

1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Brief History of the *Gram Sabha*⁴

Early History

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Deliberation under *Panchayati Raj*

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

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