5 | *Conclusion: Oral Democracy*

The world seems to be losing faith in democracy.[1] *Gram sabhas*, with all their messiness, offer some hope. They show that democracy can be strengthened and deepened by the simple but profound act of giving citizens the chance to speak and to be heard. Many of the *gram sabhas* that we describe are not examples of deliberative democracy even by Mansbridge's (2015) minimalist standard of "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern." With the exception of *gram sabhas* in Kerala, we do not observe much thoughtful "weighing" of preferences and interests. Villagers have strong opinions about their public needs and the measures they want the *panchayat* to take to meet those needs. And many of the discussions are about personal and private household benefits rather than "matters of common concern." Nonetheless they are forums that give citizens the opportunity to express their views, listen to the views of others, and be listened to by elected officials and government bureaucrats. In these ways *gram sabhas* help make decision-making more responsive and reflective.

The mutual and regular interactions that take place during *gram sabhas* help fill with democratic content the blank durations between elections. *Gram sabhas* permit the regular assessment of village government during the six years between elections. Citizens who participate are more informed about the preferences, interests, and values of others. Their participation gives them an opportunity to be introspective, to "deliberate within" (Goodin 2003, p. 64) and assess their own interests and values. Officials, whether elected or appointed, who participate have to engage with and confront the views and criticisms of citizens. This enables them to become more accountable.

If an election offers the exit option in a democracy (i.e. being voted out), voice complements it. The process is by no means perfect and, as

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[1] See The Economist Intelligence Unit (2018) for recent trends.

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we have seen, there is enormous variation between states and differences across levels of literacy. Despite this unevenness, however, the discursive process helps to improve government by enlarging the space for direct democratic engagement. *Gram sabhas* thus should be seen as inputs toward a more reflective democracy (Goodin 2003). In this sense, the contribution that they make has implications beyond India for all countries whether rich or poor.

The Indian example shows that participatory systems of democratic governance can be introduced through government policy. The 73rd constitutional amendment passed in 1992 and has been bolstered by the efforts of state governments in the years since. Variations in state policy, we have shown, can fundamentally affect the quality of the *gram sabha*. The state can all but determine what is discussed, the quality of the participation by citizens, and the responsiveness of local government to citizens' concerns. Together, the 73rd amendment and the various state government acts that followed have, in effect, created a rural Indian public sphere.

Reading the *gram sabha* transcripts has led us to question strongly the argument that India's rural citizens are merely pawns in the grip of "political society" (Chatterjee 2001). Rather, the *gram sabha* presents a curious classificatory puzzle and offers a powerful challenge to Chatterjee's binary framework of political and civil society. On the one hand, it is arguably an extension of political society, since it is created and facilitated by the state and embedded within a larger process of politics and power. On the other hand, rather than consolidating power, the *gram sabha* is designed and acts as a countervailing force to administrative power by making those in government accountable and directly answerable to the rural electorate. The *gram sabha* opens up officials' administrative actions to public scrutiny.

In states where commitment to decentralized local governance is lacking, power holders routinely subvert the democratic promise of the *gram sabha* by simply not holding them, even though they are constitutionally guaranteed. Another strategy is to hold them in name only. A perfunctory and slipshod approach is taken: budgets and updates on public works projects are not disseminated beforehand; government department officials are not required to be present to address public concerns; deliberation and grievances by citizens are summarily disregarded.

On the other hand, in states that early on have made a long-term commitment to decentralized governance, the *gram sabha* has transformed local democracy. With state support, the *gram sabha* has become an effective forum in which incumbents of power are questioned and subjected to public criticism, and even ridicule, by ordinary rural citizens. Citizens display varying degrees of civic competence and deliberative capacity. Clearly, in many cases, citizens who are both literate and illiterate have been nudged into deep democratic engagement by government policy. Our analysis shows that a version of deliberative democracy is possible even in societies with relatively low literacy. Nevertheless, greater literacy makes an important difference in the quality of deliberation because it seems to equalize the authority of participants' voices. Decision-making relies less on a few opinion leaders in medium- and high-literacy settings. When at its best, the *gram sabha* has brought to life, and to the doorsteps of rural citizens, a new talk-based form of democracy. We call this "oral democracy."

"Oral Democracy"

"Oral democracy," as an inductively developed conception of democracy, contributes to fully recognizing the diversity of forms of speech and talk in participatory political institutions. In our view, the different kinds of speech and talk contribute substantially to democratic governance even if they fall short of the more philosophically defined standards of deliberative democracy. Because of this problem of not meeting the deliberative theorists' yardstick, and the inherent risk of populist rhetoric in a democracy, the theory and practice of deliberative democracy has largely abandoned mass democracy in favor of designing and studying mini-publics and small-scale deliberative venues (Chambers 2009). Even so, normative theories of deliberation have been contested, extended, and pared down to make them more inclusive of real-world participatory practices (Benhabib 1994; Curato et al. 2017; Dryzek 2000 Elster 1996; Fraser 1990; Guttman and Thompson 1996; He and Warren 2011; Mansbridge 1980, 1998, 1999, 2015; Mansbridge et al. 2010; Mouffe 1999; Polletta and Lee 2006; Sanders 1997; Sunstein 1995, 1999; Warren and Mansbridge et al. 2013; Young 1996, 1997, 2000). But these "conceptual stretches" of conventional democratic theory have not been welcomed by all deliberation theorists (Goodin, 2018). And despite the ascendancy of theories

of democratic deliberation (Chambers 2009), no consensus now exists as to what qualifies as democratic deliberation and what falls outside its bounds.[2] We have therefore chosen to proceed inductively in our analysis of *gram sabhas* and in our attempt to theorize it.

Our use of "oral democracy" is intended to emphasize the importance of the oral dimension of this form of political participation and governance – the spoken, uttered-by-mouth nature of political engagement with the state and community through dialogues (interactive exchanges between citizens and the state and among citizens) and monologues (speeches and rhetoric employed by political leaders and public officials). The concept, we hope, will focus renewed attention on oration and oratory – the art and practice of speaking politically in public – that is a central part of what constitutes political engagement today for many people around the world. It is intended to highlight the crucial importance of all citizens attaining competency in expressing their opinions and in making cogent and persuasive arguments. Talk-centered participation should be much more widely recognized as a type of *competency* (skill) and as a *capability* that can improve individual quality of life and the quality of collective governance.

We are not breaking new ground in arguing that publicly talking about matters relating to politics and governance is a competency. In Athenian democracy, rhetoric, or the art of public speaking, was viewed as a political skill because it was recognized that speaking persuasively and effectively could influence public policy (Hauser 1999). Rhetoric was also recognized as having inventive power. It could fuel imagination because it had the potential to create new political visions and realities and also the power to generate consensus (Hauser 1999; Finley 1962).[3] With the rise of participatory democracy in ancient Greece, public speaking became a subject of formal study and training as part of civic education. This history has ancient Indian antecedents and parallels, for example, in the emphasis on debate and methods of reasoning found in Hindu *Nyaya*

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[2] For this reason, our analysis does not rely on any formalized evaluative metric like the DQI (Deliberation Quality Index pioneered by Steiner et al. 2005).

[3] Hauser emphasizes the importance of Pericles' "Funeral Oration," delivered at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War in 432 BCE, for rhetorically inventing a commitment to the value of political life in Athens being its participatory inclusivity, despite the exclusion of women and slaves from political processes.

philosophy and in oral traditions of debate and collective decision-making in Buddhism and Islam (Bayly 1996). The *Arthashastra*, a second-century BCE treatise on governance, written to train rulers how to carry out their duties, has an entire chapter devoted to the elucidation of arguments (Olivelle 2013). Greeks and Indians in the ancient period both understood public speaking to be a political skill that could be cultivated through training. Our focus on a contemporary form of "oral democracy" is meant to recognize the continuing centrality of oral competence in relation to power and to understand that this skill is unequally distributed across social strata and policy regimes. Importantly, it is a skill that can be nurtured through policy and developed with practice.

We also argue that oral competency, including the capacity to deliberate, should be understood as a human capability and articulated with the paradigmatically different "capabilities approach" to development proposed by Amartya Sen. In this approach, the various living standards that a person can or cannot achieve are their "functionings," and their ability to achieve them, their "capabilities" (Sen 1985: 16). In other words, capabilities are individual capacities for action that facilitate the achievement of valued life goals. Capabilities encompass a wide variety of action-capacities, including material and human capital inputs such as income, education, and health. They also include attributes that open up possibilities for the expression of personhood and for participation in social, economic, civic, and political spheres of action. Participating in village assemblies skillfully opens up to the individual citizen the possibility of influencing the allocation of public resources toward household and community needs that they consider to be important for their standard of living. Skilled participation in village assemblies is directly linked to efforts to improve the objective conditions of life. Speaking up in these assemblies is also linked to the public demand for dignity and recognition made by subordinated groups in order to improve the subjective dimensions of well-being (Rao and Sanyal 2010). Participation in oral democracy, therefore, is rich with the possibility of extending the expression of personhood to the civic domain and fostering a civic persona. It may even momentarily equalize agency (Rao and Walton 2004). Accordingly, effective talk-centered participation in village assemblies should be more widely recognized as a valued capability and more highly prized for its promise.

Oral competency can even be a matter of life and death in a country whose bureaucratic systems have been described as perpetuating "structural violence" (Gupta 2012). The systemic "production of arbitrariness" that is characteristic of complex bureaucratic organizations directly affects the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable citizens (Gupta 2012, p. 24). Frequently poor people are arbitrarily denied enrollment and benefits from key development initiatives regarding health, nutrition, housing, and poverty alleviation, delivered through the state's bureaucratic machinery. This machinery often fails citizens for insubstantial reasons such as not having proper documentation or not satisfying bureaucratically determined eligibility criteria. The oral democracy enacted through *gram sabhas* can expose the illegitimacy of such bureaucratic and administrative violence by forcing and fostering a conversation among citizens and local governments.

Oral democracy, our study shows, is not haplessly vulnerable to being overtaken by "plebiscitary rhetoric" (Chambers 2009), the kind of speech employed by politicians that is interested in power over truth and in manipulating and deceiving mass publics to win power. Political leaders who speak in these village assemblies do not simply "pander and flatter, manipulate and hoodwink" (Chambers 2009: 328) in order to win the support of the masses. The face-to-face nature of these assemblies allows such rhetoric to be kept in check by citizens who can question forcefully and critique scornfully. In some states we hear considerable "deliberative rhetoric" (Chambers 2009) that is devoted to inducing mass publics to thoughtfully consider and reform common (un)civic attitudes and means of action that address common problems. We also have ample evidence that shows oratory in the public political sphere can combine passion with reason.

Thus, using the frame of oral democracy allows an inclusive focus both on the dialogical exchanges between citizens and the state as well as the monological rhetoric of political leaders and state bureaucrats who seek to govern. And, it enables us to identify the differentiated oratory competencies among the mass publics that can have a shaping influence on the quality of governance and by association the quality of life.

In keeping with this frame, in the next segment we consider what the different kinds of talk in the *gram sabha* (discussed in Chapter 2) reflect regarding the reach of democracy and the deliberativeness of mass talk-

based political participation. We also discuss the role of the state and literacy in the oral democracy that thrives in contemporary rural India.

Deliberative and Democratic Potential of *Gram Sabhas*

Forms of Talk

Discursive exchanges in the *gram sabha* center on two crucial dimensions of political and civic life: the distribution of public and personal goods, and the performance of recognition and dignity. We created a typology of four kinds of talk that we observe in the transcriptions of *gram sabhas*: public-spirited talk; agonistic talk about public goods; agonistic talk about personal goods; and personal talk. Each contributes substantially to the potential *gram sabhas* hold for realizing deliberative democracy in rural India at the village level.

Public-spirited talk is focused on common concerns and on holding the state accountable to its own claims about its development and governance functions. Villagers actively demand accountability for the actions of the *panchayat* and for government services from elected leaders and bureaucrats. They also instruct state agents on actions they should take to remedy particular problems. This kind of direct participation through oral performance goes beyond indirect participation through representation via voting and written petition. That a high level of formal literacy is not a necessary condition for political literacy in the *gram sabha* marks it as profoundly egalitarian and deepens the reach of democracy. When villagers press for accountability they are exercising genuine countervailing power against the authority of the state by calling into question the legitimacy of elected leaders and public officials who fail to deliver on promises or fulfill public needs.

Public-spirited talk usually takes one of three forms: discussion that holds the state accountable; discussion that addresses public goods problems; discussion that raises wider issues often outside the jurisdiction of *panchayats*. Much of this talk is unreflective and concerns demands that citizens make on behalf of their communities, framed in nonnegotiable terms. There are those who may argue that this kind of talk does not constitute deliberation. But deliberative moments occur when villagers bring up alternative courses of remedial action. Whether or not these alternatives receive thoughtful consideration can vary widely among *gram sabhas*. From a study confined to a single period

of time, it is impossible to know whether a villager's suggestion regarding a remedial action came up again during a later meeting where it was given further consideration. When citizens mention more macro issues like global trade or affirmative action policy that are outside the ambit of the *gram sabha*, their purpose is to provoke people to reflect on these issues. Therefore, even though all of public-spirited talk may not satisfy the rigorous standards of good deliberation, there are certainly many reflective moments in it.[4]

Agonistic talk related to public goods, although it can be heated and acrimonious, has value in a system of deliberative democracy. It often reveals inequities in the priorities of political leaders, and in the allocation of resources and infrastructure development between different groups, neighborhoods, and villages. Allegations of caste-based discrimination or political favoritism are commonly aired. Publicly calling out discrimination and challenging *panchayat* leaders for their biased distributional decisions accomplishes important goals of democracy. At a minimum they effectively bring to the surface very real distributional unevenness. Communities whose members feel they are comparatively worse off or neglected can present their arguments, bolstered with facts that are unlikely to be known by people living in other neighborhoods or villages, or people of other caste groups. Beyond providing the relief of expressing frustration and fury, such "unreflective" deliberation brings to the surface information about gaps and shortages in basic physical infrastructure and resources such as water systems, housing, electricity, and roads. Agonistic talk related to public goods gives leaders a chance to respond with additional information about the projects they have completed and those under way, along with details about budgets and subsidized schemes and the conditions sometimes attached with them.

Agonistic talk about personal goods gives citizens a chance to voice the basic needs of their household and family (such as food and

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[4] Public-spirited talk deemed unreflective may serve important functions. According to Mansbridge "a (nonreflective) communicative process . . . may nevertheless play an important role in a larger deliberative system. A systemic approach to deliberation considers the quality of deliberation in a deliberative system as a whole. It directs attention to the different ways that smaller unreflective and nondeliberative acts can figure crucially in the weighing and reflecting function of a larger deliberative interaction. Such acts may, for example, bring out considerations that otherwise would have never been heard, which can then be weighed elsewhere in the deliberative system (2015: 28)."

housing) in front of the whole polity. This brings the private sphere closer to the public sphere and makes domestic issues a matter of public concern. Agonistic talk about personal goods brings to the fore revealing information about comparative disadvantages between groups and individuals, usually between caste groups and among individuals falling on either side of the poverty line (BPL-APL). This kind of talk, which is personal by definition, usually elicits only brief responses by *panchayat* leaders. Nevertheless, there can be deliberative moments. Citizens' personal complaints publicly question the rules of commensuration that are used to decide who gets coveted individual subsidies, or, why only scheduled castes should be favored in the allotment of specific types of subsidies such as free houses over other castes who suffer comparable levels of material disadvantage. In some states public questioning of these kinds of governmental criteria regularly motivates *panchayat* leaders and public officials to give extensive speeches explaining how these criteria have been formulated and why they are justified. By pushing for reconsideration of government criteria, agonistic talk about personal goods creates deliberative moments in the *gram sabha* by calling into question the government's measurement of poverty, definitions of exclusion, and the allocation of public resources.

Personal talk publicly dramatizes domestic deprivations and intimate sufferings in seeking state-subsidized benefits for oneself and one's household. When villagers talk about their personal hardships as they ask for ration cards, land, and housing, they are also implicitly raising the political question of the state's responsibility for the wellbeing of all citizens.

The Role of the State

In the *gram sabha*, citizens are in political dialog with each other as equals, with their elected political representatives, and with other officials acting as agents of the state. One of the express purposes of the *gram sabha* is to open up lines of direct communication between the local government and citizens. Theories of deliberative democracy for the most part do not take up state-citizen talk for analysis. Such talk fails to satisfy the precondition of power parity and the prerequisites of equal voice and mutual respect democratic theory presupposes. This is reflected in the empirical literature in which there has been a near exclusive focus on deliberation among citizens alone, or on deliberation

among parliamentarians. Virtually no attention has been paid to state-citizen deliberation. To correct for this exclusion of power inequality from the general framework of deliberation, Mansbridge (2015) has proposed that equality of power between participants not be seen as a governing criterion but as a standard of good deliberation. This still presupposes equality of power as a condition of good deliberation and associates inequality of power with compromised deliberation. Noting this slant, a very small set of scholars has allowed for a nuanced view of power that acknowledges the constructive role of coercive and authoritative power in organizing deliberation and translating decisions into actions (Hendriks 2009; Kuyper 2012; Curato et al. 2017). How then should we think of state-citizen communication across power disparities from within the framework of oral democracy?

We need to see that states can vary widely in the roles they play in facilitating or thwarting democratic deliberation. Where there is a supportive, facilitative state, public-spirited talk by citizens is encouraged by leaders. *Panchayat* leaders and state bureaucrats may even school citizens in effective rhetoric of political exchange to make the most of the opportunity for democratic deliberation provided by the *gram sabha*.

The state also has an important role to play as the authoritative source of public information. Theories of deliberative democracy do not spend much time on information asymmetries. The operating assumption appears to be that all persons who engage in deliberation are equally well-informed about the subject matter under deliberation. But in real life information asymmetry is a practical gap that needs to be bridged before meaningful deliberation can commence. The state facilitates public-spirited talk simply by using its authoritative power to disseminate information to citizens through elected leaders and public officials regarding public budgets, income and expenses, the status of development projects, and various government schemes for community development and household poverty alleviation. The state has legitimate control over this information and is the only source through which the public can access it. Citizens can exercise pressure for public accountability much more forcefully in states that play an active role in sharing information.

From the perspective of authority and power, two processes are at play simultaneously in the *gram sabha*. Public officials and agents of the state have more information (at least about state programs and resources) and

more authority. At the same time, an inversion of power takes place in that these authority figures are made accountable to all citizens, including those who are illiterate, lower-caste, or poor. Even though the agents of the state and citizens are unequal in power, in the *gram sabha* this power disparity can be momentarily neutralized. Keeping in mind the facilitative role of power holders and the momentary inversion of state-citizen power, we believe that, in deliberative models, "mutual communication" as a definitional matter need not be restricted only to peers among whom there is power parity. It can also include dialogic communication between actors with power disparity, such as the state and its citizen subjects. This expanded view of mutual communication will hold as long as the state's power does not govern who can talk, how much they can talk, or how speakers are responded to by other participants.

The best functioning *gram sabhas* show that power inversion between citizens and the state can be socially engineered by the state by setting up the right kinds of institutions with appropriate incentives. Appropriate institutions can foster mutual communication, listening, and responding, even across considerable power disparities. The state plays a further facilitative critical role when it temporarily neutralizes power disparities among citizens by giving everyone the time and space in which to speak. By listening and responding to citizens, even if not at exactly the same rate for different social groups, the state expands political opportunities.

Our analysis shows that states can play a constructive role in stratified societies by instilling oral democracy. The state has an important role to play in inculcating its citizens' political literacy and oral competency in the public political sphere by fostering skills of rational and critical argumentation among all citizens, both literate and illiterate. Societies need not wait for equity and power parity to emerge through exogenous or organic processes before they adopt talk-based deliberative institutions as a core element of their democratic politics. Our study points to the potentially constructive democratic role of the state in fostering civic and political consciousness among the least well-off, most oppressed citizens. This makes us optimistic.

The Role of Literacy

The effect of literacy on the quality of deliberation is nonlinear. Illiteracy does not hamper political discourse as much as it makes it haphazard.

It is akin to a blindfold that denies people, who might otherwise have intrinsic oratory skills, from understanding the facts, the issues, and the politics of the *gram sabha* in a manner that allows them to be coherent participants in the discussion. In other words, the inability to read and write may result in low levels of political literacy. Our findings in Bidar district in Karnataka show that *gram sabhas* in villages with low literacy can sometimes appear chaotic and characterized by what Hossain (2010) has called "rude accountability." In villages with low literacy, these "rude" citizens are guided by those we have called "elite stewards."

As literacy increases, a larger proportion of citizens become politically literate. The discourse tends to become less noisy and far more knowledgeable about budgets and *panchayat* procedures, and citizens have more information about the various kinds of benefits that they can apply for. This does not always translate to a more effective *gram sabha*. The reason for this is state policy. The state of Andhra Pradesh – at the time the *gram sabhas* used in this study were recorded – neglected the *panchayat* system. There was practically no difference in the deliberations within low- and medium-literacy villages because the citizens in both were placed by powerholders in the position of "passive petitioners" talking to an unresponsive state. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the state governments paid much more attention to the *panchayat* system. There literacy mattered, and citizens in villages with higher literacy levels showed more oral competency and became more effective "civic" or "strident" deliberators.

Formal literacy (as measured by census data on village literacy levels) makes a positive difference by enhancing villagers' political literacy and capacity for engaging with the state through deliberation. But state-level influence on the political construction of the *gram sabha* can override the effect of formal literacy on political literacy and the capacity to deliberate. Positive state influence can make up for the deficiency in literacy. Negative state influence can suppress whatever advantages higher formal literacy might have for the capacity for democratic deliberation.

Regional and Temporal Validity of Our Findings

South India vs. North India

Our data are from the four states that constitute South India. Are our results representative of the rest of India? South India is indeed

different from the North. On average it has less gender disparity and lower caste inequality. It also has stronger development indicators – higher rates of growth, better health, and lower levels of poverty (Varshney 2014). It is difficult to make a clear comparison between the south and the north on the quality of *gram sabhas* because there is no comparable data. The one other set of *gram sabha* recordings that we are aware of is from the northeastern state of West Bengal, which shows *gram sabhas* that are similar to many that we discuss in this book (Bhattacharjee and Chattopadhyay 2011). However, what is considered "North" India also has five times as many people as the South and is extraordinarily diverse. For instance, the state of Rajasthan has a long history of civic movements (Joshi and Rao 2017) and village councils that have been active for a long time (Krishna 2002). Rural citizens in Rajasthan make claims on the state in much the same way as rural citizens in the South by expanding their repertories of action that work across traditional networks (Krishna 2002; Krusk-Wisner 2018). Recent evidence points to a very active rural civic sphere, nurtured by social movements and state action (Krusk-Wisner 2018; Joshi and Rao 2017).

Bihar, sharing an eastern border with West Bengal, is a much poorer state than either Rajasthan or Bengal and has had a long history of government dysfunction. Evidence from 1999 on institutions similar to the *gram sabha* suggests that political participation is passive and village forums are generally used merely to endorse the suggestions of *panchayat* leaders (Corbridge et al. 2005). But Bihar has changed considerably. There has been much more attention paid in recent years to the quality of governance and rural development (Singh and Stern 2013). In some parts of the state women's freedom and gender relations have been improving due to a large policy initiative focused on building women-centered self-help groups. Since then, women have become much more active participants in the *panchayat* system (Sanyal, Rao, and Majumdar 2015). Much more research is needed on *gram sabhas* in the North before we can engage in meaningful regional comparison. But, given that the North is subject to the same constitutional amendment as the South, efforts to activate village councils and village forums should, over the long run, have similar results.

Have Things Changed in South India?

In the fourteen years since the recording of the village assemblies used in this study, *panchayats* and the *gram sabhas* have become part of the ritual of rural life. In 2006, the federal government pushed to increase the size of *panchayat* budgets. Most of these grants were nondiscretionary. The largest allocation was to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which guaranteed a hundred days of employment to every adult rural resident. This considerably increased political interest in the *panchayat* system and produced a sharp increase in political participation. Concurrently, over these fourteen years, average Indian literacy levels have increased from 64 percent in 2001 to 74 percent in 2011. They are expected to rise even higher by the time of the next census in 2021.

In Karnataka these changes, along with concerted attempts to mobilize citizens, have created a tsunami of change in the quantity and quality of participation. One of us has been involved in a ten-year ethnography of twenty villages in Bidar and neighboring districts in Karnataka (Rao et al. 2017). Over that ten-year period, *gram sabhas* have begun to demonstrate substantially increased political literacy. This increase seems to have affected the character of democratic processes rather than to have changed outcomes. Similarly, Tamil Nadu's *gram sabhas* show much higher levels of political sophistication and responsiveness from officials over the same period with sharply increased participation by women. This is due partly to organic causes and partly to state-initiated policies designed to equalize gender relations (Parthasarathy et al. 2017; Palaniswamy et al. 2017).

In the "high-capacity" state of Kerala, a sequence of governments spanning the political spectrum has created an integrated system of participatory planning. This has resulted in a functional democratic deliberative system that continues to pay dividends, both in political process and in concrete outcomes like health and sanitation (John and Jacob 2016). Kerala's *panchayats* are not very different today from when we recorded these *gram sabhas*, except that deliberative planning and implementation have become even more routinized.

In the "low-capacity" state of Andhra Pradesh (AP), the situation is very different. When we recorded these *gram sabha* meetings, Chandrababu Naidu was the Chief Minister of AP. He and his bureaucrats embraced the promise of technology-led centralized governance.

This resulted in an explicit decision to underemphasize the *panchayat* system, ignore *gram sabhas,* and manage village governance by creating parallel structures of village "user-groups" and "self-help" groups. Rural citizens became relatively disconnected from the *panchayat* system. The consequences of this are clearly observable in our transcripts.

In 2004, Naidu's party, the Telugu Desam, lost power to the Congress Party, which was also in power at the federal level By the time the influx of funds from the NREGS, with its emphasis on strengthening the *panchayat* system, came along, there was more openness in AP toward *panchayats* and their *gram sabhas*. Nevertheless, qualitative research conducted in 2012–2013 on the NREGS in AP shows the continued prevalence of the centralized "high-modernist" governance structure inherited from Naidu. *Gram sabhas*, it was found, were still being held to abide by the letter of the law rather than to give life to its spirit (Veeraraghavan 2017).

In 2014, the state of Andhra Pradesh was split in two. The northern districts formed the new state of Telangana and the district of Medak was added to it. The southern and coastal districts, including Chittoor district, now formed the geographically reduced state of Andhra Pradesh. A new political party, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, won power in Telangana. It explicitly committed itself to strengthening the village *panchayat* system in accordance with the 73rd amendment. It recently launched a new initiative, called "Gram Jyoti," to implement this goal. In the reconstituted and much smaller state of AP, Chandrababu Naidu has regained power and moved toward transforming *panchayats* into "e-governance" centers. We carefully combed through the website of the Panchayati Raj department of the AP government and found no mention of *gram sabhas*. Telangana, it appears, will strengthen *gram sabhas* while AP will continue to pursue a high-modernist vision of governance and development.

There have been many changes over the years in *panchayat* policy. But, at the state level, those changes have only served to move *gram sabhas* even further in the directions our typology identifies and systematically attempts to lay out. This fact strongly indicates the continued relevance of the data we recorded fourteen years ago. The "high-capacity" state of Kerala early on was already a global exemplar of participatory government. It continues to be so despite a succession of disparate governments. The medium-capacity states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu remain medium-capacity in comparison to Kerala, but

deliberative participation within them has become stronger. *Gram sabhas* there are becoming more vibrant and articulate. The southern and coastal districts that constitute the new Andhra Pradesh continue to pay very little attention to the *gram sabha*. The northern districts in the new state of Telangana promise to energize *gram sabhas* and the *panchayat* system.

Policy Implications

The voices of the poor are often not heard. Governmental systems devised to assist the poor, i.e. provide them with "social protection" and opportunity, are often single-mindedly focused on poverty identification through definitions, biometrics, surveys, and measurements over which the people subject to these technologies of value determination and commensuration have no say. Programs to assist the poor are administered through opaque bureaucracies that often subject people to the "structural violence" of government surveillance, fiat, and oversight (Gupta 2012). *Gram sabhas* have the potential to change that by facilitating oral democracy. In the transcripts analyzed, we witness rural Indian citizens, both as individuals and as collectives, giving voice to their concerns and complaints. *Gram sabhas* make visible to participants and the community as a whole the aspirations, fears, and everyday struggles that rural residents experience. In doing this *gram sabhas* make such experiences politically legible. They allow diverse individuals and groups – high and low castes, women and men, the educated and illiterate, citizens and officials alike – to listen to one another, to understand, to argue, and to reflect.

   Gram sabhas have the potential to nurture "oratory competency" across multiple divides and to cultivate political literacy. They help rural citizens navigate the world of government assistance and make better collective decisions. Through the oral democracy of *gram sabhas*, rural citizens stake out claims for dignity and overcome social barriers they would not otherwise be able to breach. Through *gram sabhas* rural citizens collectively expose and confront corruption and mismanagement. These actions would be impossible to accomplish individually. *Gram sabhas* create the space for elected officials and bureaucrats to respond, whether dismissively or with genuine social creativity. To put all these voices into constitutionally mandated public conversation with each other supports and enlarges deliberative

democracy. All this makes for a more reflective citizenry, a more reflective state, and helps solve the coordination failures that lie at the heart of governance.

However, we see a lot of variation in the degree to which this happens. *Panchayat* policy, the interpretation and implementation of the words of the 73rd amendment, is the remit of state governments. Our natural experiment allows us to look at the impact of state government policy on the quality of discourse within the *gram sabha*, by comparing villages across state borders that share a common language and history. We find that state-level policy makes an enormous difference to the nature of *gram sabha*, which suggests that oral competency and political literacy are not predetermined but can be shaped by policy. State policy can even override the discursive deficiencies that come from low levels of literacy.

The question then is what were the elements of the policy that mattered. First, it was the fact that there was a national-level commitment to strengthening local democracy, which was constitutionalized, and the *gram sabha* was rendered a permanent institution. Thus, *gram sabhas* are not ad hoc institutions like the participatory meetings that are ubiquitous in the developing world (Mansuri and Rao 2012). They have become as much a recurring ritual of village life as festivals and weddings. Second, it is the result of "collaborative coalition" (Fox 2016) between the top – national-level political parties who came together to pass the amendment and then implemented it via state policy, and the bottom – village residents and local politicians and bureaucrats who participate in it. Local elites who might want to undermine it are trumped by even more powerful high-level elites collaborating with village activists and residents.

Third, the permanence of the institution allows for a tolerance of mess. Appadurai argues (2015) that effective deliberation is not just about "context-legibility" but about "context-change" (the ability to shift the nature of context so that the terms of engagement are more favorable to citizens). This movement from legibility to change can be very messy, and *gram sabhas* often are just that. They can be argumentative, noisy, rude, cacophonous, and directionless. Yet, they are difficult to dismiss. This allows them to evolve, and slowly acquire legitimacy. Politicians and bureaucrats learn how to engage with them, citizens learn how to navigate them, and both officials and citizens learn how to manipulate them. In effect they become

a "performative" (Butler 2015) space where people make demands, transgress boundaries, defend positions, campaign, instruct, inform, entertain, and where mutual respect becomes an institutionalized practice. And, in doing so, *gram sabhas* change entrenched norms and reduce the gap between the government and the governed.

Gram sabhas give us a practical way to deepen democracy. They function in circumstances that are far more challenging than those that obtain in Western democracies. They therefore open up a number of questions in deliberative theory. Most importantly, instead of assuming conditions of equality exist, we need to think about how a more equal world can be achieved via a policy-induced process of change. In a world where democracy is under siege and growing inequality an important concern, *gram sabhas* are worth paying attention to.