Political Culture of Poverty and Deliberation in Rural India: The Discursive Landscape of Village Democracy

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FIRST DRAFT: NOVEMBER 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1992 the 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution was signed into law. The amendment vastly increased the role of village councils or *gram panchayats* (GP) in rural governance. It did so by instituting regular elections supervised by independent election commissions, by reserving quotas in political offices for women and underprivileged castes, and by directing governments to gradually increase the funds and powers of the village councils. Importantly, it mandated that all village councils should hold *gram sabhas* (GS), public meetings held at regular intervals in every village, to discuss and ratify core decisions made by the GPs on the selection of beneficiaries for anti-poverty programs and budgetary allocations for public goods and services. The GS is a regular presence in 2 million villages and has a direct bearing on the lives of hundreds of millions of people, making it arguably the largest deliberative democratic institution of its kind worldwide.

Coming as it did in the midst of a frenzied stream of news on the opening up of the Indian economy, the passing of the 73rd amendment received scant international attention. But its impact on the 700 million Indians who live in rural India has been profound. It has instituted 2 million little democracies across the country, making the practice of democratic politics, its attendant election cycles, deliberative rituals, and political machinations and negotiations, part of the quotidian landscape of rural life. It also radically changed the image of the State, which used to be an anonymous monolith led by geographically, socially, and politically distant and mythical personalities. Today, in addition to the old distant state, there is the new proximate state represented by the GS and the GP president, council members, and secretary.

The goal of the paper is to understand what we call the "political culture of poverty:" how poverty shapes deliberative discourse, and how deliberation shapes the meaning and lived experience of poverty. This analysis therefore contributes to two important topics with long scholarly histories: the relationship between culture and poverty (see, for instance, Rao and Walton 2004; Lamont and Small 2008) and deliberative democracy (Fung 2004; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Elster 1998; Bohman 1996; Mansbridge 1980).

Several critical questions arise at this intersection. How, for instance, does poverty and its attendant *habitus* shape democratic practice? How well suited is democratic governance to respond to the demands of the poor—especially where competing demands are made on the basis of other criteria, such as ascriptive identities based on caste? Does providing an arena for citizens to deliberate complicate the state's attempt to have a quantifiable definition of poverty and encourage citizens to challenge it?

These questions become increasingly important as GSs are empowered to make decisions on issues of central importance to the lives of India's rural poor. This process also mirrors a trend across the developing world, which is increasingly turning to community-based deliberation to implement anti-poverty programs (Mansuri and Rao

2004). Data for this paper is drawn from the recorded proceedings of 290 randomly selected *gram sabha*s held in four states in South India. Thus, we have data from a large representative sample, and we have applied qualitative techniques to analyze these data.[1]

2. CULTURE, POVERTY, AND DEMOCRACY

What does culture have to do with democracy? In theory, democracy represents a set of procedures governing decision-making that ought to operate equally effectively regardless of culture and context. But the reality is far from that expectation. We will argue here that a concern with culture is intrinsic to achieving an understanding of how a democratic system functions.

As conceived by the "radical democrats," the effects of a democratic system go far beyond keeping a check on the power of the few and responding to the demands of various constituencies. As they envision it, participation in a democratic system catalyzes desirable changes in the individual, leading to a process of positive self-transformation. The envisioned changes include enhancing the individual's facility for practical reasoning and making people more tolerant of difference and more sensitive about the need for reciprocity. Democracy should also enhance people's ability to decide on their own personal preferences, to think and act with autonomy, and to engage in moral discourse and make moral judgments (Warren 1995). Some scholars also expect the deliberative process of democracy to produce a consensus on preferences regarding final ends and means, that is, a "unanimous preference" determined through the power of reasoning (Elster 1986: 112). It has indeed been shown (Dryzek and List 2003; List et al 2006) that deliberation makes individual preferences more "single-peaked" and amenable to aggregation. In theory, then, participation in a deliberative democracy is expected to produce more cognitively competent and well-informed people with an enhanced capacity for consensual action.

What form would such participation take? In Habermas's view, participation in the democratic system entails entering a discursive field and engaging in discourse to resolve problems and disputes and achieve consensus on pragmatic matters. From a systemic perspective, the motivational force of speech or verbal communication (the medium of discourse) will facilitate the resolution of conflicts because of the social value of maintaining a shared understanding. According to this view, argumentative convincing, rather than bribes or threats, is the only mode of resolution, because the "force of the better argument" prevails. The fairness of this system is guaranteed by a structure based on discursive equality─a "public sphere"─where individuals are *a priori* equal and free of the distorting effect of inequalities (Habermas 1990). Habermas sees discursive negotiation as the principal way through which individuals in complex industrial societies create much needed new identities that transcend their old identities based on their traditional "lifeworld".

The social structure underlying this idealized notion of discursive democracy is one of freedom and fair-play, where all individuals who wish to speak have an opportunity to voice their opinion without fear of repercussion, and where all are treated

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[1] See Ban and Rao (2008) for a detailed description of the sampling framework.

with equal respect and impartiality as partners in a dialogue (Chambers 1995). In cultural terms, the kind of community envisioned is "the ideal of a moral community, one whose norms and practices are fully acceptable to those subject to them, a society based not on imposition, but on the agreement of free and equal persons" (Moon 1995).

Village Democracy in India

This is the ideological foundation that anchors the *panchayat* system of village democracy in India. The 73rd amendment builds upon a legacy of legislation that stems from the 1882 Resolution on Local Self-Government initiated by the then Viceroy Lord Ripon. Ripon's main intention behind this legislation was to facilitate "political education" and "training in the work of representative institutions" in a manner that built on indigenous systems of village government (Tinker 1967). Ripon's tenure as viceroy did not last long enough for him to ensure that his reforms were sustainable, and subsequent colonial administrators deemphasized democratic village government. But during India's early 20th century struggle for independence, *gram swaraj* (village self-rule) became a key tenet of Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy and was consequently seared into Indian nationalist ideology. By drawing on the notion that it would concretize Gandhi's vision of village self-rule, widespread support for the 73rd amendment was mobilized across all Indian political parties and regions. The amendment made deliberative processes via the GS a cornerstone of village government, creating a state-sponsored public sphere. In India, unlike in Europe, this sphere was not organically derived but was rather mandated from above by national legislation.

In India, therefore, public participation in discursive negotiation toward problem resolution is a governmental technology deliberately instituted and managed by the state—a fact that blurs the boundary between civil society and the state (Gupta 1995). In India, however, discursive negotiations at the village level do not as such create the "new identities" envisioned in the idealized version of democratic process. Indian identities tend to be well defined and entrenched in traditional social hierarchies, even taking into account a degree of fluidity intrinsic to the caste-based social hierarchy (Bayly 1999).

Across India, individuals and groups discuss and negotiate access to scarce strategic resources with competing claimants. At the least such negotiations are targeted to achieve a means to survival for individuals and families and at best, a path to upward social and economic mobility. Although the cultural context is ridden with social and economic inequalities and interdependencies, negotiators use their established identities as resources—a kind of capital—to stake claims to their due share. Rather than a monolithic moral community, India encompasses a pluralism of ethnicities, faiths, and values represented by communities varying in size and political power. These communities possess unequal economic, cultural, and social capital and compete for political power.

One notable exception is the state of Kerala, one of the four states in our sample. In Kerala, which enjoys near universal literacy, a well established cadre of Communist Party workers conducted a "People's Campaign" to train citizens in deliberative planning processes, which resulted in remarkably effective local government (Heller, Harilal and Chaudhuri 2007). This campaign built on years of progressive left-leaning rule and effective land reform, sharp reductions in social inequality, high levels of civic

participation, and extremely effective human development investments. In Kerala, moreover, where it is mandated that 40 percent of the state's budget be allocated via GPs, these local bodies have substantial resources. Yet in Kerala as elsewhere, the GS's primary function as a part of the nationwide governance system is to select beneficiaries and allocate public goods.

The cultural context of India reminds us how far removed it is from Habermas's ideal notion of the "public sphere." The reality of India's pluralistic culture, which encompasses diverse values and vast economic disparities, would be better represented by a definition of community that recognizes the "agonistic" element of social behaviors characteristic of opposing entities with unequal means (Moon 1995). This agonistic element is often reflected in fighting and aggressive encounters—including threats, attacks, appeasement, submission, and retreat. Yet the literature on this subject, including two of the most instructive ethnographies in the field (Mansbridge 1980, rural Vermont; Baiocchi 2005, Porte Allegre, Brazil), places greater emphasis on deliberative, consensual agreement.

What, then, has culture to do with democracy in India? Democracy in cultural terms is an 'artful practice' in that it involves "the formal and informal cultivation of competencies of judging, reasoning, appreciating, performing and responding" (Barnett 2003: 199). Scholars seeking to deconstruct the nature of "representation" emphasize the importance of asking "Who speaks?" and focusing on the "technologies and techniques of persuasion" used in speaking (Morris 1998: 230). Cultural theorists have long argued that speaking "depends on an individual's position within regulated systems of discourse" (Barnett 2003: 16).

These questions surrounding representation and how it is patterned by inequality and identity are central to the way in which we have examined the discursive negotiations taking place in the GS meetings. In short, we argue that the GS meeting be viewed as a discursive landscape that ritualistically sets the stage for the performance of a "political culture of poverty." We therefore examine who speaks, what they say, and how they speak, i.e., the modalities through which narratives are presented.

Poverty and the Technology of Governance

In a hierarchy that reaches upwards from the village to the county (Block), the district (Zila), the state, and the central government in Delhi, GPs and GSs are the lowest levels of government. This entire system is staffed by elected representatives and works within the framework of the Indian constitution, which adopts affirmative action policies in order to address social and economic inequalities. The state, therefore, plays an active redistributive role.

Wealth is redistributed to the poorest citizens via a technocratic process using lists of "scheduled castes" and "below poverty line" families assessed via surveys. Scheduled castes (SCs) are the formerly "untouchable" castes listed in a special schedule of the constitution that makes them eligible for affirmative action.[2] Quotas for elected positions within the government, including seats for GP presidencies and ward representatives, are reserved for SCs in proportion to their population in the village. It also includes quotas

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[2] Hence the term "scheduled caste" (henceforth SC), which is used to refer to lower castes eligible for affirmative action.

for SC enrollment in educational institutions and for government jobs. In addition, a slew of anti-poverty programs implemented through GPs are meant to allocate resources (such as concrete houses, toilets, and small plots of land from common property resources) exclusively for the SCs.

Several other benefits are also allocated to people defined as "below the poverty line," known now in every Indian language as "BPL." Depending on the state, families classified as BPL get access to houses, toilets, subsidized food, jobs, cheap credit, and scholarships. BPL criteria, which vary from state to state, include landlessness, unemployment, quality of housing, etc. These "objective" criteria are typically assessed on the basis of a questionnaire implemented by the GP. However, in order to counter-balance the GPs power over BPL selection, the list of poor families is required to be ratified by the GS.

In rural India, therefore, citizen-state relationships exist more in the matrix of a gift economy than in the realm of rights and responsibilities. Poor accountability mechanisms, lack of resources, and the identity-based nature of electoral politics result in a culture of supplication and benefaction (Gupta 1995; Mehta forthcoming). Political parties engage in the politics of patronage and maintain well-oiled networks to exchange public and private goods for electoral support (Bardhan 1988).

The vast majority of rural residents do not pay their taxes, and a GP's financial resources are mostly derived from grants from higher levels of government. These grants are almost all "tied," in that they are required to be allocated to particular groups of people (SCs, BPL, women, etc.) or to be used for particular purposes (such as building private toilets or houses). Untied funds are practically non-existent. A GS's ability to make allocation decisions is therefore limited. It can decide where to locate a road, a water pipeline, or some other small public good. It can ratify the selection of beneficiaries for targeted benefits. And, it can serve as a clearing house for information.

Ironically, in addition to establishing non-negotiable schedules and lists, the Indian constitution also created the GS as a deliberative space, opening up the possibility of such governmental definitions as BPL to be questioned. Consequently, the lived experience of these categories and their meaning can be reshaped via deliberative discourse. Since this discursive space – this "public sphere" – is embedded within an electoral space, with politicians attempting to curry favor with different groups, political incentives preclude attempts to suppress voice. By silencing a person, a local politician risks alienating an entire voting bloc. Therefore, GS are troublesome for local elites who try to ensure that they are not held – in 2001 twenty-five per cent of GPs did not hold even one over a year-long period (Besley, Pande and Rao, 2005).

Most discussions in the GS arise in the form of a demand or supplication. Villagers ask the GP to provide a public good in a particular location or to recognize someone as poor enough to deserve private benefits. Consequently, the GS creates a relatively level discursive field. It briefly releases people from primordial inequality traps and allows them the freedom to speak. Such freedom has the tendency to spill over outside the GS into everyday life.

3. CONTEXT, DATA, AND METHODS

Two to four times a year, depending on the state, a ritual is enacted in villages across the country. The elected GP officials, villagers ranging from a handful to more than a hundred, and occasionally also government bureaucrats (for example, the Block Development Officer, public works engineer, or public health official) get together in a local community hall or school building or in the open air. Their mission is to discuss the needs and problems of the villagers, distribute government-subsidized public and private goods, and to disclose the GP's budget.

The average GS meeting lasts for eighty-six minutes and usually begins with a presentation by the president or the secretary of the GP. This is followed by a public discussion open to all registered voters, but the illiterate, the landless and SC/STs, who are more likely to benefit from targeted programs are more likely to attend (Besley, Pande and Rao 2005). Discussions often take the form of call and response. Villagers mention their demands and grievances, and the secretary or a member of the GP responds to them. These discussions generally center on routine problems (non-functioning streetlights, insufficient water supply, lack of roads and other important infrastructure, etc.). Discussions also address such complex problems as the legitimacy of paying taxes when obligated resources fail to arrive and the fairness of caste-based affirmative action as a principle of resource allocation.

Data for this study are drawn from the transcripts of 290 GS meetings in four South Indian states: Andhra Pradesh (AP), Karnataka (KN), Kerala (KL), and Tamil Nadu (TN). Each transcript includes information on the caste, gender, official designation, and social position of the speaker (elected representative, school principal, villager, etc.) as well as the full proceedings of the meetings. Transcripts were coded by the kinds of issues discussed.

In this paper we will focus on public concerns about distributive justice, including caste-based affirmative action and criteria for BPL selection. In our opinion, this is an area where the diverse influences of culture, poverty, and democracy visibly and vividly intersect.

4. DISCUSSION

This section is broadly divided into two segments. In the first segment we show how the contextual reality of poverty shapes the culture of deliberation in the GS. In the second segment we explore how deliberation acts as a vehicle for creating a shared, intersubjective[3] understanding between the government and the general public of what it means to be poor.

How Poverty Shapes the Culture of Deliberation

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[3] This term is used primarily in phenomenological sociology to refer to the mutual constitution of social relationships and reality. It suggests that people can reach an agreement about their understanding of what they have experienced in their life-world and create a shared world based on their subjective understandings. There is no objective reality that exists outside of this mutually shared subjective understanding of phenomenon. As the term has been used here, it means a mutually shared and constructed meaning of poverty.

Several broad patterns emerge in the ways in which poverty shapes the discursive landscape of the GS in the rural hinterland of India:

1. Poor lower-caste members point out the competitive nature of the decision-making and resource-allocation process and complain about discrimination by proximate and distant social groups.
2. Poor lower-caste members occasionally test the resilience of the caste-based social boundaries that guide consumption patterns.
3. Upper-caste members display a flagrant disregard for the needs of other groups and try to establish their own privileged access to resources.
4. Poor general-caste villagers question the legitimacy of affirmative action that privileges caste-identity (SC/ST) over economic condition in selecting beneficiaries for government-funded private goods.
5. Poor villagers make personal pleas and deferential requests to the GP president for private and public goods, and GP president uses economic and moral standards to prioritize competing claims.

An excerpt from a GS meeting in Dharmapuri (TN) shows the usual interlocutors in a typical GS. This meeting of the GS, serving a village with a voting-age population of 563, was attended by only seven people: three elected members of the GP (the stand-in president, clerk, and an office holder) and four villagers. All of the seven attendees were men.

Among the villagers, Mariappan and Muniraj are both SCs, lowest in the local socio-economic hierarchy. Of the two, the latter embodies the agonistic voice and highlights the pervasive, historically rooted inequality that is perpetuated even within the current democratic structure. A third villager, Jayaraman, belongs to the "other backward castes" (OBC) category. Finally, there is the "President husband", who is a member of the "most backward castes" (MBC). In constituencies reserved for female candidates, the female president is often only a statutory head, replaced in her seat of authority by her husband.[4] An excerpt from the meeting transcript follows: [5]

> *Jayaraman [male, villager, OBC]:* There are 45 families in our village. None of us have any land. We work for meager daily wages. Whatever little we get we spend on our children's education. But it's impossible to educate our children up to high school because we don't have the money…. So we request the Government to do something.... Our whole area is dirty. Even the water is muddy, and that's what we drink…. How many times we have requested for a road near the cremation ground and for the supply for clean water?! We can only request and apply. The rest is up to you.

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

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[4] This transference of authority is a complex issue that requires an understanding of the fact that these women often belong to politically affiliated families where the male members have long been actively involved in local politics.

[5] The first time a villager appears in an excerpt, we note their name and caste. For an official we include their position instead of their name and their caste, if available.

Muniraj [SC]: That way [if they have a ward member] we will have the guts to enter this room [where the GS meeting is taking place]. If the required ward members are not with us, to whom can we voice our woes? Who will represent us? ... If the ward member belongs to another community, he won't even listen to our problems. Earlier there was a time when a backward caste person was not even allowed to sit in the same area with others! The officers and leaders who come here [to the GS meeting] already have a pre-set plan about what to do and say. You come, sit on the chair, say something, decide among yourselves, and go away. What's there for us to do?! You've enjoyed power for all these years. Why don't you let us have a turn? ... We don't want any problem at the communal level. For us, whether Subban comes or Kuppan comes [common names], it is the same. We vote─but what happens later? Whereas other people get water even before they ask for it, we have to ask endlessly, and even so, our demand is not fulfilled…. We don't want to fight with anyone. But at least there should be someone to listen to our problems. We've been without water supply for the past one month. Even the president knows it. He has promised to send water. But the ward member is not allowing us to take water. The water is sent to all his relatives. We cannot do anything to stop it. We told him that he has no right to stop the water supply …

President husband: … In any competition it's a rule that one should win and the other should lose. There's no community-based discrimination or problem. If all of you in booth no. 1 join and vote for me, I become the President. On the other hand, if everyone in the other booths vote for another person, then he'll become the president. And then what'll matter is what he can do for those booths that voted for him. Today, among youngsters, the level of public awareness is very high. Anyone can become a leader.… Even though there are problems between you two groups, I try to mediate. I don't encourage communal riots.…

Muniraj: Everyone should be treated equally. No one should be treated as inferior to others. We should also be given a chance to sit on the dais [where the leaders sit]. Why should we be denied that right? Just because I talk like this, it doesn't mean that I fight with you or disrespect you. I am simply voicing my feeling.

The discourse above reveals the issues that were raised and the modalities through which they were presented in the narratives of ordinary citizens. The issues ranged from access to basic public goods such as potable water, to demand for education, to more complex sociopolitical issues, such as caste-based discrimination and allegations of corruption and nepotism. The concept of citizenship based on democratic ideals of equal rights and recognition is implicit throughout the discursive negotiations, but is particularly vivid in the villager's requests for equal treatment. However, the wide chasm between this ideal and the actual practice of democracy in India is clearly visible in the fault lines that divide the "public" in this GS meeting.

The absences and silences in this meeting are as eloquent as the characters present and voices heard in revealing the three fundamental cleavages that fracture the Indian public: the economic divide, the social-symbolic divide of caste hierarchies, and the gender divide. In order to understand who the interlocutors are, how they are positioned, and the significance of their speech, it is first necessary to understand these social divides.

In the rural setting, the economic divide is illustrated by disparities in land ownership, one of the most important economic resources and status markers in agricultural societies. In India, land ownership frequently coincides with position in the caste hierarchy. Upper and middle castes (which include OBCs in South India) may own a significant portion of cultivable land in a village, while the lower-caste SCs work as daily agricultural wage laborers on that land. To a large extent, economic disparities determine attendance patterns in these meetings. Typically, the upper castes do not see any value in attending the GS meetings, which they regard as the government's vehicle to benefit the lower castes by selecting beneficiaries for subsidized goods. When they are present, upper castes often try to dominate the meetings by demanding that precedence be given to their needs (for an example, see below).

Caste-based divisions have deep historical roots and still manifest in such practices as physical distancing and symbolic deference. It is noteworthy that these traditional cultural scripts, which until India's independence legitimized inequality, are now being openly challenged in GS meetings. Such challenges are not completely new given the history of caste reform movements in South India. The Lingayat movement dates back to the twelfth century, and many more such challenges to the status quo emerged during the colonial and post-colonial periods. What makes challenges voiced in GS meetings different is that, unlike most of their predecessors, they derive not from the educated elite or spiritual leaders, poets, and philosophers on the margins of society but rather from ordinary villagers embedded in local structures of inequality. To some extent it is to be expected that where caste-based affirmative action has been federally adopted as the principle for distributing resources, identity politics and resource politics will be inseparable. Therefore, in the process of justifying demands, reason-giving is frequently replaced by claims-making on the basis of objective need and ascriptive communal identity.

The final divide is the gender divide, embodied above by the President husband and the complete absence of women. Even when women are present (often in large numbers, especially in the South Indian states, due to their membership in self-help or microcredit groups), they generally do not participate actively or enjoy the same rights as their male counterparts. This fact is evident in instances when they are silenced and their contribution discounted by male authority figures (see below).

India's Competitive Model of Democratic Deliberation

India's three major social divides set the stage for the competition for scarce resources between socially and economically unequal combatants. The de facto GP President's use of the word "competition" is in itself revelatory of the mind-set that informs participation and decision-making in this deliberatively structured resource allocation process. It suggests the prevalence of agonistic competition over consensual deliberation, the two representing opposed frameworks of decision-making regarding public goods allocation and determination of ends and means choices. We have outlined below four broad distinctions between these two decision-making frameworks.

A competition is always governed by a set of rules. In this case the rules of selection are set by the Government and are not amenable to negotiation. The rules prioritize certain criteria for determining winners and losers: (a) caste identity trumps

economic indicators (on the assumption that there is a positive association between the two, which is generally a correct assumption in India but ignores the question of the poor who happen not to belong to the lower castes); and (b) numerical majority trumps marginality. The Government occupies the role of referee, setting and enforcing the rules. While the rules are not open to negotiation, from time to time they are questioned by groups and individuals who are left behind. In contrast, the deliberative process, which generously assumes all people have equal capacity to articulate their arguments, grants everyone equal rights to do so and therefore privileges none.

In the competition for resources as carried out in GP meetings, citizens generally address their demands and pleas to the GP president, who represents the Government. Although not physically present, the Government's paternalistic authority is recognized as the invisible power deciding winners and losers and bestowing goods and services accordingly. In the excerpt cited above, members of the public do not address each other as they would in a true deliberative structure, where participants are expected to establish a dialogue and to jointly evaluate each another's arguments.

Seeking to achieve advantage in the competition for resources, participants in GS meetings use a plethora of articulation strategies. Argument based on reasons is only one of many such strategies observed in GS meetings and is used less frequently than some others. More popular are blatant personal demands, pleas, and deferential requests for private and public goods. At times it is difficult to distinguish reason-giving from statements of preferences or need, especially where needs are so fundamental, obvious, and chronic that the exercise of reason-giving becomes superfluous. In deliberative democracy, however, reason is the only acceptable form for discursive negotiation. And the question of what constitutes reason is unproblematic.

In a competition it is not necessary to arrive at a consensus about the ends and means to be pursued or the fairness of the final distribution. In fact, the logic of competition is contrary to any attempt to recognize the merits of the opponent's demands, which could only weaken one's own claim. In addition, in the type of resource competition dealt with in GPs, the ends and means are often predetermined, as when the government requires that a certain amount be spent on digging wells to meet demand caused by a water shortage. The government's financial constraints and programs determine the parameters of the discussion. No decision can be implemented without the approval of the higher authority, regardless of the strength of the consensus. Often the only dimension that is even remotely negotiable is the neighborhood or individual to receive a public or private good.

In such a setting, we have a case not of deliberative democracy but of agonistic competition that requires individuals and groups to declare their demands in the hopes of being heard. Those aspiring to be heard, recognized, and responded to employ various discursive means: pleading helplessness, drowning out competing voices, arguing raucously, threatening protest, and discussing a well-considered list of reasons. This is the version of democracy that actually prevails in the grassroots of India, where different caste groups live and fight cheek-by-jowl and suffer from varying levels of economic deprivation. The scene most resembles a courtroom, where the goal is to win by influencing the opinions of the judge and jury, who in turn determine who will win and who will lose.

Poverty and the Discursive Landscape of the Gram Sabha

The fact that the GS does not operate as an ideal deliberative body does not make it devoid of social and political value. In fact, India's GSs function as Durkheimian "sacred spheres" marking the conjunction of civil society and the state, whose ritualized interaction gives rise to a moment of "collective effervescence." In the GS, we see an attempt by the state and the public (in all its factions) to establish a forum for an egalitarian community of citizens. This moment allows individuals with disadvantaged identities (lower caste and poor) momentarily to discard the pollution and stigma of their ascriptive identities and low economic status and to slip into their sacred identity as citizens with equal rights in the eyes of the state. In fact, the more "polluted" or downtrodden an individual is in real terms, the more sacred he or she is in the eyes of the democratic state, whose avowed mission is to guarantee equality and preferential treatment for the disadvantaged. Imperfect though they are, the interactions ritualized in GSs somewhat change the nature of entrenched social relations. They serve to make the covert "weapons of the weak" overt, expose such "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) as the physical segregation of lower castes, and provide a means to challenge them.

The work of maintaining, defending, and challenging hierarchical social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Fournier 1992), prominent in the discursive landscape of the GS, is powerfully shaped by poverty and social inequality. Lower caste communities that control resources can use them to test the resilience of upper caste boundaries.

> *Villager (male, SC):* In our SC-ST colony, there's a bore-well that's plush with water. This water is being misused. If a tank is constructed, this water can be useful for the entire village.

In this example (Medak, AP), a lower caste community uses the offer of water from its well to tempt upper caste members to relax the rules of purity and pollution governing their patterns of consumption. The offer is made, moreover, with the knowledge that members of the upper caste are most likely unwilling to drink lower caste water, scoring an effective political point about discrimination.

In GS deliberations, the upper castes (the "general" or "forward" castes, referred to below as GC) are most notable for their absence. When they do participate, they generally try to dominate the discourse and to establish their privileged claim on resources, a privilege primarily derived from their traditionally recognized superiority. In the following example (Chittoor, AP), a general caste person states his demands and uses brute vocal force to assert their primacy over other claims.

> *Villager:* (male, GC): We need cemented roads in Brahamana Veedhi [Brahmin street]. We're not bothered about the expenses incurred by the *panchayat*. Our problem must be addressed.
>
> *GP Secretary (male):* The *panchayat* does not have any money…. If you want this project, you have to come forward with your "sramadan" [voluntary contributions] …

Villager (male, GC): We're least bothered about other development activities. First of all, we need cement roads. That's it.

The upper caste speaker's strident style contrasts with the fawning and wheedling tone employed by lower caste supplicants, showing how different "technologies and techniques of persuasion" are used at different levels of the social spectrum (Morris 1998). The GC villager publicly expresses his disregard for the needs of other groups, brazenly pressing his demand for a public good meant exclusively for his upper caste neighborhood. In contrast to this blatant irreverence, Muniraj, the SC villager in the first example cited above, affirms his allegiance to the ideal of communal harmony even while strongly objecting to its unjust discrimination against his caste group. In an effort to allay fears that he is trying to rile up communal tensions, Muniraj even stresses that his somewhat aggressive manner of speech is not a sign of disrespect. The sharp contrast between the two techniques of persuasion illustrates yet again how poverty and social inequality leave their stamp on the shape of democratic discourse.

Poor people in India use the forum provided by GSs to challenge the fairness of caste-based affirmative action, which puts the needs of SCs before those of other groups, regardless of economic criteria.

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

This example from Coimbatore (TN) shows how poor members of the general caste left behind by existing redistribution policies can express their dissatisfaction in the context of the GS. OBCs who are socially proximate to the SCs similarly challenge existing policies.

All of these challenges are, in reality, pleas to the government─masked in adversarial language─for a larger share of private and public goods, underscoring the government's benefactor-to-beneficiary relationship with the public. But in the democratic system, the public as beneficiary is endowed with a moral claim. The following example suggests that villagers' understand this as they make a deferential request as if asking for alms, then express indignation at being passed over in favor of others' demands.

Velusamy [villager, male, OBC]: I have been residing in this village through several generations and I've been asking for a house to live in. They say: 'today, tomorrow,' but so far, nothing's been done…. I am sitting here at the mercy of my fate…

GP Clerk: Till now houses have been allotted only for the SCs … It hasn't come for OBCs.

Velusamy: They say that it has come only for the SCs, only for them! Is it that only they are humans? And are we people not human beings? How can you say such a thing! What kind of a *panchayat* is this? We can't go directly and meet the officer.

We can only make kind requests to our President, whom we believe in. Make some arrangements for me …

The discursive strategies observed in the GS also reveal the continual masking and unmasking of private needs disguised as public needs. The following example from Coimbatore (TN) shows how figures of authority question intentions, debunk claims, and pass moral judgments on individual needs. The GS is therefore a perilous terrain, where "hidden transcripts" are continually dragged into the discourse.

> *Mailaatha [villager, female, SC]:* You must lay a road for our street. It's very difficult for the children to walk. You must help us.

> *President [male]:* Your street is not a busy street! Your husband is ill and disabled. So you have to hold and assist him [to walk]. We will lay roads if more funds are available.
> …
> *Murugasen [villager, male, OBC]:* I run a business from my house. The two electric posts near my house are not good. It's difficult to get around.

> *President:* You're asking for a light for your house and a post for that. Now I've understood your goal! ...

> *Savithri [villager, female, SC]:* I don't have a husband, and I'm suffering a lot with a child. I've got to pay for six months house rent. I want a house.

> *President:* You've moved away [of your own accord] after fighting with your husband.… We'll give you a house if it [the house grants] comes.

Concern with distributional equity is not only about getting bread-and-butter goods (such as free meals and uniforms for children and subsidized sanitation facilities). It also extends beyond the imperatives of survival to issues of socio-economic mobility (such as obtaining greater opportunities for education and employment). Poor, socially marginalized groups use the GS to broach such subjects, which fall far beyond the practical scope of the GS. These instances violate another principle of ideal deliberative democracy, the stipulation that discussions will target only problems of a pragmatic nature. In the following excerpt from Coimbatore (TN), the villager and the GP president discuss the affordability of an English medium education and how that does or does not hinder a person's chance to get into the highly coveted Indian Administrative Services (IAS) or the civil services in the context of caste-based affirmative action.

> *Villager (male):* A girl who studies in Mallanad[6] *Panchayat* corporation school [Tamil medium] cannot match a boy who studies in an English medium convent school in Coimbatore. Parents need to spend a lot for English medium education for their children.

> *President (male, GC):* Your concern about how an ordinary student will compete with convent-educated students is valid. That's why they've kept caste as a selection

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[6] Name changed to protect anonymity.

criterion. On the basis of caste, if SCs and STs have lower marks and are older, they'll still be preferred over forward caste candidates in the IAS selection process. So, with regard to education, nowadays preferential treatment is given on the basis of caste. We should change this system in favor of income-based affirmative action. This is my opinion.

The interesting fact about discussions of this nature in the context of the GS is that such matters lie far beyond its purview and are therefore futile to discuss. The villagers know that an extremely complex and contested parliamentary process and the mobilization of caste-based groups determine affirmative action policies. Yet the GS provides ordinary citizens a place to think about and voice their concerns about broader policy issues and abstract principles that closely touch their lives. Through this discursive engagement poor villagers participate in their democracy and, hence, perform their citizenship. As shown above, poverty and its accompanying cultural fabric—shot through with material and symbolic inequality—inevitably undermine the neutrality of democratic discourse in the GS and shape the culture of deliberation. The GS operates primarily a site for resource competition in which different factions of the public display or challenge hierarchical social boundaries and critique principles of affirmative action and the status of distributional equity.

How Deliberation Shapes the Meaning of Poverty

The inadequacy of identifying the poor simply on the basis of ascriptive categories (such as caste) has led India's central Government to adopt a quantifiable, poverty-based measure to achieve distributive equality. Yet the definition of poverty is hardly obvious or unproblematic, as can be seen in the discursive exchanges taking place in GSs in the four South Indian states we studied. In these exchanges, elected GP representatives and the public make a joint effort to understand the definition of poverty and the category of the "BPL beneficiary" as laid out by the Government. Individuals and households categorized as "BPL" [7] have access to a host of free and government subsidized private goods.[8]

Government representatives use the GS forum to keep the public up-to-date on Government efforts to fix poverty by pegging it down to certain objective criteria translated to numerical scores by using human and mechanized technologies, like survey, computerization, and color-coded cards. [9] GP officials and villagers also use the GS to expose flaws in the principle of accounting for the poor. Villagers criticize the actual

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

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

[9] There are typically two types of cards, yellow and red.

mechanism of beneficiary selection and express their desire to be counted among those in need of government assistance. The GS therefore becomes the site for the joint production of an understanding of what it means to be officially classified as poor in the eyes of the state.

On the official side, GP representatives spend much of their time trying to convey to the public the ever-changing parameters of poverty as determined by the federal Government. The following example comes from Dakshin Kannada (KN):

> *Ward Member (male):* How to check their [BPL households'] financial status? We cannot check this as accurately as doing a mathematics sum. Now, what is the definition of a family? Generally, it includes a husband, wife, and two children. If the family does not eat posh food everyday, but has "Ganji" [rice gruel] for breakfast, then they have to spend Rs. 25-30. Some people have unnecessary habits, like drinking tea. Taking all of this together, a family of four needs at least Rs. 60-70 [per day]. If they spend only Rs. 50 per day, even then it comes to more than Rs. 12,000[10]. This is the guideline that we've been given to decide the poverty status. We also have the details of households having telephone connections or mobile phones. Those who have these cannot be considered as BPL.

GP representatives also use discussions in the GS to help the public negotiate the labyrinth of government scores attached to each disadvantaging characteristic, such as having a physical handicap or a socio-economic handicap (as, for instance, having multiple unmarried daughters). For example, a household with a physically handicapped person is allotted 10 points; a household with two unmarried daughters is awarded 15 points; and an SC/ST household is awarded 10 points. The goal of this exercise is to help individuals convert their subjective experience of deprivation into a poverty score that can be aligned in a rank order of privation, with benefits going to applicants with the highest score. A poor individual without a family is therefore likely to be passed over in favor of a family man. In an example from Kasargod (KL), for instance, it was stated that: "Madhavan has no family, so his housing application was cancelled."

In GS discussions, participants also weigh the merits and demerits of different methodologies for determining the status of the poor. In the following example from Palakkad (KL), we observe a president attempting to explain the shift from determination by local knowledge and personal preference to impersonal, objective criteria expressed as numbers.

> *GP President (male):* Now, marks are allotted to each applicant. Previously, when Vasu and Chaclo Chetan were presidents, we used to give benefits according to our wish. We knew who the poor people were, and we used to give them the benefits. But now the government has made some rules and regulations based on which marks are allotted to applicants. It's not like [school] teachers giving extra marks to children they like. Here there are rules. And only based on that, marks are allotted for each benefit.… If you have any doubts with the marks allotted to you and others, then we can certainly check it out....

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[10] This amount is the annual income cut-off below which households qualify as BPL.

In politically mature contexts, GP presidents and ward members sometimes use the discursive space of the GS to critique these federally defined poverty parameters and point out the flaws in the beneficiary selection criteria. In the following excerpt from a GS in Dakshin Kannada (KN), a specific aspect of the poverty parameters comes under criticism.

> We can ask that the Government may have gifted a phone to a poor, aged man. Looking at this phone you can't declare that he's well off. [11] They should try to give the benefits to the right person.

In this excerpt from Kasargod (KL), the discussant points out a fundamental flaw in the housing allotment policy. This policy, which allocates house-building grants to those who do not possess a shelter, ironically overlooks landless people.

> *Ward Member (male):* There are many defects in selecting beneficiaries. Usually, we give houses and toilets to persons who have land. If we select a person who doesn't have land, then we can't give them a house. Even if people say that they'll own land after partition [of ancestral land], it's still not possible. Only if you own land now, you can be granted a house.

These examples show how GP presidents and ward members struggle over the definition of who is poor. This struggle arises not only from differences in opinion between Government and the public but also from a lack of consensus regarding the meaning of poverty within different arms of Government.

GS discussions also provide a space for public protest when the technology of governance interferes with the proper classification of the poor. In a Kasargod (KL) GP comprising several villages, for instance, computerization of the rural data base led to the entire BPL list being erroneously classified as APL ("above poverty line"), with severe distributional consequences.

> *Former Block Member (male):* This is the area of fisherman. When we renewed our ration card,[12] all BPL people became APL and the APL became BPL. Those who are listed as BPL will get rice, sugar, etc. But the people in APL are getting nothing.

In these discussions, villagers also critically evaluate the technology of census-taking, which is the largest machinery for collecting population data. In the following GS in Dharmapuri (TN), villager protests the discrepancy between the local and the national census.

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[11] Possessing a telephone disqualifies a person from the BPL category.

[12] This is a card given to individuals by the state as part of the public distribution system. The card gives people access to basic items of consumption (grains, sugar, kerosene, etc.) at state-regulated and subsidized prices from state-licensed local stores.

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

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

Discursive exchanges in the GS play a vital and irreplaceable role in creating a mutually shared understanding, if not complete agreement, between the government and the public about what it means to be poor and classified as a deserving beneficiary. These exchanges complicate the State's attempt to have a clean, precisely estimated classification of poverty by unpacking it, debating it, and translating it. In the context of the GS, poverty reveals itself not as a Cartesian but as a discursive category, and thereby creates an entirely new "political culture of poverty."

5. CONCLUSION

The institution of the *gram sabha,* a state-engineered public sphere, has brought deliberative democracy to the doorstep of 700 million residents of rural India. Within the context of durable inequalities of caste, gender and religion, these public forums provide a deliberative space where the boundary between state and civil society is blurred.

Challenging several western notions of the "public sphere," the *gram sabha* is hardly a place where participants engage in rational negotiation to reach a consensus with single-peaked preferences. Public deliberation in the *gram sabha* is rather a competition between groups and individuals who want a piece of the public pie and employ a wide repertoire of discursive techniques to make their voices heard. Participants are not interested in reaching a consensus but rather seek to stake their particular claims to the "gifts" of the state.

In this climate, no one is really listening. Each petitioner argues that he or she most deserves the benefit, whether necessities (toilets, houses, targeted benefits), or public goods (locating roads, wells, schools, etc. in a manner that benefits the petitioner), or personal benefits (such as opportunities for education or work). Each strives to make the decision-makers hear and grant their plea. The result is a competition based on identity rather than reason. In this way poverty and social inequality, filtered through what Sen (2006) famously calls the "argumentative Indian", have shaped a competitive deliberative culture within *gram sabhas*.

The competition for state sponsored benefits, moreover, takes place in the context of changing governmental imperatives, which shift with every amendment to policies designed to correct social and economic inequalities. Federal and state "schedules," for instance, are used to target benefits to discriminated castes, and quantitative surveys to identify citizens living below the "poverty line." Yet as Scott (1999) argues, the rush to classify human populations results in a Cartesian logic that forces geometric patterns on categories that are inherently fuzzy. The *gram sabha* allows this fuzziness to be expressed and to be observed, if not by the "high state" far away in the state capital, then, at least, in the more proximate *gram panchayat*. The *gram sabha* also allows those affected by these policies to express their dismay when state categories fail to take into account the realities they are familiar with. Since one of the functions of the *gram sabha*

is to ratify BPL classifications and to voice complaints about the denial of benefits, it provides a forum where public discourse shapes the meaning of poverty, discrimination, and affirmative action.

As a vehicle for expressing rural India's understanding of poverty and the state's attempts to address it, the *gram sabha* does not always accord with the proximal interests of the state. It rather creates a new "political culture of poverty" located within the intersections of the state, the village, and the local matrix of embedded social relationships. By providing a space where opinions can be voiced with relative freedom, (a temporarily level discursive playing field), these local forums also help teach people to engage and debate, and to question decisions of the Government and the *gram panchayat*. In time, these debates will help to shift what Appadurai (2004) calls the "terms of recognition," which will eventually allow subordinate groups to reverse their adverse relational circumstances. In giving poor people an arena in which to experience discursive equality and allowing them to question the state, the *gram sabha* creates the "capacity to engage" (Woolcock and Gibson 2007). If better education and health lead to greater equality of opportunity, institutions like the *gram sabha* may one day help citizens gain more equal access to social, cultural, and political capital, which in turn will lead to the "equality of agency" (Rao and Walton 2004) that is the bedrock of a functioning democracy.

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