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POWER, PATRONAGE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE PANCHAYATS OF KARNATAKA

Anand Inbanathan

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Power, Patronage and Accountability in the Panchayats of Karnataka¹

Anand Inbanathan

Abstract

Panchayats have provided the opportunity for the widest section of rural society to participate in local governance. Social conditions, however, ensure that only a section of the village people actually acquire and wield power. Political power, built through patronage, political experience, and contacts, enables a small number to dominate the functioning of the panchayats. Further, the relatively weak democratic ethos found in rural areas ensured that to most representatives, the concept of accountability was either virtually unknown or ignored in practice. Thus, local governance through the panchayats is not always a manifestation of the highest forms of democratic functioning.

I Introduction

Democracy² implies that people's participation is a part of governance. However, in modern societies, the areas and populations involved make it difficult, if not impossible, for direct democracy to be feasible. Hence the need to elect representatives³. In the context of rural political institutions—the panchayats—affirmative action (reservation) has made it possible for a number of people, who otherwise would not have been elected members, to play a significant role in the democratic process (at least in principle). Our perception of panchayats as a democratic system implicitly brings in a normative element.

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1. This paper is based on an on-going study of panchayats of Karnataka which is financially supported by Ford Foundation. It is also complementary to another on-going study, "Democratic decentralization and participation of women in Karnataka." An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop in December 1999. The comments of Mark Robinson who was discussant, and that of other participants are appreciated. The paper has greatly benefited from comments and suggestions of V. Vijayalakshmi.
 2. Democracy and citizenship are obviously related, though diversely defined by different scholars. See for example, S.M. Lipset, 1994. *The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited*, *American Sociological Review*, 59: 1-22.
Sylvia Walby, 1997, 'Is Citizenship Gendered?' in *Gender Transformations*, Routledge, London, pp. 166-79.
 3. See Judith Squires, 1999, 'Rethinking the Boundaries of Political Representation,' in Sylvia Walby, ed., *New Agendas for Women*, Macmillan Press, London.

We expect that people should have not only the opportunity but also the means to participate in the system. People's representatives should be accountable to them for their actions as representatives. And ultimately, the people who are now, in a sense, governing themselves should have social, economic and other benefits from this system. What is stated in the rest of this paper, would be keeping in view this evaluative prescription of democracy, and if observations are made of a negative nature, they need to be seen in this context. Presenting a realistic account of the functioning of panchayats does not mean that anything can or should be said entirely without relation to normative principles. These principles may be said to function as a standard, from which bearings are gauged from time to time, to establish where we are, and to determine where we should go.

There was the expectation that a clear connection existed between power and patronage in the panchayats. Power is the goal of the politically inclined individuals, and sought after if the intention is to pursue a political career. Towards achieving this end, they have to devise strategies that build up their political base, ensure that supporters stay with them, and that when elections are held they can succeed with the electors and votes they have attracted through various means. Building up a support base is often through judicious distribution of resources, and establishing connections with political leaders and dominant individuals of the villages. Patronage in various forms is the means of increasing support and political power. However, this presupposes that voters are willing to support them with their votes, and this is where the other element of democracy, accountability, comes into existence. Voters have expectations of their representatives, and if they do not deliver on these expectations, they run the risk of losing the confidence of voters, and thereby their political strength and power.

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in April 1993, the Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act 1993 was enacted with certain important features.⁴

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4. See Anand Inbanathan et. al, 1997, 'Democratic Local Governance in Karnataka State, India.' Paper commissioned by CDIE, Washington DC; Richard Crook and James Manor, 1997, *Democracy and Decentralization in South Asia and West Africa: Participation, Accountability and Performance*, Cambridge University Press.

Elections are not always held on time in the panchayats, and between 1991-1993, panchayats functioned under state government appointed administrators and not under elected representatives. Grama panchayat elections scheduled for end 1998 / early 1999 were delayed and held more than a year later on 23 and 27 February 2000. See Anand Inbanathan 1994, *Karnataka Panchayats Under Administrators*, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

These included the reservation of seats for women, SC/STs, and Other Backward Classes. Reservations were also provided for the executive positions in the panchayats, i.e., for the President and Vice President⁵.

The paper is based on data collected from Mandya district, including the Zilla Panchayat, Taluk Panchayats and Grama Panchayats during 1999, when elected members were on the verge of completing their five-year term as representatives.

II Power

The concept of 'power' has been variously defined in different contexts and by different theorists. Keeping in view the observations of Weber, Parsons, Foucault, and Morriss, though none has been wholly instrumental in the way power⁶ has been viewed, the presence or absence of power among the members of panchayats, and how it is manifested in local political institutions has been analysed. Members of the panchayats may, in a sense, be presumed to be equal, and so far as their status is concerned, all members of the panchayat (at each tier) have the same position, as elected representatives. However, it would be simplistic to assume that all members wield the same amount of power, in the functions and activities of the panchayats. Thus, we have to see how each member can 'get things done,' or influences the decisions that are taken in the panchayat. Two structures of power are found within the panchayats. One is the formal structure, related to the institutionalised positions and the authority and functions that are clearly established. The other is the informal power structure, which refers to the ability of individuals or groups to exert any influence by virtue of their personality (charisma)⁷, access to resources (information, expertise), and ability to reward or punish. In this connection, we need to see also whether there are members (or even those who are not elected representatives) who are sufficiently well endowed with the means to control the activities and functioning of the panchayats. We are thinking of people who

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5. Some aspects related to reservations have been discussed in Anand Inbanathan, 1999, 'Decentralisation and Affirmative Action: The case of Panchayats in Karnataka,' *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 269-86.
 6. See Giddens, in Philip Cassell (ed.) 1993, *The Giddens Reader*, Macmillan, London. Peter Morriss, 1987, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
 7. 'A special quality of leadership that captures the popular imagination and inspires allegiance and devotion.' Webster's Dictionary.

can be classified as elites³, in the rural context, who influence the functioning of the panchayats in directions that they choose, precisely because they have some control over other representatives. We have deviated to some extent from the Parsonian concept of power, inasmuch as we cannot see the existence and use of power in the panchayats purely as legitimate authority, and based on the position that a person holds. We need to consider authority and power separately, insofar as we have to account for the presence of people in positions such as that of president, who do not have 'power' to ensure compliance to their wishes, but have 'authority' which is specifically related to the position, for example, to sign panchayat cheques. On the other hand, persons who have 'power' may not have 'authority' based on their status or position in the panchayat (i.e. they are not elected representatives).

The emphasis may appear to be more on direct manifestations of 'power' such as in decision-making. But indirect and less visible manifestations such as political manipulation are no less significant in the decisions of panchayats, and in specific contexts, carry more weight. However, party politics, and the behind the scenes deals that were effected were less discernible to us, since the protagonists showed some reluctance to talk. This does not reduce our need to look into both manifestations of power, who wields such power, and the contexts in which different forms of power are observed. Ultimately, what we have to establish in this exercise is the extent to which an individual can/or does, affect the functioning of the panchayat, that he/she can accomplish or achieve certain goals within the panchayats, and thus, have power.

Functioning of Panchayats

The first issue which needs to be addressed in the context of power in the panchayats is the form in which it is manifested: be it the president who dominates⁹ the functioning of the panchayat, or whether a single individual, or

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8. There is always going to be some discomfort and controversy regarding the degree to which the recent affirmative action has enabled disadvantaged groups to be involved in governance. Inasmuch as they are present as representatives, there would be the presumption that at least some of them are effective participants in the panchayats. However, this paper does not subscribe to any view that the presence and participation of persons from disadvantaged groups have substantially reduced the power or influence of local elites, and their immediate effect on the functioning of panchayats.
 9. Whose views prevail over that of others in the panchayat. However, this has not been taken to mean that the 'dominant' person also 'controls' other panchayat members.

group of individuals dominate the proceedings, or if there is a visible sense of equality between the members of the panchayat. The dominance is seen in such contexts as the conduct of meetings, where these members (those with power) were the main decision makers. Regardless of whether they were the president or ordinary members, they were able to assert their personal influence on the meetings. This could also go up to controlling the meetings. Other members were allowed to speak, but no one was under any illusion that they can contradict or oppose the views of the dominant individuals. These dominant individuals' views were crucial in such aspects of the panchayat's functioning as the planning of activities, selection of beneficiaries, awarding panchayat contracts, and convening grama sabhas. In these aspects, what we found was that the dominant individuals had a substantial presence in the final outcome.

Most representatives indicated that panchayats functioned in a 'consultative' manner, where presidents sought the views of the other members before taking any decisions. However, the term 'consultative' needs to be qualified. We found that even dominant individuals did not usually use a crude and overbearing manner in their functioning. They often took a more agreeable form, and talked to the other representatives, which may seem consultative, but it was the dominant individual who took the final decision. And, this was according to what he thought was most fitting, whether others shared his views or not. This had its most extreme form in grama panchayats. In any event, the overall indication in these panchayats is that only a few members were active in their functioning, and were seen to be so. In meetings, for example, only a few members spoke, and there were even fewer who were, in a sense, dominant. Members, including the president (as we found in the zilla panchayat) deferred to the opinions and observations of these individuals, who were able to affect the course of panchayat decisions. In the taluk and zilla panchayats, these dominant individuals were persons with some standing in society, through the resources that they controlled, material and human, and had already established strong links with political leaders of different levels and in the party hierarchy. Their political experience and administrative skills were also attributes that enabled them to dominate the proceedings of the panchayats.

Elites: an important aspect to consider in the context of how panchayats functioned is the influence and role of the local elites¹⁰ and patrons of members

10. 'Elites': The main basis of considering certain individuals as 'elites' is the size of their landholdings. We have used the Karnataka government's classification: marginal (below one hectare), small (1-2 hectares), semi-medium (2-4 hectares), medium (4-10 hectares) and large (above 10 hectares). The elites would be those with land holdings in the upper end of 'Medium' and above. In addition, they may possess other features such as holding traditional positions (e.g. village headman).

of the panchayats. These elites were influential in such matters as selection of candidates, supporting their election efforts, and then indicating development requirements and locations of these works. Their influence was also a part of the process of patronage in local politics.

These locally influential and dominant individuals had either one of at least two possible objectives to be involved in panchayats. The first was their direct interest in politics and personal inclination towards political activities. Following from this may be their perception that their political base has to be built in the villages, and then through political contacts in the district and state, they would be able to rise in the political hierarchy. A second possibility may be of limited political aspirations and ambitions, which makes them content to play a role in village politics, and exercising some influence or even control over the village panchayat's activities. Rent seeking for personal accumulation may not be a major factor in their political activities, but patronage may very well be so. In either case, the increase in their political power would be their goal, as well as result, if their political actions (and manipulations) were successful. Sponsoring candidates in the panchayats who later functioned as their proxies was a fairly common means of enhancing their political power.

We observed that there were a few representatives who had also been members of the earlier panchayats, and hence, had some experience in the functioning of political institutions. These persons were naturally able to influence the functioning of the panchayats to a greater extent than the fresh entrants to the panchayats. This included former mandal panchayat *pradhans* (chairmen of mandal panchayats) who were now in the grama panchayats as ordinary members. They exerted far more influence than a one-to-one correspondence with mere membership in the panchayats. This is not only to suggest that their political experience was instrumental in their greater influence in the panchayats, but that the *pradhans* of the mandal panchayats were to a significant extent persons who were also of the local elite. While there were clear indications of the role of local elites in the panchayats, the presence of women among these elites was virtually non-existent. Women have a large and

or are caste elders/leaders. In essence, power, wealth and prestige are combined in various forms in these persons to comprise a small group in the village who dominate village politics. The locally dominant individuals (for example, former panchayat members and politically active persons --- even though they were not elected to the panchayats, persons with political connections in national/ state parties and with MLAs/MPs) also suggested development works to the taluk and zilla panchayat members, which were often implemented.

11 Anand Inbanathan, 1992. *The New Panchayati Raj in Karnataka*. Manuscript Report - 6. Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

significant presence in the panchayats, and in the village population, but not among the village elite².

The association of village elites in the panchayat is of considerable importance in different contexts. In the context of power sharing between members, local elites who were elected had much more effective power than even persons who had been elected as presidents, but who had little in terms of local importance, wealth and political experience. This was observed to a greater extent in the grama panchayats, but has some bearing also in the functioning of the taluk panchayats, and to a lesser extent in the zilla panchayats. Party politics played a much more significant role in taluk panchayats and the zilla panchayat, and this factor also reduced the possibility of local elites dominating the panchayats through their traditional connections and positions. Some members of the local elites transcended village boundaries, and had a dominant role in these panchayats (taluk and zilla panchayats) through their political experience, connections and party standing. They ceased being 'local,' but possessing wealth, prestige and power (as village elites do) no doubt helped their development into dominant players in the higher panchayats. Representatives of the panchayats clearly indicated who were the dominant members of the panchayats, and the president was only sometimes one among them. Persons who were dominant in grama panchayats, the taluk panchayats, as well as zilla panchayats appeared to depend on different circles of connections and contacts with whom they regularly interacted. For instance, with the dominant persons in grama panchayats, it appeared that they interacted more often with village community elders, and others who were 'opinion makers' and had some local importance. At the taluk level, the members who dominated were those who had a wider circle of contacts, which included the MLAs and others of the district administration and politics. Zilla panchayat members were in more regular contact with district and state level functionaries, including members of parliament, MLAs, and district and state officials. However, we have to recognize that members of GP, TP and ZP have a village base³, even if the patterns of political interaction rest on different persons.

MLAs and MLCs are members of taluk and zilla panchayats, and have voting powers, except on the occasion of the elections of presidents and

12. On women and power, see also Ann Duffy, 'Reformulating power for women,' *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 1986, vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 22-46.

13. This is not to suggest that everyone has an equal base or political support. But the members with greater power are obviously those with a significant support in villages. Those who do not have a political base of their own have to depend on patrons.

vice presidents, or when a no-confidence motion is being discussed at a special meeting¹⁴. Thus, they have a presence in the functioning of the panchayats provided by the Panchayati Raj Act itself. However, there is more to it in the actual functioning of the panchayats. MLAs and MLCs have been involved in the selection of candidates for president of taluk panchayats (as in our study), as well as in grama panchayat elections. Their activities were also visible in the interactions with locally prominent and dominant personalities, village leaders, as well as persons who have political inclinations and presence in the local area.

III Patronage

Democratic institutions require that persons be elected from time to time to fill specific political positions. When people are presented with a choice (at least in principle) of several candidates, these persons have to provide some indication that they are more suitable for the posts, and that the voter would be well advised to vote for him/her. Getting elected and then retaining political support for a period longer than the immediate short-term requirement of votes, entails a process of interaction between several individuals, including the voters, caste elders, members of elites, elected representatives of different tiers of political institutions, and party functionaries.

There are two ways in which we can consider 'patronage.' The first is related to the more traditional form of patron-client ties¹⁵, where a higher status individual has an enduring link with a lower status individual, and where mutually beneficial resources are exchanged. "...Scarce resources such as land, loans, intercession with outside agencies are exchanged for labour, deference, information, votes, perhaps armed support."¹⁶

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14. Sathpal Puliani, ed., 1998, *The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Manual*, Karnataka Law Journal Publications, pp. 133-4, pp.158-9.
 15. Patron - client relationships have been defined as "... a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron," James C Scott, 1972, "Patron-client politics and political change in southeast Asia," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 66, p. 92.
 16. Robin Theobald, 1999, 'So what really is the problem about corruption,' *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, p. 495.

The second is usually considered in relation to the political sphere, and exchange of favours for political support, "...Jobs contracts, contacts, useful information, protection from the law are exchanged by politicians for material and other forms of support—contributions to campaign funds, use of property or vehicles, banks of votes, favourable articles in newspapers and so forth."¹⁷ In the context of rural Karnataka, and the panchayats, there is some overlap between these two forms of patronage. Where one ends, and the other begins, is not something that is very clear cut or precise. It also changes from context to context. And, the same person may be in a patron-client relationship in one context, and may have a political relationship with a different person in another. The political identity, and party, of the persons are of some importance. In a case which we have, where a person changed his 'patron,' it was to another person of the same political party. Of the two forms, the former is a more inegalitarian form, with a significant difference in status between the patron and client, and a sense of obligation is built into this relationship. In the latter relationship, individuals may not have such a wide difference in status, and also may not have any firm sense of obligation to the other. Thus, if the relationship does not meet with the satisfaction of one or the other of the persons involved, it can be more easily broken than in the former case.

A further aspect that needs to be mentioned in the context of patronage and politics (the second form of patronage) is that it is not always a relationship based on activities that are honest and/or legal. While politics may no more be a kind of unpaid 'social work,' persons who are in this occupation spend considerable time and resources, on which they expect some return¹⁸. Patronage is also seen as a means of building up political support through the use of public resources such as development programmes and schemes, and locating them in specific places; using influence to benefit certain individuals—to provide jobs or contracts. And, these actions are not based on criteria that have a degree of fairness and even-handedness, that all people should, in principle, be able to benefit from the resources under the control of the political functionaries. But they are based on clear considerations of how these actions would ultimately benefit their political fortunes/career. There is no doubt that in some of these cases, resources have indeed benefited the local area, and that several individuals have derived support when they otherwise would have had none. But the problem here is that in the dispersal of development resources, or other resources, persons who were not seen as the representatives' supporters

17. *Ibid.*, p. 495.

18. See also, Paolo Mauro, 1997, 'Why Worry About Corruption?' International - Monetary Fund, Economic Issues 6, Washington, D.C.

would lose out on access to these resources. There are numerous indications that panchayat resources have been used for both building up political support (i.e. resources are distributed around to some extent), and rent-seeking (held on to by the representative)⁵. What is surprising is that members were quite willing to concede that they had benefited from panchayat resources, though to a greater extent they were prone to pointing fingers at others.

At the outset it should be noted that we do not see a single, or uniform pattern of patronage existing among panchayat members. Even the two forms of patronage that we have described have overlapping areas. Or, to see it another way, patronage as we observed in the panchayats may have aspects of both forms of patronage.

Patron-client relations

It was in the grama panchayats that we found the traditional form of patronage (patron-client) exhibited in a more pronounced manner. Patrons were usually dominant individuals of the village, and members of the local elite, who were sometimes (though not always) members of the grama panchayat. They also had several resources at their command such as wealth, political contacts, and influence even beyond the boundaries of the village. In the case of several of the grama panchayat members, these patrons were instrumental to bring them into the panchayats, persuade them to contest, and also helped them with the organization of their political campaign (if this was at all necessary). Members stated that for a first time entrant to electoral politics, the support of a patron is necessary to get people to vote for them. Community elders, elites, or better known political figures should endorse the candidature of specific individuals before the local people would vote for them at all.

The functioning of the patrons was seen in a positive sense when they initiated the candidates into politics, and advised them whenever required. It was seen in a negative sense when the patrons dominated/controlled the representatives, and did not let the members function in a reasonably independent manner. Evidently, there was no expectation that the patrons functioned only with altruistic motives. Representatives were aware that they had a role in the patrons' political scheme of things, and were expected to work towards the benefit of the patrons whenever they were called to do so.

19. An elaborate account of corruption is given in Susan Rose-Ackerman, 1999. *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Dependence of members on their patrons was observed not only among the ordinary representatives, but also those who had been elected president of the panchayat. While we are not suggesting that all women exhibit the same level of dependence, those who owed their election entirely to the patron ended up not only as dependants, but also, were prevented from asserting their independence even when they thought they were sufficiently knowledgeable about the panchayat. As a representative and president stated, although she was new to politics when she was elected to the panchayat, after about a year she felt she could function on her own. But the patron, also a member of the panchayat, publicly reprimanded her with the statement that he was the one who made her president, and she should carry out what he said, and not what she wanted to do.²⁰

There was a patronising and condescending attitude among the patrons (also extending to other male representatives, as seen from the frequent comments to this effect) that women cannot be effective political representatives and need the help and advice of men. While the patron would be 'helpful' as long as the woman continued to act strictly according to his 'advice,' there was certainly no expectation by the patron that the woman would have sooner or later learnt her way around panchayat functions, and could then manage on her own, or at least with less of advice as in the past. The possibility of breaking the connection with the patron is lower, due in some measure to the benefits that have already accrued to the client. Gratitude plays a part here, as the women who have become presidents with the assistance or intervention of patrons clearly recognised that they would not have been president, or even an ordinary representative, without their help.²¹ And, being president has also helped the incumbent's family in tangible ways. Women representatives did not give

20. There was some indication that grama panchayats were more prone to witnessing successful no-confidence motions against incumbent presidents. This was an aspect that needed further investigation, and we would not volunteer any suggestions here on either the incidence of no-confidence motions or their causes. A fact that needs to be noted in this connection is that grama panchayat presidents and vice presidents could, in principle, remain in these positions for the full length of the panchayat, i.e. five years. Thus, if a change was contemplated by other grama panchayat members or any one else, unless the incumbent volunteered to relinquish this post, the only means of effecting a change may have been through a no-confidence motion. This was unlike Taluk and Zilla Panchayats where the tenure of presidents and vice presidents is 20 months. Later, an amendment to the 1993 Panchayati Raj Act [called Karnataka Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Act, 2000] made the term of a grama panchayat president and vice president 30 months.

21. Instances of rent-seeking are clearly relevant here, and we could mention commissions for panchayat works as an important means of deriving personal benefits.

the indication that their membership, and political value were of a nature that the patron's political stature was or could be enhanced by their (women-clients) efforts—as for instance delivering vote banks, or support, or organising any political event. Thus, the patron almost always considered the relationship as one of dependence of the client. The other factor in the disinclination to break up the relationship was that the patron was still a person of some influence in the area, and antagonising him would not be in the client's interest.

Men (clients) of the panchayats appeared to have had a relationship with prominent individuals that had a status gap that was less wide compared with women, although in many cases (in the grama panchayats particularly) this was only a matter of degree. Patrons recognised that the physical mobility of men makes it possible for them to carry out activities on their behalf which women were not able to do (though the women's husbands could do so). This gave them (male representatives) greater value to the patrons, and in a sense a higher bargaining power. Another factor which would have influenced the patrons' thinking of their clients' value, was also the fact that most women (all of whom, in our study, had been elected through reserved constituencies) would in all probability not be elected again, if they contested for a general, unreserved seat (i.e. against men). Women were, therefore, likely to be one-term representatives. Men, on the other hand, may see politics as a long-term prospect, even if they do not get elected in the next elections. In this event, their value to the patron, in terms of a longer duration relationship would be higher—and in the interest of preserving the relationship, a relatively more egalitarian pattern of interaction develops.

As part of the 'benefits of office' as it were, being a grama panchayat president appears to confer some importance to the incumbents in their dealings with the police. Being an ordinary member did not have as much significance, in such matters as influencing police to withdraw cases²². The same factor, i.e. withdrawing police cases, is said to be one of the possible benefits of being associated with a MLA, in the context of patronage.

As we move from grama panchayats, and observe the higher political institutions, i.e. taluk and zilla panchayats, we see more of relations based on the second form of patronage—support bases built and nurtured through

22. A dominant member of a grama panchayat stated in his interview that he sought the president's post to deal with the police from 'a position of strength,' in a relative's case. However, with the post reserved for a woman, he thought his wife being elected as president would be almost equally suitable. This was thwarted by another dominant individual, who managed to install his candidate as president. These two dominant individuals who were once friends are now hostile to each other.

the spread of benefits, and distribution of resources. Politicians of these institutions (the MLAs, MPs, and also higher institutions of the panchayat system) needed the support of locally influential individuals to gather and organize support for them, especially at the time of elections. Thus, the same persons, who were patrons to grama panchayat members, were often related to higher political representatives such as MLAs, but these relations were not on the same lines of patronage as with patron-clients. The relations took on the form of a mutually beneficial and less inegalitarian (than in the case of patron-client relations) association that brought political benefits to both. This also means that relations that are formed on the basis of a clear perception of possible benefits, can be broken off if these benefits do not materialize. For instance, a taluk panchayat member said he was associated with a political leader who he thought would be useful in his own political career. But this leader lost elections more often than he won, and therefore, the panchayat member decided to change leaders, and joined another political leader, but one who won elections, and was now a MLA.

There are clear perceptions of possible benefits from associating with some prominent politician or the other. And, these benefits have to actually accrue to the actors in these relations if they are to persist. In another context, these benefits should not only accrue to the actors, but 'outsiders' have to see that such relations exist, through the benefits that have been exchanged. The type of case that we are thinking of here is of the panchayat representatives seeking development funds and projects to be located within their constituencies. People in the lower tiers who observe the benefits coming in, not only support the representative of the panchayat, but also the person who made it possible (such as a MP for example). Both representatives in the act, therefore, benefit in a political sense. And, organising support for the next elections would obviously be that much simpler. This is a relationship which is more businesslike, of a quid pro quo that is entailed and recognised.

At taluk and zilla panchayat levels it is often the panchayat members who make a careful choice of a well-known political leader and become an associate of this leader. This is clearly to increase their own political influence and power. But grama panchayat members are not averse to links with well known political leaders either. The president of a grama panchayat in our study

23. In our interview with an ex-Member of Parliament a question was asked about how local people would know, or could be informed, about the identity of the person who was responsible for the development project. He stated that usually, the inauguration function would be sufficient for this purpose, and the audience would easily find out.

explicitly stated that a politician needs a patron, or the association of a well-known political leader to increase one's power and influence. Several panchayat members had also stated that they benefited from the association of MLAs, and other leaders, since these people also had some control over resources that could then be directed to the constituencies of these panchayat members. This, of course, also increased the image and standing of the panchayat members, who were seen to be people who can bring development schemes and funds to their area of the panchayat. On the other hand, the members who did not have similar influence through links with political leaders, and therefore, lacked the ability to bring in funds, were looked on as poorly endowed representatives who could not do anything for their constituencies. There is the recognition among people that each constituency would have some development works carried out through their own panchayat funds, and also that these funds would have come through anyway, regardless of the panchayat member in question. These did not bring any special credit to the local representative. On the other hand, credit was given for the development activities in the constituencies which were seen as the outcome of people's enterprise and ability to attract funds. Lacking in enterprise is how many of the grama panchayat members were seen—even though these members claimed that they had carried out certain development activities in their wards (however modest they may appear to the constituents).

MPs and MLAs built their support base through these local leaders, and therefore, in various ways ensured that the local leaders were kept content. MLAs and MPs cannot easily antagonize local leaders and prominent members of the villages since their direct link with the village people affected the MLA's and MPs' election prospects. Villagers frequently stated that MLAs came to their village only at election time (sometimes not even then), seeking votes.

MLAs were also associated at various times in the activities of the panchayats, through selection of candidates at elections, and also through their influence in the selection of beneficiaries of development programmes. While in principle and according to the Panchayati Raj Act, grama sabhas are to be the venues for the selection of beneficiaries, there were sufficient indications from members of grama panchayats and taluk panchayats that the lists sent by grama panchayats were not always implemented in the form in which they had been sent. Changes were effected in the list of beneficiaries, at the instance of MLAs, as well as influential/dominant individuals (such as taluk/zilla panchayat members), or through some pressure having been brought on the Executive Officer of the taluk panchayat. Zilla and taluk panchayat members admitted that there were times when they tried to influence beneficiary selections through local contacts in the grama panchayats, and tried to get their own supporters

among the list of beneficiaries. However, they claimed that these beneficiaries were not only their supporters but they were also fully deserving people and eligible for these benefits.

In the context of the MP's development funds, the problem (as described by an ex-MP) is that large sums of money were diverted from development works which were essentially to build up the political support of a few individuals. Most MPs would spend the money at their disposal on their supporters and therefore, even where other areas needed development activities, if these were identified as belonging to their opponents' supporters then funds would not be freely utilised in these areas. In an ostensibly legitimate means of spending public money, patronage was clearly manifested in the spending patterns of most MPs (in his view). This is what is most objectionable in the allocation of MP's development funds. Development benefits that accrued to that area or to individuals were not primarily to support poverty alleviation efforts but this (poverty alleviation) was only incidental, and the primary objective was building political support.

Rent-seeking

Two general issues are involved in the manner in which resources are diverted or utilised. One, is when the representatives used them for building up their political base, and the second is when they used them on personal accumulation. Factors which encouraged predominantly one or the other (though not exclusively only one) could be related to whether the person in question has political ambitions or does not see any political future beyond the present tenure in the panchayat. The problem can begin very much at the first stage of their participation in the panchayats, and that is at the elections itself. The February 2000 grama panchayat elections, and elections to taluk and zilla panchayats held in June 2000, suggested that candidates often spent substantial amounts of money on their election campaigns—for instance, in printing pamphlets, providing frequent tea/coffee to voters, and nearing election day, for liquor. After their elections, members tried to recover these 'investments' through panchayat resources.

From opinions expressed by and about members themselves, there were indications that representatives, particularly those new to politics, did not know how to function in the panchayats. But they learnt in a very short while, particularly, it would appear, on the means of profiteering during their tenure in the panchayats.

Panchayat members who had political ambitions were more disposed to carefully building up their political support through funds and benefits that

come through the panchayats as well as their contacts with MLAs and MPs. However, members of different tiers admitted that they were given commissions for awarding panchayat contracts, and this was usually retained by themselves. A few representatives took up panchayat works, since they were contractors themselves, though the contracts were taken on someone else's name. A woman grama panchayat president stated that she was able to get 2 per cent of the contract's value as a commission. Her grouse was that she, as a woman, was discriminated against, and that is why she was given only 2 per cent. Members were of the view (and this was mentioned quite frequently) that not only were members and presidents beneficiaries of such commissions and kickbacks, but that officials too were recipients. Obviously, there were only a few persons who said that they were themselves recipients of kickbacks or commissions. There were cases where members pointed out to certain functionaries (usually presidents) in the panchayats, and stated that these people had lived in huts when they were elected, and then in a short while were able to construct *pucca* (brick and cement) houses without any visible or honest means of raising their income.

A final word on corruption is that it is so widespread²⁴, and easily glossed over by members, and also ordinary people. When we said it was surprising that so many representatives were willing to talk about corruption in panchayats, what we had in mind was that there was no sense of any wrongdoing observed among them. In fact, in one case, a dominant member of the panchayat stated that when it was seen that some members were not 'benefiting' from being panchayat representatives, measures were taken by him and others to ensure that they did get something. A problem which may be at least in their minds is that these are activities (as representatives) which take up time and effort, but no proper and legitimate remuneration was given to them (i.e. ordinary members). Presidents and Vice Presidents were given only a nominal 'honorarium.' This is the most benign explanation that could be given here, but that it has a high cost to the development effort cannot be ignored²⁵.

24. In a personal communication, Vinod Vyasulu stated that in the Indian context, 'mamool' is the word for routine payments made for services rendered.

It is when money is taken but the required service is not given, that it is considered as corruption.

25. As Rose-Ackerman (1999-226) states, "It [corruption] produces inefficiency and unfairness in the distribution of public benefits and costs."

See also, Kavin M. Murphy, Andrei Sheleifer and Robert W. Vishny, 1993. 'Why is Rent -Seeking So Costly to Growth ?' *American Economic Review*, vol. 83, No.2, pp. 409-414.

IV Accountability

Accountability is an important pillar of democracy, and though more frequently ignored than respected, it is a principle which will to a greater or lesser degree determine the quality of democracy that is found in any political system. Essentially, in political institutions such as the panchayats, what we should see is both political and administrative answerability, which means that both political representatives and government bureaucrats are responsible for their actions in the course of their functioning in the respective positions that they hold²⁶. Two aspects of accountability can be discerned. A 'negative' aspect of accountability is the question of responsibility, which entails control and punishment, and also ascertains who should be blamed if matters fail, or did not work out. A 'positive' aspect of accountability includes informing the public, providing information on objectives and results²⁷. We have tried to observe both the positive and negative aspects of accountability as present in the panchayats, though we should state at the outset that both facets were rather weak in the panchayats.

Although a few grama panchayat members had mentioned that they should be accountable to the people, there was no clear indication that they fully understood the implications of what this means. Quite a few indicated that they were accountable to their 'patrons,' elites, or to community elders as well as MLAs/MPs. Further, while grama sabhas are crucial in the context of grama panchayat functioning, they were not convinced that they should report on their activities to the people. Since the observations of the representatives were made during extensive interviews, we can also state that their sense of indebtedness to the patrons, and their respect bordering on reverence to the

26. Samuel Paul, 1991, "Strengthening Public Accountability: Can 'Exit' and 'Voice' Help?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, pp. M-78-85

27. Sigurdur Helgason, 1997, "Towards Performance -Based Accountability : Issues for Discussion," Public Management Service , OECD.

Gita Sen. 1992, 'Social Needs and Public Accountability: the Case of Kerala,' in Wuyts M, M. Mackintosh and T. Hewitt, *Development Policy and Public Action*, Oxford University Press.

M. Shivaiah, 1994. 'A Perspective on System and Measures to Enhance Accountability in Panchayati Raj (Consistent with Its Status as a Vehicle of Genuine Local Self-Government),' in Amitava Mukherjee, ed., *Decentralisation: Panchayats in the Nineties*, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi.

Charles Polidano and David Huime, 1997, 'No Magic Wands: Accountability and Governance in Developing Countries,' *Regional Development Dialogue*, vol. 18, No.2, Autumn, pp. 1-16.

MPs and MLAs, indicate that they did not hold the electors in the same level of esteem as MLAs/MPs, patrons, etc. The significant number who had indicated that they were accountable only to their families, tells its own tale about the representatives' ideas on accountability.

While the answers we received were not entirely unambiguous, it is also an indication of the lack of clarity among representatives about specific panchayat functions and roles, and who has the responsibility to carry them out. The role of the vice president is quite clear from these observations, because most vice presidents did not really have anything to do other than what an ordinary member had to fulfil in the panchayats. Again, it is fairly clear that the members were also confused about what exactly constituted 'reporting' and 'accountability' and thus, the bureaucracy (for example, in the form of the secretary of the grama panchayat) is presumed to have a greater responsibility to 'report' on the panchayat's work. Also, providing clarifications on the panchayat's work was seen as more of a responsibility of the bureaucracy (secretary) than members.

'Accountability' appears to vary somewhat between members of the grama, taluk and zilla panchayats. A distinct problem at the outset, and this is more or less widespread among all three tiers of the panchayats, is about what constitutes 'accountability.' This is essentially concerned with the place of the 'people,' and the functioning of the grama sabhas. There is a perceptible increase in the number of representatives who recognised the importance of accountability to the 'people' as we go from the grama panchayats (where only a very small number of representatives considered accountability to the people as necessary), to taluk panchayats and the zilla panchayats where a significantly larger proportion of members spoke about accountability to their 'constituents', or to their 'electors' or to the 'public'. A part of the reason for such a variation could be the relative political experience of the members of the different tiers of panchayats. In terms of lack of political experience, 90 per cent of gram panchayat members were new to politics when they were elected, while 77 per cent of taluk panchayat members were new to politics, and 67 per cent of zilla panchayat members had no previous political experience when they were elected to the panchayat²⁸. A few members had mentioned that they had been through training programmes organised by various agencies, where the responsibilities and functions of the panchayat members were discussed—and these programmes could also have been instrumental to indicate the importance of accountability to the people. Having indicated that there was a higher degree

28. K. Subha, 1997. *Karnataka Panchayat Elections 1995: Process, Issues and Membership Profile*. Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi, p.68.

of awareness of the concept of accountability among the zilla and taluk panchayat members does not imply that they have actually been accountable to the people. While the scope for direct interaction between the grama panchayat members and their constituents is much higher than in the other institutions, taluk and zilla members indicated that they met constituents when they too attended grama sabhas. However, when grama sabhas were themselves poorly functioning institutions such a claim lacks conviction. We had listed several questions to the panchayat members of the different tiers to gauge their participation in the grama sabhas. Taluk panchayat members claimed that they attended grama sabhas in their constituencies, and so too did zilla panchayat members. Village people were asked whether they attended grama sabhas, and whether they saw members of the different panchayat tiers. Their answers indicated that: 1) very few village people attended grama sabhas; 2) hardly anyone from the taluk and zilla panchayats attended the grama sabhas; 3) most often, the grama sabhas were only a formality, since the Panchayati Raj Act required that grama sabhas should be periodically convened. Many villages did not even have a grama sabha during a full year. The Panchayati Raj Act appears to be somewhat ambiguous about the 'village' in question, where a grama sabha should be held. In some grama panchayats the convenient line taken was that the panchayat headquarters constituted 'the village,' and grama sabhas were held on a regular basis in these places. Other villages of the panchayat had infrequent, and in some cases, no grama sabhas at all. Members also said that having two (or even one, for that matter) grama sabhas every year in every village would entail an excessive amount of time being spent to attend these sabhas. A sufficiently large number of grama panchayat members were not even regular to grama panchayat meetings, which has not only a statutory basis, but also, carries a 'sitting fee.' Grama sabhas have neither. Even where grama panchayat members attended grama sabhas it was usually when in their own villages, and not outside.

Grama panchayat members who had been elected through the intervention and support of local leaders or village elites, considered their answerability only in terms of their sponsors/local elites and not to the local people, the electors. There is something inevitable about this, since weaker members of the panchayats (new to politics, illiterate, lacking knowledge of functioning in a political institution, also comprising a significant proportion of scheduled caste and women members) were dependent on the patrons in their functioning as representatives. Patrons exercised a high degree of control over these functions, and hence, being accountable to them would be seen as natural, considering their form of entry into the panchayats, and political representation. From an objective perspective, members would have to be accountable to the constituents/people for their actions, regardless of who controls them, or directs

their participation. In this context, the patrons (particularly those who were not elected members themselves) were not really accountable to anyone even though they controlled the activities of these representatives. Where the representatives²⁹ husbands managed the activities on behalf of the women, it was the husbands who took panchayat related decisions, but the women were apparently accountable³⁰. When the panchayat representatives were dependent on family members in their functioning, they stated that they were accountable to family members. While we would concede that directly accounting for the actions of the panchayat would be more feasible in the grama panchayats (through the grama sabhas), the weakness of the system is reflected through no clear indications of accountability in the taluk and zilla panchayats, though representatives from these institutions too could attend grama sabhas. Under the present system, virtually no one is really accountable to the people.

There were two aspects that we mentioned in the context of accountability, the positive (providing information³¹ etc.) and the negative (taking responsibility, blame when something goes wrong). Both are weak in the panchayats. The first, is weak in the context of panchayat information being made available to people on a regular basis. Most people do not have access even to information which, strictly speaking, is in the public domain. Further, there appears to be an hierarchy involved here, i.e., persons who were considered powerful or influential, could get information from official sources (one of our questions is whether the members can get specific items of information whenever they ask). Those who were new to politics, or from a relatively poorer socio-economic background were denied such access. In the context of responsibility, or who should be blamed when something goes wrong, there appears to be an almost universal disinclination to accept blame. Our question asks about who should be held accountable when something goes wrong: answers indicated that the person/s involved in the decision-making should be held responsible.

29. This was revealed by grama panchayat representatives.

30. When our researches went to the panchayat office for an appointment with a Zilla Panchayat president, (a woman), the personal assistant to the president said, "why don't you wait a while, the president's husband is not in, and you can talk to him as soon as he comes to the office." There was the clear acceptance that the husband was the one who managed the activities of the panchayat and not the woman president herself. In this case, however, other representatives were not happy with the situation, and some objections were raised, which were also reported in the newspapers.

31. We are aware that some publications about panchayat activities are brought out by the zilla panchayat. But who reads them, or even who received copies of these publications is not known. Certainly, we have no direct confirmation from anyone in the villages about even hearing about the publications.

But while this is indicated in principle, no one has said that anyone was blamed for a problem that occurred in the panchayat, or that any sort of punishment was handed out to the person/s involved in a particular decision. There were instances of officials who were accused of having violated procedural requirements, or were suspected of rent-seeking, but they were only transferred, or as in one case, were suspended, pending an enquiry into the case.

V Power, Patronage and Accountability

That power, patronage and accountability are related is clear. That they should have manifested themselves in the present form in Karnataka's panchayats implies that local governance is still weak in participatory features.

In a democratic political system, several attributes are assumed to be present or even guaranteed to the people. Representatives of their choice, the probability that persons of virtually every recognizable group would be represented, and the possibility that these representatives can participate in the functioning of local political institutions, are attributes which can be expected in the panchayats of Karnataka. However, being representatives in the panchayats, and being a participant in the panchayat's activities are two different things, and not always seen together. It is in this context that we need to examine power sharing in the panchayats, the forms of patronage that are involved in political activities, and how the people's representatives see their role vis-à-vis their electors.

The form of participation that we observed in the panchayats have their origins in the first step of the participatory process. And this is at the elections. Free choice would presuppose that people have several candidates from which to choose one. Such a choice is normally not available to the people if the representatives were elected unopposed. The grama panchayat elections of February 2000 have shown that a very significant proportion (27.7 per cent)³² were elected unopposed. In these instances candidates were chosen by local elites and community elders/leaders,³³ where potential candidates other than the chosen few were discouraged from contesting, or as

32. State Election Commission.

33. It is certainly no one's case that the local elites would find acceptable any contention that they are subverting the democratic process. They, on the contrary, claimed that they were reducing the possibility of conflict, which at times could be very violent indeed. This noble sentiment may have been admirable if there was a very clear and evident history of conflicts in every place. But such is not the case, and most places are known to show relatively low levels of conflict.

in a few cases, that no one in that particular constituency was interested enough to contest. Reservations to seats and executive positions have not only provided for the inclusion of groups which otherwise may not have found a place in the panchayats, but have also facilitated the further dominance of local elites in the functioning of the panchayats. Taluk and zilla panchayats have political pressures brought about through MLAs, MPs, political parties and their functionaries. In all these activities, there is little thought towards providing a higher quality of governance in the panchayats. Thus, the 'human capital' demonstrated by the representatives is rarely of any account in their elections.

With only a few representatives in the panchayats who have the political experience and ability to function effectively, the activities of the many who are new to politics and membership in political institutions are inadequate in many ways. While acquiring a working knowledge to function in the panchayats may be accomplished in a short while, it is the dominant members who were reluctant to relinquish their established hold over the panchayats. In this context, we should also indicate that the situation of women members in the panchayats is not so much related to their own experience and ability as that of their husbands or other male relatives. Power, is thus, not something which was acquired by the representatives as soon as they were elected, and related to their official positions alone. In the panchayats, power is held by those who have political skills and experience, a political support base, and wide political connections, as well as the more traditional attributes valuable in the village context.

An important means of building up political experience, support and connections (and thereby increasing their power) is through patronage. The benefits to the protégé not only enable him/her to advance in politics, but when the patron needs support for his/her own advancement, the protégé can organize such support. At a certain point, the traditional form of patron-client relationship can be replaced by a form (not necessarily with the same person) which is the practical and result-oriented patronage of an almost exclusively political relationship. Rewarding supporters, and ensuring their continued support have usually been through the distribution of resources that the person controls. And this is another area where corruption sets in.

Corruption is seen in various forms in the panchayats, in keeping with competitive political systems that depend on voluntary support. However, an additional dimension is the representative's inclination to increase income and benefits for purely personal gratification. Rent-seeking appears to be quite widespread in the panchayats. But, an aspect which has to be noted here is that profiteering from their tenure as panchayat members is not seen as a

morally abhorrent activity, but as perfectly acceptable. That the institutions that can heighten the negative consequences of corruption are non-existent or less than effective, clearly indicates that accountability is one of the weakest attributes of the panchayat system. With virtually no risks involved in rent-seeking activities, it is not surprising that it is quite common.

When we speak of accountability what immediately comes to mind is that in a democracy, elected representatives are to account for their activities to their electors. However, where accountability is poorly defined and not well understood, even the suggestion that the electors are in some way entitled to an accounting from their political representatives, is not recognized by the panchayat members. The degree of such an awareness is weakest in the grama panchayats, where the majority suggested that they were accountable to their patrons, and to the president of the panchayat, but very few said they were accountable to their electors. Taluk and zilla panchayat members had a higher degree of awareness about what constitutes accountability, but this was hardly translated into practical efforts at accountability. A further consequence of the lack of any sense of accountability to the people is also the limited role of public censure. Avenues to check corruption are few, and whatever may be available are cumbersome and not without risk to the person who may seek to inform a higher authority about a specific case of corruption. Institutions that may secure accountability in some countries (such as the news media and civil society) are weak in the context of the villages and panchayats. Overall, the quality of governance, and the democratic functioning of the panchayats appear to be lacking in many aspects, and these are the attributes that need to be addressed.

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Grams: ECOSOCI, Bangalore - 560 040

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