Why Representation Matters

When members of groups that have long been marginalized finally gain access to political offices, it is expected that the social meaning of belonging to such a group will change, and that these psychological changes will have far-reaching behavioral consequences. However, these presumed psychological effects have remained surprisingly uncharted and untested. Do policies mandating the inclusion of excluded groups in political offices change the nature of intergroup relations? If so, in what ways? By drawing on careful multi-method explorations of a single case – local-level electoral quotas for members of the Scheduled Castes in India – this book provides nuanced but ultimately optimistic responses to these questions.

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The Meaning of Ethnic Quotas in Rural India

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Acknowledgments

This book describes what happens to intergroup relations when members of stigmatized groups are granted access to political offices. Most of what I know about this issue I have learned in Rajasthani villages, and in conversations with men (and occasionally women) who live far away from academic circles, and often in unenviable conditions. My first debt is to all the villagers who offered me time, attention, and often food when I had so little to give in return. Their kindness, intelligence, and endless curiosity have made this project a really humbling experience. While we may not be in close contact now that this project is completed, I think of you – and of your smiles – often.

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Gowda and I visited many Rajasthani villages together in 2009. We observed the functioning of village institutions, met villagers, and interviewed officials. I derive most of the theoretical intuitions developed in this book from the conversations I had with him on the way back from these visits. When I started developing the quantitative surveys on which the second part of this study focuses, I asked Gowda to keep working with me on the project, and I am thankful that he did. It would not have been possible without him. He helped me develop the instrument, hire and train interviewers, and figure out the myriad logistical details that require close attention on a complex research project. Thank you!

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I was lucky to work with the amazing Gopal Singh Rathore during the second round of qualitative fieldwork in Rajasthan, after the surveys were run. Gopal introduced me to various officials and civil servants in the Jaipur district. I owe a lot of what I know about *gram panchayat*s to his help, his translations, and our conversations. I thank him for his kindness and dedication. Also: we will rent a car next time.

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Note on Terminology

This book focuses on members of various Indian subcastes (*jatis*) that are now most frequently referred to as "Scheduled Castes." I mostly use the collective designation "Scheduled Castes" rather than the direct alternatives, for two reasons: (1) it was the most commonly employed term among my interlocutors, and (2) it is the most neutral and legalistic term possible to designate that group of persons, with many of the alternatives now being connoted as patronizing (*harijans*, meaning "children of god") or frankly derogatory ("untouchable"). From this point of view, only the term *Dalit* (meaning "broken to pieces" or "oppressed," a term historically used by political activists from the Scheduled Castes) may have constituted an acceptable alternative. However, most villagers I interacted with in the state of Rajasthan in 2009 had never heard of the term, unlike in other areas of India. For this reason, I tend to use the term "member of the Scheduled Castes" rather than the term *Dalit*.

In addition, I freely use the abbreviation "SC" – standing for "Scheduled Castes" – both as a noun (e.g., *this villager is a SC*, as to mean "a member of the Scheduled Castes") and as an adjective (*this is a SC-dominated village*). When referring to multiple members of the Scheduled Castes, I sometimes use the abbreviation *SCs*. While using these abbreviations rather than the full term "Scheduled Castes" mainly allows me to save characters, their use is not inconsistent with the way many of my interlocutors in rural Rajasthan referred to the Scheduled Castes (many of them not knowing what these initials actually stood for in English): many Hindi and Rajasthani speakers used the abbreviation *SC* as an adjective, as a noun, or both. I follow this practice here.

Because this book is interested in day-to-day relations between *SCs* and other, more dominant caste groups within Indian villages, I also need to refer to villagers from that large residual category in an abbreviated manner. When speaking about members of that residual category as a whole,

I mostly refer to those "other" villagers as "non-SC". While the term *non-SC* has sometimes been used by social scientists, it was not a salient term among my interlocutors (no exact equivalent existed in Hindi or Rajasthani). Because the residual category *non-SC* does not constitute a coherent ensemble on the ground (Gupta 2005), it has in fact rarely constituted a salient ethnic category in modern India. In the Rajasthani villages I visited, as in most of India, members of *non-SC* castes are usually referred to by their subcaste (*Jats*, *Thakurs*, *Brahmans*, etc.). In certain cases, members of these subcastes were also referred to by a term referring to a grouping of a number of these subcastes together. The category "OBC," meaning "other backward castes," is the most prominent and the most numerically important of these groupings within the *non-SC* category. Although the term "OBC," like the term "SC," once was a purely legalistic category, it was at the time of this study part of the day-to-day language used by common villagers, and used to designate those subcastes sometimes referred to as "middle castes." In conversations about caste or untouchability, villagers also frequently used the terms "upper-caste" or "upper castes" (the Hindi/Rajasthani term most frequently used was *unchi jati*). The subcastes that the individual who was using that term was referring to, however, depended on that individual's own identity as well as on the context of the conversation. When specifically talking about *untouchability*, the term "upper-caste" often was a relatively close equivalent to the term *non-SC*. It may have, for instance, been meant to include groups as "dominant" as *Jats*, even though the *Jat* subcaste is classified as being part of the *OBCs* in Rajasthan. However, in many other conversations, it was meant to specifically refer to those traditionally dominant castes, which are by definition neither *OBC* nor *SC*, such as *Rajputs* or *Brahmans*. Because of this ambiguity, and because the implications of the label "upper caste" are indirectly derogatory, I usually refrain from using the term "upper-caste" in my analyses, to which I prefer the social-scientific term *non-SC*, or the more informative concept of "dominant castes". Given the caste makeup of the villages in which most of my empirical work took place (which usually counted very few villagers from the "Scheduled Tribes" or non-Hindu villagers), it should however be noted that the bulk of those I refer to as *non-SC* or *dominant* throughout the book belonged to those two groupings I have already mentioned: *OBCs* and "upper-castes" (in the more restrictive conception of the term). Finally, although my analyses refrain from using the term "upper-caste" for the reasons already indicated, it should be noted that the term appears in this volume in a number of quotes, survey items, and references (especially in Chapter 2). When I draw from academic works

on caste or caste-based inequalities, the term refers to the more restrictive category (not including OBCs). When the term appears in a quote or in one of my audio survey items, it should usually be understood to include all locally dominant subcastes, including a number of *OBC* subcastes such as *Jats*.