement in the redistributive mechanism now implanted in village governance is immensely valuable. Both kinds of talk are a way of cultivating a capacity for civic and political engagement and voice. They are discursive forms villagers use to perform their citizenship and to enliven democracy.

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The Demand for Governance

Villagers attend the *gram sabha* hoping they will talk to the state and be heard. They come to petition the government and voice their grievances. *Panchayat* systems vary in the intensity with which villagers engage with elected local government leaders and bureaucrats. We will illustrate here some aspects of how mature and immature *panchayat* systems work, but leave the detailed analysis to later chapters. In mature p*anchayat* systems where villagers have a long record of attending these meetings, they also come with the sense that they have a role in village governance. Villagers are keen to learn about public works projects, allocation of government funds, and the *panchayat*'s income and expenditures. In these settings, villagers actively demand accountability for the actions of the *panchayat*. They also instruct state agents on what actions should be taken on specific issues and problems. The following excerpts that we present record villagers taking part in village governance through engaging in *public-spirited talk*.

Holding the State Accountable

In a two-hour-long *gram sabha* meeting in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, villagers vigorously challenged the stand-in president [the female president's husband], calling him out on a common malpractice of showing existing public works as new works and siphoning off money. They also held him accountable for nonworking public facilities:

Villager [male, speaker 7]: You show about three lakh as electric streetlights executed, whereas there are no streetlights in most of the places, and where there are posts the lights are not working.

President [husband of female president]: Each bulb costs about ten rupees. If we have to erect a new lamppost, each will come to five thousand rupees.

Villager: You show three lakh expenses. How many new posts have you installed?

Villager [male, speaker 8]: In the north side of the village, there are no streetlights. And the tube lights are not working at all for the past six months. You show this much expense for nonworking lights!

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Villager [male, speaker 7]: You are showing so much pipeline expenditure and overhead tank maintenance of Rs. 22,000, whereas there is no water coming in the pipeline for the past six months.

President: We have earmarked Rs. 50,000 for the provision of lights to the north area. If you want other details you can come over to the *panchayat* office and it will be given to you.

Villager [male, speaker 8]: We will not come to the office. We are assembled here to know and hear about the happening of *panchayat* in this *gram sabha* meeting.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 8]: Our *panchayat* leader here has the responsibility to explain now, otherwise, we will not let this go. You say that you have done this and that work, whereas the same work has already been done in the past. And we will not accept showing the same work against new projects.

Ward member [female]: You have collected money for the old projects and now you say you have done the project. We want the "Head" here to reply to our queries. We don't want to hear from you [to the clerk]. We want to know how far he knows what is happening.

Villager [male, speaker 8]: Now, you can come along with me, I will show you the tank water. They do not even come to our area, then how can you expect us to give us our complaint on anything! We have to go to each house where river water comes through their pipes and practically have to beg for a pot of water. There are general taps where there is not a drop of water, whereas those who have household pipes are getting water. How? There is overhead tank in the 6th ward, but there is no water. When we ask them, they say they are not connected? If we ask them, they say to ask somebody else. Nobody takes responsibility. Why should we choose a leader at all? Why should we pay Rs. 6000 each? With that money, we can have our own private pipeline. *Panchayat* members and officials should visit all the places under their control so as to know what is happening instead of just sitting here. You only say that you have done all the things. What have you done for us? If you had really done something, why should we come here for this meeting, sitting here whole day, leaving our work behind. You did nothing. That is why we are here.

(Pallepalayam, Karamadai, Coimbatore, TN)

In Dakshin Kannada, Karnataka, there was a forceful exchange in the *gram sabha*. Villagers held the *panchayat* president accountable for not delivering on the promise of supplying printed pamphlets as a precursor to the *gram sabha* to inform the villagers about the government programs and budgets. They also harangued the social forest officer for planting trees on public lands without consulting them:

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Villager [male]: Respected president, all of them [government line department officers] will speak rapidly and go off. A person like me can't understand what they say. There is no use in it. We will not get to know the benefits, about how they are allocated, about the work and all. So, I requested you to give us all the details in a pamphlet. It was approved in the last meeting. You should provide the pamphlets here, Sir. You people will say things, and I can't understand. This is because we have subsidy, but how much is that, to which castes is it allocated, we need to have the detailed information. In the last *gram sabha*, they told you to take action but nothing happened. If you speak fast and go off, we can't understand. And it is impossible for them [illiterate folks] to understand. So many poor people will ask us about the facilities you have, and we have to tell them that we don't know. If people like us [literate folks] can't follow and don't know, then what about the farmers. They can't understand. Let us have a printed pamphlet about the available subsidies for the year 2005–2006. This is what was decided in the last meeting.

Villager [male]: Here nobody knows about the government facilities.

Villager [male]: I am an intelligent man, but I don't know!

. . .

Villager [male]: No, in the *gram sabha* you will just tell one such a facility has come. But how about which jurisdiction, which work, who will handle it, you should all sit together discuss, decide on a point, and then issue a pamphlet to the people. You should distribute it to all of us, and based on it we will raise questions and doubts. [Mass speaking]

Villager [male]: There is no meaning if all of us come here and then speak en masse or fight. We can't have a meeting like this.

Villager [male]: See, we might not know about some schemes or facilities that may have been granted. If we don't access those schemes in time, then they may get lapsed. So, if you give us a pamphlet, we will make use of all the opportunities of accessing available schemes properly.

Health officer [female]: [Speaks about poultry hen subsidy and vaccination for cattle and poultry.]

Villager [male]: Even your department people never gave us the pamphlets. You may be new to the department. We are talking about the last *gram sabha*. See, you told us that these facilities are available. Unless and until you tell us, we will not get to know.

Health officer [female]: We can't print pamphlets like that.

Villager [male]: You need not do it. You give all the reports to the *panchayat*, and they will do it. The *panchayat* has lakhs of rupees in income and expenditure. They will do it. We know how much it will cost. You need not give it to all villagers. You can give copies to them [to the

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panchayat] and to me. All taluqs distribute one copy to the *gram panchayath* a week before the *gram sabha*. It should reach the villagers.

Social forest officer: Announces subsidy scheme for planting trees.

Villager [male]: Sir, you are going to plant acacia, no? The air of this plant will not be good for health.

Social forest officer: Now, you should ask them.

Villager [male]: Earlier we had another person here. Now he has retired. He used to tell us that acacia is poisonous. What your department is doing is not really good. The air will not be good at all. Here onwards I request you to stop planting these trees. If its food is poison, naturally its air will also be poisonous. This has to be decided today that you should not plant acacia trees. This is an American thing. Instead of that, we can plant jackfruit trees, eucalyptus, and other ones. There is no problem with these plants. Never plant acacia, this has been told by an officer himself.

Villager [male]: What are the aims of this social forestry department!

Villager [male]: You should plant them on government land. But if you plant in a place that has been sanctioned for residential construction, when will you give them [beneficiaries] the place? What right do you have to do this?

Social forest officer: Have patience.

President [female, OBC]: No, you should not do like this. You should not plant like that. It is not good on your part to do this.

(Ujire, Beltangadi, Dakshin Kannada, KA)

In the discursive space of *gram sabhas,* villagers also engage in publicly shaming government officials whom they suspect of corrupt practices. These confrontational engagements are also ways in which villagers fulfill their citizens' role of oversight and accountability. The direct public accountability of the state in the *gram sabha* for delivering public services and fulfilling development commitments has made *panchayat* officials and government bureaucrats answerable to all rural citizens, regardless of caste, class, or gender. This is one of the most remarkable developments in Indian democracy over the last thirty years. In the *gram sabhas* we observed, villagers' ability to exercise this power of accountability varied a great deal. It was quite well developed in mature *panchayat* systems and in villages with medium or high literacy levels. When these conditions were present, villagers were adept at questioning and critiquing government inaction and corruption. And they often used sarcasm as a way to denigrate authority figures.

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Addressing Public Goods Problems

In the mature *gram sabhas,* villagers authoritatively instruct *panchayat* presidents and staffs on ways to get things done. Their performances reflect experience and acumen in thinking about solutions to public goods problems. Examples of this abound in *gram sabhas* in medium- and high-literacy villages in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

In Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, villagers assertively instructed the president on how to solve the water problem. They recommended terminating unauthorized household connections and stringently adhering to the rules for allowing household water connections. They also suggested ways for solving the stagnant water problem:

Villager [male, MBC]: Please lay a cement road from here to the end or at least a stone chip road, and put cement road till president's house.

President [MBC]: We've given petition to the chairman. This road is proposed right from Sethpatta to be Chettiar Kottagai. This has been recommended for stone chip road. It will be done at the earliest. We have written asking for it.

Villager [male, SC]: It is not a matter of writing letters. We have to bring pressure on them.

. . .

Villager [male, MBC]: Water is not coming at all and that is why we have removed the taps. Since you are supplying water to their houses, they are not bothered.

President [MBC]: You only have to replace the taps that are near your house.

Villager [male, SC]: Cut the supply of water to individual houses and make them fill water from the common tank. Why should we fill water in a tap near our house instead of coming and filling it from the common tank? We have to convene a meeting and talk about how to save water and use it economically. When you open the water connection, immediately they switch on the motor to fill water in their tanks. So how can we get water? If you cut water they will spend it economically.

Villager [MBC]: We must call for a meeting and give them a rule that water must be used only in this way, and we must save water.

. . .

Villager [female, SC]: They have to pay a deposit of Rs. 1000. There is a booklet for it. If they have any problems, let them come and rectify it in the *panchayat*. They also have to pay a monthly fee of Rs. 30. If they don't pay, we have to cut their taps with EC. We can tell them and if they don't listen, we can cut their water connection with the help of the police. Even if somebody

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asks for water connection, we need not give. Only if they pay a deposit of Rs. 1000 and a monthly fee of Rs. 30 to the *panchayat*, then their request must be accepted. If they don't pay, connection must not be given to them. Even if they make a deposit of Rs. 1000, the connection must be given in the presence of either the town *panchayat* head or ward member or a person working for the town *panchayat*. The connection must not be taken without the knowledge of the *panchayat*. These things must be discussed in the meeting and if they don't agree to this, their water connection must be cut.

President [MBC]: OK we'll do that.

(Kethanahalli, Karimangalam, Dharmapuri, TN)

Public goods problems, particularly those pertaining to village water supply and roads, featured prominently in discussions at the *gram sabha*. In many cases these were limited to villagers making demands and complaints about inadequate public services. But in some cases, the discussions were more deliberative where villagers articulated what they thought could be reasonable solutions to the problems. Involved discussions about public goods problems and ways of addressing them were most frequently observed in *gram sabhas* in high-literacy villages in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Raising Larger Concerns

Villagers sometimes use the *gram sabha* to broach broad topics of concern that are far beyond the pragmatic reach of the *gram sabha* or even the *panchayat*. These topics typically concern distributional equity in government subsidies. But sometimes they broach such topics such as opportunities for education and employment and the consequences of globalization. These discussions reflect anxieties about socioeconomic mobility.

In a *gram sabha* in Karnataka a villager engaged in a serious discussion with the agricultural officer about the country's seed policy, arguing that it robbed farmers of their autonomy in seed sharing and served corporate interests:

Villager[male]: Please note, my points are addressed to the officials. Horticultural and agriculture departments are maintained by the government. They have not given us any information about what they can do for farmers or villagers. Why is this the case? We have lost our right of getting access to seeds by exchanging seeds among ourselves. Multinational companies have taken away this right away. The central

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government is lacking in taking any action against these policies that restrict farmers' rights. The Center is taking control of the state-owned agriculture department. Here the elected members, whether Gram Panchayat or Taluk Panchayat or Zilla Parishad or the MLA, rarely take note of this act, the Horticulture Seed Act 2004 and have a resolution passed, which could save farmers. The central government has put it on the internet. But there is no information given to the common man. So we should oppose it in the *gram sabha*. This is a new act and it is against the people. The multinational companies should be punished. If there is crop failure, compensation should be paid to farmers by the seed company. There should be an act for this. You should save the small farmer. You should highlight this issue in national level.

Farmers were exchanging thirty-three crore rupees worth of seeds. Now this is down to only 20% in government departments. They may have reached some compromise with the multinational companies, like Kargil, Sarjoth. They are all defrauding farmers. It may be BT Cotton, which is pushing our farmer to suicide situation. Now there is no seed exchange at the level of farmers. We were not selling them; we were just exchanging. Now they have taken that right away from us. The seed inspections have taken that right from us. The inspector will come and destroy our seeds and crops. He has been given so much power. This act is very serious and there is a need to be worried. I request you all to please pass a resolution in *gram sabha* and in the *panchayat* and to submit it.

. . .

Panchayat member: They have given a petition, so we should all unite and oppose it then submit it to the department. The act causes more problem to the farmers. The situation is like we have to pay money to swim in our own river. This is the opinion of all the voters. So consider the resolution regarding this and submit it.

(Beltangadi, Mittabagilu, Dakshin Kannada, Karnataka)

Rural citizens use the discursive space of the *gram sabha* to think aloud and voice their concerns about broader policy issues that closely touch their lives. In some cases, it can be read as a sign of the villagers' lack of understanding of the functional limits of the *gram sabha* and the *panchayat*. But in other cases, articulate villagers broach these issues in the *gram sabha* deliberately to raise public awareness and to try to mobilize grassroots action. In these and other ways villagers are using the *gram sabhas* to create and extend the reach and political effect of *public-spirited talk*.

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The Supply of Governance: "State-Speak"

Local governments across the four South India states take very different approaches to the *gram sabha*. The frequency and regularity with which they are held as well as the states' commitment to *gram sabhas'* goals of local empowerment vary greatly. In less mature systems, state agents view the *gram sabha* as a venue for sampling public opinion and recording public demands and complaints. In mature systems, state agents use the *gram sabha* as a venue for gathering insight into village life as well as disclosing its workings and its budgetary situation, and as a training ground for citizenship. They tried to inculcate civic consciousness in villagers and imbue them with a sense of civic responsibility. There was considerable facilitation by *panchayat* staffs who worked hard to assure that the public understands the procedures of village governance and to foster local initiatives and participation in decision-making. In the following excerpts presented we survey typical strands of discourse heard in mature *gram sabhas*. We call this *state-speak*.

Schooling Citizens in Deliberation

Most citizens come to the *gram sabha* with little prior experience of engaging in public discussion. Villagers rarely get to deliberate or converse publicly with the state in public meetings. When such meetings do occur, they are usually confined to one-way communication. Village-level committees that may entail discussion and deliberation have limited membership. Villagers often come to the *gram sabha* with bottled-up complaints about resource shortages they confront daily. Rather than treating the *gram sabha* as a deliberative space on such occasions, villagers use it for airing complaints and leveling accusations. When this happens, state agents sometimes take the opportunity to instruct citizens on how to discuss issues and deliberate. Political leaders and state officials alike try to move villagers from only voicing complaints to conducting substantive discussions concerning the problems they face.

In the *gram sabha* in Dakshin Kannada, Karnataka, excerpted as follows, we hear the *panchayat* president and government officer trying

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to guide villagers who, in their view, are being unreasonably critical and cantankerous into constructive deliberation:

Villager [male, speaker 6]: We see in the newspapers that funds of 20 and 30 crores have been allotted for South Canara. All these funds are for poor people or for you people?

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 8]: We do not have water supply for the past 15 days. You all speak about lakhs and crores which is provided by the government for poor people like us. What are you doing?

Officer: Look, funds will come from the government, but there are many places in South Canara. In only one year, the water problem of all the places cannot be solved at the same time. They will be completed one after the other. Try to understand this.

President: See, in the *gram sabha*, discussions should be conducted. It should not be a complaint receiving center. Like you, many people are here, and they too should be provided an opportunity to speak.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 3]: When there are no officials in the *gram sabha*, why should it be conducted? Who are the officials here?

President: Come here, what is your problem? Tell us.

Villager [male, speaker 6]: Do not tell him in person; say it in public.

Villager [male, speaker 15]: We do not have a chance to speak in the *panchayat* and to meet with officials or concerned officers.

President: Where, which official do you require?

Villager [male, speaker 15]: KEB [Karnataka Electricity Board] and Revenue.

Officer: They are here now.

Villager [male, speaker 15]: What will they say! They will ask us to go there [to the office].

Officer: No, you say, what is your concern.

Villager [male, speaker 1]: Whatever it be!

Officer: No, you simply tell us about your concern. See, as per guidelines, we have displayed in the *panchayat* notice board which officials should attend the *gram sabha* meeting. All of them are present here. You just mention who is not there, and which department official you require. Tell us.

(Kedila, Bantval, Dakshin Kannada, Karnataka)

States with a long history of being politically committed to decentralized local governance encourage state agents to promote deliberation in the *gram sabha*. This can be challenging in villages with low literacy rates. Comprehension of *panchayat* budgets and the financial

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details of government schemes is quite limited there. In such contexts it is quite common for villagers to either remain silent or to speak all at once when voicing their frustrations. Meetings often descend into verbal fights. Yet in mature *panchayat* systems, even where similar limitations exist, state agents can often play a critical role in fostering constructive, dialogical discussions among villagers concerning public goods problems. They demonstrate the importance of turn taking so that dominant individuals do not monopolize discussion. They help villagers frame their demands and requests in appropriate ways. In villages with high literacy rates, this task is much less difficult. Villagers are often perfectly able to deliberate among themselves and with the state without assistance.

Encouraging Cooperation and Collective Action

State agents often use the *gram sabha* as a site to mobilize citizens and instill a spirit of collective action aimed at creating and maintaining public goods. This is particularly evident in *gram sabhas* across Tamil Nadu. This is one way to see "governmentality" in action. The state tries to produce in its citizens mentalities aligned with its governance goals. In the following excerpts we hear *panchaya*t leaders using an instructional and pleading register to try to change prevailing mentalities. Sometimes these efforts succeed; sometimes they don't.

In a meeting in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, a *panchayat* president exhorts villagers to use the newly constructed public sanitation facility. He is trying to build strong public consciousness. He criticizes the disinterested attitude and inactive role of the women's self-help group. The state had made such groups primarily responsible for maintaining and operating village sanitation facilities. The discussion ended with male villagers suggesting that the women's group should be approached collectively by the villagers and urged to take up this responsibility. A step was thereby taken in mobilizing people to take collective action for the public good.

President [MBC]: Village is like a house. We should keep our village clean just like we keep our houses. If we keep the streets clean then it would be hygienic. Rs. 2.3 lakhs was spent for constructing toilets. It was built from the MLA fund. But no one is using it. *Panchayat* is paying for it. We are paying about Rs. 12,000 for its maintenance. We said that we would give

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it to the group [women's self-help group]. Even then they are not using it. We don't know when the people will become aware of this? First, a person should look at his own cleanliness, then his house, next the village, after that the country … Now the central government has announced Rs. 500,000 [5 lakhs] prize for the village. Many villages have received it. We went for training to twenty-three places. We went to a village called Mudakurichi in the Veerapandi circle of the Salem district. There they have kept the village clean and very neat. It is a small village. Even if the air blows a piece of dirt, the old man going by that way removes it. They are doing it with good thought. Likewise, we have to do the same. We haven't done it yet. So we can do it.

Villager [SC]: You are saying this, but it would be good if the *panchayat* gathers some ten people and starts it.

President: You villagers start it. Start from the house.

Villager [SC]: Many people don't know about it. They are not aware of this scheme. They think that village means agriculture. They do the agriculture and just live like that. They are not aware that if the village is kept clean there won't be any diseases.

President: They have been told to start a group for it. It would be better if such a group is formed and if they make the people aware of it.

…

President: For this they have given priority to the women's association. But none of them are coming forward.

Villager [SC]: What can we do for that?

President: They are asking, what is in this for me? And they never ask, what is in it for us? Each women's association should ask what has been done for us? And should not ask, what had been done for me? They must come forward. Only then we can do anything. The public has to come forward. If they withdraw themselves, we can't do anything. There are literate people, they have to help the *panchayat*. For example, they ask money from the government. Who is the government? Those who are among the people should come forward to form the group. All the literate youths in all the villages should come forward. We are the government. People are the government. Yes, we are the government. The money they give is our money that we pay to the government. They ask funds from the government. We can do many projects for our village with the Rs. 500,000 (five lakhs) prize money they are giving. We can bring it.

…

Villager [SC]: Nothing can be done without public cooperation. The president should do or the clerk should do or the ward member should do, this is not possible. Public must give cooperation. Nothing can be done until the public gives their cooperation.

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President: Yes that is what we say. It would be good if the public cooperate together to do this. Village would develop.

. . .

Villager [SC]: If a president goes alone and talks with them [women's group], it will not be apt. For example, if I need to borrow money and I ask a person, he would not give. When twenty or thirty of us go and ask, he would give. Likewise, when we go as a group and ask why he wastes water, why he dumps garbage on the roads, why he breaks the tap, and why they are not paying the tax etc., they will answer. It's just like the bank staffs who go in groups for collecting dues. Before this can be done, some ten people have to come forward as an example . . . .

(Kalappampadi, Pennagaram, Dharmapuri, TN)

In the following excerpt, a *panchayat* president seems to be successful in convincing villagers to contribute to a public works project related to village drinking water supply. Drinking water supply and road construction projects require local public contributions to receive designated government funding. In a *gram sabha* in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, after hearing the multiple demands voiced by villagers, the president criticizes the public's lack of interest in contributing to the drinking water project. By the end, he seems to achieve a measure of success in changing the mindset of some of the villagers. They agree to contribute toward the project:

Villager [female, speaker 3]: In my village there is no latrine. I have been telling the *panchayat* to construct a public toilet for our use. We are not able to go out in the morning or evening for nature's call. We are not getting enough drinking water; not even two pots. We are getting a lot of bore pump water, but not drinking water. That has to be done through the *panchayat* union.

President: I am taking necessary steps to construct a public lavatory. Regarding drinking water, there is not enough pressure in the piped water; that is why it is slow. That is why I am trying to pump bore water up to the tank and arrange for its distribution to all parts through pipe.

Councilor: You said bore water is sufficient and river water [for drinking] is not flowing sufficiently in the pipe. We pump more water from bore pump and supply to all parts and water flows quickly because there is enough pressure. In case of drinking water, we are pumping the water 15 km away from here. When we pump from there the water does not reach the tank because there is no pressure in the pipe because of less water. In low-lying areas, water will flow more in tap, and in upper area it will be less. We have been asking you to solve this problem for the past five years through the Rajiv

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Gandhi Drinking Water Project. We have been asking for your contribution. But you people have not come forward to contribute for the project.

Villager [female, speaker 4]: When we go out to work, we can only think of our next meal, and we do not know from where that is going to come. So how will we contribute for the project? You belong to the government, and you are asking us!

Councilor: We didn't ask just you people alone. We have already decided to spend 7 lakhs and complete the project through this *panchayat*. I am asking you for just 10%, i.e., Rs. 70,000. There are some 400 families in this village. It will be around Rs. 175/- per family. If this Rs. 70,000/- is divided among 400 families, it is just a small amount for a very big project like this, and you should not refuse it. You can think over it. How much you earn, how much you spend, how many of them are wasteful expenditures, check your budget. If you had contributed Rs. 175 per family, we could have started the project now. Let bygones be bygones, even now it is not too late. The Rajiv Gandhi Drinking Water Project still exists. The central government is still allotting funds for it. If your contribution is there, this *panchayat* will see that there is no problem with drinking water. And people will say, R. Vellore *panchayat* is self-sufficient in drinking water.

Villager [female, speaker 4]: So if we contribute Rs. 175 per family, it will be done.

President: That is what he just explained.

Councilor: Because we did not get [local] public money, we were not able to implement this project. You are all aware that we made big announcements through the public announcement system, with propaganda autorickshaw going to all the villages and also using the public drumming system. We approached individual houses. We also tried to convince you all that there will no better project than this water project. But nobody cooperated with this *panchayat*. You all know that, and you cannot deny it. I asked for your cooperation.

. . .

Villager [female, speaker 4]: Rs. 175 per family is a lot. I cannot afford to give that much. You reduce that, and I will manage. And I can even help collect from others. Rs. 50 I can give.

Councilor: Whatever you can give, start with that first, and let's see.

President: We will implement that pumping station first. First give us your initial amount Rs. 50 to start with.

(R. Vellore, Udumalaipettai, Coimbatore, TN)

In the following excerpt, a *panchayat* speaker in a *gram sabha* in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, implores the villagers to understand the

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technical challenges of resource provision. He urges them to cooperate with the administration so that the water supply problem can be solved:

Panchayat Speaker: ... With that the water problem should be solved. This was the request from him [a villager]. That also will be fulfilled. Similarly, all the pipes and taps will be raised and water will be supplied as requested. This demand was considered in our *panchayat* two months back. But the result was there was confusion and also the police were involved. We did not get any benefit. The people and water authorities don't think about how much the expenditure will be for the regular supply of drinking water. People do not have the habit of understanding what is really happening. And so they don't cooperate for the good work that is done. They don't cooperate with us even if we accept their petition. Because of this, all the work done here gets into confusion or they are stopped.

So to change this situation we need a village committee with elders, friends, and even ladies. We should form a committee with some 50 to 100 members, and they should support us in the implementing of programs for the supply of drinking water. Only when you all come together like that, we can start it. We cannot assume that just by raising the level of pipes you will get water. The people create problems by saying we are doing for our kith and kin and also they involve caste problems into this. They bring it under caste discrimination. So whichever problem you have can't be solved without the cooperation of the people. So don't tell us that we have not done it.

People have only one thought that the problem should be solved. In all the aspects of laying down the pipes and raising the pipes, we got only bad name. We never got any good name. So you don't tell that we did not listen to you. What cooperation did you extend for the work to be done? So many workers were affected and so many officers were insulted! They say that there is water from Uddayan bus stand to Kodivethu. They also say that water is supplied to Mannivannan's house and Koti's house. They say for only three people we supply water! If you feel we have laid pipelines only up to these houses, let us dig and find out. Come let us all go ...

One person said that even after fifty-one years of independence we have to walk a distance of one km and then get water. But he has forgotten the days when he had to fetch water from afar. Tell me, did we not connect pipelines to all the houses? Did we not fill the tank with water before the tank dried up? We have dug bore wells. Why don't you mention some of the things that have been fulfilled. Don't just say what is lacking. We're not saying that you should not talk about the lacunae; that is what we are here for.

(Kallavi, Uttangari, Dharmapuri, TN)

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In states like Tamil Nadu, the government's role in fostering strong and effective local governance participation is quite striking.

Instilling Civic and Fiscal Responsibility

The *gram sabha* provides the agents of the state with the opportunity to publicly comment on villagers' attitudes and mindsets regarding such things as village development, public works, and the payment of taxes. State agents often speak out against the common attitude among villagers that all resources should be provided for free by the government. They sharply condemn villagers' refusal to pay taxes and admonish them for their failure to understand that they have a part to play in public goods provision and maintenance. This can make for awkward moments, since everyone is aware that the state agents often fail to minister to public needs.

In a three-hour-long *gram sabha* in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, the president calls out the villagers for harboring the public attitude that the meeting is a futile exercise. He castigates them for their expectation that they should receive everything for free without any contribution of their own; for their failure to participate in the *gram sabha*; for their lack of understanding of the Gandhian notion of village self-governance; and for their reluctance to pay taxes for local services. Importantly, his comments caused a few villagers to join in a reflective moment and express their own thoughts on the prevailing public attitude and on the government's budget burden:

President: Whatever we said in the last *gram sabha,* nothing has been put to practice until now. What was said four years back has still not come. "Why are you calling us to attend the *gram sabha* so often? What have you done of what we said? You call for the *gram sabha*, you make resolution to do this and that. You say you want concrete roads, but we don't even have pipeline facility. When you put pipelines, you break concrete roads. What is the use of this? First you satisfy the basic necessities and then put concrete roads." The public's opinion is like this.

. . .

President: Benefiter should not expect everything for free. Free rice, free toilet, free houses, everything free. Rice is also given at a subsidized rate. If everything should be free, the government wishes you should have a part; you should work. The government wishes that.

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Villager [male, speaker 21]: Government gives Rs. 1000 for private toilets. I say that the individuals should cooperate and put some more money if they build it. I say it will be more useful.

. . .

President: We should not expect everything from the government. We should also try. If the government gives some schemes and shows the way, we should take hold of it and try to improve. If they build for five years, we should improve on it and build it to last for ten or fifteen years.

Villager [male, speaker 23]: Now the government gives everything. Giving and giving. How many politicians, how many doctors, teachers, how many people [on the government's payroll] actually do their work and how many people just eat of that work? The working people alone are not in the government's account.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 27]: People suffer; house tax has gone up. If we ask the government, they say to increase the house tax in order to increase *panchayat* revenue. How shall we run the *panchayat* without funds from the government?

President: Gandhi deemed that village should satisfy its needs by itself. To make that dream come true they are planning things and making laws. But we are in the initial first step. We can't get great profits in a short time. We can't become an adult in ten days after birth. We have to go step by step. Regarding *Gram Rajya* (*gram swaraj*), we are in the initial step. That's why we call for *gram sabha* and ask for your opinion. What I say is that opinions should take the form of actions. Our opinions should reach the top level.

Villager *[male, speaker 27]: Gram sabha* was held on 54th republic day. In that nobody participated. Then about *gram sabha* or *gram raj,* what does the public know?

President: Already we beat the drum and called people. They said, we have not done anything, so when we have not done anything, then why call for *gram sabha*? What have you done for us, they ask. Public say their problems in this *gram sabha*, and it has to be rectified, not in the next year, but at least in the coming years. "You won the second-term election. You should at least know now." When they ask like that, we have to think whether we can do anything before the next election.

Villager [male, speaker 27]: They ask for roads, streetlights, lights for their house. These villagers, how much do they know about *Gram Rajya*? From this, they don't know.

President: They don't clean the dirty water in front of their houses. We have to call for a meeting in the *panchayat* and tell them. They say we should clean it! If we increase the house tax a little, they say it is too much. Without increasing house tax, how can we function? You have to cooperate.

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Villager [male, speaker 27]: They want everything free.
(Mettupavi, Kinthukadayu, Coimbatore, TN)

In a *gram sabha* in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, one hundred and forty people attended a one-and-a-half-hour-long meeting. Loud complaints from women about inadequate water supply ended in a discussion of the relationship between taxes paid by villagers and the resources they receive. A government officer, who did not fear electoral consequences, told off a villager rudely for asking about the relationship between taxes they paid and the resources they received:

Villager [female, speaker 10]: We need more water pipe connections.

Govt. Officer: As per government rule, there should be one water pipe for every thirty houses. But here you have a pipe for every fifteen houses. You have to maintain discipline and take water.

Villager [female, speaker 11]: Even if you bring one lorry [truck] load of water, you cannot solve the problem of these ladies.

[The women participating start shouting and nothing can be understood in the noisy and unruly environment.]

Govt. Officer: Please stop your shouting and say what you want to say.

Villager [female, speaker 12]: It is difficult to get jobs, and difficult to get water. You do some arrangements for employment and water.

Villager [male, speaker 15]: Is there any connection between the house taxes we pay and the water we get?

Govt. Officer: You pay only Rs. 36 toward house tax and you want water and streetlights for your house daily. Take back your house tax and don't expect water and streetlights! First think about it yourself, what is the revenue of the *panchayat?* We have to judiciously spend the available amount and divide whatever is available. You cannot refuse to pay house tax just because you don't get water up to your satisfaction. Please maintain silence for some time. (Govindapuram, Kinthukadayu, Coimbatore, TN)

The *gram sabha* provides *panchayat* officials and bureaucrats a unique opportunity to criticize the mentalities of the public. In some of the interactions, there is a constructive attempt to create a sense of responsibility among the villagers and to garner their support for village development. Villagers are encouraged to pay taxes for houses and household water connections. These funds are potentially a vital component of *panchayat* revenues, and indispensable for meeting the required mandatory monetary contributions for certain types of subsidized public works projects. Broadly, this can be seen as a positive

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attempt to shift villagers from mentalities of destitution and dependency to a civic consciousness of fiscal responsibility. Villagers are exhorted and scolded to move from a mentality of being passive beneficiaries and petitioning for resources to one of active participants contributing to village development.

Conclusions

Voice: Beyond Representation and Writing

The *gram sabha* is a discursive space where there is competition between citizens for the state's resources as well as state-citizen engagement that varies from confrontational exchanges to exhortative appeals and practical deliberations. Rural citizens compete for personal goods for their families and for public goods for their neighborhoods and villages. They question official definitions of poverty and debate the inclusion and exclusion of people in the list of beneficiaries of government programs. Informal leaders of marginalized communities vehemently challenge discrimination and dishonor and take their quest for dignity onto the discursive scene of the *gram sabha*. In contrast, general castes and OBCs complain of being sidelined by the government. Public good allocations are also discussed extensively. *Panchayat* leaders and state bureaucrats give well-intentioned and sometimes harshly worded lessons about civic consciousness.

Overall, the *gram sabha* works as a training ground for democracy, where villagers hone their capability for vocalizing their needs and opinions and hold the state accountable. By providing predictable opportunities of talking about village development and local governance, verbally engaging with powerful men and authority figures, and directly confronting the state, the *gram sabha* brings to life a unique form of direct deliberative democracy. It extends the rights of citizens to engage with the government and to have a say. Citizens literally speak to the state by vocalizing their opinions concerning its decisions and performance. *The gram sabha* is the prime theater of grassroots democracy in rural India.

Unfortunately, voice in democracy does not invariably translate into better material outcomes in the objective quality of life of rural citizens. This book is not aimed at tracing the link between voice and outcomes. This is a limitation no doubt. Rather, it takes voice seriously as

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a political resource in itself. It focuses on analyzing voice and talk in the *gram sabha* as important in their own right having so far been relatively neglected in the existing scholarship on the *panchayat* system.

There are enormous gradations in *gram sabhas* as to how narrowly competitive or deliberative the discussions are. In the following chapters we will see how such gradations map onto the maturity of the *gram sabha* system and village literacy. In the next chapter, our attention shifts to the identification of different types of citizen performances and state enactments that play out in the *gram sabha*.

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3 *Political Construction, State Enactments, and Citizen Performances*

Can the state influence democratic deliberation in grassroots political institutions? This is an important question. Our data allow us to shed some light on this issue because of the matched-pair sampling strategy we outlined in Chapter 1. To reiterate the methodology: we selected adjacent districts on the border of the four modern South India states: the formerly undivided Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The district border-pairs were chosen partly for the reason that prior to 1956 they belonged to political entities that had lasted continuously for several centuries. In 1956, with the formation of linguistically defined states, new districts were created with the result that the bordering subregions of the old political entity were split between two new states.

The district-pairs were selected because they had several centuries of common administrative history and a common culture influenced by the mix of languages spoken, caste structures, and geography (Rao and Ban 2007; Ban, Jha, and Rao 2012). They also had similar levels of inequality and land-use patterns (Besley et al. 2016). From the matched pairs of districts we sampled villages across modern state borders that share a common majority language. Sociolinguists have argued that such common elements of culture and social structure result in "speech communities" that have common styles of discourse (Morgan 2014). In the South Indian context, David Shulman's remarkable book *Tamil: A Biography* (2016) beautifully demonstrates how language and styles of speech are inextricably linked to a sense of identity and community. We can therefore assume that within the old political entities the styles of public debate, the manner interests were communicated in public settings, and the rituals of discursive communication were similar. If styles of discourse differed markedly between *gram sabhas* in the matched villages sharing an administrative past but now located across state lines, these differences can be attributed to policy changes that occurred

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after the states were reorganized in 1956. Especially relevant would be differences in states' approach to implementing the federal directive of decentralized participatory governance.

Using this methodology, we can assess how state policies and practices affect the impact of *gram sabhas* on the political lives of India's rural citizens. We focus particularly on how villagers present their interests and demands, express their complaints and concerns, and how effectively they are able to monitor the local state and make it democratically accountable to their needs. We focus as well on how the state conducts itself in relation to rural citizens, paying special attention to what political authorities and state functionaries do to facilitate deliberation. We are interested in how authorities listen, inform, and respond to the actual political participation of rural women and men. We argue that by the way they elicit and facilitate participation, states lay the groundwork for different forms of political performance by citizens.

We have ordered the four (post-1956) states by their *panchayat*s' democratic institution-building capacity. Although all states were subject to the same federal mandate regarding decentralized participatory rural governance, states differed in the political emphasis placed on the new *panchayat* system that was supposed to fulfill that mandate. States showed different capacities and willingness to put grassroots governance into practice. These differences can be clearly traced and analyzed in at least four ways: through the history of each state's engagement with *panchayat* reform, the degree of financial devolution each allows, the regularity of *panchayat* elections, and the participatory character of the *gram sabha* itself. It matters greatly whether *gram sabhas* were regular, substantive, and predictable affairs or ritualized gatherings devoid of functional and deliberative content. Using these criteria, we categorize the states as low, medium, or high in their capacity for promoting and supporting decentralized participatory governance.

Andhra Pradesh (AP) is classified as low capacity because, at the time our data was collected (and, to some extent, still today), the *panchayat* system was weak. There was practically no devolution of funds, and village meetings were unpredictable events attended by a handful of villagers who remained largely passive. *Panchayati raj* institutions' support of grassroots democracy is largely a function of political will. Being categorized as "low capacity" in this scheme does not indicate a weak state. It indicates a state's de-emphasis of the decentralized

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panchayat system in favor of more centralized decision-making. Karnataka (KA) and Tamil Nadu (TN) are classified as "medium capacity" for the following four reasons: their long history of *panchayat* implementation; their relatively greater devolution of financial powers to village councils compared to AP; a conscientious cadre of *panchayat* officials who play an active, responsive role in disseminating information; and regularly held *gram sabhas*, actively attended by villagers.

Kerala (KL) is classified as "high capacity." In Kerala the grassroots deliberative process was preceded by an important "People's Campaign," which created effective systems of participatory planning accompanied by significant devolution of funds and power. Development planning in Kerala consists of a set of nested, cumulative stages. Meetings of villagers at the ward (neighborhood) level lead to the formation of working groups; these, in turn, lead to village-level development "seminars" where village needs are identified and suggestions for development projects are formulated; these culminate with the *gram sabha* where the lists of suggestions from the working group are announced and taken up for further discussion and ratification.

Kerala's *gram sabhas* are structured in a unique way and can vary depending on their timing in the planning cycle. Those *gram sabha* meetings held at the end of a planning period are focused on facilitating discussions aimed at formulating ward-level needs for the forthcoming planning period. Accordingly, villagers are assigned to thematic groups and each group is tasked with formulating a list of projects based on identifying common needs (this is in addition to the projects suggested by the working groups). Villagers have break-out group discussions at the end of which the collective decisions are read out in the *gram sabha*. These plans are then taken up for implementation by the working committee. In subsequent *gram sabhas,* in the new planning period, the groups focus on verifying the eligibility of villagers who apply for government subsidized benefits and rank them by priority. Kerala's *gram sabhas* are thereby managed to reach consensus efficiently and productively on their two main functions.

Our transcripts record only the *gram sabha* proceedings at the *gram panchayat* level. We are not able to observe the break-out group discussions because several groups simultaneously hold internal discussions to identify needs or rank order benefit applicants. Neither do we observe the lower ward-level meetings where most of the citizen

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deliberations take place. These are limitations in our data on Kerala. For these reasons the transcript data are replete with lengthy speeches by *panchayat* officials and bureaucrats and thin on public deliberations. The scarcity of public deliberations in the transcript data should not be read as their complete absence in the actual proceedings. Compared to other states, the process of deliberation was highly rationalized and streamlined.

In our sample we have four matched district pairs in which each district falls across a state line between states that differ in their *panchayat* system's effectiveness in promoting grassroots democracy. In most villages we observed a single *gram sabha*. In a subset of villages we observed a second. (This is why the number of *gram sabhas* observed exceeds the number of sampled villages.) In order to make the matched comparisons across state lines robust, we have compared *gram sabhas* in villages with similar literacy levels. However, for the sake of brevity, in presenting our results we have organized the findings by state and not by literacy levels. Table 3.1 lists the district-pairs and the numbers of sampled *gram sabhas* and villages by literacy level.

[Notes: Low-literacy villages are those where less than 33 percent of the population is literate, minimally defined as being able to sign their name, and high-literacy villages are those where at least 66 percent of the population is literate.]

Summary of Findings

Gram sabhas in matched districts falling across state lines varied greatly in their structure, functioning, and deliberative capacities. While we did expect some subnational variation, we were surprised by the extent of the differences in *gram sabhas* between states. There were significant differences even though all states are subject to the same federal mandate to foster decentralized governance to further participatory democracy. This chapter gives a detailed look at differences in how the *gram sabha* is structured. It shows what the agents of the state do in these meetings, and how the state shapes from above the participatory role of villagers at the grassroots.[1] We focus on

[1] Explanations for subnational differences in the *gram sabha* may also be linked to differences between political regimes or other indicators of deepening democracy associated with the federal mandate for decentralization (Sadanandan 2017).

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Table 3.1: ***District Pairs Classified by State Capacity for Fostering Decentralized Participatory Governance***

Low	Medium	High
Chittoor (AP) 7 *gram sabhas* from 7 low-literacy villages 10 *gram sabhas* from10 medium-literacy villages	**Dharmapuri (TN)** 32 *gram sabhas* from 21 low-literacy villages 14 *gram sabhas* from11 medium-literacy villages	
Medak (AP) 18 *gram sabhas* from 18 low-literacy villages	**Bidar (KA)** 11 *gram sabhas* from 11 low-literacy villages	
	Coimbatore (TN) 20 *gram sabhas* from 10 high-literacy villages	**Palakkad (KL)** 18 *gram sabhas* from 18 high-literacy villages
	Dakshin Kanada (KA) 16 *gram sabhas* from 15 high-literacy villages	**Kasargod (KL)** 16 *gram sabhas* from 16 high-literacy villages

identifying and categorizing the different types of state enactments in relation to citizen performances that came to life in the *gram sabhas* we recorded and observed.

State enactments were embedded in the rituals of governance adopted by *panchayat* leaders and state officials to facilitate and manage the *gram sabhas*. Citizens' performances were analyzed by drawing on how villagers participated as citizens and whether they displayed a heightened awareness of themselves as subjects of a democratic state. How villagers participated was partly circumscribed by routine administrative governance functions they were expected to fulfill at these meetings. It was shaped as well by the scope given to them to deliberate and partly by what they could do using their own savvy to navigate the opportunity of talking to the state. We present in Table 3.2 a typology of state enactments and citizen performances. Our goal is to advance an interpretive understanding of what can often seem to be the quite mundane workings of the *gram sabha*. Our typology is meant to reveal

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Table 3.2: ***State Enactments and Citizens' Performances in*** **Gram Sabhas**

Low Capacity	Medium Capacity	High Capacity
Chittor (AP)	**Dharmapuri (TN)**	
State: Complaint collector	*State: Social reformer*	
Citizens: Passive petitioners	*Citizens: Civic deliberators*	
Medak (AP)	**Bidar (KA)**	
State: Complaint collector	*State: Scrutinizer*	
Citizens: Passive petitioners	*Citizens: Elite stewards and Rude Citizens*	
	Coimbatore (TN)	**Palakkad (KL)**
	State: Social reformer	*State: Planner*
	Citizens: Militant deliberators	*Citizens: Benefit invigilators*
	Dakshin Kanada (KA)	**Kasargod (KL)**
	State: Informant	*State: Planner*
	Citizens: Pragmatic deliberators	*Citizens: Benefit invigilators*

the meaningfulness of the *gram sabha* as a grassroots political exercise that has civic ramifications well beyond rural public service delivery.

In *gram sabhas* in Chittoor and Medak in Andhra Pradesh, the state acted as a *complaint collector*. *Panchayat* presidents and secretaries acted as go-betweens between citizens and the distant state, recording citizens' complaints and concerns and promising to convey these up the chain of command. On their part, citizens acted as *passive petitioners* who remained ignorant of the *panchayat's* functioning. Sometimes using reverential language to address the state, citizens were reduced to requesting politely the attention of their superiors.

In *gram sabhas* in Dharmapuri and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, the state acted as a *social reformer*, forever trying to mobilize the public to act in a desired way. Agents of the state were sanctimonious, righteously and heavy-handedly setting the agenda for village development. They imposed a set of priorities for economic, social, and environmental improvement formulated from above. This prefabricated agenda was used to steer and control *gram sabha* deliberations. *Panchayat* officials and state bureaucrats hectored citizens to fulfill preestablished

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governance goals. In Dharmapuri *gram sabhas*, villagers acted as *civic deliberators*. They exhibited skill in public deliberation and were not afraid to question authority figures or to hold them accountable. In Coimbatore *gram sabhas*, villagers acted as *militant deliberators*. They were belligerent critics ready and willing to excoriate state officials for inaction and inefficiencies.

In *gram sabhas* in Bidar, Karnataka, the state acted as a *scrutinizer,* keeping a watchful eye on how *panchayats* conducted the village's financial affairs. In a courtroom-like manner, district-level bureaucrats engaged in detailed public examination of the *panchayat*'s income and expenses in the presence of gathered villagers, passed judgments on the accuracy of the financial records, and provided counsel regarding proper bookkeeping practices. Public participation in low-literacy Bidar revealed a bipolar pattern. Some villagers acted as *elite stewards* who played a dominant role in *gram sabha* deliberations and served as informal coaches in public speaking to other participants. A large contingent of other villagers acted as *rude citizens*. These citizens were perceived to be creating a commotion and were rudely reprimanded by public officials. In Dakshin Kanada the state acted as an *informant,* keeping villagers abreast of *panchayat* and government actions and providing meticulously detailed information on budgets and development projects. Villagers who were knowledgeable and articulate acted as *pragmatic deliberators*. Their discursive style was constructed and tailored to arrive at efficient decision-making.

In *gram sabhas* in Palakkad and Kasargod in Kerala the limitations of our data should be kept in mind. We only observe one part of a nested deliberative process. It is clear that the state acted as a *planner* by rationalizing and streamlining the process of public deliberation and development planning. State representatives frequently sermonized the villagers on civic conduct and ethics. Citizens, for the most part, were turned into *benefit invigilators* by being made responsible for examining the authenticity and accuracy of applications for a plethora of government-subsidized benefits and tasked with priority ranking applicants following a rigorous point allocation system.

A state's governance strategies, we conclude, can significantly influence citizens' civic capabilities, including their capacity for discursive (through talk) civic engagement. This attribute of state governance will become increasingly important as deliberation-based decision-making is embraced across institutions.

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PAIR 1. CHITTOOR, ANDHRA PRADESH (LOW CAPACITY) – DHARMAPURI, TAMIL NADU (MEDIUM CAPACITY)

Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh: *Gram Sabhas* in Low- and Medium-Literacy Villages

Historically Chittoor had low levels of feudalism. It was part of British India and was largely under the *ryotwari* system, where the state collected revenue directly from the cultivator instead of having a class of mediating landlords. Despite the lack of feudal influences, at the time of data collection in 2002–2004, the *panchayat* system was immature. For various political reasons, the state until then had deemphasized the *panchayat* system. *Gram sabhas* in low- and medium-literacy villages were broadly similar in their structure and functioning. The length of a *gram sabha* meeting ranged from fifteen minutes to a maximum of an hour. A paltry number of villagers and very few *panchayat* and government officials attended these meetings. The meetings that were attended by unusually large numbers had specific reasons behind the turnout, like the presence of an MLA[2] or the distribution of "rice tokens" as a drought relief measure. The few meetings where some information about budget or public works was shared were likely the result of the particular subdistrict involved and not due to the *gram sabha* itself.[3] These exceptions aside, the meetings in low- and medium-literacy villages were brief. They started and ended abruptly. They focused on collecting villagers' demands and grievances. The state, embodied by the *gram panchayat* head, acted as an agency for complaint collection. After bidding villagers voice their needs, they made perfunctory gestures of recording them.

The following excerpt from a typical *complaint collector state* illustrates villagers airing their demands and grievances in brief utterances without providing specific, actionable details. The role of the *panchayat* head is largely ceremonial. In this case, the *sarpanch* ends the

[2] Member of Legislative Assembly. These are important political figures.

[3] Six of the ten *gram sabhas* sampled from medium-literacy villages were from the same subdistrict (Nagari mandal). In some of them there were brief episodes of interaction between the *sarpanch* and villagers. And in a few of them some budgetary details were announced along with the list of public works undertaken and their expenses. This was unique to the subdistrict and even within the subdistrict there was unevenness in state facilitation.

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meeting abruptly, as soon as a villager raises the thorny issue of corruption in the distribution of ration cards, which give families access to government-subsidized food grains and cooking oil. The villagers accept the decision to end the meeting without protest.

President: Today on 14th April we have assembled here to conduct the *gram sabha*. You can state your problems.

Villager [OBC]: There are no roads.

Villager [OBC]: Roads are to be laid.

Villager [OBC]: We have no house.

Villager [OBC]: No bus facility.

Villager [OBC]: People who have no houses need them.

Villager [OBC, female]: We have lots of problems.

President: You tell your problems.

Villager [OBC, female]: We have severe water problem.

Villager [OBC]: We have no bores [ground water wells]; no [water] pumps.

Villager [OBC]: Water is a very big problem.

Villager [OBC]: The bore is not able to supply free flow of water.

Villager [OBC]: Roads are not proper.

President: What else?

Villager [OBC]: There is no bus facility.

Villager [OBC]: We have been saying this everywhere, but there is no use no matter where we complain!

President: What else?

. . .

President: Funds released by the government are not sufficient for any work. They have to release funds in large amounts. If they release funds, then there is a chance of laying cement roads and implementing drinking water schemes. The MLA of this constituency is providing such facilities to all other villages, but he doesn't care for this village. We have taken the help of *zilla panchayat*. To lay the road we have taken Rs. 50,000. We have taken the D. D. for Rs. 2 lakhs and laid the road in Dalitwada [dalit neighborhood]. *Panchayat* members are not getting any kind of funds or help from the government. They are cutting the funds they have.

Villager [OBC]: They have issued forty-one ration cards for the villages, but some malpractice has been taken place in this regard.

President: I think we can conclude the meeting now.

(Erikambattu, Narayanavanam)

In another *gram sabha*, the villagers' demands were met by the standard cursory response of promises to communicate the problems

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to higher-up authorities. The following exchanges typify the behavior of the complaint collector state in many *gram sabhas:*

President: Today we are conducting this *gram sabha* to discuss the problems in our village and the various activities we have undertaken so far. You can express your problems here.

Villager [youth community member]: There is no proper community hall in this village for holding meetings or events. We should construct a community hall.

President: I will inform the government to construct a community hall and to provide all facilities to conduct meetings. I will try my level best to construct a community hall.

Villager [SC]: There are no cement roads in the village. Cement roads should be laid on all the village streets.

President: Wherever we don't have the cc roads, I will try and get them constructed at the earliest.

Villager [SC]: There are electricity poles on the streets, but the lights are not there. Should arrange for the lights.

President: I will arrange for streetlights very soon.

Villager [SC]: In the village some people have huts. About fifty families have no houses to stay. So you should construct "pucca" houses for all the house-less people. We have permission to construct houses on the hill but there is no road.

President: I will discuss with the government officials about this problem.

Villager: We don't have a proper cemetery or graveyard in the village. Sometimes the adjacent villagers throw the dead bodies in the outskirts of our village, and this leads to health problems for our children.

Villager: We have complained to the *panchayat* office, but till now there is no solution. They are threatening us.

President: I have given a complaint to the collector regarding this but nothing has happened, and I am helpless regarding this issue.

(Kalyanapuram, Narayanavanam)

Gram sabhas in Chittoor were empty governance rituals. They were completely devoid of substantive deliberations. There was no dissemination of information on public income and expenditures or reporting on the progress of village public works and ongoing government schemes. This lack of transparency from the government's side made citizens into passive petitioners, suppliants submissively rehearsing a litany of complaints with little or no effect.

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Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu: *Gram Sabhas* in Low- and Medium-Literacy Villages

Gram sabhas in low- and medium-literacy villages in Dharmapuri varied greatly from those in Chittoor in three immediately noticeable ways: their duration, the number of villagers attending and participating in discussions, and the number of *panchayat* officials and district- and block-level government bureaucrats who participated in the meetings. (These included the Block Development Officer (BDO), Assistant Engineer, and Revenue Officer.) The differences attest to the crucial role played by state attention to the *panchayat* system. The differences in this regard between Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are exemplary. The *gram sabhas* in each state differ accordingly. Every single *gram sabha* in Dharmapuri started with an announcement of the meeting agenda, which included a number of clearly specified topics that were set by the state as governance priorities to be discussed at the meeting. The agenda typically included the following village development priorities: village cleanliness and greening; eradicating child labor and ensuring children's and women's development; garbage collection; and rainwater harvesting. There could be as many as ten or twenty agenda items. A substantial part of the discussion was devoted to these themes. The following excerpt records a *panchayat* clerk announcing the meeting's agenda:

Mr. Nagaraj [Clerk, OBC]: On 2.10.04, Kondappanayana Palli *panchayat* meeting is going to be held on behalf of the leader and chief guest. The entire public and other members should come and participate in it without fail.

1. Regarding cleanliness of the village, discussion is to be held and decision has to be taken.
2. Using garbage gathered in the village, worm fertilizer has to be produced. Its advantages should be discussed.
3. Discussion has to be held regarding rainwater harvesting in all places.
4. Private bathroom facilities are to be provided in all houses. Discussion is to be held regarding activating this scheme and maintaining the public ladies' bathroom. For this they [state government] have given Rs. 500 for constructing toilets in each house. Whoever is interested can apply for it. We give it [money] to you to construct it. We give it through the *panchayat*.
5. Eradicating child labor and promising that we will not encourage child labor and develop a *panchayat* in which there is no child labor.

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6. Creating awareness.
7. To develop a green *panchayat* and village, each village has been given one thousand trees to plant. Some have already been planted and now we can plant in other places and even lakes too. Then we can plant all useful plants too.
8. According to the act No. S.S. 495/PWD (e2) dated on 13.1.03, we need to maintain records for all the [water] wells in this *panchayat*.
9. According to the order of the government, we have to talk about the schemes that are announced by the *panchayat*.
10. On 02.10.2004, we will observe total cleanliness day.
11. All the plastic garbage and other garbage in all water bodies like lakes, rivers, canals etc. are to be cleared. Decision has to be taken regarding this.

(Kondappanayana Palli, Bargur)

The agenda items are meant to raise public awareness of state-sponsored development schemes and to encourage villagers to adopt them. *Panchayat* officials report on their implementation and functioning and check villagers' compliance. This exercise exemplifies the *social reformer state*. The close integration of state-sponsored schemes into the discursive arena of the *gram sabha* by government fiat has a striking influence on deliberation practices. It makes the meetings a space where villagers can develop civic consciousness and form broader development aspirations for the village. Even in *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages, villagers typically discuss development issues of broad public interest. Public discussion becomes partly an artifact of state policy. A cynical interpretation might argue that the state used the agenda as a tool for monopolizing the discursive space of the *gram sabha*. However, we see the data as more mixed, reflecting control and manipulation but also the promotion of civic deliberation, sometimes on issues beyond the scope of villagers' original or immediately pressing concerns.

Public officials made determined efforts to persuade villagers to comply with state-sponsored schemes. They embodied the social reformer state working on the front lines for the benefit of rural communities. In the following excerpt, a Block Development Officer (BDO), an important village-level administrative figure, gives a long speech on sanitation with the aim of persuading villagers to build household toilets. He emphasizes women's role in the family and appeals to ideals of modernity:

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BDO: Now, the main agenda of today's meeting is to maintain the hygiene and cleanliness of the surroundings. This means that everyone should keep their house and their surroundings clean. If each one keeps their house and surroundings clean, the streets will automatically be clean. But no one does that. So that is why the government has made arrangements for a clean village and that is the subject of today's meeting – hygienic and clean environment.

What happens if it is unclean? One will fall sick, you will get fever, you will get diarrhea, and you will get all sorts of diseases. Fifteen years back there was no society [referring to women's groups] or union at all. Now of late, societies and unions have been started, and women play a major role in it now. The key [to the public sanitation facility] is with the women. Men are not even allowed. Now no woman is scared, and they have all the rights ... women have progressed to that extent ... Only women are responsible persons. That is why there is a saying that if the woman is good then the whole family will be a good family. That is a fact. If a boy studies well it means that the mother is there behind it. To make a person good is in the hands of a woman. You have got such a big responsibility, but you do not bother for the surroundings and for maintaining a clean environment. Say, for example, if you allow waste to accumulate inside or near the house, then we will fall sick, suffer from malaria, and diarrhea. That is why we should not allow flies and mosquitoes to breed near our houses. We can prevent it, and that is why we have to keep our surroundings clean.

Say for your daily [toileting] need you can use the unused land and fields [referring to open defecation]. In villages both men and women do that. But when these lands and fields are no longer there, then what would you all do for your daily need – will it not become difficult? Males can go anywhere, but ladies will face a lot of problems. So, what I say is all of you should have a toilet. In cities there are thousands of houses and each house has a toilet. It is clean. Has the city been spoilt? No. Similarly, if we have a toilet in each and every house here, then our village will also be clean. One who has more money can build a toilet for five thousand rupees. If one is poor, he can make a toilet with a thatched roof, at least – is it not? The town people do not get diarrhea or vomiting. They might fall sick, get flu, fever, and that may be because of water problem. The water may not be good. But not in village, it is not so. So, first think of keeping your village clean, and try to have a toilet in each and every house. Are the females in town only women? Are you all not women? Here, now do you understand?! Only then you will not fall sick, you will not get any disease. We can be clean. Hygiene is the main thing. Have to have a bath daily. We should also teach our children. [Too many voices]

In life there should be some improvement – you have to improve. You do not have to spend more money for that. For each toilet the government is

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funding Rs. 500. In this village we have built twenty public convenience [latrines] for Rs. 2000. It has been completed, but it is being kept as a memorial. It is not being used. Only if it is used will it serve the purpose, only then the water will flow out of the pit, and water will not stagnate.

If there are ten people in a house, the earth has the capacity to absorb the water used by all the ten people in the house. That is why we are constructing a dry latrine. In the city if we build a septic tank the outlet will have a ditch and the waste will flow out. If dry latrines are built the water is absorbed. There is no harm in it. So each and every house should have a toilet. And please do not use the open barren land that is nearby your homes for your convenience. It will harm you and as well as the surroundings. When the town people are following it, why can't we do it? In rainy season it is difficult [to go out in the open]; at night time you come back with an insect or worm bite and that also adds to your sickness; and at night time you can't go outside alone, you have to call someone, say your husband or your neighbor for help, to accompany you as a support so as not to feel scared. Just think of how many hurdles are there. What I say is all practical. I am also a village born and bred person only.

Villagers [many voices]: We are used to this kind of habit and use only.

BDO: What you say is correct. Did we all travel by bus right from the beginning? Did this village have transportation like bus facility twenty years ago? Only now you have that facility. Times are changing; we also have to change accordingly. Earlier we used to go by walking only to the nearby village.

Villager: You say you are giving only Rs. 500.

BDO: We are just aiding you by giving Rs. 500. You have money in your group; you can avail loan and you can build. It is for your purpose and for your hygiene and cleanliness. I am not going to use it. It is mainly for the ladies. Government is helping you by giving you Rs. 500. It will cost you around Rs. 1500 or Rs. 2000. Take loans from your group and build it and you can repay it say Rs. 50 or Rs. 100 per month. The loan will be repaid in about ten months or so, and this becomes a permanent facility for you. The children also can use it. You need not go out in the open; you will not get bad smell; you will not get diseases. Because of this [lack of personal toilet] you will not get a bride for your son from the town side. First question they will ask is, do you have a latrine in your village? He will not ask you, do you have a latrine [for men]? He will ask, is there a bathroom [for women] in your village? Does your village have it?

Villagers [shouting]: We cannot afford.

BDO: What is in this issue of affordability? You have to manage with what you have. Am I asking you to build a huge building or a temple or a tower? This is our basic need – it is most important. Maybe the government

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will fund this scheme only for another year or so, then they will stop it. First the government will start it, then it will stop – is it not the usual practice? Public should make proper use of it.

Villagers [too many voices]: Now they are giving Rs. 500, then later on they will stop that also?!

BDO: That is what I am saying. You have to improve . . .

(Chimpilirodi, Shoolagiri)

Villagers here act mostly as *civic deliberators* who by spontaneous choice or design, in agreement or disagreement, speak about civic matters. The simplest response the agenda elicits is a reiteration by villagers of the importance of the issues and the need for villagers to comply. Women and men echo and elaborate on the agenda items. The verbal reaffirmations of the agenda could be cynically interpreted to be a reflection of state indoctrination and rote repetition, though they can also be public commentaries that contain villagers' critiques and suggestions.

Sometimes, the social reformer state has the adverse effect of sidelining public demands that do not fit the state's development priorities. For instance, in a particular *gram sabha* the demand for drainage had been persistently ignored and state officials had suggested digging garbage and manure pits instead. But in this environment of relatively raised civic consciousness, villagers persistently voiced their unmet demands, even when they were not aligned with the state's agenda. *Panchayat* heads, whose electoral fate depends on satisfying their constituency, find themselves uncomfortably caught between a state government that had its own set of development priorities and their constituency whose needs were different.

The following excerpt exhibits the contradiction of the social reformer state encouraging school attendance and urging improvement in education but failing to address the lack of roads in some villages. The discussion about the suffering and crisis stemming from the lack of a road ends inconclusively, and the *panchayat* clerk abruptly transitions to the next item on the agenda:

President [MBC]: On 28.09.2004 the district collector told about the scheme of 70% education for all. We also participated in that. Here the education status is poor. In the places like Pudukadu, Ondikottai, Chengimalaikadu, there are no roads. Children can study up to fifth standard only. For higher studies they have to go to Pongalur or Perumabalum. In Perumabalum the school is in the morning. There is no

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bus facility for those children. They have to walk. They are not able to walk. There is no road facility in our village. This year nine students have come back [left school]. The reason is that they can't carry the book bag. We gave petition to the former collector, Ms. Aboorva, and then we gave two petitions to the present collector. And also I gave three petitions to the former collector. But there is no action yet. There is no use. They told many things in the *grama sabha* meeting. What is the use of conducting *grama sabha* meetings? The reason is that the agendas made in the *grama sabha* meeting are not fulfilled. At the beginning many people would attend the *grama sabha* but nowadays it is getting reduced. The reason is that everyone [state officials] says lies. So there is no use for the people in this *grama sabha* meeting.

Villager [SC]: We are coming to the *grama sabha* meeting by walking. About seven or eight women have come to this meeting from Ondikottai by walking. In the previous meeting, that is in the meeting held during the month of October, we told that there is no road facility for us. Our children are suffering a lot. They find it difficult to walk. They are small children, and they are unable to walk with weight [of school bag]. They say they won't go to school. They say that there is no road, so their legs are aching. Still, we admitted them in the government school. Women are also suffering because of this road problem. We have given many petitions to the collector, and also went directly and gave complaint to the officers about this. We saw all the persons related to this problem. We went to many places and gave the complaint; and we also went to Uthangarai to submit a petition. They said we should make our children study. We can't do anything. We are not able to walk. [When we were young] We also walked like that on the stones and studied. But our children are not going. We have given petition monthly once directly to the collector. Even now we gave a petition recently. But there is no action yet. The road is as such. We ourselves tried it for rice [food-for-work scheme].

. . .

Clerk [MBC]: This year nine children have come out [of school] and started grazing cattle . . . They have to walk 6 kms. There the school starts at 8.30 am. Even if they start here at 5.00 am in the morning, they are unable to reach the school at 8.30 am.

Villager [SC]: They can't even go by bicycle.

Villager [SC]: Not even by bicycle since the road is in such a [poor] condition. School is in a village with such roads. They say that everyone should study! How can they study? Though we have made many complaints, there is still no action. The collector, VAO, or the Tamil Nadu government, none of them have the will to solve this problem. Our school-going children

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are suffering a lot. What can we do? Can we vacate this village? Where can we go?

. . .

Clerk [MBC]: Subject 3: Regarding preparing earthworm fertilizer using the wastage collected in the *panchayat*. You are putting the waste. If you put it in a pit, then we can produce earthworm fertilizer with that. Now we are going to discuss about that.

(Kalappampadi, Pennagaram)

In Dharmapuri even though there was a great deal of facilitation of *gram sabhas* by the state government, there was no discussion of the *panchayat* budget. This is likely because, at the time in Tamil Nadu, budgetary control lay with the union (block) *panchayat*, and the *gram panchayat* had little role in determining financial allotments. But villagers asked about *panchayat* funds. The resulting interactions were occasions when public officials, who embodied the social reformer state, tried to educate the public in *panchayat* finance and instill fiscal responsibility in them:

Villager [male]: But the responsibility is with the Leaders. There is a big sewage pond with dirty water lying in the outskirts of the village, which cannot be cleaned by one or two persons. The leaders should allocate funds and should remove it.

Mr. Palanivel [BDO]: There is nothing called fund and all those things. Village *panchayat* cannot do everything. We are collecting taxes; with that amount how can we spend? When we get married, we should earn money to raise our children. Do you know what are the electricity charges per month? You have to take the responsibility of management of the *panchayat*. You people do not even allow us to increase the house tax. You people do not pay water tax also. You are asking us to install [light] bulbs in the streets!

The *panchayat* management is always expecting funds from the government, and they are finding out ways and means to manage its affairs based on these funds. Can we increase the house tax? If you pay Rs. 1 as tax, the government is giving Rs. 1 and 15 paise as funds, together we have Rs. 2.15 paise as funds. We have to operate on behalf of the people. One person said that in the TV room the power supply has been cut. Since you have not paid the money, we have done that. This is only for the usage of people.

(Beerjepalli, Shoolagiri)

Pragmatic discussions of ends and means also take place. For instance, the following excerpt concerns a sustained discussion on the water supply problem that ends with a pair of villagers volunteering

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financial help and the President agreeing to move ahead with assistance from them. The cooperative discussion leads to a creative solution being proposed:

Villager [speaker 1]: There is no water in the village. What is the *panchayat* planning to do? There is no water in the tank.

Villager [speaker 2]: Lake should be deepened. This is important. Plumber is not attending to the fault properly.

Villager [speaker 3]: We need an overhead water tank near Thimmarayaswamy temple. People and cattle face much difficulty for water. Ministers and MLA's have not taken any steps.

Villager [speaker 4]: As much as I know, there is problem of water and electricity supply. Water problems are more severe. There is water connection from Chinnakothur [nearby village]. But somebody has stolen the delivery line since past five years. Now the President has to spend Rs. 2000–3000 to replace the steel pipe connection. Therefore, we request that a pump room with a bore well should be constructed in Bustalapally itself, like the one provided in the public bathroom.

President: I will inform the BDO for necessary action.

. . . [Other demands are expressed and responded to.]

Villager [speaker 15]: We need public toilet. There is no water in the water tank.

Villager [speaker 16]: There is no water in the lake even, then how can you expect water in the tank.

Villager [speaker 17]: We need cement storage tank at the ground level.

Villager [speaker 18]: If we have water in the overhead tank, then where is the need of smaller ground-level tanks!

President: We can build smaller ground-level tanks only with *panchayat* funds. But the *panchayat* does not have sufficient funds.

Villager [speaker 20]: Even if we have water tank, there is no good water, and canal water is not good. We also need drainage. That is what I request the President and vice president to look into.

President: Already all our efforts to build the drainage system could not be carried out because people did not give land, and they themselves directed the drainage water along the roads. Even the drain water pipelines laid were stolen.

. . .

Villager [speaker 22]: We will be very happy if drinking water facility for us and our cattle is provided by way of water tubs for the cattle and water tank for us.

President: We can do all these things if we get revenue for the *panchayat*.

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Villager [speaker 23]: We are not asking the *panchayat* to do this. We are asking the government to do this.

President: Okay, we will also approach the government for assistance.

. . .

Villager [female, speaker 29]: Is it not your responsibility to build the overhead tank?

President: No, it is the water board's responsibility, and it is asking for commission.

Villager [speaker 30]: Is it 20% [commission]?

President: No, it is 10%. It comes to Rs. 20,000. So I came back.

Villager [speaker 31]: Sir, we two are the temple trustees. We will give Rs. 20,000. You get the sanction.

President: Yes, you also come with me. We will give the money and get the sanction

(Bustalapally, Shoolagiri)

Gram sabhas in low- and medium-literacy villages in medium-capacity states like Tamil Nadu could be attracting villagers who were relatively educated and well informed, since they perceived the meetings to be effective and substantive exercises. Alternatively, it may be that even illiterate villagers tended to be better informed and capable of effective civic deliberation because the *gram sabhas* they attended were embedded in state governance structures that actively disseminated information and promoted participation.

Conclusion

There were vast differences between *gram sabhas* in Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh, and Dharmapuri in Tamil Nadu. In Chittoor, *gram sabhas* operated largely as spaces where state agents came to record public complaints and demands. There was not a single instance of villagers engaging in oversight of *panchayat* expenditure, demanding accountability, or monitoring the progress of public works. The state did not supply information about budgets or anything else. No government line department officials attended these meetings. These lacunae reflected the lack of importance with which *gram sabhas* were treated by the state government. In contrast, in Dharmapuri the state played the *social reformer* role. It was intent on raising public consciousness about village development issues crafted to align with state priorities. State agents engaged in social and moral persuasion to influence

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villagers' preferences to adhere to the state's development priorities. Public officials adopted a didactic tone in addressing villagers. They fostered as they steered deliberation. This resulted, on the one hand, in inculcating civic consciousness among the citizens, including on topics that were not among the natural priorities of the villagers themselves, such as the greening of the village, hygiene and sanitation, child labor, and rainwater harvesting. On the other hand, it resulted in a crowding out of deliberative space by dictating the topics for deliberation. This control of the deliberative space should not be understood as precluding deliberation. There was a significant degree of deliberation on some of the state designated issues that coincided with the villagers' priorities. Villagers were also able to bring up topics that were not on the official agenda. The villagers in Dharmapuri were *civic deliberators* whose participation in *gram sabhas* reflected an emerging civic consciousness and the capacity for public deliberation.

PAIR 2. MEDAK, ANDHRA PRADESH (LOW CAPACITY) – BIDAR, KARNATAKA (MEDIUM CAPACITY)

Medak, Andhra Pradesh: *Gram Sabhas* in Low-Literacy Villages

Gram sabhas in Medak operated as complaint recording sessions, and the state acted as a *complaint collector*. Public participation was limited to brief utterances of demands and grievances, and *panchayat* officials functioned as intermediary messengers promising to convey grievances to higher authorities. Typically, the *panchayat* head started the *gram sabha* by simply commanding villagers to speak. The state in this historically feudal village appeared as a remote institution operating at a great remove from its rural clients. Officials from the government line departments were not present in any of the meetings, and there was never any mention of public works or budgetary allocations. Overall, *panchayat* officials maintained an attitude of disdainful aloofness throughout this civic exercise. In the following excerpt, the *sarpanch* responds brusquely to a villager's complaint:

Villager [female, OBC]: Sir, [to ration inspector, henceforth, RI] you haven't given me drought rice.

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RI [male]: But we've already distributed it. When they enrolled the names for it, where were you?

Villager [female]: President knows that. Every time I go to his office he says, "Let's see."

RI: The president is present right here.

President [male]: Do you think I carry around the full list of villagers always? What can I do other than saying let's see!

Female [OBC]: He [*sarpanch*] did not inform me about it sir.

RI [male]: OK. That quota is completed. We will definitely enroll your name in next quota. Please tell me what do you want us to do for you? Do you want to get pension?

(Mamedigi, Nyalkal)

In a second excerpt, in a village where upper caste dominance is prevalent, the upper-caste male *panchayat* secretary reprimanded a low-caste female *panchayat* president when she unexpectedly broke her silence and expressed frustration at being persistently sidelined. Caste and gender are both at play here as principles of power used to suppress voice:

President [female, SC]: They [other *panchayat* officials] don't pay any heed to the *sarpanch* because I'm a poor woman. Nobody pays any attention to my words. You do everything by yourselves and keep me aside as I'm from the lower caste.

Secretary [male]: Why do you say we don't pay you attention? We told you about this meeting. You're the *sarpanch*, and everything will be done with your direction. [Addressing the *sarpanch's* husband, who is present among the crowd] You should tell your wife [the *sarpanch*] how to behave in a general meeting like this.

(Mungi, Nyalkal)

In the typical *gram sabha* in Medak, villagers voiced a range of problems about village infrastructure and resources, usually addressing *panchaya*t officials in a beseeching manner. Their discursive style relied on describing a problem, lamenting the negligence, and politely requesting attention from higher authorities. When they complained about government inaction, their tone was reverential. Villagers were careful to show deference to authority. They did not demand information on current budgetary allocations nor did they question *panchayat* officials on the use of past funds. Here again villagers acted as *passive petitioners,* combining polite complaints and pleading with submissiveness:

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President [OC]: Today we have assembled here to discuss the various problems being faced by us. I wish that the elders present here put forth our problems to the government and get something positive done. . .

. . .

Villager [male, SC]: There is no linking road to our village. The drainage and water problem persists. I wish at least now the government will look into our problems and do something for our betterment.

Villager [male, SC]: There is a problem of transportation.

Villager [male]: Namaste to all members of the *gram panchayat*. We have become independent more than fifty years ago, yet we haven't developed. Whenever a problem was raised, it was only discussed. After Mr. Ashok Deshmukh was elected the president things seem to be better. We have all contributed and purchased a water tanker. We had also staged a protest rally in front of the District collector, Shanti Kumari. Though she has given an assurance, nothing has come out it. No money has been sanctioned to us for this purpose. There is a need for a *panchayat* building. Then we need roads and drinking water.

Villager [male, SC]: There has been some development. A road has been laid in the SC colony and more needs to be laid.

Villager [male, SC]: No matter how many problems we talk to you about in these *grama sabhas*, there seems to be no solution. So there is no need to express any problem. There is no development at all.

Villager [male, BC]: There is no hospital in our village. We have to walk 3 kms to reach the hospital. The compounder will not get up. And even if he gets up he writes some prescription.

President [OC]: OK, you expressed your problems; we will note them down and try to do something.

. . .

Male [SC]: What is the use of writing down? Has the government done anything up to now? We have expressed our problems and said what needs to be done. If there is an assurance along with the time frame it will be good.

(Choukampalli, Kangti)

Gram sabhas in Medak did not appear to have a role in local governance. State facilitation of these deliberative forums was thoroughly lacking. They did not increase transparency. They were not spaces where state agents fostered villagers' civic consciousness, capacity for deliberation, or their power to hold public officials accountable.

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Bidar, Karnataka: *Gram Sabhas* in Low-Literacy Villages

In Bidar, *gram sabhas* were conducted by strictly adhering to an institutional structure laid down by the state. They uniformly started with the public auditing of the *panchayat's* accounts, called the "jamabandhi." The "Nodal officer," who was a government bureaucrat, conducted the audit and served as a direct link to the resources and power under the government's command. Due to this institutionalized system of public audit, a lot of budgetary information was brought to light and discussed in the public domain. This practice led government officials to play a significant role in interrogating and coaching *panchayat* officials about the proper maintenance of financial records and in imposing a sense of public financial accountability. As a result, *gram sabhas* were highly informative and substantive exercises. A significant part of the long meetings was occupied by meticulous inspection of *panchayat* accounts and records. In Bidar, we find the *scrutinizer state* embodied in the supervisory figure of the nodal officer.

The following excerpt showcases a nodal officer explaining the purpose and procedure of the "jamabandhi" before commencing on the time-consuming task. He explains how the practice is intended to promote transparency and cultivate the public's capacity of performing independent oversight of the *panchayat*'s workings. The surprising fact is that this particular meeting was attended by only five villagers. This did not discourage the nodal officer from fulfilling his function. This *gram sabha* meeting went on for five and a half hours. It stands as a powerful example of state facilitation of citizen participation in low-literacy Bidar:

Nodal officer [male]: Dear friends, president of the Gramapanchayat, members, villagers, secretary, and vice-president, according to the higher officials meeting held on 20th, you have received funds under several different schemes like SJRY, Indira Awas Yojana, and Ashraya for the year 2004–05. The president and secretary will arrange for a meeting to check whether all the works are completed or any are pending. This needs to be done in front of all the villagers, and they [villagers] should see the accounts. I will extend a warm welcome to all the people who are here. You will do lot of discussion on the works completed and those pending. The government has instituted this practice to know about all the issues. They have made a law called transparency to keep all the citizens informed about all the works done and to educate them. Whether it be road, drainage, electricity, water,

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whatever it is, first you should be informed about the grants that have been received and spent, then about the new work to be undertaken. Ward members should also know these things. So we have organized this Jamabandhi program today. I will look into every single issue and comment if they [*panchayat* officials] don't produce the needed documents. Nobody should comment on someone else unnecessarily. I will look into all the related applications, make a note of it, and submit to the office. This is the intention of this program.

In your action plan, some details are there and some are missing. Now, we will proceed with whatever details your secretary will give us pertaining to SJRY or water supply, and we will inform you accordingly. If some mistake has been committed and you want to inform us, you should not fight and shout. You should remain calm and cool and inform us about it, and we will check against the records in this book to decide whether the secretary has done it correctly or not. If we find any mistakes, we will let you know, and we will read out whatever we write. All the information will be brought to the notice of the government and *gram panchayat* members, and it will be set right. It should be transparent. All these days this [transparency mechanism] was not there, now it has come [as a directive from the higher tiers of the government]. I request all of you to cooperate and thank you for the opportunity [claps].

(Belakuni, Aurad)

During these highly technical public audit sessions, villagers were mostly spectators. Although they were often unable to grasp the intricacies of accounting, because of the emphasis on public accountability they had imbibed a sense of having some power over *panchayat* officials. This was reflected through their line of questioning and commentary on the functioning of *panchayat* officials:

Secretary [male]: It is settled Sir. But they haven't given the voucher.

Villager [male]: If there's no voucher, how can you believe that the work has been done? If the work is done then only they can make the payment.

Nodal officer [male]: They have showed it as outstanding in audit. This audit happens once a year. Do one thing – write that it is shown in the outstanding book. The villagers are saying that they have not done the settlement. They should understand.

Villager [male]: Why do you tell us? Will you give any of that money to us? They get the money, and we don't even get to know how much grants they've received? Sir, now you see why they haven't given a letter? Nobody here takes the responsibility; anything can be done on the basis of mutual understanding and faith.

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Nodal officer [male]: They should know that they need to submit it. The people who do the work should ask for it in the general body meeting. Out of six projects, five are listed here. Have these works been completed? What is this pipeline work? It's not listed in the action plan. OK, is the work at least over?

Secretary [male]: It is over sir.

Nodal officer [male]: Our people can't understand!

Villager [male]: Drainage work is not complete, sir. You arrange for a meeting tomorrow; let us discuss about it.

Villager [male]: They should answer all these questions, no? Or else, what's the use of the people coming here. Let them reply!

Nodal officer [male]: This is an open meeting. We'll discuss everything in front of you. We will take approval from you and proceed. You are the citizens of this village.

(Belakuni, Aurad)

Public participation in low-literacy *gram sabhas* in Bidar was variable both in numbers participating and in the quality of participation. The numbers of villagers attending ranged from one to over one hundred. The meetings also ranged from being orderly to unruly and raucous. In general, at the meetings in Bidar, villagers spoke freely, presented their demands, challenged claims made by *panchayat* officials, demanded information and clarifications, and proposed new works. In some of them people created a commotion and completely disrupted the meeting.

The meetings were characterized by two distinct patterns of participation. A large proportion of the public operated with comparatively little knowledge about government programs and *gram sabha* procedures. Many were not adept at public deliberation and were often discourteous in their speech. This type of performance typified what can be called rude citizens[4] and most likely captures the participation of illiterate and less educated villagers. By contrast, in every meeting there were a handful of villagers who made instructional interventions and tried to coach their illiterate peers in the proper manner of deliberation. These individuals, who were most likely educated, were often the dominant voices in the meetings and displayed experience in deliberation. They typify what we call *elite stewards*. This polarized pattern of participation can be associated with the skewed distribution of education. In a medium capacity

[4] There is the related concept of "rude accountability" discussed by Hossain (2010) in her work on informal pressures on frontline bureaucrats in Bangladesh.

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state where *gram sabhas* were substantive exercises, a largely illiterate population could incentivize the educated minority to attend and be vocal.

A typical *gram sabha* in Betagery showcases the two discursive patterns. It is a forty-minute-long meeting attended by forty villagers and starts with a deliberative exchange about "check dams."[5] Under a government waterworks project, a check dam has been sanctioned for the village. This leads to substantial discussion on whether a check dam is really needed and the suggestion that the funding be used instead for other purposes. The joint engineer rejects the suggestion, and subsequently a villager makes another proposal that is accepted. At the end of this deliberation, the meeting breaks up in raucous confusion. While some villagers earnestly continue the discussion, others talk among themselves, shout, and behave disruptively. This leads to a polarized atmosphere, with *elite stewards* trying to deliberate while *rude citizens* make rowdy interjections. Some villagers harshly reprimand the *panchayat* president, the secretary, and members:

Secretary [male]: One check dam is completed but there is provision for one more.

Villager [male]: Don't want another check dam.

Joint engineer [JE] [male, SC]: You can't reject the check dam.

Secretary [male]: There's pressure to execute the check dam.

Villager [male]: If it is so, let us propose to remove the silt instead of building another check dam.

JE [male, SC]: Removal of silt work will come under SGRY.

Villager [male]: You build check dam in some other village.

JE [male, SC]: One will be built in another village, but we have to build another one here.

Secretary [male]: [Addressing villagers] You select the place.

Villager [male]: You execute the work in whichever place is selected, but it will be useless.

JE [male, SC]: Don't talk like that; there'll be much use from the check dam [later clarifying that it will provide a means of conserving excess rainwater during monsoons, in an otherwise arid area]. We've constructed so many.

Secretary [male]: The work of removing silt cannot be executed by *Zilla panchayath*.

JE [male, SC]: We'll start the work soon, and the earth that's dug out will be collected on the side.

[5] Small dams constructed to collect rainwater.

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Villager [male]: We shouldn't put it on the side.
Villager [male]: You should widen the road with it.
Member: Tell further.
Villager [male]: Both road and water are required.
Secretary [male]: OK, then we will use the earth to widen the roads.
President *[male, ST]:* Agreed!
. . .
Villager [male]: People are shouting and not listening properly.
Villager [male]: People give different opinions. If one says something, another will not agree with that.
Villager [male]: What will you do in this village!
Villager [male]: Yes, what they're [*panchayat* and government officials] saying is correct. Why will they come? Nothing can be said and nothing can be heard. If all of you keep quiet, they will tell and we can listen . . .
Villager [male]: Come let us go; we have work. Let us go.
Villager [male]: The water level in the well has decreased.
Villager [male]: If you want to ask, remain here or else go away.
. . .

(Betagery, Basavakalyana)

Another exchange reveals the villagers' capacity to demand accountability from public officials, but using harsh language to do so. In the following excerpt, villagers question the quality and quantity of food supplied under the school midday meal program and reproach a schoolteacher for trying to deflect criticism with unrelated arguments. The lack of deference the villagers exhibit is noteworthy. It contrasts markedly with the deference typically shown in Medak:

Villager [male]: The management of the midday meal program in the school is not being done properly. They are not serving proper food to the students. The preparation of food is not up to the mark. It makes the students fall sick and the cooks simply take the food home.
. . .
Villager [male]: The food is not cooked properly, and the members never look into what is being cooked. Change the cook!
Teacher [male]: My name is Rajasekara; I am the co-teacher. Food will be prepared and served to the students. Some days, there may be some excess food remaining after the meal. The workers will carry the remaining food to their houses, instead of wasting it. In future, we will follow your instructions.
Villager [male]: For how many students is the food prepared?
Teacher [male]: We prepare food at the rate of 100 gms per head, but sometimes there's a bit of excess and sometimes it falls short. If it falls short

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then it is adjusted during serving, and if there's excess then the villagers take it home.

Villager [male]: They're taking it home every day!

Villager [male]: Since the past three days this is happening.

Villager [male]: Everybody knows it. Even the students know.

Villager [male]: This is the third day.

Teacher [male]: I am a teacher and I'm transferable. This is an internal problem of your village. The cook belongs to your village and has been appointed by all of you. If you discuss the problem in the meeting, it will be solved. The cook does not belong to my place; the error is human. If you find an error on our part, we will surrender and rectify it. If not, you can take action against us.

Villager [male]: They are different types [behave differently] before the *panchayat* and the public.

Teacher [male]: This problem belongs to your village. *Grama sabha* means not *panchayat* level. Let us sit, have discussions before *panchayat* officer, and then come to a final proposal.

President [male, OBC]: In your position, you have powers to take action against proxy cooks.

Villager [male]: You remove the cooks who are not interested.

Teacher [male]: It is my request to the public and you to tell me clearly that my presence in this village is not wanted by you. Please just say that, and I will go to some other place. As I am a government servant, I can work anywhere. I know what are the topics to be taught to the students, and I am doing it sincerely. But the students return home after school and throw their school bags aside and do other things instead of studying, and the parents are not in a position to guide them properly and direct their studies. So, tell me, how will they become free and fair citizens of India?

Villager [male]: Oh teacher, don't bluff us!

. . .

Villager [male]: We should catch hold of the headmaster.

Villager [male]: Change your SDMC [committee] members.

Villager [male]: The existing members' sons or daughters do not attend this school, so they're not bothered about attending the meetings. Form a new committee.

Villager [male]: Rice and lentil stocks should be checked often as they become stale quite fast.

. . .

Villager [male]: They cook the food and this gentleman [the teacher] tries to sell the rice. [mass peaking among villagers]

Villager [male]: You sell to the public and collect money from them!

(Ghogga, Rajola, Bsasavakalyan)

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Villagers also brought allegations that revealed either their failure to grasp, or their unwillingness to accept, some of the requirements on which government schemes are conditioned. For example, some infrastructure schemes had been tied to raising public contributions to match 15 percent of the cost. These matching public contribution requirements had been put in place by the government to create a sense of ownership of public resources among villagers. In the following excerpt, villagers accost *panchayat* officials and blame them for siphoning off rice received for food-for-work schemes. The secretary explains that the rice was returned because the work had not been properly executed. As this example shows, some complaints voiced in low-literacy contexts have questionable merit. Nonetheless even poor villagers make it clear that *panchcyat* officials are doing them no favors by attending this meeting and answering their questions:

Villager [male]: Couple of days back rice was received [tied to food for work scheme for people below the poverty line], but it was sent back. Will it be repeated?

Villager [male]: You allot Rs. 1,00,000 for one village, but then you say that we [the *gram panchayat*, GP] have the grants but you [public] should contribute Rs. 15,000! Who will contribute?

Joint engineer Rajkumar [male, SC]: See, that [type of scheme] has not come now.

Villager [male]: No, not like that. Last time we received rice in *panchayath*, but it was returned. Why? For what purpose did you spend it?

Secretary [male]: Now we've started work on a check-dam and the rice for that is available.

Villager [male]: When did you receive rice? Will you store it in some building and just tell us afterwards that this and that happened with it!

JE [male, SC]: No, no, it never happened like that.

Villager [male]: Simply you will tell, no, work is over, no rice, no rice! And all of you [officials] repeat the same thing.

Villager [male]: Even for the building work rice was received [by the GP]!

Secretary [male]: Yes, even for that, but none of you did the work properly. That is what happened!

Villager [male]: See, you must tell us if earth-work [under food-for-work scheme] is available.

Secretary [male]: The GP members should tell you that.

Villager [male]: You also tell the members [to tell us].

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Secretary [male]: That's why we're saying all this in front of everyone; the president is here, the members are here, and all of you are present.

Villager [male]: We gave all our votes, no?

(Chittakotak, Betagery, Basavakalyan)

This exchange is reminiscent of speech between social superiors and inferiors in the feudal *jajmani* system that prevailed in the region. What explains why some villagers use such a discourteous tone? One possibility is that villagers realize that *panchayat* and government officials, who as well-educated members of officialdom are their presumptive social superiors, are now their "servants" who are reliant on them for support. They are required by the state to listen to villagers' demands and dependent upon their votes for power. This reversal of power may be prompting some villagers to use a tone usually reserved for subordinates.

Conclusion

In Medak (AP) and Bidar (KN) districts, illiteracy exists in conjunction with upper-caste dominance. The social structure of both districts continues to be infused with feudal hierarchies. Historically, Medak and Bidar were part of the erstwhile Hyderabad state. They share a feudal legacy and other cultural and linguistic similarities. The only significant difference between them is that Medak is in Andhra Pradesh (present day Telangana after the division of AP), which neglected to foster the *panchayat* system, while Bidar is in Karnataka, a frontrunner in implementing decentralized governance. Comparing *gram sabhas* in Medak and Bidar reveals the difference state facilitation can make in fostering villagers' capacity to engage discursively with the state and take part in the deliberative process of governance.

In Medak, by not facilitating public deliberation and withholding information related to *panchayat* activities, the state turned *gram sabhas* into a vacuous ritualistic exercise. But *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages in Bidar, Karnataka, operated very differently. The vast difference in state facilitation resulted in remarkably different patterns of public participation. The meetings started with detailed public scrutiny of *panchayat* budgets, and this led villagers to be acutely aware of the public accountability of officials. Villagers attending *gram sabhas* in Bidar were inquisitive and vocal, challenging and

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confronting. They were never deferential like their counterparts in Medak. Not all villagers were fully informed about governmental regulations or had a full grasp of budgetary information, but they were not shy in demanding information or clarification. A significant part of the meetings turned into question and answer sessions on funds and allocations rather than discussions of ends and means. Often calls for clarification became so boisterous that meetings oscillated between being constructive and cacophonously incoherent. Elite stewards played a prominent role in many of these meetings. Their role was mostly educative and facilitative in making interventions to instruct the villagers on how to frame their demands. Political factionalism was noticed in very few cases. Finally, a number of *gram sabhas* in Bidar appeared to be highly polarized with verbal conflicts and mass speaking, leading to noisy breakdowns in communication alongside a minority of the attendees trying to engage with the state in a constructive and deliberative manner.

PAIR 3. COIMBATORE, TAMIL NADU (MEDIUM CAPACITY) – PALAKKAD, KERALA (HIGH CAPACITY)

Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu: *Gram Sabhas* in High-Literacy Villages

Gram sabhas in the high-literacy villages of Coimbatore were notable for the information-rich deliberative exchanges between *panchayat* officials and villagers. The combination of a medium capacity state and relatively high literacy meant that villagers were very well informed about the workings of the local government and knowledgeable about problems relating to public resources and infrastructure. The state here performed as a *social reformer state* with the same pattern of agenda setting found in Dharmapuri. The villagers were highly articulate and made knowledgeable queries and comments. They had a belligerent discursive style and frequently excoriated *panchayat* and state officials. Their performance as citizens can be best characterized as that of *militant deliberators*.

In Coimbatore, as is typical all over Tamil Nadu, *gram sabhas* start with the announcement of the agenda. The features that stood out were the articulate and informed nature of the complaints by villagers and

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their demands for accountability on technical details of the execution of public works projects. The complaints and criticisms revealed villagers' active role in monitoring public works projects. Villagers frequently adopted a combative tone when they demanded accountability, challenged *panchayat* officials on their claims, and critiqued the perceived ineffectiveness of the *gram sabha* and the *panchayat*. Villagers' critiques were backed up by their knowledge of public resource provision in other villages and relevant technical information. The meetings were both deliberative and confrontational. The following excerpt records a lengthy deliberation in one *gram sabha* in which the villagers launch a scathing critique of the ineffectiveness of the *gram sabha,* call the meetings a waste and an "eye wash," and simultaneously deliberate on multiple issues. These include the nonpayment of house taxes, obtaining water connections, and the problems in the construction of a public lavatory:

Villager: You said there is "drought" and water problem. But the water from the road pipe is getting wasted. It is flowing non-stop on the roads, and you have not done anything to stop that flow and fix the water stagnation. This problem has been there for the past two months. You're talking about rainwater harvesting! That is not helping the public in any way, where we are not even able to walk on the road during the night. In every *gram sabha* meeting we have been telling you the things you have not done for Jeevananda nagar. Whoever comes [gets elected] as the head of *panchayat*, this Jeevananda nagar is neglected, and nobody cares despite us saying that in *gram sabha* meetings. There is no improvement for the past thirty years. There is no proper road. If there is any emergency, even an auto-rickshaw cannot come here because there is no road at all here.

Villager: So many projects are being announced by the government, but nothing has been done for this Jeevananda nagar. We will feel happy and there will be some meaning in having *gram sabha* meeting if at least 10% of the projects are carried out for this area. Ever since the *panchayat pradhan* has been appointed, we have been telling in this meeting, which are the places affected, what are the problems faced by the public, where welfare projects have not been provided. But nothing has been done so far. When you are showing maintenance of drinking water pipeline, you are not sending a plumber to stop that water-flow from the pipe. And then you show electricity expenses, whereas there are no road lights nor are the lights working. You entrust this job to somebody, and he shows some [false] account. Show that he completed the job! Without verifying whether that job has been done or not, you pay them, and show the expenditure in *gram*

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sabha. Make sure that at least 10% of the sanctioned projects are implemented, otherwise do not call for such *gram sabha* meetings at all!

You have laid a road in Kumalapalayam. When water is flowing on the road, what is the use of laying such a road! Where there is water stagnation, the road will get spoiled. There should be some sewerage channel through which the sewage water can pass. You have to check those leaking pipes and set it right, otherwise the tar coating will come off.

Villager: Sir, we are all coming from Chitharasan palayam *panchayat*. We are about fifty to sixty persons who have come here personally. There is no patta for us, and there is no roads, no road lights, no electricity, no drainage, none of the facilities are there for us. We don't even have the basic requirement for us. These *gram sabha* meetings are a total waste! There is no use at all for us to have the *gram sabha*. This meeting is just an "eye wash." We have a leader here who does not know anything nor does he know what to ask.

Panchayat clerk: All these things are unfulfilled because there is no fund with the *panchayat*. We wanted to increase the house tax – what was the tax as per old schemes? It was 0.40 paise per 8 ft, means there will be Rs. 250/- tax per house. You are [living] there for more than forty to fifty years. Out of all of you there are many who have not paid house tax.

Villager: If there are ten welfare projects at least one project should be implemented, then only people will come forward to pay the taxes.

Clerk: Panchayat head emphatically said, if you pay the tax, then only there will be enough fund in the *panchayat* as well, and matching grants will be received from the government.

Villager: How do you expect us to pay taxes, when we do not have even the basic facility! Do not tell us that shortage of fund is due to non-payment of house taxes. Head has managed to get water from Metthupalayam municipality and able to give piped water to other villages under this *panchayat*. They have collected Rs. 3000/- per family for pipe connection. When will you give us the connection? Water connection is available for Sudandrapuram, teacher colony, Edyarpalayam. We have already paid house tax, though there was delay. It is more than two months now. What are you going to do about it?

Villager: In Coimbatore district they collect 45 paise /8 ft as house tax. They obtained water connection from "Athikadal," which is being supplied to all. There is short supply also there. If you want to increase the tax, we do not mind that, but show us some welfare projects that we may benefit from. You implement at least two projects in the place of ten projects. Some essential things can be met. Come to the village and meet village representatives often. You say you are toiling for us! But where is the benefit? And so whatever you say, that you strive for our benefit, will not

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be accepted by us. It is purely in the hand of *panchayat* head, officials, and administration, and we request you to do something at the earliest.

Villager: If we come and ask about the welfare amenities *panchayat* will ask us to go to the *pradhan*, and he will tell us to see others. The contractor has built septic tanks for our houses. There should be at least half inch PVC pipe, but it is not like that. They managed to add cement and sand and completed the job. If you want to test or verify what I say, you can go by yourself and see. It is just the truth. If we approach village administration they do not listen or do anything about that. There is also a school nearby. For that school also there is no facility, there is not even a good teacher teaching. For this also the head has to do something. They have allotted 30 cents of land, and the contractor manages to build the house with two bags of cement alone. Is it possible to build a home with two bags of cement only? Can our leader's house also be built with two bags of cement only! Will they accept the quality of such houses? Even the person who has taken this contract, will he do like that for his house? That is what we are questioning.

There was a person who was entrusted with laying roads near our *patta* lands. And this person who is to make *pattas* in our names is demanding Rs. 2000 or 3000 per *patta*. There are 40 *patta* that have been issued, which means you can calculate how much he is going to get. We are denied basic requirements, so where will we go for this 2000, 3000, or 7000 for getting *patta*. This *patta* is given to us [by the government] free of cost – no need to pay anything – and still these people are demanding money. An individual is asking for this money, showing reason that you people in this *panchayat* office, right from assistant to *panchayat pradhan,* are to be looked after [with bribes]. He mentions your names only and demands [money] in your names.

(Chikkadasapalayam, Round 1)

Villagers are capable of marshaling a vast amount of information in support of their arguments. This includes details about the quantity and quality of construction materials used in subsidized infrastructure projects like houses (e.g. the dimension of the plastic pipe used for building household septic tanks and the amount of concrete used for constructing the houses). They carefully identify the other municipalities and neighborhoods where water connections have been installed. Villagers complain about being extorted for obtaining land ownership documents. They correctly point out that these are given free of cost by the government. Their biting critique of the *panchayat* is constructive in spirit, aimed at drawing attention to deficiencies in village development and demanding accountability and better performance from the government. Their discursive style may not be what one expects to hear

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in high-literacy contexts in relatively well-functioning and facilitative states. It is likely that their militant discursive style results from being aware, informed, and articulate, while tight state control over *panchayat* finances restricts the execution of promises. Clearly this leads to perceptions of state negligence and pent up frustrations over the local government's inaction.

Palakkad, Kerala: *Gram Sabhas* in High-Literacy Villages

Gram sabhas in Palakkad, and in the rest of Kerala, were only one part of a series of nested development planning exercises extending from the neighborhood ward level and upwards. Participatory micro-planning exercises were conducted in smaller forums, called "working groups," which met prior to the *gram sabha*. And after the *gram sabha*, "working committees" were set up and tasked with implementing the suggested projects. Therefore, most of the deliberations occurred in these relatively small groups involving villagers and community experts. As for *gram sabhas*, the meeting leading up to a new planning period was geared to generating suggestions for drawing up a blueprint of development projects to be considered and finalized by the working committee. Other *gram sabha* meetings throughout the yearly cycle were largely focused on selecting beneficiaries for various government subsidies and schemes. For this a rigorous system of point allocation had to be followed to make sure that the most deserving individuals were chosen.

Panchayat officials laid repeated emphasis on achieving accuracy and fairness in beneficiary selection, a process that in most other states was ridden with corruption. State facilitation in these *gram sabhas* took the form of *panchayat* officials and government bureaucrats lecturing at length on the importance of following the correct procedure and fairness in beneficiary selection. These long exhortative speeches were aimed at making rural citizens more civically oriented and fair-minded, possessed with a full understanding of government policies and their rationale. Public officials in these *gram sabhas* demonstrated the capacity of the state to perform as a *planner state*.

Gram sabhas in Kerala typically started with lengthy and stately speeches by presidents in which they shared information about budgets and the progress of public works. Speakers also presented considered commentary on the overall progress of village development. Given the

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centrality of the beneficiary selection, these speeches included frequent emphatic affirmations and exhortation of strict adherence to principles of fairness when making benefit allocation decisions. In the following excerpt, a *panchayat* ward member labors at length to persuade listeners of the importance of point allocation being made in a fair manner.

Ward member: Respected *panchayat* president . . . and my dear *gram sabha* members who have come here. This *gram sabha* is a special *gram sabha*. Though applications were submitted for five years, in this 10th five-year plan, we will recognize only applications for one year. There are many schemes – housing, roofing, latrine, feed for livestock, pumpset, etc. So there are lots of things. The list of those applicants has been brought here. There is a committee in this *panchayat* called the working group. The members and conveners scrutinize these applications and allot marks based on criteria as laid down in the application forms. If the applicant is a widow, she is allotted this many marks; if there are girls aged above 18 who are not married in a family, they are given this much marks. If there are two persons aged above 60 in a family, they are given so many marks. Each application has got this criteria printed on its back. Based on that only the marks are allotted. We have also checked whether salary certificate is submitted with the application and position certificate for house and latrine applicants. For roofing, in whose name is it applied, scrutinizing all these only the list has been brought here. So if a person has applied for house, you should check whether all the marks based on the criteria are allotted. That is why we are here today. If you find any fault in this list, i.e. if marks allotted is not correct, you can say it here. Supposing a person has got less marks than he ought to get, or if a person finds that he has aged daughter but marks for it is not allotted, then you can point out such things. Only after correcting such faults we will be able to make the final list. We are now going to read the rough list. We will be forming many groups here, a group for applicants of houses, a group for applicants of roofing, latrines, etc. After sitting in groups, you will have to examine the list and tell your opinion. This is the agenda of this *gram sabha* . . . With this I end my words. Jai Hind.

(Kollengode, Ward 3)

Commitment to achieving fairness and accuracy in beneficiary selection appeared with remarkable consistency across all *gram sabhas* in Palakkad.

Public officials also made great efforts to explain how the *panchayat* went about allocating welfare benefits between different caste groups and the rationale behind prioritizing some groups over others. The following excerpt records a *panchayat* member explaining the changes

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in the beneficiary selection policy that had been made between the eighth and the ninth plans that allowed the distribution of benefits to general caste villagers, taking care to explain that benefits for general castes could be allotted only after benefits had been allotted to ST and SC groups in that order.

Member: . . . The main aim of this *gram sabha* is to read out the list of applicants and their marks. Another thing I would like to say has been hinted by the president. We all know what benefits were received till the 8th 5-year plan. Till the 8th 5-year plan only SC people used to get benefits. Even if it was houses, roofing, latrine, etc. they used to apply through block office and SC development office and they used to get the benefits. So, till the 8th 5-year plan, other people [non-SC castes] didn't get any benefits. If they wanted to build a house, they applied for loans. If they wanted to repair their roof, they used to pawn their documents. If they wanted to construct latrines they used to take loan from private persons at huge interest. So, from the 9th 5-year plan we could see even general people getting benefits . . .

We could make schemes for general category and could do a lot with the help of the government's fund. But, what usually many say is benefits are there for only SC people. They say that houses, latrines, roofs, etc. are all taken by SC and ST people only. I would like to tell you one truth. The government rule is that only if the SC fund is spent, you can spend the general fund. So we are giving benefits to SC by going after them. Even now if you see, there are SC people who have at least 3 cents of land, but how many have applied for houses? Only a few will be there. They have already received these [benefits] through various departments. In the last five years, the *panchayat* could give houses to all SC people. Roofings have been given. So the fund kept for them is spent for them only. We will have to spend this money. We select colonies and do work on roads which approach the colonies. The government itself tells that only 51% of the roads can be constructed in their areas, but we were able to construct a lot of roads. To spend the money now, we have put a new project to install tube lights. When a tube light is lit in front of a SC house, the light is beneficial not only to them but to others also. Some may say everything is done only for SC. But, as I said, only if this money is spent we can spend money on general [castes] to construct latrines, roofs, etc.

Another caste which is below that [SC] is ST. Last year 76,000/- was sanctioned for ST. If we call them, they will not come here. We spent the money by buying goats and we went to the colony to distribute them. Why did we spend that money? If we didn't spend the money for STs, we can't spend money for SC, and if we didn't spend money for SC, we can't spend money on general [caste]. It is because the rule is like that. Lot of people of

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general category have been given houses, roofing, latrines, etc. Another set up, as the president told, was that if we collect 5000/- as beneficiary amount for general category and if the *panchayat* puts in 7500/-, then when this total of 12,500/- is paid to housing board we will be able to give many houses to all. For the last five years we were able to give like this only. As a part of this *panchayat's* "complete housing for all" scheme, in cooperation with the housing board we were able to give lots of houses.

(Nallepilly, Ward 6)

Following introductory speeches, if the purpose of the meeting was to generate suggestions for development projects, villagers were divided into thematic groups focusing on such single issues as housing, agriculture, health, etc. Their mandate was confined to giving suggestions concerning the area their group was assigned to discuss. Following is an example from a *gram sabha* where this task is undertaken.

Vice president: ... we are in last phase of the financial year 2005–06 planning. According to government principles, we are organizing this *gram sabha* for planning the development of the next financial year, 2006–07. As part of the new financial year 2006–07, we have organized working groups. The working groups have suggested some projects. The *gram panchayat* members have also made some suggestions. Those suggested projects will be submitted to you. We will change those projects on the basis of your valued suggestion, and then formulate the working committee. This working committee implements the projects with the help of the ruling committee. We cannot implement all your suggestions, but we must implement the project on the basis of priority coming from the 18 wards. There are around 10 groups like agriculture and allied activities, animal protection, poverty eradication, etc. ... It is important to form these ten groups.

... We have to do lots of things. We got Rs. 11, 490, 000 in the previous year. On the basis of this amount, government suggested to formulate the project. We have to implement government suggestion ... Thus totally we must allocate Rs. 8,58, 000 for *aganwadi* & computer (literacy) project. After compulsory allocation of funds, we have Rs. 7,75,000 in our hand. We have to allocate funds for different sectors like productive, service, and infrastructure sectors. We have to allocate Rs. 21,22.500 for productive sector and Rs. 28,30,000 and 21,22,000 for service and infrastructure sectors. Infrastructure sector includes building and maintaining the roads and electricity. Service sector includes drinking water supply, building house roof, constructing houses and toilets.

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Now we will form different groups of people and discuss. Each group must select their leader and write the suggestions for your selected sector. After that you must enter your name, signature and address in this book. The groups for scheduled caste development have to include the most effective things for their development. The suggestions for development for women and children have to include *aganwadi* teachers. In the case of health, hygiene, drinking water, we have to include aged people, handicapped and children. After discussion you have to write and read in front of the people. Then only everyone can understand suggestions of each group.

POVERTY ERADICATION [86 participants' names announced]

Suggestions

Repairing houses and roofs; allotting more funds for general category people for constructing houses; and installing streetlights where it is needed.

The following roads must be improved for travel by doing maintenance work.

1. Concrete the road from Suliaman's house to Radhakrishan's house.
2. Concrete the road from Kathersha Ravuther's house to Cheriyachvi's house.
3. Protect the road from Mannamkutty to Thamarachirra & tarring rest of the road
4. Tarring the road from Mannamkutty to Thanrack . . . [total 11 suggestions were made]

(Nallepilly, Ward 6)

The subsequent *gram sabhas* through the remainder of the year were dedicated to examining applicants for the various benefits and verifying the point allocation based on criteria fixed by the government. Citizens' participation in these *gram sabhas* therefore predominantly took the form of performing as *benefit invigilators*. Following is an example of a *gram sabha* that was exclusively reserved for reading the list of applicants for various benefits and the marks received by them and announcing the chosen beneficiaries (those receiving the most points).

President [male]: Our respected *panchayat* member Muthu, staff of the *panchayat, anganwadi* staffs, literacy workers, working group members, and my brothers and sisters who have come here to take part in *gram sabha*, today we are coming together to select individual beneficiaries of the 1st year of 10th 5-year plan of Nallepilly *panchayat* . . .

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. . . In the case of houses, 23 people of general category, 11 women, where women are head of household, including houses from the blocks IRI schemes, including zillas and our *panchayat* around 50–60 houses are to be given. But we have received 180 applicants. So, I tell you that in two years' time we will be able to give houses to everyone. In the past when the housing board was involved, they used to give 7500/- for one house. But now, since they are not involved, the *panchayat* itself spends the entire money. Since we are giving 23,000/- [per house] we can't increase the number of houses. Applicants are selected based on marks received. So out of 180, fifty people will be selected based on the rules and criteria the government has laid down. The applications will be scrutinized and marks will be allotted accordingly. Based on this only the marks have been allotted and the list will be presented here. If you have any opinion on that, you can tell it. You should pass this list and cooperate in implementing it this year itself . . . [continues to talk about the importance of constructing the houses in a timely manner].

JHI [male]: I am going to read the draft of the list here. I have the whole list of all the wards, but I will read only this ward's list.

a) House for women [Reads names of applicants]. If anyone's name has not been read, but if you have given application, then you should tell.
b) General category – roofing [Reads names]. It doesn't mean that this year itself all the applicants will get it. It will be selected based on marks. A total of 50 roofing (funding) is there and only the first 5 [applicants] based on marks will get. Two applications are rejected [reads names] – one hasn't submitted a salary certificate and the other has more salary according to the certificate. So two applications are rejected.

(Nallepilly, Ward 14)

Panchayat leaders frequently commented on the pattern of public participation in *gram sabhas*. *Panchayat* presidents critiqued the lack of participation of the younger generation, of farmers who had benefitted from past subsidies, and of men. These speeches often had a strong educational intent. Leaders wanted to persuade villagers that they had the capacity to exercise democratic power through the *gram sabha:*

Panchayath president: . . . In the initial stages of *gram sabha* the head count of men was much more than women. But nowadays the participation of men is getting reduced and *gram sabhas* are now relegated to the form of any "neighborhood" meetings where female participation, their development and change [are the focus], while men have moved away from public services. Today the non-participation of men is very pronounced in *gram*

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sabhas. The main reason is that there is no voice and no questions in *gram sabhas*. The people have the power to see whether funds are allocated properly and if constructions are made in the right time in the right place. If you don't question then *gram sabhas* will fail. Usually in *gram sabhas* there will be a minimum of 150 complaints like, the road to my place is not in good condition, the well is not properly maintained in our colony, or house, electric bulbs in our streets, all these requirements come from *gram sabhas*. When there is right feedback then only *gram sabhas* become useful.

Nowadays things have changed. Now people complain that I need my house repaired, I need a cow, I need a hen, I need a goat, etc. So in this situation naturally there will be lot of complaints, lot of criticism, lot of accusations, and lot of stories of corruption. Yet one thing is specific. It is only after power got delegated to the people that rural areas can feel what is development all about. Before, we had to go to Palakkad to see a concrete road, but now we have concrete roads in our village in our *panchayath*. Same way, we are able to give drinking water to 70% of colonies. Most of the colonies have streetlights now in Palakkad district. In our *panchayath* there is maximum number of streetlights. Not only that, our *panchayath* buys maximum number of bulbs; now bulbs have been replaced with tube lights. Now from one side [of the street] we have started replacing them. We hope that we can change this soon within two years.

We have the right to question ward members, "Why bulbs have not been changed?" You can question them. You can make them disqualified from continuing [i.e. vote them out of power]. But we don't do it, as we are all selfish and running behind our personal motives. We should think of one thing, only if our village grows, we will grow. We should think about our village. In *gram sabhas* we only say personal things, need house, need hen, etc. If our village should improve we should improve. It is we who make projects for the village and we give those plans to be approved in *panchayath* subcommittees for funds. But now we focus on personal needs. If the suggestions lead to total financial development of the village, we will never discard them. We can look into that. Yet, we have to still get a lot of things, we have to do a lot of things. Even though people will complain about many things, competitively we are far ahead of many other *panchayaths* . . . If we have to develop more, we need the support of the people. All you have to do for it is to participate in *gram sabhas*. If all the members of the "neighborhood union" participate there will be a lot of participation. So, all should actively participate in *gram sabhas*.

(Pirriyari, Ward 6)

Here the president is, in effect, lamenting the *benefit invigilator* role villagers have come to play in the *gram sabha*. It is clear that he sees

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villagers as lacking in their governance role because they do not raise pertinent questions about village development nor do they demand information and accountability from elected leaders. In his view, villagers have become disproportionately focused on obtaining personal benefits and subsidies. In our view, it seems that the discursive space in *gram sabhas* for villagers to question and critique authority figures has been crowded out in Kerala by the overly rationalized planning and beneficiary selection exercises. Because project planning and beneficiary selection are done so thoroughly and are so time consuming, they do not leave time for other discussions.

Conclusion

Gram sabhas in higher-literacy villages in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and Palakkad, Kerala, differed widely from each other. In Coimbatore, *gram sabhas* had the mark of strong state facilitation and a public that was articulate and confrontational in its discursive style. The state operated as a *social reformer*, using the agenda as a tool to guide the deliberations and the development trajectory of villages. State officials and local government agents were responsive in providing information and explaining the fiscal constraints under which *panchayats* operate. The meetings were deliberative spaces with robust discussions on practical issues related to public infrastructure and resources. They also were places for discussions on more distant concerns, including affirmative action and globalization for example. Villagers in Coimbatore acted as *militant deliberators* who were strident critics of the *panchayat* demanding accountability from public officials.

In Palakkad, *gram sabhas* were part of a highly rationalized people's planning process that had been put in place by the People's Campaign. The planning mechanism was such that much of the substantive deliberations occurred in smaller meetings that were held prior to the *gram sabha*. The *gram sabha* was primarily dedicated to announcing the suggestions forwarded by the working committee, eliciting additional suggestions from the public, and selecting beneficiaries for government programs and subsidies. *Panchayat* leaders and government officials placed great emphasis on transparency and achieving accuracy and fairness in beneficiary selection. They also urged increased public participation and emphasized the benefits of public spiritedness. Overall, *gram sabhas* in Kerala operated less as

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expressive spaces and more as training grounds for citizenship aimed at making villagers fair-minded and oriented to the common good.

PAIR 4. DAKSHIN KANADA, KARNATAKA (MEDIUM CAPACITY) – KASARGOD, KERALA (HIGH CAPACITY)

Dakshin Kanada, Karnataka: *Gram Sabhas* in Higher-Literacy Villages

Gram sabhas in Dakshin Kanada disseminated a great deal of public information and fostered pragmatic deliberations between the state and the public on diverse issues of village development. State performance here centered on providing exhaustive information to the public and answering questions and complaints. *Panchayat* officials presented fine-grained information on the *panchayat's* budgetary expenses on public works projects in the presence of a host of public officials. These included *taluk* and *zilla panchayat* members and government line department officials. This formalized public audit process was very similar to the scrutinizing function performed in the *gram sabhas* in Bidar by the nodal officer. There was nonetheless an important distinction that sets Dakshin Kanada apart. Here, the public audit process did not involve active scrutiny of accounts by a nodal officer and instruction on proper bookkeeping methods. This was most likely because, in higher-literacy villages such as in Dakshin Kanada, the accounts and budgets were presented in an extremely well organized and meticulously detailed fashion not requiring any active oversight. In addition, government bureaucrats from various departments, including the electricity board, agriculture, horticulture, health, and women and child welfare, attended these meetings. These officials informed villagers of schemes under their departments and answered questions and concerns. The highly literate villagers acted as skilled *pragmatic deliberators* who provided reasoned argumentation to back up their demands and concerns.

The following excerpt records the exchange between a veterinary inspector and villagers about the problem of rabid dogs. It typifies deliberations in Dakshin Kanada:

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Veterinary inspector: How to control [rabid dogs]? We need to keep dogs within the house.

Villager [male]: It should be done like that or else it will be a problem to the people who pass by.

Veterinary inspector: To keep dogs at home is not possible. Nobody will take care to inject dogs every six to eight months.

Villager [male]: Yes

Veterinary inspector: You should do it; you can't avoid this.

Villager [male]: You should organize something from the *panchayat's* end.

Veterinary inspector: There is not such a plan this year. Not only here, not even in *gram panchayat*. You should inject the dogs that have bitten (people) this year, or, we should remove those dogs.

Villager [male]: All the dogs used to [bite] one year ago.

Veterinary inspector: Already we have spent 80% [of budget] . . . The person [who has received a dog bite] also has to be injected.

Villager [male]: Who will do it?

Veterinary inspector: What do you mean?

Villager [male]: We should get relief money.

Villager [male]: Our children are afraid to go to school because of those dogs. How to manage?

Veterinary inspector: We can't do anything for that. We can educate the dog owners, like you need to tie them up, like that. When it is ill then take it to the veterinary clinics, like that.

Villager [male]: Now, you should take actions in this meeting. You have got powers to take actions and you should decide about this whole issue.

Villager [male]: Yes.

Villager [male]: We need to have a systematic way of solving things, you know.

Veterinary inspector: When we organize camps all the institutions should help us. When we organize the camps you can have the dogs injected. But, at the same time, don't neglect and leave the dogs free to roam on the roads thinking that anyway we have injected our dogs, so no problem. You need to tie your dogs.

Villager [male]: Let us organize a camp together this time.

Villager [male]: You should permit us to cull them, as we see they are killing cows and oxen for flesh now.

Villager [male]: We have four to five dogs in each house now.

Veterinary inspector: We will organize for camps every year now.

Villager [male]: It will be good to have them once every six months.

Veterinary inspector: OK, let it be once in six months. But the public should be careful. Let all of them bring their dogs here once in six months and

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get it injected. We can do this much. We can't do anything more in this aspect. Mr. K. Praveen Nodal officer has presided here today and he will do all the needful to organize for the department's information. We have decided along with the other association to have camps in 5 wards . . . for the mad dogs. This means you can bring your dogs and get them injected. We will arrange one such a program within ten to fifteen days. We will act on it at the earliest.

Villager [male]: How much do we need to pay per dog per injection?

Veterinary inspector: Rs. 10. Respected members and friends of all the departments and my loving locals, we have organized this meeting as per the order. The main aim of this meeting is to improve the local area. We need to discuss with the local people about these requirements . . . You can tell us your opinions and ideas in working out a project, which will help the people of the village. You should understand the power of these meetings. You should also point out the weaknesses of this [meeting]. Overall, we need to find out the best method of solving our problems and improving our village. Then only we can do the work effectively.

Nowadays, it is as if we need to have everything from the government's end. People are waiting for the same. This is not a good development. It is not possible for the government to do everything. We, all the villagers, should join our hands to have development . . . In this regard I would like to tell you one incident. In a remote corner of a village in Rajasthan, they used to take a lot of risk for obtaining water. They needed to carry water from far off places; even the women used to do that work. Because of this, the people used to migrate in search of jobs. All the villagers sat together and discussed about the availability of water earlier and non-availability now, then they froze at a point and planned for a project. They organized to make seawater flow there [implemented an irrigation project redirecting the seawater into the village through canals]. All the people who had migrated came back and started cultivation. Now it is going on very well. Why I am telling is we should have the interest to develop an area. Of course we have too many street dogs here in this locality. We should sit together & think and decide how to solve this problem. We have help from *panchayath* as well as from the government. I have the confidence that this is going to happen with all our efforts. I would also like to tell you that instead of wasting these meetings for discussing individual affairs, let us discuss what is important for the development of the village. And I wish all of you will cooperate.

(Machhina, Beltangadi)

When government line department officers failed to attend *gram sabhas*, their absence became a major topic of public criticism and gave rise to protest. But these complaints and protests were politely

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framed and staged. Villagers refrained from being confrontational in their discursive style. The following excerpt records villagers expressing their discontent over the absence of the electricity board official. They plan an impromptu protest action: going to his office to lock it down and conduct a strike in front of it. A villager rationally considers the effectiveness of their proposed action and expresses his concern that traveling to the office to conduct a strike detracts from the goal of decentralization, which requires government officials to come to villages to get familiar with the problems facing rural citizens:

Villager [male, SC]: That is what I am saying – KEB [Karnataka electricity board] official did not come to this and to the previous meeting also.

Secretary: Yes.

Villager [male, SC]: Here even if anybody is dead they won't come. In our area one [overhead electricity] wire was broken [and fallen on the ground]. One man went at 5.00 am for milk, and he was just saved at the nick from danger, otherwise, he would have been dead. I read it in the paper.

Secretary: Yesterday there was a similar problem in Marve, because food assistant did not turn up at the *grama sabha* time.

Villager [male, SC]: Stop for a while. I am fed up with this! When the officers don't show up, what is to be done here? *Panchayat* member can do nothing here. If officers come, you can interact about your problems with them, and they will answer your questions. Mainly KEB [has not come]. PWD [public works department] and *zilla panchayat* have come. We will ask them. No one has come from the Taluk office. Why?

. . .

Villager [male, SC]: Regarding this we told you in the ward meeting to send a reminder to all the officials. Have you given [a reminder] sir?

Secretary: Yes sir.

Villager [male, SC]: If they have not come even then that means they have neglected the *grama sabha* meeting. So do we require this *grama sabha*? We need PWD and KEB . . .

. . .

Villager [male, SC]: You write this down and send it to the concerned department for the future *gram sabhas*. Local people are going to stop the proceedings. So ask them to send the officials who will move the people's feelings.

Villager [male]: Here no writing is implemented. We never noticed any KEB officials being present in either *grama sabha* or ward *sabha*. You promise that always you are doing it [reminding them to be present]. How?

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So until they come, we would like to lock their office. When we lock it, then they will come I think.

. . .

Secretary: Yesterday horticulture officer Venkatesha Murthy had come to *navve panchayat*. But today he has been allotted to attend a training session at Mudegere. What to do in such a situation?

Villager [male]: In such a situation somebody else may come. He is not alone in their office.

. . .

Villager [male]: Nodal officer is the person who is solely responsible for this meeting. You could have convinced them before. Ok past is past. At least for future *gram sabhas*, you should contact them, and if they are busy, ask them to send some others from their office. Otherwise, tell them we will not be conducting the *gram sabha*.

Villager [male]: What is the motive of the *grama sabha*? Nodal officer should know. Why is the government conducting *gram sabha*? Villagers should know about it. We have not come here for the biscuits and tea!

. . .

Villager [male]: Members, Mr. Hebbar said let all villagers go and lock [the offices of the absent official], then the problem will be solved. When it is not useful to us why should it *[gram sabha]* exist?

Member: So we will take a resolution. Somebody should head this. People should select.

Villager [male]: Let *panchayat* people come. We will follow you.

Member: For that we will fix today only; we will go to their office.

Villager [male]: We will follow you. Members go on.

Member: OK, I will come. You decide on what day we will go – today only. The official who is absent, we will go to his office first.

Villager [male]: We will go there and have a strike.

. . .

Villager [male]: They should come to us. It is not fair that we go there. That is not the *gram sabha* procedure. They should come here. The reason we conduct *grama sabhas* in remote villages is that officials do not know [about villages]. It is their responsibility [to attend the *gram sabha*].

(Beltangadi, Mitthabagilu)

Villagers continue discussions on each topic until a decision is reached. They are active in demanding accountability from public officials. Complaints concerning negligence of duties by government staffs are discussed calmly and almost always lead to a decision on a course of action. In the following excerpt villagers express their dissatisfaction with the absence of doctors and vaccines from the health

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facility. At the end of the discussion, a decision is made about how to discipline the absentee doctors and how to pay for the health center's electricity bill:

Villager [male]: Is there anything to ask relating to health department? Is there anything to ask about veterinary hospital? Nothing to ask?

Villager [male]: If we are attacked and bitten by a mad dog, do we have to pay for the treatment, or, will we get some concession?

Villager [male]: If we give money also it is not possible to get treatment here.

Veterinary doctor: It is not available here, but if you come to our old office, there it is available.

Villager [male]: Can you keep some of those [medications] here?

Villager [male]: If we bring them here, there is no fridge . . .

Villager [male]: We do not have this facility.

Villager [male]: Then is there no solution for bite from mad dog?

Villager [male]: There are two types of mad dog bite. If it bites a man there is no problem, because the doctor is there, but if it bites our animals then it is a problem.

. . .

Villager [male]: Why can't we arrange for one camp from the *gram sabha* and other associations? They said that there is no refrigerator in the office. These injections have to be kept in the fridge, but there is no power for this purpose. So you have to bring it from Mangalore. There is supply from the government, but there is no fridge to keep them here.

Villager [female]: If you say that there is no power, we don't have that and we don't have this, it will be a problem. You have to make some arrangements for this.

Villager [male]: Electricity supply can be arranged. Where is the new office building?

Villager[male]: Why should the *panchayat* people do this work? [Addressing the doctor] What are the people in your department doing?

Villager [female]: If we give money also they will not give injections.

Villager [male]: If you give money what can they do. If they get the injection they will give. Or else they can get it from some other doctor. We had also arranged for camps in some of the places with the help of department and *gram panchayat*. If such camps are conducted, within one or two days we can complete all the places. It is not possible to see to each and everything. There are no government. funds for this purpose. The injections for mad dog bite are not free. You have to take it by paying money. As there is no free supply, they will not bring.

. . .

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Villager [female]: When there is hospital, a doctor has to come there daily.

Villager [male]: People are going to come to you. If you want any help you can ask.

Villager [female]: If we come to hospital there will no doctor nor will there be medicines.

Villager [male]: People are complaining. What can you say about this?

Doctor: I was on leave.

Villager [male]: How many days were you on leave?

Doctor: I was on leave for 21 days. I was doing OT [Operation theatre].

. . .

Villager [male]: Whatever it is, the doctor is never there. Every time this complaint will be there in the *gram panchayat*.

Villager [male]: We will give them one more month's time. Within one month if they do not change, then serious action will be taken against them. We will promise. We will give them one opportunity. *Gram panchayat* members should observe these doctors: whether they come on time or not, whether they give treatment or not, for one month. Even after one month if nothing changes, let the *gram panchayat* bring it to my notice. I will take some serious action against them.

As far as I know, only medicines are coming from the department. Other than this, for any other problems, or for the electricity bill, money is not given by the [health] department. In all other *panchayats*, the electricity and water bill will be provided from the *gram panchayat*. There are two or three reasons for that. It will be within Rs. 4000.

Villager [male]: If the expense is within three to four thousand it can be given from the *gram panchayat*. Give one application for KEB meter, so that we need not blame you.

Villager [male]: Is there no connection between the hospital and *gram panchayat?*

Villager [male]: We have that problem here. Here afterwards there should not be any complaints like this. It should have connection with *gram panchayat*. Immediately we will arrange for one camp in this area. How much is it for each injection, is it Rs. 12 each? Even the *panchayat* has got permission to give up to Rs. 1000. We can buy so many from that. It should be done within fifteen days.

(Marajamalu)

Gram sabha sessions in Dakshin Kanada were calm, conflict-free public minded deliberations on civic issues. The state played a facilitative role by disseminating detailed information about *panchayat* budgets and government programs and subsidies. Officials were

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responsive to queries and complaints brought forward by citizens and refrained from lecturing the public.

Kasargod, Kerala: *Gram Sabhas* in Higher-Literacy Villages

In Kasargod, *gram sabhas* represent the performance of the *planner state*. We observe the same pattern as in Palakkad, where a single *gram sabha* in a planning period is dedicated to group discussion for suggesting development projects and the rest of the *gram sabhas* are aimed at beneficiary selection. Following are examples of the two kinds of *gram sabhas* that were recorded from the same site. The plan formulation *gram sabha:*

Speaker: We have to make five groups and discuss. And also I would like to say that all should stay till the end.

Group 1: Agriculture and Allied activities

VCB construction in Thanottu temple canal.

Increase the depth of the canal from Thanottukunnumangala to Ravaneswarm pallathumkal and also protect the farm and construct bund in necessary places.

VCB construction in Kottachivalappu cherukara canal.

Protect the Puthiyakandam parathodu canal.

VCB construction in Makkimaniyamkandam canal.

[Projects suggested by the following groups are also announced: basic facilities; health and drinking water; poverty eradication and women; and education.]

Now we have made a project plan that is only based on existing financial capacity of the *panchayath*. This project plan must be made final after discussion through [development] seminar in the board of *panchayath* . . . There is a lot of suggestion in our *panchayath*. But we do not have that much fund for [implementing] it. This type of suggestion is good, and there was no good suggestion like this till now. I am very happy to see that you have come here and gave good participation and suggestion.

(Ajanur, Ward 1)

In another *gram sabha*, the meeting was entirely dedicated to examining applications and verifying points allocated to each applicant and priority ranking them to receive the benefits.

10th ward member [female]: Respected block Standing Committee chairman Kunjikannan, *panchayat* STC chairman, chairperson Karthiyayini, ward member Krishnan, *panchayat* staffs and my dear

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brothers and sisters and children [school children are present]. All the details of this *gram sabha* were told clearly by the block member. Even one ward member has spoken about it. I don't want to say more on that. I request you to select the right persons and, without wasting time, turn into groups and discuss. With this I convey my wishes for the *gram sabha* and end my few words.

Standing Committee member [male]: Now to select individual beneficiaries, we will divide into five groups.

i) House construction/house repair
ii) Latrine
iii) Women/job training
iv) Agriculture/fertilizer/wells/pumpset
v) SC-ST welfare

. . . We have allotted marks [points to applicants]. You should check those and, if you find anything wrong, you can correct it. But you will have to specify the reason for changing the marks. You have the right to do so . . . Women's group can sit in front. House repair and latrine can sit in the south end. House construction can sit in the middle [of the hall]. Agriculture group can sit at that end and SC-ST can sit at that end. You can come and collect the applications. Each group should select a convener and chairman. The convener and chairman should sign in all the applications.

(Ajanur, Ward 1)

Panchayat members repeatedly appeal to citizens to be ethical as they perform their role as *benefit invigilators*. The following excerpt records a member passionately urging villagers to overcome narrow self-interest and nepotism in the selection of beneficiaries:

Block Standing Committee member: So this time the *panchayat* is selecting individual beneficiaries for which this *gram sabha* is very important. Benefits should be given to the right person. We should identify the right person and give the benefits to him. The marks they deserve should be given. They should be below poverty line. The *panchayat* or any member doesn't select these people. It is you people of the respective wards who select these beneficiaries. We are giving you a very important task of selecting the right people. So there is no point in telling that you have received nothing from the *panchayat*. It is you people who decide as to who deserves a house in this ward and who deserves latrines. So it is you who select the right people without considering any acquaintance etc. You should select the deserving people. Who are the people who are below the poverty line? Who are the people who are very poor? Who among them have [unmarried] daughters? All this should be

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considered while selecting the beneficiary. It is based on the marks you give that the *panchayat* grants these benefits. So, there is no use in being unhappy at the *panchayat*. . .

(Ajanur, Ward 1)

Panchayat officials also remark on public attendance and repeatedly urge villagers to look beyond self-interest as they engage in beneficiary selection. In the following excerpt, a ward member remarks on the behavior of being secretive about attending *gram sabhas*. Condemning such narrow-minded thinking, he emphasizes that participation in the *gram sabha* should be viewed as a civic duty rather than a benefit-seeking opportunity. *Panchayat* and state officials encourage villagers who have not been selected to receive a benefit to be happy that a poorer, more deserving person has been chosen:

Standing Committee chairman: Supposing, if the most eligible people are in ward 3, then they will be given the benefits, and if there are more eligible persons in other wards when compared to the 3rd ward, then benefits will go to them. So you should understand that. All those who applied will not get it, only the most eligible and deserving will get it. So by examining and scrutinizing the list, you yourself can decide the eligible person. You should decide who should get benefits in your ward. As the president said, instead of being selfish, we should be able to tell that such a person should be given the benefit. That is the aim of the *gram sabha* . . .

As the plan coordinator told, this participation is not enough. All the voters of this ward are to attend the *gram sabha*. At least one person from each house should come. Only then we can do a healthy discussion and make full use of it. Here, mostly [benefit] applicants would be the only ones to come. That is not enough. In the future *gram sabha*, there should be more participation. This is a development activity of our whole *panchayat*. So it is not only the duty of the ward member to see that there is good participation in the *gram sabha*, it is the duty of each one of us. In the future *gram sabha*, we should be able to bring our neighbor also to these *gram sabha*. There are people who avoid their neighbors and come to attend the *gram sabha*. They think if the neighbor comes, he may get the benefits. So when he comes to attend, even if the neighbors ask where he is going, he may say he is going to a shop and will silently come to the *gram sabha*. I don't know whether such people are there in this ward. So instead of thinking like that, for our *panchayat's* development and for the welfare of the people, we should be able to involve our neighbors also. We should be able to make our *gram sabha* more successful. Wishing only these things I end my words.

(Pallikara, Ward 3)

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Panchayat leaders critique the decline in public participation and the partisan nature of recent meetings. They emphasize the importance of *gram sabha* participation by highlighting the constitutional power vested in the people through the gr*am sabha* and by using frames like decentralization, democratic structure, and community development. In one*gram sabha*, the president gives a long speech urging more attendance at meetings and compares the *gram sabhas* of Kerala with those in Bihar, explaining why Kerala *gram sabhas* are fairer and better-performing:

GP president [male]: . . . We are here today to select the individual beneficiaries in the first year of the 10th 5-year plan. The people who have to participate in the *gram sabha* are the voters. There are around 1600 voters in our ward. In this, we know that we can't get 100% participation. But, at least we should be able to get 50% of the people to participate. Even if 50% people participate, this hall will not be enough since there will be around 800 people. The people haven't started thinking that the *gram sabha* is a very important stage. The people who have come here today for this gram *sabha*, by seeing their faces I know that 99% of them are those who given applications for various benefits. *Gram sabhas* are conducted not only to select individual beneficiaries. It is not only for those who have applied. You may think why are we telling it to you, we are telling it because it should not be repeated in the future.

There will be more *gram sabhas* in future. So in the *gram sabha* for selecting individual beneficiaries it doesn't mean that only the applicants should participate. Even those who have not applied for benefits, i.e. people who are in APL [above poverty line] can also contribute to the *gram sabha*. They can give their opinion and be involved in discussion. So in selecting the individual beneficiaries their opinion is very valued. But people are not thinking like that. What they think is that I have not given application; even if I give I will not get any benefits since I am in the APL. Then why should I attend the *gram sabha*. This is what the people think. Similarly, there won't be people here who have attended the previous *gram sabha* that was held in September. Those who have attended the last *gram sabha*, please raise your hands. See, only very few. Only half of them. Why is it? It is because there were no individual benefits given. Whenever we tell there is a *gram sabha*, the people first ask where is the application given, are there houses, latrines, etc.? This is what they ask. If it is a *gram sabha* where you give benefits, then we will come. This is the attitude . . .

. . . So participating in *gram sabha* is our right and our duty also. When the government or *panchayat* gives you some right, why should you not use it. . . .

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> At least in the next *gram sabha* each one of you should bring two of your neighbors. There are 80 people, by the end [of this *gram sabha*] there will be around 100 people. For the *gram sabha* we called the people for 1 'o'clock, but it is 3 'o'clock and even now people are coming. 2 hours late is not a problem at all! So if there are 100 people, each one of you should bring two people, so 300 people should be there. That is enough. Actually it should be 100%, but let it go. At least if 300 people participate, it would be a good *gram sabha*. Let it be any *gram sabha,* you should come. You should not see the agenda and come. You should think that attending the *gram sabha* is my duty and responsibility. With this in mind you should attend *gram sabha* . . .
> (Kuttikole, Ward 12)

Gram sabhas in Kasargod, Kerala, operate as schools of democracy where *panchayat* leaders and public officials strive to transform citizens into nonpartisan, public-minded participants in decentralized governance who understand their civic rights and responsibilities. At the same time, the *planner state* has rationalized the system to such an extent that the discursive space of the *gram sabha* has been squeezed to accommodate plan formulation and beneficiary selection, leaving little time for villagers to raise questions on *panchayat* activity and demand accountability or critique elected leaders. *Panchayat* leaders at times bemoan this pattern. They criticize villagers whose attendance they view as motivated by the desire for receiving welfare benefits and not by the greater goals of democracy.

Gram sabhas in the relatively high-literacy villages of Dakshin Kanada, Karnataka, and Kasargod, Kerala, displayed the characteristics of very different types of state facilitation. In Dakshin Kanada, *gram sabhas* enact the *informant state* whose citizens play the active role of *pragmatic deliberators*. In Kasargod, *gram sabhas* enact the *planner state* and citizens perform their role as *benefit invigilators*.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that *gram sabhas* varied widely even among contiguous districts that shared centuries old cultural and administrative history. That these differences were so substantial was surprising given that the *gram sabhas* were sampled from villages that have continued to share a common language, which can be taken as a proxy for cultural similarity. State enactments and citizens' political performances in *gram sabhas* differed significantly between these matched villages and

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could be traced to the differences in the way *gram sabhas* were structured under the policies of each state. Broadly, our findings lead us to conclude that the differing intensity of commitment with which decentralized governance through *panchayati raj* institutions has been adopted in each state deeply influenced citizens' capacity for discursive civic engagement through public deliberation.

What are the elements of state facilitation and structuring of the *gram sabha* that make such a big difference in the performance of state agents and citizens? We point to four that appear to us to be crucial. First, practices of information dissemination are vital. This includes information regarding *panchayats*' income and expenses and budgetary allocations toward village development projects, updates on public infrastructure projects completed and to be undertaken, and information about government subsidies and schemes. There was variation among the states in the quantity and quality of information shared in the *gram sabha*, which was meant to keep villagers abreast of the work and public finances of the *panchayat*. Being well informed allowed citizens to demand accountability from *panchayat* leaders and public officials. Without information the citizenry was relegated to a passive and supplicant role in local governance. Second, state control over *gram sabha* proceedings is an important factor in shaping the roles of state agents and public officials. The intensity of state control and how it is fashioned play significant roles in shaping the deliberative performance of the state and citizens. They can restrict or expand the scope and democratic content of public deliberation. Third, the presence of public officials at the *gram sabha* is also crucial. Their presence multiplied the opportunity of talking to the state by providing villagers greater scope to interact directly with government line department officials, who embody the state. And finally, the commitment and enthusiasm of *panchayat* leaders and public officials to fostering deliberation among villagers have a large effect.

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4 *The Role of Literacy in Deliberative Democracy*

Classical normative theories of deliberative democracy assume that citizens have an undifferentiated capacity for public deliberation and treat it as a taken-for-granted capability. In academic analyses that have followed, the concept of deliberation has been largely used as a heuristic standard for characterizing the quality of discussion and decision-making among citizens on issues of public relevance and community life. This is based on the original understanding of the public sphere as an inclusive discursive sphere where citizens participate as equals with similar fluency and flare in public discussions. But, it is now recognized that the idea of the public sphere was founded on privileged participation by select groups of people and favored rational argumentation as a discursive style (Mansbridge 1980, 1999; Fraser 1990; Benhabib 1994; Elster 1996; Mouffe 1999; Young 1996, 2000; Sanders 1997; Polletta and Lee 2006; He and Warren 2011; Mansbridge 2015). Many social groups were marginalized and many narrative forms were excluded.

Fraser, for example, has written about the historical construction of the "public sphere" in Europe and the United States as a masculinist site and has characterized the conception of deliberative democracy as *bourgeois masculinist* (1990, 62). Her work draws on the revisionist historiography of Landes (1988), Eley (1992), and Ryan (1990) to highlight the irony that a discourse of publicity celebrating accessibility, rationality, and equality was used with the strategic aim of constructing class and gender distinctions in the public sphere. Mansbridge has also contributed to the feminist critique of deliberation by arguing that

> a history of relative silence makes women political actors more likely to understand that when deliberation turns into theatre, it leaves out many who are not, by nature or training, actors. When deliberation turns into a demonstration of logic, it leaves out many who cannot work their

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emotionally felt needs into a neat equation . . . Many shy men are quiet, but the equivalent percentage of shy women is increased by learning silence as appropriate to their gender. (1998:152)

Taken together, these critiques acknowledge that the capacity to engage in deliberation differs among individuals and social groups. They also suggest that inequalities arising from social stratification along class, caste, and gender divides influence women's and men's ability to participate in deliberations of a public and political nature.

In India, *gram sabhas* were mandated and created with the inclusive egalitarian intention of promoting participation of all voting citizens in village development and governance. Indeed, as we have seen, in some states citizens were repeatedly exhorted to participate in larger numbers in democratic deliberation. But, at the same time, India is a country marked by extreme inequalities among social groups. A core dimension of inequality in India is literacy defined by the Indian census as the ability to read and write with understanding in any language. Literacy captures both social and economic disadvantages. The illiterate people in a village are also likely to be the poorest and to belong to socially subordinated castes and tribal groups. As a corollary, low-literacy villages are likely to have a greater percentage of socially and economically disadvantaged people. In this chapter we explore how citizens' capabilities to engage in *gram sabha* deliberations may be affected by inequalities in literacy. Fortunately, our data allow us to explore in a preliminary way how *gram sabha* deliberations vary between villages at varying literacy levels.

Scholars of Indian politics, even those studying *panchayat* level politics and performance, have not given due analytical importance to how literacy matters for political participation and deliberation. An exception is Akhil Gupta (2012), who in his work on bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India, engages in a discussion on the role of literacy – specifically, the ability to write – for the functioning of democracy in India. He focuses on the critical role of writing in a bureaucratic system that requires written communication between the government and rural citizens and the associated bureaucratic demand on villagers to submit complaints and petitions about public services and subsidies in writing. He argues that in a society where literacy is highly stratified and highly correlated with class and gender, this requirement leads to bureaucratic domination. But the view that

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illiteracy leads to "bureaucratic domination" through the administration's demand for written communication "overestimates the importance of writing and underestimates the political capacities of the poor" (p. 192). Poor citizens in Indian democracy have alternative avenues of political action.

One such alternative political avenue that does not require written communication is participating in *gram sabhas*. There illiterate citizens can verbally communicate with agents of the state and register complaints and petitions vocally. Gupta's argument seems to suggest that literacy might not play a critical role in participation in governance through public deliberation. Further, Gupta draws a distinction between two types of literacy, formal and political literacy:

> The Indian experience demonstrates that the procedures of democracy do not require literacy and that a vigorous democracy can flourish in the absence of formal literacy. What is far more essential is political literacy, and ... political literacy does not depend on formal literacy as a precondition. (p. 220)

Bhatia (2013) has made a similar point, critiquing the biases in theories of deliberative democracy by drawing on non-Western experiences of the public sphere and political communication, and showing that literacy is not a necessity for deliberative democracy to function in semiliterate societies.

We treat these arguments as an invitation to examine empirically the role of literacy in the *gram sabha*. We explore whether literacy makes a difference in how rural citizens deliberate – the capacity to articulately frame demands, voice complaints and concerns, question authority figures, and hold *panchayat* members and public officials accountable. Through our qualitative explorations of hundreds of recordings of *gram sabha* meetings we hope to offer our observations on the connection between formal literacy and political literacy of the kind relevant for participating effectively in the *gram sabha*.

Methodology

We follow the Indian census to define literacy as the ability to read and write in any language. The cutoffs we use in our study are based on the literacy data from the 2001 census. The latest 2011 census data are also included to show the magnitude of subsequent changes.

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Table 4.1: ***Statewise Rural Literacy Rates by Year***

	Census 2001 Rural Literacy Rate	Census 2011 Rural Literacy Rate
Kerala	90	93
Tamil Nadu	66	74
Karnataka	59	69
Andhra Pradesh	55	60
All India	59	69

[Source: https://data.gov.in/catalog/literacy-residence]

Since it is impossible to accurately know the literacy status of individual speakers at the *gram sabha*, our methodological strategy has been to rely on the village literacy level. This is a practical compromise that allows us to examine whether literacy affects the collective capacity for civic deliberation and if it makes a difference with regard to the nature and quality of *gram sabha* deliberations. We have used village-level literacy data from the 2001 national census to distinguish between low-literacy villages (less than 33 percent of the population literate), medium-literacy villages (more than 34 percent and less than 65 percent of the population literate), and high-literacy villages (at least 66 percent of the population literate). This categorization has enabled us to identify the different literacy contexts within which the sampled *gram sabha* deliberations occurred.

We have restricted our analysis to within-district comparisons, comparing *gram sabhas* in villages in the same district but with differing literacy levels. This is intended to prevent variations between districts in other factors from influencing our identification of possible differences stemming from literacy alone. For example, by comparing *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages with those in medium-literacy villages in Bidar, Karnataka, we can isolate differences in the capacity for and quality of deliberation. And by eliminating the possibility of other structural differences in *gram sabhas* at the district and state level, we can attribute any variations in the capacity for deliberation and its quality to differences in village-level literacy with a higher degree of certainty.

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Table 4.2: ***District Specific*** **Gram Sabhas** ***by Village Literacy Level***

District (State)	Low Literacy	Medium Literacy	High Literacy
Chittoor (AP)	7 *gram sabhas* from 7 villages	10 *gram sabhas* from 10 villages	*
Bidar (KA)	11 *gram sabhas* from 11 villages	21 *gram sabhas* from 21 villages	Nil
Dharmapuri (TN)	31 *gram sabhas* from 21 villages	14 *gram sabhas* from 11 villages	**
Coimbatore (TN)	Nil	14 *gram sabhas* from 7 villages	20 *gram sabhas* from 10 villages

Notes on data excluded from the literacy-based comparisons:
*The sample had only one high-literacy village from which only one *gram sabha* had been sampled. This has been left out of the comparison.
** The sample had only 3 high-literacy villages from which 4 *gram sabhas* had been sampled. These have been left out of the comparison.

The samples from Dakshin Kanada (KA) and Kasaragod (KL) had only high-literacy villages; therefore, there is no within-district comparison for these.

The sample from Pallakad (KL) had 18 high-literacy villages from which 30 *gram sabhas* had been sampled and only 2 medium-literacy villages (3 *gram sabhas* sampled) and 1 low-literacy village (2 *gram sabhas* sampled). Because the sample was overwhelmingly high literacy, it has been left out of the comparison.

Our method of comparison limited our sample to three states and only to those districts within which there was significant literacy variation. One unavoidable limitation of our data, as stated previously, is that we do not know the literacy level of the individual speakers. Another limitation is that villagers who attended but did not speak up (who were very likely to be illiterate) were not observable in the data because they were silent. Silence in deliberative forums as large as *gram sabhas* is hard to study, and we are limited to analyzing people's utterances. This problem is intensified in low-literacy contexts where illiterate villagers may be silent and literate villagers may dominate the discursive space. We are restricted in our analysis therefore to

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understanding how the village literacy context (not individual literacy) shapes the manner and content of what people say at the *gram sabha* and the ways in which villagers collectively communicate with elected leaders and state officials.

Summary of Findings

Through inductive analysis of the transcripts we identified core elements of political literacy that enabled villagers to be effective participants in the *gram sabha*. The level of political literacy on display at *gram sabhas* varied by the village literacy level in the anticipated direction, with *gram sabha* deliberations in medium- and high-literacy villages showcasing participants' greater political literacy than those in low-literacy villages. Political literacy with respect to the *gram sabha* centered on villagers' knowledge and understanding of four key spheres of government activity pertaining to rural development and governance: public finances; public infrastructure and facilities; publicly funded household and individual benefits; and the functioning of public offices and officials.

Having command over each of these spheres required specific abilities. Having a grasp over public finances required being able to understand *panchayat* budgets, including the conditions and constraints on using *panchayat* funds and government allocations, understanding financial disbursements made to contractors for undertaking public works projects, and being able to question discrepancies. With regard to public works, villagers needed to be able to suggest and justify resource and infrastructure projects for village development and provide specifications for the suggested works (such as location and some technical details) to the extent their experience allowed. They needed to be able to hold the p*anchayat* accountable for the proper execution and quality of public works and to understand government specified public contribution rules for certain public works projects. Regarding government subsidies and benefits, villagers needed to provide informed participation in the beneficiary selection process for BPL (below poverty line) targeted schemes, question misallocations and nepotistic practices, and ensure that benefits were given to the most deserving villagers. Finally, villagers needed to know how to bring pressure on elected leaders and bureaucratically appointed public officials and how to hold

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them accountable for their performance by challenging absences and corrupt practices.

As anticipated, in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, states that had been supportive of the *panchayat* system since its inception, the level of political literacy on display in the *gram sabha* was positively associated with village literacy level. High-literacy contexts revealed greater political literacy than medium-literacy contexts, which in turn displayed greater political literacy than low-literacy contexts. However, an important caveat is that the magnitude of difference in political literacy between similarly differing literacy contexts across states could vary a great deal. In Karnataka, the gap in villagers' political literacy and the nature of deliberation between villages differing in literacy was wider, whereas in Tamil Nadu, the gap was much narrower. This pattern is very likely tied to the state-level influence discussed in the previous chapter and possibly other intersecting influences that vary by state (such as women's membership in self-help groups).

Gram sabhas in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh, were an exception to this pattern. Here the village literacy level did not make any difference to the political literacy on display in the discussions or to villagers' capacity for deliberation. *Gram sabhas* in both low- and medium-literacy villages were similarly lacking in deliberation, and the difference in village literacy level did not get reflected in any substantive difference in quality. This, too, was likely because of state-level factors since, in Andhra Pradesh, the *panchayat* system had been historically subverted in favor of alternative governance structures.

We conclude that formal literacy (determined from census data on village literacy levels) makes a positive difference by enhancing villagers' political literacy and capacity for engaging the state through deliberation. But we also note that the extent of the difference is influenced by how the state modifies the structure and functioning of the *gram sabha* system. Although formal literacy does make a positive difference to *gram sabha* deliberations, state-level influence on the political construction of the *gram sabha* can override the effect of formal literacy on political literacy and the capacity to deliberate. Positive state influence can make up for the deficiency in literacy, as in the case of *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu. Contrastingly, negative state influence can suppress whatever advantages higher formal literacy might have in terms of political

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literacy and the capacity for deliberation, as in the case of Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh.

Our analysis yielded other interesting patterns. In *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages in Bidar, Karnataka, there appeared to be a consistent recurring pattern of villagers with higher political literacy, who were also likely educated, helping other villagers to engage with the state. This pattern of discursive intervention by those having greater political literacy to facilitate villagers' participation in deliberations was not present in *gram sabhas* in medium-literacy villages in Bidar. Instead, in the medium-literacy villages, it seemed that a more diverse group of villagers spoke up in the *gram sabha*. They were often strident when talking to *panchayat* and public officials. As a result, the deliberative atmosphere in *gram sabhas* in medium-literacy villages in Bidar was sometimes chaotic and cacophonous. In addition, in Bidar, Karnataka, and Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, *gram sabha* deliberations in higher-literacy villages were marked by more acrimony and hostility than those in villages with comparatively lower literacy levels. From this particular pattern we speculate that literacy may have the effect of broadening the base of vocal participants who are articulate, and this can sometimes have an unexpected effect. Rather than always making discussions more orderly, having a larger proportion of villagers who can give voice to their frustrations with perceived government negligence and inadequacies can make *gram sabhas* more anarchic.

The influence of village literacy on *gram sabha* deliberations is complex and defies easy simplification. While some of the effects are in the anticipated direction, others we found surprising and counterintuitive. We provide evidence of our findings by sharing extended excerpts from the *gram sabha* meetings along with our commentary.

PAIR 1. CHITTOOR, ANDHRA PRADESH: 7 LOW-LITERACY VERSUS 10 MEDIUM-LITERACY *GRAM SABHAS*

We have argued that, in Chittoor, villagers had very little knowledge about the goings on of the state because there was no information dissemination on public income and expenditures or reporting on the progress of village public works and ongoing government schemes. Villagers were therefore forced into the role of passive petitioners

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Table 4.3: ***Differences in Citizens' Performances and Gaps in Political Literacy***

District (State)	Low Literacy	Medium Literacy	High Literacy
Chittoor (AP)	*Citizens: Passive petitioners*	*Citizens: Passive petitioners*	*
Bidar (KA)	*Citizens: Elite stewards and Rude citizens*	*Citizens: Strident deliberators* (more anarchic and hostile)	Nil
Dharamapuri (TN)	*Citizens: Civic deliber-ators*	*Citizens: Civic deliberators*	**
Coimbatore (TN)	Nil	*Citizens: Militant deliberators*	*Citizens: Militant deliberators* (more acrimonious and hostile)

who could only submissively complain, petition, and supplicate. Careful comparison between *gram sabhas* in low- versus medium-literacy villages within Chittoor revealed virtually no difference in the issues people brought up or the mode of their articulation. The bulk of the verbal interjections made by villagers were brief statements of problems and equally terse demands for responsive action by officials. The expected differences in the quality of deliberation due to low versus medium village literacy seemed to be obstructed by a state that had, for political reasons at the time, undermined the federally mandated *panchayat* system in favor of its own parallel governance systems.

Low-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

Articulating Demands

The following excerpt records typical articulations of problems from *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages. Villagers name problems and demand relief briefly and without describing or contextualizing their concerns and claims in any detail. The statements are devoid of

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financial and technical queries and considerations. No sustained discussions result from their interventions:

Villager [male, SC]: My name is Muniraju. In this village sewerage facility is absent. Drains should be repaired.

Villager [male, SC]: Village roads are in a bad condition and it will be better if cc [cement/concrete] roads are laid.

Villager [male, SC]: We can tell our problems here. We want a path to Kanikapuram village as the current path goes through the forest and it is not safe.

Villager [male, SC]: Roads are not in good condition. We need a road from Bheemunicheruvu to Kanikapuram

Villager [male, SC]: Should develop drainage lines.

Villager [male, SC]: Cement roads are absent in the village. They have to be laid.

(Narayanavanam, Bheemunicheruvu)

Villagers' minimally stated petitions and supplications here reflect the lack of the knowledge and experience necessary to frame demands and complaints effectively. They fail to demand accountability from *panchayat* members and public officials for the execution of public works, or properly scrutinize budgets and beneficiary selection.

Medium-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

Articulating Demands

Gram sabha deliberations in medium-literacy villages were very similar to those in low literacy villages. Villagers stated their problems without outlining the context or specifying the details or tying their presentation of situations to a clear demand for redress:

Villager [male, SC]: Water pipes are damaged in Jangamali Kandrika.

Villager [male, SC]: We have no cement roads; when it rains it is problematic for us.

Villager [male, SC]: In Ramapuram our houses are in the low-lying areas and water is coming into the houses.

Villager [female, BC]: We have no drainage facility. Drain water is stagnating at different places.

Villager [male, SC]: We have no cement roads, water tank, and burial ground.

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Villager [male, SC]: Cement road is constructed up to half and stopped.
(Nagari, Gundraja Kuppam)

Requests and demands are articulated in nonassertive ways, as if they were merely tentative suggestions being offered to *panchayat* officials:

Villager [male]: Streetlights are getting burnt regularly. Water is leaking from the pipeline and this should be repaired.

Villager [male]: For the cost of laying cc roads the government is giving 70% grants, so if *panchayat* people give 30% it would be good.

Villager [male]: We should have metaled roads.

President: We will lay tar roads.

Villager [male]: Tar roads are to be laid.

President: I have enquired about it. Soon we are going to lay roads. We have talked about roads with some people and in the rest of the village bores were installed by us.

Villager [male, OBC]: Water bore is to be installed in our area. There is one bore nearer to 'Tellagunta' from which water is not flowing properly. Please check that one.

Villager [male]: There are no electricity poles in our area and at least three more poles are to be provided.

(Nagari, Thadukupet)

Questions from villagers on budgetary details, financial outlays, and technical aspects of project implementation were conspicuously absent during these discussions. It appears that villagers did not know how to press for information regarding budgets and implementation or how to demand accountability. From this we conclude that formal literacy is not enough to ensure robust deliberation or improved village governance. The state can stifle the role formal literacy is expected to play in improving villagers' political literacy and enhancing their capacity to deliberate. And this may suppress the potential for participatory democracy represented by the *gram sabha*.

PAIR 2. BIDAR, KARNATAKA: 11 LOW-LITERACY VERSUS 21 MEDIUM-LITERACY *GRAM SABHAS*

In Bidar, in low-literacy villages we found polarized participation between rude citizens and elite stewards. Rude citizens showed their inability to properly articulate demands and complaints and spoke with state agents in a discourteous manner. Elite stewards, a smaller

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group, made frequent instructional interventions in the public discourse, trying to coach the former group in the proper framing of demands for public resource and infrastructure. The substantive proceedings reflected the large gulf in political literacy, arguably reflective of the divide in formal literacy among the participants. In medium-literacy villages in Bidar, *gram sabha* deliberations were strikingly different. Villagers across varying levels of political literacy all spoke freely, often in a raucous manner. This resulted often in verbal fights and created an atmosphere that, at times, bordered on the anarchic and contentious. Villagers in these meetings acted as *strident citizens* who boisterously made demands, sought information, and held authorities accountable.

Low-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

Articulating Demands

Gram sabha meetings in low-literacy villages in Bidar displayed a clear divide between villagers with and without political literacy who possessed widely differing capacities for deliberation. Basic understanding of the public's critical role in deciding common infrastructure and resource demands was lacking among a section of participants. The following excerpt records a villager who thinks that a committee should decide their development needs and another villager, an *elite steward*, who intervenes to correct his misunderstanding. Even after repeated requests to voice their demands, villagers keep returning to the issue of turn taking among caste groups rather than specifying the public resources they need:

Nodal officer: You need to finalize which half-done pending works are to be completed and what new public works are to be taken up. You should tell us.

Villager [male]: You may have a committee for that. You can decide what are the works to be done for which areas. We are not necessary for that.

Villager [male]: Villagers need to decide in the *gram sabha*.

Joint engineer: We will tell what is there from our end. In this action plan, we can execute roads that are half-done.

Nodal officer: You decide and tell us your ideas.

Joint engineer: After road, if we have money left, we will do whatever you say.

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Villager[male]: If you can tell us what is the share of SC-ST, we can tell what works we want?

Villager [male]: No, now you [villagers] tell us what you want, they (officials) will look at those things later.

Secretary: 50% general and 50% to SC-ST.

Villager [male]: How much?

Secretary: 50% to general, 50% to SC-ST.

President: We need to divide general into three and SC-ST into three.

Villager [male]: Ok. Divide like that and do one work in one place.

President: Which works are to be completed?

Villager: [male]: One time you take up a work at our end, next time you take up a work at their end.

Villager [male]: Take up one work for general [castes] and take up one work for SCs.

(Basavakalyan, Rajola)

It was common for villagers to raise multiple demands simultaneously and fail to mention specific details, such as start and end points of the roads requested. Villagers also failed to understand the public contribution requirement for some government projects, like road construction. On the whole, villagers are able to voice needs but fall short of tailoring their participation to fit the parameters of government programs. In some meetings they also fail to agree on the resources most in need.

Villager [male]: We need to have three stages [raised platform for hosting ceremonies and events].

. . .

Villager [male]: We want cc road.

Secretary: We need to pay 10% from the *panchayath* [for financing road construction].

Joint engineer: You need to pay 5%.

Secretary: We need to collect taxes and pay for that. But in our *panchayath* we cannot collect any taxes.

Villager [male]: Sir, there is a budget for stage, no?

Joint engineer: That will come under Jala Nigama. Now you tell about roads and drainage.

Villager [male]: What cc road we have, it should not be through any member. We want it directly from the government.

. . .

Secretary: If we fulfill the amount of public contribution [for road construction], it can be done.

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Villager [male]: That is why we are telling. Let them [government] do the work and let all the *[panchayat]* members put in the required money.

Villager [male]: We want cc road.

Secretary: Tell us from where to where. We need to put in money to cover 10% of the cost.

. . .

Villager [male]: Let us take up the road first.

Secretary: Tell from where to where

Villager [male]: Road and drainage.

. . .

Villager [male]: No work is done in our place. We want to have a stage.

. . .

Villager [male]: We want roads and latrine in our village.

Villager [male]: Yes, the latrine funds got diverted.

Villager [male]: We don't want latrine.

(Basavakalyan, Betagere, Geligeli)

By contrast, the following excerpt records a sophisticated framing of demands, with villagers specifying the start and end points of roads they want to be built. The framing reflects a good grasp of the kind of deliberation that is effective in obtaining government projects.

Villager [male]: What are all the things you have noted for ward 4?

Secretary: Laying of cc road from the well.

Villager [male]: Which well?

Secretary: Open well.

Villager [male]: Madharagalli, you write it. It is an open well. Vishwanata's house, Madharagalli.

Secretary: Toilets near Kolachamma mandir. CC road between Cheare Shankar's house up to Ramanna's house. CC road between Naggeri's house up to main road.

Villager [female]: Not there. Ramanna Gante's house to Ambedkar Bhavan

Secretary: Is it cc road?

Villager [female]: CC road to be laid from Venkappa Pandaragere's house to Sirivantha Kumbar's house.

Nodal Officer: Is there any water problem? You are telling only about cc roads!

Villager [female]: We have bore for water, so no problem. But major problem is that of road. The water flows onto the roads and it gets filthy; we can't even walk on it. So we have written both.

(Narayanapura, Basavakalyan)

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A bifurcation in villagers' ability to grasp what is required of them in deliberative exercises and their ability to articulate their demands is prominent in the low-literacy *gram sabhas* in Bidar.

Seeking Accountability

Even in low-literacy settings, villagers put pressure on *panchayat* officials and seek accountability from them. The divide in discursive styles caused by differences in political literacy was prominent in such exchanges as well. The following excerpt records poor Lingayat villagers bringing charges of corruption against officials for their allocation of government land for building houses. Interestingly, a villager comments on participants' discursive style, stating how becoming angry led them to fight in the *gram sabha*. This was a participant's attempt to explain the frequently observed discourteous behavior of himself and others, which he claimed gave them a bad reputation:

Villager [male]: All SC people have houses in their ward. But people from our Lingayat community don't have houses.

Villager [male]: At least will you allot sites [for building houses] here? We don't even have sites.

Villager [male]: We have two to three children in each house. *Panchayath* people will give sites to [SC families with] two to three children. They will not come and see. They will take money and give it to them. They will allot side by side and eat up the money.

Joint engineer: Tell me, after my arrival to whom have we allotted sites? We have given to none.

Villager [male]: I am warning you, don't conclude this *gram sabha*!

President: I am not doing so.

Villager [male]: A site [notice] got hung in Narayanappa Gundappa's land.

Secretary: Who, I don't know! Chairman did it, go and ask him.

Villager [male]: Why will we ask him! He personally came and measured it. You go ask him.

Officer: They should consult with Chittakotta member and then do it.

Villager [male]: That's what, both chairman and member together did it.

Officer: We should ask member why they allotted four sites in the same place.

President: Then it will be an objection. That member is a relative of his. We should consult with three or four villagers [before allotting sites].

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Villager [male]: Write that they should not allot any site to anyone without deciding in the *gram sabha*.

Villager [male]: How will you permit the construction of a new house?

Villager [male]: You should give it to the poor. You should not give it to others. You should allot it as per the president's decision and by consulting three or four villagers. When we people get angry, we fight, and that leads to negative reaction. The poor [Lingayats] don't get any site here.

President: A couple of days back I went elsewhere. [When I am absent] They will somehow adjust and make it theirs.

(Basavakalyan, Betagery Chittakotak)

Elite stewards asked questions that reflected sophisticated knowledge of funding and technical details of public works. The discussion recorded as follows about a bore well and water supply reflects the main speaker's knowledge of the depth to which a bore well had been dug and his awareness of water tests and cost estimates related to the project's implementation:

Villager [male]: Then, in Jala Nigama, you should build a water tank and arrange for the water facility.

Villager [male]: Tell in detail about how much is there in Jala Nigama.

Secretary: . . .Then for that you need to reestimate. We need to request the DGM. He has sent an order, and instead of plastic pipe they have put the estimate for iron pipes. According to them an assistant engineer has made the estimate. If the committee people visit the DGM, they will give us permission to start the work. It got delayed because of the iron pipe issue only. And one more thing, the bore well was a failure there. We need to have another bore now. But when it rained in September last year, automatically there was water, so it got blocked. Same thing will happen in case of the pipeline because of the water pressure.

Villager [male]: It [water from bore well] is not good for drinking. We need to put one more [bore] where they have shown one more point.

Villager [male]: Has the test been done?

Secretary: Already done. Because there was lot of fluoride content in that water it was unfit to drink. Here [new place shown for digging bore well] it is fit.

Villager [male]: If anyone drinks it, we will get to know whether it is fit, or, if there is sweet water in the other bore that it is good for drinking.

Villager [male]: We need to send an estimate for it.

. . .

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Secretary: . . . One more thing. Earlier it was plastic pipes, now iron pipes will be used. There is a difference in rate. So it is better to take permission again.

. . .

Villager [male]: What our people do is they will kick one god and they will bless another god! One needs to sit quietly and another person needs to get it sanctioned. Do whatever you want, but it needs to benefit us. Put whatever you want, plastic pipe or iron pipe, put another Rs. 20,000 tax and get it done in this place.

Secretary: Even you know sir, that it is a government work.

Villager [male]: Stop it I say! We know it is government work. It is teamwork. There is no water in our bore. They spent one lakh to put that, but they won't do the necessary work. If three meters more depth was put, we might have had water. It is in front of us now. Unnecessarily they dug a hundred feet bore well. You might have put iron pipes. They will work on their own, and they won't discuss with others!

(Basavakalyan, Betagere Geligeli)

Overall, the most notable pattern in *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages was the polarized nature of discourse between *elite stewards* and the others. This finding is a community-level analogue to a point made by Basu and Foster (2001) on the positive externalities associated with literacy at the household level. They argue that individual-level illiteracy matters less than whether the individual belongs to a household with at least one literate person. This is because the illiterate person can be guided by a literate relative to achieve a higher level of capability. We find, similarly, that in low-literacy villages in higher-capacity state contexts, more literate individuals can lead discussions in the *gram sabha*. This can compensate for the challenges arising from low levels of average literacy.

Medium-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

Gram sabhas in medium-literacy villages showed considerable variation in attendance, quality of deliberation, and number of disruptions that occurred in them. Two of the meetings were attended by so few villagers that they were reduced to being merely informational reports by current government officials. Another was extremely fractious, with the ex-president dominating the discussion, using it as an opportunity to castigate current and past *panchayat* regimes. A few heavily attended

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meetings were devoted solely to distributing ration cards for subsidized food. These meetings were invariably made acrimonious by villagers clamoring to be included on the beneficiaries list. Verbal clashes regarding the allocation of funds among caste groups occurred in several of the meetings. Other meetings were quite deliberative in spirit. There were concrete discussions concerning various facilities required by the village, public works to be completed, and criticism regarding the quality of public works projects. Overall, a substantial number of these meetings had deliberative moments even though these were often interspersed with verbal altercations that could descend into chaotic and angry disarray. The stridency of exchanges in medium-literate *gram sabhas* was notable and exceeded that in low-literacy *gram sabhas*. We ascribe this to the likely equalization of voice attributable to higher literacy.

Articulating Demands

Competition among caste groups for development funds allocated by the state is a common feature running through several of the *gram sabhas* in medium-literacy villages in Bidar. Villagers showed greater awareness of the principles used by the state to allocate funds and were keen to question these principles. In the following excerpt, villagers ask pointed questions about whether caste related allocations were based on population size or the caste affiliation of *panchayat* members. Persons from one caste group appeal for a larger share of the budgetary allocation for laying concrete roads, complaining that their village has been neglected:

Joint engineer: In that 50% is for general [castes] and 50% for SC-ST. They will give half to general and half to SC-ST. It will be different budget for different works. Nobody should raise any word against SC-ST share. It is almost one lakh. And add to that the share for STs and in that you can get any work done as you want. It is totally for SC-ST. Each member will get Rs. 8,900.

Villager [male]: Sir, how will you divide this money? And is it on the basis of the number of [ward] members or population size?

Nodal officer: We divide on the basis of population.

. . .

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Villager [male]: First *gram panchayat* budget is spent. Mr. Ashoka Patil has said this in the *panchayat*. At that time we gave it from our heart. It was a necessity for them. Now they don't require it, so let them give it to us.

. . .

Villager [male]: We had given earlier, now we are asking. If you say no, how can it be [don't refuse our request]!

Nodal officer: Let us see.

. . .

Villager [male]: Take Rs. 1,00,000 and form a cc road.

Villager [male]: Rs. 1,00,000, thank you for that! After telling so much we never got any money. Since five years we haven't received anything. Now villagers requested president to do whatever you want, but develop Kotamala as you have developed Miracal. As you have cc road in your place, provide the same for us also.

Nodal officer: Without your consent we will not do anything.

Villager [male]: We are not talking like mad; we are not crazy!

Villager [male]: Yes, Raju, sit down.

Villager [male]: No sir, it can't be like that. We want cc road.

Officer: Tell what other works you want?

Villager [male]: Let the work up to Rs. 1,00,000 be perfect.

Villager [male]: What amount of work can be done in Rs. 1,00,000! Everything is there in the government, but it will not do anything. We want roads at any cost. What can be done out of Rs. 1,00,000!

. . .

Villager [male]: We will not get the total amount. There is a separate budget for STs.

Villager [male]: How much is there for SC-ST?

Joint engineer: For SC-ST it is 78,000.

(Basavakalyan, Mirakhal Anandawadi)

Villagers have the capacity to give their development needs deep consideration and the discursive ability to present compelling rational arguments to support their proposals. In the following excerpt, the demand for a road is quickly accompanied by the demand for a drainage canal to be built flanking the road on two sides. Villagers clarify that the canals are required to prevent sewage water from flowing onto the road. This will help in maintaining the road in good condition. Villagers insist that the cost estimates be clearly presented to them by the *panchayat* staff:

Villager [male]: CC road is there, no. Eight meters of cc can be done.

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Secretary: It is approximately five to ten thousand, more or less that much. As we are not technical people we can't tell perfectly.

Villager [male]: We need to have a canal.

Villager [male]: It should be sloped so that the flow of water will be easier.

Villager [male]: If it is not possible just leave it.

Villager [female]: We need to have a canal.

Villager [male]: If not canal, at least, let us have cc road.

Villager [male]: If it is not possible, you should look into the *panchayat!* Look at what is there legally. Whether you are there or we are there. If you do things legally, there will not be any problem. You have got all the rights to ask them. Say that you have got all the documents with you. Whatever you do, it should be within the budget limits.

. . .

Villager [male]: If canal work is done, then no vehicle can go there.

Villager [male]: No vehicle!

Villager [male]: Then we need to have a small canal.

Villager [male]: Yes. If it is left like that . . .

Villager [male]: Yes. It can't [be left without constructing canals], for that only the cc road is like that [poor condition].

Villager [male]: Where there is less space we need to have a small canal there.

. . .

Villager [male]: From that direction water will flow.

Villager [male]: The rainwater will flow on the road.

Villager [male]: Let the rainwater go there. No problem. I am talking about drainage [sewage] water.

Secretary: Discuss, discuss. Whatever you tell we will write down the same.

. . .

Villager [male]: If you can put the pipe without touching the compound wall, it is OK. Do as per the specification.

Villager [male]: On whose doorway will it pass by?

Villager [male]: How many? May be that of ten houses. That is it.

. . .

Secretary: Do the work within the budget. We have got no say in that.

. . .

Member [male]: Listen here. Canals to be put on two sides. We will do however much is possible within this budget.

(Basavakalyan, Thogaloora Halahalli)

Articulations of demands in medium-literacy villages included competing claims on budgetary allocations made by the various caste

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groups. The caste-competition for government resources reflects greater political literacy about the rules and regulations governing *panchayat* finance allocation. There were instances of verbal conflict among villagers, but there was not a single instance of one group complaining about the unruly behavior of another, as was the case in some low-literacy *gram sabhas* in Bidar. We ascribe this to the existence of discursive parity in medium-literacy villages.

Seeking Accountability

Greater political literacy enabled villagers to hold officials accountable. Detailed knowledge of public projects underway was particularly helpful for this. The following excerpt records villagers exposing *panchayat* officials' responsibility for the flawed construction of the childcare center. Using an admonishing tone, villagers denounce the *panchayat* secretary for the faulty construction plan and for paying off the contractor without first checking on the quality of the new construction:

Secretary: See, I will put forward the expenditure and income for our *panchayath* as a total for the year 2004–05. Expenses toward salaries of *gram panchayath* workers from March 2004 to March 2005 is Rs. 36,000. Royalty to the president is Rs. 6,000. *Gram panchayath* building costs Rs. 22,400, and the *panchayath* building is still half due.

Villager [male]: Which building?

Secretary: The one in Thogalur.

Villager [male]: Have you put pillars or not?

Villager [male]: Since they have put up a screen, we cannot see it.

. . .

Secretary: See, we have constructed according to the government's estimate. We have constructed the pillar and foundation.

Villager [male]: How much did it cost?

Secretary: . . . See, the Anganwadi building costs Rs. 93,000.

Villager [male]: Since when did you receive the funds?

Secretary: For that one we got Rs. 93,500. See, our budget has to be utilized within March. That [money] is for paying the contractor of the building.

Villager [male]: Nobody will call that building an Anganwadi! That is called a room; that is all.

Secretary: What I am telling is . . .

Villager [male]: We don't want it! Look at the work done.

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Secretary: Yes, you are right, but you are talking about it after everything is done.

Villager [male]: Yes, you are asking now, and we are telling you now!

Secretary: There is still some pending work to be done in the building.

Villager [male]: Pending work?

Villager [male]: You might have given it to us.

Secretary: No, no, without the work being completed we can't give it [open it for use] like that.

Villager [male]: You should not give. If the work is perfect then only you can give. But you will tell, that has to be done, this has to be done! . . .

Secretary: Look.

Villager [male]: We will not look, reply to us! Since the proposal was for two [pillars], how did it become one?

Villager [male]: Then they will search for the foundation! [Sarcastically implying that there is no foundation.]

Villager [male]: There were two, yes, two. But how come now there is only one?

Secretary: There were two.

Villager [male]: [With sarcasm] In which direction did it go?

Secretary: There was provision for two pillars in the plan. We were supposed to construct two.

Villager [male]: OK, is it perfect? No. There is no foundation at all.

Villager [male]: Next time, if the work is perfect then only clear the bill [for payment to contractor] or else don't clear it. I am saying this not for my own sake. I am saying this on behalf of all the villagers.

Villager [male]: See, now it came out [the true facts were revealed]!

Villager [male]: Yes, he is right! If something goes wrong, we will raise an objection about you.

Secretary: It will not happen next time.

Villager [male]: Next time?

Secretary: I have a request to you all. Whatever work is going on, you people should keep vigilance on that.

Villager [male]: If [good] quality work is done, it will not be a problem.

Villager [male]: Did the joint engineer say to demolish and reconstruct the building or not?

Villager [male]: He went home.

Villager [male]: We should take some money and, as he proposed, demolish and reconstruct the building. I gave him [joint engineer] a piece of my mind!

Secretary: No, no, I will not tell whether it is done or not.

Villager [male]: Do you call it as a work if there is no foundation at all! You do the work properly. Whether you take some money [bribe] for that or not, we don't mind. But we want good work to be done.

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Secretary: What is going on here? Tell me whether the work is done or not. I want to report the same.

Villager [male]: No.

Secretary: If it is not perfect, I will cancel it.

Villager [male]: Joint engineer should see it. Only he can judge both the quantity and quality of work done. That is his work. Nobody else can do it.

Secretary: For this we need to call the joint engineer.

Villager [male]: Call him, call him.

Secretary: Call him.

Villager [male]: See, nobody will work properly. Call the joint engineer. We have no objection.

Secretary: See, I am telling in this *gram sabha* meeting . . .

Villager [male]: Whatever public money is there, it has to be utilized in a proper way. That is my main concern.

Villager [male]: We are asking about the money that is being misused.

Secretary: Ok.

Villager [male]: We need to have perfect work done.

Villager [male]: Even though one work is not done fully, how come we cleared both the bills?

. . .

Villager [male]: This should not happen in the future.

(Basavakalyan, Thogaloora Halahalli)

Medium-literacy *gram sabhas* displayed considerably less citizen polarization than low-literacy ones. In low-literacy *gram sabhas*, often a large group would engage in bitter verbal fighting, creating a cacophonous backdrop against which a smaller group of elite stewards sincerely tried to deliberate. They chided and guided other villagers in framing demands and conducting themselves properly in the *gram sabha*. In medium-literacy *gram sabhas,* many contrasting voices participated and were patiently listened to. Villagers who spoke in less articulate ways were not instructed or assisted by their better-educated counterparts. In villages in which literate citizens outnumbered illiterate ones, there seemed to be fewer civic incentives for the former to guide the latter in articulating their demands and framing complaints. We speculate that, beyond an initial threshold, literacy creates an atmosphere of relative discursive equality where everyone feels free and competent to voice their claims and complaints in their own discursive style without being checked or corrected. This can lead to deliberations being disrupted by fights and villagers speaking en masse. In both medium- and low-literacy settings, villagers were able

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to bring pressure on *panchayat* members to perform their duties better. In low-literacy villages, elite stewards were able to do so effectively while in medium-literacy villages, a greater number of villagers were able to hold officials accountable.

PAIR 3. DHARMAPURI, TAMIL NADU: 31 LOW-LITERACY VERSUS 14 MEDIUM-LITERACY *GRAM SABHAS*

Political literacy in Dharmapuri was relatively high. Even in *gram sabhas* in low-literacy villages, citizens showed reasonable knowledge of *panchayat* functioning and were familiar with the protocols of public deliberation. In medium-literacy settings, citizens showed the skilled use of fine-grained information to strengthen demands and support comments while deliberating on matters of public interest. This minor difference aside, in both low- and medium-literacy settings in Dharmapuri it can be said that citizens acted as *civic deliberators*. They differed very little in their levels of political literacy.

Low-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

In Dharmapuri, thirty-one of the *gram sabhas* were in low-literacy villages. Three distinctive patterns characterized these meetings. The most remarkable aspect was active vocal participation by women. Women were often the first ones to voice their grievances and demands, and they were no less articulate and assertive than their male counterparts. In six of these meetings, female attendance far outstripped that of men. Many of these women were members of self-help groups, or SHGs. This was evident from the demands they made. Generally, women raised issues related to their SHGs (building for the group, livelihoods) and drew attention to problems in the public distribution system (ration shop malpractice) and the inconveniences faced by children (lack of day-care centers, improper school facilities, and inadequate transportation to schools).

While articulating demands, villagers consistently framed problems by mentioning the history of past actions that had been taken to register or remedy the problem. This style of articulation was different from simply voicing problems. This discursive tactic was indicative of the relatively high level of political literacy among the villagers. Both

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women's active verbal participation and the shared discursive strategy of framing demands were surprising given the low level of literacy.

Villagers transitioned seamlessly between voicing demands for public goods for their village and requesting personal goods and subsidies for their families and households. Villagers spoke with a tone both of entreaty and entitlement when making personal demands. Making requests at the *gram sabha* for personal needs reflected the state's long history of political patronage. The two political parties that have held power over the last few decades have a strong history of providing free goods and subsidized schemes to the rural population.

Articulating Demands

It is typical of women belonging to SHGs to speak at these meetings. They were often the first citizens to voice their concerns. The following excerpt records a woman who belongs to an SHG voicing multiple demands. The follow-up question about the time frame for fulfilling these requests reflects an acute understanding of the cyclical nature of the electoral process. People recognize that the reliability of promises made in the *gram sabha* is hostage to its timing.

Mrs. Amudha [villager, OBC]: I am Amudha. There is a self-help group in Kondappanayanapalli. It started long back. There are ten self-help groups in total. But even then there is no common space for those self-help groups [to meet]. We meet and work under somebody's roof or under trees. In each *gram sabha* meeting we keep saying about this. But no action has been taken. Then in our villages since agriculture is shrinking, if poor ladies get any opportunity to work, we will send our children to study and maintain our families happily. Since we are unable to educate them, they are all simply sitting in the house and we are suffering a lot. So, kindly, please make some arrangements for it.

Panchayat clerk: In this village, currently we are arranging to construct a building for the self-help groups. It has already been promised in the earlier meeting.

Mrs. Amudha [villager, OBC]: Will you do in the short term or long term? Since he (*panchayat* president) will be in the administration for only some more days (i.e. be in power till the next election cycle), within that he must do. He has said this in many meetings. So I request them to do it in the short term.

(Kondappanayanapalli, Bargur)

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Demands for public resources led to lengthy discussions marked by cogent practical reasoning. The following excerpt records a deliberative discussion regarding a water shortage in which women voice their complaints in an authoritative and aggressive manner. Villagers, ward members, and *panchayat* officials all put forward consistently argued reasons supporting their actions. They even appear to reach consensus on the remedial actions to be taken. In this excerpt a pattern often observed in *gram sabhas* is played out: *panchayat* officials and the public reach a decision through what seems on the surface to be a hostile deliberative process:

Mrs. Akila [villager, Muslim]: My name is Akila. I don't hold any post; I am a housewife. We have given lots of petitions to the village *panchayat* administrative office, to the collector, etc., but for this Pattakapatti they have not done anything. Why have you not taken any action? If you don't take action within three days we don't know what will happen! [Possibly threatening agitation.] You tell us whether you intend to do anything or not. [Talks angrily.]

President: You have the right to ask so you can ask, but you must not talk like this, "we don't know what will happen if we don't get water within three days." Government work will progress slowly only.

Mrs. Akila [villager, Muslim]: We have told the same *[panchayat]* head, but what did he do?

Villager [male]: In our place alone there is no work or no improvement done.

Villager [male]: We are not asking for anything except drinking water. Even if we go to different villages, they don't give us water. Our fasting days [Ramzan/Ramadan observed by Muslims] have come; let us at least have drinking water. We are not asking for road facility, toilet facility, etc. We don't have any other facility.

Villager [male]: For this place you have not done anything. What have you done for this place? Have you given road facility, toilet facility, etc.? Why must I talk softly? What've you really done for our place? [Shouting angrily]

Union councilor: In our village we have six [water] tanks. You are asking what we have done! Just because a Muslim person's house caught on fire, we have spent Rs. 64,000 on houses. Just for a single person.

Villager [male]: Is that the only thing needed? We are asking only for water facility. In your place school is there, toilet facility is there, everything is there. But what've you done for our place?

Mrs. Akila [villager, Muslim]: Shall we take a jar of water from your house? [In anguish]

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Union councilor: Each year they give money for one village. It cannot be given to all the villages at the same time.

Villager [male, SC]: Even while casting our votes we asked for drinking water facility. Are we asking for road, light, and other facilities!

Union councilor: We have dug two bores spending Rs. 35,000 each.

Mrs. Akila [villager, Muslim]: Where is the bore for us?

Villager [male, SC]: There is no water in the bore. If water were available in the bore, we would not need to go in search of water to other villages.

Union councilor: Entire India is suffering without water due to the failure of monsoons, so what can we do!

Ward member: We want that to be done immediately. In the first month itself the coil [of motorized water pump] was burnt, so we told our head to take action. He said we have to give petition to the collector. We ourselves gave petition to the collector. He ordered to dig 500 feet bore. On the fifth month and ninth day, on the eve of the election, our head said we can use the same motor. But since the horsepower was less, it could not suck water from even 170 feet depth well previously. The coil is under repair three to four times a year.

Union councilor: We even tried our level best by laying pipes by spending Rs. 20,000. But your ward member refused to accept that and was adamant about getting a new motor. He stopped the process of laying pipes. Your member said so. He asked us not to fix the old motor.

Villager [male]: Who said so?

Union councilor: Babu, ward member. He said we need new motor to be installed; we do not want the old motor.

. . .

Villager [male]: It is six months since the pipes have arrived here. [All of them shout in unison angrily.] Why must we be quiet? You listen to us!

Union councilor: Just listen to me and then talk! Only after doing the whole job like fixing up pipes and fixing the [old] motor, then run it, and finally if you still do not get water only then can you question the *panchayat* board. If the motor does not have the HP [horsepower] and you don't get water, only then you can complain. You all told either you put new motor or don't put anything at all. After laying pipes and fixing the motor, if you don't get water you can ask me. *Panchayat* does not have fund for installing a new motor. But if the old motor does not work then definitely we would do the needful to get a new motor. All of you stopped the work even for laying pipes.

Villager [male]: You said men are stopping you. I'll tell them not to stop the work.

Union councilor: What is the dispute between us? Why must we fight with you all?

. . .

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Union councilor: As the member says, if this is fixed, all the illegal [water] connections must be cut [disconnected] in each house.

. . .

Union councilor: We can fix the motor within eight days. Without my permission they have drawn [household water] connections.

[All talk together . . .]

President: We'll install a new motor, but all the illegal connections must be removed. Not even one connection must be there.

Union councilor: We will install ten taps at the center of the village in a row, and we will install a new motor, but not even one illegal connection must be there in the village. Everything must be cut.

(Kendikiala Alli, Karimangalam)

Villagers in low-literacy settings used *gram sabha* meetings to report and attempt to remedy people's unauthorized activities in the village. Their complaints reflected their knowledge of rules and regulations governing the use of common property, including land and trees. We take this as indicative of a relatively high level of political literacy. The following excerpt records villagers listing activities occurring in the village that infringe upon rules. Speakers request that the *panchayat* take action against those individuals who are abusing villagers' rights to common use of public property:

Villager [male, SC]: I am Sathyamurthy. In our village, in school lands around thirty persons have constructed houses. That place is meant for school and *panchayat*. The government has to take action to remove the houses. They have to be demolished.

Villager [male]: Remove houses that are in the place of the temple.

President: We will speak regarding this to the government.

Villager [male, SC]: In my village, there are three houses on temple lands. Even after getting judgment from the court, three private people are using it as their own land and they have built house on it too. Also they have not submitted the income regarding this to the government. So what action are you are going to take regarding this? Private people are using that as their own place. We have given requisition letter to the minister and it will be certified. Councilor and other leaders have given a request letter to the concerned department but even then, till now no action has been taken. It is not been rectified yet. Then in the lake of Ellanathanoor village, since private people are doing cultivation, no one else can do farming as there is no water in the lake. Government should take action against them and get the lake areas from them and hand it over to the respective persons. This problem has been handed over to the respective minister. The lake areas have been

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marked separately and shown to the concerned government officer. But till now no action has been taken.

. . . .

Villager [male, OBC]: Private people have cut the Karuvelam trees (used for fuel wood) and used it for many purposes. This is a great loss for the government. If it's auctioned and handed over to the government, it will be of great use for them. Lots of trees have been spoiled. All are being looted. There has been a loss of around one lakh for the government.

(Kondappanayanapalli, Bargur)

In the political culture of Tamil Nadu, it is common for citizens to make personal requests for welfare subsidies. Some adopt a tone of entreaty, pleading for personal relief in the face of household crises. Others employ a tone of entitlement. They command assistance and criticize the government's failure to attend to their individual needs. The following excerpt records one instance out of a myriad of possible examples.

Villager [male]: [This man was fully intoxicated and he was being noisy.] Since the past ten years the earlier president did nothing for us. This president – I will only tell the truth – all the municipal officials and Tahsildar all know about us. I have asked for a loan, and now they are refusing. I do not have anything. The government has to help me. It should do whatever it can for me. I have a son. I work hard; I have nothing. I ask the government to help me.

Villager *[female]:* I am Rani from Nallampatti village. I am a laborer in the fields. I do not own any farm. I request the government to help me. My husband is no more. I have come here to request for rice under my ration card. I want to give it in writing. The roads here are not proper.

(Pavakkal, Uttangarai)

In Tamil Nadu, making personal demands of this nature (houses, loans, food staples) does not indicate a lack of political literacy. Rather, it reflects a rational response to liberal welfare state provisions adopted by the leading political parties as a populist strategy for gaining advantage in electoral competition.

Even in low-literacy villages, men and women were acutely aware of public resource and infrastructure issues and had a good sense of the *gram sabha* and *panchayat's* scope of action. They made forceful demands on the local government and, even when their verbal expressions were hostile, the content of their communication was articulately

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framed and persistently delivered. Their participation in deliberations was not received as unruly or disruptive.

Seeking Accountability

Villagers use *gram sabhas* to expose problems with public services and hold *panchayat* members accountable. They speak out against inefficiencies in the free noon meal program for children and the lack of fair prices for food and public transportation. In their search for accountability, villagers often try to negotiate with *panchayat* officials regarding sharing responsibilities for the upkeep of certain public resources. The following excerpt captures one such discussion. It includes a wide range of topics from citizens' obligation to pay taxes to whether responsibility for maintaining village hygiene falls within the purview of the *panchayat* or resides with the public at large.

Villager [male]: I am Alagesan. There is no hygiene in the village. There are lots of sewage ponds in and around the village. The reason for cholera disease spreading over here is that there is no hygiene. They built one corporation toilet, but in front of that itself there is a sewage water pond. All the sewage water accumulates there. They have to remove all these ponds; only then the hygienic conditions of the place will improve. All the drains are clogged.

Block development officer [BDO]: Who closes these drains? You have to take care of your house and your street. You are selecting the leader and you are complaining about him. The village *panchayat* management is like a big kingdom. You have to take care of hygiene, and you should take care of removing garbage and other wastes. You are not cooperating while constructing buildings. Whenever a building is constructed for being used as toilets, you are not using it properly. Male population like us goes to toilets or urinals wherever we like, but this is not possible for the female population. Because of that we have constructed a toilet in the corner of the village. We have installed a bore pipe [water connection] there so that they would use it. Though we are not able to construct toilets for each and every house, we have constructed one in this place so that the ladies can use this. And, in time, bathrooms will be provided for them to take baths and wash their clothes. Then automatically the hygiene condition will improve.

Villager [male]: But the responsibility is with the leaders. There is a big sewage pond with dirty water in the outskirts of the village, which cannot be cleaned by one or two persons. The leaders should allocate funds and have it cleared.

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BDO: There is nothing called fund for all those things! Village *panchayat* cannot do everything. We are collecting taxes, but with that amount how can we spend? When we get married, we should earn money to raise our children [indicating personal responsibility]. Do you know what are the electricity charges per month? You have to take responsibility for the management of the *panchayat*. You people do not allow us to increase the house tax. You people do not even pay the water tax. And you are asking us to install [electricity] bulbs in the streets!. . .

(Beerjepalli, Shoolagiri)

As evident from this excerpt, villagers forcefully press on the local government for services that they perceive the government should provide. The government official, meanwhile, instead of being casually dismissive, explains through simple analogies and technical details regarding *panchayat* revenues, why the *panchayat* is unable to provide all the services needed. This exchange captures a moment of informed public negotiation regarding service provision.

Medium-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

Gram sabha deliberations in medium-literacy villages were similar to those in low-literacy ones, except that in the former villagers presented information that was even more detailed with specific numerical information and more pointed reason-giving in articulating their demands and grievances. They appeared to display a heightened awareness of the detailed procedures related to beneficiary selection, bureaucratic tasks, and practical decision-making responsibilities.

Articulating Demands

The three patterns that stood out in these *gram sabhas* were women's active participation in registering their concerns (often through several participants' serial statements, all emphasizing the same problems and demands); villagers' ability to infuse their statements with appropriate factual information and strong public reasoning; and their detailed awareness of rules and requirements regarding the acquisition and improvement of public infrastructure. The following excerpts record these aspects of medium-literacy *gram sabhas*.

In the first example, a small number of women make a coordinated attempt to press for various demands. A woman SHG leader starts by

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laying out multiple demands. Two other women follow up echoing the same needs and add specific details on how to fix the transportation problem. Finally, the SHG leader speaks again, closing her speech with a critique of the current affirmative action policy. The level of coordination reveals considerable expertise in participating in *gram sabha* deliberations:

Ms. Latha [leader of Parasakthi self-help group, MBC]: I am Latha. I am a member of a self-help group; my place is Kattuseemanoor. I asked for a phone [connection] for my village from the telephone office. But they said that they don't have the name of that place [in their database], and also that only I had come and asked for the phone and nobody else had come. But I filled up everything and they asked for Rs. 10,000 as deposit. Till now we don't know anything about that . . . Our village has all the facilities. But now all places don't have water. They say we won't get water even if we dig a bore well. Even though our village has a bore, it gets repaired often. The bore can function properly only when a place has electricity. We asked for that also, but they have not provided a connection. And we asked for ration card facility for our village people. But still they created problems saying that they can't do it for our village. All villages have bus facility. That facility also we don't have. I finish with that.

Ms. Rani [villager, MBC]: I am V. Rani, Kattuseemanur ladies club. We all have water problem; often the bore gets repaired. Bore pipe should be repaired. We don't have bore pipe.

Ms. Vijaya [villager, MBC]: I am C. Vijaya, Kattuseemanoor. In our village, we struggle a lot for water. Bore gets repaired often. We don't get even a single pot of water for drinking. There are more than a hundred houses here. No one has a phone. So we need that facility. And we walk four to five kms for bringing ration [subsidized food grains] and we need to cross the lake. It's very problematic. So we need a ration shop here. Young people are going to work and for studies. So they need bus facility to travel. Even when buses come, they don't stop here; they pass by our village. So they come back to the house and it is a loss for us. [Bus number] 37, B5, B8, and all go this way. So we need these buses to stop here and take us. The school here is only till the eighth standard. I request you to bring a school for us. But nobody cared until now. So these are all the main necessities for us. Nobody takes care of it, even president and vice-president don't care about it. So you have to take care. They don't listen to us at all. They didn't install lights for our village and bore also is not repaired. For how long can we ask? That's all.

. . .

Ms Latha: I finish this speech with thanks. Only SCs have all the facilities. But BCs [backward castes] don't have any facilities. Even to build a

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bathroom they have to get permission from the sangham leader. So kindly arrange for funds for BCs also and for all the facilities too. Please get the roads repaired and also arrange to get Suzhal Nidhi [government project]. We are unable to build a *sangham* too.

(Achamangalam, Bargur)

Discussions about public goods ran longer in medium-literacy *gram sabha* meetings. Arguments were based on factual knowledge as well as on justice concerns. The following excerpt is taken from an extensive discussion on road conditions and water stagnation, lack of bus connectivity, and the associated problem of children not being able to get to school. The female speaker provides detailed information to bolster her case and offers compelling publicly minded reasons to support redressing the problems she identifies. Her comments reveal her knowledge of the complicated process for inviting tenders for public works projects like road construction.

Ms. Murugammal [villager, BC]: My name is Murugammal, Kattakaram *panchayat*, Mudalniahi self-help group. In school three children have fallen down. It is very slippery and there is a lot of mud during the rains. The stagnant water reaches up to our legs. Last time we reported about this and asked to have it cleared, but nobody took action and simply went off. Then in ten roads, many thorns are there.

Buses are not coming for the past four days. So teachers are all coming by walking from Kanakoti. They feel it is difficult and say that they won't come. Children also cannot come. In the evenings also buses are not running properly. So we have to walk till Annanagar. Or else, if we miss that, we have to go to Anakodi. So we don't have any facilities. You all say that you are doing, but nothing has been done. Teachers also fall in that mud. Even councilors and leaders don't care about this and take no action. So you have to answer for this. Do you feel there shouldn't be any school in Kattakaram? What else can we do?

They have informed that they will put new roads. But till now, the letter has not come. Since tender has not come, they are clearing those thorns for the past two days. They are working. For putting roads we must get tender. Sand should be put before the school definitely over there because buses are not coming and children also feel it is hard to come. Lessons also can't be taught even a single day. There is no way to go and also no place to cook food [school midday meal]. You can see. Then how will the people survive?

There is no way for the water to go. Sand should be put there. You said that it will be done within days. But till now it hasn't been done. Two months have gone by. They said tar road has been sanctioned. It's very problematic. Buses

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should be able to come at least twice, in the morning while going to school and evening while getting back. If the children miss the bus, they return home since they take time to walk. So they put absent for one day in school. Again, the same problem is repeated the next day also. So for four to five days the buses have not been running properly. In case of emergencies it's very problematic. Some have bicycles and they go by that, but most of them depend on the bus. So they can't go to places that are further away. So we need bus facility definitely. That's very important. We can't expect bus anytime . . . Or else school will be stopped in Kattakaram . . . The place will not be developed in any respect. The *panchayat* will get a name [good reputation], so you have to take care of these. We too will cooperate for that. You itself come directly to see. In today's position, you itself come and see it.

(Kalappampadi, Pennagaram)

The relatively higher level of political literacy was evident in discussions about resources like household water connections and bore wells, where villagers showed their awareness of rules and requirements. The following excerpt records villagers strongly urging the *panchayat* president to take action against violators and non-payers and explaining the rationale behind the government charging villagers a deposit for bringing workers and instruments to the village for getting a bore well dug:

Villager [male, MBC]: Water is not coming at all and that is why we have removed the taps. Since you are giving water to their houses they are not bothered.

President: You only have to replace the taps that are near your house.

Villager [male, SC]: Cut the supply of water to individual houses and make them fill water from the common water tank. Why should we collect water from a tap near our house instead of coming and collecting it from the common tank? We have to convene a meeting and tell people about how to save water and use it economically. When you open the tap, immediately they put the motor to fill water in their [household] tanks. So how can we get water! If you cut water they will spend it economically.

. . .

Villager: They have to pay a deposit of Rs. 1000. There is a booklet for it. If they have any problems let them come and rectify it in the *panchayat*. They have to pay a monthly fee of Rs. 30. If they don't pay, we have to cut their taps with EC. We can tell them and if they don't listen, we can cut their water connection with the help of the police. Even if somebody asks for household water connection, we need not give it. Only if they pay a deposit of Rs. 1000 rupees and a monthly fee of Rs. 30 to the *panchayat*, acceptance must be

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given to them. If they don't pay, connection must not be given to them. Even if they deposit Rs. 1000, the connection must be given in the presence of either the town *panchayat* head or town *panchayat* ward member or a person working in the town *panchayat*. The connection must not be taken without the knowledge of the *panchayat*. These things must be discussed in the meeting, and if they don't agree to this their water connection must be cut.

President: OK we'll do that.

Villager [male, MBC]: They collect the water by diverting it when it is coming in the main line itself and we don't get water here. They are using it twenty-four hours. We get only what is remaining. From here it goes to Vedunelli and it is not sufficient for everybody. If it goes to Vedunelli, we don't get water. So if we remove the tap we can get some water. Either you put a gate valve and regularize the water flow or cut the main gate valve. Or else drill a bore well and change this situation.

Villager [male, MBC]: What is the use drilling a bore well on rocks? It has to be done on the lake. They must look for a good place. The spot at which they drilled for bore earlier was only rocks till the end. What is the use of a bore then!

. . .

Villager [male, MBC]: If ten or fifteen houses are there in an area, the people of all the ten houses must decide on a place to drill a bore well. You have to pay a deposit of Rs. 3575 or so to Tamil Nadu drinking water board. If you pay this installment, you can decide on a place and bring those people to drill a bore well. The water board gives the money to do this. This area is full of rocks. They test for water availability. That instrument checks for water availability.

(Kethana halli, Karimangalam)

Villagers in medium-literacy settings, as seen previously, often go beyond describing problems to authoritatively instruct *panchayat* leaders on what remedial measures to undertake.

Seeking Accountability

Villagers' demands for accountability focus on fair beneficiary selection and condemning the failure of ward members to attend the *gram sabha*. The following excerpt shows villagers in medium-literacy contexts framing their critiques with factual information and displaying a firm understanding of the *panchayat's* jurisdiction. One villager blames multiple parties for not attending the *gram sabha*, which he argues is critical for accomplishing the assigned political and social duties of officials:

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Mr. Munusamy [villager, OBC]: Today is Gandhi Jayanthi [Gandhi's birthday] and, for that, each *panchayat* in the entire state has decided to conduct *gram sabha* meetings. But in the *gram sabha*, everyone should attend, like the *panchayat* leader, councilor, ward member, and other VIP's also. But here only three ward members have come [instead of seven to represent all seven revenue villages under this *gram sabha* jurisdiction]. So with these people what decisions will be made in this *grama sabha* meeting! Each village ward member should come and report their problems to the leader [*panchayat* president] in this meeting. The leaders cannot go and meet all of them. After they take decisions, the government should be notified of that order. Only then the government can do any rectifications or help. Without any of these, how can he do all these for you? He won't do. Then all of you will fight and say why can't he do for us?

Now, we have to give a list of twelve people for the Anna Yojana scheme [subsidized rice scheme]. We are confused which twelve people to select. Likewise, for *kaccha* houses [with mud walls and thatched roof], ... the government has sanctioned Rs. 10,000 [for repairing damaged roofs]. This morning there was confusion in the government regarding whom it has to be given to. In this *gram sabha* if all the ward members had been present then we could decide that from our village we can recommend this person and say that he is under the poverty line. But now only three [ward] members are here. Those three villages already have *kaccha* houses. Now whether in Gangavaram or Kattapalli or Kallkapalli, anywhere, it is already there. Now whom can we select?

Same way, now wells have no water. For digging that, they give Rs. 5,000 for five wards/villages. Now which five can we select? We can select only when [ward] members come ...

Mr. Natarajan [villager, MBC]: For these schemes and all, if you ask us to arrange for persons [select beneficiaries] one day before, how will we do it? You should say two days before. Many of the people who belong to the village are not present. This is unfair.

Mr. Mani [villager, MBC]: No, they have not said. How will they [villagers] get ready [to attend the meeting]? They [*panchayat* administration] gave notice [about the meeting] yesterday at 5 pm. Your officers only made the mistake and then how can you say that we [villagers] are not coming? ...

Mr. Balu [villager, MBC]: Yes, we have to be informed one day earlier. You have to go and say this to your staffs. Yes, because we are telling you this. This is not an office.

...

Mariappan [villager, BC]: ... You should have given [notice] two days before. That's your duty. You should give G.O. [government order]. "You

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should adjust and move forward [with the meeting]." We have not come here to adjust; we have come only to conduct the *gram sabha*. What will the clerk do if you give [notice] one day before?

President: We say only that you all should come. Only when you all come, we can write the orders.

Mr. Maran [villager]: Okay we come. Now me, I came for [the last] three meetings. No other officers have come. All the three times I saw nobody [public officials] had come. Women and men both have not come. We adjust that. That is why you should inform us prior [to the meeting]. We can [inform other villagers] only when the officers inform us.

(Kattakaram, Bargur)

In these meetings there was a fair amount of discussion on the mismatch between state-led priorities and the needs of villagers. For instance, villagers criticized the state's emphasis on greening villages by planting and protecting trees while neglecting to allocate public lands to people that did not own lands and homes. The following excerpt records a discussion that starts with villagers complaining about the government's action of planting trees on livable lands and prohibiting people from cutting them down. This was followed by a series of villagers, who either did not own residential plots to build houses or had not received house-building grants, complaining about the difficulty in continuing to live in the village. The discussion continues and a villager accuses the state and the *panchayat* of serving the needs of better-off people. He exposes the irony that house-building grants cannot be given to people who do not already own lands for constructing houses. The tone of sarcasm is particularly palpable in the villagers' critique of state priorities. We attribute this healthy skepticism of the state's agenda to a higher literacy level:

Mr. Marimuthu [villager, SC]: They have planted trees where houses should be built! Now they are asking us to cut the trees and build a house there. How we can cut trees?

Ms. Selvi [villager, OBC]: There is no place to live and so where do we build houses! In living places there are only trees, which we are not allowed to cut. Then where to go and how to live?

Ms. Rajammal [villager, OBC]: Where there is *patta* [land rights], there are tamarind trees! So where to go?

. . .

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VAO: We have given petition but no constructive step was taken so far. The officials visited the place. They said they will do the needful. But nothing has been done so far.

Ms. Selvi [villager, OBC]: There is no place to build a house. Where to plant trees?

Mr. Govindan [villager, SC]: It is alright when you grow trees. But once they become big, they become dangerous to the houses.

. . .

Ms. Selvi [villager, OBC]: We have a lot of children and many of them are married, and we find it so very difficult with our children married and no place for them to live. I have grown up children. Where do we live once when they get married? We don't have a place at all. You are telling us not to leave the village and seek jobs outside. But if you don't build us houses what will we do?

Ms. Janaki [ward member, OBC]: You say, "Don't leave the place; educate your children." All nice talks! But where do we live?

Ms. Velammal [villager, ST]: For the past 30 years we are on the roads without a proper place to live in. You must do something for us.

. . .

Mr. Murugan [secretary, OBC]: Next is planting of saplings. Environmental cleanliness was the main agenda in the last meeting. They have asked everyone to plant a tree in front of their house. But nobody has done it so far. Only if we grow plants the air will be pure, and chances of getting more rain will be more likely. So everyone should plant at least one sapling. Please do it here after.

Ms. Shanthi [villager, OBC]: There is no place to build a house, where to plant trees! [Villagers laugh in chorus.]

Secretary: You don't have to plant big trees. At least some small functional saplings will do . . . You can plant trees on roadsides. You don't have to grow tamarind or teak wood. Just some small shrubs will do.

. . .

Ms. Shanthi [villager, OBC]: Once again, things are being done for well off people only. What about us? When will we get our requirements? People like us who depend on daily wages, if we could have a place to live in, it would be of great help to us.

Mr. Ramalingam [VAO, OBC]: They *[panchayat]* will definitely do the needful for you. You say you don't have a place [plot of land]. Then how can they build the house?

Ms. Rajammal [villager, SC]: If we had a place, we wouldn't ask you!

VAO: Definitely, your needs will be met. I'll inquire in the office and get you the details.

(Thandal, Karimangalam)

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Participants in both low- and medium-literacy *gram sabhas* in Dharmapuri were aware that public officials and *panchayat* members were answerable to them for delivering public services. They applied pressure and negotiated with them regarding responsibility for maintaining public services. Women's attendance and participation were noticeably higher in both low- and medium-literacy settings relative to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Women in leadership positions within their SHGs (who usually have some years of schooling) played a leading role in representing demands, complaints, and suggestions at *gram sabha* meetings. These women were not simply repeating SHG slogans or making exclusively SHG-based demands. They also spoke up about matters of common concern to villagers. Also, an SHG leader's speaking was frequently followed by other women echoing the same demands. It is possible that participation in SHGs could have helped women become familiar with deliberating in a public forum with greater fluency and interacting with men and political authorities.

PAIR 4. COIMBATORE, TAMIL NADU: 14 MEDIUM-LITERACY VERSUS 20 HIGH-LITERACY *GRAM SABHAS*

Coimbatore also displayed high levels of political literacy and participation. *Gram sabha* deliberations in medium- and high-literacy villages were similar in many important respects. Citizens acted as *militant deliberators* in both. Differences, though subtle enough not to be noticed at first glance, nevertheless existed. The transcripts reveal that in high-literacy contexts villagers had deeper knowledge of technical and financial details of government schemes and public works projects. Participants in high-literacy settings were harsher in their critique of the *panchayat* and more often used sarcasm as a discursive tool for denouncing the local government.

Medium-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

Gram sabha deliberations in medium-literacy villages in Coimbatore displayed villagers' skills at public reasoning, their awareness of *panchayat* finances, and their assertive, authoritative manner of engaging and negotiating with *panchayat* leaders. They were forceful in pushing back against the reasoning presented by officials to explain government

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inaction regarding demonstrated public needs. The depth of financial information provided by *panchayat* presidents was also extraordinary. It included *panchayat* income and expenses, *panchayat* debt, salary burden, taxes to be collected, and bills to be paid. Villagers also showed a remarkable capacity to combine the voicing of multiple demands with the prioritizing of those demands. Villagers, despite the use of hostile tones and even derision, seemed to be able to arrive at an agreement on the issues that most required government attention and action. Villagers used *gram sabhas* to probe *panchayat* leaders and public officials regarding public works projects. They used them effectively to expose malpractices, support allegations of misconduct, and hold *panchayat* leaders accountable for good and fair governance.

Articulating Demands

The following excerpt records a series of common demands and the extremely detailed response by the *panchayat* president explaining his inability to install more streetlights or to recruit sweepers to clean the village roads:

Mr. S.S. Eswaran [villager, OBC]: The grievances are expressed in front of the president and the members. Some houses in the colony of the backward castes are in the worst condition. It is very difficult to walk on the road if it rains. Poisonous plants have grown on the path. All those should be cleaned. There is no income for Manupatti *panchayat* to clean them. So I request you to provide funds to do them.

Mr. Palanisami [villager, OBC]: The lights are the worst; they are not in working condition. You say you don't have funds in *panchayat*. Road is also not proper. Thittai lake is in very poor condition. We are not able to rear cattle. It is a hindrance to the people. The lanes are not walkable. They are full of slush and they splash . . . It is said they don't attend to it as there is no fund in our *panchayat*. I request the *panchayat* president to look into it and rectify these.

. . .

President [OBC]: They ask us to pay the arrears. It is impossible to pay up anytime from the *panchayat*. The amount that has to be paid is 2 lakhs. If it is paid they are ready to provide ten lights to the *panchayat*. Likewise, there is no ditch in some places. It has to be rectified. Drainage facility is needed. Concrete road is needed inside the village. 60% of it is over and the balance 40% is remaining to be done. If drainage, roads, and lights are fulfilled, the *panchayat* of Manupatti will be like a *panchayat*.

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Our target is to collect Rs. 50,000 of house taxes. With that amount alone we have to rectify three villages. Only the electricity bill of Rs. 45,000 is collected once in two months. Other expenses like drinking water are there. We are not able to do it. If we pay for two months we are not able to pay the rest . . . I didn't give salary for three months. Manupatti *panchayat* has to repay a debt of Rs. 26,000. The entire fund was deducted for water. How can we run the *panchayat?* How will the sweeper work if we don't pay the salary? Six of them work for the salary of Rs. 600. We have appointed two persons in addition. The entire salary for one month including that of clerk is Rs. 6,000. I didn't give salary for two months . . . Also, we have got liabilities of Rs. 24,000, including electricity charges. With what can we pay? . . . Apart from the electricity bill, the water board charges are Rs. 6,000. The government charges this for giving water. If we pay that amount, we can't pay the electricity bill. If we pay the electricity bill, we can't pay the amount due for water. The position is that much difficult. In this situation the government does not allot funds properly to us. They have not given funds for nineteen *panchayats* like this. Then how can I ask the sweeper to work? Rs. 600 per month means Rs. 20 per day. Have I not to pay it from my own pocket?

(Manupatti)

Villagers, despite hostile verbal exchanges and the multiplicity of their demands, were able to agree on budgetary priorities in the face of severely limited funds. Verbal commitment to implementation was reached at most meetings. The following excerpt records villagers arguing about where to locate a concrete road. After heated argument among villagers and the *panchayat* president, a villager finally proposes that one path should be chosen over all the others because it is the path taken by children to go to school:

Mr. Chinnasamy [Villager, SC]: Money has been set aside to lay concrete road. They have set aside Rs. 10,000 for installing road lights. Where can we provide lights with this? Where can we give light for three streets?

. . .

President: There is scarcity of electricity. We have to provide road lights. [Rhetorically speaking] Don't you know how much money there is and what is the income for our *panchayat!*

Ms. Dhanalakshmi [villager, OBC]: Not for the sake of income. You can lay roads right from there. They have to cut the road there and lay it here. It may cost around Rs. 5,000.

Mr. Makkali [ward member]: First you start from that side, sir.

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Mr. Chinnasamy [villager, SC]: First you ask them to start from the *panchayat* (building). Why? You can change the plan and start from there no?

Ms. Dhanalakshmi [villager, OBC]: [With heated voice] If it is laid like that, it won't be useful to others.

Ms. Thamizarasi [Soorya SHG, SC]: They have to start from there sir. [In an aggressive manner] We suffer a lot to come from that side.

Ms. Kaleeswari [SHG]: OK. Come on tell me a solution for that burial ground. The route through which Harijans come is disconnected. That path is idle now. Can't they join it?

Panchayat clerk: OK, road should be laid.

[There is a loud discussion among the audience, especially among the women.]

. . .

President [OBC]: Ok. They have allotted only one lakh for laying road. We cannot lay all the roads from that fund. We can only lay the roads that are essential.

Ms. Thamizarasi [Soorya SHG, SC]: OK, sir. We want a road definitely for the small meadow. It is important to reach the school. The reason is children slip and fall. So school road is a must. Otherwise road is also needed for the burial ground.

(Govindapuram)

Most demands voiced in these *gram sabha* meetings concerned common resources for collective needs. Informed, detailed suggestions were made by both women and men regarding where and how specific public works projects should be implemented. Public-minded reasoning was effectively used by villagers in the articulation of their demands and proposals for redress.

Seeking Accountability

The following excerpt records a discussion about roads and shows villagers engaging the president in a debate about whose responsibility it is to build and maintain them. The *panchayat* president suggests that it is either the highways department staff or the villagers themselves who should request villagers not to spoil the metaled roads by disposing of household wastewater onto them or by blocking the drains, which causes the sewage water to overflow onto them. But villagers insist that only the *panchayat* president, using the authority of his office, should take on the task of public education and civic discipline:

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Villager [male, speaker 1]: Then this road here, which is about one and a half kilometer stretch from the highway, is so bad that we are unable to walk even. It has a lot of ups and downs and potholes. We have been informing about this very often, but nothing has been done so far.

Panchayat secretary: The project is under our consideration. We have already written to the offices and emphasizing the necessity of such a road leading into the village. We need a huge fund for that.

Villager [male, speaker 2]: They have been telling us the same thing that there is no fund for that. But the road has damages throughout. Sometimes you are not able to judge the depth of the potholes even. We cannot do this on our own.

Panchayat secretary: I have already informed this to the concerned [offices]. The road is already sanctioned for re-laying, but the funds are yet to come.

Villager [male, speaker 1]: If you cannot lay the road again, at least, the existing damaged road can be made somewhat usable by filling the potholes. We are not able to drive our vehicles, and they are getting damaged. At least the surface can be made level till more permanent repairs arrangements are made.

Panchayat president: That road belongs to the highways department. We cannot do anything or lay our hands on it.

Villager [male, speaker 1]: We know that. But what action is being taken by the *panchayat?* That is what we want to know . . . We can ask them to repair the road and make it usable.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 2]: The next thing is that used water from the homes is being let out on the roads instead of being channeled into ditches. This flow of sewage water damages tar roads. Because ditches are filled or blocked with garbage and stones it arrests the flow of water, and water flows out of these ditches. Government has to do something to save the road from being eroded.

Panchayat president: Highways people can also tell the [village] people, and we ourselves can request the people not to throw things in the ditches and choke them.

Villager [male, speaker 2]: How can we tell them! You can use your authority or good office and influence them not to do so. If somebody from highways comes there and tells them not to throw mud, stones, and garbage, it will have some influence on them than we as a member of the public telling them. They will not even bother to hear us. They have provided tar road for about three and a half kms. stretch, and this water has actually eroded the three and a half kms. of tar road. It looks very bad because the water overflows out of ditches on to the roads.

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Panchayat president: We will inform the public as well as highways people accordingly, and see how far they heed to our request. If they do not heed our request, then we will inform the concerned officials to discipline these people.

(Jellopanyakam, Round 1)

Villagers also use *gram sabhas* to strongly assert allegations of wrongdoing. They ably make their case by presenting detailed complaints about unfair practices. The following excerpt records villagers exposing the practice of forced selling by the fair price shop. When the president tries to justify the practice, the villagers strongly rebut him, explaining why forced sales are unfair and illegal:

Villager [male, speaker 4]: In the ration shop, we are getting 10 kgs. of rice per card at Rs. 6 per kg. The government is providing this rice at a cheap rate. But the shops insist that we buy some other things also if we have to buy 10 kgs. of rice. The other thing costs us an extra Rs. 10. I request that concerned officers should take notice of this, and inform the shop that they should not insist us to buy other things along with 10 kgs. of rice.

Panchayat president: What they say is that they are asking the buyers to buy essentials and commercially used products only. There are also one of the "provision" items only.

Villager [male, speaker 4]: I want you to tell them not to insist on other provision items.

Panchayat president: You may say so, but they too are sitting there to sell the commodities they are asked to sell along with other products.

Villager [male, speaker 5]: To this effect, I have already given petition to the Tashildar and district collector. This has happened to me personally and hence I wrote to them. But I have not received any reply so far. Usually when we go to purchase rice, we carry only the exact amount of money since we know the price and quantity. But while billing, if they ask us to purchase other products also, we do not have money for that. If I want to buy one and a half kg of sugar, they insist on buying 1 kg of salt also. Sometimes it is with great difficulty we manage the cost of one and a half kg sugar, then where will we go for that extra three or four rupees for 1 kg of salt!

Panchayat president: Anyway, they are asking you to take the essential goods only, which instead of buying from somewhere else you are going to buy from here. You can ask to be billed for that also.

Villager [male, speaker 4]: They do not issue a bill for that product. That is wrong!

(Jellopanayakam)

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In *gram sabhas* held in medium-literacy settings, villagers are able to exercise their democratic power to deliberate, expose corruption in public services, and challenge and contradict powerful authority figures.

High-Literacy *Gram Sabhas*

Participants in deliberations in high-literacy *gram sabhas* in Coimbatore directed withering criticism at *panchayat* members. Villagers demanded accountability on the most technical aspects of the execution of public works projects. They aggressively challenged claims made by *panchayat* officials. Harshly denouncing what they saw as the ineffectiveness of the *gram sabha*, they backed up their critiques by citing their thorough knowledge of public resource provision in other villages, tax collection details, and other relevant technical and financial information. Hostility of villagers against *panchayat* leaders seemed heightened at these meetings.

Articulating Demands

The following excerpt records villagers angrily complaining about water supply problems, the maintenance of an overhead tank, and the irregular collection of house taxes. Villagers go so far as to threaten action through the consumer court in case of water borne infections. Knowledge of institutions through which legal action can be taken against *panchayat* negligence reflects villagers' high level of political literacy. Villagers do not confine themselves to vociferous complaints and caustic critiques. They are already one step ahead, as they publicly declare their ability to take action against the *panchayat*. We also find it striking that, instead of arguing for withholding payment of house taxes, they forcefully insist on their timely collection:

Villager [male, speaker 8]: The basic needs are drinking water, drainage, and streetlights. That is what you are here to provide and we can ask you only. We are in the 6th ward. We have no water whereas there is enough water for the *[panchayat]* vice president's garden! Our place is just beyond that garden only. Why not we ask for drinking water?

Villager [male, speaker 6]: You show so much amount as "maintenance" charges for O.H. [overhead] tank and pipeline repairs, whereas if we ask the person who distributes water, he has not been paid for his job and hence he is

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not interested. Then you may write a [memo] letter and stamp it with the signature of the *panchayat* head stating that "we have no connection with ward 6," and then we will make our own arrangements! You say you serve and maintain the tank. Even now I can show you the water that comes from the tank is "full of germs." If we are infected with some water borne diseases, then we will go to the consumer court!

Villager [male, speaker 8]: Or at least give it to us in writing, that in no way you [*panchayat*] are connected to the O.H. tank, and we will maintain that. We have been struggling for more than one and a half years now. We also requested you to ensure supply for one day on this side and the other day on that side, whereas you are just giving water to one side and you ignored us.

Villager [male, speaker 7]: Those who live in "down-side," they open the "valve" and so all the water meant for us also goes to that side.

. . .

Panchayat president: We cleaned the tank just 3 months ago.

Villager [male, speaker 8]: Now you can come along with me, I will show you the tank water. They do not even come to our area, how can you expect us to register complaints on anything. We have to go to each house where river water comes into their pipes and practically beg for a pot of water. There are general taps where there is not a drop of water, whereas, those who have household pipes, they are getting water. How? There is O.H. tank in 6th ward, but there is no water. When we ask them, they say they are not connected. If we ask forcefully, they tell us to ask somebody else. Nobody takes responsibility. Why at all should we choose a "leader"? Why should we pay Rs. 6,000 each? With that money we will have our own pipe.

Panchayat members and officials should visit all the places under their control and get to know as to what is happening instead just sitting here. You say that you have done all the things. For us what have you done? If you had really done something, why should we come here for this meeting, sitting here whole day, leaving our work behind! You did nothing, that is why we are here!

. . .

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 11]: . . . First you [addressing *panchayat* officials] try to collect water connection charges correctly. You will come to know how much you are receiving. You disconnect the supply for non-payment after three lapses or three months. Then only they [non-paying villagers] will have a fear of disconnection! Why you want to wait months together? This applies to all whether it is president, vice-president, ward members, or anybody. If charges are not paid, disconnect the [water] supply.

(Pallepalayam, Round 2)

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Villagers here give directives to *panchayat* members and the president on what they should do to fix problems and to improve their systems, such as regularly collecting water charges, disconnecting household pipes for non-payers, and collecting house taxes on a designated day of the month and notifying non-payers. All this is a way for villagers to force the *panchayat* to ensure it is generating the revenue needed for improving public resources and infrastructure. Their castigation of elected representatives is meant to pressure them to visit the village wards much more frequently to interact with villagers and get to know their local problems.

Seeking Accountability

The following excerpt records villagers complaining that roads have not been constructed properly. Drainage channels have not been put in place while constructing roads, and the servicing of the drinking water pipeline has not been done properly. *Panchayat* officials have failed to monitor and check on the work of contractors before paying them. Participants caustically ask how a public lavatory could be constructed near the school's kitchen without consulting the villagers. Villagers in these *gram sabhas* are exceptionally well informed:

Villager [male, speaker 8]: When they started the work for building the lavatory they did not consult us! As the public we gave the suggestion as to how it should be done. But purposely they dug up before the *panchayat* drinking water tank. When they did so, we all went there and objected about the place where they have dug up. They demanded Rs. 5,000 for stopping the work.

Panchayat official: Who asked?

Villager [male, speaker 8]: The contractor demanded the money. They have already finished the job of installing the "chamber" tank. They already asked us for Rs. 5,000 and now they are asking for Rs. 3,000 to not complete the work and leave as it is unfinished. They are so adamant that they could ask anything without fear! This latrine is being constructed near the vicinity of the "nutrition meals" centre! How could that function? It is a matter of hygiene and cleanliness. When the work was in progress, you or the ward member should have gone there to inspect the work. Instead you allowed the contractor to dictate the terms! There is no use pointing fingers at each other. Some solution has to be arrived at. Now we are all shouting at each other, blaming each other for this public facility. What these contractors do, they

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come here on their own and do something on their own. You may have personal vendetta on the *panchayat* president, but just because of that you should not indulge in "black marking" his name. Anybody can do that. If you do not like a person, incite somebody against him. That is not fair. I am not blaming you or our village people. But there is a third person who is instigating these things.

(Chikkadasapalayam, Round 1)

Villagers were able to put considerable pressure on *panchayat* officials and force them to discuss actions that they may have undertaken covertly. The following excerpt records an example of this. It captures an argumentative exchange in which a villager accuses the president of getting a household drinking water connection but then using it for agriculture and irrigation. The excerpt opens with a villager pressuring the president into a discussion of illegal water usage while the president tries to scuttle the topic by arguing that the scheduled *gram sabha* is for discussing *panchayat* income and expenditures. The discussion moves on to the president explaining why it is often necessary to deviate from the stated rules. It is noteworthy that a villager uses the analogy of the "blindfold" to indicate that they are well aware of irregularities in the *panchayat's* actions and allocation of resources. There is palpable satire in the villager's speeches. The president, in turn, tries to defend himself, in part, by deflecting the discussion to public responsibility for the maintenance of village resources and insinuating that the villagers were responsible for the poor condition of the village roads:

President: In the last *panchayat* we passed resolutions for cooperative societies and agriculture.

Villager [male, speaker 3]: What did you do? Who looked into it? We want the details. *Gram sabha* meeting means there should be nothing hidden and everything should be in the open.

President: One second, *gram sabha* meeting is to report the income-expense status of the *panchayat* projects.

Villager [male, speaker 3]: If you can't give [the details], say we can't give!

President: Not that. The government gives a seal. The *gram sabha* meeting is not for the *panchayat* resolutions every month.

Villager [male, speaker 3]: Not only that, as a *panchayat* leader, you got the permission for drinking water and you took it to your garden! Regarding this, you got a notice from the highways department stating that the amount

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that you paid will not be returned. Even then, how did the Thasildar give you permission?

President: Yes, see they gave it like that. We returned it saying that others have got it like that, so we will do the same way. We gave a second application and got it. We asked for agriculture. In the *gram sabha* meeting, we will not take up this problem because, for example, this person has taken it for agriculture, so he must have taken the relevant permission. We can't go and ask what permission he got.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 3]: No need of discussion; give it in written form.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 4]: I am not against anything. Whoever it is, take the government's permission and do things properly.

President: That's all, why are you bringing that up again? If there are any hindrances, the individual can go the concerned officials and report. Everybody has a right. *Panchayat* has a right. Village officials have a right. Not everybody has every right. Now to take water for agriculture [we have to go by the] *panchayat* resolution and then [take permission from] Thasildar and IAS. Like this, permission has to be taken from everyone and they do. *Panchayat* does not have all the rights. When it comes to agriculture, there might be different kinds of management in our *panchayat* and in the neighboring *panchayat*. We give preference and support to the farmers.

Villager [male, speaker 4]: If you are also [a farmer] we will give. You are talking unnecessarily. Give an answer!

President: In Ganeshapuram, the public there was against a farmer. Even then one *panchayat* member went and saw that he was taking [water connection] for agriculture. We gave the permission. People will object. Even then we give. We can't say no because it is for agriculture. Let him take, that's our policy.

. . .

Villager: As a *panchayat* leader, you got the permission for drinking water and took it for agriculture. That's a different issue! I have written a letter to the concerned higher official and collector notifying them that the *panchayat* leader has done this. I should know what is your resolution.

. . .

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 6]: To each one, I will openly tell. Any problem, patta problem or any other work, if such a person is there you can't achieve anything in this *gram sabha*! I will say, any department you go to, we can't do without spending for a cup of tea [complaining of staffs taking bribes]. So all the women who have come for this meeting take a decision. We can't do

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anything in our *panchayat*, I am saying openly! Nobody does thing blindfolded.

President: Listen for a minute. Why I am saying it is because, whether it is a *panchayat* office or VO office or a Taluk office or a Union office, by following the laws completely nothing can be done for the public! You understand? Today is *gram panchayat* meeting. The government says there are six thousand voters here. The meeting can be held only when 10% are present. Which GP meeting can be conducted in the *panchayat* following the law? We cannot manage the *panchayat* by following the law completely. Understand this properly.

In the same way, when petition after petition goes to offices – he will have a patta problem; this man will have a ration card problem; this woman will have a patta change – each one has a different problem. Then what will that office feel about our *panchayat?* This is a problematic *panchayat*. So for whatever issues we approach them, what should be finished today, will take a week. You understand? . . . Now we have to think. Some problems might be there. The situation is like that. Every office is like that. If someone from Ganeshapuram goes, they say come after two days. When there is no problem what will I say, I will send you to the clerk. It's a cooperative village. This is the reality. It is not like how you think. Taking all the laws in your hands. In any office, in any village, you can't do anything you want. . .

Villager [male, speaker 6]: Is it like this! [Nonchalant even though the president responded harshly and tried to shut them up.]

. . .

President: You are citing the law. What I am saying is, see here brother, if you are talking about law, taking the pipelines will be difficult. We are here to do that. . . . If we keep talking of the law how will ten others be benefited!

Villager [male, speaker 6]: Ten people today, hundred people tomorrow. You are doing a business!

President: Now, why do we call you and talk?

Villager [male, speaker 6]: You are going to do a business tomorrow instead of agriculture, if you keep talking of the law! What will happen?

Villager [male, speaker 8]: The law cannot be different for different people. What actions have you taken?

President: Last year, what was not done in the last fifty years, we achieved – eight kilometers of roads.

Villager [female, speaker 9]: Road – all the stone chips are coming off!

President: We did what was not done in the last fifty years in the *panchayat*. We can go only step-by-step.

. . .

President: You have to cooperate. It's your property. What am I telling you?

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. . .

Villager [male, speaker 8]: You are thinking like that. I am telling you openly. We have told in many *gram sabha* meetings. We have not asked about any actions. We have installed sodium lights and spent Rs. 1,00,000 for drinking water. But you are not maintaining. You have to do it correctly.

President: The government is the public. You people have to take the responsibility of maintaining things, whether it's a latrine or self-help building, any work. It should be under your control. We sanctioned eight kms road and told you when we worked. We said, in the future, it will be a road only if – that official is not here. If he comes now he will not believe that it was done only in last period. Why? Everything has become old. If you had cooperated, would it become will this! You are the only ones using the road, not other villagers or officials.

(Illupanatham, Round 1)

The following excerpt records an example of the kind of broad discussion villagers sometimes launch in high-literacy *gram sabhas*. In this discussion villagers try to learn more about why a new free midday meal program has been launched by the government, and who its targeted beneficiaries are. They speculate on whether it will lead to corruption or meet public expectations. Villagers express concern that social status and dignity may be adversely affected by partaking of free meals. They question why the state government is providing free meals in addition to providing old-age pensions. They ask whether the public has a role to play in monitoring the number of people fed daily and the quality of the food in order to stem corruption. They raise a question about the tax burden incurred by this program and whether it will be possible to withdraw from it in the future. Finally, in justifying the prolonged discussion on this scheme, a villager comments that the *gram sabha* serves as a space where villagers can come to understand government policy. Such statements, we believe, reflect an enlightened conception of the larger purpose of the *gram sabha:*

Ward member [male, speaker 13]: Taking into consideration the condition of the village, our area is undeveloped . . . The midday meal scheme that has been started now will benefit only 56 or 60%. Because all are farmers, they go out [for work during the daytime] and can't collect the food. Moreover, people who are self-respect conscious will not eat the food. It will be useful if they give it us these things – rice or money. I can't say it is useful for all, only 5% or 10% will benefit from it.

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President: As Ramasamy Gounder says, the government and CM [chief minister] has announced this "midday meal plan" as a useful plan for all. What the CM has said, she has said people are starving all over Tamil Nadu, so nobody should die for want of food. So there is no status issue here. The rice which is sold for Rs. 6 is now sold for Rs. 3. Majority of the people don't buy twenty kgs in the ration. Some people don't have ration cards. Some people buy it and sell it for Rs. 10; they smuggle it to Kerala. They gave ten kgs for Rs. 3.50 and ten kgs for Rs. 6 to stop death from starvation, it was announced. People who are status conscious need not come. When people are starving, they won't be bothered about status. Such a situation is there in Mettuvai *panchayat* that daily fifty people are eating.

Ward member [male, speaker 13]: Farmers who are daily wage laborers.

President: Who are they? Even if you give food-for-work, everybody will eat. Instead of giving it for free, if you give works, it's a good plan.

Ward member [male, speaker 13]: Why, there are so many jobs? Why don't they do that? The state and government are already implementing the food-for-work plan now.

President: It's for people who cannot work. It's a short-term plan. We do not know now, they will decide later. Now because of famine, to avoid death due to starvation [they have started the new plan]...Yes, deaths due to starvation are not happening everywhere. Few people may have gone through starvation out of ignorance, inability to seek self-employment, and the inability to get the government's help. We can't conceive that in Tamil Nadu. If you see in Coimbatore who are the people who eat – old people, people who can't walk, they eat. People who have the talent to survive do not come here to eat.

...

Ward member [male, speaker 13]: In this *panchayat* the number of people who eat is more. It is not like that in the next *panchayat*. In some places, they purposely increase the number of people who come to eat and show. But the number of people who come to eat is becoming less. So that rice, pulses, will it not pave way for corruption? Having that rice and pulse, selling it to others won't it lead to corruption?

President: What you ask is correct? Who eats in this? The president and village office sign and give a coupon. We directly see and give it only for people who come to eat. They have to get the coupon and give food. If suddenly there is an inspection, if they write false accounts, they will lose their jobs. It happened like that in a few places. Fifty people don't eat in all the places. Twenty-five people eat, ten people eat. They ask to prepare meals in nourishment halls. We can give food for as many people who eat. The accounts should be only for people who actually eat. Regarding this

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panchayat, fifty people are eating, account is there for fifty people. You can check even now.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 15]: President, VAO [Village Administrative Officer], both of them, can they fulfill all their duties and also examine this? What is the role of the public in this? Village public, how much do they participate in this?

President: Eat, they eat know.

Villager [male, speaker 15]: They eat! I accept that. But the president and one VAO, only these two, without the examination of the public! Can this plan be executed by those two? The public also needs to know.

President: It's not like that. We see who are in the status to eat in this? I see if the food is good or not. Only the public is eating it know. If they say the food is not good we should correct it immediately, otherwise, I report to the higher officials. The place of service will be changed or they will be dismissed. So they fear that and do their jobs. It's not necessary that we should examine everyday. Nobody is a child. Only adults eat and even they are a part of the public. We can't say all the fifty are in worse condition, but the maximum are and that is very clear. Even if the taste changes a little but, they report immediately. So the cooks cannot cheat.

. . .

Villager [male, speaker 15]: Now our government has deficiency of funds. For this plan, how much is being spent? How many people are below the poverty line? If we take the statistics and make it permanent, how much will the tax burden increase? If they do it temporarily and stop it, won't the people protest?

President: In the *gram sabha* we should talk about the management of the *panchayat*. If we talk about the stand taken by the government, it will be not correct. They announce and we follow. It's our duty to find people who can benefit from the plan. We can't criticize the government's stand. It will not be correct.

Villager [male, speaker 15]: The state and central governments say that village is the life of the country. A large percentage of people live in villages they say. Why I say this is because how much do the villagers understand the government and its plan? It is only for people to understand and my aim is not to criticize the government's plan. (Mettupavi)

In these high-literacy settings, demands for accountability were even more hard-hitting and the criticism against corruption and inaction was even more biting than in medium-literacy ones. Villagers treated authority figures, like *panchayat* leaders, as their peers. Villagers

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unsparingly denounced officials for their failures, real or perceived, in fulfilling their roles in village governance and development.

Gram sabhas in medium- and high-literacy settings in Coimbatore were similar. Demands and complaints were well framed by public reasoning and even in charged discursive environments, villagers were capable of arriving at a consensus on prioritizing some matters over others. Beyond these strong similarities, there was a difference between medium- and high-literacy *gram sabhas* in the intensity and harshness of public critique directed at *panchayat* officials. That participants in high-literacy *gram sabhas* had a hard-hitting discursive style was an unanticipated finding. This does not mean that these *panchayats* were more inefficient compared to those in medium-literacy contexts. We speculate that this discursive style stems from these more literate villagers having a sharper ability to scrutinize and identify deficiencies in the *panchayat*'s performance as a result of their acute awareness of the technical and financial details of government schemes and public works projects and their familiarity with governmental institutions. Villagers in high-literacy settings also used the *gram sabha* as a platform to express their opinions and concerns about broader issues like employment and dignity, the effect of affirmative action, inequalities in the quality of public versus private education, and the factors affecting the chances for social mobility. We hypothesize that villagers deliberately broach these topics in order to have direct impact on their life chances through the participatory democracy of the *gram sabha*.

Conclusion

Deliberative democracy hinges on ordinary citizens' capacity to deliberate intelligibly among themselves and with the state on matters of governance and development. A precondition for success is political literacy, which is the state of being knowledgeable and informed about an array of things, including village public resource needs and public works, *panchayat* finances, government subsidies, and the functioning of public offices and officials. Recent studies of *gram sabha* deliberations suggest that social stratification and its attendant inequalities may be influential in patterning vocal participation (Sanyal et al. 2015; Parthasarathy et

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al. 2017).[1] Yet we know almost nothing about how one of the most fundamental dimensions of inequality, literacy, might affect villagers' political literacy and the capacity to deliberate. Our study of hundreds of transcripts of *gram sabhas* has allowed us to begin to understand how the unequal distribution of literacy modifies deliberation in a democratic political system.

We found that state-level factors that shape the functioning of the *gram sabha* system play a crucial mediating role in the effect of literacy. Although formal literacy appears to make a positive difference to *gram sabha* deliberations, state-level influence on the political construction of the *gram sabha* can override the effect of formal literacy on political literacy and the capacity to deliberate. Positive state influence can raise its citizens' political literacy through various facilitative measures and make up for the deficiency in formal literacy in low-literacy contexts. In facilitative states, comparing across low- and medium-literacy villages and between medium- and high-literacy villages, we find robust deliberation and narrow gaps in citizens' political literacy and in the nature of deliberations. Contrastingly, negative state influence can suppress whatever advantages greater formal literacy might be expected to have in terms of increasing villagers' political literacy and the capacity for deliberation in high-literacy contexts. In obstructionist states, comparing across low- and medium-literacy villages, we find virtually no deliberation in *gram sabhas* and no meaningful difference in citizens' political literacy. We find the state's role to be key in subduing the effect of high formal literacy or for favorably compensating for the lack of literacy.

Among states that were similarly supportive of the *panchayat* system, although having different styles of facilitation (Tamil Nadu and Karnataka), there was a substantial difference in the magnitude of the gap between *gram sabhas* at different literacy levels. While there was a vast difference between low- and medium-literacy *gram sabhas* in Bidar, Karnataka, in the nature of deliberation and in villagers' political literacy and capacity to deliberate, there was a much smaller

[1] Parthasarathy et al. (2017) find that across multiple measures of deliberative influence, women are at a disadvantage relative to men – they are less likely to speak, set the agenda, and receive a relevant response from state officials. Sanyal et al. (2015) find that women who state they belong to self-help groups display a more advanced "oratory competency" in deliberating in *gram sabhas* compared to other women.

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difference between low- and medium-literacy *gram sabhas* in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu. One possible explanation for the robust deliberations in low-literacy Dharmapuri, where women's participation was substantial, might be the self-help group (SHG) effect. Women's SHGs have had a strong presence in Tamil Nadu since the 1990s. It is quite possible that regular participation in these forums has improved women's political literacy and their capacity to deliberate in public sphere institutions with authority figures.[2] In contrast, in Karnataka, SHGs started much later and had not reached the levels of participation found in Tamil Nadu at the time the *gram sabhas* were recorded for this study. There may be additional factors behind this difference that we have not been able to capture.

The literacy effect is thus neither linear nor simple, and high levels of literacy are not a necessary condition for better deliberation. In low-literacy settings, *elite stewards* can provide direction and compensate for otherwise unruly discussions, and higher levels of literacy cannot override the unwillingness of a state to support the *panchayat* system. In states where *gram sabhas* are substantive and regularly held, repeated participation seems to lead to a heightening of political literacy and cultivating familiarity and fluency with deliberation regardless of the level of literacy. Thus, despite the limitations of our data, our findings and analyses lead us to suggest that a supportive state is necessary for creating effective spaces for deliberation in *gram sabhas*, and formal literacy has a favorable effect only in the context of a politically supportive state.

[2] This is corroborated by Palaniswamy et al. (2017) in a recent paper that experimentally evaluates the impact of an SHG intervention on *gram sabha* discourse in Tamil Nadu. Also see Sanyal (2009, 2014) for related work in West Bengal and Sanyal et al. (2015) for further analysis of the role of SHGs in these data.

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5 Conclusion: Oral Democracy

The world seems to be losing faith in democracy.[1] *Gram sabhas*, with all their messiness, offer some hope. They show that democracy can be strengthened and deepened by the simple but profound act of giving citizens the chance to speak and to be heard. Many of the *gram sabhas* that we describe are not examples of deliberative democracy even by Mansbridge's (2015) minimalist standard of "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern." With the exception of *gram sabhas* in Kerala, we do not observe much thoughtful "weighing" of preferences and interests. Villagers have strong opinions about their public needs and the measures they want the *panchayat* to take to meet those needs. And many of the discussions are about personal and private household benefits rather than "matters of common concern." Nonetheless they are forums that give citizens the opportunity to express their views, listen to the views of others, and be listened to by elected officials and government bureaucrats. In these ways *gram sabhas* help make decision-making more responsive and reflective.

The mutual and regular interactions that take place during *gram sabhas* help fill with democratic content the blank durations between elections. *Gram sabhas* permit the regular assessment of village government during the six years between elections. Citizens who participate are more informed about the preferences, interests, and values of others. Their participation gives them an opportunity to be introspective, to "deliberate within" (Goodin 2003, p. 64) and assess their own interests and values. Officials, whether elected or appointed, who participate have to engage with and confront the views and criticisms of citizens. This enables them to become more accountable.

If an election offers the exit option in a democracy (i.e. being voted out), voice complements it. The process is by no means perfect and, as

[1] See The Economist Intelligence Unit (2018) for recent trends.

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we have seen, there is enormous variation between states and differences across levels of literacy. Despite this unevenness, however, the discursive process helps to improve government by enlarging the space for direct democratic engagement. *Gram sabhas* thus should be seen as inputs toward a more reflective democracy (Goodin 2003). In this sense, the contribution that they make has implications beyond India for all countries whether rich or poor.

The Indian example shows that participatory systems of democratic governance can be introduced through government policy. The 73rd constitutional amendment passed in 1992 and has been bolstered by the efforts of state governments in the years since. Variations in state policy, we have shown, can fundamentally affect the quality of the *gram sabha*. The state can all but determine what is discussed, the quality of the participation by citizens, and the responsiveness of local government to citizens' concerns. Together, the 73rd amendment and the various state government acts that followed have, in effect, created a rural Indian public sphere.

Reading the *gram sabha* transcripts has led us to question strongly the argument that India's rural citizens are merely pawns in the grip of "political society" (Chatterjee 2001). Rather, the *gram sabha* presents a curious classificatory puzzle and offers a powerful challenge to Chatterjee's binary framework of political and civil society. On the one hand, it is arguably an extension of political society, since it is created and facilitated by the state and embedded within a larger process of politics and power. On the other hand, rather than consolidating power, the *gram sabha* is designed and acts as a countervailing force to administrative power by making those in government accountable and directly answerable to the rural electorate. The *gram sabha* opens up officials' administrative actions to public scrutiny.

In states where commitment to decentralized local governance is lacking, power holders routinely subvert the democratic promise of the *gram sabha* by simply not holding them, even though they are constitutionally guaranteed. Another strategy is to hold them in name only. A perfunctory and slipshod approach is taken: budgets and updates on public works projects are not disseminated beforehand; government department officials are not required to be present to address public concerns; deliberation and grievances by citizens are summarily disregarded.

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On the other hand, in states that early on have made a long-term commitment to decentralized governance, the *gram sabha* has transformed local democracy. With state support, the *gram sabha* has become an effective forum in which incumbents of power are questioned and subjected to public criticism, and even ridicule, by ordinary rural citizens. Citizens display varying degrees of civic competence and deliberative capacity. Clearly, in many cases, citizens who are both literate and illiterate have been nudged into deep democratic engagement by government policy. Our analysis shows that a version of deliberative democracy is possible even in societies with relatively low literacy. Nevertheless, greater literacy makes an important difference in the quality of deliberation because it seems to equalize the authority of participants' voices. Decision-making relies less on a few opinion leaders in medium- and high-literacy settings. When at its best, the *gram sabha* has brought to life, and to the doorsteps of rural citizens, a new talk-based form of democracy. We call this "oral democracy."

"Oral Democracy"

"Oral democracy," as an inductively developed conception of democracy, contributes to fully recognizing the diversity of forms of speech and talk in participatory political institutions. In our view, the different kinds of speech and talk contribute substantially to democratic governance even if they fall short of the more philosophically defined standards of deliberative democracy. Because of this problem of not meeting the deliberative theorists' yardstick, and the inherent risk of populist rhetoric in a democracy, the theory and practice of deliberative democracy has largely abandoned mass democracy in favor of designing and studying mini-publics and small-scale deliberative venues (Chambers 2009). Even so, normative theories of deliberation have been contested, extended, and pared down to make them more inclusive of real-world participatory practices (Benhabib 1994; Curato et al. 2017; Dryzek 2000 Elster 1996; Fraser 1990; Guttman and Thompson 1996; He and Warren 2011; Mansbridge 1980, 1998, 1999, 2015; Mansbridge et al. 2010; Mouffe 1999; Polletta and Lee 2006; Sanders 1997; Sunstein 1995, 1999; Warren and Mansbridge et al. 2013; Young 1996, 1997, 2000). But these "conceptual stretches" of conventional democratic theory have not been welcomed by all deliberation theorists (Goodin, 2018). And despite the ascendancy of theories

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of democratic deliberation (Chambers 2009), no consensus now exists as to what qualifies as democratic deliberation and what falls outside its bounds.[2] We have therefore chosen to proceed inductively in our analysis of *gram sabhas* and in our attempt to theorize it.

Our use of "oral democracy" is intended to emphasize the importance of the oral dimension of this form of political participation and governance – the spoken, uttered-by-mouth nature of political engagement with the state and community through dialogues (interactive exchanges between citizens and the state and among citizens) and monologues (speeches and rhetoric employed by political leaders and public officials). The concept, we hope, will focus renewed attention on oration and oratory – the art and practice of speaking politically in public – that is a central part of what constitutes political engagement today for many people around the world. It is intended to highlight the crucial importance of all citizens attaining competency in expressing their opinions and in making cogent and persuasive arguments. Talk-centered participation should be much more widely recognized as a type of *competency* (skill) and as a *capability* that can improve individual quality of life and the quality of collective governance.

We are not breaking new ground in arguing that publicly talking about matters relating to politics and governance is a competency. In Athenian democracy, rhetoric, or the art of public speaking, was viewed as a political skill because it was recognized that speaking persuasively and effectively could influence public policy (Hauser 1999). Rhetoric was also recognized as having inventive power. It could fuel imagination because it had the potential to create new political visions and realities and also the power to generate consensus (Hauser 1999; Finley 1962).[3] With the rise of participatory democracy in ancient Greece, public speaking became a subject of formal study and training as part of civic education. This history has ancient Indian antecedents and parallels, for example, in the emphasis on debate and methods of reasoning found in Hindu *Nyaya*

[2] For this reason, our analysis does not rely on any formalized evaluative metric like the DQI (Deliberation Quality Index pioneered by Steiner et al. 2005).

[3] Hauser emphasizes the importance of Pericles' "Funeral Oration," delivered at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War in 432 BCE, for rhetorically inventing a commitment to the value of political life in Athens being its participatory inclusivity, despite the exclusion of women and slaves from political processes.

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philosophy and in oral traditions of debate and collective decision-making in Buddhism and Islam (Bayly 1996). The *Arthashastra*, a second-century BCE treatise on governance, written to train rulers how to carry out their duties, has an entire chapter devoted to the elucidation of arguments (Olivelle 2013). Greeks and Indians in the ancient period both understood public speaking to be a political skill that could be cultivated through training. Our focus on a contemporary form of "oral democracy" is meant to recognize the continuing centrality of oral competence in relation to power and to understand that this skill is unequally distributed across social strata and policy regimes. Importantly, it is a skill that can be nurtured through policy and developed with practice.

We also argue that oral competency, including the capacity to deliberate, should be understood as a human capability and articulated with the paradigmatically different "capabilities approach" to development proposed by Amartya Sen. In this approach, the various living standards that a person can or cannot achieve are their "functionings," and their ability to achieve them, their "capabilities" (Sen 1985: 16). In other words, capabilities are individual capacities for action that facilitate the achievement of valued life goals. Capabilities encompass a wide variety of action-capacities, including material and human capital inputs such as income, education, and health. They also include attributes that open up possibilities for the expression of personhood and for participation in social, economic, civic, and political spheres of action. Participating in village assemblies skillfully opens up to the individual citizen the possibility of influencing the allocation of public resources toward household and community needs that they consider to be important for their standard of living. Skilled participation in village assemblies is directly linked to efforts to improve the objective conditions of life. Speaking up in these assemblies is also linked to the public demand for dignity and recognition made by subordinated groups in order to improve the subjective dimensions of well-being (Rao and Sanyal 2010). Participation in oral democracy, therefore, is rich with the possibility of extending the expression of personhood to the civic domain and fostering a civic persona. It may even momentarily equalize agency (Rao and Walton 2004). Accordingly, effective talk-centered participation in village assemblies should be more widely recognized as a valued capability and more highly prized for its promise.

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Oral competency can even be a matter of life and death in a country whose bureaucratic systems have been described as perpetuating "structural violence" (Gupta 2012). The systemic "production of arbitrariness" that is characteristic of complex bureaucratic organizations directly affects the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable citizens (Gupta 2012, p. 24). Frequently poor people are arbitrarily denied enrollment and benefits from key development initiatives regarding health, nutrition, housing, and poverty alleviation, delivered through the state's bureaucratic machinery. This machinery often fails citizens for insubstantial reasons such as not having proper documentation or not satisfying bureaucratically determined eligibility criteria. The oral democracy enacted through *gram sabhas* can expose the illegitimacy of such bureaucratic and administrative violence by forcing and fostering a conversation among citizens and local governments.

Oral democracy, our study shows, is not haplessly vulnerable to being overtaken by "plebiscitary rhetoric" (Chambers 2009), the kind of speech employed by politicians that is interested in power over truth and in manipulating and deceiving mass publics to win power. Political leaders who speak in these village assemblies do not simply "pander and flatter, manipulate and hoodwink" (Chambers 2009: 328) in order to win the support of the masses. The face-to-face nature of these assemblies allows such rhetoric to be kept in check by citizens who can question forcefully and critique scornfully. In some states we hear considerable "deliberative rhetoric" (Chambers 2009) that is devoted to inducing mass publics to thoughtfully consider and reform common (un)civic attitudes and means of action that address common problems. We also have ample evidence that shows oratory in the public political sphere can combine passion with reason.

Thus, using the frame of oral democracy allows an inclusive focus both on the dialogical exchanges between citizens and the state as well as the monological rhetoric of political leaders and state bureaucrats who seek to govern. And, it enables us to identify the differentiated oratory competencies among the mass publics that can have a shaping influence on the quality of governance and by association the quality of life.

In keeping with this frame, in the next segment we consider what the different kinds of talk in the *gram sabha* (discussed in Chapter 2) reflect regarding the reach of democracy and the deliberativeness of mass talk-

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based political participation. We also discuss the role of the state and literacy in the oral democracy that thrives in contemporary rural India.

Deliberative and Democratic Potential of *Gram Sabhas*

Forms of Talk

Discursive exchanges in the *gram sabha* center on two crucial dimensions of political and civic life: the distribution of public and personal goods, and the performance of recognition and dignity. We created a typology of four kinds of talk that we observe in the transcriptions of *gram sabhas*: public-spirited talk; agonistic talk about public goods; agonistic talk about personal goods; and personal talk. Each contributes substantially to the potential *gram sabhas* hold for realizing deliberative democracy in rural India at the village level.

Public-spirited talk is focused on common concerns and on holding the state accountable to its own claims about its development and governance functions. Villagers actively demand accountability for the actions of the *panchayat* and for government services from elected leaders and bureaucrats. They also instruct state agents on actions they should take to remedy particular problems. This kind of direct participation through oral performance goes beyond indirect participation through representation via voting and written petition. That a high level of formal literacy is not a necessary condition for political literacy in the *gram sabha* marks it as profoundly egalitarian and deepens the reach of democracy. When villagers press for accountability they are exercising genuine countervailing power against the authority of the state by calling into question the legitimacy of elected leaders and public officials who fail to deliver on promises or fulfill public needs.

Public-spirited talk usually takes one of three forms: discussion that holds the state accountable; discussion that addresses public goods problems; discussion that raises wider issues often outside the jurisdiction of *panchayats*. Much of this talk is unreflective and concerns demands that citizens make on behalf of their communities, framed in nonnegotiable terms. There are those who may argue that this kind of talk does not constitute deliberation. But deliberative moments occur when villagers bring up alternative courses of remedial action. Whether or not these alternatives receive thoughtful consideration can vary widely among *gram sabhas*. From a study confined to a single period

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of time, it is impossible to know whether a villager's suggestion regarding a remedial action came up again during a later meeting where it was given further consideration. When citizens mention more macro issues like global trade or affirmative action policy that are outside the ambit of the *gram sabha*, their purpose is to provoke people to reflect on these issues. Therefore, even though all of public-spirited talk may not satisfy the rigorous standards of good deliberation, there are certainly many reflective moments in it.[4]

Agonistic talk related to public goods, although it can be heated and acrimonious, has value in a system of deliberative democracy. It often reveals inequities in the priorities of political leaders, and in the allocation of resources and infrastructure development between different groups, neighborhoods, and villages. Allegations of caste-based discrimination or political favoritism are commonly aired. Publicly calling out discrimination and challenging *panchayat* leaders for their biased distributional decisions accomplishes important goals of democracy. At a minimum they effectively bring to the surface very real distributional unevenness. Communities whose members feel they are comparatively worse off or neglected can present their arguments, bolstered with facts that are unlikely to be known by people living in other neighborhoods or villages, or people of other caste groups. Beyond providing the relief of expressing frustration and fury, such "unreflective" deliberation brings to the surface information about gaps and shortages in basic physical infrastructure and resources such as water systems, housing, electricity, and roads. Agonistic talk related to public goods gives leaders a chance to respond with additional information about the projects they have completed and those under way, along with details about budgets and subsidized schemes and the conditions sometimes attached with them.

Agonistic talk about personal goods gives citizens a chance to voice the basic needs of their household and family (such as food and

[4] Public-spirited talk deemed unreflective may serve important functions. According to Mansbridge "a (nonreflective) communicative process . . . may nevertheless play an important role in a larger deliberative system. A systemic approach to deliberation considers the quality of deliberation in a deliberative system as a whole. It directs attention to the different ways that smaller unreflective and nondeliberative acts can figure crucially in the weighing and reflecting function of a larger deliberative interaction. Such acts may, for example, bring out considerations that otherwise would have never been heard, which can then be weighed elsewhere in the deliberative system (2015: 28)."

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housing) in front of the whole polity. This brings the private sphere closer to the public sphere and makes domestic issues a matter of public concern. Agonistic talk about personal goods brings to the fore revealing information about comparative disadvantages between groups and individuals, usually between caste groups and among individuals falling on either side of the poverty line (BPL-APL). This kind of talk, which is personal by definition, usually elicits only brief responses by *panchayat* leaders. Nevertheless, there can be deliberative moments. Citizens' personal complaints publicly question the rules of commensuration that are used to decide who gets coveted individual subsidies, or, why only scheduled castes should be favored in the allotment of specific types of subsidies such as free houses over other castes who suffer comparable levels of material disadvantage. In some states public questioning of these kinds of governmental criteria regularly motivates *panchayat* leaders and public officials to give extensive speeches explaining how these criteria have been formulated and why they are justified. By pushing for reconsideration of government criteria, agonistic talk about personal goods creates deliberative moments in the *gram sabha* by calling into question the government's measurement of poverty, definitions of exclusion, and the allocation of public resources.

Personal talk publicly dramatizes domestic deprivations and intimate sufferings in seeking state-subsidized benefits for oneself and one's household. When villagers talk about their personal hardships as they ask for ration cards, land, and housing, they are also implicitly raising the political question of the state's responsibility for the well-being of all citizens.

The Role of the State

In the *gram sabha*, citizens are in political dialog with each other as equals, with their elected political representatives, and with other officials acting as agents of the state. One of the express purposes of the *gram sabha* is to open up lines of direct communication between the local government and citizens. Theories of deliberative democracy for the most part do not take up state-citizen talk for analysis. Such talk fails to satisfy the precondition of power parity and the prerequisites of equal voice and mutual respect democratic theory presupposes. This is reflected in the empirical literature in which there has been a near exclusive focus on deliberation among citizens alone, or on deliberation

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among parliamentarians. Virtually no attention has been paid to state-citizen deliberation. To correct for this exclusion of power inequality from the general framework of deliberation, Mansbridge (2015) has proposed that equality of power between participants not be seen as a governing criterion but as a standard of good deliberation. This still presupposes equality of power as a condition of good deliberation and associates inequality of power with compromised deliberation. Noting this slant, a very small set of scholars has allowed for a nuanced view of power that acknowledges the constructive role of coercive and authoritative power in organizing deliberation and translating decisions into actions (Hendriks 2009; Kuyper 2012; Curato et al. 2017). How then should we think of state-citizen communication across power disparities from within the framework of oral democracy?

We need to see that states can vary widely in the roles they play in facilitating or thwarting democratic deliberation. Where there is a supportive, facilitative state, public-spirited talk by citizens is encouraged by leaders. *Panchayat* leaders and state bureaucrats may even school citizens in effective rhetoric of political exchange to make the most of the opportunity for democratic deliberation provided by the *gram sabha*.

The state also has an important role to play as the authoritative source of public information. Theories of deliberative democracy do not spend much time on information asymmetries. The operating assumption appears to be that all persons who engage in deliberation are equally well-informed about the subject matter under deliberation. But in real life information asymmetry is a practical gap that needs to be bridged before meaningful deliberation can commence. The state facilitates public-spirited talk simply by using its authoritative power to disseminate information to citizens through elected leaders and public officials regarding public budgets, income and expenses, the status of development projects, and various government schemes for community development and household poverty alleviation. The state has legitimate control over this information and is the only source through which the public can access it. Citizens can exercise pressure for public accountability much more forcefully in states that play an active role in sharing information.

From the perspective of authority and power, two processes are at play simultaneously in the *gram sabha*. Public officials and agents of the state have more information (at least about state programs and resources) and

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more authority. At the same time, an inversion of power takes place in that these authority figures are made accountable to all citizens, including those who are illiterate, lower-caste, or poor. Even though the agents of the state and citizens are unequal in power, in the *gram sabha* this power disparity can be momentarily neutralized. Keeping in mind the facilitative role of power holders and the momentary inversion of state-citizen power, we believe that, in deliberative models, "mutual communication" as a definitional matter need not be restricted only to peers among whom there is power parity. It can also include dialogic communication between actors with power disparity, such as the state and its citizen subjects. This expanded view of mutual communication will hold as long as the state's power does not govern who can talk, how much they can talk, or how speakers are responded to by other participants.

The best functioning *gram sabhas* show that power inversion between citizens and the state can be socially engineered by the state by setting up the right kinds of institutions with appropriate incentives. Appropriate institutions can foster mutual communication, listening, and responding, even across considerable power disparities. The state plays a further facilitative critical role when it temporarily neutralizes power disparities among citizens by giving everyone the time and space in which to speak. By listening and responding to citizens, even if not at exactly the same rate for different social groups, the state expands political opportunities.

Our analysis shows that states can play a constructive role in stratified societies by instilling oral democracy. The state has an important role to play in inculcating its citizens' political literacy and oral competency in the public political sphere by fostering skills of rational and critical argumentation among all citizens, both literate and illiterate. Societies need not wait for equity and power parity to emerge through exogenous or organic processes before they adopt talk-based deliberative institutions as a core element of their democratic politics. Our study points to the potentially constructive democratic role of the state in fostering civic and political consciousness among the least well-off, most oppressed citizens. This makes us optimistic.

The Role of Literacy

The effect of literacy on the quality of deliberation is nonlinear. Illiteracy does not hamper political discourse as much as it makes it haphazard.

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It is akin to a blindfold that denies people, who might otherwise have intrinsic oratory skills, from understanding the facts, the issues, and the politics of the *gram sabha* in a manner that allows them to be coherent participants in the discussion. In other words, the inability to read and write may result in low levels of political literacy. Our findings in Bidar district in Karnataka show that *gram sabhas* in villages with low literacy can sometimes appear chaotic and characterized by what Hossain (2010) has called "rude accountability." In villages with low literacy, these "rude" citizens are guided by those we have called "elite stewards."

As literacy increases, a larger proportion of citizens become politically literate. The discourse tends to become less noisy and far more knowledgeable about budgets and *panchayat* procedures, and citizens have more information about the various kinds of benefits that they can apply for. This does not always translate to a more effective *gram sabha*. The reason for this is state policy. The state of Andhra Pradesh – at the time the *gram sabhas* used in this study were recorded – neglected the *panchayat* system. There was practically no difference in the deliberations within low- and medium-literacy villages because the citizens in both were placed by powerholders in the position of "passive petitioners" talking to an unresponsive state. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the state governments paid much more attention to the *panchayat* system. There literacy mattered, and citizens in villages with higher literacy levels showed more oral competency and became more effective "civic" or "strident" deliberators.

Formal literacy (as measured by census data on village literacy levels) makes a positive difference by enhancing villagers' political literacy and capacity for engaging with the state through deliberation. But state-level influence on the political construction of the *gram sabha* can override the effect of formal literacy on political literacy and the capacity to deliberate. Positive state influence can make up for the deficiency in literacy. Negative state influence can suppress whatever advantages higher formal literacy might have for the capacity for democratic deliberation.

Regional and Temporal Validity of Our Findings

South India vs. North India

Our data are from the four states that constitute South India. Are our results representative of the rest of India? South India is indeed

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different from the North. On average it has less gender disparity and lower caste inequality. It also has stronger development indicators – higher rates of growth, better health, and lower levels of poverty (Varshney 2014). It is difficult to make a clear comparison between the south and the north on the quality of *gram sabhas* because there is no comparable data. The one other set of *gram sabha* recordings that we are aware of is from the northeastern state of West Bengal, which shows *gram sabhas* that are similar to many that we discuss in this book (Bhattacharjee and Chattopadhyay 2011). However, what is considered "North" India also has five times as many people as the South and is extraordinarily diverse. For instance, the state of Rajasthan has a long history of civic movements (Joshi and Rao 2017) and village councils that have been active for a long time (Krishna 2002). Rural citizens in Rajasthan make claims on the state in much the same way as rural citizens in the South by expanding their repertories of action that work across traditional networks (Krishna 2002; Krusk-Wisner 2018). Recent evidence points to a very active rural civic sphere, nurtured by social movements and state action (Krusk-Wisner 2018; Joshi and Rao 2017).

Bihar, sharing an eastern border with West Bengal, is a much poorer state than either Rajasthan or Bengal and has had a long history of government dysfunction. Evidence from 1999 on institutions similar to the *gram sabha* suggests that political participation is passive and village forums are generally used merely to endorse the suggestions of *panchayat* leaders (Corbridge et al. 2005). But Bihar has changed considerably. There has been much more attention paid in recent years to the quality of governance and rural development (Singh and Stern 2013). In some parts of the state women's freedom and gender relations have been improving due to a large policy initiative focused on building women-centered self-help groups. Since then, women have become much more active participants in the *panchayat* system (Sanyal, Rao, and Majumdar 2015). Much more research is needed on *gram sabhas* in the North before we can engage in meaningful regional comparison. But, given that the North is subject to the same constitutional amendment as the South, efforts to activate village councils and village forums should, over the long run, have similar results.

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Have Things Changed in South India?

In the fourteen years since the recording of the village assemblies used in this study, *panchayats* and the *gram sabhas* have become part of the ritual of rural life. In 2006, the federal government pushed to increase the size of *panchayat* budgets. Most of these grants were nondiscretionary. The largest allocation was to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which guaranteed a hundred days of employment to every adult rural resident. This considerably increased political interest in the *panchayat* system and produced a sharp increase in political participation. Concurrently, over these fourteen years, average Indian literacy levels have increased from 64 percent in 2001 to 74 percent in 2011. They are expected to rise even higher by the time of the next census in 2021.

In Karnataka these changes, along with concerted attempts to mobilize citizens, have created a tsunami of change in the quantity and quality of participation. One of us has been involved in a ten-year ethnography of twenty villages in Bidar and neighboring districts in Karnataka (Rao et al. 2017). Over that ten-year period, *gram sabhas* have begun to demonstrate substantially increased political literacy. This increase seems to have affected the character of democratic processes rather than to have changed outcomes. Similarly, Tamil Nadu's *gram sabhas* show much higher levels of political sophistication and responsiveness from officials over the same period with sharply increased participation by women. This is due partly to organic causes and partly to state-initiated policies designed to equalize gender relations (Parthasarathy et al. 2017; Palaniswamy et al. 2017).

In the "high-capacity" state of Kerala, a sequence of governments spanning the political spectrum has created an integrated system of participatory planning. This has resulted in a functional democratic deliberative system that continues to pay dividends, both in political process and in concrete outcomes like health and sanitation (John and Jacob 2016). Kerala's *panchayats* are not very different today from when we recorded these *gram sabhas*, except that deliberative planning and implementation have become even more routinized.

In the "low-capacity" state of Andhra Pradesh (AP), the situation is very different. When we recorded these *gram sabha* meetings, Chandrababu Naidu was the Chief Minister of AP. He and his bureaucrats embraced the promise of technology-led centralized governance.

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This resulted in an explicit decision to underemphasize the *panchayat* system, ignore *gram sabhas,* and manage village governance by creating parallel structures of village "user-groups" and "self-help" groups. Rural citizens became relatively disconnected from the *panchayat* system. The consequences of this are clearly observable in our transcripts.

In 2004, Naidu's party, the Telugu Desam, lost power to the Congress Party, which was also in power at the federal level By the time the influx of funds from the NREGS, with its emphasis on strengthening the *panchayat* system, came along, there was more openness in AP toward *panchayats* and their *gram sabhas*. Nevertheless, qualitative research conducted in 2012–2013 on the NREGS in AP shows the continued prevalence of the centralized "high-modernist" governance structure inherited from Naidu. *Gram sabhas*, it was found, were still being held to abide by the letter of the law rather than to give life to its spirit (Veeraraghavan 2017).

In 2014, the state of Andhra Pradesh was split in two. The northern districts formed the new state of Telangana and the district of Medak was added to it. The southern and coastal districts, including Chittoor district, now formed the geographically reduced state of Andhra Pradesh. A new political party, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, won power in Telangana. It explicitly committed itself to strengthening the village *panchayat* system in accordance with the 73rd amendment. It recently launched a new initiative, called "Gram Jyoti," to implement this goal. In the reconstituted and much smaller state of AP, Chandrababu Naidu has regained power and moved toward transforming *panchayats* into "e-governance" centers. We carefully combed through the website of the Panchayati Raj department of the AP government and found no mention of *gram sabhas*. Telangana, it appears, will strengthen *gram sabhas* while AP will continue to pursue a high-modernist vision of governance and development.

There have been many changes over the years in *panchayat* policy. But, at the state level, those changes have only served to move *gram sabhas* even further in the directions our typology identifies and systematically attempts to lay out. This fact strongly indicates the continued relevance of the data we recorded fourteen years ago. The "high-capacity" state of Kerala early on was already a global exemplar of participatory government. It continues to be so despite a succession of disparate governments. The medium-capacity states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu remain medium-capacity in comparison to Kerala, but

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deliberative participation within them has become stronger. *Gram sabhas* there are becoming more vibrant and articulate. The southern and coastal districts that constitute the new Andhra Pradesh continue to pay very little attention to the *gram sabha*. The northern districts in the new state of Telangana promise to energize *gram sabhas* and the *panchayat* system.

Policy Implications

The voices of the poor are often not heard. Governmental systems devised to assist the poor, i.e. provide them with "social protection" and opportunity, are often single-mindedly focused on poverty identification through definitions, biometrics, surveys, and measurements over which the people subject to these technologies of value determination and commensuration have no say. Programs to assist the poor are administered through opaque bureaucracies that often subject people to the "structural violence" of government surveillance, fiat, and oversight (Gupta 2012). *Gram sabhas* have the potential to change that by facilitating oral democracy. In the transcripts analyzed, we witness rural Indian citizens, both as individuals and as collectives, giving voice to their concerns and complaints. *Gram sabhas* make visible to participants and the community as a whole the aspirations, fears, and everyday struggles that rural residents experience. In doing this *gram sabhas* make such experiences politically legible. They allow diverse individuals and groups – high and low castes, women and men, the educated and illiterate, citizens and officials alike – to listen to one another, to understand, to argue, and to reflect.

Gram sabhas have the potential to nurture "oratory competency" across multiple divides and to cultivate political literacy. They help rural citizens navigate the world of government assistance and make better collective decisions. Through the oral democracy of *gram sabhas*, rural citizens stake out claims for dignity and overcome social barriers they would not otherwise be able to breach. Through *gram sabhas* rural citizens collectively expose and confront corruption and mismanagement. These actions would be impossible to accomplish individually. *Gram sabhas* create the space for elected officials and bureaucrats to respond, whether dismissively or with genuine social creativity. To put all these voices into constitutionally mandated public conversation with each other supports and enlarges deliberative

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democracy. All this makes for a more reflective citizenry, a more reflective state, and helps solve the coordination failures that lie at the heart of governance.

However, we see a lot of variation in the degree to which this happens. *Panchayat* policy, the interpretation and implementation of the words of the 73rd amendment, is the remit of state governments. Our natural experiment allows us to look at the impact of state government policy on the quality of discourse within the *gram sabha*, by comparing villages across state borders that share a common language and history. We find that state-level policy makes an enormous difference to the nature of *gram sabha*, which suggests that oral competency and political literacy are not predetermined but can be shaped by policy. State policy can even override the discursive deficiencies that come from low levels of literacy.

The question then is what were the elements of the policy that mattered. First, it was the fact that there was a national-level commitment to strengthening local democracy, which was constitutionalized, and the *gram sabha* was rendered a permanent institution. Thus, *gram sabhas* are not ad hoc institutions like the participatory meetings that are ubiquitous in the developing world (Mansuri and Rao 2012). They have become as much a recurring ritual of village life as festivals and weddings. Second, it is the result of "collaborative coalition" (Fox 2016) between the top – national-level political parties who came together to pass the amendment and then implemented it via state policy, and the bottom – village residents and local politicians and bureaucrats who participate in it. Local elites who might want to undermine it are trumped by even more powerful high-level elites collaborating with village activists and residents.

Third, the permanence of the institution allows for a tolerance of mess. Appadurai argues (2015) that effective deliberation is not just about "context-legibility" but about "context-change" (the ability to shift the nature of context so that the terms of engagement are more favorable to citizens). This movement from legibility to change can be very messy, and *gram sabhas* often are just that. They can be argumentative, noisy, rude, cacophonous, and directionless. Yet, they are difficult to dismiss. This allows them to evolve, and slowly acquire legitimacy. Politicians and bureaucrats learn how to engage with them, citizens learn how to navigate them, and both officials and citizens learn how to manipulate them. In effect they become

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a "performative" (Butler 2015) space where people make demands, transgress boundaries, defend positions, campaign, instruct, inform, entertain, and where mutual respect becomes an institutionalized practice. And, in doing so, *gram sabhas* change entrenched norms and reduce the gap between the government and the governed.

Gram sabhas give us a practical way to deepen democracy. They function in circumstances that are far more challenging than those that obtain in Western democracies. They therefore open up a number of questions in deliberative theory. Most importantly, instead of assuming conditions of equality exist, we need to think about how a more equal world can be achieved via a policy-induced process of change. In a world where democracy is under siege and growing inequality an important concern, *gram sabhas* are worth paying attention to.

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