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**Local Governance, Patronage
and Accountability in
Karnataka and Kerala**

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LOCAL GOVERNANCE, PATRONAGE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN KARNATAKA AND KERALA

Anand Inbanathan¹

Abstract

Various measures have been taken to enhance the accountability of elected representatives in the panchayats, and to make the institutions of decentralisation more responsive to the people. This was also expected to achieve more in terms of development and benefits to the people who needed them. Political representatives, however, see their role not only as being a means of serving the interests of their constituents, but at the same time, as a means of building their own political base, through patronage.

Democracy in India has been instrumental in enabling people to vote every few years and elect their representatives. At various levels, this has brought in political functionaries who have been instrumental in, or have claimed to be instrumental in, providing benefits to their constituents. Representation has largely been related to the benefits that accrue to the constituents, and constituents often relate to their representatives as potential beneficiaries of some form of personal advantage.

Panchayats in the country have been designed to have development interests of the people in view, and provide a more responsive manner of meeting such interests. Being responsive is one form of accountability to the voters and constituents, i.e., by meeting what the constituents need and want. However, accountability has other aspects to it, such as being answerable to the voters, both by informing them of their (representatives') actions, and also being held responsible for whatever they have done (or not done). The people should be able to hold their representatives 'accountable' for whatever actions that were taken by them in their capacity as representatives.

While the institutions of local government have the provision of reserved seats for various disadvantaged groups, the election to political office needs several attributes of a personal nature as well as the goodwill and support of various individuals in positions of political power. Representatives who are elected not only need to affirm their commitment to their constituents, but also have to be responsive to the manner in which they were elected, perhaps through patrons and patronage. Building up a political base of their own too is a matter which representatives need to provide for, through distributing benefits to their supporters, to ensure continued support (votes for example). In the context of accountability, political patronage tends to weaken the representatives' perception of their answerability to their constituents, and instead, brings to the fore the perception that patrons and persons who were instrumental in providing political support to get them elected were effectively more important than the ordinary people.

These issues will be discussed in the present paper, with empirical data from two south Indian states Karnataka and Kerala. These states have been perceived as being, in their own ways and at different times, at the forefront of introducing measures of decentralisation. Three districts

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were selected in Karnataka, namely, Mandya, Gulbarga and Dakshina Kannada; and three districts in Kerala as well, viz., Kollam, Kozhikode and Palakkad.

Distribution of Respondents (Karnataka)

District	Grama Panchayat*	Taluk Panchayat**	Zilla Panchayat
Mandya	54	42	22
Gulbarga	55	37	42
Dakshina Kannada	55	29	29
Total	164	108	93

Note: * Six grama panchayats in Mandya, five in Gulbarga, and four in Dakshina Kannada

** Two Taluk Panchayats in each district; and three zilla panchayats.

Distribution of Respondents (Kerala)

	Grama Panchayat*	Block Panchayat**	District Panchayat
Kollam	95	11	11
Kozhikode	95	18	24
Palakkad	18	8	0
Total	208	37	35

Note: * 6 grama panchayats each in Kollam and Kozhikode, and two grama panchayats from Palakkad.

** 10 block panchayats from these districts; and two district panchayats

As many members who could be located and contacted were interviewed for these studies, and thus, we have more representatives in our sample who were from the grama panchayats.

Panchayati Raj in Karnataka and Kerala

The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1993, followed the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. In keeping with the provisions and guidelines of the Constitutional Amendment, Karnataka had introduced the reservation of one-third of the seats for women, reservations for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population in the state, as well as one-third for Backward Classes. Reservations were provided for the posts of presidents and vice-presidents to the same extent as for the ordinary seats. The Constitutional Amendment had not made it mandatory for the reservation of seats for Backward Classes, and this issue was to be decided at the discretion of the states. Even before the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Karnataka had in place the Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1983, which had provided for the reservation of one-fourth of the seats for women, and reservations for the SCs and the STs. It had not reserved seats among the chairmen and vice-chairmen of mandal panchayats or for presidents/vice-presidents of the zilla parishads, which were the two democratic institutions of the then existing panchayati raj. Notwithstanding the earlier start that Karnataka had in devolving some powers to the panchayats, successive governments have not seen it fit to empower panchayats to the extent that they can function in a relatively autonomous manner. With limited financial powers, for instance, the panchayats still function under some constraints (see for example, Rao 2002).

Kerala enacted the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act 1994, which incorporated the requirements of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. However, it had not devolved many powers to the panchayats at that time (Sastry 1995). Increased devolution of powers came into effect only after the return to power of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) to the state legislature in 1996. The LDF not only effected several measures to devolve powers, but also launched the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in 1996 (Isaac and Harilal 1997). This was to ensure greater participation in local governance and also better utilisation of funds that had been devolved. Kerala's devolution of powers to panchayats, however, was not something that had a history before the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. As Kannan (2000:93) noted, ".....the agenda of decentralisation remained stalled because successive governments had better things to do than decentralise their power". Once the Constitutional Amendment came into place, Kerala, and particularly the LDF government, carried out measures to bring about greater transparency in governance, introduced several mechanisms of accountability, as well as devolved more powers in finance and administration to the panchayats (Franke and Chasin 1997; Isaac 2000; Das 2000).¹

Representation and Accountability in Panchayats

Panchayats have been so designed that there is an important role for the rural people to participate in their functioning. Grama sabhas are the institution where direct democracy is, in principle, possible, with local people being involved in suggesting development activities and their development needs. These are expected to be incorporated in grama panchayat plans and more in conformity with the 'felt needs' of the people. However, the direct role of the people has some limitation, and in general, the development activities and functioning of the panchayats largely depend on the bureaucracy and the elected representatives. In the Panchayati Raj legislations of both states (1993 in Karnataka, and 1994 in Kerala), whatever suggestions and recommendations that are made by the grama sabhas only need to be given "due consideration" by the grama panchayats.

A view that appears to suit the manner in which panchayats are to function is that the representatives should represent the people, and in the words of Pitkin (1967: 209), "Representing here means acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them". Two specific dimensions are immediately noticeable in this view of representation: one is 'interests', and the second 'responsiveness'. The matter of 'interests' is not as straight forward as it may sound. There are no common interests among all the people: discerning which interests should take precedence, and the order in which they would be implemented is a potentially divisive factor. However, in the panchayats, a distinction is normally made between community interests and individuals' interests. Community interests include providing, drinking water (for instance through tanks), proper drainage, roads, streetlights, toilets, etc., while individuals' interests include housing loans, and electricity for homes. 'Responsiveness' suggests the manner in which the representatives function, which takes into account what their constituents want, and thereby meet their interests. There is also the characteristic of accountability that is included in responsiveness. A representative is accountable to her/his constituents at the same time that she/he is responsive to them (Phillips 1998: 4; Rao 1998). In this context, communication between representatives and their constituents becomes crucial in whether

representatives get to know what their constituents want, and if the activities taken up by panchayats meet the needs of the people. This is where grama sabhas are of particular importance, if they are sufficiently well attended by the local people, and if they choose to actually participate in them. Grama sabhas do not have to be the only means of communication, though they may come closer to what Habermas considered as 'public sphere', where political deliberation can take place, which is "...public use of reason jointly exercised by autonomous citizens" (in Hindess 2000: 42; also Habermas 2000: 288-94). People may be able to communicate with their representatives also through everyday talk, and this could be considered part of the deliberative system as well (Mansbridge 1999). This two-way communication between the representatives and their constituents comprises not only the deliberation that one expects in the context of political institutions in a democracy, but such interaction also ensures that representatives are aware of what the people want, and development, therefore, would be more focused on the interests of the constituencies.

In some aspects, the panchayats in Kerala function in a manner somewhat different to panchayats in Karnataka, though in some others there is considerable similarity. While the Kerala panchayati raj also conforms to the requirement of a three-tier structure, the relative sizes of the panchayats vary, and grama panchayats are much larger than in Karnataka. There is no fixed size for grama panchayats, they could vary between a population of 20,000 to 40,000, and each ward comprising 2000 persons has one representative. In Karnataka, the size of a grama panchayat is usually fixed at a population of 5000 in most parts of the state, or 4000 in the hilly areas. The importance of grama panchayats has been pegged at a much higher point in Kerala, with the block and district panchayats being of relatively less importance compared to those in Karnataka. Thus, not only have more functions been devolved to the grama panchayats in Kerala, but substantial funds have also been devolved. Karnataka's grama panchayats do not have the same consequence, and furthermore, in successive Panchayati Raj Acts (1983 and 1993) grama panchayats have been reduced in size, (the 1983 Act had mandal panchayats at the village level).

A second important difference is the role of political parties. There is evidence to indicate that parties in Karnataka are much less involved in the functioning of the panchayats. They do play a role at the time of elections, where selection of candidates is normally the function of the party, and party officials at the district. They do not, however, ordinarily intervene in day-to-day activities of the panchayats. In Kerala, the activities of the panchayats are far more politicised, for politicisation pervades not only the elections, but also more often the ordinary functioning of the panchayats as well. This was particularly noticed in panchayats where the Leftist parties were in a dominant position, and also had a party member as president of the panchayat (the CPI(M) for instance, is generally thought of as a centralised system) (Rammohan 1998)ⁱⁱ.

An analysis of the functioning of the representatives in the panchayats requires, first, that their motivation to be in politics is above question. This issue becomes crucial inasmuch as the expectation is that only those who were interested in being elected representatives were the ones who were actually elected to the panchayats. In such a case, they may take greater interest in carrying out their functions as representatives. However, from our studies in the two states, there is reason to state that such an expectation is often belied by the representatives' lack of interest in being

elected representatives of the panchayats. In Karnataka, a substantial number of representatives in all the three tiers of the panchayats indicated that they had not been interested in politics when they contested the elections. Compulsions of various kinds persuaded these persons to contest. Women, for instance, were more or less compelled to contest by male members of their families, or other men, who were prominent members of the village (elites). The highest number of those expressing a lack of interest in politics was among the women representatives in Gulbarga district. In fact, there were a higher number of women who stated their lack of interest in politics than those who indicated an interest in politics. Among the districts chosen for the study, the highest number of those expressing low interest in politics was in Gulbarga, and the lowest was in Dakshina Kannada, with Mandya falling in between. Even among the male representatives, the number of those indicating a lack of interest in politics was higher in the grama panchayats than in the higher tiers. This seems related also to the competition that is involved in elections in the three tiers. Elections to grama panchayats are meant to be held without political party involvement or party identities. In practice, however, there is a disguised involvement of parties, through party officials and members who support candidates in these elections, as well as through the identification of well-known political figures whose photographs are printed on the candidates' campaign pamphlets (for example, Indira Gandhi or Rajiv Gandhi who, as every one knows, were in the Congress-I). Despite the involvement of party officials in the electoral campaign, it appears that for most of the village people, the indication of support for specific candidates was a personal recognition of the persons concerned, usually of the village elites or "big men" of the village, rather than their party identities. In these circumstances, there were many cases where voting was not even necessary, since there was only one candidate who contested in each constituency, and who was therefore declared elected unopposed.ⁱⁱⁱ In the functioning as representatives, a large proportion of the women representatives, in particular, were only nominally the representatives and the *de facto* representatives were their husbands or other men of the village (Inbanathan 2001; Vijayalakshmi 2001; Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar 2003). A lower number of representatives of the taluk and zilla panchayats indicated a lack of interest in politics. Even among this much smaller number (than in grama panchayats), there were more women than men who indicated a lack of interest. Elections to taluk and zilla panchayats involved far more commitment of funds, time and energy, and the likelihood was much less that anyone without interest in politics would contest. There were also indications that getting party tickets to contest cost the potential candidates substantial amounts of money (Inbanathan and Gopalappa 2003), and therefore, less likelihood that anyone who was willing to raise these funds would do so if there was a lack of interest in politics.

A predominant section of Kerala's panchayat representatives indicated that they were interested in politics when they had contested the panchayat elections, with 96% of the men saying that they did. The women were less inclined to make such a statement, with 63% indicating that they had been interested in politics, while a little over a third of the representatives, 37%, indicated that they had not been interested in politics when they had contested the elections. However, in terms of their political experience at the time of elections (in whatever capacity in party activities, holding elective positions, involved in campaigns), 81 % of men stated that they had political experience,

while only 35% of women representatives had any political experience. Though this still leaves a substantial number who were completely new to politics (particularly the women representatives), it was certainly lower in Karnataka's panchayats, where most grama panchayat members (95% females and 85% males) were new to politics. As seen, the number of those without any political experience at the time of their elections to the panchayats, particularly in the case of women representatives, was very high, and across all the three tiers of panchayats. The significance of the response from the women representatives is also indicative that the quota for women has been filled through bringing in women who were not interested in functioning as panchayat representatives, and they were essentially brought in to fill the quota.

Having been elected, what forms of representation were observed in the panchayats? At the outset, it should be noted that the interaction between representatives and their constituents was usually minimal. This was more pronounced among women representatives, and the interaction was lowest in the grama panchayats, rising slightly in the higher tiers. This may sound surprising, considering that the number of representatives in the grama panchayats of Karnataka was one for every 400 population, and they were usually residents in the same locality where they contested. Hence, moving about and meeting their constituents should be physically a relatively simple activity. However, social restrictions were probably more significant in this context than the bare fact of being a representative in a geographically small area. In any event, from our study, only 19 per cent of women in Gulbarga indicated that they interacted with their constituents, and 68 per cent in Dakshina Kannada said that they did so, with Mandya women representatives falling in between these extremes. Taluk and zilla panchayat representatives indicated a higher proportion who claimed to interact with their constituents. Many of the women said that there was no need for them to directly interact with their constituents because their husbands, who were more experienced in political matters were in effect the representatives, and therefore, it was even better for the constituents than if they (the women representatives) interacted with them. Male representatives claimed to have met their constituents more often than the women representatives have, but for the most part it appeared that, as in the grama panchayats, even unplanned or spontaneous face-to-face interactions with many of the constituents was a definite possibility. It seemed far less likely (also confirmed by many village people who were asked) that they went around the constituency to meet constituents in the taluk and zilla panchayats. What happened was that constituents went to the taluk or zilla panchayat offices, and asked for help/favours from the representatives, and this was the manner of interaction between representatives and their electors.

It is evident that with a relatively low level of interaction between representatives and their constituents, there was also a lower possibility of the representatives being able to find out the needs and requirements of the constituencies. While grama sabhas were poorly attended in most places, except for Dakshina Kannada (Mandya and Gulbarga had far lower attendance in grama sabhas) the constituents had virtually no possibility of discussing development needs and requirements. Taluk and zilla panchayat representatives rarely attended the grama sabhas, and their overall interaction with constituents was also very low. Grama panchayat representatives often claimed that since they were residents of the same local area of their constituencies, they were fully aware of the requirements

even without anyone coming to them to tell them about these needs. This also seemed to indicate their lower grasp of the essentials of the democratic principles involved, that they were to interact with their constituents as a matter of seeking their participation, rather than as a purely mechanical condition of information gathering.

A further indication of the functioning of the representatives in Karnataka was the relatively large number of them who were not aware of the standing committees. In grama panchayats, the standing committees had only a nominal presence in most places, though Dakshina Kannada had a better situation regarding their representatives being aware of the functioning of standing committees, and in fact, who took an active part in their functioning. Taluk and zilla panchayats had properly constituted standing committees, they were well attended, and the members properly recognised their role. Participation in the standing committees of the higher tiers of panchayats was significant in the decision-making process of the panchayats.

In Kerala as well, grama sabhas functioned in a manner that was less than participatory, with most grama sabhas hardly meeting the quorum requirement of 10% of the members. A significant fact about the attendance in grama sabhas was that it was usually people from the poorer sections, and those below the poverty line, who attended the grama sabhas. Those in higher economic situations, the middle and upper classes, did not do so. This is not without reason. Grama sabhas have become institutions that are linked to beneficiary selection and the indication is also that only those in lower economic conditions would stand to benefit from attending the grama sabhas. Standing committees in Kerala's panchayats, however, functioned in a far more effective manner, and they had an important function in the running of the grama panchayats. With the grama panchayats of Kerala being of substantially larger size as well as having larger budgets for their work, they had more effective functions than the grama panchayats of Karnataka.

Accountability

Accountability in a democratic system implies that representatives need to be responsive to their electors, inform them of what they have done in their capacity as elected representatives and finally, to be answerable for their actions (Sen 1992; Shivaiah 1994; Helgason 1997; Polidano and Hulme 1997; Sawyer 2000). Moncrieffe's (2001:27) description suggests two aspects of accountability, one that she refers to as "ex-post facto" accountability, which is "answering for the use of authority", and the other is "ex-ante" accountability. The latter is a more inclusive category, and takes in constituents' interests, interaction and consultation between representatives and their electors, so that the representatives can be more knowledgeable about and responsive to their interests, and in short, improve the quality of representation.

Accountability and Patronage in Karnataka

A democratic system needs to have representatives who are both responsive to their electors/constituencies' interests as well as be answerable for their actions as representatives. Representatives in Karnataka's panchayats were in a general manner in agreement with the principle that they were accountable to their electors. However, the implications of this principle do not appear

to have been fully understood by these representatives. Thus, there were members of panchayats who stated that they were accountable to the bureaucracy (among these were more of women than men). A few stated that they were accountable to their patrons (local elites), and others to community elders, or panchayat presidents, or MLAs/MPs or even their families. In terms of numbers, in order of preference as it were, the largest proportion suggested that they were accountable to their patrons, and then in lower numbers to MLAs/MPs, family, community elders, presidents/vice-presidents of panchayats and then the bureaucracy. The importance of patrons to the political advancement of individuals, as well as even in their first steps in the panchayats towards being elected, is something about which the representatives are clearly aware. At the lower rung of the panchayats (i.e., the grama panchayats), the patrons have been very influential in the elections, selection of candidates and then in the campaign (if there was any need for an election), and if necessary, in financially supporting candidates. The support was also extended after the initial elections to the panchayats, to the election of the presidents and vice-presidents. There were more men in the taluk and zilla panchayats who indicated a preference to continue in politics as compared to the grama panchayats where the numbers were far less. Cultivating important political personalities was a means by which they could advance in the political sphere, both in the party hierarchy as well as in electoral politics. In the context in which the elections are held (party politics), it is almost impossible for an individual to contest and win on his own. Evidently, when the representatives consider themselves as being particularly beholden to their patrons, even to the extent of thinking that their political success was entirely due to the patrons, they were more prone to accept that they were accountable to the patrons rather than to the electors. Patrons were able to direct or give instructions to the representatives whom they were instrumental in getting elected, and representatives were responsive to them (Inbanathan and Gopalappa 2003).

A few members of all the three panchayats had mentioned that they were accountable to the bureaucracy. This seems to be related to their dependence on the bureaucracy to give them information about the panchayats and their functioning. With most representatives being new to elected positions and even to politics (other than perhaps as voters), their sense of inadequacy in terms of knowledge of panchayat programmes, administration, and their role and functions in the panchayats gave them a sense of awe of the bureaucracy. Officials appeared to be both knowledgeable and in greater control of the panchayat programmes and functions in the perception of these representatives.

Panchayat members have certain powers to carry out their responsibilities and functions as political representatives. This is related to their political positions, which they get into either because of their own inclinations, or persuasion or compulsion of some others. State or parliament legislators have far more power than the incumbents of panchayat seats, and their (panchayat members') influence and power over development activities are circumscribed not only by the scale of funds involved, but also by the outcomes which they can personally influence.

Patronage in Karnataka

The traditional form of patron-client relationship was more often found in the grama panchayats of Karnataka than in the higher tiers. Patrons were members of the local elite, and they were sometimes elected members of panchayats. Very often, they were not elected representatives themselves. However, the significant factor was that they were usually in possession of several resources, including political contacts, which sometimes extended beyond the villages, as well as wealth, and prestige. Local elites were also usually from among the castes higher in the social hierarchy, and rarely did we find those from the Scheduled Castes in this category of local elite (even though as community leaders or elders, some individuals were able to influence activities in their own community). Villagers referred to these persons as “big men of the village”, which also demonstrates that women were not among the village elite. As a positive feature, patrons initiated candidates into politics and advised them whenever that was required. On occasion, elites functioned in a manner that had a more negative and undesirable outcome, as when the patrons dominated the functioning of the panchayats through those they had brought into the panchayats, and otherwise carried out an “extra-constitutional” function when they had not been elected to the panchayats.

In the patron-client type, a clear and wide status distinction exists between the patrons and the clients, and the representatives were mostly the clients. Patrons of the local elite were sometimes representatives themselves, but often were not elected representatives. Such relationships were significant to the political advancement of new aspirants to politics, and even to being elected to the panchayats. A direct form of dominance is seen when local elites are also elected representatives themselves. However, the system of reservation and the rotation of reservations makes it less likely that they can get elected every time, even if they were so inclined. Further, the elites were able to increase their dominance by their control over several representatives and hence, being elected was not a prerequisite for their dominance. Patrons too derived some other benefits from their clients. While it was the male representatives who claimed that their political support to the patrons was of importance to the patrons, women representatives did not have this aspect in view about their links with the patrons. In addition, women were usually linked to the patrons through their husbands rather than through directly interacting with them, a deviation from the usual view of patron-client relations as being dyadic relations (see, for example, Scott 1977). Patrons sometimes persuaded representatives who were their clients to distribute benefits to their supporters (other supporters of the patrons) through the panchayats. A few panchayat representatives also stated that patrons were beneficiaries of panchayat projects, as contractors of local projects, which were also instrumental in building up their political support base.

Dependence on patrons was not only of ordinary representatives, but also of presidents of panchayats. Women were more likely to be dependent on the patrons, and the pattern of reservations appeared to favour the weaker or less able representatives in the eyes of the patrons (Inbanathan 1999). Patrons or the village elite preferred to function as representatives, and through the more pliant representatives, rather than build up a cadre of able representatives in the panchayats. The limited tenure of the presidents and vice-presidents of Karnataka's panchayats also reduced the possibility of the office-bearers to improve on their skills and confidence during their very brief tenure.

Three presidents and vice-presidents each with a term of 20 months in the taluk and zilla panchayats, did not give sufficient time for capacity building. In the grama panchayats, the tenure of presidents and vice-presidents was 30 months, and hence, there would be two presidents in each five-year term of the panchayats. The short tenures and the need for fresh elections of presidents and vice-presidents gave much more scope for manipulation and patronage in the panchayats. A further problem, particularly in the higher panchayats, was that the cost of being elected as president had to be borne by three individuals (for President) in a five-year term of a panchayat. This also resulted in increased rent-seeking by office-bearers on the grounds of having to recover their election expenses^v (see also Vijayalakshmi 2008).

In taluk and zilla panchayats, there were less of patron-client relations (though still in existence) and more of purely political relations (on this distinction see Powell 1977; Weingrod 1977; Theobald 1983, 1992; Korovkin 1988) based and built up through the distribution of resources of various kinds. They were more a relationship of equals, or at least the inequalities in status were far less than found in patron-client relations. Choices were made to be associated with political leaders who would benefit their own career advancement, and if such an outcome did not come about, they could leave this person and join another political leader.^v MLAs and MPs also needed these local leaders and supporters to build up their own support base. They had to ensure that these supporters benefited in some manner, and thus, remained happy to be associated with them. MLAs and MPs could not afford to antagonise these local leaders, since it was they who had direct links with the voters, rather than the MPs and MLAs themselves, whom villagers stated that they visited their villages only at the time of elections, and sometimes not even then. Without the local leaders who garnered votes for them, the state political leaders would be hard pressed to be elected.^{vi} Local leaders were sometimes elected representatives of these panchayats, but at other times were not elected representatives but worked for political parties in various capacities. MPs, however, had an additional means of linking up with local representatives, through the Member of Parliament's Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS). Panchayat representatives occasionally made representations to MPs to use the MPLADS funds in their area (constituency). Funds are normally used depending on the political base of the MP, who would prefer to spend this money on his supporters rather than on people who may be supporters of other parties or political leaders (see also Gopakumar *et al* 1998).

Accountability and Patronage in Kerala

Kerala's situation appears to be somewhat different from that of Karnataka. An immediate difference in the functioning of the panchayats in Kerala is the role of political parties. With political parties being more active in the functioning of panchayats, and electoral situations being such that the margin of support between the LDF and the UDF is not large (Cairo 2001), parties are usually inclined to intervene more often (particularly the LDF) in the functioning of the panchayats. Further, even in the selection of candidates, there was a greater likelihood (though, clearly the situation of women representatives is not far different from that of women representatives in Karnataka) that candidates had been party workers when they were selected to contest for the panchayat elections. However, one should not overstate the differences, and ignore the similarities, which were also often observed.

Accountability in Kerala's panchayats had more of similarities with what was found in Karnataka, in the sense of answerability to the constituents. In the panchayats of both the states such accountability was minimal. Representatives were more often likely to give information to the constituents in Kerala's panchayats, because this was mandatory, and the panchayats had to publish various details of their work and financial dealings. These were to be distributed to the electors, and with the levels of education and literacy in Kerala, were read by some of the electors. However, consulting the electors on a regular basis was not as common as would be expected, although grama panchayat representatives stated that they met constituents now and then, on the road for example, and exchanged information with the electors. Such interaction did not involve many of the electorate, and was limited to only a small fraction of the ward members. Members of district and block panchayats were even less likely to meet their constituents unless these people went to them, most often in the panchayat office, for some specific purpose of their own. Block and district panchayat members rarely attended grama sabhas, and grama panchayat representatives were not able to have much of a discussion or interaction with electors because not many of the electorate chose to attend them either. Representatives often claimed that they had group meetings of their ward members (grama panchayats) and discussed issues pertaining to their wards. Such claims were not usually well supported with actual details of what transpired in these meetings, and hence, were not likely to have taken place with the regularity that representatives claimed they were held (i.e., once a month).

Representatives often stated that while they were to be accountable to the people of the panchayats (i.e., the electorate), they were also answerable to party officials and the party. The importance of the party is obvious as they are selected and supported by parties to get elected to the panchayats. They also have the practice of reporting regularly to party officials, as well as consult them on what needed to be done in the panchayat. While representatives may consider it feasible to be accountable to so many entities, ordinary people stated that they were rarely contacted by the representatives or informed about panchayat matters. One should also recall the reaction that may accrue if they were to cease being 'accountable' to the party, as they are to the ordinary people. Punitive action is feared, and therefore, they would heed to party officials. Further, where women representatives are concerned, as with Karnataka's panchayat members, it is the husbands who were party officials or members who encouraged them to contest, and for the most part counselled or controlled their functioning in the panchayats. We may add a note here that the people's statement that representatives rarely contacted them was made in a political environment where the competing parties (or coalitions) are very close in the quantum of support that they can depend on. What could be a reason is that most political functionaries probably think that they need not regularly interact with the ordinary people during the five years that come between elections, and the campaign and interaction with people is only when they are seen as potential voters, and nearer the time of elections. This is clearly so in Karnataka, and evidently in Kerala as well.

While answerability for their actions would be considered as one aspect of accountability, Kerala's panchayats, as with Karnataka's, did not show any sign of having taken action against those who may have been held responsible for wrong-doing. There was a small number of representatives who stated that corruption was punished, but details were not forthcoming.

Karnataka had introduced only a few and limited measures specifically to enhance accountability (considerable significance was attached to the grama sabhas). Kerala, on the other hand, introduced several measures for this purpose. These had been introduced not only to increase the participation of the people in the functioning of the panchayats, including the planning process, but also to make the panchayats more responsive to the people. Further, measures were also suggested to reduce the scope of corruption in the carrying out of panchayat projects and programmes, reduce if not eliminate the possibility of patronage in beneficiary selection,^{vii} and act as means of redressal such as through the institution of ombudsman. Accounts audits and performance audits have also been included among the means to monitor the functioning of the panchayats.

The institution of ombudsman has an ambiguous position in the scheme of things in Kerala. Initially, much was expected from this institution, and seven ombudsmen, people of various backgrounds including the judiciary and retired officials who had held high ranks while in government service, were appointed to this position. The advantage of having ombudsmen was that ordinary people could bring to the notice of this authority malfeasance and wrong-doings in the panchayats. Ombudsmen were to investigate these panchayats and suggest remedial measures. After the UDF came to power in the state in 2001^{viii}, the number of ombudsmen has been reduced to one. With just one ombudsman for the entire state, it is not possible to investigate all the cases that are brought before him and to make a ruling on every case. Thus, most cases are long delayed, and as representatives themselves were quick to point out, payments were already made before the ombudsman was able to reach a conclusion on most cases of panchayat expenditure. Further, as the lone ombudsman could obviously hold hearings only in one place in the state at a time, for most people of the state, travelling to and from the place where the ombudsman was at a particular time, was both tedious and time consuming, resulting in a lack of interest to pursue any case. There was no case in our study area where it was reported that a case had been investigated and closed by the ombudsman. Representatives were neither supportive of the institution of ombudsman nor did they condemn it, and this ambivalence is probably in tune with the role that the ombudsman plays. Contractors who had been interviewed during this study were not even sure whether the institution of ombudsman was functional. Representatives, however, were of the view that the ombudsman was not in a position to do anything significant to control or reduce corruption, which they affirmed is widespread. A final observation about the actual functioning of the ombudsman is that a principle on which it had started, that the people could represent themselves and present their own case, was vitiated when the ombudsman's hearings began to take on the hue of a regular court of law.

Grama sabhas have been designated as an important institution of accountability. In the Kerala panchayat system, grama sabhas have been given even more importance than in Karnataka's panchayats, insofar as the number of functions is concerned. In fact, there were even people who suggested that the grama sabhas were the institutions that carried out a "social audit" in the panchayats, a misnomer in many ways, but is indicative of the manner in which grama sabhas were viewed. Grama sabhas in most panchayats did not serve the function for which they were designed, of involving and encouraging the participation of village people in ward sabhas (in Kerala, where grama panchayats could be very large, each ward of 2000 adults holds a grama sabha). The functions for

which they were convened were also not carried out, and only minimal discussions were held on the panchayats' functions.

In most panchayats, the manner in which local people were informed about grama sabhas was through party workers, anganwadi workers, SHG members, or the grama panchayat representative of the particular ward. Not everyone in the ward heard about the grama sabha, and sometimes only a few heard about it. A few representatives claimed that this was deliberately done to avoid the possibility of members of opposition parties attending the grama sabhas, or prevent larger gatherings in the grama sabhas. Sometimes, even if the people of the ward knew the date, if the grama sabha did not start on time, some of those who came to attend the grama sabha left before it even started. Most of those who attended the grama sabhas were prospective beneficiaries of panchayat/development schemes, or were women SHG members who were told to attend the grama sabhas by grama panchayat representatives. A minimum of 10% of the ward population is required to be present at the grama sabhas, for them to be considered as grama sabhas. However, representatives and local people indicated that this was rarely achieved (i.e., 10% attendance).

An issue that may have some bearing on the accountability of representatives is their inclination to contest elections again, after their present term. A related issue is whether they think of politics as a possible career regardless of their contesting in the elections which follows their completion of the current term as representatives. We presume that they may have a bearing as far as their need to not only impress the electors with their ability and capacity to meet their interests, but also to be more interactive with their constituents. There were indeed representatives who stated that such a thought (of contesting elections again) was a motivating factor in their increased interaction with electors, as well as trying to be responsive to them. More men than women representatives showed such an inclination. However, members of Left parties suggested that while they were interested in politics, it was left to the party to finally decide whether they should contest. Women, on the other hand, suggested that whether they would contest might depend on a seat reserved for women, and they may be less interested if they were to contest from an "open" seat. The system of reservation of seats ensures that the same constituencies as those they presently occupied would not be reserved for women in the next elections (considering that most women representatives had contested for seats in constituencies reserved for women).

Patronage in Kerala

We had started with an assumption that politics is not generally a vocation that is embarked on by individuals and based only on their own inclination. Someone else is needed to encourage, or sponsor the candidate, so that his/her chances of succeeding in politics increase, and more importantly, they are able to get a party ticket and are then elected. The panchayats are a lower level of political institutions than the state legislature and the Parliament, and those who contest panchayat elections are often people with very little political experience. Support for fresh candidates (or even those who had been in politics for some years), and the source of encouragement could vary for men and women. With the men, the political party is the main entry point, and most representatives had indicated that their political work and the support of a party official were instrumental in their entry

into electoral politics. With women, the number who had indicated an earlier involvement in party politics, and the support from party officials to contest the elections, was much lower than with men. More often, it was their husbands (most of whom had party links as workers and party officials) who persuaded or encouraged them to contest the elections. Such encouragement for men and women is necessary to organise campaigns for elections. Most representatives also accepted that without party support, getting elected as independents is very difficult, and very few people can succeed.

Along with the political party (which is an organization of diffuse and large size), it is specific officials in the party who are crucial and instrumental in sponsoring and furthering the individual's career in the party as well as in politics, i.e., they function essentially as patrons. For most women, their husbands advised them on what they had to do as representatives. There were those who claimed that they did not have any patrons or even needed them. This appears to be a matter of how they perceived "patrons". That they needed supporters and well-wishers to sponsor their candidature as well as support in their campaigns is not disputed, even if they did not agree that it was "patrons" who encouraged and supported their entry into politics. Patrons can be helpful and supportive of their protégés. The functioning of such patrons and their protégés, however, is not uniformly that of a patron-client relationship. That such relationships exist is not to be denied, but variations in these relationships lead to some ambiguity, and the less than unanimous feeling (among representatives) that patron-client relationships or even relationships of a purely political kind also exists.

While such support from political officials in the party has been clearly observed, there is less involvement of those whom we could call the elite of villages. In fact, representatives were initially inclined to suggest that local elite were not involved in politics,^{ix} but later agreed that they were occasionally involved in political activities, but they were not influential or influenced panchayat activities because of being local village elites. They were likely to be party officials themselves, in addition to being locally important persons. This contrasts with the situation in Karnataka, where local elites (the "big men" of the village), even when they were not elected panchayat representatives, were involved and influenced the functioning of panchayats, through their intervention in selecting candidates for elections mostly in grama panchayats, selection of beneficiaries, and locating development schemes.

There is a general belief among representatives in Kerala that patrons chose persons as prospective political protégés on the expectation that they would be beneficial to the patrons in some manner or other. Their power and political status are expected to grow with the support of panchayat representatives. There was also the belief that patrons preferred men rather than women in their scheme of political patronage due to their presumption that men can better aid political activities than women can, a perception not different from that of patrons in Karnataka.

Karnataka has a more individual-predominant patronage, with patron-client relations more common in the grama panchayats, and more of the purely political relations at the higher levels. In Kerala, such individual-predominant relations appear to be less pronounced, and while patrons and mentors appear to be present in Kerala's political parties, what is more visible is that parties are involved in a more direct manner in the functioning of the panchayats. In an institution where representatives are not likely to be elected in successive elections from the same constituencies, due

to the reservation of seats for different groups, electoral accountability (on electoral accountability, see Prewitt 1970) is an attribute which is less likely to play a significant role in the functioning of representatives. Likewise, their patronage is not of a type that leads to the building up of political support for themselves. Accountability too in the sense of being responsive to their electors is of less importance when they do not find themselves answerable to a recalcitrant electorate that would not choose to vote for them in the next elections. However, political parties have a longer tenure in local government, even though specific individuals may come and go.

In Kerala's party politics, where the LDF and UDF have alternated in the state government and rarely continued in office for successive terms, their sense of being accountable is far more evident than that of individual representatives. Party members who have now been elected to the panchayats may feel more responsive to their electorate because of the party being held accountable for what they (representatives) had or had not done while in office. It is in this context that we find representatives stating that they are accountable to the party, which actually may make the difference to whether they are tapped by the party for other posts, or they are dropped from holding any other office. On a related aspect, being responsive to their electors is in a sense to distribute benefits (patronage) to their supporters, who otherwise may not choose to support them. Patronage in the present context is also manifested through the party, i.e., the party functions as the patron, rather than individual party officials or members (on a similar phenomenon see Caciagli and Belloni 1981). Thus, when local people got whatever benefits that they had sought, the immediate thought is not only that local representatives had been instrumental in getting them these benefits, but the party identity is also immediately at the forefront and clearly known. Further, it should also be noted that representatives do not always consider themselves as the authority in making commitments on benefits, or deciding on what the panchayats should do. This is particularly so with the Left parties, where party officials are not only consulted but they also tell representatives what they should do. Representatives claim that party officials, through their regular interaction with them (representatives) as well as with local people, are well aware of what is needed, and can advise the representatives to take up various issues in the panchayats. This will ultimately redound to the credit of the party, later on help in the elections. Such party-oriented efforts are less visible in the functioning of the panchayats in Karnataka, though it is no one's case that party politics are not noticed. However, in the grama panchayats, where elections are held without the official participation of parties, local leaders (as such, and not as party officials) too get more prominence than the parties of the state do. Even in the higher panchayats where party identities are important in the elections, and parties are clearly involved, there seems to be less involvement of party officials on a regular basis in the functioning of the panchayats, and their involvement takes place more often at the time of elections than otherwise.

Conclusion

Karnataka, in the 1980s, following the enactment of the 1983 Panchayati Raj Act, and Kerala in the 1990s, following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, had brought in several innovations in the panchayati raj systems of the two states. At the time when Karnataka's Act, 1983, came into existence, no state had given the kind of support to women's participation through the reservation of

one-fourth of panchayat seats for women. Much has taken place since then. Reservations of seats for women as well as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been incorporated in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and all states have had to follow this principle. While the reservation of seats has given an opportunity for the disadvantaged groups to find a place among elected representatives of the panchayats, power has not been devolved to them to the extent that one may want. Thus, Karnataka has manifested political decentralisation, but much less of administrative and financial decentralisation. Kerala has been able to provide for more of all the three attributes of decentralisation. Further, while Karnataka had not brought in sufficient measures to increase transparency and participation, as well as to evolve institutions of accountability, Kerala did much more towards this end. Ultimately, regardless of the kind of institutions that are present, we can see, as in Karnataka, wide variations in the functioning of the panchayats in the three districts that were chosen for study, viz. Mandya, Gulbarga and Dakshina Kannada. Similar differences have been observed in Kerala too, where despite the institutions and measures that were introduced, participation, transparency and accountability vary from panchayat to panchayat. Likewise, the measures meant to keep under control and reduce the levels of corruption have not had the desired effect. Kerala may have marginally lower levels of corruption due to the measures that were introduced, but they have by no means reduced corruption to a low level. Evidently, something more than just the introduction of political institutions and other measures are needed for the reduction of corruption, as well as to motivate the people to take greater interest in the functioning of the panchayats.

Notes

- ⁱ In an overall sense, decentralisation in most parts of India would conform to the statement that, "At present, India's decentralisation to rural and urban governments is a patchwork of deconcentration, delegation and devolution," (Sethi 2004: 3).
- ⁱⁱ However, one should not get the impression that Left parties are monolithic entities, with a clear hierarchy and very unified and disciplined functioning. Like other parties, they too have factions, in-fighting, and several individuals who have more or less the same levels of influence within the parties (see for example, Haridas 2006).
- ⁱⁱⁱ In the grama panchayat elections of February 2000, 27.7 per cent had been elected unopposed (source: State Election Commission).
- ^{iv} A woman vice-president of a Zilla Panchayat explicitly stated that she had only a limited time in which to recover the considerable amounts that she had spent to get elected as vice-president. Further, she mentioned this in her zilla panchayat office, in the presence of several people, indicating thereby that she did not consider this as a matter to hide.
- ^v A taluk panchayat representative stated that his association with a political leader did not benefit him since this man lost elections more often than winning. Hence, he left him and joined another leader, one who won elections, and at the time of this study was the MLA in his area.

- vi The view of a local elite and political functionary, was that when an MLA asked him to campaign and organise political support for him (MLA) at an earlier election, it was on the agreement that some money would be paid. Subsequently, the MLA did not pay this money. In the next elections, the local elite refused to gather support for the MLA's election. The MLA realised that he needed the help of the person from the local elite, and came to see him, with the pending funds, and asked him to help.
- vii Elaborate guidelines were brought into effect for this purpose, in a government order: GO (P) No. 181/98/LAD, dated 2 September 1998. While it is presumed that political institutions have an impact on the levels of corruption, and therefore, we would expect Kerala's panchayats to have benefited from the specific measures to reduce corruption, that corruption still exists and even thrives is a measure of the relative ineffectiveness of these measures. See also, for example, a multi-national study on corruption, which draws a relationship between political institutions of accountability and corruption, Lederman et. al 2001; see also Vijayalakshmi 2008.
- viii The state government found that the number of cases decided even with seven members (ombudsmen) was not commensurate with the costs involved in maintaining them, their office staff etc., and thus, reduced the number of ombudsmen to one.
- ix An extreme view of a few representatives was that there were no elites in the village at all.

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