

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.

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

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

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) person¹ 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.

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

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

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 SC² 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

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.

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

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:

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

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

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-

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

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 husband⁵ [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.

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

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.

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 *panchayat* 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!

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:

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

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.

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

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

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*.

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

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

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 *panchayat* 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

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.

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

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

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)

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.

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.

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

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

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*.