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**Open Governance and Surveillance:
A Study of the National Rural Employment Program in Andhra Pradesh, India**

by

Rajesh Veeraraghavan

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

in

Information Management and Systems

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor AnnaLee Saxenian, Co-Chair

Professor Peter Evans, Co-Chair

Professor Paul Duguid

Professor Michael Burawoy

Spring 2015

**Open Governance and Surveillance:
A Study of the National Rural Employment Program in Andhra Pradesh, India**

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Rajesh Veeraraghavan

Abstract

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This dissertation grapples with the questions: Does transparency lead to accountability? Is it possible to "democratize" surveillance, turning surveillance into an instrument of democratic control over state bureaucracy? Can a state bureaucracy combine visions of surveillance within the state and "openness" to citizens to help police itself? To address these questions, I studied an "open governance" project located in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh and involving the countrywide National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). I raise the questions about transparency and accountability at two different levels: first at the level of the bureaucracy, and second at the level of the citizens themselves. Looking at the two inevitably raises further questions of the power relations both within the bureaucracy and between the state apparatus and the citizens it is intended to serve. Looking within the bureaucracy, I show that local bureaucrats and politicians have discovered ways to subvert these formal efforts of control through informal norms. Looking at relations between the state apparatus and the citizens, I examine the recruitment of citizens in two different social contexts, a class/caste-divided village and a tribal community. Between the bureaucracy and the citizenry, I argue that the state has attempted to construct a state-civil society "sandwich" to squeeze the lower-level bureaucrats both from the top, using information technology, and from the bottom, getting testimonies from workers by opening government records. Here, I find that expectations of participation from below in response to transparency from above are not met because workers fail to participate as expected. A central part of what follows explores and delineates the multiple, complex reasons for this failure of the "public sphere." Overall, these findings illustrate how hard it is to actually eliminate last-mile corruption, even with sophisticated technological and social strategies. (Nonetheless, I also find and lay out numerous potential benefits to this program.) In conclusion, I argue that instead of the prevalent metaphor of "sunlight," open governance is better thought of as a "flashlight" and that people embrace openness and reject surveillance depending on whether they are the subject or the object of the "flashlight." This shift in metaphor helps to raise more directly the inevitable issues of power.

For Vidhya

Acronyms, abbreviations and terms

Andhra/AP/Andhra Pradesh/Telugu land: A state in India. The state has three regions: Rayalseema, Coastal Andhra, and Telangana. The main language is Telugu; Hindi and Tamil are spoken in some regions.

MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly typically elected for a 5-year term.

Minister: The minister is the political head of a particular portfolio, like rural development, health, or education.

Chief Minister: The chief minister is the political head of the state.

NREGA: The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was enacted in 2005 to guarantee employment (manual labor) for any eligible citizen in rural India. The name was changed to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), in 2009, but people still refer to it colloquially as NREGA and hence this document continues that practice. At the state level, it is referred to as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

RTI: The Right to Information Act was passed in 2005, legislating the right of citizens' to access public records.

Sarpanch: The elected village head.

Mandal: In Andhra, since the 1980s, the boundaries of governance has been shifted closer to the village, replacing the administrative block used in other regions with the mandal. A mandal typically represents about 20 villages as opposed to 40 villages in the case of block.

MPDO: The Mandal Parishad Development Officer (MPDO) heads bureaucratic affairs at the Mandal level.

Gram Sabha: A meeting of all adults in the village discussing various affairs of the village. There are many kinds of gram sabha, one is the constitutionally mandated meeting, which happens (or is supposed to happen) once or twice per year. Under NREGA, there is also a requirement to conduct a gram sabha to decide the type of work to be done and to convene the social audit to announce the findings of the work done.

Apna: Andhra Pradesh Non-government Association is a group formed by the rural development bureaucracy to network.

Reddy: A powerful landed caste in AP.

Untouchable: An English term used to refer to outcastes, that is, to those who are considered impure and outside properly human caste groups.

Dalit: A contemporary, political term used to refer to those formerly known as Untouchables. The term means "the oppressed" and signals allegiance to political movements that fight for the equality of these groups in Indian society. Many young people among the formerly Untouchable castes self-identify as Dalit.

Tribals: the aboriginals or the adivasis of the land.

Kamma: The other powerful caste in AP, mainly in the coastal districts of Andhra.

Congress Party: The current ruling party both of the Centre (federal) and the AP state governments.

TDP: Telugu Desam party, formed in 1982 when the Congress Party monopoly was broken in AP. Its leaders are from the Kamma caste.

CPM: Communist Party (Marxist).

CPI: Communist Party of India.

CPI (ML): The banned Communist party (Naxalite/Maoist).

MKSS: Mazdoor Kisan Shakthi Sangathan, is a social movement in Rajasthan.

JJSS: Jan Jagaran Shakti Sangathan, is a registered trade union of unorganized sector workers in Bihar.

Temporary field staff (bureaucrats) at the mandal level for NREGA:

Field Assistant (FA): The field assistant, as of this writing, is entrusted with the responsible of giving work to the workers at the village level. The FA typically hails from the same village where he works.

Technical Assistant (TA): The TA operates at the mandal level, as the technical person in assisting with defining and measuring the work and monitoring the FA.

Computer Operator (CO): As the name indicates, operates the computer and is also at the mandal level.

Engineering Consultant (EC): The EC supervises the TAs and are involved in controlling work budgets.

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Prologue

I was sitting in a hot, open field in a remote countryside in Bihar. The occasion was a public hearing, organized by Jan Jagaran Shakti Sanghatan (JJSS), a new local social movement, which had recently formed to support the workers' struggle for employment. I had signed up to volunteer as administrative help, and I was filling in applications on behalf of workers requesting work from the government under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Hundreds of workers were lined up in front of me, waiting patiently for their turn.

A tent had been set up for the occasion. It was already full of people from the local village, but more villagers from nearby continued to trickle in. The hearing began with the organizers singing some revolutionary workers' songs. Immediately after, Kamesh, one of the organizers of the event, stood in front of the podium and demanded, "Have you ever seen a muster roll?" A resounding "No!" shook the tent. "Have you had one hundred days of employment?" Again, "No!" Kamesh explained that the purpose of the meeting was to inform people about their rights like knowing the purpose of the muster roll, which determines how they are paid and they are entitled to one hundred days of work and to present the results from a recent audit.

A week earlier, I had worked with some volunteers who were preparing for a village survey. We were looking at the government records of a village we were going to audit. One volunteer remarked, "This Ganjaram is on multiple muster rolls. He claims to have worked in multiple places on the same day." The following day, we visited some villages to track down Ganjaram and discovered that he had passed away years ago.

The same villagers who told us about Ganjaram showed us their bank passbooks. Normally, these passbooks are kept securely by local government clerks, but the looming audits had prompted officials to return passbooks to the workers. The villagers, however, being illiterate, could not read what was written in their passbooks. They asked me to read some of the entries aloud, and I obliged. To one worker, a man named Kanchi, I said, "It looks as if you worked forty days this past year, received Rs. 4000 for it in your account, and then subsequently withdrew it." Kanchi gave me a blank look, which quickly turned to rage. All of the other passbooks indicated similar activity, and the villagers became increasingly agitated. Another volunteer asked them, "Are you saying that you haven't received this money?" They replied, "No, none of it."

This was exactly the kind of illegitimate activity that JJSS was interested in unearthing, so we asked the villagers to come to the following week's public hearing. Most hesitated but eventually agreed to come. When we asked them to sign a written testimonial, however, most refused, saying, "I cannot sign this paper. I need to live here." They feared retaliation from government officials. Later the fear spread to the other villagers, and some demanded that we return their written testimonials.

In the evening, we encountered some of the villagers having a drink and discussing the day's events. Kanchi was among them, and we all began to discuss the hearing. Kanchi voiced everyone's worries: "These bastards will kill us. I am not scared, but some people are." We assured them that JJSS would remain in the area and that we would provide support.

One week later, at the public hearing, Kamesh laid down the protocol of the event: “Lift your hands if you wish to share your thoughts, and come to the microphone in the front to speak.” He noted that the proceedings would be video-recorded.

Mukhya, the panchayat president, was the first to speak. He said, “Everything is going well in this village. All the work has been done, and everybody was paid.” Then the results from the most recent audit were read out, making clear the gross disparities between the government records and from the survey.

Kanchi raised his hand to speak: “My name is Kanchi, and I am from Boratola.”

Kamesh said to him, “The government records say that you worked on a project to move sand from Ram’s house to Krishna’s. Did you do so?”

“Yes, sir, I did work on that project.”

“The government records show that you worked for forty days and were paid Rs. 4000. Is that correct?”

“No, sir, I have not been paid that much money. I only got Rs.1000.”

Someone immediately shouted, “He is lying!”

Kanchi was livid. He pointed towards Mukhya, the panchayat leader, and said, “He is a crook. He and his cronies must have taken the rest of my money, all 3000 rupees!”

Mukhya rose, rushed over to grab the microphone, and then hit Kamesh on the head with the microphone stand. This caused a great uproar, and the workers started running towards Mukhya, shouting “Hit him, hit him.” Suddenly sticks appeared and they were charging up to Mukhya, who was whisked away to safety. Everybody was running and shouting, and there was a minor scuffle between Mukhya’s men and some of the workers. The activists were clutching their documents so that they wouldn’t be taken away in the commotion.

Soon the organizers were able to bring the meeting to order. Mukhya returned, and everybody sat down. The meeting re-started, and though the atmosphere remained tense, the scuffle had ironically brought the agenda into sharp focus. The testimonials continued to pile up, but the workers were careful not to be abusive and to stick to facts. People were clapping and cheering and backing up testimonials from anyone who had the courage to come and speak up. The government clerks who were responsible for maintaining the document contested the evidence and gave counter-testimonials. Some workers also stepped up to support the clerks’ claims, attesting that they have been paid fully for their work and that there were no problems in the village. These testimonies were often booed.

Finally the Mukhya got up and said, “I have listened to the workers’ complaints, and I now know that there are problems, but I wish that somebody had told me earlier.” He promised to ensure that the correct wages were given to the workers and to secure employment for everyone. Then the meeting ended, and the testimonials were submitted to the Mukhya, the media, and the district collector’s office.

The next morning I visited the village where Kanchi lived and found him. He told me, “Mukhya came by in his car last night and threatened the people in the village for speaking out. But,” he added, looking away, “he can’t do anything to me.”

I asked him, “What do you think will happen?”

He said, "We have been discussing that in the village; it is unclear what will change. But in the last ten years that this Mukhya has been in power, I have never seen him afraid like this." He added gleefully, "It felt good."

1 Introduction

Transparency, accountability, citizen's voice. Like gender and anti-corruption before them, these are no longer just political issues, off limits to the World Bank as a nonpolitical organization. These are how we define Open Development.

— Robert Zoellick, President, The World Bank, September 29, 2010¹

The effectiveness of the state in delivering social benefits to citizens is one of the big issues of modern social science and policy, especially in the global south. There is no “magic bullet” for increasing state effectiveness, but it is generally understood that addressing the set of problems labeled “corruption” is central to effective delivery.² Hence, since 1996, the World Bank alone has supported more than 600 anti-corruption programs (Banerjee et al., 2012). Efforts to address corruption have led to a focus on “openness” and “transparency,” and the public “participation” they are assumed to involve as antidotes to corruption.³ Scholars and activists need to gain a better understanding of the interplay of corruption, openness, and transparency and to bring political thinking to the forefront of our imaginations in finding solutions to these problems.

This dissertation will delineate these assumptions in theory and explore their deployment in practice by examining the world's largest public employment project, India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), as it is implemented in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh (AP).

AP has embraced a sophisticated information technology solution to improve bureaucratic transparency of public records, and has made an extensive investment in social auditors, who visit every village in the state twice a year to open up public records to citizens. In India, AP represents the first state where the government has proactively “opened itself up” to citizens' scrutiny (Aiyar & Samji, 2009). The state's investment in technology and human effort to leverage transparency as a solution is unparalleled, and

¹ <http://wbi.worldbank.org/wbi/devoutreach/>

² See (Olken & Pande, 2011), (Banerjee, Mullainathan, & Hanna, 2012), and (Deshingkar, Johnson, & Farrington, 2005).

³ “Corruption” has been defined as “the misuse of public office for private gain” (Svensson, 2005) or “the breaking of a rule by a bureaucrat (or an elected official) for private gain” (Banerjee et al., 2012). Such unambiguous and universal definitions seem to be considered necessary to see it as a “problem” which can then be “solved.” Ferguson calls this move the “anti-politics machine,” (Ferguson, 1990) and Zoellick's quote above supplies an adequate example of such phenomenon.

its efforts to provide employment through this program have paid off (Maiorano, 2014). Various studies point to a reduction in corruption in the workings of NREGA in AP as compared to the rest of the country (Muralidharan, Niehaus, & Sukhtankar, 2014a, 2014b). The Andhra form of governance has been hailed as the “Andhra model” of transparency that shows the way for replication elsewhere (Aakella & Kidambi, 2007a; Aiyar & Samji, 2009; Maiorano, 2014)⁴. Corruption has been identified as the problem to be solved and openness the solution. Strategies revolve around using the idea of the public sphere to foster deliberation as well as the use of information technology to survey the actions of the state.

The rest of this introductory chapter will examine the theories that underpin openness and surveillance, the public sphere, and technology and politics. I then discuss the research and analysis, and end by summarizing the arguments in the dissertation.

1.1 Openness and Transparency

The economists Sen and Dreze (2014) argue, “[c]orruption has become such an endemic feature of Indian administration and commercial life that in some parts of the country nothing moves in the intended direction unless the palm of the deliverer is greased” (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 95).

Openness and transparency have been touted as solutions to the problems of corruption, with information and information technology playing key roles (Kuriyan, Bailur, Gigler, & Park, 2011). Indeed, the 2004 World Development Report (WDR)⁵ identifies information as the critical mechanism for making states directly accountable to the poor and suggests “putting poor people at the center of service provision: enabling them to monitor and discipline service providers, amplifying their voice in policy making, and strengthening the incentives for service providers to serve the poor.” Corruption in such accounts therefore has to be made “visible” to citizens, and, if it is, the report assumes the citizens will participate in its condemnation and elimination.

The relationship between transparency and openness (and information) is not always clear, however. Transparency International, an NGO, helped spread the idea that transparency “addresses corruption and undemocratic rule in a seemingly neutral way by advocating greater access to information for the public” (Stone, 2002). Ball’s extensive “postmodern” archeology of transparency produces three metaphors: transparency is a public value or norm of behavior to counter corruption; transparency is synonymous with openness; and, finally, transparency is a continuum and a component of good policy (Ball, 2009).

Fung et al. analyze a variety of transparency projects to identify those that work by a set of common elements. They declare that what is needed is the sort of information

⁴ “Andhra shows the way” <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/nrega-andhra-pradesh-shows-the-way/article1334013.ece>, “Andhra Pradesh shows the way for NREGA social audit” <http://www.governancenow.com/news/regular-story/andhra-pradesh-shows-way-nrega-social-audit>, “Andhra is India’s no. 1 NREGA implementer: Study” <http://www.igovernment.in/news/24562/andhra-is-indias-no-1-nrega-implementer-study>

⁵ See (World Development Report, 2004)

revealed by “targeted transparency” (Fung, Graham, & Weil, 2007). Targeted transparency represents a more focused approach to public information in which government compels companies or public service agencies to disclose information in standardized formats in order to reduce specific risks or improve services. Such policies are more light-handed than conventional regulation because they rely on the power of information rather than on enforcement of rules and standards or financial inducements to alter choices.

As Fung et al. note, targeted transparency is a very appealing proposition because of the “light-handed” nature of the intervention, which relies on the power of information. Part of the appeal of transparency is the passivity it entails, where the state or the institution can assume it has met its obligations and just wash its hands of further responsibility once it can claim to have achieved transparency.

But, it is important to ask in the light of such claims, does transparency on its own lead to accountability?(Fox, 2007). An extremely influential study, using randomized control trials to study the effect of community monitoring as a result of the provision of information, did not show any effect (Olken, 2007). But merely providing information often do not work as expected because of a failure of a political understanding of transparency, and in consequence policy makers and scholars either continue to work with a flawed system or call for an end to transparency (Lessig, 2009) (Etzioni, 2010). Instead of abandoning transparency, taking the cue from Fox, we need to ask, “What types of transparency manage to generate what types of accountability?” (Fox, 2007).

1.2 Openness and Surveillance

The use of information in governance is a vexing subject. We clamor for release of information about the state (openness) while the state wants more information about its citizens (surveillance). Yet, though these two might seem to go together, in general people applaud openness but condemn surveillance. In the deployment of the word surveillance, I follow Dandekar’s use of surveillance with respect to the bureaucracy: “The term surveillance is not used in the narrow sense of ‘spying’ on people but more broadly to refer to the gathering of information about the supervision of subject population in organizations.”(Dandekar, 1990)

Technology, discussed in more detail below, has resulted in the unprecedented gathering and release of information, thereby bringing the issue of information and its role in governance into sharp focus (Toyama, 2011). The passing of “right to information” acts in several countries around the world implies that this is an era of unprecedented openness: the right to survey the actions of the state has been legislated.

Another facet of such openness is, perhaps counterintuitively, the phenomenon of surveillance -- not just of the government, but also by the government (Haggerty & Samatas, 2010). There is increased concern about government spying on citizens, as evidenced by the frequent news stories of state surveillance around the world. After the recent leaks by Edward Snowden of the U.S. government’s surveillance operations, surveillance has come into even sharper focus. Yet, currently, theoretical discussions tend to address transparency and surveillance separately: the former is celebrated and the latter deprecated. We ask how we can see the state, and in a separate conversation we ask how

we can avoid being seen by the state (Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, & Veron, 2005; J. Scott, 1998).

Scott's vision, encapsulated in writings like *Seeing like the State*, has inspired many projects like this dissertation that attempt to grapple with the idea of "seeing" (e.g., seeing the state, seeing the citizen, etc.) (Scott, 1998). For Scott, the state sees in a particular and distinct way: to help discipline the population. He conceptualized this seeing through the concept of "legibility."

Legibility stands for a state's attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion. Having begun to think in these terms, I began to see legibility as a central problem in statecraft. The pre-modern state was, in many crucial respects, particularly blind; it knew precious little about its subjects, their wealth, their landholdings and yields, their location, their very identity. It lacked anything like a detailed "map" of its terrain and its people (J. Scott, 1998, p. 2).

Scott, by looking at failed state projects, convincingly argues that the problems are associated with the issue of legibility. In effect, Scott argues that a certain type of high-modernist state attempts to gain a synoptic view of reality through state "simplifications." The centralized state, in the act of seeing, constructs representations and maps of the situation that can then be used to discipline the population. Scott finds that these projects are utopian social engineering projects, and they often fail because from the commanding heights of the state it is hard to see what is happening on the ground. In sum, Scott develops a logic of seeing unique to the state that relies on abstractions that lead to severe errors in executing its own utopic visions.

While it is comforting to keep these concepts of surveillance and transparency in two separate silos, I argue that they ought to be examined together, as intimately connected phenomena (Haggerty & Samatas, 2010). Considering them separately leads either to a symbolic rather than a substantive gesture of openness by the state or to a failure to understand the elements of surveillance that are necessarily in play in truly open governance. Moreover, considering transparency without the corollary of surveillance avoids taking into account the work that we are asking of the citizens when we advocate their "participation" in governance. Bringing the two subjects together makes the political complexities of open governance clear. As Jonathan Fox eloquently reflects, "One person's transparency is another's surveillance. One person's accountability is another's persecution. Where one stands on these issues depends on where one sits" (Fox, 2007)⁶.

Recent critical work on governmental transparency argues for gaining an understanding of information in any given social context by examining power relations and public action (Benjamin, Bhuvanewari, & Rajan, 2007; Fung et al., 2007; Hetherington, 2011; Srinivasan, 2011). Paying close attention to the strategic use of

⁶ Zuckerman has deployed Schudson's term of "monitorial citizenship" to discuss, as he puts it, the "post-informed citizen." (Schudson, 1996; Zuckerman, 2014) But, I think surveillance adequately captures what we are ultimately asking the citizens and brings out the asymmetry of power more clearly.

information by different actors and recognizing that transparency and surveillance have to be considered together, I argue that open governance is best seen as an attempt to democratize surveillance. Invoking surveillance in the study of openness helps to bring the ideas of politics, resistance, and conflict—all topics that economically oriented accounts too often leave aside—to the center of analysis. Just as openness is not inherently a positive phenomenon, surveillance is not inherently negative (Strathern, 2000). I argue that neither of these concepts is bad or good a priori and that a successful open-government project must accept that openness and surveillance play complex and symbiotic roles. Open governance necessitates not only democratizing openness but also democratizing surveillance (Haggerty & Samatas, 2010).

My study shows that people embrace openness and reject surveillance depending on whether they are the subject or the object of the surveillance, which brings up issues of power. I found that workers do not participate in attempts to monitor the state, because they worry their criticism will lead to the termination of the NREGA program. Also, workers worry that the instruments of surveillance will be turned against them by the politically powerful.

1.3 Participation and Public Sphere

To get to accountability from transparency you need participation from citizens. Citizens do not participate, it is believed, because of asymmetry of information: one set of agents in a transaction has more relevant information than another (Mansuri & Rao, 2012). Citizens do not know about the workings of the state and need to be made aware of its workings. So, to fix the lack of participation, it is assumed that states should first fix the asymmetry of information. In other words, opening up the state via provision of information to citizens, leads to greater participation.

Not everybody agrees with the directionality from openness to participation. Jenkins, reflecting public hearings, points out “the underlying assumption is that if more people participate in decision making there will be greater information sharing, and greater chances that citizens will detect and oppose the pilfering of resources meant for them” (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). In effect, he argues that participation leads to information rather than the other way around. For example, a World Bank report states “as participation increases, vital information not in the public domain becomes available and the voices of interested parties can help make governments more accountable; both in turn enhance performance” (World Bank, 1994).

More fundamentally perhaps there is no consensus on the desirability of “participation” which in development literature and practice has produced much heated debate. On the one hand, scholars emphasize the transformative potential of participation. Chambers emphasizes the importance of participation by the poor, who were often rendered invisible by the development practitioners of the time (Chambers, 1994). For Chambers, participation is where “the positivist, reductionist, mechanistic, standardized-package, top-down models, and development blueprints are rejected, and in which multiple, local, and individual realities are recognized, accepted, enhanced, and celebrated” (Chambers, 1997, p. 188). The goal is to get local buy-in and to involve the poor in decision making (Gaventa, 2006). This hegemonic participatory approach has gained acceptance in international development. (World Bank, 1994)

On the other hand, some scholars challenge the pervasive belief that participation is unequivocally good, calling it “the new tyranny” (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Cooke and Kothari contradict the World Bank quote above, arguing instead that “the more ‘participatory’ the enquiry more its outcome will mask the power structure of the community” and that this masking represents the tyranny of participation. Others argue that participation proponents have a naïve view of power, in that they often end up seeing the “local” as the site of empowerment, leading to a “tendency to essentialize and romanticize the local” by ignoring power and social inequalities (Mohan & Stokke, 2000). Empowerment in participatory mechanisms has been largely “depoliticized and individualized” (Christens & Speer, 2006)

Some critics want to counter this all out attack on participation, Hickey and Mohan explicitly ask what it takes to move from “tyranny to transformation.” Williams asks whether “participatory practices and discourse necessarily de-politicize” (Williams, 2004). Both argue for bringing politics back to participation. Williams goes on to posit that it is possible to move towards “re-politicization of participation” by developing “a new political imaginary of empowerment.” More generally, participatory development’s claims to transparency and openness may provide a key pressure point at which to build and deploy the political capabilities of the poor and their allies.

This dissertation, while using Williams as a point of departure, asks how the participatory development’s claims to transparency and openness can act as a “pressure point” to push politics to the forefront and what role information plays in the process. I argue that openness makes surveillance possible, and so could deter participation⁷. Thus, we have to examine these issues contextually and ask what purpose are we opening for, who is participating and to what end.

While the participation strand emphasized inclusion in democratic processes, I now turn to the nature and quality of deliberation involved in participation. A starting point for many theorists is the idea of Habermas’s “public sphere.” (Habermas, 1991) According to Habermas, who was largely concerned in tracing the emergence and subsequent collapse of the bourgeois public sphere in Britain, France, and Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries, the public sphere refers to an “ideal speech” situation where social issues are settled through rational deliberation despite inherent status and identity differences.

Habermas defines the public sphere as the sphere of private people who join together to form a “public”. One of Habermas’s key assumptions was the disinterest of the participants. He argued that people arguing in coffeehouses did not bring in their own narrow personal interests. Another key assumption was discursive equality, in that all participants could speak freely and equally effectively. And finally, rational discourse implied that the “best” argument won and achieved consensus. The “best” was defined entirely based on universal notions of logic based on facts. The more deliberative the process, the more undistorted the communication and the more likely it is that consensus

⁷ I explore how surveillance could deter participation in chapter 6.

will be acceptable by all concerned.⁸ One of the goals of democracy is to give everybody an equal voice. But, the question that has challenged Habermas's account is whether the dominated can speak in an unequal world. Calhoun writes, "Habermas simply doesn't address the power relations, the networks of communication... and the structure of influence of the public sphere except in general terms." Calhoun further notes, "The most glaring and often cited instance of this issue is Habermas's decision" to put the "plebeian public sphere to one side as a derivative discourse" (Calhoun, 1992).

Drawing on the Habermasian public sphere as a heuristic, Baiocchi studied the participatory budgeting process of the Brazilian government-sponsored assemblies (Baiocchi, 2003). Baiocchi studied two poor districts in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, with a particular focus on the public nature of the deliberations. The participants in Porto Alegre were poor, were not formally educated, and had suffered under decades of authoritarian rule. Baiocchi argued for the importance of having a state-sponsored public sphere, which ensured that the meeting took place regularly. He argued that there was a difference between the two districts he studied. In one the activist networks were strong and this helped the meetings to be public spirited. He argued that experienced activists thus played an important role, helping to prevent the meetings from degenerating into personal conflicts and ensuring that these discussions were open ended. (An example of such "degeneration" comes in the prologue, where I describe a meeting that was disrupted by violence and activists had to intervene to get the meeting back in order.)

One other factor for Baiocchi was the role of the government in creating a public sphere. He argues that the "official" nature of these government-sponsored budgeting assemblies gave an impression that the meetings could accomplish something. He concludes that "even holding constant the definition of public sphere (Habermas), its features are present in two poor districts in Porto Alegre, Brazil—a context that would be considered unlikely, given their citizens' material difficulties, their lack of education, and the lack of a liberal political culture." Baiocchi's main extension to the Habermasian model was mediation and state sponsorship, both of which raise important questions for the focus of my research.

Rudolph and Rudolph argue for a "democratization" of the Habermas public sphere by looking at Mahatma Gandhi's ashram (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2010). Here *democratization* refers to the extension of the bourgeois public sphere to the "plebian world of non-literate villagers." Gandhi is known for "inventing" a nonviolent form of protest, which he termed the Satyagraha ("truth force"). Nonviolent forms of protest include preparing oneself for sacrifice through self-discipline and a form of ascetic living that was encouraged in his incubator, the voluntary ashram, and, most importantly for this argument, deliberation with the adversary. Building on Habermas, Rudolph and Rudolph argue that the ashram replaces the 18th century coffeehouse as the locus of the public

⁸ Criticisms of the Habermasian public sphere span questions about the historical existence of the sphere to the narrowness of his concept, specifically "bracketing off" gender, identity, and idealizing aspects of rationality to settle differences (Calhoun, 1992).

sphere and provide a radical alternative to deal with issues of power in deliberations. They argue that Gandhi's model better fits Habermas's goal of attaining consensus. Gandhi's consensus was achieved not through "rational" discussions, but through empathy and sacrifice. In Gandhi's model, exemplification and performance play visible roles, thereby appealing to the heart as well as the mind of the people.⁹ Gandhi further seems to bridge the distance between the public and the private spheres. Gandhi's ashram brought private issues out in the open, challenging the Habermasian notion that the viability of the public sphere required that private issues be excluded. They write, "Gandhi's deliberative process involves more than rationality and belief that reason without emotion cannot yield knowledge, truth, or the public good. Reason has to be strengthened by suffering, not by force."

But, Ivan Krastev gives the strongest critique of the citizen surveillance, when he argues:

The movement aims to build a reverse panopticon whereby it is not government that will monitor society but society that will monitor those in power. The totalitarian utopia of people spying for the government is now replaced by the progressive utopia of people spying on the government. (Krastev, 2013)

He argues that the "problem, however, is spying is spying, regardless of who is spying on whom." He ends the article arguing instead for trust in the democratic institutions.

Ostrom offers an alternative, building on the idea of trust within the community. Among Ostrom's eight "design principles" for the community to self govern is the idea that a community can monitor itself and does not need the state to do so. Ostrom writes, through "coproduction" citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them (Ostrom, 1996). Importantly, Ostrom is against "models" of any kind, as these seem to offer the illusion that they can work across contexts when they usually only work under highly specific situations and cannot be scaled-up (Ostrom, 1990). She argues that we have to look at specific instances where a community could self-organize to produce useful assets.

Scott remains skeptical about the possibilities of the poor to overcome power differentials and deliberate in front of powerful representatives of the government and NGOs. He points to the hidden strategies of non-compliance and "weak" forms of protest among the poor, which he refers to as "hidden transcripts" or "infra politics" (Scott, 1990). Deliberations are neither rational debates that suppress power differentials nor emotional outbursts by the poor. Instead, deliberations are targeted based on what the poor can get away with (Scott, 2008). These private interactions also give space for "hidden transcripts" where workers' grievances are aired.¹⁰ Scott's argument is that

⁹ The land redistribution movement, started by Vinoba Bhave, was a Gandhian appeal to the landholders to voluntarily return the land. See (Church, 1975).

¹⁰ Scott's argument however suggests that some aspects of the transcripts are always hidden, and what gets out are tainted and are targeted by the workers depending on the audience (government or civil society). Scott maintains that the process of airing private transcripts is not automatic and may not even be necessary. In my fieldwork this past summer, I did witness evidence of workers largely not opening up

hidden transcripts are nurtured in front of a specific audience and in particular spaces. The key question here is what conditions provide the right spaces and audiences for hidden transcripts to be aired.

To sum up this section, my hypothesis agrees with Scott that there are hidden transcripts, and consequently calls for an empirical examination of the moments where these hidden transcripts emerge. So doing, it builds on Baoicchi's observation of a third-party role to mediate and thus makes these intermediaries a central focus of research. In chapter 4, I discuss how an intermediary institution is created to render the state visible to the citizen. The Ostromian vision is played out in chapter 7, where a tribal community self-organizes to make NREGA work well, outside the purview of the state (Ostrom, 1990).

1.4 Technology and Politics

If information is assumed to be key to assuring the effectiveness of state service provisions, then it is easy to see why people will assume that information technologies should be central to reforming ineffective services. It is tempting to believe that technology can overcome informational asymmetries that may produce economic or political inefficiencies. This assumption is evident in the work of those economists who see mobile phones as vehicles to provide price information to fishermen, and in the work of those who see information kiosks or laptops as sources of political empowerment (Jensen, 2007; Toyama & Kuriyan, 2007). The theory of technology-based governance thus takes it for granted that technology fosters better governance (Weinstein & Goldstein, 2012). What has become known as "e-governance" is expected to foster openness, transparency, accountability, and even participation of citizens almost automatically (Heeks, 1999).

Studies suggest that information and communications technology (ICT) have largely been successfully employed in streamlining labor-intensive bureaucratic transactions within the state, rather than in facilitating participatory efforts from the citizen (Chadwick, 2003). A study examining the use of the UK's Open Government Data (OGD) finds that there is less use of open data for civic contexts (Davies, 2010). It is clear that citizen participation and engagement is not guaranteed by adoption of information technology. Studies looking at e-government usually discuss the efforts within the state apparatus and separate these from citizens' involvement. There is also the question of who benefits from the open government data; Gurstein argues that OGD may reinforce existing inequalities between the "information-haves" and the "information-have-nots" (Gurstein, 2012; Gurstein, 2011).

There is also an ever-present danger that the state may feel that its "transparency" obligations are complete when formal requirements have been completed, allowing it to tick "the open-data box" having made some datasets available regardless of the value of the data and its contribution to openness or participation (Janssen, 2012). Then it will

fully, but there were moments when it was possible to bring out their frustrations out in the open.

build, for example, visualization tools to make it easy for people to use websites and online tools, and then wash its hands.

There has been a rise in the use of civic technology, in the hope that citizens will be able to interact with the state just by using new tools without bothering to be involved in “traditional politics” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Zuckerman, 2014). In this model of governmental transparency, politics have been stripped away and information, in an apolitical and economic sense, is promoted, both to increase governmental openness and to invite and encourage the participation of the citizenry in the nation’s governance (Patel, Sotsky, Gourley, & Houghton, 2013). Governance is reduced to a data-translation and provision problem and information technology can be used both to translate and to provide. As a result there has been a proliferation of “hackathons,” which at best motivate more people (technologists) to become involved in civic issues and at worst trivialize problems of governance to be solved in a weekend (Morozov, 2014).

Some recent research indicates, however, that this reliance on information technology to increase openness may be misguided. Studies have shown that attempts to use technologies and expert knowledge to naturalize or camouflage politics have repeatedly failed (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007). Further, as Gurstein argues, there are two possible worlds of open government data: “One the world of smart phones and iPads of apps and upscale demographics, and the contrasting world of slum dwellers” (Gurstein, 2012).

One way to resolve the lack of politics in the practice of open governance across the world has drawn attention to the ambiguity of this openness and called for a separation of the politics of open governance from the technologies of open data (Yu & Robinson, 2012). Some authors, notably Zuckerman, have argued in the context of the U.S. that citizens (certain constituents who use the internet) do not want to be associated with “political” causes, but instead advocate for thin participation (Zuckerman, 2014). Zuckerman seems to offer new “weapons for the weak” in a modern twist on Scott and to accept citizens’ participation and not force them to be political (Scott, 2008).

In chapter 3, I show how technology was used, in a political sense, within the bureaucracy to control its workings. I also discuss how lower-level bureaucrats use the very same technology to deter surveillance. In chapter 5, I explore why politicization is indeed critical for participation, but comes with its own set of problems. In chapter 6, I show how politics gets in the way of workers coming forward to participate in the state’s open-data project, because their interests are not aligned with the state’s interests.

1.5 Method

Happenstance shapes fieldwork as much as planning and foresight. Numbing routine is as much a part of such work as living theater. Impulse is as important on the ground as rational choice; mistakes are often as significant as accurate and wise choices. This may not be way fieldwork is reported, but it is the way it is carried out in reality (Van Maanen, 2011).

This dissertation grapples with the questions: Does transparency leads to accountability? Is it possible to “democratize” surveillance, turning it into an instrument of democratic control over state bureaucracy? More specifically, can a state bureaucracy

combine visions of surveillance within the state and openness to citizens to help police itself? I examine this in relational terms:

- Who is pushing for open governance, and to what end?
- What are their intentions, what are their assumptions about openness, and what are the effects of their interventions?
- What is the form that the openness takes, and how is it constrained or enabled by previous experiences in the state?
- What resistance to the project is present in existing social structures?
- How does the state respond to these social structures?

The NREGA's "open governance" project in Andhra Pradesh combined visions of surveillance and openness within the state and recruited citizens to help survey the bureaucracy. Questions are examined at two different levels: at the level of the bureaucracy, in which different bureaucratic actors are pitted against one another, and at the level of the citizens themselves. In looking at citizen participation, I look at two different social contexts, a tribal and a class/caste-divided village, to understand how social structure affects implementation.

This dissertation is primarily based on an ethnographic investigation in Andhra Pradesh over an 18-month period between 2011-2012, during which 12 months were spent in the field. I used a variety of approaches to collect data, including participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, a survey administered in 50 villages, content analysis of documents, and archival work in the assembly archives in Andhra Pradesh.

Attempting to follow information and discover its social moorings, I relied on a multi-sited approach (Marcus, 1995; J. Srinivasan, 2011); I could not have discovered what I discovered if I had been located in one village. I wanted my work to capture the situated essence of what was going on, not to suggest that what I discovered here is essentially true everywhere. Indeed, in conclusion I suggest that the problem with the implementation of the "openness" strategy within the state is that it did not reflect on the situated character of early successes but rather assumed these would generalize. Moreover, I was not merely interested in studying the impact of "solutions," but rather in opening up their mechanism to understand what was deployed in the methods of governance and why. I was interested in particular in understanding the governance strategy of NREGA, and had to examine interactions (Gupta, 2012). As Burrell argues, the work of constructing a field site is particularly complicated when the reach of technology (and the state) denies you the luxury of being in one place (Burrell, 2009).

My primary motivation for picking this case came from Evans, who notes "It is always fun and often useful to expose the perfidies of public sector actors, this kind of news is already in oversupply. What is needed is more research on positive cases." (Evans, 1996, p. 1131) My fieldwork studied a positive case to better understand the mechanism that was put in place. The case was not entirely positive, as I discuss in the dissertation, but the project has reduced corruption and has received lots of positive attention.

My fieldwork was actually done in two states, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, with the majority of time spent in Andhra Pradesh. The work can be divided into three phases. The first phase involved gaining an understanding of social audits in Bihar and Andhra

Pradesh, which I carried out by participating as a social auditor. I volunteered as a government auditor for two months and shadowed an audit team while it conducted a door-to-door survey of workers. The second phase involved learning the bureaucracy of NREGA at the state, district, and sub-district “mandal” levels. I attended several internal meetings with higher-level state bureaucrats and witnessed day-to-day operations of the bureaucracy. I also attended more than 25 meetings (some of which were over 12 hours long), videoconferences, workshops, and political rallies at the village, mandal, and state levels. The third phase was directed towards gaining an understanding of the workers’ experience of NREGA by living and working with them for a three-month period in two villages, one a tribal and the other a predominantly Dalit village. During this time I “worked” as an unpaid daily wage laborer, and interviewed a large number workers and inhabitants in each village, witnessing the social audits in the village. I retrieved documents from the Andhra Pradesh legislative assembly to analyze how the legislators discuss NREGA in their meetings. In the end, I conducted over 100 semi-structured interviews of individuals working at the village, regional, state, and national levels.

Looking for variations in the phenomena I observed helped to bring the problematic aspects of the workers’ situation into sharp focus. This “trick” was suggested to me in a conversation with my advisor. In my first break from the field I told him that I could see no differences in the implementation of the system, that all the audits looked the same. He told me to make an active project of looking for differences: “If you think there is no difference, there will be no difference. You have to look for difference” (Becker, 2008).

With this reminder, and with a resolution to keep my mind open to all aspects of the subject I was investigating, I constantly solicited and received advice from my “subjects” themselves, filtering their responses through my own biases and abilities. Their comments ranged from epistemological concerns to mundane questions of where to stay and who to talk to. Higher-level bureaucrats, having seen many survey-based researchers come and go, were puzzled by my extended stay. In my first interview with a bureaucrat at this level, he asked, after discovering that I was going to be spending a year in Andhra Pradesh, “What will you do for so long in the field?”

Later, using the same system of soliciting guidance, I received valuable advice on which regions to visit and which phenomena to observe. Increasingly I came to believe that simply spending time in the field, even without a focused aim, yielded valuable material for later analysis, though some of my economist colleagues warned me to be careful about chasing anecdotes. Like the bureaucrats, the workers did not know what to make of me. Our conversations often revolved around whether or not I had come to police them. Was I a CIA agent sent from America? Had I run away from my family to take solace in the countryside? All this is to say that my method was a constant but often undirected search for patterns. This is not a new method of doing ethnography, but a valuable one.

The biggest source of uncertainty turned out to be my search for a comparative story. I hoped to contrast meetings initiated by social movements with those organized by the state. I believed that this comparison would allow me to analyze the process of

institutionalization that the state brings with the politicization that the social movements bring to observe the relative effects on mobilizing citizen participation.¹¹

Integrating myself in an auditing process was often a delicate operation given that I was studying the struggle over corruption. My outsider/observer/student status could only provide limited protection. If I worked with the auditors, it was very hard to gain the trust of the bureaucrats and the workers, and even within my work with the auditors I needed to vary my role. In one case I volunteered to serve as an active auditor, and in another case I stayed with the senior auditor supervising the auditing process. I was careful to vary the location where I performed each of these roles, so that I could see and be seen in a new light in each case. I also attended several public hearings in different social, political, and geographic locations. I was alert to the possibility of different outcomes in the auditing process depending on the extent to which the meetings were politicized and exposed to protests.

Finally, in order to understand from the perspective of the workers' experience of the democratic process and of the NREGA program, I located myself among the workers for two extended periods of time in two different villages. My rationale for this decision is best articulated by Beteille (Béteille, 2009):

The democratic process not only operates at different territorial levels, but it has to work through a social structure that exercises manifold constraints on it. Those who were seriously interested in seeing how democracy worked in India could not help noting how the political process was being refracted by the social structures. And those whose objective was to record the enduring features of that social structure could not help noting the tremors introduced into it by democratic politics.

Gaining Access

I had connections with the leaders of the Bihar social movement, Jan Jagaran Shakti Sanghatan (JJSS), through my work in the U.S. for The Association for India's Development¹². I have come across many activists in my decade of social and ethnographic work, so I had a good understanding of the major groups working in

¹¹ My first plan was to make an interstate comparison. I chose Bihar and Andhra, but within the initial month of my fieldwork, the social movement in Bihar decided not to pursue social audits as a strategy because there was no support from the state. This meant that I could not use Bihar as a full-blown case in my analysis. As a result of this change, I realized the importance of the state and particularly the importance of the support of the political class in the social auditing process. Once the interstate comparison fell through, I considered several alternate frames of comparison within Andhra Pradesh but eventually realized that the civil society had pulled out from the NREGA process. I was disappointed by this, though later I realized that the phenomenon in itself was data; indeed, I have included a chapter describing the genesis of the social audits in Andhra and the historic role of the civil society in the audit process.

¹² <http://www.aidindia.org>

development in India. Before beginning my fieldwork I also briefly visited the Social Audit Director. Thus my permission to enter the scene came from the top, which helped in gaining initial access to the audit teams and state bureaucracies. For the later stages of my work I used the “snowballing” technique to interview activists, political leaders, and bureaucrats.

Andhra became the main site for my work, which meant that I needed to improve my fluency in Telugu. Ultimately I adopted the following strategy: I started by spending time in Chitoor, a region of Andhra Pradesh, where the inhabitants speak Tamil. I used the assistance of auditors who knew both Tamil and Telugu in the initial months. My interactions with the bureaucrats were carried out predominantly in English. Eventually, thanks to this immersive experience in Telugu, as well as to the close relation between Telugu and Tamil, I came to be relatively fluent in Telugu.

I was eager to spend time in areas outside Chitoor, partly because I was interested in variations in the system and partly because Chitoor is considered to be a “soft district,” meaning that it is an easy district to administer from the bureaucrat’s point of view. Consequently, I hired a man from another village who spoke both Tamil and Telegu as both a traveling companion and a translator. This decision turned out to be invaluable, since, in addition to his translating and guide services, he gave me insights into the workers’ quality of life and was able to share vignettes of his own village to compare with our experiences in the areas we visited. This man felt uncomfortable while staying in a different place, although he spoke the language, and so he did not perform the traditional role of guide and interpreter with the surrounding villagers. Instead he remained in the background, serving as an excellent source of comparative information. Moreover, he was a Dalit, and I am a Brahmin, and thus we were received differently. He was also a former lower-level bureaucrat and his perspective helped me look at corruption in different ways. His stories of seeing corruption in his work were a rich source of insight.

After witnessing the audits, I realized that to understand the system fully I needed to learn more about the way NREGA worked at the lowest level, and so I decided to stay with the workers. I wanted to gain as much familiarity with the region as possible and thus chose a mandal in Chitoor where they spoke Tamil. Later, in order to understand the village meetings, I returned to the same mandal in Chitoor that I had previously visited and with the assistance of the local audit team conducted surveys using an existing World Bank survey.

When I was investigating the workers’ experience at the village level, I did not want the higher-level bureaucrats to keep track of me. I hoped to win the trust of the local bureaucrats and auditors so that they would talk to me sincerely, without feeling they had to perform for me. For the first half of this stage of my research, I wanted to pick a primarily tribal area, which meant that Srikakulam district was an ideal choice. Following my connections, I eventually contacted an NGO who had been working in the tribal area for a number of years. However, because I did not want to be identified with the NGO, I did not work in the villages where they had an active presence but instead used their influence to gain access to a remote village.

For the second half of this stage of my research, I wanted to work in a village where the land and factional politics were exaggerated. Accordingly I was advised by the Principal Secretary of the Rural Development Department in Andhra to go to Kurnool

district. To pick the mandal and village, I followed a similar technique of utilizing my network of connections, contacting first people at the state level, then, through them, people at the mandal level, and so on. Eventually I chose a large village that was not on the main road connecting the mandals.

While the majority of the villagers in each case did not hesitate to talk to me about corruption, my presence did change the reality. Because I was observing attempts at anti-corruption, the surveillance methods and audits became sensitive subjects. I did my best to “blend in,” but, inevitably, I was not always successful. Therefore, I embraced it, taking advantage of the effects of my presence to discover new material. I was thus far from a fly-on-the-wall researcher. I took the “participant” in participant observation seriously (Burawoy, 1998). Instead of prioritizing consistency in my work, I chose to emphasize opportunistic diversity.

With that said, I also took great care to remain neutral and to protect people’s identities. As noted above, I attempted to keep my visits to the various villages and mandals largely unnoticed by the higher-level bureaucrats, and I tried not to align myself explicitly with any particular camp. Occasionally, of course, my strategy of neutrality failed. One lower-level bureaucrat accused me of being a “do gooder” (gandhi giri) and asked me to not get involved in local issues. He was upset that I was delving into the land records of his village. In trying to take advantage of my outsider status, I also inadvertently politicized a public meeting in one village and was ultimately forced to flee from the meeting (Chapter 4).

In time I came to realize that the “neutral” position is not always a popular position. At one public meeting, where I was taking a video of the proceedings, the auditors and the local bureaucracy, at odds with each other, each wanted a copy of the video to prove their point. When I refused to yield to their demands, I was subjected to a great deal of harassment. Thus, I was often forced to make difficult choices and could not satisfy everybody, but in such cases I took comfort in the diversity of the responses to my presence and my intentions.

Nevertheless, my status as a researcher in the audit yielded many insights into the limited power of the audit process to penetrate the social space. I received many testimonies of corruption occurring just beyond the reach of the auditors, and I learned of the lower-level bureaucrats’ disdain for the auditors.

On another occasion I tried to separate myself completely from the bureaucracy, appearing in a village with no introduction. I took seriously the idea that reality comes into sharper focus when normality is dislodged (Burawoy, 1998).

I was not the only active participant in the research process. Several of my “subjects” had an interest in promoting their own points of view. One of the higher-level bureaucrats told me, “Of course you get access to only certain spaces. We let you see what we want you to see.” It was a constant struggle to understand what was going on, and I developed several alternate strategies. The setting for my interviews, for example, was extremely important. Several bureaucrats spoke differently depending on whether our interaction happened at the office or at their house. The motivations for this difference, moreover, were dependent on the personalities of the individuals.

Activists worried that I would find NREGA to be corrupt and thus provide fodder for right-wing efforts to end the program; bureaucrats did not want me to find that they were corrupt because they were afraid they might lose their jobs as a result. Similarly, the

local auditors tried to either impress me by working harder than usual or to control and limit what I saw. Workers lingered at the field site to convince me that they were working longer hours. I tried both to take the distortions into account in my analysis and to exploit the effect for my own research purposes whenever possible.

Studying a contemporary phenomenon offers the advantage of being able to participate in the process, but there is a significant challenge in studying an evolving process as it happens. Theory is a tool that lets you see aspects of social reality you might otherwise miss, but ultimately it may have to be rejected in order to witness the true phenomenon. I have not been able to let go of the theoretical framework easily, finding it to be an invaluable help in the field.

In ethnography, the research site never leaves the researcher. It has been more than two years since I left Andhra Pradesh, but I return constantly in my mind, in sifting my data, interpreting my experiences, and writing up my analysis. The commitment to ethnography truly does not stop with fieldwork but continues long afterward. It is certainly true for me.

1.6 The Structure of the Dissertation

The rest of the chapters are structured as follows:

In chapter 2, I set up the context of NREGA in Andhra and describe the “Andhra Model” of governance. I discuss how high-level bureaucrats in Andhra constructed a state-civil society “sandwich” to squeeze the lower-level bureaucrats both from the top, using information technology, and from the bottom, getting testimonies from workers by opening government records.

In chapter 3, I present how the higher-level bureaucrats in Andhra created a technology-based system of surveillance for their subordinates. I show how the lower-level bureaucrats have discovered ways to subvert these formal efforts of control through informal norms and how there is an iterative process of control and resistance using technology to mediate.

In chapter 4, I discuss an attempt to institutionalize a public process of auditing government records known as “social audits” in Andhra. I trace the evolution of the social audit process from Rajasthan through various experiments over the years to the current institutional structure of conducting audits.

Chapter 5 focuses on public meetings. While the previous chapter showed how the institutional structure evolved, this chapter examines how these structures determine the outcome of the social audit meeting. To understand the effects of the structure on these meetings, I compare variations in the institutional underpinnings. Specifically, I discuss three meetings, each organized by a different institutional structure: bureaucracy, political party, and the social audit institution. For each, I look at the effects of the meeting on citizens’ participation. My main motivation is to situate the social audit meeting among other public meetings and other studies of how the meetings are organized to understand how the outcomes are shaped by a complex set of factors reflecting issues of power and politics. An analysis of various meetings organized by different political and government entities is then presented (chapter 5), showing that the

effectiveness of these meetings is dependent on where the meetings falls on the politicized spectrum.

In chapter 6, I explore the experiences of villagers encountering the audit process in the context of the work program. In order to do this, I first look at how NREGA works and is interpreted in practice. While the data I present here was gathered in one village, I also draw information from other villages where I spent time during my fieldwork. Issues of caste and class differences show that local social and political relations inevitably affect the implementation of the NREGA, and thus the audit process. By studying it from the perspective of the workers, I have found that workers do not participate because they worry their critiques will lead to the termination of the NREGA program, which they prefer, as it frees them for their relationship with the landed-caste. Also, the workers are worried that the instruments of surveillance will be turned against them by the politically powerful.

In chapter 7, I explore how NREGA works in a village where there is a strong sense of a community. In contrast to the villages discussed in chapter 6, in tribal villages NREGA works well. This is because tribal populations actually care about the physical infrastructure they build as a community and derive real benefit from it. I argue that there are two broad inter-related factors that account for this: their relationship with the state and the lack of social division within the tribe.

Finally, in chapter 8, I argue how hard it is to actually eliminate last-mile corruption, even with sophisticated technological and social strategies. Nonetheless, there are potential benefits to this program. First, the program actually worked very well—less corruption and more worker dedication—in the context of the tribal village. Second, even with the corruption, the NREGA is extremely beneficial to the workers. These benefits are not only from wages but also the transformation in bargaining power between the workers and the landowners. Therefore, even though there are many obstacles in eliminating corruption, this should not to be used as an excuse to end the program. I conclude by discussing the implications from the Andhra case: that open governance needs to be re-imagined, from thinking of open governance merely as democratizing information to seeing it as democratizing surveillance.

2: The Case: NREGA in Andhra Pradesh

In this chapter I describe the case of NREGA in Andhra Pradesh. I first trace briefly the political, economic and agricultural context of India. I then describe NREGA and problems of governing public works in India and particularly in Andhra Pradesh. I then describe the "Andhra Model" of governance. I discuss how the Andhra Pradesh state has constructed a state-civil society "sandwich" to squeeze the lower-level bureaucrats both from the top using information technology and getting testimonies from workers by opening government records (Fox, 1993).

2.1 India's Political, Economic and Agricultural Context

While urban India has garnered a lot of attention lately by becoming a back office and software powerhouse, Gandhi's observation still holds: "The true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its 700,000 villages. If the villages perish, India will perish too." Also true is Keniston and Kumar's assessment of India - "For all of its ancient cultural wealth, despite the persistence of old elites and emergence of new elites, India remains one of the world's poorest societies" (Keniston & Kumar, 2004).

The Indian state that was born after the British colonial era had considerable legitimacy. There was a strong commitment to government intervention to promote industrialization, economic growth, and redistribution. However, the government was not fully autonomous and needed the upper classes to stay in power, and so the redistributive policies suffered to a large extent.

Agriculture and specifically land issues fall under local state jurisdiction in India. The fact that the local state had control over land issues meant that the federal government did not have much say in actual implementation. As the Congress Party dominated both state and federal governments, it should have been possible to create some consensus. However, local landed interests were powerful in state governments and they became a major impediment to land redistribution (Frankel, 1978).

Although the rural poor could vote, thanks to universal suffrage, they were not yet independent political actors and were embedded largely in the existing social structures. This meant that the landlords and other moneyed classes still had power, and political leaders had to form patronage networks. This ensured that the progressive force of the party was marginalized and that social redistributive goals were not a priority. Also, the capitalist class in India was not a homogenous class and thus suffered from a collective action problem. So, the states performed a regulatory role, dispensing patronage, rather than a "developmental" role focused on capital accumulation (Bardhan, 1998). With these contradictory forces (one with a strong state mandate to reform the countryside) and without complete control by the capitalist classes, the only alternative for the government was to attempt to release the economic dynamism of the society through the public support of private profitability (Kohli, 2004) (Kohli, 1987).

In 1947, India was an agricultural economy with 60% of its gross domestic product (GDP) from agriculture and a net area of about 118 million hectares under cultivation. The colonial British had changed the land system in substantial ways to

facilitate the major extraction of resources and to maintain control. Specifically, the British made these changes to agricultural policies in 18th-century India:

- Created a class of absentee landlords by passing the Permanent Settlement Act, where rights to own the land were given to the landlord instead of to the cultivator;
- Institutionalized land transfers, making land a private good.

Furthermore, in the last years of their occupation, there was major development of irrigation and measures to establish scientific research and development (Bhalla, 2007).

At the time of Indian independence, the “zamindari” system¹³ of insecure tenancies, concentrated ownership, great inequality in land holdings, prevalence of tiny uneconomic holdings, and fragmentation of holdings characterized the agrarian structure (Appu, 1997). The land policy adopted by the Indian state after independence was to address these problems. Because land was under state jurisdiction, state governments enacted the post-independence land reforms. In general, land reforms were an important agenda; the local states quickly adopted a number of reforms to confront the land situation. The main tenets that were part of the common legal framework were:

- Abolition of intermediary tenures;
- Tenancy reforms: regulation of rent, security of tenures, and ownership rights to tenants;
- Ceiling on land holdings and distribution of surplus land.

The agricultural strategy thus had two irreconcilable goals, one focused on increasing agricultural output to support rapid industrialization and the other focused on reducing inequality in rural life.

The first major agricultural programs after independence were allocated only to districts with favorable conditions like adequate access to water. There was widespread criticism of these plans, which made the planning commission quickly abandon them for a more widespread agricultural program. Also, the initial attempts favored more intensive cultivation of land rather than relying on machinery and modern inputs.

The land reform did eliminate the numerous layers of intermediaries between the state and the cultivator, and have played a positive role in penalizing absenteeism (Patnaik, 1986). In some sense, the power has shifted from the erstwhile zamindars to a new structure where the power is now shared between the former tenants who had larger holdings. The reforms left the bottom layer of the agrarian structure, mainly laborers and sharecroppers, untouched. The prevailing patterns of land rights and produce sharing stood in the way of adoption of modern farming practices¹⁴ (Appu, 1997).

¹³ The zamindar means “landholder.” The term connotes the holder of an intermediate interest in land with the obligation to pay land revenue to the government. These were essentially parasitic rentiers who appropriated a substantial share of the produce of the land and harassed the actual cultivators.

¹⁴ Appu gives a fascinating insider’s look into land reform politics, having worked as a Land Reforms Commissioner in the 1970s.

Because the land reforms were not successful (except the abandonment of the zamindari system), no real dynamism was possible in Indian agriculture, as the small farmers were not incentivized to improve agricultural production, relying solely on labor-intensive agricultural production programs (Frankel, 1971). It was fairly clear that the state pursued the path of increasing output without worrying about equity.

Another interpretation is that the Indian state came out of its struggle for independence with a reformist mindset of giving land to the masses, but that was stalled because of political issues (Appu, 1997). The central state could eke out more of a technical role in the agriculture modernization experiment and had to rely on the local state for more of the controversial land reform implementation.¹⁵ In many states the land reforms have not been carried through, resulting in a rural structure where there are the landed class and the landless laborers (Balagopal, 2011).

Caste relations add another dimension to the inequality in India¹⁶. Caste and class relations are intertwined, and particularly caste inequality contributed to class based inequality, because of historical division of labor that restricted mobility. The class-caste nexus is particularly salient in India, where each region has its own castes. In Andhra Pradesh (AP), the Reddies and Kammas constitute the dominant landed community and the landless laborers are mainly Dalits. Tribals are a distinct category and usually live in the hills and do not suffer from the same caste/class based divisions like the Dalits. Agrarian surplus extraction was based on exploitation of lower-caste households with marginal or no land (Jakimow, 2014). These class-caste exploitations are not merely historical and continue even today and I discuss that in chapter 6.

In Andhra Pradesh, over the past few decades, exploitative relations between landed and landless class have come under pressure because of political mobilization from low-caste groups (Byres, Kapadia, & Lerche, 2013; Jakimow, 2014). The dominant castes are gradually losing their capacity to influence the political behavior of those below them leading to identity based politics which is transforming the rural country side in Andhra Pradesh (Balagopal, 2011; Kohli, 1988).

Ideally, how does the state function with a sense of developmental purpose targeted at eliminating poverty without being co-opted by the propertied and caste interests? Then, is it also important to have the state be flexible enough to promote the activities of the propertied classes? (Kohli, 1987, 2004) These questions frame the context for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) implementation in Andhra.

In the next section, I start introducing NREGA, review briefly the literature that discuss the issue of corruption in the context of the program.

¹⁵ It would be interesting to understand why the constitution was written to give jurisdiction over land issues to the state.

¹⁶ For an historical account see (Bayly, 2001). For an introduction see (Mines, 2009)

2.2 NREGA

The Act was passed in 2005 as a result of a political compromise which came to be known as the “common minimum program” as part of a coalition government, with raised expectations for providing basic safety to the poor in rural India (Khera, 2011). NREGA itself has two broad goals. One is to provide employment for workers, and the other is to build useful rural infrastructure. To achieve these aims, NREGA seeks to provide at least 100 days of guaranteed-wage employment per year to every household, provided its members are willing to do manual labor at the government-approved minimum wage (Khera, 2011). The work typically consists of digging ditches, building agricultural bunds or canals, and other measurable labor projects carried out on public lands. The program has been spending about USD 5.5 billion per year, 7.9% of its budget for fiscal year April 2013-March 2014, paying workers to work on state-designated, public-works projects (Muralidharan et al., 2014a). It provides basic employment and some have claimed that it is the largest public-employment program in human history (Muralidharan et al., 2014b). According to a survey in 2011-12, about 25% of all rural households in India worked in NREGA. Dalits and tribals made up 40% of the total workforce, while women constituted on average 50% of the workforce, which is higher than most other development programs.

The first place to start to understand how NREGA came to be is the edited volume by Reetika Khera (Khera, 2011). The book chronicles the “battle” to pass the right to work law largely from an activist’s perspective, as Jean Dreze is credited for playing a key role in designing the program. Chopra details the role of the state and non-state actors in passing the law (Chopra, 2011).

Many studies have been published, debating every provision of the scheme. Most have focused on understanding the impact of the program in providing a basic safety net to poor citizens and in preventing distress migration to the cities. The majority of these studies, however, use the Indian government’s own data to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. By last count there have been about 100 articles published on the program. For a comprehensive summary of these studies, see the *Anthology of Research Studies on the MGNREGA (2006-2012)* (Mann & Pande, 2012).

Concern about corruption has dominated studies on NREGA, particularly because of the scale of the program and its potential to provide a basic safety net to the poor. While the majority of the studies have been external, there have been a few studies that have worked closely with the state governments to experimentally study the roll out of the program (Muralidharan et al., 2014b).

The studies have argued about the effect of NREGA and how much corruption there is under each state. There are rankings of each state, and by most estimates the Andhra Pradesh story has been regarded as a success: its performance ranks near the top across all states. In the largest randomized experiment in the world, where the roll out of the biometric cards were measured, the corruption in NREGA was found to be about 30% in the control villages, and it dropped to 20% in the treatment villages (Muralidharan et al., 2014b).

While there has been primary work on quantifying the effects of NREGA, there have also been articles trying to compare different studies. For example, one article argues that “A leakage rate of 30% or less seems a lot better than the 90% leakage rates

associated with food subsidies in India.” NREGA benefits seem to spillover and have had effects beyond the program, for example, raising private-sector wages. Documenting the effects from 2006 to 2009, one study shows that the daily wage for casual work has risen 9.7% in select states and 5.5% on average. The statistic lends credence to the belief that NREGA has improved the bargaining power of workers. Others contest this, arguing that the demand has not been met and that the number of people who have been given work on average has been low. Another study by the same authors argues that NREGA has prevented migration, despite the fact that the earnings outside of the village are nearly two times higher than earnings in NREGA, because of very high migration costs.

Further, in studying corruption, there has been separation of funding for wages and material. While NREGA had a 60:40 labor-to-material ratio, there have been efforts to modify it to 49:51, prompting concerns from several academics and activists. Judging from recent experience, there is nothing wrong with the current 60:40 norm for the labor-to-material ratio in NREGA projects. Lowering the norm to 49:51 would severely dilute the employment objective of NREGA without doing anything to make NREGA projects more productive.

Corruption in NREGA has been subject to constant discussion, in particular because the majority of the funds for the program (90%) come from the central government, its implementation is left to the states, and many of the states have been accused of engaging in or turning a blind eye to the diversion of those funds (Khera, 2011). In Andhra Pradesh, however, NREGA has generally been celebrated as a success, and the state’s administration of the program has been looked to as a “model” of implementation, worthy of imitation (Maiorano, 2014). However, much remains to be done to ensure that NREGA is corruption-proof for material as well as wages.

Mathur’s examination of the Uttarkhand bureaucracy using ethnographic methods finds that the documentation requirements of NREGA has made it onerous for the bureaucracy there (Mathur, 2012). While the Andhra story is acknowledged as a success, there has not been a sustained examination of the mechanisms that were put in place. Aiyar’s study focuses largely on one part of the implementation and on social audits, but relies on interviews (Aiyar & Samji, 2009).

Researchers from the Poverty Action Lab, based in San Diego (U.S.), have conducted an experimental study, using randomized control trials and in conjunction with the state government of Andhra Pradesh, documenting that corruption in Andhra has is 30% in the NREGA program (Muralidharan et al., 2014b). Another recent study examines the political reasons for the seriousness with which Andhra Pradesh undertook the implementation of the program (Maiorano, 2014). But, the transparency safeguards that have been painstakingly built into NREGA need to be understood in its own terms and to see how it works in practice.

2.3 Andhra Pradesh's Political and Administrative Context¹⁷

The key element in determining a radical shift in the Andhra's governance strategy, was the political will at the highest level, namely that of the late Chief Minister (CM), Y.S.Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR).¹⁸ YSR, enjoyed tremendous clout and played a crucial role in getting the Congress Party elected to power. This government also came to power because of the crucial support of the Left, and there was agreement on a common minimum program that would be forged to improve development in India. Two pieces of legislation that came out of this consensus were the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the Right to Information Act (RTI). AP is the only major Congress Party-governed state in the country and was therefore key to ensuring that the program was implemented well in Andhra. YSR also had a local reason: the former ruling party, Telugu Desam Party (TDP), had lost badly and post facto analysis argued that it was because of focus on urban areas (known as the “India Shining” campaign) and neglect of rural areas.

There were left-wing extremist groups, known as the “Naxal problem,” which were also very important to gaining support in the Tribal areas around that time. Also, the rural program that YSR administered through the centrally sponsored “food for work” (often called “loot for work”) program was documented to have “exceptionally high misappropriation(s)” to its party operatives (Maiorano, 2014). NREGA is similar to the “food for work” program, but instead of food, cash was supposed to be given out to the workers. There were a number of safeguards in the act to control for corruption, if implemented.

YSR had also campaigned vigorously promising that he would focus on the rural poor. He had undertaken a padayatra (journey on foot) across the poorer districts in Andhra for 45 days in the hot summer. YSR seemed resolved to implement the program well. He got one of the honest bureaucrats who had made his name through the struggles in Nellore (a district in Andhra) and in administering several successful programs in the bureaucracy. According to Raju, who was the principal secretary of rural development, YSR told him to ensure that the program was implemented well. He had also warded off criticism from the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in the party and told them to keep away from this program. He would find other ways to make money for them.¹⁹ As Maiorano noted: “the chief minister’s actions were crucial to change the very perception of the state’s welfare schemes, from a way to amass wealth by powerful actors, to a device for re-election” was a radical move.

¹⁷ The Andhra Pradesh has been split into two states on June 2, 2014, namely Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Bulk of my field work was restricted to the districts that became part of the new Andhra Pradesh.

¹⁸ See (Maiorano, 2014) for an analysis on the key role of the political agency in determining NREGA in AP. I rely on his argument, but I also attest to hearing a similar story in my interviews.

¹⁹ This “other ways of making money” is coming out in the open now; there is an enquiry underway and his son is now in jail for corruption during his father’s tenure.

It was puzzling that YSR, a Reddy, would try to properly implement a program that largely seemed to benefit landless laborers and was not aimed at farmers. In my interviews,²⁰ what seemed to emerge was that a) the landless laborers represented by the Dalit population do form a significant voting block; b) 100 days of work/family was not seen to directly or significantly affect the interests of the farming class; and c) people underestimated the extent to which this program would be able to raise the minimum wages in the country side. Wage increase or not, it definitely seem to have increased the options available for the workers to work at the NREGA work site, compared to working on the agricultural farm.

The state of Andhra Pradesh, like the rest of the states in the country, is administered through a hierarchy as shown in Figure 1. The state is divided into districts. Under each district there are mandals, a unique AP phenomenon. (In other states, the districts are divided into administrative blocks.) The mandals are further divided into gram panchayats, under which are villages. Finally, within villages are habitations, which are often segregated by caste. The dissertation uses “higher-level” bureaucrats to denote bureaucrats at the state level and “lower-level” bureaucrats for those operating at the mandal and village level.

Andhra Pradesh administrative context

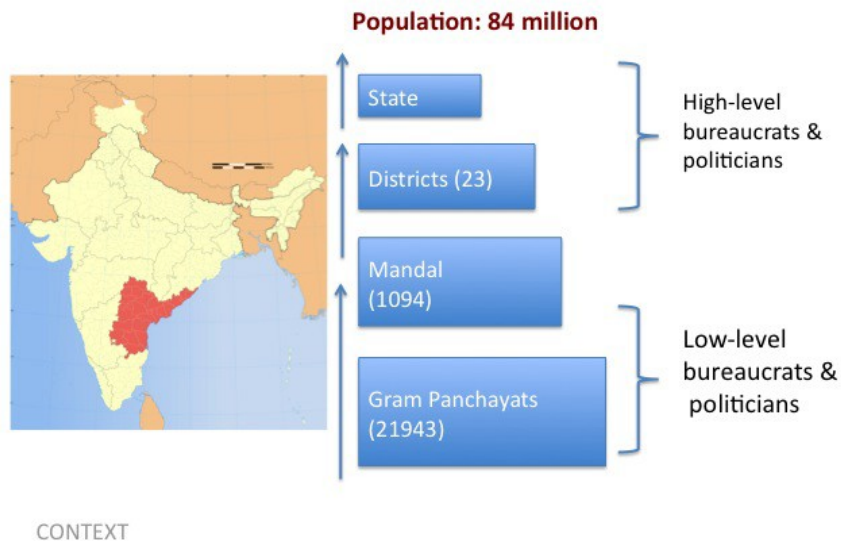


Figure 1

²⁰ As YSR is now dead, I relied on interviews with the then-principal secretary of Rural Development.

Figure 2, shows the hierarchy of the implementing bodies in NREGA. The administration of NREGA operates at different levels of the hierarchy. The positions represent the four tiers of administration, matching the state, district, mandal, and village levels. In Andhra Pradesh, in the last decade, there has been an effort to outsource the work of the state to outside agents and contractors (Manor, 2006) (Kuriyan & Ray, 2009). NREGA continued that trend of employing contract labor. The entire bureaucracy at the mandal level, except the Mandal Program Development Officer (MPDO), was a temporary work force. But in practice, the main players in Andhra Pradesh are at the state level and the lower-level bureaucrats at the mandal level. The administrators at the district level are largely bypassed. The village-level agents are controlled at the mandal level, effectively reducing the number of levels to two: the higher-level bureaucrats at the state level and the lower-level bureaucrats at the mandal level. There are no offices at the village level for NREGA. There is a district office, but its role is limited to storing documentation and rubber-stamping projects that come up and down the hierarchy.

The implementation agency is at the mandal level. The mandal has an office, which is called the mandal office or sometimes called the MPDO office. Each village typically has a field assistant (FA), who assigns work, maintains attendance registers, and makes all key decisions at the field level. The FA is an important position at the village level; it is an administrative position and not part of the village panchayat. In Andhra Pradesh, the move to appoint bureaucrats as opposed to relying on the local political positions is an attempt to take control of the implementation.

The technical side of the program, planning the actual work, is left to two other administrative positions at the mandal level, called the Technical Assistant (TA) and the Engineering Consultant (EC). The TA and EC are appointed at the state level, again to remove them from local political influences. They are also temporary contract employees and often have a diploma and in some cases engineering degrees. NREGA work is standard and “simple,” but the TAs and ECs still need to know to be able to read engineering diagrams. The role of the TA and EC is to plan projects and take measurements. NREGA pays workers based on the amount of work done, on a piece-rate basis, and the TAs are the one who measure the work. They maintain measurement books, which document the dimensions of the work. In effect, they do the job that contractors used to do before NREGA.

The most critical actor at the mandal level is the computer operator. The computer operator is responsible for digitizing all the records and plays a very critical role in the AP’s implementation of NREGA. His/Her appointment also happens at the state level. These computer operators are well trained in using computers, and know how to install the software required; they are trained at the district level.

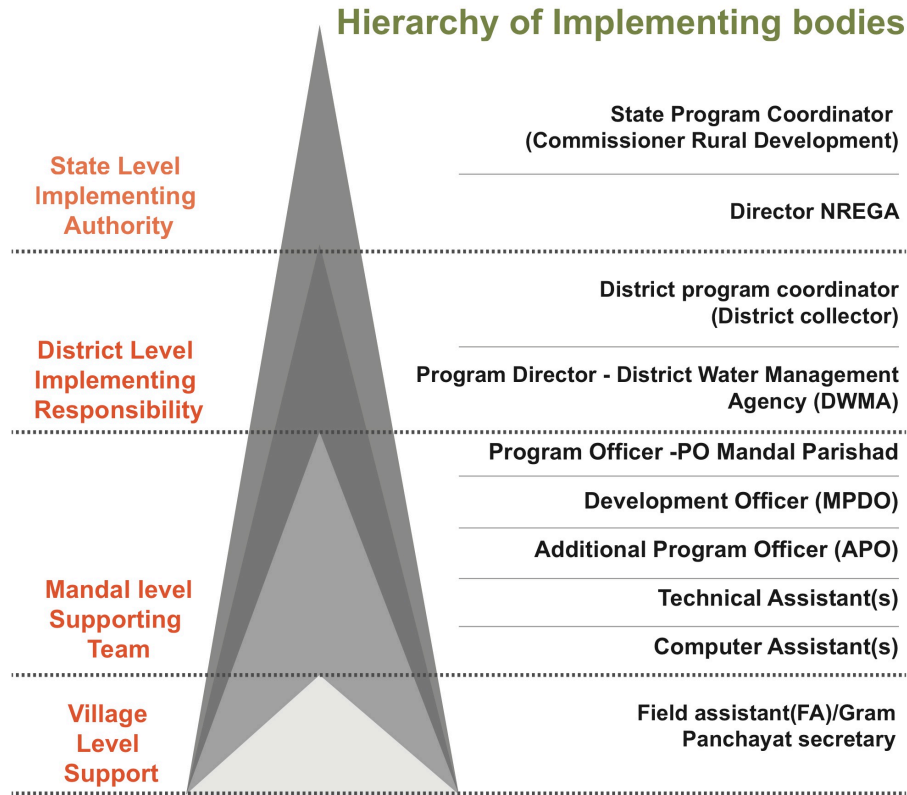


Figure 2

NREGA is further distinguished from other development programs in that employment is guaranteed, meaning that it cannot be left to the whims of a political party, often the source of political corruption. Moreover, states cannot cite lack of funds as a reason for eliminating the program. Thus distinct from earlier programs, NREGA might also be said to reflect their experience, including several previously successful features into its structure. In particular, the NREGA overlapped with the Right To Information (RTI) legislation passed at the same time. The impetus for the RTI law was a famine-relief project in Rajasthan.²¹ Workers who worked in the famine-relief projects were not receiving the stated benefits of the program, and money claimed for their pay was in fact being siphoned off to corrupt officials. After struggles that spanned two decades, activists were able to “open” government documents used to track the payments (many of which in fact merely concealed the corruption) and checked them against the testimony of the workers whose payments they purported to record. They used the

²¹ For a critical view of how RTI passed in India and why it did not face much resistance from the bureaucracy see (Sharma, 2014).

resulting discrepancies to challenge the state's account. This eventually found its way into the NREGA legislation in the form of "social audits" (Baviskar, 2009).

Social audits have been mandated in NREGA, and all states are required to conduct them. The law stipulates that the social audit is to be conducted every six months by the local villagers. The state government of Andhra Pradesh has gone a step further and institutionalized such audits. The AP case is especially distinctive because of its interaction between online (internal administrative surveillance) and offline (public-facing, involving the workers) monitoring for accountability; this process is rarely recognized in the wave of enthusiasm for online approaches that omits the offline dimension.

The audit team has a certain "embedded autonomy" in that, though funded by the state, it is independent of the implementing agency (Evans, 1995). The audit unit consists of a central team that travels around the region and local contingents from the villages themselves. Village auditors are typically the literate children of NREGA workers and are hired and trained on a per-audit basis. The social audit consists of three stages. First, social auditors "open up" everyday government documents not previously made public, such as muster rolls and measurement books containing the dimensions of NREGA projects and their locations. In the course of an audit, auditors measure worksites to make sure that they match the dimensions in the records, read muster rolls aloud to verify that the details in these documents match what the workers recall, and record all discrepancies between the official records and what they learn in the course of the audit.

In the second stage, the workers produce written testimonies supporting or countering the government records. Household surveys allow for private discussions in which workers are able to air their grievances. Where the workers are willing, these private discussions are recorded in an audit document with the worker's signature or thumbprint. In the third stage of the audit, all the audit documents are examined in a public hearing, in which both the government records and the audit report are presented to the public. The audit report is read, and the public is offered a chance to speak. A government officer presides over this meeting and levies penalties in the form of fines, suspensions, or termination to bureaucrats who are found to be corrupt. Workers, activists, and local-government officials attend the public hearing. In some cases, representatives from the media also attend and, in troubled regions, the police. The audit documents are publicly presented first at the village level (in meetings known as gram sabhas) and then at the mandal (sub-district unit), or regional administrative hub, in a meeting presided over by district bureaucrats. These mandal public hearings offer new opportunities for citizens to critique the state.

The starting point of my analysis is NREGA's supposed status as a solution to the political-bureaucratic and contractor nexus that has traditionally been used to structure development programs. Until the NREGA program, Andhra Pradesh had a weak record of implementing public-works programs. One of the predecessors of NREGA in the state was a "food for work" program. A study looking at its implementation declared the program to be a waste. Several newspaper reports and government audits suggested that local officials embezzled funds by fudging muster rolls, paying lower daily wages than the prescribed minimum wage, and taking bribes to allot work. One report argued, "One of the most disturbing findings that emerges from this research is that almost everywhere we studied, panchayat officials and sarpanches were instrumental in the corruption of

“food for work.” The report calls into question the promise that decentralization holds for improved accountability and better service delivery.” (Deshingkar et al., 2005)

This account draws attention to the different roles and interests of the various levels of administration. In the case of the NREGA, the program is sponsored by the central government, but each state must ratify the Act and create its own scheme to guide its implementation. The central government periodically tries to ensure that the states follow the basic regulations of the Act, and it is able to block the funds if the state bureaucracy is found to be not following the rules. In Andhra Pradesh, as in other states, this implementation involves a three-tier structure of governance: the district, the mandal, and the village gram panchayats (councils). Traditionally, the different levels of bureaucracy have operated by a top-down theory of management. The scope and nature of government projects are decided at the state level, money is released at the top, and the work then gets done at the local level.

Typically, circulars and government orders issued at the state level govern the programs. These circulars and orders provide guidelines determining what is allowed under each program. In 1992, there was a nationwide decentralization of power and local elected governments began taking on development projects.²² This decentralization, however, did not automatically bring greater accountability. In the eyes of bureaucrats at the state level, rather than democratizing the process, the new system simply introduced new possibilities for corruption. One senior bureaucrat summarized the issue as follows:

I found three kinds of vested interests: politicians who get the works sanctioned are bringing the works to the village so that they have a share in it, and the engineers and contractors, who implement the works and make the estimates, also have a share in it. I have found that development programs in the past have been driven through and through by these vested interests. So, I realized that, if NREGA is to run, we have to keep these three fellows out. We need to have a totally different business process. The same business process just will not work. Willy nilly, these people will come in and position themselves. We need to turn the whole thing upside down, and only then will things move. We need to take away the powers from everyone.

This “last-mile problem” arises from the inability of higher-level bureaucrats to govern the vast areas under their jurisdiction due to a limited number of civil servants and a deep-rooted unwillingness to cede power to the locals. In order to reduce this last-mile corruption, the Andhra Pradesh higher-level bureaucrats have sought to centralize the implementation, using information technology to control the lower-level bureaucrats. In addition, they have tried to institutionalize social audits by involving workers in this surveillance of the lower-level bureaucrats.

²² The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution allowed for the increased role of village councils, or gram panchayats, in rural governance.

2.4 Andhra Model of Governance: State-Civil Society “Sandwich”

In effect, the aim has been to build a state-civil society “sandwich” to exert pressure from both the top (higher-level bureaucrats) and the bottom (the workers) to squeeze the corruption out of the lower-level bureaucrats in the middle of the sandwich (Fox, 1993)²³. The “sandwich” strategy as originally conceptualized by Fox imagines the countervailing power to come from “below” (the grassroots) to take advantage of the “opening from above.” Figure 3 captures the imagination that flows out of such a sandwich strategy. As does Fox, I find that reformists within the state and allies from the outside construct a “scaled-up organization” through a certain “institutional entrepreneurship” (Evans, 1996).

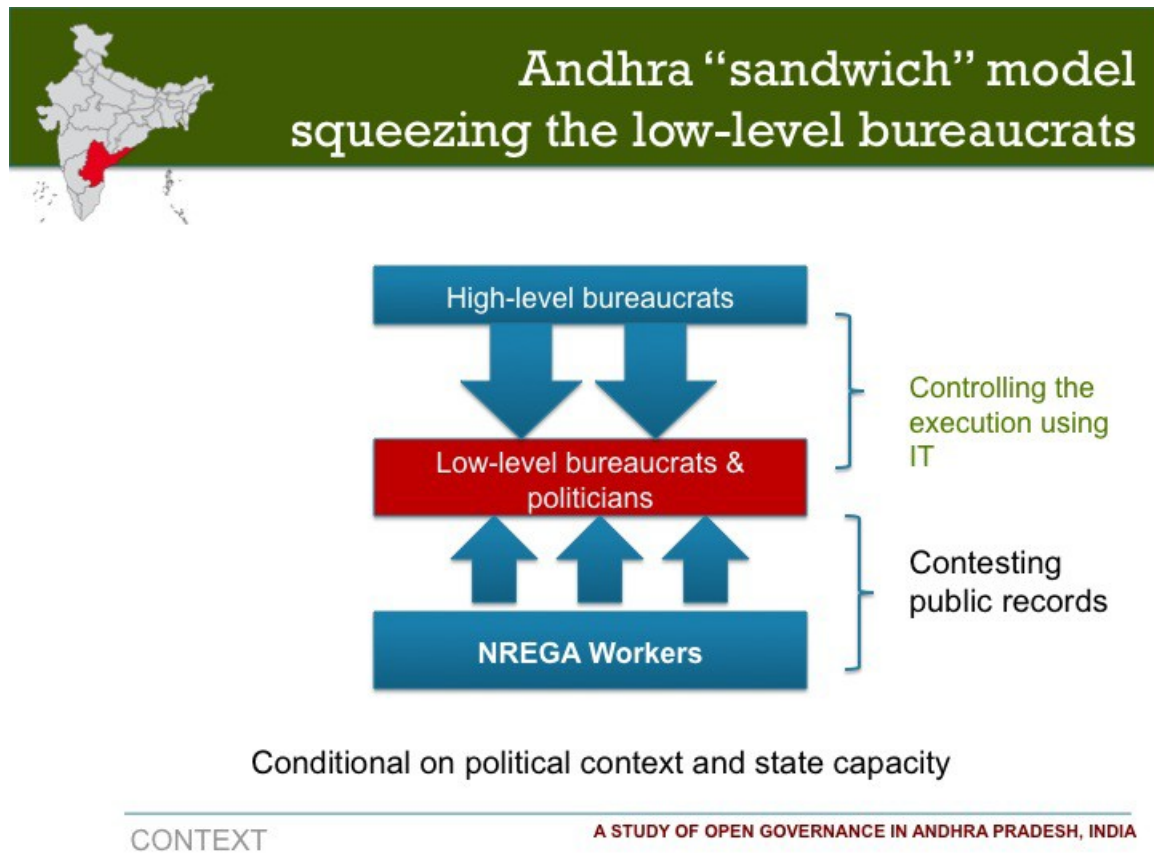


Figure 3

In chapter 3, I focus on the top half of the “sandwich,” where I discuss how the higher-level bureaucrats surveyed the lower-level bureaucrats.

²³ Fox writes - "The term "sandwich strategy" is shorthand for these coordinated coalitions among pro-accountability actors embedded in both state and society (Fox, 1993).

3: Governmentality and Panopticism

3.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at an information and communication technology (ICT) initiative by the Andhra Pradesh (AP) state government. This initiative goes beyond the usual access-oriented initiatives to address what the AP government officials consider to be the “last-mile” problem. The last-mile problem is the inability of higher-level bureaucrats to govern their jurisdiction due to a limited number of civil servants and a deep-rooted unwillingness to cede power to mistrusted—or at least corruptible—subordinates. To address the last-mile problem, the higher-level bureaucracy has deployed various forms of surveillance mechanisms to control the lower-level bureaucrats, but this has succeeded only in part. Lower-level bureaucrats have found ways to circumvent surveillance as well as control, although imperfectly. Here, the software system designed by the higher-level bureaucrats is an evolving panopticon that overcomes resistance to the system by changing its design constantly. The struggle for control of the panopticon persists as the lower-level bureaucrats find creative ways to thwart the intentions of their superiors.

3.2 Framework

Max Weber offers bureaucracy as a positive force to reckon with, despite its potential to trap us in an iron cage. Bureaucracy protects officeholders from the arbitrary whims of the ruler by requiring them to adhere to a predetermined set of rules (Weber, Gerth, & Mills, 1946). Here, the higher-level bureaucrats share Weber’s vision.

The themes of governmentality and panopticism frame this chapter (Heeks, 1999). The idea of governmentality, introduced by Michel Foucault, refers to a form of governing seen as a “conduct of conduct”. Governmentality is a form of rationality deployed—using a detailed set of “micro-practices”—to manage the conduct of others, where people are persuaded to control themselves. According to Foucault, in the shift from a sovereign power to a disciplinary power, governmentality became the new way power was exercised by the state over the population (Foucault, 1977). While the general discourse around governmentality treats it as a state-versus-population construct, here the idea is of governmentality within the bureaucracy: the higher-level bureaucrats exert power over the lower-level bureaucrats primarily by controlling their “micro-practices”. In essence, a system designed to survey the population is turned into one designed to survey lower-level bureaucrats, thereby splitting the monolithic state internally.

In India, higher-level bureaucrats have traditionally exercised control through government orders and circulars, that is, paper documents that circulate through the hierarchy. Apart from rules and procedures that come down from the top, periodic reports were generated at the field level and sent up. The actions of the higher-level bureaucrats can be seen as controlling the “micro-practices” of a program. These highly detailed practices governed every aspect of the program.

The concept of the panopticon can explain how higher-level bureaucrats transcend the material limitations of exercising power over subordinates. Foucault helped

popularize Bentham's idea of the panopticon as an effective means of maintaining surveillance over prisoners. The architecture of the prison is arranged so that the prisoners do not see each other but are seen by a central observer. Not knowing when and if they are being observed, the prisoners discipline themselves to avoid sanctions. While Bentham meant the panopticon to be beneficial to society, today the idea of the panopticon raises the specter of the Orwellian "surveillance society" (Lyon, 1994).

The panopticon and "micro-practices" operate at two levels. The panopticon exerts power through a disciplinary process whereby the "gaze" leads to adherence to the prison rules. The micro-practices move beyond the gaze and exert control over the everyday rules of the prison.

To reiterate, governmentality has largely been used to look at the relation between state and citizen, but here governmentality and its modes of surveillance apply to the relation between well-intentioned, higher-level bureaucrats and their subordinates. This approach can be traced to Weber, who believed bureaucracy was a distinct "life order" and had substantial social benefits (Du Gay, 2005; Sharma & Gupta, 2009).

The next section introduces the setting and discusses the problems that occupied the senior bureaucrats and motivated them to find solutions. It then takes up the task of understanding how the ICT system was put in place, what its main components were, and, specifically, how the ICT system is at the center of the higher-level bureaucrats' vision.

3.3 The High-Level Solution: Technology-Mediated Adaptive Panopticon

One senior bureaucrat discusses the conceptualization of the proposed solution to local corruption as follows:

The entire bureaucracy was top-down; half the time goes in preparing reports and reports and reports. Because of this, whichever functionary I asked, "what is the single most irritating thing?" they told me it is the need to fill out so many forms and send so many reports. I thought I must have a system where I should not ask anybody for any report. Another thought that occurred to me from Day One: one simple transparency measure that is, give the worker a slip that he has worked last week for so many hours. He can then take it to the sarpanch (village head) or postal system or wherever to get his payment. The idea of the beautiful MIS, which you must have seen by now, occurred out of that.

The solution the higher-level bureaucrats identified was a political and technological vision for the information system targeting higher-level bureaucrats, lower-level bureaucrats, and workers. First, in its role as an "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson, 1990), the system would centralize power by taking it away from local politicians, seen as a corrupting influence. Second, the software system makes it easier for the lower-level bureaucrats to meet the increased reporting demands of NREGA's new transparency requirements and thereby encourages their use of the system (Mathur, 2012).

The fundamental premise behind surveillance is that the senior bureaucrats' monitoring of subordinates leads to better compliance with rules. The need for surveillance emanates from the higher-level bureaucrats' deep distrust of the hierarchical

bureaucratic form of governance. Control must therefore be implemented from the center. Two principles guide the use of technology to centralize control: to increase the visibility of work done at every level of the bureaucracy and to control micro-practices at the field level by enforcing and updating rules programmatically. The higher-level bureaucrats wanted to build a digital panopticon by relying on a sophisticated set of tools with various checks and counter-checks for control. Focusing on the production and circulation of a document called the muster roll, the sections below provide details of how the panopticon functioned.

3.4 Seeing the Lower-Level Bureaucrat

3.4.1 Digitizing the Muster Roll

The muster roll records the number of days worked by a worker at a worksite and bears witness to the actions of the government.²⁴ The muster roll has a dual purpose: it is an accounting mechanism and a surveillance mechanism to track the work of subordinates. What concerned the higher-level officials was the aggregate number of days generated for a region. Digitizing the records increases the granularity of the data visible to the higher-level bureaucrats. As a senior bureaucrat remarked,

Once all the applications are entered into the computer the job cards come; once measurements are entered, estimates come. Once measurements are entered payroll data, muster rolls, measurement pay orders will come. So no decision needs to be taken by anybody, it will automatically happen. And once the program started running, it was on an autopilot mode, it was the MIS system that was running it.

In addition to the raw data available on the software system, a number of reports are put on the web by a software company contracted by the state government. These allow anybody, more specifically, the senior bureaucrats, to generate reports dynamically.²⁵

3.4.2 Live Capture and Uploading the Muster Roll to the "Cloud"

Another aspect of the system is the ability to capture data right from the location of the field site using mobile phones. Every field assistant has been given a smart phone with an application to record attendance at the work site. According to an official presentation:

The objective is to achieve complete transparency of NREGA by transferring live data from the worksite to the website on a daily basis. It is designed to arrest

²⁴ Historically, the muster roll remained closed and internal to the bureaucracy. Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghatan (MKSS), a social movement in Rajasthan, radicalized the document, removing the secrecy around it and forcing the document to be read out in public. Their struggles contributed to an act called Right to Information (RTI) in 2005, which among other things mandates the government to open up records for inspection by the public.

²⁵ The ability to generate reports dynamically is a huge step forward; many states like Bihar have not yet managed this step of reliably getting the data up on the web.

distortions in the program like muster fudging, delays in payments, *benami* wage seekers, fake measurement, and work duplication.²⁶

Speeding up the data capture is a “natural” progression that increases the higher-level bureaucrats’ power by letting them see the data as it comes in. This takes “legibility” to a new level, where the bureaucrats are able to tell the number of workers who show up to work that day across the state.²⁷ The next section discusses what the new technology system enables.

3.4.3 Forcing Location-Enhanced Muster Roll

One of the supervisor’s jobs is to visit the work site and monitor the field assistants’ work. Until now, there has been no easy way to verify whether the supervisors have done their job. With the advent of mobile phones, there have been attempts by the higher-level bureaucrats to take advantage of the location-based tagging that is now possible.

Every supervisor has been given a smart phone with a custom application that records attendance. The supervisor is instructed to send the data from the field site so that the location information travels as metadata along with the attendance details. Making the supervisor’s visit visible should pressure the supervisor to actually visit the work site, ultimately deterring the field assistant from indulging in corrupt acts. Another example of tracking the supervisors is the production of a location-based deviation report to automatically harvest the trips that the supervisor makes to the field. This report is automatically generated and produced for the district program director. The report is intended to make it easy for the bureaucrat to follow up based on “deviations” from the norm.²⁸ This is particularly useful as automation was too difficult to implement before, reducing the visibility of deviations.

The following section focuses on the higher-level bureaucrats use of the enhanced vision provided by technology, successfully deploying the MIS to remotely control the program.

3.5 Micro-Practices

3.5.1 Controlling the Document Remotely

One of the ways that the higher-level bureaucrats tried to control the lower-level bureaucrats was to remotely generate documents. As an example, muster rolls were remotely generated to prevent bogus entries by centrally controlling various elements of the muster roll. Some of the strategies included: pre-populating many aspects of the form, making certain aspects of the form read-only, and pre-populating the workers’ names in the musters before it reaches the field.

²⁶ *Benami* refers to bogus names, given in lieu of real workers’ names.

²⁷ Bureaucrats routinely logged on to the web portal in front of me to show the number of workers that had shown up to work that particular day.

²⁸ The deviations assume that there has been location tagging of the worksite. Every time a new worksite is opened, a new process has been added, which is due to tagging the work and adding it to the database.

To further make this system foolproof, the higher-level bureaucrats passed an order mandating that the state office generate physical copies of the muster rolls and send the forms to the various mandals, with each muster digitally encoded so that it can be counted and tracked.

The pre-population of the muster roll restricts the flexibility of the field assistants to form groups arbitrarily and thereby prevents them from introducing bogus entries. Further, to reduce arbitrariness in the group formation, a worker, having joined a particular group, has to remain in it for a year. The mobility restriction is intended to prevent the field assistant from fudging reports by shifting workers around in multiple groups, which makes it harder for the higher-level bureaucrats to track them. Another problem was that workers were shown in the muster roll to be working on multiple worksites in the same day. To avoid this issue, work assignments were centralized and achieved using a computer algorithm that randomly assigns groups to worksites, removing local discretion. Thus, the muster roll shows both the group and the worksite the worker has been assigned to. This centralized allocation of work assignment has also enabled the higher-level bureaucrats to mute caste differences and effectively force the upper-caste workers to work on Dalit land.

3.5.2 Modify Circulars Through Software Patches

The variety of changing goals of the bureaucrats' intended use of the MIS system created the need for a mechanism for system updates. In the pre-digital days, the rules were updated by issuing a circular and a government order. When paper-based circulars are used, recipients can deny having received it or can (willfully) misinterpret it, or communication can be delayed as the order travels through the postal system and through the hierarchy. Finally, the local bureaucrat lacks an incentive to act on the document.

The software system deployed by the higher-level bureaucrats to govern the program implementation makes it easy to modify circulars by releasing software updates or "patches." These software patches refer to code that helps patch a software system dynamically when "bugs" are found or new features are added. In many ways, circulars and government orders are a means to do what a software patch is most suited to do. The government order usually concerns an update or fix to a particular policy. Given the similarity, both in structure and function, the transition to the software patch to achieve the same end is desirable, at least in theory. In addition to matching the functionality and the structure of a circular, the patch increases the certainty of compliance with the rule.

One of the most contested issues in NREGA implementation in Andhra Pradesh is the appointment of the local field assistant. This step is crucial, since the local field assistant is responsible for providing work, taking attendance, giving payment slips, and measuring the amount of work done by the group. Traditionally, the field assistant was appointed on the recommendation of the local elected political representative. To prevent political interference, the NREGA program director created a computer algorithm to appoint the field assistant. The computer algorithm restricts who could be appointed as field assistant: those not in the "top" bracket in terms of number of days worked last season would not qualify for the position. Thus, to eliminate local corruption the state thus has leveraged the IT system so that these decisions can be made centrally rather than in the field.

The next section discusses how the technocratic system played out in practice. Specifically, the project was resisted by the lower-level bureaucrats and that in turn

caused changes to the software system to counter that resistance, which prompted new resistance, making the project's goal a constantly moving target.

3.6 Weapons of the “Corrupt”

The higher-level bureaucrats had expected the technology system to encounter resistance and had built in many features to counteract it. The system, which lent the higher-level bureaucrats their power, also became the weapon that the field bureaucrats used to defend their interests.

3.6.1 Partial Digitization

Digitizing often means a loss of information that exists in a physical form. What is digitized and what is left out is problematic. Reflecting on the digitization that had happened in this division, a senior bureaucrat noted that “the only documents that seem to matter are the ones that are getting digitized and the rest of the documents are gathering dust in the offices with no effort to maintain them anymore.” She was referring to supporting documents like measurement books, vouchers, etc. which are not digitized but nevertheless need to be properly maintained. She was trying to make a renewed case for ensuring that all documents are properly maintained.

3.6.2 Patches Interrupted

The system is constantly in flux, as is evident from the hundreds of software patches that have been released. The software patches are usually linked with new government orders and circulars that help govern the program. One major achievement was that the use of software patches was eliminating the field staff's ability to “misinterpret” or ignore the circulars. For example, if a certain type of work—say, canal digging—is inappropriate during a particular season,²⁹ a decision will be made to disallow that work, and a software patch will be issued by the higher-level bureaucrats to delete the work from the list of approved works in the system. Initially, the software patches often travelled via CDs and as mail attachments to the mandal computer centers. The first iteration of the patches mirrored the functionality of the circulars, that is, someone had to install the patches. Field-level computer operators installed the patches, selectively. They told me that, on receiving a patch, they would look at the list of changes by inspecting the metadata file that came with the patch, and if it had something they did not like, they would delay installing the new patch in their local system.³⁰ The discretionary power of the computer operators was possible because the patches had to be manually installed.

The higher-level bureaucrats made further changes to prevent the need for human intervention by automatically updating the software if the system detected an Internet

²⁹ Certain types of projects will be stopped or not allowed during rainy months, because it is easy to claim that work is done but not to prove it because the project is covered with water after heavy rains.

³⁰ The metadata file would tell exactly what the patch was fixing in plaintext just as a typical bug fix would tell you in the release notes.

connection. Having the software on the Internet eliminated communication delays as well as the manual process of circulating CDs, allowing the system to be updated instantly. But the offline and online worlds still had to be integrated, and the offline-online separation caused problems for the higher-level bureaucrats and opportunities for their subordinates. If the software was offline someone could make changes locally and then upload them to the server. To undermine automatic (online) updates, a few computer operators would physically disconnect their computers from the Internet and then call and complain that they were not able to connect and were therefore working from the older, offline version. They would process the pending cases, and only then update to the latest version. The higher-level bureaucrats eventually discovered this behavior and eliminated the software's offline functionality. Then, changes had to be made online. This illustrates the cat-and-mouse game that is being played between the different levels of the bureaucracy.

The process of uploading software patches to fine tune the operations of a large government program gives senior bureaucrats immense and immediate power to control the shape of implementation on the ground. Their ability to revise the system has led to constant change, because it is easy and guarantees results. In fact, one of the bureaucrats told me that this is the primary way they fix problems in the field. Local corrupt acts, wherever they occur, are centrally detected and fixed, and eventually become global software updates, thereby strengthening the program.

3.6.3 Political Interference

The software system that was put in place to allocate field assistants faced challenges in implementation. I asked every program director (who heads the implementation at the district level) that I met in my field trips whether there had been any political interference to thwart their plans. The responses varied depending on the local political situation. In some cases, the program director would tell me that the software changes had been a boon, allowing them to throw up their hands when a local political representative insisted on appointing a favored person. They were able to tell the politician to appeal to the higher-level bureaucrats, since the computer process locked them out and there was no way to override the rule locally. This strategy worked to some extent. In many cases, where the politician's choices were not honored, they blocked the appointment by using a clause in the act that required the signature of the politicians in finalizing selection. This political resistance has resulted in field-assistant positions not being filled in many places where the local political power is just too strong. Ultimately, the higher-level bureaucrats were forced to settle on a compromise, whereby the software would list the top three field-assistant candidates and the discretion to choose from among them would be given to the local politician.

3.6.4 Hiding Behind the Computer

Automatic generation of the muster roll has created major headaches for the bureaucracy and for the workers. It has inadvertently encouraged lower-level bureaucrats to hide behind the computer. Workers complained that the field assistant would declare that the computer had not assigned them work. On further inquiry, it usually turned out that in many of these cases there were ongoing conflicts between the field assistant and the workers. Ironically, centralization allows the lower-level bureaucrats to enjoy more

latitude and hide behind the computing system for some of their own doings. The ICT system is thus facilitating and blocking transparency at the same time.

3.6.5 Location-Based Tracking Reports

The real-time updating of muster roll data via mobile phones has resulted in adding another layer of oversight. Supervisors are tasked with visiting the worksite to see whether the official report of the number of workers at a worksite matches the reality on the ground. Each supervisor is given a GPS-enabled phone, and randomly assigned to a worksite to double-check the attendance. The location tracking of the supervisor enables “watching the watchers” to see whether they are going to the field site. This is enabled by a “deviation report”, which marks the difference between the location of the worksite and the location of the supervisor when the attendance report was submitted.

The location-based deviation report clearly shows the field staff’s exact location on a map and distance from the field site. When I checked the report, it showed that for the entire district only two (out of 20) officers did go to their assigned field site. The representatives of the software company in charge of building the system talked about how the field-level bureaucrats were reluctant to use the tool but were forced to. The initial reasons given for not using the system revolved around the fact that the network connectivity was patchy in the rural areas. The lower-level bureaucrats then quibbled that the original location of the site was not properly recorded and so the whole exercise was pointless, since the deviation reports could not be trusted.

As a result, two things were done: the worksites were GPS tagged again and an ingenious software fix was implemented. The software fix enabled the phone to store the GPS location on the phone and to send it later when network connectivity becomes available. The fix enabled field supervisors to record the fact that they had been to the actual field site to measure attendance. The software fix essentially resolved the network-connectivity issue, because the attendance data is automatically sent whenever the device detects the network, but the original location was registered as metadata. Despite this, reports that the GPS locations where the supervisor was when recording attendance, some 20-50 kilometers away from the field site, suggest that, perhaps, they never left their administrative offices. When I brought this up with a senior bureaucrat, he said it was one of the issues that he needs to follow up on. He said, “If everybody is misbehaving like this, how many MPDOs [bureaucrats] can I suspend?” Ultimately, bureaucratic and political will is needed to solve these problems; technology cannot do so alone.

The next section discusses how this analysis speaks to the broader concerns of governmentality, technological determinism, and the political effects of technology.

3.7 Conclusion: Surveillance as a Desirable Measure

The higher-level bureaucrats used surveillance of their subordinates as a way of controlling their micro-practices and thus reducing last-mile corruption. In this case, the bureaucracy surveyed itself and not the population at large, whose freedoms were not curtailed. Here, a system designed to survey the population is turned into one to survey lower-level bureaucrats, thereby splitting the monolithic state internally. In other words, both the structure and the nature of the surveillance make it possible to look at governmentality as a desirable force.

Technological Determinism

There are two shifts in the materiality of the technology to focus on: the shift from paper to electronic controls and a shift within the digital realm. While both reflected the intentions and the ability of the bureaucracy to eliminate corruption, it is necessary to look at the evolution of these material changes to understand the implications of what transpired. These phenomena are processes in transition, particularly in the case of material shifts in technology, so the limitations of using a technical system that are discussed in this chapter could be seen as necessary problems of transition. However, some of these problems won't go away, even when the transition is "complete."

The use of software patches offers an instructive example of the paper-to-digital shift and its effect on governance. Software patches were intended to augment the functionality of the paper circulars, but with a promise to eliminate discretion at the last mile. The software patches still had to be installed by lower-level bureaucrats, which cannot be taken for granted. Once the patches were installed, the systems did reduce certain forms of corruption. The idea of the patch helps us see technological intervention as something that can be mutable and changeable—and thus subject to all kinds of influences, benign or otherwise.

Digitization was partial and ultimately relied on bureaucratic and political priorities, leading to a certain disregard for how the paper documents were maintained. The use of mobile phones to record attendance did create an opportunity for faster tracking of attendance and potentially allowed for a random spot check on the same day. But while the availability of the data minimized certain forms of corruption, it did not immediately trigger action. Likewise, the location-based reports revealed corrupt acts, but knowledge of the transgressions did not automatically lead to corrective action. Thus, the shift from paper to digital makes corruption more visible, but does not necessarily inspire more action against it. The partial nature of the digitization reflects the priorities of the bureaucracy rather than the transitional quality of the process under study.

Shifts within the digital realm, such as the one from an offline to an online mode, reveal the adaptive nature of the system. While the technical system of control makes it easy to adapt to new threats, the constant tweaking of the system also shows that technical fixes continue to be subverted.

The directionality of technology is not predetermined but is influenced by human actors and their intentions. My findings align with the amplification thesis—that technology amplifies the intentions of humans, constrained by their abilities to deploy it (Toyama, 2011).

Technology and Politics?

The main argument in this section is that technology has now become the main object of politics, even though it is deployed with an explicit anti-political discourse, and that the system affects people differently depending on the power they enjoy with respect to their ability and intentions to control the technology. Technology helped the higher-level bureaucrats to curb corruption, thereby amplifying their intentions. The lower-level bureaucrats who were forced to use technology found that using software to maintain records as opposed to manually filling out forms made their lives easier. It reduced the

burdens of maintaining adequate records that increased with NREGA's transparency mandates and mitigated the disincentives to take up NREGA work highlighted in a recent study in Uttarakhand (Mathur, 2012). Technology was also used to monitor the lower-level bureaucracy.

However, lower-level bureaucrats have found ways, albeit imperfect, of circumventing surveillance as well as control. Unexpectedly, technology has also created new opportunities for the lower-level bureaucracy to "hide behind the computer," to avoid pressure from local politicians to bend the rules.

In the process, the IT system has been created in such a way to disempower the workers of the program who are not consulted in the technological design. Technology has become a black box beyond the understanding and control of the beneficiaries for whom all of this was supposedly created. But high-level bureaucrats find that they cannot completely control from the center, and instead have to deal with continuously changing the technology to cope with the ever-changing demands. The technological system is not meant to monitor the workers, but only the lower-level bureaucrats; in other words, the panopticon does not include the worker. Hence, governmentality is meant to be a positive force, intended to ensure that the workers get adequately compensated for their work by eliminating corrupt acts by the lower-level bureaucracy.

Where does technology render itself an "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson, 1990)? Ferguson's study of Lesotho alleged that technologies and expert knowledge are used to naturalize and camouflage politics, making the practice of technocratic development an "anti-politics machine." In Andhra, the higher-level bureaucrats explicitly try to create an anti-politics machine by centralizing control through technology. So, in contrast to the Lesotho case, here there is an intention to build a technology system to smooth out a certain type of politics right from the beginning. For example, in the case of using an algorithm to appoint field assistants, an attempt was made to use technology to avoid politics. There are two possible responses: that the higher-level bureaucracy is merely trying to push forward a different form of politics or, as I argue, that the bureaucrats' intention to avoid the local politics is desirable, since the algorithm at least ensures that another constraint gets added. I assert that "messy politics" cannot be preferable to what the bureaucrats from the center are trying to do and that technology at least helps them to play an arguably desirable form of politics (Winner, 1980). The deployment of technology is inherently political even when the goal is to eliminate a kind of politics.

This chapter examines the use of ICT in a public-works project in rural India, revealing how higher-level bureaucrats exercised power using digital technology to control the functions of lower-level bureaucrats. The use of ICT (databases, SMS, phones, etc.) was intended to amplify the gaze and thereby control the micro-practices of these lower-level bureaucrats. The purpose of the surveillance by the top-level bureaucracy was to control their subordinates and eliminate corruption, but this has been achieved only in part. Lower-level bureaucrats have found ways of circumventing surveillance as well as control—but imperfectly. For scholars of ICT, this chapter serves as a corrective to the limited empirical research examining the use of ICT in particular configurations within the state. The analysis makes the case that when surveillance is used in managing public-works projects, it need not have Orwellian connotations. The question is not whether there is too much governmentality or whether ICT creates a

panopticon, but whether ICT can reduce corruption. In Andhra Pradesh, ICT was used to reduce corruption and create a more “Weberian” bureaucracy, but with clear limits.

In the next two chapters, I describe the process of constructing an institution and a mechanism (public hearings) to elicit support from the workers of NREGA.

4: Creation of the Social Audit Institution

4.1 Introduction

Imagine an information department with the commitment of a NGO and the knowledge of a tout and his enthusiasm. We can go far in reworking the state.

Corruption is the old information revolution that baroquized the state. Now one needs a new information revolution to redo the state, which then hands over problem solving to the community (Visvanathan, 2008).

In the late 1980s, a social movement called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangatan (MKSS) was founded in Rajasthan as a response to corruption in public works projects and with a desire to ensure that proper wages be paid to workers (Singh, 2005). For MKSS, as for other social movements, the struggle was with the state. Reflecting on their struggle, MKSS activists allege that their initial tactics were often “one-sided” in the sense that protests offer “platforms of one-sided communication of one’s own understanding and demands” (Singh, 2005). Having learned from their mistakes, the MKSS activists later went on the lookout for something more deliberative: “It was in the search for a more neutral and open platform for democratic expression that the MKSS hit upon the idea of organizing village-based public hearings called *jan sunwais*” (Roy, Dreze, & Dey, 2007). The struggle for proper wages would not be fought simply in rhetorical terms, but also through opening secret government records. It helped that the leading activists of the movement were former bureaucrats who had a deep familiarity with and access to the state bureaucracy (Sharma 2014). The activists opened documents that historically had been closed. These documents were then brought to the attention of workers to ascertain their accuracy, and they were discussed in the *jan sunwais*, which were facilitated with the help of activists, students, and volunteers who traveled to the villages. These MKSS-led efforts, which started off as elite “guerilla audits,” finally culminated in the Right to Information Act (RTI) in 2005 (Hetherington, 2011).

The RTI found its way into a government scheme for the first time under the NREGA legislation, in the form of “social audits” (Baviskar, 2010). Social audits, which are mandatory in NREGA, represent a legal framework for operationalizing RTI: for the first time, NREGA allowed an open audit process inspecting public records of a public works project. The law mandates a biannual social audit with elaborate rules governing its implementation. The guidelines also delineate in great detail how to conduct social audits: how to publicize the events, collect information, and prepare documents for the audit. The basic approach of the social audit stems largely from the MKSS manual. What has changed over time is the social and institutional make-up of the audits, both the people conducting the audits and those participating in them.

Audits initiated by civil society are effective for creating spectacles and getting attention, but it is not possible to sustain the spectacle on a regular basis; their processes require institutionalization. The eventual form of the audit institution is a state-sponsored, embedded but autonomous institution, which incorporates a civil-society presence within

the state. This allows for regularization of the audits and has the additional benefit of translating the findings into bureaucratic speech, but it also is prey to the ever-present danger of being fully co-opted. This chapter discusses the historical evolution of social audits, not to give a teleological view of what is possible but because this is the only setting in India where social audits have endured, and this survival points to the institutional innovations that are necessary and the challenges that arise for surveillance when the state gets involved.

The process of institutionalization is a result of negotiation and compromises between key activists from MKSS and higher-level bureaucrats, tempered by the political realities of Andhra Pradesh (AP). During the process, many questions had to be answered, such as who should run the social audits in AP: the state or the local civil society. The granularity of the audits was also an important issue: should the social audit cover entire districts at a time, or should it be conducted at the village level? Dealing with resistance from within the state was an issue, as was conducting an audit without attracting too much attention from political parties. These and other questions were resolved through active experimentation as well as through internal debates that eventually settled on the current institutional form of “embedded autonomy”: the social-audit unit is embedded within the state, receiving funding and oversight but preserving its autonomy with respect to recruitment, management, and its status as an external entity. In the end, the nature of the resulting institution affects the type of surveillance that is possible.

4.2 The Rationale and Rhetoric of Social Audits

The social audit is described in government documents as a process in which “details of the resources, both financial and non-financial, used by public agencies for development initiatives are shared with the people, often through a public platform” (Vision Foundation, 2005). Social audits allow officials to enforce accountability and transparency, providing the people with an opportunity to scrutinize development initiatives. Shekhar Singh, a key member of the National Campaign For People’s Right To Information (NCPRI), offers a broader definition of social audits, which seems to fit with their use by NREGA: according to Singh, the social audit is an ongoing process through which the potential beneficiaries and other stakeholders of an activity or project are involved from the planning to the monitoring and evaluation of that activity or project (Singh, 2005).

The audit in the broadest participative sense consists of three stages³¹. The first stage is the *gram sabha* (village assembly) in which the local *panchayat* (village

³¹ The law (NREGA, section 17) stipulates eleven stages of implementation for the social audits. These stipulations include verification at each stage, starting from registration of intent to work, selection of work sites, payment of wages and unemployment benefits, approval for technical estimates, and documentation such as muster rolls (NREGA, section 17). The guidelines also delineate, in great detail, how to publicize the events, collect data, and prepare documents. In preparation for the audit, the gram panchayat shall make available all relevant documents including the muster rolls, bills, vouchers, measurement books, copies of sanction orders, and other related books of account and papers to the gram sabha for the purpose of conducting the social audit (NREGA, Schedule 1, section 13). The social-audit process also relies on the

assembly) decides which type of work it will undertake. The results of these deliberations are the lists of works and a budget that must be submitted for government approval. The second stage is the daily monitoring by the workers themselves at the worksite. The third, ex post facto stage, which has received the most attention, is the household survey, ending in a public hearing (Aakella & Kidambi, 2007b). A social audit is thus a legal framework, a set of guidelines, and a set of processes undertaken, from the initiation of any project, by a population independent from the state. Writing about MKSS, Roy and Dey note:

The NREGA is the first law in the country that put economic and social rights in a legal framework. Establishing such an alliance between the poorest citizen and the state in these most basic components is the real blueprint of the NREGA. An alliance between the ordinary citizen and the state is the roadmap of not just the NREGA, but of democratic governance. (Roy et al., 2007)

Reflecting on the suo moto nature of the act, Mishra writes, “A government sharing information proactively without being asked for it is a true indication of a democratic and transparent society” (Mishra, 2003). Social audits are a platform where information is shared. There is an expectation that sharing information will encourage people to deliberate and move towards a truly democratic society. Moreover, this availability of government records seems to enable people to have “informed” discussions, rather than the “one-sided” discussions of protest. Thus, in this context, information is seen as a neutral enabler leading people to action, or at least to speech.

At its most basic level, the problem, as articulated by these RTI proponents, is that people do not know their rights and entitlements, and that social audits provide a mechanism to address this ignorance. For example, Dreze argues that low levels of awareness play a major part in the lack of public pressure to make NREGA work. Instead of demanding work, workers passively wait for work to come their way (Drèze & Khera, 2009). A comparative study of the NREGA project in three states agrees on the instrumental role of information and argues, “lack of information on the part of the beneficiary reduces the monitoring potential and effective implementation and enables corruption” (Shankar, Gaiha, & Jha, 2010). More importantly, the study argues that people with “information” seem to participate in and benefit from the program. The study suggests that this is because “information enabled those who possessed it to avoid being shortchanged by the administration.” Conversely, they write, “in areas where poorer and illiterate participants are in greater numbers, they are likely to experience more corruption from government officials during the implementation because they possess less information on the benefits accruing to a participant in NREGA.” It goes on to recommend “the government should invest more in advocacy campaigns about their programs, particularly in the poorest areas” (Shankar, Guha, & Jha, 2010). These findings

right to information legislation, which allows any citizen to demand government records. In addition to the provisions in the NREGA, the RTI has a number of provisions that directly support public scrutiny of schemes and programs. One of the important provisions is the requirement to proactively display government records at the worksite.

point to the paradox of the RTI legislation: how can the uninformed know what to ask, if they don't even know their entitlements?

The findings suggest a causal connection between information provision and reduction in corruption. This is similar to the hope behind the RTI movement, that is, that information is an active agent of social change. A report associated with the government planning commission agrees with this view: "Social audit essentially completes the loop by generating and providing relevant information about the development programs, in the absence of which the delivery system remains supply oriented rather than demand oriented³²." (2005) The task for social audits is clear: to inform people. A World Bank-sponsored study on social audits finds that after a social audit has taken place, awareness among the laborers does increase dramatically.

Social audits do more than just share government records; they also produce alternate records, for comparison, through household surveys. So there are essentially two different documents, one produced by the government and the other produced by the social audit. Then, the question becomes what to do with these documents. According to the government's "lessons learnt" report on social audits, "placing information in the public domain and having an open discussion by all stakeholders on various aspects cleanses the program, allowing for correction" (Center for Good Governance, 2009). According to (Aakella & Kidambi, 2007a), the stated purpose of social audits echoes this view:

Bringing the documents to the public domain and discussing them in an open forum; the coming together of the various stakeholders—the laborers, government functionaries, and the polity on one single platform, and the public nature of the proceedings, wherein the various details of the scheme are discussed thread-bare has a desirable effect on the quality as well as the implementation strategies of the scheme.

In broad strokes, these excerpts sum up the assumptions that underlie social audits: first social audits "inform" people; second, these "informed" people are motivated to participate in questioning; third, the process involves bringing documents into the open and deliberating with everybody present to improve the quality of implementation.

Not everybody is equally hopeful about the potential of social audits. Jenkins, reflecting on the historical MKSS public hearings, points out that behind this "the underlying assumption is that if more people participate in decision making there will be greater information sharing, and greater chances that citizens will detect and oppose the pilfering of resources meant for them" (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). In effect, he argues that participation leads to information rather than the other way around, which has been the dominant assumption so far.

MKSS, in its later writings, seems to be only cautiously optimistic and suggests that the audits are essentially an experiment. For the MKSS, organizing a public hearing meant breaking new ground. For an organization that in the past had organized only public meetings, rallies, and protests, there was a degree of apprehension about how the new model of public hearings would be received and understood. The very first questions

³² Look at (Vision Foundation, 2005)

were whether people would turn up at all, how much space the system would create for participation, and whether it would gain the legitimacy required to expose and address conflict-ridden local issues, including specific instances of corruption. Most importantly, it remained to be seen whether an atmosphere could be created in which people would find the courage to speak out openly against those who had been exploiting them, whether this kind of democratic space would be created.

Their fears were not unfounded. As the story in the prologue points out, written testimonials often get withdrawn at the last minute, and physical threats for speaking out are part of the reality of social audits. A recent report estimates there have been fifty reported cases of RTI related deaths (Pande, 2015).

Others point to the lack of provision for follow-up action in the law. While the law stipulates the occurrence and the frequency of social audits, there is nothing in the law to ensure that the findings are acted on. This lack of action often results in frustration and a belief that social audits produce nothing that materially changes lives (Shekhar, 2005). This lack of action is an important challenge to the information-leads-to-action thesis. Echoing similar sentiments, Medha Paktar, a leading public voice in India, warns, “If we limit ourselves to the right to know and right to knowledge without any further right to decide and right to plan, nothing is likely to change within the present democratic framework” (Central Information Commission, 2009). Bringing documents is not enough, write Jenkins and Goetz on the right to information: “the link between transparency and accountability is not guaranteed” (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). Jenkins suggests that the key is for people to participate in decision making, which will provide “greater chances for citizens to detect and oppose the pilfering of resources meant for them.” But the fact is that a partial right to information may actually lead to less action: the government can claim it has made a good-faith effort and that no one is interested, and so it will resist further claims.

Thus, it is not just information, but information with the power of decision making at the local level that holds the key for reducing corruption. Nevertheless, some activists hold on to their hopes, regardless of whether or not the system produces any measurable outcomes. One activist said to me:

It is not like other audits, where it takes place within the four corners of a wall. Even if nothing comes out of the audit it is still fine. It is a public event, selecting youth, training them, putting records in hand, and they [the auditors] are going to the village, they are meeting people, and then again they are coming and presenting the findings openly in gram sabha. So just imagine nothing happens, there is a week, and there is an activity in the public domain. See, a cockroach, when it is a dark cockroach, it is very happy, [but] you shine a light on it, it gets scared. Similarly the corrupt person will sweat. He may know that nothing will happen, but he will still be scared. If he knows the audit is a closed-door activity it is different. Auditing is not a new thing, it has been happening for 50 years. It has always been behind closed doors. But in social audits the whole thing is going in the public for the first time. There is a revolutionary element.

He was referring to the fear that corrupt bureaucrats may feel at the field level. Nor did he stop there. He further argued that even if the beneficiaries did not talk to the auditors, the process would still be useful in the long term:

But at least, you know, after the auditors leave the house, the husband and wife will speak with each other. You are creating a revolution in their mind. The activist recalled, in one such audit, the auditors in that mandal cried after their efforts did not pan out and did not get the expected support of the community. But I told them, “What you did is that, you put a seed in people’s minds; don’t expect it will come out immediately. You cannot change the whole village immediately. It will take time. If the whole community learns that you are cheating, it is hard to control. So what you are doing, you are planting seeds: if there is somebody there, they will facilitate, and growth will be fast. If nobody is there, how does the forest grow? You can never say nothing will come. Otherwise what accounts for the revolutions in the past?”³³

Echoing the sentiment of this activist, the social-audit director writes:

The battle is for more than a right to ask, more than a right to monitor; indeed it is an important first step in an assertion to be heard and to call the bluff of a democratic system. By the people? Of the people? For the people? In an ideal setting, social audits would in fact ensure transfer of power slowly but surely from the hands of those implementing the scheme to the beneficiaries of the scheme, ending a stranglehold not challenged before. (Aakella & Kidambi, 2007)

But this “transfer of power” is not going to be won easily. A quote by a politician, an MLA (elected representative) whose “right hand” siphoned off one lakh of rupees (INR 100,000), underlines the fragility of social audits. After a rousing public speech about transparency, he whispered into the ear of the presiding officer, “Do you think if I didn’t want it, the public meeting would have gone on? There would have been only tables and chairs” (Kidambi, 2007). Thus, once again, information may give the appearance of action and change without necessarily bringing it about.

Shankar Singh, a MKSS activist writes:

If transparency is to be meaningful, that which is revealed must be understandable. Therefore, we have to evolve new methods of demystifying information and ensuring that all of humanity is in a position to comprehend the information and ideas that affect their lives.

³³ This argument suggests that some of the changes caused by social audits will take place slowly over time, and thus it may be too early to evaluate the audits’ full potential. This study carries that limitation, but the institutional arrangement and the accompanying rationality seem to be frozen, thereby making this analysis reasonable.

The need for officials to “demystify” the documents puts a limit on the scope of social audits for social change. The onus of the responsibility shifts from documents themselves to the third-party group assigned to carry out their translation to the people. This responsibility raises a number of issues, such as whether the process will be co-opted; whether these documents are objective facts amenable to translation; and whether there is an ideological component to this translation. Shekhar Singh, commenting on the public hearing, writes, “They are dramatic affairs where ‘information’ and its analysis reveals the who, the how, and the why of various misdeeds; they give courage to the exploited to bring their predicament out into the open.” The “drama” in Shekhar's Singh's quote raises the question of the extent to which these public hearings are “performances” that use these “information” strategies to challenge the local state.

Nevertheless, all the people providing information rely on an intermediary to demystify the information. The question arises, therefore, of how to intermeditate in a systematic way. The Rajasthan and Bihar experiments had their effects in terms of challenging the local state. The questions now are who can sustain this level of focus and what happens when the state takes up this task of institutionalizing social audits? Can it be done and will it be co-opted?

Schematically, the social-audit mechanism consists of three stages. First, social auditors “open up” everyday government documents that were previously not publicly available—such as muster rolls and measurement books that maintain dimensions of NREGA works and their location—to workers. In the course of an audit, auditors measure worksites to match their dimensions to records; read muster rolls aloud to verify that the details in these documents match what the worker recalls; and finally record all discrepancies between the official records and what has been learned in the course of the audit.

In the second stage, the auditors deliver the survey results to the workers and solicit written testimonies countering the government records. Household surveys initiate private discussions in which workers are able to air their grievances. When workers are willing, these private discussions are recorded in an audit document that also bears the worker's signature or thumbprint.

In the third stage of the audit, the audit documents are discussed in a public hearing where both the government record and the audit report are presented to the public. The audit report is read, and the public is offered a chance to speak. A government officer presides over this meeting and levies penalties in the form of fines, suspensions, or termination on bureaucrats who have been found corrupt. Workers, activists, and government officials from the local village assembly attend the public hearing. In some cases, representatives from the media and, in troubled regions, police are there. Social-audit report documents are presented in public at the village level (gram sabha) and then at the regional administrative hub, in a mandal public hearing, which is often more convenient for the district bureaucrats to attend. These public hearings offer new opportunities to mount a critique of the state.

The rest of this chapter, discussing the genesis of social audits in Andhra Pradesh and the historical role that the civil society played in structuring the audit process, shows

how conflicting understandings of social audits evolved.³⁴ It traces the origins of social audits from the perspective of the actors who were involved in its creation. The chapter ends with a description of the structure of the audit system in Andhra Pradesh, out of which the final institutional structure of the audits arose.

4.3 Bootstrapping Social Audits in Andhra Pradesh

There were three phases of experimentation that led to the final structure of the auditing system in AP. First, a direct, MKSS-style audit was imported from a different context, except that participants realized that the project director's role in ensuring that the state take action necessitated putting the bureaucrat on the spot to hear comments and complaints. Later audits led to the feeling that the state needed to speed up the process or it would never be completed. The second major phase of experimentation was the Anantapur audit, which was again a replica of a mass-social audit done by MKSS, but here with active state support. This audit led to the challenge of demonstrating that meaningful action, meriting the visibility that the experiment had received, would be taken. The third stage of the social-audit experiment, the current form, is described at the end of this chapter.

4.3.1 The “Food for Work” Pilot Program

The genesis of the social-audit process in AP lay with the chief bureaucrat in the Rural Development Department, Raju. He told me that he and several others in senior bureaucratic circles had heard about the innovations of the social movement in Rajasthan, the MKSS.³⁵ When they decided to implement social audits in AP, Raju, along with a few members of his team, went to observe the work of MKSS in Rajasthan. The institutional mechanism and initial funding for the initiative came from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The DFID have been involved with the government of AP for more than a decade, helping to modernize the state in several sectors. Each department (Health, Rural Development, and Education) had a unit called the Strategic Planning and Innovation Unit (SPIU-RD) to facilitate the experimentation. Raju told me that through the offices of SPIU-RD he got the audit initiative started. SPIU-RD contacted the NGO Action-AID to help train officials to conduct social audits. Action-AID in turn looked to MKSS for help and asked them to conduct a workshop.

The story that follows shows how MKSS started exerting its influence from the earliest days of the audit process. The MKSS activist Sowmya Kidambi, who now runs the social-audit unit in AP, recalls that she rejected the Department's initial request to run a workshop. She insisted that workshops are useless and that if the state was really interested in learning about social audits they ought to participate in a pilot of an existing

³⁴ The chapter heavily relies on key interviews with people from the state and from the civil society who were involved actively in the initial phases of the partnerships.

³⁵ See Sharma's book on how MKSS had energized a certain section of the senior bureaucratic circles in India to get the legislation passed (P. Sharma, 2014).

program. She recalls that the state official backed away and took a few months to get back to her but eventually came around and asked MKSS to train lower-level bureaucrats to do the audits. She remembers saying, “We don’t want to train the government people to do social audits. Why will I train a BDO (Block Development Officer) in conducting a social audit? Pointless, no? It is like teaching a thief how to catch thieves.” Since the activist’s dismal view of lower-level bureaucrats matched the way the higher-level bureaucrats saw the problem, they were easily convinced to involve NGOs as neutral third parties to be trained to conduct the audits.

The higher-level bureaucrats’ view of their subordinates determined the institutional formation of social audits in AP, paving the way for the creation of an autonomous entity that kept out the lower-level bureaucrats completely. The social-audit unit became a top-heavy institution, with regular staff at the higher-levels but no regular employees at the lower level. So, social auditors did not have lower-level bureaucrats from the existing state apparatus, but also did not have a regular staff at the field level.

The program chosen for the first pilot was a public works program, the predecessor to NREGA, called the “Food for Work” program.³⁶ Three gram panchayats were chosen within a short distance from Hyderabad, to make it easy for the state bureaucrats to visit. Instead of inviting bureaucrats to be trained for the audit, Action-AID reached out through its networks of NGOs. Each NGO was asked to send one person to be trained to do the audits. The training itself was held in Hyderabad, and the state routinely called NGO staff to attend trainings. One NGO worker who attended the meeting told me that she did not think much when she received the call for the meeting as she was used to being sent for training. Staff from 32 other NGOs from all over AP attended the meeting; this was their first encounter with social audits.

The NGO worker recalled that she really liked the training. As she described the pilot from the 2006 audit in Andhra Pradesh, I realized that the training template has not changed over the years and continues to be followed. The training process takes two days and has two distinct parts. The first part is a lecture on the various elements of the RTI Act. The power of the social audits is drilled into the trainees by a series of lecturers. The second part involves learning by doing: the auditors are taught to examine audit reports, check inconsistencies, counter-check supporting documents, and verify official signatures. Documents have to be retrieved from the local government offices. In the pilot in 2006, when there was no computerization of these records in AP, the process was manual. The NGO worker I spoke with remarked, “Nowadays it is as easy as removing a banana peel. All this was not there then. It was done manually.”

I have firsthand experience of this manual process, not in AP (where, by the time I was in the field, it was already computerized), but in Bihar, where the preparation of documents for the audit was still a manual process. The documents had to be arranged and indexed together to make it easy for auditors to counter-check information. The process was very laborious and time-consuming, and its result was a consolidated document that was the only starting point of the audit. Computerized or not, this part of the audit resembles a typical financial audit. The only difference is that the auditors are

³⁶ The “Food for Work” program, like NREGA, was a work program in which citizens worked on public work projects but they were paid in food grains in exchange for their work.

not professional accountants hired by the government but instead are laymen trained in short order to verify the documents.

The auditing process brought a lot of attention to the documents. The NGO worker recalled, “These documents were a dead give-away that something was wrong. The muster rolls were neat, clean; everybody gets universal 80 rupees and so much grain. They were freshly written and given to us when we applied to get the document.”

While the auditing of records by laymen is in itself a big step in democratizing the auditing function and bringing to light such obvious fabrications, the major innovation of the social audits was to extend the verification beyond the office to the field, thus confronting the beneficiaries. Sowmya, the senior auditor, explained to me the “go to the field stage” aspect of the MKSS audit:

What do we do? Whether you do it in Bihar, Jharkhand, AP, Rajasthan, anywhere else, it is the same technique. The technique does not change. The technique is you take the record and go and ask the worker: Rajesh, the record says this much money and this much grain, did you get this or not?

While the technique is similar no matter where the audit takes place, the question of gaining trust in AP was paramount, and it manifested itself in the performative nature of the audits. To guarantee that the auditors remain objective, a number of rules govern their mobility. This is not new; the performance of bureaucrats has always been subjected to a number of rules to guarantee a sense of fairness. Specifically, there is no surprise in the budgetary considerations that control the workings of the bureaucracy or in the requirement that bureaucrats produce vouchers for their expenses and a budget that dictates precisely the limit in their offices’ expenses. I was surprised, however, to find that the audits’ rules go beyond these budgetary and procedural considerations. The rules focus on managing the way in which the workers perceive the auditors. Michel Foucault’s theories are useful in analyzing this system: MKSS had developed an elaborate set of “micro-practices” that were performed and then encoded as norms in AP. These norms dictated where the auditors should stay in the village, what they should be seen eating during the audits, and even what sort of transportation they should be allowed to take. The activist recalled: “We had been instructed to stay only at the panchayati office or the school building. The government had given us money, but we had to find our own food. They wanted us to eat food at the laborers’ houses.” The norms were supposed to send a clean image to the worker so that the auditors were seen to be out of the ambit of the local power structures.

The auditors (even the District Resource Persons (DRPs)) come from modest backgrounds, but they come as auditors, and to bring respectability to the process they are supposed to dress in formal shirts and pants. They are actively discouraged from eating meat and consuming alcohol during the audit. Meat eating is particularly a thorny issue for the auditors, as most of them are meat eaters and occasionally do venture outside on their own to eat meat. One of the senior bureaucrats joked to me, taking a dig at the audit leadership, that the ban on meat eating is a Brahmin (upper caste) conspiracy. I was told that the policy rationale existed partly due to economic considerations, as meat is considered a luxury in the villages. In addition, there is a signaling issue: eating meat and drinking alcohol signals that the auditors have been co-opted.

Similarly, the auditors have rules that specify where they can spend the night. In the initial phase of the audit, “arrangements” are made to ensure that the auditors stay at the mandal office. When they go to the villages for the audit, they are supposed to stay only in government buildings, whether it is a school or the local panchayat building. Negotiating access to these buildings is mediated through local bureaucrats.

Several auditors complained to me that these restrictions made their life hard. While they grudgingly agreed to live in government buildings during the time of the audit, they found it hard to follow the transportation rules and often borrowed vehicles (motorcycles) from the lower-level bureaucrats to commute to the villages, particularly during the initial hiring of the Village Social Auditors (VSAs). They also did not follow the food norms of eating only at the workers’ houses, instead buying food from shops. The activist recalled that women from the local self-help group cooked spicy but good food and that it was not hotel food. However, these violations did not occur during the initial pilots, when the auditors stayed at the village Gram Sabha Bhavan, a government building.

The next stage in the audit is the open public hearing, where the findings are discussed openly in front of the workers. But, as I discuss in chapter 6, the negotiations that happen outside these formal meeting spaces are equally salient. The auditor I spoke with recalled that the night before the first public hearing in AP, a small group approached the building where the auditors were staying. The group showed the auditors a tattered document, which had been signed by the actual laborers who had worked on the site. They turned out to be laborers from outside, and machinery had been used to do much of the work. The tattered notebook showed what had actually transpired. The audit team prepared the audit report based on their findings and was ready to present the next day. What happened next, and the role the MKSS activists played, was enormously influential in how the audits in AP are practiced today.

The story of this first public hearing mirrors the one I discussed in the prologue, with one crucial difference: officials and bureaucrats attended the public hearing. I was told that about 250 people showed up for it, and that is a large turnout compared to what I personally saw in later audits. The presentation started with the summary statistics written in the original documents, including the total amount of money spent, the number of works created, and the number of workers who had worked in the scheme. After that, the auditors revealed their findings in the form of “deviations” from the official documents. At this point, the auditors seem to be dwelling exclusively on the numbers, and there was no acknowledgment from the people present, a contrast to the MKSS experience in Rajasthan and my observation in the Bihar, where the people present were cheering the findings organized by the social movements.

Then one senior MKSS activist, who had come from Delhi to attend the meeting, stood up and said, “I have come from Delhi. I am going back to Delhi and will tell people that all is well in AP and it was a good experience for me to participate in.” That provoked a reaction from the audience. There was sudden realization that the meeting was nearly over. Until that point the workers apparently all sat silently through the reports of corrupt acts. However, once they found that there would be no follow-up and that the meeting was drawing to a close, the workers started making noises. Some workers caught hold of the three sarpanches who were present. (A similar thing happened in Bihar: we were forced to clutch our documents, and the situation spiraled out of

control.) In this case the local Action-AID organizers looked to MKSS for support. Soon the activists had seized the moment and turned the pressure towards the senior bureaucrat who had come to address the meeting. The bureaucrat stood up and promised that action would be taken. Soon after, all the workers returned to their original seats.

After the meeting, the top bureaucrat, Raju, convened a debriefing session with all the auditors to discuss future strategy. Nothing came of it other than a decision to conduct more pilot audits. The higher-level bureaucrats were convinced that they had controlled corruption in AP through NREGA and were keen to show off their ability to get rid of corruption in the program. One senior bureaucrat taunted the leadership team that at the current rate it would take ten years to audit the entire state. There was tremendous, irresistible pressure to cover more areas. They were looking for ways to speed up audits in AP.

MKSS had experimented with a mass social audit to cover an entire district in Rajasthan, and the senior bureaucrats decided that AP also should experiment with mass social audits. The Anantapur social audit was an experiment in conducting social audits, which relied on periodic mass social audits that covered entire districts at a time.

4.3.2 The Anantapur Social Audit

Anantapur was chosen for the audit because it was the district that the then-Chief Minister had launched NREGA from. Anantapur also had the maximum number of NGOs working there who could be mobilized for the audits.

More than 1,500 volunteers from various parts of Anantapur took an oath along with the Principal Secretary of Rural Development, officials of the district administration, representatives of the voluntary organizations, elected representatives of the district, and the representatives of MKSS, vowing that they would participate together in the spirit of establishing people's participation and control over schemes such as the NREGA. These vows were enshrined in a 2006 declaration called the "Anantapur Mass Social Audit Padayatra." The declaration specified the lofty goals of the audit:

The padayatra aims to strengthen all stakeholders subject to being within the framework of the law. The social audit helps bring out the strengths and the weaknesses in the implementation of the APREGS (NREGA) to ensure that the strengths are replicated and corrective action are taken where there are loopholes. The padayatra aims to create a strong alliance of those vested with administering the NREGA with those outside of it who genuinely wish to work together to achieve the principles and goals of the right to employment and minimum wage. This padayatra is a step to ensure that the entitlements under this law reach the people by creating the conditions for the proper implementation of the Act and scheme in its letter and spirit. It hopes to bring about awareness in the people about NREGA and to ensure that the non-negotiable facts in the NREGA would be met and to show solidarity with the wage seekers. The people from government, non-government, academicians, and intellectuals would work together to ensure that every wage seeker could seek labor with dignity.

The declaration was meant to bring about the best possible cooperation between all the actors. It stated that all the “stakeholders” were united in the cause of ensuring that the workers get the benefits they were promised.

The state’s job was to hand the public records to NGOs. The NGOs were promised full autonomy in administering the audits. In a letter to the district and the mandal bureaucrats in Anantapur, the state government sent instructions:

Since the Government is also a partner in the padayatra and is interested in ensuring that the whole exercise of APREGS (NREGA) is implemented well, I request you to pay personal attention to the following items of work. Further, the participants of the padayatra would be applying under the relevant sections of the RTI and NREGA for the above information. I request that this information may be made available immediately and without any negligence.

It was clear that despite the invocation of the RTI, an internal government circular was needed to legitimize the RTI request from the public, so that it could be honored without delays. The letter also was explicit in the desire to use the audit as a showcase to indicate the success of NREGA:

Since honorable state and union ministers, several national and state government and non-government functionaries, academicians, and members of the media will also be present and this is the first of its kind event, I would like to showcase our administration as an efficient and responsive one. Hence I request you to kindly spare no efforts in making the padayatra a success.

One Action-AID activist who had been among the coordinators told me that many of the bureaucrats expected that there would be no corruption in NREGA, as they felt the vested interests would have required more time to take control and make the program corrupt. Thus, there was a lot at stake and many expectations.

This was the first time that the state government was allowing a public audit of its workings by civil-society actors on such a massive scale. In the inaugural address, one of the officers compared the padayatra to Mahatma Gandhi’s march: “This social audit process is like the Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi, which got us the Freedom from the British. Freedom is our right, and we need to instill enthusiasm in the people in the villages.”

It was not long before resistance arose from lower-level bureaucrats. The required cooperation with the civil society did not trickle down to the local bureaucrats. The Anantapur report of the audit, written by the government, noted, “[M]ore than social auditing it was policing and that led to confrontation... The process... was initiated in a campaign mode but sometimes ended up in an inquisition mode.” The Action-AID activist told me that the audits soon started finding corruption: “The results were shocking to the bureaucrats, against the initial expectation of no corruption; there was a lot of corruption in NREGA.” The audits thus created a tense atmosphere in the village, and the process was clearly not going as the state had hoped. The uproar seemed to have been similar to the one at the “Food For Work” audit (above), with the people in the village demanding action.

The next step in the audit was the public hearing. The state had summoned the media in anticipation of a successful audit. Members of political parties had shown up, in particular members of the then-ruling Congress Party. In contrast to the state's original promise to give a free hand to the civil-society members who had conducted the audit, the bureaucracy controlled the meeting. The findings were throttled, and the original plan of discussing all the findings in the meeting did not happen. The state controlled which parts of the findings were read out.

Despite this suppression, however, the audit process ruffled a lot of feathers, both among the local political class and among the lower-level bureaucrats. Some members of the civil society were also upset that they had not received a fair hearing. Everybody walked away dissatisfied. The Anantapur-type audit could not be replicated. In fact, the backlash from the political class was so strong that no audit was allowed in the Anantapur district for two full years, even when other districts started to carry out audits.

Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, the Anantapur experience set the social audits in AP on a new trajectory. There were diverging opinions about the reasons for its failures. The current audit-leadership team felt that mass audits were a mistake and should not have been attempted. But the NGO participants were disappointed that the government did not take their opinions seriously. Some withdrew from the audits, while some waited to be called again. The state team drafted new rules for the audit and convened a consultation, in which NGOs apparently gave suggestions. One NGO worker, who was part of the consultation process, recalled:

The draft rules specified that the government need not do the social audit. Anybody can do social audits, and the government will fund. The findings will have the same bearing, and it would not matter who conducted the social audits. They removed all that in the final draft. They defined the social-audit finding: one that was done by the state. The draft rules created an opening for civil society to be part of the audit process, but the final audit resolution closed that opening.

Several members of the audit team challenged this view. They asked me, "Where are the NGOs today? Who is stopping them from using RTI and doing a counter social audit on their own and contesting our audits? If they feel that the state audit team is captured, let the NGOs do them and submit reports."

The debate was about whether the state had the monopoly on social audits. I did not get a straight answer to the question of why the civil society had backed off from the audits. One activist summed it up well:

There were no active efforts from the state to include the civil-society actors... If civil-society actors are really serious, they can push it, they can make hullabulla [loud noises] and make their voices heard. But from both sides there was no active interest.

However, serious questions were raised about the continued monopoly of social audits by the state. The same activist who was critical of the civil society asked me rhetorically:

Who defines that social audit should mean this? It has become like a dictionary definition. No one should appropriate the word. Social audit is not trademarked... There are ideological issues... I am not trying to portray that civil society is an ideal thing... There should not be any extra credit given to the civil society. It is just an actor. The variability is what is interesting.

When I brought this issue to the social-audit leadership, I heard an echo of the dominant logic of the state, to which variability in the process is anathema. I was asked, “How can audits not be standardized? It has to be the same everywhere.” Ultimately the state decided to look inward and ended up building its own audit institution, hiring NGO workers as senior auditors. The next section describes the institutional audit structure.

4.3.3 The Current Institutional Audit Structure

The Society for Social Audit and Transparency (SSAAT) is viewed as a representative of the civil society, and hence it is registered as a Society. A government circular has declared that the Society should be independent from the state to retain its “cutting edge machinery.”³⁷ The Principal Secretary of Rural Development maintained that if the social audit process could be divided into three phases—the pre-audit phase, the social audit, and the post-audit phase—then the social audit itself could be largely left to the SSAAT. The state’s main role should be in the post-audit phase, when it should take action on the findings. The only role for the state in the pre-audit phase, he maintained, was handing the requested documents to the audit team.

The Principal Secretary pointed out that the social-audit unit director is not a government insider; the state had hired an activist from MKSS. The identity of the Society thus continued to be usefully ambiguous. Bureaucrats at every level think of the social-audit unit as NGO people, whereas the villagers (NREGA workers and others) think of the audit team as representing the state, but not the local state. The lower-level bureaucrats think of the audit unit as a powerful actor that exerts authority without deserving its power. Other NGO people treat the audit unit more ambiguously, depending on how critical they are of the state. But none of the actors see the audit unit as their own. The audit management seems to enjoy this ambiguous position, but the field-level auditors do not like the ambiguity; they do not like the contract nature of the job and want to see themselves more definitely as part of the state. The auditors all want permanent jobs, but they are currently contract employees without benefits, and their positions can be terminated at will.

The audit leadership revealed that the audit unit is intentionally maintained in this way so as not to become part of the permanent bureaucracy. The audit team is therefore denied a permanent office, any sense of tenure, and any official badges that might indicate that they are part of the state. Several DRPs have expressed great frustration with their ambiguous position. The DRPs have long demanded some form of government ID that they could display to prove their positions as state officers when they enter a village.

³⁷ Circular D.O.I.r. No. 143/SSAAT/2009, dated July 13, 2009.

Thanks to SSAAT's policy of keeping the auditors outside the state system, they have been actively denied these IDs. The policy exists to ensure that the auditors do not enjoy any special privileges and to show workers that they themselves could be involved in questioning the local state; but one of the results of the policy is a strong feeling of discontentment among the auditors themselves.

The team is split into the administrative staff, located in an office in the state capital Hyderabad, and the auditors-at-large, who assemble at a village for any given audit. The audit team is a 1,000-member organization, in which every member is on a yearly contract. The field-level staff is distributed in a hierarchy with three levels (a prefix indicating the level they operate at): there are State Team Monitors (STM), State Resource Persons (SRP), District Resource Persons (DRP), and Village Social Auditors (VSA). To ensure compliance with the law, the audits are supposed to be conducted by villagers; hence the only level of employee with "auditors" in their title are the VSAs; others are facilitators and go by titles such as "monitors" and "resource persons."

The hiring of the local auditors is done at the village level at the beginning of every audit. The tenure of the VSAs lasts only for as long as that particular audit, after which the unit is supposed to be disbanded. In practice, however, the DRPs maintain a list of the most hardworking VSAs, and those are frequently summoned to attend multiple audits; they are informally referred to as senior VSAs. Some of these senior VSAs have attended more than 50 audits in the same district.

There are three broad considerations that drive the selection of the audit team: legal, strategic, and ideological. The act mandates the villagers themselves should carry out the audit. The AP social-audit team reflects a compromise, whereby the bureaucracy meets this legal requirement but retains control of the unit by managing the unit's bureaucracy. In theory, having the audits conducted by the workers themselves, or their sons and daughters, would allow the youth to be trained, so that they could form a "reserve army of transparency activists" who would continue to fight for these audits on their own in the village. In practice, the local bureaucrats exert far more control over the process than these youth in training.

While the budget for hiring auditors is supported by the state, the process of hiring is internal, governed by the SSAAT. The state has significant sway in hiring the directors and the social-development specialists, but hiring the officers below that rank is largely left to the discretion of the director. The hiring of the DRPs is done at Hyderabad, and they have usually risen through the ranks after starting as VSAs. Clear guidelines govern the hiring process of DRPs: they must complete a written test and an interview with the management. In my chats with VSAs, those who have applied to be promoted to be a DRP do so first by expressing their interest to their current DRPs. The VSAs thus usually come with strong recommendations from current DRPs and are then shortlisted for the DRP position. The written exam tests their understanding of the act and the purposes of the audit. The interview usually revolves around the commitment of the applicants for the cause. I have attended a few interviews that served more as avenues for communicating the ideology and the rhetoric of the audits than as actual interviews.

Most of the direct hires have been made by reaching out to NGOs. The hiring process of VSAs, in contrast, happens at the village level. The auditors have to be literate, a requirement that eliminates a number of people in every village, and they need to be able to write, preferably in English. The VSAs are paid the minimum wage and, as noted,

are hired only for the duration of the audit, after which the team gets disbanded. Each audit team is headed by one SRP. The audit is done at the mandal level. The number of DRPs depends on the size of the mandal and its prior auditing history. Typically the range is five to ten DRPs per audit.

On the first day of the audit, the DRPs complete the recruitment of the VSAs by going to the villages and finding literate youth. The senior management knows the importance of hiring the best VSAs. I have attended workshops coordinated by the audit team in which discussions about the hiring process dominated the agenda. The rules mandate that care should be taken to hire VSAs who are not part of any power structure; they should, moreover, be sons and daughters of NREGA workers.

Once hired, the auditors' movements are restricted according to where they are from. The rules depend on the hierarchy: the SRPs are not allowed to work in the district they are from, and there is a rotation every six months or so to move SRPs to different districts. The DRPs are not allowed to work in their own mandals, but they can work in the same district. Finally, the VSAs cannot be assigned to audit their own villages and are instead assigned to different villages in the same mandal. The policy was designed to prevent collusion and political pressures. As a result, the DRPs and SRPs constantly travel from one place to another. There is no guarantee that they will come back to the same place again after six months. In many cases, they don't come back, and they certainly do not work with the same teams. Yet the SRPs want to develop teams with recognized and familiar cultures, so that they can more easily manage the DRPs under them. Such efforts are undermined by the necessity of continually moving to different towns and forming new teams.

The question of whether or not the auditors are activists was constantly disputed and had to be answered frequently in the meetings. I found it echoed in training workshops at the district level, in the content of the training, and even in private conversations. The official rhetoric is that the auditors should view themselves as activists. However, in one audit that I attended, a senior member of the team asked a crowded room full of DRPs to raise their hands if they considered themselves activists. Much to my surprise, no hands went up, and the senior auditor then continued, "Good. Let us keep it real: auditing is a job, that is you all are getting paid for, so you should all work hard to earn your living."

Despite this discouragement, when the auditors do think of themselves as activists, that mindset has real effects, allowing them to exercise some power during the audits. Activist auditors are able to exercise power for the duration of the audit through the public hearing. Their power, however, wanes as soon as their audit is finished, and I have seen them realize that they have lost it when the public hearing ends and the local bureaucrats turn hostile. One auditor quipped, "We don't even get water afterwards, so better get it now." Reflecting on the condition of the audit itself, the director of social audits told me:

When I compare MKSS and AP, [there are few similarities] except for the fact that we have state support, we get information really easily, and we have public hearings and some form of follow-up action. I think what is missing from our side is that real streak of activism. MKSS will never ever compromise on going and eating at a worker's house. We never do that. No matter how difficult it is

individually, they go to each house and eat, whereas I have not been able to enforce it at all: no matter how much I pushed them, saying each person should eat in a laborer's house. That's what makes the personal connection. But that's not what happened. I don't think it is just a question of scale. It is also a mindset. You also feel *sarkari hai* [part of the government]. Since they feel sarkari they prefer to eat in a hotel. That is something that bothers me.

One internal correspondence email from a senior AP bureaucrat stated, "I am certain that no state government will ever do a social audit as we are anticipating (as provided for in the rules just issued.) It has been most difficult even in AP. This is because the implementation structure would resist any genuine social audit."

The next chapter addresses the effects of the institutional process of the social audit in Andhra Pradesh, and the question of whether it has been tamed and bureaucratized.

5: The Politics of Open, Social Audit Meetings

5.1 Introduction

Where are you? ... What is the name of the district, mandal, and village you are in? What is name of the sarpanch? ... Give the phone to him. ... [*With a raised voice, addressing the sarpanch*] Do not dare to do anything to our official! ... We will get the police! ... What do you think you are doing? No! Stop, stop, listen to me, just let them go! ... Give the phone back to our official. ... [*Now addressing the social auditor*] Are you safe? You do not panic. You immediately leave the place. Do not give any of the documents to them.

This excerpt is part of a phone call made by a senior auditor to a field team in a village in Andhra Pradesh (AP), revealing the continuous struggles and dangers that auditors encounter when they attempt to open up local records. As we saw in the last chapter, social audits include the use of “open” meetings to facilitate participation from the workers. In theory, the public hearings ensure that the findings cannot be suppressed because of the number of citizens present to witness and question the proceedings. In other words, these public meetings are a way to democratize surveillance: they focus on the surveillance of the local state by the auditors with the support of the workers.

This chapter's focus is the public meeting.³⁸ While the previous chapter showed how the institutional structure evolved, this chapter examines how these structures determine the outcome of the social audit meeting. To understand the effects of the structure on these meetings, I compare variations in the institutional underpinnings. Specifically, I discuss three meetings, each organized by a different institutional structure: bureaucracy, political party, and the social audit institution. For each, I look at the effects of the meeting on citizens' participation.

³⁸ Recall the story in the prologue, which was a vignette of a public hearing organized by a social movement *Jan Jagaran Shakti Sanghatan* (JJSS) in Bihar. My aim here is to set that meeting in context, while not dwelling on the details. JJSS, following the footsteps of MKSS where social audits were originally developed, focused on using these meetings to expose the workings of the local state. These audits resemble the “guerilla audits,” in that they are not regularized, and the organizers take an oppositional stand with the local state. As we saw in the vignette, these meetings resulted in raising worker consciousness about the problems of corruption by the local political leaders and a forum to air their grievances. But, these performances could not be sustained as a regular activity, because the “findings” had to be acted on. Workers cannot be summoned on a regular basis to participate in these meetings.

My main motivation is to situate the social audit meeting among other public meetings and other studies of how the meetings are organized to understand how the outcomes are shaped by a complex set of factors reflecting issues of power and politics.

The chapter begins with a mandatory village meeting known as a gram sabha, a “regular” event. Such meetings are attempts by the state to increase citizen participation in government procedures. Through surveys and ethnographic observation, it is apparent that these meetings suffer from bureaucratic apathy, resulting in their being merely ceremonial exercises, exerting no substantive effect on either the village or the state officials. In contrast, a meeting coordinated by a political party called the *raccha bandha* (RB) shows that, when politicized, public meetings are well attended. Then, I discuss an attempt to politicize the social audit meeting, revealing pre-existing political rivalries that reject the idealism of conducting dispassionate meetings. Alas, the contemporary Indian countryside does not resemble the Habermasian coffee house! The final section traces the continuous evolution of the ongoing political complexities of the social audit meetings and argues that the social audit system currently operates within the spectrum of available freedom by avoiding overtly political and bureaucratic elements.

5.2 Fully Bureaucratized: State-Mandated Gram Sabha

In 1992, India passed an amendment to its constitution that set in motion the decentralization of power to the village councils (Rao & Sanyal, 2010). Panchayati raj, as such decentralization is known, has been part of the national discussion since India’s independence, yet it was only in 1992 that the panchayats were recognized as democratic bodies and given a formal role in rural governance. The institution of the gram sabha—meetings at the village level—was one result of this new governmental role, and this section deals with the efficacy of considering the gram sabha as a public sphere to improve governance (Rao & Sanyal, 2010).

The origins of the gram sabha can be traced to an old practice of having village elders arbitrate in local affairs. While it may not seem particularly democratic for five old men to make decisions for an entire village,³⁹ the current model of gram sabha has been designed by the central government “to serve” a democratic function: increasing citizen participation in government procedures.

Rao and Sanyal’s comparative study paints an optimistic picture of the possibilities of these meetings (Rao & Sanyal, 2010). By recording and analyzing 290 randomly selected gram sabhas in four states, they make the case that marginalized citizens use these meetings to contest state decisions and to receive entitlements from the state. They argue that through participation in these meetings, citizens have found a way to represent private issues as public and to present their cases effectively and forcefully. Most importantly, they find that in those four states, marginalized citizens are generally

³⁹ The legitimacy of khap panchayats is being increasingly questioned in the Indian media; many view them as a regressive force primarily involved in moral policing and supporting anachronistic causes. For example, khap panchayats are allegedly involved in “honor killing” of people of different religions or caste that decide to marry.

not afraid to speak out in public meetings. They advocate the state's scheduling these meetings regularly to ensure that the voices of the poor are heard.

Most developmental programs by the state now require a gram sabha to be conducted in a region, during which local citizens vet many decisions. In addition, there are the more mandatory, regular meetings that Rao and Sanyal analyzed.⁴⁰ I administered their survey after making minor modifications to it in 50 villages.⁴¹ The process of administering the survey revealed more about the phenomenon than presenting the results from the survey. I administered the same survey in all the villages in two mandals, which I chose partly because I had spent some time in one of the mandals and was already familiar with it. It was also one of the mandals surveyed by the Rao/Sanyal team five years before. I had assembled my survey team from among the social auditors themselves. The auditing department had hired about 100 people from the local village. I selected ten of them, based on availability and interest. My team consisted of one woman and nine men, most of whom were young, matching the typical profile of the auditors, who were predominantly in their early twenties. For the survey I adapted the questionnaire developed by Rao and Sanyal, translating it into Telugu, the local language. I asked those auditors who were local to conduct the survey, but I ensured that they were not sent to their own villages. I myself arranged to go to three of the gram sabha meetings to conduct the survey.⁴²

In my discussions with Rao in preparation for my first gram sabha, he told me to speak to inhabitants of the village who would be able to help me discover the meeting. I did not understand at that time why a meeting like a gram sabha would need to be "discovered."

It took me two months to find out when and where the meeting would take place. I knew that a mandatory meeting of this kind was a rare event, and missing it might mean losing the opportunity to observe one. I carefully followed the hierarchy down from the state capital to the district headquarters. Even there, however, the district program directors did not seem to know whether the meeting would take place. They told me they had not yet received the government circular informing them of the details. The social auditors I accompanied also did not know about the details of the meeting or about the people in the village.

I saw the government circular only a couple of days before the meeting. The mandal Program Development Officer (MPDO) had received a similar circular, but she said she had only skimmed the letter; after all, it was only one among many circulars that she receives from the state. She initially worried, however, that I had been sent from the state to ensure that her gram sabhas were conducted properly. After seeing my familiarity with the auditors, she came to accept that I was there on field work from the US, and she confided in me that the meetings were a headache but had to be done because they were

⁴⁰ The exact periodicity to these meetings are not clear, varying from two times to four times per year.

⁴¹ I chose two mandals to align with the original survey five years prior and covered all the villages in these mandals.

⁴² I got a ride from one of the presiding bureaucrats to ensure that I was on time, and that I would get to the next meeting on time.

part of her job. The AP government had further burdened the bureaucracy at this time because the current term for elected political representatives had run out, but new assembly elections had not yet taken place.⁴³ So, the task of administering the gram sabha fell to the local bureaucracy instead.

I was at the mandal office when a group of panchayati secretaries (PS) gathered to plan the gram sabha.⁴⁴ One of the PS later told me that they met to determine the schedule of the gram sabha, which had been confirmed without any input from the people in the villages. The secretaries had divided up the mandal and appointed several senior bureaucrats from different departments to serve as “observers.”⁴⁵

The protocol of announcing the gram sabha was the same in each village: a person with a drum (*tom tom*) walked through the main areas of the village, yelling out the date and time for the meeting, and announcing that “special officers” were going to come. All the gram sabhas in the mandal were held on one day, so it was exceedingly difficult for the bureaucrats presiding, as well as for the surveyors, to ensure that we had people covering all the gram sabhas.

The meetings happened through the day. The attendance varied, depending on the time of the meeting and the size of the village. Moreover, because the meetings tended to be held in government buildings in upper-caste areas, it was difficult for Dalits and members of the backward castes, who lived in distant neighborhoods, to attend. In a few meetings the only people present were the bureaucrats, with nobody in the village attending. I was present at one of these unattended meetings and observed the responses from the bureaucrats. The “special officer” asked the PS why no one had showed up. The PS replied that it was not his village; he was simply filling in for somebody else. We stayed for 20 minutes, hoping that somebody would appear, but, despite the fact that the PS asked a few villagers to join us, they all apologized and said they had work to do and could not come to the meeting. The PS immediately took his camera and took a photo to show attendance after signaling those few to just stick around for a minute. The official recorded some impressions in his notebook to prove that the meeting had taken place. It was clear that the government record thus bore no relation to reality. Nothing in it would indicate that the meeting had been unattended and had accomplished nothing.

It was clear that the lower-level bureaucrats did not want to be conducting these meetings and were just going through the motions to satisfy bureaucratic protocol. While the lack of interest is partly attributed to the fact that the lower-level bureaucrats were not supposed to be conducting these mandatory gram sabhas, and were recruited at the last minute, as Gupta points out, these rushed meetings are more the norm than the

⁴³ I heard that the political class in AP (the Congress Party) did not want to have the elections yet because they were not sure of winning them. There was a lot at stake politically at that time in AP: its legislature had split up, and a new secessionist movement was threatening to break from the state.

⁴⁴ While I had full access to many of the meetings, there were some private meetings I was not allowed to attend. This was true at all levels of the bureaucracy.

⁴⁵ At this mandal, the observing team of senior bureaucrats comprised the Vigilance Officer of the mandal, the school headmaster, the panchayati secretary, and the local head of the Veterinary Department.

exception.⁴⁶ The bureaucratic indifference to conducting these meetings shows how little planning and foresight goes into these meetings, and can be attributed as much to the higher-levels of the bureaucracy as to the lower-levels. Under such circumstances, the probability of having a productive meeting is very low.

The content of the gram sabhas that I attended varied depending on the interests of the people running them; surprisingly there were no instructions on the content from the management. It was clear to me that these meetings were just not taken seriously at all. In one meeting I attended, the PS gave a state-of-the-village address, talking about the various issues that concerned the village, but also used the opportunity to give the villagers a civic lesson:

If we want our streetlights to be fixed, water pumps fixed, when we don't have money in our panchayatis, where will we go? Everyone should pay taxes. If a motor burns out, where will the funds come from? ... Say you buy a land with one lakh; in that, 4% is given by the government to our panchayati. So that money we should utilize only for lights, hand pumps, and similar items. We should not use it for other things. ... Who has paid taxes: no one has paid. Only when everyone pays can we get things done, fixing the lights, the pumps etc. ... Where will we get all the funds? The government will not give all the funds. We are given only so much, on the basis of our population. That we should remember.

He also gave a lesson on cleanliness and declared his helplessness as a civil servant:

What is cleanliness? We should keep our lanes and our panchayati office as clean as we keep our houses. We spend INR 10,000 to have the municipality people clean our village, the very next day it is covered with dirt again. Can I get this done all by myself? Only when all of you support me can I do something about it. ... Only if all you cooperate can I do something. Putting money in this is not a great thing.

Throughout his speech he emphasized the responsibility of the citizens in taking care of the village, and it was striking that his discourse went on for some time without being explicitly challenged by the people present at the meeting.

People did not seem to actually pay attention to what was being said; a few tried to get up and leave, they were told to wait, and they reluctantly sat down. They seemed to have some questions of their own. A Dalit man raised the issue of not having a drilled well in his village. He asked, "Why is it that we still don't have that facility in my neighborhood when other neighborhoods have it?" The question clearly touched on the sore subject of caste differences, but the PS replied by saying that there have been no funds for it; he reassured the man that when there were funds it would be first on the agenda.

⁴⁶ For a similar "unplanned" meeting that the bureaucrats had to administer and how these unplanned meetings are actually par for the course—and therefore "planned"—see Akhil Gupta's discussion of the health camp in (Gupta, 2012)

After the meeting I caught up with the Dalit who had asked the question. He told me, “Even ten years ago we would not have dared to bring up an issue like this. Things have changed now. It is a different generation now. We don’t talk to them unless we are given respect. We are not dependent on them for work. There is no dependence.” The “them” referred to the upper-caste inhabitants of the village. I also asked the surveyors for their impressions of Dalits’ willingness to speak at the meetings. Before I had finished my question, several of the surveyors were responding: “People are not afraid. They are talking in groups. The women are particularly effective in talking. Ladies make the officers stand and talk.” I sensed that much of the zeal to portray a changing world came from my own survey team, many of whom were Dalits. There was clearly a desire among them to paint a picture of a society in which caste had been overcome. But as soon as I asked them about marriage and inquired whether people could marry across castes, they said, “No way. That is not happening.” One of them added, “Even if you wait 5,000 years that will not change. Feelings are not there on our side, and the upper castes won’t allow it. Only love marriages are a way to achieve it.”⁴⁷

To get a better sense of the locations of these meetings, I asked my survey team if it was a problem that the meetings often take place in the panchayati office or the school building, typically upper-caste establishments. Several nodded, saying, “Yes, that is a big issue,” though they had not brought it up with me. It was taken for granted that formal meetings organized by bureaucrats—to seek participation—always happen in areas where the Dalits cannot come. One of them said that the reverse is true too: if the meeting takes place in a Dalit area, nobody from the upper-caste areas will come. He said if the meeting is held in an upper-caste habitation, there is a chance of attracting a few Dalits, but not the other way around. Significantly, the bureaucrats themselves seem to give no thought to these considerations, as these practices have been routinized and solidified, thereby excluding the participation of certain social classes entirely. One of my surveyors suggested that meetings should be conducted at the neighborhood level and not at the village level. While a few expressed support for this idea, they all agreed on the difficulty of conducting a separate meeting for each neighborhood, since each village typically consists of 10-20 neighborhoods. One of the surveyors pointed out that if the state attempted to conduct neighborhood sabhas, the process would become too political and difficult to organize.⁴⁸

The gram sabha is an example of the “anti-politics machine,” a ceremonial exercise at best if it actually happens, and otherwise a “failure” but a meeting on paper to conform to the rules that meetings should happen (Ferguson, 1990). These meetings reflect the apathy of the bureaucratic state, which seems to not be interested in adding additional work, and particularly to avoid any political backlash. But, they are organized, because it is mandated.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ In India, particularly in rural areas, marriages are arranged by the two families. Love marriages are exceptions.

⁴⁸ In the next section, I discuss a meeting where this same issue was raised.

⁴⁹ I do agree with Rao's analysis to the extent that workers do attend and record their grievances, which does show that the citizens are not afraid to speak out to have their voices heard; the potential long-term

The surveyors and I were quickly able to identify who was missing from the meetings. The political parties and the sarpanch (village head) were largely absent. As mentioned earlier, the sarpanches were no longer in power, and in a few places the villagers were aware of the significance of this. The sarpanches who did show up to the meetings asked questions, hoping that some of their complaints could be resolved. The special officers presiding over the meetings were given clear instructions; one surveyor overheard a conversation between officers in which the MPDO said, “Any problems that people are raising, just reply that we will solve them.” Such pat assurances were not necessarily empty, however: in some cases, the MPDO would call the department responsible for the issue in question and ask why the issue had not been solved yet. I was excited about the possibility that the meetings were used as forums for solving problems. But one of the surveyors quipped that the real gram sabhas were not the ones we had observed but rather the raccha bandha (RB) meetings. As soon as the RB was mentioned, several members of the survey team expressed their excitement about these meetings. I asked them what the main difference was between the two types of meetings, and they responded in unison: “It is the presence of the political party people.”

5.3 A Political Party Meeting: Raccha Bandha (RB) Meeting

The political party in power organizes the RB meeting as a roadshow, with all the local mandal bureaucrats present in a village. These meetings are political in the sense that they are organized to show that the political party is responsive to the citizen’s needs and can solve concrete problems, by assembling the entire party bureaucracy. The purpose of the RB meeting is to ensure people’s complaints are heard and resolved. The presence of all line departments together is to reduce coordination costs among bureaucrats. Normally, the bureaucrats are in the mandal offices, so to see them together in the village is a rare sight. The meeting brings the maximum participation from the village residents, because political leaders come, and because the bureaucrats are forced to solve—or at least hear—the issues in the village.

Within minutes of mentioning the RB meetings, I was told that they were not a creation of the current political party but were started by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) leader. One of my interviewees at a gram sabha, when asked about the RB meetings, said, “Everybody comes to those meetings. The political party people, all the department people are there. The program used to be called as Janmabhoomi, when the TDP were in power. Now they have changed their name. Fighting will happen in those meetings. Raccha bandha is the true gram sabha; this is not real.”

The RB meetings mobilize entire bureaucratic offices at the mandal level to travel to the villages, in an attempt to impress the villagers and to reduce coordination costs among the bureaucrats. When I attended one of the RB gatherings, it was easy to see that it resembled a political rally. The meeting started off with a speech written by the Chief Minister, read out by one of his representatives:

From the previous raccha bandha program, we have understood what you are expecting from our government, we understood what you want and need. Those who work for you wholeheartedly, those who respond to your problems, they have seen how much you appreciate them first-hand. That appreciation of yours is what is encouraging us to come to you again and again. For this new raccha bandha program, you are the inspiration. To fulfill the promises made in the first raccha bandha program, we have listened to your problems and have promised to solve them. As we are those who serve you, it is our responsibility to solve your problems, and it is for that we are holding this second raccha bandha. In the first raccha bandha, with 2,500 crore rupees, 26 lakh people have benefited with ration cards, pensions, indiramma houses, 0.25% interest, YSR abhaya hastam, upadhi haami [a promise of work], and the rajiv aarogyasri scheme. All these services were delivered. In that raccha bandha, whosoever was eligible for these schemes, we took applications from them. All those applications were screened, and the eligible ones were recognized. ... More schemes and more programs. For the benefit of farmers, there will be no interest for loans up to 1 lakh. ... In the state, with a goal of having no poor person striving with hunger, we have started a great and humanitarian scheme of providing 1 kg of rice for 1 rupee. To make this program available to more people, through this raccha bandha we are going to issue new, 24-lakh ration cards to eligible poor people. ... Come, participate in raccha bandha and make these schemes and programs a success. Enjoy the benefits of these schemes, and we are hopeful that you will bless us who are working day and night to fill your lives with light. Your Kiran Kumar Reddy garu, CM of AP.

The meeting thus began with its organizers, the political party, taking credit for solving the problems of the citizens.

The meeting served as an opportunity for the political party in power both to announce new developmental programs and to identify and resolve problems in the delivery of public services. Typically, the politicians who run these meetings used them to pinpoint failures in the bureaucracy. One politician from the Congress Party said:

We have developed ourselves a lot. However much we do, we will have shortfalls and more requirements, and the responsibility of fulfilling those is on us, specifically on the bureaucrats. ... In the first raccha bandha, no matter how many homes were given, more will still be needed. In a similar manner, ration cards, livelihood measures, all these issues need to be addressed in this raccha bandha, and I am reminding the bureaucrats. In this raccha bandha, I hope the bureaucrats take inspiration and solve the problems on the spot because we have the responsibility to do so. In a similar manner, there are a lot of issues that we need to bring to the government's notice to get them solved. Already we have taken up a lot of development programs: the roads have been developed, water problems been taken care of. Even to mention all of them would take a lot of time. ... But the remaining development programs also need to be implemented.

The main selling points for the RB meetings and the reason for the high percentage of participation from the villagers are the presence of political support and the fact that since all the line departments were present, they could solve the problems “on the spot.”⁵⁰ Normally the bureaucrats stay in the mandal offices, so to see all of them in a village is a rare sight. Nevertheless, not everybody agreed with the stated claim that the party in power was solving new problems. One activist said, “The meetings are a way to ensure that the state gets credit for work they were supposed to have done already.” Due to the political nature of the RB meetings, people associate them with the Chief Minister of the state, hence the politicians are there to be seen getting things done.

I attended two RB meetings. One of them had a bigger political presence and was organized like a rally. There were booths on the side manned by lower-level bureaucrats collecting petitions. The state issued receipts to acknowledge that they had collected these petitions, but their fate seemed to vary depending on whom I spoke to. One person claimed that there was no way the petitions would be looked at systematically, and another claimed that they were immediately dumped in the wastebasket. The citizens have learned to be pragmatic about these things. In some case, brokers who were local politicians backed some of the petitions to give them additional weight. Moreover, they have learned that the “on-the-spot” problem solving at these meetings is far more important.

At the meeting, multiple conversations happened at the same time. Each bureaucrat had a group of people around him, with the political party members serving as representatives of the citizens and speaking on their behalf. The nonviolent intervention of police helped to keep the meeting from becoming unmanageable. The bureaucrats, used to dealing with individual complaints from the comfort of their offices, now had to deal with workers mobilized by political groups in the open.

In many ways, I found the RB meetings to be a huge success, certainly with respect to attendance. They are very different from the social audit meetings, where the political parties are actively excluded. They also are distinctly different from the bureaucratically run gram sabha, a merely ceremonial exercise without much to offer the citizens.

5.4 A Social Audit Meeting: Breaking the Script

The typical audit process involves seeing workers’ input by locating the worker mentioned in the official work attendance document. This means that the workers are summoned as individuals (Shankar, 2010). But I wanted to understand how they are embedded in the village as members. So, I ventured beyond and talked to people who were outside the list. I also wanted to talk to workers, through a trusted and political intermediary who could give support. Taking into consideration the timing and location of the village meeting, I ensured that the timing was flexible and delayed the start of the meeting. I urged an active process of canvassing to ensure that workers were mobilized to attend the meeting. Thus, in the audit I participated in, I exercised my dual identities of researcher and auditor, sometimes encouraging the audit to extend beyond its original

⁵⁰ In the RB I attended about 500 people turned up. This compared to 10-20 people showing up for regular gram sabha.

script. The tension between my goals as an independent scholar and my role of shadowing the auditors was present throughout. I tried to limit my transgressions throughout the process, and usually I was able to retain my identity as a researcher when away from the audit team. While participating in the audit, however, my identity was ambiguous, and sometimes I was identified simply as a member of the audit team. This confusion, however, often led to productive conversations that I exploited in the interests of learning as much as possible about the auditing process.⁵¹ The result was that the audit was “politicized” and resulted in bringing out existing political rivalries that could not be resolved in the bureaucratic logic that the social audit team also operated under.

The audits happen at the administrative level of the mandal, a governing unit of roughly 20 villages,⁵² and are scheduled one or two months in advance. As discussed, this undermines the original intention of the audit, it is also convenient in that it allows the bureaucrats time to prepare the necessary documents for the audits and to advertise that they will be made available on the final day. In practice, the schedule was used more as a guideline than as a strict regulation, often resulting in audits being postponed for months. I was told that the audit schedule had to be flexible, because some audits take longer than originally anticipated and the district-level bureaucrats often have unpredictable schedules.

I reached the mandal one day before the auditors arrived. I knew that they would be staying at the mandal office and that the team would consist of the District Resource Persons (DRPs) and the State Resource Person (SRP) only, these being the members of the mobile team who travel from one audit to another. The DRPs would meet with the NREGA bureaucracy at the mandal office to receive the documents and a description of the various villages in the mandal.

The audit team is guided by rules and norms established in training sessions and periodic workshops, described in chapter 4. Some of the rules are hard to follow in practice, especially the mandate that the auditors maintain a distinct identity from the NREGA field bureaucracy. The purpose is obvious—to prevent any collusion between these two units and to maintain the image of an objective audit, so that workers will come forward without fear—but in practice the auditors rely on the help and support of the NREGA bureaucrats and are inevitably identified with them in the eyes of the villagers.

The first task in the audit is to recruit auditors from the mandal. Typically the mandal is spread over a 20-km radius, and the lack of adequate transportation and poor road conditions make it hard to traverse. The local bureaucrats know the terrain well, and

⁵¹ The role of participant observer entails more than “fly on the wall” work where the observer merely records events. But it is not clear to what extent the participant can and should affect the work he is observing, and to what extent the work is affected simply by his presence. The process presents a dilemma to the practical researcher, but it also gives new insights into the agency of the observer and the biases and limitations inherent in such encounters. While I was careful to be consistent in how I approached the audits, the extent to which I was able to exert agency in the audit varied. I discuss more of my rationale in the Introduction.

⁵² Most mandal villages that I visited, in addition to containing the government offices, are connected to the rest of the state through main roads. The villages surrounding the mandal village are usually served only by secondary roads.

they also know where to find potential auditors. Thus, while such delegation violates the regulations of the audit, even the best-intentioned DRP usually asks for the help of the local field assistant (FA) in finding local auditors. The most common arrangement is for the DRP to travel with the FA on his motorbike to each village. I traveled with them on a few occasions, and in each case the FA took us to the village square and the DRP asked around to find a literate person interested in working for the audit.

There are only a few literate people in each village, and one of them told me that because of their literacy they are the default participants in the village for every government project. A number of state-run initiatives require people from the villages to conduct surveys, since it is cheaper and more effective to hire people who are familiar with the terrain. As a result, each village contains a few educated youths who are used to carrying out surveys.

The hiring process is very swift, consisting only of the following questions: “Are you interested in working as an auditor for a period of two weeks? Do you know how to read and write? What are you doing now? Do you have any connection to the FA or to the local political class?” Technically, if the potential surveyors are connected to the FA or to the local political class, they cannot be hired. In practice, however, political connections are too common to avoid. The real safeguard in the audit process is the random appointment of the VSAs (Village Social Auditors), which ensures that they are not assigned their own village. The rate of pay for the local surveyors is fixed at INR 100 per day, with their meal expenses covered.

The number of DRPs assembled for an audit varies depending upon the size and complexity of the audit.⁵³ The DRPs divide up the villages among them, and each is given the responsibility of recruiting local surveyors. Once all of the VSAs are hired, four or five of them are assigned to a particular DRP for the duration of the audit. Typically each DRP is required to conduct a survey in two villages. There was a marked range in the sincerity and motivation of the DRPs and their teams. The DRP I shadowed—“John”—seemed very enthusiastic about the audit process, and I soon discovered that he had the reputation of being a hard-working auditor.⁵⁴

John told me that it is critical to pick the right VSAs for the job. Significantly, women are not the first ones chosen. John told me that the presence of women auditors is complicating for the DRPs. He told me that sometimes the women complain that they cannot walk for long distances, and their safety becomes an additional concern for which the DRP is responsible. Because the audit requires the local auditors to relocate to the mandal office and to stay with the audit team in the night, in order to safeguard them from village pressure, the lack of gendered facilities often becomes a problem.⁵⁵ I have

⁵³ The complexity is determined by the problems the mandal has encountered in previous audits. Those mandals requiring more support receive a greater number of DRPs and are often assigned more skilled auditors, though all of these decisions are made informally.

⁵⁴ Even though the identity of the DRPs assigned to a particular audit is not known ahead of time and it is not guaranteed that that same set of DRPs will always work together, they often know each other, and any DRP’s attitude towards the work is easy to glean through discussions.

⁵⁵ One circular addressed the issue of accommodation by decreeing that the office of the MPDO, the most “luxurious office” in the mandal headquarters, be assigned to the women auditors.

seen cases in which interested female recruits were forbidden by their parents or by the village head to work with the audit team. Despite these constraints, however, in the audits I have witnessed a small number (around 10%) of the auditors were women.

After the teams were selected and the auditors did an initial inspection of the mandal's documents, we were ready to leave the office for our assigned villages. The journey was not trivial, even though the village was not a long distance away. Each team was given a weighty bag, usually carried by a VSA, to carry all their files in, including the consolidated reports, muster rolls, and payment vouchers. The team I was shadowing waited for an auto-rickshaw to take us to the village. The bus service is infrequent, so auto-rickshaws are a more reliable form of travel. The autos were "share autos" and far exceeded the allowed capacity in weight, but the charge was nominal, and every inch of space was accounted for.⁵⁶

The auto-rickshaw dropped us at the village square, where the FA was waiting for us. He took us to an empty house, telling us that it was ours for the duration of the audit, but the DRP did not seem happy about this and told me and the other VSAs that we couldn't stay there. When I asked him why, he explained that the FA had chosen a house belonging to one of his associates. The usual protocol is that the auditors stay in a public building, typically a school or a village panchayat office, because if the auditors stay in a private house there is always the possibility of undue influence and the entire audit comes under suspicion. Accordingly, we lugged our bags to the school building.

Within minutes, the former sarpanch arrived on his motorbike. The DRP introduced the audit team as coming from the state government to conduct a social audit of NREGA. After talking on the phone, the sarpanch handed him the keys to the school, which was very modest. The village, like every other village in Pradesh, was segregated along caste lines. There, NREGA work was done mainly by Dalits and the backward castes; the school we stayed in was in the Dalit neighborhood.

The auditors started getting their documents in order, and I ventured out to talk to the villagers. It was late evening and growing dark. The school's verandah seemed to double as a hangout for the local youth. They had a television with them and were tuning in to a cricket match. This particular group of youths had a tough reputation and played their part, talking loudly and catcalling. I couldn't resist watching the game and stood with them on the verandah. After a while one of the youths asked me why we were there in the village. I told him about the audit and also about my own work. He nodded and returned to his game. Then, gradually, the rest of the youths started talking to me. They had seen the auditors before in their village; indeed this was the fourth round of audits in this mandal.⁵⁷ One of them added, "We know everything that happens in the village with respect to NREGA, but we won't be talking to the auditors." They said that the audits are all shams and hence won't be wasting their time and compromising their own position in the village.

⁵⁶ The abysmal public transport system further ensures that the auditors are dependent on the FA for their travel needs. The motorbikes that the FAs so often use cannot be purchased by someone earning only an FA's salary, yet another indicator of the ubiquitous minor corruption.

⁵⁷ While the social audit is mandated every six months, it took the state some time to organize regular audits. Each round refers to the count of audits in that particular mandal.

The audit exercise started at 6:00 a.m. in order to catch the workers before they left for work. It was hot even then and would become unbearable later in the day. The four auditors split into two pairs. They were tasked with talking only to workers whose names were on the muster roll and with interviewing those workers in their houses, as they needed to see documentary proof—a NREGA job card—that they were talking to the right person. Asking for the job card was also a convenient way of establishing their authority, since they are not given government badges.⁵⁸ The auditors asked for other documents too, such as bank passbooks and payment slips, which serve as additional proof that the worker has in fact been working.⁵⁹ Asking for these documents sends a signal that the auditor is part of a state enterprise; there is a thin line between information and surveillance in the audit. Because of the documents' importance, the auditors often advise the workers: "Do not give the documents to anybody. Keep them safe. They are your proof." In the interactions I witnessed, the request for documents served both as a conversation starter and as a focusing gesture that quickly established the authority of the auditor.

The auditing process is fairly routinized, and each DRP has seen many audits, though for most VSAs the audits occur only every six months.⁶⁰ In spite of the procedure's routine nature, however, asking these questions is a substantial task. One ambiguity is an issue of translation: the auditors have to translate their questions using local references that can be understood by the villagers. The translation is an iterative process and usually time-consuming, at least for the initial interviews. The need for translation is particularly acute when designating the nature of the work being discussed. The term on the official documents is often not the term used by the workers. Further ambiguity arises because workers' sense of time is often difficult to pin down, which results in confusion when asked to recall how much work they did. This is also true on the issue of wages: workers often do not remember precisely how much they were paid for a particular task, and their memories become less reliable the further back in time the auditors ask about.⁶¹

This inherent ambiguity not only makes the job of the auditors more difficult but also gets exploited by the local bureaucratic officials at the time of the gram sabha and public hearings. Asking all these questions often takes time, but the auditors need to rush to reach all of the workers in the muster roll. They are required to interview every single one; there is no sampling strategy. This requirement puts enormous pressure on the auditors to move quickly from one house to another, and if a worker is not in his or her

⁵⁸ See the discussion on government badges in chapter 4.

⁵⁹ The documents also let the workers know how much they should expect to be paid for their work. The payment slips act as a physical record that their work has been measured.

⁶⁰ The senior VSAs see more audits, as they get pulled into other audits, but only a tiny fraction of the VSAs become senior VSAs.

⁶¹ The time between audits typically varies from six months (the target) to a year. In some mandals, audits happen only once every two years. The reasons for this lag vary from local resistance to governmental struggles at a higher level.

house when the auditors visit, they are usually marked as “no shows” in the audit report and forgotten.⁶² The auditors optimize their time by developing shortcuts, quickly jotting down the essentials in these “door-to-door” visits. They complete the reports in longhand later, either when they are back at their village headquarters or at the mandal office.⁶³ Because of the need for speed, there is a range in the attention given to each worker, which depends also on the level of reciprocity that the auditor senses in the worker. The DRP reminded me constantly that just visiting every worker and checking every worksite is an enormous task, and my experience of it was indeed physically exhausting.

In each interview, the auditors asked the workers how much they worked, where they worked, and if they had been paid the amount listed on their documents. Once in a while, they would talk about entitlements and ask the workers if they were satisfied with NREGA and if they were receiving the non-monetary benefits offered to them according to the law. The interaction was brisk. While waiting at the door, the DRP would send a VSA to the next house to inspect the next worker’s job card. They did not find any major transgressions; nonetheless, the workers always seemed happy when the interview was over.

John, the DRP I was shadowing, was trying hard to impress me. He would often ask me, “What should I do differently? You are an independent observer, why don’t you tell me what to do?” He had heard my conversation with the local youths and had noted their comment that the audits were a sham. Slowly, with my encouragement, he started deviating from the regulated script of the interviews, talking more freely to people in the village. We paused and conversed with people who were not on the muster roll, and we asked them questions that, as will become clear below, allowed us to understand the political realities in the village.

The first effect of veering off the script was that the audit process slowed considerably. John had been assigned to cover two villages in this audit, but at the speed we were going, we would have trouble covering even one village. I benefited from having had a conversation with this SRP earlier. He had worked at an NGO for several years and complained to me about the “quota system” and the time pressure that pervades the audits. I also felt emboldened by my conversations back in Hyderabad with the social audit leaders. When asked about the limited time assigned for each audit, a senior auditor told me:

You have to create the time. Nobody is telling you to complete the audit in a certain time period. I say if you need 20 days for an audit, spend 20 days in the field. I have never stopped them spending more time in an audit. Planning is in their hands. How many days are required to do an audit is in their hands. Expenditure I question, however. If it is going to take longer, I want you to tell me why are you taking more than ten days. Expenditure tabs should be there.

⁶² They are supposed to make another visit, but often there is no time.

⁶³ When I first observed an audit and saw the auditors filling their notebooks after the surveys were over, I mistakenly thought that they were involved in a massive fraud, filling out the documents in the office instead of doing their work.

We needed to reach out to the SRP who oversaw the audit and was John's boss. Fortunately, the SRP immediately agreed to find somebody else to survey John's other village. Having gained time, we started extending the conversation at each house. Outside one we saw a big poster of Ambedkar. Accordingly I mentioned Ambedkar to the worker and asked if he was a union leader. He said he was not a union leader but the president of the Ambedkar Association. Many villages, particularly in the Dalit neighborhoods, declare their allegiance to their hero with a statue, but there was none in this village. The union leader told me that there had been a dispute over who would pay for the statue and who would be responsible for dedicating it, a clear indication of division among the Dalits.

As soon as the union leader learned that I was a student from the US, he started talking in a different tone.⁶⁴ He was a literate man in his late thirties, though in appearance he seemed to be somewhere in his fifties. He told us that the FA had come the previous day and instructed everybody in the village not to cooperate with the auditors. He had apparently warned the villagers that if they talked to the auditors, NREGA might be canceled. But, the FA had continued, "Don't worry, I will get your testimonies."

To our surprise, people started slowly trickling in to the house where we were speaking with the Ambedkarian. He taunted them, asking if they were happy with their NREGA wage. The first batch of women who arrived looked hesitant, but the Ambedkarian's mother urged them to talk. The women then began to tell us that the FA was biased and did not give work to them. The DRP said, "I cannot take your testimony unless I can see your job card." A few went back to get their job cards. Some were workers we had already visited. One of them said, "I did not know that you were connected with our leader," meaning the Ambedkarian. Soon we heard that NREGA work was not being given and that the workers were not being paid adequately for their work. There were pending payments, and bribes were required to obtain job cards in the first place. We now started hearing things we had not heard yet in the audit.

As we left the house, we noticed that we were being followed. It was a small village, and the news of our spontaneous meeting had obviously traveled quickly. I saw the FA glaring in our direction. The DRP instructed him in a loud voice to go away or he would call the Police. The FA shouted back that he was not doing anything wrong, and he reminded the DRP that it was his village and he could stand anywhere he wanted. Eventually the FA passed on the task of intimidation to his friends, though we still managed to get written testimonials and group signatures from a sizable number of the workers who had been speaking with us.

The atmosphere quickly became menacing, and the auditors became nervous. I asked John, "What have we done? Should we back out?" He replied, "No, we should press forward." We were constantly asked, both by the FA and by his men, what we had found out. The DRP gave the standard answer: "Come to the gram sabha to find out." By the third day we had a clear sense of strong political divisions in the village. The Dalit neighborhood was further divided, and I discovered later that the Ambedkar Union,

⁶⁴ Dalits who hold Ambedkar as their role model are fiercely modernist and consider the West to be very progressive. Ambedkar is often seen in statues dressed in Western clothes. Thus it is natural that this worker would be impressed by my U.S. affiliation.

which had tried to assemble all the Dalits together, was further split. We heard more stories, some of which concerned a recent chemical plant spill that was ignored by village leaders; the company even went so far as to bribe the Dalit leaders to say nothing, even though the village drinking water was polluted. The uncovering of such stories bred an increasing amount of animosity. Typical audits do not come close to revealing such controversial issues.⁶⁵

We were crossing the Dalit neighborhood on our motorbike when the sarpanch appeared on his bike and signaled for us to stop. He asked, “Why did you spend such a long time in the house of someone in the opposition party? You should not believe what they are saying. Is there no other house left for you to finish?” The DRP, trying to put up a brave face, replied, “I am here to do my job, and if you have any problems with the audit, you should report it to my manager.” The sarpanch softened and said he was just ensuring that the auditors got the full picture and weren’t caught up in dirty local political fights. He added, “You are here to talk to people who have worked in NREGA, to ask them a few questions and then leave.” I did not think much of this discussion, and I certainly did not anticipate for what was in store for us later in the audit because of our “minor” deviation from the norm.

In the village that evening we encountered the cricket-watching group of youths. They were now eager to initiate a conversation, and we held an impromptu meeting with them at the village center. They quickly dug to the core of the issue, discussing the inability of the villagers to talk against the local officials. One of them said, “Ravi [the FA] is ultimately one of us. Even if he has taken money, he lives here. It is not going to be possible to mobilize against him. He is our relative.” After our discussion, they warned us to finish the report soon and leave the village immediately afterward.

The last step in the audit process was the gram sabha. Typically, at this stage, the auditors are already tired and still have a second village to visit. The gram sabha is thus not a priority, and the audit team does not look forward to it. This particular gram sabha, however, was different. The DRP was keen to hold a productive meeting. I told him that we should ask the members of the opposition political party to see if there was any interest among the workers in attending the meeting, and we also asked around the village. We soon realized that the location of the meeting was critical. The FA told the DRP that, as is usually the case, the previous meetings had been held not in the Dalit neighborhood but in the upper-caste area of the village. The statement seemed strange coming from him, since he himself was a Dalit, but he preferred it not to be held where the bulk of the NREGA workers lived. Nevertheless, John insisted that it be held in the Dalit neighborhood.

The debate now shifted to where exactly it should be held in the Dalit neighborhood. The Ambedkar leader had warned us that the precise location would matter. He tried to sway us toward his side of the neighborhood, but the FA insisted that

⁶⁵ I had many discussions with the senior auditors and bureaucrats about the superficiality of the current audit process. I used every opportunity to advocate qualitative rather than quantitative audits. Indirectly, I was advocating for the state to store information about each village so that they could develop a robust vision of the political situation in that village. Later I found that such data is actually recorded (or used to be recorded) by the local police (chapter 6).

there would be too much chaos if we held it there. Eventually, the DRP settled on a compromise that seemed acceptable to both sides: he chose an open temple decorated with an array of spears.

The next decision was when to hold the meeting. Normally, the gram sabhas were held at times convenient for the auditors, without regard for the convenience of the workers.⁶⁶ I insisted, however, that our meeting be held in the evening, after the workers had returned from their work. The auditors feared that the meeting would become unruly in the night, because of people getting drunk, and eventually we decided on holding the meeting at 5:00 p.m.

That afternoon we went to inspect the NREGA work being done in the hills surrounding the village. At 5:00 p.m. we returned, and the auditors walked around the village to round up people for the meeting. We discovered that most of the Dalit neighborhood was empty because the workers had not returned yet, and so we decided to postpone the meeting. The sarpanch showed up at 5:15, asking why the meeting had not started. We explained that the workers had not yet come back. Reluctantly he agreed to return later. Slowly the meeting space began to fill up. One drunken man kept asking for a separate passbook. The sarpanch drove up on his bike twice more to see if the meeting had started. Finally the DRP told him that the meeting would start at 7:00 p.m. The SRP arrived soon after this from the mandal. People continued to trickle in; the place was getting packed, and the sky was darkening.

The people assembled at this stage were all men from the Dalit neighborhood. Had the meeting been held in the upper-caste area of the village, the likelihood of these workers attending would have been very low; holding one gram sabha for an entire village is dysfunctional. The DRP invited me to sit with the auditors, but I told him that I needed to take photographs and record the proceedings. However, I was hesitant to leave the auditor, suspecting that he would need my help, and as it turned out, I was dragged into the discussion anyway.

The audit meeting started off in the usual way, with a speech proclaiming that NREGA was designed to preserve the right of the workers to work. John stressed that for Dalits the number of workdays was unlimited.⁶⁷ Next he gave a dry presentation of the demographic statistics of the village. He announced that 26 work projects had been completed in the village in the previous year. He also gave the total amount of money spent in that period on NREGA works. People started interrupting at this point with a range of complaints:

“I don’t have a job card, so I was not allowed to work.”

“I had to bribe the mates to get my payment.”

“The FA’s family do not go to work, but they still get paid.”

“I gave my name to be added to the work group, but it was left out.”

“NREGA is a waste, please take it away.”

⁶⁶ There have been objections to this timing and a new process has now been issued that brings special officers in to preside at these meetings.

⁶⁷ In practice the number of workdays allowed per family changes based on the year and season.

One person shouted, “NREGA work is done mainly by women, and yet there is not a single woman here at the gram sabha.” In fact, a few women had appeared, and one asked, “Why do I not have a passbook in my own name? Why do I have to work under somebody else’s name?”

The FA was initially silent. But the Ambedkar leader said, “Forty percent of the people in this village do not have passbooks.” Clearly this was a political statement indicating the split in the village. This allegation irked the FA, and he said, “So what if you don’t have documents? You are still able to get work.” He was upset that people were using a technicality to attack him.

By this time there were multiple conversations going on. I had been observing the meeting from the periphery, believing that I would avoid notice by not standing on the platform, but suddenly I became the object of attention. Three people were pointing their fingers at me, asking, “Why did you spend one hour and fifteen minutes with the opposition party?” Though we had known that our movements were being followed, we did not anticipate that it would become an issue raised in the meeting. Our first response was to ignore the question.

Meanwhile, the FA was claiming that he would settle the passbook problem soon. He added, looking at the most outspoken woman, “I will feed you the passbook in your mouth.” This was a derogatory remark and upset both the women and many of the men. The woman replied, “Mind your language. Do not degrade yourself.” Soon after this a fistfight broke out between the sarpanch and a few men from the Ambedkar Union. The youths we had spoken to earlier formed a circle around us in an attempt to protect us. The Additional Program Officer (APO) tried to intervene, but somebody tried to attack him. The sarpanch intervened immediately, by shouting not to attack the APO. The situation was getting out of control, and the people were becoming increasingly restless.

There was a clear split in the attendees: some approved of our unorthodox behavior as auditors, and others sided with the FA and sarpanch’s men and wanted us to leave. One of the auditors mentioned that the FA was related to the sarpanch, which violated the rule stating that the FA cannot be related to any member of the political party. The SRP, hearing this, said that he would complain to the higher authorities and have the FA removed. This was the last straw. The FA, visibly upset, started shouting insults at all the people who were speaking out. Once again the attention shifted to me and to the auditors, and again people started to ask why we had spent so much time with a member of the opposition party. More questions followed about why this meeting was being held so late and why was it being held at this spot. The accusers were implying that the whole audit was politically motivated.

The conflict was no longer about the content and veracity of the workers’ testimonies. The meeting had triggered a pre-existing feud between two factions, and because the fight was grounded in politics, all sense became relative. We, the auditors, became tools of the contestants in a pre-existing political configuration.

The discussion by this time had completely broken down, and several scuffles had broken out. Someone hit the sarpanch, and after that the situation spiraled into chaos. A few youths pushed me around, but others built a wall around the DRP and me. It was very dark, and eventually, I was whisked away, I could not even see the faces of the people escorting me to safety. I found myself on a motorcycle, accompanied by the SRP and the DRP. We rushed out of the scene and saw that the other auditors had also escaped

on motorcycles. In the distance, I could hear the fight continuing. Suddenly somebody noticed that we were fleeing the scene and yelled. The person driving our motorcycle told me to hold on tight, and he accelerated to the motorcycle's maximum speed. Thus the auditors and I were literally driven from the meeting with our official documents. All we had achieved was the rekindling a pre-existing political fight.

We did not speak much that night. We were happy to return to the mandal office, and after the long day we soon fell asleep. I woke early in the morning and wanted to go back to the village, but the other auditors all looked at me as if I were out of my mind. They said they had work to do: they had to finish their paperwork. I decided to call the FA on the phone. He answered immediately, and I told him that I wanted to come and talk to people in the village. He said the tempers were high and that anything could happen. He added, "I cannot be responsible. You should know that you were warned." He also said that nobody would talk to me.

In spite of his warnings, I took a bus alone to the village. It was late morning, and I was confident that I would be safe. I was proud of having triggered a debate in the village, and the truth is I was also showing off, partly to myself, that I was not afraid after our unceremonious exit from the village the previous night. The first person I saw in the village was a man who had tried to hit me during the meeting. He now tried to avoid me, but I walked up to him and asked if the FA was around. I wanted to show him that I was there to see his man rather than the opposition party, to allay his fears, and also to play it safe. He said that the FA had gone to a nearby town, which I already knew.

I walked down the main street of the village. Everybody was busy doing their work, and though a few glanced at me, nobody came forward to talk. I felt that everybody was watching me and found it increasingly difficult to stay. The Ambedkarian union leader was not there. I met with another person from the local media, a writer for the opposition-party newspaper, who was sympathetic to what we were doing in the audit.⁶⁸ He asked me to leave. He said the village would not be safe for me until several days had passed. He said, "All this will calm down in a few days." But he also said, "Nothing will come out of this."

5.5 The Fight Over Control of the Gram Sabha

The village meetings about NREGA in Andhra Pradesh underwent a number of changes that reflected the power struggles within the program. When I first arrived in early 2012, the NREGA gram sabha was not held regularly. By the end of my time there, these social audit gram sabhas were mandated, with additional supervision to ensure that they took place. The auditing department, which had initially advocated openness and transparency, had to take a qualified stand when it came to these open meetings. The auditors in AP did not want to conduct these meetings at the village. I often heard the gram sabha ridiculed as a feudal and useless forum. I was puzzled by this apathy, and initially thought the auditors at the local level were simply not doing their job. While some bureaucratic

⁶⁸ The media in AP is very politicized: there is a mouthpiece for each party, and each portrays his party in the best possible light.

apathy was indeed there, in fact they were carrying out a charade required by the auditing department.

At heart the struggle was a conflict between the “Gandhian” vision of the village republic and the “Ambedkarian” rejection of the village as a democratic public sphere. The local political forces in Rajasthan did not want audits conducted by activists from the outside. They wanted to reassert the primacy of the gram sabhas as village meetings convened by the villagers, in which outside actors cannot participate. But an MKSS activist, who knew the Rajasthan case, said, “The social audits, if done at the gram sabha, are a waste. Whether it is Bihar or Rajasthan, they all claim to have done audits, and there are zero findings; everything is okay. Gram sabha as an institution can be misused.” A report by the newspaper *Hindu* summarizes the issue well⁶⁹:

This is where the amendment to Section 13 Schedule I of the act came to their aid. The amendment itself was done surreptitiously and discovered much later by activists only when it was used against them. ... It stated the social audit process shall be open to public participation. Any outside individual person apart from the gram sabha shall be allowed to attend the social audit as an observer without intervening the proceedings of the social audit. The sarpanches gained respite with the High Court, staying the entire social audit process in the state and ruling that Section 13B had to be followed to the letter. With this the social audits as done earlier, in a campaign/participatory mode, came to a standstill.

The article was referring to the fight in Rajasthan. But this amendment put similar pressure on the leadership team in AP.⁷⁰

The Andhra story was different in that the sarpanches were not involved in the program. A senior bureaucrat in charge of NREGA told me:

NREGA was the first implementation in AP that completely and totally bypassed the sarpanch. And that’s why the scheme has worked well in AP. Sarpanch does not have cheque-writing power. Their only role is to ensure that work is happening. Beyond that, not giving him hold over the program is what saved NREGA in AP. Otherwise we would not have had social audits to begin with. ... See, it is easier for you to go after an MPDO or an FA or a TA than to go after a sarpanch, because if you go after a sarpanch there is a huge political backlash. There would have been Congress-TDP alliances, there would have all kinds of protests. We bypassed all of them.

⁶⁹ No guarantees anymore, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-sundaymagazine/no-guarantees-anymore/article810013.ece>

⁷⁰ Three years after the clause was inserted, pressure from activists caused the clause to be dropped, as seen in a notification from the Ministry of Rural Development in New Delhi, on June 30, 2011.

This influenced the nature of the audits in AP, making it easier for social audits to be conducted by outside actors. It also affected where these meetings took place. The senior audit member told me:

There were two issues. First, the sarpanches were not involved in the whole program. Second, to conduct a gram sabha we did not have a locus standby. The political party does not have a locus standby. ... See, we did not have the whole concept of a gram sabha in NREGA in AP. We knew that in order to get the bureaucrats involved we would have to push up the level where the meetings take place. So the mandal was accessible. ... It would be very difficult for somebody to go to every village. There was lot of discussions about this, but ultimately it was a pragmatic choice. In NREGA, the implementation was done at the mandal level, and the mandal office was answerable to most of the issues. If the sarpanch were implementing the scheme, we would have held the sarpanch responsible, but over here it was the mandal office implementing the scheme. That's the reason why we got such overwhelming support from the sarpanches in the first two years, because they had nothing to do with NREGA. They had no check-writing powers. They were not the ones implementing the scheme. It was all being run through Field Assistants directly under the control of the mandal office.

The former Minister of Rural Development, a Congress Party member, echoed the significance of the sarpanches being left out of the implementation of NREGA in AP. I asked him, "If social auditors are opening public records and reading them out in a public meeting, aren't you giving ammunition to the opposition party to question the Congress Party and tarnish its image? Why would you agree to such a thing?" The minister replied:

Government is not afraid of social audits. It is because no political party work is involved at the local level. Whatever misappropriation takes place, the responsibility lies with the officer, the Field Assistant, or the Technical Assistant, or the MPDO of the mandal, or the Project Director of that particular district. Responsibilities are with them and not with the political worker, and not with the Congress Party.

He also discussed the policing of the bureaucrats that had dictated the locations of the meeting at the mandal level:

It was because we realized that the MPDO could not be at every gram sabha. If you had to hold 25 gram sabhas, then you would not be able to hold them effectively. Secondly, we wanted somebody much higher than the MPDO to attend it, which was how the PDs and additional PDs started attending the public hearings.

The political party at the local level did not feel implicated by social audits, as the party was not directly involved in the program; it was the lower-level bureaucrats who instead were implicated.

During my time in AP, I noticed a shift in the nature of the gram sabhas, from not being held at all to being events that were held simply to comply with regulations, without true interest on the part of the organizers. The auditors could not avoid these meetings, and they came under pressure from the presiding officers to conduct village meetings. One auditor told me, “They had us cornered. For the gram sabha thing, all over AP they cornered us. The bureaucracy got after us, saying, ‘gram sabha, gram sabha, gram sabha.’ Okay, today we are having the gram sabha.” As a result, the meetings turned into mere rubber stamps. They would take place at times when workers were away, times dictated purely by the auditors’ convenience, resembling the mandatory gram sabha discussed earlier. Further, no thought was given to the location of the meetings. Throughout the process there was no real effort to encourage village participation.

I have seen meetings where less than five people were present and the auditors mechanically read their findings. The meetings always ended with taking thumbprints of the people present, and occasionally an auditor would use a camera phone to take a photo of the meeting. In each audit, the meeting was the last act of the auditors before they departed for the next village or the mandal office.⁷¹

I also saw meetings in which there was resistance from the local bureaucracy and elites. In one meeting, held at 4:00 p.m. outside the panchayati bhavan and attended by only a small number of people, the DRP who was reading the findings focused on high-level details. He talked about the total amount of money spent in the village and the amount of “deviation” that the auditors found, but he left out individual testimonies. One villager, a local sarpanch, asked the social audit team to read out the names of the workers who had testified. The DRP refused, saying loudly, “Are there any NREGA workers here? I will only read out the findings if there are workers here.” Several of the attendees replied, “We all are workers. We have worked on NREGA.” The DRP replied back, “If you are a NREGA worker, bring the job card.” The people gathered were shouting now. They said that they were workers and that they were not required to carry their job cards all the time. The DRP repeated that he would only read out the names if the workers were present. I did not understand why he was hesitant to read out the findings, and my confusion was echoed by a question from one of the attendees: “The social audit process is an open process. Why are you afraid? How will we know what you have been doing for the past few days in our village?”

Later I attended another meeting in which the DRP was unwilling to reveal the workers’ names. It was only after several days that I understood the reason for this hesitancy. At the mandal public hearing, I noticed a group of workers waiting impatiently for their findings to be read out; they all stood up when their village’s name was called. But the officials told them to sit down. Even though their village was being discussed, their particular issue did not come up for some time. The presiding officer read out each issue and then cross-examined the individuals concerned in the complaint. The politics of who should be held responsible for such issues is not straightforward. The zealous DRPs try to pin every issue on the MPDO, but the more pragmatic learn that there is not much point

⁷¹ In a typical audit, each audit sub-group will visit two gram panchayats (villages).

in blaming the MPDO, as the current structure does not allow for action to be taken in such a case. In many instances, the MPDO is sitting in the panel of judges, sending a confusing signal to the people present. These limitations demonstrate the difficulties inherent in treating the state as a unitary whole, throwing open the question of whether it can adequately police itself.

Once the issue concerning the impatient group of workers was finally raised, the presiding officer called the name of the villager who had made in the complaint. There was laughter when he rose to stand by the FA. The presiding officer asked whether he had issued testimony to the auditor. The worker acknowledged that it was his thumb impression but added that he did not understand the issue. He was confused. There was no problem. He had received the money. He wanted to withdraw the complaint. There was nothing anybody could do. The auditors were furious, and everybody present was laughing. The issue was dropped. The presiding officer thanked the worker for showing up to the meeting.

The truth is that workers rarely come to the mandal public hearings, and if they do, it is usually for the purpose of taking back testimony they have made in private in the village, after being pressured by the local bureaucrats. In fact, the village meetings have started serving as opportunities for the local officials to find out who has testified against them. They then put pressure on the workers to take back their testimony. It is thus not surprising that the DRPs are hesitant about what they reveal in the gram sabhas, but a consequence of this necessary caution is that openness, as a strategy, seems unavailable to the auditors, and they often become discouraged when their work is rendered useless by later retractions.

At one public hearing, the presiding officer asked the DRPs whether a particular item had been read in the village meeting. The auditing officials tried to ridicule this requirement: according to them, the important meeting is the one at the mandal level, not the meetings at the village level, a perspective that echoes the Ambedkar vision of the senior bureaucrat. I asked them why the auditors were not honoring a requirement in the law that they read out their findings in the village meetings and one senior auditor replied:

It is a requirement according to the law, but it is not a requirement as far as we are concerned. ... The program is supposed to be implemented through the panchayats, money is supposed to be placed with the sarpanch. None of that is being done, so the question of the social auditors not conducting the gram sabha does not matter.

The presiding officers rejected any finding that was not read at a village meeting. There is no way to ascertain who was to blame. The presiding officer did not have a choice, particularly as workers tend not to attend the mandal public hearings. On some occasions, however, findings that were supported by workers' testimonies were also thrown out, on the claim that they had not been read in the village meetings. This led to great frustration among the auditors, who felt that they had been wronged by such wholesale dismissals. The auditors complained about their wasted efforts in the public hearing itself and in the internal audit meetings, as well as in conversations with me.

Because of these complaints, the social audit leadership and the rural development department eventually instituted a new process: a neutral, objective party, an

ombudsman, would attend village meetings. The ombudsman would be identified in each mandal ahead of time. A schedule of audits was drawn up to inform the ombudsman of the times and dates of the meetings. This schedule ensured that the auditors were on schedule to complete the meetings. Yet the ombudsman was far from neutral. The auditors complained that often he would start acting as a judge, cross-examining the petitioners. The intended role of the ombudsman was simply to countersign every finding to confirm that it had been read out loud in the meeting. But I discovered in my discussions with an ombudsman, who, like many of the ombudsmen, was the headmaster of a school and represented the “intellectual class,” that he had a dismal view of the social auditors. The auditors were barely literate, he complained, and were therefore often ridiculed for speaking beyond their formal training and capacities.

The flaws in the system could not be assigned to one particular group; imperfections existed in every aspect of the system’s design and execution. One thing above all was clear: the workers were not directly engaged in this fight. When their rights were discussed, it was the auditors who were standing up on behalf of the workers.

5.6 Conclusion

The Andhra Model is reputed to have resolved the problem of bureaucratic apathy toward the gram sabha meetings and to have embraced politics to the extent possible from the outside. The audits took different forms, and the meetings were bureaucratized. The auditors are trained to follow a script, which dictates that they talk only to workers of NREGA. In discussing with auditors the reasons they follow the script, there were many responses ranging from having a standardized approach that can be followed everywhere, having a quota and schedule of audit completion, guarding against local elite capture of the audit process, and de-politicizing the audits to keep it objective. The household survey, with questions about the number of days a worker has worked, makes it easier to train the auditor. I was told it was simply not practical to do anything different and was challenged to come up with a standardized template that can be effectively administered to the whole state. Ultimately it came down to scale. Several auditors bemoaned the fact that they cannot possibly have the time to do anything else, that they barely can follow the script.

The gram sabha meetings have gone through a number of iterations, ultimately settling on the bureaucratized solution of having outside supervisors attend the meetings. All of the meetings, and particularly the public hearings, are structured to keep the political parties out. The bureaucrats in charge of organizing the meetings pay attention to the seating arrangements on the stage. The auditors and the bureaucracy police the type of language used in these meetings, and control which issues (only social audit findings) can be discussed. The decisions taken at these meetings are not often read out openly, being recorded instead on paper to minimize altercations. The decisions can be appealed in a personal hearing in the district office.

Considered together, the open, state-run meetings that take place in villages operate on a spectrum, from fully bureaucratized, non-politicized meetings to fully politicized meetings. Their agendas, far from being dictated by the political party hosting the meeting, in fact vary based on the organizers’ intention and the meeting’s capacity to politicize, resulting in often dramatically different outcomes.

The gram sabha discussed in this chapter operates at the fully bureaucratized end of the spectrum. The state-mandated gram sabha meeting demonstrates that if there is no

mobilization, either by the auditors or by political parties, there will be no civilian participation. The RB meeting discussed in this chapter operates, by contrast, at the political end of the spectrum, where there is both intent and capacity to politicize the meetings. These RB meetings can indeed be seen as political rallies hosted with maximum support from the political party, and in consequence are usually well attended.

The social audit meetings, despite being designed to find problems within the system, are always in danger of degenerating into empty bureaucratic exercises. Therefore, an intent to politicize is not enough, as shown by a politicized meeting without the capacity to politicize, leading to situations that cannot be easily sustained. Social movements are able to play a confrontational role in meetings, using them as spectacles to exercise their power. The department in charge of designing the social audits, which is embedded in the state but nevertheless has some autonomy, has worked out a way to avoid both overtly political and overly bureaucratic elements in the meetings with some success. The social audit leadership had tried to avoid the village gram sabha meetings, because they don't have sufficient leverage in those meetings and attempts to politicize those meetings backfire, instead choosing to operate at the mandal-level meetings. In essence, the meetings, initially intended to be entirely transparent, have become only partially open, which has limited their potential for increasing worker participation in governance but has also allowed the system to avoid overt political challenges. It is possible to imagine the possibility of a less scripted audit if there were political capacity, either in the form of a political party or by ensuring adequate localized planning and care went towards these meetings.

The auditors' attitudes went from having these meetings just for procedural compliance, to finding ways to not do them, to wanting to have these meetings opened up, to completely scripting them, and finally, to having an ombudsman ensure that these meetings are not fully compromised.

Ultimately, these meetings are very political. There is conscious bureaucratic apathy from the auditors in that there is a quota of meetings to cover, and there is politics in the sense that these meetings have the potential of being co-opted by political rivalries, so they become partially closed both in the sense of not revealing anything substantive which in this case is desirable but also by rushing the meetings and "closing participation."

In practice, outcomes are further impacted by the agency of the social auditors as well as by the social structure of each village, explored in the next two chapters. Specifically, I take up the question of why do workers do not participate by looking at the political-economic realities of the life in a village.

6: Caste, Class and NREGA in Kurnool

6.1 Introduction

I trudged my way with the workers up the hill to the worksite, a 30-minute walk. The workers who had come with me did not know what to make of me. They seemed nervous that I was accompanying them. The field assistant (FA) stopped by on his motorcycle and offered me a ride, promising that we would be able to see multiple worksites at the same time. I politely refused, as I had been on such flying visits before. I told him I wanted to do NREGA work. He laughed and went away. The workers had probably heard that I was coming to watch them: they were surprised when I later insisted that I be allowed to work alongside them.

As soon as we reached the worksite, everybody went to his or her respective workgroups. The task for the day was building earth bunds on a hill. When I first arrived, I just watched. I was not given any work although I expressed my interest in working. I learned that everybody had brought their own tools: a pickaxe, a grub-hoe, and a basket. There were no spares. I waited for a bit, and then one of the women signaled to me to join their sub-group. She said she could use some extra help. A few others shouted at her for doing this, but I earnestly started on the task. Digging bunds involves breaking up the ground, removing stones, and carrying and depositing sand. I wanted to prove that I could do it, without realizing that by doing so I would become a laughing stock in the group and later in the village. I had hoped that working with them would get me closer to them.

I soon realized that I did not have the skill required to do what the government classifies as “unskilled” labor.⁷² The woman was patient and said she would show me how to use the tools to work properly. I poked around and narrowly escaped chopping off my leg several times, worrying all the time about flying pieces of stone from nearby digging hitting my eyes. I worked dutifully for a bit, but the sun was very hot, and I already felt that it had been a long session.

I also wanted to try my hand at removing the stones from the ground. Another man in the group did this task, and he hesitantly gave me the necessary tool. He was clearly worried that I would break it. He told me that you have to use the tool with care and not hit the stone directly but on the side, to loosen the stone from the ground. He showed me how to do it a few times, but to no avail. There was a constant clacking sound from the tool hitting the stone. I realized that I might reduce his wages by taking away his tool, so I decided to try the work only when he took a break.

After some hours the FA came by with his muster roll. The place was not accessible by motorcycle, so he had to park and walk to the worksite. He was amused to find out that I was working. He said, “Okay, come on, let us go now.” I told him, “I will come back with the workers.” The workers exchanged glances, and the FA left.

Soon we all took a break. A few women had brought clothes to wash in a bucket, and they wanted my permission to wash their clothes in the nearby stream. I was confused and told them they were free to do as they please. Then one of them asked me

⁷² The work is “unskilled” because it does not require any formal training.

where was I really from, the Delhi or Hyderabad government. I had told them that I was a student, but they had not believed me. Now I told them again that I was a student from America. The discussion moved on, and eventually one of the women asked me, “When should we leave?” I told them, “We can leave whenever you are done.” One of them asked, “Aren’t you here to supervise us?” I said, “No! I am a student from America, here to do research. I have no connection with the government.”

They were confused. One of them said that a supervisor from elsewhere would never be willing to do manual work with them, even for a day, and thus I could not be a supervisor. There was some discussion of my real motivation in coming there. Opinions varied: perhaps I was a CIA agent from America, coming to discover whether the laborers in rural Andhra Pradesh were doing their jobs; perhaps I had run away from my family. We laughed. Finally, they seemed to accept that I was a student. Within a few minutes, the workers knew my family history and the amount of money I had spent on airfare to get there. They did not know how to account for the fact that I spent so much money to come and be with them.⁷³ One of them, after hearing that I was a harmless outsider, asked nonetheless, “Can we leave now?” Unfazed by all the discussion, he still thought I was there to oversee their work.

That day they stayed at the worksite for five hours. I continued “working” at the site for two weeks. On the second day we finished the work in three hours, which seems to be their normal working time per day. This particular work site was up in the hills and it was clear that the workers did not find the work meaningful or directly useful to them. It was just work for wages.⁷⁴

This chapter explores the frame of anti-corruption efforts by higher-level bureaucrats to see what effects such a frame produces on the ground. This is not an argument that the anti-corruption frame has not been beneficial; it has undoubtedly reduced corruption, but there have also been unintended consequences that limit an audit system’s effectiveness as an anti-corruption tool. Instead of rejecting the advantages of the anti-corruption campaign outright, I show the real effects that the campaign produces, both positive and negative.

The chapter’s point of departure is the fact that workers usually do not show up at the public audits in great numbers, as we saw earlier. While chapters 4 and 5 examined the bureaucratic structure of these public meetings and the identity of the people organizing them, this chapter and the next analyze the public audits from the standpoint of the village. In this chapter, I will explore the experiences of villagers encountering the audit process in the context of the work program. In order to do this, I first look at how NREGA works and is interpreted in practice. While the data I present here was gathered in one village, I also draw information from other villages where I spent time during my fieldwork.⁷⁵ The story about the Reddy and the Dalit is, in turn, a story about the landed

⁷³ I heard this from many people, including activists and government bureaucrats, who thought field research was too expensive and brought no real returns for anybody.

⁷⁴ I explore this issue of perception and attitude toward work by looking at a tribal village where there was a different relationship with work, and the effect on how works gets done.

⁷⁵ The opening vignette where I did work was in a different village, but it was a Dalit habitation.

and the landless, but that in turn is a story about the way that local social and political relations inevitably affect the implementation of the NREGA, and thus the audit process. An effective response also, in other ways, ignores the local character of the situations it parachutes into: the Andhra Model overlooks the very geographic specificity that goes into identifying a model by place.

The rest of the chapter is divided into six sections: (a) an overview of the village where I stayed for the majority of my fieldwork; (b) the NREGA program at work; (c) an examination of the Reddies' perspective; (d) an examination of the workers' perspective; (e) an overview of the village's preparations for a public audit and the audit itself as seen through the eyes of the villagers; and (f) a concluding section of analysis.

6.2 An Overview of the Village

In the state of Andhra Pradesh, the two dominant land-owning castes, the Reddy and the Kamma, generally live in different regions. The leaders from these castes typically occupy political positions connected with different parties. The Congress Party generally represents the Reddy and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) represents the Kamma. The dominant caste in the Kurnool district, the part of the Rayala Seema region where I stayed during my fieldwork, was Reddies.⁷⁶ In local terms, "Reddy" indicates any male member of the landed class, while "Dalit" is from the former "untouchable" caste and often indicates a landless person.

Everywhere I went in Andhra Pradesh, though the terrain and the vegetation varied, one thing remained constant: the complete segregation of villages based on caste. The village in the Kurnool district where I chose to live contained one of the largest land holdings in the district, as measured by the number of acres under cultivation. In picking a large village I hoped to witness as marked an interaction as possible between the differing interests of the landed and the landless.

Because I wanted to understand the history of the village and the evolution of the relationship between these players over time, a friend advised me to inquire in an unlikely place: the local police station.⁷⁷ The police in Andhra have maintained a practice of keeping detailed surveillance records about the village, first instituted during the colonial era. The records helped me to see the evolution of the village conflicts over the course of decades. They showed the power of the elites, who were almost never formally charged with crimes, and, over the years, the slow process of Dalit empowerment through the reclamation of public spaces, by blocking roads and filing formal petitions. In examining the police records, I was able to understand the social context for the implementation of NREGA: the gradual transformation from an elitist society to a democratic system.

I spent a few days "locked up" in the police station, sitting on the floor and copying records, as I was not allowed to photocopy them. They were bound in thick notebooks, each dedicated to one village in the Mandal. I saw jottings that extended back

⁷⁶ The state of AP was split into three different regions: Rayalseema, Telangana, and Coastal Andhra.

⁷⁷ Conversation from the field with Vivek Srinivasan. Also discussed in his dissertation. (V. Srinivasan, 2010)

30 years, usually written in English and reading almost like the diary of a journalist or a field researcher.⁷⁸ The records indicated that the police were often aware of crimes even when no formal cases were reported. In other words, they were not legal documents or formal charge sheets, but informal and meticulous notes kept so that the police could understand the activities in the village. More than anything else, the records showed me that there is a vast difference between what the state knows and what it is able and willing to take action on. This difference would later come into play when the state's auditors recorded problems with the implementation of NREGA but then seemed to lack any ability to take action.

The police had kept intimate records concerning the landed class: who owned how much land, who were the “trouble makers,” how and where violence had erupted, how many deaths were due to pre-existing conflicts, the size of the “army” that each leader commanded. But they also recorded instances of Dalit resistance to the elites. Several petitions had been filed over the last three decades in which Dalits asked for permission to celebrate their own events. One of the letters asked for permission and police protection for Christmas celebrations for a two-hour period. A few others reported harassment by Reddies. They asked for protection by the police during weddings. These requests, in the form of signed documents, were Dalit attempts to reclaim the public spaces of the village, reflecting a changing social system.⁷⁹

Today Dalits are not afraid of the landed class and don't have to seek police permission when using public spaces. Within a few days of entering the village, I saw firsthand proof of this—and saw how recently this change had occurred. A group of youths was erecting a huge banner in the central pathway of the village, announcing a celebration in the Dalit church. In this village, the Dalits have embraced Christianity, as is the case in most other villages in Andhra. The symbolic gesture of placing a banner in a public space, where the Reddies would undoubtedly see it, was an act of self-affirmation and defiance. This level of defiance did not arise overnight, as my interviews with the Dalits will show. As I watched the young men put up the banner, an older Dalit man told me such an act could not have happened even a decade earlier.

The geographical separation of castes in the village seemed, by contrast, to be frozen in time. The village is organized such that the Dalits are forced to traverse the Reddy areas to leave the village, thus allowing the Reddies to see who comes and goes. I

⁷⁸ I was told that the complete records were in the archives in the district headquarters. The police constable needed some coaching from the inspector to help him find the records. He returned with a pile of dusty notebooks; I was clearly the first person to consult them in years. When I asked the police inspector who used them, he told me that they were important in introducing the village to a new inspector. The police are transferred often, and the records provide a way to get up to speed on what is going on in the village. Yet this practice of recording detailed surveillance has stopped in this area and the notes have not been updated for several years. The police told me that this was because the factionalism problem has gone away.

⁷⁹ Apart from the conflicts, the notes contained basic statistics of the village: population, caste composition, temples, water sources, crimes, names of prostitutes, the important people in the village and their political affiliations, and the number and status of court cases. They categorized the factions in the village and listed the types of threats each posed, identifying by name the faction leaders, their main associates, and the people who made bombs.

stayed in the Dalit area, and throughout my time there I experienced the sensation of being watched by Reddies sitting outside their houses and chatting as I made my way to the bus stop. I was told that only a few decades ago, the Dalits had to fold their hands and carry their slippers when they walked through these streets. I stayed on the “Mala” side of the Dalit habitation. The Dalits are divided into the Malas and Madigas, reflecting the caste divisions permeating the rest of the society. Normally the Madigas aren’t allowed to eat at a Mala’s house. On the rare occasion when they do eat together, one Mala woman told me that they vigorously wash their plates to preserve their “purity.” This phenomenon of “trickling down” of caste feelings has been referred to as the “sanskritization” of society (Srinivas, 1956). Despite the fact that Dalits have now embraced Christianity, I did not notice changes with respect to these deep-rooted caste divisions⁸⁰.

6.3 The Reality of NREGA Work in the Village

As discussed in chapter 3, NREGA was centralized because of concerns about corruption, which resulted in the central state preparing a list of work permitted in NREGA. The “shelf of works” determines what work is allowed and dictates the type of work chosen. In an attempt to provide transparency at the lower levels, however, the centralized state instituted two formal mechanisms to decentralize their operations: one was to use Gram Sabha (the process of public auditing described earlier) to decide the nature of the work for each project, and the other was to give power to the workers by creating “mates” to record attendance. These mates, or supervisors, have been legitimized by the state. They are hired to be representatives of the workers and are responsible for filling out official documents and keeping the muster rolls. In my fieldwork I discovered that neither of these approaches operated as intended. Gram Sabha serves as convenient rhetoric indicating that the state is interested in worker participation, but it achieves little more than that. Mates, in their turn, have been co-opted by the lower-level bureaucrats and function more often than not as part of the state.

NREGA guarantees that workers can find work whenever they want it and that the work to be done will be decided by the Gram Sabha. The idea behind this system was that if a Gram Sabha were conducted in a given village, the workers in that village would be able to choose their own work, which would then be meaningful to them. In the village where I stayed, the program officer in the Mandal office who was in charge of NREGA showed me documentation with pictures to prove that there had indeed been a Gram Sabha. He kept a notebook and a file in which all the meetings were meticulously documented. The pictures showed people from the village attending the most recent meeting and approving the work schedule. I remarked that all the Gram Sabhas for the entire Mandal (about twenty villages) were recorded as being completed in just couple of days. He nodded sheepishly and said, “We work hard.” It was clear to me that the process had been carried out as a formality, in clear violation of the NREGA principles, which dictate that the workers themselves will decide the nature of the work, using the Gram

⁸⁰ See the “Tangled Web” to understand the conflict between malas and the madigas on the issue of reservation of madigas. (Kandalla Balagopal, 2000)

Sabhas. In reality, the workers were never consulted. The Gram Sabha was assembled only for the sake of proving later that there had been a meeting. The workers did not know about the nature of their work until the day it began.⁸¹

The task of filling the muster roll was given to the workers to give more control of the work to the workers themselves, and thus to curb corruption by the state employees. Those workers who were appointed “mates” were paid INR 2 more than the regular worker and entrusted with the supervision of one work group, composed of 20 workers. I did not see, however, that the mates were able to play a supervisory role. Indeed, it was not even clear that the mates understood that this was their role. The same action that empowered them turned them into quasi-bureaucrats without giving them any comprehension of the larger system.

Over time it became clear to me that nobody was worrying whether work was done in NREGA. The government did not worry about this because each worker was supposed to be paid based on a measurement of what his or her work group produced each day. In theory, the payments were governed by an extensive piece-rate system, which had been established through an elaborate series of studies referred to as “time and motion” studies.⁸² The rates were determined by the collective output of each workgroup, as opposed to tracking individual output, in an attempt to incentivize the workers to work collaboratively, as each worker’s payment was dependent on the group’s output.

In Andhra Pradesh, the measurement system was not enforced. In an interview, one of the state bureaucrats told me candidly that when NREGA was first introduced in the state, the government officials just wanted workers to become aware of NREGA as a possibility.

Measurement would have put excessive pressure on the lower-level bureaucracy to maintain records, not to mention the workers complaining about the workload. We just left it loose for a year; there were no shackles to prevent corruption of any kind, and it was a “free for all.”

Ignoring the measurement requirements was a way to garner consent to the implementation of NREGA from both the lower-level bureaucrats and the workers. So NREGA was first implemented in Andhra with minimal restrictions. A local media person in the Mandal echoed this story, telling me that there was no measurement and that the workers did what they pleased. “Also,” he added, “the lower-level bureaucrats and the mates started fudging attendance registers and making money.” It seems to be a running paradox that strategies designed to circumvent corruption end up promoting it.⁸³

⁸¹ The work in question was a smaller project, as opposed to a large project like canal work, which requires the entire village to work on one work site for days and which provides a clear benefit to the community.

⁸² These time-motion studies, an innovation created by an NGO, replaced archaic notions of how much work needed to be done before the government would pay a worker. A manual describes the various rates in use under the old system, accounting for soil types and different types of work.

⁸³ Some states, like Bihar, continue to have a difficult time implementing NREGA, despite a willingness on the part of the higher-level bureaucrats to ignore corruption. This indicates a strong resistance to NREGA, and how political priorities are salient, which in turn depend on the existing power relations, based on class

This same journalist said that as a consequence of having “guaranteed money” from NREGA, the workers started demanding higher wages from the Reddies for their agricultural work. Before NREGA the men were paid INR 50 and the women were paid INR 30 as a daily wage for agricultural work. For that wage, they used to work for eight hours, from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., with a one-hour lunch break. But with the advent of NREGA, the wages increased to INR 125, and they continue to increase whenever the minimum wage is increased by the state.⁸⁴ The journalist said that as a result of this jump in wages the farmers “suffered.”⁸⁵ When the workers refused to work for less than the NREGA wage, the Reddies approached bureaucrats and politicians about the issue. According to the local reporter, Reddies pressured the local Mandal officials, claiming that they needed workers for their land. Similar pressure from the Reddies must have occurred elsewhere too because a compromise was soon reached, and an NREGA calendar was created in 2008 that specified when NREGA work could be opened. The journalist recalled, “The officers (APO) prepared it. They called for a meeting for all farmers and asked them when they wanted the laborers, and the schedule was prepared based on their input. The farmers were satisfied.”

NREGA rules do not officially allow these compromises. As NREGA was supposed to be an on-demand program, the workers should be able to demand work any time, and many activists claim that the limited schedule violates a tenet of the scheme that set it apart from previous development schemes. When I tried to probe the officials about the schedule, they initially denied its existence, then reversed tack and argued that it was necessary to take heed of local conditions. The local MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly, an elected position) was explicit about the compromise. He was a Dalit and understood the workers’ interests, but he said, “We have to take care of the Reddies as well, otherwise they will create a scene.”

6.4 The Reddy⁸⁶ Perspective on NREGA

This section focuses on the Reddies’ perspective on NREGA and the work situation in the village. In combination with the following section on the workers’ perspective, this section reveals the varied perceptions of life in the village and situates the NREGA in the context of caste relations. I argue that class and caste relations continue to play an

and caste.

⁸⁴ NREGA is paid for largely from funds provided by the central Indian government, as opposed to local state governments. The central government tried to protest the raising of minimum wages by the state by fixing the amount of the NREGA wage and urging the state governments to make up the difference.

⁸⁵ P. Sainath, an avid and rare commentator on rural issues in India in the English newspapers, pointed out in a interview with me that NREGA could be a blessing for small farmers (those who own less than five acres of land) because NREGA does not exclusively target the poor, meaning that small farmers could work for NREGA in lean seasons and compensate their income. While I could not find any farmers echoing this point of view, the small farmers I encountered all had job cards and seemed to have benefited from NREGA.

⁸⁶ The Reddy represents the powerful landed caste in AP.

important role in the system of work implemented in Andhra, given the evidence presented below.

I did not have to try to get the Reddies talking about NREGA: they hated it. The dominant reaction was the claim that NREGA made workers lazy. I heard this comment from every Reddy I questioned. According to one, the workers' laziness affected the Reddies directly: "After NREGA the workers are not interested in working on our lands. They tell us, 'In your land, we have to work the whole day, but in NREGA we only work for two hours, so we cannot work for the same amount.'" One farmer tried to offer a solution: "NREGA is a waste. It does not benefit farmers. The wage has increased. They come whenever they want to. They should move the NREGA work to start from March instead of starting it from February." I heard other farmers push the date even further, to April, making the work available only in the summer months.

Some farmers claimed that NREGA made the workers not just lazy but incapable of sustained work. They said that the bodies of the workers became used to not working, thus damaging their capacity for prolonged agricultural work, and as a result the farmers were forced to hire more workers.⁸⁷ One farmer complained, "Nobody wants to work now. They just want money. The NREGA routine was just go, sit, and come back. The management needs to supervise. There is a percentage scheme: you get some; I get some. Who will speak out? There is a commission. There is no use of NREGA to the village. NREGA workers should be redirected to work on farmers' land." The demand to open agricultural land to be sponsored under NREGA ambit was something I heard from many farmers. They told me that they were not against NREGA, perhaps coming to terms with their inability to change the situation. "NREGA is good," one remarked, "if we are able to get the government to get the laborers to work on our lands." In effect they were asking for a state subsidy, via NREGA, to regain their control of the laborers. Arguably, if NREGA were to be diverted to private lands, it would lose its radical potential as a rights-based program. However, a partial diversion at least may be necessary to save the scheme from total collapse.

One farmer spoke in a low voice and asked me not to identify him, a rare occurrence. He said:

The people who are behind this are the leaders. They don't do any work but just show that there was work done for the audits. There is no use for the NREGA work. They don't do roads. They don't build useful assets. If we ask them we don't get anything. They tell us we don't have rules to get the NREGA money to redirect it on our lands. There is no place as worse as this place in the whole earth. It is happening elsewhere. Only in my village there is nothing. The big farmers are big thieves. It is all done with the politicians. The workers are spoilt by the supervisors' giving them a drink. I will also be corrupted by a drink.

⁸⁷ While I am not aware of any studies examining the reduction in agricultural productivity, other NGOs and activists who work in sustainable agriculture echo the view that NREGA has indeed affected farming. Some of them told me that farming was hard work and because the laborers are not interested in working for the same rates, farming is left to suffer. While politically and ideologically they side with the laborers and wish for higher wage rates, they also wonder whether the smaller farmers are able to afford the higher wages and whether the laborers are willing to do hard labor.

He was implying that not all farmers are treated equally. The big farmers, who have the major portion of power within the region, are not siding with the small farmers. They gain politically by having the laborers benefit from NREGA, both receiving cuts and obtaining political mileage.

Revealingly, in my interviews with farmers, the bigger ones (with many acres of land) tended to talk about the issues in the abstract. They were not threatened personally by NREGA. Indeed, most of them had leased their agricultural lands to tenant farmers. It was difficult to get in touch with the owners because many had gone to the city. When I was able to interview a large-scale farmer, he would typically say that NREGA concerned the bureaucrats and the laborers and that I should go speak with them. None of the big farmers I spoke to seemed concerned either by the program itself or by the public audits, suggesting that they did not have strong links with the low-level bureaucrats who were most often the people guilty of corruption.

The smaller farmers I spoke with were explicit about why the big farmers did not align with them:

We tried to tell the MPDO. We got the collector involved as well. But they just nodded. They said, “Take the labor after they finish NREGA work.” But the reality is that the laborers are tired just walking back and forth in the sun. It is far away for them. We could be strong if we act together, but nobody is listening to us. The big landlords are not interested in fighting with us, because they do not care. They give their lands for lease. They don’t need labor. They are not coming to support us. We need to give the worker food. We need to give them drinks and lure them to come to work.

The disadvantages of NREGA thus fall most heavily on the small farmers, who own land that must be tended but have neither the ability to lease their fields when workers are unavailable nor the resources to provide the higher wages that the workers now demand. Some of them who have leased the land from large landowners are paying non-negotiable rents, which burdens them further.

With regard to the limited and arbitrary NREGA schedule, one Reddy said, “If NREGA were given continuously, then the workers would finish the work and be willing to come to work on our lands. But because the work is so intermittent, they start and stop their work at their own will. It makes it hard for us.” In other words, if NREGA were consistently confined to certain months of the year, the farmers would be able to plan around the schedule. As the system stands, however, the arbitrary schedule affects workers and Reddies alike. When I asked the bureaucrats about the intermittent NREGA work, they told me that NREGA is an on-demand program—they did not say whose demand—and that it was within their rights to start and stop the program. According to the original principles of NREGA, the demands should come from the workers themselves, but in reality the workers seemed to have very little, if any influence on when NREGA work was offered.

There have been disputes about whether or not NREGA has affected wages, based on aggregate analysis (Imbert & Papp, 2012; Jha & Ramaswami, 2012)⁸⁸. My own conclusion, based on the data gathered during my fieldwork, is that NREGA has indeed raised wages substantially. Elsewhere farmers were striking by declaring “crop holidays,” keeping their land fallow as a form of protest (Vakulabharanam, Prasad, Laxminarayana, & Kilaru, 2011). They were signaling to the broader society that the government should not ignore the needs of the farmers. A few local language Telugu newspaper reports tied these protests to NREGA, and the rural development department sent investigative teams to examine these claims in the district where the farmers had declared crop holidays. The investigators concluded that the strikes were not related to NREGA, but such a conclusion is too convenient for the existing government system to be believed without corroboration. One farmer in Andhra told me:

The farmers are not doing well. That’s why we have farmers’ suicide. We need a farmers’ union. We need to stop planting and call for farmer strikes. Then they will all come running. Everybody is striking. Collectors are striking. Farm workers are striking. The factory workers are striking. The government employees are striking. We need to be striking. Nobody is representing us. We need to unionize. We need to declare a crop holiday here.

It was clear to me that the small farmers felt so helpless in the face of NREGA and the increasing wage demands from workers that striking often seemed like the only avenue left open to them, as they have to pay rents on their leased lands.

Several of the farmers I spoke with wistfully remembered the “good old days,” when the workers could be put to work. They advanced several possible strategies for coping with NREGA, including bargaining for a farmer-friendly schedule and stopping work at the local level. The desire for a redirection of NREGA work to private lands came up often, and I found that the idea was being repeated even in policy circles at the state level.⁸⁹ The farmers were really optimistic about the possibility of having this done. The way they saw it, either NREGA should go away or be redirected to work on their own lands, with a strong preference for the latter.

⁸⁸ See Dilip Mookherjee review, MNREGA: Populist leaky bucket or successful anti-poverty programme? - See more at: http://ideasforindia.in/article.aspx?article_id=292#sthash.zv1Ja1N4.dpuf
http://ideasforindia.in/article.aspx?article_id=292

⁸⁹ NREGA’s rules specify that if there is no public work to be done, work should be done first on Dalit land, then on land belonging to the caste immediately above the Dalits, and so on. The Reddies’ land would thus come last. I did not see any work being done on Dalit land, though I did hear about a land survey identifying Dalit lands for development. I also heard murmurs that the process of identifying land belonging to Dalits was fraught with corruption and that more often than not upper-caste lands were identified as Dalit lands, thus allowing Reddy lands to be cultivated through NREGA.

6.5 The Workers' Perspective on NREGA

In my investigation of the village's range of responses to NREGA, I interviewed a former faction leader, a Reddy whose name I had seen several times in the police ledger but who had mellowed over the years. He made the following remarks on Dalits:

There used to be a fear before. They used to be afraid. Now they have learnt to question. The state is also giving them rice. They are getting aware of their rights. We used to control the laborers. We would not give enough money to workers. We would not give payment on time. Everybody was like this. ... The problem with the caste system was not that the system was wrong, it was the implementation. The caste system was a good division of labor, but over time things went bad. We started looking at them [the Dalits] as subhuman. This is how the feelings became bad. There used to be killing. Now the "moorkham" [animal] feeling has gone. The change has come. They are doing well. ... These people did not even have proper food to eat. Now they have enough money.

He concluded his remarks by suggesting that the resistance we see from Dalits today is a consequence of past acts of domination. He was talking in generalities, and I did not dare ask him what he himself had done.

The relationship between Reddies and Dalits cannot be examined purely in economic terms.⁹⁰ There is also the ubiquitous abuse and contempt experienced by the Dalits, the overwhelming social power of the Reddies, and the helplessness with which the Dalits, until very recently, faced the demands of the landed caste. The regret voiced by the former faction leader regarding past abuses was a rare exception rather than the norm.

My conversations with Dalits would start with a discussion of work and invariably end in an analysis of their relations with the Reddies. One worker observed, "We used to just go and work continuously for the Reddy. Even in the night we had to be available for work. Then we have to start early in the morning. We did not get any wage. We used to get food and country liquor. It was like that." The oppression of the Dalits by the landed caste has a painful history that is sometimes hard to bring out. In one discussion, a Dalit referred to caste-related discrimination as having "caste feelings." He was initially hesitant to talk to me about the issue, but when pressed he spoke as follows:

I will tell you a story that happened in this village. It was a story about my uncle. It was natural for the workers to get kanji [porridge, usually made of rice soaked in water] from the Reddy. The kanji used to be served by the women in the household in a glass, a special container reserved for distribution purposes. But here the practice was that they would serve only the water to the workers, leaving the rice at the bottom of the container. One day, when the kanji was transferred, my uncle noticed exactly one morsel of rice that had slipped in by mistake to his cup. He immediately took hold of the grain of rice, tied it to a rope, and ran

⁹⁰ Balagopal finds fault with the Left parties for not appreciating the non-economic angle and documents how the Left lost lot of support over the years (Balagopal, 2011).

around the village. He was talking to the rice, it seems. “Why are you here? Why do I need this morsel of rice from the house of those bastards? Why do you come into my life and affect my peace?” He made such a scene that people from the village gathered around him. He then resolved not to go to that house to work anymore. That is our story.

The story is an ironic indictment of the cruelty too often shown to the Dalits by their Reddy employers.

Discussing caste is a tricky issue. It is always present in the way the villagers live their lives, determining where their homes can be built and which part of the village they will inhabit, but it is also not something one can easily bring up in conversation. I took it as a given that caste played an enormous role in the culture of the village, but I was eager to learn how and why that role might have changed over the years.⁹¹

Traditionally, Dalits were not paid wages for their work. Instead there was a system called “vetti chakri,” in which workers used to receive food for their labor. The work was divided based on the different skills required, and the tasks were gendered. The wage rates varied with the types of work. Being paid in cash is thus a recent phenomenon for the Dalits. One of them recalled,

We started getting cash 20 years back. We used to get INR 1 for our work. Now we get INR 200. We got change. We got it because we have become aware in our society. Kids are learning slowly through schools. When we don’t have anything, we go to the Reddy, and then we started having Ma Reddy Ma Reddy [My Reddy] sentiment. We still offer respect, but things have been slowly changing over generations.

Traditionally, when the workers undertook agricultural work, Reddies would accompany them to the fields. The workers would leave in the morning with their lunches packed and return after sunset. It was a full day’s work, and the Reddies constantly supervised them to ensure that they were working. I was curious to see how the workers were supervised in the NREGA system. Some of the Reddies had suggested that part of the problem with NREGA was that there was no supervision of the work. The workers, in contrast, told me not to believe the Reddies. They told me that they were paid based on the amount of work they did, and they explained the role of the Technical Assistant (TA) in NREGA, whose job was to go and measure the work completed. They showed me their job cards and pointed to the variation in the amounts of money they had received. They were unambiguously unwilling to be characterized as “lazy workers.” They did have problems with NREGA, but their complaints revolved around the fact that the payments were not made in a timely fashion, and thus they could never be sure how much money they would receive. The TAs and the FAs would refuse to tell them how

⁹¹Among many other stories, I heard of a “two-glass system” to separate cups for Dalits from cups for Reddies; of the first time Dalits were allowed to enter the Hindu temples, a date that the Dalits remembered with the utmost accuracy as an epochal moment; and of the debate on whether Dalits should be allowed to consume water from the well.

much money they would receive, claiming that the computer would decide, effectively hiding behind the computer.

In my visits, I saw the TA and the FA visit the field site, but I did not see them measuring the work completed. They would arrive on motorcycles, needing to cover a vast area, and the fact that they actually showed up at the worksite suggests that there was a process in place for measurement of the work, yet I did not see them performing this task. The FA collected the muster rolls from the mates each week and took them to be entered in the computer system at the Mandal level.

When I asked the workers about the current method of payment, one man compared the system with the system in place when they worked on Reddy lands and argued that the current system was better:

The payment for NREGA work is based on how much we are working. If we do more work, we get more. This is better than when we had to go and work at the Reddy for our livelihood. Now we don't go there. Well, we go there only when we need it. It has been forty years in the making where our situation slowly changed. Not suddenly.

Another worker talked about the problem of getting money punctually from NREGA:

I go for NREGA work. The payment is delayed. But we get work. They keep starting and stopping work. They give a week here, then stop two weeks, then give another week. ... They say we don't have permission to start work, so they stop the work. The bill sometimes does not come. It comes whenever it comes.

The average delay in payment was about six weeks, though for some workers it took much longer. No one knew why payment was delayed. The Andhra bureaucrats have employed a lot of technology to solve the problem, as we saw in chapter 3. The issue was a topic of discussion at a conference in Hyderabad, where several senior bureaucrats from all four southern states gathered to compare their experiences in administering NREGA. The Andhra bureaucrats were left wondering how it was that Tamil Nadu did not seem to have any problem in making payments punctually: they had not used any technology at all but had simply resorted to cash payments, decentralizing their payment system by delegating to the local panchayat leaders. By contrast, in Andhra the fear of corruption had led them to create a centralized structure relying on a technological system designed to isolate problems in the payment method. The system was an attempt to let the bureaucrats see what was going on, but it had led only to delays and confusion.

The workers themselves had no way of knowing what was going on in the system. Some of the educated youths were eager to discuss it: The bill comes whenever. If you ask, they say it has not come. If we ask the mate, the mate refers to the field assistant; then if we go to the Mandal headquarters, they ask us to go further up to ask. Who is the government? "We are the government," one said. They keep saying payment is coming. If we work for a week, the mate takes some, the field

assistant takes some; they tell us that the money is in a “suspense account.” Who should we ask?

It was clear to me that NREGA administration was centralized, as we saw in chapter 3. During my time in Andhra, even in the summer months, when NREGA work was on the calendar, the work was only intermittent. Moreover, it was difficult to discover which projects had been dictated by policies at the top level of government, which by policies at the district level or the Mandal, and which had been stopped at the village level. The bureaucracy was revealing its power not just by conscious design but also by negligence. Some of this negligence can be traced to apathy at the local Mandal, which led to work being available inconsistently, but some could be traced to the more central control. At a state-level meeting where I was asked to give my feedback I mentioned that the policy of allowing work to be stopped and started according to the whims of the bureaucracy significantly affected the “on-demand” nature of work. I learned that some of the unexpected halts were due to government concern about corruption, and some because of the need for state clearance for certain work ahead of time. The process was centralized, and even the district-level bureaucrats could not open new types of work not sanctioned at the state level.

At the lower levels, this centralization was often resented. I received many complaints from district-level bureaucrats who understood the rationale of the anti-corruption campaign but bemoaned the lack of easy ways to add work. There were not even online prompts available to create new work types in NREGA’s computer system; they had to be approved through offline, paper-based protocols. Centralization, in other words, has to some extent lessened corruption, but it has also increased the helplessness of the lower-level officials and compounded the system’s inefficiency.

The workers did not know about these difficult complexities within the system. I asked them whether they believed the Reddies were responsible for the delays in payment. One of the laborers said, “If it was the Reddy, we wouldn’t get a single rupee. They say that if we go to NREGA we cannot come to their land. They stop the NREGA work, if they have work in their land.” Not all of the workers, however, found fault with the Reddies. One worker told me, “If it was the Reddy giving the money, he would give it to us in the evening or the next day. The government gives money after four weeks. That is how this government work is done.” In essence, the payment system with the Reddies is often preferable to the NREGA because of its simplicity and promptness. In some cases the landlords give advance payments to convince Dalits to work on their land.⁹² One MPDO (chief bureaucrat at the Mandal level), who seemed intent on providing NREGA work, revealed that the workers simply would not come to work for NREGA. We went together to a neighboring village and held a meeting with the workers; they told us that they could not work for NREGA because they needed payment to survive. The NREGA payments were often delayed by several months, and they could not afford to wait that long.

Nevertheless, while they offered a lot of criticism about the implementation of NREGA, it was clear that they wanted NREGA to stay, in order to give them the

⁹² It was not clear how much of it was due to the pressures of NREGA; opinions varied.

possibility of changing their relationship with the Reddies. One worker said, “We don’t even have one hundred days of work [the minimum guarantee of NREGA]. But we are happy to get half that in a year, per household. Imagine if we got one hundred days per person: the Reddies would be up in arms.” Clearly he and his fellow workers viewed NREGA as something to be preserved. The workers valued the system not just because of the better wages but because it gave them a sense of self-respect and the autonomy to decide where they would work.

To emphasize the strength of the Dalits’ desire to be free from the control of the landed class, I will include the story of an incident that happened while I was in Andhra. I was talking to a defiant Dalit youth wearing a white-collared shirt. He told me that the Reddies had not welcomed his wearing such a good shirt. I reacted with disbelief. He said that the day before he had been walking on the street past “his” Reddy’s house. The Reddy, seeing his shirt, seemed visibly upset but did not ask him to remove the shirt, as would have been the norm in earlier times. Now, instead, he told the youth to move a heap of cow dung from area to another. The youth claimed that this was pointless work, thought up just to ensure that his shirt would be soiled. Seeing my surprised reaction, the youth offered to walk with me down the street, confident that the interaction would repeat itself. The incident proved to me that, though caste relations have changed, they are still a major and disturbing force in the village. Many Dalits still depend on the Reddies economically. The defiant youth told me, “This is the reason we like to have more work options.” NREGA is one such option. Many village youths migrate to the cities and live in worse conditions in order to escape the caste-based constraints of village.

6.6 The Local Bureaucracy Prepares for the Audit

I had arranged to reach the village one month before the social audits arrived, according to the NREGA schedule. I went to the Mandal office to familiarize myself with the preparations there. I had seen such preparations among the lower bureaucracy before, in other locations, and so had some idea of what to expect in the office.

I was asked to wait at first, while the MPDO performed a religious ceremony in the office. After introductions, he started describing the NREGA set-up. He drew some diagrams on a paper and described the district’s administrative hierarchy. It is typical for bureaucrats to engage in a discussion of meaningless facts to avoid talking about the issues at hand. I listened to the details of who reports to whom, jaded by now after receiving similar treatment from many other bureaucrats. Eventually I was given a document called the "At-a-Glance Report", which can easily be downloaded from the Internet thanks to the extensive computerization of NREGA reports. I tried to resist this time-wasting tactic, telling him that I already knew the basic structure of the system. He chided me for not being patient and continued to tell me facts I already knew.

I then told him that I wanted to understand his perceptions of the conflict about NREGA at the local level, to hear about the pressure he was receiving from the Reddies to stop the work. He told me that I should find out such things on my own. I asked for information about the land survey they had done to identify private lands to be developed. He was surprised that I knew about the survey and said, using another tactic I had seen before, that it would take time to explain the details and that I should return later, perhaps in the evening, when he would have it ready. As I suspected, when I

returned in the evening he was not there, and he would not entertain future requests for a meeting, citing the office's busy preparations for the audits.

I did not see those preparations up close in this Mandal, but I had watched a pre-audit procedure in a different Mandal, observing the field assistants from the Mandal working frenetically to create the necessary documentation.⁹³ The process started with a meeting in which the APO announced that the auditors were coming in a few days; he instructed the FAs to ensure that the documents were properly filled out and organized. The auditors require the documents to be organized by village, and this is one of the reasons that the auditors inform the Mandal beforehand that they are going to perform an audit, even giving out schedules, despite the fact that such advance notice violates the purpose of an auditing procedure. If no warning were given, none of the documentation would be prepared, necessitating endless delays. The system of advance notice for audits has thus become standard practice. I have seen circulars sent through the government hierarchy informing bureaucrats of a pending audit. As discussed in chapter 4, one of the disadvantages of the institutional structure currently in place in the auditing system is that the structure limits the procedure's potential for effective change before the audit has even begun.

The lower-level bureaucrats have learned what the auditors typically look for, since the audits have been repeated several times. They have learned to check and modify signatures approving works, to ensure that the supporting documents are in order, and, if a document is missing, to reproduce it for the occasion. This requires detailed work. In the village where I was able to witness their preparation, some of the bureaucrats showed genuine fear of the audit, telling me that they had to ensure that the documents were in order or their jobs would be in danger. The more politically connected field assistants, however, did not bother. One played funny dialogues from popular movies that recreated their situation. Nonetheless, in general a tense atmosphere prevailed in the Mandal office before the audits. The auditors constantly find new ways of examining the data, changing what they look for and, most importantly, talking directly to the workers. So the audits, in spite of the advance warnings, remain a threat to the lower-level bureaucrats.

Now returning to the Mandal associated with the village, the lower-level bureaucrats did not let me stay even to observe the initial preparations. I protested that it was a government office and that I had the right to stay, but they replied, "Please, sir, we are busy. Try to understand, this is what the MPDO wants us to do. We are helpless. This is torture, sir. They are only paying us 2,200, and we have to do all this work." I left the building, not wanting to make their situation worse.

The preparation for the audits had ripple effects in the village. I had spent a month there already, but up to this moment I had not discovered the full nature of the mates' role. Prior to this point my conception of the mate's role stemmed from the state's expectation of them. The mates were representative of the workers, and as far as I could see, meeting them alongside other workers, they acted like workers too. But with the audit looming, I stumbled upon a group of mates sitting and chatting, and discovered another facet to their position.

⁹³ I took advantage of the different identities that come with changing how I entered the "field" which gave me different vantage points to see different aspects of the phenomenon.

Mates are involved in the corruption. The state, for its part, has created fixed-size worker groups and appointed mates to supervise them. Since the groups are formed and the mate selected by the workers themselves, the assumption is that the mate has the interest of the workers in mind. But theories don't always function as intended. The worker group makes it difficult for the auditor to get accurate testimony from the workers because they cannot speak individually, only through the mates, who are the most empowered among the workers and as such often enter into collusion with the field assistants. Before the audit, all the mates are told by the FAs to warn the workers not to talk to the audit team. The mates themselves are the only workers who attend the audit meetings. If a mate says something incendiary during the meeting he is "fired" and the state notes that it has taken action. But "firing" a mate does not mean much because he never had an official governmental post in the first place. One mate, when asked about the auditors, said, "We are the easiest to go after, but what are they going to do? All they can do is remove us from being mates so we become workers [again]."

When I fell into conversation with the group of mates during the village's preparations for the audit, we soon began chatting about how money is made in the village. The mates explained a scheme in which everybody—workers, mates, and lower-level bureaucrats (the TAs)—are paid off. One gave an example:

The worker puts in only a half meter, but we exaggerate the depth of work. When the TA comes to check, he gets a cut, as he can see that the work is not completed. The worker gets the whole amount whether he worked or not—if we don't give the money to the worker, then he is going to upset the whole thing. So we take care of them. We make money by writing extra names in the muster.

The mates, originally workers, had thus become "contractors" too. When I asked whether they were the contractors, they laughed and said, "We are Dalits too. We do not have money. We just skim some money. There are bigger things that are going on, and nobody is going after them." They were not willing to talk in specifics, and I soon gave up trying to confirm that what they were telling me was accurate.

One mate bemoaned the fact that the workers do not understand the system of corruption and blame the mates for its shortcomings:

Everybody says a mate is a donga [thief], but nowhere does it come out that the worker is a donga. The worker does not seem to realize the equilibrium. The workers want everything. They don't realize that there are others in the game. Everybody needs money. Money is made through fake names. The worker says why shouldn't he be paid when others are paid. If workers work, then it would be a different matter. Why do you think the workers are coming to the Gram Sabha and speaking with confidence? "Ten acres of removing thorns shown in the record." In practice they do it for two acres. Everybody benefits.

As the workers are not able to read, they cannot confirm how much money the mate has made and often believe that the mates have acquired more money than they actually have. The mates explaining the situation to me said, "The whole logic is worked out. The corruption trickles up." They mentioned all the actors—the FA, the TA, the post office

manager, the EC, the MPDO. Though they did not have visibility beyond the Mandal, their understanding of the lower levels of corruption was comprehensive.

Later I had a conversation with one of the state-level union leaders of the field assistants in the state.⁹⁴ He told me about the percentage scheme, which mirrored what I had heard from the mates in the village where I stayed. The FA said, “We don’t touch the labor side of things. We used to before, but we have decided to change, to focus on the material side and to exaggerate and fudge the cost on materials prepared for the work.” I heard similar remarks from the auditors as well, suggesting that the corruption is concentrated on the material side, leaving aside the wage component, which affects laborers and is often skimmed by the mates. The audits have thus had an impact in shifting the type of corruption practiced by the different levels of bureaucrats.⁹⁵

From my own observations I can only testify that the auditors measure the work being done. If they find discrepancies, they note it in their reports. I attended several audits, making the measurements alongside the auditors, and I can personally corroborate the deviations like the ones the mates had mentioned to me. Nevertheless, it was clear that the mates, though workers in the eyes of the state, were not acting as workers. They had moved over to the side of the lower-level bureaucrats and became part of the system. Wanting to address the issue of the auditors’ measurements, I asked the mates about the auditing team that would soon be arriving. “If the auditors do a good job, we will also settle them under the covers,” one said. “All of this is taken care of before the Gram Sabha. The last time the auditors came, we gave them some chicken and liquor and settled the matter. But we try to avoid going to that level. Our workers won’t talk. We will instruct them what to say.” Another mate told me more cautiously, “The auditors cannot be captured all the time. They cannot be reliably captured. We don’t know who comes as auditors this time.” Later, a few auditors corroborated this suggestion that a percentage of the auditors were corrupt. I myself witnessed a few instances in which an auditor would vanish for a while during the audit, and when he showed up again the crowd would harass him about where he had been. But in my observation, this was the exception rather than the norm.

In a discussion with senior audit and bureaucrat leaders, when the topic of mates arose, the audit leaders revealed that they knew about the role of the mates in the chain of corruption. When I suggested that the state was too hopeful about the mates and saw them as supporters of the workers, however, one senior bureaucrat replied, “That is the extent of what we can do as a state. If the mates want to cheat their own workers, what can the state do?” This was a sober acknowledgement of the limits of a centralized government.

⁹⁴ The union was formed to fight for the rights of the lower-level bureaucrats, namely the field assistants. During my fieldwork, the field assistants were organizing to fight for job security and an increase in wages. They eventually got the increase in salary.

⁹⁵ Partly this change occurred also because the state pre-generates the muster rolls, making it difficult to fudge the rolls locally.

6.7 Encounter with the Auditors

In this section I discuss the auditors' arrival in the village and analyze the various ways in which their presence is perceived by the villagers and bureaucrats. I describe the complex interactions of the workers, the lower-level bureaucrats, and the mates, who are, perhaps unexpectedly, key actors in resisting the investigations of the auditors.

When the auditors finally reached the village, I decided not to introduce myself.⁹⁶ I was in the house where I was staying when the auditors came by to ask their routine questions to the house owner. My landlady told me, "Look at these auditors—they are dressed so badly. They are not officers. They cannot do anything. All their findings will be dropped." I was surprised by her quick condemnation. She had gone from looking at their clothes and commenting on their appearance to determining whether they had any strength in the bureaucratic setup. Then I remembered that I had heard such observations discussed in social-auditor training sessions.⁹⁷ The auditors themselves had requested that they be given uniforms and state-issued ID cards establishing them as state employees. The audit leadership rejected the idea, claiming that the auditors should be seen as fellow workers, thus giving the workers confidence when answering the auditors' questions. In practice, this decision had the opposite effect: many workers did not think that the auditors were important, in part because of their lack of official dress, and so dismissed their questions and their admonitions alike.

Then again, some workers did not trust the auditors exactly because they were state employees. The auditors are all part of the same state unit, leading to the perception that the audit unit was too embedded with the state and not sufficiently autonomous from it. The auditors try hard to separate themselves from the local offices, as we saw in chapters 4 and 5. Ultimately, however, their hosts are the local bureaucrats, who provide them with food and lodging. As a result, the workers view the two groups as intimately connected. From the point of view of many of the villagers, the auditors are simply more officials from the local office, coming to ask a few more questions. The audit team's short stay in the village compounds their inability to garner any trust.

The Reddies I spoke to did not think much about the auditors. They had trouble recalling the auditors' arrival last time, and did not seem to particularly notice that the auditors had already arrived in the village. They reported to me that the entire audit unit was a sham, indicating that they would want the auditors to find more corruption in NREGA, but they don't. From their point of view, the audit unit was part of the bureaucracy. I tried challenging them with the fact that the audit unit is also comprised of youth from the nearby Mandal, but they dismissed them as pawns in the hands of the bureaucracy, who will do what they are told to do and so lack any agency of their own. I asked them whether they would attend the audit meeting, and they said that they are not invited to the meeting. They are right, as I discussed in chapters 4 and 5, the audit script does not include them. The auditors are trained to avoid speaking to them because of the worry that they will unduly influence the process and as we saw in chapter 5, speaking to them does create problems that cannot be resolved in a bureaucratic process.

⁹⁶ For the rationale behind this decision, see the discussion of methods in the Introduction.

⁹⁷ I discuss this from the auditors' perspective in chapter 4.

The audit was in full swing and the auditors were going door-to-door, double checking the official records by talking to workers. In the house across from where I was staying, I noticed that the worker gave a statement about her “delayed payments” in addition to answering the auditors’ questions. I did not think much of it, but later that night, I saw a mate stop by the house. He asked for the woman who had testified, demanding to know why she had done it. She said that she had not been warned to remain silent when the auditors came. The mate replied that he had forgotten to warn her and told her that she should have made her complaint to him directly. She said she had in the past but had received no response. Eventually the mate convinced her to sign a document and told her to come to the public hearing to withdraw her complaint. She agreed to go. The mate promised to settle her “delayed payments” later, when he obtained the next round of payments.

I had a chance to witness this extraordinary scene in the private and closed sphere, away from the formal spheres set up by the state for settling, and it provides a window into the type of informal negotiation that happens because of the open process of the audit. Part of the fear and the hatred I had seen expressed about the audit by the lower-level bureaucrats was because the audit does allow the workers to know their rights, and leads to better bargaining. Audits do provide opportunities for settling accounts, and allow the workers to settle with the local bureaucracy, even if not in the full glare of the public meetings.

I later met with the auditors, revealing my position in the village as a researcher, and went with them to a few households to see how they conducted their survey. The auditors were determined to do a thorough job. They told me that they had received many statements: the word had gone out that other people had spoken. The mates and the FAs were putting pressure on the auditors to reveal the names of the workers who had testified, but although the auditors initially did not reveal the names, later on they yielded to the pressure and gave the list of names before the meeting. I asked the auditors why they gave out the list. One senior auditor replied, “if we did not, then it would be hard for us to prove our case in the meeting and they would dismiss the evidence.”

The Gram Sabha was held in the village square. At first glance, it seemed to be well attended. There even appeared to be workers participating in the event. But on closer examination, it became clear that only three groups were present fully: the mates, the lower-level bureaucrats, and the auditors. The workers would often be brought in, if they were willing to change their testimony. Almost at once a fierce argument broke out between the mates and the auditors. The mates fought the auditors and disputed all of their findings. The person who was supervising the Gram Sabha, a mid-level bureaucrat who worked on a different department, sided with the lower-level bureaucrats. There was vigorous dispute and confusion about what exactly his role was. The senior auditors' stated that it was merely to record the proceedings to maintain some sense of objectivity. But he insisted that he had to evaluate the decision on each and every claim that was brought up, and to decide, based on the evidence presented by both sides, whether to accept that evidence or not. The village Gram Sabha meeting was supposed to be just a meeting to inform the villagers about what the audit had found. During my fieldwork, it started that way. But, as I detail in chapter 5, there have been constant changes in the purpose of the meeting and tremendous variation in how seriously the meetings are taken by everybody concerned. This particular meeting was an exception in that the Gram

Sabha was contentious between the mates and the auditors. This was not the state's vision of whose sides the mates should be on. The mates had completely transformed into state agents, resisting the investigation into the corrupt practices of the village at the expense of the workers' rights and wages.

I asked my landlady to explain to me what the mates were saying, and she obligingly conveyed these sentiments to me:

How can we speak against our own relatives in the work groups? Anybody who has become a mate will steal. If educated people are stealing, why cannot people with no money take a little? There is nobody who is not corrupt—the postal office also steals.

The gist of their argument, repeated with endless variations, was that everyone is corrupt, so it is trivial to object to corruption on their level; there are bigger thieves to worry about.⁹⁸

6.8 Conclusion

The audit process (described in chapters 4 and 5) opens government records to the workers with the stated aim of encouraging the workers to speak out and participate in the system, putting pressure on the lower-level bureaucrats to be honest by increasing last-mile transparency. I argue, however, that this goal of increasing worker participation through increased “openness” did not materialize. The workers actively reject such openness because they view it as a form of surveillance, which threatens their economic interest.⁹⁹ That is why NREGA work is preferable to them, as opposed to working in the fields of the landed class. I offered evidence indicating that NREGA is viewed differently by the workers and by the landed class. In essence, workers prefer NREGA work, while the landed class does not. Managing these different interests has a profound effect on the scaling down of NREGA, limiting it to only 100 days per family.¹⁰⁰ Further, I also argue

⁹⁸ I heard a similar interpretation when I later discussed elections with the villagers. I pointed out that politicians buy votes. The villagers told me that they accept money from all the parties and then choose to vote for whomever they want; usually their decision is based on caste.

I wanted to find out whether their statements rang true with members of the political parties, and they said, “We can only do so much. It is a closed ballot.” I was told that two weeks before the election, the entire village gets free gifts. Each party pays a local hotel to provide a feast and promises to take care of the bills. The villagers come to eat, and lots of liquor flows. In addition, the parties usually offer about INR 500 to each villager. This figure was calculated using the sums offered by rival political parties also playing at the local level.

⁹⁹ Another possible reason for workers missing the meetings is their fear that elites will be present at the meetings and will hold the workers' participation against them. In the audits that I attended, however, the upper-caste Reddies who make up the land-owning class were not present in the meetings. The Reddies, in conversations later, do not think much of the social audit process and in some sense want to see more corruption exposed, suggesting that this explanation is incorrect.

¹⁰⁰ As of December 2014, there are plans to further restrict NREGA to only “backward” districts.

that there was a difference among the farmers, between the small and large landowners. The small landowners, who seemed to be more vocal and specific about their wage grievances because of the success of NREGA, did not seem to have the power to block the program. Instead, they had resorted to appealing to the bureaucracy to resort to changes at the local level to block NREGA work during seasons when they most need workers.

Audits deter lower-level bureaucrats from acting dishonestly because there is no guarantee that the auditors will be co-opted, creating uncertainty and fear that lead to a reduction in corruption. But workers prefer to work for NREGA and are happy to maintain a reduced workday in exchange for cash payments to these same lower-level bureaucrats. Necessarily, this under-the-table system limits the participation and cooperation of the workers in the audit process.

In addition to door-to-door surveys among the workers, auditors survey the work directly by inspecting the worksites, which leads to wage reductions for the workers because it puts pressure on the lower-level bureaucrats to measure the work using a regular system. The lower-level bureaucrats are penalized with corruption charges if the auditors find that there is deviation from the official record. Since the workers do not want to work for a full day, they are not forthcoming to the auditors.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, workers will report egregious violations by the lower-level bureaucrats to the auditors in the door-to-door visits. As we saw in the earlier chapters, however, the workers' testimonies are often withdrawn before the public hearing, as the lower-level bureaucrats have been known to use these open meetings to find out who has spoken out and then punish the workers in question afterward.

The workers who actually show up at these meetings and speak out are mates. Typically, however, the mates attend the audits not to support the auditors but to oppose them. Many, acting autonomously, have joined forces with the local bureaucracy and hope to protect their interests by preserving NREGA. Often the workers cannot oppose the mates' actions publicly because the mates are their relatives; instead, workers bargain with mates informally. For the most part, in any case, the mates' opposition to the audits is in line with the desires of the average worker, who prefers the extra income and freedom of working for NREGA to going back to working exclusively for the Reddies. The workers, therefore, far from taking advantage of the "open audits," worry about whether the audits could be used to reduce their wages. They prefer a known system with familiar corruption elements. Given this situation, openness is not always desirable, since it seems to run counter to at least the short-term interests of the workers.

In the Andhra villages where I spent time during my fieldwork, the class-caste relations have been changing between the landed (Reddies) and the landless (Dalits) classes. The story is a process of slow change through a process of local struggle. The Dalits have been gradually finding a voice, and the bureaucrats have gained sufficient independent autonomy to resist, at least partially, the demands of Reddies. The implementation of NREGA has assisted in this slow change by providing workers limited

¹⁰¹ I also encountered cases of the same work being reported for and of machines being used for different projects and the contractors then paying off the workers not to report this to the auditors.

but “guaranteed” work, with higher wages and without any monitoring—a marked contrast to their other option of farm work for the Reddies, who monitor the workers’ actions closely. NREGA thus strengthens the position of the workers with respect to the Reddies. Not surprisingly, the Reddies do not like this turn of events and characterize the effect of NREGA as making workers “lazy.” They do not have the power to block the program, but they are able to gain some concessions from the bureaucrats, most importantly the restriction of times when NREGA work is permitted in the village, so that the Reddies are not deprived of workers when they most need them on their farm land.

The public audits are supposed to “inform” workers of their rights and enable them to communicate with their superiors; they are also designed to put preemptive pressure on the lower-level bureaucrats to adhere to rules. To some extent these aims are met, but the audits have limits. They do not empower workers to use the public forums to argue with the state, not because of fear, as one might expect, but because their interests are tied up with the corruption currently inherent in the system, and in their eyes the informal method of bargaining with the mates and field assistants is preferable to trusting a bureaucratic settling of accounts.

The democratic system of NREGA does indeed increase the wages of the workers. But in exchange for a small fee, the workers are losing the ability to protest against corruption. For many people in the village, the only way to make money was to participate in small acts of corruption—acts everyone in the village was aware of—so there was very little interest in fighting corruption.

7: Tribal Communities and Meaningful Work

7.1 Introduction

In contrast to the Dalit areas discussed in chapter 6, in tribal areas or villages¹⁰² NREGA works well. This is because tribal populations actually care about the physical infrastructure they build as a community and derive real benefit from it. There are two broad inter-related factors that account for this: their relationship with the state and the lack of social division within the tribe. The chapter starts with a vignette of work in a tribal village, away from NREGA, and then discusses the tribal context and its social and physical structure. Section 7.3 discusses how the state sees the tribal population and how the tribal population sees the state, then explores the work culture of the tribe and, finally, how work sensibilities carry forward seamlessly into NREGA.

I witnessed several community events while I was living in the tribal hamlets. One of them was the anniversary of a death, called the “samadhi bhoja,” a potluck. Living in the tribal village was equally foreign to my Dalit travel companion as it was to me, and we were both struck by the communal effort that went into preparing for this event. The preparations were vastly different from those that would be done for a similar event in the village discussed in the previous chapter.

A few days before the event, my host told me that I should attend the festival to learn how the village was organized. The preparations had begun the weekend before, with a few of the “tribals” going to the local market to fetch produce.¹⁰³ The village was stirring with work. A few youths had cut branches from a tree for firewood and had gathered the wood into a pile. My Dalit companion remarked that in his village celebrations people would not come out as one unit. Here everyone seemed to know what needed to be done. One youth, MC, emerged as the leader and coordinated the work.

The day of the festival began at 5:00 a.m. when I was woken up by footsteps near the school where I was staying. The room I was sleeping became a makeshift kitchen. Cooking started right away. Some of the tribals spread the onions on the floor, others sat nearby to chat with each other and help out. I soon found myself peeling onions. Another group chopped garlic, while a third focused on brinjal. MC came by and asked for a few helpers to fetch water. Tribals brought huge bowls and platters to hold everything we were chopping. Rice, meanwhile, was being cooked out in the open.

¹⁰² This chapter discusses four different tribal habitations, part of one tribal village, and here referred to as the “tribal village.”

¹⁰³ The list included oil, masala, plastic glasses, a sack of rice, salt, tomatoes, brinjal, and two bags of masala powder. The total expenses came to roughly INR 8,900, paid in cash.

The preparations continued steadily, with about 30 people actively working, coordinated by MC. Both men and women participated; men did most of the cooking. Some tribals from nearby hamlets came as well. In seven hours of working together not a single voice was raised or temper lost, and nobody seemed to avoid work.¹⁰⁴ The host of the festival was nowhere to be found, and I realized only gradually that the host was the entire village. A stranger would not have been able to tell whether it was a festival taking place in one house or in the entire village.¹⁰⁵

Nobody had time to have a shower or bothered to dress before the festival, but a few pastors came dressed in their robes. Throughout the evening, these pastors were given special treatment; they were even presented with a special country chicken cooked especially for them. Nobody else in the village seemed to get any special treatment, either during the work or the feast.

The day illustrated several facets of tribal life. The tribe lives communally, there is a culture of working cooperatively, and a local leader emerges to coordinate various tasks. This is a contrast to what was observed at the NREGA worksite at the Dalit hamlet, where the local landlord coordinated and in his absence nobody emerged to fill that role.

7.2 The Tribal Context

I spent time in four different tribal villages, each at a different elevation, surrounded by hills, and in the middle of what could be considered a forest. The villages were two hours away from the nearest town, and most were completely isolated from vehicular traffic. There is an infrequent bus that takes travelers as far as a larger village in the foothills, and then visitors trek up (the trek is about one hour or less). Tribal villages are so small and spread out that they are more like hamlets than villages. Within the village there are no splits along caste lines, in stark contrast to most villages that are segregated by caste. Each tribal hamlet contains about thirty families. The tribals in the region where I stayed identify themselves as Savaras. They spoke two languages with equal fluency, Savara, the language of their tribe, and Telugu, the language of the region.

The beauty of the place hides some of its problems. Water is an enormous problem in these areas. The streams were not flowing when I visited and, going higher in the hills, it is more difficult to find water. In one of the hamlets where I stayed, the tribals had constructed elaborate bamboo pipes to channel water from streams to their houses. Hamlets closer to the plains have wells installed with the help of the state. Each tribal member has access to land in the hills, which (s)he cultivates. Some tribals own land in

¹⁰⁴ I was told that things have indeed changed in the tribal area and not everybody from each household actually works. Only one person in each family was sent to work instead of everybody in the household. This is consistent with other tribal habitations where communal work was done and a representative was sent from each village.

¹⁰⁵ The family of the deceased man provided the cost of all the food and decorations, which came to about INR 22,000.

the plains, for which they have titles, but it is more customary for the tribals to live off the forest that they “own” without any formal recognition from the state.

Protecting its way of life from incursions by “plains people”—merchants and state officials—is an effort that dominates tribal history. Many tribal hamlets have been compelled to move. The tribals I spoke with had all descended from the hills to be nearer to the plains, and I heard about their years-long struggle for the right to live in the hills.¹⁰⁶ The key difference between tribal conditions and conditions elsewhere is that their struggles have been largely external and with the state. I discovered that tribals are never left alone and constantly fear interference from outsiders. Many tribals told me stories of how they used to run away to the recesses of the forest when merchants and local forest officials visit them, and came back to their dwellings only after several days or weeks.¹⁰⁷

Discussions with my Dalit companion proved invaluable in allowing me to see the tribals in a comparative light. My companion and I took advantage of our isolation in the hills to have lengthy discussions on the ways that tribals lived differently from other people in the region. Gender relations seemed to be more harmonious than anywhere else in India,¹⁰⁸ with the division of labor between men and women remaining well balanced. Cases of widows remarrying were common. “Love marriages,” where individuals choose their own partners, were much more common than in other parts of the country. The women approached us and talked to us without any hesitation, which was a dramatic change from the other places where we spent time. In perhaps the most revealing interview I conducted there, a youth asked me about my travels and then told me he had never been to India. He said, “Very few people from our tribe have ventured beyond the town below.” It was strange for him to refer to the rest of the country as India, but that shows the remoteness of many of those tribal hamlets, particularly those at high elevations.¹⁰⁹

The material conditions of the tribals are not adequate by modern standards. Health was a big concern: I saw several malnourished children, and because mosquito infestations were endemic in the hamlets, malaria was a common and lethal disease. Waterborne diseases like typhoid are also common there.¹¹⁰ Tribals have their own ways of treatment using medicinal plants,¹¹¹ but with changing lifestyles and availability, they

¹⁰⁶ A few referred to the period as a “karuvu kalam,” when they had little food to eat. There was a strong tone of despondency in their narratives of their own history.

¹⁰⁷ See Scott for an extensive treatment of how people avoided the state and moved around. (Scott, 2010)

¹⁰⁸ Though this was true in general, I did see a woman being dragged violently out of a house.

¹⁰⁹ In spite of their isolation, tribals do own TVs, visit markets, and watch movies in the town below, all ways of consuming “Indian” culture.

¹¹⁰ My Dalit companion and I painfully endured both typhoid and malaria while we were there, with my companion's condition becoming life threatening.

¹¹¹ A cut on my leg healed very quickly when I was treated with juice from medicinal plants.

have started to go to health clinics in the plains. The state has now implemented an emergency phone number to call for help, and a doctor comes by in a van.

Geographically isolated, the tribe was united politically: they all voted for the same party. This is consistent with other tribal habitations: there was greater solidarity that manifested itself in all things. One NGO worker told me that in his three decades of living in the area, in general he observed that the more disconnected the tribals were from the rest of the world, the greater the solidarity and cohesion with each other. The outside world brought a variety of occupations, and also a sense of the individual and a stronger desire for private property. For example, a youth at the most integrated tribal village had dreams of building his own house and for that he was willing to travel and live in a slum in Chennai. While there were different degrees of integration with the rest of society among the various tribal habitations, in general the tribals' sense of community was unique.

7.3 The State "Seeing" the Tribals

On one hand, the state has helped to destroy tribal culture through various incursions into tribal life, but on the other hand, the state supplies the tribals with valuable material resources in the form of development. In the four tribal hamlets that I visited, there were different development indicators, but in general the following rule applied: the further up in the hills they were, the less access the tribals had to water, roads, and modern institutions like schools. To compensate for this reduced access, the state has offered arable, two-acre plots of land in the plains to tribals in the highest hamlets, as well as access to bore pumps and school buildings, in exchange for submission to market forces (but without necessarily supplying them with market information).

The state's operations in the tribal areas have followed two broad policies: displace tribals from their land, and bring tribals to full citizenship by giving them access to public services. Not surprisingly, tribals have resisted. These two broad policies of displacement and development can be seen as intertwined. The state has played a contradictory role in shaping the lives of tribals, both historically and in modern times, with the rhetoric of bringing "development," resulting in a greater distance between the state and the citizen than elsewhere.

State officials believe that the tribals need economic and social development and access to services, and they have instituted a policy of luring tribals from the hills to the plains.¹¹² They wish to increase the tribals' "legibility" and make them proper citizens of the state. All four of the hamlets visited, driven by water shortages, had moved down in elevation by accepting the state's offer.

Many of the tribals recall vividly an episode from the 1970s when NT Rama Rao, then the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh (AP), made one of the first gestures of including tribals as citizens by entering a tribal area and dancing with them. But the struggle with the state has intensified in recent years, with tribals fighting state orders to

¹¹² I am focusing here on the tribals who live in higher elevations. Every tribal area has a special state institution focused on tribal welfare and development funds are usually routed through them.

move entire villages at one time. The tribals are sitting on mineral resources, which have become greatly sought after, so there are conflicts that often end in violence. The clashes between the tribals and the state have been so intense that a resistance movement with a Maoist ideology has been fighting the state.

Maoists, as these groups are known, have been very active in the jungles of Andhra Pradesh. Their protest was to engage in violence against the state actors and installations. The fight continues to range in the hills where tribals live and are caught in the crossfire. Balagopal documents how the state displays its violent side by engaging in “encounter killings.” (K Balagopal, 2006) Encounter killings are portrayed by the state as police killing defiant tribals in self-defense. In reality, these encounters are perpetrated by the state to remove tribals from their lands. The Maoists often kidnap state officials and hold them for ransom.

Violence was not the only mechanism for dealing with the situation. Tribals organized and used legal mechanisms, as well as nonviolent protests. In one habitation, tribals had successfully organized to protect a hill, which was about to be blown up by a mining company. The tribals seemed to have managed to protect the site by asserting that the site represented some sacred value to them; they had successfully installed a temple on the top of the hill. A local NGO activist, who had been living in the tribal areas, noted that these wins by the tribals are very rare. The pressures that assault them also give the tribals their cohesion and solidarity.

From within the state, there has been particular focus on “developing” tribal areas by ensuring that basic public services are provided. Special tribal policies are openly discussed as policies meant to appease the tribals. Periodically “peace talks” are held between the state and the Maoists (K Balagopal, 2005). I attended a Prime Minister Rural Development Fellows orientation program, where recent graduates are sent to work in rural areas—and particularly in the tribal areas—to help identify areas of improvement to deal with the “Maoist problem.”¹¹³ The special treatment of the tribal areas extends to NREGA as well, where there is a distinct policy of having up to 300 days of work available, as compared to merely 100 days of work allocated to non-tribal areas. There have been changes in the policy as well; at times, the tribal areas have no limit on the number of days of work that was allowed, effectively enabling the full mission of NREGA, the “right” to work, to come to fruition in the tribal areas.

The state has built hostels for the tribal children, where they all go to school. The entire village empties during the school season when the children go to nearby boarding schools paid for by the state. Not all tribals are sanguine about sending the children away to school. One of them noted that these schools are eliminating skills that would have been learned through working, and also that the schools are of such low quality that the children do not learn anything useful.

The state also seems to have persuaded many tribals to cultivate cash crops like cashews rather than subsistence crops. I visited in harvesting season, and the merchants came up to collect the produce; in general they seemed to give the tribals very bad prices

¹¹³ <http://pmrdfs.tiss.edu/>, also see <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/in-naxal-zone-the-fellow-who-works-where-the-official-dare-not/> where the strategy backfires and results in fellows get kidnapped.

for their crops. (I had obtained market prices by calling on my mobile phone; the tribals were selling their goods at a lower price.) The tribals could not transport their goods and had not collectivized: each tribal negotiates an individual rate with the merchant, dictated by the amount of climbing, the condition of the fruit, the size of the crop, etc.

The problem in such shifts in cultivation practices lies not only in the exploitation of the tribals but also in the transformation of their way of life. The conversion to cash crops in this region has indeed brought in more money, used to buy things like mobile phones, modern clothes, and in some cases cement houses. But, as one old tribal noted when reflecting on this change, “It has made our bodies lazy.” The traditional native crops, like *jonnah* and *korralu*, have been all but eliminated. The old man pointed to a few patches of them and explained that while everyone once consumed them they are now left untouched. When I asked him why this is the case, he replied, “It takes effort. We have become lazy and weak as a result.”¹¹⁴

In general, the tribals living in the hills continue to fear the state, partly because of a lack of interaction with state officials and partly because of their history of exploitation by the state. In several different interviews, tribals told of interactions with the state that were tales of abuse in which the state officials treated the tribals as sub-humans. In my discussion with local tribal authorities, it seemed that the bureaucrats saw their work as a “civilizing mission,” echoing the colonial mindset of bringing development to these regions. In NREGA, the state tried to install a policy whereby the field assistants (FAs) would be from the same village as the workers they supervised, and usually from the same caste. But there was no such policy for the other lower-level bureaucrats, who were all appointed through a centralized process. In the tribal hamlets I spent the most time in, the FA was not a tribal. In the case where the FA was a tribal and from the same hamlet as the workers he supervised, the workers clearly benefitted from and appreciated this bond. None of the other lower-level bureaucrats who worked in the mandal office were tribals, diminishing the possibility of strong bonds between the tribals and the state.

A few days after I had arrived in the hamlet where I was then staying, the long-awaited rain arrived. I was resting in my “house” (the one-room public school building) and was suddenly interrupted by two tribal youths who wanted me to come with them immediately. They told me officers had come. It was raining hard outside, and I was in the midst of writing my field-notes, which I found extremely challenging to keep up with due to the constant activity around me. I tried telling them that it was raining and that I did not want to leave the building, but they insisted that I come.

I was also curious to see who this “officer” was. I half expected a collector or district-level officer. It turned out it to be an FA from NREGA. About a dozen tribals were standing around him in the rain, while the FA himself was protected from rain. The FA had come on his weekly trip to the village, bringing with him his Technical Assistant (TA). (In the Dalit village, the FA visits everyday). I found a place to sit and asked him what was going on. He replied that he wanted to find out who I was and what I was doing there. I explained that I was a student from America. The tribals were listening to every word, and I was surprised to see how deferential they were to the FA. This was in sharp contrast to the experience in the Dalit village, where the FA was “one of them” and did

¹¹⁴ I recall the “laziness comment” about farmers, but not from the Reddies about the Dalits as in chapter 5, but from the tribals themselves reflecting on their lives.

not garner such respect. The tribals continued to stand in the rain until we finished talking.

The FA then went to his motorcycle. Many of the tribals went with him and saw him off. The following week, the same events repeated but in a different setting. This time when the FA arrived on his bike we were working at the NREGA worksite. He stopped near me, and again I saw deference from the tribals: all of them stopped their work and looked at him, assuming he would decide their next move. The FA spoke to a tribal who came running to me and said, “There is a problem; you should not be working.” I asked him why, and he told me that that was what the FA had told him. I asked the FA, who was close enough to hear me, “Why should I not be working?” He said that my name was not on the muster roll and therefore I should not be working. I said, “I am a guest in this village, and I am just helping out.” There was nothing he could say to that, though he tried insisting that I could not work. It was a futile power struggle, and eventually he left. Some of the tribals were worried and asked me why I had gotten myself into trouble. I said, “He cannot do anything to me.”

I was amazed by how much control a temporary state employee had over these tribals. The tribals are a proud lot, and I was surprised by their deferential conduct toward state officials. Yet the reaction was rooted in a long history of exploitation and abuse, which has intensified in many tribal pockets in the country. Contrast this with the Dalit groups that have managed to garner political power: they now have representation within the state and have a different relationship with the local bureaucrats. The distance between the local state and the tribal area was large both in terms of geographical and social distance.

7.4 The Work Culture of the Tribals

One of the most striking things was how hard the tribals worked, both during the preparations for the festival discussed earlier and on a daily basis at the NREGA worksites. I myself almost fainted the first day of my work there, but their dedication reflected the fact that they felt they were working on their own land rather than on government property or land owned by people in a different caste. I watched them build a house collectively and marveled at their collaborative spirit, yet during this process one tribal remarked, “Things are changing in our village. Previously the whole village would come, now only one person from each house is sent for this.” Nonetheless, their work ethic is extraordinary to someone from outside their culture.

Each family worked on their hill plot alone. I went with a father and son team on one of those trips. We had left the house at 9:00 a.m., but I learned later that there had been an earlier shift before then, when they took the animals out to graze. The father worked on cutting and clearing the land. He pulled weeds, removed thorns, and ensured that the plants had enough sunlight. His son worked nearby, chatting as he did. I helped to clear some bushes, but I was already tired just from walking up the hill, and after some time they told me to sit down. I was astonished by their stamina. Working, on their own land, was part of their lives; there was no alienation, as there was no exploitation.

Historically, the tribals had not experienced exploitation like the Dalits had under the Reddies.¹¹⁵

We got back at noon and had lunch at the house. The meal consisted of rice and stew. The tribals depend on government rations for their rice and eat almost no vegetables (also true of the Dalits). Most of the tribals, moreover, don't drink milk but subsist entirely on tea for their liquids. Meat is reserved for Sundays, if they eat it at all. After we ate, the tribals rested, and then there was more work to do: washing clothes, fetching water, going to the market, cooking. Work was constant. They spent their days on the move, and since they lived in the hills, their endless walking was itself no mean feat.

The men of the tribe I stayed with frequently went on hunting trips which served as another illustration of how their culture fit in with the tenet of NREGA work of dividing the outputs equally. Once, I went with them to hunt for wild pigs. The hunt was not successful, but had they managed to kill a pig, every person on the hunt would have been given a share of the meat, regardless of whether or not he had participated in the kill. Before the hunt, the tribals debated whether to take me or not because they were worried about my safety. Finally they escorted me as far as the hill where the pigs were and told me to stop there. They then explained that since I had come, I would get my share of the hunt. The same was true for several boys who had come to represent their families but did not go on the hunt itself; custom dictated that they receive shares regardless.

The culture of unquestioned collaboration and sharing throughout the community was evident in every tribal hamlet that I visited. It affected every aspect of their lives, and it was an ideal culture for implementing NREGA, because the lands the tribals worked on through NREGA belonged to the tribals living in the community, and they themselves were eager to work not only for the wages but also for the benefit of the community as a whole.

It was not long, however, before my assumptions were shattered and I came to realize the complex reality of the ways in which corruption affects us all.

It had been a few weeks since I had come to the village. Some children came up to me and asked me to play street cricket. I declared that I had no energy to play cricket, but when they started, I decided to take a book and notebook and sit near them, although out of the hot sun. The children were playing, and a few youths were milling around as well. The FA, who was a tribal and was part of the village, was there with his son, who was playing with another man.

Soon the man—who I later discovered was a contractor from a different habitation—pulled out a notebook. The FA started reading names from his phone, as if he were reciting a muster roll. The list was long, and he was reading the job card number and the name. This went on for about half an hour. I resisted the temptation to ask what was going on. The exchange was happening in the middle of the street, in broad daylight.

¹¹⁵ I did hear about the historic role of tribal chiefs and how they had exploited tribals in some habitations. There was one crucial difference between the tribal chief and the Reddy control. The chief has been rendered powerless now, but the Reddies still control the lives of the Dalits.

The next day, I went for a walk with the FA and asked him about the man he had been speaking with yesterday. He said it had been a contractor from a different village. I asked him why had he read out the names to this contractor, and he replied without hesitation, “Oh, he is responsible for some work. He has used JCP [machinery, in violation of NREGA regulations] to do the work.”¹¹⁶ He is interested in the names of the workers, as the work was supposed to be done by workers.” I asked him if he was doing “swaha” (local slang for eating money). Again without any hesitation, he replied, “Yeah.” I did not have to probe. His statements were made without reservations or arrogance. I asked him, “Why is the contractor asking you?” and he said, “The contractor needs the job-card IDs because only then will he get paid.” Then I asked whether he gives some money to the workers whose name got added, and the FA exclaimed, “No!” I asked him whether he himself received any money for his services, and he replied, “No, why should I?” That was all. I had witnessed a corrupt act, committed in front of everybody’s eyes. Due to the records now available in the mobile phone, the contractor did not even have to go to the mandal office. It was done easily, with no trouble at all.

This vignette illustrates the complex connection between morality and corruption in village (even tribal village) culture: often corruption is not seen as an immoral act, and not even as corruption at all.¹¹⁷ I had many discussions with lower-level bureaucrats who justified acts of corruption as a normal part of living or as petty compared to large-scale corruption at the higher levels of bureaucracy.

7.5 Tribal NREGA Work

The NREGA work fit smoothly into the tribals’ traditional schedule, starting at 6:00 a.m. everyday. When I visited the village, the NREGA work was the construction of a dirt road, which required the workers to lift stones and fill in the gaps with mud. It was difficult manual work. The work went non-stop with breaks taken by individuals performing distinct roles: digging, collecting, and spreading/pouring. They worked for three to five hours without any signs of shirking. The work was coordinated by the same youth, MC, who had managed the festival; he seemed to be a natural leader. The weather was pleasant, so there was no need for the NREGA government-provided shade.

The whole village worked as a team; when a few of them were sitting on the side of the road, taking a long break, they got called to come back to work. It was also significant that the entire village seemed to participate in the work. We counted 43 people working, all of whom started at the same time. The early ones waited until everybody

¹¹⁶ The rules of NREGA disallowed the use of machinery, because the primary motive for NREGA was to actually provide employment for workers. Also, allowing machines would bring back the contractor-raj that NREGA was to get rid of. ((Khera, 2011).

¹¹⁷ I don’t want to over-generalize the behavior of the FA, and extend it to the tribal community as a whole. I merely intend to bring forth the case for how corruption manifests itself in unexpected ways. It is possible to argue here that it was not the tribal who was corrupt, it was the tribal who, in becoming the state agent (an FA), had become corrupt.

arrived before they began. The NREGA work was paid based on the collective output that was provided, so it was not surprising that the people who showed up late were shouted at. But it was clear that there was not the same level of oversight as in the Dalit village. Sometimes, of course, there were minor arguments, but these were quickly resolved within the community, and in general an atmosphere of willing cooperation reigned.

Similar to the “mate” in the chapter 6, there was also a “mate” recognized by the government, but his job was simply to fill the muster roll. The mate in this tribal village was a worker and did not seem to enjoy any special relationship with the FA. This seemed to be the case in all the habitations visited. In contrast to the mates in the Dalit villages, here the mates also did not wield any special power over their fellow tribals. Everyday the mate took attendance and entered the muster roll and took carbon thumb impressions from the workers towards the end of the workday. The mates who were given the task of the muster roll did not coordinate the work, nor was the FA around to visit the worksite everyday.

MC, who was the hardest-working member in the village, supervised the work. This was in sharp contrast with the experience in the Dalit village, where there were no supervisors to actually see that the work got done. The FA in the Dalit village did come everyday, but did not really ensure that work was done, nor was there a community leader who orchestrated the work. The landed Reddies has raised the issue of the lack of supervision as one of the weaknesses of NREGA; in the tribal region, the community organically supplied the necessary leadership and oversight. The structure and management of the work emerged organically from the community itself. As a result of this familiar structure and universal commitment, the work proceeded steadily, and every day a bit more of the road was constructed.

At one point, the tribals were moving a fence to ensure that their measurements were correct and that they were constructing a straight road. The tribal whose property was thus reduced in size did not seem to mind; indeed, he was actively cooperating with the operation. The boundaries between private property and the commons were blurred.

The remoteness and existing level of infrastructure means that NREGA work remains very relevant to the tribal workers. I asked every NREGA worker if NREGA was useful. In the Dalit habitations, the answer focused just on wages. The tribals gave a different answer: the product of the work itself was of use to them. Because they felt this way—that the work itself produced something of value to them personally—there was no shirking or need for any chapter 4 external intervention to manage their work.

The external intervention from the state persists with mixed results. The higher-level bureaucrats, because of their anti-corruption focus, have standardized the type of work that is allowed in the tribal areas. The state prioritizes earthwork projects, and such projects align with the needs of the tribal communities because of the poor infrastructure in the tribal areas, which is itself a product of the relationship with the state. Tribals live in the hills, and very often do not have proper access roads. One of the works that is allowed in NREGA is bush clearance to build roads. In a forest environment, where the tribals live, this means actually building a road where none exists. This was in sharp contrast with the Dalit area, where the same project of bush clearance often meant that the work was done in an area where there was one bush to clear. The work was usually

several kilometers away from where the Dalits lived and so they did not see that the work product would be useful to them.

As noted, the state has a distinct policy of appeasement to deal with the tensions in the tribal area, the state policy with NREGA is different in that tribals enjoy 300 days of work as compared to 100 days elsewhere. Further, there are no class conflicts in these tribal areas, eliminating the local problem of arbitrarily stopping NREGA work to appeal to the Reddy farmers, as is the case in the Dalit villages. This allows the tribals to treat NREGA as part of the normal work schedule.

Thus, in the tribal areas, NREGA work is carried out that is both meaningful and profitable for the community, enabling the implementation of the program in these regions to hue closely to the original intention of its designers.

7.6 Conclusion

The NREGA works well in tribal areas because of two inter-related factors: the existence of a relatively homogenous tribal population and the relationship of the tribals with the state. These two elements combine to achieve the primary functions of NREGA: to provide employment to workers and to build useful assets that will benefit the community.

Tribals are farmers who work their own lands, living as a united community. The state has played an important and contradictory role in shaping the lives of tribals, both historically and currently, and today the tribals are increasingly dependent on a way of life made possible by the state. NREGA prioritizes earthwork projects, and such projects align with the needs of the tribal communities because of the poor infrastructure in the tribal areas, which is itself a product of the relationship between the state and the tribes. Also, tribals, being farmers, immediately benefit from land-development projects.

Crucially, because of their community-based work culture, tribals treat NREGA as their own. This is not the case in Dalit areas, where the workers do not own land individually and do not have a sense of collective ownership of the land where NREGA work is done. There, even if NREGA work is valuable in raising the water table or improving soil fertility, the Dalits do not see these benefits as directly benefitting them. In the tribal areas, the local government's power is in part removed by the centralization of the program, and though the tribals do sometimes find ways to make money on the side, they do not affect the nature of work under NREGA. There are no class conflicts in these tribal areas, eliminating the problem of schedule changes at the local level, and as a result NREGA officials in tribal regions offer more workdays. For their part, the workers have fully integrated NREGA into their lives.

Examination of a village where tribals work on NREGA projects on their own terms, away from the state's vision, and can still represent the ideal vision of NREGA as it was originally conceived, shows that NREGA works well in these tribal regions. This is not an argument against state intervention but an argument that small communities are capable of managing their own NREGA projects. This chapter explored a tribal village where the state's influence is limited due to the village's remoteness. By studying the tribal situation, we access a different model, that is, the Ostromian vision for managing resources and undertaking development, where the local community manages a program, in this case NREGA, that the state has laid out in broad contours. The tribal case

illustrates the possibility of achieving the state's goal of local community participation, but at the work stage and not at the audit stage as the state had expected.

In many ways the system offers the perfect "sandwich" (support from both the top and the bottom) that the state was looking for, but its success does not emanate from a desire for transparency (Fox, 2015). In fact the clamor for transparency has resulted in increased surveillance, whereas, as Ivan Krastev argues, what the system needs is greater trust among its players (Krastev, 2013).

In the tribal areas, because of its own strength, the community has implemented an alternative and successful method of managing NREGA, starting not from a position of openness, which too often means surveillance, but from a position of trust, which the community responds to and provides. This Ostromian system is made possible in the tribal setting, which helps to create a society with less local exploitation than other villages historically experience (Ostrom, 1990).

However, as the tribals are displaced from their dwellings to become landless laborers, the community model seems to be moving out of reach. For that reason, the Ostromian vision is limited in its applicability, but it is not the only model that suffers from limited applicability. The surveillance model that the state supports also needs the "people in the tower" to do the right thing; it requires the watchers to be watched, as benevolence and care cannot be taken for granted. What I find common in both these settings (the Dalit and the tribal) is the desire for the state to have community support of the higher-level bureaucrats' anti-corruption efforts. But with the very different conditions in these tribal villages, the centralized model seems to be futile. Given that no ideal solution is to be found, the Ostromian community model deserves serious consideration.

8: Conclusion: Democratizing Surveillance

8.1 Introduction

The dissertation grapples with the questions: Does transparency lead to accountability? Is it possible to "democratize" surveillance, turning surveillance into an instrument of democratic control over state bureaucracy? More specifically, can a state bureaucracy combine visions of surveillance within the state and openness to citizens to help police itself?

Openness usually means, and in fact relies on, the democratization of information. The logic is that the open government project releases public records that should increase transparency of government functions and create greater participation in government. This logic, "if you build it, they will come," solves the accountability problem by creating access to information. In doing so, it changes the "open government" initiative from a goal to a process characteristic, from an "end" to a "means," while not recognizing the political work that is needed to translate the open initiatives into a means for better governance (Fung et al., 2007).

The problem of openness comes from its assumptions about information. When we think about openness in government, the dominant theory is that there is information asymmetry (Stiglitz, 2002). If that asymmetry is addressed by increasing the amount of information, for example, by putting government records out in the open, that increase leads more people to see and question. For this process to work, "information" has to be universal and transferrable (Duguid, 2014). However, "information" is not an objective good with a fixed meaning: that information has to be reproduced every time it encounters a human interpreter—its meaning is socially constructed—not simply delivered by the information (Brown & Duguid, 2002). In other words, the impression that "information" produces on an individual, the meaning it generates, depends on several contextual factors. Meaning and measurement are easily confused, and both may be taken as a direct function of quantity.

It is perhaps easiest to see this through an example. The simplest document, the muster roll, is an attendance register, recording daily attendance. If information is fixed, and there is an objective quantity of it, then opening up the attendance register to the worker transfers that information. In other words, democratizing information assumes that merely opening records can fix the information asymmetry problem, as the worker can better see the actions of the state. Of course, crude forms of the theory also assume that the mere transfer of information will produce change, which Fox calls "tactical" (Fox, 2015). More sophisticated arguments realize that the worker seeing the muster roll is not in a position to challenge the state, not being powerful enough to use this information.

However, even the sophisticated argument does not fully represent the issues involved. It is possible that the meaning of the muster roll for the worker is different from

the intended meaning of the auditors and/or the state employees when they create and distribute that record. For example, the opening up of the muster roll often concerns verifying whether the lower-level bureaucrat has entered the record properly, so that the auditor is interested in using the worker to help survey the lower-level bureaucrat. But the worker often sees the muster roll as the state's way to survey the worker. In other words, the state may use the audit to see whether the worker or the lower-level bureaucrat worked or not. So, the same information results in different meanings, depending on the social position and the circumstances of its interpreter (Duguid, 2014) (Hetherington, 2011) (J. Srinivasan, 2011).

Further, there is the issue of “translation”—most workers are not literate, so the document is read aloud—resulting in “transmission” losses. The priorities and interests of the auditor who is doing the reading determine the content that gets read. This requires the workers' trust in the reader, which introduces its own problem and cannot be taken for granted. For the metadata of the record to serve its originally intended purposes, it has to be translated, trusted, and interpreted. For information to be interpreted, the terms of interpretation is often contested and cannot be solved by more information (Tsoukas, 1997).

The change agent in this scenario is “information,” achieved through the principle of openness. But this portrayal has the causal chain backwards. Information does not cause people to become surveyors. If the intent and the capacity to surveil exists, then, it is possible for information to become “surveillable,” hence openness could lead to surveillance under certain circumstances¹¹⁸. I propose to add surveillance:

motivation for surveillance ⇒ transparency ⇒ surveillance ⇒ accountability.

Surveillance is seeing with the desire to control (Lyon, 1994). Providing information does not necessarily lead to the possibility of control. There has to be some off-channel processes (like mediators or institutional arrangements) or, simply put, politicization that could make use of “information” to be an impetus for surveillance. I use the term “politicized information” to refer to the information that can be used to control somebody else. We have information, in the sense of muster roll, but it does not mean much in its “raw form,” as it is produced for different entities' (e.g., accountants) particular needs for documentation (Hetherington, 2011). However, documents are not necessarily self-evident (Hull, 2012). The same information may not be reused for a different audience. It has to be transformed or co-produced (Finn, Srinivasan, & Veeraraghavan, 2014).

We care about meaning of information and not merely interested in transmitting information as bits that stripped of context. The dominant Shannon and Weaver's theory of information is problematic, and does not apply, as we are asking to not preserve the original bits as is, because we are after all interested in the meaning of information¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Toyama makes a similar argument about Technology (Toyama, 2011).

¹¹⁹ Weaver writes: The word information, in this theory, is used in a special sense that must not be confused with its ordinary usage. In particular, information must not be confused with meaning “ (Weaver, 1949, p. 5)

(Shannon & Weaver, 1959; Weaver, 1949) . The transformation is possible through politicization. Of course even politicized information does not necessarily guarantee a revolution, in other words, even when the muster roll is in the hands of a politicized individual who knows how to find meaning in that document, as in the case of the Rajasthan worker or the JJSS worker in Bihar, that individual has to contend with the reality of the power situation that they are in. In both cases, they found the state and the political machinery uncooperative, squashing their resistance. In most cases, it does not even get to that point. Open government projects open up records, which is information for the producers of the information but not for the consumers, unless the consumers are turned into producers through the process of politicization.

A surveillance motivation needs to precede openness to have the documents opened. In this case, there was an internal surveillance that preceded external openness. The higher-level bureaucrats required the lower-level bureaucrats to have these records available. In that sense, the document exists because there is a surveillance requirement. Now, at this stage, openness can be had, in the sense of putting information out there. But for this information to become relevant, somebody must be interested in seeing it. Then, and only then, can the information that is put out there be translated, recreated, and reproduced to be relevant.

So the idea of putting out information and expecting participation has it backwards. The intent and the capacity to survey need to precede the distribution of the resulting information. To the extent that the higher-level bureaucrats and the auditors have the motivation to survey, they are able to exert pressure using the information. The expectation that workers will be interested because the auditors are translating the information for them does not immediately enroll the workers to be surveyors. The workers have to be politicized through an “offline” process, as happened in the case of MKSS in Rajasthan and of JJSS in Bihar (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999).

The workers I encountered in Andhra are not mobilized to become surveyors, so giving them information does not translate into politicized information. Further, their capacity and intent is dependent on the social relations that reflect their culture and attitude to work. The relations that the workers share with the lower-level bureaucrats, how they think about their work, and their interests all come into play.

The workers come with their own motives and perspectives. The information—the muster rolls, payment record slips, wall paintings—all remain meaningless information produced for somebody else, and have not yet become information that could be used to contest the state. That is possible only if the worker is politicized. The auditors are not interested in and are not in a position to engage in politicization. There is no app yet for politicization! Further politicization cannot easily be institutionalized or bureaucratized, and politicization can have problematic consequences.

In this dissertation I have argued against the exclusivity of using openness as a lens to look at government transparency projects. Openness is thought of as “good for

and Shannon writes: "semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem" (Shannon & Weaver, 1959, p. 32)

all” hence the dominant metaphor is sunlight. But, this utopian vision has led to stripping politics out of the discussion. Thinking of open governance as also entailing surveillance makes it a more political, relational concept. My argument instead is to consider openness and surveillance together as two sides of the same coin.

A better metaphor to consider therefore is a flashlight¹²⁰. Bringing up the notion of a flashlight inadvertently seems to focus on the tool, the flashlight, but I want to focus also on the context around the use of flashlight. The flashlight metaphor makes it possible to recognize and ask relational questions such as: who is holding the flashlight, what is the object that is getting illuminated, who decides what is seen, how the public is seeing, and what the resistance is to the flashlight.

There is also the process of building a better flashlight through information technology to increase the ability to survey. It is a terrain of struggle. The result is a partial “openness.” In sum, to question whether transparency leads to accountability, we need to insert political questions, which is easier with the idea of surveillance.

Section 8.2 discusses the attempts of the higher-level bureaucrats to build the flashlight and deploy it within the bureaucracy. Section 8.3 discusses attempts to delegate control of the flashlight to social auditors, and Section 8.4 the process of engaging citizens to see the state in public meetings. Sections 8.5 and 8.6, attempt to disaggregate the citizens, presenting findings from two villages that show how social structure determines participation. Section 8.7 discusses the theoretical contributions of this dissertation in conclusion.

8.2 Using the Flashlight Within the State

My research examined efforts by the southern state of Andhra Pradesh to govern the largest employment program, the NREGA. As discussed in chapter 3, higher-level bureaucrats framed the governance problem as a “last mile” corruption problem, where the lower-level bureaucrats in the villages needed to be held accountable. Such surveillance, according to the senior bureaucrats, leads to better adherence to the rules and thus limits the possibilities of corruption. Ultimately, the need for direct surveillance emanates from a deep distrust on the part of the higher-level bureaucrats of the hierarchical form of governance and bypass intermediaries.

Two different principles were followed in this attempt to centralize control through technology: to increase the visibility of work done at every level of the bureaucracy and to constrain activity at the field level by enforcing and updating the program’s rules systematically. The high-level bureaucrats wanted to build a digital panopticon, relying on a sophisticated set of tools equipped with various checks and counterchecks to control their lower-level bureaucrats. They assembled a wide array of technology to do this with—databases, communication tools like SMS, phones, different ways of viewing reports, and location-based tracking. The technological system increased the time between the processing and the release of the field reports, allowing the higher-level bureaucrats to take action on transgressions.

¹²⁰ The idea of Flashlight came up in an interview with activist in Andhra who used the word in describing what social audits were doing.

However, while this surveillance has succeeded in strengthening their control and decreasing the levels of corruption, the lower-level bureaucrats have strenuously resisted the surveillance. These lower-level bureaucrats have found various ways of bypassing or sabotaging the surveillance systems, even resorting to such measures as pulling out power cables, not installing software patches, and using other software designed to resist surveillance.

The higher-level bureaucrats continuously react to this resistance by building new technologies, as well as evolving other protocols to circumvent the resistance. The result is a constant “cat and mouse” game that in turn results in an evolving and unstable system of governance. The technology itself is seen differently by the different players. For the elite bureaucrats, it is an expression of their intention to curb and manage corruption¹²¹. For the field-level bureaucrats, it is a force to be resisted and at the same time a screen for their own failings, as technological failures provide easy excuses. The workers do not know the extent of the technology being used, and often view the system of governance as a black box.

The use of technology in implementing NREGA has resulted in centralizing control of the program, but this centralization, ironically, has limited the higher-level bureaucrats’ ability to deal with transgressions at the field level. Their vision, amplified by technology, helps them to see these transgressions, but their ability to take action still relies on the hierarchy of the bureaucracy, which is often so complex as to prevent effective action. Their increased vision, therefore, does not guarantee effective control on the same scale.

Perhaps it is worth repeating the argument that in the effort to increase the vision of the state bureaucrats, it is clear that openness alone fails to adequately capture the essence of what is going on. The higher-level bureaucrats can see the opening up of local state practices as “openness,” but the lower-level bureaucrats can see it as surveillance and therefore resist it. By disaggregating the state, I argue against the Scottian vision of legibility that brings forth the state as a monolithic entity rendering its population “legible.” Instead, the act of seeing can be contested within the state. This is particularly salient within the Indian context, where the various bureaucratic departments have been seen as uncooperative, leading to structural violence that is enacted on the poor (Gupta, 2012). This ideological vision of the state persists in the civic-tech movement, that seems to counter the view of the state seeing its population by reversing the gaze, but fundamentally ends up reproducing the unitary vision of the State. I argue instead that the state has to be disaggregated, allowing for alternative state-society synergies (Evans, 1996) (Fox, 1993).

8.3 Democratizing Surveillance by Embedded-Autonomous Institutions

When a state surveys itself, there is always a desire to extend the number of people conducting the surveillance in order to increase the effectiveness and perhaps also the legitimacy of the system, and thus intermediary institutions are created. The dominant

¹²¹ The “corruption” that was framed as a problem by the higher-level bureaucrats, was corruption at the lower-levels. There was no questioning of corruption that the higher-level bureaucrats may be indulging in.

institution is the state's internal audit, which the social audit process tries to open up to public view. By offering a detailed public verification of government records by citizens and a mediator (often an organization), social audits attempt to make complex government records public and comprehensible to a largely non-literate population.

In chapter 4, I argued that the institutional structure of the social auditing system affects the state's surveillance system. Independent audits, while effective in creating spectacles and catching the workers' attention, cannot be sustained effectively on a regular basis. Thus the state-sponsored, semi-autonomous auditing system, which incorporates members of the "civil society" by recruiting activists and NGO workers within the state, allows for regularization of the audits. This offers the benefit of translating the findings into bureaucratic language but also the danger of being co-opted by the larger state agenda. I analyze the historical evolution of the social auditing system. Since Andhra Pradesh is the only place in which social audits have endured, their continued use there points to institutional innovations, allowing us to assess the challenges and advantages of surveillance in practice.

8.4 Politics (or lack thereof) in Public Meetings

The main function of the public meetings within the auditing process is to communicate the findings of the auditors and to take decisions on the petitions and complaints lodged by the citizens. In chapter 5, I offered an analysis of various meetings organized by different political and governmental entities, and argued that the effectiveness of the social audit meetings is dependent on where the meetings land on the politicized spectrum. The public meetings are a way to democratize surveillance; they focus on the surveillance of the local state by the auditors with the support of the workers. Yet, despite being designed to find problems within the bureaucracy, these meetings are in constant danger of degenerating into purely ceremonial exercises, largely because they are often dominated by the very bureaucrats they are designed to monitor.

Moreover, the auditors who come to the village are required by the audit regulations to engage only with the workers rather than the whole village. Yet the other classes are often deeply influential in the social structure of the village and in the tensions, conflicts, and corruption present in the community. Both the landed class and the political parties, particularly the opposing political party, are left out of the audits. One of the reasons for their exclusion is that, if they are included, rhetoric and fights dominate the meeting, as is evident in the politicized meeting I discussed in chapter 5, but without them the auditing system necessarily yields incomplete pictures of the communities it is supposed to assess, meaning that as a surveillance tool the system is severely flawed.

The intent to politicize is not enough: I showed that a supposedly politicized meeting without the capacity to politicize the proceedings fails to deliver its intended outcomes. The capacity to politicize is tied with the structure of the group organizing the meeting and the relationship it has to the state. Social movements, in contrast with the institutionalized auditing system, have the capacity to play a confrontational role and are able to use the meetings as spectacles, exercise their power and openly declare their biases. The audit group, because of its closer relationship with the state, tends to avoid

overtly political and bureaucratic elements, and because of this it can forge only very limited connections with the citizens themselves.

One of the innovations of the social audit process was the prevention of secret audits controlled by the powerful. In theory the public hearings ensure that the findings cannot be suppressed because of the number of citizens present to witness and question the proceedings. In practice, however, I found that these public meetings primarily allow the lower-level bureaucrats to influence the auditors and to put pressure on the workers to change their testimonies. The result is that these meetings are not open in any meaningful sense, and the auditors, in consequence, try not to air their findings publicly in order to avoid manipulation of the workers by the lower-level bureaucrats. Ironically, the lower-level bureaucrats often want the testimonies to be read out only so that they can then pressure the workers to withdraw their complaints. Openness, therefore, can be a two-edged sword, and its desirability depends on its context and on how and why it is been put to use. Again, openness comes with surveillance as its other face, and what was openness to lower-level bureaucrats, manifested itself as surveillance to the auditors and workers and, not surprisingly, they resisted the gaze.

8.5 Disaggregating Citizens

In the villages in Andhra the relationship between the landed class (Reddy) and the landless (Dalit) has been slowly transforming over the course of many years. Dalits have been finding a voice through a decades-long struggle. The bureaucrats have gradually gained sufficient autonomy to resist the demands of Reddies, partly because of the centralization of control by higher-level administrators, as shown in chapter 3. The implementation of NREGA provides limited but guaranteed and unmonitored work to the workers, unlike the agricultural work offered by the Reddies, which is intensely monitored. Thus NREGA has further strengthened the position of workers with respect to the Reddies.

Not surprisingly, the Reddies do not like this turn of events and claim that NREGA makes workers “lazy.” They do not have the power to block the program, but they are able to gain some concessions from the bureaucrats. These concessions take the form of restricting the times when NREGA work is permitted in the village, so that they can employ the workers when work is crucial on their land.

In order to give the workers more stature and representation, the higher-level bureaucrats have created the role of “mates”—workers who are elected as representatives of the larger worker population. In my fieldwork, however, I discovered that the mates strive to block the surveillance of the central state. Far from having the interests of the average worker at heart, they collude with the lower-level bureaucrats, becoming agents in the last-mile corruption.

The workers themselves are happy with NREGA and do not want to lose the program. Because they value the work and the wages it offers them, they are afraid to testify to the auditors about the mates’ corruption, believing that if they complain the auditors will take away the program completely. Moreover, the mates are often relatives of the workers, meaning that the workers feel unable to act against them; instead they bargain with the mates informally, maintaining the system of petty corruption.

Though the audits theoretically provide a way to put preemptive pressure on the lower-level bureaucrats and on the mates to adhere to rules, the system is limited in its effectiveness. The workers do not use the public forums to argue with the state, not only because they fear retribution but also because their interests are implicated in the current system of corruption. Bargaining informally with the mates and field assistants seems easier and wiser to them than trusting a bureaucratic settling of accounts. The workers, in turn, resist the surveillance of their work; again, here is a case of openness for the auditors that, when translated as surveillance by the workers of NREGA, they resist.

8.6 Community Solidarity as Opposed to Openness

The “sandwich” metaphor of the Andhra model assumed that the workers of NREGA, as its beneficiaries, would support the higher-level bureaucrats’ anti-corruption project (Fox, 1993). Their expected participation was to enable local seeing. The successful case of NREGA was found in the case of the tribals, promoting a certain Ostrom-like vision of managing NREGA via “co-production” (Ostrom, 1996).

Chapter 7 argued that NREGA works well in tribal areas because of two factors: the existence of a relatively homogenous tribal population and the relationship of the tribals with the state. These two elements combine to carry out the primary functions of NREGA: to provide employment to workers and to build useful assets that will benefit the community.

Tribals are farmers and work their own lands, living as a united community. Historically and currently, the state has played an important and contradictory role in shaping the lives of tribals, and today the tribals are increasingly dependent on a way of life made possible by the state. NREGA prioritizes earthwork projects, and such projects align with the needs of the tribal communities because of the poor infrastructure in the tribal areas and because tribals, being farmers, immediately benefit from land-development projects.

Crucially, because of their community-based work culture, tribals treat NREGA work as their own work. This is not the case in Dalit areas, where the workers do not own land. There, even if NREGA work is valuable in raising the water table or improving soil fertility, the Dalits do not see these benefits as directly benefitting them hence, for them, the wage issue is more important. In the tribal areas, the local government’s power is in part removed by the centralization of the program, and though the tribals do sometimes find ways to make money on the side, these corrupt practices do not affect the nature of work under NREGA. There are no class conflicts in these tribal areas, eliminating the problem of schedule changes at the local level, and as a result NREGA officials in tribal regions offer more workdays. For their part, the workers have fully integrated NREGA into their lives. Thus, the NREGA work that is carried out is both meaningful and profitable for the community, enabling the implementation of the program in these regions to hue closely to the original intention of its designers.

8.7 Theoretical Contributions

Democratizing “Legibility”

In Scott's vision, his "seeing" state refers to the "surveillance" side of transparency and not merely the "openness" side (Scott, 1998). Alternatively, applying Scott to get to accountability from transparency is particularly valuable, as it brings forth to center of the discussion the idea of control that "seeing" enables. In other words, Scottian "seeing" has a purpose, which is state control of the population. This is particularly distinct from transparency projects that assume that "seeing" happens through putting out information. But seeing need not be restricted to the state seeing its citizens.

The State does not have monopoly over seeing

As Scott is so concerned with the state rendering the citizen legible, he never gives credence to the idea that the governance infrastructure that is rendering the citizens legible can be made legible. While Scottian analysis warns against a particular type of high-modern state with the capacity to carry out "utopic" visions, the analysis largely assumes a false dichotomy of the state vs. the citizen. But the state is not a monolith, as this analysis shows: there are fights within the levels of the state. Instead, the debates of legibility should be situated in the particular empirical context to examine the concrete effects of the project of increased legibility. The Scottian vision, while valid, has inadvertently dominated debates over any project that seems to increase legibility and produces critiques that seem to make projects suspect.

The State can see beyond static simplifications

Scott posits that the high-modern state sees in a particular way in order to simplify complex reality and construct a synoptic view. We could see that the state governs through creating general-purpose rules and categories of subjects that further its narrow interest, effectively abstracting a complicated social reality. Therefore, reality gets reduced for the sole purpose of disciplining the population.

But the synoptic, simplified view of the state is not necessarily static. As with the idea of the circular (even without the software patches) in chapter 3, the state continuously issues changes to its rules to refine the plan. As a result, the idea that the state just plans projects and does not update its plans based on local context is not often the case, particularly in the contemporary state that I found in Andhra Pradesh.

The logic of Scott's theory cannot account for how social audits—essentially state enterprises—provide a counter-narrative to the state's vision. It appears that from Scott's perspective on the nature of the state and of state-citizen relations, legibility is in the hands of the state while "metis" (practical knowledge) is the province of the citizen (Scott, 1998). However, Scott's vision does not allow for the idea that an alternate possibility can be systematically realized by allowing for citizens to attest to findings that counter the official narrative. In other words, it is possible for the state to tap into metis to help govern better.

While I agree with Scott—there is indeed a dominant logic of how the state functions where it chooses to recognize only a particular type of seeing to enable standardization—there is room to go beyond these simplifications (as in the survey-forms) by relying on unstructured data, as we saw with the collecting of testimonies from people. There are opportunities within the state system that allow for these possibilities of

going beyond its narrow confines in order to go beyond simplification. But failing to even allow for the theoretical possibility is problematic.

Legibility within the state may be necessary for democracy to be possible

Seeing is not simply a disciplinary function that the state imposes on citizens; it could also be imposed on the state. In fact, it is the necessary function that makes democratic seeing possible. In other words, the idea that there is accurate documentation of activities and some internal surveillance is necessary for the right-to-information activists to be able to exert power over the state. Here is where I find problems with Wikileaks founder Assange's manifesto to force surveillance leaks in order to cripple the efficiency of government (Armstrong, 2015). As he saw it, by leaking documents, he wanted to put preemptive pressure on the state to not keep these records for fear that they will be leaked, thereby crippling the state. I am arguing the opposite: we need the state to internally surveil itself, which necessitates documentation, which then under certain conditions could allow the actions of the state to be seen more clearly by citizens.

Civic tech movement suffers from the inverse Scottish problem

The civic tech movement seeks to invert the directionality of the seeing to make the citizen see the state (Zuckerman, 2014). At first glance, it seems to counter the Scottish pessimism of giving the state the monopoly on seeing by allowing the citizens to see the state. But it also sees the state largely as a monolith, taking for granted the surveillance that must have happened prior to when its technologies could be used to get the state to be accountable. In other words, while it seems to invert the directionality, it really reproduces the Scottish dichotomy. The movement also suffers from having not only a monolithic vision of the state but also a monolithic view of the potential of the citizen to orchestrate the seeing. It fails to recognize that citizens are also part of the problem.

Fox's sandwich

As the local state is embedded in society, Fox's "sandwich strategies," which assume a state-society dichotomy, need to be reimagined (Fox, 1993).

The sandwich theory also has to be granular enough to account for the variation in the social structure and power relations within the community: the state has to be agile and to react based on particular conditions that it encounters. It also suggests that for adequate pressure to work from the top, a strategy to increase the number of reformists within the state has to be undertaken. Sandwich strategies also expect a willingness from "society" to cooperate with the state reformists, but often societies' interests are local and may not align with state interests.

Finally, sandwich strategies need not be vertical, where the bottom part of the sandwich is "local" as in the citizens/workers, they could be "horizontal," where the "bottom" could be from an embedded but autonomous bureaucracy that provides oversight. In other words, the sandwich strategies could not be just between state and society, but instead could involve coalitions within the state.

The Habermasian public sphere

Notions of transparency assume unproblematic participation and a certain rhetoric of inclusiveness and democratic decision making. In this context, the notion of the public sphere is invoked as a place for ideas to be shared and discussed openly. The public sphere is Ferguson's anti-politics machine: nobody shows up or is even expected to show up. But, it is but an empty space unless politicized. It exists to fulfill a function that may not be intentional, but nevertheless produces the effect of rendering these meetings apolitical. Participation could put people at risk—either from threats from powerful interests or by exposing their own involvement in corruption.¹²² This is what naive Habermasians—but not Habermas himself—fail to understand. The public sphere serves the openness function, but also makes surveillance possible at the local level, which makes it problematic and hence resisted. The idea of a public sphere typically relies on openness to facilitate public reasoning, but it has to be mindful of surveillance as a reality, throwing into question the desirability of having public forums. The structure of the institution organizing the public sphere determines the possibilities of politicization, which may be necessary to engender participation.

Further, ideas of the public sphere assume direct participation, but we may have to imagine possibilities for indirect participation through proxies. In addition to communication (as in deliberation or speech) we also should acknowledge information (as in testimonies via documents) as a valid object in the public sphere. One possibility to explore is anonymized participation using documents as proxy mediated by independent non-local actors, which allow for protection of the “participants” without undermining their local situation. In essence, we need to “transform” the imagination that is embodied in the public sphere from its Habermasian idealism.

The potential for realizing an Ostromian vision of co-production

Openness and surveillance are external interventions from the state to make systems of governance possible. But the community can organically generate alternative governance if there are certain preconditions in the social structure.

The Andhra model can be seen as an attempt to scale up an Ostromian vision from the tribal communities, where NREGA works well to the rest of the state (Ostrom, 1996). The design of on-demand work that is legislated, with the expectation that the community choose projects and participate in audits questioning the local state, reflects such a projection. But, as we saw in chapter 6, these Ostromian visions do not travel easily, as Ostrom herself admits in questioning the very idea of “models.” (Ostrom, 1990) The Ostromian “co-production” is limited both by the desire for one-size-fits all models that the state is peddling, but also by the disincentives for the workers to produce public assets unnecessary for them.

¹²² While Habermas himself had a sophisticated understanding of the public sphere, where he discusses the “transformation” of the public sphere, the naive Habermasian still holds this view.

In sum, to the question of whether transparency leads to accountability, we need to insert political questions, which makes more sense when we consider openness and surveillance together. I have argued that open governance is best seen as an effort to democratize surveillance. More specifically, open governance is about democratizing decisions about who and what is surveyed. I argue that the flashlight is a better metaphor than sunlight to examine the political effects of transparency. People embrace openness and reject surveillance depending on whether they are the subject or the object of the flashlight, which brings up issues of power. Also, we need go beyond the simple state-citizen dichotomy and disaggregate both the state and the citizenry, and to examine concrete coalitions that could be formed to truly democratize governance. The outcome of such democratization is an empirical question.

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