Grounding the state:

Poverty, inequality and the politics of governance in India's *panchayats*

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Abstract

Decentralization is commonly defended on the grounds that it will bring government closer to people, thereby creating political structures that are more transparent and accountable to poor and marginal groups in society. However, a problem that is well-recognized in the decentralization literature is that the devolution of power will not necessarily improve the performance and accountability of local government. Indeed, in many cases, decentralization simply empowers local elites to capture a larger share of public resources, often at the expense of the poor. Reflecting on these relatively long-standing problems, an important strand of scholarship has argued that central government can play a central role in counterbalancing the forces that tend to disfavour the poor. In this paper, we aim to inform this scholarship by reflecting on the interface between local government and local people in two Indian States: Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP). Drawing upon 12 months of primary research, we argue that although the Government of AP has not devolved power to the extent that proponents of decentralization would have liked, its populist approach to *certain forms of poverty reduction* has empowered the poor in ways that the more ambitious decentralization agenda in MP has not. This, we argue, is due in part to the fact that MP's decentralization process failed to challenge the well-entrenched power of the village chiefs, the *sarpanches*. But the discrepancy can also be explained in terms of the historical evolution of "development populism" in AP. In particular, we argue that the strong performance of programmes aimed at subsidizing rice for low income households and providing credit to women's "self-help groups" (SHGs) is part of the State government's wider political strategy of enhancing and maintaining electoral support among women, scheduled castes and the poor.

"Accountability is not confined to democratic forms of government, although it is in democracies that demands for greater accountability are generally to be heard," (Robertson, 1985: 3).

1. Introduction[1]

A recurring theme that emerges from a sizeable body of literature on decentralization is the relatively weak connection that exists between decentralization and poverty reduction (e.g. Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Golooba-Mutebi, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Manor, 1999; Moore and Putzel, 1999; Rahman, 2001). Despite great strides at devolving power to local, democratically elected bodies, decentralization in Colombia, Brazil and West Bengal appears to have achieved little in the way of reducing poverty or improving regional disparities (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001: 37-39). Manor's conclusions (1999: 106-108) about experiences in Bolivia, Karnataka and Bangladesh are equally pessimistic.

Explanations for the relatively poor performance of decentralization efforts tend to fall into one of two camps. One argues that the devolution of fiscal, political and administrative powers has been insufficient, and it is the lack of substantive decentralization that explains the modest impact. Framed in this way, decentralization is viewed as being at odds with the interests of central agencies and officials whose control of the state apparatus disfavours poor and marginal groups and regions. A second line of reasoning suggests that without mechanisms to ensure accountability, decentralization simply empowers local elites to capture a larger share of public resources, often at the expense of the poor. In low income countries, efforts to devolve substantive powers to local government are undermined by the fact that the ability to control the levers of (local) government confers substantial material benefits, such as licenses, government contracts, and access to state-provided resources.

Reflecting on these relatively long-standing problems, an important strand of scholarship in the decentralization literature has argued that the underlying distribution of assets and entitlements will have important bearing on the extent to which marginal groups are able to take advantage of the mechanisms and opportunities created by decentralization, and improve their ability to gain access to the (various) resources provided by the bureaucratic state. Crucially, it is argued that central governments can play a central role in this process.

Judith Tendler's study of governance and government performance in Brazil (1997) provides an important means of understanding the ways in which central governments can foster a culture of accountability between local officials and the rural poor (Tendler, 1997; Tendler and Freedheim, 1994). Central to Tendler's analysis was the 'paradoxical' (Harriss, 2001) finding that the effective delivery of healthcare, drought relief and other forms of government assistance was dependent on external support from 'higher-level' echelons within government, and in certain instances, *a central state which constrained and usurped the authority of local government*. Contrasting the "stylized portrayal of decentralization," she argues, "the central government took power away from local government, even though its actions ultimately contributed to strengthening the capacity of local government," (Tendler, 1997: 147).

Such findings are consistent with a wider literature on decentralization, which suggests that central governments can foster local accountability in a number of ways. First, as Crook and Sverrisson (2001: 52) have pointed out, central states can provide an important 'counter elite' to groups that would resist efforts to make local bodies more democratic (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Moore and Putzel, 1999). Second, and crucially, they can structure incentives in a way that allows local participation and public accountability to take root. Such incentives would conceivably include career trajectories, 'earmarked funding' (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001: 51) for local bodies and status within society (Crook and Manor, 1998; Tendler, 1997).

As Tendler (1997) rightly concludes, insights of this kind do not necessarily demolish the decentralization project. They do however, put a wrinkle in a popular understanding of decentralization, in which policies aimed at devolving power to local bodies are locked in a zero-sum struggle with central agencies within government. Clearly, central agencies and officials can enhance the power of those systematically excluded from local political processes. However, the scholarship on decentralization is somewhat ambiguous about the conditions that would foster a balance between the autonomy that local bodies need to function effectively and the accountability to ensure that such bodies act in the public interest (however this may be defined).

Underlying this ambiguity is a tension between the procedural challenge of encouraging decentralization and the normative principles on which accountability and government legitimacy are historically based. As Robertson (1985: 2-3) has pointed out, accountability implies both a *normative* expectation that "those who exercise power . . . are in a sense stewards and must be able to show that they have exercised their powers and discharged their duties properly" and a *procedural* one, which emphasizes "the arrangements made for securing conformity between the values of a delegating body and the person or persons to whom powers and responsibilities are delegated," (Robertson, 1985: 2).

Because of its size and its relatively ambitious efforts to devolve government, India provides an important case for understanding the ways in which decentralization can improve the performance and accountability of local government. In 1993, the Government of India passed a series of constitutional reforms, which formally recognized the authority of district, sub-district and village level bodies. The 73rd Amendment to the national constitution provided a series of responsibilities over which locally-elected representatives would have new authority and jurisdiction. However, despite the fact that the 73rd Amendment created a series of mechanisms aimed at ensuring the participation and influence of marginal groups, such as women, tribal communities and "scheduled castes", studies of India's decentralization process have consistently highlighted the fact

that the 73rd Amendment and earlier attempts at decentralisation have failed to prevent a local (and primarily landed) elite from controlling the local bodies.

In this paper, we argue that Indian decentralization has been articulated and defended principally on the basis of two normative goals: political inclusion and social advancement. Our central focus is the interface between local government and local people in two Indian States: Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP). Since 1994, the Government of MP has legislated a series of institutional reforms, designed to enhance the power of the *gram sabha* (the village electorate) and the accountability of the *gram panchayat* (the village assembly). This process culminated in 2001 with the legislation of *gram swaraj* or "village self-rule." AP, in contrast, has pursued a policy that has effectively by-passed the locally elected institutions, using the non-elected bureaucracy as a principal means of delivering poverty programmes. Not only has the Government of AP failed to enact comparable reforms, it is also thought to have diluted the power and autonomy of the *panchayats* through its own brand of "development populism." Policies of this kind have been portrayed as a failure of democracy and decentralization (Manor, 2000; Mathew, 2001).

Drawing upon 12 months of primary field research, we argue that although the Government of AP has not devolved power to the extent that proponents of decentralization would have liked, its populist approach to *certain forms of poverty reduction* has empowered the poor in ways that the more ambitious decentralization agenda in MP has not. This, we argue, is due in part to the fact that MP's decentralization process failed to challenge the well-entrenched power of the village chiefs, the *sarpanches*. But the discrepancy can also be explained in terms of the historical evolution of development populism in AP. In particular, we argue that the strong performance of programmes aimed at subsidizing rice for low income households and providing credit to women's "self-help groups" (SHGs) is part of the State government's wider political strategy of enhancing and maintaining electoral support among women, scheduled castes and the poor. Coupled with a Chief Minister whose political fortunes have become strongly tied to an image (of himself and of a government) based on transparency,

accountability and good governance, we argue that these factors have helped to produce a bureaucracy that has counterbalanced the typical forces of corruption and contracting that tend to disfavour the poor in India.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the normative and procedural dimensions of the 73rd Amendment, and then assesses the extent to which they have been achieved in practice. Section 3 compares politics and decentralization processes in Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In Section 4 we explore the extent and determinants of political inclusion and social advancement in 12 villages in AP and MP. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. "Good governance," in practice and theory

Since at least the time of Independence, the reduction of poverty and the empowerment of poor and politically marginal groups in India have been strongly associated with at least some form of decentralization (see, for instance, Jha, 1999). Perhaps the most enduring image of decentralization in India was Gandhi's vision of village *swaraj*, in which universal education, economic self-sufficiency and village democracy would take the place of caste, untouchability and other forms of rural exploitation. Although this vision has been hotly debated since (at least) the time of Independence (see, especially, Ambedkar's debates with Gandhi, cited in World Bank, 2000a: 5), Gandhi's vision has had an enduring effect on the ways in which decentralization has been articulated and defended in Indian politics. Beyond the symbolic imagery of the independent 'village republic,' an important element of this relates to the idea that the *panchayats* can and should serve as a forum that would represent traditionally marginal groups (such as women, backward castes, etc.) and a vehicle for social advancement.

Procedurally, the 73rd Amendment to India's Constitution contains a number of provisions that would facilitate the achievement of these norms. Principal among these are the stipulations that:

- Representatives at village, sub-district and district levels be elected to five year terms;

- One-third of all seats be reserved for women;

- There must be reservations for SCs and STs proportional to their population;

- Such reservations must apply to elected village chiefs, the *sarpanches*;

- The voting public – the *gram sabha* – has constitutional status as a formal deliberative body at the village level;

- Individual States may enact further provisions creating reservation status for other backward groups.

At the village level, the *gram sabha*, which constitutes all eligible voters within a *gram panchayat* area, is meant to serve as a principal mechanism for transparency and accountability. Among its principal functions are:

- To review the annual statement of accounts;

- To review reports of the preceding financial year;

- To review and submit views on development programmes for the following year;

- To participate in the identification of beneficiaries for some government schemes.

This last provision is particularly important because it confers substantive authority over an area that is particularly prone to misallocation and corruption.

The 'Eleventh Schedule' of the 73rd Amendment identifies 29 areas over which *panchayats* can legitimately have jurisdiction. Many of these – such as agriculture, minor irrigation, animal husbandry, fisheries, social forestry, small-scale industries, and implementation of land reforms – focus on particular sectors within the rural economy. Others – such as rural housing, rural electrification, transportation and communication linkages – are primarily concerned with the provision and maintenance of rural infrastructure. Some cover the provision of key rural services, such as health, sanitation and primary, secondary and vocational education. Others still govern the provision of targeted welfare benefits – such as the PDS, and benefits for scheduled castes and tribes, women and children and the handicapped.

In short, the 73rd Amendment covers many areas that would enable the *panchayats* to improve the lives and wellbeing of poor and vulnerable groups. Moreover, it contains specific provisions that guarantee the inclusion of traditionally excluded groups, such as

women, SCs and STs, and transparency for local institutions such as the *gram panchayats* and the *gram sabha*.

However, studies of decentralization have consistently highlighted the fact that the 73rd Amendment and earlier attempts at decentralization have failed to prevent a local (and primarily landed) elite from controlling local *panchayats*.[2] Micro-level studies have shown that *gram sabha* often fail to fulfil their role as deliberative bodies or as a mechanism for accountability (Alsop et al., 2000; Deshpande and Murthy, 2002; Nambiar, 2001). This is partly attributed to low levels of participation among the electorate as well as the non-cooperation of local officials. Examples of the latter include officials delaying or postponing *gram sabha* meetings, officials not attending *gram sabha*, and, more generally, official decisions having no bearing on decisions reached during the *gram sabha* (Crook and Manor, 1998: Chapter 2; Deshpande and Murthy, 2002; Nambiar, 2001).

Even when there are reservations to ensure that marginal groups have a place in the *panchayat* system, there is evidence to suggest that these formal institutions have been usurped by more informal patterns of domination and power. Reservations for women, for instance, are notoriously prone to corruption by male relatives, excluded from formal participation by their lack of scheduled status (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 1999). Similar patterns have been observed among SCs and STs, whose economic well being is dependent on the patronage of local elites.

There is thus a substantial gap between the normative principles on which the *panchayats* were founded and the procedural ways in which they operate in practice. Explanations for poor performance include the centralizing tendencies of State governments (Mukarji, 1999), the incentive structure of the non-elected bureaucracy (Jha, 1999; 2000; de Souza, 2000), and rural inequalities rooted in land holdings, caste, religion and gender (de Souza, 2000; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; Lieten and Srivastava, 1999; Crook and Manor,

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[2] See, for instance, Alsop et al. (2000); Behar and Kumar (2002); Deshpande and Murthy (2002) Echeverri-Gent (1992); Jha (1999) Mukarji (1999); Nambiar (2001); de Souza (2000); Vyasulu and Vyasulu (1999); World Bank (2000a; b; c)

1998: 35 and Mukarji, 1999). Such findings highlight the difficulty of transposing formal models of democracy onto societies in which power and politics are determined by highly informal systems of inequality and domination. Moreover, they suggest that the ideals that *panchayati raj* aims to uphold – transparency, accountability and democracy – are somewhat inconsistent with the ways in which the Indian state has traditionally operated in rural areas. Specifically, the notion that state interventions would be guided by pluralist pressures institutionalized in elections, public meetings and the like, underplays the relationship that often exists between public office and private commerce (cf. Wade, 1985). This is not to suggest that elements within the Indian state would never uphold the public interest – just that it is difficult.

'Enabling regimes'

Reflecting on the decentralization process that took place in Karnataka in the early 1980s, Crook and Manor (1998: Chapter 2) argue that 'bureaucrats at all levels were made considerably more accountable to elected politicians than they had ever been before,' (Crook and Manor, 1998: 45). This, they argue, was due to the fact that *mandal* (sub-district) councillors were far more vigilant in demanding and monitoring a wider distribution of public resources from non-elected officials within the bureaucracy. Particularly important to this process was the level of public (as opposed to private or 'back room') contestation that transpires over the allocation and distribution of public resources.

Accounting for the subsequent re-centralization of power in Karnataka, Jain (2000: 3650) argues that the political orientation of the party in power (i.e. the political and ideological terms on which it draws electoral support) had strong bearing on its commitment to decentralization. Such assertions are very consistent with the experience of the two "models" most commonly associated with good governance in India: Kerala and West Bengal.

In 1996, the Left Democratic Front government in Kerala launched the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning, an exercise that resulted in the devolution of 35 to 40 per cent of plan (i.e. non salary) expenditure to local bodies (Harriss, 2001). This involved unprecedented planning and co-ordination among the *gram sabhas*, as well as block and district-level *panchayats* (see Harriss, 2001 for a detailed account of this process). Although there were problems of co-ordination and some resistance from the non-elected bureaucracy (Harriss, 2001; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002), the process was notable both for the sheer scale of devolution as well as the political mobilisation that transpired around the issue of decentralised planning (Harriss, 2001). However, it is vital to stress the fact that this process took place in a context of competitive party politics, in which the legitimacy of the ruling government (a CPI (M) coalition) was highly dependent on a re-distributive agenda.

The experience in West Bengal suggests that political parties can and will challenge the interests of dominant groups when they develop and pursue a programme that is ideologically committed to the goal of social redistribution (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Echeverri-Gent, 1992; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; Kohli, 1987). Central to the ruling Left Front government's decentralization agenda in the late 1970s was a two-pronged strategy aimed at strengthening the *panchayats* and redistributing land to the rural poor. As Kohli (1987) has argued, the Left Front's ability to penetrate the countryside and to challenge the interests of landed elites was highly dependent on a party with a coherent leadership, an ideological and organizational commitment to exclude propertied interests from the process of governance, a pragmatic attitude toward facilitating a non-threatening environment for propertied interests, and an organizational structure that was both centralized and decentralized, allowing the regime to maintain contact with local society, without becoming beholden to local propertied elites.

Much like Tendler's 'optimal' arrangement in Brazil, the Left Front government appears to have been able to strike an ideal balance between local governance and a central executive, whose power and legitimacy helped to maintain a minimal sphere of autonomy

from local elite capture.[3] Other studies of democracy and transition point to the important ways in which central government power and programmes have challenged the authority of local elites, and empowered the rural poor (see, for instance, Harriss, 1992; Kohli, 1987; Robinson, 1988). Central to the transformations Robertson (1988) documented in Andhra Pradesh were the pro-poor programmes introduced by the Union government during the mid- to late-1970s. Specifically, policies aimed at strengthening the enforcement of land ceilings, abolishing bonded labour and providing poor people alternative sources of credit had the largely unintentional effect of dismantling the decades-old system of debt, bondage and vote buying that had defined electoral politics in the village of "Mallannapalle." Significantly, the credible threat that land ceilings would now be enforced encouraged the two main landlords out of moneylending, thereby removing a principal means of bonding local labour. During the same period, the introduction of the Indebtedness Relief Act and the availability of new sources of income and credit (arising largely from central government programmes) further severed the links between landlord and tenant/labourer. The end result was that by the 1977 Parliamentary elections, the principal village leaders were "no longer in control of the Mallannappalle vote bank but neither was anyone else. For the first time since elections began, the Mallannappalle voters were not told how to vote," (Robinson, 1988: 246). Harriss (1992) reaches conclusions very similar to these in a longitudinal study in Tamil Nadu.

What makes these findings particularly important is the implication that government schemes – and centrally sponsored ones at that – can empower subordinate groups by improving their economic (and therefore political) power relative to that of dominant landed interests. Such findings appear very consistent with the experience in Kerala and West Bengal, where poverty reduction and effective local governance were strongly associated with a government that was highly committed to the goals of social

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[3] Note that the historical events which led to the establishment of the Left Front government in West Bengal have prompted some scholars to question the viability of replicating the experience in other political settings (see, particularly, Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Corbridge and Harriss, 2001; Echeverri-Gent, 1992). Moreover, it is worth emphasising that the achievement of this political programme was not entirely democratic in character (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002), reiterating the tension that can exist between coherent

redistribution in rural areas (Corbridge and Harriss, 2001; Echeverri-Gent, 1992; Kohli, 1987).

3. A tale of two States

Recent assessments of decentralization in Andhra Pradesh (AP) have emphasized a State that has become decidedly hostile to the interests of *panchayati raj*. In contrast to Madhya Pradesh's ambitious 'experiment' in direct democracy (see below), the AP government has been associated with a system of governance that has undermined the *panchayats* in favour of line departments and 'parallel bodies' such as water user groups, joint forest management committees, self-help groups and the like (Manor, 2000; Mathew, 2001b). A principal vehicle in this process has been the AP government's well-publicised *janmabhoomi* programme. Introduced in 1997, *janmabhoomi* aims to reduce poverty through the establishment of community development programmes, such as watershed rehabilitation, joint forest management, thrift and credit, and so on (Manor, 2000; Mooij, 2002; World Bank, 2000b). Central to the programme is the idea that poverty reduction is contingent upon the active participation of poor people, both in terms of self-employment through subsidised credit but also in terms of contributions in kind, such as voluntary labour (World Bank, 2000b). The assumption here is that poor people require both the resources and the incentive to lead healthy and productive lives.

Whether or not it has been able to achieve these aims, *janmabhoomi* is believed to have undermined the autonomy and functioning of the *panchayats* in two important ways. First it has been alleged that the AP Government has diverted public resources intended for centrally-sponsored schemes into the *janmabhoomi* programme, thereby 'starving' the *panchayats* of funds which are rightfully theirs (Manor, 2000; G. Krishna Reddy, 2002: 877). Second, *janmabhoomi* is perceived to have used the village *gram sabhas* as a means of organising and identifying beneficiaries (World Bank, 2000b: 50), creating a situation of confusion for recipients and for the *panchayats*. As G. Krishna Reddy (2002: 877)

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policy and popular democracy. As Corbridge and Harriss (2001: 227) have argued, 'West Bengal is not a 'model' for the rest of the country.'

points out, "there is a heavy dose of bureaucratic involvement in running *janmabhoomi*." Nodal officers at district and mandal levels are centrally involved in selecting works, channelling resources and organizing user committees (G. Krishna Reddy, 2002).

There has been considerable debate about whether the use of parallel bodies necessarily undermines the ideals of political inclusion and social advancement. Vyasulu and Vyasulu (1999), for instance, argue that the *janmabhoomi* programme in AP and the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in MP are important examples of top-down programmes that can have positive effects for the rural poor. Chandrababu Naidu, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, has argued that because they are organised on the basis of class, caste, gender, etc., SHGs are actually more participatory than *panchayats*. His principal assertion is that SHGs conform with the divisions that already exist in rural society. *Panchayats*, on the other hand, aim to encourage democratic ideals, such as equality, transparency and freedom, but fail to enforce them, thereby creating a situation in which the local bodies are systematically captured by powerful elites.

Responding to arguments of this kind, Manor (2000) has argued that any benefits that derive from *janmabhoomi* have come at the expense of *panchayati raj* because, in this case, the AP government had 'illegally' diverted funds designated for the *panchayats* into its *janmabhoomi* programme. G. Krishna Reddy (2002: 877) argues that janmabhoomi

> . . . has not brought any substantial change in the way the bureaucratic functionaries are positioned vis-à-vis people except that the officials are asked to visit the villages periodically . . . In fact, precisely because of this reason, it has become yet another officially sponsored ritual . . .

Similar arguments have been advanced by M. Gopinath Reddy (2003).

Central to this debate – and to the government's position within the debate – are the ways in which government programmes have been organized and delivered, and the constituencies they have been designed to serve. As Mooij (2002) and Suri (2002) have pointed out, the ruling Telugu Desam Party's fortunes in *panchayat*, State and national elections have been highly contingent upon the support of poor groups, such as backward

castes, women and agricultural labourers. In the early and mid-1980s, support from these groups was attained primarily through the populist programmes of then Chief Minister N T Rama Rao ("NTR"), such as the Rs2/kg rice scheme, in which the State government (with GoI subsidies) provided subsidised rice to large numbers of people in rural areas (see, especially, G. Krishna Reddy, 2002; Mooij, 2002). Similar factors were believed to have influenced the State government's decision to prohibit the sale of alcohol, an apparent response to the 'anti-arrack' movement among poor women in rural areas (Mooij, 2002).[4]

When Naidu wrested control of the party (from his father-in-law) in 1995, he embarked on a political agenda aimed at rolling back many of the populist measures introduced by NTR. Central targets in this process were the Rs2/kg rice scheme (raised to Rs6/kg), subsidies on water and electricity and the ban on liquor consumption (see, especially, G. Krishna Reddy, 2002). Parallel to this process was the construction of a political platform aimed at privatizing selected state-owned agencies and encouraging transparency and accountability within the public sector. As numerous observers have pointed out, policies of this kind were extremely popular with international donors, such as the UK Department for International Development and the World Bank, but *very unpopular* with the large class of farmers (particularly those using bore well irrigation) who have traditionally benefited from state subsidies (Harshe and Srinivas, 2000; G. Krishna Reddy, 2002; Mooij, 2002).

Mooij (forthcoming) identifies four "articles of faith," which underlie Naidu's approach to good governance. One is an explicit attempt to separate the powers of bureaucrats from those of elected politicians. A second is the institutionalization of performance assessments and meritocratic means of transferring and promoting public sector employees. A third is the improvement of transparency through the introduction of electronic documentation and correspondence between citizens and the state. A final and

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[4] Whether and to what extent these tactics influenced voting patterns is an interesting question, considered in some detail by Suri (2002).

crucial component is the Blairite notion that citizens can and should be encouraged to participate and take a stake in government programmes, such as *janmabhoomi*.

In rural areas, the dual commitment to good governance and painful reform has created strong incentives to shore up political support among traditional constituencies. Partly for this reason, populist policies on rice, *janmabhoomi* and micro-credit for women, have endured (Mooij, 2002). Moreover, in the wake of the 2001 *panchayat* elections, in which the TDP suffered substantial losses to the rival Congress Party, the TDP undertook a "massive review" (G. Krishna Reddy, 2002: 880) of its policies and programmes, resulting in two important outcomes. One was a change to *janmabhoomi* in which rounds were held bi-annually instead of quarterly. A second was the introduction of a new non-elected official at the village level: the village secretary. Hired, promoted and rotated from Hyderabad, the village secretary was explicitly designed to provide a systematic source of administration which draws its authority and legitimacy from the State bureaucracy. In this way it is highly consistent with the Chief Minister's public commitment to organised and accountable government (personal communication with senior officials in the GoAP). Less explicit (but acknowledged) was the notion that the new position would provide a more reliable means of distributing government largesse preceding and during critical election periods.

In sum, party politics in Andhra Pradesh have produced a government and a Chief Minister whose political fortunes have become strongly tied to an image based on transparency, accountability and good governance. The progressive 'weakening' of the *panchayats* has been construed as a reflection of the Chief Minister's autocratic 'style' and the ruling Telugu Desam Party's strategy of creating and maintaining political control by channelling funds into local user groups (Manor, 2000; Mathew, 2001b).

In contrast to AP, Madhya Pradesh is often portrayed as a pioneer in the field of decentralization (Behar and Kumar, 2002; Manor, 2001). Since 1994, the State government has introduced a series of legislative reforms, which have expanded the formal authority of the *gram sabha*. In 1999, an important reform was the 'Right to

Recall,' which gave the *gram sabha* the power to dismiss the GP chairman (the *sarpanch*) in the event of wrongdoing. In 2001, the State government expanded the *gram sabha's* authority to include greater powers of planning, consultation and accountability (Behar, 2001; Behar and Kumar, 2002; Manor, 2001). The principal features of the reforms – *gram swaraj* – are outlined in Box 1.

Box 1: *Gram Swaraj* in Madhya Pradesh: major provisions

1. Powers governing beneficiary selection and the location of externally funded schemes will be shifted from the GP to the *gram sabha* and to eight permanent and other ad hoc village committees.
2. All user committees shall be chosen by the *gram sabha*.
3. Proportions of seats on all user committees will be reserved: one-third for women and one-third for 'deprived categories' (Manor, 2001: 715).
4. The *gram sabha* will not be permitted to take a decision unless one-fifth of the *gram sabha* is present, of which one-third must be women and one-third SCs and STs (Behar, 2001).
5. Failing unanimous decisions on the part of the *gram sabha*, members will be required to vote on a secret ballot.
6. An appeal process is provided, whereby villagers can take their appeals to three 'higher-level' officials at the sub-district level (a sub-divisional officer, the *Janpad Panchayat Adhyaksh* and a member of the *Janpad Panchayat*).

Source: Behar (2001); Behar and Kumar (2002); Manor (2001).

Compared with AP, MP has instituted a number of reforms, which (in theory) empower the *gram sabha's* ability to ensure efficient and accountable governance. One important manifestation of this relates to the State's Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS). Under the scheme, the sub-district level *janpad panchayat* (JP) has the authority to fund and oversee the functioning of the *shiksha karmi*, the local schoolteacher (Behar and Kumar, 2002: 35). Significantly, the *gram panchayat* has the ability to choose and select the site of the school and the schoolteacher (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 1999). Once a village provides the space for the school and identifies a teacher, the MP government guarantees to create and fund a school in the GP area within 90 days of the application (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 1999). In contrast, *panchayats* in AP do not have this authority.

Another important difference between the two States is the MP government's 1999 decision to create District Planning Committees (DPCs). The principal function of the

DPCs is to co-ordinate, evaluate and oversee the plans and budgets of subordinate municipalities and *panchayats* (Behar, 1999; Minocha, 1999). The Government of MP also reserves the right to devolve additional powers to the DPCs 'from time to time,' (Government of MP, cited in Behar, 1999). A key component of district government in MP is the requirement that DPCs have a State Minister serving as Chair. The explicit aim of this stipulation is to expedite district-level allocations of government funding. (The Minister has the authority to approve district-level dispersals of money without going through the usual bureaucratic channels). Other members of the DPC include the president of the ZP, the District Collector, a pre-determined number of scheduled representatives, 'special invitees' from the *Lok Sabha* (union lower house), *Rajya Sabha* (upper house) and State Legislative Assembly, and elected representatives, four-fifths of whom shall constitute the entire DPC (Minocha, 1999).

Such 'high-level' participation within the DPCs and the large discretionary powers that still rest with the State government have prompted some analysts to conclude that DPCs actually constitute a threat to lower level GPs and JPs, as well as the ZPs (see, for instance, Manor, 2001; World Bank, 2000a). In the words of the World Bank study of decentralisation in MP, ministers, MPs and MLAs have 'completely usurped the powers of the ZP,' and 'completely undermined beneficiary selection of the GP, JP and ZP,' (World Bank, 2000a: 49). Others (such as Minocha, 1999) have argued that district government in MP is a 'laudable objective,' but one which lacks the technical and administrative ability to plan and implement the responsibilities now devolved to the DPCs. Finally, Behar (1999) lists criticisms from municipalities, divisional bureaucrats and opposition parties (i.e. the BJP) that the appointment of a Minister is undemocratic (in the sense that his/her loyalties transcend the district) and that the new system creates unnecessary confusion within the existing bureaucracy.

As in AP, decentralization in Madhya Pradesh has been used by the ruling Congress Party as a means of maintaining political support in rural areas, as well as within the ranks of its own party. The creation of district government, for instance, has been interpreted as an attempt on the part of the Chief Minister to 'placate state legislators,'

(Manor, 2001) whose interests were believed to have been threatened by the new-found powers of the *panchayats*. This in turn, was seen as a response to Sonia Gandhi's efforts to undermine the authority of Congress Chief Minister Digvijay Singh by supporting a rival Congress member in MP (Manor, 2001). Along similar lines, *gram swaraj* has been interpreted as an attempt to wrest resource allocations and political loyalties out of the hands of the powerful village chiefs – *sarpanches* – and back into the hands of the Congress machinery. However, as Behar (2003) points out, the reforms were ultimately ineffectual because they failed to wrest the power to sign and operate the crucial village accounts from the hands of the *sarpanches*.

In theory, the constitutional amendments legislated by the MP government therefore create a village structure with strong mechanisms for *downward accountability*. The principal mechanisms include:

- Powers of appointment and approval in the hands of the *gram sabha*;

- The right of the GS to 'recall' or dismiss the *sarpanch*;

- Minimum requirements governing the GS quorum;

- Direct elections of GP councillors and *sarpanch*;

The legislation also provides important opportunities for *upward accountability*, in particular the guarantees provided through the EGS and the ability to appeal to sub-district officials.

A key question that emerges in this context is whether the more rigid and apparently more bureaucratic system in AP provided a more effective form of inclusion and social advancement than its counterpart in MP. Central to this inquiry is both an analysis of the very different systems of governance put in place by the two State governments and the wider historical trends which have influenced their political orientation in rural areas. As Harriss (2000) has argued, MP is a State in which upper caste and class dominance has endured, particularly in rural areas (cf. Jafflerot, 1998). In contrast, AP is a state in which traditionally backward castes have challenged the historical dominance of land-

owning castes, such as the *reddys* and *kammas*. Divergences of this kind reflect both the AP government's (relatively modest) commitment to land reform and the (more important) ways in which development populism has been used to garner electoral support among the rural poor (cf. Harriss, 2000; Mooij, 2002; forthcoming; Reddy, 2002).

In the following section, we argue that although the Government of AP has not devolved power to the extent that proponents of decentralization would have liked, its populist approach to *certain forms of poverty reduction* has empowered the poor in ways that the more ambitious decentralization agenda in MP has not. In particular, we demonstrate that our respondents in AP were more engaged in the *gram sabha* and with non-elected officials than they were in MP, and that the programmes which were least amenable to the influence of the elected councillors (particularly the *sarpanch*) were actually the least corrupted.

This, we argue, is due in part to the fact that MP's decentralization process failed to challenge the well-entrenched power of the village chiefs, the *sarpanches*. But the discrepancy can also be explained in terms of the historical evolution of "development populism" in AP. In particular, we argue that the strong performance of programmes aimed at subsidizing rice for low income households and providing credit to women's "self-help groups" (SHGs) is part of the State government's wider political strategy of enhancing and maintaining electoral support among women, scheduled castes and the poor.

4. Contested power: governance and politics in the *gram panchayats*

The following section draws upon research conducted in 12 villages in 6 districts in AP and MP. A central assumption that informed our selection of regions and villages was that the political structures created by the decentralization processes in MP and AP were sufficiently different to generate interesting comparisons of the ways in which formal processes of decentralization can affect accountability and participation at the village

level. A second assumption, which guided the selection of districts and regions, was that agro-ecology (quality of soils and rainfall, extent and quality of irrigation, etc.), agrarian relations, and agrarian structure would affect local involvement in the *panchayats*, and with it local forms of accountability.[5]

Table 1: MP Village Overview

District	Ujjain		Mandla		Tikamgarh	
Village	PR	LJ	GG	PT	SM	MB
Land distribution (Ranking)[6]	6	3	5	2	4	1
Reserved SP?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Caste of SP	FC	BC	ST	ST	OBC	GC
Party affiliation of SP	Congress	BJP	Congress	Congress	Congress	BJP
Literacy	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low	Low
Population size (households)	140	296	187	176	369	129
Distance from District HQ	Near	Remote	Near	Remote	Near	Remote

Table 2: AP Village Overview

District	Chittoor		Krishna		Medak	
Village	OP	VP	KO	KA	GU	MD
Land distribution (Ranking)	3	2	5	4	6	1
Reserved SP?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Caste of SP	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC	FC	OBC
Party affiliation of SP	Congress	Congress	TDP	TDP	Congress	Congress
Lliteracy	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate		Very Low
Population size (HHs)	214	553	1422	464	1560	427
Distance from District HQ	Remote	Near	Near	Remote	Near	Remote

A researcher worked in each of the villages for over a year between June 2001 and June 2002. A large sample of 40-70 HHs (depending on village size) was selected randomly, stratified by land holdings and caste. In addition a small sample of 10 HHs were purposefully selected from this sample to represent one typical house from each of the livelihood groupings identified in the village.

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[5] Space restrictions prevent an explicit analysis of the regional variations – both within and among States – we uncovered in our research. These elements we address in Johnson *et al.* (forthcoming). In AP, villages were selected in the districts of Medak, Krishna and Chittoor, which correspond with the broad historical regions of Telengana, Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema. In MP, field sites were chosen in Ujjain, Tikamgargh and Mandla, which correspond with Malwa, Bundelkhand and Mahakoshal.

[6] Six represents the highest landlessness, one the lowest.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews were designed to understand the extent to which the GPs and GS were able to affect the implementation of *2 general types of government scheme*: employment generation (largely EAS and JRY) and self-employment programmes (largely SGSY, formerly IRDP). FGDs were conducted with major caste, class, religious and age groups, as well as in separate groups of men and women. The principal questions were designed to understand:

- How the selection process works (informally) with respect to principal social groups in the villages (e.g. caste, class, gender, religion, age);
- How people perceive the role and quality of the *panchayats* in general and with respect to their particular group;
- Levels of awareness about the nature of the schemes being discussed, how the programmes and *panchayats* are supposed to function and what rights they are entitled to under these programmes and in relation to the *panchayats*;
- Whether and to what extent they have used formal mechanisms (such as the *gram sabha* in both states, the right to recall in MP) to ensure accountability of government officials;
- Which formal and informal mechanisms have been most effective (if any)

Key informant interviews were conducted with *elected representatives* (sarpanch, upa-sarpanch, all ward members), *non-elected officials* (e.g. the VAO, BDO, the patwari, etc.) and villagers, selected on the basis of caste, class and gender. These were principally designed to understand:

- The political, administrative and fiscal powers that the GPs and *gram sabha* have to ensure the appropriate and accountable delivery of employment and self-employment schemes;
- How the selection process takes place, especially among GP members (representing different wards and therefore different caste constituencies) and the non-elected bureaucracy (e.g. the BDOs, VAO, VDO)

- The extent to which the PRIs have the power to ensure that programmes are implemented according to the letter of the norms, rules and laws under which they were meant to be governed.

Political inclusion

Village assemblies

Our questions about representation in the *gram sabha* were strongly tempered by the large gap that is known to exist between the rhetoric surrounding the ideals of direct democracy and the actual performance of the *gram sabha*. Interviews with villagers did little to dispel this scepticism. In both States, the *gram sabha* was widely perceived as a powerless forum, in which *panchayat* leaders would simply confirm decisions already taken by the *sarpanch* and other GP leaders.

Interviews with ward members, *sarpanches* and villagers in all of the six villages in MP suggest that the 1994 reforms had little impact either on the day to day functioning of the *panchayat* or on the relationship among villagers, elected representatives and government officials. Under the *gram swaraj* reforms, the 8 user committees are meant to be selected by the *gram sabha* and then empowered to decide matters in accordance with the needs of their constituents. Moreover, a quorum of at least 20 per cent of the GS is required on matters relating to development planning, village expenditures and beneficiary selection.

In practice, the committees and the *gram sabha* in the MP villages appeared largely dysfunctional. Only in the case of PT (where power was substantially contested; Johnson *et al.*, forthcoming) did we find evidence of the quorum being used to influence decisions of the GP. According to the 1994 reforms, members of the 8 committees were meant to be selected by the *gram sabha*. Evidence from Mandla, Ujjain and Tikamgarh suggests that the gram sabha was involved in the election of committee members. In practice, however, the selection process was dominated by the *sarpanch*, often in collaboration with the line ministry officials whose projects were being implemented in the village. "Selection" here was essentially a matter of compiling a list of names, and submitting

them to the relevant line departments. In one village in Ujjain, for instance, a forest committee was formed on the basis of a 20 minute meeting between the *mantri* and the *gram sabha*, whereby the former instructed the latter to form a committee, documented eight names and then left the village. In many cases, committee members were completely unaware that they were even on a committee. In our household surveys, the number of respondents who said they were members of a village committee was less than 2 percent. Finally, the committees in question appear to have been highly ineffectual. Forest committees in Ujjain, for instance, showed no resistance to illegal logging around the village; water conservation committees had no powers to curtail the extraction of groundwater and the sinking of borewells. The only committees that appear to have had any role in local development initiatives were the educational and agricultural committees principally because they were connected to the allocation of government programmes and resources. In this respect, the functioning of the committees was far more a matter of bureaucratic procedure than it was one of democratic representation.

Interviews with *sarpanches* in the MP villages revealed high levels of confusion and derision arising from the *gram swaraj* reforms. *Sarpanches* in the Tikamgarh villages told us that they "were forced" to decide matters outside the *gram sabha* because it "takes too long" to reach consensus and to achieve the 20 per cent quorum, as the legislation requires. In best case scenarios, the *gram sabha* served as a "final stamp of approval" for decisions about the location of projects, the selection of beneficiaries, and the distribution of state resources. However, the "vote" or voice of the GS had little power to alter or challenge the decisions presented within this village forum. Interviews with the villagers in question reveal an opaque process in which the *sarpanch* would accept the relevant documentation, providing little information about whether and how the claim would be processed. Many respondents told us that their claims were still outstanding, and that they had received no follow-up information about their status.

Moreover, *sarpanches* were highly adept at manipulating the *gram sabha* to meet the requirements of *gram swaraj*. Signatures of villagers and ward members were commonly added to the register; *gram sabhas* were arranged with very little time or notice for ward

members to organise opinion or support on a particular issue. Indeed, we encountered many responses to suggest that ward members and villagers were completely unaware that *gram sabhas* had in fact been held.

Interviews and survey responses in AP revealed a number of interesting differences between the functioning of the *gram sabha* in AP and the processes we encountered in MP. First, it was clear that levels of participation in the GS were significantly higher in AP than they were in MP. This appears to be primarily the result of the fact that the GS was used as a means of selecting beneficiaries and announcing allocations for the State's *janmahboomi* programme and during 2002 for the State's FFW programmes.

In AP, we find that rates of attendance and participation in the *gram sabha* (a very crude indicator of political inclusion) were substantially higher (73%) than those for MP (48%), a State in which the *gram sabha* has been vested substantive powers and responsibilities stemming from the "*gram swaraj*" reforms of 1999.

Table 3: *Gram sabha* attendance, AP and MP

Andhra Pradesh		
Attend *gram sabha*	Yes	230 (73%)
	No	87 (27%)
Speak at *gram sabha*	Yes	74 (27%)
	No	193 (73%)
Madhya Pradesh		
Attend *gram sabha*	Yes	79 (48%)
	No	87 (52%)
Speak at *gram sabha*	Yes	54 (34%)
	No	105 (66%)

Source: household surveys

A second and related difference between the two States was a much stronger presence on the part of *mandal*-level officials in the gram sabha. Interviews with *mandal* officials, representatives and villagers revealed that the mandal development officer (MDO) and more rarely the *mandal* revenue officer (MRO) were consistently involved in GS meetings. Once again, this is primarily due to the fact that *mandal* officials were

responsible for implementing and coordinating *janmahboomi* and FFW programmes in the villages, and that the GS served as a principal vehicle in this process.

Finally, *gram sabhas* in AP followed a more rigid and systematic schedule than did their counterparts in MP. *Sarpanches*, ward members and villagers in Chittoor reported that the *gram sabha* would convene on the 5th of every month, and that GP councillors would attend meetings at the mandal office every three months. In Medak and Krishna, GS meetings appear to have been somewhat less frequent, although representatives, officials and villagers all reported that *gram sabhas* would operate according to a fairly rigid schedule.

During the so-called "janmahboomi *gram sabhas*," villagers could apply to be included on the list of beneficiaries selected for programmes funded by the programme. Interviews with ward members in Medak and Chittoor suggest that beneficiaries were selected during meetings among GP members, *sarpanches* and contractors, and that the *gram sabha* were essentially used to announce these decisions. On their own, the *gram sabha* in AP were therefore no more representative than their counterparts in MP.

However, the presence of the *mandal*-level officials appears to have created an alternative mechanism through which villagers could take their interests. When asked whether they had met the block (or in AP *mandal*) development officer within the past twelve months, a total of 22 per cent of respondents in AP reported that they had either met the Mandal Development Officer (MDO) on their own or in a group (Table). In contrast, 98 per cent of respondents in MP reported that they had had *no dealings* with the block development officer in the past 12 months.

Table 4: Percentage of respondents meeting with block development officer

Andhra Pradesh		
Met MDO	No	271 (78%)
	Alone	55 (16 %)
	Group	21 (6%)
	Number	347
Madhya Pradesh		
Met BDO	No	297 (98%)

Alone	4 (1%)
Group	4 (1%)
Number	301

Source: household surveys

In sum, the most important variations we find in AP and MP are ones relating to levels of participation in the GS and levels of interaction between our respondents and elected and non-elected officials. In terms of the GS, a crucial point that needs to be made at this early stage is not that participation in MP was all that low (48 per cent), but that levels of participation in AP appear to have been exceptionally high (73 per cent). At first glance, findings of this kind appear highly consistent with the image of an AP government committed to principles of transparency, accountability and a professionalized bureaucracy. Upon closer inspection, it is clear that although interaction between "ordinary villagers" and non-elected officials was higher in AP, it is not at all clear that the relationship was any more transparent or accountable. This is due in part to the fact that *mandal* officials were not necessarily listening or responding to the needs of their plaintiffs. Moreover, the active role of non-elected officials appears to have come at the expense of the power and autonomy of elected representatives in the AP *panchayats*. Much like the responses we encountered in MP, the testimony of villagers and ward members in the AP villages gives the impression that the *gram sabha* was little more than a public forum in which announcements about *janmahboomi* and other government programmes were made by the *sarpanch*. Evidence that the *gram sabha* was used to select beneficiaries or to identify BPL households was non-existent. As in MP, villagers in the AP villages used the *gram sabha* to make claims and requests about government schemes and entitlements (such as white cards), largely to no avail. Reports of opaque processes, ambiguous responses and the like were very common among our AP respondents. Indeed, during a field visit to one of the Medak villages, a group of SC villagers asked us if we could help them obtain BPL white cards.

An important question that arises in this context is whether the *gram swaraj* reforms have expanded the prospects for local democracy or whether they have in fact exacerbated processes of exclusion within the *panchayats*. The enthusiasm for decentralisation in MP

puts an emphasis on village level institutions, particularly the *sarpanch*, as the gatekeeper of all resources. However, the result is the (over) empowerment of the *sarpanch*, which *gram swaraj* has tried to dismantle, and a reduction of power players (and thus political competition) at the village level, with most information and patronage channelled through fewer people. This also reduces the options by which people can seek redress, especially given that the block level is meant to be the watchdog of the GP. Although they are by no means a vibrant democracy, the high levels of participation we find in AP do suggest that citizens are engaged in some sort of political discourse with the bureaucratic state. Relation of this kind have a legacy in AP, reflected in the State government's policies (and electoral strategies) on reservations and targeted poverty reduction.

Reservations

As noted earlier the 73rd Amendment stipulates that panchayats at all levels "reserve" seats for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other backward castes (OBCs). Findings from our studies in both States suggest that reservations of this kind had a limited impact, and that powerful families and elites were able to control the agenda and decisions of the GPs, in spite of reservations. However, longer standing policies of targeted reservations in AP appear to have produced important forms of political empowerment in the sample villages.

Table (5) shows the reserved status of the *sarpanches* in each of the 6 villages in AP.

Table 5: Political and Social Characteristics of Sarpanches in AP

Region	Telangana		Rayalaseema		Coastal Andhra	
District	Medak		Chittoor		Krishna	
Village	MD	GU	OP	VP	KO	KA
Sex	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Reserved Status	Yes (women open)	Yes (Women open)	Yes (OBC open)	Yes (OBC women)	Yes (OBC open)	Yes (OBC open)
Caste	Mudiraj (OBC)	Reddy (FC)	Yadav (OBC)	Vaddi (OBC)	Yadav (OBC)	Gowda (OBC)
Party Affiliation	Congress (I)	Congress (I)	Congress (I)	Congress (I)	TDP	TDP

All of the *sarpanches* in the AP villages were elected on a reserved ticket; two (MD and GU) for women from any caste, one for women from the OBC (other backward caste) category (VP), and three open to the OBC category (KO, KA and OP). An important point to keep in mind here is that, unlike State Legislative Assembly and Union *Lok Sabha* elections, reservations in the *panchayats* apply for only one session, after which point the constituency is opened to non-scheduled political competition. The potential empowerment and representation of SCs, STs, OBCs and women is therefore limited to one term. In none of our villages did we find *sarpanches* who had re-gained the leadership after winning on a scheduled ticket.

Beyond the limitations imposed by the *panchayat* voting system, the formal powers and responsibilities of scheduled *sarpanches* and ward representatives were often easily undermined by the informal authority of local elites and powerful families. KO in the coastal district of Krishna is probably the most illustrating case in point. In this village, a woman had achieved the seemingly unusual distinction of winning the election of *sarpanch* on an open ticket (i.e. it was not reserved for women). This was unusual in at least two ways. First, she was from a caste (*yadav*) whose power has not traditionally been strong in this part of AP (although this has changed – see below). Second, she was a woman. However, any optimism about the empowerment of women was quickly tempered by interviews with the individual in question, which revealed that she was the mother of a very powerful shipping magnate from the coastal city of Vizag, who was keen to extend his influence (and that of the TDP) in his home village. In this instance, the *sarpanch* served as a proxy for her son and his allies within the village. Any claims that the *sarpanch* was serving the needs of women were tempered by our interviews with ward members and villagers, which suggest that all of the major decisions in the village were being taken by the *sarpanch's* son and other men in the village. Indeed, interviews with female councillors and villagers suggest a strong bias against women and against members of castes other than *yadav* (a theme we address further in Sections 5 and 6).

The "capture" of formal power through informal means was by no means uncommon. In the other two GPs in which female *sarpanches* had been elected on a reserved ticket (MD

and GU) the formal authority of the *sarpanch* had quite clearly been usurped by male family members. In MD, for instance, the husband of the *sarpanch* not only controlled the GP, he also conducted our interview on his wife's behalf. Subsequent discussions with his wife revealed that she had very little knowledge of the GP or its functions (a finding that was common among female councillors – see below). Interviews with the *sarpanch* and ward representatives in GU revealed a political scenario very similar to that in MD. Here again, it was the *sarpanch's* husband who answered on his wife's behalf. Similar observations were made in MP. In MB, a village in which power relations were particularly unequal, the female *sarpanch* was visibly subservient to her husband, who once again conducted our interviews on his wife's behalf.

The same cannot be said of caste. If we look at the social characteristics of the *sarpanches* in AP (Table), we can see that all but one of the GP leaders is from a backward caste. The one exception to this pattern is the (forward) Reddy *sarpanch* in GU. An important point to emphasise here is that all but one of the GPs is controlled by caste groups whose economic and political trajectory has been moving upwards. Moreover, they have done so in part by taking advantage of the reservations that exist outside of the *panchayat* system. Historically, the Reddy, along with the Kamma and Kapu, have been the largest beneficiaries of post-Independence land reforms in AP (Srinivasulu, 2002; Suri, 2002); others benefited from occupational diversification among the higher castes who moved away from agriculture into the professions. Now their political and economic dominance in the State is well-recognised (Ram Reddy, 1990; Srinivasulu, 2002; Suri, 2002).

Sarpanches in the Andhra villages of OP, VP, KO and KA were all elected on tickets reserved for OBCs. Here it is notable that all of the *sarpanches* were from caste groups whose economic and political fortunes have improved in the last ten to fifteen years. In OP and KO, the *sarpanches* were from the upwardly mobile *yadava* caste. The Yadava, also known as Golla, are one of the largest BCs in AP. They were traditionally livestock keepers and have accumulated much wealth through dairy and meat production, both sectors are expanding due to urban demand and changing food habits. In the coastal

districts they were among the groups that benefited from the transfer of land from the higher castes because of their good links with patrons through trade; they were suppliers of milk and ghee. The Yadava have been able to take advantage of reservations for BCs more than many others because they have been relatively better off in physical asset ownership. They were wooed aggressively by the TDP because of their numerical strength and their Sheep and Goat Rearers Primary Societies were given preferential treatment in access to grazing.

The *sarpanch* in KA was from the gowda caste. The Gowda (also known as Gowndla and Eediga) were toddy tappers and have emerged as a dominant caste because they have been able to diversify into the highly profitable and politically powerful liquor trade. Gowdas have formed toddy tappers' cooperatives at the village level as well as a state level Toddy Tapper's Associaiton which gives them bargaining power vis a vis government with respect to excise duty. This has led to several concessions – a nominal charge of Rs 5 per annum per toddy palm and liberal granting of licenses for toddy shops. In Krishna (KA and KO) they have benefited from the TDP's strategies to accommodate dominant BCs. This has given them access to party tickets for State, Union and *panchayat* elections.

Apart from two villages in Ujjain (PR and LJ), and one primarily tribal village in Mandla (PT), the power dynamics we encountered in the MP villages tended to conform with the conventional argument that MP has not experienced the kind and scope of agrarian transition we find in coastal and southern regions of AP (Harriss, 2000; Jafflerot, 1998). Of the six GPs in MP, it would be fair to say that three of them – GG (in Mandla), SM and MB (in Tikamgarh) – were completely under the control of a single individual.

Table 6: Political and social characteristics of sarpanches in MP

Region	Malwa		Vindhyachal-Baghelkhand		Bundhelkhand	
District	Ujjain		Mandla		Tikamgarh	
Village	PR	LJ	GG	PT	SM	MB
Sex	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Reserved Status	Yes (open, women)	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (open, women)

Caste	Brahmin	Sondhiya-Thakur (BC)	Pardhan (ST)	Gond (ST)	Sahu (OBC)	Jain (General caste)
Party affiliation	Congress (I)	BJP	Congress (I)	Congress (I)	Congress (I)	BJP

As we can see from Table 6, four of the six sarpanches were reserved: (PR – open for women; GG – ST; PT – ST; MB – open, women). In GG, the SP was from the *pardhan* tribe, whose group was numerically and politically subservient to the more powerful *lodhis*. Much like the female representatives we interviewed in AP, the *sarpanch* in GG derived much of his political power from a more powerful private party. The individual in this instance was an ex-*zamindar* Brahmin, whose political ties with the ruling Congress Party conferred considerable political influence. Responses from villagers in this GP – particularly *pardhans* – suggest that the *zamindar* was "ruling by decree," and that representative institutions like the GP and the *gram sabha* were unresponsive to large elements of the village, except the *lodhis* whose numerical and economic power had influenced the distribution of development benefits.

In short, reservations favouring SCs, STs, OBCs and women appear to have had little impact on the everyday functioning of the GP in either State, particularly in villages in which these groups are still politically and economically subservient to traditional elites. However, the impact of longer term reservations appears to have been far more influential. This is particularly evident in the case of "upwardly mobile" castes in AP, such as the *gowda* and *yadava* in AP, whose members have benefited economically and – it would seem – politically from a long-standing policy of reservation.

Social advancement

Gram panchayats in India have long been portrayed as "clearing houses" for the Ministry of Rural Development and for other line agencies, with no substantive powers of their own. This is frequently attributed to the fact that the vast majority of States devolved few substantive resources or powers of revenue collection to the *panchayats* (Johnson, 2003). It also reflects the administrative structure that underlies the *panchayat* system. As Dasgupta et al. (2002: 77) point out,

The majority of developmental funds are channelled through the national schemes that come with fixed targets and budget lines. These schemes are top-down and inflexible, giving the Panchayats limited scope for planning. Panchayats are limited to choosing the projects under the schemes.

The vast majority of revenues we found among the 12 GPs were either tied to centrally sponsored schemes, such as JRY (*Jawahar Rozgar Yojana*, a wage employment poverty programme), Food for Work (FFW), etc. or were transferred from superior bodies in the form of 11th Finance Commission Funding or in AP, the State government's *janmahboomi* programme. This is not to say that local revenues were non-existent; just that they were negligible. Local revenues were limited to house taxes, water charges and revenues derived from the auction of rights regulating access to local CPRs, such as irrigation tanks, forests and animal carcasses. Our interviews with *sarpanches*, ward representatives and officials from Rural Development, Revenue and other line agencies, suggest that the GPs had very little willingness to tax local revenues, and that most of the decisions being made about budgetary allocation were handed down from the District to the GP. Compounding these more general problems, a number of GPs in our sample reported problems arising from ecological and economic disruption, particularly drought. GP officials in the Medak and Chittoor villages reported that drought conditions had severely depleted local revenues. One *upa-sarpanch* in Medak, for instance, estimated that only 25 per cent of the households in the panchayat were able to pay their taxes, compared with about 50 per cent in "normal" years.[7]

Larger GPs located close to industrial and market centres had a larger pool of local resources on which they could draw. GU, for instance, was a GP of more than 1500 households, with close proximity to the national highway surrounding the Hyderabad industrial belt. Records and interviews with officials in this village showed that the GP had a total budget of 700 thousand rupees, of which 300,000 derived from local revenues. Given its proximity to a local industrial belt, and the revenues factories in the area

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[7] The implications of these disturbances are tempered to a certain degree by the fact that the Government of AP was able to procure a large quantity of rice in 2002 for Food for Work programmes in the State, and that a large proportion of these were directed towards areas affected by drought. However, not all of the AP villages received FFW programmes (see below).

provided, this GP was somewhat exceptional. In contrast, the officials and records in KA, a GP of 464 households, reported GP revenues of 265,000, of which 106,000 were derived from local sources, including house taxes (45k) and revenues derived from the auction of rights to fish in the village tank (58k). For most GPs, the most important sources of revenue were centrally sponsored schemes, such as JRY, EAS and FFW. GP budgets in our sample ranged from 25 thousand to 400 thousand rupees.

In terms of planning, identifying needs and representing interests, evidence of GPs or their constituents developing plans that they would one day implement in their villages was very rare. In some of the MP villages, *sarpanches* and ward members said they were involved in a series of "village action plans," but these were essentially requests for funding developed by the GP and then sent to the block and the district for approval, according to pre-existing programmes, such as JRY or IAY (a centrally sponsored housing scheme for the poor). Such planning exercises were only reported in the district of Tikamgarh, and appear to have had no clear connection to the eight village committees which were meant to be empowered by *gram swaraj* legislation or to the *gram sabha*. Interviews with "ordinary villagers" in the Tikamgarh GPs revealed that people outside the GP were not involved in these activities, and their ability to exert influence on the process was therefore minimal. Such findings were very consistent with the kind of "planning" (or more appropriately, *requesting*) we found in the AP villages and other MP villages.

However, to conclude that members of the GP were entirely beholden to the aims and stipulations of external programmes would be somewhat misleading. On the contrary, our findings suggest that a GP's autonomy vis-à-vis the Revenue and Rural Development Departments could vary, particularly with respect to the programme that was being implemented in the village. Where *sarpanches* and ward members enjoyed more autonomy in both States was over the selection of beneficiaries for public works programmes, such as FFW and the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS, a centrally sponsored employment programme for the poor). In GPs where the distribution of power was not entirely skewed in favour of one or two powerful figures, the selection of

labourers could be a highly political process, pitting ward members against *sarpanches* and against one another (Johnson *et al.*, 2003). Among the more interesting cases were ones in which representatives and *sarpanches* were able to reach compromise on the distribution and rotation of employment opportunities within the GP (Johnson *et al.*, 2003).

In both States, we encountered reports from representatives, villagers and some local officials, of jobs and labour being decided on the basis of contracting. Although the processes and individuals involved could vary with the village and with the programme, contracting tended to conform to the following pattern: upon receiving a disbursement from a publicly funded programme, a non-elected government official (such as the Assistant Engineer, the AE) would come to the village to determine the needs of the *panchayat* (i.e. what the works would do), the costs of the proposed projects, and to identify individuals with whom the project could be administered. In many instances, these activities would be conducted in conjunction with the *sarpanch* and/or other powerful individuals in the community; potential contractors (often sarpanches or ward members would meet with Mandal officials and then get the plan approved by the AE.

For public works programmes, such as JRY, EAS and FFW, local politics played an important role in two respects: (1) selection of beneficiaries and (2) determination and payment of wages. In both of these areas, the prospects for democratic representation were slim, although not entirely non-existent. The role that *gram sabhas* were meant to play in the selection of beneficiaries differed in the two states. In AP the GS was formally limited to identifying needs and taking up requests from villagers. In MP, according to the *gram swaraj* reforms of 2001, the GS was meant to select all individuals who would participate in externally funded programmes. In neither State however, did we find any evidence of the *gram sabha* playing a substantial role in the selection of beneficiaries.

Depending on the village and on the size of the programme, *sarpanches*, ward members, and other well-connected individuals could vie for the opportunity to contract employment opportunities in the village. Because they are more lucrative, large projects

typically attract larger interests. One ward member in Medak (AP), for instance, told us that if the contract was worth more than 100,000 rupees, they would be decided by the MDO, and even by MPPs and MLAs. In Tikamgarh (MP), villagers and representatives reported that smaller jobs were commonly contracted out to "mates" – or small-scale contractors, who assumed the costs of organising the labour and ensuring the jobs were completed according to the specifications set out by the line department. In GU, another village in Medak, villagers told us that the selection of beneficiaries had shifted from contractors to ward members and the *sarpanch*.

One important pre-requisite for contracting large projects, such as FFW, was an ability to front the money required to pay the labourers. Most government programmes stipulate that the payment is made only after the completion of the work. The benefits derived from contracting were substantial. By virtue of the gap that exists between the payment of the labourers and the payment for the job, contractors were able to suppress or replace wages in their favour. Participants in employment programmes in the MP districts of Mandla, Tikamgarh, and the AP districts of Chittoor, Krishna and Medak, reported that their wages were significantly lower than the minimum wage; some reported they had not been paid at all. Among many FFW programmes in AP, we found that villagers were being paid in cash, instead of rice (as the programme stipulates), and that rice was being sold by *sarpanches* and other contractors to traders who then sold it back to the FCI, a process that became known as "recycling" (Deshingkar and Johnson, 2003). Reports of this kind were also encountered in the Tikamgarh villages (MP).

The ability to manipulate programmes in this way highlights a number of powers, which *sarpanches* and – to a varying degree – GPs and GP members have at their disposal. First, they are responsible for collecting and forwarding the list of beneficiaries to the BRO/MRO and ultimately the BDO/MDO for approval. In theory, contractors are meant to have no involvement in this process (something government officials went to great lengths to stress), but in practice, the list of names being negotiated at this juncture frequently includes those of labour contractors. Indeed, in many cases, the names of *sarpanches* and contractors were one in the same. Second, they oversee the bank

accounts from which payments are ultimately made. Interviews in AP revealed that *sarpanches* also issued payments for JRY and the 11th Finance Commission.

Third, *sarpanches* and ward members have some autonomy to decide the type and location of the project, usually in consultation with block-level officials, such as the Assistant Engineer and the BDO/MDO. The degree of autonomy tends to vary with the particular programme and the power relations that exist between village representatives and government officials. In FFW programmes, for instance, decisions concerning budgets, needs and the nature of work to be done, are largely the remit of the Assistant Engineer, who identifies and costs project activities, and approves final payments. AEs are largely accountable to the MDO/BDO, who is meant to approve and oversee FFW activities. In MP, *sarpanches* and ward members reported that they enjoyed some autonomy to select beneficiaries and to decide works being funded by EAS and JRY. By contrast, in AP, our respondents reported that JRY funds were irregular, and generally used to fund *janmahboomi* projects (cf. Manor, 2000).

In a multi-party democracy, the ability to select beneficiaries and determine wage rates can of course provide a useful means of rewarding those who provide support, and of punishing those who vote the "wrong" way, during elections. In almost all of our sample villages, we found examples of villagers and entire hamlets being punished by the *sarpanch* and other powerful figures for failing to support his party in the previous election. Punishment here could include being denied employment opportunities provided by public works programmes or being deprived valuable forms of infrastructure, such as irrigation tanks, wells for drinking water, and so on. Strategies of this kind were particularly effective in GPs in which the *sarpanch* was in a position of unchallenged authority. In GPs where the balance of power was more even, or where the position of traditional (often land-holding) elites had been challenged, the ability to mete out punishments of this kind was far less absolute (Johnson *et al*., forthcoming).

However, it is crucial to stress that *sarpanches* do not enjoy these powers in all cases and for all government programmes. In AP, where non-elected nodal officers played a more central role, this appears to have made an important difference.

Programmes, politics and the gram panchayats

To what extent did these processes vary according to programme? Leaving aside the "front line" politics that decide the allocation of documentation necessary to engage in these programmes (which we address below), we discovered a strong discrepancy in terms of the types of programmes that were more or less prone to corruption and malfeasance. Although many villagers voiced complaints about the issuance of white cards (see below), the Public Distribution System (PDS, an all-India programme that subsidizes rice, grains and other essential commodities) was widely perceived as a beneficial and well-functioning programme, as were the Old Age Pension (OAP) Scheme, the Widow's Pension Scheme and DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) programmes in Andhra Pradesh. Such assertions were very different from those directed towards public works programmes, such as FFW and JRY. Although villagers acknowledged the fact that PDS grains were prone to misappropriation, responses among the poorest families in our samples suggest that PDS rice was reaching them and – crucially – that it was making a difference in their lives.

Different programmes of course vary in terms of the kinds of documentation beneficiaries need to provide in order to qualify for the benefits they provide. Access to PDS benefits, for instance, requires beneficiaries to provide BPL "white cards," which are obtained on the basis of household surveys conducted by the Revenue Department. In theory, the *gram panchayat* in AP and MP is meant to confirm the list of BPL households, and any modifications or amendments are meant to occur in the GP and the GS. As we have seen, neither the GP nor the GS had the capacity to undertake this function. Moreover, the ability to obtain white cards was highly dependent on a series of gatekeepers, whose authority in this instance was used to extract bribes from deserving beneficiaries. One important gatekeeper was the Village Administrative Officer (VAO), the lowest official within the Revenue Department, who is responsible for issuing BPL documents within

the village. This is an individual who was consistently associated among villagers with high levels of corruption and bribery.

Bribery on the part of government officials reflects both the documentation that is required to be eligible for government programmes, such as FFW and PDS, as well as the power and incentives that local gatekeepers have at their disposal. Levels of documentation and gatekeepers vary according to the scheme. Access to PDS grains and AP's 3kg/rice schemes, for instance, requires BPL white cards issued by the VAO. To be eligible for the centrally sponsored IAJ, which funds new housing for poor families, applicants must obtain land records from the *patwari*, the VAO and block level officials in the revenue office. Reports of bribes being demanded from these officials were widespread in all of the sample villages.

Contrasting "well-performing" programmes with more corruptible ones, like FFW or JRY, provides an important way of understanding whether the success or failure of a particular programme is due to governance or design. Here one of the more striking contrasts relates to the power and responsibility of the *sarpanch*. In employment programmes, such as FFW, the *sarpanch* exercises a substantial amount of authority over the selection of beneficiaries and the determination of wage rates. One of the most common complaints among villagers in both States was that beneficiaries were being selected either by the *sarpanch* or by labour contractors and that in many instances, they were being paid less than the government minimum wage; in some cases, they were not being paid at all.

In contrast, we find that DWCRA programmes were performing particularly well in AP and that the PDS was viewed favourably by respondents of different caste and class in both States. When asked to say which government schemes had provided the most tangible benefits, responses in AP were overwhelmingly in favour of DWCRA. Women in all of our AP study sites reported that the loans provided to SHGs were fair (interest rates were negotiated among group members, not imposed), the funds enabled them to invest and participate in new enterprises, such as dowry insurance, and that the

government provided training (in bookkeeping, saving, etc.), which they could use in other walks of life. Even those whose groups had disbanded reported the transfer of important skills and the confidence to engage in collective activities in the village. Moreover, despite the fact that documentation is required for DWCRA membership (DWCRA members are required to produce 3 passport photos, as well as a ration card or income certificate), we encountered no reports of the bribery we found with other poverty programmes, such as FFW, JRY and IRDP (now SGSY). Finally, and this is somewhat different from public works programmes, many DWCRA groups in the AP villages were multi-caste.

Such findings are very different from the responses we encountered in MP. In all of the villages in which we were conducting research in MP, we encountered no evidence to suggest that government programmes had produced the kinds or scale of benefits associated (among our respondents) with DWCRA in AP. When asked whether government programmes had helped women in the MP villages, not only did our respondents reply that they were not aware of programmes which had helped women, many actually stated that existing government schemes in the village had done nothing to improve the status of women.

How do we account for these discrepancies? First, and this has bearing on our understanding of governance in AP, the *sarpanch* has little or no authority to decide the selection of beneficiaries and the determination of interest rates for DWCRA, as he does with other programmes, such as FFW and EAS. In the former, the targeting and selection of beneficiaries are under the authority of MDOs and Village Development Officers. Payments to the Self Help Groups (SHGs) come directly from the *mandal*. Unlike FFW and EAS, there is little formal, and from our interviews, informal, scope to manipulate DWCRA programmes without achieving the connivance of *mandal* level officials.[8]

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[8] The only evidence we found of DWCRA manipulation in AP was a case from Medak, in which the *sarpanch* and a number of local notables tried to convince a self-help group to use their loan to purchase tractors, which – it appears – would have enriched the individuals in question. Significantly, the SHG in question had sufficient autonomy – created in part by the unelected bureaucracy – to withstand this pressure.

Procedures of this kind are substantively different from those of the most comparable credit programme in MP, the centrally sponsored SGSY. [9] In this context, *sarpanches* are centrally involved in the targeting and selection of beneficiaries, and reports of misappropriation are widespread (Nayak *et al.*, 2003).

Second, mandal level officials in AP were routinely more involved in the allocation of DWCRA programmes than were their counterparts in MP (BDOs) or than they were in the allocation of FFW. Although the involvement of field officers in DWCRA was not as extensive as that of international donor programmes, such as the World Bank's District Poverty Initiatives Program (Mooij, 2002: 37), it was clear that *mandal* officials were instrumental in the formation and functioning of the SHGs. All of the DWCRA beneficiaries we interviewed in AP reported that they had joined the SHG after a *mandal* level official (either the MDO or the village development officer) had encouraged them to do so. This is reflective of a more systematic presence at the village level on the part of *mandal* level officials in AP. In MP, our findings suggest that access to block level officials was far less frequent and less common than it was in AP, creating a situation in which *sarpanches* and other local notables were often the only means by which "ordinary villagers" could obtain access to the bureaucratic state and the benefits provided through various schemes and programmes.

Finally, women's self-help groups and DWCRA have been a central part of the ruling Telugu Desam Party's political strategy of maintaining support in rural AP, particularly among BC and SC women (Mooij, 2002; Suri, 2002). As Mooij (2002) has argued, DWCRA programmes in AP have provided an important means of transmitting the image of a government that is committed to the reduction of poverty, the improvement of government accountability and the empowerment of women. Whether it has actually achieved these aims is somewhat less important in this context than the fact that the legitimacy of the government is now widely perceived and portrayed in terms of being able to implement programmes that improve the lives of the poor. The Chief Minister of

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[9] Formerly the Intergrated Rural Development Programme, SGSY targets small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers and rural artisans below the poverty line. Within this group, 50% is reserved for

AP has also invested substantial time and resources, promoting the image of a government whose administration is governed by principles of transparency, responsiveness and upward accountability. It is thus not entirely surprising to find that *mandal* and district level officials have been extensively involved in their promotion at the local level. In MP, as in many other Indian States, DWCRA has been merged with SGSY, which is not targeted at a single constituency (Mooij, 2002), and has not been pushed as vigorously as DWCRA in AP (Nayak et al., 2003).

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have argued that although the Government of AP has not devolved power to the extent that proponents of decentralization would have liked, its populist approach to *certain forms of poverty reduction* has empowered the poor in ways that the more ambitious decentralization agenda in MP has not. In particular, we argue that the government's bureaucratic approach to *janmabhoomi*, DWCRA, reservations and food subsidies in AP have produced benefits commonly associated with decentralization in India. These include political engagement (if not inclusion) at the local level, social advancement of reserved castes and the effective delivery of poverty programmes aimed at providing low cost credit to women and subsidized rice to the rural poor.

Returning to the debates raised at the beginning of the paper, the comparison of governance and accountability in AP and MP provides a number of interesting insights about the connection between central power and local governance. First, the findings from AP and MP appear to support Tendler's assertion (1997) that governance at the local level can be influenced by a central state which is willing and able to counter-balance the power of local elites. In MP, the failure to challenge the well-entrenched authority of village *sarpanches* appears to have diminished both the quality of political engagement (in the *gram sabha* and between villagers and non-elected officials) as well as the quality of government programmes. In AP, the involvement of non-elected *mandal*-level officials – and the non-involvement of elected GP officials – certainly helps

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SC/STs, 40% for women and 3% for the physically handicapped (Nayak *et al*., 2003).

to explain the effectiveness of DWCRA, particularly when compared with public works programmes, such as FFW.

Second, the findings documented in this paper highlight the important ways in which a combination of competitive party politics and populist policies can produce positive outcomes for the rural poor (Harriss, 2000). Of particular importance in the case of DWCRA and the Rs2/kg rice programmes in AP was the crucial link between the TDP's populist strategy of attracting electoral support through the use of development largesse. However, to conclude that it was only the involvement of the non-elected bureaucrats that explains the performance of DWCRA would be somewhat misleading. The crucial issue here is the extent to which these programmes have been *politicized* as entitlements among citizens and among government officials in AP (cf. de Waal, 1997).

In this respect, the findings documented in this paper are perhaps more reflective of underlying historical trajectories – of caste and class transformation – than they are of (relatively short-term) changes in governance. As Harriss (2000) has argued, MP is a State in which upper caste and class dominance has endured, particularly in rural areas (cf. Jafflerot, 1998). In contrast, AP has experienced a fairly modest degree of agrarian transformation, in which traditionally backward castes, such as the gowdas, vaddi and yadav, have clearly benefited from the types of development populism Harriss (2000) argues is so crucial to the reduction of poverty. In this paper, we have argued that the political inclusion and social advancement we uncovered in our research were directly a result of the broader and wider political transformations that were happening (or not, as the case may be) in each State. In this respect, inclusion and advancement appear highly dependent on a central state that was both contested and committed to the goal of poverty reduction.

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