

### 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

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 *panchayats*' 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

*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

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.<sup>1</sup> We focus on

<sup>1</sup> 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).

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> Member of Legislative Assembly. These are important political figures.

<sup>3</sup> 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.



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

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.

### 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.

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:

*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

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

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

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



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

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*.

*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

(Bustalappally, 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

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.

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 *panchayat* 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:

*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 of 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.

### 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 “*jama-bandhi*.” 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,

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.



*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<sup>4</sup> 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

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

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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Small dams constructed to collect rainwater.

*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

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)

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 *panchayat* 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].

*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

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

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 non-payment 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*



*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

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

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

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

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

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.

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 Radhakrishnan's house.
2. Concrete the road from Kathersha Ravuther's house to Cheriyaachi's house.
3. Protect the road from Mannamkutty to Thamarachirra & tarring rest of the road
4. Tarring the road from Mannamkutty to Thanack ... [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*, *aganwadi* 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* . . .

... 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 benefited 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*



*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

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

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:

*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

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

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?

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 Mudgere. 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

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.

...



*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

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 Ravanesswarm 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

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

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)

*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 *gram sabha* and by using frames like decentralization, democratic structure, and community development. In *onegram 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. ...

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

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.