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Producing Prosperity:
Language and the Labor of Development in India's Western Himalayas

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

by

Hannah Addaline Carlan

2021

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2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Producing Prosperity:
Language and the Labor of Development in India's Western Himalayas

by

Hannah Addaline Carlan

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Alessandro Duranti, Chair

This dissertation is a linguistic anthropological study of developmental governance in the densely multilingual Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, India. Widely lauded as India's newest leader in "inclusive growth," Himachal Pradesh has witnessed rapid transformations over the last thirty years that have propelled it to the top of the human development indices in India, particularly for having achieved gender- and caste-balanced outcomes in education, health, and poverty alleviation. As official indicators have risen, however, rural livelihoods in the state have become increasingly threatened by declining agricultural productivity, vast unemployment, and climatic instability. Despite these growing forms of economic and environmental precarity, Himachal continues to be framed as an exceptional developmental success both by scholars and ordinary citizens alike. This dissertation engages such paradoxical claims of developmental success amidst longstanding and growing forms of inequity in the region by asking: how is

Himachal's exceptionalism made and maintained? That is, how do state and non-state development workers produce, interpret, and transform the meanings of poverty and prosperity in everyday life, and to what effects?

Drawing on twenty-one months of ethnographic fieldwork across state and non-state development institutions in District Kangra, I argue that Himachal's exceptionalism is not the result of the benevolence of state welfare programs or the successful implementation of its policies, but of the sustained efforts of development workers who produce, interpret, and erase signs of poverty and prosperity in their everyday interactions with citizens. I refer to these processes as *semiotic labor*, and trace how particular ways of speaking become ideologically tied to forms of institutional personae, expertise, and authority, thereby shaping how the meanings of welfare policy's categories and criteria are enacted through bureaucratic and democratic decision-making processes. I demonstrate that semiotic labor is central to the everyday production of rural prosperity in Himachal, as it renders legitimate forms of access and exclusion from welfare and democratic politics. By tracing the semiotic logics through which poverty and prosperity, deservingness and dependency, and agency and responsibility gain their meanings in context, this dissertation underscores how everyday communicative practices become integral to the constitution and consequences of the developmental state in India and beyond.

The dissertation of Hannah Addaline Carlan is approved.

Erin Debenport

Akhil Gupta

Purnima Mankekar

Norma Mendoza-Denton

Aradhana Sharma

Alessandro Duranti, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

For Sue, Willie, and Jake

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Transcription and Transliteration Conventions

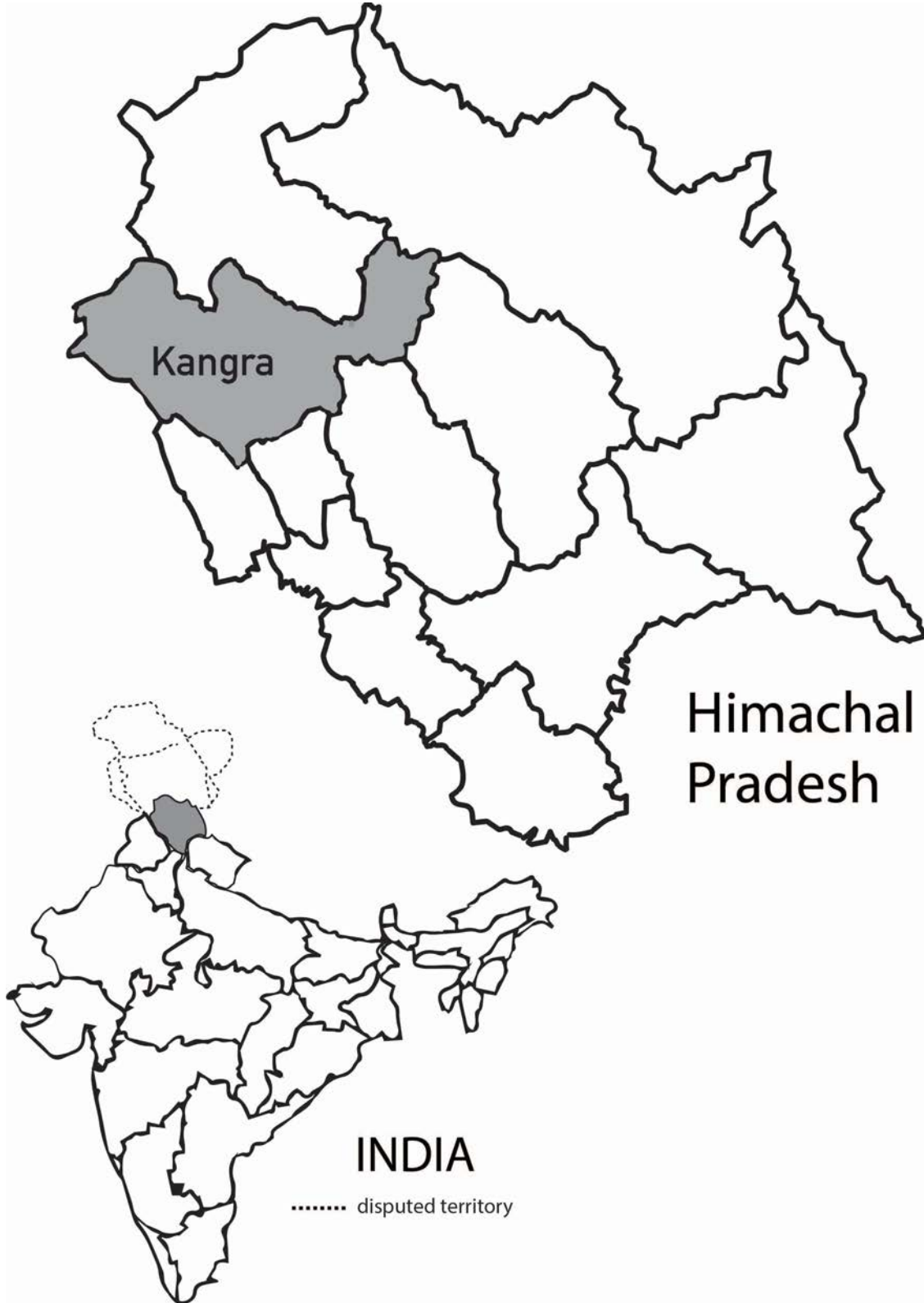
Symbol	Meaning
.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
=	Latching
-	False start or cut-off
!	Emphasis
:	Vowel elongation
[]	Overlapping speech
()	Inaudible/best guess
((<i>word</i>))	Description of actions
CAPS	High volume
“ ”	Reported speech
(0.5)	Silence duration

All transcripts in Hindi and Kangri are represented in the Devanagari script. Orthographic conventions for Kangri have been adapted from Eaton (2008), modified to maintain fidelity with the pronunciations used in the variety of Kangri spoken in my field site. Kangri, like Punjabi and Dogri, has lexical tone, such that syllable-initial voiced, aspirated consonants lose aspiration (but not voicing, as in Punjabi) and gain tone, but I have not used diacritics to represent tone in my transcription of the original Kangri. Transliterations of Hindi and Kangri appear as follows: when I am quoting a speaker in Hindi or Kangri, their statement appears in normal font, while English words therein are italicized. When I am using a Hindi or Kangri word in my own analysis, it is in italics. For the sake of readability, diacritics for vowel length have been eschewed in favor of duplicating letters, e.g. “aa” rather than “ā”, and I have not included diacritics for retroflex consonants (so alveolar /ɳ/ [ɳ] and retroflex /ʈ/ [ɳ] are both written “n,” rather than the latter with a *nyukta* diacritic “ṅ”). Translations into English are all my own.

Glossary and Abbreviations

AEO	Agricultural Extension Officer
ADO	Agricultural Development Officer
ATMA	Agricultural Technology Management Agency
BDO	Block Development Office
BPL	Below poverty line
BJP	Bharitya Janata Party
CDPO	Child Development Protection Officer
Crore	100 million
Desi	Local or Indian
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
Gram panchayat	Village council
gram sabha	Village assembly
HP	Himachal Pradesh
HPSAU	Himachal Pradesh State Agriculture University
IRDP	Integrated Rural Development Programme
Jagrukta	Awareness
Kanal	Unit of land measurement (1/8 of an acre)
LSEO	Ladies Social Education Officer
LVDC	Ladies Village Development Coordinator
Mahila mandal	Women's collective
Nagar Nigam	Municipal Corporation
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NRLM	National Rural Livelihood Mission
OBC	Other Backward Caste
Panchayat	Village council area
PDS	Public Distribution System
PKKKY	Prakritik Kheti Khushaal Kisaan Yojana
PMAY	Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana
Pradhan	Village council headperson
Quintal	100 kilograms
RTI	Right to Information
SABLA	Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for the Empowerment of Adolescent Girls
SC/ST	Scheduled Caste / Scheduled Tribe
SHG	Self-help group
SGSY	Swarnajayanti Gram Rozgar Yojana
SMS	Subject Matter Specialist
Tehsil	Block
Ward panch	Village council member
VRP	Village resource person
ZBNF	Zero Budget Natural Farming

Map of Himachal Pradesh



Above: Map of District Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. Below: Map of India. Map by the author.

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सब से पहले, मैं अपने हिमाचल प्रदेश के दोस्तों को धन्यवाद करना चाहती हूँ। आप लोगों ने मुझे बिना झिझक के अपनी ज़िदगियों में स्वीकार किया और मुझे हिमाचल की राजनीति, इतिहास, अर्थव्यवस्था, और समाज के बारे में बहुत कुछ सिखाया। इस थीसिस के हर एक पन्ने पर आप सब का बहुत बड़ा प्रभाव है। मुझे आशा है कि मैंने ढंग से आपके काम और संघर्ष को पेश किया होगा और आपको अपने शब्दों को पढ़ कर खुशी मिलेगी। मुझे पुरा कांगड़ा घूमने के लिए, अपने सुख-दुख बांटने के लिए, खेती करना सिखाने के लिए, और अपने परिवारों में शामिल करने के लिए, बहुत बहुत धन्यवाद। मैं आप सब का हमेशा आभारी रहूँगी।

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Vita

Education

2014 M.Phil., Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

2012 B.A., *summa cum laude*, Anthropology and Linguistics, New York University

Publications

To appear “The Racial Language of Fatphobia.” *Anthropology News*.

In press “Grammars of Difference: Language, Literature, and Racialization in the *Linguistic Survey of India*.” In *Colonialism and Official Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, ed. Vinay Lal. New Delhi: Primus Books.

2021 “‘No One is Poor in Himachal’: Cultivating Stateless Agency in an Indian Village Assembly.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12299>

2020 Review of *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, by Sabrina Strings. NYU Press, 2019. UCLA Center for the Study of Women Blog.

2020 Review of *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills*, by Kirin Narayan. University of Chicago Press. 2016. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* (54): 137-141.

2019 Mankekar, Purnima and Hannah Carlan. “The Remediation of Nationalism: Viscerality, Virality, and Digital Affect.” In *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*, ed. Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. pp. 203-222.

2018 “‘In the Mouth of an Aborigine’: Language Ideologies and Logics of Racialization in the *Linguistic Survey of India*.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (252): 97–123.

2015 “‘Dented, Painted, and Proud’: Satire on Indian Social Media after the 2012 Delhi Gang Rape.” *Texas Linguistic Forum: Proceedings of the 23rd Symposium about Language and Society* 58: 11–22.

Fellowships and Awards

2020 John Gumperz Graduate Student Essay Prize, Society for Linguistic Anthropology

2020 Dissertation Year Fellowship, UCLA Graduate Division

2020 Jean Stone Dissertation Research Fellowship, UCLA Center for the Study of Women

- 2018 Wenner-Gren Foundation Dissertation Fieldwork Grant
- 2017 Charles E. and Sue K. Young Graduate Award, UCLA
- 2017 Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Fieldwork Grant
- 2017 Fulbright-IIE US Student Research Award
- 2017 Critical Language Scholarship, Punjabi, US Department of State
- 2017 UCLA Affiliates Scholarship
- 2016 Graduate Research Mentorship, UCLA Graduate Division
- 2014 Dean's Scholar Award, UCLA Graduate Division
- 2013 Bill and Melinda Gates Cambridge Scholarship

Conference Presentations (Selected)

- 2020 “‘No One is Poor in Himachal’: Cultivating Bureaucratic Agency in an Indian Village Assembly.” Raising Our Voices, American Anthropological Association.
- 2020 “Socialization into Agrarian Nostalgia in Himachal Pradesh, India.” 5th Annual Graduate Interdisciplinary Conference on South Asia, UCLA.
- 2019 “‘We Eat Their Minds’: Language Ideologies and the World of Extension in Kangra. Interrogating South Asia.” Graduate Student Conference, University of California-Irvine
- 2019 “(De)Politicizing Language Shift in/as Development in India’s Western Himalayas.” Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- 2018 “Women Farmers and the Languages of Sustainable Agriculture in Himachal Pradesh, India.” American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting; San Jose, CA
- 2018 “Multilingualism and ‘Women’s Empowerment’ in Himachal Pradesh, India.” IGALA X: International Conference on Gender and Language; Gaborone, Botswana.
- 2018 “Development in Translation: Language and Women’s Empowerment in Himachal Pradesh, India.” South and Central Asia Fulbright Conference; New Delhi, India.
- 2016 “Colonizing Language, Contesting Knowledge: British Epistemologies and the Linguistic Survey of India,” American Anthropological Association, Minneapolis, MN
- 2016 “Gender Violence, Neoliberal Institutions, and Digital Activism in India,” Thinking Gender XXVI, Center for the Study of Women, UCLA

INTRODUCTION:

An Exceptional State

The monsoon was nearly over, but it was still rainy that September morning. The rolling hills flanking the head of the Kangra Valley were covered in lush greenery, cradled by the immense peaks of the Dhauladhar mountains. That morning, the sun peeked its way through the clouds to reveal a complete rainbow stretching from the base of the mountains to the cluster of villages packed into the sprawl of villages surrounding the city of Kalyana¹. I was preparing to attend one of the annual women's village assemblies (*mahila gram sabha*) scheduled to take place in each of the village council areas (*gram panchayat*, hereafter *panchayat*) in the District that morning. I had been invited by Uma, the elected headperson (*pradhan*) of nearby Seri *panchayat*, who I had grown close to throughout my fieldwork.

I entered the *panchayat*'s building and got settled in the back as women filed in two-by-two, dragging plastic red chairs from stacks that made a horrible noise when they scratched the concrete floor. While women continued to trickle in, Uma began the meeting of the village assembly rather unceremoniously. She began to speak in Kangri, her first language and the first language of most residents in her *panchayat*, briefly explaining the goals for the day's discussion (*charcha*). It was rumored that several *panchayats*, including Seri, were going to be incorporated into the neighboring Kalyana Municipal Corporation in the next year or so, and people were getting nervous. The Municipal Corporation had been formed in 2015 after Kalyana was selected to become part of the national Smart Cities Mission, an urban development project promising to deliver high-tech, renewable energy-based infrastructure, renovated parks and green spaces, and

¹ Village, panchayat, city, and person names throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms. District and state names are genuine.

updated public transportation and residences, although almost none of these projects had been completed in the three years since. If Seri became part of the Smart City, it would dissolve their village-level governance, subjecting them to policies and taxes set by the municipal council, and making them ineligible for a vast array of benefits designated for citizens residing in rural areas. Most worryingly, this included the potential end of Seri residents' eligibility for 100 days of daily wage labor that is guaranteed to rural citizens in India through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which is the primary source of income for women in the area.



Figure 0.1 Residents gather for women's village assembly, Sept. 2018

“There's no benefit of joining the Municipal Corporation,” said the *panchayat* secretary, Padma. “Just look at what they've done with these dustbins all over the place.” Padma pointed

toward the door, just outside of which lay plastic garbage cans turned on their sides, waste spilling out around them (see Figure 0.2). The dustbins were part of a sanitation initiative associated with the Smart City project and the Clean India Campaign (*Swacchh Bharat Abhiyan*) to promote the separation of organic and inorganic waste and stymie pollution on streets and in rivers. After they were installed across the District, a garbage collection plan had never been implemented, and most of them lay in disarray.



Figure 0.2 Garbage cans outside *Seri panchayat*.

Padma continued, “They installed them, and they never empty them. Now there is filth (*gandagi*) scattered all over the panchayat, and wild animals (*avaara pashu*) come to eat it and end up destroying the crops nearby.” Another woman affiliated with a local NGO added, “We’ve called them to complain and no one answers the phone! They won’t take responsibility for the

problem they created!” An elderly resident added that she was worried about the higher taxes they would have to pay if they were forcibly incorporated into the Municipal Corporation and wondered if people would lose access to subsidized rations they receive through the Public Distribution System. “There’s no benefit for poor people. The benefit is only for the rich. They won’t even give food to poor people. The panchayat is good for poor people,” (*gareeb lokaan vaaste panchayat thik ae*). Uma agreed, and encouraged everyone to come to the *panchayat*-wide village assembly next month, where they would propose a vote to collectively object to their incorporation. “I know everyone is busy, but these days, no one is idle (*bele koi ni ae*), everyone has ten problems going on, so we have to make time. I look at you all now and you look fine, but when I go to your houses I see how many problems you have. No one is comfortable/prosperous (*sukhi koi ni ae*).”

Amidst the discussion, a man driving a silver sedan arrived, parking his car in a mud puddle that he would later have to call a tow truck to get out of. He wore a long-sleeved, button-down shirt with black slacks, a steel-faced leather watch shining on his wrist. He entered the room and Uma greeted him, “Please come, sir” (*Aaiyee sir*). He took a seat at the middle of the head table, and pulled out a large, tablet-style smartphone that he began to scroll through.

Uma attempted to wrangle the room from its boisterous discussion: “Sisters, sisters (*Didi, didi*),” she said, using the familial term for older sister. “Be quiet for a minute.” She shifted focus, “Welcome everyone. Today we have organized this event to give you information about services for women and children. We would like to welcome our guest to give you this information.” She began clapping, and the man in the room stood from his chair. He introduced himself as the Child Development Protection Officer (CDPO) for Kalyana Block, who oversees the *anganwadi* centers that provide preschool and nutrition services for mothers and children.

“Namashkaar (hello) everyone, first of all I would like to thank our gram panchayat headperson, the honorable Sri Uma Ji² and secretary for inviting me. Today, I — are you all understanding me?” He asked, using a register of formal Hindi that starkly contrasted with the local variety of Kangri used between Uma and the *panchayat* residents. A few women in the crowd confirmed they were understanding. He went on, continuing to use a formal register of Hindi interspersed with English lexicon (in italics):

Okay, I have been invited here today and I want to give you some important information which is that this month, this month, is being celebrated as people’s nutrition month across all of India. All across the country, this month is being celebrated as people’s nutrition month. So, I will discuss a little bit later what services, what *schemes* are available through the *anganwadi* (pre-school) centers, and in the coming weeks someone from the *Health Department* will come to tell you about what kinds of care is necessary for children, but first, I should tell you why this nutrition campaign is being run Why did it become necessary? You may have read in the newspaper recently, about a month and a half ago, that there were two or three poor little girls, who were from a single family. They died from hunger. So this was very unsettling news, that even today in our country there are people who are dying from hunger. Even when food grains are grown by the *tons*, there is production by the *tons*, there is *wastage* by the *tons*. It gets spoiled.³

He continued: “However, our Himachal is not included in those kinds of states. Himachal is a prosperous state (*samriddh rajya*). Meaning, there are not those kinds of people living here who do not receive three meals a day. There probably isn’t any family in your panchayat who goes to sleep hungry. Is there any family who sleeps hungry? Or whose children sleep hungry?”

He paused, while Uma shook her head side to side, and a few people in the crowd said “no.”

² Sri is a name-initial honorific address term and ji is a name-final honorific.

³ Mujhe aapke yahan bulaya hai toh mai ek aur ahem jaankari aapko dena chahunga ki is maah jo hai is mahine jo hai, poshan abhiyan maah manaaya jaa raha hai, pure Hindustan mein. Pure desh mei, poshan abhiyaan maah manaaya jaa raha hai. Toh uski mai thodi si aap se baatcheet karunga, [...] toh main anganwadi ke bare mei baad mei baat karunga ki kaun kaun si suvidhaayen hain, kaun kaun si scheme hain, par yeh poshan abhiyaan jo hamara desh mei chal raha hai, uske upar aapke paas yaha par Health Department se bhi log aayenge is mahine, aur voh batayenge ki bacchon ki kya dekhbaal karne ki avyshakta hai. Mai aapko pehle bataun ki poshan abhiyaan kisliye chalaya hamare desh mei, kyon avyshakta pad gayi? Ab aapko shayad kuch dedh mahine pehle akhbaar mei khabar mili hogi ki gareeb shayad do teen bacchiyaan thi, ek hi parivaar ki. Voh bhukh se mar gayi. Toh ek bahut hi vichilit karnewali khabar thi ki aaj bhi hamare desh mei log bhukh se mar rahe hain. Jab ki hamare desh mei anaaj ton, tonon se hisaab se paida hota hai, paidavaar hota hai, aur tonon ke hisaab se uski wastage hoti hai, kharab hota hai.

“There must not be any family like that. There probably isn’t any family in your panchayat that doesn’t have a roof over their heads. Is there any family like that, who is living in a house without a roof, or who lives outside in a hut (*jhuggi-jhopadi*)?” He waited, a lengthy silence hanging in the air.

Not far from where we were sitting, about 15,000 migrant workers from Rajasthan and Maharashtra were living in a network of slum dwellings (*jhuggi-jhopadi*) on the banks of a local river. In 2015, their community had been evicted from Kalyana for the sake of beautifying the “Smart City” and combatting “open defecation.” None of the families had received compensation or rehabilitation, and four months later, Himachal Pradesh was declared the second “Open Defecation Free” (ODF) state in India.

The bureaucrat continued: “Although there might be a few people living in huts. But even they have roofs over their heads. And in my *idea* everyone has access to all the *basic facilities* in your panchayat. There might be one or two poor families, but even they have food to eat.” In his narrative, the bureaucrat crafted a particular image of poverty associated with images of destitution and deprivation, houselessness and hunger: a “real” poverty was surely elsewhere, and certainly not in Himachal. I thought back to just moments earlier, before he arrived, when Uma and the residents produced a different image of poverty, one that was very much present, and that Uma saw first-hand when she visited residents’ homes: *sukhi koi ni ae*. No one is prosperous.

This tension begs a simple, but vexing question, one that continues to be debated by scholars, policymakers, activists, and citizens alike: what does it mean to be poor? How is this meaning produced, and by whom? The images of poverty conjured by the bureaucrat, Uma, and the *panchayat* residents present at the village assembly differed, shifting across the contexts of their

encounters. Before the bureaucrat arrived, Uma and the residents proclaimed multiple problems affecting people in the *panchayat*, with residents identifying themselves as “poor” and the Smart City as only for the “rich.” After he arrived, a different image emerged, one framed by his own understanding of the broader political economy of the Indian nation-state, and in it, of stories of far-away states in which “even today” there are people dying of hunger. Where do such distinct understandings of rural wellbeing come from, and how do they get reconciled in everyday encounters like these?

The bureaucrat’s narrative about Himachal Pradesh is a familiar one, which has come to dominate scholarly and public imaginations of the region over the last three decades. Widely lauded as India’s newest leader in “inclusive growth,” the western Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh has witnessed rapid transformations over the last thirty years that have propelled it to the top of the human development indices in India, particularly for having balanced outcomes across lines of gender and caste difference, making it “a surprising exception” in northern India (Drèze 1999). The bureaucrat’s narrative of Himachal’s prosperity on the one hand, and the *panchayat* residents’ narratives of rising economic, political, and environmental precarity on the other, was further distinguished by the stark contrast of their forms: his mixture of “formal” (or Sankritized) Hindi (*avyshakta; maah; vichlit*) and English lexicon (*wastage; idea; basic facilities*) was markedly different from the variety of Kangri used in their own discussion of rural development. These differences were not mere reflections of speakers’ class and professional backgrounds: they produced distinct meanings of rural well-being, with concomitantly distinct understandings of who is responsible for generating it.

In this dissertation, I examine how prosperity is produced in everyday encounters between rural citizens and the bureaucrats, NGO workers, and elected officials who administer and

govern rural *panchayats* across Himachal's most populous district: Kangra. I demonstrate how speakers use their multilingual communicative repertoires to constitute and contest the ubiquitous claim that Himachal is an exceptional developmental success—a place where “no one is poor.” The dissertation engages paradoxical claims of developmental success emerging from scholarly accounts and everyday encounters with the state in the context of growing economic and environmental uncertainty in Kangra by asking: How is Himachal's exceptionalism made and maintained? That is, how do different speakers, with different interests, produce, interpret, or, instead, contest the meanings of poverty and prosperity in everyday life, and to what effects? In doing so, the dissertation offers a linguistic anthropological account of developmental governance in a place that eludes popular imaginations of poverty, tracing how entitlements are rendered obsolete and rural livelihoods are transformed through everyday interactions.

Drawing on twenty-one months of ethnographic fieldwork across state and non-state development institutions in District Kangra, I argue that Himachal's exceptionalism is not the result of the benevolence of state welfare programs or the successful implementation of its policies, but of the sustained efforts of development workers who identify, interpret, and erase signs of poverty and prosperity in their everyday interactions with villagers. I refer to these processes as *semiotic labor*, and trace how particular ways of speaking become ideologically tied to forms of institutional personae, expertise, and authority, thereby shaping how the meanings of categories and criteria are produced and enacted through bureaucratic and democratic decision-making processes. These forms of semiotic labor are central to the production of rural prosperity that undergirds the developmental state in Himachal, directly shaping modes of access and exclusion from welfare and democratic politics. Given the embeddedness of development work in a densely multilingual political economy of language in Kangra, the question of how

communicative practice shapes bureaucratic practice can help uncover how citizens become seen as undeserving of state care without threatening the legitimacy of the developmental state (Gupta 2012). By tracing the semiotic logics through which poverty and prosperity, deservingness and dependency, and agency and responsibility gain their meanings in context, this dissertation underscores how everyday communicative practices become integral to the constitution and consequences of the developmental state in India and beyond.

0.1 Himachal as Developmental Exception

Since the late 1980s, Himachal Pradesh has become known as a developmental success unparalleled by any other state in northern India. Himachal's economic growth (commonly measured through Gross State Domestic Product) has been largely attributed to its wealth of natural resources: the state supplies 25% of the national electricity via hydropower, has a bustling fruit and vegetable industry in its higher altitude regions, and supports a massive tourism industry that attracts international and domestic travelers to its pristine landscapes and renowned religious pilgrimage sites year-round. Where Himachal stands out, however, has been in its consistently high human development indicators, which consistently rank first or second place nationally, making it one of India's most "socially progressive states" (Drèze and Sen 2013, 194). Achieving balance between economic growth and human development – or what has come to be known as "inclusive growth" – is the newest ideal in global development zeitgeist, one that seeks to counteract the consequences of an economic growth-driven model of development for its exacerbation of economic and social inequities (Drèze and Sen 2011). The goal of "inclusive growth" is often framed as the opposite of "infrastructure-driven" development (M. B. Das et al. 2015), which has been unable to alleviate poverty and improve quality of life for the vast majority of people. Inclusive growth envisions improvements in

quality of life for all people, rather than only for those who can access markets, and is characterized by socially-driven policy and increased spending to improve access to healthcare, education, and employment. Himachal, particularly in the last decade, has become renowned for having achieved inclusive growth, marked by its rising standard of living across lines of gender and caste.

In 2019, Himachal was ranked second nationally, and first in northern India, in the Sustainable Development Goal Index in India.⁴ The report, conducted by India's premier policy think tank, the NITI Aayog, reported that only 8.05% of Himachal's population is classified as "below the poverty line" (BPL), down from 34% in 1994.⁵ Among the Scheduled Caste (*Dalit*) population, only 16% are below the poverty line, several times below that of other states in northern India. Himachal outranks every state nationally in elementary education rates (92.87%) and female labor force participation (39.70%). Over 98% of the population has access to potable drinking water, and (officially) only 0.89% of the population live in slums or temporary dwellings. Himachal was officially declared "open defecation free" in 2016, the second state in India to become ODF, meaning that every household has access to a toilet with sewage that does not contaminate groundwater or surface soil. This took place just two months after a "non-notified" slum was razed and thousands of families evicted from the banks of a river outside

⁴ Data collected from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation. NITI Aayog, 2019. "SDG India: Index and Dashboard 2019-20." Available at: <http://niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2020-07/SDG-India-Index-2.0.pdf>

⁵ The NSSO calculates poverty using the Tendulkar poverty line, established by the National Planning Commission in 2011-12, which categorizes people earning less than Rs. 33 per day (approximately USD 0.40) as below the poverty line. States have their own eligibility criteria for BPL, and Himachal's income qualification at the time of my fieldwork was Rs. 2500 per month (although in chapter five of this dissertation I show how the actual criteria for BPL were interactionally produced and expanded beyond official criteria).

Kalyana.⁶ Rural electrification is officially 100%⁷, and both cellular density and internet connections are over 100%, meaning that there are more mobile phones than there are people. Himachal has the highest internet subscription density in the country, with two connections per person. In the realm of political representation, Himachal has fully implemented reservation (an affirmative action policy) for both women and members of historically oppressed castes and tribes: there is an equal balance of male and female elected officials in rural *panchayat raj* (village council governance) institutions (50.1% female), and 29.41% of seats in the state legislative assembly are held by Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe members.

Himachal's success evokes enigma and mystery: what "secrets of success" (World Bank 2015) are at work here? What sets this state apart so starkly from neighboring states like Haryana, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh, where human development indicators trail far behind? Political scientists, economists, and development studies scholars attribute Himachal's success to two interrelated phenomena. The first cites a combination of progressive state policy and effective implementation by the rural bureaucracy. The rural bureaucracy has been described as exceptionally transparent, accountable, and free from corruption. Akshay Mangla (2015; 2013) attributes this to the state's "deliberative" bureaucratic norms, wherein problem-solving and troubleshooting are preferred methods used by low-level officials when engaging with rural citizens, unlike the more "legalistic" norms of bureaucrats in neighboring states like Haryana, making them more likely to deny access to beneficiaries. The second attributes this effective implementation to a socially egalitarian culture in the mountains that facilitates open, transparent

⁶ *The opening vignette of this dissertation briefly described the politics of ODF declaration in Himachal. During my fieldwork, I witnessed panchayat officials, under immense pressure from the Block Development Office, submit ODF declarations before residents had actually received funds to construct a toilet. Many households in Himachal still currently lack sanitation, and there are many more houseless individuals particularly amongst migrant families.*

⁷ *Again, this wasn't the case in reality.*

relationships between bureaucrats and citizens, equal treatment of men and women, and minimal caste discrimination. Kiran Bhatta attributes Himachal's success in socially inclusive policy implementation to a "culture of transparency" in the mountains, wherein small-scale, tight-knit communities afford more closeness between citizens and government officials (2008, 19). The result has led to what has been called a "virtuous circle" of social inclusion, in which policy and culture work together to produce high rates of political participation and poverty alleviation (Bhatta 2008, 9).

Yet, official indicators tell a different story when analyzed more closely. In recent years, the branding of Himachal as a developmental success story has co-occurred alongside several other shifts, including a dramatic decline in the child sex ratio in the state and in particular the district of Kangra—this project's field site (John et al. 2008), an overall *decline* in female workforce participation, and climatic changes that have severely threatened the state's predominantly agricultural livelihoods, including increased water scarcity, declining yields, and increases in extreme weather events that destroy crops (John et al. 2008; Mathur 2016; R. B. Singh and Hietala 2014; Asian Development Bank 2010). This has led to an exodus of working-age men to nearby cities like Delhi and Ludhiana in search of employment, which leaves women with compounded burdens of farm work alongside household work and childcare (cf. Mathur 2016 on similar trends in the neighboring state of Uttarakhand). These patterns underlie what one journalist called the "Himachal paradox" (Shrinivasan 2012), which suggests that the story of this state's success as a beacon of growth and inclusion requires more investigation to understand how people are experiencing and understanding ongoing changes in the region.

As an anthropologist, the questions I ask in this dissertation—what does it mean to be poor, and how is this meaning produced?—are fundamentally different from those asked by

political economists and development scholars. These scholars largely take poverty as objectifiable fact—standardizable, quantifiable, measurable—rather than a socially produced by people in everyday life (Biruk 2018; Merry 2011), and as I will show, through particular ways of speaking. Despite the epistemological and methodological differences between an economic and anthropological approach to poverty, the macroeconomic explanation for Himachal's exceptionalism relies heavily on arguments about "culture," which is said to be more inherently egalitarian and cohesive in the mountains, thus paving the way for socially inclusive development. These narratives rely on a circular logic in which culture-explains-indicators and indicators-explain-culture.

My aim throughout this dissertation is not to dismiss Himachal's exceptionalism as an illusion of decontextualized statistics, nor do I deny the contours of cultural difference across regions in India. The question is thus not whether Himachal's exceptionalism is "real"—it is indeed experienced and framed as such by my interlocutors—but rather *how* it remains as such despite evidence to the contrary, characterized by both longstanding and growing forms of inequity in the region. In addressing this question, I demonstrate how Himachal's exceptionalism is not derived from a more inherently "egalitarian culture" in the mountains, but rather is politically produced through everyday interaction. The aim is to show how profoundly these processes shape contemporary imaginations of place and people, and the concrete impacts they have on rural bureaucratic and democratic decision-making processes. In order to unpack this approach, it is first necessary to understand how a particular idea of "Himachali culture" has come to dominate contemporary explanations for its developmental success, and how these are rooted in both colonial and postcolonial discourses on the region.

0.2 Gender and Caste Egalitarianism in the Post/Colonial Imagination of Himachal

Recent discourses of Himachal's exceptionalism have lengthy precursors in pre-liberalization, pre-statehood, and pre-independence discourses on the region. Himachal was already known as an outlier in northern India in the 1980s, having shrugged off colonial stereotypes of the hills as "backward" and "underdeveloped" (Mathur 2016). One 1989 report noted, "such is the prosperity of Himachal that a well-travelled Indian Foreign Service officer, now retired, says that Himachal 'comes closest to being a Himalayan Switzerland'" (M. M. Singh 1989). Even then, however, concerns about the economic and environmental vulnerability of the region spelled concern for the future, as development efforts linked to hydroelectric dams, deforestation, and industrialization threatened to destabilize mountain ecologies.

Since at least the 1980s, then, scholars have been mining the paradox of Himachal's prosperity, and drawing evidence for the state's "socially inclusive" growth from sociological and ethnographic studies of norms around gender and caste in the region. Political scientists and economists often draw on ethnographic analyses of tribal communities in the upper regions of the state and extrapolate from them to be representative of other regions, like Kangra, which have far more social and linguistic continuity with Punjab and Haryana than districts like Lahaul and Spiti. Nevertheless, there is a substantial body of sociological literature, which is often cited by development studies scholars and economists, detailing evidence of gender parity and caste egalitarianism in hill societies. These include histories of matrilineal and polyandrous marriage practices especially in tribal communities (Rahimzadeh 2020; Snehi 2011; Parmar 1975), women's centrality to natural resource management (Bingeman 2003), women's "active" political participation in *panchayat raj* institutions (Drèze 1999), and a long history of activism against economic degradation and male alcoholism through women's collectives (Drèze 1990;

Berry 1997; Bhatta 2008; Klenk 2010). Women in the state are often described as being less subject to norms of female seclusion compared to surrounding states, particularly due to their central role in the agrarian economy. Being responsible for most of the daily labor in agriculture and animal husbandry means that women enjoy greater mobility and control over household decision-making (M. B. Das et al. 2015, 51).

Development scholars also describe norms around caste in the region as being uniquely egalitarian for northern India. Caste discrimination is described as relatively reduced in Himachal, particularly when compared to surrounding states like Haryana. In her comparative study of social inclusion and development in Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, Kiran Bhatta describes the status of Dalit (previously “untouchable”) families in Himachal Pradesh as relatively prosperous compared to those in Haryana:

[Dalit families in Haryana] had many more *kuccha* [mud] houses and open drains with *kuccha* roads leading to houses overlaid with dirty water and garbage. The general picture one faced there was of poverty and gross neglect. Many homes that I visited presented depressing sights – dark, with the barest of materials, a couple of pots at most, a thread bare mat on the floor, often only a cloth covering at the entrance, the inhabitants looking distinctly under-nourished, under-clad and with little hope in their voices. In Himachal I never encountered poverty and despair of this kind. Even the Dalit homes... did not lack human dignity. They may have had smaller grain storage areas, fewer or no cattle, no water source in their front yard or no toilets, but the inhabitants were not on the edges of humanity. (Bhatta 2008, 58–59)

Such images of destitution elsewhere resonate throughout Himachal Pradesh, invoked by bureaucrats like the CDPO and circulating in everyday narratives of my interlocutors, becoming central to how they understand themselves and the region. Casteism (*jaatvaad*) was often described as non-existent by my interlocutors, who cited Scheduled Caste people’s material possessions (homes, cars, clothes), as well as the system of reservation, as evidence that “high” caste groups were truly suffering in today’s world. By linking caste discrimination to economic

inequities and/or overt forms of violence, such discourses erase past and ongoing forms of ordinary violence against Dalits in the region (S. K. Sharma 2016).

Discourses of gender and caste egalitarianism have long played a central role in the political life of the state. Constructing an image of Himachali society as egalitarian was central to early arguments for independence from Punjab, which was won after lengthy political mobilization in 1971. Prior to this, a concerted effort was made to justify the need for a separate administration. The central argument for independence was that a regional administration would be able to harness the distinct social and economic contours of the region for its developmental future. Attempts to distinguish the region from its then-ruling authority, Punjab, were directly tied to ideas of its cultural distinctiveness, which were deeply rooted in visions of gender, caste, religious harmony. In order to uplift the hill state from its history of poverty and deprivation—first at the hands of princely rulers, and later at the hands of the British—the state would require its own government, uniquely suited for the contours of its region and population.

Y.S. Parmar, the first Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, wrote extensively on the cultures, politics, and economics of the region, and his writings became central to the movement for statehood in the 1960s. A sociologist by training, Parmar completed his doctoral thesis on Himalayan polyandry at the University of Lucknow in 1942, which he subsequently went on to revise as a monograph entitled *Polyandry in the Himalayas* (Parmar 1975). As Parmar rose to prominence as a regional leader in the Congress Party, he sought to rehabilitate the drab colonial depiction of the hill states as both economically and socially “backward.” He did so by transforming what was once considered justification for outside rule by Punjab into a source of strength and distinctiveness, thus requiring distinct administration in order to adequately bring about “development.” While lobbying for Himachal’s independent statehood with the States

Reorganization Commission in the early 1950s, Parmar wrote letters to the Chairman that were later published in a book entitled *Himachal Pradesh: Its Proper Shape and Status* (Parmar 1965). In these letters, Parmar articulates the need for Himachal's statehood based on the distinct cultural, economic, and environmental characteristics of hill societies, which set them apart from Punjab and necessitate separate administration. Chief among these differences was the status and treatment of women in Himachal, which was seen as fundamentally distinct from the plains:

Our women, free to marry or divorce, who suffer from no disabilities or complexes, work shoulder to shoulder with men in all walks of life, which concern the village community and are bound to play a great and noble role in the building up of this Province. Our backward people are determined to go ahead and in a very short time to come up to the standards of our neighbors. Only they must be allowed to develop according to their own light, traditions and peculiar circumstances. (Parmar 1965, 16–17)

Parmar sought to rehabilitate image of hill societies from a colonial vision of economic deprivation by amplifying visions of its unique social and cultural resources, particularly the role of women in the agrarian economy. He juxtaposes hill people's egalitarian cultural characteristics with those of their Punjabi neighbors, seen as exploitative rather than cooperative, oppressive rather than egalitarian. From these early writings, Himachal emerges as place that is distinct in its collective solidarity and its humble, hardworking peasantry:

The simple, unsophisticated, humble and meek hill-man, with his respect for the higher values of life, fails to understand the behaviour of his aggressive neighbor and naturally reacts very strongly against his attitude. It may be well known that friends from Punjab joined hands with the Princes in perpetrating all sorts of repression and exploitation in these hills. (Parmar 1965, 16–17)

Parmar further sought to distinguish Himachal from Punjab on the basis of a lack of religious communalism, as well as through an absence of linguistic differences (and thus sociopolitical differences, as the states were being organized linguistically (Sarangi 2009]). The hills were described as being religiously and linguistically homogenous, home to Hindus without caste bias and speakers of a unified Pahari (in fact, Pahari is not a single language, but is used as a

shorthand to describe dozens of varieties stretching across the Himalayan region). Here again, as Parmar lobbied for Himachal's statehood, he articulated these features as fundamentally distinct from the neighboring Punjab:

Himachal Pradesh, fortunately, is spared all this malady [of conflict]; for it is a State predominantly of the Hindus and no communal problem whatsoever exists here. Even the language problem, which has baffled the Administrators in Punjab, is non-existent in Himachal Pradesh. People speak Pahari, the more educated being influenced by chaste Hindi. Hindi alone is taught in schools and other institutions. Thus the State is not troubled by all the complicated communal and language problems of the Punjab. Some of the most highly placed persons in Punjab have advised that Himachal Pradesh should not, in any case, merge with Punjab for it is fortunate in not having this two-fold problem at all. Any merger of the two would completely upset the present social order in the hills and is bound to result in a very strong reaction from the people. (Parmar 1965, 18)

Parmar's writings were not the first to make an argument for the cultural distinctiveness of the Himachali hill societies vis-à-vis the plains, as British colonial writings and administrative records attest to. Early colonial records similarly describe the egalitarianism and social cohesion of small-scale hill societies, particularly through depictions of the region as being free of caste consciousness prior to the arrival of the British. J.B. Lyall, Settlement Officer and author of the *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kangra District* (1874), presented similar distinctions between Kangra and greater Punjab in his ethnological-cum-administrative survey. Rather than attributing a fixed and immutable caste hierarchy to the hills, both writers describe caste hierarchies as in a process of becoming, such that people were known to "rise" in the ranks and become high caste through service to the princely ruler, or *jagirdar*, and similarly, may fall from ranks through labor deemed lowly, like ploughing. Lyall's analyses of caste fluidity in Kangra were reprinted two decades later, Francis Cunningham's *Gazetteer of the Kangra District* (1883-4), which also has an extensive section comparing the "customs of the hills and the plains," which is based on Lyall's accounts. It includes mention of a strict caste endogamy in

the plains, while people in the hills frequently intermarry across castes, a striking difference from one of the most canonical ethnological theories of caste in colonial India (Dirks 2011).

Theories of the egalitarianism of hill societies in South Asia extend beyond Himachal, and resonate in writings on similar contexts like the highlands of northeastern India, Thailand, Burma, and Vietnam. James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009b), for example, posts an essentially anarchic character of hill societies, marked by an unruly and shifting social order irreducible to colonial logics of quantification and standardization:

As a general rule, social structure in the hills is both more flexible and more egalitarian than in the hierarchical, codified valley societies. Hybrid identities, movement, and the social fluidity that characterizes many frontier societies are common. Early colonial officials, taking an inventory of their new possessions in the hills, were confused to encounter hamlets with several "peoples" living side by side: hill people who spoke three or four languages and both individuals and groups whose ethnic identity had shifted, sometimes within a single generation. Aspiring to Linnaean specificity in the classification of peoples as well as flora, territorial administrators were constantly frustrated by the bewildering flux of peoples who refused to stay put. (Scott 2009b, 18)

Scott notes that the anarchy of hill societies allowed them to flourish beyond the gaze of the colonial state, allowing for the relative fluidity of both caste and gender boundaries, resulting in "relatively higher status for women than in the valleys" (Ibid.: 19). Scott's analysis and arguments about Southeast Asia are strikingly similar to those posited for the western Himalayas, which continue to pervade contemporary imaginations of the region as devoid of the relate caste and gender hierarchies of the plains.

These theories on social egalitarianism in colonial and early postcolonial writings on Himachal Pradesh, and hill societies across South Asia more broadly, have formed the basis for arguments about "inclusive growth" in the region. The exceptionalism attributed to Himachal Pradesh today has roots in these early articulations of the relatively fluid caste and gender hierarchies in the hills. In these depictions, not only is the internal heterogeneity of the state

flattened, but an ahistorical, romanticized image of small-scale mountain societies as egalitarian and cohesive reifies a static view of the rural peasantry as being untouched by the cultural influences of Brahmanical patriarchy. This not only obscures the historical forms of caste oppression in the region, but dismisses the ongoing and rising forms of caste violence experienced by Dalits in the region (S. K. Sharma 2016). These narratives reify casteism as belonging to the realm of another time/space, associating it with stereotypical images of poverty and destitution.

Himachal's exceptionalism is thus clearly not new, nor is it apolitically "cultural." Rather, exceptionalism has long served as a political strategy within historical projects of developmental statecraft in the Himalayas, first among British colonial settlers and later by Himachali political leaders. In both cases, a primordial image of social cohesion has been mobilized to satisfy political ends, and in doing so, erased historical forms of caste violence and gender inequality in the region. Given these processes, it becomes necessary to consider other explanations for how Himachal maintains its status as a "surprising exception" in northern India. In the following three sections, I outline the framework through which this dissertation seeks to answer this question.

0.3 Semiotic Labor and the Production of Knowledge

The first theoretical debate of importance to this dissertation concerns the nature of knowledge production about development. Decades of scholarship in anthropology has examined the production of knowledge about development. While early critiques emphasized the material consequences of development for the Global South, particularly in that European industrialization was predicated on settler colonialism, enslavement, and extractivism (Frank 1967; Amin 1978; Wallerstein 1974; Cardoso and Faletto 1979), subsequent scholars turned to questions of how development maintains its ideological coherence through practices of

knowledge production. Building on early poststructuralist theories of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980), as well as postcolonial critiques of Western epistemologies and representations of the non-West (Said 1979), scholars began to consider development as a discursive formation through which the “Third World” has come to be known since World War II. Institutional modes of knowledge production through policy and project documentation revealed the concepts, categories, and power dynamics through which knowledge about the Third World is produced and development rendered into a depoliticized, technocratic problem requiring interventionist expertise (Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995; Mitchell 2002). Scholars traced the effects of development discourse on subjectivities and practices in postcolonial contexts, in which “underdevelopment” has become a defining category of postcolonial identity (Gupta 1998).

More recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of attending to the everyday practices of low and mid-level development workers, rather than solely focusing on official modes of knowledge production. Inspired by the sociology of translation (Latour 1996; 2007; Callon 1984), these approaches seek to advance beyond an analysis of development as discourse in order to understand how project knowledge and project success is produced through the everyday practices of actors. This has led to a number of ethnographic studies detailing how managers and brokers “translate” social practices into project knowledge (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Levitt and Merry 2009; Merry 2011; Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012; Biruk 2018). These works draw from the post-discursive (and often anti-linguistic) method of science and technology studies, which highlights how associations across assemblages of human and non-human actors—persons, institutions, documents—generate interpretations of success or failure at successive levels of project implementation (e.g. Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005; Mathur 2016; Latour 2007). This work points to the social labor required to produce and sustain the

coherence of developmental knowledge, projects, and discourses; however, such work often fails to provide an understanding of how such associations, interpretations, and enrollments are made in real time. A linguistic ethnographic approach, I argue, has the capacity to provide such insights into how disparate actors and moments are sites for the production of semiotic coherence.

Despite the widespread use of analytics like discourse, translation, and vernacularization in the anthropology of development, ethnographic analyses of development practice have primarily approached everyday language as a vehicle for knowledge transmission, rather than a source of knowledge production. When discourses, policies, and concepts travel across contexts, they encounter inevitable social differences, and otherwise well-intentioned policies become (mis)interpreted and (mis)translated (Pigg 1997; Tsing 2005; Li 2007; Salemink 2006; Marais 2014; Radcliffe 2015; Gal, Kowalski, and Moore 2015), ultimately leading to a failure of implementation (Mathur 2012). Very few scholars have considered how everyday linguistic practices produce developmental logics, nor have they considered the functions of language beyond its referentialist one (cf. Kockelman 2016; Cody 2013; Ahearn 2001a). Amongst those who have devoted substantial attention to ordinary encounters between citizens and state/non-state development workers, the talk that mediates those encounters has been seen as ephemeral and fleeting, and rarely analyzed for what its form might reveal about the mechanisms of institutional power, authority, and agency.

This dissertation considers talk as a technology of developmental knowledge production in Kangra. I approach the everyday production of knowledge about poverty and prosperity as a form of biopolitics (Gupta 2012), one that occurs not only through the production of official knowledge, statistics, and indicators, but also through everyday interactions between citizens and

state agents in which decisions of access and eligibility are made, interpretations of poverty and prosperity produced, and forms of exclusion legitimated. I look to everyday encounters between rural citizens and government bureaucrats, NGO workers, agricultural extension agents, and *panchayat* functionaries, who are the first line of contact between rural villagers and development institutions in the area. These workers, who are tasked with the implementation of massive programs of social, political, and economic transformation, conduct their work through face-to-face interactions with rural citizens, wherein workers provide services, information, and advice geared toward the transformation rural citizens into self-sufficient and productive capitalist subjects.

By fronting the importance of everyday interaction, this dissertation shows how development workers across institutional contexts use their multilingual semiotic repertoires to produce and contest the meanings of poverty and prosperity in their contexts, as well as the concepts and categories embedded in programs and policies. I refer to this production of meaning amidst contestation as “semiotic labor.” Semiotic labor seeks to capture how development work gets done through interaction, is informed by ideologies about language, and is productive of subjectivity and value (Kroskrity 2000; Irvine and Gal 2000). While there is a long history of theorizing language through a political economic framework as a type of labor, capital, and/or commodity (Rossi-Landi 1983; Bourdieu 1977a; Irvine 1989; Kockelman 2006), I draw on recent anthropological discussions of linguistic (Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013; Kockelman 2016), affective (Mankekar and Gupta 2017; 2019), and phatic (Elyachar 2010) labor, extending these insights to the world of rural development and state bureaucracies to understand how speakers produce value in the social-semiotic sense: they generate meanings,

interpretations, and practices that gain legibility and are valorized within a broader field of meanings, interpretations, and practices.

As I will show across the chapters of this dissertation, what is at stake in the semiotic labor of development workers and rural citizens in Kangra is not only the actual delivery of services—who gets access to what entitlements—but also the very meanings of the concepts, categories, and frameworks through which those services are rendered appropriate and adequate. Everyday interactions are arenas of meaning-making, in which speakers' multilingual semiotic repertoires become resources for establishing authoritative interpretations, enacting expertise, and ultimately, influencing decisions of access and exclusion. The questions I ask across the chapters are therefore not merely about the efficiency or effectiveness (or lack thereof) of public service delivery, but about how such services come to be seen as relevant and necessary (or not) in the first place, and what this might reveal about how people make and unmake notions of poverty and prosperity in everyday life.

0.4 Bureaucratic Voice and the Cultivation of Authority

The second major concern of this dissertation centers on the production of bureaucratic authority. Whereas “in scholarship on bureaucracy, *writing* has remained the very image of a formal organizational practice, the central semiotic technology for the coordination and control of organizations” (Hull 2012: 20, emphasis in original), this dissertation argues that face-to-face interactions are a crucial modality through which bureaucrats and other actors produce the state's legibility and legitimacy. While there is a substantial literature on the ideological importance of language for state formation and nation-building (Ayres 2012; Anderson 1991), much of the anthropology of the state in South Asia has emphasized the materiality of bureaucracy as key to the reproduction of state power. Such work has demonstrated how forms of writing,

documentation, enumeration, mapping, and more recently digitization are key semiotic technologies through which the state attains its aura of bureaucratic rationality (Gupta 2012; Hull 2003; 2012b; V. Das 2004; Mathur 2012; 2016; Dandurand 2019; Reddy 2015; Cody 2009). These practices have continuities with colonial modes of knowledge production in South Asia (Cohn 1987; Appadurai 1993; Carlan 2018; In Press).

The primary reason for the focus on materiality in studies of bureaucracy and the state is the ability of writing and documents to circulate beyond their contexts of production. Talk, however, is largely seen as transient, fleeting, and immaterial, and has largely not been considered a technology of state and non-state bureaucracies. As such, anthropologists have steered more directly toward those papery items that are seen as more concrete and tenacious than “orality’s ‘jelly fish like’ (Scott 2009a, 230) quality—manipulable and fleeting” (A. Sharma 2013, 318; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012a; Cody 2009; 2013). However, linguistic anthropologists have long demonstrated how a range of semiotic processes become citational through their reiteration and recontextualization, circulating beyond immediate contexts of interaction and shaping forms of personhood and subjectivity (Mendoza-Denton 2011; Nakassis 2013; 2016; Gal 2018).

By accounting for the semiotics of bureaucracy beyond the material, I point to the “communicative infrastructures” of development (Elyachar 2010; Besky 2016; Bate 2021)—meetings, assemblies, trainings, and everyday conversations—through which speakers constitute and enact bureaucratic authority in everyday life. Rather than reify a distinction between speech and materiality, I follow more recent scholarship in “language materiality” that demonstrates how linguistic processes are central to forms of exchange, commoditization, and labor under global capitalism (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014). My approach doesn’t dismiss centrality of bureaucracy’s material forms to the everyday constitution of state

power, but rather seeks to provide a more holistic account of the semiotic constitution of bureaucratic legibility in everyday life.

This dissertation offers the concept of the “bureaucratic voice” to account for how particular ways of speaking become resources for the production of bureaucratic authority, and its concomitant forms of virtue, legitimacy, and (in)culpability (see also Assor 2021 on bureaucratic virtue). The bureaucratic voice in Kangra consists of a register of pronominally and lexically formal (i.e. Sanskritized) Hindi with extensive English lexicon drawn from bureaucratic activities, legal frameworks, and institutions. It is grammatically marked by its usage of collective pronouns and syntactic formations (e.g. passives and causatives) that both distribute agency across multiple speakers and mitigate the agency of particular individuals. Rather than consider the bureaucratic voice an objectifiable code external of its contexts of usage, I argue that the bureaucratic voice gains its salience and social meaning through its pragmatic effects: it allows speakers to invoke broader forms of state authority while mitigating their individual responsibility. This stance of “virtuous inculpability” is the core of the bureaucratic voice.

My framework of the bureaucratic voice seeks to combine threads of theorization in the anthropology of bureaucracy and the anthropology of voice and voicing. I draw upon Asif Agha’s concept of “enregisterment” (Agha 2003; 2005; 2007), a semiotic process through which linguistic features become clustered into a socially typified speech register. Registers can be tied to both specific social groups and, usually, specific social activities; as such, they may be recognizable across speakers but only used competently by specific speakers engaged in the social activity therein (Agha 2005; Gal 2018). Professions often entail specific registers—lawyers, doctors, teachers, religious leaders, and, in this case, bureaucrats—which are steeped in unique lexical, grammatical, and even phonetic conventions (R. H. Conley 2016; C. Goodwin

1994; Harding 1987), but other social activities like parenting often also entail the use of specific registers that mark speakers as a particular type of (moral) person (Ochs 1992; Ochs and Schieffelin 2009). When a socially-recognizable persona is tied specifically to a register, Agha refers to it as an “enregistered voice” (Agha 2005). Agha’s concept of the “enregistered voice” is drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of voice, in which a way of speaking (or in Bakhtin’s case, writing) becomes socially recognizable and ideologically tied to a social persona, or what Bakhtin refers to as a “social voice” (Bakhtin 1981). Voices gain meaning when they are performatively enacted and become indexically linked to distinct social personae (Hill 1995; Agha 2005; Harkness 2013; Slobe 2018).

The concept of the bureaucratic voice also draws on work done on the semiotics of bureaucracy by Matthew Hull (Hull 2003; 2012a), and in particular his notion of “bureaucratic agency.” Hull argues that bureaucratic agency inheres through forms of bureaucratic writing, which tend to collectivize agents and obscure individual authors, both through their material circulation and through the linguistic features used therein. In his analysis of “graphic artifacts,” or “discourse-mediating materials such as files, maps, letters, reports, and office manuals” (Hull 2003, 290), Hull notes the use of passive constructions, collective pronouns, abstract nouns, a lack of evidentials (or subjective stance-taking in general), and indexes of hierarchy and status (e.g. modal verbs like “must” used for inferior officers, “may” used for superiors), among other features. Together, these features enact bureaucratic agency by collectivizing authorship and distributing responsibility for actions (see also Morton 2014; George 2016; Bernstein 2017 for discussion of similar features in other contexts). My notion of bureaucratic voice builds on these investigations by demonstrating how an assemblage of semiotic resources—spoken, embodied, and material—collectivize agency and distribute responsibility for bureaucratic decisions in

everyday interactions. The bureaucratic voice, through its distinctive speech register and stance of virtuous inculpability, is a key semiotic mechanism whereby bureaucrats enact their authority while mitigating responsibility for decisions.

0.5 Stateless Agency and the Erasure of Responsibility

In addition to examining how speakers produce meanings (through semiotic labor) and enact authoritative assessments of poverty and prosperity (through bureaucratic voice), I also seek to understand how Himachal becomes reified as an exceptional state, both in the sense of an institutional entity (*the state*) and in the sense of its condition (a state of prosperity), despite the diverse forms of social and material inequity therein. Doing so leads me to engage with anthropological theories of the state, agency and responsibility, and erasure. Examining how *particular* understandings of agency and responsibility are constructed and enacted in everyday encounters can help nuance our understanding of how the developmental state in India maintains its legitimacy despite the exclusions it generates.

In the post-liberalization context, neoliberal modes of governmentality emphasizing personal responsibility for citizen well-being have co-occurred alongside movements for rights-based welfare legislation and public goods.⁸ This shift has been accompanied by the rise of non-governmental organizations that seek to provide information, knowledge, and skills that are meant to “empower” individual subjects to successfully participate in the market and pull themselves out of poverty (A. Sharma 2008; Li 2007; Cruikshank 1999; Elyachar 2005). Scholars of “neoliberal agency” (Gershon 2011) have examined how individuals become positioned as entrepreneurial bundles of skills in the wake of the erosion of state welfare. In the Indian context, anthropologists have noted the combination of tactics used by state and non-state

⁸ See especially: A. Sharma 2008; Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2011; Grewal and Bernal 2014; Bear and Mathur 2015; Bornstein and Sharma 2016; A. Sharma 2018.

actors to position themselves as variously responsible, inculpable, virtuous, and/or righteous (Bornstein and Sharma 2016; A. Sharma 2008). In subsequent chapters, I explore how state bureaucrats, NGO workers, politicians, and citizens use semiotic resources to define institutional boundaries, align themselves with moral stances, and assign forms of agency and responsibility.

Linguistic anthropology offers a robust set of tools for analyzing the constitution of agency and responsibility in everyday life. Speakers' linguistic structures and framings are resources for enacting and encoding agency (Duranti 1990; 1994; 2004; Ahearn 1999; Enfield and Kockelman 2017). Alessandro Duranti's study of the Samoan *fono*, village council meetings in which high-ranking members of society (*matai*) try to come to consensus about juridical or political matters, has shown how particular grammatical constructions can not only encode degrees of agency of certain key participants in an event, but they can also be used to blame (and, thus, accuse) or praise them (1990; 1994; 2004). Such practices of grammatical encoding of responsibility thus provide evidence of how relations of power, authority, and hierarchy are negotiated within temporally unfolding conversational encounters. The importance of attention to grammar as a locus for understanding how agency is constructed across cultures has been affirmed by numerous other scholars (Ochs and Capps 1995; Ochs, Gonzales, and Jacoby 1996; Ehrlich 2003; Ahearn 2001a; R. H. Conley 2011; George 2014). In addition to grammar, there are also performative and metacommunicative aspects of agency's construction through language, rooted in the reflexive capacity of speakers to evaluate, assess, and frame the acts of others (Taylor 1985; M. H. Goodwin 1990; Duranti 2004; C. Goodwin and Goodwin 2004; Lucy 1993; Urban 2006).

Examining the interactional constitution of agency and responsibility can help uncover how the state becomes reified above the level of civil society, while individuals are subsumed.

This has been a key concern in the anthropology of the state, which has examined how the state is socially produced and reified as a scalar entity above the level of civil society, devoid of individual actors (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1999; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Trouillot 2003; A. Sharma and Gupta 2006; Gupta 1995; 2012; Bornstein and Sharma 2016). Rather than assume the stability and coherence of the state, anthropologists consider the state as a series of “effects” (Mitchell 1999), “apparatuses” (Althusser 1971), and “ideas” (Abrams 1988) that produce the state’s coherence. Anthropologists have detailed several practices through which the state becomes reified and shape citizens’ subjectivity, including through discourses of corruption (Gupta 1995), techniques of spatialization and localization (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Pigg 1992), forms of inscription and literacy (Gupta 2012; Debenport and Webster 2019; Cody 2009; 2013; Ahearn 2001a), technologies of governance (Corbridge et al. 2005; Sivaramakrishnan 1999), the production of statistics (Biruk 2018; Merry 2011), among others. Only a handful of studies have called attention to the role of everyday language in the production of the state, particularly as it pertains to the cultivation of bureaucratic authority (Bernstein 2017; George 2016).

Understanding how the state becomes reified requires attending to processes of scale-making (Lempert and Carr 2016; Gupta 2012, 29; 2003; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). While the state is routinely imagined as a series of “nested hierarchies” (local, regional, national), this obscures the routine practices through which the state is produced in everyday life (Gupta 2012, 29–33). Attention to linguistic structures can be particularly useful for investigating how the state is produced as a scalar phenomenon distinct from and above civil society, while individual actors and contexts are subsumed. Doing so allows us to trace how welfare policies, and the categories embedded in them, are produced in interaction, rather than being standardized entities that are

“implemented” in a “top-down” fashion (Lipsky 2010; Silver 2010). This is especially important given that categories and concepts defined through policy tend to be taken for granted by researchers who focus on the “accuracy of data collection rather than on a sustained interrogation of the category itself as a form of state simplification (Scott 1998) or a thin description of a complex social reality (Broche-Due 1995)” (Gupta 2012: 66). In fact, it takes work to make such categories appear objective and context-transcendent (Appel 2012): this is the semiotic labor through which particular meanings and interpretations gain salience over others. Semiotic labor is mediated by language ideologies, as ways of speaking become linked to higher orders of indexical value, authority, and prestige (Silverstein 2003; Agha 2011; Blommaert 2015). This work also entails processes of collectivization, as the acts of individuals become tied to larger groups and institutions, as well as forms of erasure, as individual contexts and speakers are subsumed (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal and Irvine 2019). Together, these processes have direct implications for agency, as the ability to attach a sign or interpretation to a broader context that transcends individuals and erases forms of difference imbues speakers with power and authority (O’Connor 2020).

Rather than assume what agency means in Kangra, I pay attention to how my interlocutors produce particular understandings of agency and responsibility through their interactional practices. For example, in Chapter Two, I demonstrate how a specific vision of the “active” woman in Kangra is produced in encounters between NGO workers and members of women’s collectives. I analyze how NGO workers highlight, problematize, and erase particular ways of speaking, dressing, and even sitting while attempting to make women “active” and not “idle.” I also analyze my own role in producing this vision of “activeness” through short documentary films that I made for the NGO. In Chapter Five, I explore how bureaucratic

decisions become purified of the agency and responsibility of state actors. Through an analysis of deliberations over the assignment of “below poverty line” (BPL) status, I show how bureaucrats and elected officials push for the elimination of BPL status throughout the *panchayat* on the basis of appeals to Himachal’s prosperity. I detail how they expanded BPL ineligibility to include novel criteria, making assessments of rural citizens’ conditions (*sthiti*), and ultimately declaring the *panchayat* “BPL free.” The result is what I call “stateless agency”: a collectivized democratic authority devoid of state influence or interference. This framework uncovers how bureaucratic and democratic modalities of governance operate through the paradoxical erasure of state actors, mediated by speakers’ interactional strategies.

Taken together, semiotic labor, bureaucratic voice, and stateless agency are crucial to the production of Himachal’s developmental exceptionalism in everyday life. The remainder of this introduction provides context for the study, including discussion of linguistic dynamics in Kangra, the institutions and people with whom I conducted fieldwork, and the ethnographic and linguistic methods employed therein.

0.6 Fieldwork and Methodology

Himachal Pradesh is situated in a region of the Western Himalayas broadly known as “Dev Bhumi”—the land of the gods—famous for its breathtaking landscapes and religious pilgrimage sites. Anthropological scholarship on the region has explored the rich cultural and political life of mountain (or Pahari) societies, with special emphasis on the everyday lives, folklore, political activism, environmental practices, and religious devotion of Pahari women (Narayan 2016; Narayan and Sood 1997; Sax 1991; Berry 1997; Baker 2011; Parry 2013; Elmore 2016). Kangra is home to speakers of dozens of linguistic varieties that shade into each other at fuzzy borders not easily distinguishable. Most ethnographic accounts of the region quote

some version of the same locally-circulating aphorism: language changes every five kilometers in the mountains. Today, there is a vast linguistic tapestry in use in Kangra, with most speakers commanding between three and five languages, including Kangri, Gaddi, Punjabi, Hindi, and English, with Kangri and Hindi being the two most dominant codes. English, as I show throughout this dissertation, is mostly used at the lexical, rather than syntactic, level. Kangra's multilingual speakers are rapidly shifting away from local varieties of Kangri and Gaddi toward Hindi, due to their associations with limited potential for upward mobility in the job market.

At the time of this study in 2017-2019, most young people around my age (28 at the time) were bilingual in Hindi and their family's primary language, either Kangri or Gaddi, but favored Hindi in their everyday interactions. Adolescents and children, however, were largely being socialized, both through education and at home, into speaking Hindi alone, while maintaining passive competence in the language used by elders in their family. The shift is happening much more rapidly for Gaddi than Kangri, as the former is spoken by a community officially designated as "Scheduled Tribe," which has shifted from a traditional pastoralist livelihood to a settled, aspirant orientation to commercial livelihoods. As younger generations in Kangra age into adulthood, both Kangri and Gaddi will be likely become endangered, and after a few more generations, they will likely cease to be spoken. While linguists have provided documentation of particular varieties of Kangri (Eaton 2008; S. Sharma 1974), which I have drawn on in my own analysis of linguistic structure, there are as yet no linguistic ethnographies of the region detailing the sociolinguistic dimensions of language use in everyday life.

Kangra is situated at the base of the Dhauladhar range of the Western Himalayas. My home during fieldwork overlooked the peaks of the mountains, and was situated right at the edge of their ascent. Most of Kangra consists of the valley beneath the mountains. While there are still

many people living in the upper reaches of the foothills, the majority of the population live in the relatively flatter plains of the valley, situated on sloping, terraced fields. The district is home to a diverse array of castes, including a substantial population of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. I worked closely with three families, who happened to be from Rajput (high, or General), Chaudhary (middle, or Other Backward Caste), and Gaddi (tribal, Scheduled Tribe) castes respectively, all of whom lived in joint family households and consisted of 9 – 10 members (two grandparents, two sets of married couples, and each couple had two or three children each).

Like the rest of the state, Kangra is an overwhelmingly agrarian economy, and almost everyone is reliant on farming for household food consumption. Landholdings are small and marginal, averaging less than an acre (8 *kanal*). Of the families I worked most closely with, landholdings ranged from only 2 or 3 *kanal* to 25 *kanal* (~3 acres), but very few families have more land than that. Women conduct the majority of agricultural labor, and they cultivate staple cereals (wheat, rice, maize) and vegetables (especially potatoes, onions, okra, cauliflower, gourd, eggplant, radish). Commercial cultivation is rare in Kangra, and farming is done primarily for sustaining household food requirements, which must also be supplemented with additional staples secured from the Public Distribution System (e.g. oils, sugar, pulses). Among the few families with more land, they may sell a few *quintal* (100kg) of their grains locally.

Fieldwork for this dissertation took place over twenty-one consecutive months from October 2017 – June 2019. I took one-month-long breaks from fieldwork in July and December 2018 to attend international conferences in Gaborone, Botswana and San Jose, California, where I presented emergent research findings and used the time to reflect on the project more broadly. My research began, as is common, far different than how it ended. I entered the field planning to

conduct an ethnography of a single non-governmental organization that I call Sahayata, which focuses on programs of women's empowerment. I planned to trace the circulation of the discourse of empowerment across multilingual contexts of interaction in order to understand how gendered ideologies about development are produced and transformed in practice.

While residing for the first six months of my fieldwork on the NGO's campus, I conducted extensive observations, recording, and interviews with NGO employees and beneficiaries, and cultivated close relationships with several NGO workers who would continue to remain central to my fieldwork. I followed these NGO workers as they conducted their meetings with women in villages across the district, traveling up to five hours one way to meet with women. Within a few months of being in the field, however, it became clear that limiting myself to the realm of a single NGO was impossible given the complex interrelationships between development institutions in the region. I decided to expand the scope of my analysis and the questions I was asking beyond the realm of the NGO and its discourse of empowerment.

Kangra is a well-traversed area for anthropologists – to my surprise, I happened to live in the same village where two well-known anthropologist couples from the U.S. have built homes, and I lived not far from other PhD students conducting ethnographic research in the area. The predominance of NGOs in the area also meant that there was a steady rotation of students from universities in Delhi, Chandigarh, and Mumbai who would come to conduct short-term research projects in the area through partnerships with NGOs. As such, I often felt like I was swimming in a sea of researchers, particularly while residing at the NGO, which was another reason I decided to expand my horizons to some of the other development institutions in the area.

In the early months of 2018, I began to visit several government offices in the area, including the Block Development Office, the Department of Agriculture's Block and Circle

Offices, multiple *panchayat* (village governance) offices, and the Municipal Corporation's head offices in Kalyana. In each context, I was either introduced to an employee by a mutual friend, or I merely showed up and waited for an audience with an officer. As a white woman from the United States who speaks fluent Hindi, I was privileged in my ability to access these spaces relatively easily. My combination of visible foreignness, advanced linguistic competence, and my dressing in Indian suits or *salwaar kameez* meant that people were eager to place me and learn about what I was doing there.

Across contexts, I introduced my research in a similar way: I was studying how language impacts rural development efforts, and was interested in observing how village-level workers use different languages when interacting with citizens during program implementation. In each institution, I honed in on a small group of employees who I followed closely as they conducted their activities with villagers. In some contexts, I ended up focusing on how a particular scheme or program was implemented, like the National Rural Livelihood Mission (Chapter 3) or the Natural Farming Skilled Farmers' Program (Chapter 4). In other contexts, I followed workers as they conducted their everyday work, including at the NGO Sahayata and various women's collectives, or *mahila mandal* (Chapter 2), and in *panchayat* administration (Chapter 5).

As I traversed these sites, I used several methods for data collection. First, I conducted participant observation in offices and in "the field," or the spaces where development workers conducted meetings with rural beneficiaries. I observed the daily rhythms of office life, spending much of the first six months I was in the field inside the offices of Sahayata, and later in government bureaucracies and *panchayat* offices. Most of my time was spent outside offices, traveling with my informants to and from the sites where they conducted the implementation of programs with beneficiaries.

Face-to-face meetings constitute the overwhelming majority of what rural development workers in Kangra, including state bureaucrats, NGO workers, and local elected officials, do on a day-to-day basis. They were an extremely rich ethnographic site from which to not only understand the mechanics of particular bureaucracies, but also to see the interwoven nature of institutions across state and non-state lines, to hear about the rifts and rivalries between them, to socialize and eat delicious meals together with people you might otherwise never see. I worked primarily in two blocks (*tehsil*) in District Kangra, the main one of which I have given the pseudonym Kalyana (to protect the identities of government employees posted in the BDO and other offices). Kalyana block consists of 24 *panchayats*, each of which is composed of several villages. The neighboring block was much larger, consisting of more than 50 *panchayats*, and is where I followed several NGO workers who primarily conducted their work in the upper hills of Kangra.

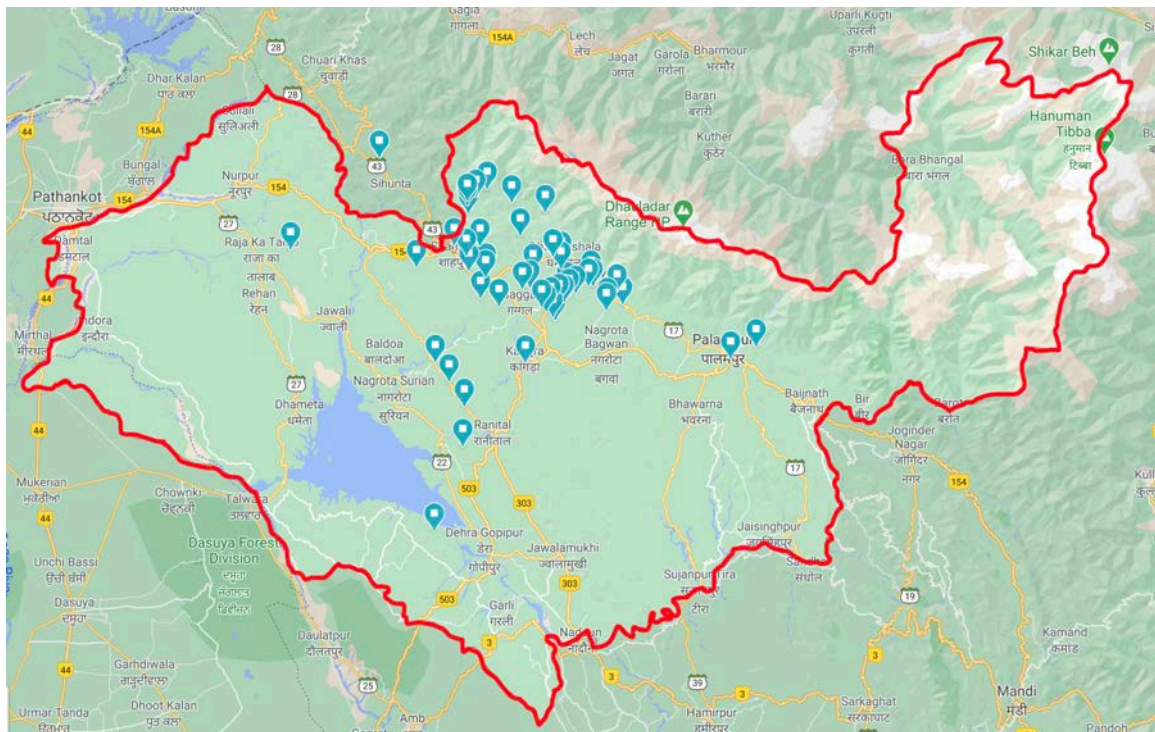


Figure 0.3 Fieldwork locations

District Kanga (outlined in red), with geotags (in blue) of locations where the author conducted fieldwork. Map via Google, edited by the author

The second, and primary, method I used throughout my fieldwork entailed video recording interactions between development workers and citizens, especially during meetings, assemblies, camps, and other “official” institutional work. Since I limited my actual video recordings to the parameters of meetings, it was relatively easy to gain permission for recording from the participants in meetings. At the beginning of a meeting, I asked to be given a few minutes in which to introduce myself to the people present, explain my presence as a researcher, and ask for permission to record. I was only ever denied permission to record one meeting, not by the participants of the meeting, but by the facilitator, who wanted to protect the privacy of the government employees therein.

Altogether, I recorded 130 hours of meetings, of which I have transcribed and translated approximately 10 hours. Transcription was completed alongside two research assistants, who worked closely with me at different points of my fieldwork. My first research assistant, Gaytri Sharma, ushered me through the first six months of my fieldwork when I was living at Sahayata and trying to get my bearings in the broader institutional landscape. Gaytri was especially instrumental in my early months as I was learning Kangri and Gaddi, having studied Hindi and Punjabi intensively prior to fieldwork. When Gaytri was selected for a senior position at an NGO in Madhya Pradesh, she moved from Kangra and I began searching for another research assistant to help primarily with transcription.

In August 2018, I was introduced to Sunila Devi, who is my age and was a single mother with a young daughter at the time. Sunila and I became close while we spent hundreds of hours together collaboratively transcribing my data. I received enough funding to compensate Sunila at

the rate of Rs. 500 (USD 7) per hour, for an average of forty hours per week, of transcription and other research assistance work for the nine months we worked closely together. Sunila is a native speaker of Kangri, Gaddi, and Hindi, and our work together went something like this: we listened to selections of video together, identified interesting portions for analysis, and worked together to transcribe them. I would check my transcriptions of the Kangri and Gaddi portions with Sunila, who would correct my mistakes. I would then check my comprehension of the Kangri and Gaddi portions with Sunila in Hindi, and based on my knowledge of Hindi, I would translate the original into English. Often, I would double check portions of recordings with the people in the videos, making sure we had accurately captured their meaning. Since all of my recordings were of multiparty interactions, usually outdoors, it was often very difficult to capture everything that was said clearly, despite having relatively good audio equipment. The transcripts I have included in this dissertation have been curated from the 10 hours of data transcribed in the field; altogether, they represent approximately 20 minutes of actual video recording. The constraints of a dissertation, and the fact that transcripts flatten human interaction so dramatically, speak to the limitations of anthropological knowledge production. In my analysis, and through the photos and ethnographic descriptions surrounding them, I hope to breathe life into those transcripts, as necessarily partial and impoverished representations of the interactions I witnessed.

The third method I employed during my fieldwork included semi-structured and unstructured interviews (approximately 50 recorded, many more unrecorded). I interviewed people across the development industry in Kangra, including senior bureaucrats (e.g. the BDO, Municipal Commissioner, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, the Panchayati Raj Inspector, Child Development Protection Officer), local political leaders (*panchayat* headpersons, ward persons,

and secretaries, Municipal ward councilors), low-level bureaucrats (ladies village development coordinators, ladies social education officers, junior engineers, an industrial extension officer), officials and scientists from the Department of Agriculture and Agriculture Science Center (Subject Matter Specialist; agricultural extension agents, agricultural development officers, agricultural scientists), NGO workers (all from Sahayata), the leaders and members of multiple women's collectives (*mahila mandal*), activists working on issues of sociopolitical and environmental justice (e.g. Manshi Asher and Prakash Bhandari from Himdhara Collective), and scholars who I met at workshops and meetings in Kangra (e.g. Arun Kumar, Professor of Economics at Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi). I also interviewed, both formally on the record and informally off the record, dozens of people who interacted with the institutions where I was conducting observations, particularly the women who were targeted most by these institutions in their work.

The final method I employed throughout my fieldwork consisted of collection and analysis of locally-printed newspapers. Every day, I read two papers, *The Tribune*, and English-language daily based in Chandigarh but printed locally in Kangra, and the *Dainik Jagran*, a Hindi-language daily with outlets across India, and also printed locally in Kangra. I also occasionally read other Hindi-language dailies like *Amar Ujala* and *Punjab Kesari*. In reading the papers, I was able to learn about and analyze stories about local events, political issues, and controversies that I was either hearing about in my daily life or had witnessed first-hand. I was particularly interested in saving stories broadly related to development efforts in the area, and how communities were being impacted by them in various ways (for example, I collected dozens of stories about a four-lane highway that was scheduled to be built right in front of the homes of two of the families I lived with, causing them to both be displaced; I was preparing to write

about this had it occurred, but fortunately, the highway was eventually abandoned due to environmental hazards). I collected over five hundred individual newspaper stories throughout my fieldwork, which I have stored digitally. These stories serve as both empirical sources of information about events and interesting pieces of data through which to analyze the representation of development in Kangra. Examples of these appear throughout the dissertation.

In addition to participant observation in offices and in the field, I also spent a great deal of time with several core families with whom I lived on and off throughout my fieldwork. With these families, I approached research quite differently than I did in institutional contexts. While I collected hundreds of photos and videos of everyday life with these families, especially as they taught me to work on the farm, these moments have largely not made it into the pages of this dissertation. My general focus on institutional encounters means that I have left out much of this informative participant observation from my analysis here, although I hope to incorporate in later writing, but for now, they remain very much the foundation of my understanding of life in the Valley, and of women's lives in particular.

0.7 Chapter Overview

The dissertation is organized around the four primary institutional arenas of my fieldwork, each chapter taking a deep dive into the interactional dynamics of particular development projects in Kangra.

Chapter One, “We Eat Their Minds: Communicative Infrastructures of Development in Kangra” frames the subsequent four chapters by providing an ethnographic exploration of the role of talk in development practice across institutional contexts. I argue that development projects rely on the semiotic labor of low-level bureaucrats, NGO workers, and elected officials, as well as citizens who attempt to enroll, maintain, and at times erase beneficiaries through face-

to-face meetings with villagers. By analyzing my interlocutors' narratives *about* their work, which they understood as "eating people's minds," I show how meetings constitute the primary site wherein workers performatively enact their authority and expertise, and ultimately produced evidence of their effectiveness.

Chapter Two, "Becoming 'Active': Visions of Women's Participation in Development," examines how NGO workers and women's collectives in Kangra co-produce what it means to be an "active participant" in rural development. This chapter interweaves scholarly perspectives on participation to understand how development workers at the NGO Sahayata and women's collectives collaboratively produce and visibilize women's "active" participation. This process relies on certain forms of semiotic labor by Sahayata workers, whose interactional strategies highlight, obscure, and preserve specific practices that ultimately produce a vision of women's collectives as "active" and the NGO itself as a boon to rural women. This analysis reveals how we might more critically assess participation as an ethnographically-situated, highly contested social product.

Chapter Three, "Voicing the State: Register, Play, and Bureaucratic Personhood," examines the role of socially-typified voices, or ways of speaking tied to a particular social persona (Bakhtin 1981), in the everyday production of the state, and how such voices are used to consolidate an image of the Himachali state as exceptionally benevolent and "developed." I examine everyday encounters between rural bureaucrats from Kalyana's Block Development Office and women who receive welfare benefits intended to support rural livelihoods for citizens below the poverty line through the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). I analyze semiotic strategies that bureaucrats deploy in cultivating a figure of personhood (Agha 2005) in which they remain both virtuous (honest, hardworking) and inculpable for problems of service

delivery. These strategies include the usage of an “enregistered voice” (Ibid) of English-infused Hindi that I refer to as the “bureaucratic voice” alongside forms of playful humor that I call “bureaucratic banter.” Together, these practices enact a vision of the Himachali state, and state agents, as exceptionally benevolent, and thus inculpable for instances of rural poverty, while positioning women as both incompetent and irresponsible for their inability to improve their livelihood.

Chapter Four, “Roots of Responsibility: Contesting Expertise in an Agrarian Technocracy,” examines interactional debates between farmers and agricultural extension agents amidst a state-sponsored push to eradicate chemical farming just ahead of two looming deadlines: Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s goal of doubling farmers’ incomes and food production by 2022, and a plan to declare Himachal Pradesh an “organic” state by the same year. I analyze recordings of farmers’ camps, wherein extension agents attempt to persuade women farmers to abandon chemical agriculture in favor of Zero Budget Natural Farming, an agroecological philosophy being piloted statewide by the Department of Agriculture, and further marking Himachal as a “progressive state.” I demonstrate how extension agents use the bureaucratic voice (outlined in chapter three) alongside specialized terminology from agricultural science to cultivate and perform what I call “agro-bureaucratic expertise.” I show how women farmers draw on their own registers of agrarian expertise in Kangri, through which they highlight their existing use of local (*desi*) practices and center the issue of food security for their families, which they argue would be threatened by a total abandonment of chemical inputs. Understanding the dynamics of these debates is crucial for understanding why so-called “progressive” state agricultural policies have circumscribed uptake amongst farmers.

Chapter Five, “‘No One is Poor in Himachal’: Cultivating Stateless Agency in a *Panchayat* Village Assembly,” examines the bedrock of rural governance in India—the village assembly, or *gram sabha*—and the deliberative process whereby citizens are designated as “below the poverty line” (BPL). I examine one *gram sabha* in Kangra wherein BPL status was eradicated altogether, leaving hundreds of people ineligible for a vast array of state aid programs. My analysis shows that the decision to declare Jagni *panchayat* “BPL free” relied heavily on both bureaucrats and elected representatives’ reformulations of the criteria for BPL, and the meaning of “poverty” more broadly, but that their contributions were erased from the unfolding proceedings and the official outcome. More broadly, the findings underscore language as a central modality whereby structural violence remains irreducible to individuals (Gupta 2012), not through practices seen as illicit and transgressive, but through those deemed participatory and inclusive.

The Conclusion returns to the overarching question of the dissertation—how is Himachal’s developmental exceptionalism made and maintained in an era of increasing precarity?—by considering a recent state investment initiative called “Rising Himachal.” The project, which seeks to attract foreign investment in state industries, has positioned the state as a beacon of sustainable and inclusive growth in northern India while courting investments in industries that stand to damage local ecologies and undermining regulations that protect workers and communities. Such processes speak to the ongoing need to critically examine how Himachal’s exceptionalism continues to be produced, and to what ends.

CHAPTER 1:

“We Eat Their Minds”: Communicative Infrastructures of Development in Kangra

“You can’t throw a rock without hitting an organization (*sanstha*) around here anymore,” said Sita, a low-level government bureaucrat at the Kalyana⁹ Block Development Office (BDO). We were on the way to conduct a meeting with members of a self-help group in a nearby village when Sita called attention to the explosion of NGOs in the area in recent years. “There’s now ten organizations in every village! They were only made to eat our minds.”¹⁰ To “eat someone’s mind” in Kangri, as well as Hindi and other north Indian languages, is an idiomatic phrase meaning to annoy, pester, or drive crazy through excessive talking. Sita’s argument that “organizations” only eat people’s minds was repeated by many of my interlocutors in Kangra. Neha, a long-time NGO worker, made a similar statement one day when we were on the way home from a meeting with the leader of a women’s collective (*mahila mandal*). After discussing the leader’s achievements with her collective—getting a handpump for drinking water installed in the village, securing widows’ pensions, filing First Information Reports (FIRs) with police after instances of domestic violence—Neha directly compared her work to that of the leader. “She has done *practical* work. What do we people do? We learn language and give speeches. And oppression will never end by eating people’s minds.”¹¹

Beyond the realm of NGOs, I heard this idea repeated again from farmers at the end of a long workshop on the dangers of chemical farming organized by the Department of Agriculture: “They really eat our minds, you know?” (*dimaag bahut khande, na?*). After a village assembly

⁹ All village, block, and person names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

¹⁰ *Ik ik graan ch das das sanstha aayio. E sirf dimaag khaane vaaste baniyo.*

¹¹ *Inhone practical kaam kiye hain. Ham log kya karte hain? Ham dimaag khate hain. Ham bhaasha seekh ke bhaashan dete hain. Dimaag khaane se se thodi na bitega julm.*

that involved an “awareness camp” (*jagrukta shivar*) in which a local banker from Punjab National Bank lectured women on the importance of maintaining a savings account, I heard it again from an attendee: “All they do is eat our minds.”

By framing themselves and others as “mind eaters”—people who merely talk rather than do “practical work”—my interlocutors made use of a salient idiom that seemed to call attention to a strange conundrum underlying the local economy of development institutions in Kangra: talk is certainly central to what development workers *do*, but it is unclear what all this talking is *doing*. My interlocutors’ qualms with talk resonated with a broader ideology about language, one that is mirrored in scholarship on development practice, which holds that language is merely a neutral medium, used to convey information, and thus devoid of social action. Linguistic anthropologists, however, approach language as a non-neutral medium, one that is not merely representative of inner states but which performatively constitutes social relations in everyday life (Silverstein 1976; Duranti 2011). Nevertheless, most scholars of development have viewed language as an instrumental vehicle for knowledge transmission rather than a political process requiring analysis in and of itself (Lewis and Mosse 2006). As a result, ethnographies of development attempt to trace policy as it circulates first through the realms of offices, bureaucracies, and think tanks, and then attempt to understand how it is “translated” downward, through the interpretative practices of mid-level bureaucrats, low-level fieldworkers, and ultimately to villagers. These practices remain illegible until they are subsequently translated into paperwork and policy documents produced by mid-level managers and ultimately in official development metrics. Problems arise, then, when words are mistranslated and speakers miscommunicate due to irreducible social differences (Salemink 2006), or even, for some, ontological ones (Radcliffe 2015). Very few scholars have considered how everyday

interactional practices themselves constitute and produce developmental logics, nor have they considered the multifunctionality of language beyond its denotational one (cf. Kockelman 2016).

Amongst those who have devoted substantial attention to ordinary encounters between citizens and state/non-state development workers, the talk that mediates those encounters has been seen as ephemeral and fleeting, and rarely analyzed for what its form might reveal about the mechanisms of institutional power, authority, and agency. As such, talk hasn't been considered a technology of state and non-state bureaucracies, and anthropologists have steered more directly toward those papery items that are seen as more concrete and tenacious than "orality's 'jelly fish like' (Scott 2009a, 230) quality—manipulable and fleeting" (A. Sharma 2013, 318; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012a). Given this widespread social and scholarly approach to talk, the question was not necessarily *why* my interlocutors devalued their work as "eating people's minds," but what this framing itself was doing – what it both generated and obscured.

In this chapter, I argue that development projects rely on what I will call the *semiotic labor* of low-level workers who attempt to enroll, maintain, and at times erase beneficiaries through face-to-face meetings with villagers. Their work takes place primarily outside of the physical infrastructures of offices, bureaucracies, and NGO campuses, requiring them to enact forms of institutional expertise and identity through their communicative practices. By first analyzing my interlocutors' narratives *about* their work, which they understood as "eating people's minds," I show how meetings "in the field" constituted the primary site wherein workers performatively enacted their authority and expertise, and ultimately produced evidence of their effectiveness. Although I also spent a great deal of time in bureaucratic offices and NGO campuses, I emphasize "the field" outside of them precisely because this was where my interlocutors carried out the majority of their work with community members, and thus where

they most directly impacted the lives of rural citizens. The time I spent in offices was important for tracing how their fieldwork activities manifested (or not) in the official records of their institutions, and I draw on these experiences in framing my analysis of interactions I witnessed and recorded outside office spaces.

In this chapter, I use my interlocutors' narratives about their work, using this as a springboard from which to consider how the anthropologies of development, bureaucracy, and governance could be enriched by rigorous analysis of everyday talk. I argue that the metaphor of "eating people's minds" revealed an emic framework through which to understand the anxieties and ambivalences of doing development through talk. I then draw on recent anthropological studies of meetings (Sandler and Thedvall 2017; Morton 2014; Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017) in order to consider how face-to-face interactions constitute a "communicative infrastructure" of development in Kangra (Bate 2021; Besky 2016; Elyachar 2010). I argue that meetings, trainings, assemblies, and everyday conversations are not merely sites of information exchange, but they also performatively enact the legibility of development institutions in everyday life, and are the medium through which citizens become enmeshed in and shaped by the logics of developmental governance in Kangra. Finally, bringing theories of affect to bear on language ideologies (Ochs and Schieffelin 1989), I examine how ideologies about *specific* languages guided my interlocutors' multilingual work, and how these underscored the affective potentialities of language choice for generating (or foreclosing) forms of passionate and engaged connection with rural citizens. Before turning to the subsequent chapters, I consider the overall stakes of the project for uncovering how Himachal's developmental exceptionalism is produced, and more broadly, the centrality of talk in the mechanisms of structural violence and exclusion that belie the developmental state in India.

1.1 The Work of Awareness

“There’s no shortage of schemes.” Mahesh, an extension officer with the Department of Agriculture in Kalyana block, was explaining to me the challenges of his work inside his small office. “There’s plenty of schemes, but most farmers don’t know how to take advantage of them, which department to go to.” He framed this problem as a “gap” (using the English word) between the state’s vast services and the actual “awareness” (*jagrukta*) of these amongst farmers. He argued that it was precisely this gap in awareness that he and his staff of agricultural extension officers were filling through their interactions with farmers, both in their offices and through informational “camps” organized in villages. My fieldwork had led me to Mahesh’s office as I sought to understand how state and non-state development institutions conduct their work through interactions with rural citizens, who are primarily small and marginal landholding subsistence farmers in Kangra.

Around this point in our discussion, a male farmer entered his office to inquire about a scheme on subsidies for constructing a polyhouse¹² used to cultivate off-season fruits and vegetables. Mahesh briefly told the farmer that he would first have to acquire certification in the use of a polyhouse from the state agricultural university in Palampur before he would be eligible to apply for the subsidy. Mahesh explained that the training was a procedural requirement for eligibility for the scheme, but he did not assist the farmer in actually signing up for the training, or provide details on who to contact or how. He said to return afterwards to complete the paperwork for the application. The farmer agreed politely before exiting, and Mahesh turned back to me to continue our discussion. After the farmer left, I wondered if he would be able to contact the necessary people at the university to sign up for a training, and then whether or not he

¹² *A polyhouse functions the same as a greenhouse, but its polythene covering makes it cheaper to build and maintain.*

might actually attend the training and then return to the office to fill out the paperwork for the application.

Soon, another farmer entered Mahesh's office, an older man wearing a traditional Himachali cap and gray sheep's wool vest. He sat down next to Mahesh and began to explain to him that he had applied for a subsidy of 15,000 rupees for a power weeder over two months ago, but nothing had been transferred to his account. Mahesh explained that his funds would be disbursed once they were sanctioned by his superiors in Palampur, which he had no control over. He and the farmer continued to talk for another fifteen minutes, during which time Mahesh decried the fact that most farmers don't know what benefits are available to them through the department: "our farmers aren't that aware" (*ahaan de farmer itne jagruk nahi hain*). As they spoke, I heard Mahesh repeat this phrase multiple times, "there isn't much awareness in people" (*lokaan ch itna jagrukta nahi hai*). The farmer, on the other hand, decried the bureaucracy: "Jai Ram Thakur's [the current chief minister of Himachal Pradesh] government never looks down [to the ground]" (*Jai Ram Thakur sarkar kadi thhale nahi dikhdi*¹³).

After the farmer left, Mahesh turned back to me to complete my interview. He pulled out a sheet of paper from the pile on his desk and showed me a list of farmers who had applied for subsidies. "See, people *are* very aware, they're very smart" (*log bahut jagruk hain, bahut smart hain*). "They do apply for schemes, for tractors, power weeders, solar fencing, polyhouses, but then it takes months for the department to approve, sanction, and issue the funds." He explained that he had submitted paperwork for several dozen farmers in his block to receive subsidies, but that it had been months with no response from his superiors in Palampur. "It's a problem with the system," he said (*system ki baat hai*). His critique quickly shifted to corruption in the

¹³ The word for "to look" in Kangri is *dikhna* (*दिखना*), which is similar to the intransitive "seen" in Hindi and Punjabi.

department of agriculture, and he described how the senior officers in the department had their pockets lined by private companies, motivated only by the interests of agrochemical corporations rather than of actual farmers. The reality, he explained, is that he has no “power,” and that none of his superiors listen to his concerns. Once he forwarded the paperwork to the appropriate office, he said, his “hands are tied” by the officers who “sit on our heads” (*jo hamare sir pe baithte hain*). The result of this system was that farmers were always coming to eat his mind—“*aa ke hamare sir khaate hain*”—demanding to know why their benefits have not come through yet. Farmers see “the department” as useless, thinking “these people don’t do anything” (*yeh kuch nahi karte hain*). “We feel sad when we have done our job and even then, farmers don’t get any benefit. Then there’s no joy in working” (*dukh tabhi lagta hai jab ham apna kam karte hain aur fir bhi fayda nahi milta hai, tabhi kam karne mei koi maza nahi aata hai*).

Mahesh’s narrative, as well as that of the second farmer who visited with him, resonates with other ethnographic accounts of how the state in India is produced through narratives of bureaucratic corruption (Gupta 2012; A. Sharma 2018). When speaking with the farmers seeking subsidies, Mahesh framed himself as a source of “awareness,” an informational conduit through which farmers might be able to appropriately identify and apply for schemes, but that his actual power was limited by his low position in the bureaucracy. His effort to generate “awareness” amongst farmers, providing them with information on what to apply for and how, was curtailed by the fact that he had no actual “power” to manifest those benefits himself. He merely served as a conduit between farmers and the department officials—those who “sit on his head” who are responsible for distributing funds. While in one sentence, he explained that the major problem facing him was that farmers are largely “unaware” of the benefits they might avail, in the next, I was assured that farmers *are* indeed aware, but that the “system” was merely too slow and

corrupt to meet their needs. The result, he felt, was that farmers and officers were constantly eating each other's minds—him about applying for benefits, farmers about not receiving them—meanwhile, very little was actually changing in the lives of farmers.

As I continued to follow these block-level workers, I increasingly heard familiar discourses like that of “awareness,” which circulates widely in Indian development discourse (A. Sharma 2008), but the narrative that remained most intriguing to me was that the one in which development institutions were described as merely “eating people's minds,” talking all the time but doing little to actually improve the lives of rural citizens. This discourse was not only a reflection of my interlocutors' frustrations with “the system,” but it also highlighted the fact that talk itself forms a central part of their everyday work, while providing a shield to guard against citizens' claims, one that insulated workers from positions of personal responsibility. When Mahesh decried farmers' lack of “awareness” in one sentence, and the corruption of the bureaucracy in another, he insulated himself from farmers' demands for benefits and maintained a self-presentation as both empathetic to and completely incapable of helping farmers.

Anthropologists have documented these shifting tactics, between neoliberal modes of “awareness”-raising and material forms of welfare provisioning, as integral to the neoliberalization of the Indian state and its development apparatus (A. Sharma 2008; Grewal and Bernal 2014). Some institutions, like the Department of Agriculture, are among the few that do continue to directly provide substantially subsidized and at times free material inputs to farmers—seeds, fertilizers, tools, technologies—but Mahesh and his team of block-level extension agents primarily emphasized that their work is focused on the generation of awareness (*jagrukta*). Jasneet, one of the agricultural extension officers I followed closely, similarly explained in an interview that she understood the main task of her job to be producing awareness

(*jagrukta*) and understanding (*samajh banana*) within farmers. Following similar lines as Mahesh, Jasneet argued that farmers were “unaware” not only of the benefits available to them but of the appropriate use of the benefits they do receive (I discuss extension advice at length in Chapter 4). She explained that her work entailed not only telling farmers what inputs (i.e. seeds, fertilizers) to use, but also ensuring they knew how much to use and why. “It’s not only that we provide technology, but we have to tell farmers how to use the technology. If a farmer is given a ‘medicine’ (pesticide) that he is only supposed to use one milliliter of, but he uses 5 milliliters, then he can destroy his crop.” Jasneet argued that her job was much more difficult than merely delivering this information to farmers; it required building relationships with farmers so that they knew the reasoning behind her recommendations and would then follow her suggestions.

Without this deeper level of understanding, she explained, there was no point (*koi fayda nahi hai*).

When I would ask my interlocutors what they felt it meant to be “aware,” they responded with a range of explanations about understanding one’s rights, knowing about government services, or being sensitive to issues of gender and caste inequality. My interlocutor Neha from the NGO Sahayata explained to me in an interview what it meant to make people “aware”:

“We people, who are Sahayata workers, we people especially try to make people aware about their rights, so that the don’t think that we are slaves, or we are the slaves of the panchayat headperson or we are the slaves of the government administration, but that we have chosen them, they should work for us, that’s why. Only those people who are aware can put pressure.”¹⁴

¹⁴ *Ham log jo Sahayata ke worker hain, khaas kar ham logon ka yahin rehta hai ki ham unko aware karen, unke adhikaaron ke prati, taaki unko yeh naa sochen ki ham gulaam hain ya ham pradhan ke gulaam hain ya prashaasan ke gulaam hain, balki yoh hamne unko chuna hai toh voh matlab hamare kaam karen iske liye. jeda jagruk e saih dabaav paande.*

The awareness that she and others sought, however, did not come from a single or even a handful of meetings with women. Neha explained why her own efforts to transform women into “leaders” in their communities were constrained by the infrequency of their meetings.¹⁵

“If I want to prepare a woman to be a leader, then I will have to work with her for at least three years. Only then will she become a leader. If I say that I have gone and done two meetings and now she is a leader, then she is not a leader. This is the issue with the organization, there are so many projects, sometimes we have to do this work sometimes that work, and so it doesn’t stay regular.”

Since the work that Neha and others did was repetitive and involved long meetings, it was frequently described as a process of eating people’s minds. Often, I would be standing in a crowd, listening to Neha, Jasneet, or Mahesh deliver a speech to a group of women, and someone near me would lean over and smilingly say, “They sure do eat our minds a lot, don’t they” (*bade-bari dimaag khande, na?*).

While many anthropologists have examined the circulation of discourses like awareness as part of the broader shift toward neoliberal development paradigms, my interlocutors’ framings pointed to the way that awareness itself was a shifting category, its meaning produced moment-by-moment, its attainment always elusive. Neha’s formulation of awareness as realizing one’s rights vis-à-vis the state is reminiscent of the work of feminist consciousness-raising inspired by Paulo Freire, and indeed her affiliation with a women’s empowerment NGO meant that her own thinking had been shaped by broader discourses of empowerment. In the time I spent with her, and at the NGO itself, I never encountered the more explicitly Freirian or Gandhian notions of empowerment that have been studied by anthropologists like Aradhana Sharma, Tania Li, and

¹⁵ *Agar mahila leader maine teyaar karni toh kam se kam mere ko teen saal uske saath kaam karna padega. Tab vo leader banegi. Mai bolun ki mai do meeting kar ke aayi aur yeh leader ban gayi, toh vo leader nahi bengi voh. Yeh toh sanstha ka yeh aata hai, kyonki project bahut jyada hain, kabhi yeh kaam karo, kabhi vo kaam karo, toh vo regular nahi ho pata.*

others, which have been operationalized in neoliberal development projects across the Global South (A. Sharma 2008; Li 2007; Cruikshank 1999). That does not mean that such transnationally circulating discourses were not also present amongst rural development workers in Himachal, the discourses I encountered were inherently polysemous, their meaning shifting depending on the context of the interaction.

The fact that awareness seemed a moving target was not merely due to the term's inherent fuzziness (Cornwall and Eade 2010), but it was also reflective of the fact that awareness itself was not only a goal or ideal, but a project and activity (*jagruk karna*; 'to do/make aware')—something they both do and produce. Mahesh, Neha, and other low-level workers attempted to produce awareness through their interactions with rural citizens. Because awareness is for them an ongoing project—something that requires doing and redoing—it entailed the kind of repetitive, exhausting, and even annoying routines that “eating people’s minds” invokes in Hindi and Pahari [Kangri]. By eating people’s minds, development workers were not only talking – they were also (attempting to) transform rural citizens’ understandings of the world, and thus produce new kinds of “aware” subjects.

Becoming “aware,” for my interlocutors, directly impacted what rural citizens would be able to do politically and economically, and thus was wrapped up in notions of productivity and value. By applying for new schemes, farmers might be able to cultivate more efficiently and effectively, and ultimately more profitably (see Chapter 4). By learning about their rights, rural women would not only be able to “put pressure” on powerful institutions, they would also gain access to resources and entitlements that would improve their livelihoods (see Chapter 2). By participating in state livelihood schemes, rural women were expected to become entrepreneurs, generating new sources of income for their households (see Chapter 3). For Mahesh and Neha, as

well as others, the state was providing ample support that rural citizens merely were not taking advantage of due to a lack of awareness – not only of *what* benefits to apply for, but *why* they should apply for them. Making citizens aware required a deeper level of engagement—of *interactions* that had the potential to transform worldviews—rather than merely unidirectional transfers of knowledge or information.

1.2 Language, Labor, Value

The work of raising “awareness” by “eating people’s minds” is central to the everyday labor of development workers in Kangra, who attempt to not only exchange information or services with citizens, but to transform citizens’ understanding of the challenges facing rural livelihoods, and ultimately, who is responsible for mitigating them. This process of generating alignment in meaning is what I refer to throughout this dissertation as *semiotic labor*. Semiotic labor entails a range of communicative strategies, which are shaped by a linguistic economy of value, for producing authoritative meanings, criteria, and visions of rural development, and in Himachal particularly, of rural prosperity. These strategies are explored in depth in each chapter, while the rest of this section examines how anthropologists in recent years have theorized the relationship between language and labor amidst capitalist production and development. The following section considers how semiotic labor unfolds through a communicative infrastructure of development practice rooted in face-to-face meetings, assemblies, trainings, and everyday interactions.

Recent scholarship in anthropology has attended to the growing importance of so-called “immaterial labor” (Lazzarato 1996) in the production of value and subjectivity. In addition to the literature within the field of conversation analysis on talk as a workplace activity (Drew and Heritage 1992; Heritage and Clayman 2010), recent scholarship in linguistic anthropology has

substantial increased attention to the relationship between language and labor, in contexts where both capitalist and cultural value is at stake. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's classic (and rarely cited) work on linguistics and economics proposed that we consider language, and other sign systems, as themselves material "artefacts" that are the product of human work through social praxis (Rossi-Landi 1983; 1977). Proposing an expansion of Marx's labor theory of value through semiotics, Rossi-Landi argues that human work produces both verbal and non-verbal artefacts, which have different use values (a verbal artefact's use value being in human communication, a non-verbal artefact having a range of other use values, although a material artefact like a flag can also have communicative use value as well). Rossi-Landi was primarily concerned with language-as-work outside of the realm of market exchange, and thus more broadly how particular signs circulate and gather meaning in a "speech economy" (see also Duranti 1992, 667). However, other scholars have demonstrated how language itself becomes standardized and exchanged in markets (Keenan 1974; Irvine 1989). More recent examinations of linguistic labor have been primarily concerned with the commoditization of language under neoliberalism. Such work demonstrates how neoliberal conceptualizations of the self as a business have meant that "soft skills" like language, as well as affect and other social practices, have become resources for the production and extraction of surplus value by firms (Gershon 2011; Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013; Shankar 2015).

By demonstrating how firms and workers increasingly generate value from affective, embodied, and linguistic practices, these works have been illuminative of the shifting logics of capitalism worldwide. Scholarship on affective labor, for example, calls attention to how workers under both new and old forms of capitalist production generate value from affect. Building on Hardt's conceptualization of affective labor as work that produces "a feeling of ease,

well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (1999: 96), Mankekar and Gupta analyze the growth of business processing outsourcing (BPO) industries in Bengaluru, India, and how workers’ phone-based interactions with customers are both reliant on BPO agents’ affective labor and productive of affects in the form of brand loyalty or client satisfaction, both of which are monetized by firms (Mankekar and Gupta 2016; 2017; 2019). They argue that affective labor is “predicated not simply on the transmission of information, as technocratic accounts of the BPO industry would have us believe, but also on processes of cultural and experiential border crossing” (Mankekar and Gupta 2017, 79). Workers in BPOs not only marshal their own affective resources to generate value for their companies, but their labor is also productive of workers’ own subjectivities as BPO agents (Mankekar and Gupta 2019).

In addition to affect, recent studies have addressed the centrality of language and interactional practices more broadly to the labor of service workers, including those jobs embedded in development projects. In his study of a German-founded sustainable development NGO in a Guatemalan cloud forest, Paul Kockelman studied how rural villagers working for the project are taught to use limited Spanish and English, alongside conversational norms of greeting, question-answer, assessment, and referring, in order to cater to the communicative expectations of transnational ecotourists who purchase trips to visit villages in the cloud forest (2006). Kockelman argues that the success of the sustainable development initiative is predicated upon the interactions that take place between Q’eqchi’ Mayan villagers and Western tourists. In their interactions, villagers are taught to use a “pidgin language of ecotourism” (2006: 91) in order to cater to the communicative norms and service expectations of tourists; tourists not only pay for certain standards of food and shelter, but they also purchase experiences that include

being communicated with in specific ways. Q'eqchi' villagers are taught—or “capacitated”—with culturally-specific rituals of greeting and departing, are taught to explicitly name plants and animals for tourists, pointing them out as they walk through the cloud forest. These interactions, Kockelman shows, constitute what he calls the “immaterial labor” that is integral to the NGO's success, both ideologically and economically, as it becomes standardized and priced as part of the ecotourism initiative, the profits of which sustain the conservation and development initiative. More broadly, Kockelman shows how these immaterial labor practices transform villagers and tourists' actions into *interactions*, commensurating social practices with monetary value, and transforming Q'eqchi' villagers into capitalist subjects.¹⁶

In another context, Julia Elyachar has examined women's empowerment initiatives via finance in Cairo, and argued that the establishment and maintenance of communicative channels—what she calls “phatic labor”—form the basis of a network of social infrastructure upon which economic value is produced and extracted by finance institutions in Cairo (Elyachar 2010). Elyachar builds on the work of Roman Jakobson (1990 [1960]), who drew on Malinowski's notion of phatic communion (1936 [1923]), or everyday sociality that maintains social ties, to describe the “phatic function” of language as that which creates and sustains communicative channels. Extending this, Elyachar shows how women in Cairo make and maintain social relationships through “visiting, moving around a megacity, chatting, and consolidating friendship,” practices of making and maintaining communicative channels between networks of women through which all kinds of economic resources potentially flow (2010, 457). In Cairo, private companies like Intel and Vodaphone and philanthropic foundations like the Gates Foundation similarly recognize the value of this phatic labor. By drawing on these

¹⁶ See (Emlen 2020) for a similar account of the transformation of rural villagers into capitalist subjects through novel ways of speaking and interacting amidst coffee producers in the Peruvian Andes.

communicative channels, firms and foundations tap into an existing social infrastructure through which to spread new technologies and development projects.

Beyond the realm of market exchange, language and labor have been theorized as central to the performance and management of social identity. Holliday and Squires, for example, have recently analyzed how predominantly white university campuses often entail a hostile “linguistic climate,” wherein the use of varieties of English like African American English are stigmatized (Holliday and Squires 2020). Holliday and Squires show how bidialectal Black college students switch between “standard” and African American English while they navigate a climate of linguistic racism, thereby performing “*sociolinguistic labor*: the physical, emotional, and psychological effort put into deploying sociolinguistic resources in a way that is meant to satisfy others” (Holliday and Squires 2020, 4). Sociolinguistic labor, in their formulation, is thus an extension of longstanding analyses of how speakers use their linguistic and cultural repertoires to performatively enact their social identities across contexts.

In Kangra, the everyday labor of rural development entails multiple forms of social and interactional labor. Much as the service interactions between BPO agents and customers, the greetings between Q’eqchi’ Maya villagers and ecotourists, and the visits between Cairene women constitute far more than “just talk,” the everyday labor of rural development is equally demanding of workers’ social-semiotic resources and productive of their subjectivities. By referring to their work as *semiotic labor*, I highlight the range of communicative practices my interlocutors engaged in to produce and maintain their institutions’ legibility and validity in the field, far from their physical offices or campuses. Since language is inherently embodied and affective (Ochs and Schieffelin 1989), I attend to the many strategies that my interlocutors use to produce and/or contest visions of rural prosperity. This includes the everyday interactions with

farmers that Mahesh and Jasneet had, the meetings that Neha conducts with rural women's collectives, and their reflexive narratives of their experiences in interviews with me. It also includes a range of other communicative practices done for the purposes of maintaining one's network (Elyachar 2010)—phone calls and visits conducted to keep in touch with women who had not been seen in some time, and who might need to be invited to a subsequent training or workshop. It also included the linguistic and affective work of talking to beneficiaries—"eating their minds"—in order to generate the elusive goal of "awareness," and responding to rural citizens who made claims for certain benefits—and thus getting their minds eaten. Their labor was therefore not merely about transmitting information, but was about the production and valorization of meanings within a broader field of meanings, of what constitutes "awareness" and what doesn't, while still maintaining relationships with rural citizens predicated on mutual exchange.

Unlike the service economy, the semiotic labor that my interlocutors engaged in and the value they produced was not *directly* standardized, priced, and extracted for a profit by a firm or NGO; rather, it remains, as Elyachar notes, *in potentia* of becoming translated into economic value (2010: 457). This potentiality, however, was a source of anxiety for my interlocutors, as forms of material exchange between workers and beneficiaries were to be avoided lest their interactions become monetized, and thus corrupt. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss how my interlocutors' management of this corrupting potential was integral to their work, and more broadly, how it served as a narrative frame through which to distinguish and disentangle an otherwise deeply intertwined state/non-state development bureaucracy in Kangra. In section IV, I explore in more detail the interactional practices entailed by semiotic labor, focusing in particular on how talk inside, outside, and about meetings made development institutional logics legible in

the field, was productive of development workers' subjectivities, and generated affective responses from rural citizens.

1.3 Meeting the State

A large, boxy white jeep was picking up speed ahead of me. I was following a group of bureaucrats who invited me to attend a meeting at a local hospital, and I was trying to keep my eyes fixed on the red lettering that set their jeep apart from the others: "Himachal Sarkar" (Himachal Government). I trailed them on my motor scooter, struggling to keep up as they flew over speed bumps and snaked through the dusty, crowded lanes of downtown Kangra city. I balanced myself and my interlocutor from the Block Development Office, Sita, who held on tight behind me. Upon reaching our destination—a local hospital—I followed Sita inside the building where we were ushered into a small conference room full of individual school desks, packed uncomfortably by adult bureaucrats and NGO workers. I immediately recognized a cohort of government officers from the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program, who I had met at the NGO Sahayata months prior during a workshop on the implementation of a law concerning child sexual abuse (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act). I sat next to them and we caught up about how my fieldwork had taken me away from Sahayata and toward the government (*sarkari*) offices, which they were pleased to hear, inviting me to come and visit their offices sometime.

A group of young men went around serving tea and snacks when another familiar face appeared, the administrative head of another NGO in the area who I had interviewed (and who had interviewed me) when I was familiarizing myself with institutions in the region. Somewhat surprised to see me, and I him, we smiled and exchanged nods of greeting. He assumed a

position behind a podium and beside a projector in front of the conference room where he was joined by a hospital coordinator and several representatives from a transnational charity called SmileTrain, which offers free surgeries to children with cleft palates. I listened as the various institutional leaders—the NGO director, the hospital bureaucrat, the SmileTrain representative—described the pro bono surgery program to the ICDS officers, BDO bureaucrats, and NGO workers present, instructing them on what cleft palates are, how to apply for the program, who to contact at the hospital, and what support beneficiaries could expect to receive. After about two hours of presentation and discussion, we stood in line for a buffet of lentils, rice, and vegetables, before crowding back into the room to eat together and catch up on events in our lives.

This scene, extended from my fieldnotes, captures the daily rhythm of the development bureaucracy in Kangra: rushing to meetings where hours of talk is punctuated by unexpected encounters with seemingly disparate officials and institutions. While some meetings, like this one, took place in more formal settings (a conference room in a hospital), many others took place in the homes and terraces of rural villagers, or in the courtyard of a *panchayat* building.

Meetings were productive sites for understanding just how interdependent state and non-state institutions in Kangra are—how they not only co-existed but *relied on* each other's networks, infrastructures, and resources to function. Often, I attended a meeting with interlocutors from the BDO, only to meet bureaucrats from another department, who I had originally encountered through an NGO. Working across institutions, and thus not limiting my observations to a single domain, was not only necessary, it was unavoidable. Given this mutual imbrication, it became important to ethnographically trace how “state” and “non-state” institutions came to be seen as distinct in practice by my interlocutors (A. Sharma 2008; Grewal and Bernal 2014).

Despite their mutually imbricated aims and practices, state and non-state workers held radically different visions of themselves and the institutions they represented. This included both rifts between state and non-state institutions as well as tensions between different state bureaucracies and between different NGOs. Given how intertwined they were, then, my interlocutors' reflexive narratives about their work became an important way to carve out and highlight fissures of difference between their various institutions. This was particularly necessary given how similar their work *looked*, particularly to community members who were often embedded in projects for multiple institutions. Across contexts, the daily life of development involved a core activity: talking, primarily in face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face meetings—including lectures, trainings, workshops, camps, and assemblies—make up the everyday practice of development workers in Kangra, and are the primary way that rural citizens come in to contact with institutions in everyday life (whereas their trips to various NGOs and bureaucracies were rare, if at all). The same was true for NGOs, who often hosted events on their own campus but whose workers spent the majority of their time in the field. Public servants were themselves extremely mobile, spending as much as half of their time conducting meetings in villages, where they might come into contact with other workers conducting similar activities. For state bureaucrats, for example, it became imperative to maintain a boundary between themselves and NGO workers, to distinguish their own work from the similar activities of NGOs, e.g. in promoting microfinance (chapter 3) or sustainable agriculture (chapter 4).

The content of actual meetings—and the semiotic strategies that emerged therein—became legible to me through my meeting-external ethnography. Often, what happened before and after a meeting was arguably more relevant and revealing of the dynamics between development workers, institutions, and rural citizens than what happened during it. The

conversations I had on the way to and from meetings were deeply informative of my understanding of what happened therein. These moments also afforded opportunities to correct a misinterpretation of what I may have seen during a meeting, about what someone said, or about how people were interacting with one another. For example, many times when I would arrive with someone from an NGO to a meeting of an independent women's collective, I would be interpellated as also working for that NGO. As a result, people often presumed I would be uncritical of the NGO, and thus avoided making critical assessments of the NGO's work. After an initial meeting with my NGO interlocutors, however, I would often return to meet with people alone, at which point I would often hear more of their perceptions of the NGO that they had not shared previously. The same was true of my connection to government offices. While I came into contact with many *panchayat* headpersons through my work with the Block Development Office, I would later travel back to a *panchayat* to do follow-up interviews or just to causally meet people for lunch or tea. In each of these encounters, I would learn about the hidden conflicts, slights, and mistrust that was invisible to me during the initial meeting itself.

One way that my interlocutors enacted boundaries between institutions was to highlight differing approaches and understandings of appropriate relations of exchange and reciprocity with rural beneficiaries. While all the workers I followed engaged in similar forms of community-based service, my interlocutors from multiple institutions strove to distinguish their work from that of other institutions in the area on the basis of the kinds of relationships they cultivate with beneficiaries. A key way of doing this was by framing their service as unidirectional—giving, not taking. In the case of one particular rivalry between two different NGOs in the area, both of which were engaged in programs of “women's empowerment,” my interlocutors from one NGO, Sahayata, framed the opposing NGO as taking from—even

looting—villagers through their microfinance program, whereas they saw themselves as “social workers,” servants to communities who gave rather than took. In another instance, Sita, the state bureaucrat I worked with from the BDO, painted all NGOs as fundamentally parasitic—as reliant on the gifts and generosity of community members to conduct their work, whereas the state maintained a clear line of distance from beneficiaries, refusing to engage in forms of exchange with them. On one occasion, for example, Sita went to conduct a meeting with a women’s self-help group at the office of a local *panchayat*. When we reached, we found the *panchayat* office was closed and locked, despite it being 11 AM on a weekday. Sita called the *panchayat* headperson (*pradhan*) and angrily demanded she send the *panchayat* watchman (*chaukidaar*) to come and open the office. The headperson told her everyone was busy conducting business outside the office, and suggested Sita conduct her meeting in the home of one of the women themselves. Deeply offended by the suggestion, Sita went on to argue that she is not some “NGO person” who would conduct a meeting at someone’s home:

Why should we do the meeting in someone's house? This is our government office, it's not like we are from an NGO, that there's no place for us to sit. And we need neither the *pradhan* nor the secretary, we just need this to be open, right? [...] And the government gave us this (building) to sit for a meeting, we are going to do the meeting here. Why should I go to someone's house? We bring our food, we bring our own water. We have no need to sit at anyone's home. NGO people go to people's homes and sit, because they need everything there. Absolutely. Not us. Hannah have you seen me? Have you? We do not go to anyone's house to do a meeting. We do not eat anything at anyone's home. Right? We have to worry about our jobs, right? If one day someone comes to our house and says, "give me these things to eat" then what? Right? What do NGO people do? They will eat, and even if they get fired, they will join another NGO. Isn't it? Okay then, why do we have to go to someone's house and do it? Order the watchman to keep this open. We will come and do a meeting when we like.

Here, Sita distinguishes the nature of her work from that of NGO workers in several ways. First, she claims that as a government officer, she will only conduct meetings in official government buildings, like the *panchayat* office. Although I accompanied Sita and other bureaucrats on multiple occasions to meetings at beneficiaries’ homes, her own framing is one that directly

attaches the location of her work to its authority and legitimacy. The other way that Sita argues her work is incommensurable with that of NGO workers is in the lack of material or social reciprocity between herself and her beneficiaries—a practice that would jeopardize her job. NGO workers, she says, *have to* conduct meetings in people’s homes because *they need everything* there. By this, she means food, drink, shelter, hospitality, and infrastructure for meetings (e.g. chairs, tables, floor rugs). Although bureaucrats were embedded in relationships of exchange with beneficiaries (they did visit their homes, drink tea, etc.), they consistently maintained that their work was purified of such potentially corrupting practices. This incommensurability was directly contrasted with the practices of NGO workers, who bureaucrats argued were dependent on the resources of the women they targeted to function. By reflexively narrating these moral distinctions in practice, bureaucrats constituted themselves as both virtuous and benevolent (see chapter 3), as well as authoritative representatives of the state (see chapter 5).

Rivalries between NGOs in Kangra were similarly fraught, and the co-presence of multiple NGOs in a single village meant that workers were constantly struggling to distinguish themselves from other NGOs in the area. On several occasions, I would accompany Neha and other Sahayata workers to a meeting with a women’s collective in a village only to find that representatives from another large women’s empowerment NGO in Kangra were already there, and were busy conducting their business with the women present. This would lead to an awkward situation in which Sahayata workers—who primarily worked through speaking—were left waiting while the other NGO—which primarily focused on maintaining microfinance savings and loan self-help groups within the broader collective—conduct their auditing and collection of payments from women.

In their narratives, Sahayata workers' portrayed the other NGO's microfinance program as an exploitative and harmful practice for rural women, while arguing that their own work to promote women's empowerment through talk was at minimum not harmful, even if it was limited in its effectiveness, given its "impractical" connotations. Not only Sahayata workers, but also my interlocutors from the Block Development Office (who were engaged in their *own* microfinance scheme) articulated the microfinance NGO, and its workers, as "looters" (*thagnewaale*). Both Sita and Anita, low-level bureaucrats from the BDO, said this on separate occasions when conducting their own meetings with a women's self-help groups. "These [NGO] people take 10 rupees per person per meeting. They just make as many groups as they can to take people's money. They're just a bunch of looters (*thagnewaale hain*)."¹⁷ Neha, from Sahayata, told me that even if her own work was just to "give speeches," at least she didn't have anything to do with money or loans for villagers. "We stay away from money," she told me. Another Sahayata worker, after running into the other NGO's workers at a meeting, put it this way:

We come to give information (*jankaari dene ke liye aate hain*), and if you don't want to take it then fine. We are at least helping people whereas all they [other NGO] cares about is money.

After another meeting where the two NGOs collided again, I asked another Sahayata worker named Bimla to explain to me why the two organizations don't work together given the similarity of their goal to empower women. She said, "[Other NGO] people want that they should be the only ones working in this village and no other organization, but this is also our village! Their one work is with money, nothing else."¹⁷

¹⁷ [NGO name] wale chahte hain ki sirf woh is goan mei kam karen aur koi aur sanstha nahi, par yeh bhi hamara goan hai. Unka sirf paise ka kam hai, aur kuch nahi.

By framing their work as incommensurable with forms of material and social exchange, my interlocutors all similarly sought to distinguish themselves and their institutions within the vast array of development organizations in the area. My interlocutors, from both state and non-state institutions, remained concerned about the line between their interactions with rural women crossing over into a transactional arena. NGO workers, who primarily conducted their activities in and around people's homes, made sure to always bring tiffins from home with food to eat during the day so as not to rely on their host's generosity. BDO workers, on the other hand, refused to conduct meetings outside of the *panchayat* building where they could maintain a connection to "state" authority. In the next section, I expand on how the actual form of my interlocutors' meetings were generative of the bureaucratic logics of their particular institutions, and how the evidence produced thereof was critical to the performance and maintenance of institutional legibility and authority in the field.

1.4 Infrastructures of Interaction

Face-to-face meetings—within, across, and outside of institutional settings—constitute the bulk what of what low-level state and non-state development workers do on a daily basis. As such, they were an extremely rich ethnographic site from which to understand the practices of particular institutions, to see the interwoven nature of institutions across state and non-state lines, to discover the rifts and rivalries between them, and to socialize and eat delicious meals together with people you might otherwise not see. They were also a mechanism for the enactment, performance, and contestation of institutional logics outside of the physical environs of offices and NGO campuses. Meetings were not only where things got done, but meetings themselves *did* things (Morton 2014; Sandler and Thedvall 2017).

Although “in scholarship on bureaucracy, *writing* has remained the very image of a formal organizational practice, the central semiotic technology for the coordination and control of organizations” (Hull 2012: 20), the meeting is also a central semiotic technology through which development institutions, policies, and political economic rationalities are made real in everyday life. The meeting is semiotic in that it is a vehicle for meaning production, and it is a technology in that it is an organizational tool used for particular ends, which has recognizable features, affordances, and constraints. Both development workers *and* rural citizens conceptualize development as a series of meetings, in which they “eat one another’s minds.” Across the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how state and non-state development workers’ codes, registers, voices, as well as affective and embodied resources, were central to the constitution and performance of their professional identities inside and outside of meetings. I argue that these semiotic strategies are not peripheral to the bureaucratic practices of different institutions, but are constitutive of them. In this section, I consider more broadly how the format, arrangement, and documentation of meetings reveal distinct institutional and ideological logics that animated different development institutions in Kangra.

In recent years, anthropologists have examined both what constitutes a meeting as an organizational ritual, and also what meetings themselves generate in the world. Helen Schwartzman, in her now-classic ethnography *The Meeting*, defines meetings as communicative events where people “assemble for the purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or group” (Schwartzman 1989, 7). In conversation analysis, a robust body of literature on workplace interaction has considered meetings through a noticeably Western framework of institutional practice, characterized by a bounded time frame, norms of turn-taking and consensus-building, and “explicitly goal directed interaction” (Raclaw and Ford 2015; Drew

and Heritage 1992). The analyst's task then was to trace how participants achieved social order through their interaction, thereby build meaning in situ. Anthropological accounts of meetings extended these insights to understand how speakers in non-Western contexts (Brenneis 1987; Duranti 1994) co-constitute meaning through locally salient interactional norms.

More recent anthropological accounts take meetings to be emic categories, defined through the perspectives of their interlocutors (Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017, 11), while still attempting to generate a broader theory of the meeting as a performative technology of development and governance. Drawing on Brian Larkin's theory of infrastructure as both architecture and practice of circulation (Larkin 2013), Thedvall and Sandler conceptualize meetings as "architectures" to capture their simultaneous material and aesthetic dimension, as built around contextually-specific norms of timeliness, turn-taking, agenda-following, and other practices. They consider them "practices of circulation" to capture the ways in which existing forms of language, documents, decisions, and ideas are drawn on and reformulated in practice. Finally, they consider meetings as "makers" to capture their productive capacity—the way that they generate institutional logics, power relations, ideologies, and subjects. Nayanika Mathur, in her analysis of meetings between government (*sarkari*) officials in Uttarakhand, similarly argues that meetings are "the theatre of the state" through which "agents perform 'being *sarkari*'"; she argues that meetings generate a palpable "*sarkari* affect" that constitutes and "perpetuates bureaucratic life" (Mathur 2016, 31–32). Meetings are thus performative in that they both make institutions, and they make people into specific kinds of subjects, whether they be "willing revolutionaries[,] endlessly improvement-oriented workers [or] rule-internalizing bureaucrats" (Sandler and Thedvall 2017, 16).

Mass meetings have long been crucial for the generation of political subjectivity and national belonging in South Asia. Bernard Bate has analyzed how face-to-face meetings and vernacular oratory delivered by activists at the turn of the century in Tamil Nadu became the “interpellative infrastructure” through which the idea of a singular Tamil public sphere came into being (Bate 2021, 66). As the Indian independence movement advanced, mass meetings and vernacular speeches constituted a novel semiotic technology through which previously unaddressed groups were addressed as members of a unified public. Bate argues that vernacular oratory, mass meetings, and other communicative genres like poetry and songs, provided the infrastructure of modern Tamil politics; this was the medium through which the idea of a Tamil people, as well as a broader national body politic, was called into being, generating new modes of political agency. Vernacular oratory was itself a novel technology of politics, and the novel interactions it generated—between elites and non-elites, high and low castes, literate and illiterate—were the building blocks that unified previously disparate groups into a newly constituted political whole. Bate’s approach to vernacular oratory and mass meetings as infrastructures of politics points to the centrality of communicative genres to the project of state- and nation-building. As this dissertation is also concerned with meetings that took place primarily outside of government or NGO offices, ranging from audiences of a few dozens to a few hundred, I also consider how meetings function as an infrastructure for the state and non-state project of development in Himachal Pradesh. Formal differences between, for example, a meeting between a bureaucrat and a small help-group and a village assembly, point to similarly distinct histories and logics of institutional power. The former, with its emphasis on auditing and tracing the activities of women, echoes the bureaucratic state’s emphasis on surveillance and documentation, while a village assembly entails a massive political exercise of decentralized democracy predicated on an

attempt at consensus-building. Both types of meetings are integral to the production and visibilization of development in Himachal Pradesh, and indeed they bring together otherwise disparate groups who both shape and are shaped by the social imaginary of exceptional development in the region.

Meetings are thus “infrastructures of interaction” in that they become the basis through which rural people (especially women) come into contact with, and are implicated in relations of obligation with, the state/non-state development apparatus. Since the vast majority of rural people involved in development programs are non-elite, they contribute less to the written infrastructures of bureaucracy underpinning the developmental state; however, their presence and participation in meetings, workshops, trainings, and other face-to-face encounters are the basis upon which such forms of documentation come to exist in the first place. By attending to these spaces, I demonstrate how non-written communicative interactions form the basis upon which institutions are made legible in everyday life, and the communicative strategies deployed therein become critical tools through which development workers attempt to reshape rural citizens’ ways of seeing and enroll them into programs; for citizens, these meetings are a primary mode through which they make demands on the state and stake claims to both rights and services.

1.5 Meeting Forms and Formalities

While the English word “meeting” was itself used across the institutional contexts I examined, the word meant something different to different people in different contexts. Whereas some considered meetings to be a multiparty discussion amongst a group of people, others considered meetings as intended for the delivery of information that attendees were expected to absorb. Broadly, meetings entailed gatherings of two or more people wherein at least one person

was there in an official capacity and with the goal of performing tasks required by their profession—providing information on a scheme, monitoring self-help group activities, facilitating a discussion on current events, identifying beneficiaries for a program, etc. These two general types of meetings were qualitatively very different—one might entail far more unidirectional, lecture-style interaction while another would be multi-party, conversational interaction—formats that broadly mapped on to the logics of the institutions themselves. However, I do not take these two general patterns to be indicative of a more “egalitarian” vs. “hierarchical” ethos (as, perhaps, my interlocutors might suggest), but rather that specific developmental logics were themselves embedded in meeting formats.

The most crucial thing that meetings *did* was enroll rural people into relationships with development institutions, thereby generating expectations of subsequent interactions and participation in programs. For example, when my interlocutors from the BDO needed to form a self-help group through the National Rural Livelihood Scheme (see Chapter 3), they relied on *panchayat*-level contacts, particularly the secretary, to identify potential beneficiaries and call them together for a meeting. Women would then receive a phone call from the *panchayat* secretary, and would be told to come for a meeting without any further explanation of what the meeting would be about – they would merely be told to bring their government ID (*aadhaar*) card, and arrive at a certain time. On one occasion, I recorded a meeting in which Sita was forming new NRLM self-help groups in a *panchayat*, which involved her giving a lengthy speech on the aims of the program and the expectations of members, including how they would be required to take a small business loan and begin an income-generating activity at home. The women listened quietly, and after it was over, I followed them outside to ask them some questions. “Did you know what the meeting was going to be about today?” I asked one woman.

“No, we were just told to come and bring our *aadhaar* card.” She said. “Do you know what kind of work you will do through this scheme?” I asked. “No idea.” She said. “Do you think this scheme will benefit you?” I asked. “We’ll have to wait and see. We only just became BPL (i.e. officially below the poverty line, and thus eligible for the NRLM scheme), and we haven’t received and benefit from the government yet. We are interested in working, but we’re not sure how.” Later, when Sita and I left the *panchayat*, she began commenting on the success of the meeting, and particularly the fact that four groups had been officially formed. I responded, asking whether she thought the women would be likely to follow through with her instructions about starting an income-generating activity at home. Sita responded: “This is a good *panchayat*. 100% they will do it. 100%.”

For NGO workers, meetings were instrumental for identifying women to attend later trainings and workshops at their main campus, and for involving them in ongoing projects. Meetings were rarely one-offs; they set up expectations for follow-up meetings. For example, when my interlocutors knew that they were responsible for bringing a certain number of women to a training in a month’s time at the main NGO campus, they would begin organizing many field visits to cultivate the relationships that would generate enough goodwill for women to agree to the arduous burden of taking a day or two away from their home duties to attend a workshop at the NGO campus many miles away. These requests were never presented outright to women; they were always brought up at the end of a meeting, after they had been speaking for an hour or two, in which NGO workers offered advice on local problems that women wanted to have addressed. After the NGO worker had offered information, for example, on how to attain information about the status of a road under construction through the Right to Information Act, or answered women’s health-related questions about how to make a home remedy for menstrual

cramps, then the NGO worker would ask the women present to volunteer to attend an upcoming overnight training or workshop on their campus in the coming weeks. Securing volunteers was difficult, because women often felt unable to leave their homes for multiple days at a time, and were expected to be home by male relatives. Yet, once a group of women had established a relationship with an NGO worker in a meeting, they often felt obliged to help them – knowing that this was part of their job – and one or two women would volunteer to attend. The NGO worker would then be sure to take their phone number, and would make follow-up calls to ensure the women actually did show up to the training.

Meetings were also generative in that they produced institutional authority in village spaces far from government bureaucracies and NGOs; meetings were themselves the infrastructures. The embodied interactional arrangement of meetings often mirrored the logics and values of the institutions themselves. As such, meetings by BDO workers or agricultural extension agents often looked quite different from those conducted by NGO workers. Sahayata, the NGO where I spent most of my time, conducted meetings on their home campus in a large room where everyone sat on the floor in a circle. In Figure 1, for example, several workers from the NGO Sahayata lead a discussion on the verandah of a women's collective building in a village fifty kilometers from the NGO's campus. Their format mirrors the dynamics of their meetings in the NGO itself. In Figure 2, for example, an NGO worker leads a meeting with members of women's collectives in the offices of the NGO, organized in a single circle where everyone is seated at the same height.



Figure 1.1 NGO worker leads a meeting at the home of a women’s collective leader



Figure 1.2 NGO worker leads a meeting with women’s collectives at Sahayata

In both Figures 1.1 and 1.2, there is a similar arrangement of bodies in space. Both meetings entailed a single NGO worker positioned on the floor in a circular formation with women, who looked toward her as she led a discussion on women's health (Figure 1.1) and panchayat governance (Figure 1.2). Both of these meetings also took place entirely in Kangri, the most used local language, and involved several interactive activities where women were asked to work in small groups to discuss a problem, and present their discussion to the larger group. This format mirrored the NGO's own internal meetings, which entailed meta-level discussions on the proper conduct of meetings in the field. In an early workshop I attended during my fieldwork, I recorded a session in which NGO workers discussed how to conduct a meeting with adolescent girls who were participating in a government scheme called SABLA (Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for the Empowerment of Adolescent Girls; now discontinued in Himachal) which was administered through the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The scheme itself entailed a wide range of goals concerning the empowerment of adolescent girls, including teaching girls about health, hygiene, nutrition, skills, and exposure to public service institutions like banks and police stations. I observed and recorded a session in which senior NGO workers led an instructional workshop for junior NGO workers in which they were asked to collaboratively design a "module" for how to conduct a meeting with adolescent girls. The team members broke into small groups, designed a module on a piece of chart paper, and then presented their module to the larger group. In figure 5, the text of one group's module includes the steps with which they should conduct a meeting:

Workshops like these were particularly used for training new recruits in the conduct of NGO work in the field. Sahayata frequently transitioned young women who had reached the age of 18 who had previously participated in their youth programming into roles as part-time fieldworkers for projects involving adolescent girls. In this particular training on the SABLA scheme, there were role-playing exercises in which new recruits were instructed to performatively enact a meeting using NGO workers as actors. As the new recruits conducted the role play, the more senior fieldworkers would then interrupt them, commenting on how they were standing, speaking, and otherwise behaving. They were instructed to speak loudly, to maintain eye contact, and to inject liveliness into their speech. This reflexive training process was necessary for NGO leaders who felt that their young recruits were often too shy and unconfident to perform fieldwork with women, and that they required explicit training and “capacitization” to be able to become legible as a Sahayata worker in the field.

Unlike the workers in Sahayata, those from the BDO and Department of Agriculture conducted meetings in a different format wherein one or more workers would sit in chairs or at a table facing rows of women either on the floor or in chairs organized in rows facing the front of the room. The interactional dynamics in these spaces differed accordingly; in Sahayata’s meetings, an NGO worker would seek to stimulate a back-and-forth discussion with women present, who were often asked call-and-response style questions and were encouraged to contribute to the discussion. Meetings organized by the BDO or agricultural extension officers would often recreate the dynamics of their offices in the field. The worker would sit in a chair, often behind a table taken from someone’s home that was placed in front of them to resemble a desk, and women would sit on the floor facing the speaker. The speaker would then deliver a lecture, with little back-and-forth with the audience, and women would be expected to listen

quietly. In Figure 3, for example, Jasneet, an agricultural extension agent from the Department of Agriculture, conducts a meeting in which she delivers information on schemes available through the department. The meeting itself is taking place on the verandah of a farmer's house, and she has arranged herself seated in a chair with a makeshift "desk" in front of her, consisting of a coffee table brought out of the farmer's house. On top of this "desk," Jasneet has placed the attendance register for the meeting, along with a folder containing information pamphlets about the schemes. The women sit on the floor, facing her while she speaks. A similar arrangement is visible in Figure 4, where Anita, a bureaucrat from the Block Development Office, conducts a meeting with self-help groups on the verandah of a panchayat building, where she sits in a plastic chair facing women below her.



Figure 1.4 Jasneet, agricultural extension agent, delivers information on schemes to group of women farmers



Figure 1.5 Anita, bureaucrat from Block Development Office, leads a meeting with a self-help group

Both NGO and “state”-led meetings, despite their visible differences, disciplined women’s attention: if women engaged in separate discussion, they were hushed and asked to pay attention. The tolerance that workers exhibited for disinterested or disruptive behavior during a meeting varied based on the worker, but I found the general expectations of minimizing overlapping talk, facing the speaker, and remaining for the length of the meeting remained the same across contexts. By far the most common challenge my interlocutors faced was the latter, as women were often anxious to get home in time to cook dinner for the family. When a meeting stretched beyond 4:00 in the afternoon, there was often nothing anyone could do to demand women’s attention any further.

In addition to the contours of how meetings were conducted, the actual dynamics of meetings were often just as important as the evidence of their existence. For both Sahayata workers and others, meetings were thus performative in that they provided opportunities to generate evidence of their “output” to the institutions that employed them. For everyone I worked with, this entailed providing physical documentation of a meeting in the form of either (1) photographs or (2) attendance registers. The NGO workers primarily used the former, while the state bureaucrats used the latter (V. Das 2004; Cody 2009).

In January 2019, for example, I traveled with a team from the NGO Sahayata to attend the monthly meeting of a *mahila mandal* (women’s group), where they planned to deliver some information about an upcoming workshop for women’s groups in Kangra. After making the one-hour journey to reach the village, we found that only a couple of women had shown up for the meeting. Without a substantial number of the members present, Sahayata workers decided to reschedule their visit for a later date, and then began to pose the women for a group photograph. Needing to populate the shot, they asked two women working in the neighboring Anganwadi (preschool) center to join, who stepped out with a throng of toddlers. As they gathered together, two more women passed by the group on foot, en route to pick up their children from the school bus. Noticing the group, they stopped and chatted with the others present before a Sahayata worker asked them to stand for the photo. I quickly snapped the photo at his request and the worker, standing in the half circle of women said, in the spirit of “*cheese*”: “Awareness meeting photo!” My interlocutors would use the photo later as evidence of their work with this particular women’s group.

On another instance in September 2018, I went with Jasneet, an agricultural extension agent, to a meeting with a group of women farmers in a nearby village, where she planned to

disseminate information about agricultural schemes and distribute free samples of okra seeds and pesticides. As women arrived in staggered waves, Jasneet asked each of them to sign their name in her register, and then to sign names of other women in their extended families. “Don’t sign the same way – change your signature a bit.” Each woman signed two, three, four times in different ways, as Jasneet asked “do you have a *Jhethani* (elder sister-in-law)? *Darani* (younger sister-in-law)? Who else is at home?” Providing these signatures remained a ritual of participation for these women, and valuable evidence for Jasneet, who must submit the attendance register to her boss as evidence of her extension activities. I didn’t ask her about the inflated signatures, but Jasneet nevertheless bemoaned what she was doing: “We have to show numbers. Otherwise, we will be scolded from above (*upar se daant padegi*).”

In both of these instances, the meetings themselves were secondary to the evidence of their existence. By providing digital copies of the photographs or the attendance register, they created lasting material representations that would go on to serve as evidence of the success of their work at subsequent scales of the organizational or bureaucratic hierarchy. This process has been well documented in studies of development, but rather view it as evidence of corruption, scholars have shown how such practices of “cooking data” (Biruk 2018) are constitutive of knowledge production more generally—of the selective ways that people craft coherence through narratives drawing upon incoherent or often irreconcilable experiences (Bruner 2002; Ochs and Capps 2002).

The final way in which meetings were productive of institutional logics was through the actual linguistic choices that they made therein. The code and register choices made by speakers generated certain affective affordances and constraints that were central to the production and maintenance of effective communication with rural citizens. How these choices were made, the

language ideologies informing them, and the affects they generated are the subject of the next and final section of this chapter.

1.6 Language Ideologies, Affective Ideologies

Since Kangra is a densely multilingual region, the question of language choice was central to the everyday work of my interlocutors. The language used most widely in the communities where I worked was Kangri, also known by its more colloquial term, Pahari, meaning “of the mountain.” Pahari is spoken by a range of caste groups, but the majority of the people who I worked with were agriculturalists from middle- and upper-castes (OBC and General). There was a smaller population of Scheduled Caste (Dalit, or locally known as *harijan*), groups in the area, including the community in which I lived for fourteen months, who were Pahari-speaking Sikhs who I was often told by residents nearby that they were “actually” *harijan*, but had converted to Sikhism. (My inclination was never to ask my neighbors about their conversion to Sikhism, and to see them as they understood themselves: as Sikh). There were several other languages spoken by communities that originated outside of Kangra but had settled there, some many generations prior, including Gaddi (also often called Pahari), spoken primarily by a community consisting of multiple castes that originated in the Bharmour sub-district of Chamba, the neighboring district north of Kangra, who were previously nomadic shepherds but had settled in Kangra to work in business and agriculture. Gaddi was largely used by members of the Gaddi community, and was not learned by the broader Pahari-speaking population, although the two languages are themselves closely related and share many features, allowing speakers to understand one another to various degrees. Although most Gaddi speakers had competence in Pahari, they preferred to communicate in Hindi with non-Gaddi speakers and even often declared themselves as incompetent in Kangri. In turn, learning Gaddi was not a

priority for non-Gaddi development workers, who expected to communicate in Hindi or Kangri with Gaddi speakers, while those who used the Gaddi language were mostly themselves members of the Gaddi community.¹⁸

Alongside Gaddi speakers, there was also a substantial community of Nepali speakers belonging to the Gorkha brahmin caste, who historically had served in the army of British India, but had resided in the area for generations and were similarly engaged in agriculture and other small businesses. They maintained their language across generations, even as young children of Kangri- and Gaddi-speaking parents were rapidly shifting toward Hindi, and maintained a strong caste-based community connection through living in shared village areas, maintaining distinct spaces of worship (which were Nepali Hindu temples dedicated to Shiv ji, the dominant deity in the region), marrying within the caste, among others. I had many Nepali-speaking interlocutors during my fieldwork, but Nepali itself was never used outside of the interactions within Gorkha village areas, at the temple, or at people's homes.

In addition to Gaddi and Nepali, Kangra is also home to a substantial population of Tibetan speakers belonging to the exiled Tibetan refugee community. The Tibetan community, far more than the other groups seen as being "from outside" (*baahar se*), operated outside of the purview of state development institutions in Kangra offered. There are many reasons for this, chief among which is the fact that Tibetans are still considered temporary refugees and are not Indian citizens.

¹⁸ *The Gaddi community has a highly complex relationship with both caste and language. There are two overarching Gaddi communities in Kangra, who are locally called Gaddi brahmin ('high' caste) or "pure" (tribal) Gaddis. Both are officially designated as "Scheduled Tribe" for the purposes of official documents, a designation that was seen as inappropriate by many of my interlocutors given both caste differentiation of the community and the fact that most Gaddis in Kangra no longer participated in the traditional forms of pastoralism associated with the nomadic Gaddi community in Bharmour. Gaddi Brahmins in Kangra allied themselves first and foremost with their caste identity over their language or "regional" identity; a Gaddi brahmin could easily marry a non-Gaddi brahmin that spoke Kangri and had no connection to the region of Bharmour where Gaddi people are from. The Gaddi language was equally as fraught – there were substantial groups of Gaddi brahmins that spoke Kangri over Gaddi, while most of the younger generation had shifted to Hindi entirely, while so-called "pure" Gaddis continued to speak the language.*

The Tibetan community, as a result, maintains a robust set of social welfare institutions for its own members, including schools, hospitals, cultural centers, places of worship (primarily Buddhist temples), charitable organizations, and NGOs. As a result of this political, economic, and cultural divide, none of the institutions conducted any activities with Tibetan speakers.

Aside from the Tibetan community, Kangra is also home to a range of migrant communities from across India, who are primarily low-caste and tribal citizens from Rajasthan and Bihar, many of whom have been living in the area for decades, but are widely excluded from the welfare provisioning efforts of local bureaucracies and NGOs. My own engagement with migrant laborers in the area was limited to my friendship with one family that lived in my neighborhood, who were *Adivasi* (indigenous) migrants originally from Rajasthan who spoke Hindi and Marwari. The parents worked as recycling collectors (*kabaad*), and their seven children (six girls and a boy) attended school and looked after each other while their parents walked dozens of kilometers collecting used electronics, which they carried on foot to fix and resell. They had previously lived in a slum area along a river in Kalyana, which was demolished at the beginning of the “Smart City Mission,” an urban development project that began in 2015. Along with hundreds of other migrants who had been living in the settlement for many years, this family’s home was destroyed and they were forced to relocate, fortunately finding a small, two-room set in a mud house that they rented for 1000 rupees per month (15 USD). This family never received assistance from the state, nor were they involved in any efforts by NGOs. Like most migrant laborers, they were de facto excluded from the range of welfare institutions that catered to “local” citizens.

While the actual degree of linguistic and social complexity in the region was quite broad, the range of differences navigated by my interlocutors in development institutions was decidedly

narrower. The groups that my interlocutors targeted through their work were primarily Kangri and Gaddi-speaking agriculturalists, but Kangri was by far the more commonly used language in everyday interactions. During meetings, the choice of language was fraught with another set of options “from outside”: Hindi and English. In recent decades, Hindi has become widespread in Himachal Pradesh through both education and mass media. As the official language of the state (alongside English), most of my interlocutors learned Hindi in school, while continuing to use Kangri or Gaddi at home. Even this, however, was a recent shift: it has only been in the last twenty years or so that teachers were themselves proficient enough to use Hindi in the classroom, previously using local languages to communicate.

These days, Hindi has become more of a dominant language for younger generations due to the predominance of Hindi-language media, and Hindi-medium schooling. Most young children would not be exposed to Hindi until they began school at age five, but soon thereafter, they would cease using Kangri or Gaddi at home. Parents, often associating Hindi with upward mobility, often also used Hindi with their children. While many schools in the area are themselves English-medium, the actual linguistic fluency in English amongst my interlocutors, both development workers and ordinary citizens, was highly limited. English was rarely used beyond individual lexemes. Aside from the more senior bureaucrats I interviewed, e.g. the Block Development Officer, no one I worked with felt comfortable conversing in English. As such, it was largely agreed that English was an inappropriate medium for meetings. Hindi, however, occupied a far more complex position for my interlocutors. Although nearly everyone in the age range of forty and under had received Hindi-medium schooling until at least eighth standard, the same was not true for people in the middle- and upper-age range, and especially not for older women, most of whom had received far less education in their childhood than is standard

practice today. So, whereas passive competence in Hindi was widespread, active competence varied widely across people by age, gender, class, and caste.

Given these general sociolinguistic dynamics, I now want to consider how my interlocutors framed their linguistic choices metapragmatically, particularly how they attributed affective affordances and constraints to their linguistic choices, which were said to generate or close off potential connections between speakers. My interlocutors' ideological discourses about their language choices at work were metapragmatically framed as affectively (rather than communicatively) consequential, and their actual language choices (which mirrored and diverged from their metapragmatic discourses) were similarly generative of affects that shaped the engagement they received from their audience, and thus the perceived success of their work.

Narratives about which language was most appropriate to use in working with rural communities were rarely ever rooted in a concern about mutual intelligibility. Throughout my fieldwork, I constantly asked my interlocutors about their language choices in meetings with rural women, particularly the decision to use Hindi vs. Pahari vs. Gaddi. While I expected to hear explanations related to speakers' differing linguistic competences, I was instead told by people from across the institutional spectrum that "everyone understands Hindi." I was told that if people do not understand what is happening in a meeting, it was not because they lack the linguistic competence necessary to comprehend the Hindi utterances, but rather because they are unable to connect to the words, and therefore the speaker, at a deeper level. Language choice, thus, was less a question of (mis)communication, and more of a choice with affective consequences. The language one chose to use either made possible or constrained one's affective connection to their interlocutor. The wrong language, I was told, would generate feelings of

intimidation, fear, and alienation, thereby undermining their attempt to engage women in an *interaction*, rather than a unidirectional speech or lecture.

For those working in NGOs or as elected representatives in *panchayats*, the consensus was that it was necessary and important to speak in Kangri, particularly with rural women. Uma, the headperson (*pradhan*) of a *panchayat* near my home, was deeply embedded in development institutional networks around Kalyana. She had previously worked for the NGO Sahayata for a decade, where she specialized in sustainable agriculture projects, and was highly involved with the Department of Agriculture's trainings. She herself was a relatively young woman, in her early forties, with a teenaged daughter. As such, she held a position of significant influence in the local government, and was well-known as a gifted and charismatic public speaker. Her approach to the question of language choice was unequivocal: "Most ladies can understand Hindi, except for the much older ones. But even so, it's important to speak in Pahari because people feel more comfortable. Also, unless you speak in Pahari, people won't listen to you. Unless you make that issue reach their heart, they won't accept it" (*Jab tak unke dil tak baat nah pahunchayenge, tab tak woh nahi manenge*).



Figure 1.6 Uma (left) speaking to a group of women outside the office of her panchayat.

For Uma, despite the variation in the demands of her positions as *panchayat* headperson and NGO worker, she sought to maintain a uniform style of speaking and interacting across the domains of her work. She reflected often on the need to maintain a style of interacting with rural citizens in particular that resembled the “ground level” (*jamini star*). As such, she consistently spoke in Pahari when interacting with village residents, while shifting into Hindi when talking to bureaucrats from the BDO or the Department of Agriculture. For Uma, the question of using Hindi was not rooted in concerns about the referential content of speech—in whether people would be able to understand—but rather about the affective properties of languages. By choosing

Hindi, or worse, English, she might alienate certain speakers, especially older women. Furthermore, the choice of a code was itself framed as a way to make an issue “reach people’s hearts,” and thus generate a connection with them that would result in an actual change in her interlocutors’ behavior. By using Hindi, on the other hand, she ran the risk of becoming seen as a “mind eater,” someone who only talks, and doesn’t actually produce a dialogue with one’s interlocutors. Uma’s metapragmatic framings mirrored her own approach to conducting meetings with rural women, where she exclusively used Kangri, and at times even felt compelled to intervene during events where people were speaking solely in Hindi.

For example, at a public hearing (*jan sunvai*) in September 2018, hundreds of residents from Uma’s panchayat and the surrounding area had gathered to address a group of senior bureaucrats about local development issues. The hearing had been taking place entirely in Hindi when one resident in attendance, a woman affiliated with the NGO Sahayata, took the mic and requested that everyone present speak in Pahari. She explained—herself speaking in Hindi—that most of the people were complaining about the proceedings being in Hindi, and that everyone should please speak in Pahari. The fact that she was using Hindi while critiquing the speakers for doing so reveals that competence in the language was not the issue. Instead, she implicitly demonstrated the sense of alienation and distance that the villagers in attendance felt from the ongoing proceedings. After this, the vice-headperson (*up-pradhan*) of Uma’s panchayat, continued speaking in Hindi when addressing the crowd, prompting Uma to yell at him loudly: “Up-pradhan ji, *Pahari!!!*” He continued on in Hindi, leading her to yell even louder several times before he responded, saying everyone there was “educated” (*padhe-likhe*) and could understand him. He dismissed both Uma and the resident’s demand on the basis of his constituents’ widespread competence in Hindi rather than the affective consequence of using

Hindi for its social and indexical connotation with formal bureaucratic context (see Chapters 3-5). By rationalizing his choice as based on speakers' ability to comprehend his utterances, he dismissed the affective potentiality of Hindi to alienate the attendees, while also dismissing the explicit demand of both Uma (his superior in the *panchayat*, who is both younger than him and a woman) and the attendee who explicitly requested that Pahari be used.

Uma's language choices set her apart from the bureaucrats with whom she worked in the Block Development Office and the Department of Agriculture. Often, the stark contrast between her use of Pahari and the registers of bureaucratic Hindi and English used by the bureaucrats in other offices (detailed further in Chapters 3, 4, and 5) generated a palpable difference in the engagement of women in attendance at meetings. While women in meetings would often engage in ample byplay, or side conversations between a subset of ratified participants in the interaction (Duranti 1997, 303; M. H. Goodwin 1997), frequently taking phone calls in the middle of a speech or focusing on other things while a meeting unfolded (i.e. knitting a sweater, soothing a child), when Uma took the stage, women paid attention. They stopped engaging in byplay, directed their gaze toward her, and contributed tokens of agreement and approval throughout her speeches. Uma herself also had a unique charismatic oratorical style, often inserting call-and-response tokens, repeating herself when women did not respond loudly enough, and telling lots of stories and jokes that kept women entertained. Uma also often explicitly framed her speech around women's own interests and experiences, in ways that were rarely every addressed by bureaucrats.

For example, during a meeting with farmers held by the Department of Agriculture to introduce a natural farming scheme (discussed at length in chapter 3), Uma took the stage to address the women farmers in attendance after a series of speeches and videos in Hindi about the

scheme had been delivered by Mahesh and his colleagues. The farmers in attendance, who at this point were displaying signs of boredom and disinterest marked by their steadily increasing byplay, suddenly turned their attention toward her and the room buzzed with interest. She began by metapragmatically framing her decision to speak in Pahari: “Hello everyone. I am going to speak in Pahari, because I work on the ground level and I think that Pahari seems good for me.” As she went on to talk about the benefits of “natural farming,” repeating much of what had been said by Mahesh with little uptake from the crowd, the women displayed their engagement by responding to Uma’s repeated questions, establishing a rhythmic call and response dynamic with the audience:

Transcript 1.1

- 1 Uma: मेरा नाम उमा ए, मैं सेरी पंचायत ते ए
My name is Uma, I am from Seri panchayat
- 2 उईयां खेती-बाड़ी दा कम बी करदी
I also work in farming
- 3 मैं agriculture block कन्ने trainingआं बी गईओ थी सोलन बी शिमला बी
I have also gone with the agriculture block to trainings, in Solan and in Shimla
- 4 तां जीयां कि इक गल अहां दी सारे ते पहले खेती कुण ओंदी थी अजे ते बी पच्ची साल पहले
so like, one thing, first of all, 20-25 years ago what kind of agriculture was there?
- 5 कीयां करदे खेती
how did (we) do agriculture?
- 6 ((silence))
- 7 इक सब्द बोलनेयो
give me one word!
- 8 Farmers ((multiple people speaking at once))
- 9 Uma देसी? उस दे बाद लालच अहांयो केस च लेआया
Desi (local)? after that, we got greedy for what?
- 10 Farmers अंग्रेजी च
for English (i.e chemical farming)
- 11 Uma अंग्रेजी च
for English
- 12 उण फिरी केस च जादे अहां
now, again what are we going for?
- 13 Farmers देसी च

- for desi (local)
- 15 Uma देसी च
for desi
- 16 मतलब क्या चीज इस च आई कि लालच
meaning what has come out of this? that greed? --
- 17 Farmers बुरी बला ए
[is a bad curse
- 18 Uma बुरी बला ए ए ना
[is a bad curse, right?
- 19 मतलब कोई बी चीज अहां जीयां उण इक छोटा देआ example लेंदे एन अहां सूटां च ओंदे
meaning anything, we, like now, let's take a small example, we are in suits
- 20 औरतां ज्यादा एन इस वास्ते
it's mostly women [here], that's why
- 21 इक सूट अहां पांदे fashion चलेआ दुआ पांदे फिरी
we wear one suit, then it goes out of fashion, then we wear another one
- 22 अटी करी क्या ओंदा सै पराणे ई fashion आई ओंदा अहां संतुष्टि केस च ओंदी
then what happens, that old fashion comes back, and what do we start to like?
- 23 Farmers पराणा
the old (style)
- 24 Uma पराणे च ओंदी ना
the old one, right?
- 25 तां सै चीज अटी करी ए ओआ दी कि अजे ते पराणे जेडे जमाने च अहां दे बुजुर्ग जेडा बी कम करदे थे
so that thing comes back and whatever work our elders did in the older age before today
- 26 तां सै उण अहांयो लगा पता कि सै सही थे अहां गलत ए
now we have realized that they were right and we are wrong
- 27 अहां लालच दे कारण जितना बी कुछ ए कम करा दे एन
however much work we are doing because of greed
- 28 तां सै चीज क्या ए अहांयो बी खराब करा दी अहां दे बच्चे बी खराब करा दी
then what is that thing? it is ruining us, it is ruining our children
- 29 पर्यावरण जो बी खराब करा दी मतलाब बिमारीयां सौ लगा दीआं जमीन बी खराब ओआ दी
it is ruining the environment, we're getting 100 diseases, and the land is also being ruined

Here, Uma's ability to command farmers' attention begins with her metapragmatic assessment of Pahari as a good choice for working on the "ground level." The actual features of her speech then draw the audience further in: the call-and-response style of her oration, her use of colloquial aphorisms like "greed is a bad curse" (*lalach buri bala hai*), and her analogy between women's agricultural choices with women's fashion choices all receive uptake from the crowd in the form

of collective responses that directly follow from her formulations. She goes on later to make another comparison between the “hollow” (*kokhla*) sensation that women experience in their wombs after birth and the “hollow” state of the land after excessive chemical fertilization. Uma’s speaking style was thus framed by discourses of affect and generative of affects in her interlocutors in the form of their attentive uptake and engaged responses to her narrative.

Other interlocutors of mine similarly explained the politics of language choice through narratives about the fear and intimidation that are provoked by English and Hindi, but their own practices were in tension with the ideological valorizations they attributed toward local languages. Mahesh, the bureaucrat from the Department of Agriculture, consistently argued that extension workers should use Pahari due to a concern about farmers being “afraid” or “hesitant” (*jhijhak*) to ask questions if you use Hindi or English. When I asked him about his own language choices in an interview, Mahesh explained that his work was to explain, “to make people understand,” but that unless it is a “two-way street” then there is no use. As such, he said, it is important to speak in the “local dialect” because it allows for more of a “dialogue,” and people feel less “hesitant” to ask questions.

In another instance, at a festival (*mela*) organized by the Block Development Office to showcase various development initiatives in the area, Mahesh introduced me to some visiting scientists from the Himachal Pradesh Agriculture University using a similar discourse the affective consequences of language choice: “Hannah is studying extension. She is looking at what kinds of languages are used in field meetings with farmers, and whether they are able to understand. Many villagers get scared when people use English or Hindi, and she wants to see how local languages are being used to help facilitate the extension process.” However, despite often repeating the importance of using local languages in order to make farmers comfortable so

that they may engage in an interactional dialogue, Mahesh rarely spoke in a language other than Hindi with farmers, and often used extensive English terminology from agricultural science. This choice was often defended by him and other AEOs as a product of their training in English-medium agricultural universities, and the lack of an “equivalent” vocabulary for certain scientific concepts in local languages. Yet, Mahesh did use Kangri, and Punjabi, to communicate with interlocutors outside of meetings with farmers. In our first encounter, Mahesh used Hindi and Kangri when speaking farmers in his office, and took a phone call in Punjabi with a former colleague in Pathankot, but during the many meetings I attended, he never strayed from his agrobureaucratic register of English-infused Hindi (see chapter 4).

While many of my interlocutors’ own language ideological discourses did not match their actual practices, Neha, my interlocutor from the NGO Sahayata, did in fact primarily communicate with women in their first language, either Pahari or Gaddi, as she herself was a Gaddi woman. In an interview toward the end of my fieldwork, after I had recorded Neha in dozens of meetings with rural women in which she only used Pahari and Gaddi, I asked her what would happen if she went into a meeting only speaking in Hindi. She responded¹⁹:

“Then we won’t be able to make that space, right? There will be a distance between them [and us]. They will think ‘this language, I don’t know where you’re from, you’re from elsewhere, who are you, what is this?’ When you will speak to them in their language, especially with women, because if you want to understand women’s problems, then you are going to have to become like them. It’s only when you become like them, then they will tell you, right?”

¹⁹ *Space nahi bana payenge, na? Duriyaan rahengi unke beech. Unko lagta hai ki ‘langauge toh pata nahi kahan se hai, kaun hai, kya hai?’ Jab unki bhasha mei baat karenge, khaas kar aurton ke sath, kyonki aurton ki samasya agar janna hai toh unki tarah banna padta hai. Unki tarah banenge thabhi batayengi, na?*

For most of my interlocutors, then, the question of language choice was fundamentally an affective one. Neha, Uma, and Mahesh, in different institutional settings, argued that women in the area could likely understand Hindi just fine, but that it would be difficult to create an environment where women would feel comfortable and welcome, rather than intimidated and fearful. Despite having a similar orientation to the affective power of language choice, however, their own linguistic practices varied dramatically, with speakers like Uma and Neha consistently using Kangri and Gaddi, while others like Mahesh more consistently used Hindi and some English. The fact that nearly all of my institutional interlocutors agreed about the importance of using local languages for both their affective potentialities—not only making people comfortable, but finding a way to make an issue “reach their heart” enough to actually change their behavior—became instrumental for the success of their work, whether it be persuading farmers to switch from chemical to natural agriculture (chapter 3), to become politically more active in their village (chapter 2), to take out a loan for an income generating activity (chapter 4), or to make appropriate eligibility determinations for welfare schemes (chapter 5). Taken together, then, the question of language choice, far beyond concerns for denotational content or comprehensibility, were rooted in an affective politics wherein forms of status, expertise, and authority were enacted through the use of a particular code or register. I address the particular ways that my interlocutors’ ways of speaking cultivated authority, enacted professional vision, and impacted decisions about rural welfare in each of the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the everyday labor of rural development in Kangra, which workers metapragmatically frame as “eating people’s minds.” Mind-eating, I have argued,

serves as a narrative device through which to grapple with feelings of ineffectualness, and to guard against potential citizens' claims. Workers across state and non-state institutions are themselves deeply intertwined, mutually reliant on one another's social and material infrastructures in order to conduct their activities. Nevertheless, bureaucrats and NGO workers performatively constitute themselves as morally distinct in their everyday discourses, particularly regarding norms of exchange and extraction with beneficiaries. While the interactional nature of rural development makes state and non-state workers both reliant on forms of social and material exchange with rural women, both state and non-state bureaucrats frame their work as unidirectional, and thus incommensurable with gifts or hospitality.

Eating people's minds entails face-to-face interactions in meetings, which involve a range of communicative practices that together I refer to as "semiotic labor." Semiotic labor attends to the fact that development practice is talk-mediated, but involves far more than the mere dissemination of information. My interlocutors framed this primarily through discourses of awareness (*jagrukta*), which was both a goal and an activity that brought rural citizens into relationships of obligation with development institutions. The kinds of semiotic labor that my interlocutors performed varied across state and non-state institutions, and could be located in the format and performance of meetings, which are the primary technology through which rural development workers enact the bureaucratic and developmental imperatives of their institutions outside of their physical offices.

While speakers in Kangra are members of a multilingual society and have diverse linguistic repertoires, they differ in their ideological and practical usage of the primary languages in Kangra: Pahari [Kangri] and Hindi. Whereas state bureaucrats tend to use Hindi, and NGO workers Pahari, they nevertheless share a common language ideological framework through

which they cultivate a sense of moral conduct. This framework associates language not solely with communicative ends but also with affective consequences. By speaking (or claiming to speak) in Pahari with rural villagers, public servants cast themselves as both practically efficient and morally inclusive. Their actual use of languages, registers, and conversational strategies, as I will show in the next chapters, are not peripheral to the logics of developmental governance in Kangra, but instead are central to the constitution and circulation of ideas of need, deservingness, and prosperity that become the contested ideological ground upon which decisions about policy are made and maintained.

CHAPTER 2:

Becoming “Active”: Visions of Women’s Participation in Development

Shortly before the Indian election in 2019, I was accompanying two NGO workers, Neha and Karan, on a trip to a remote village to provide information on voting in the upcoming election to the members of a women’s collective (*mahila mandal*). To get there, Neha and I drove an hour on my motor scooter from Kalyana to meet Karan at a busy market intersection in the neighboring development block (*tehsil*). We left my scooter in the NGO’s local office and boarded a bus that took us up a thin gravel road high into the mountain’s terraced villages. After an hour and a half on the bus, snaking around curves that dropped sharply into ravines, gripping tightly onto the seats in front of us, we disembarked from the bus on an empty road overlooking vast terraced hills. I looked left and right for any sign of a nearby village. Turning to Neha, I asked “How do we get there?” She pointed upward. “We climb,” she said. I craned my neck upward and took in the sight of the mountain, scanning the steep cliffs for signs of habitation. The three of us then proceeded to hike slowly, careening upwards another two kilometers, zigzagging back and forth like reverse cross-country skiers. While the majority of the trip was quiet, we did pass by one woman who was deftly traversing the hillside, bounding flawlessly down the rocky incline, late to pick up her young children from the school bus far below. She and her young children lapped us quickly, an elementary-aged boy and girl carrying bookbags the size of their bodies, passing us on their way back up. “We will see you up there!” Neha said to her in passing, “Make sure everyone is ready.” As we continued our trek, Neha repeated an often-heard phrase: “You see how difficult our work is? No one in the office knows what we go through.”



Figure 2.1: Getting there with Neha and Karan

Neha and Karan work for a non-governmental organization (NGO) based near Kalyana that I call Sahayata (‘Support’). Sahayata broadly focuses on promoting women’s empowerment, agricultural sustainability, and community health. Founded by a prominent feminist activist in 2002, Sahayata employs dozens of men and women from villages across District Kangra, who are grouped into teams focused a theme—leadership, agriculture, violence, health—and stationed across regional offices in several blocks of the district. Neha and Karan were currently senior members of the leadership team, who focused primarily on meeting with government-run women’s collectives (*mahila mandal*)—village-based collectives that conduct an array of activities meant to promote women’s political participation, economic empowerment, and social

welfare. These collectives were the primary targets of Neha and Karan’s work, as they were already organized, met monthly, and were used to receiving visits from various NGOs. Neha and Karan were both born and raised in the area in which they worked. Neha, a Gaddi²⁰ brahmin woman, speaks several languages fluently, including Gaddi, Kangri, and Hindi, while Karan, a middle-caste man, spoke fluent Kangri and Hindi but understood Gaddi. Both had been working full time for Sahayata for many years—Neha since the organization was opened when was a teenager, and Karan for the last five years. They knew the village we were traveling to well—both had visited it many times, and were familiar with the terrain we were traversing. This familiarity, however, did not diminish the daily struggle of their work—which only began with getting there.

The day that we traveled to the village atop the mountain, invisible from the road from which we ascended, we arrived to find women busy in their daily tasks – cooking lunch, milking buffaloes, washing clothes. We waited another hour or so for women to finish their work, change into a fresh salwaar kameez, and gather in the verandah of a neighbor’s house. Then, we watched for another hour as the women sorted out the financial business of their collective’s various self-help groups (smaller groups of women who pooled money for a joint savings account). While they collected monthly contributions, settled debts from loans taken previously, and documented everything in their written register, the three of us sat watching, Neha and Karan waiting for the opportune moment to begin the speech on voting that they had come to deliver. As the group

²⁰ Gaddi is the name of a traditionally pastoralist community historically originating in the Bharmour region of Distict Chamba in Himachal Pradesh, just north of Kangra. While the community is officially designated as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), the brahmin (upper-caste) members of this community consider themselves to be distinct from the lower-caste members of their community, who they live separately from, and who are locally referred to as “pure Gaddi.” Gaddi brahmins, who are often recipients of the official ST designation and thus recipients of certain benefits for historically disadvantaged castes, but are considered brahmin and will often marry other non-Gaddi brahmins. The politics of Gaddi-ness is extremely complex, with some considering it nothing more than a language (and not a caste or ethnic identity), while others see it as an ethnic identity independent of language.

members began to depart, Neha urged them to stay and give their attention for a short discussion. Neha first asked everyone to move from their current positions clustered in a group to sit in a circle facing one another, and then quieten down and listen for a few minutes. She then began to speak in Gaddi: “Sometimes people ask what women’s collectives do and we say ‘we don’t do anything.’ That’s why they say *bela mandal*.” The term *bela mandal* (idle collective) is a common play-on-words with *mahila mandal* (women’s collective). “Is that true that women don’t do anything?” Neha asked. The women looked at her quietly and she asked again. “Women don’t do anything?! Speak!” (*Bola!*), she said, before the women responded more forcefully, “Yes, we do!” She continued: “The point of coming and sitting here is not to just collect your money and go home. It means doing something for your village.”



Figure 2.2 Neha (front row, second from right) and Karan (back row, right) pose with members of a women’s collective in Kangra

Neha and Karan then proceeded to ask the women what they knew about the upcoming parliamentary election—how the houses of parliament are structured, how members of

parliament select the prime minister, and the importance of voting for a candidate based on your own ideas, rather than the ideas of your family or husband. The women listened politely, responding to questions when asked, and agreeing to vote in the election before itching to disperse and get back to their homes to prepare dinner. Quickly, Neha and Karan posed the group members with several brightly-colored posters displaying different demands – justice for the killing of activist-journalist Gauri Lankesh, release of arrested activist-academic Shoma Sen, and a poem protesting violence against women -- which the women were instructed to hold while standing together for a photo with Neha and Karan, which I took. Shortly thereafter we made the trip back down the mountain. Neha repeated her common refrain: “You see how difficult our job is? These women’s collectives are just idle (*bele*), they don’t want to do real work (*asli kaam*). They just want to give their 10 rupees [for the savings account] and leave.” Whereas Neha felt that she and others like her were putting in immense effort to generate women’s active participation in rural politics and development, women themselves just seemed to not want to do any “real work.”

Not only do Neha and Karan (and I, by virtue of my presence and my role as photographer) work to visibilize women in particular ways through photographs like the one above, but they also struggle to elicit from women various signs of their embodied, linguistic, and affective engagement. They travel long distances, demand women’s time, and struggle to maintain their attention. They encourage women to sit in specific arrangements, to speak in certain ways, and to devote their time to certain goals (e.g. voting) and not others (e.g. maintain a savings account). As both fieldworkers and locals to this area, Neha and Karan go to great lengths to transform women’s collectives from what they see as being “idle” (*bele*) to “active” as the key goal of their profession as social workers (*samaajik karyakarta*) through Sahayata.

This chapter examines how NGO workers and women’s collectives in Kangra co-produce what it means to be an “active participant” in rural development. What kinds of semiotic labor are required to see and be seen as “active”? Anthropologists have written extensively on the politics of “participation” as a development discourse and technology of governance. They have broadly demonstrated how “participation” emerged as an idealized route to rural empowerment and autonomy in decision-making, only to be co-opted for institutional ends with uneven and deleterious effects (Kelty 2020; Shah 2010; Mosse 2005; A. Sharma 2008; Corbridge et al. 2005; Cooke and Kothari 2001). Linguistic anthropologists, instead, have written extensively on participation as a multimodal interactional achievement—the way that humans use speech, their bodies, tools, and the natural environment to collaboratively build meaning through social action (Duranti 1986; C. Goodwin and Goodwin 2004; C. Goodwin 2018).

This chapter interweaves these scholarly perspectives on participation to understand how development workers at the NGO Sahayata and women’s collectives collaboratively produce and visibilize women’s “active” participation as a particular assemblage of embodied, affective, and linguistic practices, which are constituted and contested in interaction. This process relies on certain forms of embodied, affective, and linguistic labor by NGO workers (Mankekar and Gupta 2016; 2019; Rossi-Landi 1983; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012), which are cultivated through a professional habitus (Bourdieu 1977b; C. Goodwin 1994). Sahayata employees work to highlight, obscure, and preserve specific practices that ultimately produce a vision of women’s collectives as “active” and the NGO itself as a boon to rural women. I present examples from different encounters between NGO workers, rural women, and myself as researcher—including recordings of small meetings between NGO workers and individual women’s collectives, larger events and demonstrations, and an autoethnographic account of my experience producing a film

for the NGO—in order to uncover what semiotic strategies undergird the production of visibly “active” women participants.

This investigation builds on the work of anthropologists and sociologists who demonstrate how actors produce seemingly coherent knowledge about people, places, and spaces (Latour 2007; Biruk 2018; Mosse 2005; Scott 1998). In taking the idea of participation as its ethnographic object, this chapter traces how participation has been conceptualized by development scholars through metaphors of scale (“high” v. “low”) and by anthropologists through metaphors of degree (“active” v. “passive”). I argue that many anthropological critiques of scalar concepts of participation have relied on problematic assumptions about what it means to be an “active” participant that obscure the agency of seemingly less-powerful people. I draw on linguistic anthropological analyses of participation to demonstrate how speakers use a range of semiotic devices to co-produce what it means to be “active” in specific interactional contexts. This analysis reveals how we might more critically assess participation as an ethnographically-situated, highly contested social product.

2.1 Scales of Participation

“Visiting Himachal Pradesh from, say, western Uttar Pradesh or Haryana, one is struck by the lively and confident presence of so many Himachali women in public spaces from village commons and local markets to bus stands, tea shops, cinema halls and government offices” (Drèze 1999: 14).

Since the early 1990s, the state of Himachal Pradesh has received substantial attention for its development indicators. Development studies scholars, economists, and sociologists have argued that Himachal has had unique success in producing “socially inclusive” growth. Once seen as economically and socially deprived, recent studies detail a dramatic decline in poverty rates across both urban and rural contexts, fueled by strong economic growth driven by several industries that marshal the state’s particular climatic context and natural resources: hydroelectric

power generation, seasonal agricultural commodities, cement and mining, and tourism. This has been coupled with a rapid rise in human development indicators, including education, health, and employment, setting Himachal Pradesh apart from neighboring states like Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, which have some of the lowest human development indicators in the country even while they have experienced strong economic growth overall. This discourse of Himachal's socially-inclusive growth has been closely tied to the production of knowledge about women's participation in the rural economy. Participation grew in importance in development discourse particularly in the 1990s, when the United Nations Development Programme's incorporated "people's participation" the special focus of its human development report (United Nations Development Programme 1993). According to the report, "participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives" (United Nations Development Programme 1993, 21). This definition was subsequently adopted and appears in the Himachal Pradesh State Human Development Report of 2014, which emphasizes the successful decentralization of the bureaucracy and devolution of powers to *panchayat raj* institutions in the state (Planning Commission 2014).

Building on this concept of participation, development scholars and practitioners have largely understood participation to be about presence; this makes participation largely all or nothing, such that one can either be present and therefore be a participant, or not. Attendance at events, discussions, and decision-making forums is considered indicative of participation, and its closely related concept, empowerment. The emphasis at the time was on mitigating barriers to participation, such that whether or not one had the ability to influence decisions over one's life was related to forms of social and economic inequity. Since the UNDP conceptualized participation as binary, it could become a quantitative phenomenon, measurable in indices and

percentages. Participation is described in scalar terms, as something that has “levels” which can be “higher” or “lower” in percentages of populations. In Himachal Pradesh, rates of female labor force participation, political participation, and participation in education are said to be exceptionally “high,” based on large-scale data surveys that are often rendered into illustrative graphs, tables, and other visualizations. Such techniques of seeing participation are necessarily partial—they do not tell us about the quality or regularity of women’s extra-domestic labor, their pay, or their experience on the job. These elisions are not only a byproduct of a certain type of economic knowledge production, but they are themselves constitutive of that knowledge. Eliding context is what allows for us to infer women’s “participation” from a bar graph.

Such accounts draw direct inferences between numerical values—populations divided along gender, caste, and locale; percentages rendered and compared—and the values of that cultural context. We read bird’s-eye views of women’s “lively” presence in public spaces in Himachal Pradesh and marshal that as evidence of women’s participation in development, the economy, and rural politics, captured in descriptions by development economists like that of Jean Drèze above. We read about women *panchayat* leaders who are “active” in their duties and engaged with their work, “in contrast with other parts of the country where women candidates are typically put up by their male relatives as proxy candidates to satisfy the quota requirements and end up having practically no involvement in the Panchayat at all (even the meetings are attended by their male relatives)” (Bhatty 2008: 113).

Women’s participation as a numerical phenomenon has been key to the production of Himachal Pradesh’s exceptionalism in achieving “inclusive development.” Development scholars offer two broad explanations for women’s “high” participation in Himachal. The first cites several policies introduced in the years after Himachal achieved statehood in 1971,

including the early promotion and subsequent legislation of universal elementary education, which became compulsory in 1997²¹, as well as a series of land reforms that abolished feudal regimes of tenancy, placed a ceiling on land ownership, and redistributed common land (*shaamlaat*) to landless peasants, which helped to mitigate historical forms of caste dominance.²² While universal elementary education is now the legislative norm across India, Himachal Pradesh has achieved particular success at implementing it – which scholars explain as the result of certain essential aspects of Himachali culture and society.

The most central component of this discourse is the nature of gender relations and the status of women in Himachali society. Historically, women’s political and economic participation has been shaped by high rates of male out-migration from the hill region to cities in the Plains for work in industrial jobs, which some scholars have argued has left women with additional responsibilities that have afforded them “greater economic control and empowerment” (Bhatty 2008: 112). In addition to shifting demographic dynamics in the hills, scholars have argued that women in the state enjoy a more “favourable social context” (Drèze 1999: 15) as compared to Plains societies, one that is believed to be rooted in an egalitarian ethos born out of the cohesiveness of small-scale societies dotted across the mountainous terrain. As a result, scholars argue that divisions of gender and caste are less pronounced, and women enjoy greater mobility,

²¹ *The Public Report on Basic Education in India (1999) singled out Himachal Pradesh as having achieved the most success in promoting gender-equitable access to elementary education in the country. This was largely the result of the Himachal Pradesh Compulsory Primary Education Act of 1997, as well as state welfare schemes to mitigate the costs of schooling through free school uniforms, textbooks, tuition scholarships, and a robust midday meal program (Himachal Pradesh Development Report, 2002).*

²² *The Land Ceiling Act of 1972 – one of the first pieces of legislation passed by Himachal state government – both placed a cap on the size of landholdings for a given family consisting of one husband, wife, and up to three children of 15 acres of irrigable land and 30 acres of non-irrigable land, and provisioned schemes for redistribution of surplus land to landless people. The actual redistribution of land has been uneven – people who were officially given land were often not allowed to occupy it. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 has also been implemented minimally in Himachal Pradesh, where 68-70% of the land is considered forest, and many tribal communities have been excluded from forests used for grazing under the pretenses of conservation (“Forest Rights Act in Himachal Pradesh,” Himdhara Collective).*

involvement in non-domestic labor, and are less subject to norms of seclusion: “The participation of women in development programs and their access to markets, services, and spaces is linked to a culture where female seclusion is not as normative as it is in neighboring states” (M. B. Das et al. 2015, 15). Another scholar wrote, “Compared to the deeply entrenched inequalities of caste and gender that pervade the plains regions of North India, social norms in the Himalayas are more inclusive... Gender norms in the Himalayas tend also to be more inclusive than in the plains. Women participate more in the economy and enjoy greater freedom of movement and decision-making authority within the household” (Mangla 2015, 890).

Several cultural practices are often cited as indicative of this more egalitarian social context, including “symmetric” marriage practices (Drèze 1999), wherein women remain close to their natal homes and continue to contribute to them after marriage, leading to greater investment in girls’ health and education; a strong “tribal ethos” and a history of polyandry and matriarchal kinship relations in tribal communities (Parmar 1975; M. B. Das et al. 2015); less adherence to orthodox Hindu religious practices of enforcing caste-based separation (Bhatty 2008, 122–26); “a strong tradition of protest movements against environmental degradation and male alcoholism” (M. B. Das et al. 2015, 51); and rural politics being “less male-dominated than in other parts of north India” (Drèze 1999, 15). Himachal’s curious case of “socially inclusive” development thus has been said to not only benefit women, but has been engendered by them: it is the central role of women’s participation in rural political life that has been deemed the key to the Himachal’s “secrets of success” (M. B. Das et al. 2015).

These arguments thus frame participation as something that is inherent to the social fabric of Himachal Pradesh, and thus something that cannot be replicated in contexts where the fissures of gender and caste are more intransigent. Yet, while both the statist and the cultural explanation

attribute Himachal's inclusive growth to women's "active" role in the rural political economy, this role is explained as the mere outcome of something else – a benevolent state, an egalitarian culture – and not as the product of the acts, practices, and decisions made by women per se. Participation becomes an almost inevitable outcome, naturally flowing from an absence of political and social barriers.

The quantitative data, indexes, and labor force participation rates that are produced about women reverberate in Himachal and are directly tied to discourses about the "active" Himachali woman; see this article from March 9, 2019, in the English-language paper *The Tribune*, based in Chandigarh. Here again, we are told that despite a nation-wide decline in women's labor force participation, Himachal stands atop the list of states for having a high rate of women's participation in agriculture. The large text at the top reads, "In Himachal, women report themselves as being employed in agriculture, which means that they do not regard themselves as mere helpers, but active agents." The piece then quotes Pronob Sen, Programme Director at the International Growth Center in London, who says, "There is a long history of men migrating for jobs and women taking over the economic activity in villages. They take the decisions and call the shots. This is culturally embedded in these states." This quote appears in the body of the article amidst a description of the overall decline in female labor force participation (FLFP), both nationwide and in Himachal. "Rural participation dipped 4 percent from 71 to 67 percent between 2004-5 and 2011-12, while urban participation also fell from 36 to 30 percent. Notwithstanding, Himachal is still better than other states on the whole."

NOW
more of
Himachal
every week

Himachal
Tribune

Now Every
Saturday
with
The Tribune

Woman, thy name is vitality



VIGNETTES
SHRINIVAS JOSHI

In Himachal, women report themselves as being employed in agriculture, which means that they do not regard themselves as mere helpers, but active agents. 'They take the decisions and call the shots.'

THE campaign theme of Women's Day 2019 was #Balance for Better, whereby the call to women and their supporters for the year around is for 'collective action and shared responsibility for deriving a gender balanced world.'

Today, though we are worried about the unemployed youth, yet very few talk about the employment of women despite the fact that women's participation in labour force has declined sharply. The labour force participation rate (LFPR) was 25.51 per cent in 2011-12 as per the National Sample Survey estimates. It was 24.8 per cent in rural and 14.7 per cent in urban areas. As per the World Bank data, women's LFPR was 27 per cent in 2016.

The participation of women in the labour force in India is lowest among countries in South Asia after Pakistan. It is a fact that the contribution of women in India to the GDP is only 17 per cent — less than half the global average of 37 per cent.

IMF Chief Christine Lagarde believes that India's GDP would be 27 per cent higher if more women participated in the labour force.

But Himachal does not lose the rest of India line. With 47.4 per cent LFPR of women, it is second to Sikkim, according to the Census 2011. The World Bank in its report coming to public domain in June 2017 has placed the state on a par with Sikkim. FLFP is, however, waning in Himachal, too. Rural participation dipped 4 per cent from 71 to 67 between 2004-05 and 2011-12, while urban participation also fell from 86 to 80 per cent. Notwithstanding, Himachal is still better than other states on the whole. 'There is a long history of men migrating for jobs and women taking over the economic activity in villages. They take the decisions and call the shots. This is culturally embedded in these states,' says Prunab Sen, programme director, International Growth Centre. No wonder, that the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015-16 shows that 90.8 per cent of currently



A representative of Himachali woman, 'Jalbola', a creation of Mahesh Chandra Saxena on The Ridge, Shimla.

married women in Himachal Pradesh take household decisions, of them 90 per cent belong to rural areas and 96.4 per cent to urban areas. According to Das, women elsewhere in India are withdrawing themselves from agriculture, but in Himachal, women report themselves as being employed in agriculture, which means that they do not regard themselves as mere helpers, but active agents. A survey was conducted in two panchayats of Kandaghat block during the agriculture season and it was found that in one hectare of land, a pair of bullock works for 1,084 hours; men for 1,212 hours and women for 3,485 hours. Women do not call it drudgery, they do it with interest and as if they are the actual owners of land, caring a naught for whose name figures in the revenue record. How long will this go? Will they also, like their counterparts in other states, not think of withdrawing themselves from the onerous task of agriculture? It is, therefore, important for all of us to make jobs in agriculture worth their while.

Employment in high-value agriculture, like off-season vegetables or floriculture, is really important.

Statistics from NFHS, 2015-16 show the advance of Himachali women in other fields too. A total of 89.8 per cent women of 6 years and above in rural areas and 77.9 per cent in urban areas have attended schools. In totality, females who attended school were 79 per cent in 2015-16 as against 73.1 per cent during 2005-06. There are 99.5 per cent households here, which are electrified; 94.9 per cent households have improved drinking water source; 70.7 per cent have better sanitation facility; iodized salt is being used by 99.1 per cent of households. The black spot for women of Himachal is anaemia. The anaemic non-pregnant women of age 15-49 is 53.8 per cent; it was 43.2 per cent in 2005-06 and that of pregnant women in the same age-group is 50.4 per cent in 2015-16 as compared to 38.1 per cent in 2005-06. The Health Department should wake up to find a solution for this menace.

Like women of other states, women of Himachal, too, are swayed by 'son-fixation'. Aparna Negi, professor at HPU, gives an evidence. The HP State Council for Child Welfare was declared an adoption agency in April 1998; the council has been receiving 75 per cent applications for adopting a boy, whereas 67 per cent among the abandoned infants are girls.

Representative of Himachali woman, 'Jalbola', a creation of Mahesh Chandra Saxena, remained in the darkness of the stores of the Municipal Corporation for many years to come out to light a few years ago like the Himachali woman who is coming out of darkness and heading towards light saying, 'Woman, thy name is vitality'.

TAIL PIECE

In olden days, Himachali women would not utter the first name of an elder relative. I asked the name of her father-in-law from a woman and she said 'mangal aur brhaspat ke beech ke'. She nodded when I said, 'Budh Ram'.

Few technologies

LALIT MOH

Many technologies by the Institute of Bio-Resource (IHBT), a CSIR Palampur, can transform economy of Himachal, but these found any takers.

Scientists at IHBT a kiln for manufacturing coal from bamboo. CSIR centre Jharkhand proved that the barbed coal produced from IHBT has the same burn as charcoal produced from other wood. The barbed coal making kiln cost at a cost of about ₹1.2

Scientists said that charcoal was being produced from the entire northern timberwood. It is less depletion of green trees are slow growing not be replenished ever, once it reaches bamboo can give supply of wood for charcoal. Even the government has failed to these technologies.

At present, charcoal hovering at ₹500 to ₹600 per quintal. Farmers can earn extra from bamboo charcoal, the claimed. The IHBT developed technology to develop more byproducts from bamboo charcoal. The charcoal used for producing carbon, which is used in pharmaceutical and other uses. It has a ready market. It can prove very profitable for farmers who opt for bamboo farming, it

Figure 2.3 Newspaper clipping, *The Tribune*, March 9, 2019. Photo by author.

2.2 Degrees of Participation

“There is a world of difference between the simple fact of attendance at a meeting, and the ability to contribute effectively to that meeting or to shape its conclusions. Participation can be more or less active, and more or less passive. It also matters a great deal who gets to set an agenda, and who is able to call a vote or structure a discussion.” (Corbridge et al 2005: 126)

Critical anthropological studies of participatory development, and related discourses like empowerment, have demonstrated how participation has been used a technocratic and ideological aim of development institutions particularly since the 1980s. Whereas post-war development institutions relied on heavily bureaucratic, technocratic, and depoliticized

approaches to development through planning (Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995), subsequent approaches sought to replace top-down models with more “participatory” approaches to development. These approaches sought to redistribute power to local communities in order to restore their autonomy and ability to determine their needs. Anthropological studies have noted, however, that this discourse of participation is equally as depoliticizing as the technocratic regimes of bureaucratic planning that preceded it, romanticizing “local communities” as devoid of power relations (Cooke and Kothari 2001). In many cases, the ideal-type of participation—in which “rural” communities have autonomy in decision-making, and socially differentiated members of communities are given equal space in this process—remains unattained due to the technocratic demands of meeting project goals; such processes thus result in the use of methods that are “performative” rather than “substantively” participatory, and which ultimately appropriate “local knowledge” for project goals (Mosse 2001). We have thus seen how participatory development projects (led by NGOs, development banks, and government programs) have generated new forms of exclusion—entrenching elite power among rural communities (Shah 2010; Kamra 2020); incorporating rural women into new forms of indebtedness (Elyachar 2005); advancing land expropriation and the erosion of indigenous sovereignty (Li 2007); engendering possibilities for political claim-making even as they reproduce individualizing narratives of personal responsibility (A. Sharma 2008); and obscuring social realities in favor of manifesting coherent images of project “success” (Mosse 2005).

Several scholars have shown that performative practices make both projects and beneficiaries legible as certain kinds of knowledge and subjects. Erin Moore (2017) argues that elite NGO workers in Uganda persuade adolescent girls to perform the psychosocial affliction of having low self-esteem as part of a transnational mission to revive the mental and physical health of girls.

Following Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization, the NGO attempts to empower girls by first raising their consciousness of their existing disempowerment. Paradoxically, the NGO workers do an incredible amount of work to position the girls, and have them position themselves, as suffering from poor self-esteem, despite the fact that the girls claim to experience confidence. Program workers even go so far as to have girls perform a particular way of walking as indicative of their increased self-esteem through participation in the NGO's program, and thus their increased empowerment. Such performative processes are themselves double-edged, as participation in state and NGO projects enacts disciplinary tactics that produce new forms of "empowered" subjects, even while those processes engender possibilities for new forms of claim-making on the state (A. Sharma 2008; Bornstein and Sharma 2016; Grewal and Bernal 2014).

Whereas many anthropological critiques of participation have demanded greater attention to the contextual specificities that are elided in development discourse, some scholars have attended more to how the elision of social context is itself a central mechanism whereby development actors and beneficiaries co-produce knowledge about development. David Mosse's account of a transnational participatory development program in India demonstrates how ideas of participation are produced at different levels of project management—with intermediaries subsequently translating the existing complexity of beneficiaries' experiences with the project into coherent images of project success (Mosse 2005). Mosse argues that such elisions of complexity are constitutive of development practice, such that what is ultimately represented in project documents is necessarily removed from contexts of implementation.

In another context, Cal Biruk (2018) demonstrates the process whereby project fieldworkers for a Malawian AIDS research project travel to conduct surveys with rural households, where

they were required to produce “clean” data through a web of unclear, incomplete knowledge collected through social interaction. Biruk demonstrates that in order to “see like a research project” one must learn to tackle the mess of human experience and turn it into a clear and objective record that can be rendered into statistical data (Biruk 2012). This analysis builds on James Scott’s analysis in *Seeing like a State* (1998), where he demonstrates how modern bureaucracies, through technologies of knowledge production, render legible the contours of populations and places. Biruk, Scott, and Mosse thus demonstrate the centrality (and constitutiveness) of erasure to state-making and development programs, wherein what becomes known and seen as legitimate, real, and accurate is premised on the elision of other information.

These studies are illustrative of the processes whereby policymakers, bureaucrats, NGO workers, and researchers produce idealized portraits of participation, wherein the inconsistencies and contours of context are often subsumed under imperatives to present coherent narratives to funders, managers, or public audiences. This approach is illuminative of how participation has become a political tool for furthering institutional mandates, and that has unforeseen consequences. Yet, critical studies of participatory development, which question the elisions of context that are required to produce abstracted, quantitative knowledge about participation in project documents and surveys—themselves conceptualize participation as something that can be evaluated in terms of degree: it can be more “active” or “passive” (Corbridge et al 2005), increasingly or decreasingly “visible, voluntary, and vibrant” (Kelty 2020: 255), built from below or merely imposed from above by the gaze bureaucratic gaze of project management. Thus, the photo described above captured by Neha and Karan would be considered inadequately participatory, an inauthentic representation of women as participants, one which was merely staged, orchestrated by the NGO workers for their own ends. Yet, such a formulation is itself an

inherently political statement predicated on a decontextualized presumption about what it means to be “active” or “passive,” one which thereby positions the women involved as somehow less agentive than the NGO workers. How might we understand such partial representations without necessarily pathologizing the women involved as mere “pawns” of the NGO’s agenda?

Techniques of visibilization—through photos, through bar graphs, or through written anecdotes about women’s “lively” presence in public spaces—are central to how development workers make women’s work legible as “active.” The fact that these technologies highlight certain information and decontextualize it so that it might circulate more broadly necessarily obscures other relevant information—e.g. what came after the photo, or the quality of women’s extra-domestic labor force participation. For example, in Figure 2.4 below, a senior Sahayata fieldworker named Jagriti took a photo of a women’s collective that she was visiting in order to offer information on the issue of voting (part of the same campaign before the 2019 election). After the meeting, she asked the women to stand for a photo. The women stood for the photo and gathered together several brooms to show their work as part of a cleanliness campaign (*safaai abhiyan*). Jagriti took the photo, and afterwards the women immediately dispersed. The leader (*Pradhan*) of the collective suggested the women actually do some cleaning, but everyone was in a rush to get back to their daily work at home. Rather than understand the women in the collective as “passive” participants in this photo, merely “staged” to serve the NGO’s agenda, we might recognize how the women are also participating in the visibilization of their own labor, and doing so benefits them as well by bringing attention to their women’s collective beyond their immediate surroundings. As such, the co-constitutive nature of participation through this photograph was the collaborative achievement of rural women and rural NGO workers, one that itself served multiple agendas.



Figure 2.4: Sahayata worker Jagriti photographs a women’s collective.

2.3 Visions of Participation

“Participation, at the very least, requires seeing oneself participate” (Kelty 2020: 257).

Linguistic anthropologists, sociologists, and education scholars offer an approach that differs from the conceptualization of participation in manners of scale or degree. They emphasize participation as something that is inherent to human interaction, and which can be accomplished through multiple semiotic means. This seeks to counter ideas about participation as more or less “active”—and thus more or less adequate, authentic, or even moral—by demonstrating how people shape interaction even without extensive verbal contribution. Thus, even seemingly “silent” or “voiceless” actors impact the social production of meaning in interaction. Duranti

(1986; 2003; 2015) demonstrates how audiences to political speeches, theaters, or classroom lectures are not “passive receptors” of speech but rather co-authors during the performance of speech acts (see also Schegloff 1972; Goodwin 1981 on “recipient design” in conversation analysis). This is not only because the presence of other(s) enables the speech act to occur, but it is also because audiences’ reactions, responses, and attention shape the speakers’ choices. Erving Goffman articulated this through his notion of participant frameworks, which demonstrate how conversational participants may include not only speakers and hearers, but addressees (to whom talk is being directed), ratified participants who are not being addressed, overhearers, and potential hearers, all of whom collaboratively produce and shape what is being said (Goffman 1979; Schegloff and Sacks 1984; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). As we will see below, a laugh can reshape the tone and direction of a conversation, leading to contestations over meaning and overt discussions about participants’ affects. This is true even when addressees are not physically present, not only in cases of electronically mediated interactions, but also in the sense that our practices are always influenced by the culturally salient voices, genres, and expectations that circulate across contexts (Bakhtin 1981).

Charles Goodwin and Marjorie Harness Goodwin, building on Erving Goffman’s earlier studies of participant frameworks, extend our understanding of participation by examining the embodied, affective, and material practices that humans deploy to collaboratively build meaning in interaction. They demonstrate that even a speaker suffering from aphasia who has access to only four words can contribute meaningfully to the coproduction of meaning in interaction by using his gaze, body, and intonation (C. Goodwin 2004). Practices of touch, gaze, and gesture, along with tools and the natural environment, together become ways of coproducing meaning (C. Goodwin and Goodwin 2004; M. H. Goodwin 2006; 2017). Rather than conceptualize

participation in terms of scales or degrees, in which a seemingly less vocal conversational partner would be considered a less “competent” speaker or “active” participant, this work demonstrates how people co-produce meaning across a range of semiotic modalities. It also demonstrates how participation is itself something we learn to do in specific ways, within specific *communities of practice* over time (Lave and Wenger 1991). As such, what may seem to be a more “peripheral” or “passive” form of engagement (e.g. listening, watching) is itself a legitimate form of participation that is crucial to building competence in a given community of practice. This approach, built on a Vygotskyan and Marxist analysis of learning and praxis, takes a more encompassing understanding of human agency that may be otherwise diminished by looking at participation in terms of scale (“high” vs. “low”) or degree (“active” vs. “passive”), and which recognizes the embodied, affective, and material practices that work alongside talk in social action (Bourdieu 1977b; Giddens 1979; Ortner 1984).

If we understand participation as constitutive of social interaction—such that a gesture is equally productive of meaning in a politician’s lengthy speech—then we may begin to investigate how particular *ideas* about participation emerge, circulate, and are reframed, and how those ideas serve distinct interests. This allows us to understand how NGO workers engage with rural actors without preemptively positioning speakers in positions of higher or lower participation, and thus more or less agency. What it means to be an “active” participant is not context-independent, but is the result of collaborative meaning production. Nevertheless, *how* the meaning of “activeness” gets constructed is a political process mediated by speakers’ semiotic resources and social position. In his seminal article “Professional Vision” (1994), Goodwin demonstrates how speakers belonging to certain professions—archaeologists, police officers—produce “socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the

distinctive interests of a particular social group” (1994, 606), which render particular meanings from otherwise obvious visual entities through their multimodal semiotic resources, including tools, the body, and the natural environment. He identified three interactional strategies through which speakers collaboratively construct the nature of events, places, and people: “*coding*, which transforms phenomena observed in a specific setting into the objects of knowledge that animate the discourse of a profession; *highlighting*, which makes specific phenomena in a complex perceptual field salient by marking them in some fashion; and (3) *producing and articulating material representations*” (Ibid).

Through an analysis of the trial of four officers from the Los Angeles Police Department charged with violating the civil rights of Rodney King, Goodwin demonstrates how the defense and their expert witness Sergeant Charles Duke rendered videotape evidence of King being beaten on the ground into a careful, tactical, and appropriate performance of police protocol in which King himself was seen as the aggressor. The defense lawyer outlined a coding scheme around use of force learned in police training. He then highlighted certain movements in King’s body and coded them as evidence of aggression requiring further escalation. He used slowed-down frames from the video on the television screen to attest his narrative framing of King as aggressor and the police officers as competent, protocol-following professionals. This way of seeing, cultivated through appeals to technical expertise and profession-specific training, ultimately allowed for the police officers on trial to be found not guilty of criminal wrongdoing, although two were later convicted in a civil suit. This process of framing King as the instigator rather than victim of police brutality was thus the outcome of situated interaction, in which the construction of a person as more or less “active” or agentive is itself mediated by speakers’ professional practices of seeing.

In the next section, I demonstrate how Sahayata workers, women's collectives, and myself as researcher collaboratively produce and contest what it means to be an "active" participant in rural development by highlighting aspects of women's embodied, affective, and linguistic practices, coding them as either "active" or "idle" (*bela*), and producing material representations of them in the form of photos and a documentary film. Doing so is critical to instantiating the success of the NGO, and contributes more broadly to the exceptionalization of Himachal Pradesh as a "socially inclusive" developmental success.

2.4 Making "*Bele*" (Idle) Women "Active"

Sahayata team members understood the core task of their work to be transforming women's groups from "idle" (*bela*) to "active" (using the English word). The goal of this section is to understand how NGO workers co-constituted what it meant to be "active" during their everyday encounters with women's groups. Here we will see how the meaning of "activeness" itself emerges in interactions where women collaboratively highlight certain embodied, affective, and linguistic practices and code them as either signs of "activeness" or "idleness." When members of the collectives present evidence of their current activities—i.e. go to village assemblies, present petitions for public works, etc.—NGO workers draw on technical knowledge about bureaucratic protocols, legal rights, and governmental structure to evaluate women's existing practices as insufficient. The analysis reveals that members of women's collectives are themselves collaborative participants in the construction of social meaning, such that it becomes untenable to conceptualize their participation in metaphors of scale or degree. I show that Sahayata workers' ability to draw on multimodal semiotic resources gained from their profession as NGO workers is crucial to establishing an authoritative vision of what it means to be "active."

In June of 2018, employees of Sahayata, including Neha and Jagriti, organized an event for several women’s collectives in their block called a “women’s collective celebration” (*mahila mandal utsav*). This celebration was planned as part of a larger effort by the NGO to organize a federation of women’s collectives – to bring the many individual, small women’s collectives in the District together under the umbrella of a larger federation that would push for broader forms of social change in Kangra. Creating this federation required getting women to agree to show up to further events, and convincing them that doing so would be key to manifesting larger societal changes that would not be possible with individual groups alone. Several dozen women attended that day, sitting underneath a temporary tent house²³ while Neha and Jagriti positioned themselves in front of the crowd before beginning to speak to the women present.

Jagriti began by asking a representative from each women’s group to stand, come to the front, and tell the group how long they have been operating and what kinds of “work” they have done in their group. One by one, women came forward and introduced themselves and their groups. Some mentioned having gotten an illegal liquor shop closed in their village, others mentioned getting a handpump installed for drinking water, while several mentioned that they

²³ *A tent house is a temporary construction for events made of bamboo, rope, and cloth*

haven't accomplished much because group members do not attend meetings, and no one will listen to them.



Figure 2.5: Jagriti (above) and Neha (below) deliver speech to women's groups

Jagriti responded by referencing a common saying about women's collectives: "Okay, I had started to say one word to you all, right? *Bela mandal*." The phrase "*bela mandal*" (idle collective) is a play on the similar-sounding "*mahila mandal*" (women's collective), and is used widely in the area as a joking way to disparage women's collectives as ineffective. Several women in the crowd began to mumble at the same time. Jagriti continued, "Yes, right? This word, this word means that you are *bele* (idle). *Bele* women and *bela mandal*. Do you want people to hear this about you?" A few women responded quietly, "No." Jagriti countered: "Speak!" (*bola!*) to which the women responded more forcefully "No!" She continued: "You don't want this, right? But for this what are you going to have to do? You are going to have to do *work*." Jagriti argued that most women's collectives are merely focused on collecting dues

through their government-run savings account, and using savings to purchase supplies for village events (chairs, pots and pans, tent houses). This work, Jagriti continued, was not the kind of “work” (*kamm*) that women’s collectives were created for. She asked the crowd, drawing on examples stated previously by representatives of the different collectives: “What kind of work do you have to do? Like some groups said they had an alcohol problem (*sharaab di samasya*) in the village or some other people got a handpump installed. Okay, so listen, your mahila mandal has a register, right? How many registers do you have?”

Several women responded: “Two.” Here, Jagriti turned her attention to the documentation practices of women’s groups, and the distinction they make between their financial activities (collecting monthly dues, settling debts from interloaning) and their broader “work” that they would record in the “action register,” that includes the topics they discuss, plans they make, or other non-financial activities. After distinguishing the purpose of the two registers, Jagriti continues (translated from Kangri):

“Listen, when your women’s group is formed, when you register the group [i.e. with the government] and you get a form, have you ever read that form? On this form are written the women’s group aims (*uddeshya*) that why are you forming (the group). Someone say, what are the aims of making a women’s group? Why do we make a women’s group?”

One woman in the crowd begins to say that none of the women know why the group is formed, or for what reason, they just come and give their money and leave. Neha steps in and says “No, aunty, what women do is a different issue, but what is *written* as the aims of the women’s group?” The woman continues to explain that if anyone has a problem, we form a group to help them. “To do economic support (*aarthik sahayata karni*). “Yes yes, okay, to do economic support. Now someone else say, what is any aim of the women’s group, any at all?” She begins

to point to individual women and asks them to stand and speak, who respond by saying they do not know what is written. She moves to other women who also say they do not know. “Okay, forget about having read the list, you just tell me, why do we form a women’s group? Do we form the group just to give money? No? Then why do we form the group?” Another woman began to share about how women use the group to share one another’s joys and sorrows (*sukh-dukha baantna*). Jagriti responded, “Okay, so we have economic support, solving problems, and sharing our joys and sorrows. Any other?” Another woman mentioned gathering together “stuff” (*samaan*, meaning supplies like pots and pans, chairs, and other things used for events). “Yes, okay, most of you are doing this. You’re giving money, and you don’t know what the rest of the aims of the women’s group are. That is why they call you an idle group. If you aren’t going to do any work then will this organization run? It won’t run, will it?” Several women begin to object, saying that they *do* work but women won’t attend the meetings, so what’s the use? Neha steps forward again to say that when groups are founded, then women attend for the first few months, but when they realize that “you aren’t going to do any work, then they stop coming. They lose interest. But if you read the aims of the women’s group, then you can have a discussion (*charcha*). It’s okay to gather money, but we have to do more work than that, right? It’s not that we just come, give 10 rupees, and leave. You need to read the aims of the *mahila mandal*, this is a government thing, there are laws behind it, you have to work according to the aims.” Jagriti continued (translated from Kangri; original transcripts available in in Appendix):

Transcript 2.1

1 Jagriti: the thing is that in this too it is written, in your goals it is written, *education*
 2 this is a word right? education means your studies
 3 you should study yourself, teach your children, if there's someone who isn't able to study
 4 **that** is your goal
 5 your goal is that the custom of dowry (*dahej pratha*), you call it a custom, put a stop to it
 6 right? that is one work of your mahila mandal
 7 if you yourselves start that kind of work

8 to stop alcoholism, untouchability, to end caste discrimination
9 if you start this kind of work,
10 this is a big work (*bada kamm*) and then no one will be able to call you “idle collective”

Here, Jagriti has framed women’s claims about their current work and challenges they face as a misrecognition of the actual aims of their women’s collective. By referencing the official aims listed in their government-administered register (*karyavahi register*), which they receive when they establish a collective, Jagriti argues that the women are unaware of the true purpose of their collective, which would be gained from reading the written goals and from understanding the “laws” and the provisions for women’s collectives, and then beginning to act accordingly. Jagriti has articulated her own vision of the purpose of women’s collectives—promoting education, ending dowry, alcoholism, untouchability, and caste discrimination—which she refers to as a “big work” (*bada kamm*) and the way to avoid becoming an “idle collective.”

Many women in the crowd began to speak, saying that they do actually attempt to get these things done, but that people won’t listen to them. Jagriti responded by asking whether the women have filed an official application for these works through their *panchayat*, to which one woman responds “we go to the village assemblies, and we speak there –” before Neha interrupts: “You have to give a *written* application!” Jagriti then asks if everyone present knows about the Right to Information Act before launching into a description of what procedures they should follow in order to submit written requests for information from their elected officials regarding the status of public works—getting the requisite signatures, noting the date, and making a photo copy. Jagriti and Neha then proceed to layer together further direct instruction of what the women must do to see an RTI application through, as directed by the NGO (underlined), while using reported speech to perform the voices of these women back to them, portraying them as being unwilling to see an application to its final result (**bold**):

Transcript 2.2

- 1 Jagriti: we will tell you how to write the application
2 and you will give that, there to the panchayat secretary
3 and from this you will get information
4 that whether or not they filed that application, whether the money came or didn't come
5 you need to have all of the information
6 **but you don't want to do anything, you only say that**
7 **"yes I gave it, I told them, and it didn't happen, they just made it get lost like that"**
8 it's not like that! take up any problem
9 and solve it to the very end
10 Neha: you know what we think?
11 we people think **"we will just say it one time, give the application one time,**
12 **and from that the work will happen."** It's not like that, right?
13 we have to go more than once for some kinds of work
14 Jagriti: **or we say "let it go" right?**
15 **"let it go, who will do it [i.e. why bother]?" right?**
16 but if you will discuss it once like when some NGO people come
17 or anyone comes and they will give you the right kinds of advice

Here, both Jagriti and Neha utilize a similar interactional tactic to counter women's claims that they are already following the procedures—attending gram sabhas, speaking up, submitting applications—by using reported speech to perform women's voices. By mimicking what women are said to do, framing them as essentially lazy and unwilling to do the long-term work necessary carry out a petition to its conclusion, they are then able to contrast this with their own knowledge and NGO's more broadly as a source of guidance and advice. Throughout this meeting, various women in attendance attempted to offer examples of the kinds of work they have done through their women's group, while also conveying the struggles and challenges they have faced to their success – members not attending meetings, panchayat official being unwilling to listen to them, filing a petition for road work only to have the work stop before completion. They expressed concerns rooted in the everyday social and bureaucratic challenges to their ongoing functioning, but few of them claimed to be doing nothing at all. However, Neha and Jagriti continuously reframed women's concerns about an unruly bureaucracy as evidence of their personal and individual lack of knowledge and tenacity – their "idleness." Voicing the women through

reported speech, both Jagriti and Neha are able to simultaneously frame the women (a category Neha actually includes herself by using the collective ‘we’) as merely in need of information, “advice” that the NGO can offer on how to properly write an application, file it in the panchayat, and follow up on their requests. By offering them a brief, technical explanation of the Right to Information Act, the problem that the women had presented – bureaucratic indifference – has been reframed as personal lack in both knowledge and motivation to follow the correct procedures (filing petitions in writing, following up in a timely manner). By both highlighting women as the problem and offering the NGO as the solution, Neha and Jagriti then make their final intervention: asking the women to join with the federation they are forming and to select a date for their first meeting.

2.5 Active Affects

In addition to gaining knowledge of bureaucratic proceduralities (e.g. following proper channels, submitting written requests, following up) and legal rights (e.g. the Right to Information Act), Sahayata workers highlight certain embodied and affective practices that are necessary in order to become an “active” women’s collective. This concerns how women conduct themselves in meetings, including what they wear, how they sit, and the kinds of “energy” and “enjoyment” they should bring to the meeting through activities like singing. In a meeting with a women’s group in a village that was required traveling a similarly long distance from the NGO office as that mentioned in the introduction, Neha described how women should conduct themselves in their meetings:

Transcript 2.3

KEY: **Embodied (including language); Affective; Material**

- 1 Neha every month the pradhan and secretary meet, they start their meetings with a song
- 2 **many times they sing a hymn, or sing something**
- 3 **it's not that you came and sat and chatted,**

4 **two women sat in a group over there, two sat there, two sat there ((pointing left & right))**
 5 Member that's how it is
 6 Neha you shouldn't do that, okay
 7 because you are empowered women
 8 you are women, I mean, you have to work for some change
 9 it's not that "I will just think about my own home"
 10 you have to work for change, you have to work for this
 11 **that you should sit, sit together, and look at what is there**
 12 Man²⁴ you have to help each other
 13 Neha you have to help each other, so together, I mean, you have to meet on the 10th
 14 **sit in a circle and do the meeting, this time you sat like this, right**
((gesturing toward scattered seating arrangement))
 15 **in a circle what happens is you can see each other's faces**
 16 **don't turn your backs and sit on the other side**
 17 **if I sit with my back to someone, then that isn't enjoyable**
 18 **everyone sit in a circle, everyone's faces should be showing**
 19 the pradhan, secretary, ward leaders, they start the meeting
 21 Sahayata will not keep coming every time, we won't come every time
 22 it's your organization, you have to work in this organization
 23 **even if you sing one song**
 24 **not our film, film songs but our Pahari songs**
 25 **the songs from our weddings and other functions, start the meeting with those songs**
 26 **in this what happens is that it's enjoyable, the 'energy' [English] keeps going**
 27 **if you just sit like that and keep on chatting then it's not enjoyable**
 28 you need to meet like that, every month,
 29 and next month on the 10th if we don't come to do the meeting
 30 it's your responsibility that you will meet
 31 and **take a photo of it and send it to us on whatsapp**
 32 **then I will feel that "yes" [i.e. you are active].** you have my whatsapp number right?
 33 you have a smart phone right?
 34 Member we don't have one! *((all laughing))*
 35 Neha no one at all has a smart phone?
 36 Member buy a smart phone and give it to us madam! *((all laughing))*
 37 Neha there must be (one) *((group members laughing))*
 38 if you don't have one then there must be some women in the village with one
((group members laughing))

Here, Neha outlines several embodied and affective practices that constitute a properly “active” and “empowered” women’s group. She begins by describing another collective in which the members start their meetings with a song, and that they do not sit in small groups chatting individually. Instead, she tells them that “you are empowered women” (*tuhaan sashakt naariyan*)

²⁴ One of the group member’s husbands stayed for this meeting and sat on a chair observing, interjecting at moments. His contributions were usually glossed over by Neha.

en), and thus you need to “work for some change.” Doing so requires first sitting in a large circle, so that they may be able to see one another’s faces, and so that no one has turned their back to another member, which is “not enjoyable” (*maja nahi onda*). They should then begin each meeting with a song, but not the *filmi* songs they hear in Hindi music, but rather Pahari songs that are sung during weddings and other events. If they do so, then it keeps up the “energy” and “enjoyment” will come from this joint activity—as opposed to just chatting in small groups. These embodied practices of sitting in a circle, looking at each other’s faces, and singing together are said to generate affective responses—enjoyment, energy—which will allow the group to function as an active, empowered collective. The material representation generated therefrom—the WhatsApp photo—is what ultimately will allow Neha to feel that the group is actually “active.” Although Neha instructs them to take a photo of the meeting and send it to her on WhatsApp (thereby creating a material record of the “active” group), one member informs her that none of them have a smart phone, suggesting Neha buy one and give it to the group. As Neha asks several follow up questions about who else in the village may have a smart phone, the group members’ ongoing joint laughter forms a chorus that ratifies the implicit claim placed on the NGO to provide the technology necessary to meet their criteria of “activeness.”

In addition to the embodied and affective resources that NGO workers highlight as key to being “active,” women’s sartorial choices were also highlighted and coded as signifying either activeness and idleness. In another meeting, a senior member of the leadership team named Sadhana was leading a discussion about the purpose of women’s collectives in small room in a village-level NGO office when she began a lengthy discussion about women’s veiling practices. The headscarf or veil (Hindi: *ghunghat*, Kangri: *jhund*) is itself a complex practice with multiple meanings, that can be used in various ways and for various ends (Abu-Lughod 1988; Mahmood

2005). Sadhana takes issue with the veil and begins to frame it as a sign of women not being “active” and “aware,” arguing that this practice is a source of women’s “suffocation.” Two members of the women’s collective present begin to engage in a debate with Sadhana and with one another about this issue. Aarti, a woman in her forties, agrees with Sadhana, offering evidence of how the veil has personally affected her and how she feels it is forced, while Rani, a woman in her sixties, argues that the veil is merely a symbol of Indian women’s beauty, which they can decide whether or not to wear as they please. As the women discuss back and forth, Sadhana repeatedly intervenes not only to take issue with the language being used to discuss veiling itself, but also to highlight certain affective responses that women have during the discussion—whereas Rani and others present take on a lighthearted rather than confrontational tone, laughing at different points of the discussion, Sadhana argues that this discussion is not a “laughing matter.”

Transcript 2.4

1 Sadhana: and in women's groups, what we are calling this veiling practice
2 because whenever we talk about this veiling practice
3 (we say) "oh no, now it isn't happening"
4 but those who are wearing the veil, ask them what their lives are
5 Aarti: look, if we will laugh then we will laugh under the veil, no one will see your face
6 this is the thing, even when we are angry that's why we are under the veil
7 ((all laughing))
8 Sadhana: why did we laugh? -- one minute
9 why do we have to laugh under the veil?
10 Rani: the veil, it is one of the beauties/adornments of the Indian woman
11 Sadhana: one - please
12 'beauty', don't say this word in front of me
13 ask this Indian woman
14 ((points to a Sania, member who previously stated that she wears the veil))
15 when she covers with the veil, how much does she like it?
16 ask her how much beauty she can see
17 ok?
18 we say really well in language that it is beauty
19 but the person who lives with it=
20 Member: [=it becomes a problem for doing work
21 Sadhana: [ask her how much of her beauty is made from that veil
22 so when we will keep *this* kind of idea ((points to Rani))

23 then a woman like **this** will never be able to lift the veil ((*points to Sania*))
24 Aarti this veil is from force ((*several women laugh*))
25 Sadhana:hmm! ((*Sania lightly hits Aarti on the shoulder*))
26 Rani: then don't wear it
27 Aarti: It's a veil of force
28 Someone can break their teeth as well
29 ((*many women laugh loudly*))
30 Rani: ((*laughing*)) only if you wear it long hhhh
31 Aarti: what? if they wear it long then
32 Sadhana: not teeth - I will tell you
33 aunty,
34 Rani: some people don't know about the veil
35 no one is even wearing it
36 Sadhana: because, this is not a laughing matter
37 Rani ((*whispering*))
38 Aarti: yes!
39 Sadhana: this is a *women's* issue
40 you know I went to one woman's group -
41 Aarti: madam there's one more thing
42 nowadays we wear it this way and we can see ((*moves one layer of headscarf over face*))
43 before, one part went this way and the other was this way ((*pulls second layer over face*))
44 you can't even see like this, I can't see you
45 Sadhana: so this is our life
46 Aarti: and also before women used to wear such long shawls as veils
47 now there's been a lot of changes
48 the next generation of girls aren't even- they are doing good
49 Rani: they don't wear it at all
50 Aarti: they are doing good
51 Sadhana: I mean they are completely not wearing it
52 you can't say this, because in front of is
52 what is your name? Sania? Sania is saying she wears it
53 so we can't say this and this veil is the kind of tradition
54 this to me, in any sort of condition,
55 whether it's this veil tradition
56 or whether it's the tradition of not going to the temple [i.e. during menstruation]
57 or whether it's this red vermilion- [i.e. in the part of the hair to signify marriage]
58 sometimes people say to wear it and sometimes to clean it [i.e. if your husband dies]
59 all of these traditions are the kinds of traditions
60 that are not issues to laugh about at all
61 Several: yes
62 Sadhana: all of these are the kinds of traditions
63 that put women within four walls
64 and give birth to their suffocation, nothing else
65 when women will be able to bravely come out and go-
66 Aarti: there's one more thing
67 when someone dies, right
68 women can't go to their house, there's a restriction on that
69 and like if someone does die in the village, then women don't go
70 men go to the weddings, and they go to their house
71 **why can't women go?**
72 **why can't she go?**

73 first she had to take a white headscarf, then she has to take out this ((*points to nose ring*))
74 she can't wear a bindi, she can't wear anything, completely plain
75 *women can't go*
76 sometimes she won't even know if someone has died or not
77 she finds out from her gut (*kokh*)
78 this thing is wrong
79 Sadhana: completely



Figure 2.6 Line 42, Aarti demonstrates how women "nowadays" wear their scarves (*chunni*)

43. Aarti: "before, one part went this way and the other was this way"



Figure 2.7 Line 43. Aarti wraps the scarf twice around her head to display how women wore them "before"



Figure 2.8 Line 44. Aarti demonstrates her inability to see in the “old” way.

In this exchange, excerpted from a much longer discussion, the speakers build through contestation and debate a fraught portrait of the meaning of the veil, as well as several other practices that get subsequently brought into the discussion. Sadhana, Rani, and Aarti all take on different stances toward veiling, as well as other practices. The debate begins when Aarti starts to discuss how women use the veil to hide their emotions—their laughter or their anger (4-5)—leading Sadhana to question why women would choose to laugh under the veil. Rani, the older woman, then states that the veil is one “beauty” of the Indian woman (*ghunghat Hindustani*

naari ka ek shobha hai). Sadhana then takes direct issue with Rani's use of the word "beauty," saying that she should ask whether she likes it and how much she can see when she's under the veil (16). Aarti then begins to describe the practical problems women face when their faces are covered by the veil, arguing that the veil "is from force" (24) and interferes with one's ability to work and live comfortably, as it may cause someone to trip and fall and break their teeth (29). Rani, the older woman, responds "don't wear it then" (27). Sadhana tries to redirect the discussion from these Aarti's practical arguments, which many in the room have begun to laugh about, saying that this is "not a laughing matter," but rather is a "women's issue" (36-39). Aarti continues to discuss how the veil is impractical, modeling how women who wear the veil low over their faces are unable to see, before noting that the kind of veiling practice doesn't really happen among today's young women. Rani agrees with Aarti, saying that women today "don't even know what about the veil, no one is even wearing it" (34-35), and thus that the question is irrelevant for the current context. Aarti agrees, pointing out that most young women today do not even practice veiling anymore, particularly not in the ways that their mothers and grandmothers did, agreeing that this is a positive change for today's young women (48-50).

Aarti and Rani have thus, from very different perspectives, articulated a rebuttal to Sadhana's argument about the veil by asserting that whereas earlier, women were expected to veil in certain ways, that that is no longer the case. Sadhana continues to take issue with the women's casual and lighthearted tone by telling them that this is not something they should be laughing about. She attempts to build a particular vision of the veil as generating women's "suffocation," and that by removing it, women will be able to emerge bravely – before Aarti interrupts to divert the discussion away from veiling to another practice that she adamantly rejects: the prohibition on women's attendance at funeral ceremonies. She goes on to say

forcefully that she feels this restriction placed on women's movement, as well as the sartorial expectation for them to remove their jewelry, wear white scarves, and be completely "plain" (*saadha*), is wrong. Aarti and Rani thus reframed Sadhana's attempt to problematize the veil as an embodied symbol of women's suffocation, variously claiming it as either a matter of preference or something that causes difficulty for movement, but Aarti ultimately redirects the conversation away from this toward something more relevant for her current experience: her inability to mourn in particular ways. In this case, Sadhana's attempt to highlight and code the practice of veiling as problematic, as well as women's affective responses to her remarks in the form of laughter, were taken up and reformulated by the women present, generating a range of sentiments on what veiling actually represents to women.

2.6 Active Representations

The final strategy in enacting a *professional vision* of "active" women's collectives is "producing and articulating material representations" (C. Goodwin 1994, 606). The photos mentioned above are a central technique of how NGO workers visibilize active participation. By gathering women into groups, standing in certain poses and configurations while holding material objects like a broom or a poster of a political prisoner, the women behind and in front of the camera together create images that later circulate in NGO reports, in local newspapers, and on social media.

ने सामाजिक मुद्दों पर जागरूक किए लोग



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गगल: ने इस सप्ताह 'उमड़ते सौ कटोड़' अभियान के तहत लगभग पंद्रह गाँ

गगल : इस सप्ताह 'उमड़ते सौ कटोड़' अभियान के तहत लगभग पंद्रह गाँवों में जागरूकता की अलख जगाई है। की प्रवक्ता ने बताया कि अभियान के तहत गाँव केटलू, डोला, झरेड़, दरगेल, सुहड़ी में लोगों को जागरूक किया गया। इस दौरान महिलाओं और पुरुषों में समानता, न्याय, शिक्षा, दहेज, प्रथा, घरेलू हिंसा पर जानकारी दी गई। इस अवसर पर मौजूद रहीं।

[डाउनलोड करें जागरण एप और न्यूज़ जगत की सभी खबरों के साथ पायें जॉब अलर्ट, जोक्स, शायरी, रेडियो और अन्य सर्विस](#)

Figure 2.9 "[Sahayata] made people aware of social issues." (*Dainik Jagran*, Nov. 23, 2017).

During the first six months of my fieldwork in Kangra, I lived on the campus of Sahayata and acted as a volunteer for the organization. I contributed in several capacities: cooking and cleaning in the kitchen and dining hall; writing reports on workshops; documenting events with my video camera; and, on two occasions, producing and editing short documentary films on Sahayata's activities in the community. One film featured a girls' cricket tournament, and the experiences of girls who participated from villages where they were generally not allowed to play cricket or other sports in public spaces. The second film, which I focus on here, concerned a protest march organized by Sahayata as part of a larger transnational campaign against gender-

based violence called One Billion Rising, started by feminist activist Eve Ensler. This protest took place at night and was themed “Take Back the Night” and was attended by several hundred girls and women who Sahayata was connected to through their community work. The march itself began around 8 PM at the busiest intersection in Kalyana’s main Bazaar, and ended several kilometers later at a large gathering space where Sahayata organized a gathering for speeches, dancing, and music. I, along with two other media team members, documented the march and made a four-minute short film on the process of organizing and executing this event, which Sahayata used (along with the other film) to show to their funders, visitors, and their own participants. At the time, I made this film as a way to contribute to the work of the organization, which I thought would be a productive use of my skills and time. It was only later—while writing this chapter—that it occurred to me that the film itself encapsulates much of the work of enacting a professional vision of women and girls as “active” subjects that my own research participants were engaged in their daily conversations. I made the film on my computer, but the footage and editing choices were the product of collaborative discussions with NGO workers. The film, summarized below, highlights several embodied, affective, and linguistic practices that NGO workers articulated as indicative of “activeness,” as well as the practices that they themselves engage in to produce this “activeness.”



Figure 2.10 Anticipation

The film starts in the outdoor garden of the NGO office. We look down on a Sahayata team member painting a sign reading “Break the silence!” An upbeat song plays over images of Sahayata team members laughing together as they gather posters and signs for the march. The camera cuts to a long line of girls and women filing out of the NGO’s campus, smiling and waving at the camera as they go by.



Figure 2.11 Preparation

A time lapse shows the Sahayata team setting up for an evening celebration. Signs go up rapidly on the walls, chairs move into rows, the stage is set up with audio equipment. The music builds as the room steadily fills with chairs. The next shot cuts to the front of the same room, bursting full of people, girls sitting on the floor, boys squeezing through the crowd. Many are wearing yellow bands around their heads reading in Hindi: “This is our night, this is our message, the day is also ours, the night is also ours.” (*Yeh raat hamaari, baat hamaari, din bhi hamaara, raat bhi hamaari*).



Figure 2.12 Welcome

The next scene is outdoors, in the market, and it is dark. Cars and scooters with bright headlights drive by slowly, the narrow streets choked with traffic. The team has gathered at a meeting point, hundreds of people stand together with yellow bands tied around their heads featuring Hindi text about the One Billion Rising campaign. A team leader stands above the rest, delivering a speech about rising cases of violence against women, and how they are gathered there to contest violence against women by “taking back the night” (quote from film clip).



Figure 2.13 Departure

The march begins as a long line of women, girls, and boys walk down the main thoroughfare in Kalyana (Fig. 2.13). They carry signs made by NGO workers reading: “Come, let’s win the night!” (*Aao, andhere ko jeetein*); “Girls are nature’s gift / do not dishonor them!” (*Beti hai kudrat ki uphaar/ mat karo iska tiraskaar*); “The sin is not in my clothes / it is in your glare” (*Dosh meri kapadon mei nahi, teri najar mei hai*). Shots feature girls and boys both thrusting their hands in the air, shouting loudly and smiling into the camera while the music picks up speed.



Figure 2.14 Exclamation

Sahayata team leaders shout call-and-response slogans in Hindi, to which the marchers shout in response: “*We have come out to say*” / “*The day is ours, the night is ours!*” (*Ham kehne nikale baat hamari! Din hamara, raat hamari!*). “*Raise your voice! We are one!*” (*Avaaz do! Ham ek hain!*). “*From harassment, we will take! / Freedom!*” (*Chedchaad se lenge! Aazaadi!*).



Figure 2.15 Escalation

The march ends and everyone packs the hall for a celebratory program. Call-and-response slogans are shouted on a loud speaker as women and girls clap above their heads while shouting responses in unison. Several NGO workers take the stage to give speeches about why they have gathered together. They speak about how this act of taking back the night will challenge societal beliefs about women's place in the nightscape.



Figure 2.16 Exaltation

After the speeches end, performances begin on stage. Several girls perform dances to Bollywood songs. A local rock band takes the stage. The guitarist plays Hindi songs and the room breaks into song and dance. Girls hold hands and twirl each other around. A young man in the crowd mimics a guitar while colored lights circle the room. The camera fades to black and a banner appears on screen reading “One Billion Rising / Rise! Resist! Unite”

• • •

The scenes I chose to feature in the film highlight several of the same practices that NGO workers framed above as being “active.” First, the scenes highlight several facets of NGO workers’ own labor—making signs, setting up the space, delivering speeches, shouting slogans—which are integral to presenting the NGO as an entity that is making people both “aware” of problems like violence against women and “active” in contesting it. Second, it

portrays the women and girls present as “active” by highlighting several of the embodied, linguistic, and affective practices: they are shown loudly shouting slogans; hoisting signs and/or their fists into the air; clapping in rhythm with slogans; wearing matching headbands; smiling, laughing, and dancing. Enacting my own professional vision, gained through my position as researcher and resident at the NGO, involved choosing scenes that represented the women and girls therein as enthusiastic, excited, and engaged in the activities, while eliding scenes in which they looked bored or tired; in which they were busy chatting with their friends and thus not shouting slogans; if they were playing with signs instead of holding them up; or if they were playfully making faces to the camera. Doing so allowed me (and the Sahayata workers who reviewed and approved my edits) to construct a coherent portrait of the event in which everyone present was an “active” participant. These choices were not neutral, but were made in an effort to contribute to building the NGO’s public image, support its funding prospects, and celebrate its work as a positive force in the community. The film not only depicts the women and girls therein exhibiting certain “active” affects and embodied practices, it also generated affects from the NGO workers and administrators, as well as subsequent viewers (Mankekar and Carlan 2019). As the images were remediated in new contexts, and with new audiences, creating new impressions long after I left, the original context of its creation became tied to broader indexical frames and narratives about women’s exceptional participation in Himachal Pradesh.

2.7 Conclusion

The question of participation remains a pressing one for scholars of development and governance. How participation should be measured, evaluated, and categorized has been the subject of extensive debate, with the goal of fostering more “inclusive” political economic systems. Himachal Pradesh has broadly occupied a position of exceptional success in having

manifested “inclusive” development, particularly for women and people from historically disadvantaged castes. Yet, this work relies entirely on surveys and census data that draw broad conclusions based on labor force, poverty rates, or other quantitative phenomena that obscures how such categorizations come to exist in the first place (see also Chapter 5 for a discussion of the interactional co-constitution of BPL criteria and the meaning of “poverty” more broadly). Anthropological studies of participatory development have widely critiqued this approach to participation as a technocratic development discourse that depoliticizes the dynamics of rural communities. These contributions have demonstrated how participation can be used to obscure power relations between groups of different class and caste positionalities, generating new forms of exclusion. Such accounts tend to portray rural people as variously kept out of positions that would allow them to truly participate, to set agendas, to make decisions about their lives. As such, the solution to these critiques has often been an appeal to a more genuine kind of participation that is equitable, voluntary, and community-driven—one that is more “active.” This approach misses an opportunity to investigate how what it means to be “active” is itself a situated social phenomenon. By embracing a more encompassing understanding of participation that does recognize the ways that *all* participants—not just speakers, but hearers, overhearers, and even absent potential hearers—shape the production of social meaning, then we may be able to identify how and why certain *ideas* about participation arise, circulate, and dominate *and* whose interests such interpretations serve.

The analysis offered in this chapter has attempted to demonstrate two aspects of the study of participation in rural development. The first is that the speeches, photos, and videos that constitute the daily activities of development workers are the product of negotiations between NGO workers, women’s collectives, and myself as researcher. To presume that the subjects

represented in photos or videos, or who were present at meetings, had little role in shaping the outcome of those events or representations is to reproduce the same elision of political context that anthropologists have demonstrated to be rampant in development discourse. Instead, we may view these encounters as collaborative and contested co-productions of meaning.

The second point I have demonstrated is that what it means to be an “active participant” is itself an outcome of situated interactional negotiations. This process involves highlighting, coding, and materially representing certain affective, embodied, and linguistic practices that are considered active, while obscuring or eliding those that are not. This process requires the semiotic labor of everyone involved—not only NGO workers leading discussions, but women who show up to them, who affirm and contest what it means to be active, and me, as photographer and filmmaker, who wanted to contribute something to the NGO during my research. By producing these material representations of what it takes to be seen as “active”—including this chapter—I hope to have contributed to our critical ethnographic understanding of participation as itself the outcome of social and political entanglements between speakers. As such, we cannot place participation in the same kinds of scales of quantity or degrees of quality as many scholars have done. By assuming that what it means to be an “active” or “passive” participant can be ascertained outside of specific contexts, anthropologists risk reproducing the same elisions in context and meaning that they seek to excavate from the depoliticizing effects of development discourse. Indeed, to argue that women who stand for a photo for an NGO are merely “passive” vehicles of a “staged” institutional agenda is itself to make a political claim about the nature of women’s agency: it presumes that they neither shape nor benefit from the meaning created therein. Instead, the meaning of participation itself is the outcome of sustained interactions, and thus cannot be extrapolated into context-independent models. Rather than

asking how we may “increase” or “improve” participation for marginalized groups, we should reflect on how we come to see participation as a salient category to begin with. Who defines participation, and how is it made salient? How do we come to see something as participatory, or not? At stake in such questions is a more grounded understanding of how social actors with various interests use diverse semiotic resources to build meaning collaboratively, without necessarily positioning them in hierarchies of scale or degree.

CHAPTER 3:

Voicing the State: Register and Play in Bureaucratic Encounters

“The government is providing, but the people who really need the benefits, they don’t get them.” The headperson (*pradhan*) of a Kalyana panchayat was telling me about his concerns with the provisioning of state welfare benefits in his crowded one-room office. “Look, I mean, we are doing the paperwork, but on the *basic level, ground level*, the work isn’t happening at all.” (*Dekho, matlab, kagajon ka kaam pura kar rahe hain, par basic level, ground level ke upar kaam hai hi nahi*). The discrepancy between policy and practice, between what’s written and what actually happens on the “ground level,” is a major concern for practitioners and scholars of bureaucracy alike. While the *pradhan* I was interviewing articulated a familiar concern with the failure of welfare benefits to “reach” the public, the way he framed the problem relied on a performative enactment of two intertwining characters—state agents and rural villagers—who emerged in his narrative through a contrastive register of English-infused Hindi alongside the local language, Kangri.

Transcript 3.1

Hindi; English; *Kangri*

- 1 Pradhan: officially जब हमें indication आती है, उस के बाद जिम्मेबारी बनती है हमारी,
officially, when we get an indication, after that the responsibility [to deliver services] becomes ours
2 देखिए वो ward को ले के मतलब एक group meeting करें
look, if they would do a group meeting with the ward,
3 वो आगे scheme express हो सकती है, ठीक है जी?
then that scheme could be expressed further, right madam?
4 कि ये जो ग्राम सभा होने जा रही है, यह objection होगा इस में यह मुद्दे हैं
that at the village assembly, this objection will happen, these issues will be raised,
5 इन लोगों के नाम जाने हैं मकान के लिए जाने हैं, या मतलब repairing के लिए जाने हैं,
these people’s names will be put forward for housing, or houses will go for repairing,
6 जैसा जो भी है pension है जो भी है,
or whatever there is, pensions, whatever,
7 तो उस चीज में भी ये लोग आना पसंद नहीं करते
so even then people don’t like to come

- 8 Hannah: क्यों?
Why not?
- 9 Pradhan: मतलब वो ही है अपने व्यक्तिगत काम, व्यक्तिगत काम और कोई बड़ा reason नहीं है,
their personal work, there's no other big reason,
- 10 उस के बाद जब आयेंगे तो यहाँ पे बोलेंगे, उदा फार्म भरोईआ? तां में तां रईआ, मिंजो तां दसिआ नी,
after that they will come here and say "his form was filled?! I was left out! No one told me!"
- 11 Hannah: ((laughs))
- 12 Pradhan: problem यही है, कि साड़े जो मलतब लोक एन, जिनांयो जरूरत ए
this is the problem, that our people, they ones who need [benefits],
- 13 सै ई मतलब खुद ओणोयो त्यार नी एन.
they themselves aren't willing to come.
- 14 सरकार तो कर रही है हम लोग enforce कर रहे हैं हम लोग ही उनको दे रहे हैं पर क्या करें?
the government is doing it, we are enforcing it, we are giving them [benefits], but what can we do?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *pradhan* frames the problem of lagging service delivery—of the discrepancy between policy and practice—as the result of citizens' lack of engagement in the bureaucratic process. He centers his narrative on low attendance at village assemblies. The government, he argues, is providing ample benefits, and government workers like himself are doing the necessary work to provide benefits by organizing regular village assemblies, disseminating information, and enforcing policies. Still, he claims, people are unwilling to show up to meetings, and later complain that they are left out.

While relaying his diagnosis of the situation, the *pradhan*, who holds a democratically-elected position with extensive bureaucratic duties, constructs two characterological figures (Agha 2005): one of the benevolent state officer, and the other of the irresponsible rural citizen. In producing these figures, the *pradhan* switches repeatedly between Kangri, which he uses to both mimic and evaluate his panchayat residents, and a variety of Hindi infused with English lexical items (e.g. *officially*; *indication*; *objection*; *express*; *related*; *repairing*; *invitation*; *aware*; *enforcing*) which he uses to describe his and the state's actions and responsibilities. When contrasting this voice with that of *panchayat* residents, the *pradhan* switches into Kangri and uses reported speech to parodically perform a villager showing up to his office later,

complaining that they were left behind. These two voices stand in sharp contrast not only in code choice, but also in the social and moral attributes associated with the voices represented therein. While the *pradhan* presents the state (*sarkaar*), himself, and his colleagues (ward leaders) as both virtuous and hardworking, the panchayat residents are framed as both uninformed and unreasonable, barging into government offices to make a scene rather than following appropriate bureaucratic protocols by attending meetings and submitting applications.

This chapter explores how rural bureaucrats in Himachal Pradesh performatively constitute the state's legibility and authority through their multilingual semiotic tactics of voicing and parody. Anthropologists have extensively analyzed how "the state" emerges as an ideological entity through various discursive, ideological, and bureaucratic practices (Abrams 1988; Trouillot 2003; Gupta 1995; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gupta 2012). An abiding focus on materiality has revealed how documentation, inscription, and more recently, digitization render the state's legibility through appeals to bureaucratic rationality (Gupta 2012; Hull 2012a; 2003; Mathur 2012; 2016; V. Das 2004; Dandurand 2019; Weber 2009). More recently, a smaller number of studies has delved into the linguistically-mediated nature of institutional practice—the way that meetings, speeches, audits, camps, and everyday conversations are a central part of what bureaucrats and NGO workers do in their everyday practice (Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017; Morton 2014; George 2016). While many studies have demonstrated the centrality of language to state formation and nationalist projects (Ayres 2012; Anderson 1991), most have avoided dealing more substantively with the complexity of talk as a tool of statecraft—steering more directly toward those papery items that seem more concrete and tenacious than "orality's 'jelly fish like' (Scott 2009:230) quality—manipulable and fleeting" (Sharma 2013: 318).

Drawing on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in rural bureaucracies across District Kangra, including the Kalyana Block Development Office (BDO) and several village-level administrative councils or *panchayats*, I argue that two broad and overlapping semiotic practices—which I call the *bureaucratic voice* and *bureaucratic banter*—are central mechanisms whereby the state is produced as distinct from civil society, and speakers’ utterances become tied to hierarchical scales of bureaucratic authority. Both strategies are “bureaucratic” not in the sense that they are solely used by state actors, but rather that they accomplish a key feature of bureaucracy: the simultaneous distribution of responsibility and mitigation of individual culpability (Hull 2012a; 2012a).

3.1 Himachal’s Bureaucratic Exceptionalism

Since the 1990s, Himachal Pradesh has been widely applauded by political scientists, economists, and development scholars for having an effective and transparent state bureaucracy that achieves socially-inclusive and successful welfare service delivery (Drèze 1999; Drèze and Sen 2002; Bhatta 2008; M. B. Das et al. 2015). As a “special category” state, Himachal receives additional financial assistance from the central government due to the difficulty of its terrain, low population density, and limited infrastructure; however, even amongst other special category states, Himachal has come to be known as a notable exception for its investment in social welfare provisioning and the efficiency of its service delivery. As such, scholars have searched for what sets the state apart, to explain “why Himachal Pradesh [has] invested its resources responsibly and accountably, why these investments led to positive outcomes, and how the state maintained inter-group equity in access to markets, services and political spaces” (M. B. Das et al. 2015, xix). Several major social development schemes and laws—including universal primary

education, rural preschools, primary healthcare centers, gender and caste reservations in *panchayat raj* institutions, a rural employment guarantee program, housing programs, among others—have been notably successful in implementation according to large surveys like Government of India’s National Sample Survey. This has been particularly striking given the poor outcomes reported in surrounding states in northern India, especially Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, and Uttarakhand. Himachal’s success is largely based on these indicators.

While scholars have shown how indicators and other forms of quantitative data production are themselves highly social processes, which rely on the erasure of inconsistencies and the production of coherence (Biruk 2018; Merry 2011; Latour 2007), most of this work has focused on how middle and high-level managers produce coherence through their ways of seeing and translating social life into project success (Mosse 2005; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Biruk 2012). Himachal’s “exceptional” indicators have led development economists into the realm of folk anthropology: theories of essential caste egalitarianism, gender equity in household decision-making, and a “culture of transparency” (Bhatty 2008, 19) in the mountains have circulated widely as explanations for Himachal’s exceptional success in manifesting “inclusive growth.” This chapter attends to the everyday practice of welfare implementation by low-level state bureaucrats in order to demonstrate how ideas about Himachal’s developmental success are themselves produced in ordinary interactions, rather than merely being the result of elite policymakers and statistical knowledge production.

Amongst the reasons for Himachal’s success in service delivery, Himachal’s distinctive success has been attributed to a “culture of transparency” that permeates small-scale hill societies, which she argues reduces social distance between groups of different caste, class, and gender backgrounds and thus minimizes conflict between bureaucrats and citizens (Bhatty 2008;

M. B. Das et al. 2015). This “culture” of “closeness” and “informality” is said to facilitate good governance and transparency, a narrative that can be found across similar texts that attribute the state’s bureaucratic exceptionalism to the intrinsic properties of hill society. A recent report by the World Bank, for example, links the success of the small hill state to the conditions of its topography:

Himachal Pradesh’s hilly terrain has resulted in a unique context of political and economic cohesion in other ways as well. The state has very low density of population that lives mostly in small villages. When combined with the difficult terrain, the smallness creates incentives for collaboration, reinforces inter-dependence, helps transcend caste divisions, and strengthens networks across different groups. It also binds the citizens in a common social and religious attachment to the Himalayas, its flora, fauna and water sources. The Himalayas are central to the Himachali identity and tie the citizens in a bond of social cohesion. (M. B. Das et al. 2015, xix)

Such narratives romanticize hill societies as socially egalitarian, closer to nature, and unencumbered by the scourges of casteism and patriarchy found in the Plains. While some scholars argued that precolonial Himalayan societies were relatively egalitarian in their political organization and resource distribution (Guha 1989), others have instead called attention to the long histories of caste exploitation that characterized the princely states in Kangra and Shimla as well as the caste-based systems of landownership, labor, and patronage within them (S. K. Sharma 2016). Furthermore, the postcolonial context has seen decades of deepening caste inequality even amidst greater attention to Dalit (previously “untouchable”) exploitation and the implementation of caste reservation policies. While arguments about an inherent egalitarianism

in Himachal tend to highlight the upper districts of the state (Lahaul, Spiti, and Kinnaur), which are home to more Adivasi (tribal) communities, there is ample evidence that Adivasi communities (including, in Kangra, the Gaddi tribe [see Chapter 1]) also practice strict Brahmanical caste divisions (S. K. Sharma 2016). While it is clear that notions of bounded, tight-knitted, and socially egalitarian hill societies were likely untenable even in a precolonial context, the post-liberalization context has dramatically reshaped the makeup of Himachal's population as neoliberal capitalist development projects continue to rely primarily on low-caste migrant laborers from across northern India, resulting in the rural economy being further propped up by regimes of class and caste discrimination (Shah and Lerche 2020). Furthermore, the lower districts of the state which border Punjab and Haryana, including Kangra, are also witnessing a dramatic drop in the child sex ratio, evidencing rising practices of female feticide in the state (John et al. 2008).

Moving beyond culturalist explanations for Himachal's bureaucratic success in implementing welfare policies, Akshay Mangla (2015; 2013) locates the source of Himachal's exceptional social development in the everyday practices that characterize bureaucratic norms. He agrees that Himachal has attained unusual success in welfare implementation, focusing in particular on the rollout of universal primary education, which he attributes to the unique style of low-level bureaucratic practice in the state. He argues that in Himachal, state officers are more likely to troubleshoot problems and find solutions in order to deliver services to rural people, thus following what he calls "deliberative norms." This differs from neighboring states like Haryana which are said to be trapped in "legalistic norms" wherein officers remain rigid and inflexible, and thus fewer benefits are successfully administered.

While Mangla attempts to nuance the more static culturalist arguments espoused by development economists about Himachal's success in implementing welfare programs, his analysis is built on largely non-ethnographic survey responses from a large swath of sample villages, leaving us without in-depth analysis of *how* bureaucrats actually enact their “deliberative norms” in practice. As such, I offer a more critical and situated account of how rural bureaucrats engage with citizens in their everyday work of administering and evaluating the delivery of welfare benefits—*how* they actually deliberate, and with what strategies. While many scholars have often highlighted bureaucratic “informality” as key to Himachal's success, I instead draw on linguistic anthropological theories of voice and humor to demonstrate how seemingly casual, jocular, and intimate interactions are themselves key to the production of hierarchies of expertise, authority, and responsibility (Basso 1979; Trnka 2011; Siegman 2020). By highlighting everyday forms of contestation that emerge from the implementation of welfare policy, we can better understand how the state is reified as a benevolent provider through its performance by social actors.

3.2 The Traveling Block Development Office

This chapter is based on fifteen months of ethnographic observation, video recording, and interviews collected from the Kalyana Block Development Office and seven *gram panchayats* (village council areas) located in the Kalyana community development block, or *tehsil* (sub-district). Kalyana block consists of twenty-four *gram panchayats*, each of which is overseen by an elected council of representatives consisting of a headperson (*pradhan*) and several ward leaders which represent smaller areas within the *panchayat*. I got to know many of these *panchayat* representatives through regular visits to their offices, both alone and in the company of two bureaucrats from the Block Development Office (BDO) whom I followed closely for over

a year, who I call Anita and Sita. The BDO is the lowest tier of the rural state bureaucracy in India, which works closely with elected *panchayat* representatives in administering state welfare benefits to villages. The BDO is headed by the Block Development Officer, who during my fieldwork was a twenty-eight-year-old man I call Aditya, who was unusually young for his rank, highly educated, and who grew up locally in Kangra. I got to know Aditya through one two-hour interview and regular informal chats when he would have time to see me in his office. He remained exceedingly busy and I often would only catch him in passing at events, where he would always ask how my work was going. Aditya, or as he was usually called, BDO Sahib, gave me permission to observe the work of his staff officers, Anita and Sita, who I had initially been introduced to through a neighbor in my village.



Figure 3.1 Anita, bureaucrat from the Block Development Office, sitting in a local *panchayat* office before a meeting with a self-help group

Anita and Sita were employed as the two Ladies' Village Development Coordinators (LVDCs) for Kalyana block. LVDCs, also called *gram sevikas* or village servicewomen, are career positions that recruit through a state examination process and adhere to caste-based reservation policies. The LVDCs report directly to the Block Development Officer, who they would meet with regularly. Across the state, there is a centralized seniority list based on length of experience, and promotions follow the hierarchy of seniority. Upon promotion, LVDCs take on the position of Ladies Social Education Officer (LSEO), which primarily oversees the Chief Minister Housing Program (Mukhya Mantri Aavas Yojana), a state scheme that offers subsidized loans for housing in the name of a female owner. Anita and Sita work in a shared an office with two or three other officers at the BDO. At the time of my fieldwork, they consisted of one Ladies Social Education Officer and one contract worker focused on building toilets through the Clean India Campaign (Swacch Bharat Abhiyan). Both in their mid-forties with teenage children, Anita and Sita had been first hired in the late 1990s (Anita, 1996; Sita, 1998) and were on track to retire in 2031-32. Both women are officially designated as Scheduled Caste, although neither of them openly discussed this with me, and were members of middle-class families. Sita lived in a small rented apartment with her husband, who also worked in the BDO, and their teenaged son, just down the road from my house in a village on the outskirts of Kalyana. Her father ran a highly successful tailoring business just down the road, and we frequently spent time at their house. Anita, her husband, and their teenaged daughter lived together in a rented apartment in central Kalyana just a short walk from the BDO. In February of 2019, Anita was promoted to LSEO and transferred to the next block over, leaving Sita the sole LVDC in Kalyana.

As LVDCs, Anita and Sita were responsible for overseeing the implementation of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) in twelve *panchayats* each. The NRLM is a World

Bank-funded microfinance scheme that replaced the earlier Swarnajayanti Gram Rozgar Yojana (SGSY) in 2011. The program provides subsidized loans and employment training to self-help groups (SHGs) consisting of seven to ten women from Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. Microcredit projects have been the subject of extensive anthropological analysis, particularly for having exacerbated precarity amongst rural populations (Kar 2018; Elyachar 2005; Moodie 2008), but such studies have yet to examine the role of language in mediating the everyday production of notions of deservingness, dependency, and poverty itself as ideologically shifting categories.

I spent extensive time observing and video recording Anita and Sita's regular meetings with SHGs in various *panchayat* offices, as well as observing their work in the BDO itself. In these meetings, Anita and Sita introduced women to the NRLM program, enrolled them into SHGs, monitored the monthly activities of SHGs, and encouraged members to take out large loans from government banks that they were instructed to use in order to begin an "income generating activity." They would often provide fliers or information about various skills training workshops in, for example, organic vegetable cultivation or tailoring, but Anita and Sita's primary job was to monitor women's financial activities—to get them to take out and repay loans—and they expected women to decide how to spend the money on their own.

Meetings with SHGs lasted anywhere from an hour to two and a half hours, and consisted of Anita and Sita describing the program's goals and expectations, documenting and auditing group financial records, and catching up on various happenings since they last saw each other. Through this work, I got to know the *pradhans* and secretaries from various *panchayats*, with whom I often cultivated independent relationships, as well as with self-help group members, who I would often have a chance to interview separately while Anita and Sita were doing paperwork, and who

I would see later at different events. However, since my primary focus was on following bureaucrats, I have less detailed information about the dozens of women who attended Anita and Sita's respective meetings. My primary interest was in understanding how Anita and Sita conducted welfare implementation through meetings with SHGs, including how they used their multilingual repertoires. In the following sections, I detail two overlapping interactional strategies Anita and Sita deployed in their everyday meetings with self-help group members, and how these allowed them to cultivate themselves as both virtuous (honest, hardworking) and inculpable for failures in welfare implementation. Doing so was often necessary in the face of continuous challenges from group members over the soundness of the NRLM scheme.

3.3 Voicing a Bureaucratic Persona

While scholars of the state have demonstrated how various discourses—of corruption (Gupta 2012; 1995), of transparency (A. Sharma 2013; 2018; Hetherington 2011), of empowerment (A. Sharma 2008; Elyachar 2005; Li 2007)—are central to the constitution and consolidation of the state in everyday life, less is known about how particular ways of speaking are implicated in the everyday production of the state. Several studies have shown that bureaucrats, including so-called “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 2010) like teachers, doctors, NGO workers, and other institutional actors, use socially-distinctive codes and registers as their medium of official communication in order to cultivate bureaucratic and democratic identities, translate policies across contexts, and manage conflicting social expectations (Bernstein 2017; George 2016; Gal, Kowalski, and Moore 2015; Pigg 2001; Silver 2010). Much of this work is directly concerned with how languages, as well as registers (defined below), genres, and forms of embodiment, are used to produce and perform types of personhood, expertise, and authority (Pigg 1997).

The linguistic anthropological concept of “voice” can help clarify how forms of bureaucratic personhood become encoded in ordinary speech. When a particular way of speaking becomes socially recognizable and ideologically indexical of a set of moral and ideological values attached to the speaker, Bakhtin refers to this as “social voice” (1981). When a social voice is tied specifically to a register it then becomes an “enregistered voice” (Agha 2004; 2005). Registers are socially-distinctive ways of speaking tied to both specific social groups and, usually, specific social activities; as such, they may be recognizable across speakers but only used competently by specific speakers engaged in the social activity therein (Agha 2004; 2005; Gal 2018). Voices can be represented across communicative mediums, but they gain meaning when they are contrastive and thus indexically linked to different social personae (Hill 1995; Agha 2005; Harkness 2013; Slobe 2018). Professions often entail specific registers and consequently lawyers, doctors, teachers, religious leaders, and, in this case, bureaucrats are steeped in unique lexical, grammatical, and even phonetic conventions (R. H. Conley 2016; C. Goodwin 1994; Harding 1987), but other social activities like parenting often also entail the use of specific registers that mark speakers as a particular type of (moral) person (Ochs 1992; Ochs and Schieffelin 2009).

Bureaucrats in the rural development bureaucracy in Kalayana mobilize an enregistered variety of English-infused Hindi that I call the “bureaucratic voice,” which is used to cultivate a figure of personhood that is both virtuous and inculpable. The bureaucratic voice consists of a register of formal Hindi (i.e. grammatically formal and consisting of Sanskritized Hindi lexicon), interspersed with English lexicon tied to bureaucratic activities. It is also often marked by the use of collective pronouns, and syntactic forms that both distribute agency across multiple participant roles (e.g. causatives) and mitigate the agency of individuals (e.g. passives). The use

of reported speech often marks boundaries between the bureaucratic voice and the imagined utterances of villagers, represented in Kangri. Since many terms of English origin, e.g. “school” or “government,” are bivalent (i.e. occur simultaneously) in Hindi (Woolard 1998), and the boundaries between linguistic codes are themselves emergent in specific ethnographic contexts (Nakassis 2016; Rampton 1995), I do not conceptualize the bureaucratic voice as a form of “code switching” or “code mixing,” but rather highlight how speakers construct reflexive, metapragmatic distinctions between social characteristics by drawing on particular ways of speaking that are inherently multilingual, influenced by long histories of contact and convergence (S. N. Das 2016). In the transcripts below, I label portions of speech as “Hindi,” “English,” and “Kangri,” while also recognizing that these labels are inherently unstable, and only acquire socially-salient distinctiveness in their performative usage to construct particular figures of personhood—the virtuous state agent and the irresponsible welfare recipient. What makes the bureaucratic voice socially recognizable, then, is not merely its combination of Hindi and English, but also its contrastiveness with the most commonly-spoken language in Kangra: Kangri. Kangri serves as both a more general medium of communication with and between self-help group members, but becomes a semiotic resource for performatively distinguishing the characterological figure of the virtuous bureaucrat from that of the irresponsible rural welfare recipient.

Since the bureaucratic voice is a way of speaking—a “style” that is used to index stances of authority and distance, and thus non-intimacy (Bucholtz 2009)—and not a property of bureaucrats per se, it can also be used by other speakers who are involved in or are approximate to state power (e.g. pradhans, secretaries, and even ordinary citizens themselves), as we will see further in the next two chapters. This voice is thus “bureaucratic” not in its sole usage amongst

state bureaucrats, but rather in its accomplishment of a key semiotic feature of bureaucracies—the collectivization of authority amidst the erasure of individuals (Hull 2003; 2012a). As such, it is a resource that many speakers who interact with the Block Office, as well as other state institutions like the Department of Agriculture (see chapter 4) and the *panchayat* system (see chapter 5), mobilize in their effort to invoke their “virtuous inculpability.”

In Himachal, the enregistered persona I am referring to as the bureaucratic voice consists of several features bundled together, including lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic features (see Table 3.1). However, these basic features are themselves accompanied by particular speakers’ strategies, personalities, and interests, and as such the bureaucratic voice becomes salient not through its objectifiable features but through its enactment and performance in interaction.

Table 3.1: Features of the Bureaucratic Voice

Lexical	Grammatical	Pragmatic
Sanskritized Hindi (e.g. <i>mahetvapuran</i> , <i>avyshakta</i> , <i>vichlit</i>).	Collective/plural first, second, and third person pronouns (especially we, ‘you[plural]’, they), and in the case of zero anaphora, plural verbal morphology	Attributions of responsibility to other speakers
English lexical items used in bureaucratic contexts (e.g. objection, enforcing, attendance, meeting, order, trainings)	Causative verb constructions, distributing responsibility across multiple participants (see also Ch. 5)	Playful banter as strategy for mitigating accusations
	Passive verb constructions, mitigated agents	Appeals to bureaucratic proceduralism, rules, and standardized criteria (even when such criteria are being re-formulated in interaction).

3.4 Enacting Bureaucratic Authority

Sita is middle-aged, waif-thin, with light brown hair and a tendency to wear jeans under her kurta. Having worked for the Block Development Office for over twenty years, she now serves as one of two Ladies Village Development Coordinators (LVDCs) in Kalyana block and is responsible for implementing the National Rural Livelihood Mission in the *panchayats* under her charge. I accompanied Sita on regular field visits to various *panchayats* around Kalyana, where she met with a dozen or so women at a time to establish and monitor self-help groups and facilitate loans with which group members were expected to begin an income generating activity at home. For both Sita and Anita, the nature of the activity itself was not of concern; what mattered was ensuring women were both taking and repaying their debts under the scheme. This meant that loans were often disbursed for things other than self-employment. I once witnessed Anita tell a woman she could take on a loan to build a toilet for her home, and that this would fall under the criteria of “social need.”

In August of 2018, Sita was joined by nine members of a self-help group in the office of Anji *panchayat*. After taking attendance and inquiring as to why certain group members were absent, Sita began to explain that in order to maintain their status as officially Below the Poverty Line, the members of BPL households would be required to participate in the NRLM scheme as well as work through NREGA—the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which provides 100 days of daily wage labor in rural India. Sita repeatedly stated that it would be required (*majburi hai*) to take a loan in order to start an income generating activity, to which she faced pushback from several women present. One older woman stated very bluntly: “if we take on debt, then we will die poor like that, we will die from debt.” Sita responds that this loan is “for poor people and has the reduced interest rate of seven percent,” and that in order to continue receiving her BPL status, that she will have to take a loan (*loan lena pauna*). Later, as Sita was

further explaining the terms of the scheme, another group member named Ritika began to explain that she was already in debt from a loan she took out through the Prime Minister Housing Program (Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana, PMAY) from the Block Development Office to construct her house. It was difficult enough already to repay that loan, and it didn't seem feasible to take on more debt. Sita began to ask her a series of questions about the nature of her housing loan, and where she had received the remaining sum to construct her house:

Transcript 3.2

KEY:

Italics: Kangri

Bold: Bureaucratic voice

Underline: English lexicon

SPEAKERS: Sita, LVDC (S); Ritika, Group member (R); Aliya, Group member (A)

- | | | | |
|-------|---------------------------------------|----|--|
| 01 S: | कितना पैसा लगिआ मकाने पर | S: | <i>((to Ritika)) how much money was spent on your house?</i> |
| 02 R: | ज्यादा लगिआ ओणा | R: | <i>it was a lot,</i> |
| 03 | रिस्तेदारों दित्ता सारेआं जोड़ी-जाड़ी | | <i>our relatives pooled together and gave it</i> |
| 04 S: | जी नहीं यह बात मत बोला करो | S: | no ma'am, do not say this thing- |
| 05 R: | नी मैडम जी | R: | <i>no, madam ji-</i> |
| 06 S: | नहीं यह बात नहीं बोलनी कि | S: | no. you should not say this thing that |
| 07 | हम ने मकान का काम लगाया | | we got the house work done |
| 08 | तो रिस्तेदारों ने दिया | | and so our relatives gave |
| 09 R: | नी मैडम जी | R: | <i>no- madam ji-</i> |
| 10 S: | NO. | S: | <u>NO.</u> |
| 11 R: | दित्ता तां बोला दी | R: | <i>they gave (money), that's why I am saying it</i> |
| 12 S: | सुनो, मेरी बात सुनो. कितना दिया? | S: | listen, listen to me. how much did they give? |
| 13 R: | बी हजार मेरे मामा दित्ता, | R: | <i>my uncle gave 20 thousand,</i> |
| 14 | मेरिआं भेणां दित्ता, | | <i>my sisters gave</i> |
| 15 | मेरिआं ताईआं दित्ता, मेरे भ्रा दित्ता | | <i>my aunts gave, my brothers gave</i> |
| 16 S: | पूरा पूरा total कितना ओईआ | S: | altogether how much is the <u>total</u>? |
| 17 R: | ईयां तिन तिन साढे तिन लख रुपैया | R: | <i>like three, three, three and a half lakh rupees</i> |
| 18 | इतना तां लगिआ हा | | <i>it cost that much</i> |
| 19 S: | अच्छा, सुनो | S: | <i>((looking at others)) okay, listen,</i> |
| 20 | ब्लॉक से मिला एक लाख तीस हजार | | she got 1 lakh²⁵ 30 thousand from the block= |
| 21 R: | तीं जार, आं | R: | <i>=30 thousand, yes</i> |
| 22 S: | बाकी इनके रिस्तेदारों ने दिया | S: | the rest her relatives gave |
| 23 A: | रिस्तेदार दिंदे मैडम | A: | <i>our relatives give, madam</i> |

²⁵ A lakh is 100,000

- 24 S: ओ हो, ठीक है, बी पी एल के लोग क्या करते हैं? S: **OH HO:::, okay, what do BPL people do?**
- 25 एक लाख तीस हजार लेंगे ब्लॉक से **they will take 1 lakh 30 thousand from the block,**
- 26 और दस लाख की कोठी खड़ी करेंगे **and build a 10-lakh mansion,**
- 27 उस वक्त बोलते हैं रिश्तेदारों दित्ता **at that time they say, "our relatives gave"**
- 28 R: मेडम मेरे नी ए, तीआं लखां दी कोठी नी ए R: *madam, mine isn't, it's not a 30-lakh mansion*
- 29 S: क्यों रिस्तेदारोंयो इक लख ई घटा दा हा S: *were your relatives really just one lakh short?*
- 30 रिस्तेदारोंयो इक लख ही घटा दा हा. है? *your relatives were only one lakh short? really?*
- 31 सोचने की बात है ना, **it's something to think about right**
- 32 रिश्तेदारों को एक लाख ही कम पड़ रहा था **your relatives were just one lakh short**
- 33 जहां रिस्तेदार चार लाख जुटा के दे सकते हैं, **if your relatives were able to gather and give four lakhs,**
- 34 वो एक लाख और भी दे सकते थे **they were also able to give one more lakh**
- 35 R: देणेआले मां पयो तां मेरे बी नी ए R: *my parents aren't wealthy,*
- 36 मेरे घरेआला तिन्ना अखी च लगीओ *my husband was injured in his eye*
- 37 सैं बी कुछ कमाणेआले नी एन *he isn't earning anything*
- 38 S: नहीं वो तो, वो बात अलग है ना, S: **no, that's, that's a different issue,**
- 39 आपकी बात नहीं **it's not about you,**
- 40 में बी पी एल सब की बात कर रही हूँ **I am talking about all BPL people**
- 41 जिनको मकान मिलते हैं **who get houses,**
- 42 उनको एक ही dialogue है, **they have only one dialogue,**
- 43 पांच पांच लाख की कोठी खड़ी कर देंगे, **they will build a 5-lakh mansion and say**
- 44 मेरे रिस्तेदारों दित्ता *"my relatives gave"*
- 45 R: मेरे नी ए आहां दी R: *mine, ours isn't that ((laughs))*
- 46 S: सोचने दी गल ए, S: *it's something think about,*
- 47 रिस्तेदारों इक लख ही घटा दा हा *your relatives were only one lakh short.*
- 48 बई रिस्तेदार चार लख पहले देणेओ त्यार थे *really? if your relatives were ready to give 4 lakhs,*
- 49 तिन्नी चौं लखां दी कोठी बणाई लेणी थी, *then they should have built a 4-lakh house.*
- 50 कयो सरकार पर depend थे **why did you depend on the government?**
- 51 R: आहां दा मकान बणिआ नी R: *our house was built, if*
- 52 तां मेरा मकान नी बणना हा ए *if not then my house wouldn't have been built*
- 53 S: कई case चलिओ उपर S: **several cases have gone up**
- 54 ((shakes head and begins writing silently)) ((shakes head and begins writing silently))

Throughout this exchange, Sita switches between Kangri and the bureaucratic voice as she attempts to first frame a group member, and subsequently all BPL recipients, as dishonest and dependent. Whereas the Prime Minister Housing Program is intended to supplement, through low-interest loans, the costs of building of concrete (*pakka*) houses, it is not enough to cover the entire cost, leaving many rural people left to borrow from relatives. Sita frames this practice as deceptive, arguing that if someone is able to gather four lakhs from their relatives, then they do

not require the assistance of the government. She does this while invoking an authoritative stance through her switch into the bureaucratic voice in lines 4-8, and then again in lines 12-19, where she asserts that all BPL recipients merely take advantage of state welfare in order to build mansions (*kothi*). In line 9, as Sita begins to construct her narrative of welfare recipients, Ritika attempts to intervene in line 6, saying “no, madam ji,” to which Sita cuts her off with a firm “No,” in English (line 10). The bureaucratic voice becomes further salient as a resource to index a virtuous and benevolent state when it is contrasted with Sita’s use of Kangri. In lines 27 and 44, Sita switches from the bureaucratic voice into Kangri when parodically voicing, through reported speech, people who take money from their relatives to build houses, using a mixture of sarcasm and critique to frame them as cunning and dishonest. As Ritika defends against the accusation against her, Sita smilingly says, against switching from the bureaucratic voice into Kangri: **“I am talking about all BPL people who get houses, they have only one dialogue. They will build a 5-lakh mansion and say “*my relatives gave.*”**

The shift from the bureaucratic voice into Kangri marks a contrastive distinction between Sita’s authoritative assessment of rural need and deservingness, or lack thereof, and the generalized figure of the cunning welfare recipient. While making her argument, Sita is continuously smiling and using a high-rising intonation that elicits somewhat nervous laughter from Ritika, who continues to push back but does so while laughing (see Figure 3.2). At this point, Sita is looking away from Ritika and toward the other women in the room as she asks somewhat rhetorically in Kangri in line 50 why someone who was able to gather four lakhs from family members would **“depend on the government,”** before offering a vague threat: **“several cases have gone up,”** which could refer to the Block Office itself or to even higher levels of authority. Sita’s multilingual voice-play draws a contrast between the state as benevolent, and

herself as its virtuous servant, while constructing a figure of BPL recipients as cunning and undeserving of state aid. This theme of the abuse of state benevolence by people are not “really poor,” which appears in the previous transcript and across this dissertation, itself produces and maintains ideas of Himachal’s developmental exceptionalism, as a place where no one is poor.



Figure 3.2 Sita (front left) parodically says “my relatives gave” and Ritika (third from left, wearing yellow) laughs

Anita, the other Ladies Village Development Coordinator in Kalyana block, often mobilized similar tactics to produce an idea of state benevolence and BPL recipients’ welfare dependency when meeting with SHGs. In January of 2019, I accompanied Anita on a visit to Balera panchayat to meet with a self-help group. The majority of the meeting was spent auditing the group’s financial register, and filling out individual group members’ passbooks, which they use to keep track of loans taken out from the group’s joint savings account. While Anita was completing some paperwork, I began to ask some questions in Kangri to group members sitting beside me about how she came to be involved with this scheme and group. When a group

member named Neetu told me that the “Rural Development people” (*RD aale*) put her in the group, I then asked Anita to expand on how she chooses women for the groups she makes, continuing to speak in Kangri while Anita responded in the bureaucratic voice to explain the NRLM scheme beginning in line 6.

Transcript 3.3

KEY: *Kangri*; Bureaucratic voice (English lexicon)

SPEAKERS: Anita, LVCD (A); Neetu, Group Member (N)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>01 A: बी पी एल ई cover करना हमने,
 02 तो इनको उस में ही बी पी एल के लिए ही है ना,
 03 उनका राष्ट्रीय ग्रामीण अजीविका मिशन
 04 मतलब start कर के थोड़ा घर में बैठ के
 05 अपना काम करेंगी है ना,
 06 वो तो करना नहीं है इन्होंने
 07 वो तो मैंने पहले बताया आपको office में
 08 NREGA, NREGA के बिना कुछ करती नहीं है
 09 ये अभी भी देखो कैसी भाग-दौड़ लगी है
 10 N: तां खेतों में, खेतों में जाणा
 11 A: शुरू से हम बोल रहे हैं कि group बनाओ
 12 मैंने उस दिन भी बोल दिया
 13 कि आना नहीं चाहती है
 14 ए काम करना नहीं चाहती हैं,
 15 मजबूरी में कर रही
 16 कि कट ना जाएँ हम.
 17 कट जायेंगे हम बी पी एल से
 18 इसलिए कर रही हैं
 19 मजबूरी बनी है. सचाई तो यह है अब
 20 N: उईयां वैसे घर में क्या काम करना चाहिए बई
 21 A: कुछ भी काम कई काम है
 22 इतनी training हैं,
 23 अभी chart दूँगी तो आपने बोलना,
 24 इक बी नी करनी आहां
 25 ((pulls out piece of paper from purse))
 26 N: आहां दे वोले तां ओणी नी
 27 A: सब डरदी ए लेआ दिखा
 28 training क्या करदे, पढ़ा ये
 29 बी पी एल लोगों के लिए हैं सारा ही</p> | <p>A: we have to <u>cover</u> all the BPL,
 so, they, only they are in it, it is for BPL only,
 their National Rural Livelihoods Mission,
 they will <u>start</u> a little while sitting at home,
 they will do their own work
 they don't want to do that,
 I told you that before in the <u>office</u>,
 without NREGA, NREGA they don't do anything
 even now look how they are running away
 N: <i>in the fields—(we have to) go into the fields</i>
 A: from the beginning we are saying make a <u>group</u>,
 I said this the other day too,
 that they do not want to come
 they don't want to work,
 they are doing it because they have to,
 “so that we don’t get cut” [i.e. from BPL list],
 “we will get cut from BPL,”
 that's why they are doing it,
 it's become compulsory. this is the truth now.
 N: <i>like, like what work should we do at home then?</i>
 A: any work, there are many kinds of work,
 there are so many <u>trainings</u>,
 I will give you a <u>chart</u> now, and you will say
 “we don't want to do any one of them”
 ((pulls out piece of paper from purse))
 N: <i>people like us won't even be able to</i>
 A: <i>you are all scared. look at this</i> ((holds up paper))
 what <u>trainings</u> we are doing, read this,
 these are for BPL people, all of them,</p> |
|--|---|

This excerpt, taken from a recording of a two-hour meeting, reveals how Anita uses her multilingual repertoire to both frame herself, as well as the state more broadly through its provisioning of schemes and trainings, as virtuous and benevolent, while portraying rural women, particularly women classified as below the poverty line, as both dependent on state aid and unwilling to do “work.” After I asked Anita to explain how women are chosen for groups, Anita began by using the bureaucratic voice (line 1), explaining that they must “**cover all the BPL**” people. She then continues using the bureaucratic voice to explain that the NRLM will allow women “**to start a little while sitting in their homes, to do their own work,**” (4-5) but that women don’t want to do that and prefer to just work through NREGA, which guarantees a small daily wage for manual labor. While she is speaking, Neetu attempts to respond to her, inserting in line 10 that she has responsibilities at home like working in her fields.

Anita goes on to argue that women only participate in the scheme so that they do not lose their BPL benefits, and are thus unmotivated to do “work” at home. Neetu responds by asking what kind of work they are supposed to be doing at home, herself switching mid-sentence from Kangri into Hindi in line 20. Anita then imbues the bureaucratic voice with its most distinctive salience as she switches between it and Kangri while using reported speech to parody the women present: “**any work, there are many kinds of work, there are so many trainings, I will give you a chart now, and you will say ‘we don’t want to do any one of them.’**” As she says this, she holds up a sheet of yellow paper with Hindi writing on it, which contains information on various skills training programs, but Neetu responds by saying that “people like us” won’t be able to do these trainings and read these pamphlets, referring to her eyesight being weak which she mentions a few moments later in the recording. Anita continues framing the women as making up excuses for not participating in the training, going on to say that women who say their eyes

don't work have no trouble making food and washing clothes at home. Anita palms her forehead in a gesture of playful exasperation, while Neetu and the other women present chuckle.



Figure 3.3 Anita (left) next to Neetu, palming her forehead in lighthearted exasperation

Despite the playful dynamic, Anita's assessments of women's unwillingness to do "work" is consistently challenged by the women present, who also draw on their varying degrees of competence in Hindi to respond to Anita's characterizations of them, as well as to demand greater detail of the kinds of "work" she is expecting them to do. Anita provides no information about how the women might start to earn money at home, merely pulling out a flyer and asking for a group member to read it aloud (which she says she cannot). The conflicting expectations between Anita and the women involved in the groups—wherein Anita expected women to take a loan in order to start a business on their own, and to seek out trainings provided by the Block office, while the women were unclear on why or how they might do so—was a source of

constant friction. And yet, these conversations remained full of playful ribbing and laughter, as we will see more the following sections.

3.5 Voicing the Non-State

In addition to being a resource for distinguishing the state from welfare recipients, Anita and Sita also use the bureaucratic voice to distinguish themselves from a field of other development actors who are imbricated in their work, particularly NGOs. Sita and I were walking to a *panchayat* office one day when we started to chat about the activities of two prominent NGOs in the area. She stopped me suddenly and said, “You can’t throw a rock without hitting an NGO anymore.” Her tone was clearly frustrated. “There’s now ten organizations in every village” (*ik ik graan ch das das sanstha aaiyoo*). While Anita and Sita spent a fair amount of time in the BDO itself, most of their actual work consisted of meeting with SHGs in the various panchayats under their purview. Because they work at the lowest rungs of the bureaucracy, they are often mistaken for NGO workers or other non-state functionaries. There were several NGOs in the area that were also conducting highly similar work to them, including one well-known NGO that promoted its own microfinance programs through SHGs. Often, the same SHGs would be involved with multiple institutions (and as such, would have multiple savings accounts through them)—one through an NGO, one through the local women’s collective (*mahila mandal*), and another through state schemes like the NRLM. As such, Sita and Anita were constantly working amidst a field of non-state actors who were doing similar work as them—establishing and monitoring microfinance programs—requiring them to continuously distinguish themselves as state actors. They did so through both explicit, metapragmatic assertions about their role as state agents, as well as through the use of the bureaucratic voice.

One weekday afternoon, Sita and I arrived to a *panchayat* for a scheduled meeting with an NRLM self-help group, only to find the *panchayat* office was closed and locked. Sita immediately called the *panchayat* headperson, a woman named Uma who was recently elected and also had spent ten years working for a nearby NGO. Sita demanded Uma come to open the office immediately, citing the fact that it was the middle of the day on a weekday and the government should be “open.” Uma informed her that she was unwell, and the secretary had gone to a resident’s home for some business. After they spoke on the phone, we waited about half an hour for someone to arrive. Sita was visibly annoyed at the fact that Uma had suggested on the phone that she conduct her meeting at the home of a self-help group member. Eventually, Uma arrived and we began to set up for the meeting. Soon, Uma stepped out of the office and I started my video recording of Sita preparing to start the meeting. I then captured an exchange, first between Sita and myself, and then between Sita and the group of women there for the meeting.

Transcript 3.4

SPEAKER: Sita (S); Hannah (H)

KEY: *Kangri*; **Bureaucratic voice (English lexicon)**

01 S:	((to Hannah)) she is in anger today	S:	((to Hannah)) <u>she is in anger today</u>
02 H:	why?	H:	<u>why?</u>
03 S:	घर में क्यों करेंगे हम meeting?	S:	why should we do the <u>meeting</u> in someone's house?
04	हमारे सरकारी अफ- दफ्तर है		this is our government of- office
05 H:	अच्छा इसलिए	H:	oh that's why
06 S:	((to all)) NGO से थोड़े ना हैं हम	S:	((to all)) we are not from some NGO
07	हैं ना?		right?
08	कि हमारे लिए बैठने की जगह नहीं है		that there's no place for us to sit
09	और ना हमें प्रधान चाहिए ना secretary चाहिए		and we need neither the <u>pradhan</u> nor the <u>secretary</u>
10	हमें सिर्फ यह खुला होना चाहिए		we just need this to be open
11	ठीक है ना?		right?
12	हमें क्या मुझे क्या काम पड़ना उससे?		what business do I have with her?
13	है मुझे काम? कोई काम नहीं है		do I have any business? there is no business.
14	secretary से कोई काम नहीं है		I have no business with the <u>secretary</u>
15	secretary से तब होगा		there will be (business) with the <u>secretary</u>

16	जब APL या BPL के number पूछने हैं	when I might need to ask the <u>APL</u> or <u>BPL</u> number
17	ठीक है ना?	right?
18	और सरकार ने दिया meeting बैठने के लिए	and the government gave us this to sit for a <u>meeting</u>
19	हम यहाँ करेंगे meeting	we are going to do the <u>meeting</u> here
20	में क्यों जाऊँ किसी के घर?	((looking around)) why should I go to someone's house?
21	खाना हम अपना लाते हैं पानी अपना लाते हैं	we bring our food, we bring our own water
22	हमें किसी के घर बैठने की कोई जरूरत नहीं है	we have no need to sit at anyone's home
23	NGO वाले बैठते हैं लोगों के घरों में जा कर	NGO people go to people's homes and sit
24	क्योंकि उनको वहाँ सब कुछ चाहिए होता है	because they need everything there
25	बिल्कुल हम नहीं Hannah तू ने मुझे देखा? है?	absolutely. not us. Hannah have you seen me? have you?
26	हम नहीं जाते किसी के घर meeting करने	we do not go to anyone's house to do a <u>meeting</u>
27	हम किसी के घर कुछ नहीं खाते	we do not eat anything at anyone's home
28	ठीक है ना?	right?
29	हमें अपनी नौकरी की फिक्र होती है, है?	we have to worry about our jobs, right?
30	कल को हम में से कोई बोलदे हमारे घर आ कर	if one day someone comes to our house and says
31	जी यह समान दो खाने को फिर?	"give me these things to eat" then?
32	ठीक है? है? NGO का क्या है?	okay? right? what do NGO people do?
33	खाई बी लेणा कड़ी दींगे	<i>they will eat, and even if they get fired</i>
34	तां ओर दूई NGO करी लेणी join	<i>they will <u>join</u> another NGO</i>
35	की नी? तां बस फिरी	<i>or not? okay then</i>
36	क्यों करना हम ने किसी के घर जा कर	why do we have to go to someone's house and do it?
37	हमें नहीं मतलब	we do not need (anything)
38	चौकीदार को order करो कि खुला रखें इस को	<u>order</u> the watchman to keep this open
39	हम जब मर्जी आये meeting करें	we will come and do a <u>meeting</u> when we like

Here, Sita uses the bureaucratic voice alongside metapragmatic framings of herself as a state officer and *not* an NGO worker. The distinction between the two types of figures—as well as the moral attributes she ascribes to them—becomes particularly marked when, in lines 33-35, she switches back into Kangri when voicing the characterological figure of “NGO people.” Whereas Sita describes government officers as honest and professional—never conducting meetings outside government offices, never taking food or drinks from people’s homes—NGO people are portrayed as reliant on rural citizens for the infrastructure necessary to do their work, and thus endlessly seeking to use this hospitality for their own benefit. This encounter also demonstrates the ideological interplay between language and material infrastructures. Sita embodies “the state” not only through her way of speaking, but also by being where “the state” is – in the panchayat

office, and not in the homes of rural citizens. This demonstrates how registers like the bureaucratic voice take on indexical meanings not through their linguistic features alone, but also through their associations with material practices, embodied gestures, and the built environment (Nakassis 2016).

3.6 Bureaucratic Banter

Anita and Sita maintain close relationships with self-help group members, despite often divergent understandings of state responsibility and citizen dependency. Anita and Sita constantly navigate tensions that emerge when women challenge their expectations, and must defend against accusations of misconduct (e.g. accusations of coercing women into a taking on loans unnecessarily). Still, the dynamics between bureaucrats and rural women remain largely congenial and cooperative. Yet, we should not assume this general conviviality equates to a culture of “transparency” as bureaucratic norms have been characterized by other scholars, who argue that norms of “informality” are indicative of more equitable social relations and thus more transparent bureaucratic practice in Himachal (Bhatty 2008; Mangla 2015). In this section, I argue that the ordinary forms of parody, play, and humor that characterize bureaucratic encounters—which I call bureaucratic banter—are a crucial resource for enacting bureaucratic authority and constituting the meanings of dependency and responsibility. Such processes are critical to the semiotic labor that development workers perform, as they not only implement schemes, but produce the categories and situated meanings of policy in interaction (see Chapter One for more discussion of semiotic labor).

Anthropologists have extensively analyzed the role of humor in producing both social identities and relations of power and inequality. Scholars have primarily approached joking as a resource for identity formation and negotiating inequitable social relations. Basso’s classic study

of Apache joking about Anglo Americans argued that Apaches used satirical performances of “the Whiteman” to critique aspects of Anglo personhood and thus temporarily subvert their claims to supremacy (Basso 1979). Goldstein’s study of joking in Brazilian *favelas* similarly argues that absurd humor provided an escape from the everyday abjection of poverty (Goldstein 2003). Black’s study of joking about AIDS in a Zulu gospel choir in South Africa allowed HIV-positive members to subvert taboos around the virus while constructing support amongst group members who were dealing with pervasive stigma attached to their status (Black 2012). Calhoun’s study of anti-hegemonic racial comedy on the social media platform Vine similarly demonstrated how users’ linguistic performances allowed them to subvert forms of racial profiling and linguistic stereotyping (Calhoun 2019). Other studies of dark humor have demonstrated how speakers’ appeals to violent, misogynistic, and scatological imagery allow them to critique relations of power and domination (e.g. Limón 1989; Carlan 2015).

Several studies in political anthropology have moved beyond an analysis of humor as resistance to examine how humor itself performatively enacts relations of power (Trnka 2011; Bernal 2013). In his analysis of relationships between Israeli settlers and Palestinians working in a grocery store in the West Bank, Siegman (2020) argues that humorous interethnic exchanges in which co-workers amount to a form of “playful antagonism,” which he draws from Radcliffe-Brown’s functionalist account of joking as a mechanism for conflict avoidance in African kinship networks (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). Departing from an account of joking as a mechanism for conflict avoidance, Siegman’s account of the settler-colonial dynamics between Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian grocery store workers demonstrates that playful antagonism, marked by attempts to embarrass an interlocutor, do not mark a departure or transcendence of relations of domination, nor are they evidence of “peaceful coexistence,” but that joking is itself constitutive

of relations of power (2020). By analyzing Palestinian workers' jokes about their Jewish-Israeli managers in the settler business Super Israel, Siegman avoids romanticizing jokes as a form of resistance against settler colonialism and instead argues that everyday humor "enacts rather than neutralizes Israeli-Palestinian antagonism" (Ibid: 113). Following this analysis, when analyzing bureaucrats' humorous and playful exchanges with rural women, I do not posit these to be evidence of the kind of "informal" norms and "social closeness" that others have argued to be typical of Himachali bureaucracy. Rather, forms of bureaucratic banter are "formal" in the sense that Irvine (1979) has shown, wherein formality itself is defined by a patterned set of communicative practices. As such, I demonstrate below how bureaucratic banter is "formal" in the sense that it is a repetitive communicative resource through which bureaucrats enact a figure of personhood rooted in virtuousness and individual inculpability. This process is thus central to the production of bureaucratic authority and state power, rather than its erasure.

On one occasion, I was recording a meeting between Sita and seven members of a self-help group in Seri panchayat, just a couple minutes' drive from our houses (Sita and I were neighbors). Having already formed this particular group, Sita was merely checking in on the group's progress and ensuring that their accounting register was up to date. While reviewing the group's register, which contained the record of loans taken and repaid, Sita chatted with group members before noticing something awry in the register. Some money she had disbursed to the group members the previous month – a small sum of Rs. 300 (USD 4) each – was unaccounted for and the balances were off. Lalita, a group member, leaned forward and said "I took a loan of 1000 rupees," which is why that money was missing from the ledger. Sita snapped, "What do you mean you took a loan of 1000 rupees? Where? How?" Lalita responded that she had needed the money, and decided to borrow it and documented an outstanding balance for herself that she

would then pay back. She had written the date and amount she had borrowed on a clean page of the back of the register, to ensure that everything was represented clearly.

Sita was not happy. She scolded her: “No, no, no, that was completely wrong. I made an account for you, and now you’ve made yourself a different account? You should have just discussed it amongst yourselves that you were going to use the money, but kept my writing as it was.” Sita didn’t mind that Lalita had taken the money per se, but she was upset that she had decided to make her own separate account, thereby distinguishing her loan from that of the group members. Now, rather than showing each group member with an active loan to repay, it appeared that six out of seven group members did not have any outstanding debt. Lalita defended her choice as in the interest of transparency and honesty: “Madam ji, do you know why I made that, I made because I took a loan, and I wrote it in the copy so that I could show everyone that ‘yes, I took it.’ The rest of the group members do not want their names associated with my debt.” Her framing calls attention to the logic of her decision, while also positioning Sita’s rationale as arbitrary, a defining feature of bureaucratic practice more broadly (Gupta 2012). Sita responded exaggeratedly, “Oh wow, you are blessed!” (*Dhanya hai aap!*), moving her hands into a praying motion and beginning to bow in front of Lalita, as if to say that she was an anointed figure, more important than the others. Everyone in the group began to chuckle at her gesture.



Figure 3.4 "Lalita ji is our god!"

“I say that Lalita ji is our God now! Everyone’s, Lalita ji is everyone’s God!” While Lalita felt herself to be acting in the best interest of the group, Sita’s gesture of bowing to her conveyed that Lalita must think she is “God” if she could decide for the others and depart from the group by creating her own account. These comments were met with disapproval from the group leader, Rekha, who cut through the joking atmosphere by switching from their ongoing Kangri conversation into Hindi to try to clear up the confusion, to which Sita let out an amused smile. Rekha stood next to Lalita, placing her hands on Lalita’s shoulders to comfort her and saying: “Look Madam ji, she took the money, and we do not mind, she is our sister and we gave her permission. But our names should not be written if we did not use this money. Our names should be removed.” Sita responded: “No, absolutely not, I will balance your account to zero once Lalita returns the money, but your names should not be removed.” The group was required to keep a

steady flow of debts and repayment, and Sita was preparing to instruct the group on how to go to the local branch of Punjab National Bank to acquire a much larger loan for the group under the NRLM scheme. Several of the group members were insistent that they did not need to take loans through the group like Lalita had. Sita responded by switching from Kangri into the bureaucratic voice:

Transcript 3.5

KEY: *Kangri*; **bureaucratic voice (English lexicon)**

SPEAKERS: Sita, LVDC (S); LALITA, Group member (L)

- | | | | |
|-------|--|----|--|
| 01 S: | वो अलग बात है, सुनो | S: | that is a different matter, listen. |
| 02 | वो अलग बात हैं हिमाचल में | | that's a different matter, in Himachal |
| 03 | किसी को जरूरत नहीं है पांच सौ हजार | | no one needs 500 or 1000 (rupees). |
| 04 | ठीक है? सब अमीर है | | okay? everyone is rich |
| 05 L: | नी नी मैडम जी -- | L: | <i>no no madam ji --</i> |
| 06 S: | और भगवान वैसी गरीबी दिखाएँ भी नहीं | S: | and may God never show (us) that kind of poverty, |
| 07 | जो जो actual में गरीब होते हैं | | those those who are <u>actually</u> poor, |
| 08 | हम लोगों ने कभी नहीं देखी वो गरीबी ठीक है? | | we people have never seen that poverty, okay? |
| 09 L: | हां यह तो है | L: | yes, this is true |
| 10 S: | जो जो actual में गरीबी होती है, ठीक है ना? | S: | what, what <u>actual</u> poverty is like. okay? |
| 11 | ठीक है फिर भी | | okay. nevertheless, |
| 12 | आप लोग bank में कम से कम पैसे डालेंगे | | you people will put the minimum money in the <u>bank</u> |
| 13 | और आपस में use करेंगे उस पैसे को | | and [the rest] you will <u>use</u> amongst yourselves okay? |
| 14 L: | आं जी | L: | <i>yes, ma'am</i> |
| 15 S: | ठीक है? | S: | okay? |
| 16 | और जैसे आपका account खुल जाता है | | and as soon as your <u>account</u> opens |
| 17 | अगले महीने आपके loan के form भरे जायेंगे | | next month your <u>loan forms</u> will be filled. |
| 18 L: | अच्छा | L: | okay |
| 19 S: | ठीक है? आई बात समझ में? | S: | okay? do you understand? |
| 20 L: | हां जी | L: | yes, ma'am |

Here, Sita invokes the bureaucratic voice in order to counter the group members' claims that they are not in need of a loan. Sita argues that "no one in Himachal" needs a small loan of 1000 rupees (USD 15), because "everyone is rich" (line 3-4). While Lalita begins to disagree with Sita's claim that no one is poor in Himachal in line 5, Sita performatively calls on God to prevent them from ever seeing "that kind of poverty" (6-8), to which Lalita agrees (9). This interjection

actively constitutes a categorical distinction between types of poverty, and positions residents of Himachal Pradesh as being not only “not truly poor,” but incapable of imagining “real” poverty. This type of rebuttal, which I heard repeatedly throughout my fieldwork, did the regular, everyday work of exceptionalizing Himachal Pradesh and thereby guarding against citizens’ claims on the state.

Having temporarily dispelled their challenge, Sita then continues to outline the next steps in securing a large loan for the group members, using the characteristic mixture of Hindi and English lexicon rooted in bureaucratic procedurality (*bank; use; account; loan; forms*). Sita goes on to suggest that the loan should be Rs. 50,000 per person (675 USD). Rekha, another group member, then asks what they are expected to do with that much money, herself adopting the switch into Hindi. Sita then shifts back into a joking frame accompanied by a switch back into Kangri:

Transcript 3.6

KEY: *Kangri*; **bureaucratic voice (English lexicon)**

SPEAKERS: Sita, LVDC (S); Rekha, Group member (R); Lalita, Group member (L)

- | | | | |
|-------|---|----|--|
| 01 S: | छह छह ladies है ना | S: | there are six <u>ladies</u> , right? |
| 02 | पचास पचास हजार दिलवा दूंगी में | | I will get you 50,000 rupees each |
| 03 L: | हां जी | L: | yes ma’am |
| 04 R: | नहीं उस में हमें क्या यानी की | R: | no, so, what do we (have to) do in this? |
| 05 S: | जो भी काम करते आप | S: | whatever work you do. |
| 06 | आप क्या काम करते हैं? | | what work do you do? |
| 07 R: | नहीं काम तो थोड़ी करेंगे ना | R: | no, we are going to do a little work |
| 08 | पर पचास पचास हजार का बोल रहे हैं | | but you are saying 50,000 each. |
| 09 | पचास हजार नहीं लेना हो फिर? | | what if we don't want to take 50,000 then? |
| 10 S: | आप ने कितना लेना है बोलो | S: | how much do you want to take, tell me |
| 11 R: | नहीं वो तो हमारी अपनी मर्जी है कितना लेंगे | R: | no, that is up to us how much we will take, |
| 12 | जरूरी थोड़ी है हम पचास हजार लेंगे | | it's not like it's necessary for us to take 50,000 |
| 13 S: | जी जी आपकी मर्जी चलेगी | S: | yes yes it will be up to you |
| 14 | पर मुझे बताना पड़ेगा ना | | but you will have to tell me, right |
| 15 R: | नहीं तो हम जबरदस्ती पचास हजार नहीं लेंगे ना | R: | no but we are not going to take 50,000 by force, right |
| 16 S: | आप ने तो तो वहीं तो पूछ रहीं हूँ | S: | you, so, so that's what I am asking |

17 कितना लेना आप ने?
18 R: वो तो हम तब बतायेंगे
19 जब लेना होगा हम ने, नहीं ऐसे तो
20 S: एक लाख भी हो सकता है
21 R: हां जी?
22 S: एक लाख भी हो सकता है
23 R: नहीं नहीं एक लाख भी नहीं लेना हमने
24 S: कोई बात नहीं :::
25 आपको पच्चीस हजार दिलवा देंगे
26 R: नहीं उस में ब्याज कितना रखा आप ने?
27 S: ब्याज सात --
28 नहीं मैंने नहीं रखा है सरकार ने रखा है मैडम
29 R: कितना रखा आप ने?
30 S: सात percent है
31 मैं नहीं बोलती ब्याज रखने वाली
32 R: अच्छा सात percent
33 S: सात percent ब्याज है
34 आप direct जायेंगे बैंक में
35 साढ़े तेराह या चोदह percent ब्याज लगेगा
36 आप बी पी एल में हो आप group में हो
37 आपकी application जो है वो मेरे sign
38 और बी डी ओ साहब के sign के साथ जायेगी
39 इसलिए सात percent लगेगा
[2-minute gap]
40 S: ठीक ए? कितना की लेणा
41 केस कमे वास्ते लेणा
42 ठीक ए तुहां गल बात करी लेनयो
43 परसों account खुलणा तुहां दा
44 तिस दे बाद अक्टूबर महिने च
45 दवारा मीटिंग ओणी ए. उस दिन--
46 R: शुरु शुरु च मैडम जी थोड़ा कम ई लोन दिनयो
47 फिरी लैडिज भरींगिआं ना ((inaudible))
48 S: तुहां पंजा जारायो बोला दे
49 तां बोला दे
50 मैं डेढ़ लख लेणा ए
51 ALL: ((laughing))

how much do you want to take?
R: we will tell you that
when we will need to take, if not –
S: it can also be one lakh [100,000] ((smiling))
R: yes ma'am?
S: it can also be one lakh
R: no no we don't want to take one lakh either
S: don't worry::
we will get you 25,000
R: no-- how much interest have you put in it?
S: interest seven--
no I did not put it, the government put it, madam
R: how much did you put?
S: it's seven percent
I don't decide the interest
R: okay seven percent
S: it's seven percent interest
(if) you go directly to the bank
it will be 13 and a half or 14 percent
you are in BPL, you are in a (self-help) group,
your application with go with my signature
and with the BDO sir's signature,
that is why it will be 7 percent, okay?
[2-minute gap]
S: okay? how much will you take
and for what work will you take,
okay? you discuss it
the day after tomorrow your account will be opened
after that, in October
there will be a meeting again. that day--
R: in the very beginning Madam give us a bit less loan,
then the ladies will repay it, right ((inaudible))
S: you are saying 50 thousand
and over there she is saying
"I am going to take one and a half lakhs (150,000)"
ALL: ((laughing))



Figure 3.5 Line 32: Sita: "She is saying that 'I will take one and a half lakhs!'"

Whereas Rekha and Lalita use more directly confrontational tactics to question why they should be required to take on exorbitant loans of Rs. 50,000 each, Sita uses the bureaucratic voice while also playfully suggesting the women take an even larger loan of one lakh each (Rs. 100,000). As Rekha contests Sita's offer to give everyone Rs. 50,000, going as far as to say that they will not be made to take this loan "by force" (line 15), Sita then begins to tease Rekha by upping the amount to one lakh (20-22), smiling and changing her tone to one playful ignorance. At this point, Sita has begun to suggest the women take on a larger and larger loan, playfully acting as though she does not understand the women's desire to take no loan at all. While administering a larger amount would ultimately provide evidence of her groups' successful participation in the NRLM scheme, Sita's exchange tacks between a tone of playful ignorance and pointed threat, one that is backed up by the prospect of the women losing their status as BPL recipients if they do not participate in the scheme.

Rekha responds to this by saying “no no we don’t want to take one lakh either” (23). Sita then continues to extend the joke by saying “don’t worryyyy, we will give you 25,000” (24-25), again extending the joking frame with an exaggerated smile. Rekha then responds by asking “how much interest have you put?” (26). Sita then momentarily breaks the tone of playful banter to make a crucial metapragmatic distinction--“no *I* did not put it, the *government* put it, madam” (28)—which counters Rekha’s direct attribution of responsibility to Sita. Sita then continues by using the bureaucratic voice in lines 33-39 while describing the procedure whereby their loan application will be submitted to the bank. Shortly thereafter, Sita resumes speaking in Kangri (40), having overcome the more direct challenges posed by group members, and attempts to wrap up the discussion by saying that the women should decide amongst themselves what kind of “work” they would like to do with the loan that will be given to them in a few days. Rekha makes a final plea: “in the very beginning madam give us a bit less loan, then ladies will repay it” (46-47), which Sita then responds to by again invoking a humorous tone: “You are saying 50,000 and over there she is saying ‘I am going to take one and a half lakhs!’” (31-32) to which the entire group erupts into laughter (see Figure 3.5). Here, Sita’s quoting of another group member, who she frames as eager to take on a large loan, dispels the idea that all the members are resistant to the program, despite the continued challenges by multiple women present.

These examples, as well as those in the earlier section, exemplify the ordinary rapport that low-level bureaucrats like Anita and Sita cultivate with rural women. While managing constant conflicting expectations and assessments of the status of poor women, the tone of their daily conversation hovers in the realm of tense laughter and play. Indeed, much of the ideological tug-of-war, between who is responsible or deserving, and what constitutes “actual poverty,” takes place in a jocular and playful register, one that differs starkly from accounts of

bureaucratic encounters as indifferent and impersonal (Herzfeld 1992; Silver 2010). While, bureaucratic banter might be seen as affirming a “culture of informality” in the Himachali bureaucracy, and thus the source of successful implementation of welfare schemes like the NRLM, I see forms of playful exchange as key to the production of bureaucratic authority and state power. These processes should not be considered contrary to otherwise “formal” bureaucratic practice, but rather integral to it. The enregistered bureaucratic voice and bureaucratic banter are “formal” in the sense that they are patterned and repetitive across contexts are central to the institutional genre I have called the bureaucratic voice.

Bureaucratic banter and the bureaucratic voice together constitute central forms of semiotic labor through which the Himachali state becomes a developmental exceptional. By asserting an authoritative stance, distancing Himachal from “actual” poverty, and assessing women as overly “dependent” on the benevolence of state benefits, Sita and Anita both produce the prosperity of their state. By drawing on the bureaucratic voice, these speakers performatively enact the “virtuous inculpability” of the state agent and juxtapose this with a Kangri-based figure of the cunning and dependent welfare recipient. Rural women challenge this view of them by asserting their own appeals to transparency and actual need, and declaring that welfare programs like the NRLM do not benefit them, but rather plunge them into unpayable debts.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how rural bureaucrats in Kangra use their multilingual repertoires to constitute a distinct view of the Himachali state as exceptionally benevolent, and welfare recipients as both irresponsible and undeserving. While many accounts of bureaucratic practice have highlighted processes whereby rural citizens are denied state aid, the Himachali context provides insight into how welfare programs are differently conceptualized by state agents and

rural citizens. Programs like the Prime Minister Housing Program, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, and the Public Distribution System (which provides subsidized rations) are often decried as unnecessary in the Himachali context by rural bureaucrats across Kangra. Microfinance schemes like the National Rural Livelihood Mission, on the other hand, are unwanted by the majority of welfare recipients not only for the debt they entail but also due to the lack of explication and training in how that money should be used. When confronting these disparate expectations in everyday encounters, bureaucrats like Anita and Sita must manage the simultaneous feat of invoking their authority while mitigating charges of misconduct and coercion. Self-help group members constantly questioned Anita and Sita's motives and assessments, as well as the broader soundness of state policies like the compulsory NRLM scheme. While the stakes involved in these debates were high, potentially costing women thousands of rupees in debt, the nature of the discussion ranged dynamically in an arena of playful banter that relied upon contrastive multilingual voices, exasperated gestures, and raucous laughter. These semiotic resources of voicing and play mitigate citizens' challenges while positioning welfare recipients as dishonest and undeserving. Such processes are not only central to the enactment of bureaucratic power, but are also central to the everyday production of Himachal's developmental exceptionalism. By attending to the semiotic strategies that bureaucrats and citizens mobilize in their everyday encounters, we can better understand how the state is made real in everyday practice.

CHAPTER 4:

Roots of Responsibility: Contesting Expertise in an Agrarian Technocracy

“In the coming time, in a year or two, these medicines will be banned.” Mahesh, Subject Matter Specialist for the Department of Agriculture’s block office in Kalyana, was delivering a workshop on chemical-free farming to a crowd of nearly two hundred farmers, almost all of whom were women: “In the whole state, soon you won't get either medicines or fertilizers.” By “medicines” (*davaiyaan*), Mahesh was referring to the pesticides, insecticides, and weedicides that the Department of Agriculture heavily subsidizes for farmers, along with synthetic fertilizers and genetically modified seeds. Mahesh repeatedly described farmers as lacking “awareness” regarding the harmful effects of “medicines,” declaring that they had all been duped into a regime of dependency on agrochemical corporations: “The companies are running their businesses and you people are totally dependent on them.” Not just “companies,” but Mahesh argued that farmers had become “totally dependent” (using the English words) on the “block,” his own office, which supplies the vast majority of agricultural inputs to farmers in the region. Eventually, a farmer in the crowd stood from her seat, directing her outstretched hand at Mahesh while beginning to speak in Kangri: “The medicines we get through the agriculture [department], first stop those medicines. You send us seeds and with them you send all these medicines. What are we supposed to do with those medicines?” The crowd burst into applause.

In late 2018, farmers and agricultural extension agents in Kangra were facing two looming deadlines: Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s mandate to double both farmers’ incomes and food production by 2022, and the planned shifts to declare Himachal Pradesh a “fully organic” state by the same year, when the synthetic fertilizers and chemical inputs that farmers receive directly from the Department of Agriculture, along with private retailers, are expected to

become contraband. Extension agents were tasked with preparing farmers for the anticipated policy changes that will severely disrupt, if not fully break, the supply chain of inputs between agrochemical corporations, the state agricultural development bureaucracy, private retailers, and farmers. Amidst growing anxiety surrounding the future of Himachal's agrarian economy, the Government of Himachal Pradesh introduced the Prakriti Kheti Khushaal Kisaan Yojana (Natural Farming Skilled Farmers' Program, or PKKKY), a statewide project to promote Zero Budget Natural Farming in Himachal Pradesh. Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) is an agroecological philosophy premised on farmer self-reliance and autonomy from both the state and the market, prioritizing the use of local (*desi*), chemical-free inputs that are made at home (and thus do not need to be purchased) using the manure and urine of livestock, along with other household items like gram flour and jaggery. ZBNF has become a vanguard in agricultural policy in recent years in India, with the PKKKY being one of the first major state-sponsored policies to incentivize farmers to adopt the practice.²⁶ ZBNF promises to deliver a technocratic solution to the twin crises of agrarian precarity and environmental degradation. If implemented nationwide, said Rajiv Kumar Vice Chairman of the NITI Aayog, ZBNF "would lead to a paradigm shift in agriculture."²⁷

In September 2018, extension agents began a massive awareness program to encourage farmers to abandon chemical agriculture in favor of ZBNF. Although the philosophy of ZBNF seeks to disentangle farmers from their reliance on both the state, as the harbinger of the

²⁶ *The Government of Andhra Pradesh founded a non-profit in 2015 called the Rythu Sadhikara Samstha (Farmers Empowerment Corporation) to promote ZBNF in the state. The Andhra Pradesh ZBNF (APZBNF) program, much like the PKKKY, is primarily focused on knowledge transfer "through participatory social learning" (Khadse and Rosset 2019: 861). Adopting a model of "horizontal extension and education methods" (Ibid), APZBNF works primarily through farmer field schools and farmer-to-farmer demonstrations, a methodology originally developed by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The goal of this approach is to eradicate hierarchical, top-down pedagogical approaches in favor of a more farmer-led approach.*

²⁷ *Quote excerpted from print edition of The Tribune, "Zero-budget farming to bring about a revolution: NITI Aayog." July 9, 2018.*

destructive chemicals introduced during the Green Revolution, and the market, as its profit-driven bedfellow, the PPKKY scheme in Himachal tied the philosophy directly to the state agriculture bureaucracy, mediated by the first line of contact between farmers and the state: the extension service. Extension agents like Mahesh were tasked with enacting a new vision of agricultural expertise rooted in chemical-free farming while persuading farmers to gain independence from state services. Mahesh and other extension agents were constantly confronted with challenges from farmers like the one above who pinpointed him, as representative of the state, for funneling “medicines” to farmers in the first place. Mahesh felt trapped in the contradiction: on the one hand, he was instructed to train farmers in chemical-free farming, and on the other, he was still being handed pre-determined targets for distributing chemical inputs every season from the district officers in Palampur, most of which far exceeded the demand of farmers. “What’s the point of our work?” he bemoaned. “No one listens to us. They just tell us to sit here and be quiet.”

In this chapter, I explore how debates unfolded between extension agents and farmers over culpability for agrarian distress and responsibility for agrarian transformation in light of the state-sponsored push toward ZBNF and an anticipated ban on chemical inputs. How did extension officers like Mahesh attempt to maintain their agricultural expertise amidst contradictory and shifting bureaucratic logics? What social and semiotic resources did extension agents and farmers draw upon to produce and contest visions of agrarian expertise and state responsibility in everyday interaction? I examine video-recorded meetings between extension agents and large groups of farmers organized by state and non-state agricultural institutions, including the Department of Agriculture’s block office in Kalyana, the Agricultural Science Center in Kangra, and the Himachal Pradesh State Agriculture University in Palampur, to

understand how agricultural extension workers sought to cultivate and legitimate their expertise authority while mitigating their ability (and responsibility) for transforming either farmers' practices or state policies. I argue that extension agents manage their precarious positions by invoking bureaucratic and scientific registers of Hindi and English that invoke their agricultural expertise while mitigating their personal responsibility, as well as that of the state more broadly, for transforming the agrarian economy. I have called this speech register, which is used across the rural development bureaucracy in Kangra, the "bureaucratic voice," which consists of English-infused Hindi, and which in extension contexts includes an additional repertoire of English-based agricultural science terminology. This register not only indexes a particular vision of agricultural scientific expertise, but it also dispels individual state agents' culpability as members of the low-level bureaucracy that "no one will listen to," in Mahesh's framing. Together, I describe these linguistic processes as enacting agro-bureaucratic expertise.

Extension agents enact agro-bureaucratic expertise by framing agrarian distress—characterized by soil infertility, decreased yield, novel plant diseases, and negative effects on public health—as stemming from a lack of "awareness" amongst farmers about the harms of chemical agriculture, while placing both the ability and responsibility for agrarian transformation with farmers alone. Failure to adapt—in this case, by adopting ZBNF—is attributed to a "gap" in knowledge to be filled by the extension agent, as well as the moral failures of farmers who are mired in their own short-sighted greed for increased yield. In response, farmers, who are primarily women in Kangra, draw on their own linguistic repertoires in Kangri to re-frame extension agents' narratives of "awareness" (*jagrukta*) and "greed" (*lalach*) in order to highlight their own expert knowledge and experience as cultivators. They emphasize how a sudden and complete abandonment of chemical inputs would result in food insecurity for the majority of

rural families who are not cultivating for profit but for subsistence. As such, farmers' hesitation toward natural farming is firmly rooted in their priorities as both cultivators and homemakers, informed by memories of a pre-green revolution era of food insecurity, and is performed through their use of Kangri-based registers of knowledge and expertise. Ultimately, farmers' concerns about the implications of chemical abandonment, as well as their demands for state accountability for introducing chemicals in the first place, are dismissed by extension workers as evidence of a lack of "awareness," reinforcing tensions between bureaucrats and farmers that are likely to constrain the uptake of ZBNF by Kangri farmers. More broadly, this chapter considers the role of state agricultural policy in the production of Himachal's developmental exceptionalism, with the PKKKY being seen as a progressive shift toward sustainable, inclusive development policy. I argue that the rollout of the PKKKY served as additional ground upon which state bureaucrats articulated a vision of Himachal Pradesh as a leader in sustainable development, despite the massive resistance to the scheme amongst farmers themselves.

4.1 Piloting Zero Budget Natural Farming in a "Progressive" State

Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) is an agroecological philosophy developed by agrarian activist and "guru" Subhash Palekar. Based on Japanese farmer Masanobu Fukuoka's principles of "do nothing farming," ZBNF aims to replace chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified and hybrid seeds with a suite of resources rooted in "traditional" and "local" (*desi*) knowledge and practices. The manure and urine of Indian-bred (*desi*) cows, rather than the Jersey cows imported during the green revolution, are used as homemade fertilizers to replace those purchased from the market, which also provides the nutrients to restore soil fertility and stem the negative effects of chemical farming. In doing so, ZBNF attempts to free farmers from their reliance on the source of their distress: the state, as the harbinger of harmful green

revolution technologies, and the market, from which farmers must procure the expensive inputs needed to do chemical agriculture.

Palekar earned a Bachelor's of Science from the College of Agriculture in Nagpur at the height of the green revolution, and in 1972 he returned to practice chemical farming on his family farm in the Virdarbha region of Maharashtra. By the mid-1980s, Palekar witnessed a dramatic decline in the yield that had earlier been increased through the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. He spent two years conducting research on forest vegetation to understand how forests sustain healthy ecosystems without human intervention. Convinced that the chemical inputs he had been using were the source of his farm's declining soil fertility, he began to conduct experiments on his farm that became the basis for the principles of ZBNF. In the mid-1990s, Palekar joined with the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangh (KRRS), a farmer's rights movement in the state of Karnataka, to promote ZBNF across the state. Palekar's method of promoting ZBNF remained rooted in the social movement sphere until 2015, when the state of Andhra Pradesh established a non-profit organization called the Rythu Sadhikara Samstha for the development and promotion of ZBNF in the state.

Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh—the three states where ZBNF was first developed and promoted—have experienced some of the worst effects of agrarian crisis in the country. Excessive chemical farming has both degraded soil health and forced farmers to take on loans to purchase inputs. Meanwhile, the cost of cultivation has increased while prices have decreased, leading to mass rural indebtedness that have resulted in hundreds of thousands of farmer suicides in recent decades. Himachal Pradesh, on the other hand, has been distant from discourses of agrarian crisis in India, much less farmer suicide. Whenever I would ask officials in the Department of Agriculture if they knew of any farmer suicides in the state, they said that

such a thing has not yet happened because the conditions in Himachal are far less dire than in other intensive commercial farming areas. Across the state of Himachal Pradesh, farmers are overwhelmingly small and marginal landholding farmers who cultivate for home consumption rather than commercially. As such, there is far less indebtedness due to fewer input requirements. Much of Himachal that is located in higher altitude regions is predominantly rainfed, and those areas in the lower regions of Himachal are irrigated through a centuries-old system of irrigation canals called *kuhls*. Although in recent decades, warming temperatures have eroded glaciers that feed the rivers that supply water to *kuhls*, for the most part farmers are able to access some form of irrigation in Kangra, meaning that the extreme effects of drought that are more common in other parts of northern and central India have been less felt in Himachal.

The Himachal Pradesh Department of Agriculture launched the Prakriti Kheti Khushaal Kisaan Yojana (Natural Farming Skilled Farmers' Program) in May of 2018. The program (or 'scheme') provides subsidies on inputs required to practice natural farming — e.g. drums used to make biofertilizers — and provides trainings on Zero Budget Natural Farming across the state of Himachal Pradesh. During 2019-2020, the scheme set a target of reaching 50,000 farmers through such awareness workshops and trainings. The PKKKY has a 25-crore (3.2 million USD) budget which primarily funds a massive extension program across the state as well as offering several financial incentives, including an 80% subsidy on construction costs for lined cattle sheds to facilitate the collection of urine, drums that are used to mix manure and urine-based natural fertilizers, and “bio-pesticide” materials like sticky traps and pheromone traps. The PKKKY, as a state-level scheme, subsidizes certain materials like plastic drums used to make natural inputs at home, and funds a massive extension program of awareness camps, trainings, and workshops carried out by the Department of Agriculture's block-level extension services.

Why was Himachal selected for an expansive ZBNF program, if farmers in the state are experiencing markedly less distress than in other areas, particularly neighboring states like Punjab and Haryana? The answer to this question has much to do with the political landscape in Himachal in 2018. At the time, the state was led by Governor Acharya Devvrat, who was previously the principal of the Gurukul School in Kurukshetra, Haryana, where he had overseen the development of a 200-acre farm based on the ZBNF principles. Devvrat has also risen in the ranks of the Bharitya Janata Party (BJP), and has since been appointed the Governor of Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The relationship between Devvrat as a senior BJP leader and Palekar, with his now explicitly “spiritual” farming, are important considerations when understanding why Himachal was selected for the program. This is particularly salient in the broader context of rising Hindu fundamentalism of the BJP nationwide, and in Himachal specifically, where the BJP holds massive power and popularity.

Himachal has also been considered a “progressive” state in which policies of inclusive development have been seen as successful (M. B. Das et al. 2015). As a heavily agrarian economy, Himachal Pradesh is home to primarily small-scale subsistence farmers, as well as a host of “progressive” commercial cultivators primarily in the upper Himalayan region of the state, in Districts like Kullu and Spiti, where ecological conditions are conducive to off-season fruit and vegetable cultivation. Land reform and forest management legislation has also been considered progressive in the state, although implementation of key policies like the Forest Rights Act have been widely criticized (Himdhara Collective n.d.; Aggarwal 2020). Himachal Pradesh’s reputation for implementing “inclusive” and “sustainable” development policies has positioned it as attractive for a pilot program on ZBNF, despite the fact that the social and environmental conditions of agriculture in the state are vastly different from those in other

regions of India. This mirrors a broader tension in agricultural policymaking in Himachal, which emphasizes commercial cultivation amongst large and wealthy farmers, who make up a tiny percentage of the farming population in the state. The vast majority of small and marginal landholding farmers who cultivate for subsistence means that the kind of risk-taking, capitalist behavior that policy encourages is largely incompatible with the goals and priorities of Himachali farmers. ZBNF is the latest attempt to marry a capitalist approach to agricultural development—where agriculture is positioned not as a requirement for food security, but rather of economic growth—with concerns for environmental sustainability, climate change mitigation, and public health.

Throughout my fieldwork, the tension between a vision of agriculture as a source of profit vs. as a source of food security animated the debates I witnessed between extension agents and farmers. For extension agents, the potential loss of yield accompanied by a switch to ZBNF was seen as unproblematic, because farmers were viewed as commercial cultivators who might suffer a loss of profit, but not a loss of basic food security. “Everyone has access to two meals a day in Himachal,” I was told constantly by extension agents. “No one is hungry.” These pervasive narratives of Himachal as a place where no one lacks basic necessities were fundamental to the justification for implementing the ZBNF scheme. For these agents, the refusal to switch to ZBNF was not due to concerns about hunger, but due to greed. A loss of yield would merely reduce the family’s income for a few seasons, but once the soil recovered, then yield would return to normal. Meanwhile, household needs would continue to be met, unthreatened by a reduction in yield. The vast majority of farmers in Kangra, however, cultivate entirely for consumption, and whose needs cannot not be met on their small landholdings alone, making them reliant on a combination of self-cultivated grains and rations purchased through the Public

Distribution System, India's nationwide food security system. For farmers, a potential two-to-three-year decline in yield was tantamount to starvation. As I detail further below, however, concerns about food security remain at the forefront for small and marginal farmers in Kangra, making a switch to ZBNF, with its concomitant loss of yield, particularly untenable. Extension agents attributed farmers' fears to their lack of "awareness" about both the long-term benefits of switching to natural farming, as well as their "greed" for immediate profits.

4.2 Extending Knowledge

Agricultural extension is the grassroots educational service performed by a cadre of Master's-educated officers in the Department of Agriculture, as well various PhD-level scientists and officers in affiliated institutions like the agriculture science centers and state agriculture universities. The agriculture extension service serves three main functions: to sell subsidized inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.), to provide information about the Department's schemes and technologies, and to make recommendations for treating plant diseases or pests. The "block," or the lowest level of the bureaucracy, employs three kinds of extension agents — agriculture extension officers (*krishi prasaar adhikaari*, AEOs), who have the most direct contact with farmers, agriculture development officers (*krishi vikaas adhikaari*, ADOs), who are senior to AEOs and primarily assist with farmers' applications for schemes, and a Subject Matter Specialist (SMS), who oversees the work of the AEOs and ADOs and provides technical expertise in more formal camps and trainings. Agriculture extension officers (AEOs) primarily interact face-to-face and by telephone with farmers, answering immediate questions and providing inputs. Farmers visit their "circle" offices, which are posted throughout the block (in the case of Kalyana, six AEOs for 24 panchayats), as well as occasional visits to individual farms to inspect a problem. AEOs organize regular "camps" with farmers, meetings in which they

usually deliver a lecture and answer questions farmers may have. In Kalyana, all six AEOs and two ADOs were women under the age of 35, while their supervisor, the Subject Matter Specialist, was a man named Mahesh in his late forties who I introduced in the start of this chapter.



Figure 4.1 Jasneet, agriculture extension officer (AEO), leads an extension meeting with farmers in a village near Kalyana

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published its *Guide to Extension Training* in 1985, in which they describe extension in the following way:

Extension is not concerned directly with generating knowledge; that is done in specialized institutions such as agricultural research centres, agricultural colleges or engineering departments. Extension takes this knowledge and makes it available to the farm family. Rural extension, therefore, is the process whereby knowledge is communicated, in a variety of ways, to the farm family. This process is usually guided

and supported by an extension agent who works at the programme and project level, and who is in direct contact with farmers and their families. (Oakley and Garforth 1985, 8)

Extension is said to “bridge the gap” between centers of research and policymaking and farmers, with agriculture being the primary focus of extension due to its importance as the base of most rural economies. By definition, then, extension is not conceptualized by the FAO and most development institutions as a generative process, but rather an iterative one in which knowledge created elsewhere (in the realm of scientific research centers) is spread via an agent to farmers, or villagers in general. Extension, in the sense that it is used by development professionals, thus means extending knowledge that is generated in research and policy institutions to farmers, so that they might make decisions that will improve their farm productivity. Even though many theories of extension attempt to subvert a hierarchical power dynamic between “expert” and “target” by prioritizing some reciprocal sharing of information from villager to extension worker, the premise remains that an “expert,” conceived as an outsider to the community, enters a rural space and gathers participants to transmit some new ideas, technologies, or practices.

The concept of extension as a top-down transfer of knowledge presents a fundamental contradiction that Paulo Freire identified in his essay “Extension or Communication” (Freire 1974). Freire argues that it is the task of the extension agent to persuade the agrarian peasantry to adopt their knowledge and technologies, and is thus an act of “domestication.” Extension as “domestication,” Freire argues, is not only flawed, but harmful, as it prevents them from developing their own critical awareness of reality. Since semantically, extension entails extending knowledge and thereby substituting the peasant’s worldview with “another form of thought, implying another language, another structure, another manner of acting” (Ibid.: 95), this is a process not unlike colonial forms of indigenous erasure or what Freire calls “cultural invasion.” For Freire, education cannot take the form of an educator who “knows” and an

educatee who becomes the repository of facts. Developing his theory of education as conscientization, Freire demands that the extension agent refuse to view the peasantry as receptacles for propaganda and instead educate through “communication,” which he argues is a collaborative, intersubjective practice in which Subjects, having a shared sign system of language²⁸, engage in dialogue in order to know an object in the world. Extension, by virtue of its singular directionality and embedded hierarchy of knowledge, is thus fundamentally at odds with the true meaning of education as conscientization, or “the practice of freedom” (Ibid.: 132).

Freire’s critique of extension is apt when applied to formal models of extension practice like the one outlined by the FAO, in which the agent is presumed to be both (1) a non-farmer and an outsider to the rural community, and (2) having access to fundamentally different knowledge than, and indeed occupying a contradictory worldview to, the agrarian peasantry. This technocratic understanding of extension mirrors wider critiques of development itself “as a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of ‘progress’” (Escobar 1995, 44). However, what is not reflected in either Freire’s critique of extension or wider critiques of development is the fact that there is an enormous variation and fluidity within everyday encounters between extension workers and rural communities, such that the purportedly static hierarchies of knowledge and power do not appear as clear for either the “experts” or the “targets” of extension in practice.²⁹ Such critiques also reproduce problematic assumptions about

²⁸ Freire does not account for the multilingual realities that characterize much of the Global South. For him, language is a transparent medium that makes possible the critical discussion of ideas. As such, Freire’s critique sidesteps more fundamental questions about how not only languages, but registers and ways of speaking within them, are linked to class, gender, caste, and other sociopolitical subjectivities, such that speakers of the same language still occupy diverse positions within hierarchies of knowledge and power.

²⁹ Many scholars have written about development as a set of practices that produce unexpected and novel sets of meanings and effects (Gupta 1998; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). What I’m trying to do here is look specifically at how extension as a practice of intersubjective, dialogical interaction becomes a crucial site where ideas about development take shape, rather than them being imported from institutional sites to rural communities

villagers as inhabiting spaces outside of “modernity,” untouched by global processes until they become subject to attempts to transform them by educational institutions or interventions from development workers.³⁰ Rather than assuming *a priori* that extension reproduces hierarchical transfers of knowledge that do not engage villagers in an intersubjective practice of knowing together, I try to see how meetings operate as spaces of contestation and collaboration in defining problems, blame, and solutions for problems at the village, state, and national levels.

Anthropological studies of agriculture have foregrounded questions about how agricultural knowledge is produced and encodes forms of hierarchy, authority, and expertise. These works emphasize the ways that agricultural knowledge is always already hybrid, informed by global processes, and modern, even as it is informed by situated cosmologies, histories, and practices (Gupta 1998; Pandian 2009). Dean’s study of agricultural extension in Zanzibar has shown how forms of knowledge, science, and expertise are encoded through the gendered figure of the agricultural extension agent (Dean 2013). In the Zanzibari context, farming is a female-gendered activity, while local male extension agents position women as lacking “scientific” knowledge about specific crops and cultivation strategies. Women farmers, on the other hand, offer justifications for their decisions based on their previous experiences dealing with various pests and diseases. Dean shows that while the authority and expertise attributed to the extension

where they are “reformulated.” Freire and Escobar are both also deeply Marxist and preoccupied with the presence of resistance in colonized spaces that have become the target of “development.” My aim here is not to reproduce arguments about the tension between structures of power and resistance in development spaces, which has been widely critiqued for reifying a deterministic understanding of power. In this formulation, people’s creative capacities to transform development are largely reactionary to their experience of domination by the discourse and its institutional apparatus. Escobar’s portrayal of the “local” as a space of noble resistance not only obscures the complex interrelationships of rural peoples with global forces but also is curiously un-Foucauldian, as the village is seen as a space somehow outside of discourse where people assert their own cultural needs and identities in opposition to development.

³⁰ Gupta (1998) and many others have critiqued this conceptualization of the village as occupying a space outside of modernity. Freire goes on to describe rural people as having worldviews dominated by “magic thinking,” which he argues must be preserved rather than eradicated through extension. Such a romanticization of the rural as unmodern or unscientific obscures the ways in which practices are always already hybridized and influenced by global processes.

agents vis-à-vis women farmers does reproduce gendered hierarchies, farmers' practices demonstrate the limits of the power of the extension agent, whose advice is often ignored. In central India, caste divisions amongst farmers become the basis upon which agricultural extension agents draw lines of "good" and "bad" farmers (Kumar 2016). When upper-caste farmers' soybean productivity declines, agents blame the environment and farmers' lack of understanding of "scientific" agriculture methods, despite the fact that such methods do not yield a substantially greater crop. This allows agents to reproduce forms of caste

While many studies have shown how agricultural knowledge is socially produced through the categories of "tradition" and "modernity" (Gupta 1998), as well as gender and race (Dean 2013; Ortiz 2020), which are productive of forms of expertise and authority, the role that linguistic practices play in these processes remains underexplored. How do distinct ways of speaking become indexically linked to forms of agricultural expertise, and how do these intersect with forms of gender, class, or caste difference? In considering the implementation of ZBNF in Himachal, I aim to discern not only how certain categories of "natural," "local," or "chemical" farming are socially produced, but how such processes are embedded in a particular political economy of languages in Himachal through which authority and expertise becomes socially legible in everyday speech.

4.3 Enregistering Agro-Bureaucratic Expertise

As the educational and communication service of the Department of Agriculture (and allied institutions), extension is mediated and shaped by the political economy of language in Kangra. In Kangra, extension agents primarily communicated in Hindi and English-based registers associated with agricultural science. In Chapter Three, I introduced the register that I call the *bureaucratic voice*, which consists of English-infused Hindi, and is used particularly in contexts

in which speakers seek to invoke authority without responsibility. Extension agents, as state agriculture workers, also primarily communicate in this register of English-infused Hindi, which includes substantial agricultural science terminology in English and Sanskritized Hindi. While Kangri and Gaddi are the most common regional languages (and the first languages of many officers themselves), extension agents rarely used these languages in their formal extension meetings and camps with farmers. AEOs and the SMS, Mahesh, spoke Kangri fluently as a first language, but almost never used it in their everyday interactions with farmers, and never in formal extension camps or trainings. Amongst the team of NGO workers from Sahayata who also conducted meetings with farmers about organic and natural farming, they were far more likely to speak in Kangri. Sahayata workers, who are usually also women farmers, insisted on using Kangri when they speak to farmers, often remarking on their choices explicitly and framing their choices as reflective of their work on the “ground level” (*jamini star*). Amongst state extension workers, language was a central resource for the production of both agricultural expertise and bureaucratic authority.

Linguistic anthropologists have demonstrated how expertise is enacted linguistic and other semiotic practices (Jacobs-Huey 2003; Carr 2010; Newon 2011; S. N. Das 2016; Lawlor and Solomon 2017). Carr has argued that “expertise is inherently interactional because it involves the participation of objects, producers, and consumers of knowledge. Expertise is also always ideological because it is implicated in semistable hierarchies of value that authorize particular ways of seeing and speaking as expert” (Carr 2010, 18). Language use is thus central to the indexical and ideological constitution of expertise, as something that people *do*, rather than something that people *are*. Yet, the enactment of expertise is predicated upon the objectification of people, places, and forms of knowledge, such that properties of certain people come to be seen

as unquestionably authoritative. As such, the production of forms of expertise is just as much about the fixing of expert knowledge as it is about the delimitation of laity ignorance: “realizing one’s self as an expert can hinge on casting other people as less aware, knowing, or knowledgeable” (Carr 2010, 22; Mitchell 2002). In this process, language remains a crucial resource for cultivation and performance of expertise, mediated by ideologies about language. Specialized speech registers are a particularly salient resource that ties ways of speaking to particular professional identities, activities, and habituses (Ochs 1992; C. Goodwin 1994; Agha 2005; Gal 2018; Bourdieu 1999). In her seminal study of baby talk, Elinor Ochs has shown how the simplified register of “motherese” is central to mothering as a social activity, which indirectly links the register to the social category of gender and motherhood (Ochs 1992). Social contexts mediate the ideological and indexical tying of the speech register to the category of “mother,” erasing the fact that non-mothers also use the register (see also Irvine and Gal 2000). In another context, Lanita Jacobs-Huey demonstrates how African American hair stylists use a specialized lexicon of haircare that allows them to both perform their expertise and manage challenges from clients about their choices (Jacobs-Huey 2003). Language is thus central to the social recognition of expert knowledge, which is cultivated through performance rather than being attributable to identity categories (e.g. gender, class) or professional titles (e.g. mother, hair stylist).

Investigating the linguistic enactment of expertise in agricultural extension is particularly necessary given the way that language intersects with gender, class, and caste in Kangra. Whereas most studies of agricultural extension have taken male agents as the norm, thus emphasizing gendered dimensions of male authority vis-à-vis female farmers, all eight of the AEOs and ADOs in Kalyana block during my fieldwork were young women under the age of 35.

My initial thought was that since nearly all agricultural labor in the state is performed by women, and women are the primary “targets” of extension in Kangra, it made sense to employ women as AEOs to be the primary point of communication between farmers and the Department. However, when I would ask questions about why so many extension agents in the region are women, I was told that the positions were less prestigious amongst the cohorts of graduates at the State Agriculture University, with male graduates tending to track toward positions as agricultural loan specialists in state banks. In this context, extension is overwhelmingly dominated by women, but these women come from different class and caste backgrounds compared to farmers. The region surrounding Kalyana is home to a diverse array of “general” (or “high” caste), OBC (“middle,” or “other backward caste”), Scheduled Caste (“low” caste), and Scheduled Tribe (including both indigenous and nomadic groups) communities.

In the areas surrounding Dharmshala, however, OBC communities are most heavily involved with agriculture, and as such are more often present in extension spaces. Extension agents themselves tend to be from “general” (or “high”) castes as categorized under the reservation system. I cross-referenced this using publicly available data from the Himachal Pradesh Staff Selection Commission, which oversees examination and appointment for government jobs (<http://hpsssb.hp.gov.in/>). In the last three years, on average two thirds of positions for both Agriculture Extension Officers and Agriculture Development Officers were awarded to candidates in the “General” category. In the last three years, on average two thirds of positions for both Agriculture Extension Officers and Agriculture Development Officers were awarded to candidates in the “General” category. The AEOs I followed most closely thus occupied positions of class and caste difference vis-à-vis farmers, which, alongside their high

levels of education and training in agricultural science, meant that their gender was largely irrelevant to the authority and expertise they inhabited as state agents.

Extension spaces in Kangra are highly multilingual. In addition to Hindi, English, and, amongst farmers, Kangri, there were also other languages embedded in the educational materials used by extension agents. Since ZBNF policy was first developed in Andhra Pradesh, many of the educational materials used to instruct farmers were written and filmed in Telugu, the majority language of that state which is not spoken in Himachal Pradesh. I attended a training with a scientist named Dr. Sharma from Himachal Pradesh Agriculture University (HPAU) in a village near Kalyana in June of 2018 on the cultivation of azolla (*Azolla pinnata*), an aquatic plant promoted through ZBNF that increases nitrogen growth in rice paddies, controls weeds, and which can be used for animal fodder to increase the protein content in milk. Dr. Sharma showed a video of the process of constructing a water pit in which to cultivate azolla, which was in Telugu, and which no one (including himself) could understand. Dr. Sharma also distributed a handout in English entitled “azolla preparation,” which he also did not translate, and which none of the women could read. The farmers in attendance (who speak Kangri) watched as he held up a small laptop with barely-audible sound, on which he showed videos in Telugu and then in English and provided intermittent explanation of what was happening in the video in Hindi. An NGO worker named Uma also expanded on Dr. Sharma’s explanations in Kangri.

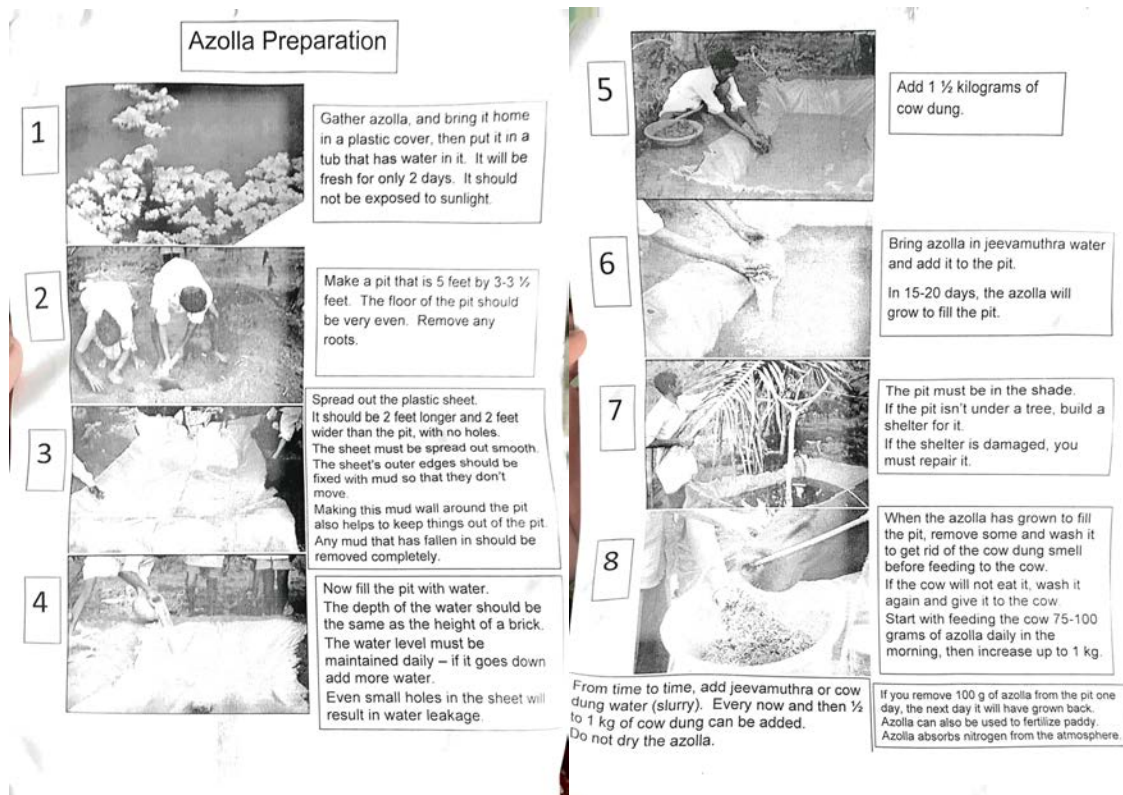


Figure 4.2 Handouts distributed to farmers on azolla cultivation

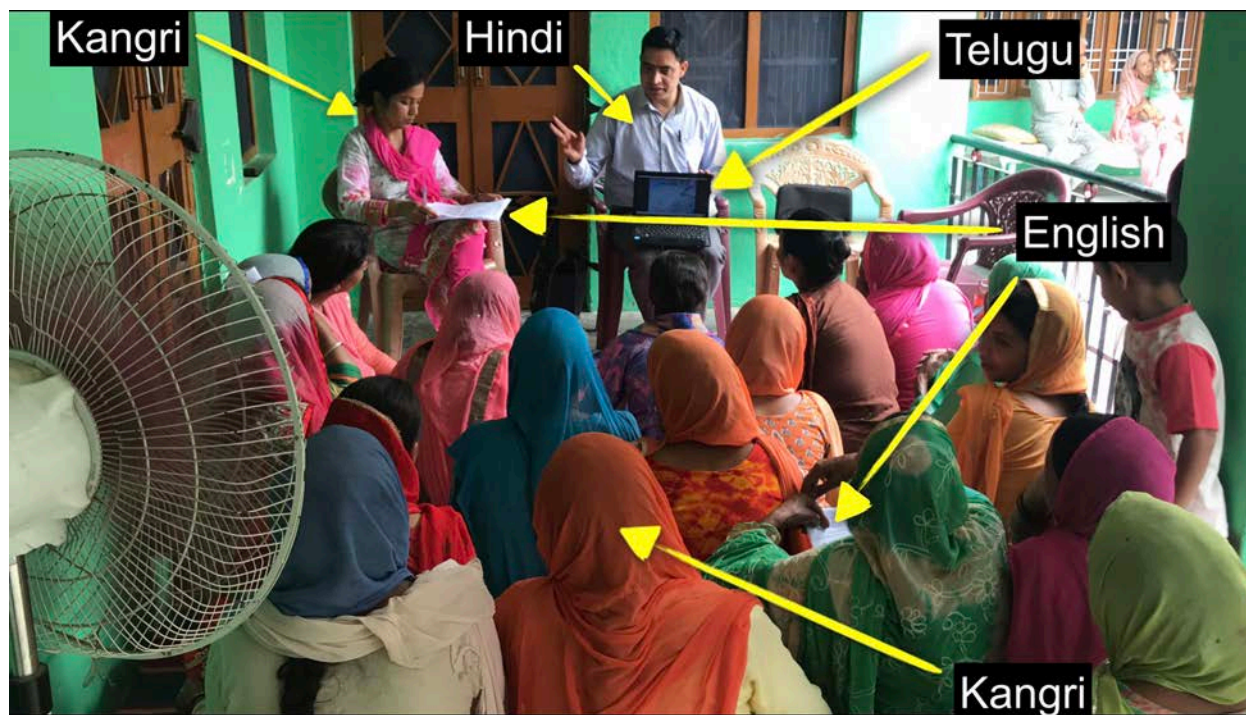


Figure 4.3 Languages used in extension meeting

In this instance, as the information about azolla was first unevenly translated from the video Telugu and the handout in English, into Hindi and into Kangri, farmers themselves engaged in ample crosstalk to explain what they were hearing from both Dr. Sharma and Uma, the NGO worker who spoke in Kangri. After the discussion, Dr. Sharma also performed a demonstration in an actual pit that had been constructed outside the house where we were meeting, and farmers watched while Dr. Sharma and Uma explained in Kangri the process of constructing the pit. Despite the differences in the communicative styles of Dr. Sharma and Uma, there seemed to be no confusion amongst farmers about what needed to be done to construct the pit. This fact ties into my argument in Chapter One about the lack of concern for mutual intelligibility in multilingual development work—farmers could understand Dr. Sharma speaking just fine, even if the English and Telugu-based media were unintelligible to them. As such, knowledge and expertise become indexically linked to particular ways of speaking about farming, which replicate forms of hierarchy between bureaucrats and farmers while positioning farmers as less “aware” of departmental programs, scientific methods, and the overall benefits of natural farming.

The role of language in enacting expertise and contesting responsibility was on full view in September of 2018, when the Department of Agriculture’s block offices staged an awareness camp (*jagrukta shivar*) to inaugurate the PKKKY and introduce farmers to the philosophy and practice of ZBNF. In Kalyana, extension officers gathered about 100 farmers from across the block, of whom all were women except for about 10 men, to attend a day-long training in the conference room of the Block Development Office. Farmers filed in to rows of tables lined in shape of a half circle, with long-stemmed microphones positioned in front of every third chair, none of which functioned. Mahesh, the Subject Matter Specialist in Kalyana and senior most

bureaucrat at the block-level, was seated in a high-backed leather chair at the head table on a raised platform, surrounded on either side by two other senior male officers, one from the Department of Irrigation and Public Health, the other from a different extension program under the Department of Agriculture called the Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA). The six AEOs and two ADOs in Kalyana block, all young women under the age of 35, sat in the front row managing the sign-in procedure. A projector hanging from the ceiling projected an image onto a screen in a grainy, purple hue that read “Zero Budget Natural Farming” in English, with the Hindi translation below, and with a photo of Subhash Palekar’s face and two wheat stalks. Large posters in Hindi were positioned around the room on detailing various aspects of natural farming, along with information on the Department’s other schemes for solar fencing, polyhouses, and power tillers. Representatives from multiple NGOs were in attendance and I greeted them as they took seats in the audience to be trained.



Figure 4.4 Launch of PKKKY, Kalyana, Sept. 8, 2018

During this day-long awareness camp, which I video recorded, Mahesh spoke at length about the deterioration of traditional agricultural knowledge, farmers' dependence on the state, and the destruction of the land and public health at the hands of farmers who overuse chemical inputs. The farmers were shown several videos explaining the harms of chemical agriculture and the alternative methods used in ZBNF, both in Hindi and in English with Hindi subtitles, but again with barely audible sound quality. Mahesh and the other officers present spent some time describing the specific practices entailed in ZBNF, including how to make natural fertilizer (*jeevamrit*) out of household items like gram flour, jaggery, manure, cow urine, and yogurt. After a brief explanation of these techniques, Mahesh delivered a lengthy lecture on the problems with contemporary agriculture, and how farmers should reform their practices. At the center of his narrative was the issue of responsibility: while extension agents worked to frame farmers as unaware and unethical in their usage of pesticides and fertilizers, farmers responded to argue that the department was instead responsible for funneling these inputs to them in the first place. Throughout his speech, Mahesh used the English-infused Hindi register that I described as the bureaucratic voice, which is particularly used to shift blame and responsibility from himself, and the state more broadly, onto farmers:

Transcript 4.1

Mahesh (m, 52), Subject Matter Specialist

Bold: English

1	Mahesh: अब वो यह क्या कि हम ने मेरे ख्याल	now what it is, in my view, is that
2	देसी बीज तो खत्म ही कर दिये	we have put an end to local (desi) seeds
3	अच्छा हर बार company वालों ने	okay, every time, the company folks
4	बड़ा अच्छा (?) कर दिया कि hybrid	have done a great (thing), that - hybrid
5	इस बार मान लो आप तीन सौ रुपए ले गये एक kg	this time imagine that you took one kilogram for 300 rupees
6	विभाग वाले आये	the department (seeds) came,
7	अगली बार फिर आप ने खड़े हो जाना	and next time you again will stand up
8	सर जी और दे दो जी	and say "sir, give us more sir"
9	अगली बार फिर तीन सौ का	next time again it costs 300 rupees
10	उनका तो business चल पड़ा है	they are running their business

11	और आप लोग तो depend हो गये उसके उपर	and you people have become dependent on them
12	अच्छा वो कभी पक रहा है कभी नहीं पक रहा है	sometimes that (seed) is ripening, sometimes it isn't ripening
13	कभी मौसम जल्दी ठंडा हो रहा है	sometimes the weather is getting cold fast,
14	कभी जल्दी गर्म हो रहा है	sometimes it is getting hot fast
15	पर जो आपकी local varietyओं थी	but your local varieties that used to exist
16	वो तो वैसे ही पकती थी	they ripened no matter what
17	ना बीमारियां लगणी उस में	nor did they get diseases in them,
18	ना ज्यादा मेहनत थी	nor was there a lot of effort required,
19	ना दवाईयां लगनी	nor were there medicines required
20	जब दवाईयां कम लगेंगी उस में	when there will be less medicines used,
21	तब खाद भी कम लगेंगी	then it will also require less fertilizer
22	तो आपकी सेहत भी अच्छी होगी ना	so then your health will also be good, right?

In transcript 4.1, Mahesh argues that farmers are at fault for multiple changes that have harmed both the environment and their health. He claims that farmers have ceased using their “local” (*desi*) seeds, and have instead become “dependent” on the hybrid seeds sold by the “company people,” or those who produce seeds for distribution via the department of agriculture. The result is that farmers keep spending money, coming back each season to beg for more: “sir, give us more” (8). He argues that hybrid seeds sold by the department (i.e. by his office) are those that are unsuitable for the environment, because they are engineered in environments very different from Himachal Pradesh. The “local varieties” of seeds that farmers have stopped using, he explains, were not only resistant to pests and diseases, but they also required less labor, and were ultimately better for their health. Mahesh went on to explain how the department is doing everything in its power to assist farmers, providing tools and technologies that would make farm labor easier and more efficient, but that farmers refuse to advocate for themselves by asserting a demand for support to their local government offices. Here, Mahesh included not only programs intended for farmers but the broader spectrum the welfare provisioning offered by the state government, including pensions and other schemes:

Transcript 4.2

Mahesh (m, 52): Subject Matter Specialist

Bold: English

1 Mahesh: हमें दुख होता है कि हम बैठे हैं किसानों के लिए
2 और उनको वो चीज नहीं पाती
3 तो कहीं ना कहीं कमी है वो
4 वो वो यह कमी जो मुझे लगी
5 कि कहीं से भी demand नहीं आती है
6 कोई भी चीज है tub है motor है
7 दुनिया भर की toolkit है, टोके हैं
8 तो आप कृपया कर के अपनी पंचायत के through दें so please give [demand] **through** your panchayats
9 और वो एक दिन आ के ले जाए and one day come and take them [i.e. tools]
10 तो आप के लिए so for you
11 वो मतलब time waste करने नी जरूरत नहीं है there will be no need to **waste time**
12 और आराम से और दूसरा यह है कि and easily- and the second thing is this that
13 दूसरा अगर कहीं आप सरकारी दफ्तर पे if you are ever at a government office,
14 जो आपकी पंचायतस की meetings होती है your panchayat's **meetings** that happen
15 कहीं higher level पे यह point उठाएँ raise this **point** at a **higher level**
16 कि हमारी जब पंचायत में ग्राम सभा होती है that when village assemblies happen in our panchayats
17 जब ग्राम सभा में तो आते हैं when we come to the village assembly
18 जो दूसरे सभाएँ होती हैं the other meetings that happen
19 उसमें यह बात करवा लें in these please make it be discussed
20 कि सभी विभागों की अधिकारी उसमें आए that all the department's officers should come
21 जैसे जन मंच का program शुरू हुआ है like the public hearing **program** that has begun
22 अगर वो वो भी एक जन मंच है if that, that is also a public hearing
23 वो तो हर एक महिने आपकी पंचायत में हो जाएगा that will happen every month in your panchayat
24 मान लो बीस विभागों के लोग imagine if people from 20 departments
25 अगर आपके पास उस दिन आ गए came to you that day
26 तो बीस विभागों की problem then 20 department's **problems**
27 तो आपकी solve होगी of yours will be **solved**
28 अगर मान लीजिए कोई बुजुर्ग आदमी if, imagine, some elderly man,
29 अस्सी साल का 80 years old,
30 उसने वृद्ध अवस्था पेंशन लगानी हो he needs to apply for an old age pension
31 उसको तो पता नहीं चल रहा है अनपढ़ है he isn't figuring it out, he is uneducated
32 कहाँ जाएँगे किसको पूछेंगे कब form भरेंगे where will he go, who will he ask, when will he fill the **form**
33 आगे गए officer मिला नहीं मिला he went forward, found an **officer** or didn't
34 और अगर कहीं से वो direction दिला के and if from somewhere he could get **direction**,
35 अगर वो direction वहाँ बैठा हो if the **direction** was sitting there
36 प्रधान साथ में होंगे उसको verify करेंगे the pradhan will be with him, he will **verify** it,
37 form भर के उधर (?) सुविधा मिल जाएगी fill the **form**, and there ((unclear)) he will get that service
38 तो आप मतलब so you, I mean,
39 आप लोगों को बहुत powers दे रखी हैं you people have been given a lot of **powers**
40 पर आप उन चीजों को utilize करना जानो but you (need to) learn to **utilize** these things

Mahesh invokes the bureaucratic voice here, not only in the characteristic register of English-infused Hindi he uses, but also in the way that he uses this register to articulate a vision of the state as benevolent provider and farmers as unaware and unwilling to “utilize” the “powers” that have been given to them. He urges farmers to attend panchayat-level meetings, including village assemblies (*gram sabha*) and public hearings (*jan manch*), in which they should present their demand for services to government officers, submit forms for applications, and solve their own problems. This narrative emerged as Mahesh extolled the vast schemes and subsidies offered by the department on various tools and technologies, claiming that “we” (i.e. government officers) are available to help farmers, but that they do not take advantage of their services.

Shortly hereafter, Mahesh invited an NGO worker from Sahayata to speak to the crowd. Uma, a *panchayat* headperson and long-time member of Sahayata’s organic agriculture team, took the stage to encourage the farmers present to adopt natural farming. The crowd listened intently to her, as she spoke in Kangri with a call-and-response style of oration (see Chapter 1, Transcript #). Unlike previous speakers, Uma called attention to the predominance of women in the room, using this as a way to compare the consequences of chemical farming to the experiences of women and mothers. She compared the cyclical nature of fashion trends in women’s “suits” (*salvaar kameez*) to the cyclical fashion of “desi” farming—it always comes back around. She then went on to make a direct comparison of the degradation of the land due to chemical farming to the feeling of having an empty (*khokhla*) womb after having just given birth, also hollow and infertile. “Just as a new mother must be fed nourishment (*kurakh*), so must we give nourishment to the earth.” Instead, she continued, farmers choose to feed the land with Urea (synthetic nitrogen fertilizer) and then go to the market and say “we need medicine.” She also made metapragmatic assessments of the language used to refer to chemical inputs: “What word

have we used for killing insects? Medicine. But to kill means what?” The crowd responds, “poison” (*jahar*). “Instead of using the word “medicine” (*davai*), which is used when we go to a doctor for treatment, we should be calling this thing what it actually is: poison. That is our goal for today, for you to understand the difference between medicine and poison.” Uma then repeated the ingredients that can be easily found at home and used to fertilize crops naturally, including wood ash collected from the hearth (*tudi*), yogurt made from cow’s milk (*lassi*), urine (*gaumutra*), and manure (*goaa*). Uma concluded by asking “how many ladies will start [doing natural farming] today!?” At this point a woman farmer in her sixties named Kusum stood and began to directly challenge Mahesh, and the “department” more broadly, to “stop” distributing medicines:

Transcript 4.3

Bold: English

Uma (female, 42): NGO worker

Kusum (female, 65): Farmer

Aarti (female, 45): NGO worker

Mahesh (male, 52): Extension agent and Subject Matter Specialist

1	Kusum	अहां तां सारे कम करी लेणा ठीक ठाक	we will do all of the work fine
2		पर जेडा agriculture दे through दवाई मिलदिआं	but the medicines we get through the agriculture [dept]
3		तां वो दवाई बंद करा पहले	first stop those medicines
4	Uma	सै सरां ते पूछा	you ask the sirs (i.e. officers) about that
5	Farmers	((<i>farmers clapping</i>))	((<i>farmers clapping</i>))
6	Kusum	सच बोलदे एन	we speak the truth,
7		सै तुहां बंद करदे दवाई तां	you stop the medicines
8		अहां सारेआं कम चलणे एन	then we will do all the work
9		हां जी	((<i>farmers clapping</i>)) yes ma'am
10		अहां नी एन पसंद	we don't like them
11		लिखी के अहां चिट्ठी दिंगे तुहांजो	we are going to write a letter and give it to you
12	Aarti	pesticide और यूरीया बगैरा अगर बैन हो जाता है	if pesticides and Urea et cetera become banned
13		तो कम से कम नियम मतलब कार्यवाही ((?))	then at least a rule, I mean, an action ((<i>unclear</i>))
14	Kusum	इस बार तां तुहां सारे	[this time you all --
15	Mahesh	सब से बिल्कुल आप ने	[first -- absolutely you --
16	Kusum	तुहां सांजो बीज भेजणा ए	you send us seeds
17		उस ने कन्ने सब दवाई भेजणी ए	and with that you send all these medicines

18	तां अहां क्या करनी ए सै दवाई	so what are we supposed to do with those medicines?
19 Mahesh	मैं वही बोल रहा हूँ ना आप	that's exactly what I'm saying, right. you --
20	एक मिनट एक मिनट एक मिनट	one minute, one minute, one minute
21 Kusum	तां फिरी अहांयो सै दवाई नी चाईदी	so we don't need that medicine again
22 Mahesh	एक मिनट	one minute
23 Kusum	अहां इस बार दवा कोई नी छूणी ए	this time we won't touch any medicines
24	agriculture दी	from the agriculture (department)
25	दवा कोई नी छूणी इस बार	we won't touch any medicine this time
26 ALL	((farmers clapping))	((farmers clapping))
27 Mahesh	एक मिनट एक मिनट	one minute one minute
28	एक मिनट	one minute ((farmers clapping))
29	आप - एक मिनट	you -- one minute ((farmers clapping))
30	एक मिनट शोर ना मचाएँ	one minute, please don't make noise
31	ऐसा है ना	it's like this right
32	कि सुनिए आप सुन रहें हैं ना	that, listen, you're listening right?
33	इन्होंने सवाल भी खुद किया	she has herself asked the question
34	और जवाब भी खुद दे दिया	and herself given the answer
35 Kusum	हां जी	yes sir
36 Mahesh	ठीक है ना, और अच्छी बात है यह	right, and this is a good thing
37	और यह जान के अच्छा लगा	and it's nice to know
38	कि आप लोग इतने जागरूक हो गये हैं	that you all have become so aware
39	कि हमें जहर नहीं चाहिए है ना	that we don't want poison, right?
40	बड़ी अच्छी बात है	it's a really good thing,
41	पर कई चीजें ऐसी होती हैं,	but there are several things that are like this
42	देखिए हम दफ्तर में काम कर रहे हैं	look, we are working in an office
43	ठीक है ना हम अकेले नहीं कुछ ऐसा बोल सकते हैं	okay? we cannot say something like this alone
44	आप लोग जब बोलेंगे	when you people will speak
45	है ना, तो उसका कुछ ज्यादा असर होता है	right? then that has a larger effect
46	अगर आपको ऐसा है ना	if you feel this way,
47	तो आप एक लिखित तौर पर जरूर दें	then you should definitely give in written form
48	अगर आप ग्रूप में हैं	if you are in a group ,
49	तो group के दस हैं बीस हैं sign कर के दे दें हमें	then 10 or 20 of your group should sign and give us
50	बड़ी अच्छी बात है, उस में कोई -	is a very good thing, there's nothing in that --
51	क्योंकि हमने नहीं decide करना होता है	because we don't have to decide
52	यह हमारे से उपर जो अधिकारी बैठे हैं	the officers who are sitting above us,
53	उन्होंने decide करना है	they have to decide
54	तो हम उनको भे -	so we send them -
55	अगर ऐसे बोलेंगे तो ओ बोलेंगे पता नहीं	if we say like this then they will say I don't know,
56	जान-बूझ के काम करने से टल रहे हैं	they are intentionally avoiding doing work
57	ठीक है पर जब आप सौ पचास दो सौ लोगों का	okay, but when it you are 100, 50, 200 people
58	लिखित रूप में ऐसा आएगा ना	if it will come like this in in written form, right
59	तो वो कुदरती है	then that is natural

In this exchange between Mahesh, a farmer named Kusum, and two NGO workers named Uma and Aarti, there is a direct confrontation over the question of responsibility. Kusum, speaking in Kangri with her hand outstretched toward Mahesh, directly attributes responsibility to the department of agriculture for distributing chemical inputs and hybrid seeds to farmers. She begins by saying that farmers will “do the work” necessary to implement natural farming, but that the agriculture department should first “stop” the medicines. As she speaks, the other farmers in the room begin to clap and join in a chorus of agreement, and the room fills with the sounds of their voices. Mahesh tries to intervene multiple times (lines 9, 12-13, 15-16), while Kusum continues to build toward her final declaration, that no farmers would touch any medicines from the department of agriculture this year. In lines 18-23, Mahesh continues to try to regain the floor from the farmers who are continuing to clap loudly and engage in side conversations with one another. Eventually, Mahesh is able to begin speaking again as the farmers return their attention to the front of the room. At this point, Mahesh launches into a long explanation about his lack of individual power, and how the farmers present should provide their demands as a group, of 100 or 200 people, in writing to the department of agriculture. He explains that he is glad to know that the farmers have become “so aware” (line 26) and that they do not want “poison.” Throughout his response, Mahesh uses the collective “we” to frame himself as part of the lower bureaucracy that ultimately has no power to “decide” anything; it is the officers sitting above “us” that “decide” things (37). By attributing authority away to a higher bureaucracy, and also framing farmers’ vocal critiques as useless until they are presented in writing, Mahesh mitigates his personal responsibility while enacting an authoritative stance rooted in bureaucratic proceduralism.

Amidst a widespread narrative that blames farmers for agrarian distress, which farmers variously reiterate and reject, there are also attempts to responsabilize the state as the arbiter of chemical agriculture during the green revolution. In the next section, I show how the founder of the ZBNF movement, Subhash Palekar, attempts to frame the state, and agricultural science more broadly, as the source of a “conspiracy” against farmers, even as he uses the same linguistic features to perform scientific expertise. I then turn to the narratives of women farmers who, during another training at the Agriculture Science Center in Kangra, center the question of food security as an ethical imperative greater than environmental sustainability.

4.4 The Guru-Scientist

As an alternative to green revolution technologies, ZBNF rejects many of the central tenets of agricultural policy and science in India. By emphasizing the importance of Indian (*desi*) agricultural knowledge, inputs, and livestock breeds, rejecting “Western” agricultural science, and emphasizing a Gandhian philosophy of farmer self-reliance, ZBNF’s model entails a dramatic rethinking of the relationship between the state, universities, and farmers in the reform of agriculture. The founder of the ZBNF movement in India, Subhash Palekar, has gained increasing attention as its charismatic leader.³¹ Researchers who have studied ZBNF and Palekar argue that his charismatic leadership is rooted in an ability to explain “complex scientific concepts” in “farmer’s language, which is language adapted to farmers for popular education”

³¹ *Palekar and his method have come under fire for being aligned with Hindutva ideology, especially the valorization of the cow and his support of cow protection (gaurakhshak), which has motivated violence against Muslim and Dalit communities that have consumed (or been accused of consuming) beef. ZBNF also has also been criticized for its claim of being “zero budget” when in fact people do need to purchase inputs to practice it, including drums, desi cows, and other inputs. As such, Palekar has taken to calling the method Subhash Palekar spiritual Farming (SF), which has become a source of confusion and contention in the movement. Palekar’s charismatic leadership and self-proclaimed guru status as the father of the movement have contributed much to its read and popularization amongst farmers, although during my fieldwork, farmers in Himachal were only just being introduced to him.*

(Khadse and Rosset 2019: 858). These scholars do not explain what is meant by “farmer’s language,” other than an implied simplification of otherwise complex concepts. I attended a training that Palekar conducted at Himachal Pradesh State Agriculture University in Palampur, which lasted six days and was conducted for approximately one thousand farmers. Throughout the program, Palekar spoke in the same highly Sanskritized register of Hindi with substantial English mixed throughout that I described in Chapter Three as the “bureaucratic voice.” This register was similar to the register that extension agents across Kangra use in their everyday interactions with farmers, yet it contained even more extensive English, often veering into sentence-level utterances in English. Although Hindi serves as a lingua franca across much of northern India, it remains a second or third language for many farmers in Himachal Pradesh. As such, while farmers in Kangra can understand everyday spoken Hindi, those present, particularly the women farmers, conveyed to me difficulty following Palekar’s lecture due to its saturation with “pure” Hindi and English.

In late September 2018, farmers traveled from across District Kangra, as well as Chamba, Hamirpur, Una, Bilaspur, and Mandi, to attend the six-day training at Himachal Pradesh State Agriculture University in Palampur. They were housed and fed for six nights in the university dorms. So-called “progressive” farmers were selected to attend from across the state, chosen by their block-level extension agents, with the goal of training them to become models for ZBNF that will persuade others in their villages to also adopt by demonstrating the ability to attain good yield from the method (Flachs 2017). I attended the inaugural day of the training, which was led by Subhash Palekar, and was able to meet with a number of people there who I had previously met in other extension contexts, including scientists from the Agriculture Science Center in Kangra, officers from the Department of Agriculture in Kalyana block, NGO workers from

Sahayata, and farmers who I had met in various events, all of whom were there to be trained. Unlike all of the trainings, camps, and workshops I had attended previously, there were very few women present in the crowd, which was overwhelmingly dominated by male farmers. This struck me as unusual given that the majority of agricultural labor is performed by women in the state, and women are the ones who interact most with the Department's block offices, both for procuring inputs and for seeking advice when a problem arises with a crop.

When I asked some friends from Sahayata why there were so few women present, they told me that it was hard for women to be away from their homes for so many days – who would take care of the house? Who would cook the meals? It wasn't that families refused to allow women to go away for overnight trainings, my friends assured me, but rather that it was impossible to convince women themselves to stay gone for so long. "Tension ho jata hai" (*they worry*). The women who were present from Sahayata were there in their capacity as workers receiving a wage to be trained, and had much experience with overnight trainings of this kind, making their families more accustomed to their periodic absences. The handful of other women present were largely older women who had young daughters-in-law at home to care for the house. A six-day overnight training was simply out of the question for the vast majority of female farmers. As a result, the training's focus on "progressive farmers" de facto elided the core group of farmers in Himachal Pradesh: young, married women, whose duties to their husbands, children, and parents-in-law took precedence over a training of this kind.

After a two-hour bus journey from Kalyana, I arrived to the University campus and walked around until I found a group of people from Sahayata who I could sit with during the training. From the entrance, we all moved together into the University auditorium, which seated about one thousand people and was arranged in two tiers like an opera house. I sat with the

representatives from Sahayata in the upper balcony, where I set up my camera to record the lectures. Down below, toward the front of the lower section sat University administrators, professors, and scientists. A long table was arranged on the stage, where five men were seated, including Om Chand Shankar, then Principal Secretary for Agriculture of the Government of Himachal Pradesh. In the middle was Subhash Palekar, dressed in a grey long-sleeved khadi shirt with a beige Nehru vest. Several tripods were arranged on stage, prepared to record.

After several short introductory speeches given by the men seated on stage, Palekar took to the pulpit from which he delivered a two-hour lecture on the history of agricultural development since the Green Revolution, the many alternatives that emerged since and their faults, and the philosophy and science of ZBNF. This lengthy speech was followed by six more days of lectures, broken up by a lunch break in the middle of the day. The farmers present sat in the rows of the over-full auditorium, many with notepads and pens in their laps, taking notes on what they could capture. Palekar's voice quality was immediately reminiscent of a religious leader, matching his self-acclaimed *guru* status as the father of ZBNF. Dressed in a grey Nehru-style collared vest and grey, long-sleeved shirt with white cotton pants and simple, black sandals, Palekar's combination of everyday footwear with refined, high-quality khadi cloth invoked his status as renowned figure of a farmers' movement. He began to speak, at first in a slow, steady rhythm, but soon beginning to modulate his volume between an almost-whisper to a shout. The length of his pauses between phrases was just long enough to build uncomfortable anticipation, leaving the audience waiting anxiously for the conclusion to each sentence. He began to lecture on the Green Revolution (*Harit Kranti*), agreeing that it was the correct approach for its historical context, when food production was insufficient for the population. gesturing his arms upward, he argued that we must again double food production to meet the growing population,

yet agricultural scientists have yet to discover a solution that will both double production *and* double farmers' incomes. Describing each of the “alternatives” (*vikalp*) to chemical agriculture



that have emerged in recent decades—focusing heavily on “organic” (*jaivik*) farming—he decried the “lies” and “conspiracies” that have reduced farmers to a perpetually degraded existence.

Figure 4.5 Subash Palekar delivering lecture on ZBNF to farmers at Himachal Pradesh State Agriculture University in Palampur

After lunch, the farmers returned to the auditorium where Palekar proceeded to deliver a two-hour long lecture describing the chemistry of various environmental processes, all of which were attributed directly to God. Agricultural scientists—many of whom were sitting in the front row—were directly addressed and mocked, pinpointed as the source of much of the environmental destruction that has occurred in recent times. ““There is nothing in the earth,’ say the great scientists. They are lying and saying that however much fertilizer you will put, that is how much yield you will get... Agricultural scientists are lying. Are they scientists?” He repeated this refrain throughout his lecture: “Agricultural science is not science, it is ignorance

(*agyaan*)... [The Agricultural Science Center] should be called the Agricultural Ignorance Center (*Krishi Agyaan Kendra*).”

He proceeded describe various agroecological processes, which he referred to as the “laws of nature” (*prakriti ke siddhant*) that are given by God, including: the nutrient cycle (*khadhya chakkar*), capillary force (*keshika bal*), the water cycle (*jal chakkar*), and the carbon cycle (*prangaar chakkar*). Pacing back and forth across the stage, microphone in hand, he dictated each of these processes, taking long pauses between each clause, periodically reminding the crowd to write his words down verbatim, in Hindi: *likhiye!* “please write!” He used a white board approximately 3 feet tall by 4 feet wide propped up on an easel on the stage to draw diagrams of the various cycles, which was not readable to the hundreds of farmers present, especially those of us sitting in the upper balcony. Throughout his speech, he dictated these processes to farmers, instructing them to copy down his lecture verbatim. He repeated every line two or three times, spoke slowly, and used a mixture of Hindi and English, with extensive Sanskritized lexicon for scientific concepts and terms. For two hours, I watched as farmers attempted to copy down his words as he dictated long and complex sentences that were increasingly difficult to follow. An hour and a half into the lecture, he continued dictating but removed his plastic sandals and sat cross-legged in in the sole high-backed leather chair on the stage. “If there is **carbon dioxide**... if there is **carbon dioxide**... then leaves create nutrients with full capacity. Any green leaves... through the process of photosynthesis... take **carbon dioxide** from the air... and form that nutrients are created.” *Agar carbon dioxide hai, agar carbon dioxide hai... toh patte puri kshamta se khadya nirmati karte hain. Koi bhi hare patte... prakash sanshleshan kriya ke dwara... hawa se jo carbon dioxide lete hain... usse khadya nirmati hoti hai.*

He pronounced each syllable slowly, including sounds that are not normally pronounced in Hindi, such as the “ha” syllable in “ya-ha” (यह; ‘this’). Throughout his lecture, many of the concepts he sought to explain are given in highly Sanskritized translations of English scientific terms. “*Upyukt sanjeevak, yani hormones*” (suitable analeptic, meaning, hormones) “*Sukshmajivaanu*” (microorganisms). Meanwhile, the farmers in the room became increasingly engaged in conversations with one another, the volume in the room increasing steadily.

Despite Palekar’s repeatedly attributing blame to agricultural science and scientists for “lying” and perpetuating “ignorance” through their perpetuating of input-intensive farming, the register of his speech is remarkably reminiscent of that of the agro-bureaucratic register that state extension agents use in their own interactions to farmers. For example, during his lecture, Palekar explains the creation of humus, the organic matter in soil that contains nutrients that promote growth, including nitrogen. At issue for Palekar is not only the harms caused by chemical agriculture as the product of the West, but also “organic” farming as a Western paradigm, which he views as just as damaging to the environment and to farmers’ financial stability due to its even more expensive inputs.

Transcript 4.4

Subhash Palekar (male, age 70)

Bold: English

1	Palekar: और एक बहुत एक बहुत महत्वपूर्ण मुद्दा बताता हूँ	I tell you one very, one very important issue
2	जैविक खेती	(how) organic farming
3	हमारी भूमि की उर्वशक्ति कैसे नष्ट करती है	destroys the fertility of our land
4	यह महत्वपूर्ण मुद्दा है	this is an important issue
5	समझ ले कर जाओ उसको आगे	understand this and take it forward
6	साथियो	friends
7	हमारी भूमि का जो मूल्यांकन का मुद्दा है	it is an issue of the valuation of our land
8	valuation of the land	valuation of the land
9	it is dependent the fertility of the soil	it is dependent the fertility of the soil
10	हमारी भूमि का मूल्यांकन	the valuation of our land
11	भूमि की उर्वशक्ति पर निर्भर है	is dependent on the fertility of the land

12	fundamental science says	fundamental science says
13	humus is created near the root zone	humus is created near the root zone
14	not beyond the root zone	not beyond the root zone
15	इस का मतलब है humus की निर्मिती	this means that the creation of humus
16	जड़ों के पास होती है जड़ों के बाहर नहीं क्यों?	happens near the roots, not outside the roots. why?
17	प्रकाश संश्लेषण की क्रिया के माध्यम से	through the process of photosynthesis
18	photosynthesis process के माध्यम से	through the photosynthesis process
19	हरे पत्ते जितना खाद्य रोज निर्माण करते हैं	however much food green leaves produce every day
20	carbohydrates	carbohydrates
21	this is a fundamental science	this is a fundamental science
22	कि humus की निर्मिती जड़ों के पास होती है	that the creation of humus happens near the roots,
23	जड़ों के बाहर नहीं	not outside the roots

While Palekar critiques of Western science for eroding Indian agricultural knowledge, continuously praising “swadeshi” (self-reliant) and Indian (*Bharitya*) technologies and practices, he consistently relies on English-based registers of agricultural science terminology in his lectures, not only using terms for chemical elements like “nitrous oxide” and “chlorofluorocarbons,” but often code-switching entirely into English sentences. Palekar draws heavily on English-based agricultural science terminology, which he intersperses with Sankritized Hindi equivalents. He uses parallel structures of translation to articulate his points first in English and then in Hindi. Thus lines 8-9 and 13-14, uttered entirely in English, are followed by a Hindi translation in lines 10-11 and 13-14. Palekar also frames his critique of organic farming through discourses of “fundamental science,” describing processes of photosynthesis and humus creation that he argues are crucial to soil fertility, but artificially created in organic agriculture’s techniques.

Whereas extension workers attributed farmers’ unwillingness to adopt natural farming to their lack of “awareness” about the long-term increase in yield that follows a 2-3 season decline in productivity, Palekar’s attributes the unwillingness of farmers to adopt to a conspiracy between agrochemical corporations and agricultural scientists to keep them in a position of dependency on the state. Instead, Palekar assured farmers throughout his talk, ZBNF has the

potential to double or even triple yield if performed properly. Research into the potential yield loss associated with ZBNF, and its concomitant threat to food security, has shown that even with maximum potential nitrogen fixation and release, only 52–80% of the national average nitrogen applied as fertilizer is expected to be supplied” (Smith et al. 2020, 247). The result is an immediate drop in yield, which stands to threaten India’s needed food supply, although studies predict a long-term recovery of soil organic matter and thus a potential restoration of yield. Still, farmers’ concerns about yield loss, and starvation, are rarely taken seriously and are often framed as their lack of information or willful ignorance. While Palekar’s attribution of responsibility for agrarian distress to state agricultural policy’s reliance on Western practices relies heavily on the same register of agricultural science used by state extension agents, farmers themselves attempt to reframe narratives of their “unawareness” by pinpointing the state’s culpability in perpetuating chemical farming and asserting their own expert knowledge rooted in memories of pre-green revolution food insecurity.

4.5 Engendering Expertise

Women farmers in Kangra perform the vast majority of agricultural labor and decision-making, will face the brunt of the implications of a ban on chemical inputs. As the primary “targets” of extension and the people who will be most directly impacted by shifts in state agriculture policy in the upcoming years, women’s interactions with agricultural scientists and extension agents are a central domain in which they assert their own expert knowledge through distinct linguistic and affective discourse strategies. Women farmers primarily speak in Kangri-based registers of agricultural knowledge in order to frame to their existing practices as “already natural,” particularly in their vegetable gardens, alongside memories of pre-green revolution food insecurity. Inside and outside formal extension spaces, I witnessed women farmers directly

challenge the authority of state extension agents by asserting the culpability of the state for introducing chemical farming in the first place. In transcript 4.3 above, for example, Kusum, a woman farmer in her sixties, uses her native language of Kangri to directly attribute responsibility for the overuse of “medicines” to Mahesh and the agriculture department more broadly.

In May 2018, I went with a group of farmers organized by the NGO Sahayata to attend a two-day training at the Agriculture Science Center in Kangra.³² The topic of the training was “organic” farming, although there was a significant portion of the lectures dedicated to discussing ZBNF. One by one, lectures were delivered by a soil science specialist, vegetable science specialist, and an animal husbandry specialist on various topics related to “organic” farming (with the occasional recommendation to use chemical pesticides like malathion). The speeches delivered contained similar messages about the lack of awareness amongst farmers about the harms of chemical farming, and the need for farmers to shift away from monocropping grains and paddy to more profitable crops like vegetables and pulses. Toward the end of the first session on the first day, a leader from Sahayata called on a “progressive” farmer to come forward to speak to the group about her experience with organic farming. Seelu Devi, a Sahayata worker who specializes in women’s health, was singled out by one of the NGO’s most senior agriculture workers, an older gentleman affectionally referred to by everyone as “Chacha ji” (uncle). Seelu insisted that she would not have much to say as she was not really doing organic farming, but

³² *The Agricultural Science Centers (Krishi Vigyan Kendra, KVK) are agricultural extension centers located across India. In Kangra, the KVK is associated with the Himachal Pradesh State Agriculture University. The goal of the KVK is to serve as the link between farmers and the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), which is the centralized institution for agricultural education and research in India. The KVKs fall under the Deputy Director of Agricultural Extension. There is one KVK in each district of Himachal Pradesh, with District Kangra’s situated in the town of Kangra, approximately 20 kilometers south of Kalyana. KVKs are operated by agricultural scientists who perform experimental research on technologies and methods on small plots of land and who then conduct educational activities with farmers to encourage farmers to adopt scientific practices.*

Chacha ji insisted she come forward since she had over fifteen years of experience with Sahayata. She responded, saying she has been farming since her childhood, and as such her knowledge was primarily based on her “practical work.” Nevertheless, she came forward and began to speak, first introducing herself in Hindi but soon thereafter switching into Kangri.



Figure 4.6 Agriculture Science Center (Krishi Vigyan Kendra) in Kangra, May 2018

A seasoned NGO worker and thus an experienced public speaker, Seelu immediately drew in the attention of the crowd and began to narrate stories of farming in her natal home (*pyoki*) where she would eat endless amounts of maize that now people have ceased growing. Since people have stopped raising “animals” (*dangre*, which includes cows, goats, and sheep), they no longer have access to manure required to farm in the “old way.” Seelu’s narrative immediately tied her “practical” expertise to having watched the shifts that have taken place since her

childhood. Other farmers in the crowd nodded along and contributed tokens of agreement, smiling and laughing as Seelu remarked on fond memories of loading up on delicious maize (*chhalli*) as a child and that left her too full to eat regular meals. After establishing herself as a farmer with “practical” knowledge, she then turned to the issue of “organic” farming and raised the central question of hunger that is rarely discussed when farmers are encouraged to stop using chemical inputs. Here, she goes against both the views of the agricultural scientists in the room and against Chacha ji, her senior and the person who invited her to share her experience by speaking to the room.

Transcript 4.5

Seelu Devi (f, 45), NGO worker and farmer

Chacha ji (m, 75), NGO worker and farmer

1 Seelu Devi	की सच्चाई जेड़ी ए सेह है	that, the truth is what it is
2	जे अगर में मंदी है मैं जैविक करादी	if I say that I am doing organic
3	तां मेरा जेड़ा कन्ने घाये दा खेत है सह जैविक नि ए	then my grass fields, they aren't organic
4	की अहाँ लोका ने गल भी करादे	we are saying to people that
5	की जैविक करनी है अहाँ	we need to do organic
6	तां लोका दा एक ही question फ़ान है साड़े अगे	then people have only one question before us
7	की हाँजो भूखे मरने दी नौबत आई आणी	that will the problem of starvation come to us
8	आई आंगी नी आंगी	will it or won't it?
9 Farmers	औणी ए!	it will!
10 Seelu Devi	नी ओणी ए	won't it? ((to Chacha ji))
11	नई चाचा जी ए कदी मनी नी सकदे	no, Chacha ji, I could never believe that
12	हा हा हा	ha ha ha
13	नी ? दिखा दी चाचा जी जेड़ी सच्चाई	no, look, Chacha ji, the truth is--
14 Chacha ji	((<i>indistinguishable</i>))	((<i>indistinguishable</i>))
15 Seelu Devi	ओ चलो सह तां अलग चीज है ना	ok well that's a different issue, right,
16	जेड़ी सचाई है सामने नी है	what the truth is, that is not coming out in the open
17 Farmers	लोक निर्भर जेड़ियां चिजां नी सूटणा	If people don't put the things they are dependent on
18	अगर तिहनायो अपणागे तां भूखी मरने	if we adopt those (new things) then we will starve
19 Seelu Devi	तां होणी सच्चाई	then we will get the truth
20	तां सच्चाई होंदियां	that is when the truth happens
21	तुहां जाहलु तक असां अपनागें ताहलु	when we adopt [organic], then [we will see the truth]
22	कन्ने बोलणे दा मतलब अहाँ दा,	and what we mean to say is that
23	कोई भी अहाँ जेड़ा अपनाई चुक्यो एन	if any of us has adopted already,
24	कन्ने अहाँ बिलकुल जैविक ए सैह नी ए	and we are completely organic, then that is not it,
25	मना तिहा चीजां यो	believe these things [I am saying]

Soon after this moment, Seelu Devi was ushered from the podium, silenced by Chacha ji. The question of hunger was raised again and again at every training I attended. Farmers argued that ceasing use of synthetic fertilizer (especially the catch-all Urea) would result in starvation. Many such farmers, including Seelu Devi and Kusum, based their assessments on their memories of cultivating before the green revolution, when yield was insufficient for the needs of their families. Extension agents and Palekar both attempted to convince farmers that adopting ZBNF would bring both increased yield and increased income, yet farmers' questions about the decline in productivity that would occur in the immediate aftermath remained attributable to either their willful ignorance or their victimization at the hands of the state.

A final way that women farmers enacted their own agricultural expertise, while mitigating claims of their lack of “awareness,” was by asserting their existing use of “local” (*desi*) agricultural practices, particularly in the cultivation of their kitchen gardens. Through participant observation on family farms during three agricultural seasons in 2018-2019,³³ I gained insight into the decisions that women make about cultivation, including the selection and purchase of inputs, when to sow and harvest, and how to treat pests or diseases. Women farmers emphasized their already-ongoing use of non-chemical, “local” (or *desi*) methods, and challenged the assertion of extension agents that they were overusing chemical inputs. While their monocropped grain fields (wheat, rice, and maize) were primarily fertilized with synthetic fertilizers like Urea and NPK, all homes also have a kitchen garden (*sugadu*) that are exclusively fertilized with

³³ *During this time, I performed labor on the farms of four families ranging in landholdings from 3-25 kanals (0.375 – 3.125 acres). I assisted with sowing, harvesting, and weeding, all performed by hand using a sickle (darati), as well as tending to cows with two of the four families who had them (one family with 5 kanals had 1 Jersey cow, another family with 25 kanals had two Jersey cows and 1 desi cow). I also assisted in tending several of the families' kitchen gardens (sugadu), usually a small plot dedicated to growing vegetables for home consumption. This labor was performed in tandem with living with these families on-and-off throughout fieldwork, and was done alongside normal cooking and cleaning duties within the home.*

manure, urine, wooden ash, yogurt, and other homemade inputs. The importance of the *sugadu* to the family diet was not only the sustenance it provided, but it also shaped farmers' narratives of their agricultural practice as "already natural" and "*desi*."

In their narratives, women farmers often mobilized images of Himachal as an already-clean state, in which they are already conducting default-natural and organic agriculture practices through their home kitchen gardens (*sugadu*), where they intercrop vegetables and use manure (*gobar*), urine (*gaumutra*), wooden ash (*tudi*), and yogurt (*lassi*) as fertilizer. They argued that the complete abandonment of the relatively small amount of chemical fertilizers they use would result in dramatically reduced yield, leading to starvation. For many older women, their memories of pre-green revolution farming, especially before the 1980s, are a major source of their hesitation to transition to chemical-free farming. Suhana, a farmer whose family I lived with on-and-off throughout my fieldwork, emphasized with pride the quality of her "organic" kitchen garden, and the nutritious vegetables that she provides for her family (Figure 3). As a sixty-two-year-old grandmother of four, Suhana had vivid memories of life as a young woman, when no one had access to two meals a day.

Along with anxieties about returning to a time of severe food insecurity, Suhana was particularly reticent to embrace a style of farming that would entail significantly more labor, which is entailed by the abandonment of "medicines" that kill pests and weeds. She argued that women already have "no time" with which to complete additional labor required to farm without "medicines." This is particularly true of the weeding process, which takes place by hand using a sickle, and is done alongside the use of weedicides but that still requires an immense amount of daily work to keep invasive weeds at bay and to provide fodder for animals. Extension workers, however, cite "laziness" as a primary obstacle to farmers' adoption of ZBNF, while insisting that

new technologies (e.g. tractors, threshers, tillers) have made farmers' lives easier than ever. When asked about the possibility of ceasing synthetic fertilizers in grain fields, the same farmers would assure me that doing so would be tantamount to inviting starvation onto the household.



Figure 4.7 Suhana prepares to plant a mixture of *desi* vegetable seeds in her *sugadu* (kitchen garden)

4.6 Conclusion

Scholars have shown that expertise is enacted through social practices, particularly through language use (Jacobs-Huey 2003; Carr 2010; Newon 2011; S. N. Das 2016; Lawlor and Solomon 2017). This chapter documents how agricultural expertise is practiced and performed through distinct linguistic strategies by agricultural extension agents, agricultural scientists, a movement leader, and women farmers in Kangra. As they debate the merits of a major technocratic

intervention into agrarian state policy in Himachal Pradesh, these speakers draw on enregistered varieties of English-infused Hindi and Kangri as resources for cultivating distinct expert visions of the past and future of agricultural knowledge in Himachal. As a state that has been praised for its “progressive” and “socially inclusive” state policy, including the recent rollout of the PKKKY scheme, Himachal occupies a unique place in the contemporary imaginary of development in India. Being a predominantly small-scale, non-commercial agricultural district, Kangra is home to farmers whose primary livelihoods and sources of food security come from their family farms. The planned shift toward declaring Himachal an “organic state,” and concomitant bans on chemical inputs, means that farmers and extension agents alike are bracing for a radical shift. The PKKKY scheme is attempting to popularize Zero Budget Natural Farming as a sustainable alternative through which to grow both food production and farmers’ incomes, but the concerns of farmers about a decline in yield and increased labor mean that these actors often clash in expectations and knowledge about agrarian decisions.

Extension agents, drawing on their bureaucratic and technical knowledge as state agents, articulate visions of farmers as “unaware” and unwilling to do hard work, dependent on the state’s benevolence for their needs. When challenged by farmers who assert the responsibility of the state for supplying chemical inputs in the first place, extension agents frame themselves as powerless to make decisions, and farmers’ outcries as useless unless they are presented in writing. By drawing on the bureaucratic voice (see also Chapters 3 and 5), a register of English-infused Hindi that is used to guard against accusations of personal culpability, extension agents perform a type of agro-bureaucratic expertise that positions them as authoritative experts in bureaucratic proceduralities. When the leader of ZBNF, Subhash Palekar, draws on a similar style of English-infused Hindi to critique the state while presenting himself as scientific expert, he

both reifies the legitimacy of agro-bureaucratic modes of expertise even as he criticizes the state for its reliance on “Western” models of agriculture. Kangri farmers, positioned as either willfully ignorant by state extension agents or victims of the state by Palekar, assert their own expertise as food producers and homemakers whose utmost priority remains the unthreatened food security of their families. Through narratives that invoke past memories of scarcity and valorize current practices as “already natural,” women farmers forcefully challenge the state’s assessments of them and call into question the ethics of a “sustainable” alternative to chemical agriculture.

CHAPTER 5:

“No One is Poor in Himachal”: Cultivating Stateless Agency in a *Panchayat* Village Assembly

On April 22, 2018, Jagni³⁴ *gram panchayat*, a group of five villages governed by a single village council in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh³⁵, became the first in its administrative block to be officially declared free of citizens below the poverty line, or “BPL free.” Each of the 133 families previously registered as “BPL” were evaluated in a public forum known as a village assembly, or *gram sabha*: a form of direct democracy in which citizens settle disputes, determine the appropriation of funds for public works, and identify beneficiaries for state welfare programs. After hours of case-by-case deliberation, the Jagni *gram sabha* resulted in the erasure of BPL status altogether from the five surrounding villages (hereafter, the *panchayat*), leaving hundreds of residents suddenly ineligible to access a vast array of programs, subsidies, and loans provided by the central and state governments reserved for citizens below the poverty line. The outcome was celebrated the following day in the local Hindi-language newspaper, the *Dainik Jagran*³⁶:

Gram panchayat Jagni, which falls in development block Kalyana, has become a completely BPL-family-free *panchayat*. In the village assembly meeting on Sunday, the *panchayat* systematically passed a motion and in the motion it was clear that there is no family in the *panchayat* that comes under the prescribed criteria of the BPL register. Although until now, there were 133 families that came in the BPL register, on Sunday they overruled their eligibility while taking their names back and declaring themselves above the poverty line.

Members of the village assembly are portrayed here as agentive subjects, collectively declaring their economic independence and rejecting the benevolence of state welfare benefits. The article

³⁴All place and person names are pseudonyms.

³⁵A *gram panchayat* is a village council, but the term *panchayat* is also used to refer to the region that is governed by that council.

³⁶My translation.

goes on to quote the Block Development Officer, a senior bureaucrat in Kalyana, who says that Jagni has become a “role model” for other *panchayats* in the area who should follow suit in not putting “resource rich” (*saadhan-sanpann*) families in BPL registers “without reason” (*akaaran*).

In the weeks thereafter, local bureaucrats and elected officials in and around Jagni expressed to me unequivocal approval of the decision, arguing that government entitlements designated for BPL citizens were being erroneously delivered to families that do not truly qualify as poor.

“These days, everyone has a car and a TV,” one bureaucrat told me. “No one is poor in Himachal.”

Decisions about rural administration in India are made in interactions between bureaucrats, elected representatives, and citizens, yet little is known about how deliberative processes like the *gram sabha* function across India’s vastly diverse social and linguistic contexts. The Jagni *gram sabha* involved local bureaucrats, elected officials, and *panchayat* residents, yet the result was hailed the democratic achievement of the *panchayat* residents alone. How did this occur? What semiotic resources mediated the collectivization of the *gram sabha* as democratic agent, devoid of state influence or interference? What does this process reveal about how bureaucratic and democratic modalities of governance operate more broadly?

In this chapter, I argue that the “success” of the *gram sabha* as democratic process and the legitimacy of its bureaucratic result relied on the rendering of *panchayat* residents as its sole collective agent, effacing the state actors who both presided over and participated in the debate. Through close analysis of video recordings of the Jagni *gram sabha*, collected during twenty-one months of ethnographic research in Himachal Pradesh between 2017 and 2019, I demonstrate how bureaucratic categories like BPL are not applied onto rural populations, but are themselves produced through interactional contestation. My analysis shows that the decision to declare Jagni

panchayat “BPL free” relied heavily on both bureaucrats and elected representatives’ reformulations of the criteria for BPL, and the meaning of “poverty” more broadly, but that their contributions were erased from the unfolding proceedings and the official outcome. This occurs as speakers draw on their multilingual repertoires (Gumperz 1964) to distribute agency for decisions across multiple, often ambiguous participant roles (Goffman 1979; Enfield and Kockelman 2017), and indexically link utterances to higher scales of authority beyond the individual speaker. This interactional achievement, in which a heterogeneous array of residents, bureaucrats, and elected representatives with disparate opinions on how BPL status should be applied was rendered into a single collective agent devoid of any state actors, constitutes what I call “stateless agency.” I argue that stateless agency—as the linguistic purification of state actors from democratic and bureaucratic practices—is not an isolated tactic in this ethnographic context but rather is inherent to the production of democratic and bureaucratic legitimacy, and to the legitimacy of the developmental state more broadly. Below, I highlight three semiotic resources that underlie the cultivation of stateless agency during the Jagni *gram sabha*: (1) causative verbs that grammatically distribute agency across two semantic roles (Agents and Causers), thereby mitigating any individual’s responsibility; (2) code switches from the local language, Kangri, into an “enregistered voice” (Agha 2005) of English-infused Hindi that I call the *bureaucratic voice*, which indexes state authority beyond the individual speaker; and (3) metapragmatic statements that explicitly attribute agency and responsibility for an ongoing action to other speaker(s).

This chapter builds on linguistic anthropological work on the grammar of political agency (Duranti 1990; 1994), which has demonstrated how speakers’ linguistic framings become resources for constituting social action, as well as theories of bureaucratic agency (Hull 2003;

2012a; V. Das 2004), which examine how bureaucratic writing renders heterogeneous networks of actors into collective agents in ways that obscure individual authorship and responsibility. I expand on these insights by examining how an assemblage of semiotic processes mediate the collectivization of agency and erasure of individual responsibility in the interactional space of the *gram sabha*. By demonstrating how a *panchayat* of some 5,000 residents was deemed fundamentally “not poor” and thus undeserving of BPL status, this chapter uncovers key semiotic mechanisms whereby the democratic and bureaucratic procedures underlying the developmental state reproduce their legitimacy through the erasure of state actors. More broadly, the findings underscore language as a central modality whereby structural violence remains irreducible to individuals (Gupta 2012), not through practices seen as illicit and transgressive, but through those deemed participatory and inclusive.

5.1 The *Gram Sabha* and/as “Participatory Democracy” in Himachal Pradesh

Nestled in the foothills of the immense Dhauladhaar range of the western Himalayas, Jagni is home to seven hundred families primarily from a middle caste group known locally as Chaudhary, and who speak between three and five languages, including Kangri, known colloquially as Pahari (meaning “of the mountain”), Hindi, and to different degrees Punjabi, Gaddi, Nepali, and English. During two consecutive years (October 2017 – June 2019) of fieldwork on the multilingual development bureaucracy in Himachal Pradesh’s most populous district, Kangra, I observed and video-recorded *gram sabhas* in four different *panchayats* in the hopes of understanding how elected representatives, bureaucrats, and residents manage village administration in the context of their dense linguistic diversity. I lived near Jagni and made frequent visits to the *panchayat* office to observe the everyday work of the village council and government bureaucrats employed therein, including the *panchayat* headperson, or *pradhan*,

council members, and the *panchayat* secretary. During these visits, I was often told that the *panchayat* was extremely prosperous, that there were no landless (*bhumiheen*) residents, no residents without a toilet, and on many occasions that no residents could properly be called “poor” (*gareeb*). While struggling to reconcile this constant narrative of prosperity with the experiences of multiple families in the area who did not, in fact, own land or have a toilet, I began to understand that the claim that “no one is poor” in Jagni was not a mere attempt on behalf of the *panchayat* leadership to present a favorable image to a foreign researcher. I heard it repeated in contexts ranging from formal bureaucratic encounters to dinnertime conversations between residents. I came to understand this seemingly innocuous refrain as part of a much broader discursive and ideological project in which Himachal Pradesh has become exceptionalized as a developmental success in northern India, despite rising economic and environmental instability in recent years (Minocha 2015). The present chapter demonstrates how this exceptionalism is itself produced through the linguistic dynamics of the *gram sabha*, in which a purported developmental achievement—the eradication of poverty from Jagni *panchayat*—is predicated on the interactional achievement whereby the will of a few was rendered the will of the collective.

Although it has been practiced in different forms across South Asia since antiquity (Maine 1876), India’s contemporary system of village council governance (*panchayat raj*) was formally instituted with the passage of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution in 1992 and was subsequently implemented in different phases at the state level. Advocated by Gandhi as the basis for a decentralized democracy rooted in village self-rule (*gram swaraj*) in independent India, *panchayat raj* was not formalized until relatively recently and has remained understudied (but see Sivaramakrishnan 2000; Kalaramadam 2012; Tanabe 2007; Brenneis 1978; 1987; Bailey

1965). After independence, a highly centralized form of governance modeled on the British parliamentary system was formed in India, and it was not until decades later that the *panchayat* system was implemented as a decentralized alternative.

A *gram panchayat*, or village council, is the lowest level of the three-tiered *panchayat raj* system and consists of a headperson, or *pradhan*, and five or more (depending on population size) representatives for individual wards, or *ward panch*. These elected positions follow a system of affirmative action known as reservation (*aarakshan*). In Himachal Pradesh (hereafter, Himachal), half of the seats on a village council are reserved for women, with additional seats reserved for an equal number of men and women from Scheduled Castes (previously “untouchable”) and Scheduled Tribes (indigenous or *adivasi*), based on the caste demographics of the *panchayat*.³⁷ The *panchayat* council is elected by the village assembly, or *gram sabha*, consisting of all residents aged eighteen or older in the *panchayat*. The *gram sabha* itself has no legal authority to make decisions, but rather is a suggestion-making body that must formally endorse the actions taken by the *panchayat*. Each *panchayat* is staffed by a secretary, who manages the bureaucratic tasks associated with administration and is employed by the Block Development Office. In Himachal, a meeting of the *gram sabha* is convened quarterly throughout the year on standardized dates. If a quorum is reached of one-fourth of the total population of voters, then residents, elected *panchayat* representatives, the *panchayat* secretary, and other bureaucratic functionaries like an external observer meet in a face-to-face public setting (usually in a courtyard or field outside the *panchayat* office) to propose, debate, and approve issues of local development and governance (see Figure 5.1).

³⁷ *Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, Election Amendment (2008), Chapter IV, “Reservation of Seats in Panchayats.”*



Figure 5.1 The Jagni Gram Sabha

In its idealized version, the *gram sabha* is reminiscent of what Jürgen Habermas (2018) called “deliberative democracy”: a discursive process of consensus-building through public debate. Scholars have contributed much to nuancing Habermas’s theory of deliberative democracy by asserting that seemingly inclusive mediums of public debate often rely on and reproduce existing social inequalities (Cody 2011; Fraser 1990; Jackson 2013; Mouffe 1999). As a form of direct democracy, the *gram sabha* has often been framed as a tool of “transparency” and “empowered participatory governance” in both scholarship and public culture in India (Issac and Heller 2003). Several studies argue that *panchayat raj* constitutes a form of “vernacular democracy,” one that enables empowered self-governance in an otherwise trenchant bureaucracy (Tanabe 2007; Michelutti 2007; Issac and Heller 2003). In addition to the fact that all democratic processes are themselves “vernacular” insofar as they are socially and historically contingent (Jackson 2013), *panchayat raj* is an indigenous system of governance with precolonial roots that must be understood on its own terms rather than be seen a “vernacular” iteration of a Western

model of deliberative democracy. Doing so allows us to understand how practices of governance hailed as “decentralized” and “participatory” can have controversial results and yet remain irreducible to charges of bureaucratic corruption (Gupta 1995; 2012; Muir and Gupta 2018; A. Sharma 2018), a crisis of implementation (Mathur 2012), or the failure of *panchayat raj* institutions to manifest genuine participation (Drèze 1990; Kalaramadam 2012; Corbridge et al. 2005). Indeed, this analysis demonstrates that it is precisely *through* the mechanisms of governance deemed most participatory that the elimination of BPL status from Jagni *panchayat*—itself a growing trend across District Kangra (Mohan 2019)—becomes possible and sanctioned as a democratic achievement.

Research by scholars and development practitioners alike has offered a highly positive assessment of the lower-level *panchayat raj* institutions in Himachal. *Gram sabhas* are said to be convened regularly and with widespread participation of marginalized groups, including women, Scheduled Caste, and Scheduled Tribe citizens (Bhatty 2008; Drèze and Sen 2013; M. B. Das et al. 2015). Himachal’s success in implementing inclusive *panchayat raj* institutions is often accredited to a “culture of transparency” (Bhatty 2008: 19) that emerges through a relative social egalitarianism and economic cohesiveness in small-scale hill societies, particularly when compared to neighboring states like Punjab and Haryana (M. B. Das et al. 2015; Parmar 1965). Such discourses of Himalayan societies as relatively caste- and gender-egalitarian obscure entrenched histories and ongoing systems of oppression in the region (S. K. Sharma 2016). Furthermore, such assessments often cite the significant presence of women in spaces like the *gram sabha* as straightforward evidence of gender-balanced rates of participation in the democratic and development processes (Drèze 1990a; 1990b; Bhatty 2008; cf. Kalaramadam 2012). Rather than offer a critique of how such discourses of participation obscure inequalities in

practice (Cooke and Kothari 2001), I am interested in teasing apart how participation itself enables and sanctions projects that are by their very nature partial and exclusionary (Kelty 2020). Indeed, it is through debates conducted in the public sphere—mediated by speakers’ language ideologies, registers, and ways of speaking—that differences in opinion coalesce and the will of a subset of actors is rendered as the will of the collective.

5.2 Bureaucracy, Collectivization, Erasure

Research in linguistic anthropology has demonstrated the centrality of communicative practices to the everyday constitution of political economic projects like development, capitalism, and neoliberalism (McElhinny 2008; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Ayres 2012; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2015). Such work seeks to understand how speakers use an array of semiotic modalities to co-constitute and reproduce political economic formations in everyday life (Pigg 2001; Pinto 2004; Heritage and Clayman 2010; Gal, Kowalski, and Moore 2015). While many studies have demonstrated the importance of language for state formation and nation-building (Ayres 2012; Anderson 1991), much of this work has emphasized how the state is produced through material artifacts—how forms of writing, documentation, enumeration, mapping, and more recently digitization are key semiotic technologies through which the state attains its aura of bureaucratic rationality (Hull 2003; 2012a; 2012b; V. Das 2004; Weber 2009; Mathur 2012; Gupta 2012; Mathur 2016; Carlan 2018; In Press; Dandurand 2019). Key to this process is the erasure of social actors, such that bureaucratic decisions, knowledge, and policies may be reproduced through context-independent logics (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal and Irvine 2019; Biruk 2018; Appel 2019; Kockelman 2016).

The process whereby bureaucratic writing and discourse collectivizes agents in ways that make individual authors inscrutable has been theorized as “bureaucratic agency” (Hull 2003,

388; 2012a). Whereas bureaucratic agency emphasizes the materiality of bureaucracy's diffuse authority and authorship, my analysis demonstrates how writing often operates parallel to spoken interaction in bureaucratic and democratic practice, and as such, that a sole focus on the documents produced therein elides the complex contestations that surround their creation. Furthermore, my approach exceeds the official space of government offices to investigate how bureaucratic logics shape the democratic sphere of the *gram sabha*. In the *gram sabha*, state actors' linguistic strategies render a heterogeneous array of *panchayat* residents into a collective group seen as more capable (and culpable), meanwhile effacing their own individual roles in the proceedings. The result is what I call *stateless agency*: a form of collectivized democratic authority that relies on the erasure of bureaucratic and elected state actors in order to maintain its legitimacy. My analysis thus contributes to work on bureaucracy, the developmental state, and governance by analyzing how processes of collectivization and erasure inhere in bureaucratic and democratic speech (Hull 2010; Bernstein 2017), but looks beyond documents produced in government offices to understand how a range of social actors co-produce bureaucratic logics of collectivization and erasure in interaction.

For example, while waiting for the *gram sabha* to begin, I took note of the signs posted on the walls of the *panchayat* building displaying information regarding various laws and programs. Painted on the side of the building were the official criteria of ineligibility for BPL status (Figure 5.2):

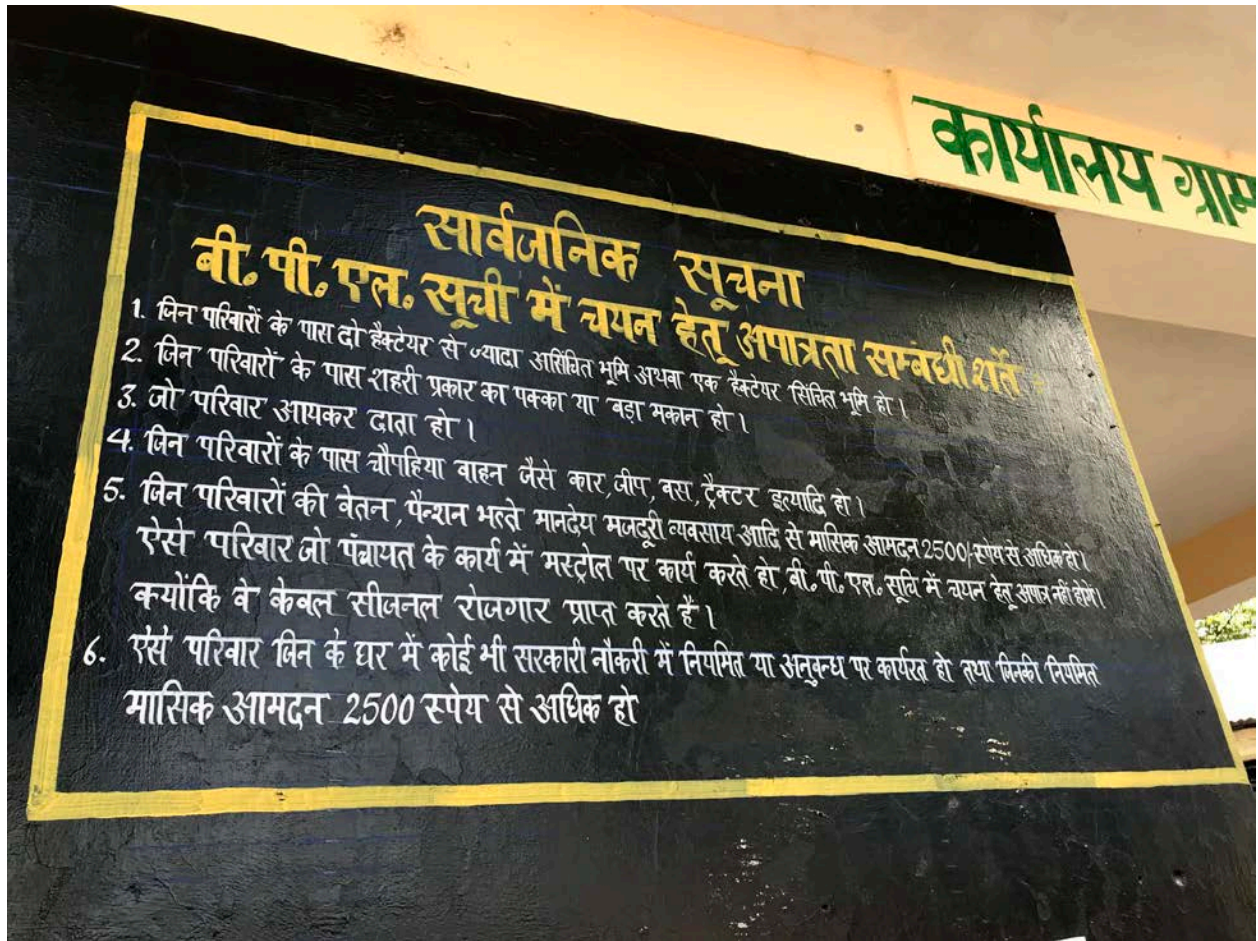


Figure 5.2 BPL ineligibility criteria board

PUBLIC INFORMATION	
Conditions of ineligibility for selection in BPL register	
1)	Those families that have more than two hectares of unirrigated land and one hectare of irrigated land
2)	Those families that have a city-like cement or large house
3)	Those families that are income tax payers
4)	Those families that have a four-wheel vehicle like a car, jeep, bus, tractor, etc.
5)	Those families who have a monthly income of more than 2500 rupees (~34 USD) from a salary, pension, allowance, honorarium, day labor, business, etc. Those families who work through the <i>panchayat's</i> muster roll [i.e. NREGA, an employment scheme] will not be ineligible for selection in the BPL register because they only receive seasonal employment
6)	Those families in whose homes anyone has a government job, regularly or on a contract, and whose regularly monthly income is more than 2500 rupees

Forms of bureaucratic inscription like the BPL ineligibility criteria board, as well as the *panchayat* register and the official list of BPL families, operate at different degrees of legibility. The most “transparent” document—the BPL board painted on the side of the *panchayat* building—was not referenced during the proceedings, despite being a potential source of official information to evaluate and shape the decision-making process, while the more obscured documents (e.g. the BPL register itself) were subject to contestation and evaluation by the *gram sabha* members. Throughout the assembly, new criteria were introduced, while others were expanded and reformulated. These new criteria, never codified in writing, directly shaped decisions about who should be cut from the BPL register. As such, forms of inscription are central to the bureaucratic process, but are not encompassing of it: instead, writing operated alongside and partially intertwined with the larger proceedings that unfolds in talk, wherein the BPL criteria were reformulated, individual families were evaluated, and certain speakers argued that the entire *panchayat* should be deemed BPL free. Further analysis of how bureaucratic categories are themselves *produced* in situated interactions mediated by speakers’ multilingual repertoires can offer insight into how policy is produced in practice rather than merely applied (or distorted) by implementing agents and rural populations (Lipsky 2010; Mosse 2005).

A growing number of studies has delved into the interactional realm of bureaucratic practices—the way that meetings, speeches, audits, trainings, and everyday conversations are central to the social life of governmental, developmental, and activist institutions (Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017; Sandler and Thedvall 2017; Morton 2014). While the meeting “form” has been examined for its formal logics, rules, and capacity to generate (rather than solve) problems (Schwartzman 1987; 1989), this study aims to deepen our understanding of the “technologies of talk” (Gal, Kowalski, and Moore 2015, 611) that enable the emergence of a collectivized

democratic will in the meetings underpinning *panchayat* governance. By integrating analysis of the ethnographic specificities of meetings, alongside the technologies of speech that emerge within them, we can better trace the semiotic logics that engender and sustain developmental projects around the world (Hull 2010; Bernstein 2017; Kockelman 2016).

Attention to how linguistic structures, embedded in their ideological regimes of value, facilitate the emergence of political and bureaucratic categories in everyday interaction can complement existing work on how actors “translate” knowledge and policy in practice, thereby rendering certain categories or interpretations salient over others (Latour 1993; 2007; Pigg 2001; Mosse 2005; Hull 2012a; Mathur 2016). This approach is particularly productive for investigating how the state is produced as a scalar phenomenon distinct from and above civil society, devoid of individual social actors (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1999; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Trouillot 2003; A. Sharma and Gupta 2006; Gupta 2012; Bornstein and Sharma 2016). Such analyses allow us to trace how bureaucratic categories like BPL, rather than being standardized criteria that are “implemented” in a top-down fashion, are instead “cultural concepts” (Silverstein 2004) that emerge and are co-constituted in interactions between public servants and rural beneficiaries (Lipsky 2010; Silver 2010). Making such categories appear objective and context-transcendent is rooted in the semiotics of scale-building, wherein specific utterances or interpretations become linked to higher orders of indexical value (Silverstein 2003; Gupta 2003; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Agha 2011; Blommaert 2015). Establishing scalar categories entails processes of collectivization, as disparate speakers or interpretations are rendered into legible units, as well as erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000), as individual contexts and speakers are subsumed. This process has direct implications for agency, as the ability to attach a

sign or interpretation to a broader context that transcends individuals and erases forms of difference becomes a resource for indexing authoritativeness and legitimacy (O'Connor 2020).

The concept of stateless agency elucidates the de-individualizing powers of modern bureaucratic institutions, which can offer a more nuanced understanding of how state actors and state responsibility are eroded *through* interaction, as opposed to through neoliberal state policies. This linguistic perspective on contemporary modalities of governance in India complements existing scholarship that has demonstrated how the post-liberalization Indian state has promoted a complex amalgamation of neoliberal logics favoring deregulated markets alongside legal and policy frameworks designed to bolster public goods and welfare, albeit with often uneven and contradictory effects in practice (A. Sharma 2008; Bear and Mathur 2015; Bornstein and Sharma 2016). As such, rather than conceptualize stateless agency as neoliberalism at work—understood as economic policies and social rationalities that erode state welfare infrastructures in favor of market rationality (Harvey 2005; Ganti 2014)—I offer an ethnographic account of how a process intended to *provide* access to welfare benefits manifests counterintuitively in their erasure (Gupta 2012). The concept of stateless agency thus provides a framework through which to understand how bureaucratic and democratic processes come to be purified of state actors and interference, and how such processes are in fact constitutive of their legitimacy. By attending to the semiotic strategies whereby the state comes to be seen as both outside and above the realm of democratic debate, we can better account for how practices deemed licit and transparent are implicated in the everyday production of bureaucratic power.

5.3 The Semiotics of Stateless Agency

Research on language and agency has demonstrated how speakers use grammatical structures, as well as narratives, genres, and registers, to emphasize or mitigate their feelings of

control over actions in their lives (Duranti 1994; Ochs and Capps 1995; Ahearn 2001a; Ehrlich 2003; George 2016; R. H. Conley 2016; Ward 2016). While the constitution of agency is an ongoing, subconscious process of human action in the world (Bourdieu 1977b; Giddens 1979; Ortner 2006), I emphasize how agency is “socioculturally mediated” (Ahearn 2001b, 112), and is subject to metapragmatic contestation and evaluation. Languages have diverse grammatical mechanisms for encoding or mitigating agency by placing participants in semantic roles with varying degrees of responsibility (Duranti 2004; Ahearn 2001b). In addition to grammatical categories that encode a speaker’s semantic role, agency can also be analyzed in reflexive statements, narratives, and orientations of attention like gaze and gesture (Lucy 1993; Duranti 2009; Throop and Duranti 2015; Shoet 2007). Agency is thus here treated as including not only capacity to act—itsself mediated not only by language, but by class, gender, and caste—but also the capacity to define *who* is acting and what the nature of those actions are. This includes explicit attributions of responsibility for ongoing actions, e.g. “you did it.” Such statements are both *metapragmatic* and *performative*, that is, “linguistic signs...about how to interpret the extrasemantic meanings encoded in speech” (Urban 2006: 90; Silverstein 1993) that further frame speakers’ agency in interaction.

In the *gram sabha*, one grammatical resource that encodes speakers’ agency is the use of causative verbs. In both Kangri and Hindi,³⁸ causative verbs grammatically encode two semantic roles that share responsibility for the action underway: a Causer (the person making an action be done by someone else) and an Agent (the person doing the actual action). Other roles in

³⁸ In Kangri, causatives have two derivational morphemes, *-aa* and *-uaa*, which differ slightly from Hindi’s causative morphemes, *-aa* and *-vaa*. (See Eaton 2008 for extensive comparison of Hindi and Kangri causative morphology). The underlying verb stems differ in Kangri and Hindi as well, such that a Kangri causative verb (e.g. *kataana*, “to make *X* be cut”) might appear similar to a Hindi transitive (*kaataana*, “to cut”), with the subtle difference of the vowel length in the verb stem (“*kat*” vs. “*kaat*”).

causative formulations include a Patient (the object being acted upon) and a Beneficiary (the person the action is intended for). Here, I distinguish the grammatical Agent (capitalized) from the broader social category of “agent” indicated by a range of practices (Duranti 1994). In his grammar of Palampuri Kangri, which is similar but not identical to the variety of Kangri spoken in Jagni, Eaton (2008) argues that in causative formulations, the Causer role is grammatically necessary but semantically is not entirely responsible for the action. Neither the Causer nor the Agent has “more” agency than the other, and as such the pragmatic effect is a kind of distributed agency (Enfield and Kockelman 2017) across both roles. By omitting the Agent, a speaker may highlight the Causer as more agentive, yet there still remains implicit distribution of agency across both roles. In imperative formulations, however, the Causer and the Agent may both be omitted, rendering an ambiguous, but distributed, pragmatic agency. For example:³⁹

(1) All arguments expressed

मैं तुहां ते तिस वास्ते लकड़
 maĩ tuhaã te tis vaaste lakaḍ
 1SG_{CAUSER} 2PL_{AGENT} INST 3SG-OBL_{BENEFICIARY} for wood_{PATIENT}
 (जो) कटाणा
 (jo) kaṭaṇa
 (DAT) cut-CAUS-INF⁴⁰

‘I will make you cut (the) wood for him/her’

(2) Causer highlighted, Agent and Beneficiary omitted

मैं लकड़ (जो) कटाणा
 maĩ lakaḍ (jo)kaṭaṇa
 1SG_{CAUSER} wood_{PATIENT} (DAT) cut-CAUS-INF
‘I will make the wood get cut [by Ø]’

(3) Causer, Agent, and Beneficiary omitted

लकड़ (जो) कटाई देआ!
 lakaḍ (jo)kaṭaai dea
 wood_{PATIENT} (DAT) cut-CPCL⁴¹ give-CAUS-IMP

³⁹ Abbreviations follow Leipzig glossing conventions. Available at: <https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>

⁴⁰ Unlike Hindi and Punjabi (two closely related languages to Kangri), Kangri has the option to express future with the infinitival form of the verb or by inflecting for future tense (Eaton 2008: 215–16).

⁴¹ Like Hindi, Kangri has the ability to make conjunct verbs, but in Kangri, the verb stem in a conjunct verb acquires the compounding participle suffix -ee (ई), so, for example, a conjunct causative for “to make/have

'Make the wood get cut [by Ø]!'

When both the thematic Agent and Causer are explicit, as in example (1), the causative verb “to make X cut Y” (*kaṭaana/कटाणा*) “attenuates the importance of the agent...and at the same time indicate[s] the causers [are] not the agents either” (Eaton 2008: 92), thus resulting in an ambiguous, yet distributed pragmatic agency across both roles. However, when the Agent is omitted, the pragmatic effect is a highlighting (Goodwin 2018) of the Causer’s responsibility for the action while the Agent remains ambiguous and thus with diminished responsibility, as in example (2) above. In the imperative form in example (3), the Causer may also be omitted, leaving only a Patient expressed. While imperative commands may be issued at specific speakers, thus highlighting the implied addressee’s agency, commands in the *gram sabha* are often issued more broadly at groups of speakers like the *panchayat* residents or the state actors as a whole by means of the type of construction shown in (3). Thus, by omitting both the Agent and the Causer in an imperative command, there may be an even more ambiguous distribution of agency in which no individual is distinguishable. Causatives are thus productive for accomplishing two semiotic processes, collectivization and erasure, as they allow a speaker to distribute agency across multiple roles while also potentially highlighting specific actors and obscuring others. For state actors in the *gram sabha*, this allows them to both distribute agency across residents and themselves, while often highlighting residents as Causers and omitting themselves as Agents.

In addition to grammatical and metapragmatic resources, state actors draw on a speech register tied to a socially typified persona, or an “enregistered voice,” that is a resource for

something be cut+ “to give” (*deṇaa*), meaning “to have something be cut/for someone,” would be *kaṭaāee deṇaa* (कटाई देण).

indexing authority while mitigating individuals' agency and responsibility in the *gram sabha* (Agha 2005; Bakhtin 1981; Volosinov 1973; Ochs 1992; Harkness 2013; Hill 1995; Wirtz 2014). I refer to this register of authority-without-responsibility as the *bureaucratic voice*. The bureaucratic voice consists of formal Hindi (i.e. spoken in the highest pronominal register, *aap*) interspersed with English lexical items. Many English words are bivalent (Woolard 1998) in Hindi and English, including some of those that I am labeling as English lexical items, including "government," "record," and "school." Other English words are not bivalent and fall more specifically in the register of the bureaucratic voice, like "guidelines," "attendance," "income," and "condition." The bureaucratic voice is also often accompanied by the use of the plural pronouns like "you(plural)" and "we," which further collectivize the assembly and mitigate individual speakers' responsibility (Morton 2014), as well as the causative verbs mentioned above.

While the bureaucratic voice is used widely in contexts varying from government to education, in the context of the *gram sabha*, it has second-order indexical value of state authority (Silverstein 2003). Hindi and English are both official languages of government administration, and are rarely used in everyday conversation in Kangra. This register further inheres its indexical value through metapragmatic invocations of the authority of bureaucratic rules, law, and even police, as we will see below. This register is thus not exclusively or inherently bureaucratic, as it circulates beyond bureaucratic contexts, and may be used with varying degrees of competence by state and non-state actors (Goebel 2014; Gal 2018). In the *gram sabha*, the bureaucratic voice becomes a particularly productive semiotic resource for cultivating stateless agency as it indexically links speech acts to higher forms of authority that both bolster speakers' assertions while mitigating any potential for sole culpability.

Taken together, causatives, metapragmatic attributions, and the bureaucratic voice are part of a broader semiotic assemblage (Pennycook 2017; Mendes 2020) that also includes textual artifacts, office spaces, institutions, and other technologies that make up the bureaucratic-cum-democratic sphere of the *gram sabha*. Together, these features are used to render heterogeneous actors of diverse backgrounds and material wellbeing into a collective agent that is declared as “not poor,” and therefore undeserving of state aid guaranteed to citizens living “below the poverty line.” While this collectivized agent is codified later in writing through both the *Dainik Jagran* and the *panchayat* register, my attempt here is to demonstrate how purportedly standardized bureaucratic categories like the poverty line are themselves produced in specific contexts of interaction. I focus here on spoken semiotic resources that undergird this process, although the resolution to make Jagni BPL free is ultimately enacted through the signing of the official proceedings register (*karyavahi* register), which is written by the *panchayat* secretary and signed (or stamped with a thumbprint) by *gram sabha* members indicating their approval of what has been written (See Figure 5.3). The complex interactions leading up to this act of writing are critical to understand how the stateless agency that sanctions it is cultivated through spoken semiotic modalities.

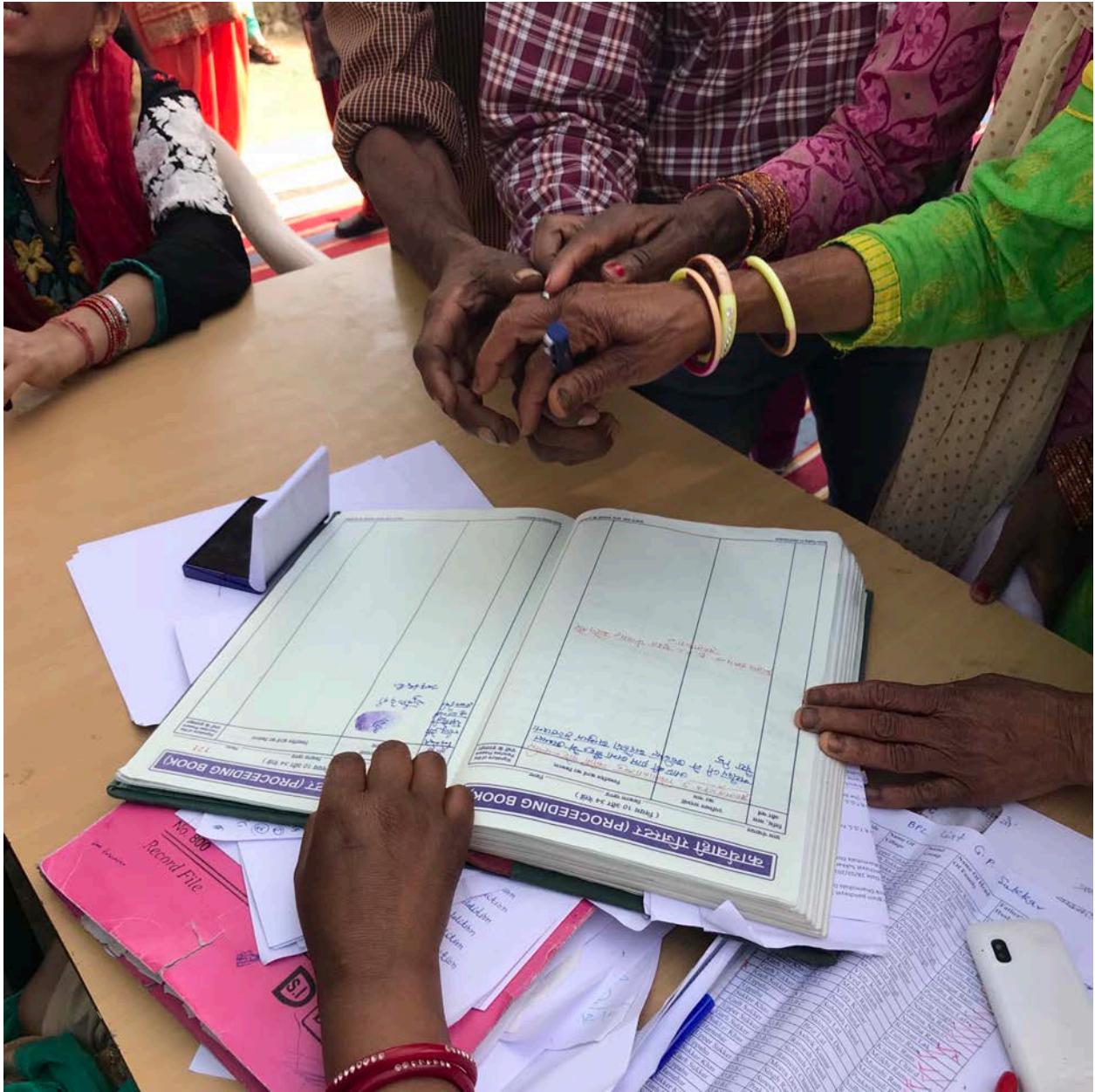


Figure 5.3 *Karyavahi* register

5.4 The Unfolding of the Jagni *Gram Sabha*

The *gram sabha* in Jagni was scheduled to commence in the outdoor courtyard surrounding the *panchayat* building at 11:00 AM on April 22, 2018. When I arrived with a research participant from Jagni around 1:00 PM—anxiously thinking we would miss it—we found a crowd of only a few dozen had arrived, with more trickling in. I walked into the courtyard with

my research participant, who signed her name in the attendance register and moved to sit on a large mat on the floor where most of the women present were gathered, chatting with neighbors, some with their hands busy knitting, others soothing small children in their laps. Seated in a half circle of plastic chairs were primarily men and a few older women, with additional men squatting atop the brick wall that enclosed the courtyard.

Pankaj, the *panchayat* headperson, and Isha, the *panchayat* secretary, sat at a long head table in plastic chairs and were surrounded on either side by the elected representatives (*ward panch*) of each of Jagni's seven wards. Sitting to Isha's left was Arbind, a junior engineer from the Block Development Office, who was there as an observer (*paryavekshak*) to ensure the proper functioning of the *gram sabha*. Together, these 10 speakers make up the group I gloss as "state actors," and who primarily speak in Kangri and the bureaucratic voice of English-infused Hindi. These actors are not considered members of the village assembly (*gram sabha*), which consists of the voting-age adult residents of the *panchayat*, but together they both preside over and direct the proceedings.

Of the nearly 200 residents present at the height of the meeting, all present were native Kangri speakers, with different degrees of competence in Hindi ranging from passive competence to active fluency. This competence correlates with speakers' educational backgrounds, and their gender, class, caste, and age. Two of the residents who appear in the transcripts below, Urmila Devi and Dhoonichand, were both Kangri-dominant speakers, with Dhoonichand able to switch into a limited degree of Hindi (see excerpt 5.6), while Urmila Devi never did.

Metapragmatic Attributions

Around 2:30 PM, Isha called the meeting to order as they had reached the official quorum of 185 attendees required for the *gram sabha* to take place. She began by saying that the main issue for debate today was the “IRDP families.” IRDP, which stands for the Integrated Rural Development Programme, is one of the largest and longest-running state poverty alleviation schemes in India, which provides subsidized loans intended for citizens to start small businesses and other income-generating activities, and which requires BPL status for eligibility (officially, although in practice non-BPL citizens often receive subsidized loans under the scheme [(Drèze 1990)]). As such, IRDP often functions as a metonym for BPL and is used interchangeably by many members of the rural development bureaucracy in Kangra, but BPL status is itself a broader category that entails access to a wide array of programs, subsidies, and benefits.

As the meeting began, Isha began by explaining in Kangri that the “block” (meaning the Block Development Office) gives the “power” to the *gram sabha* to determine which families deserve be included “in IRDP” (i.e. are below the poverty line). She starts by describing the “conditions” (using the English word) for ineligibility, some of which are listed in the BPL ineligibility criteria board (Figure 5.2), others of which are not, although the board itself is not referenced by anyone present as a source of information:

Transcript 5.1

Expanding Ineligibility.⁴²

KEY:

+ : new ineligibility criteria

= : existing ineligibility criteria

Word: Metapragmatic attributions

~word~: English lexical items

1 ISHA: इक ~condition~ और ऐ

⁴² Orthographic conventions for representing Kangri have been adapted from Eaton (2008), but modified to maintain fidelity with the pronunciations used in the variety of Kangri spoken in Jagni. Kangri, like Punjabi and Dogri, has lexical tone, but for the present chapter, I have not represented tone in my transcription of the original Kangri.

2 ~IRDP family~ च जिन्नी बंदे औणे
+ 3 जिस दे बच्चे जेड़ा ~private school~ए पढ़दे ओ, ना?
= 4 घरे मकान पक्का ओए
= 5 पच्ची सौ ते ऊपर ~income~ ओए, ठीक ऐ ना जी?
+ 6 खाणेओ दो टाईम रोटी पकदी ओए
7 ऐसा कोई परिवार जेड़ा ग्राम पंचायत जगनी च
+ 8 जिस दे परिवारे च जेड़ा इक टाईम खाणा बणदा ओए
+ 9 या ~income~ दा कोई ~source~ ना ओए
10 सैह ऐ जेड़ा बंदा IRDP दा पात्र ऐ
= 11 ~and otherwise~ जिस दा मकान पक्का ऐ
= 12 जिस दे प - जि दी ~income~ पच्ची सौ दे ऊपर ऐ
+ 13 बच्चे जेड़ा सैह ~private school~आं पढ़ा दे एन
14 तिहनां बच्चे, तिहनां बंदे
15 सैह IRDP दा पात्र नी ओणा ए
16 ए ~power~ जेड़ा ग्राम सभायो दित्तिओ
17 में उम्मीद करदी तुहां ते
18 कि जेड़ा बी तुहां ग्राम सभा अज सदस्य आइओ एन
19 तुहां जेड़ा बी करना अज
20 इक ऐ सोची लेंदे कि तुहाड़े सिरे पर इक भगवान दा ऐ ए
21 ठीक ए? तुहां गलत मत करीआंदे
+ 22 ऐसा ना ओ कि कोई बंदा जेड़ा बीमार ओए
+ 23 या जेड़ा कमाई ना सकन ओ सैह IRDP च ना ओ एन
24 कन्ने दोबारे ते सैह ई बंदा आई आन
25 जेड़ा बंदा जे इस वक्त ~stand~ ओ चुकिओ

1 ISHA: there's one more ~condition~
2 however many people will come in an ~IRDP family~
+ 3 whose children, who study in ~private school~, right?
= 4 whose home- house is cement
= 5 whose ~income~ is above 2500, right, okay?
+ 6 who have food to eat twice a day
7 any family like this in gram panchayat Jagni
+ 8 in whose family food is made once a day,
+ 9 or who do not have a ~source~ of ~income~
10 that is the person who is eligible for IRDP
= 11 ~and otherwise~ whoever's house is cement
= 12 whoever's - whoever's ~income~ is above 2500
+ 13 whose children are studying in ~private school~
14 those children, those people,
15 they will not be not be eligible for IRDP
16 this ~power~ that has been given to the gram sabha.
17 I expect from you
18 that whichever of you members of the gram sabha have come
19 whatever you will do today
20 we should remember that God's (blessing) is on your head
21 okay? please don't do wrong
+ 22 let it not happen that some person who might be ill
+ 23 or who cannot earn, that that person is not in IRDP
24 and then again that same person comes

Here, Isha mentions several existing criteria for ineligibility to “IRDP” (i.e. to the BPL register), including living in a cement house (line 4) and having a monthly income of more than Rs. 2500 (line 5), both of which are also listed on the public information board. She also introduces five new criteria: having access to two meals per day (line 6 and line 8), having a source of income (line 9), having children that attend private school (line 13), and having the ability to earn (line 22), and not being ill (line 23), none of which are conditions of ineligibility listed in the public information board, yet become conditions by virtue of having been introduced by Isha and unchallenged by anyone else present.

While introducing these new criteria, Isha also asserts that it is the members of the *gram sabha* who have been given the “power” (using the English word) over the decision-making process, thereby metapragmatically attributing agency to residents despite her own contribution to reshaping the ineligibility criteria. She also notes in line 19 that “God’s (blessing) is on your head,” i.e. that the members have a moral responsibility placed on them by God not to choose people who have not already had the benefits of BPL and have been able to “stand” (in English) on their own feet. She has thus articulated that the decisions taken will be those of the members present, who are acting as conduits of God himself, while positioning herself as a secondary participant to the decision-making process, despite having just introduced five new criteria of ineligibility into the proceedings. Shortly hereafter, Isha includes an additional criterion—that recipients should not have access to more than two or three “suits” (*salwaar kameez*, the typical attire for women)—while again metapragmatically distancing herself from a position of authorship of the criteria (and therefore responsibility for reformulating them) by stating that her job is merely to “make the government’s guidelines reach you people” (*tuhaan lokaan tak paunchaana e*).

Causatives

After the initial opening statement by Isha, in which she has articulated an expanded range of “conditions” for BPL eligibility, she begins the proceedings by reading out the names of the individuals (as heads of household) who are currently registered as BPL. She reads the first person’s name, his ward number in the *panchayat*, and then looks up expectantly. The person whose name has been called is not present, and the crowd responds with silence, to which Isha then says in Kangri: “what is his condition!?” (*kya sthiti e is di?!).* Some murmuring begins, and she says, “oh now everyone is quiet!” It becomes clear that the people present don’t know who she’s referring to, and she gives a description of where the person’s house is in the village. The crowd continues to murmur to one another, prompting her to say again: “what is his condition!?” Isha begins to write on the register in front of her, when there is a muffled response from someone in the crowd, whose voice isn’t quite audible over the ongoing crosstalk. She responds with disapproval in her voice, “The guy’s still poor? He hasn’t risen above the poverty line yet? Hey, listen! He hasn’t risen above the poverty line yet? Which school do his children attend?” A woman in the crowd responds, and Isha confirms: “It’s a government school, right?” Satisfied with the answer, she writes something in the register in front of her, and moves on to the next name.

The process continues as the names are read aloud, and those who are present stand to face questioning. At one point, a woman named Urmila Devi stood to comment on someone who she does not name directly but who she describes as having a job and a cement house in a nearby village. She uses this example in order to demand that Isha cut all of the people with cement houses (criteria #2 on the BPL ineligibility board) from the BPL list (see Figure 5.4). Isha then uses a causative verb (in bold) attribute agency to Urmila Devi and encourage her to name

specific people to be cut from the register. Urmila does not provide any name, but Isha subsequently directs a *ward panch* to cut multiple people whose names are mentioned by other people in the crowd.

Transcript 5.2

“You should make two or four more people be cut”

Causative

- 1 URMILA ((begins to stand)) तिहनां ने क्या?
 2 तिहनां बई पक्के मकान बणाईओ ना
 3 तां ऐ जब्बन आलेआं नौकरी बी लागिओ
 4 तिहनां बी पक्के मकान बणाईओ ना
 5 मैं उम्र भरी मुसीबत झेलीओ ना जमीन ना पट्टी
 6 तां उण तुहां तिहनांयो सबनायो कटी देआ
 7 सबनायो कटा
 8 MAN तिहनायो बी कटा जब्बन आलेयो बी कटा
 9 ISHA जब्बन आले दे आ --IRDP family~आं च एन?
 10 ((to ward panch holding BPL list)) इस बंदेओ बी कटी देआ
 11 URMILA कटी देआ ऐ () बी कटी देआ
 12 ISHA हां जी जब्बन आले दा नां बोला
 13 URMILA जिहनां दे एन ना सबना दे पक्के मकान तिहनांयो सारेयांयो कटी देआ
 14 MAN नां दसा तुहां नां पूछा दे
 15 CROWD तां इनायो पता नी इनायो नां ((Urmila looks around hesitantly))
 16 MAN नां दसा! क्या पता इनायो तुहां गलादे तां?
 17 ISHA जब्बन आले दा क्या पता लाणा हे सारे? (?) नां बोला!
 18 MAN बोला!
 19 ISHA नई आंटी नां बोला तुहाड़ा नां कटिआ
 20 तुहां दो चार बंदे होर **कटाई देणे**
 21 CROWD ((someone from the crowd yells out a name))
 22 ISHA क्या नां ए?
 23 MAN ((repeats the name loudly, while other people in the crowd repeat it))
 24 URMILA ((looks around, and slowly sits back down))
 25 ISHA ((repeats name)) सारा ((??)) चांदे ?
 26 ((to ward panch)) (name, father's name) बी कटी देआ
 27 जब्बन आले बी कटी देआ
- 1 URMILA ((begins to stand)) they have done what?
 2 those guys have made a cement house, right
 3 so these ones who live in Jabban ((a nearby village)) have gotten a job too
 4 and they have made a cement house, right
 5 I have suffered hardship my entire life, (I have) neither land nor a plot
 6 so now you should cut them all,

7 cut them all ((i.e. those with cement houses))
8 MAN cut them too, cut the ones from Jabban
9 ISHA are the Jabban ones, are they in the ~IRDP families~?
10 ((to ward panch holding BPL list)) cut this guy too
11 URMILA cut them, () cut them too
12 ISHA yes ma'am, please say the Jabban people's name
13 URMILA those who have, all of them who have cement houses, cut all of them
14 MAN say the name, they are asking you the name
15 CROWD the name, they don't know their name ((Urmila looks around hesitantly))
16 MAN say the name! how would they know what you are talking about?
17 ISHA what do we know of the Jabban guy's? (?) say the name!
18 MAN say it!
19 ISHA no, aunty, say the names, your name has been cut,
20 **you should make two or four more people be cut**
21 CROWD ((someone from the crowd yells out a name))
22 ISHA what is the name?
23 MAN ((repeats the name loudly, while other people in the crowd repeat it))
24 URMILA ((looks around, and slowly sits back down))
25 ISHA ((repeats name)) does everyone (??) want
26 ((to ward panch)) also cut [name]
27 ((looks at Urmila, turns to ward panch)) also cut the Jabban guy

In this excerpt, Urmila Devi stands and asserts in lines 1-2 that someone, who is not named but is referred to as “they” (*tihnaa*), has a job and has built a cement (*pakka*) house in Jabban, a nearby village that is not located in the *panchayat*. She then describes herself in lines 3-4 as having “suffered hardship [her] entire life,” and that despite being landless, she is not registered as BPL. Urmila Devi then argues that Isha should cut everyone with a cement house, using the simple active transitive commands attributing agency to Isha: “(you) cut them” in Kangri (lines 6, 7, 11, 13). Isha asks Urmila Devi whether the person she is describing as having a cement house in another village is part of the “IRDP families” (line 9), at which point she begins to ask her for the name of the person she has described. Urmila looks around hesitantly and does not respond, either because she doesn't know the person's name or she is unwilling to say it.

Isha then uses a passive construction followed by a causative formulation in lines 17-18 when she says that Urmila Devi's name “has been cut” (line 19)—meaning she is not registered as BPL—and then attributes agency to Urmila Devi (as Causer) by saying “you should make two or four or names be cut,” while leaving the Agent ambiguous (line 20). Another man in the

crowd joins in to urge Urmila Devi to name the man she has described, before another person in the crowd shouts out a name. Isha reformulates Urmila Devi's general request to cut everyone with cement houses by emphasizing that it is Urmila Devi that is causing the specific name to be cut that someone else in the crowd is offering, despite the fact that Urmila Devi never names this person, and it is unclear if the name offered by the crowd matches the person she initially described. Isha then quickly asks if everyone wants this person to be cut (line 25), but before anyone in the crowd responds, she quickly issues a command to the *ward panch*, who is holding the list of names, to cut the name that has been offered. She then looks to Urmila Devi who has regained her seat on the ground and adds the command to "also cut the Jabban guy," although it is unclear here if these are the same or different people.



Figure 5.4 *Gram sabha* member stands to comment on a resident's condition (*sthiti*)

Bureaucratic Voice

The *ward panch* continues to read the list of names of currently registered BPL families, and a name is called of an older woman present. She stands, dressed in a pink *salwaar kameez*, her scarf (*chunni*) draped over her head. Isha says, “*Amma* [mother], how is your house?” She responds: “It’s mud [*kaccha*].” Isha: “What does the main do?” (i.e. head of household, using the English term ‘main’). She responds, in an almost whisper, “gas.” Isha, in a raised voice, responds: “He drives a gas truck? He drives a gas truck? They pay the gas people [*gas aale*] more than six thousand, how are you still poor?” The woman responds somewhat shyly: “What can we do?” (*kya kari sakde?*). Women in the crowd begin to chuckle. Shortly thereafter, a woman seated towards the front of the crowd says to Isha, “Madam ji⁴³, those who don’t need it shouldn’t come (i.e. in the BPL register), those who do need it should come.” Isha responds, switching from Kangri into the enregistered bureaucratic voice:

Transcript 5.3

“If it was my power”

Metapragmatic attributions

Bureaucratic voice (~English lexical items~)

- 01 ISHA: तुहां लोकां कटना कि मैं कटना ऐ?
 02 *अगर मेरी~power~ होती तो मैं लोगों को बुलाना था?*
 (25.0 silence)
 03 मैं तां ~employee~ नी ऐ ना, पंचायत ~secretary~ एहत्यु दी
 04 मिंजो आल पूरी पंचायत दा ~data~ ए
 05 कुण बंदा गरीब ऐ कुण अमीर ए
 06 *पर~government~ ने यह हाथ बाँध दिए हैं*
 07 *कि अब यह~power~ जो है आपको दी ए*
- 01 ISHA: are you people cutting or am I cutting?
 02 *If it were my ~power~ then would I have called people?*
 (25.0 silence)
 03 I am not some ~employee~, (I am) this panchayat ’s ~secretary~
 04 I have the entire panchayat’s ~data~
 05 which person is poor and which person is rich
 06 *but the ~government~ has tied these hands,*
 07 *that now this ~power~, it has been given to you*

⁴³ “*Ji*” is an honorific suffix used across many north Indian languages.

In this excerpt, Isha switches from Kangri into the bureaucratic voice in lines 2 and 6-7, while simultaneously asserting the government's rules of conducting *panchayat* administration through the *gram sabha* and metapragmatically framing herself as powerlessness over the proceedings. In responding to an assembly member's command for her to "cut everyone" who does not "need" BPL benefits, Isha claims that she cannot cut people, as the power to do so has been given to the assembly. She thereby casts herself as an authoritative source of bureaucratic knowledge with no actual "power," arguing in line 3-4 that she has all the "data" and thus knows who is *really* rich or poor, but that the "government" has "tied these hands" (lines 6-7). By drawing on these metapragmatic framings of her individual powerlessness and the assembly's power as a collective (using the plural form of 'you' in lines 1 and 7), Isha combines the bureaucratic voice with metapragmatic framings to further distance herself from a position of individual responsibility, despite her ongoing participation in the deliberative process. Her attempt to solidify this bureaucratic distance and lack of agency does not go unchallenged by *gram sabha* members, as in the following excerpt:

Transcript 5.4

"You will say that 'the secretary did the survey wrong'"

Bureaucratic voice (~English lexical items~)

Metapragmatic attributions

- 01 ISHA: ((stands)) इक गल्ल ऐ
 02 जाहलु एहत्थु सहमति नी ओणी ऐ ना?
 03 तुहां DCएओ चली जाणा ऐ DCएओ चली जाणा ए
 04 कि~secretary~ ने~survey~ गलत किया
 05 और जब गए ना तो जिनके~attendance~ लगी ऐ ना
 06 मैंने घर घर जा के पूछना ऐ कि
 07 "मैंने क्या गलत बोला आपको?"
 08 किस को दी गई power?
 09 जब उप ग्राम सभा हुई थी तो आप लोगों को नहीं बोला

10 कि “इन बंदो को काटो और इन बंदो को डालो”
 11 बोला नी फिरी भी अपनी~case~ओं को ले के ऊपर तक जा ई रहे
 12 उण जे - तुहां ऐ ~power~ दित्तिओ
 13 तां कटा ना बंदेयो! कन्ने आहां पांद
 14 ((elderly man rises from his seat))
 15 MAN: गल्ल ईयां ई ऐ ~record~ तुहाड़े आल ऐ ना
 16 ISHA: ((sits back down)) अंकल जी तां तुहां केत लाणे
 17 जे ~record~ अनुसार में कटणे तां तुहां केत लाणे
 18 WARD PANCH: तां फिरी अहां इहनां अप्पु अंदर बेई के कटी देणा
 19 कन्ने सद्दना कोई नी

01 ISHA: ((stands)) there’s one more thing
 02 when there won’t be agreement here, right?
 03 you will go to the DC [Deputy Commissioner], you will go to the DC and say
 04 that “the ~secretary~ did the ~survey~ wrong”
 05 and then everyone here whose ~attendance~ has been logged,
 06 I will go to every single house and ask,
 07 “what did I say to you that was wrong?”
 08 who has been given the power?
 09 when the ward-level assemblies happened then none of you people were told
 10 that “cut these people and put these people.”
 11 you weren’t told, and still you are taking your ~cases~ up to higher (levels)
 12 now if you– this ~power~ has been given to you
 13 so cut people! and we will put them
 14 ((elderly man rises from his seat))
 15 MAN: it’s one in the same thing, you have the ~record~, right?
 16 ISHA: ((sits back down)) uncle ji, then why would we bring you (here)?
 17 if I was going to cut according to the ~record~ then why would we bring you
 18 WARD PANCH: so then we- they would sit inside and cut [people] themselves,
 19 and (they) wouldn’t have called anyone

During this excerpt, Isha stands from her seat and switches from Kangri to the bureaucratic voice when discussing the potential involvement of the Deputy Commissioner, the highest authority in the district, if there is not “agreement” (*sahmati*) over the outcome of the proceedings. She uses the bureaucratic voice while threatening to go door-to-door to interrogate each member about what they may claim she did wrong in the proceedings (lines 5-11). By switching into the bureaucratic voice, Isha invokes an authoritative stance, pre-emptively defending herself against accusations of individual wrongdoing while threatening retaliatory action. She then also metapragmatically asserts that the “power” (using the English word) to cut members has been

“given to” the *gram sabha* in lines 8 and 12, directing members to “cut people” that “we” will then “put” in the register (13).

An elderly man sitting in a plastic chair to the right of the head table rises and challenges her formulation of the participant framework in which the “power” resides with the *gram sabha* alone, saying, “it’s one in the same thing, you have the ~record~, right?” (line 15). Here, he attempts to reframe Isha’s assessment of the participant framework by asserting that as secretary, she has control over who is entered into the formal BPL register in writing. As Isha regains her seat, she says to him, “Uncle ji, then why would we bring you (here)?” (line 16), and a female *ward panch* to her right adds, “then they would sit inside [i.e. the *panchayat* office] and cut people themselves, and they wouldn’t have called anyone.” The elderly man sits back down as she turns her attention back to the other residents who continue to speak to one another for several minutes, his challenge rebuffed.

A major hurdle to the process of case-by-case evaluation is the fact that many of the families whose names are called are not present at the *gram sabha*. This creates a situation, not unlike that mentioned in Excerpt 5.2 above, in which those individuals who are not present and unable to defend themselves are more likely to be cut from the register. As Isha and the other state actors press for this outcome, they simultaneously distance themselves from agentive roles in the unfolding interaction. For example, after calling out the male head of a family on the list, the *ward panch* controlling the list asked “What is his condition?” No one responds, and it is clear the person whose name has been called is not present. Isha repeated loudly in Kangri, “What is the condition of his house?” (*Kadeaa makaan sthiti ae ihnaa di?*). A man sitting on the cement wall marking the boundary of the courtyard began to respond in Kangri: “His [house] is okay. His son lives outside (i.e. of the village)” (*Ihnna theek ae, munda baar renda*). Isha responded,

“He’s okay?” (*Theek ae?*). The man added, “He drives a car, his own car” (*gaddi chalaanda, apni gaddi*). The secretary interrupts, switching into the bureaucratic voice while taking notes on the papers in front of her, “Is his house cement, brother?” (*Makaan pakka hai, bhai?*). He responds: “Yes, ma’am, it is cement” (*Haan ji, pakka ae*). “And this man should be removed from IRDP right?” (*Aur isse jo IRDP mei hataya jaayen, na?*), looking for a response. He agrees, “Yes ma’am” (*Haan ji*). Here, Isha’s use of the passive construction while speaking in the bureaucratic voice (“this man should be removed”) obscures her direct responsibility for both removing the man from the list of registered families and for having repeatedly asked questions driving the decision forward toward its result.

Isha, satisfied with the response, says okay, jots down a note on the paper in front of her, then immediately raises her hands and begins clapping, prompting a few members of the crowd to follow suit in applauding. One of the *ward panches*, sitting to her left, also raises her hands above her head and claps vigorously while the *pradhan*, Pankaj, adds, “Good job! It is like that,” (*Shabaash! Aisa hai*), pointing his finger toward the women in the crowd in front of him as if to say “take note of what this man has done.” Another female resident begins to speak, referring to the man who was just cut from the register who was not present at the time, raising a concern about a potential conflict that could result if the person were to be cut without being present, referencing the person who answered Isha’s questions about his “condition,” she said: “Madam ji, he might go to his house to fight.” Isha responded: “What is there to be afraid of about becoming rich?”

Eventually, the assembly members began to reach a state of exhausted agitation. Many had been there since 11 that morning, and it was nearing 4 PM. The 133 previously registered names have been read and 18 names have been officially cut. Isha then stood to read each of the names

aloud who remain on the register, but first she begins to lecture the crowd for “coming and crying” when they were truly rich, while those who were poor were sitting silently, with no “life in their tongue.” One of the families who had been cut, who was not present when the discussion of their status occurred, had shown up after being called by someone in attendance and had approached the head table in an aggressive manner, trying to grab the secretary’s phone. The *pradhan* stood and told them to move away, prompting Isha to say that anyone who attempts to fight anyone else will be arrested and jailed for 24 hours without bail—again using the bureaucratic voice while appealing to a higher authority, the police.

Arbind, the bureaucrat who was observing the proceedings, intervened to chastise the residents for not taking the assembly seriously, using the bureaucratic voice to bolster the threat of police action: “The *gram sabha* is happening all over Himachal, don’t think this is some small thing. You who are fighting – it will take two minutes for you to be inside [jail]. We will call them right now.” Isha becomes increasingly distressed, at one point her voice breaking as she points out several people who she describes as “really poor” (*asli gareeb*) who are not saying anything. The *pradhan*, Pankaj, intervenes to encourage people to cut further residents while using both the bureaucratic voice as well as a causative construction in Kangri:

Transcript 5.5

“You can speak, and she will write”

Bureaucratic Voice

Causative

- 01 PANKAJ: अभी भी आप लोगों का मौका ऐ यह एक सलाह जो ऐ ना
 02 अभी भी आप बोल सकते हो, कारवाई यह लिख सकती है
 03 नाम सोचेंगे तो डालेंगे ना हम?
 04 तुहां नी कटाणा तां कुहत्थु ते पाणा?
- 01 PANKAJ: right now you people have a chance, to make a suggestion
 02 right now you can speak, and she will write the action
 03 if you think of a name, then we will put it, right?
 04 if you won't **make [people] be cut**, then from where will [new names] be put?

In this excerpt, Pankaj switches from the bureaucratic voice into Kangri in line 4. He begins by arguing that the members present need to “make a suggestion” about which names to cut, and then Isha “will write the action” in the register. Here, Pankaj draws on a referentialist ideology in which acts of writing are seen as transparent renderings of statements rather than transformative acts in themselves, a framing that both attributes agency to the *gram sabha* members and further mitigates Isha’s agency in the proceedings. In line 3, Pankaj also makes use of the inclusive “we” (referring to the group seated at the head table) by saying “we will put it,” attenuating the fact that Isha is the sole actor responsible for “putting” things in the register. In line 4, Pankaj switches back into Kangri and uses a causative construction, in which he highlights the members of the *gram sabha* as Causer, while the Agent is ambiguous, followed by an indirect construction that again obscures the Agent: “if you(plural) do not make [people] be cut, then from where will [new names] be put?”—i.e., new names cannot be added to the register the residents have old names removed. This causative construction both highlights the agency of the assembly as a collective (you, plural) while obscuring the state actors’ role in the proceedings with the passive “be put.” The previous lines 1-3, uttered in the bureaucratic voice, further index the *pradhan*’s authoritative framing of assembly, in which it is residents who are responsible for speaking and choosing names, whereas the secretary will merely write those actions in the register.

After Isha reads aloud the names of the eighteen families that have been removed, she poses the question: “tell me, are all of the remaining families really poor or are some of them actually rich?” This prompts another woman to stand and declare that all of the names from her ward who were registered as BPL were really “fine” (*theek en*) and that with the exception of one woman, who was seated nearby, all the others should be cut. At this point, the assembly comes to a dramatic conclusion as another *gram sabha* member, a man named Dhoonichand, moves to the

front of the crowd and begins to speak. In the ensuing exchange, reproduced at length to capture the final dramatic moments of the assembly, all three semiotic processes I have described—causatives, bureaucratic voice, and metapragmatic attributions of agency—co-occur across multiple speakers:

Transcript 5.6

“You made it BPL free, right?!”⁴⁴

Causatives

Bureaucratic Voice (~English lexical items~)

Metapragmatic attributions of agency

- 1 DHOONICHAND: जो आदमी है स- ((*crowd noise*))
 2 सुणा सुणा जी ओ बई सुणी लेआ
 3 PANKAJ: सुना!
 4 DHOONICHAND: ((*turns and speaks to women seated at front of crowd;*
 5 *voice inaudible to back of crowd over noise*))
 6 ओ बाऊ सुणी तां लेआ पहले बोलणा ओंगा
 7 तां बाद च बोली लेआ
 8 ओ बाऊ तुहां अनपढ़ गँवार तां नी एन
 9 ((*unclear*))
 10 मैं गरीब आदमी आहां बी दिहाड़ी लाणा
 11 ((*unclear*)) इहनांइओ कटा
 12 ((*gesturing to back of crowd*))
 13 ए तां बचारे गरीब एन
 14 इहनां कुछ मंगना नी
 15 ए इहनांइओ पाआ ना
 16 एहत्थु मोटे मोटे बंदे सारे बैठिओ
 17 ए बेटर ऐ कि सारे दस दस साल ओइओ
 18 **सारेआंइओ कटाई देआ**
 19 [कन्ने दुआरा ~survey~ करा कन्ने तिहनां बंदे पाआ]
 20 ISHA: [सैह बंदे ((*unclear*)) नी ना दिंदा]
 21 जिहनां दे ~family strong~ ओइआ=
 22 DHOONICHAND: = ~strong~ ऐ ((*turns to group of women to his left*))

⁴⁴ Transcription is an interpretive act (Ochs 1979; Duranti 2006) through which certain elements are highlighted while others are omitted. In this case, I have reduced the voice of the crowd to one speaker label, “Crowd,” although there are dozens of voices present here. Given the size of the crowd, it was often impossible for me to discern which speakers were articulating responses. There are also many details of the interaction that could not be fully represented in the text, including the organization and movement of bodies in space—processes that are central to the collaborative building of interaction as social action but which I have not been able to address here (C. Goodwin 2018; 2000; M. H. Goodwin 2017).

- 23 [असां ~strong~ एन ((beats chest))]
 24 ISHA: [जेडे गरीब गरीब माणु]
 25 सैह तमाशे दिखा दे
 26 DHOONICHAND: सुणा सुणा मेरी गल्ल सुनी लेआ
 27 ((unclear))
 28 असां दो टाईम रोटी खा दे, ((unclear))
 29 ~property~ भी ए
 30 सुणा सारे बंदे दसा पहले सारे बंदे **कटाई देआ**
 31 कन्ने दुआरा ते ~survey~ **कराई देआ**
 32 कन्ने गरीब बंदे **पुआ**
 33 CROWD: हां:.
 34 DHOONICHAND: जाहलु सुणा जाहलु कोई अमीर बंदा पौंदा तुहां इहनां--
 35 [((unclear)) एहत्थु आई के]
 36 PANKAJ: [~survey~ के लिए बाहर से बंदा आए कोई]
 37 [एहत्थु बोलो बोलो]
 38 DHOONICHAND: [((unclear))]
 39 PANKAJ: बोला ठीक ना?
 40 DHOONICHAND: सुणा सुणा अगर मैं गलत बोला दा तां
 41 बई साहब हथ खड़ा करी देआ कि मैं गलत बोला मैं
 42 CROWD: ((one woman raises her hand))
 43 ((another woman speaks)) ठीक बोला ठीक बोला दे
 44 PANKAJ: ((to Dhoonichand)) क्या बोला दे लोग
 45 DHOONICHAND: बोला कि दोबारा ~survey~ **कराई देना** जेडा गरीब माणु
 46 तिसइओ रखा कन्ने बाकी सारे **कटाई देआ**
 47 ISHA: भाई (.) बई सुण (.) मेरे बई पहले सुण लेआ
 48 पहले गल्ल ऐ ~survey~ ओई चुकिआ
 49 गल्ल ऐ ऐ आप बी पी एल मुक्त पंचायत कर सकते हो
 50 लेकिन! ~survey~ दोबारा से नहीं होगा
 51 DHOONICHAND: चलो बी पी एल मुक्त कर देंगे फिर
 52 मुझे सारे बंदेओ (बोलना नी) ((waving fingers))
 53 सब ने बंदेओ मुक्त कर दिया
 54 PANKAJ: यह बैठे हैं सारे एक बार सोचो
 55 अभी पालम – पालमपुर में दो-तीन
 56 दो गाँव चार-पांच गाँव बी पी एल मुफ्त हुआ है
 57 DHOONICHAND: ((to the crowd)) पांच पंचायतें पांच पंचायतें
 58 जो बी पी एल मुक्त हैं
 59 किसी की लड़ाई बीच में कोई नहीं है।
 60 ओ सारे बंदे कैसे खा दे
 61 ((unclear))
 62 सारे अमीर अमीर लोग एन
 63 तिहत्थु सुलाह च कोई गरीब नी ए
 64 पालमपुर चलीआ मरांडा चलीआ सुलहा चलीआ
 65 कोई तिस दे पंचायतां च कोई बी मतलब बी पी एल च नी ऐ
 66 PANKAJ: सुना सुना हां

67 DHOONICHAND: सब जायज एन सारे बंदे सहमत एन न?

68 PANKAJ: अवे -दो वक्त का रोटी सभी खा रहे हो ना?=
69 DHOONICHAND: = अरे – कुण कुण तां गरीब ए?=
70 CROWD: =((crowd noise))=
71 PANKAJ: = तां फिर?
72 सोचा जरा सोचा क्यों आपस में लड़ रहे हो?
73 DHOONICHAND: ईयां बोलण दा कोई फायदा नी ओणा,
74 ग्रांए दा विकास नी ओणा,
75 कुछ नी ओणा, ईयां करा सारे मुँह बंद रखा
76 PANKAJ: क्या विकास क्या मिल रहा है आपको बोलो?
77 WARD PANCH1 : क्या सारे चांदे कि पंचायत बी पी एल मुक्त ओईआं?
78 PANKAJ: बोलो ! बोलो ! सारे चाहते हैं?
79 हाथ खड़ा करो
80 WARD PANCH 2: करी देआ **कराई देआ**
81 PANKAJ: हाथ खड़ा करो ((inaudible))
82 DHOONICHAND: सब हथ खड़ा करा हथ खड़ा करा सारे ई
83 ((few people raise their hands))
84 करी देओ बई सारे करी देओ
85 PANKAJ: करा! बोलो हां?
86 ठीक है ना?
87 बोला!
88 हाथ खड़ा करो! हाथ खड़ा करो!
89 DHOONICHAND: सारे बंदे खड़ा करी देआ
90 ((some enthusiastically raise their
91 hands, some raise then put them down, some do not
92 raise them at all))
93 PANKAJ: हाथ खड़ा करो
94 हाथ खड़ा करो! ((one woman raises both hands))
95 शाबाश!
96 करो हाथ खड़ा करो!
97 हाथ खड़ा करो
98 ((Arbind gestures towards me to capture everyone in the video.
99 Panchayat members seated at the head table begin to clap
100 their hands above their heads.
101 Dhoonichand takes out his phone and begins to
102 take photographs of the crowd.))
103 PANKAJ: बी पी एल मुक्त कर दिया ना?!
104 CROWD: ((woman off camera)) बचारे कल्ले कलाचे माणु तिसदा अक तां गइआ
105 कुदा क्या जाणा, कुसी दा कुछ नी जाणा
106 ((women in the crowd stand to leave, Pankaj yells for them to sit down,
107 but many leave anyway, while others stay to discuss amongst themselves))

1 DHOONICHAND: whichever person - ((crowd noise))
2 listen please, oh man listen here!
3 PANKAJ: listen!
4 DHOONICHAND: ((turns and speaks to women seated at front of crowd;

5 voice inaudible to back of crowd over noise))
6 first I will speak
7 then you speak afterward
8 oh brothers, you are not some uneducated peasants
9 ((unclear))
10 I am a poor man, I also work day labor
11 ((unclear)) cut them!
12 ((gesturing to back of crowd))
13 over there those poor things are poor,
14 they won't ask for anything,
15 put them ((i.e. in BPL))
16 everyone sitting over here is big and fat ((i.e. rich))
17 it's better that, since everyone has already had 10 years,
18 **make everybody be cut**
19 [and do the ~survey~ again, and put those people]
20 ISHA: [because of people like that ((unclear)) doesn't give it]
21 those whose ~families~ have become ~strong~=
22 DHOONICHAND: =are strong, ((turns to group of women to his left))
23 [we are strong! ((beats chest))]
24 ISHA: [those people who are really poor]
25 they are (just) watching the spectacle
26 DHOONICHAND: listen, listen to what I have to say
27 ((unclear))
28 we are eating food twice a day ((unclear)),
29 we also have ~property~
30 listen, first everyone say to **make everybody be cut**
31 and **make the ~survey~ be done** again and
32 **make whoever is poor be put**
33 CROWD: ye::s
34 DHOONICHAND: when(.)listen(.)when anyone puts a rich person,
35 [((unclear)) you come]
36 PANKAJ: [someone should come for a ~survey~ from outside]
37 [here, speak speak]
38 DHOONICHAND: [((unclear))]
39 PANKAJ: speak, it's okay, isn't it?
40 listen listen if I am speaking wrong then,
41 brother, raise your hand and say I am speaking wrong
42 CROWD: ((one woman raises her hand))
43 ((another woman speaks)) you are speaking right
44 PANKAJ: ((to Dhoonichand)) what are people saying
45 DHOONICHAND: they said to **make the ~survey~ be done again** and
46 put whoever is poor and **make everyone else be cut**
47 ISHA: brother (.) brother listen (.) my brother, first listen
48 the first thing is that the ~survey~ has already happened
49 the thing is, *you can make this a BPL free panchayat*
50 *but! the ~survey~ will not happen again*
51 DHOONICHAND: *ok we will make it BPL free then*
52 *everyone shouldn't say (I did it)! ((waving fingers))*
53 *everyone made it BPL free*
54 PANKAJ: *this – think about it one time*
55 *right now, in Palam- in Palampur, two or three,*
56 *villages, four or five villages have become BPL free*
57 DHOONICHAND: ((to the crowd)) *five panchayats, five panchayats!*
58 *that are BPL free*
59 *in which there are no fights between anyone*
60 all those people are eating money

61 *((unclear))*
62 they are all rich people there,
63 over there in Sulah no one is poor
64 go to Palampur, go to Maranda, go to Sulah,
65 there's no one in BPL in any of their panchayat s
66 PANKAJ: listen listen yes
67 DHOONICHAND: everyone agrees, everyone is in agreement right?
68 PANKAJ: *hey! You're all eating food twice a day right? =*
69 DHOONICHAND: =everyone – who among you is even poor?!=
70 CROWD: =*((crowd noise))*=
71 PANKAJ: =*so then?!*
72 *think a little, think, why are you fighting?*
73 DHOONICHAND: there's no point in talking like this,
74 the village's development won't happen,
75 nothing will happen, do like this, shut your mouth
76 PANKAJ: *what development are you all getting?!*
77 WARDPANCH 1: does everyone want the panchayat to be BPL free?
78 PANKAJ: *SPEAK! SPEAK! Does everyone want it?*
79 *raise your hands!*
80 WARD PANCH 2: do it! **make it be done!**
81 PANKAJ: *raise your hands!*
82 DHOONICHAND: everyone raise your hands! raise your hands everyone!
83 *((few people raise their hands))*
84 do it everyone, do it!
85 PANKAJ: do it! speak! Yes?
86 it's okay right?
87 speak!
88 **RAISE YOUR HANDS! RAISE YOUR HANDS!**
89 DHOONICHAND: everyone raise your hands!
90 *((some enthusiastically raise their*
91 *hands, some raise then put them down, some do not*
92 *raise them at all))*
93 PANKAJ: *raise your HANDS!*
94 *raise your hands! ((one woman raises both hands))*
95 *well done!*
96 *do it, raise your hands!*
97 *raise your hands*
98 *((Arbind gestures towards me to capture everyone in the video.*
99 *Panchayat members seated at the head table begin to clap*
100 *their hands above their heads.*
101 *Dhoonichand takes out his phone and begins to*
102 *take photographs of the crowd.))*
103 PANKAJ: you made it BPL free right?!
104 WOMAN: poor things, some people are single, and their rights have gone just like that
105 what are they (i.e. rich people) losing? they won't lose anything
106 *((women in the crowd stand to leave, Pankaj yells for them to sit down,*
107 *but many leave anyway, while others stay to discuss amongst themselves))*

In the beginning of the excerpt, Dhoonichand takes the floor and begins to implore the *gram sabha* members to cut people from the BPL list. He says that the people are not “uneducated peasants” (8), and that even though he himself is poor, evidenced by his work as a day laborer

(*dihaadi laana*), there are people in the crowd who are really poor and who won't "ask for anything" (14), gesturing to people in the back of the crowd. He suggests that a survey be redone to assure that those who are "strong" and "rich" (or, "big and fat") are removed, and those who are poor are put in the list. Here we also see Dhoonichand bring up the ineligibility criteria originally introduced by Isha in Excerpt 5.1—eating food twice a day—along with the more general criteria of owning property (28-29). He then uses these criteria through a series of causative verbs in lines 18 and 30-32 to implore residents to cut more people from the register. He places the residents in the grammatical role of Causer, while the Agent remains ambiguous, but may be inferred to refer to the *panchayat* secretary. Isha, switching from Kangri into the bureaucratic voice in line 49, stands and says that "you," using the plural form in Hindi, "can make the *panchayat* BPL free," thereby emphasizing residents' collective agency in the decision, while using a passive construction to argue that a survey "will not happen again" (50). In response, Dhoonichand says in Hindi "okay, (we) will make it BPL free then" (51), using the third person plural verb (*kar denge*) that (through zero anaphora) silently encodes the subject as an inclusive "we." He then immediately distances himself from the singular role of Agent through a metapragmatic statement in Hindi denying individual responsibility for the action underway—"everyone shouldn't say I did it. everyone made it BPL free" (52-53). Pankaj continues to build on this momentum, using the bureaucratic voice to admonish the *gram sabha* members who are all "eating food twice a day" (68)—again, a novel criteria—and therefore should not be seeking BPL status anyway. Dhoonichand reaffirms Pankaj's assessment in line 69: "who among you is even poor!?" Breaking through the rising crowd noise, a *ward panch* poses the question to the *gram sabha* as a whole: "does everyone want the *panchayat* to be BPL free?" (76). People look around at one another, sitting silently or mumbling to those around them. In

reaction to this lack of response, Pankaj shouts eight times at the residents to “raise their hands” (79-97), increasing the volume of his voice each time while adding “well done!” when some individuals begin to raise their hands, while others do not (95). He then makes a metapragmatic statement both performatively characterizing the *panchayat* as BPL free and articulating that the decision has been made by the *gram sabha* members, using the bureaucratic voice: “you made it BPL free, right?!” (103). The three speakers who initiated or propelled the decision to become BPL free—Isha, Pankaj, and Dhoonichand—all engage in such attempts to attribute collective agency for the decision to the *gram sabha* members while mitigating their individual responsibility therein.

As the confusion grows, there was never an attempt to count the number of hands raised to vote for or against the proposition to declare the *panchayat* BPL free, but shortly after this, people began to depart, restless and tired after a long day in the sun. One woman, particularly vehement in her opposition, said loudly that people were being forced to raise their hands, again using the causative: “they are making us speak” (*jabardasti buliaade*). Dhoonichand approached her to challenge her assessment of the situation, bending down to touch her feet as a sign of respect, to which she promptly swatted him away and continued to argue with him for several minutes. I stood with the rest of the residents, reflecting together on what just happened, and watching as some went forward to sign their names to the *panchayat* action register, while others refused to sign. The resolution appeared to have been passed, and while specific people stayed to argue against it, there was a palpable mixture of frustration and resignation from other residents, who departed to return home after a long day.

5.5 The Fallout

For over a year after Jagni was declared BPL free, there were ongoing discussions amongst residents who wanted to officially challenge the decision. My video recording of the events became a coveted record for both *panchayat* residents and officials in the local development bureaucracy, who all requested copies via WhatsApp. Much like Charles Goodwin showed in his analysis of lawyers' competing framings of the video evidence of the beating of Rodney King (1994), my informants offered vastly different interpretations of the final minutes of the *gram sabha* even while watching the same video. Whereas residents highlighted certain statements made by the *pradhan* and secretary as evidence of their responsibility for the decision—especially Pankaj's command to "raise your hands!"—the state actors (including Pankaj, Isha, and Arbind) highlighted the hands that were raised as evidence of consent amongst the crowd. Members of Jagni women's groups, on the other hand, felt the video was incontrovertible evidence that the *pradhan* had forced the residents into agreement. They planned to use the video when lodging a formal complaint with the Deputy Commissioner (as predicted by Isha), but eventually lost momentum in their pursuit. The multiple interpretations of the events that emerged from the video, even amongst participants who were present that day, demonstrates that the outcome was not easily reducible to the acts of any single individuals, but rather was produced through joint (if uneven) collaboration.

In September 2018, five months after the Jagni *gram sabha*, the Block Development Officer (BDO) faced hundreds of residents in a public hearing called a *jan sunvai*—a venue in which citizens provide public comment on local development issues and demand accountability from officials—when a representative from a local NGO addressed the events in Jagni directly: "The government says that now in this *panchayat* there is no one who is poor. On paper it is BPL free. Everyone is rich." Several people chuckled. She then turned to the crowd: "I mean, when did you

people all become rich? What month was that? May?” The crowd burst into laughter. One man in the crowd added: “The decision was forced! Some people were forced to sign, others didn’t even know what was happening!” However, the BDO maintained that the decision was not his to reverse: that it was the people’s power, and if they wanted to reverse the decision, they would have to do so in their next *gram sabha*. In subsequent *gram sabhas* that I attended in Jagni, however, the decision was not addressed further, and the *panchayat* continues to be celebrated as a “model” by local officials.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed interactional strategies that mediate decision-making processes in the the direct democratic sphere of the Indian village assembly, or *gram sabha*. I have argued that Jagni’s declaration as BPL free relied on a core interactional achievement wherein state actors collectivized the *panchayat* residents as a singular agent while diminishing their own role in doing so—the result of which I have described as “stateless agency.” More broadly, I have argued that this “stateless agency” is not the result of isolated tactics of political maneuvering by a handful of bureaucratic authority figures in this context, but instead is constitutive of democratic and bureaucratic processes more broadly, in which individual state actors are purified from positions of responsibility. I have drawn on studies of grammar and political agency (Duranti 1994), bureaucratic agency (Hull 2003; 2012a), and democratic and bureaucratic technologies of speech (Hull 2010; Bernstein 2017) in order to demonstrate how an assemblage of linguistic resources mediate the cultivation of stateless agency in the democratic-cum-bureaucratic sphere of the *gram sabha*. I have highlighted three linguistic resources through which state actors erased their agency from the Jagni *gram sabha*—causative verbs in Kangri, an enregistered variety of Hindi and English that I have called the bureaucratic voice, and

metapragmatic statements that attribute agency to an/other—all of which worked to co-constitute the will of the *gram sabha* as a collective agent while disentangling state actors from the unfolding action. This analysis reveals that bureaucratic categories like “BPL” are not “implemented” through top-down application of standardized criteria, but are produced in socially situated contexts of interaction where the will of (some) people is made into collective state action. More critical analysis of the linguistic mechanisms that render bureaucratic and democratic processes as purified of state actors can help to better understand how an assemblage of semiotic resources mediate the “translation” of categories like BPL in venues like the *gram sabha* (cf. Latour 1993).

The outcome of the Jagni decision was seemingly counterintuitive given that it did not benefit anyone directly. The erasure of BPL status harmed not only the potential beneficiaries of BPL-designated schemes, but also reduced the opportunity for *panchayat* functionaries to seek illicit compensation for access to *panchayat*-distributed BPL funds. However, what occurred in Jagni speaks to a much larger phenomenon in Kangra, one that reflects the uneven experiences of development in the region. In recent years, at least 68 *panchayats* in Kangra have been declared BPL free despite villagers’ protests (Mohan 2019): a trend that has been celebrated as evidence of Himachal’s exceptional success in achieving widespread and “inclusive” poverty alleviation. These narratives infuse everyday life in the region, including those of my interlocutors who told me time and again that “no one is poor in Himachal.” Such ideas directly inform notions of deservingness and responsibility in decision-making spaces like the *gram sabha*, as regionally and nationally-circulating debates about the meaning of poverty impact the categorization and standardization of BPL criteria in contexts like the *gram sabha*. Outcomes like the Jagni decision speak to the broader paradox of developmental bureaucracy in India, in which the institutions,

workers, and policies directly oriented toward mitigating poverty and improving rural wellbeing are also those which often deny rural people's access to state benefits (Gupta 2012).

While studies of bureaucracy have focused primarily on writing as “the central semiotic technology” (Hull 2012: 20) whereby the state is made real in the everyday lives of citizens, my research project presents a more holistic analysis of interactional phenomena in mediating and cultivating bureaucratic power. Speakers' multilingual repertoires are themselves semiotic resources that enable the collectivization and erasure of individuals from official decisions. Attending to the linguistic strategies used to cultivate stateless agency within and beyond official government institutions will allow us to better trace the scalar logics of the developmental state in everyday life. Such semiotic processes, far beyond the momentary present, have tangible and lasting consequences for people within and beyond those spaces of contestation, not merely through practices deemed corrupt or transgressive, but crucially, through those deemed licit and participatory.

CONCLUSION

Shortly after my fieldwork ended in 2019, the government of Himachal Pradesh hosted a global investors' meeting called "Rising Himachal." The event was a massive spectacle featuring appearances and speeches by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur, and resulted in over \$12 billion USD (83,000 crore INR) of investments pledged in infrastructure, housing, hydropower, and agribusiness, among other industries. Swiss helicopter manufacturer Air Zermatt invested \$75 million USD (Rs. 500 crore) toward the construction of ropeways, ski resorts, heli taxis, and heli safaris. Munjal Auto Company announced they were planning to invest in a water bottling plant, and Air One Aviation proposed investing in drone technology for use in agriculture and horticulture industries. Tens of thousands of crores were marked for investment in hydropower projects across the state. Just days before the event took place, while the state legislative assembly was out of session, the Governor of Himachal Pradesh passed an ordinance exempting small and medium enterprises from a suite of regulations, including requiring permission ("no objection certificates") from local residents and *panchayats* prior to construction, and no longer requiring health and safety inspections prior to operating businesses in the state (Lohumi 2019).

Rising Himachal, which took place again in 2020, is part of a broader effort to transform Himachal's small-scale agrarian economy into an industrial one dominated by private capitalist firms. While Rising Himachal represents a full-scale embrace a neoliberal model of development that poses little direct benefit to the population—hydropower projects damage mountain ecosystems while electricity gets funneled to Delhi and Chandigarh, drones threaten to replace workers, heli safaris cater to elite tourists—the state's strategy for attracting investors hinges on its indicators regarding human development and social inclusion. The website

(risinghimachal.in) advertises the state as having a “cohesive society, accountable bureaucracy, and committed leadership,” citing the World Bank’s 2015 report on social inclusion and sustainable development (M. B. Das et al. 2015). A scrolling marquee lists the main reasons why companies should choose to invest in Himachal, including that the state was “recently ranked first in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals,” and that “Himachal is well known for peace, harmony, and law and order.” Rising Himachal’s Twitter profile features messages from state officials praising the “accessibility of industry to the state’s political leadership and bureaucracy” thus ensuring a haven of “good governance” for investors.



Figure 6.1 Tweet by @InvestIndia, retweeted by @Rising_Himachal

In many ways, Rising Himachal merely recycles longstanding ideas of Himachal’s social and political exceptionalism, which stretch back to pre-independence writings on the region. Whereas Himachal’s success in promoting “inclusive growth” has long been attributed to the state’s emphasis on social policy—its emphasis on education, land redistribution, environmental

protections, etc.—we now see the same rhetoric of inclusion being used to both undermine social protections and embrace a vision of capitalist growth that promises to widen, rather than reduce, socioeconomic inequities. Arguments about the “accountability” of the bureaucracy are being used to attract investors while citizens are stripped of their bureaucratic recourse to object to intervention in their communities. Himachal’s ranking in the sustainable development index is being used to attract industries will directly contribute to climate change, exacerbate pollution, and destabilize mountain ecologies. These shifting logics point to the need for greater understanding of *how* Himachal’s exceptionalism manifests and persists, and to what ends.

This dissertation has sought to understand how Himachal’s developmental exceptionalism is produced in everyday encounters between bureaucrats, elected leaders, NGO workers, and rural citizens in Kangra. Narratives of Himachal’s exceptionalism not only reify the state as an ideological phenomenon, and but they also solidify Himachal as a *particular kind of state* where prosperity abounds. Crucially, my goal has not been to ignore social, material, and political differences across regions in India, thereby attributing Himachal’s exceptionalism to statistical reductionism or discursive false consciousness. In fact, almost everyone I encountered in Kangra, from senior bureaucrats to rural farmers, resoundingly agreed that they are “better off” than people in other states considered emblematic of poverty and deprivation in India. The question, then, has been not *whether* Himachal is exceptional, but rather *how* it remains seen as such despite the necessarily uneven modes of social, political, and material wellbeing in the region. Understanding this process, I have argued, requires attending to how the meanings of poverty and prosperity are produced in everyday interaction. What it means to be an “active” or “idle” participant, deserving or dependent, responsible or inculpable, rich or poor cannot be

inferred outside of the social and linguistic contexts in which such categories gain their salience and coherence.

While the anthropologies of bureaucracy and development have drawn extensively on forms of materiality, metaphors of translation, and deconstructions of discourse, the realm of interaction has remained largely unexplored despite the centrality of talk to development practice. Linguistic structures, strategies, and resources are a critical window onto the semiotic constitution of the state, bureaucracy, and development. Face-to-face interactions are the primary medium through which rural citizens engage with the bureaucratic-cum-democratic state machinery and its promises of development. As many scholars have shown, the hallmark of bureaucratic writing is its distributed agency, in which corporate authorship subsumes individuals (Hull 2003; 2012a). Several scholars have pointed to the forms of collectivization and distribution of agency inherent in bureaucratic speech (Bernstein 2017; Hull 2010), but this dissertation has offered a lens through which to understand how ways of speaking become tied to a figure of personhood (Agha 2005; 2007) that is not only authoritative-yet-inculpable, but also *moral*, which I've referred to the *bureaucratic voice*.

Although the bureaucratic voice has referred here to a particular register of English-infused Hindi used in institutional spaces in Kangra, the indexical and ideological effects of this voice are broadly applicable across ethnographic contexts. In particular, the bureaucratic voice accomplishes two simultaneous semiotic processes central to bureaucracy—collectivization and erasure— as speakers' utterances both distribute agency across speakers and mitigate individual responsibility. The bureaucratic voice is thus central to the spatialization of the state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), as ways of speaking become ideologically and indexically linked to higher scales of institutional authority, thereby subsuming individuals within a broader hierarchy of

state power. I have furthermore argued that the rendering of collectivized agency purified of state interference, or what I've called *stateless agency*, is not limited to bureaucratic processes alone, but is instead constitutive of bureaucratic and democratic modalities of governance more broadly. By demonstrating how democratic processes like the *gram sabha* entail the participation of range of state and non-state actors in deliberative debates, but which attribute the outcome of decisions to citizens alone, I have called for greater attention to how linguistic resources mediate the reification of the state as both distinct from civil society and devoid of individual social actors.

This dissertation has broadly sought to contribute to scholarship on the political economy of language and other sign processes, which stretches back decades but has gained momentum with recent turns toward the study of language and capitalism, neoliberalism, materiality, value, infrastructure, and development (e.g. Irvine 1989; Ahearn 2001a; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Elyachar 2010; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2015; Kockelman 2006; 2016). By introducing the concept of *semiotic labor*, I have called attention to the fact that low-level bureaucrats, NGO workers, and citizens are not the “receptacles” of development, links in an ever-decreasing chain of policy implementation from institutional cores to peripheries, but rather are themselves producers of the meanings, criteria, and values through which policy gains its legibility and legitimacy in everyday life. I have referred to the work that my interlocutors do as “semiotic” to capture the multimodality of human interaction, noting that their labor is both mediated by sign processes and productive of signs and their meanings – of what constitutes success, prosperity, participation, and inclusion. Linguistic anthropology provides tools through which to do such an archaeology of sign-making: to trace how having access to two meals a day (Chapter Five) or

wearing a scarf over one's head (Chapter Two) come to index particular meanings in particular contexts, as well as how those meanings are contested.

This research furthermore contributes to the anthropology of development, which has in recent years sought to answer similar questions about how success is produced through practice, often using a Latourian framework of translation to understand how forms of incoherence and instability are rendered into visions of success and coherence across networks of actors (Mosse 2005; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Mathur 2016; Biruk 2018; Latour 2007). While such work has been largely agnostic on the question of actual linguistic practices, I have attempted to make the case that talk is not only central to these processes of interpretation, but it is *the* medium through which such interpretations cohere in everyday life, particularly since whole sectors of the development economy, from awareness camps to empowerment trainings to bureaucratic meetings to *panchayat* village assemblies, are built on a bedrock of face-to-face interaction. These spaces deserve much greater scholarly attention, as they hold much of the key to understanding how people co-constitute and interpret the categories and concepts upon which policy is built.

While many studies of neoliberalism in the Global South have primarily focused on the erosion of state welfare caused by policies made at the national and transnational level, this study follows other scholars who have noted the complex and contradictory logics of neoliberal governmentality in India, wherein populist democratic politics and activism has manifested in a slew of rights-based welfare legislation even amidst deregulations to the economy and environment (A. Sharma 2018; Bornstein and Sharma 2016). Such studies call attention to the fact that India's bureaucracy, despite being designed to promote the alleviation of poverty, ultimately ends up exacerbating it through practices of corruption and the arbitrary decisions of

bureaucrats (Gupta 2012). Himachal, on the other hand, has escaped such narratives of corruption and emerged as a leader in transparency and good governance. My ethnography has shown that bureaucratic processes often do end up exacerbating precarity for rural citizens in Himachal, but not through practices deemed corrupt or illicit, but through those deemed transparent and inclusive. Often, decisions of access and attributions of responsibility occur in the open, and speakers' multilingual repertoires become the currency of debate. These findings support an approach to policy as interactionally achieved, rather than hierarchically implemented, and thereby distorted, by successive rungs of middle and low-level bureaucrats, so often the brunt of critique for the failure of policy implementation.

The stakes of this project have been high, not only for its scholarly objectives, but also for shedding light on the lives and livelihoods of my interlocutors, whose debates and contestations I have sought to document and preserve despite the constraints of the textual medium. In particular, I have attempted to nuance accounts of the region by attending to the paradox of exceptionalism—how prosperity has become a defining narrative about Himachal Pradesh, experienced as real even as it becomes the ideological ground upon which exclusions are legitimated and perpetuated. Despite the widespread assumption that talk is a fleeting, transient phenomenon with little material resonance, I have argued that the interactional production of exceptionalism has lasting consequences for rural citizens, such that whether or not one is able to produce or contest an interpretation of one's deservingness or culpability directly impacts whether one gets access to benefits and entitlements that sustain rural livelihoods. It is here, in the interstices of interaction, that exclusion becomes a democratic achievement and evidence is provided of developmental success.

Appendix

Transcripts from Chapter 2

Transcript 2.1

- 1 Jagriti: गल ए ए ना कि तिस च बी लिखिया होणा तुहाडे उद्देस्य च कि शिक्षा
2 इक शब्द होंदा ना? कि शिक्षा मतलब पढाई तुहाडी
3 तुहां खुद पढा अपणे बच्चेयो पढा कन्ने कोई ऐसा जेडा नी पढाई सकदा
4 **सै** तुहाडा उद्देस्य ए
5 तुहाडा उद्देस्य ए ए कि दहेज प्रथा जेडी ए तिसियो बोलदे तुहां प्रथा तिसियो रोक लगा
6 है ना? इक सै तुहाडे महिला मंडल दा कम्म ए
7 तुहां अपु अगर मतलब सै दा कम्म शुरुआत करेंगे है ना?
8 नशाबंदी पर रोक लगा, छुआछूत, जाति-पाती दा भेदभाव मिटा है ना?
9 अगर तुहां ए शुरु करेंगे ना?
10 ए बी बडा बडी ए कम्म तुहांजो बेला मंडल कोई बोली नी सकदा

Transcript 2.2

- 1 Jagriti आहां तुहांजो सै लिखणा दसी देणी
2 कन्ने सै तुहां, तित्थु पंचायत सेक्टरी बल देणी
3 कन्ने तिसदे तुहांजो सुचना मिली आणी
4 कि ए प्रसताव पेआ था कि नी पेआ था पैसा आया था कि नी आया था
5 सारी जानकारी होणी चाईदी
6 पर तुहां कुछ करणा नी ए तां तुहां खाली ए बोलिंदे कि
7 “हां जी दित्तिया था बोलिया था होया नी मतलब ईयां तीयां गुआई छड्डी”
8 तीयां नी ओंदा कोई बी समस्या तिसां चुक्का
9 कन्ने end तक तिसदा हल जेडा सै करा
10 Neha आहां पता क्या सोचदे?
11 आहां लोक सोचदे **आहां इक बरी बोलणा ए इक बरी application दे देणी**
12 कन्ने कम ओई आणा तीयां नी ओंदा ए कम ना
13 कईयां कमायो बार बार जाणा पौंदा
14 Jagriti **या आ तां छड्हा परां ए ना?**
15 **छड्हा परां कुण करे ए ना**
16 पर ए ए कि तुहां इक बरी चर्चा तां करा जीयां कोई संस्था आला ओंदा ए
17 या कोई तुहांजो कुछ ना कुछ सलाह दींगा तां सही

Transcript 2.3

KEY: **Embodied (including language); Affective; Material**

- 1 Neha सैह हर महिने प्रधान सेक्टरी मिलदीआं सैह अपनी मीटिंग गाणे दे शुरु करदीआं

- 2 **कई बरी कई बजन गांदीआं कुछ गांदीआं**
3 **ईयां नी आई के बेईए कन्ने चर्चा पाई लेईआ**
4 **दो जन्नीआं झूंड पाई के तां बाईआं दो तां बेईआ दो तां बेईआ**
5 Member सैह ई ए
6 Neha सैह नी करना ठीक ए
7 कि तुहां सशक्त नारीआं एन
8 जणासां एन मतलब तुहां कुछ बदलाव वास्ते कम्म करना ए
9 ए नी ए कि बस मैं अपने घरे तक कुछ सोचना ए ना
10 बलदाव वास्ते कम्म करना तिस वास्ते करना पौणा
11 **कि थोड़ा इकट्टा बैठा बैठा दिखा क्या ए ना**
12 Man एक दूसरी की मदद करनी है
13 Neha इकट्टा दी मदद करनी ए तां इकट्टा मतलब तुहां दस तरीकांयो करना
14 **गोले च बैठना मीटिंग करना इस बरी ईयां बैठे ना**
15 **गोले च क्या ओंदा कि इक्की दुए चेहरे दुसदे**
16 **पिठ करी के बैणा दुए साइड**
17 **अगर मैं कुसकी साईड पीठ करी के बेई आंगी ना तां सैह मतलब मजा नी ओंदा**
18 **सारेयां गोले च बैठणा सारेयां दीआं शकलीआं दुसणा चाईदीआं**
19 प्रधान सेक्टरी जेड़े पंच सदस्य सैह मीटिंग शुरू करन
20 सहायता हर बरी नी ओंदी रहणी ना आहां हर बरी नी ओंदे रहणा तुहां दा
22 तुहां दा संगठन ए तुहां कम्म करा तिस संगठन च ना
23 **तुहां मतलब बेशक गीत गाआ इक**
24 **अपणे जेड़े फिल्मी फिल्मी गीत पर अपने जेड़े पहाड़ी गाणे ओंदे ना**
25 **अपणे ब्याह कार्ज दे गाणे सैह ई गाणे तिस गाणे शुरू करा मीटिंग च**
26 **तिस च क्या ओंदा बड़ा मजा ओंदा ना energy बणी रहणदी मतलब**
27 **ईयां बेई रेंगे चर्चा पांदे रेंगे ता मजा नी ओंदा**
28 तीयां मीटिंग करनी हर महिने
29 कन्ने अगली बरी दस तरीक आहां नी आए ना मीटिंग करना
30 तुहाड़ी जिम्मेबारी ए तुहां मीटिंग करनी ए
31 **तिस दा फोटो खिंजणा कन्ने आहांजो whatsapp करना**
32 **तां मिंजो लगणा कि आं ए ना whatsapp number ए ना**
33 smart phone रखिओ ना?
34 Member: हे नी रखिओ!
35 Neha: कुसी दा बी नी ए smart phone
36 Member: smart phone खरीदी के देईआ मैडम जी ((all laughing))
37 Neha ओणा ए ((group members laughing))
38 तुहांयो नी एन ना तां ग्रएं च ओणा ए कुछ जनासां दे ((group members laughing))

Transcript 2.4

- 1 Sadhana और महिला मंडलों में जो हम लोग बोल रहे हैं कि यह घुंघट प्रथा
2 क्योंकि जब भी हम लोग घुंघट प्रथा की बात करते हैं
3 “ना जी, अब तो है ही नहीं”
4 पर जो घुंघट निकाल के रही है आप उसको पूछो कि उसकी जिंदगी क्या है
5 Aarti देखो हंसी लगेगी तो घुंघट के अंदर लगेगी, कोई तुम्हारा मुआ दिखेगा
6 यह बात है, जब गुस्सा होगा तो भी हमारे अंदर हम घुंघट के अंदर है
7 *((all laughing))*
8 Sadhana क्यों हम लोगों ने हंसा? एक मिनट
9 हम लोगों ने घुंघट के अंदर क्यों हंसा?
10 Rani घुंघट जो है यह हिंदुस्तान की नारी की एक शोभा है
11 Sadhana एक – please
12 शोभा, मेरे सामने यह शब्द नहीं
13 इस – इस हिंदुस्तानी नारी से पूछो
14 *((points to a young group member who previously stated that she wears the veil))*
15 जब यह घुंघट ओडती है तो इसको कितना अच्छा लगता है
16 इसको पूछो कि कितनी शोभा नज़र आती है इसको
17 ठीक हैं?
18 हम भाषा में बड़ा अच्छा बोलते हैं कि शोभा है
19 पर जिसके साथ यह बीतता ह=
20 Aarti [=काम करने में दिक्कत होती ही
21 Sadhana [उसको पूछो कि उसके साथ कितनी शोभा उस घुंघट की बन रही है
22 तो हम लोग इस तरह के विचार रखेंगे
23 तो इस जैसी औरत कभी घुंघट नहीं उठा पाएगी
24 Aarti यह तो घुंघट जबरदस्ती का है
25 Rani *((laughs))*
26 Sadhana हम!!
27 Rani तां मत पा
28 Aarti जबरदस्ती का घुंघट है
29 किसी के दांत भी टूट सकते हैं
30 *((many women laugh loudly))*
31 Aarti क्यों? अगर ज्यादा पा दे तां
32 Sadhana दांत नहीं, मैं आपको बताती हूँ
33 आंटी,
34 Rani *((?))* कईयां झुंदे दा पता नी ओंदा
35 कोई बी नी पा दे
36 Sadhana क्योंकि, यह हंसनेवाली बात नहीं है
37 Rani *((whispering))*
38 Aarti हां!
39 Sadhana यह एक महिलाओं का मुद्दा है
40 आपको पता है एक महिला मंडल में मैं गई-

- 41 Aarti मैडम जी एक बात और भी है
 42 इस टाईम तो ऐसे डालती हूँ है ना अब दिख भी जाता है
 43 पहले तो एक पल्ला यह ऐसा होता था और दूसरा ऐसे होता था
 44 ऐसे तो दिख नहीं रहा आप तो मेरेको दिख नहीं रहे हो
 45 Sadhana यह हमारी जिंदगी है
 46 Aarti और शॉल की भी घूँघट इतना बड़ा डालती थी पहले औरतें
 47 अब काफी changeएं आ गई हैं
 48 अब आगेवाली लड़कियां तो घूँघट बिल्कुल नहीं – वो अच्छा कर रही हैं
 49 Rani बिल्कुल नहीं डालती
 50 Aarti वो अच्छा कर रही हैं
 51 Sadhana मतलब बिल्कुल नहीं डाल रही है तुहां बोली नी सकदे ना क्योंकि हमारे सामने वो
 52 क्या नामम है आपका? सानिया? हमारे सामने सानिया बोल रही है कि मैं डालती हूँ
 53 तो यह हम यह नहीं बोल सकते और यह जो घूँघट यह ऐसा रिवाज है ना
 54 यह मेरेको किसी भी हाल में घूँघट वाली रिवाज हुए
 55 या मंदिर में ना जानेवाले रिवाज हुए
 56 यह या फिर यह जो मांग भर ली कभी मांग भर ली
 57 कभी बोलो कि इसको साफ कर दो कभी बोलते हैं कि इसको भरो
 58 यह सारे रिवाज ऐसे रिवाज है
 59 जिसके ऊपर हंसनेवाले का कोई मुद्दा नहीं है
 60 Several हां जी
 61 Sadhana यह सारे ऐसे रिवाज है जो औरत को चार दिवारें के अंदर
 62 एक घुटन मतलब पैदा करते हैं बाकी कुछ नहीं है
 63 औरत बहादुर निकल पाएं औरत आगे बढ़ पाए
 64 Aarti एक बात और है
 65 जब कोई मरता है ना
 66 औरत इस्सी के घर नी जा सकती, उसके लिए एक बंधन है
 67 और जै से गाँव में मर भी जाता है कोई, औरत जाती नहीं है
 68 मर्द शादियों में भी जा आते हैं, और उनके घर भी
 69 **औरत क्यों नहीं जा सकती है?**
 70 **क्यों नहीं जा सकती है?**
 71 पहले सफेद दुपत्ता लेई लिया, यह निकाल दी ((points to nose ring))
 72 बिंदी नहीं लगायी, कुछ भी नहीं बिल्कुल साधा
 73 औरत जा नहीं सकती
 74 वो कभी पता नहीं चलता है मरा हुआ कि नहीं मरा
 75 पता कोख से चलदा है
 76 यह तो गलत बात है
 77 Sadhana बिल्कुल

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